Wounding the Female Body Politic:
Reading the 1580s in *The Faerie Queene*

Halle Edwards

An Honors Thesis in English Literature
Submitted to the Stanford University English Department
May 14, 2014

*Advisor*
Professor Roland Greene

*Second Reader*
Professor Andrea Lunsford
Dedicated to the memory of Carolyn Bagley Edwards,
who would have been proudest,
and to the memory of Chase Pinkham,
who showed me that history is alive.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Roland Greene for taking my spark of interest in *The Faerie Queene* and helping it grow into a fire big enough to tackle a project of this size. He gave me faith in my ability to bring something new to the interpretation of this epic, and for that, as well as for guiding me through the thesis writing process this year, I am forever grateful. I would also like to thank Andrea Lunsford, who has been my mentor in the English major since sophomore year. She personally ensured that I declared a major in English, and has been a source of wisdom, guidance, and support ever since. Her comments and direction on this project in particular, as my second reader, have been invaluable.

Alice Staveley guided the English Honors program this year with grace and humor, from the proposal process through the final phase of editing. She deserves endless accolades for transforming thirteen very diverse proposals into thirteen full theses. Hilton Obenzinger guided our cohort with sage and sane advice about the writing process. I am also indebted to a host of faculty who helped shape not only this thesis, but my entire undergraduate career. Joshua Landy, Brittany Perham, Elaine Treharne, and Kirstin Valdez Quade’s kind advice and open ears throughout my time at Stanford, but especially this year, will not be forgotten. And Linda Paulson, as my advisor, mentor, and dear friend since my first days at Stanford, has given me constant guidance and support – not to mention a home. I am incredibly lucky to have learned from and worked with such gracious, intelligent people.

I would especially like to thank Jessica Beckman, my graduate mentor on this project, for working with me tirelessly, reading countless drafts, and helping this project be its very best. I can say with confidence this thesis would not have flourished without her support and bottomless patience.

Finally, I could not have completed this project without the ceaseless love and support given to me by friends and family all over the world. From weekly thesis-writing sessions to late-night study breaks to supportive Skype calls, my friends and family kept me grounded during this year. And to my mother, father, brothers, and sister in particular, thank you for putting up with me – and my irrational obsessions. I hope you’ll agree that this one paid off.
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Introduction

The Gaping Gulf

In 1579, John Stubbs, a Protestant pamphleteer, published *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf Whereinto England is Like to Be Swallowed by Another French Marriage if the Lord Forbid Not the Banns by Letting Her Majesty See the Sin and Punishment Thereof*. The treatise opposed Queen Elizabeth I's potential marriage to Francis, Duke D'Anjou, the son of Henry II of France. As the title suggests, Stubbs was more than a little concerned that the marriage would make Protestant England a subject of Catholic France. Elizabeth was so angered by the pamphlet that she ordered for Stubbs and his publisher to be tried for seditious writing. They were found guilty, and on November 3, 1579, both had their right hands cut off as punishment.

The event is notorious for Stubbs's words on the scaffold before the sentence was carried out, as reported by an eyewitness: "The hand ready on the block to be stricken off, he said often to the people, ‘Pray for me, now my calamity is at hand.’ And so, with three blows, it was smitten off…After the deed was done, Stubbs took off his hat with his left hand, and declared in a loud voice, ‘God save the queen!’"

England in the sixteenth century was not a safe place for writers to speak their minds, even if their gallows humor was on point.

Edmund Spenser, unlike Stubbs, learned how to frame his criticism and satire more subtly. In 1579, Spenser was an ambitious writer and secretary to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, one of Elizabeth's closest councilors. He had recently published *The Shepheardes Calender*, an emulation of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Though he was not a part of

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1 See Berry, pages Xxxxv-Xxxvi, for the full account of Stubbs’s punishment.
Elizabeth's inner circle, he was close enough to court to know how to present himself – and his ideas – without risking his life. But even if he had not learned that lesson well enough by 1579, his publisher was the same man who had published Stubbs's *Gaping Gulf*, a connection that surely would have driven home the dangers of criticizing Queen Elizabeth.

*The 1580s as the Birthplace of The Faerie Queene*

Soon after the publication of *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser was given a post in Ireland. He spent most of the 1580s there, witnessing and reporting the brutal results of English occupation, while also writing the first half of his magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*. During that decade, Elizabeth's court was rocked by a series of climactic events: the failure of Elizabeth's last marriage negotiation, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the attack of the Spanish Armada. All of these events raised questions about England's security and its future after the death of Elizabeth, who had refused to marry and leave behind an heir. Spenser, as a rising writer and an increasingly important figure in Ireland, would have been intimately concerned with questions of England's future, questions that rode on the decisions of its willful Queen.

Spenser’s anxieties about England’s future began to manifest in his writing, though of course, he had to be subtle about their presentation. Indeed, the work that Spenser produced during this time, *The Faerie Queene*, was dedicated to the Queen herself:

To the most high, mightie and magnificent Empresse renovvmed for pietie, vertve, and all gratiovs government, Elizabeth, by the grace of God Qveene of England, Fravnce and Ireland and of Virginia, Defendovr of the Faith. Her Most
Hymble Servant Edmyn Spenser Doth in All Hymilitie dedicate, present and
consecrate these his labours to live vwith the eternitie of her fame.²

Reading this dedication alone, a reader might expect the epic to, indeed, be nothing but
praise for Queen Elizabeth. However, the contents of The Faerie Queene, which Spenser
intended to "fashion Morall vertues" in twelve parts (only six were finished before his
death), are anything but straightforward. Each book has a knight who represents a virtue,
and that knight navigates the bizarre world of Faeryland and fights in the name of their
virtue, with varying degrees of success. The epic contains a rich cast of recurring
characters as well, and the narrative often redirects to them, which can be disorienting.
The epic is also masked by several levels of allegory and ornate poetic decoration. The
Faerie Queene is thus an intensely complicated work that demands an equally astute,
careful reader. Given the work's difficulty, Spenser's personal history in Ireland, and the
tumultuous state of England during the 1580s, The Faerie Queene must be read with two
very careful eyes open, especially when trying to tease out Spenser’s attitude towards
Elizabeth.

Indeed, many scholars have pointed to instances in The Faerie Queene,
particularly in its second half (Books Four, Five, and Six, published in 1596) that directly
allegorize events of Queen Elizabeth's reign, and not always in a flattering way: for
example the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots (allegorized as the trial of his villain Duessa)
and the attack of the Spanish Armada (allegorized as a fight between his hero Arthur and
the another villain, the Souldan). But the second half of The Faerie Queene was largely
written in the 1590s, well after the events in question. The first half of The Faerie
Queene, Books One, Two, and Three, was written during the 1580s, while these events

² See Hamilton, page 22, for a reproduction of the 1590 title page.
took place, but does not contain direct allegories for these events.

This demands the question: how exactly did the trauma of the 1580s figure into the first half of *The Faerie Queene*, if not directly?

I find my answer in a descriptive detail employed often during Book Three, which centers on Britomart, the Knight of Chastity and Spenser's only female knight. Her femaleness does not go uncommented on, and in fact, Spenser presents her in stages, both as a weak, love-stricken teenage girl and a capable knight. Many female characters in Book Three sustain and bear ghastly wounds, both physical and metaphorical, which represent their encounters with love and lust. In Britomart’s female stage, she too sustains such a wound after falling in love with the image of a man. Britomart describes her wound as feeling like having swallowed a hook, remarking:

*Sithens* [the hook] hath infixed faster hold

Within my bleeding bowels, and so sore

Now ranckleth in this same fraile freshly mould,

That all mine entrailes flow with poysnous gore,

And th’vlcer groweth daily more and more;

Ne can my running sore find remedie,

Other then my hard fortune to deplore,

And languish as the leafe falne from the tree,

Till death make one end of my dayes and miserie. (3.2.39)³

The description is graphic, brutal, and hauntingly realized. Love in *The Faerie Queene* is not a trifling thing – Britomart predicts her pain will lead to death. Many other characters

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in Book Three bear similar wounds, and all are similarly violent and visual.

Despite the jarringly violent nature of the wound imagery, and its close relation to these characters' experiences of love and lust, critics of Spenser have yet to fully examine their significance. I argue that the nature of the wounds, written on the bodies of his female characters, betray Spenser's critical attitude towards Queen Elizabeth. This attitude would have been shaped by his experiences in Ireland in the 1580s and further sharpened by the tumultuous nature of the decade for Queen Elizabeth herself.

**Hybrid and Metamorphosis**

I illustrate Spenser’s anxiety about Queen Elizabeth, and her female body politic, with the help of Caroline Walker Bynum, whose theory of hybrid and metamorphosis, which she applies to medieval texts, I find quite useful both in the sixteenth century and within the world of *The Faerie Queene*.

In exploring how medieval thinkers reconciled changing and abnormal natural

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4 The role of sexuality, chastity, and gender in *The Faerie Queene* has been oft discussed by Spenserian scholars. Mid-century work examined particular books, rather than the whole poem, paving the way for more specific studies. Roche studied the middle books in *The Kindly Flame*, examining Britomart's chastity (51-95), Amoret and Belphoebe as two alternatives of Christian love (96-149), and the role of Florimell (150-194). Alpers, in *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene*, reads Britomart's adventures as a clash between heroic and pastoral modes (371-405). Scholars in the 1980s examined Spenser's discourse as related to gender, power, and the queen. Judith Anderson, in “In Liuing Color and Right Hue,” explores these criticisms in Belphoebe’s narrative (47-66). In "Singing Unsung Heroines," Silberman explores how Spenser actively evades Petrarchan norms and creates an androgynous discourse. Parker, in *Literary Fat Ladies*, reads Spenser’s opposition into the epic’s dueling narrative and lyric tendencies. Recent scholarship has continued to engage in issues surrounding sex and gender in the poem. Cavanagh explores Britomart’s modeling of chastity in *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires* (139-172). Broaddus, in *Spenser’s Allegory of Love*, examines Britomart’s repressed sexual desire (23-45). In *The Limits of Eroticism*, Stephens examines the relationships Amoret forms with female characters (25-46). Spenser's gendered vision of imagination (47-72) and the clash between heroines and monstrous figures (73-101). In *Transforming Desire*, Silberman explores Britomart's quest as the embrace of risk (13-35), Adonis's wounds in Book Three (35-48), images of hermaphrodites (49-69), Britomart and Artegall's fight and subsequent union (99-115), and the allegorical figure Lust (117-125). Katherine Eggert aims to bridge the gap between Book Five's romance-driven and historical-allegory-driven sections (22-50). I hope to continue this discourse with a careful examination of wounds in the poem, especially within Book Three, and how they reveal Spenser’s critique of Elizabeth's body politic.

5 See Bynum, pages 25-30, for more on her conception of hybrid and metamorphosis.
phenomena, Bynum identifies two concepts of change: hybrid and metamorphosis. While hybrid is inherently confrontational, metamorphosis allows for transition. As Bynum argues, “The hybrid expresses a world of natures, essences, or substances (often diverse or contradictory to each other), encountered through paradox; it resists change. Metamorphosis expresses a labile world of flux and transformation, encountered through story” (Bynum 29-30). Hybrid allows for doubleness and resistance while metamorphosis is couched in gradual, observable, understandable change. From these definitions, it is understandable why hybrids could be seen as more inherently problematic than creatures that transform gradually.

Looking more closely at the definitions of hybrid and metamorphosis, and how they apply to *The Faerie Queene*, reveals how this theory can better draw out Spenser’s anxiety about Queen Elizabeth’s body politic. In his epic, Spenser relies on vivid and often bizarre imagery to exact his moral allegory. Bynum writes about how images of change can be used to reveal truths:

[Hybrid and metamorphosis] can be understood both to destabilize and to reveal the world… The man who becomes a wolf (metamorphosis) can be seen as revealing his rapacity; satyrs, chimeras, or mermaids (hybrids) can be understood as depicting lust, hypocrisy, or the insubstantiality of love. On the other hand, both hybrid and metamorphosis can be destabilizings of expectation. Both can suggest that the world, either in process or in the instant, is disordered and fluid, with the horror and wonder of uncontrolled potency or violated boundaries.” (Bynum 30-1)

This destabilizing of expectation has tremendous relevance to the study of *The Faerie
Queene, which relies on intentionally troubling and bizarre imagery to exact its allegory. Furthermore, the epic is replete with mythical hybrids like satyrs, who represent lust, and characters like Britomart, who undergoes a metamorphosis from a weak woman to a strong knight. But beyond Spenser’s use of hybrid and metamorphosis imagery, the larger implications of those images – and the privileging Spenser grants to metamorphosis over hybrid – allows Spenser to express his discomfort with Elizabeth’s female body politic.

As Bynum writes:

Hybrid reveals a world of difference, a world that is and is multiple; metamorphosis reveals a world of stories, of things underway. Metamorphosis breaks down categories by teaching them; hybrid forces contradictory or incompatible categories to coexist and serve as commentary each on the other.

(Bynum 31)

Spenser uses metamorphosis to tell the story of Britomart. He exploits her feminine weakness at its most disgusting, through descriptions of her wound, and then uses metamorphosis to show how she, despite her inherent weaknesses, can become a knight. She never inhabits a hybrid female-knight state; she is either the wounded woman or the male knighthly figure. In contrast, hybrid imagery in the epic – from satyrs to men forced to dress as women – is used to show problems and moral missteps.

The problematization of hybrid imagery in The Faerie Queene is crucial, because Queen Elizabeth, in many ways, was attempting to be a hybrid: a queen and a king, a virginal mother and a desirable woman. Spenser actively rejects that notion, and instead presents his lone female knight Britomart as metamorphosing between female and male. So while Elizabeth attempted to blur the lines of her gender to maintain her hold on
monarchical power, Spenser consistently criticizes her attempts at hybridity and instead presents the narrative of metamorphosis as being a more natural, acceptable mode of change. I will trace instances of hybrid and metamorphosis imagery both in Elizabeth’s presentation of her body politic and in *The Faerie Queene* to elucidate Spenser’s discomfort with Elizabeth’s hybridity, a further indication of his anxiety about Elizabeth’s body in power.

**Structure**

In this thesis, I first elucidate why the 1580s was such a difficult and transformative decade for Queen Elizabeth and her court, and how that affected Edmund Spenser’s already difficult experiences as an English colonist in Ireland. I trace the obvious shadows of these historical events in the second half of *The Faerie Queene*, before turning to Book Three, in the epic’s first half, to examine the female wounds and argue that they, in a more subtle, lingering, pernicious way, contain the weight of Spenser’s anxiety about Queen Elizabeth and the future of England. Throughout the essay, I will refer to Bynum’s theory of hybrid and metamorphosis to further draw out Spenser’s discomfort with Elizabeth and his privileging of a clear gender binary.
Chapter 1. The 1580s

Part 1. Queen Elizabeth

The 1580s was a particularly tumultuous decade for Queen Elizabeth and her court, which in many ways marked a crucial turning point for her reign. Her last marriage negotiation ended at the beginning of the decade, leaving England to come to terms with the reality of a childless queen and an uncertain future. Furthermore, several ongoing crises came to climactic conclusions: Elizabeth continued to struggle with what to do with Mary, Queen of Scots and finally executed her in 1587, sparking Catholic outrage in Europe, and England’s tension with Spain continued to increase, leading to the threatened invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588. These events raised questions about Elizabeth’s strength as a queen and the safety of the realm.

Throughout the drama, English citizens, including Spenser, were forced to adjust their expectations of Queen Elizabeth and England’s future – in a much more urgent way than they would have in the preceding decades. The resultant anxiety can be traced in *The Faerie Queene*, both overtly in the last half and subtly in the first half. In this section, I examine the three most crucial events of the 1580s – Elizabeth’s last marriage negotiation, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Spanish Armada. I trace the tension between Elizabeth’s self-presentation as a hybrid – a queen and king, a virgin and a mother to her people – and how her courtiers and Spenser consistently pushed back against this presentation. I argue that the decade’s heightened sense of struggle, both in terms of the actual events and the power struggles Elizabeth faced with her council, left noticeable imprints on the last half of *The Faerie Queene*, though I ultimately argue these
obvious imprints should lead us to seek their less-obvious counterparts in the epic’s first half.

_The Queen and Her ‘Frog’: Elizabeth’s Last Marriage Negotiation_

From the time Elizabeth assumed the throne at age twenty-five, through the entirety of her childbearing years, Queen Elizabeth entertained marriage proposals, both with local suitors and eligible nobles from abroad. Over the years, she continuously refused to settle on a marriage, and instead used the negotiations as a way to extend favor – or express disapproval – to not just her courtiers in England, but also the various princes of Europe. Her unmarried chastity was a necessary part of marriage negotiations, but also helped her create a public image as the Virgin Queen – an image she was increasingly unwilling to part with. Elizabeth actively presented a hybrid identity – she was the virgin queen and mother to the English people, but she also presented herself as a desirable woman who was heavily sought after by both her courtiers and foreign princes. For the first few decades of her reign, she kept the possibility of marriage, and an heir, alive, largely thanks to this hybrid presentation, fueling hope of a stable succession after her death. Once Elizabeth left that possibility behind, England had to adjust to an uncertain lineage and therefore an uncertain future – a fear strongly reflected in the endings of the last two books of _The Faerie Queene._

Elizabeth’s final marriage negotiation reveals the tensions surrounding a possible royal marriage. In 1579, she began her last formal marriage negotiation, with the French Duke Francis D’Anjou. By this point, Elizabeth was in her mid-forties, making

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6 See Levin, Chapter Three (39-65) for a detailed analysis of how Queen Elizabeth used marriage negotiations as a political tool and as a way to craft her identity.
childbearing unlikely. It seems Elizabeth did not leave behind her childbearing years without careful thought, since this last marriage negotiation was one of most protracted and serious. D’Anjou became the first foreign suitor to actually come visit her in England. Her courtiers watched as she nicknamed this last suitor her “frog,” after an earring he had given her. Furthermore, she is said to have accepted a ring from him and kissed him in full view of her court, among other accounts of their flirtation. Whether or not she really meant to marry him, the courtship was certainly more serious than the many that had preceded it. Perhaps because of the courtship’s intensity, arguments against Queen Elizabeth marrying a foreign prince appeared, as they tended to whenever foreign matches were proposed, but more highly charged and volatile than ever: this was the marriage proposal that prompted Stubbs to publish *The Gaping Gulf*. Although both Stubbs and his publisher lost their right hands for libel, the existence of the pamphlet shows how venomous the feeling against Elizabeth’s potential marriage was. Either the controversial nature of the match or Elizabeth’s desire to remain single prevailed, for the marriage negotiation faltered, even though D’Anjou and Elizabeth kept the negotiation alive into the early 1580s for political reasons.

Thus by the early 1580s, the court and the nation had to formally accept that Elizabeth would not marry and produce an heir. By the time the final negotiation drew to a close, ending officially with the death of D’Anjou in 1584, Queen Elizabeth had reached her fifties, meaning she could no longer have children and continue the Tudor

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7 Previous suitors did not want to risk the humiliation of being turned down based on their appearance. See Levin, page 50, for an illumination of other obstacles Elizabeth presented to her suitors.
8 See Neale, page 241, for a detailed account of Elizabeth and Anjou’s courtship.
9 See Levin, page 63, for an account of the incident.
10 See Levin Chapter 3 (39-65), Neale Chapter 15 (237-256) and MacCaffrey Chapter 16 (198-217) for detailed accounts of the Anjou courtship and interpretations of its conclusion.
line. After more than twenty years of negotiations and the expectation of marriage, this was a big adjustment for her courtiers and the realm to make. They now had to turn their attention to finding the best possible successor while protecting the throne from a coup.\textsuperscript{11} During a century in England when questions of lineage had caused political turmoil, to accept childlessness was a highly controversial move.\textsuperscript{12} The unsettled succession set the 1580s, from their beginning, with an anxious tone.\textsuperscript{13}

Elizabeth’s resulting childlessness and the risky state that put England’s future in would have affected Spenser. Although he left for Ireland in 1580, and thus would have experienced the readjustment from a foreign shore, the future of the realm was everyone’s concern, especially someone working to expand England’s hold on the world. Indeed, while every citizen of England was necessarily concerned with the realm’s future, for Spenser, and other figures involved with England’s nascent colonialism, the question of why England sought to expand, and in whose name, was a crucial one. Given that Elizabeth had no heir, the question of who Ireland and other holdings would pass to, especially given the difficulty maintaining colonies, was an important question – and a troubling one to leave unanswered. This question certainly would have troubled Spenser, and his anxieties would become even more strongly pronounced in the 1590s, as he wrote the last half of his epic and England reconciled itself to being close to Elizabeth’s death.

\textsuperscript{11} See Neale 246-7 for a discussion of the immediate aftermath of the match’s dissolution.
\textsuperscript{12} Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, threw England into turmoil by divorcing himself from both Catherine of Aragon and the Catholic Church, all in pursuit of a male heir with a different queen. The years before Elizabeth’s reign were particularly bloody as the throne passed from Edward VI to Lady Jane Grey to Mary I, who tried to bring England back to Catholicism, and before passing to Elizabeth. For more on Henry VIII, the Protestant reformation, and the tumultuous years between his reign and Elizabeth’s, see Neale Chapters 1 (13-26) and 3 (38-60), and MacCaffrey Chapters 1 and 2 (3-32).
\textsuperscript{13} However, by refusing to marry, Elizabeth could also have been acting to protect her own authority, since Protestantism codified a family hierarchy with the husband at the head. See Weisner-Hanks, pages 30-4, for a detailed discussion of how Protestant religious reforms affected gender roles within marriage.
Indeed, Spenser’s anxiety about the future of England is palpable in the last half of *The Faerie Queene*. In particular, both Book Five and Book Six have inconclusive endings that leave their heroes’ legacies, and the future of Faeryland, in question. Book Five ends with the release of the Blatant Beast, a creature who spreads lies and malice, “his hundred tongues did bray…And still among most bitter wordes they spake,/ Most shamefull, most vnrighteous, most yntrew” (5.12.41-42). Had the beast appeared earlier in the epic, the hero, Artegall, might have subdued him. But instead, Artegall continues his journey back to court: “he for nought would swerue/ From his right course, but still the way did hold/ To Faery Court” (5.12.43.7-9). The uncertainty of the fate of Faeryland in Book Five speaks to a broad anxiety about England’s future. The sixth and final book also ends with a great degree of uncertainty. Although Calidore manages to temporarily subdue the Blatant Beast, “whether wicked fate so framed,/ Or fault of men, he broke his yron chaine,/ And got into the world at liberty againe” (6.12.38.7-9). Spenser does not pin the blame for the monster’s escape on any one figure; he suggests both fate and men but leaves it up to the reader to imagine. This uncertainty of where to place blame parallels the state of England’s future and Elizabeth’s marriage – was the queen solely to blame, or were her advisors and European politics more culpable? But the uncertainty also allows Spenser to skirt direct criticism of Queen Elizabeth while simultaneously communicating anxiety about England’s future. Regardless of the cause of the beast’s release, it causes chaos without hope of peace, “Nor euer could by any more by brought/ Into like bands, ne maystred any more” (6.12.39.3-4). Thus the epic ends with the Blatant Beast running throughout the world. The uncertain, chaotic reality of the epic’s ending parallels how Spenser saw the future of England and its holdings in Ireland.
Elizabeth’s lack of an heir would have been a part of Spenser’s anxiety about England’s future, causing him to actively trouble his later book endings. He would have seen Elizabeth’s childlessness – the result of her attempts at hybridity – as a guarantee of a difficult transition and instability following Elizabeth’s death. By giving Books Five and Six uncertain, dark endings, and suggesting that order in the world is decreasing, not increasing, Spenser pushes back against the notion that Elizabeth was able to successfully fracture her identity into strategic pairs – king and queen, virginal mother and desirable woman – without jeopardizing England. Rather, in Spenser’s eyes, Elizabeth had doomed England to strife.

*Queen Versus Queen: The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*

One of the must crucial decisions of Elizabeth’s reign, the decision to execute Mary, Queen of Scots, ultimately hurt Elizabeth’s body politic, despite protecting England from its chief Catholic threat. Spenser uses the circumstances of Mary’s execution to demonstrate Elizabeth’s weakness, suggesting that Elizabeth was impaired by her feminine empathy, and further rejecting Elizabeth’s presentation as a hybrid of king and queen.

For much of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, Mary, Queen of Scots lurked in the background, the symbol of the Catholic threat to Protestant England as well as a personal threat to Queen Elizabeth’s place on the throne.\(^{14}\) After being overthrown by Scottish lords, Mary sought refuge in England in 1568, where Elizabeth put her under house

\(^{14}\) Not only did Mary have a claim to the throne through her grandmother Margaret, Henry VIII’s older sister, but she had also surpassed Elizabeth in that she had married and had a child, James, the heir to the throne of Scotland and another potential claimant to Elizabeth’s throne. John Neale has a detailed account of the career of Mary in chapters 7, 10, 11, 12, and 16 of his book. MacCaffrey also has a detailed account in Part III (chapters 9-12) and chapter 29 in his history of Elizabeth.
arrest. Despite calls by many on Elizabeth’s privy council to send Mary to the Tower for trial and execution, Elizabeth resisted. Since Elizabeth refused to fully imprison her, Mary was a constant thorn in Elizabeth’s side, scheming with other European kings and lords to depose Elizabeth and return Catholicism to England.\(^{15}\)

Elizabeth struggled to protect both her own interests and Mary’s life, which were simultaneously opposed and linked. Despite Mary’s schemes, Elizabeth was wary of executing Mary, since executing a monarch, even a deposed one, would suggest that a monarch could be killed. More than weakening Elizabeth’s authority, this could endanger her life. However, tensions between the cousins came to a head during the 1580s, forcing the ongoing strife to a conclusion. Elizabeth managed to keep Mary’s scheming at bay for most of her imprisonment by granting her a comfortable household but watching her correspondence closely.\(^{16}\) However, in 1586, Mary was implicated in the Babington Plot, a plan for Philip II to invade England, remove Elizabeth from the throne, and crown Mary instead to return England to Catholicism and Spain’s sphere of influence.\(^{17}\) The plot provided reason to place Mary on trial for treason, in front of 36 lords, including Burghley, a close confidant of Elizabeth’s, and Walsingham, who had gathered much of the evidence against Mary without Elizabeth’s knowledge. Although all lords save one voted in favor of Mary’s guilt and execution, Elizabeth delayed for as long as possible, and even after Mary was finally executed in February 1587, she asserted that her Privy Council had acted without her consent. This reveals what a delicate situation the execution put her in – caught between fighting with her privy council and protecting her

\(^{15}\) See Neale Chapter 12 (191-204) and MacCaffrey Chapter 12 (135-46) for in-depth treatments of the Ridolfi Plot, one of the most prominent examples of Mary’s attempts to displace Elizabeth.

\(^{16}\) See Neale 257-60 for more on the precautions placed around Mary.

\(^{17}\) For a full account of the Babington Plot, including the involvement of Lords Burghley and Walsingham in finding the crucial evidence, see Neale Chapter 16 (257-282) and MacCaffrey Chapter 29 (343-354).
own authority. Until the very end, Elizabeth did not want to take part in the killing of a monarch, even one that threatened her own life.

The execution of Mary, Queen of Scots secured Elizabeth’s place on the throne but also demonstrated the limits of her authority, a consequence Spenser allegorized in *The Faerie Queene*. In the allegorical scene of Mary’s execution, Spenser presents a queen’s feminine empathy delaying justice, rather than aiding it. Mary, Queen of Scots is allegorized as Duessa, one of the epic’s most persistent female villains. Duessa meets her end in court, against the wishes of Queen Mercilla, an analogue for Elizabeth, showing Spenser was aware of the politics of Elizabeth’s privy council during the 1580s, despite his placement abroad in Ireland. Spenser creates figures including Zele, Authority, and Justice to “[charge Duessa] with breach of lawes” and implore Mercilla to exact justice on her, while figures like Pittie, Nobilitie, and Griefe plead for mercy (5.9.43-45). Even after Murder, Sedition, and Adulterie, among others, condemn Duessa, they cannot overcome Mercilla’s “tender hart,” which paints her as weak and incapable of facing facts (5.9.46-8). Mercilla does not even directly pronounce Duessa guilty. Instead, the narrator passively states, “So was [Duessa] guiltie deemed of them all” (5.9.49.6).

Mercilla is troubled by this, for she:

…Yet would not let iust vengeance on [Duessa] light;

But rather let in stead thereof to fall,

Few perling drops from her faire lampes of light;

The which she couering with her purple pall

Would haue the passion hid, and yp arose withall. (5.9.50.5-9)

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18 See Neale 274-82 and MacCaffrey 348-54 for the politics surrounding Mary’s execution.
Rather than exacting justice, Mercilla cries, covers her face, and rises up – pronouncing the end of the trial without naming the punishment. Thus the canto ends on an ambiguous note, with Mercilla crying rather than pronouncing the inevitable sentence. She is the epitome of an overly sentimental, weak-willed woman – an intentionally troubling image of a woman in power.

Thus Spenser weakens Elizabeth with her mercy, while simultaneously praising her at length for it in the next canto:

> Who then can thee, Mercilla, thoroughly prayse,
> That herein doest all earthly Princes pas?
> What heauenly Muse shall thy great honour rayse,
> Vp to the skies, whence first deriu’d it was,
> And now on earth it selfe enlarged has,
> From th’vtmost brinke of the Armericke shore,
> Vnto the margent of the Molucas?
> Those Nations farre thy justice doe adore:
> But thine owne people do thy mercy prayse much more. (5.10.3)

This praise of Mercilla for desiring to save Duessa is lengthy, gushing, and overwrought – suggesting an undertone of sarcasm or scorn, especially given that Mercilla was so besieged by characters in the previous canto begging her to end Duessa’s life. Indeed, Duessa’s fate is not confirmed until the narrator discusses it after the fact when Artegall and Arthur carry out the deed, “Much more it prayed was of those two knights… yeelding the last honour to her wretched corse” (5.10.4.1-9). So despite praising Elizabeth’s mercy, those who carry out justice – in the epic, Arthur and Artegall, and in
real life, Burghley and Walsingham – are given greater praise. The subtle but pressing implications are that Elizabeth’s will, though noble, can be undermined for the sake of justice, and, that as a female ruler, she does not have the stomach for tough decisions.

Again, Spenser pushes back on the notion that Elizabeth can be both a woman and a king, and instead presents an image of her as fully handicapped by her feminine empathy. By suggesting that Elizabeth’s privy council, all men, had more to do with serving justice to Mary, Queen of Scots than Elizabeth herself did, and even that Elizabeth hindered justice, Spenser presents the image of a woman in power as a liability to the nation as a whole.

“Who Would Dare to Invade”: The Spanish Armada

Finally, the Spanish Armada incident was the largest foreign policy crisis of Elizabeth’s reign, and though Elizabeth reveled in its defeat, Spenser diminishes Elizabeth’s role, instead emphasizing male martial might. Thus Spenser argues for a clear gender binary, especially when it comes to war, and actively rejects Elizabeth’s presentation as a woman with “the heart and stomach of a king.”

Elizabeth used the Armada’s failed attack, a major victory, to emphasize her authority. The Armada had sailed against England on the orders of Philip II, provoked by Elizabeth’s support of Protestant rebellion in the Low Countries as well as the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots.19 Despite England’s victory, the threat of the Armada left doubts about the safety of the realm. Thus in a speech to soldiers following the defeat of the Armada, Queen Elizabeth celebrated not just England’s victory but her own strength. Her speech emphasizes the strength of England and of her body politic:

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19 See Neale, Chapter 17, for a succinct treatment of the Spanish Armada’s attack (283-301); see MacCaffrey, Chapter 18, for another account (235-249), as well as Chapters 19-22 for a detailed account of the attack’s aftermath and consequences in England.
…I have placed my chiefeast strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.²⁰

Elizabeth emphasizes her love for her subjects and the internal strength of her body despite her frail female form. Indeed, she explicitly presents herself as hybrid, a woman with “the heart and stomach of a king,” and extracts authority and power from that self-presentation. By including battle imagery and promising to “take up arms,” Elizabeth poses not only as a king, but one who can take up arms, bolstering her kingly presentation while deemphasizing her “weak and feeble” woman’s body. Furthermore, she “scorns” “any prince of Europe would dare to invade the borders of my realm,” casting all foreign princes as enemies. This characterization is strategic, especially since those same princes once vied for her hand in marriage. Elizabeth suggests that only by ruling alone can she adequately protect England from foreign threats, a crucial defense of her decision to remain unmarried and heirless.

²⁰ As written in Cabala, Mysteries of State and Government: in Letters of Illustrious Persons and Great Ministers of State, 373. (See Levin 206, note 56, for a summary of the debate about this speech’s authenticity.)
While Elizabeth managed to hold off a great threat to England, the magnitude of the Armada – and her public admission of its strength – represents a significant scar on her body politic, one that registered in Spenser’s epic. The Spanish Armada figures in *The Faerie Queene*, though Spenser emphasizes male martial might, and not Elizabeth’s leadership, in its defeat. He rejects Elizabeth’s presentation as a hybrid and instead offers Arthur as a male representation of England in the defeat of the Armada. The Armada was an event Spenser was acutely aware of – not least because some of the ships from the Armada crashed on Irish shores and he was charged with overseeing the clearing of the wreckage.\(^{21}\) While most English citizens had no actual contact with the Armada, Spenser’s experience suggests he would have been acutely aware of the reality of the threat. Perhaps this explains why Spenser’s prediction of Queen Elizabeth’s reign in Book Three includes her reigning “ouer the Belgicke shore” – a commentary of her support of the Low Countries during their rebellion, and painting that “rule” as more successful than reality (3.3.49.7). In bolstering the strength of Elizabeth’s international influence, he works to protect England from the force of future threats.

But perhaps more significantly, Spenser allegorizes the Armada as the attempt of the Souldan to “subuert” the “Crowne and dignity” of Queen Mercilla, casting Elizabeth as a victim during the incident and thus weakening her authority. In the epic, Mercilla is attacked out of jealousy by a “mighty man”:

\[
\text{Mongst many which maligne [Mercilla’s] happy state,} \\
\text{There is a mighty man, which wonnes here by} \\
\text{That with most fell despight and deadly hate,}
\]

\(^{21}\) See Hadfield 193 for a detailed account of Spenser’s experience of the Armada.
Seekes to subuert her Crowne and dignity,
And all his powre doth thereunto apply… (5.8.18-5)

The “mighty man” turns out to be the Souldan, and he moves to attack Mercilla with his massive, unwieldy chariot, powered by the bodies of slaughtered men:

…Swearing, and banning most blasphemously…
And mounting straight vpon a charret hye,
With yron wheeles and hookes arm’d dreadfully,
And drawne of cruell steedes, which he had fed
With flesh of men, whom through fell tyranny
He slaughtred had… (5.8.28-8)

The Souldan, “swearing…blasphemously,” “dreadfully” armored, and profiting from death, is an obvious allegory for Philip II, using the Low Countries as a platform to attack England with the Armada. England is represented by Arthur, who “In glistering armes right goodly well beseene” stands to face the Souldan (5.8.29.4). This puts the strength of England in a man’s body, fully deemphasizing Mercilla’s, and therefore Elizabeth’s, role in the defense. The contrast between the modestly (but beautifully) armed Arthur and the monstrous Souldan fits the English account of the Armada’s attack – a small but noble country facing up against a monstrous, unjust one. Their fight lasts for much of the Canto, mirroring the protracted nature of the Armada battle, “Thus long they trast, and trauerst to and fro” (5.8.37.1). But finally, Arthur triumphs, which sends the Souldan’s mounts running, similar to how the Armada was scattered, “with their ryder ranne perforce away:/ Ne could the Souldan them from flying stay,/ With raynes, or wonted rule, as well he knew” (5.8.38.4-6). Even the remnants of the battle echo the wreckage of
the Armada: “Onely his shield and armour, which there lay,/ Though nothing whole, but all to brusd and broken” (5.8.44.1-2). Thus Arthur defeats the Souldan and gains glory, much like the glory England gained when it defeated the mightier Spain.

However, Mercilla’s role is reduced to little more than bait for the Souldan, who seeks “to subuert her crowne and dignity.” This reveals Spenser likely thought of Elizabeth as more of a cause of the Armada’s attack than a reason for England’s defeat of it, turning Elizabeth’s greatest victory into yet another critique of her authority. Even though Elizabeth claimed hybridity through having “the heart and stomach of a king” after defeating the Armada, Spenser rejects that imagery in his allegory. He instead presents a gender binary: a very feminine queen, beset by the wicked Souldan, who is saved by the gallant Arthur. Once again, Elizabeth’s role is weakened and Spenser refuses to acknowledge her hybrid presentation.

As I have shown, the most obvious historical events of the 1580s and their shadows in *The Faerie Queene* are easily traceable, especially in the epic’s last half. Additionally, we can start to tease out a subtle but insistent criticism of Elizabeth as well as anxiety about England’s future. That criticism often centers on Elizabeth’s attempts to present herself as a hybrid of a queen and king, and involves Spenser rejecting that hybridity by minimizing her leadership or highlighting her supposed weaknesses. But while the biggest historical events in England in the 1580s are directly allegorized in the epic’s last half, written in the 1590s, we must consider their effect on the first half of the epic, which was being written as these events took place and was published soon after, in 1590. The anxieties about Elizabeth’s lack of an heir, encroaching Catholicism, and a growing military threat to England during the 1580s, and their effect on Spenser, will be
brought to bear on my analysis of the epic. But first, I will turn to Spenser’s experience of the 1580s, and how his experiences in Ireland would have further contributed to a complex but ultimately critical view of Queen Elizabeth and her court.

Part 2. Edmund Spenser

Andrew Hadfield’s biography of Spenser, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, provides the most recent and detailed examination of Spenser’s life to date, including his time in Ireland during the 1580s. Hadfield draws key connections between moments in Queen Elizabeth’s reign and Spenser’s tenure in Ireland in the text of *The Faerie Queene*. I turn specifically to Hadfield’s picture of Spenser’s life in Ireland and how that affected the epic, and engage with his portrait of Spenser in drawing out the particular anxiety of the 1580s. However, I will go further than Hadfield in tracing how the conflicts of the 1580s – both in Elizabeth’s England and Spenser’s Ireland – translated into the anxiety about Queen Elizabeth’s body politic that manifested in the “love wounds” in Book Three.

“Deadly Debate”: Spenser’s Life Before 1580

Spenser’s life before his mission in Ireland was typical of an ambitious, middle-class, Cambridge-educated man: it revolved around seeking jobs and favor with important figures at court, figures who would have colored his attitude towards Queen Elizabeth. Spenser worked for Elizabeth’s favorite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, as a secretary, while developing his career as a writer. He also received patronage from Lord Burghley. Burghley, as one of the queen’s closest advisors, was often frustrated with her actions, and was behind the covert publishing of several negative pamphlets about the
queen, including *Ane Detection of the duinges of Marie Quene of Scots* in 1572 and the aforementioned *Gaping Gulf* in 1579.22 Both the *Gaping Gulf* and Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* were published by the same publisher, Hugh Singleton. Spenser’s ties to both Burghley and Leicester have been used to try and interpret his allegiances, but as Hadfield argues, “[Burghley and Leicester] were not consistently hostile towards each other” and both ended up working to derail Elizabeth’s last marriage negotiation with Francis D’Anjou. Spenser’s close association with two men who were intimately involved with Elizabeth and her affairs – and certainly had criticisms of her – is an influence that cannot be discounted. And of course, the fact that *The Gaping Gulf* and *The Shepheardes Calender* shared a publisher suggests Spenser associated with people with strong criticisms of Queen Elizabeth. Even before his tenure in Ireland, we should note this possible influence on his worldview.

Indeed, in one of Spenser’s earliest and most important published works, *The Shepheardes Calender*, Hadfield traces a subtle but insistent criticism of Queen Elizabeth in passages that are disguised as praise. For example, in the April eclogue, a description of the Queen’s face as “The Redde rose medle with the White yfere,” which seems like a standard description of beauty in Renaissance terms, is complicated by the gloss on the word “yfere”: “By mingling of the Redde rose and the White, is meant the uniting of the two principall houses of Lancaster and Yorke: by whose longe discord and deadly debate, this realm many yeares was sore trauelled, and almost cleane decayed.”23 In other words, Spenser reminds the reader of the bloody origins of the Tudor Dynasty, and the risk that Elizabeth, as a female ruler, poses to the dynasty’s future. Either she will marry a foreign

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22 See Hadfield, pages 126-127, for a detailed treatment of Lord Burghley’s connections to Stubbs.

23 Line 69, page 73; pages 80-1 for gloss in the Yale edition.
prince and England will lose its independence, or she will die childless and leave the succession unsettled, threatening to throw England back into “longe discord and deadly debate.” The *Calender* thus subtly criticizes aspects of England and Elizabeth, and as Hadfield writes, “Spenser shows himself to be painfully aware of the delicate nature of the survival of the nation’s history and the need to preserve it.” Hadfield also reads the tale of Algrind (a transparent allegory for Archbishop of Canterbury Edmund Grindal, who was suspended by Elizabeth over a religious disagreement) in the July Eclogue, as being “intensely critical” of Elizabeth, despite appearing like praise on the surface. In the July Eclogue, Algrind is injured by a passing eagle, who represents Elizabeth. As Hadfield argues, “If the queen as the eagle did not mean to injure Algrind/Grindal, then she clearly does not know what she is doing and has not understood of the effects of her actions; if she did mean to injure him…then Elizabeth has alienated her clergy, who unite in defence of Algrind/Grindal at the time when she most needs their support.” In either case, Elizabeth is presented as an incapable ruler.

Thus even in the 1570s, Spenser, involved in the English court through his connections with Leicester and Burghley, was sensitive about the state of Elizabeth’s England and was not afraid to put his anxieties into writing. However, he also would have been very aware of the punishments that awaited writers who spoke too plainly. Spenser learned to navigate the line of praise and subtle criticism, even early on his writing career, a skill that he exploited to its fullest capacity in his later works.

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24 See Hadfield, pages 131-40, for a discussion of *The Shepheardes Calendar* in the context of Spenser’s life as a young writer, including analyses of the April and July eclogues.
25 Hadfield 134
26 See Hadfield 137-8 for the full discussion of the July Eclogue.
Finally, as Hadfield again notes, Spenser used *The Shepheardes Calender* as a power play against patronage politics, suggesting an independent, contrarian streak that is important to trace through his later writing. By criticizing Leicester’s secret marriage to Lettice Knollys in the April Eclogue, “Spenser was attempting to sever himself from the world of patronage politics and in doing so was asserting himself as a writer.”27 While Spenser was working to get closer to the court and ingratiate himself with important figures and the Queen, he also had his own ambitions as a writer. These opposing forces – the need for patronage and the desire for independence – become clear in his early writing, and only intensify after his period in Ireland, as he began to write *The Faerie Queene*.

*Paradigm Shift: To Ireland in the 1580s*

Spenser’s decade in Ireland imbued him with new experiences and new anxieties about England and, more potently, about Elizabeth as its ruler. Spenser’s life completely transformed in Ireland: he went from the life of a secretary in London to following military campaigns and routinely witnessing violence in the harsh world of colonial Ireland. As secretary to Lord Deputy of Ireland Arthur Grey in the early 1580s, he went on military expeditions, witnessed the aftermath of the massacre at Smerwick Castle, and was charged with writing correspondence back to England describing and defending Lord Grey’s actions, showing an immediate, intimate involvement with the bloody politics of English colonization.

Even within Spenser’s first few weeks in Ireland, he saw the brutal effects of English colonial rule. On a journey from Cork to Limerick, Spenser viewed the effects of

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27 Hadfield 131
starvation on the Irish people. In the 1590s, in *A View on the Present State of Ireland*, he wrote about the effects of the famine:

> Out of euerie Corner of the woods and glinnes they Came Crepinge forthe vppon theire handes for theire Legs Coulde not beare them, they looked like Anatomies of deathe, they spake like ghostes Cryinge out of theire graues, they did eate the dead Carrions, hapie wheare they Coulde finde them.\(^{28}\)

Spenser (writing as Irenius) hauntingly recreates the effects of famine, even though he later states it is a famine that “they themselves had wroughte.”\(^{29}\) Nevertheless, the description speaks to the kind of horror that Spenser saw immediately after arriving in Ireland, a stark contrast from his life in England and one that surely would have began to change his outlook. As Hadfield writes,

> Within three and a half months Spenser had been transported from the city of his birth, taken up residence in a foreign capital (at a time when few Englishmen outside the aristocracy and the military travelled at all), been present at a spectacular military disaster, and marched with an army some 300 miles through hostile territory laid waste, in which he had witnessed the terrible effects of early modern military operations.\(^{30}\)

To say Spenser experienced what we now call culture shock would be an understatement.

The harsh “justice” inflicted on the Irish by the English made its way into *The Faerie Queene*, showing the influence of Spenser’s time in Ireland on the epic. Perhaps the harshest event Spenser witnessed in Ireland was the massacre at Smerwick Castle. Grey accepted an unconditional surrender from a garrison of rebels, then took the terms

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\(^{30}\) Hadfield 164
as an excuse to “dispose of the inhabitants of the fort as he saw fit, whereas his enemies expected to be granted mercy and then imprisoned.”

Spenser wrote the letter from Lord Grey to Queen Elizabeth explaining and justifying the massacre, noting in the end that “There were 600 slayne.” Spenser’s own account of the massacre in *A View* corroborates what he wrote for Grey in the letter and argues for the necessity of the massacre, “theare was no other waie but to make that shorte ende of them which was made.”

Despite his belief that the massacre was necessary, the fact that he was witness to such violence further illustrates the transformation his life experienced. Spenser’s experience in Ireland is allegorized often in the second half of the epic, with Artegaall, the Knight of Justice, standing for Lord Grey, and Talus, the “iron man” executing a particularly violent version of justice in Artegaall’s name and Spenser making an “explicit connection between the poet and the soldier.” This is underscored by how in *The Faerie Queene*, Book Five, Artegaall and Talus return to court only to see a poet with his tongue “for his trespasse vyle/ Nayld to a post” (5.9.25.2-3). In contrast, the courtiers stand silent, “Ne euer was the name of warre there spoken” (5.9.24.6). These stanzas criticize courtiers for ignoring the realities of war and celebrate poets for speaking truth, showing that Spenser was defining himself as a war poet.

Spenser’s distrust of court and disdain for the cushioned life courtiers lived might have been influenced by Sir Walter Ralegh, whom he would have met at Smerwick.

Ralegh, a courtier known for his tendencies to be a fair-weather friend, probably authored
the poem “The Lie,” which paints a very cynical vision of life at court. This distrust of the world Queen Elizabeth had built around herself, as a world less valuable than the colonial world of Ireland, despite its hardships, is a view Spenser came to have that was perhaps further sharpened by contact with Ralegh. While scholars dispute the extent of Spenser and Ralegh’s relationship, the fact that Spenser wrote the famous “Letter to Ralegh” when he was first seeking to publish *The Faerie Queene* indicates that he recognized Ralegh’s influence at court and saw their projects as at least somewhat similar.

Even when his service to Lord Grey ended, Spenser’s life in Ireland was marked by strife and anxiety. He watched the destruction of the Irish noble family that had ruled the island since the fifteenth century, with the Earl of Kildare arrested and his son-in-law, the Baron Devlin, executed. His involvement in legal issues in Ireland as the decade progressed (the English were working to reform Irish laws during this period to bring the island closer politically to England) led him to criticize the Irish people’s innate sense of justice, “Not onelye soe in theire verdites but allsoe in all other theare dealings speciallye with the Englishe they are moste wilfullye bente for thoughte.” Spenser lived in a land where he tended to distrust the people around him, a reality that surely affected his psyche. Once he moved to Dublin, because of his connections with the New English elite, he became part of important musical and literary circles, though “Dublin was a city acutely aware that it was under threat.” So despite the more important social position he had in Ireland as compared to England, that importance came at a price: an Englishman

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36 See Hadfield, page 173, for discussion of Ralegh’s character.
37 Hadfield 173
39 Hadfield 178
could never feel fully safe or secure as a colonist in a nation plagued by violence and discord. That anxiety and insecurity is important to consider as one reads the works Spenser composed during this period. In addition to his experience of the two major historical events of the 1580s – the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots and the Armada attack – as described above, Spenser’s daily life in the 1580s was dramatically different from his life in England.

Spenser wrote the first half of the epic during the 1580s, suggesting that a reading in light of the 1580s, both in terms of Spenser’s experience and the events of Elizabeth’s reign, is productive and necessary. Though Spenser did not start to publish his works again until 1590, once he had acquired an estate in Ireland, he made no secret during the 1580s that he was at work on a large project, though he had to balance writing with his other work and family responsibilities, all as part of his quest to be an independent writer. This push for independence as a writer matches his push for independence from court and public opinion, even as he simultaneously tried to fit into that world.

“Deceitfull Wit”: The Faerie Queene as Criticism

Spenser, despite his contrarian streak, was still an outsider to the English court’s inner circle, and was therefore still dependent on the patronage of nobles, notably Ralegh, for the publication of his poems. Yet despite his dependency on patronage during this period, he did not shy away from controversial poetry that painted the English court in a less than flattering light, particularly in Colin Clout’s come home againe, but also, crucially, in The Faerie Queene, despite its dedication to Queen Elizabeth. Spenser

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40 Hadfield 185
wanted to be the master of his own poetic world, and thus no one was sacred, even – or especially – Queen Elizabeth.

At the end of the 1580s, Spenser worked to publish *The Faerie Queene* and other poems he had been at work on during his initial tenure in Ireland, and was successful thanks to wealthy patrons. The “Letter to Ralegh,” in which Spenser describes the project of *The Faerie Queene* to Ralegh, is seen by many scholars as an appeal for Ralegh’s support in publishing the epic. If so, Spenser would have been shrewd to seek Ralegh’s support, as he had risen at court during the 1580s, due at least partly to the poetry he wrote in praise of the queen.\(^{41}\) With the help of Ralegh, Spenser did manage to come to England and get the epic published, though its first edition was a rather barebones affair since he did not have excess funding for an elaborate edition. *The Faerie Queene* was likely published first as both Spenser and his publisher Ponsonby saw it as the best work to launch the resurgence of Spenser’s literary career.\(^{42}\) Along with *A View on the Present State of Ireland* (which was circulated in manuscript form), the epic helped Spenser make a name for himself as a writer and commentator, so much so that Queen Elizabeth rewarded him a pension of 50 pounds a year – a sum over twice the income of most secretaries and government officials. While it is possible that Spenser read *The Faerie Queene* at court for Queen Elizabeth, and she gave him the pension out of gratitude for his work, it is not certain, and Hadfield argues it is more likely that Ralegh and Burghley interceded on Spenser’s behalf to secure him the pension, perhaps viewing him as an important political figure to have on their side in Ireland.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{41}\) See Hadfield, pages 231-5, for discussion of Spenser and Ralegh’s relationship.

\(^{42}\) Hadfield 254

\(^{43}\) See Hadfield, pages 235-6, for more details on Spenser’s pension, including possible reasons for its high amount.
Despite his relative success as a writer during the 1590s, supported by patrons, Spenser was critical of Queen Elizabeth’s court and many of the figures who supported him, as his work from the period shows. For example, Colin Clout’s come home againe (written in 1591 but not published until 1595) is, as Hadfield argues, “extraordinarily, aggressively dismissive of the court and courtly values.”\(^44\) Colin attacks the court, as a place

Where each one seeks with malice and with strife,

To thrust downe other into foule disgrace,

Himselfe to raise: and he doth soonest rise

That best can handle his deceitfull wit… (Lines 690-3)\(^45\)

Spenser’s dislike of the court drove him to use his allegory in The Faerie Queene to exert dominance over events of the court by narrating them, while also lifting up his life in Munster as superior. As Hadfield argues, “Living in the margins, Spenser was now able to place himself at the centre of his world.”\(^46\)

And indeed, The Faerie Queene advertises its complex, critical nature from its beginning. As Hadfield argues, in the epic’s opening canto, the Redcrosse Knight defeats the monster “Error,” at one point holding it in a grip so powerful that it vomits, “Her vomit full of bookes and papers was” (1.1.20.6). While the image of books and papers is clearly presented to the reader, the Redcrosse Knight does not notice the books. Spenser is showing that reading is a difficult process, and that readers should be on their guard.\(^47\)

Spenser meant for The Faerie Queene to be complex and challenging, anything but

\(^{44}\) Hadfield 240

\(^{45}\) Colin Clout’s come home again, page 552 in the Yale Edition.

\(^{46}\) Hadfield 243

\(^{47}\) Hadfield 256
uncomplicated praise for the ruler who sat at the head of the court Spenser found so
problematic. Especially while reading the first half of the epic – which does not
allegorize current events as directly – the reader should be alert to how Spenser subtly
undermines Elizabeth and her court.

One way Spenser subtly undermines Elizabeth in the first half of *The Faerie
Queene* is by engaging with the issue of sex and celibacy, which necessarily complicates
the idea that the epic is praise for Queen Elizabeth. As Hadfield argues, even Book One,
“On Holiness,” stars a “lusty bachelor,” the Redcrosse Knight, who spends more time
learning to regulate his sexual urges than reflecting on piety or scripture.\(^48\) Much of the
Protestant writing during this period called into question the celibacy of Catholic priests
and highlighted the corruption among them, raising doubts that celibacy could ever be a
trusted, holy state.\(^49\) This criticism of celibacy is charged, given that Queen Elizabeth was
not only (officially) celibate, but she co-opted the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary as a
way for her subjects to revere her – filling the void of that crucial part of Catholicism
with the sacredness of her own body.\(^50\) To problematize celibacy would thus force a
sixteenth century reader to consider not only their virgin Queen, but the outcome of that
virginity: her very dangerous childlessness. Thus by questioning celibacy Spenser subtly
undermines Elizabeth’s self-presentation as a virgin queen and calls into question her
choice to remain heirless.

Book Two also deals with the regulation of sex, to the detriment of Elizabeth.
The hero of Book Two, Guyon, Knight of Temperance, responds to sexual provocation in

\(^{48}\) Hadfield 257-8
\(^{49}\) See Weisner-Hanks, pages 30-34, for a discussion on the rejection of celibacy as a sanctioned state, and
particularly how that affected expectations for women’s lives.
\(^{50}\) See Levin, Chapter 2: “Elizabeth as Sacred Monarch.”
the Bower of Bliss by angrily destroying the entire structure – hardly a model of
temperance. Hadfield reads the destruction of the Bower as an attack on the pageantry
and revelry of Elizabeth and her court.\textsuperscript{51} Given that the episode comes at the end of Book
Two, and Guyon’s rejection of his own virtue is the climax, not the starting point, of his
adventure, I agree that ending with the Bower’s destruction is a very intentional, charged
statement. By destroying the Bower, a vision of Elizabeth’s court, Guyon strikes at
Elizabeth. Given that the Bower is a site of sexual provocation, and it represents a vision
of Elizabeth’s court, the ending of Book Two could be read as another place where
Spenser questions Elizabeth’s chastity. In this case, rather than criticizing Elizabeth for
her chastity’s outcome, childlessness, Spenser suggests she is not truly chaste, as the head
of such a decorous, indulgent court. This undermines her presentation as a virgin queen,
and thus further breaks down her hybrid identity.

This subtle but pressing criticism of Elizabeth’s life and choices, especially with
regards to marriage and children, is pushed front and center in Book Three. The main
color character Britomart’s central drive is to find Artesall, her destined beloved, and in the
meantime she acts as the Knight of Chastity. Britomart, as a maiden knight who later
manages to marry, have children, and thus extend her lineage, stands as a representation
of everything Elizabeth could not do for her kingdom.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, the 1590 edition of
\textit{The Faerie Queene} ends with Amoret and Scudamour reunited, a sight Britomart views
with both joy and jealousy:

\begin{quote}
So seemd those two, as growne together quite,
That \textit{Britomart} halfe enuying their blesse,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Hadfield 260-1. See also Parker’s chapter on the Bower of Bliss (pages 54-66), which argues the bower reflects Spenser’s attitude towards Elizabeth and the female gender more broadly.
\textsuperscript{52} Hadfield 261
Was much empassiond in her gentle sprite,
And to her selfe oft wisht like happinesse,
In vaine she wisht, that fate n’ould let her yet possesse. (3.12.46.5-9 (1590))

Hadfield argues that Spenser shows here “the sort of emotions that a queen should have, the excitement not just at her much anticipated future union, but also the prospect of securing her nation’s future…Spenser brings us back full circle to the issues raised at the start of the Book I, showing that the future lay in thinking carefully and properly about sex.” Since Queen Elizabeth – at least publicly – refused to think about sex, she was dooming England to an uncertain future in Spenser’s eyes.

Thus, despite the fact that The Faerie Queene is dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, its actual content, along with Spenser’s personal history, suggests a very complicated, critical relationship to Queen Elizabeth, her court, and the nation. What Spenser saw in Ireland shook him to his core, and created doubts about the stability of England’s future, both in terms of the realm’s ability to subjugate Ireland and its ability to weather the monarchical transition after Elizabeth’s death. That anxiety is manifested plainly in Artegaill’s actions in Book Five and the lack of resolution in both Book Five and Six. But that anxiety is also revealed in the slow and sustained picking apart of female bodies in Book Three, questioning their very strength and ability to rule in such a complicated world. An examination of Spenser’s particularly bizarre treatment of wounds in Book Three reveals how those anxieties are more subtly but perniciously manifested, revealing his attitude towards Queen Elizabeth was perhaps even more critical than Hadfield imagines.

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Chapter 2. Wounds in *The Faerie Queene*

Part 1. Battle Wounds and the Preservation of Male Strength

One of the most bizarre and memorable choices Spenser makes in *The Faerie Queene* is to allegorize love as a wound. Throughout Book Three, he uses wound and injury imagery to illustrate his discussion of love, lust, and chastity. But to understand why these love wounds in Book Three are so bizarre, even within the world of the epic, we must first understand what we might call typical Spenserian battle wounds: wounds that are marked by the action of their creation, rather than any lingering descriptions the wounds themselves receive. This will set apart the love wounds that Britomart and Amoret suffer as unusual within the scope of the epic’s normal treatment of wounds. By examining what a typical Spenserian battle wound looks like, I will set the stage for discussion of the love wounds and thus draw out Spenser’s particular anxiety about the female body politic. I will also examine how Spenser treats male knights in their weaker moments, and show how he still affords them dignity, while, as we will see, his female knight has much more to prove.

“A Sea of Bloud”: Typical Battle Wounds

*The Faerie Queene* is replete with instances of battle wounds. This perhaps speaks to Spenser’s absorption of the violence he witnessed in Ireland, since Spenser’s heroes inflict violence and fall victim to it often throughout their journeys. An understanding of Spenser’s battle wounds not only illuminates how Spenser’s experience of violence in Ireland shaped *The Faerie Queene*, it also provides a necessary contrast to the love wounds. The most typical battle wounds involve a cut being made in a body,
followed by a display of blood and gore. The product of the wound – the blood and gore – is emphasized over the wound itself, in contrast to the female wounds we will see, which focus on the site of the wound. I catalogue instances of these battle wounds in Book One and Book Two to help draw out this contrast.

Book One, in particular, contains many battle wounds. In the second canto, the Redcrosse Knight’s piercing strikes against the Sarazin causes “streames of purple bloud” to “[dye] the verdant fields,” though the resultant wounds are not directly mentioned (1.2.17.9). In the third canto, the Redcrosse Knight battles a Paynim and pierces him so fiercely that “from his gored wound a well of bloud did gush” (1.3.35.9). Although the wound is explicitly mentioned, the blood is more strongly emphasized. In the fifth canto, the Redcrosse Knight battles another Paynim. So much blood is produced their arms are dyed “vermilion,” and “all the gazers harts did grow./ Seeing the gored woundes to gape so wyde” (1.5.9.6-8). In the sixth canto, the knights Satyrane and Sansloy fight, again producing streams of blood and gore that overshadow the wounds they bear, “And made wide furrowes in their fleshes fraile…/Large floods of bloud adowne their sides did raile” (1.6.43.5-7). The wounds even render the knights unrecognizable: “with their drerie wounds and blodye gore/ They both deformed, scarsely could be known” (1.6.45.5-6). When Arthur cuts off a giant’s arm in Canto Eight, the wound is minimized in favor of describing the gore: “Large streames of bloud out of the truncked stocke/ Forth gushed, like fresh water streame from riuen rocke” (1.8.10.8-9). Although the “desperate deadly wound” is named in the next stanza, it is not lingered on like the river of blood (1.8.11.1). Arthur attacks Duessa’s seven-headed beast in the same canto, cutting one head “down to the teeth”:
A sea of bloud gusht from the gaping wound,
That [Duessa’s] gay garments staynd with filthy gore,
And ouerflowed all the field around;
That ouer shoes in bloud he waded on the ground. (1.8.16.6-9)

Note that the blood gets four lines of description while the wound itself is only briefly mentioned. Arthur then turns back to the giant and manages to behead him, ending a gory fight scene with even more gore, leaving the body “All wallowd in his owne fowle bloudy gore./ Which flowed from his wounds in wondrous store” (1.8.24.4-5). In the next canto, Redcrosse finds a knight who attempted suicide bearing a typical wound:

All wallowd in his owne yet luke-warme blood,
That from his wound yet welled fresh alas;
In which a rustie knife fast fixed stood,
And made an open passage for the gushing flood. (1.9.36.6-9)

Finally, Redcrosse’s battle with the dragon is suitably violent, but again blood is emphasized over the wound: “The weapon bright…Ran through his mouth with so importune might./ That deepe emperst his darksome hollow maw./ And back retyrd, his life bloud forth with all did draw” (1.11.53.5-9). Thus the epic begins with a pattern of violence and violent descriptions that emphasize blood and gore over actual sites of injury on the body.

Book Two also is also heavily violent, continuing Book One’s pattern of carnage while also further solidifying the image of battle wounds. When Guyon fights a madman in Canto Four, he produces many streaming wounds: “[the madman] sore he bett, and gor’d with many a wound./ That cheeks with teares, and sides with bloud did all abound”
(2.4.3.8-9). In the next canto, he fights Pyrochles, and strikes “Deepe in his flesh, and opened wide a red floodgate” (2.5.7.9). Later in the canto, Pyrochles’ wound is still gushing as he is found by his brother Cymochles, “groneth out his utmost grudging spright./ Through many a stroke, and many a streaming wound,” (2.5.36.7-8). Cymochles, after revenge, attacks Guyon in the next canto, and both wound the other, though their wounds are not explicitly mentioned: “The mortall steele despiteously entayld/ Deepe in their flesh, quite through the yron walles./ That a large purple streme adown their giambeux falles” (2.6.29.7-9). Guyon meets the brothers again in Canto Eight, and strikes Pyrochles, creating another gushing wound: “And through his shoulder pierst; wherewith to ground/ He groueling fell, all gored in his gushing wound” (2.8.32.8-9). Arthur also manages to wound Cymochles in spectacular fashion:

That through his thigh the mortall steele did gryde:

He swaruing with the force, within his flesh

Did breake the launce, and let the head abyde:

Out of the wound the red bloud flowed fresh,

That vnderneath his feet soone made a purple plesh. (2.8.36.5-9)

However, Arthur also gets wounded, and indeed: “Wyde was the wound, and a large lukewarme flood,/ Red as the Rose, thence gushed grievously” (2.8.39.1-2). Arthur is also injured in his battle in Canto Eleven, and is weakened “through losse of bloud, which from his wounds did bleed” (2.11.48.5). So in Book Two, as well as Book One, battle wounds occur frequently, and Spenser continually emphasizes the gush of blood and gore, rather than the site of the wound, in realizing violence. These descriptions often come in a stanza’s final lines to further emphasize their impact. The intense, physical
violence of battle wounds is an important quality to note in comparison to the love
wounds, which have a much more slow, deliberate realization.

“Searching the Orifice”: Healing Wounds

This frequency of violence occasionally lends itself to scenes of healing. Healing
descriptions necessitate some focus on wound sites, but do not occasion the intense,
lingering look the love wounds receive. When Spenser focuses on an injured or disgraced
male character, both the descriptions of injury and the actions that caused the knight to be
injured are imbued with both sympathy and distance from the body itself. This distancing
privileges male wounds and actions above the female love wounds, which are endlessly
analyzed, categorized, and judged.

An example of a battle wound that is followed past its creation, though without
the intense focus of the love wounds, is Marinell’s in Canto Four of Book Three.
Britomart, the knight of Chastity, fights Marinell, a formidable knight born of a nymph.
Following a brief exchange, Britomart and Marinell fall to blows. Their fight is brief,
highly charged, and violent:

But she againe him in the shield did smite,
With so fierce furie and great puissaunce,
That through his threesquare scuchin percing quite,
And through his mayled hauberque, by mischaunce
The wicked steele through his left side did glaunce;
Him so transfixed she before her bore
Beyond his croupe, the length of all her launce,
Till sadly soucing on the sandie shore,

He tombled on an heape, and wallowd in his gore. (3.4.16)

Spenser describes Marinell’s injury at length, but focuses on the action that causes the wound as opposed to the wound itself. He notes that Britomart’s lance pierces Marinell’s “threesquare scuchin,” “mayled hauberque,” and finally “through his left side,” causing him to fall on the shore. Marinell then “wallow[s] in his gore,” so much that he “Distaines the pillours, and the holy grownd” (3.4.17.7). Spenser, by emphasizing the product of the wound, its gore, rather than the wound itself, marks it as a battle wound. The gushing violence of the wound also underscores the action of the scene. Unlike the love wounds I will examine, Spenser does not linger on the wound’s site or comment on Marinell’s character.

Even when Marinell is discovered by his mother and the other nymphs, his wound is not emphasized. The fact that Marinell’s wound is followed beyond its creation is, in itself, unusual. Typically, when battles finish in the epic, enemies are left vanquished, their wounds unremarked on. But in this case, Spenser switches focus from Britomart (who inflicts the wound) to Marinell, and describes his rescue by the nymphs. When he is first discovered, the product of the wound is again emphasized, not the wound itself:

"And comming to the place, where all in gore/ And cruddy bloud enwallowed they found/
The lucklesse Marinell" (3.4.34.7-9). The description is similar to the other rare instances when characters are discovered with existing wounds. When an injured Paynim is described in Book Two, "his cruell wounds with cruddy bloud congealed," the emphasis is on the blood (1.5.29.6). Timias, Arthur’s squire, sustains a similar injury in Book Three, "With bloud deformed, [he] lay in deadly swownd…The Christall humour stood
congealed round" (3.5.29.2-4). In this case, the wound is not even directly mentioned, but the product is. So even if a battle wound is lingered on past its creation, Spenser still pays very little attention to the wound itself.

The nymphs heal Marinell’s wound quickly, a marked contrast from the treatment the love wounds receive. When the nymphs search the wound, even though Spenser acknowledges the orifice, he does not dwell on it:

They softly gan to search his griesly wound…
They softly wipt away the gelly blood
From th’orifice; which having well vpbound,
They pourd in soueraine balme, and Nectar good. (3.4.40.2-8)

While Spenser briefly lingers on the orifice in this case, the nymphs’ brief search of it allows them to understand and quickly heal the wound. The fact that Marinell’s wound is cleansed and healed further differentiates the treatment that female characters Britomart and Amoret receive. Their wounds fester for days, even weeks, before they are able to find relief. Thus, even when battle wounds receive some extended focus, their treatment is distinct from that of love wounds. The fact that Marinell is healed and Spenser grants his body a degree of privacy and sanctity implies a privileging of the male body that his female heroes, with their gruesome love wounds, do not receive. The different treatment of battle wounds highlights Spenser’s confidence in male bodies, both physically and mentally, and allows him to privilege their knightly roles.
Artegall Enthralled: Knightly Humiliation

Beyond just wounding, when Spenser’s male knights find themselves in shameful situations, Spenser does not focus on their bodies or inherent weaknesses like he does with Britomart, his lone female knight. While male knights are often called to task for their actions, the privacy of their bodies is respected. Spenser moralizes about their actions and choices without worrying about any hidden weaknesses of their bodies, hearts, or minds. Even when Spenser’s knights struggle, like when Artegall is beaten and subdued by Radigund in Book Five, he privileges them above the female. This drives home his anxiety about the female body, and, more pointedly, the female body in power. He also further problematizes hybrid imagery in this episode by depicting disgraced, feminized knights as the epitome of humiliation.

Artegall’s subjugation by Radigund is one of the most profound instances of knightly failure in the epic. Artegall is beaten and subdued, but Spenser presents his wounds and subsequent subjugation in a way that protects his honor. After a series of mostly successful adventures, Artegall finds himself in fierce battle with Radigund, a woman who subdues male knights and forces them to perform female roles in her castle. As their fight begins, Spenser focuses on the physical details of the combat. When Radigund lands a blow, Spenser notes “With her sharpe Cemitare at him she flew,/ That glauncing downe his thigh, the purple bloud forth drew” (5.5.9.8-9). Again, Spenser does not emphasize the site of injury – in this case, a thigh that must be badly cut – but the blood that comes from the wound, highlighting the physicality of the injury but not the body that is victim, thus preserving the male body’s strength.
When Artegaill loses the fight, Spenser focuses on Artegaill’s mistakes rather than any inherent weakness of his character or body. Artegaill becomes distracted by Radigund’s beauty when her helmet is knocked away, causing him to lose the duel: “At sight thereof his cruel minded hart/ Empierced was with pittifull regard” (5.5.13.1-2). Spenser does acknowledge Artegaill’s “empierced hart,” but instead of dwelling on it, the way he might with Britomart, he immediately describes Artegaill’s resulting action: throwing his sword away, “his sharpe sword he threw from him apart,/ Cursing his hand that had that visage mard” (5.5.13.3-4). Even as Artegaill fails, Spenser emphasizes his willful throwing of the sword, not his “empierced hart,” in causing failure.

Spenser criticizes Artegaill’s loss to Radigund, but describes the loss in terms of Artegaill’s giving up, not Radigund’s strength. By throwing his sword away, Artegaill concedes the upper hand to Radigund, who fiercely attacks him. Though he tries to resist her with his shield, he loses the fight and “to her mercie him submitted” (5.5.16.9). However, Spenser emphasizes Artegaill’s weakness, not Radigund’s strength, in the outcome:

So he was ouercome, not ouercome,

But to her yeelded of his owne accord;

Yet was he iustly damned by the doome

Of his owne mouth, that spake so warelesse word,

To be her thrall… (5.5.17.1-5)

Artegaill makes his own fate, by yielding “of his owne accord,” he is “iustly damned” by his “owne mouth.” So the loss is blamed on Artegaill, rather than Radigund’s superior strength. While the loss could put Artegaill’s knightly legitimacy in question, nowhere in
this description does Spenser question his inherent physical strength or capabilities. Rather, he emphasizes that Artegaill lost because he allowed himself to. He criticizes Artegaill, but does not doubt his ability.

Despite Artegaill’s battlefield defeat, the description of his subjugation by Radigund actually manages to help him maintain his righteousness. While Spenser does not spare details of Artegaill’s humiliation, he puts more blame on Radigund’s wickedness, and the overstepping of women in general, than he does on Artegaill’s defeat. Artegaill is stripped of the artifacts that mark him as a knight and made to dress as a woman: “[Radigund] caused him to be disarmed quight./ Of all the ornaments of knightly name… In stead whereof she made him to be dight/ In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame” (5.5.20.3-7). Spenser allows the reader to see Artegaill disarmed and put in ridiculous women’s clothing, down to the “napron white,” showing he does not shy from showing his heroes in dangerous or humiliating situations (5.5.20.8). Indeed, Radigund further humiliates Artegaill by putting his arms on display with the others’ she has subdued, and breaking his sword, “for feare of further harmes” (5.5.21.3-8). Not only are Artegaill’s knightly relics, marks of his strength and legitimacy, put on display, his sword is destroyed. This is both a practical loss for a knight and a key bit of phallic symbolism on Spenser’s part, emphasizing Artegaill’s feminization, a process presented as the most humiliating possible transformation. However, since Artegaill faces this humiliation as a hybrid of a knight and a woman, his male legitimacy is preserved. Artegaill the knight is not humiliated, Artegaill the hybrid of knight and woman is. Thus Spenser further problematizes hybrid imagery, which subtly undermines Elizabeth and avoids fully disgracing his male knight.
Furthermore, Spenser even finds nobility in Artegaill’s humiliation. Artegaill is placed with the other disgraced knights, who Spenser describes as “braue knights…. There bound t’obay that Amazons proud law” (5.5.22.2-3). Even in their humiliation, Spenser emphasizes their bravery. Artegaill mourns to see them, “his bigge hart loth’d so vncomely vew” (5.5.22.5). Radigund places him “most low,” and sets him to spinning flax, “A sordid office for a mind so braue” (5.5.23.1-4). Again, while Spenser does not spare any details of Artegaill’s humiliation, he continues to defend Artegaill’s bravery in the face of injustice. He even seems to praise, or at least empathize with, Artegaill for honoring the knightly code and “right well [behaving]” the one who “him wonne in fight” (5.5.23.7-9). Losing becomes another sign of Artegaill’s nobility, not a moment of disgrace.

The bulk of Spenser’s criticism falls on Radigund, and her wickedness in turning noble knights into womanly slaves.

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. (5.5.24.1-6)

Spenser uses Artegaill’s failure and subsequent subjugation as an opportunity to expound on the importance of gender roles, and offers Radigund as an example of a woman who has far overstepped the bounds of her gender. He dwells more on her wickedness than Artegaill’s weakness. Spenser even finds a way to speak through Artegaill’s humiliation to
chastise Radigund: “How euer it his noble heart did gall,/ T’obay a womsans tyrannous direction… But hauing chosen, now he might not chaunge” (5.5.26.3-6). Spenser praises Artegall for holding up nobly despite in such a humiliating situation. Thus the Radigund episode further reveals how Spenser privileges male roles and their abilities as knights, while he consistently finds flaws with females in roles of power.

Spenser, in emphasizing the active roles of male knights, privileges them above his female knight, Britomart. The nature of their wounds emphasizes their power in inflicting violence more than their weakness in falling victim to it. Furthermore, Artegall’s episode of humiliation actually works to defend his adherence to knightly virtue, even as the hybrid image of knight-turned-woman is presented as the apex of humiliation. Indeed, Spenser aims the criticism for the creation of these hybrids at Radigund. His sustained moralizing about Radigund’s subjugation of men represents a deep anxiety about the female body politic and the risks it holds, even for men in positions of relative power. Along with the love wounds in Book Three, Radigund’s Castle troubles female political power. But to more fully elucidate Spenser’s anxiety about the female body politic, I now turn to his grotesque, bizarre, sustained treatment of love wounds in Book Three.

Part 2: The Love Wounds of Book Three

One of Spenser’s most striking poetic choices in Book Three, which centers on the virtue of chastity, is to depict love and lust metaphorically as wounds. These love wounds, which are distinct in form from battle wounds, have rarely been discussed in depth. However, the nature of love wounds in Book Three of The Faerie Queene, and
specifically the wounds of the hero, Britomart, reveals that Spenser lavishes on his lone female protagonist a lingering and critical eye, an eye that both supports her emblematic virtue of chastity and denigrates her ability as a knight, a role he consistently links with masculine, physical strength. Accordingly, once Britomart is able to embrace a more masculine heroic persona, she becomes a more capable knight. Spenser then contrasts her newfound strength with another visually striking female wound, Amoret’s, to both underscore Britomart’s development and reinforce imagery of weakened female bodies, revealing Spenser’s moral privileging of masculinity and a sustained criticism of feminine weakness. The opening up of female bodies through wounds reveals Spenser’s anxiety about not just the female form, but a compulsive need to examine and understand female bodies – especially bodies like Britomart’s, which are afforded power. The wounds thus subtly but critically undermine the authority of Queen Elizabeth – the figure the epic is dedicated to – by relentlessly calling the female body into question. In this section, I will demonstrate the unusual nature of the love wounds and argue that they reveal Spenser’s anxious, critical attitude towards Elizabeth.

“No Vsuall Fire”: Britomart’s Wound

Britomart, in the second canto of Book Three, sustains a grisly metaphorical wound that mirrors her growing love for Artega (the same knight whom Book Five centers around). The graphic, gory nature of Britomart’s self-described wound reveals how Spenser treats her differently than his male protagonists by casting a long look at the debilitating effects of Britomart’s wound. The wound problematizes Britomart’s body,
strength, and ability, while also providing the opportunity for Spenser to linger over her body, ultimately reflecting Spenser’s criticism of Queen Elizabeth’s body politic.

As Britomart falls in love with Artegall, Spenser allegorizes her love as a wound. Canto One foreshadows Britomart’s wound’s significance as a mark of love (and potentially lust) by afflicting the characters Adonis and Malecasta with wounds that symbolize their amorous feelings. However, Britomart’s wound grows slowly, festers, and saps her energy, unlike the sudden accidents that befall Malecasta and Adonis, suggesting her wound has a more complex role than an indicator of sudden, lust-driven affection. Britomart sustains her wound by looking at an image of Artegall in her father’s mirror, the image that eventually sets her quest in motion. But before she embarks on her quest to find him, she spends weeks debilitated by her wound, a wound that begins as an “engraffed paine;/ Whose root and stalke so bitter yet did tast,/ That but the fruit more sweetnesse did containe” (3.2.17.5-7). Using the bizarre imagery of a plant engrained inside of Britomart, Spenser describes the love forcefully taking root—an image that both suggests a more sustained attraction than Malecasta’s lust for Britomart, but also highlights Britomart’s lack of agency in the matter. The image of “grafting” illustrates a particular violence that speaks to both the strength of the wound and the weakness and susceptibility of Britomart’s body to it. So despite the “sweetnesse” her love promises, Britomart begins to suffer, “Her wretched dayes in dolour she mote wast” (3.2.17.8). Thus the wound begins to take a physical, mental, and emotional toll on Britomart.

At the wound’s onset, Britomart’s frailty and malleability are emphasized and described in detail, casting her as a uniquely weak Spenserian hero. The moment when Britomart first sees Artegall, her initial wounding is described as a subtle injury that she
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does not initially feel: “the false Archer, which that arrow shot/ So slyly, that she did not feel the wound./ Did smyle full smoothly at her weetleese wofull stound” (3.2.26.7-9). This is somewhat analogous to the small injuries she sustains fighting in the first and last cantos, but those wounds do not penetrate beyond the surface. In contrast, this arrow pierces deep into Britomart’s body and soul, causing a deep and rankling wound. The wound slowly but overwhelmingly takes hold of Britomart:

Thenceforth the feather in her loftie crest,

Ruffed of loue, gan lowly to auaille,

And her proud portance, and her princely gest,

With which she earst tryumphed, now did quaille… (3.2.27.1-4)

Britomart’s weakening is supported by imagery that suggests a bird, that most graceful, feminine, and delicate of creatures: her “feather in her lofty crest, ruffed of loue” dropping, her portance and “princely gest” “quailing.” Her decline continues as she becomes “sad, solemne, sowre, and full of fancies fraile” (3.2.27.5). Thus despite acknowledging Britomart’s inherently “princely” nature, Spenser presents Britomart as a delicate and “silly Mayd,” who thinks she is suffering from “some melancholy” (3.2.27.7-9).

Britomart’s wound begins to affect her psychologically54, differentiating it from the typical battle wounds Spenser’s heroes usually sustain and underscoring the severity of the wound as it grows and festers. The wound disrupts her sleep, “with fantastick sight/ Of dreadfull things the same was put to flight,/ That oft out of her bed she did astart,/ As one with vew of ghastly feends affright” (3.2.29.4-7). But it is not “ghastly

54 I refer to psychology to indicate the internal, mental affects of Britomart’s wound. I use the term because it is the most descriptive modern marker for this concept, not because it was a term or concept used in the same way during the sixteenth century. For further discussion on this issue, see footnote 55.
feends” that disturb Britomart’s sleep, it is “that faire visage, written in her hart” (3.2.29.9). The image of Artegaill’s face written on Britomart’s heart is evocative, and demonstrates both the physical realization of Britomart’s love and the bizarre nature of the wound. Despite the fairness of Artegaill’s visage, Britomart’s love for him wakes her as if from nightmares, her “former smart” renewed (3.2.29.8). Though the wound is made real through physical description, its true hold is on Britomart’s emotional and psychological core. Thus this wound is not just a typical Spenserian battle wound, with purple blood and surface-level gore. It is a wound that provides an opportunity for a sustained examination of Britomart’s female body and its vulnerabilities.

Spenser continues his examination of Britomart’s body by allowing a different character to examine it: Britomart’s maid, Glauce. Despite the wound’s severity, Glauce checks Britomart’s reaction and provides a moment of relief amidst Britomart’s suffering. In a moment both tender and humorous, Glauce sees Britomart’s histrionics and compares them at length to dramatic images of sadness: “Like an huge Aetn’ of deepe engulfed griefe,/ Sorrow is heaped in thy hollow chest,/ Whence forth it breakes in sighes and anguish rife” (3.2.32.6-8). After these lengthy descriptions of sadness, she concludes Britomart’s suffering comes from love, which she fears above even “an huge Aetn’ of deepe engulfed griefe”: “how much I feare, least loue it bee” (3.2.33.1). Glauce’s speech provides a moment of comic relief by describing in vivid detail Britomart’s sorrow, and diagnosing Britomart’s extreme sorrow as love, something to be feared more than “an huge Aetn’” of grief. This moment works to further highlight the dramatic psychological effects of Britomart’s wound but also, simultaneously, to trivialize them. Since all of Britomart’s visible suffering to this point is psychological, it both differentiates her
wound from the many physical ones that came before it in the epic, and comments on her inherently weak, feminine nature. This scene between Britomart and Glauce, then, by coming off as humorous, casts a critical eye on female bodies and emotions.

Rebuffing Glauce, Britomart describes her malady in alarming detail, highlighting the physical, gory nature of her wound and further sustaining its examination. “For no no vsuall fire, no vsuall rage/ It is, O Nurse, which on my life doth feed,/ And suckes the bloud, which from my hart doth bleed” (3.2.37.3-5). The wound is not just a distraction or an idle love; it is sucking away her very life. The description is both vivid and painful, and pushes on the purely psychological and emotional understanding of the wound Spenser has previously presented. It also subverts the comic tone created by Glauce’s speech and begins to transform the image of the wound from a psychological malady to a physical one. Indeed, as Britomart both recounts the wound’s origin to Glauce and describes her symptoms, she grants it an intensely physical, violent nature. Britomart comments that after she saw “that seeming goodly-hed,” she was unaware “the hidden hooke with baite I swallowed” (3.2.38.8-9). Violent and wonderfully descriptive, the image of hook and bait reinforces Britomart’s lack of agency in the matter of the wound and furthers the wound’s transition from psychological to physical.

Spenser turns even more intently towards Britomart’s wound as Britomart describes it in detail. Her weakness and susceptibility are highlighted as the wound receives its most graphic realization:

Sithens [the hook] hath infixed faster hold

Within my bleeding bowels, and so sore

Now ranckleth in this same fraile freshly mould,
That all mine entrailes flow with poysnous gore,
And th’vlcer growth daily more and more;
Ne can my running sore find remedie,
Other then my hard fortune to deplore,
And languish as the leafe falne from the tree,
Till death make one end of my dayes and miserie. (3.2.39)

From her bleeding bowels, to her entrails flowing with poison gore, to the ulcer causing such pain that only death could release her, Britomart’s description of the wound is striking for its brutal physicality, its emphasis on poison, rankle, and rot, and its totalizing nature. In sharp contrast from Spenser’s earlier focus on the wound’s psychological effects, and Glauce’s humorous words of comfort, only Britomart’s description of her wound does justice to the extreme, bizarre pain it causes her. Britomart is thus able to justify her suffering through detailed, gory description, while Spenser also justifies his sustained examination of the wound by providing such a graphic climax. The intense nature of the wound builds on Britomart’s earlier suggestion that it is sucking away her life. The steadily-growing nature of the wound and its implications for Britomart’s mortality also suggest the wound could be violently severing her from her bodily boundaries – opening her up to her later male, knightly metamorphosis. So as much as the wound marks Britomart for her femininity and associated weakness, it also suggests her malleability and capability of transformation.

But before Britomart can be transformed into a male knightly figure, she has to suffer the effects of a unique wound, setting her apart from other Spenserian heroes. Spenser rarely links his other five heroes to this level of intense, rotting, physical
humiliation. While the villains (like Duessa in her true form, or the allegorized figure of lust in Book Four) often are described in unrestrained, gory detail, his male heroes never are. Although his heroes are often subject to harsh treatment, as when Artegall is subjugated by Radigund in Book Five, the effects are never physically disgusting, as Spenser inflicts his judgment morally. It is also telling that Spenser’s only female hero is the one who receives this sustained, gory descriptive treatment – and equally telling that, once Britomart embraces a more traditionally masculine, knightly role, that the descriptions of her wound end (but are replaced by an equally vivid and gory female wound, borne by Amoret). Thus we see Spenser’s lingering gaze on the female body that also casts a negative eye on Britomart’s inherently weak femininity. This sparks the narrative arc that makes Britomart become a knight, a traditionally masculine figure, allowing Spenser to privilege masculinity as he articulates his allegory of chastity.

The simultaneous focus on and criticism of Britomart reflects Spenser’s anxieties about Queen Elizabeth. Although he elevates a female character to the role of knight, that elevation does not come without serious question and examination. Britomart’s body is subject to a penetrating examination by Spenser, exposing all of its potential weak points. This mirrors Spenser’s subtle but sustained critique of Queen Elizabeth that I examined in the previous chapter. But the effect here is subtler, since Book Three does not directly allegorize events of Elizabeth’s reign. Instead of directly calling into doubt the actual decisions of Elizabeth’s reign; by describing Britomart’s wound, Spenser opens up the female body for examination and criticism. So although Spenser is a subject of Elizabeth, he does not present female agency through Britomart without first exploring and (literally) poking holes in it. Thus the love wound allows Spenser to articulate his
anxieties about the female body and its weaknesses, despite that fact that Britomart is one of his heroes, and Elizabeth is his queen.

“Her Molten Hart”: Britomart’s Malleability and Metamorphosis

Spenser further reinforces Britomart’s soft, feminine by depicting the words of others as “sinking” into her body during the second and third cantos – chronologically the earliest part of Britomart’s story. These descriptions work to both suggest that not only is her body physically weak, but that her psyche is similarly soft and malleable as well, casting the early Britomart as dependent and feminine – but also open to metamorphosis, an image of change Spenser prefers to hybridity. Thus by allowing Britomart to transform into a male knight, Spenser is able to include a female knight while also privileging male strength. This further criticizes Elizabeth since Spenser elevates Britomart’s metamorphosis over Elizabeth’s hybridity.

By showing the words of others physically altering Britomart’s will, Spenser illustrates her malleable pre-knight body. Twice, the words of others affect Britomart in a strong way: when Guyon first describes Artegaill to Britomart, and when Glauce convinces her to masquerade as a knight. Spenser visualizes these moments by showing words actually sinking into parts of Britomart’s body. In the first description, Guyon’s description of Artegaill sinks into Britomart’s heart: “His feeling words her feeble sence much pleased,/ And softly sunck into her molten hart” (3.2.15.1-2). In the second description, Glauce’s plan, to have Britomart masquerade as a knight, “sinks” into Britomart’s mind:

Her harty words so deepe into the mynd
Of the young Damzell sunke, that great desire
Of warlike armes in her forthwith they tynd,
And generous stout courage did inspire… (3.3.57.1-4)

Even though the part of the body in question changes – both Britomart’s heart and mind are assaulted by the words of others – the imagery of sinking is sustained. The sinking image serves the practical purpose of visualizing the process of the will being altered. However, Spenser uses this identical image two cantos in a row, and to describe the same character, which indicates – more than just a convenient bit of description – he is commenting on Britomart’s particular softness and susceptibility to the suggestions of others. This underscores the weakness and stereotypical femininity her character exudes in these early cantos.

Britomart only manages to become a true hero of Spenser’s epic once she is able to “shut vp all her plaint in priuy griefe” and embody a truly masculine form of knighthood, in contrast from her malleability in the early cantos (3.4.11.2). The revelation of the debilitating nature of her wound for Artegaill in the second and third cantos demands resolution, or at least an explanation of how such a helpless young girl could become a knight, let alone one who could so coldly dispatch Malecasta in the first canto. Britomart’s metamorphosis grows from both her wound and her malleability, and

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55 In sixteenth century England, the understanding of what we now term "psychology" – the inner workings of the mind and soul – was driven by theories of the self, rather than theories of the brain. Theories of self in the Renaissance were still largely driven by thinkers like Aquinas and even Augustine (and were radically altered in the seventeenth century by thinkers like Descartes and Locke). Augustine, an early Christian philosopher, posited a difference between inner and outer self, the outer self being the body and the inner self being the soul. Spenser’s desire to show words affecting the mind and soul seems to build from that conception, with the image of words literally sinking through the outer self to the inner self to alter the will. For more on Augustine’s theory of self, see Taylor, pages 127-145. Daniel’s conception of melancholy as a conscious “assemblage” is also helpful, in that he recognizes the importance of an actual declaration of melancholy – in other words, an act of will – in defining a particular affect (see pages 25-30).
we see her feminine body transformed into a stereotypically knightly, masculine figure, allowing her to become a true Spenserian hero while reinforcing Spenser’s gender binary.

Britomart works to heal her wound by going on a quest to find Artegall, embracing the physical task of searching for him over the emotional anguish of her initial love. Britomart’s wound is never fully healed in Book Three since she does not find Artegall until Book Four. So initially, it appears that Britomart will continue to suffer from her wound during the length of her adventure. As she departs, she tries to sustain herself with thoughts of her love:

With such selfe-pleasing thoughts her wound she fed,

And thought so to beguile her grievous smart;

But so her smart was much more grievous bred,

And the deepe wound more deepe engord her hart,

That nought but death her dolour mote depart. (3.4.6.1-5)

Once again, the wound is exacerbated by even the promise of Artegall, “engor[ing]” Britomart’s heart and threatening to irrecoverably doom her to “dolour.” However, Britomart is able to turn her tortured feelings into action as she begins her search for Artegall: “So forth she rode without repose or rest,/ Searching all lands and each remotest part” (3.4.6.6-7). After two cantos of Britomart complaining, swooning, and bleeding from her wound, the image of an active knight, riding “without repose or rest,” stands in sharp contrast to the image of Britomart completely debilitated by love. Thus, only action – not “selfe-pleasing thoughts” – can sustain Britomart in her quest. She has to embrace action over contemplation, the physical over the mental, the masculine over the feminine, to become a true Spensieran hero.
However, just before her metamorphosis, Britomart’s feminine side makes a last, climactic appearance. Following her initial departure, she articulates her complaint: three stanzas in which she both describes her grief and embraces her precarious position in that she is entirely beholden to fate. The complaint is the final moment during Book Three during which Britomart embraces her emotional, feminine side at length:

Huge sea of sorrow, and tempestuous griefe,
Wherein my feeble barke is tossed long,
Far from the hoped hauen of reliefe,
Why do thy cruell billowes beat so strong,
And thy moyst mountaines each on others throng,
Threatning to swallow vp my fearefull life?
O do thy cruell wrath and spightfull wrong
At length allay, and stint thy stormy strife,
Which in these troubled bowels raignes, and rageth rife... (3.4.8)

By emphasizing the feebleness of her body, and describing herself as lost in a “huge sea of sorrow,” Britomart emphasizes both her emotions and the vulnerability they expose her to. She is but a “fearefull,” “troubled” woman in the face of “cruell wrath and spightfull wrong,” despite her new knightly outfit. The entire text of the complaint, three stanzas long, gives her ample room to express her emotions and articulate the weakness of her female body, especially compared to the much stronger forces of fate.

Following the complaint, Britomart manages to “shut vp all her plaint in priuy griefe,/ For her great courage would not let her weepe” (3.4.11.2-3). As a knight of action, she has no more time for contemplation. Using an epic simile, Spenser further
illust rates Britomart’s full inheritance of her knightly abilities. “So the faire Britomart hauing disclo’st/ Her cloudye care into a wrathfull stowre,/ The mist of griefe dissolu’d, did into vengeance powre” (3.4.13.7-9). Britomart gets her strength from newfound wrath and vengeance – aggressive qualities associated with blood, one of the four humors that was most associated with masculinity.\textsuperscript{56} Thus Britomart not only closes up her emotions and adopts male dress, her body has also internally become more male, allowing her to become a knight. Her “great courage” soon becomes apparent, as she easily strikes Marinell down. From this moment onwards, Britomart embraces a truly masculine image of a knight – unwavering, unemotional, and physically prow.

As she embraces a more masculine, knightly persona in the fourth stanza, and through the end of the book, Britomart becomes both more physically intimidating, and less emotionally and psychologically malleable. After the metamorphosis, Spenser never again uses the “sinking” description for Britomart. He solidifies this transition during the final canto, when Britomart confronts Busyrane. After Busyrane wounds her, Britomart smites him, so “mightily” that “to ground/ He fell halfe dead; next stroke him should haue slaine” (3.12.34.1-2). Amoret “dernely” calls for Britomart to abstaine, and Britomart “lothly” agrees, only because without Busyrane alive, Amoret’s enchantments will be set forever (3.12.34.4-8). This is the type of moment – when Britomart is influenced by another character – that Spenser would have typically used the “sinking” description. The fact that he does not, and that he describes Britomart as “loth” and

\textsuperscript{56} See Weisner-Hanks, pages 36-7, for a succinct discussion of the four humors, and particularly for how blood was tied to men and seen to make them bold, courageous, and strong. See Noga, pages 9-14, for a more detailed definition of the humors, including blood, and pages 113-70 for a detailed history of theories of the humors in the Renaissance. Finally, Paster’s book has a detailed treatment of the humors as applied to Shakespeare. See especially pages 59, 66, 114, and 214 for arguments tying blood to bold behavior.
longing for “reuenge to see,” enforces her metamorphosis from weak woman to tough, masculine knight, especially in the face of Amoret’s wounded femininity (3.12.34.8-9).

Britomart manages to transform her weak, female body into a strong, male, knightly one. However, this metamorphosis does not represent Spenser’s wishful thinking about Elizabeth’s power, despite her claim of possessing the “heart and stomach of a king.” In fact, Britomart’s metamorphosis shows how Spenser’s knights have to adhere to a strict paradigm of masculinity, since he cannot conceive of a knight who does not present as male. Since Britomart cannot be both feminine and a knight in his world, he first shows her female body as malleable and transformable, and then only shows her as a truly qualified knight once she adopts a male form. Just like Arthur replaced Elizabeth in Spenser’s vision of the Armada battle, and Mercilla failed to exact justice on Duessa, Spenser suggests that only a male figure can be a successful knight. This directly flies in the face of Elizabeth’s presentation as a hybrid, as having the feeble body of a woman masking the heart and stomach of a king. Thus Spenser suggests that such hybridity is problematic and impossible, and presents metamorphosis as the only possible solution.

This further troubles Elizabeth’s position since metamorphosis can only exist in the fictional world of the epic. Through Britomart’s metamorphosis, Spenser implies that Elizabeth, as a woman in the real world, can never claim male strength. This reveals yet another layer of his discomfort with Elizabeth.

“Staines of Vermeil”: Britomart’s Smaller Wounds

Despite the fact that Spenser heavily exploits Britomart’s feminine weakness early in Book Three, both through the graphic descriptions of her wound and her
malleable body, the nature of some of her other, smaller wounds actually props up her chastity. This reveals that Spenser still believes in the inherent ability of Britomart to be one of his knights and represent a moral virtue, despite his preoccupation with her female body and all the hazards it entails. This complicates the relationship he has with Britomart, as his only female hero, as he both exploits her femininity but defends her virtue and status as one of his heroes. However, this defense of Britomart actually works to undermine Elizabeth, who was detrimentally affected both by rumors about her lack of chastity and the ultimate consequence of it: not producing an heir. Thus Spenser further taunts Elizabeth by presenting Britomart as a superior model of chastity, as she is not only unaffected by lustful characters but eventually marries and continues her line.

Spenser, by foreshadowing a small battle wound Britomart sustains in the first canto with more dangerous wounds other characters receive, highlights Britomart’s chastity and purity. Although the other wounds have key similarities to Britomart’s, their outcomes suggest Spenser is condemning the other characters while celebrating Britomart. The first wound, Adonis’s, is sustained out of carelessness, and he dies “engored of a great wild Bore” (3.1.38.2). The fact that Adonis’s wound is mortal, in comparison to Britomart’s small wound, suggests Spenser is critiquing Venus and Adonis’s lustful relationship and how it made Adonis reckless. Malecasta’s wound, which she sustains out of lust for Britomart, is even more problematic: “her wound still inward freshly bled,/ And through her bones the false instilled fire/ Did spred it selfe, and venime close inspire” (3.1.56.3-5). This wound, similarly to Britomart’s love wound, is notable for its inward bodily effects. However, the emphasis on fire and venom, as

57 For a more detailed analysis on Adonis’s wound as criticism of lust, see Silberman’s chapter about Adonis in Transforming Desire (35-48).
opposed to the weakness-signifying poison and rot of Britomart’s wound, hint at the
wickedness of Malecasta’s character. Indeed, the “venime” of the wound inspires
Malecasta to creep into Britomart’s bed in the middle of the night. Like Britomart,
Malecasta’s wound drives her to action, but unlike Britomart, Malecasta is consumed
with lust. Spenser presents Malecasta’s wound as both a reflection of her impurity and an
impetus to immoral action – which both provides a nice contrast to Britomart’s love
wound in Canto Two, and a key contrast with the minor wounds Britomart receives
during the narrative.

The nature of Britomart’s minor wounds differentiates her from the immoral
Adonis and Malecasta. Britomart responds to Malecasta’s invasion of her bed with swift
violence, fighting off Malecasta and the knights who come to her aid. But she does not
escape the encounter unscathed:

The mortall steele stayd not, till it was seene

To gore her side, yet was the wound not deepe,

But lightly rased her soft silken skin,

That drops of purple bloud thereout did weepe,

Which did her lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe. (3.1.65.5-9)

Since Britomart sustains this wound fighting off (the wounded) Malecasta’s lustful
attack, and also given that the story of Adonis’s wounding foreshadowed this scene, we
cannot take this wound to be simply decorative. The tiny wound, with its vivid purple
drops staining Britomart’s white gown, is visually striking and memorable. Some have
read this episode as Britomart being scarred by her initial foray into the world of love and
lust.\textsuperscript{58} However, this wound is completely different Britomart’s love wound, and even Malecasta’s wound from earlier in the canto. Those wounds go under the skin, they fester, and they affect the victim’s psychology and actions. This wound, however, is surface level, dripping with “purple blood” – a hallmark of battle wounds. Given that this wound reads more like a battle wound, and a shallow one at that, I would not ascribe it the same significance as others have. Especially given the nature of Britomart’s love wound, which is internal, festering, and psychological, this surface level wound is markedly different. It represents Britomart’s imperviousness to lust by showing that lustful attacks from outside only affect her in the slightest, most physical way – her internal will remains unchanged and pure.

Another similar wound Britomart sustains further emphasizes the small wounds’ purpose in defending Britomart’s chastity. The second cut, sustained during Britomart’s final adventure in Canto Twelve, shows Britomart’s chastity and adherence to her virtue:

\textit{Vnwares [Busyrane’s sword] strooke into her snowie chest,}
\textit{That little drops empurpled her faire brest.}
\textit{Exceeding wroth therewith the virgin grew,}
\textit{Albe the wound were nothing deepe imprest. (3.12.33.4-7)}

This wound clearly mirrors the one sustained in the first canto – it is vivid, surface-deep, and ultimately inconsequential. In fact, the cut drives Britomart to strike more forcefully at Busyrane, suggesting that Britomart’s knightly abilities are not hindered by encounters with love and lust, they are increased. Precisely because these wounds are surface-level only, and do not prevent Britomart from being an effective knight, they highlight Britomart’s chastity and imperviousness to lust.

\textsuperscript{58} For an argument on Britomart’s wounds as initiation, see Broaddus 23-45.
The fact that Britomart’s story is bookended with these minor cuts suggests Spenser is outlining her continued inexperience with love and lust, and thus defending her chastity. Unlike Malecasta’s quickly-sustained, festering wound, and unlike Amoret’s grievous injury inflicted by Busyrane, Britomart does not succumb to any love that is not the pure love she has for Artegall. She is scratched and affected, in a very tangential way (in both instances she does notice the wound until after it is sustained), but it does not deter her from her quest. This bookending with the small wounds also illustrates how Britomart’s chastity is never diminished, despite her associations with various immoral and questionable characters over the course of Book Three. As one of Spenser’s heroes, this defense of her virtue is paramount – especially since Spenser does not shy from exploiting her feminine weakness. Thus Britomart’s tiny wounds work to prop up the adherence to her virtue, rather than further weaken her or suggest that she is succumbing to lust, and in the process defend her status as one of Spenser’s allegorical heroes.

Britomart’s continued imperviousness to lust is another way Spenser subtly undermines Elizabeth. As her reign continued, rumors about her supposed affairs, including with Robert Dudley, piled up. Furthermore, as we saw in her marriage negotiation with Francis, Duke D’Anjou, she did not shy away from bold – and many thought indecent – behavior with him in front of her court. Thus Elizabeth, as her reign progressed, was constantly subject to gossip and suspicion about her chastity – gossip that wounded her body politic more sharply than Britomart’s cuts wound her physical body. Britomart, despite her adventures and contact with unsavory people, manages to maintain her chastity, unlike Elizabeth. Even more crucially, Elizabeth’s public chastity caused her to be childless, dooming England to an uncertain future. Just as Andrew

59 See Levin, chapter 4 (66-90) for an overview of rumors about Queen Elizabeth’s sexual behavior.
Hadfield reads the first ending of Book Three (with Britomart watching Amoret and Scudamour embrace) as a comment on Elizabeth’s skewed value system in the eyes of Spenser, Britomart’s continued adherence to her value of chastity also pokes at Elizabeth’s public image as a virgin queen, a choice that severely complicated England’s future and guaranteed her public chastity would always be under scrutiny.

“Her Trembling Hart”: Amoret’s Wound

By the end of Book Three, when Britomart reaches her final challenge of rescuing Amoret from Busyrane, she has embraced a masculine, knightly role. From holding her own, both physically and intellectually, against Paridell, to avoiding being caught up in the lustful drama between Paridell, Hellenore, and Malbecco, Spenser demonstrates Britomart’s development from a stereotypically weak, feminine damsel in distress to a capable knight. However, her effectiveness as a male knight is not fully illustrated until her final adventure, when she rescues Amoret from Busyrane. By rescuing Amoret from a particularly potent foe, Spenser both argues for Britomart’s effectiveness as a knight and provides a contrast between Britomart’s old, weak femininity – now embodied by Amoret – and her new, masculine strength. This contrast is made explicit by giving Amoret the most gruesome, vivid wound portrayed in the epic. The contrast further supports Spenser’s belief that knights must be masculine, and provides an even more detailed and gory examination of love as a wound, which allows Spenser to continue to elucidate his anxiety about the female form. By presenting a clear gender binary – Britomart as a successful male knight and Amoret as a gruesomely injured damsel –
Spenser undermines Elizabeth’s attempts to place herself in the middle of the binary and claim both masculine and feminine traits.

Even before rescuing Amoret from Busyrane, Spenser crystallizes Britomart’s new, masculine image as she invades Busyrane’s castle. To invade the castle, she has to penetrate the fire that Busyrane uses to seal the entrance. Scudamour, another knight, sees the flames and gives up hope that he can rescue Amoret – in a moment of cowardice that suggests Scudamour is inadequate both as a knight and as a man: “What is there else, but cease these fruitlesse painses./ And leaue me to my former languishing?” (3.11.24.1-2).

Scudamour, with his vocalized anguish and cowardice, is shown as an ineffective knight, despite his masculinity. Britomart, although she is described as “dismayd” (with the pun on “maid”), is able to penetrate the flames (3.11.22.1). Her passage through fire is one of the epic’s most gorgeously realized images:

Therewith resolu’d to proue her vtmost might,

Her ample shield she threw before her face,

And her swords point directing forward right,

Assayld the flame, the which eftsoones gaue place,

And did it selfe diuide with equall space,

That through she passed; as a thunder bolt

Perceth the yielding ayre, and doth displace

The soring clouds into sad showres ymolt;

So to her yold the flames, and did their force reuolt. (3.11.25)

Britomart embodies an aggressive, male position in penetrating the flames. This provides a clear contrast to Scudamour, who is too afraid to attempt such a brave feat, and thus
solidifies Britomart’s new, masculine bravery. It is also a highly sexualized image, which suggests that Britomart not only embraces bravery but a kind of male sexuality in rescuing Amoret. But crucially, it is still a chaste, noble sexuality – Britomart treats Amoret respectfully after she rescues her, protecting her without expecting anything in return. She can therefore embody the image of male physicality and sexuality without fully falling into a male sexual role or losing her chastity. Thus Britomart remains chaste despite embodying a very male sexual image. This image – powerful and unyielding – is strikingly different from the Britomart early in the narrative who suffers for her love and allows others’ words to affect her. Thus Britomart, by abandoning her femininity and embracing masculinity, is able to be a true knight.

The reemergence of the love wound imagery seals Britomart’s male metamorphosis while allowing Spenser to further tease out the inherent problems and weaknesses of female bodies. With Britomart transfigured into an effectively male character, and free from the complaints of her wound, a vacuum is created in the narrative, which tends to rely on weakened female figures to raise the stakes of the drama. This vacuum becomes especially apparent as Britomart and Scudamour both come to Amoret’s rescue, and Scudamour is forced into a submissive, feminine role. Spenser properly fills this void with Amoret, a woman suffering for love the way Britomart suffered earlier in the narrative. However, while Britomart’s wound was self-described and not made physically real, Amoret’s wound is physical, and excruciatingly detailed, so that her suffering is fully emphasized. Thus, Amoret’s even more vivid wound both marks a powerful return to the theme of wounds as love and makes Britomart look even stronger and more developed in her masculinity by comparison.
The sheer brutality of Amoret’s wound attests to a great degree of anxiety on Spenser’s part about the female form. The comparison between Britomart and Amoret begins as Amoret is presented in Busyrane’s gruesome love masque, “She dolefull Lady, like a dreary Spright,…Had Deathes owne image figurd in her face,/ Full of sad signes, fearefull to liuing sight” (3.12.19.4-7). Like Britomart earlier in the narrative, Amoret’s suffering appears to be mostly emotional and psychological: Spenser dwells on her deathly countenance and downtrodden nature. But then, as earlier in the narrative, Spenser then turns to a physical description of the wound. However, unlike Britomart’s wound, which she describes herself, Amoret’s wound is described by Spenser, and takes clear physical form:

Her brest all naked, as net iuory,

Without adorne of gold or siluer bright,

Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify,

Of her dew honour was despoyled quight,

And a wide wound therein (O ruefull sight)

Entrenched deepe with knife accursed keene,

Yet freshly bleeding forth her fainting spright,

(The worke of cruell hand) was to be seene,

That dyde in sanguine red her skin all snowy cleene. (3.12.20)

At that wide orifice her trembling hart

Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,

Quite through transfixed with a deadly dart,
And in her bloud yet steeming fresh embayd… (3.12.21.1-4)

This passage is visceral, grotesque, and beautiful, and develops slowly as Spenser passes over Amoret’s body, and then the wound, and finally her heart, separated from her body. Spenser’s lingering gaze on the female body resurges, but that gaze allows for rich descriptions – Amoret’s “trembling hart” laid in a silver basin, bathed in her steaming blood, while her ivory skin is dyed red from the bleeding. Aside from being one of the most visually intense moments in the epic, this passage provides a final, climactic image of love as a wound by recalling earlier wounds and surpassing them. Amoret’s wound – with blood dripping on ivory skin – both recalls Britomart’s little wounds with their sensuous descriptions and Britomart’s larger wound, with its severity and deadly intent. But Amoret’s wound, by combining both the beautiful and deadly nature of all of Britomart’s wounds, marks the final, fullest visualization of love as a wound that Spenser provides in Book Three.

The wound is particularly vivid since Spenser contrasts it with Amoret’s pure, “iuory,” “snowy cleene” figure, “Without adorne of gold or siluer bright” (3.12.20). Amoret is a woman in the most pared-down sense of the word, carrying no symbols of wealth or status. Her pale, naked female body stands as a kind of perfect femininity, which is continually violated by Busyrane. Her body, violently ruptured, with her heart laid out in the silver basin – a mark of her captor’s superior wealth and status as well as power – has been horribly corrupted. While Britomart’s love wound existed metaphorically, via her own description, Amoret’s wound is made physically real, through its actual creation by a male character – forcefully driving home Spenser’s final,
climactic image of Book Three, an image that communicates intense anxiety about the female form.

Similar to earlier scenes in Book Three, the love-wound prompts Britomart to act. However, while Britomart overcame her first wound by embracing masculinity on a personal, emotional level, she is able to rescue Amoret using brute physical force, “the stout Damzell to him leaping light./ His cursed hand withheld, and maistered his might” (3.12.32.8-9). Without hesitation, Britomart attacks Busyrane, a sharp contrast from the sighing, malleable pre-transformation Britomart. Britomart’s masculine strength allows her to save the damsel in distress, both fulfilling her role as a knight and also providing a clear image of her metamorphosis. Thus Spenser continues to highlight the effectiveness of the male knight through Britomart’s development.

However, Spenser does defend the value of a traditionally feminine, sympathetic role immediately after Busyrane is attacked, by having Amoret step in to defend him: “next stroke him should haue slaine,/ Had not the Lady, which by him stood bound,/ Dernely vnto her called to abstaine” (3.12.34.2-4). If Britomart had slain Busyrane in this moment, Amoret’s ghastly wound could never have been healed. But it takes Amoret, logical and sympathetic even through her suffering, to stop Britomart, fully engaged in masculine rage. Thus Spenser does not seem to suggest that stereotypically emotionless, physically strong masculinity is the only key to virtue. While he values this in his knights, he recognizes the importance of femininity in fully fleshing out his value system. This also explains why, once Britomart embraces the masculine, he produces Amoret to fulfill the feminine vacuum in the narrative. Thus Spenser seems to argue for a balance between masculine and feminine, that, while it privileges the masculine, still
reserves a crucial place for female bodies. This, in turn, allows Spenser to privilege a clear gender binary over any attempts to hybridize gender, troubling Elizabeth’s position. Since Britomart and Amoret both occupy a key role in the defeat of Busyrane, Spenser critiques the notion of a single person straddling gender lines and attempting to fulfill dual roles. Since Elizabeth occupies a hybrid role, this criticism naturally falls on her and her self-presentation.

Despite presenting and privileging a gender binary over hybrid roles, the conclusion Spenser pushes throughout his epic is that, despite the necessity of the female, ultimately, a male figure has to lead and take action, which weakens the female body politic. This figures in how he allegorizes the Armada victory through Arthur instead of Mercilla, taking away from Elizabeth’s chief foreign policy triumph, and how he presents the execution of Duessa (Mary, Queen of Scots) as a moment of weakness, not strength, for Mercilla (Elizabeth). But in Book Three, in the epic’s first half, Spenser undermines Elizabeth more subtly. By presenting a gender binary, he draws out the weaknesses of the female form while simultaneously arguing for male dominance.

This subtler but equally insistent criticism of Elizabeth’s female body politic is a natural product of Spenser’s time in Ireland and the fresh influence of the events of the late 1580s. The quieter criticism is also appropriately cautious, given that the first half of The Faerie Queene was the first work Spenser had published in over a decade. This was a time, after all, when writers could lose their hands for libel. Spenser cautiously tests the waters of critique, insistently picking at Elizabeth’s body politic while supporting and praising her on the surface. But the wounds – the rotting, streaming, vivid love wounds – reveal Spenser’s potent anxiety about the female body politic. Of course, these
descriptions say more about Spenser’s own psyche than political history or the ultimate legacy of Elizabeth’s reign. But exploring Spenser’s wound imagery allows us a glimpse at how Elizabeth’s subjects carefully imagined and responded to her authoritative, complex self-presentation.
Conclusion

Wounding Elizabeth’s Body Politic

The 1580s was a crucial decade in Elizabeth’s reign – her childlessness transformed from a temporary worry to a permanent, troubling state of affairs. This increased the tension surrounding the future of England after Elizabeth’s death, and added more weight to threats from Catholics Mary, Queen of Scots and Philip II of Spain. These threats culminated in the execution of Mary and the attack of the Spanish Armada on Philip’s orders. Spenser experienced most of this challenging decade on Irish ground – ground that his fellow countrymen were struggling to subjugate, ground alternately soaked in blood and dried up by famine.

Out of this world of colonial violence, and in the context of a very difficult, transformative decade for England, Spenser wrote The Faerie Queene, an exceedingly long and complicated allegory for not just the current events of the time, but idealized moral virtues. In this context, the epic must necessarily be understood as critique of Elizabeth and her female body politic. Traces of Elizabeth, and directly allegorized scenes of her reign, are strongly imprinted in the epic’s latter half – with the execution of Duessa (Mary, Queen of Scots) and the defeat of the Souldan (the Armada). However, since the criticism of Elizabeth does not appear directly in the epic’s first half, written during the actual decade of upheaval, where exactly is it hiding?

I find Queen Elizabeth, and specifically Spenser’s anxiety about her female body politic, written with love wounds on the bodies of female characters in the epic’s first half. The love wounds open up female bodies for examination and give Spenser power over them, allowing him to endlessly probe them for both possible weaknesses, exposing
the problems of a female body in power. The love wounds are in marked contrast from battle wounds, which appear in many instances throughout the epic and are usually given and received by male characters. Those wounds are intensely violent, action-based, and gory. Although often fatal, in some cases like Marinell’s, they also have the ability to be healed.

But the love wounds, which are more rare and yet more striking, linger, fester, and rot on the bodies of female characters. The love wounds allow Spenser’s gaze to linger over the female body and endlessly problematize it, reflecting his anxiety about the female body in power. We see this type of wound on Britomart and then, once she is able to “shut up all her plaint in priuy griefe” and become a male knightly figure, transferred onto Amoret. And while Britomart is able to metamorphose from a “silly Mayd” to a true knight, characters who claim hybridity and try to embody more than one role at once are usually criticized – from lust-filled satyrs to the Amazon-woman Radigund. This reflects critically on Elizabeth, who claimed to have the “heart and stomach of a king” lodged within the “weak and feeble body of a woman.” Thus Spenser expresses a deep, lingering, and pernicious anxiety about the female body, and the female body in power, by opening those bodies up for examination through wounding.

Healing Britomart

Despite Spenser’s marked anxiety about the female body in power, the epic should not be read as a broadly misogynistic portrayal of women. In fact, the world of The Faerie Queene – with its gender metamorphosis, gender hybrids, beautiful virgins, wicked witches, female warriors, nymphs, queens, and seemingly everything in between
– presents a rich array of female characters that, in itself, suggests a belief in not just the necessity of the female gender, but a respect for it and an understanding of its sheer diversity. The fact that Spenser chose to carry on the epic tradition of having woman warriors, when he could have easily created a cast of all-male knights, also indicates a more qualified attitude towards women.

Britomart’s last appearance in the epic bolsters this more nuanced reading of Spenser’s women. By Book Five, Britomart has not only found Artegaill and thus finished her original quest, she has saved him from Radigund and had many of her own side adventures. Beyond proving herself as a capable knight, she has also found love and saved her lover, a knight himself. Thus the overall representation of Britomart is complex – she has both found love and discovered a remarkable inner strength, all while metamorphosing between genders. Nowhere is this complexity better illustrated than in her final appearance. While Artegaill rides off to complete his quest, still unfinished, Britomart is troubled, but resolves to heal herself:

There she continu’d for a certain space,

Till through his want her woe did more increase:

Then hoping that the change of aire and place

Would change her paine, and sorrow somewhat ease,

She parted thence, her anguish to appease. (5.7.45.1-5)

This ending, while uncertain, carries the strong suggestion that Britomart is capable of healing herself and having further, independent adventures, and in fact, that having adventures is the only way she has to overcome her own inner pain. Had the epic been

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60 Hadfield also argues compellingly that Spenser’s account of the painless birth of Amoret and Belphebe by Chrysogenee reveals a deep-seated compassion for the often-harrowing experience of childbirth that women face, and even some understanding for Queen Elizabeth’s decision to remain childless (263-4).
finished, perhaps we would have seen an official marriage between Britomart and Artegaill. Perhaps this would have included Britomart’s transformation back into a wholly female character. But with this image as our last representation of Britomart, we are left to imagine the possible world of her future, a world that could contain as much adventuring as a knight as it does a more traditional role as Artegaill’s wife. So despite the extended imagery of her wound, and the fact that Spenser used Britomart to express his critique of Elizabeth’s female body politic, Spenser also gives her as happy of an outcome as any character in the epic receives. This suggests, in the end, that the world of the epic perhaps offers as much hope of peace to female characters as it does to male ones, provided they uphold certain moral virtues. This complexity should only be further explored as we read Spenser’s epic and tease out the nuances of his very rich, complex host of characters and images.

Wide is the Wound

Even given this more qualified reading, the weight of Spenser’s wound imagery – and the complexity it bears in terms of gender and violence – can be noted in the works of his immediate successors. For example, when Milton describes the birth of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, she is born from a wound in Adam’s side, as Adam recounts:

[God] stooping opened my left side, and took

From thence a rib, with cordial spirits warm,

And life-blood streaming fresh; wide was the wound,

But suddenly with flesh filled up and healed:

The rib he formed and fashioned with his hands;
Under his forming hands a creature grew,
Man-like, but different sex; so lovely fair,
That what seemed fair in all the world, seemed now
Mean, or in her summed up, in her contained… (Paradise Lost 465-473) \(^{61}\)

Aside from the similarity of Milton’s wound imagery to Spenser’s, this passage has direct roots in *The Faerie Queene*: the phrase “wide was the wound” is taken directly from Spenser, who uses it to describe one of Arthur’s battle wounds: “Wyde was the wound, and a large lukewarme flood,/ Red as the Rose, thence gushed grievously” (2.8.39.1-2). Milton thus directly calls back to Spenser, and his images of wounds in particular, to describe the birth of Eve.

Milton’s wound is fascinating in itself. As readers of Spenser’s wounds, the image of blood “streaming” from a wound should be quite familiar – it reads like a battle wound, with its emphasis on gore. Furthermore, Milton quickly heals Adam’s wound, like Spenser quickly heals Marinell’s, not allowing us to gaze on it long. This wound borrows from the gory imagery of a battle wound, and the privileging of a male wound in its quick healing. But this wound differs, crucially, in that it is a site of birth as well as violence. And while Spenser is wont to describe gushing blood at length, Milton also invites his reader to gaze at the product of Adam’s wound – the rib that becomes Eve.

While Eve is a character that most readers already come to with a certain amount of baggage, Milton further problematizes Eve by explicitly linking her birth with violence. By darkening the circumstances of Eve’s birth, Milton works trouble her image in the mind of the reader, even as she quickly turns into “so lovely fair” a creature.

Furthermore, the fact that Eve is made from Adam’s rib suggests that she is, at her core,

\(^{61}\) Pages 253-4 in the Kastan edition.
at least partly male, but on the surface female – making her a hybrid, yet another layer of troubling complexity. But unlike Spenser, Milton does not get the opportunity to “open up” Eve with a wound to probe her and expose potential weaknesses. Rather, Eve is left whole (unlike Adam, forever missing a rib), forcing the reader to imagine – and fear – what she could be capable of. Thus Eve’s birth from a wound, from another body, hybridizes and problematizes her for the reader. By taking wound imagery from Spenser, Milton is able to trouble the reader’s image of Eve well before she is able to speak or act for herself.

An allusion like this demonstrates how complex and meaningful Spenser’s wound imagery can be. When we evaluate closely how Spenser creates this imagery we can illuminate other works that look to The Faerie Queene for inspiration. Future lines of inquiry could explore instances of such violence in Spenser’s contemporaries or his successors to trace a lineage of wounds. Exploring how this lineage continues or is disrupted could further reveal tensions surrounding representations of female bodies and female power. And while such examinations may not allow us, as readers, to heal the wounds we find, they may help us probe deeper into the works that fascinate us.
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