

Refashioning the Epic:  
An Analysis of Spenser's Breaks within *The Faerie Queene*  
by  
Claire Eckert

A thesis presented for the B. S. degree  
with Honors in  
The Department of English  
University of Michigan  
Winter 2014







*For always being the recipient of my writing, I thank you.*

*My swan song begins the only way I can imagine.*

*Dear Gram,*



## Acknowledgements

This thesis truly could not have been completed without some very important people who guided me through the process, offering advice and a helping hand when needed.

Thank you to my advisor, Professor Linda Gregerson, for introducing me to Edmund Spenser and for leading me on this journey through *The Faerie Queene*. Your expertise and insights were indispensable, and I am certain that this paper would not be where it is today without your help.

Thank you to Professors Gillian White and Jennifer Wenzel for leading the way through the rollercoaster nine months that created this thesis. Your comments and sound advice did not fall on deaf ears: panic is unproductive, and this journey has taught me to 1) write often, 2) read more often and 3) never underestimate the power of *The Craft of Research*.

I could not have gotten to where I am without the never-ending support of my friends and family. Thank you for listening to me talk about this poem, even if you never read it: I truly appreciate the open ears, free-flowing encouragement, and endless supply of caffeine.

Thank you especially to Nicholas Provenzano for introducing me to Evernote, a program that saved my notes and sanity throughout the process. Without it, the amount of reading alone would have been overwhelming enough, never mind the writing process.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my parents for supporting me throughout this journey, and reminding me that I can do anything I set my mind to. Thank you for pushing me to follow my passions in math and English, for when everyone else said it could not be done, you both said it could.





## Abstract

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is a curious work of tension: between epic poetry and lyric repetition of stanzas, local events and global moral themes, completion and incompleteness of narrative temporality, narrative materiality, and poetic structure. By examining specific scenes within the work, this thesis aims to analyze forms of breaks in Spenser's work in order to better understand the incompleteness within the poem. These breaks ultimately provide insight to Spenser's idea of the genre of the epic and units of imagination. By creating tension between the traditional linear sequencing and structure of an epic and a cyclical repetition and movement of poetic structure, Spenser is able to include within his work political and erotic suggestions, while simultaneously refashioning what it means to be an epic poem.

The introduction discusses Spenser's digressions from the traditional genre of epic, including the use of cyclical lyric stanzas, which complicate the linear chronological sequencing of the poem. The tension between these elements ultimately allows for work to be done behind the written word, creating an unwritten, un-closed space that holds agency of its own. Chapter 1 introduces the historical context for the writing of *The Faerie Queene*, focusing on the implications and pressures under which Spenser was writing. Chapter 2 examines Spenser's creation of space within the cyclical written stanza, analyzing at length the tension between chronological time and allegorical time. Chapter 3 focuses on formal break in Spenser's prosody through the example of Belpheobe's blazon, introducing the concept of a realm of the unwritten word. This realm allows Spenser a place to deflect responsibility insofar as the reader is the one who actually thinks about and conceptualizes the very area that Spenser blatantly erases. Chapter 4 incorporates the idea of deniability and deflected responsibility in Book V of *The Faerie Queene* during the political allegorical scene of the trial of Duessa. The poem, at this place,



moves quickly between units of imagination, allowing the narrative to live in multiple realms at once. We conclude with a meditation on the consequences of these disrupted traditional norms of the epic. Spenser creates, through the multiple types of breaks and tensions, a new type of epic poetry, a hybrid of the epic and non-epic, one characteristically Spenserian.



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Short Titles

- “FQ”: Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. A. C. Hamilton 2<sup>nd</sup>. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. Print.
- “Montrose 2002”: Montrose, Louis Adrian. “Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary.” *English Literary History*: 69.4 (2002): 907-46. Print.
- “Montrose 2006”: Montrose, Louis Adrian. *The Subject of Elizabeth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 215-28. Print.
- “SE”: Hamilton, A. C.. *The Spenser Encyclopedia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990. Print.
- “Staines”: Staines, John. “Elizabeth, Mercilla, and the Rhetoric of Propaganda in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. 31.2 (2001): 283-312. Print.





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## Introduction

From the first book of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, readers are overwhelmed. Knights travel throughout books and cantos, plotlines are difficult to keep track of, and the sequencing of the poem seems to be secondary to the themes and moralizing lessons Spenser attributes to the work. These characteristics turn off many people from the early modern poem, published initially in 1590 and again, revised and expanded, in 1596. These features are precisely what make the work intriguing: Spenser's way of weaving complex motifs and lessons throughout the poem, which stands at over 36,000 lines, truly makes *The Faerie Queene* a work of literature of epic proportions. Readers and critics alike have traditionally placed Spenser's work under the genre of "epic poetry" (sometimes called "heroic poetry"), if only because of its overall length. Yet this category does not fully encompass *The Faerie Queene*.

In this thesis, I intend to argue that Spenser refashions the genre of epic by manipulating the traditional aspects of heroic poetry. By analyzing breaks within *The Faerie Queene* (including breaks in narrative temporality, narrative completion, and formal prosody), we will gain insight regarding Spenser's manipulation of the genre of epic and the different units of imagination at work in the poem. Spenser is able to include within his poem political and erotic suggestions while simultaneously refashioning what it means to write a heroic poem by creating tension between the traditional linear sequencing of an epic and the cyclical movement/repetition of lyric poetic structure. This refashioning ultimately allows increased agency to poets, who are no longer confined only to traditional forms and rules of genres, but rather are able to manipulate the genre to fit their writing by creating their own rules.

Turning to the definition of an epic, we see that a main characteristic is one of a linear timeline: based on the oral tradition of Homer, epic works have, at their structure, a simplistic

chronological time sequence. Events follow each other in a line, one thing happening after another: there is a sense of continuous, unified, forward movement within the work. Though the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (PEPP)* notes in its “Epic” article that there is an “epic convention of beginning not at the earliest point of the story but with the action already underway ... [the poem must] fill in the chronologically prior events at a later point” (440). These earlier points or later actions are usually introduced by embedded narrative, epic prophecy, or by an episode loosely connected to the primary epic plot (Epic 440-1). It is important to note that though the actions may not be introduced in chronological order, they are still able to be placed in a clear chronology, insofar as a linear timeline would be able to be produced describing the events of the poem.

This timeline is complicated when Spenser creates sub-structure to divide his poem: it is not presented to the reader in one section, nor is it divided simply into chapters or book. As the *PEPP*’s “Narrative Poetry” article notes, “Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) complicates epic-romance with sophisticated allegorical anatomy; although influenced by Ariosto, the author replaces ottava rima with his own nine-line stanza” (913). Ariosto, in his romance epic *Orlando Furioso*, strayed from the traditional structure of heroic poetry by writing in eight-line stanzas, introducing the use of cyclical units within a larger poetic structure. While calling back to traditional epic poets, Spenser builds upon Ariosto’s departure from the traditions of heroic poetry, but goes so far as to divide his poem into a new type of nine-line stanza, a unique formulaic time structure that creates miniature cycles within the poem: every nine lines, we start again.

By developing the Spenserian stanza and using it throughout *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser creates a tension between the cyclical structure of the lyric stanza and the overall linear structure

of the poem as epic. This tension creates space within the work as a whole: the cyclical structure of one stanza must connect with the stanzas before and after it, a feat accomplished by the white space between the units. Theresa Krier notes “Spenser’s thousands of oscillations between stanza and interval elicit a sense from readers that even when events in a stanza, or an episode, or a life seem to be at an end, *something* [emphasis in the original] does continue” (15). Although a stanza, or line, ends prosodically, there is still work being done behind the poem to move the reader forward.

It is here that we can expand upon Krier’s observations and introduce the idea of units of imagination: Spenser fluctuates between local and global units throughout *The Faerie Queene*, an aspect that is only partially evidenced by the use of lyric stanzas within an epic poem. Here, we take the term ‘units of imagination’ to refer to the scope of the moment of focus: a global unit of imagination would be the poem as a whole, or a recurring theme of *The Faerie Queene*; a local unit of imagination, on the other hand, would include a specific stanza or line, a figure of speech, an image, or an individual episode/moral within the work. The units of imagination within the poem are at odds: the differences in scale amount to differences in kind. The manipulation and movement between these different units (the local and the global) ultimately allows Spenser to give the poem agency of its own: much as the oscillation between stanza and interval allows the reader to move from moment to moment, the oscillation between local and global (and the stages in between) allows Spenser and *The Faerie Queene* to move between the written word and the space behind it.

It is the manipulation of the space behind the written word that Spenser exploits in order to complicate the traditional closure of an epic: he poignantly places important features or events outside the written word (in the interval, rather than the stanza), leaving the reader to either

complete the episode on their own, or simply live with an unfinished experience. Though the recurrent lyric stanza “encourages recapitulation, a small-scale doubling back that augments or reexamines what has already been said,” the final alexandrine line “produces repeated (and repeatedly superseded) moments of summary, gloss, or provisional closure that complement the larger narrative’s own insistent swerves from any final ending” (Narrative Poetry 914).

The lack of closure within *The Faerie Queene* is another characteristic that goes against the tradition of epic: as Jonathan Goldberg notes in his *Endlesse Worke*, “the poem is not merely finally unfinished, but frustratingly incomplete and inconclusive throughout, even when it encourages its readers to expect conclusions” (1). “Spenser’s poem is not a world, complete, closed, and referential, but a process demanding endless doing and ‘endlesse worke,’ because it relentlessly undoes itself, denying closure” (Goldberg 26). Goldberg’s preoccupation with the lack of closure within the poem is certainly one of note. Traditional epics follow a linear timeline, one in which there is a beginning and an end: events move the work forward, rather than take the reader backward to previous unfinished plotlines. This is not the case in *The Faerie Queene*. The lack of closure, along with the lyric stanza, creates a space in the work to which is prescribed agency: Spenser is ultimately able to include erotic and political commentary within this un-closed, unwritten space without claiming responsibilities for his actions. The blank space of the poem, in essence, becomes a new writing space for Spenser, one where the unwritten can be written.

Spenser’s blatant departures from the tradition of the epic (recurrent lyric stanzas as opposed to linear timeline, the absence of closure, and the agency given to the unwritten word) make the reader question the accuracy of the label of *The Faerie Queene* as a heroic poem in the traditional sense. The manipulations of conventional norms creates, in essence, a new form of

epic: as Goldberg notes, “*The Faerie Queene* is so fully the rewriting of epic and romance ... that it establishes a literary space that is located, in its play of text against text, on the deadpan side of parody” (19). Though this thesis does not discuss ‘the deadpan side of parody,’ Goldberg’s statement is equally convincing when discussing the literary space that is created and located within an allegorical realm. Spenser, through his written and unwritten word, manipulates and refashions the genre of epic as a whole: *The Faerie Queene*, much like many of its characters and elements, is situated in two realms. In this case, the realms are those of ‘traditional epic’ and ‘non-traditional epic,’ and though this may seem rudimentary, it is Spenser’s insistence that his work is able to occupy these realms simultaneously that makes the poem revolutionary.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the political environment in which Spenser was writing, as well as the stakes of writing political commentary and erotic blazons during the Elizabethan reign. We cannot understand the purpose of Spenser’s manipulations without first understanding why these manipulations might have been implemented in the first place. Examples of John Stubbs and Sir Philip Sidney will serve to illustrate the very real danger Spenser faced if *The Faerie Queene* offended Queen Elizabeth I.

Chapter 2 begins our examination of Spenser’s breaks within the poem, beginning with a break of temporal sequencing. I will discuss Spenser’s use of poetic structure and form of the work as a tool in creating a new type of time: allegorical time, as opposed to linear chronological time. Florimell’s flight through the forest (found in Book II, canto iii) and the inverted causality related to the scene illustrate the use of the poetic form as time-piece, and demonstrate how Spenser is able to dodge responsibility in his written word. Due to the manipulated cause-and-effect cycle, readers of *The Faerie Queene* are unable to pinpoint exactly where the circle of

responsibility begins: the cause and the effect are not clearly distinguishable, and it is this confusion that creates space within the written cycles for the poem to do work.

Chapter 3 explores one of Spenser's half-lines, an incomplete final alexandrine of a stanza that is in the middle of the description of Belphoebe, a figure associated with Elizabeth. This maneuvering of poetic form creates a prosodic break: interesting insofar as Spenser breaks rules that he created specifically for *The Faerie Queene*. Turning back to the stakes of Spenser, we will be able to discuss the motives for placing a pause in the poetic temporal movement (i.e. the way in which the poem moves through time via the beat/rhythm of the poem itself) and how the decision allows the speaker to deny responsibility for the subsequent thoughts of the reader. More precisely, by placing the half-line prior to an anticipated description of Belphoebe's genitals, the natural pace and track of the poem is broken. The reader, who must now cross the white space between stanzas in order to continue the blazon, determines any further movement down Belphoebe's body. This white space is precisely where Spenser has situated the erotic image of Belphoebe's womanly parts.

Chapter 4 continues examining Spenser's use of white space, this time in Book V with the trial and execution of Duessa in Mercilla's court. To an even greater extent than the Belphoebe episode, this scene demonstrates Spenser's ability to navigate dangerous (political) commentary through the manipulation and mastery of poetic form and structure. The placement of white space allows a physical location in which to place the unwritten execution of Duessa, creating a break in narrative completion, insofar as there is no written closure regarding the fate of the character.

The thesis concludes with a global link between the local breaks: we will discuss the implications of Spenser's departures from the tradition of epic, and how the different units of



imagination of the breaks (from the local half-line to the more global unwritten execution) serve to refashion the epic genre. By giving agency to the poem, Spenser is able to create spaces within and behind the written word to hold commentaries (be it erotic or political) that could displease Queen Elizabeth I. By having *The Faerie Queene* occupy multiple realms simultaneously (linear/cyclical time, written/unwritten words, complete/incomplete), Spenser, in essence, shows his reader that his work can be considered both an epic and not-an-epic, or, perhaps, just a new Spenserian heroic poem.

## Chapter 1: Spenser's Stakes

In Spenser's era, the concept of "free speech" was a limited one: writers and pamphleteers were under constant scrutiny from Parliament and the Crown regarding political commentary and criticism. In the late 1500s, Elizabeth's council was hyper-aware of public commentaries on the subject of the Queen's actions and intentions. What critic Louis Montrose calls the "Elizabethan political imaginary," or, "the collective repertoire of representational forms and figures ... in which the beliefs and practices of Tudor political culture were pervasively articulated," was very much on the minds of not only the royals and aristocrats, but also the Elizabethan subjects who looked to Elizabeth as the face of a nation (907). These representations of Elizabeth's political sphere were visible within Elizabethan society, and both influenced and were influenced by the public's interpretations and opinions of the monarch. Yet we see that this political imaginary was ultimately unstable in Spenser's time: Elizabeth's changing regime and indecisiveness (especially regarding the executions of high-profile traitors such as Mary Stuart) ultimately undermined the court's "attempts to restrict, regulate, and enforce uniformity in the political culture" (Montrose 2002 908).

Many people believed that Elizabeth's inconstancy was conditioned by gendered aptitudes about pity and mercy at the time: women were considered to be 'soft,' a fact that could cause a female monarch to try to compensate for her assumed piteous nature. Mary Villeponteaux, who comments on Elizabethan mercy in *The Faerie Queene*, discusses Elizabeth's trouble finding a balance between mercy and cruelty, as well as the monarch's muddling of lines between mercy and pity. After inspecting some questionable political decisions of Elizabeth, Villeponteaux notes:

These uneasy attempts to distinguish divine mercy from weak human pity, and simultaneously to recommend and warn against mercy, suggest that actual expressions of mercy in the public sphere are always suspect, easily dismissed as the products of emotional frailty rather than rational virtue. And this is especially true of a woman's mercy. (165)

In this passage, Villeponteaux explains the notion that gendered behaviors in Elizabeth's time were believed to contribute to muddled politics. Finding balance between mercy and pity is difficult for all rulers, but even harder for female sovereigns: Elizabeth not only had to deal with the standard difficulties of balancing mercy and pity, but also had to navigate a realm of cultural prejudices regarding her gendered aptitudes.

Many subjects were hesitant to trust Elizabeth's womanly judgment, especially when it came to emotional decisions, most notably the decision regarding Mary Queen of Scots' execution. We must note, however, that there were some defenders of the Queen. John Aylmer, in his 1559 paper regarding the place of women in governmental roles, reminds readers that Elizabeth is not the sole proprietor of political power in England; instead, there is a substantial role played by those male politicians who were able to voice opinions regarding the running of England (Montrose 2002 911). It is interesting to note that, despite Aylmer's support of Elizabeth due to her supposed "divine selection," he also argues that "bridles on a woman ruler should ensure that her feminine weakness does not lead the nation to ruin" (Villeponteaux 166). We see that Spenser, too, shares Aylmer's opinion regarding the possibility of feminine weakness leading a nation to disaster. In Book V, Spenser discusses the place of women in relation to men and politics:

Such is the crueltie of womenkynd,  
 When they haue shaken off the shamefast band,  
 With which wise Nature did them strongly bynd,  
 T'obay the heasts of mans well ruling hand,  
 That then all rule and reason they withstand,  
 To purchase a licentious libertie.  
 But virtuous women wisely vnderstand,  
 That they were borne to base humilitie,  
 Vnless the heauens them lift to lawfull soueraintie. (V.v.25)

In this stanza, Spenser suggests that women have been bound to a “shamefast band” by Nature solely by being female (V.v.25.2). Although women are virtuous and able to “wisely vnderstand” their place in society, they are nevertheless “borne to base humilitie” under the “well ruling hand” of their male counterparts (V.v.25.7, 8, 4). Spenser, however, ends the stanza with a warrant: these statements are only true if the woman was not “lift[ed] to lawfull soueraintie” by divine selection (V.v.25.9). Lauren Silberman, in her 2004 article “*The Faerie Queene*, Book V, and the Politics of the Text,” notes that this stanza seems, at first, to be a “blatant endorsement of female subordination, uncompromising except as is necessary to accommodate women who actually hold power, namely Elizabeth” (11). Silberman references Montrose’s essay on *Midsummer Night’s Dream* with the fact that “Elizabeth benefited from conventional sexual politics and condoned sexual hierarchy from which she conveniently exempted herself” (9). Elizabeth is simultaneously inside a gender sphere and outside of it: she is a woman *and* a man, a queen *and* a king. It is precisely this blending of dichotomies that allows Elizabeth to rule as a woman while having legitimate claims to monarchical power.

Silberman later argues that Spenser's strategy to neutralize the political commentary in this stanza is to use an unreliable narrator (11). Though this is certainly one potential key to unlocking Spenser's strategy of deflecting political opinions in the poem as a whole, I find Silberman's suggestion unfulfilling in this case, insofar as Spenser has not questioned (or brought the reader to question) the reliability of the poem's speaker thus far in the work. In this passage, the narrator appears to be as authoritative as ever, signaled by the declarative statements found about female subordination. The warrant regarding the "lawfull soueraintie" of female monarchy does not undermine the narrator's reliability, but rather voices the exceptions to a commonly held belief regarding the status of women as rulers: that women outside of monarchical reign are subordinate to men, but the divine selection of female royalty overrules the weakness of the gender.

We see that the weakness of women is taken as truth, and though Elizabeth partially skirts this assumption, it is still necessary for her to be surrounded by male counsel, despite the divine sanction of her rule. It is precisely because of this presumed weakness that a male counsel is necessary for the commonwealth, one that will lead the female monarch away from emotionally-driven decisions and to judgments governed by reason. In *The Faerie Queene*, Mercilla (the allegorical figure for Elizabeth at this moment) is surrounded by male knights, whose purposes are to advise the queen regarding the fate of Duessa – Arthur and the other knights are not driven by emotion when trying to persuade Mercilla to execute Duessa, but rather advise her through sound argumentation and logical reasoning. In this way, as Montrose suggests, the male counsel (both in real Elizabethan England and in *The Faerie Queene*) as well as the political nation (including nobility and aristocratic members) held the duty to make sure Elizabeth fulfilled her responsibilities to the country, despite her gender (Montrose 2002 911).

Yet this duty to remind and advise Elizabeth on how to run the commonwealth was not unrestricted, as Spenser would have very well known. Though counsel was considered a right and a duty of certain Elizabethan subjects, the execution of the duty was dangerous. In multiple scenarios, subjects were punished or silenced by the House of Commons for unsolicited advice. John Stubbs, a pamphleteer during Elizabeth's reign, was one of those unfortunate Englishmen who gave uninvited advice to Elizabeth. In his tract *Gaping Gulf*, Stubbs voices his opposition to the proposed marriage between Queen Elizabeth and the French Catholic Duc d'Alençon. In response to his enflamed writing, Stubbs had his right hand chopped off in the Westminster marketplace, and was subsequently imprisoned for eighteen months.

On the other side of things, Sir Philip Sidney was in a similar situation regarding writing a piece that Queen Elizabeth did not appreciate. His "Letter Written to Queen Elizabeth, Touching her Marriage with Monsieur" discusses many of the same concerns with her marriage to Duc d'Alençon, but unlike Stubbs, Sidney held the political position that allowed him to offer royal counsel (Montrose 2002 913). Montrose goes so far as to explain that Sidney offered his advice with "prudence and grace," yet was still forced to write his advice figuratively (in what Spenser would consider a 'darke conceit') because of the control Elizabeth had placed on the ways of political commentary. Because his letter overstepped Elizabeth's prescribed boundaries Sidney lost Elizabeth's affections and retired from court for a period. Though his punishments were never as severe as Stubbs' (Sidney kept both his hands), it is noteworthy to realize that those people in roles that allowed for political counsel still risked Elizabeth's disapproval and punishment for unwanted advice.

Given these episodes, of which Spenser would have been aware, we can see that writing political commentary during Elizabeth's reign was not without risk. In a poignant example of his

awareness of his writing environment, Spenser creates a character, Malfont, a poet who has been sentenced to punishment for writing inappropriate works. In Book V, canto ix, we see Malfont's tongue nailed to a post in a public area. Spenser, in one stanza, explains to the reader Malfont's crime and appears to defend the decision for punishment:

Both with bold speaches, which he blazed had

And with lewd poems, which he did compyle;

For the bold title of a Poet bad

He on himselfe had ta'en, and rayling rymes<sup>1</sup> had sprad. (V.ix.25.6-9)

Malfont, Spenser seems to suggest, has brought the punishment upon himself: "he on himself had ta'en" the title of a malicious poet by writing both "bold speaches" and "lewd poems" (V.ix.25). With this accountability comes the idea that Malfont knew that his work was not going to be received well by the aristocrats in Faerie Land. It is interesting, however, that Spenser mentions that part of Malfont's transgression included spreading his inappropriate work: by situating this fact at the end of the stanza, Spenser makes the reader pay attention to the final reason of punishment.

If we assume that writers in real Elizabethan England were at risk of situations like Malfont's, it is clear that Spenser would be aware that spreading his work would carry more risk than if he only presented it in court. As John Staines comments on this passage, "the poet [Malfont] has spread libelous attacks against the Queen and must be punished as an example to other poets" (290). Though Stubbs was not punished for poetry, we can see that Spenser is very much aware and knowledgeable about the consequences of being a "Poet bad," one marked by

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hamilton, 'rayling rymes' suggests broadsides (large sheets of paper printed to announce events, proclamations, or advertisements), which were suppressed by Elizabeth I (Hamilton 573).

“bold speeches” and “lewd poems” (V.ix.25). Goldberg comments that Spenser is aware of the “social reality, that the poet’s words are at the sovereign’s command” (Goldberg qtd in Staines 290).

Spenser’s depiction of Malfont in Book V, canto ix, further exemplifies the fact that he is aware of the dangers poets face in the political and public sphere. The Malfont scene serves to introduce the notion of political censorship: the “Poet bad” was accused of spreading “lewd Poems,” and was ultimately punished for his actions. It is interesting to note, however, that no mention is made in regards to the truth of these statements: the poet, labeled as ‘bad,’ is considered guilty and punishable merely for the fact that his writings upset the monarch.<sup>2</sup> DeNeef, in a discussion of Malfont and Bon Font, claims that Spenser justifies the Malfont’s punishment:

In a book which argues that Justice is only a conceit for action, even a Right Poet could legitimately be silenced if his poem occasions, as the proem to Book IV suggests it has, active dissention and discord. Once the virtue is rendered relative to the common good, the poet faces the risk of all would-be reformers: the law might misjudge him or even accurately judge him as a socially disruptive influence. (132)

Under Elizabeth’s reign, it was not only poets and writers who were at risk for punishment. Sidney is one example of an aristocrat being punished for giving unsolicited and unwanted advice to Queen Elizabeth, but we see that even in Parliament, free speech was a rarity. As Montrose explains, “in theory, the authoritarian Elizabethan regime made no allowance for an open public sphere; and in practice, it did its best to monitor and constrain its

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Villeponteaux 179-80.



subjects' speculations, opinions, and judgments concerning matters of state" (Montrose 2002 914). This seemingly overbearing regime was necessary in Elizabeth's eyes, for even she could not "erase from public memory former judgments, residues of once-accepted truths that shake the legitimacy of the current party-line" (Staines 290). Elizabeth, as well as her council, had to be aware of the public memory: in a time fraught with turmoil and change, the Queen needed to maintain an image of loyalty to her policies and the commonwealth and constancy for her subjects – she could not afford to be seen as a "flip-flopper" (using modern political terms). This sense of constancy was doubly important insofar as Elizabeth needed to show that she was not wont to change her views, either from a political perspective, or from a perspective driven by her feminine nature.

But given this limitation of free speech, how, then, did Spenser not get punished for his highly political *The Faerie Queene*? After all, published writing could produce even more damage to a person's reputation than spoken words or sermons, if only because of its physicality. Despite the fact that published writings could be banned or pulled from public hands, Elizabeth and her court would not be able to stop the exchanging of ideas, or verbal critiques of the work. Spenser, in order to skirt the issue of apparent political critique, includes within his work a glorification of Elizabeth, noting in his *Letter to Raleigh* that he has represented her in multiple characters, including the beloved Gloriana.

Furthermore, Montrose suggests that Spenser's form and organization of his works could allow for leniency regarding his political commentary:

In *The Shepheardes Calendar*, as throughout his poetic corpus, the formal indirections of Spenser's medium allowed him considerable scope for vivid and

sometimes extreme figurative expressions of opposition to aspects of courtly values, aristocratic conduct, and monarchical policy. (Montrose 2002 914)

We see all three of these categories (courtly values, aristocratic conduct, and monarchical polity) portrayed in *The Faerie Queene*. It is interesting, however, that Spenser introduces his intentions for commentary in his *Letter to Raleigh*, noting that “the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (*FQ* 714). Spenser is aware, we see, that some people may not be pleased with how he presents his work:

To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises. But such, me seeme, should be satisfide with the vse of these dayes, seeing all things accounted by their showes, and nothing esteemed of, that is not delightfull and pleasing to commune sence. (715-6)

In this passage, Spenser justifies his use of an allegorical poem. His professed motive for a fictitious poem is entertainment: he hopes to bring pleasure to his audience through the fantasy epic. Yet we can see that the level of allegory and fantasy has multiple purposes: it simultaneously entertains, allows a line of thinking to be worked through, and gives Spenser a cover for his political or erotic commentary. The allegorical nature of the poem gives space for a new way of thinking to be pondered. Especially in regards to inverted causality, an allegorical poem allows Spenser to create a new logic sequence, and with it, a new time organization.

Though some people may want a more straight-forward description<sup>3</sup> of his commentaries regarding the steps to “fashion a gentleman or noble person,” we see that his “clowdily

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<sup>3</sup> i.e. a sermon or pamphlet that states his opinions outright, rather than cloaking them in poetry

enwrapped” advice is safer for the poet (*FQ* 714, 716). By shrouding his critiques in a fantasy world, Spenser is, in essence, deflecting potential punishment onto the reader: it becomes, to put it casually, a “you said it” situation. As Staines puts it, “the sovereign does not speak the poet’s words but *interprets* them”; Spenser writes (or, in some cases, does not write) the words on the page, but it is up to his reader (not necessarily limited to Staines’ sovereign) to interpret them (Staines 290). Because of the instability and unattainability of authorial intent, it would be almost impossible to blame Spenser for any inferences reached by his supposed implications.

Spenser puts breaks in his poem to refract some of his commentary to his audience: he leads the reader right up until the point where he would have to claim responsibility for his opinions, and then drops off the line of logic, leaving the audience to jump topics with him while simultaneously continuing down the path they just left. In these episodes, “Spenser appears to be calling to his readers’ attention to that very politicization of speech and silence which impelled early modern writers to cultivate the indirections and equivocations of figurative discourse” (Montrose 2002 924). Spenser, through these moments, is exploiting the fictive nature of his work, as well as the nature of the white space of printing, in order to convey this “politicization of speech and silence” (Montrose 2002 938, 924).

Though Spenser, through his employment of white space and creation of nonlinear time sequencing, is interested in calling attention to the physical limitations placed on writers, we see that he is also aware of the authority his works have as moral instruction. By claiming to be able to “fashion a gentleman or noble person” according to twelve public virtues, and do so by way of poetry instead of didactic prose, Spenser is able to situate himself in a hybrid political and public sphere. Montrose describes, “Spenser’s poetry, so carefully and elaborately materialized in printed books, constituted an intervention into the Elizabethan public sphere” while

simultaneously “employ[ing] the resources of misogyny to further the political agenda of limited monarchy” (Montrose 2002 939). Spenser does not fully place his work in an exclusively public, nor political, sphere: instead, he uses the overlapping nature of these spheres as a setting for the poem and its readers. *The Faerie Queene* is very much aimed toward Queen Elizabeth and the court as an audience: Spenser’s *Letter to Raleigh* and his dedicatory sonnets to high-profile aristocrats appear to be proof that his poem has hopes of entering the royal court. Yet we also see that Spenser must position his poem outside of this publicized political circle, since his claim to “fashion a gentleman or noble person” by way of the poem seems preoccupied with inner self-fashioning of the reader into a moral being, whether this reader is associated with a political realm or not (*FQ* 714).

Analyzing this notion suggests *The Faerie Queene* must be aimed at two audiences: the nobility of the court (who will re-learn the lessons of courtly virtues, and gain the most from the political/courtly criticism), and those subjects who wish to become more like the first group. Spenser, in this way, increases the intentions of the text and simultaneously expands the audience for his political commentary. This is bold, especially considering the precarious situation in which Spenser places himself: he not only is providing extensive political commentary, especially regarding the Mary Queen of Scots trial and execution, but he is allowing these opinions to circulate in the public sphere. Despite Spenser’s attempts at deflecting the blame resulting from his commentary onto his readers, he is still in danger of political punishment if his advice to Queen Elizabeth and her court comes across as unwelcome or presumptuous. Knowing this, it is daring for Spenser to tailor *The Faerie Queene* to a wider audience than just the court: if Elizabeth or people of her court found the work offensive, Spenser would be in more trouble

for circulating the banned ideas amongst the public. Spenser could, truly, become the next John Stubbs of Elizabethan England.

Yet, we can see through further examination, that Spenser's use of fantasy setting, creation of new time sequences that are complicated by questions of causality, and his use of poetic structure to veil potentially dangerous commentary allows him more freedom than he would have been given through other literary forms (i.e. sermons, pamphlets, letters). Turning back to his *Letter to Raleigh*, we can see that his defense of his writing style makes sense: though some people want him to be more straight-forward through "good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts," by employing any medium outside of fantasy/epic/romantic poetry, Spenser runs more of a risk of displeasing Queen Elizabeth (*FQ* 715). Because of the very nature of his epic, which is set in the far-away Faerie Land, Spenser is able to deflect accountability of his political commentary onto the white space of the poem, and the theoretical space between the real English realm and Faerie Land. This space is most noticeably created by Spenser's use of a fantasy setting, yet by manipulating the tension between reality and fantasy through temporal sequencing and inverted causality, Spenser constructs an unwritten realm that holds its own agency. It is this characteristic of *The Faerie Queene* that redefines the conventions of epic, and allows the poem to be situated in multiple opposing realms.

## Chapter 2: Inverted Causality and Temporal Incompletion

The problem of inverted causality is one not usually associated with linear time sequencing: those events that happen first have an impact on those that happen later. With this notion, a “chronological time” timeline does not allow realms of deniability – Spenser, while writing his political commentary in *The Faerie Queene*, would have been wholly unable to hide his opinions and critiques in and behind the text, a necessary action due to the risk of punishment described in the previous chapter.

In order to create a new time sequence, Spenser generates a cycle of inverted causality, one in which there is no clear “cause and effect” relationship between two events, but rather two “because” relationships. To illustrate this, I invite you to examine the following two figures:

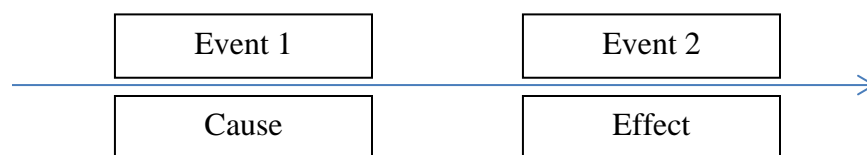


Figure 1: Chronological Time Sequencing

In Figure 1, we impose a linear causal relationship between the first event described and the second one, a relationship that we normally prescribe to everyday life. We will call this chronological time. In this relationship, the first event (the cause) brings about the second event (the effect).

But this is not always the case in *The Faerie Queene*. Instead, we can have:

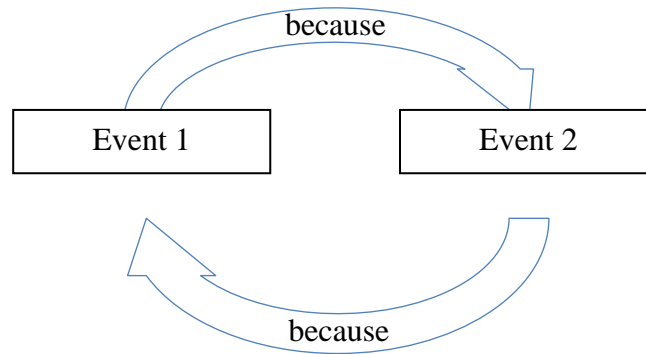


Figure 2: Inverted Causal Relationships

Figure 2 illustrates how Spenser, through inverted causality, forces us into a cycle of cause and effect, with the reader never quite sure which is supposed to come first. The first event described in the poem could be thought of as a cause for the second, yet in places, the second event is seen as a cause for the first. There is no clear “cause” and “effect” relationship, but rather a two-way “because” connection. It is here that a second type of time is introduced: allegorical time. Robert Wilson claims “by the standards of common sense, or according to the criterion of a ‘real’ time flow, the temporal deformations ... are clearly impossible. On the level of allegory, however, they are both possible and extremely meaningful” (60). Allegorical time is not constrained by a linear timeline: characters, causes and effects, and motives often float around in a seemingly unorganized way. That is, until Spenser decides to unveil to the reader the structure of his time sequencing, one that is marked by beats, stanzas, cantos, and books rather than seconds, minutes, hours, and days.

The most prominent example of this within *The Faerie Queene* is the first scenes with Florimell, when she is running through the forest in Book III. In III.i, we are following the knights Arthur, Guyon, and Britomart. The two knights see a woman flying through the forest, in obvious distress,<sup>4</sup> and Arthur and Guyon decide to follow her to try to help. Britomart (who we

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<sup>4</sup> See *FQ* III.i.15

follow after the knights split) travels through a forest and meets a knight, Marinell, at the seaside, where they fight:

But she againe him in the shield did smite  
 With so fierce furie and great puissaunce,  
 That through his threesquare scuchin<sup>5</sup> percing quite,  
 And through his mayled hauberque<sup>6</sup>, by mischaunce  
 The wicked steele through his left side did glaunce;  
 Him so transfixed she before him bore  
 Beyond his croupe, the length of all her launce,  
 Till sadly soucing on the sandy shore,  
 He tumbled on an heape, and wallowd in his gore. (III.iv.16)

Though this stanza does not hold much bearing on the actual time-sequencing of the events in Book III (insofar as the specific battle description holds no bearing on the overall structure of events), it is noteworthy due to the fact that Spenser makes a point to describe the extent of Marinell's injury: "he tumbled on an heape, and wallowed in his gore" (III.iv.16.9). Spenser repeats this sentiment less than ten lines later, when he notes at the end of a simile "so fell proud *Marinell* vpon the pretious shore" (III.iv.17.9).

After Britomart leaves the scene of the battle, we turn to Arthur and Guyon, who have been pursuing Florimell, the "fearefull damzell" "through thick and thin, through mountains and through playns" (*FQ* III.iv.46.3, 1). When Arthur finally catches up to Florimell at the beginning of Canto V, we are told the reason for her flight by her steward, who is running to find Florimell (like Arthur and Guyon):

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<sup>5</sup> Triangular shield

<sup>6</sup> Long coat of chain mail



A Sea-nymphes sonne, that *Marinell* is hight,  
 Of my deare Dame is loued dearely well;  
 In other none, but him, she sets delight,  
 All her delight is set on *Marinell* ...  
 But fame<sup>7</sup> now flies, that of a forreine foe  
 He is yslaine, which is the ground of all our woe.

Fiue daies there be, since he (they say) was slaine,  
 And fowre, since *Florimell* the Court forwent<sup>8</sup>  
 And vowed neuer to returne againe,  
 Till him aliue or dead she did inuent<sup>9</sup>. (III.v.9.1-4, 8-9, III.v.10.1-4)

The Dwarf emphasizes the linear chronological timeline that Florimell has been following, speaking in specific chronological time demarcations (five days since Florimell heard of Marinell's injury, four days since she fled court to find him). By narrating the events in this way, they are situated within the chronological time sequence of *The Faerie Queene*, and thus follow a "cause and effect" illustrated here to make the causal relationships clear:

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<sup>7</sup> rumor

<sup>8</sup> left

<sup>9</sup> discover

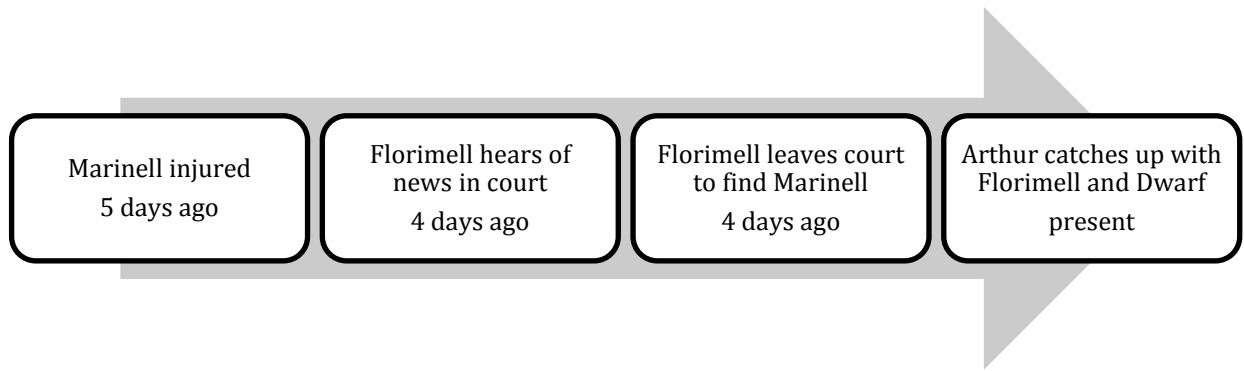


Figure 3: Florimell Scene Timeline

There is a clear causal relationship amongst the multiple events: it is apparent that Florimell's flight from court was caused by the distress of the news that Marinell had been injured. Though the argument of false information<sup>10</sup> could be made, the sheer amount of coincidence that must take place in order for this argument to hold up raises suspicion. As Catherine Rogers notes, "we saw Florimell flying before Marinell was cut down. However, it is apparent that the poet is attempting to be precise about the schedule of departures to suggest ... that there is order in the traffic we have previously observed" (55). The original scene of Florimell's flight comes in Book III, canto i, when:

All suddenly out of the thickest brush,  
 Vpon a milkwhite Palfrey all alone,  
 A goodly Lady did foreby them rush,  
 Whose face did seeme as cleare as Christall stone,  
 And eke through feare as white as whales bone: ...  
 Which fledd so fast, that nothing mote him hold,

And scarce them leasure gaue, her passing to behold. (III.i.15.1-5, 8-9)

<sup>10</sup> This means that readers could argue that Florimell had received incorrect information in court. Spenser allows for some leniency regarding this hypothesis, by placing some uncertainty within the stanzas by using "fame" in III.v.9.8 and the parenthetical "they say" in III.v.10.1. Yet the specificity of the days makes this hypothesis wholly unsustainable.

By making it clear that Florimell was fleeing prior to Marinell's injury, Spenser focuses our attention on the tension between chronological and allegorical time within this episode.

This tension makes the reader aware of the role allegorical time holds in the poem. Later in Book III, Spenser clears up any confusion regarding the sequencing of events, yet in doing so, makes the sequence even more muddled. In the scene, Satyrane is questioning the Squire of Dames regarding the news of the Faery court and the Squire's recent adventures:

Who thereto answering said, The tydinges bad,  
 Which now in Faery court all men doe tell,  
 Which turned hath great mirth, to mourning sad,  
 Is the late ruine of proud *Marinell*,  
 And suddein parture<sup>11</sup> of faire *Florimell*,  
 To find him forth: and after her are gone  
 All the braue knightes, that doen in armes excell,  
 To sauegard her, ywandred<sup>12</sup> all alone;

Eamongst the rest my lott (vnworthy') is to be one. (III.viii.46)

The Squire's note that Marinell's injury is the talk of the court, and the impact Florimell's flight had on the attendance of the knights, shows the reader that this episode is not merely a small event. It is necessary to realize that Spenser makes it apparent that Marinell was supposed to have been injured prior to Florimell's departure of court, yet we know that we saw her running prior to Marinell's fight with Britomart, in canto i of Book III.

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<sup>11</sup> departure

<sup>12</sup> wandered

With this clear inversion of events, we can see that Spenser creates a cycle that transcends the abilities of the linear timeline we were given by the Dwarf. Figure 4 illustrates the events in a cyclical relationship:

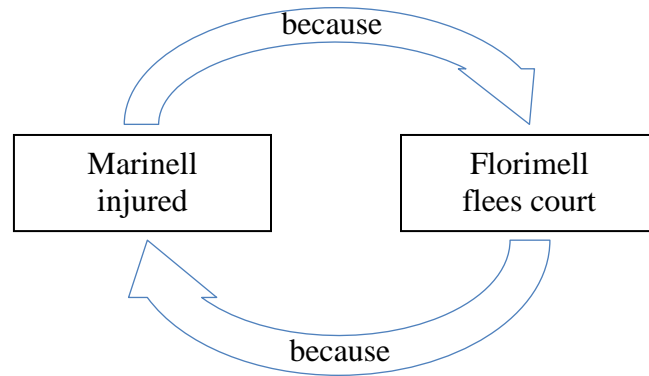


Figure 4: Inverted Florimell/Marinell Causality

Figure 4 shows that there is no clear causal relationship between Marinell's injury and Florimell's flight: Marinell is injured after Arthur leaves Britomart to follow Florimell, but Florimell is running because Marinell is injured. This inverted relationship is juxtaposed with the linear timeline presented to the reader from the Dwarf in canto v. The cause for each event can be seen in the other: Marinell would not have been hurt if Britomart had not gone to the sea, but her travels were instigated by Florimell's running insofar as her partner knight left to chase after the fleeing damsel (which was, in turn, brought upon by Marinell's injury). In the *Spenser Encyclopedia* entry for "Time," it is noted that "Spenser's control of narrative time<sup>13</sup> depends upon his awareness that in narrative there are no reasons (other than specific genre-memory or custom) why time cannot be almost boundlessly anachronic. There are, on the order of narrative, neither natural nor necessary temporal sequences" (689). It is at this moment that Spenser calls the audience's attention to the tension between chronological and allegorical time, and how

<sup>13</sup> In our terminology, narrative time is equivalent to allegorical time.

readers cannot assume that chronological time is dominant within the poetic structure of *The Faerie Queene*.

We see that Florimell's sequencing is precisely the point in which Spenser is explicitly showing his audience that the chronological time that has been able to be imposed upon the work will not suffice. Richard McCabe, in his *Pillars of Eternity*, comments on the discrepancies between the allegorical and chronological timelines at this point, explaining:

[The Dwarf's] account cannot be reconciled with the events of the poem where Florimell's flight clearly precedes her lover's fall. If we accept the dwarf's word, Florimell has no reason for being where she is – in flight or otherwise – in canto one: a timely warning this against the dangers of attempting to fabricate elaborate systems of chronology from this point onwards. (91)

McCabe touches upon the idea that the Dwarf may not be a reliable source of information by qualifying his claims with "if." Yet, from the information given to us by multiple sources (Satyrane, the Squire of Dames, and even Spenser), it is clear that it is not the misunderstanding of the Dwarf that leads to the confusion of timelines.

Rather, we can see that it is the attempt at translating allegorical time to chronological time that brings issues: the "elaborate systems of chronology" in *The Faerie Queene* work together in the poem, yet are independent of one another (McCabe 91). Certainly, allegorical time and chronological time overlap, but the two systems work side-by-side, rather than together. Meaning, we see chronological time measurements used as reference points within the narrative: the Dwarf explains the chronology of the events to Arthur using days as a time-unit, rather than cantos or stanzas. In this way, chronological time can be situated (with some work) within allegorical time, but it is when allegorical time tries conform to chronological time that problems

arise. Turning back to the “Time” entry in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, the distinction is made that allegorical time is able to be anachronistic: we can situate chronological time within allegorical time, since allegorical time has the option of being non-anachronistic, yet the opposite cannot hold.

As Wilson notes, Spenser employs the “manipulation of narrative time<sup>14</sup> against the standard of a presumed ‘real’ linear time of common sense and phenomenal experience” (57). Taking this idea even further, we can see Spenser use this manipulation to not only make apparent the differences between ‘real’ linear time and his allegorical time sequencing, but also to give space within the cycle of causality, a space that he will later employ as a safe haven for political commentary. As the “Time” article in the *Spenser Encyclopedia* claims, “the deformed time schemes indicate logical relationships of priority, contingency, and subordination” (690). Examining the Florimell scene’s inverted causality, in light of this claim, it appears that the events are co-dependent: the contingency relationship between Florimell’s flight from court and Marinell’s injury goes both ways. With this comes an equal priority and importance level for the events: by having the events be contingent upon each other in either direction, neither the flight nor the injury can claim a higher priority or importance within the narrative as a whole. In other words, one event necessitates the other, and is simultaneously necessitated by that same event which it necessitates.

Joanne Holland touches upon this necessitated/necessitates relationship by noting that, within *The Faerie Queene*, “sequence ceases to be of much importance” and that “what is happening at any moment in the continuum ... is equivalent to what is happening at any other moment” (252-3). Even though events change, Spenser does not prioritize the events in a linear

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<sup>14</sup> Meaning, allegorical time.

sequence, and thus takes some of the importance away from chronological time as a determiner of causality. The mutability of the order of events (since they are connected via a cyclical relationship) suggests that readers can, to put it casually, jump into the cycle at any moment and still be able to learn all of the events.<sup>15</sup>

This is, in part, what Spenser does to the audience in the Florimell sequence: we are not given the step-by-step timeline (the chronological time, the linear sequencing) of the events, but rather are thrown into the midst of action and move between multiple plot lines within the course of the events. As we see in the illustrations, the cycle that has been a point of discussion has empty space between the events and relationships: the timeline is not filled, but rather, has white space whose purpose is able to be manipulated. McCabe notes “the final solution can lie only in an escape from the succession and duration of time, essentially an escape into eternity” (57). With this in mind, the possibility of Spenser using the manipulation of time to escape time is presented: by compounding types of timelines (linear and nonlinear), Spenser allows the readers to essentially escape any one specific type of time. This idea can be expanded to Spenser’s global picture. By manipulating the genre of epic by compounding classical traditions and changing specific elements, *The Faerie Queene* is situated inside as well as outside the genre of epic poetry. With the escape from time comes the idea of eternity as a release from time, a place where timelines are not important, and where the narrative action of the poem is what is of focus. In the Florimell sequence, we are instructed to suspend our disbelief through the manipulation of time sequencing: in order to absorb the entire effect of the poem, we must disregard our logical presuppositions. Readers are forced to move from a local unit of imagination (focused on the

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<sup>15</sup> Though outside the scope of this thesis, the ability to control the hierarchy of events is further evidence of Spenser’s ability to manipulate the written word to do work for him. There is power in this ability, and it is precisely this power that gives Spenser authority to refashion the time sequencing and genre within his epic. For further reading, see Williams (1970).

individual timeline of the Florimell sequence) to a global one (focused on the action of the entire poem), and through this move, we are forced to deliberate and recognize that *The Faerie Queene* is not simply a story of knights and adventures, but one also filled with moral instruction and allegory.



### Chapter 3: Formal Prosodic Breaks

Spenser's break in narrative temporality ultimately shows the reader his ability to manipulate his poetic space to do the allegorical work he would like it to do: he is able to create a new sense of time sequencing through his written word. These words are organized in cyclical nine-line stanzas; traditionally called the Spenserian stanza, with the prosodic units beginning with eight lines of iambic pentameter, concluding with a final alexandrine line in iambic hexameter. It is important to note that Spenser created this stanza structure specifically for *The Faerie Queene*, and it is the localized unit of imagination within the poem: topics and events (including metaphors) are usually confined to one or two stanzas, though longer groups of stanzas may be related in theme.

This is the case in Book II, canto iii, when we are introduced to Belphoebe, a high-spirited maiden who is a strong fighter. While certainly female, Belphoebe, much like Queen Elizabeth, inhabits portions of both the feminine and masculine spheres of society. When Belphoebe is initially introduced, readers receive an eleven-stanza description of her physical beauty, yet one portion of her body is mysteriously absent. It is here that Spenser presents another type of break within the poem: this time registered in the prosodic structure of the writing itself.

As we move down Belphoebe's body, from her head to her torso, the blazon appears to be standard, yet precisely when we reach her genital area there is a conspicuous break:

So faire, and thousand thousand times more faire

She seemd, when she presented was to sight,

And was yclad, for heat of scorching aire,

All in a silken Camus lylly whight,

Purfled vpon with many a folded plight,  
 Which all aboue besprinckled was throughout,  
 With golden aygulets, that glistred bright,  
 Like twinckling starres, and all the skirt about  
 Was hemd with golden fringe (*FQ* II.iii.26)

The final line of this stanza holds only three feet in prosodic meter, even though the structure of the Spenserian stanza requires it to hold six. Though not initially obvious, the next stanza begins with a description past her thighs: “Below her ham her weed did somewhat trayne,/ And her streight legs most brauely were embayld” (*FQ* II.iii.27.1-2). A. C. Hamilton claims that this half-line, “either confirms the topos of inexpressibility or indicates the poet’s distraction when he contemplates Belphoebe’s genitalia, and necessarily moves lower” (184). Part of Belphoebe is inaccessible to us; Spenser uses blank space as a blockade to make this inaccessibility obvious to his reader through obvious omission.

Hannah Betts notes there was a certain type of ambivalence associated with a royal blazon,<sup>16</sup> yet “this ambivalence is focused not on the mouth or breast, but on the description of Belphoebe’s genitalia. The vulva is conveyed as a euphemistic space within the catalog, according to the blazon’s conventional use of *occupatio*, or emphasis by means of apparent avoidance, to describe the genitalia” (161).<sup>17</sup> By noticeably skipping over Belphoebe’s genitals through prosodic incompleteness, Spenser draws more attention to them, perhaps more so than if he had completed the line. The topic certainly deserves sensitivity: Spenser, by no means, wishes

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<sup>16</sup> Betts does note that “in 1590 Spenser fulfilled Elizabethan culture’s expectations of a blazon of Elizabeth I, creating a chaste Petrarchan icon as the expression of his ambition to become the nation’s poet” (Betts 163).

<sup>17</sup> Spenser introduces Belphoebe in his *Letter to Raleigh* as a representation, or shadow, of Queen Elizabeth I, and because of this fact, we can consider Belphoebe’s description to be a representational royal blazon.

to offend Elizabeth by discussing or describing her womanhood, yet by leaving a white space in the poem, Spenser makes it apparent that he is skirting around the issue.

However, despite initially skipping over Belphoebe's secret parts, Spenser seems to return to a displaced version of them later in the blazon, during a description of her armor:

All bard with golden bendes, which were entayld

With curious antickes, and full fayre aumayld:

Before they fastned were vnder her knee

In a rich iewell, and therein entrayld

The ends of all the knots, that none might see,

How they within their fouldings close enwrapped bee. (*FQ* II.iii.27.4-9)

The “curious antickes” on Belphoebe's armor suggest a type of magical (or at least, non-human) protection of her virginity: the enameled portions and richness of the armor itself sees Belphoebe's virginity as desirable, and “the hidden ends [of the rope] suggest that her armour cannot be undone, being a virgin's knot ...” (*FQ* II.iii.27.5; Hamilton 184). In *The Spenser Encyclopedia's* entry for “Gender,” it notes “it is virginity that provides the ground of moral interest of the significant human females in the poem. Yet it is implicitly understood that they may not lose their virginity and remain within the ranks of the ‘human’” (326). Though the discussion of what is considered human is not necessarily pertinent to the current discussion, the importance of virginity in regards to morality is noteworthy. Virginity is a “rich iewell” that must be protected by a knot that cannot be untied and be guarded by magical creatures. The fact that Belphoebe is feminine may be marginalized by her masculinity insofar as she is described as an armored leader, yet her virginity is still essential for her to be a moral (female) character.

According to Montrose, Spenser, at this point “displace[s] any allusion to her genitals into an intricate description of the ‘rich Jewell’ in which the ‘knots’ of her buskins are ‘entryld ... that none might see’” (Montrose 2002 919). This is especially noteworthy because of the associations attached to Belpheobe: not only is she a strong, independent woman, but she is also a fighter, a knight in her own sense. If Spenser had drawn attention to Belpheobe’s femininity as defined by the physical body, he would, in a sense, negate the masculinity associated with the maiden. Instead, he places blank space where we normally would expect genitals. Spenser, in a way, creates mystery regarding gender by not representing something so vital to the classification. We see that those objects “which cannot be discovered ... Spenser represents as a hole in his poem, a blank space upon the page, an anomalous absence set within the typographical order and plenitude of his book” (Montrose 2002 922). By hiding her feminine parts, Spenser forces his readers to imagine Belpheobe occupying both the role of a woman and of a man: her ‘true’ gender is left undiscovered to the reader insofar as there lacks a specific closure to the issue. It is not that Belpheobe is genderless, for we know that she is female, but rather that the single definitive characteristic is out of reach, and thus we cannot have a true moment of discovery during the blazon.

In Spenser’s *Letter to Raleigh*, he specifically notes that Belpheobe is a shadow/representation of Queen Elizabeth herself:

For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall Queene or Emperesse, the other of a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I doe expresse in Belpheobe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent conceipt of Cynthia, (Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of Diana.) (716)

Because of this unconcealed relationship between Belphoebe and Elizabeth, it would be inappropriate for Spenser to describe Belphoebe's genital region. By placing the area in question within the white space of the text, "the figurative shadowings of the poet's allegorical discourse allowed both for dangerous construction and for deniability" (Montrose 2006 227). Spenser is able to fashion Elizabeth's genitals by situating it within the realm of allegory, a place constructed within the white space of the page.

The ambiguity of Belphoebe's gender mirrors Queen Elizabeth's own situation, since she was considered to be both masculine and feminine in her sovereign role. When Elizabeth addressed the troops at Tilbury in preparation for the Spanish Armada, she claimed that "I know I have the bodie, but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and Stomach of a King, and of a King of England too, ..." (Elizabeth I). She lives in two realms: that of the feminine person and of the masculine persona. Montrose explains "as the embodiment of divinely sanctioned political authority, the former person<sup>18</sup> was implicitly masculine, whereas the latter, private person<sup>19</sup> was explicitly feminine" (Montrose 2006 219). Elizabeth is physically a woman, and thus has certain characteristics and failures attributed to her. Yet she is also a military leader, a fighter, much like Belphoebe.

Spenser admits that there are multiple representations of Queen Elizabeth I within *The Faerie Queene*, yet Belphoebe is the one of only two characters that he names outright as a shadow of the real-life sovereign, and is the only character who is physically present in the poem.<sup>20</sup> By already associating Belphoebe with Elizabeth, Spenser must take extra care in his description of the masculine-feminine character. Montrose suggests that the half-line can serve to

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<sup>18</sup> Referencing the "most royall Queen or Empress" in Spenser's *Letter to Raleigh*.

<sup>19</sup> Referencing the "most virtuous and beautifull Lady" in Spenser's *Letter to Raleigh*.

<sup>20</sup> The other representation of Queen Elizabeth I is the faerie queen, Gloriana, who does not make an appearance within the work.

“exemplify Spenser’s subtle and complex response to and reshaping of the eroticized language of the Elizabethan political imaginary” (Montrose 2002 919).<sup>21</sup>

The anomaly of the unpointed short line is apparent: it is, after all, one of only two half-lines in the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, and was not changed before the 1596 edition of the work.<sup>22</sup> The intentionality of the irregularity is apparent: Spenser creates his own poetic structure and clearly breaks his constructed rules. It is not as if Spenser does not know the prosodic rules in place within *The Faerie Queene*, so his unveiled digression from the standard cannot be ruled as simply an accident. In the “Spenserian stanza” entry in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, it notes that “the final alexandrine, in completing a couplet, gives the effect of closure, but by being unequal in length carries the reader as if on a wave into the next stanza” (672). By leaving the final line of stanza 26 incomplete, Spenser not only leaves the blazon as a whole incomplete (insofar as even when it continues, there is still a piece of Belpheobe’s body that remains without description) but also allows the reader to linger upon the missing body part. The half-line does not have the power to carry the reader to the next stanza immediately: there is white space that we must cross before we can continue down Belpheobe’s body.

Theresa Krier describes Spenser’s intervals thusly: “in the stanza breaks, a reader experiences suspension, that great Spenserian-romance condition, but this is an active condition of change and novelty and surprise, not a static or somnolent condition” (5). The reader’s active role in this suspension is precisely what allows Spenser to have the white space do work for him. This fact creates an interesting situation, since the white space between stanzas 26 and 27

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<sup>21</sup> Montrose defines the Elizabethan political imaginary to be the “collective repertoire of representational forms and figures – mythological rhetorical, narrative, iconic – in which the beliefs and practices of Tudor political culture were pervasively articulated” (Montrose 2002 907).

<sup>22</sup> The other short line occurs in the final line of II.viii.55.

contains an unwritten description of Belphoebe's genitals. We are wholly unable to move forward *without* imagining that part of the body that Spenser was so deliberate in excluding. In this way, Spenser leads his reader right up to the point of sensitivity then skips over it, forcing the reader to continue with the path of description in order to meet up with the poet after the moment of sensitivity has passed. Meaning, Spenser is aware of the fact that he cannot safely write about Belphoebe's feminine parts, since she is expressly associated with the queen, so he places that body area in the white space of the poem, through which the reader must traverse in order to continue reading.

We are, in essence, placed in a "you-thought-it" situation: Spenser is able to deflect the responsibility of thought onto the reader, saving himself from potential displeasure or criticism regarding the subject. Though the reader is ultimately the subject who thinks the unmentionable thought, some responsibility for the unwritten is also placed upon the white space of the poem. There is work being done behind the written word, work that Spenser may have intended, but the author holds no agency in its execution. Unlike the Florimell sequence, where Spenser manipulated the written word to create a space and do work for him, in Belphoebe's blazon we see that the opposite is true: Spenser manipulates the blank space of the poem to say what he cannot. The erotic, much like the political, is a sensitive world to negotiate within, and it is through the blank space of the poem that Spenser is able to do the work that so desperately needs to be done, yet cannot be written.

#### Chapter 4: Narrative Incompletion

Spenser's multiple kinds of breaks, such as the formal breaks of poetic structure (as seen in the half-line) and narrative temporal breaks (such as the one observed in the Florimell sequence) ultimately culminate in a break of narrative completion. This type of break is defined by the physicality of the poem: the tension between written word and white space is precisely where the work of the poet is completed. In *The Faerie Queene*, we see this most prominently during the allegorical trial scene in Mercilla's court during cantos ix and x of Book V. Narrative incompleteness in this scene is formulated by a lack of closure regarding the events of the plot: the culminating act that would tie all loose ends together is palpably missing in the text.

In the court scene, readers are presented with Duessa, a character created in Book I as an antithesis to Una (who represents goodness and faith). Duessa is charged with treason,<sup>23</sup> and her fate is ultimately decided by Mercilla, the ruling woman of the court, who must find a balance between justice and mercy. These two aspects come into focus because of the placement of the scene within *The Faerie Queene* and Spenser's use of language: the overarching theme of Book V is justice, yet Mercilla's name has mercy at its root.

The topical reference in the scene is apparent: Spenser has cast Mercilla as a likeness of Queen Elizabeth, and Duessa as Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland. It is important to note the similarities in charges that both Mary and Duessa face. There is, above all, treason in the attempt to kill the queen:

For she whylome (as ye mote yet right well  
Remember<sup>24</sup>) had her counsels false conspyred,

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<sup>23</sup> *Spenser* V.ix.41.

<sup>24</sup> Spenser is calling the reader/audience to remember the last time Duessa was seen, it was during an example of false friendship and duality.



With faithlesse *Blandamour* and *Paridell*, ...

And with them practiz'd<sup>25</sup>, how for to de pryue

*Mercilla* of her crowne, by her aspyred,

That she might it vnto her selfe deryue<sup>26</sup>,

And tryumph in their blood, whom she to death did dryue. (*FQ* V.xi.41.1-3, 6-9)

The accusation that Duessa, along with Blandamour and Paridell, planned to kill Mercilla mirrors closely the events that transpired in Elizabeth's realm in the latter half of the 1500s.

During Elizabeth's reign there were multiple conspiracies for her assassination: the Northern Rebellion of 1569,<sup>27</sup> the Ridolfi Conspiracy of 1570-71,<sup>28</sup> and, the most pertinent to Spenser and *The Faerie Queene*, the Babington Plot of 1586. The Babington Plot, named after the conspirator Anthony Babington, was a plan to kill Queen Elizabeth I in order to crown Mary Stuart as Queen of England. Letters between Mary Stuart and Babington suggested Mary's involvement with the plot,<sup>29</sup> and Babington confessed to Mary's role in the conspiracy. This was not the first time Mary was accused of being involved with a conspiracy: in 1567, Mary Stuart was accused of colluding with the Earl of Bothwell in the murder of Lord Darnley, Mary's husband. Though the authenticity of the Casket Letters (the letters between Mary and Bothwell that were brought as evidence against the Scottish Queen) is debated, the fact that Mary was

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<sup>25</sup> Schemed.

<sup>26</sup> Hamilton notes that the translation of this word to "transfer" also allows for a legal interpretation, one which means to "convey by right of descent," which fits well within a political allegory (Hamilton 575).

<sup>27</sup> This was an unsuccessful attempt by Catholic nobles in Northern England to replace Elizabeth (a Protestant) with Mary (a Catholic) as Queen of England.

<sup>28</sup> The Ridolfi Plot was a plan to replace Elizabeth with Mary as Queen of England, using help from Spanish troops and the Duke of Norfolk.

<sup>29</sup> It has been hypothesized that Elizabeth's council doctored at least one of the letters. However, the letters between Babington and Mary were very much real (Lewis 19).

already implicated in a conspiracy plot made it easy to imagine she could be involved with another.

Even if Mary was not going to take any physical action in the conspiracy, the Bond of Association (1584) was enough to indict Mary of treason: the act “expanded the category of treason ... to include anyone suspected of harboring subversive thoughts against the queen, regardless of whether that person happened to be a subject of the crown” (Lewis 20). By broadening the requirements of treason to include “subversive thoughts,” Elizabeth’s council ultimately expanded their power in squelching imaginable conspiracies against the queen’s life.

Turning back to *The Faerie Queene*, we see that Zele does not merely accuse Duessa of treason; he also cites five contexts for the crime against her, “...to banish all remorse,/ and aggrauate the horror of her blame” (V.ix.43.3-4). The reasons introduced in these latter stanzas serve as both further evidence against Duessa as well as a call to justice:

First was a sage old Syre, that had to name  
The *Kingdomes care*, with a white siluer hed,  
That many high regards and reasons gainst her red.

Then gan *Authority* her to appose  
With peremptorie powre, that made all mute;  
And then the law of *Nations* gainst her rose,  
And reasons brought, that no man could refute;  
Next gan *Religion* gainst her to impute  
High Gods beheast, and powre of holy lawes;  
Then gan the Peoples cry and Commons sute,

Importune care of their owne publicke cause;

And lastly *Iustice* charged her with breach of lawes. (*FQ* V.ix.43.7-44.9)

The crime of treason and the interpretations, as noted by Hamilton, parallel the crime brought against Mary Stuart. Citing A. B. Gough, Hamilton interprets “Authority” as a reference to the Act of 1584,<sup>30</sup> the “law of Nations” was broken when Mary conspired against Elizabeth, “Religion” argued that Mary needed to die in order to keep the Protestant religion safe, and the (House of) “Commons” was the body that petitioned for Mary’s death to Queen Elizabeth (Hamilton 576).

The commonalities between the trial of Duessa and that of Mary Stuart are numerous enough that Spenser would be hard pressed to deny the political allegory at work in the scene. Spenser would have needed to be aware of the sensitivity of the Mary trial, especially considering Elizabeth’s indecisiveness regarding the execution. It is apparent that Spenser intended to include the unconcealed topical reference despite its sensitive nature. By unveiling the allegorical concepts in this scene, Spenser denies himself the possibility of deflected responsibility and political deniability: he has blatantly led the audience to associate his writing with a specific topical reference, and no longer has the option to produce a “you thought it” situation like he did in the poetic half-line.

The ethical and political world of Elizabethan England is complicated and hard to navigate. It is precisely through the Mercilla and Duessa scene that Spenser discovers the complicated nature of the political realm and maneuvers his way through it. “Spenser’s

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<sup>30</sup> This act pertained to the safety of the queen, and outlined the process of investigating suspected rebellions or attempts to injure Queen Elizabeth. If a person was found guilty of treason under this act, they would be unable to inherit the throne of England, and would be “pursued to death by all the Queen’s subjects.” Any plan that included killing the Queen was now considered a capital offence. (*Statutes at Large*, vol. VI, Cambridge University Press, 1763).

fictionalization of these momentous political and constitutional events registers their complexities, ironies, and duplicities, but it does so from a perspective that is more clearly aligned with the commonwealth's position than with the queen's" (Montrose 2002 937). Spenser is not pretending to know the thoughts or decision tactics of Queen Elizabeth I, but rather, gives his reader a commoner's view of the trial scenes: the opinions expressed are not necessarily ones of criticism or authority, but rather reflections of what the public may have been feeling during the process.

The final two stanzas of canto ix hold Mercilla's judgment:

But *Artegall* with constant firme intent,  
 For zeale of Iustice was against her bent.  
 So was she guiltie deemed of them all.  
 Then *Zeke* began to vrge her punishment,  
 And to their Queene for iudgement loudly call,  
 Vnto *Mercilla* myld for Iustice gainst the thrall.

But she, whose Princely breast was touched nere  
 With piteous ruth of her so wretched plight,  
 Though plaine she saw by all, that she did heare,  
 That she of death was guiltie found by right  
 Yet would not let iust vengeance on her light; (*FQ* V.ix.49.4-50.5)

In this section, it is clear that Mercilla knows what is just in regards to Duessa's fate. Like *Artegall*, she believes that Duessa is guilty of all of the crimes that she is accused of. Yet, we also see that mercy plays a role in the judgment: according to the Act of 1584 (if we are to take

the previously mentioned “Authority” as such), Duessa’s plan to take the crown from Mercilla and “tryumph in their blood, whom [Duessa] to death did dryue” is considered a capital offense, one punishable by death (*FQ* V.ix.41.9). It is precisely when Duessa too closely resembles Mary, Queen of Scots, that she is sentenced to death by Mercilla (Silberman 9).

At the time of sentencing, Mercilla is said to have “piteous ruth.” This phrase calls attention to the tension between mercy and justice that is at play in the scene: Mercilla, like Elizabeth, must maintain a balance between mercy and pity, especially as a woman. In the “Gender” entry of *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, we are presented with the idea that “Spenser attempted to envision a moral structure that could integrate the two realms [male and female] without undermining the sexual-political structure of society, to create a morality that could heal the split between private virtue and public power” (325). Pity, as a private virtue, is viewed as a feminine characteristic of a sovereign, whereas mercy, a public power, is considered to be masculine. Mercilla, as well as Elizabeth, must negotiate between these two realms: the public and the private. Elizabeth had added complications, since she was indicting her cousin (playing to the private virtue of pity) and a fellow sovereign (touching on the extent of her public power): “to charge Mary Stuart, a Catholic woman, with treason was one thing; legally to charge the sovereign Queen of Scots with treason, let alone to bring her to trial and condemn her, was quite another” (Phillips 124).

We see that “although portraying Elizabeth as Mercilla appears to idealize her virtues, evoking her ‘myld’ mercy at this point also reminds the reader of those less flattering depictions of the queen’s mercy ...” (Staines 301). By creating an idealized version of Elizabeth, Spenser is also pointing out Elizabeth’s flaws: when placed next to Mercilla, whose judgment is uncomplicated by family ties, Elizabeth’s decisions are under scrutiny. Elizabeth was in the

public eye, and was being judged, even if those critiques were not publicly expressed. In Elizabethan England, it was apparent that “no matter how Elizabeth responded to Mary’s trial, she would thus be drawing attention to the deepest uncertainties of her reign” (Lewis 31). The “uncertainties” reference the norms of prescribed femininity, especially regarding mercy and justice of a female ruler. The indecision on the part of Elizabeth regarding how to respond to Mary’s trial is mirrored in *The Faerie Queene*: despite the evidence presented against Duessa, “treason is a state of mind, the intent to destroy the monarch or the state; it is a hidden crime, one that authorities must dig deeply to uncover” (Staines 288). Elizabeth was, in all intents and purposes, stuck between a rock and a hard place: if she allowed Mary Stuart to commit treason without punishment, the precedent for Elizabeth’s mercy would be set, and she could be considered a weak ruler. On the other hand, by setting a precedent for the execution of a fellow monarch, Elizabeth was leaving her own position exposed: just like she condemned Mary, someone else could condemn Elizabeth. Condemning a fellow sovereign to death, especially on potentially shaky evidence, could also portray Elizabeth as an iron-fisted ruler, meaning Elizabeth would be a woman without the virtue of mercy or pity. Though Mercilla does not have the complications of Duessa being a sovereign or family, she still hesitates with her decision to execute the character, despite being clearly persuaded by Zele and Artegall’s argumentation.

We see, however, that Spenser hides the most important event of the sequence: Duessa’s execution. Canto ix begins with contemplation about the relationship between mercy and justice, after which it is noted that Duessa is dead:

Much more it prayesd was of those two knights;

The noble Prince, and righteous *Artegall*,

When they had seene and heard her doome a rights

Against *Duessa*, damned by them all;  
 But by her tempred without grieffe or gall,  
 Till strong constraint did her thereto<sup>31</sup> enforce.  
 And yet euen then ruing her wilfull fall,  
 With more than needfull naturall remorse,

And yeelding the last honour to her wretched corse. (*FQ* V.x.4)

The first three lines of this stanza serve to reinforce the opinion that Mercilla's judgment was correct: Artegall and the Prince both support the decision to condemn Duessa, who was "damned by them all" (*FQ* V.x.4.4). It is not until line six that it is hinted that Duessa is already dead, and even then, Spenser does not make the death apparent. There is narrative incompleteness here: the concluding action that has been the center of attention in the latest scene never takes place within the poem. There is no closure to the Duessa trial, outside of the simple "thereto."

It is interesting that the scene of Duessa's execution is missing from *The Faerie Queene*. Though some may argue that Spenser does not want to depict such actions, this argument does not hold credibility, since we have already seen executions in Book V, even within canto ix itself.<sup>32</sup> Staines notes "the two gruesome public executions of Canto 9 make the absence of Duessa's death-scene all the more apparent" (Staines 303). What the reader expects, much like in the half-line example, does not come. Yet here, Spenser is not deflecting responsibility for his thoughts onto the reader; instead, this responsibility and deniability is placed upon the poem.

Spenser is calling attention to the white space of the poem, and showing his readers that he is able to utilize this space to do work that cannot be written. According to Montrose,

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton notes that this single word refers to the chopping off of Duessa's head, "though that is deliberately not said, nor need it be" (578).

<sup>32</sup> We see the execution of Malengin at V.ix.19, as well as the tongue of Malfont nailed to a post in the town square at V.ix.25.

“Spenser is using the resources of fiction and the medium of print to thematize ‘the politicization of speech and silence’ ... In a rhetorical strategy not unlike those directed toward Belphoebe in canto 3 of the Legend of Temperance [Book II], Spenser draws attention to what cannot be written about the trial of Duessa by bridling the royal prerogative in the interstitial silence between cantos 9 and 10 of the Legend of Justice” (Montrose 2002 938). By marginalizing Duessa and her execution to the white space of the poem, Spenser makes readers aware of the sensitive nature of the subject, and the way he must maneuver the political sphere within his writing. In order to move through this difficult terrain, Spenser gives the white space of the poem authority to do work: work that he cannot safely write with words.

There is movement behind the poem, within Faerie Land itself, which has its own agency, or at least this is what Spenser would like us to believe. Not everything has to be written, especially not things that are a risk for him to write. By hiding Duessa’s execution, Spenser is mimicking the events of Mary’s execution, which was also hidden from the public eye. Queen Elizabeth gave the order for Mary’s death, yet her subjects performed the act before Elizabeth wanted it to be done. In this way, the actions in (or, rather, not in) *The Faerie Queene* mirror the displaced responsibility Queen Elizabeth had in the Mary Stuart case: in the end, Elizabeth was able to blame someone else for the completed execution. Elizabeth signed Mary’s death warrant on February 1, 1587 and gave the warrant to William Davison (a privy councilor) for safe-keeping. Two days later, however, William Cecil (one of Elizabeth’s council members) called together the Privy Council of England and decided to execute Mary without the Queen’s knowledge. Mary was executed on February 8, and Elizabeth immediately blamed Davison for the execution, claiming that he acted contrary to her orders, despite the fact that she had already signed the death warrant.



In the hidden, yet unveiled,<sup>33</sup> execution of Duessa, “Spenser reminds us . . . that behind the rhetoric, Mary’s hidden body remains beheaded, and that her unwritten, unwritable execution remains part of public memory” (Staines 304). It is not that Spenser disagrees with Mercilla (or Elizabeth’s) execution order, but rather, that this execution does not need to be written to be inscribed in public memory. Tobias Gregory notes that “he leaves the topical reference discernible but quietly erases the conflict” surrounding the trial and sentence (369). Gregory goes one step further and discusses the contrast between characters, noting it “suggests criticism of Elizabeth for not acting more like Mercilla” (370).

Spenser’s criticism, it is important to realize, is unwritten. Instead, it is enveloped in the white space of the poem, a place where it is safer to discuss (or, rather, not discuss) sensitive subjects. It is a place where Spenser can deflect responsibility from himself to the work as an agent. The agency of the white space, and of the poem as a whole, is generated by the lack of closure within the written word: the lack of closure creates a moment of *occupatio*, where the reader is even more aware of the missing element of the scene than if Spenser had described the event outright.

During this episode, we see Spenser transition between different units of imagination: the conclusion of canto ix is very much situated within the local, topical imagination, whereas the beginning of canto x transitions quickly to a global, abstract moral allegory regarding justice and mercy. We follow the trail of Mary Stuart closely, with Spenser focusing on the political references of the scene rather than making poignant, overarching claims about justice as a whole. As we cross the blank space between cantos ix and x, we must not only allow for the execution of Duessa, but must also prepare for a switch from a local unit of imagination to a global one.

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<sup>33</sup> Hidden by the white space of the poem, unveiled by Spenser’s attention to it in the beginning of canto x and his lack of attempt to cover the topical reference of the scenes.

Spenser begins canto x with a meditation on the relationship between mercy and justice, a global concept that has been at play during the local episode of Mercilla's court:

Some Clarke doe doubt in their deicefull art  
 Whether this heauenly thing, whereof I treat,  
 To weeten *Mercie*, be of Iustice part,  
 Or drawne forth from her by diuine extreate.  
 This well I wote, that sure she is as great,  
 And meriteth to haue as high a place,  
 Sith in th'Almighties euerlasting seat  
 She first was bred, and borne of heauenly race;  
 From thence pour'd down on men, by influence of grace. (*FQ* V.x.1)

In these lines, which open canto x, Spenser justifies Mercilla's mercy by noting that mercy and justice both hold priority in society. Despite uncertainties regarding where mercy comes from in relation to justice, it is clear that the focus of this stanza is on the global moralizing allegory of mercy and justice.

The move to a global focus at the beginning of a canto is not unusual for Spenser, yet it is interesting in this episode the pace at which the reader must make these switches: we move from the topical reference in canto ix to a global meditation of mercy and justice in V.x.1, to a unit of national epic (the story of an idealized nation, history, and fate) in V.x.3, only to return to the topical reference in stanza 5. The reader, in the matter of only a few stanzas, goes from contemplating abstract moral ideals to the aftermath of Duessa's execution. The movement through these units of imagination happens, like the execution itself, in the white space of the poem: Spenser does not suddenly shift units during a stanza, but only in the interval between

stanzas. Much like the missing execution, the change of units of imagination in the unwritten space creates a tension in the work, and gives the unwritten word agency to do work. In this case, the work is the re-focusing on the different scales of the poem itself, scales that remind the reader that Spenser is not preoccupied with only the local or the global moments, but rather, is conscious of both at the same time.

Holes created in the poem (be it between cantos or stanzas) cannot be filled without the active role of the reader (to imagine the execution of Duessa or to switch from local to global units of imagination) and the agency of the white space (to hold these events without Spenser's written word). This characteristic of Book V, cantos ix-x, deviates from the traditional epic, which would describe each event that was pertinent to the tale: the reader would not necessarily need to be an active participant (outside the act of reading the poem) in order to understand the events happening in the work, and the blank space would not have agency of its own. The blatant removal of a crucial moment (i.e. a moment of closure), such as Duessa's execution) forces *The Faerie Queene* to remain inconclusive; it is an epic, but one with holes.

## Conclusion

By reading *The Faerie Queene*, we learn many things, not the least of which are the virtues desired in a courtly setting. Moral instruction cannot come, however, without the movement between the global meditations and the local topical examples, and Spenser's changing scope (from the local to the global) emphasizes the discussions of each of these units of imagination.

Despite transitioning between these units of imagination in the white space of the poem (a more seamless transition, rather than a choppy one), there is still tension created in the work when these transitions happen quickly. Because the transitions happen in the white space of the poem, it is the reader's responsibility to refocus their reading view as Spenser moves across the spectrum of scope. Readers must fill gaps and voids within *The Faerie Queene*, making them active agents of the poem, with the white space as their medium. In both the Belphoebe blazon and Duessa's execution, it is the reader who must supply the events of closure in each instance (either a description of Belphoebe's genitalia, or the physical execution of Duessa), rather than the author. Spenser creates an unwritten narrative behind his written word, a narrative that contains sensitive materials that would not necessarily be suitable for him to write.

The deflected responsibility in both the Belphoebe and Duessa scenes gives agency to the poem itself: it is the reader and the work that interact to extract the story from the white space, rather than the reader and the author interacting through the written word. Spenser, in creating these situations of deflected responsibility, is ultimately able to include erotic and political commentary that might have otherwise upset Queen Elizabeth I. By placing the commentary in the white space of the poem, Spenser not only creates tension between the written and the

unwritten word, but also creates a poem that does not offer completion, or closure, unless the reader supplies it.

Tensions, however, are not only between the written and unwritten word. We see tension in Book III between chronological and allegorical time: one is wholly possible in real life, whereas the other necessitates a fantasy time sequence. Having different time sequences, especially ones that are not wholly compatible, breaks the normal convention of epic poetry, which traditionally can be placed in a chronological sequence. The Florimell/Marinell episode in Book III proves to Spenser's readers that this convention is not held by *The Faerie Queene*: the time sequencing within the poem is different than what we experience in the real world.

These different time sequences (chronological and allegorical) are ultimately brought about via the use of lyric stanzas within the epic: the reader moves linearly through the epic, yet does so by way of numerous cyclical Spenserian stanzas. The refashioning of the traditional epic structure (which, if it is divided at all, is usually divided into larger portions) allows *The Faerie Queene* to be situated within two realms: that of the epic, and that of the non-epic. By simultaneously occupying these differing realms, Spenser's poem is wholly unique. Though Spenser certainly calls upon the tradition of epic and expands upon Ariosto's radical departure from the norm, *The Faerie Queene* stands alone insofar as Spenser includes a level of allegory that is missing from other works.

We see Spenser manipulate traditional characteristics of the epic genre in order to give the poem more agency to do allegorical work: by creating a space behind the written text, Spenser is able to include erotic and political commentary; by forming a structure of cyclical lyric stanzas within the epic as a whole, the poet creates an awareness of the differing units of imagination at work within *The Faerie Queene*. It is precisely when we focus on the smaller

units that there are issues with the classification: at the stanza level, we find holes in the poem, not only logically/narratively, but also structurally, with intervals of blank space coming once every nine lines. The oscillations between the written and unwritten at this unit of imagination make it apparent that both spheres have agency of their own: the former is governed by Spenser-as-poet, whereas the latter is positioned by Spenser, but is ultimately acted upon by the reader.

The movement between these scopes of focus creates tension: the reader must move with Spenser to focus on differing scopes of imagination, yet these movements are unwritten.

Together with the tension between allegorical and chronological time, the tension between the units of imagination ultimately revise ordinary narrative causality, and, at times, displace it to the white space of the poem. Through the Florimell sequence, Spenser takes importance away from chronological time as a determiner of causality. In moments of *occupatio* (in Belphoebe's blazon and Duessa's execution), Spenser denies causality simply by not allowing closure for the events: Belphoebe's blazon is unfinished, and Duessa's execution is hidden from the written word. By placing these moments in the realm of the unwritten, Spenser forces the reader to interact with the poem and become an active participant in reading *The Faerie Queene*.

The changed agency and authority of the poem diverges from the traditional heroic poem, where the narrator usually holds complete authority/agency over the work (stemming from the oral tradition of the genre). This refashioned genre ultimately gives more agency to the poem and the poet by allowing them to break from the confines of traditional conventions of the epic genre. Spenser nods to his predecessors within the epic genre by maintaining some conventions of heroic poetry, yet ultimately fashions his own version of an epic poem, one truly Spenserian, and opens the doors for later writers to do the same.

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