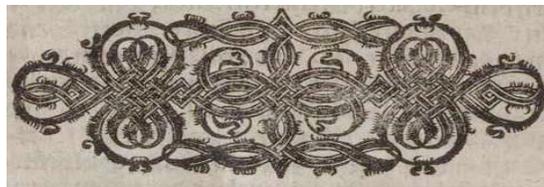


## Reflections: Spenser, Elizabeth I, and Mirror Literature

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**Abstract:** In Book Three of Spenser's *Faerie Queen* frequently, the magical mirror in which Britomart first sees the image of her beloved--and object of her quest--is the most prominent of the many mirrors found throughout the text. It functions as a crucial intersection of the conventional courtly mirror of love and the hortatory mirror of religious and political discourse. This mirror transforms Britomart into both a completely appropriate avatar of Elizabeth and a completely legible message to the poem's most prominent audience member, the Queen. This paper argues that Spenser's message of admiration and instruction to his queen can be read most clearly when Britomart and her mirror are contextualized by an understanding of the courtly and hortatory mirror traditions.



Critical analysis of Book Three of Spenser's *Faerie Queen* frequently centers on the problematics of interpreting Britomart, the martial maiden who represents a complex conflation of virginity and chastity with marriage and reproductive imperative, as an avatar of Queen Elizabeth I.<sup>1</sup> The magical mirror in which Britomart first sees the image of her beloved and object of her quest is often treated as no more than a plot device or conventional symbol in these analyses, and when scholars do examine this mirror, also called Venus's looking glass, as an important aspect of her characterization they tend to emphasize the dangerous and corrupting temptation to narcissism that it appears to offer to Spenser's maidenly knight of chastity.<sup>2</sup> Because this looking glass is the most prominent of the many mirrors found throughout the text and functions as a crucial intersection of the conventional courtly mirror of love and the hortatory mirror of religious and political discourse, I argue that Britomart's mirror offers interpretive possibilities exceeding those commonly assigned to it and actually serves to expand her significance far beyond the obvious role

of personification of the virtue of chastity. This mirror, in fact, transforms Britomart into both an entirely appropriate avatar of and a completely legible message to the poem's most prominent audience member Elizabeth. Spenser's message of admiration and more importantly instruction to his queen, however, can be read most clearly when Britomart and her mirror are contextualized by an understanding of the courtly and hortatory mirror traditions and situated within Spenser's sophisticated development and manipulation of the mirror as metaphor.

In the *fin amor* tradition, especially as instituted by the vastly influential *Romance of the Rose*, reflections of the beloved in mirrors, fountains, and eyes allow for the Neo-platonic ideal of recognition of one's self in one's beloved as well as for exaggerated praise of the beloved through descriptions of idealized images of physical beauty and personal characteristics. Such conventions lead to praise metaphors in which the loved one can be flatteringly called, for instance, the "glass of fashion" or the "mirrhor of feminitie" and thereby be portrayed as the very embodiment of the perfect Platonic form of any attribute the lover wishes to extol.<sup>3</sup> As early as the fourth stanza of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser, who was no stranger to this tradition and employed its conventions throughout his oeuvre, injects such traditional implementation of literary mirrors into his text by calling Queen Elizabeth I a "Goddess heauenly bright, / Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine" (1.Proem. 4.1-2).<sup>4</sup> Thus, Spenser's overt adulation of his queen as the very image of Grace itself has an equally overt function of flattery in the courtly tradition. Spenser continues to use this convention in a traditional form throughout the poem, but at crucial moments he also develops and manipulates it to produce an artful mix of criticism and flattery. For example, in the Proem to Book Six, which seems to have been composed after Spenser's departure from Elizabeth's court and during his apparently unwilling rustication in Ireland, Spenser complicates the convention even as he employs it, reproaching Elizabethan mirrors for their deceptive qualities while using them as a means of flattering the Queen. Acknowledging the common illusory use of mirrors, Spenser writes,

But in the triall of true curtesie,  
Its now so farre from that, which then it was,  
That it indeed is nought by forgerie,  
Fashion'd to please the eies of them, that pas,  
Which see not perfet things but in a glas:  
Yet is that glasse so gay that it can blynd

The wisest sight, to thinke gold that is bras. ( 6.Proem.5.1-7)

Noting that beautiful contemporary reflections of courtesy are "forgerie" and can "blynd" the viewer to truth, Spenser destabilizes courtly use of the mirror tradition to criticize current Elizabethan "curtesie" as nothing but a sham and showy reflection of what "curtesie" once was and ought yet to

be. The court, which should see “perfect things” in a glass, is instead blinded by the dazzling crystal surface of the mirror and thus mistakes a reflection of brass for one of gold: the perfect Platonic form that the courtly mirror ought to reveal is missing and has been replaced with false, surface glitz. However, in the next stanza Spenser juxtaposes this critique with an assurance that Elizabeth, whose gleaming reflection is neither false nor gaudy, is its one exception. He asserts that, notwithstanding the current general failure of courtesy to live up to its past glory, in his queen he finds a “patterne . . . of Princely curtesie” that exceeds those from “all Antiquity” (6.Proem.6.5-3). Her “pure minde . . . [reflects true courtesy] as in a mirrour sheene,” dazzling the eyes of her worshipful beholders; but, rather than blinding them to truth, it “doth inflame” all eyes that see it, inspiring them to praise both true courtesy and the Queen who reflects it (6.Proem.6.5). By placing his criticism of mirrors and mirror imagery in apposition to his deployment of that imagery for adulation of his sovereign, Spenser rhetorically cloaks his doubt regarding the perfection of his queen and her court in blameless, and politically safe, admiration. We will see a similar manipulation of the courtly mirror trope so that it operates on multiple levels in the Proem to Book Three and in Spenser’s portrayal of Britomart.

The second type of mirror metaphor, the didactic literary mirror, which has existed from the early Middle Ages as a distinctive hortatory genre based on the mirror as its central metaphor, differs significantly from the traditional courtly model of love and praise and is equally if not more important to Spenser’s agenda with regard to Britomart because it allows him both to praise and to instruct his queen in the person of a single character. Divided into four basic types: encyclopedic mirror literature that “reflects things as they are,” fantastic mirror literature that reflects what exists only in the writer’s imagination, prognostic mirror literature that reflects “the way things will be,” and didactic mirror literature that “shows the way things should or should not be” through both exemplary and admonitory examples, this genre remained extremely popular well into the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Herbert Grabes asserts that in this genre “the idealizing function of the mirror [as metaphor] is closely connected with the function of the real toilet-mirror,” exhorting its intended audience to use its content to improve his or her “thoughts and conduct” much as one would use a toilet-mirror to improve one’s outward appearance. Although the earliest didactic mirror literature was largely religious or contemplative often directed at specific ages or classes of people, religious mirrors were eventually “displaced in quantity and importance” in favor of “exemplary political mirrors,” including the well-studied mirror-for-princes sub-genre.<sup>6</sup> I argue that in Book Three, in particular, we see Spenser moving beyond the courtly mirror model to a deeply significant political deployment of the hortatory model of mirror

literature, along with noteworthy use of the literal mirror, by shaping the tale of Britomart into a mirror text for his own prince, Queen Elizabeth I.

### **Elizabeth, Spenser, and Mirror Literature**

Such a move by the poet would not have been lost on his queen, for Elizabeth I was no stranger to mirror literature and its many possible uses and implications. While we can reasonably conjecture that as a woman noted for her extreme erudition she would have encountered at least some of the many English and Latin mirror texts available during her lifetime, we also know that when she was eleven years old Elizabeth translated *Le miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, a lengthy religious mirror poem by Marguerite de Navarre, to present to her step-mother Katherine Parr under the title "Glass of the Sinful Soul."<sup>7</sup> Although we cannot be certain what prompted Elizabeth to translate this particular work, it is possible that it was given to her as an assignment. If so, it may have been chosen for educational, religious, diplomatic, and political reasons; however, if the young Elizabeth herself chose this text for translation, she may have done so from an attraction to its thematic echoes of her own situation. Either way, the poem introduced the young princess to the traditions and complexities of the mirror genre and taught her something about reflection, identity construction, and power. Born from a union made possible through the deployment of the incest taboo and declared a bastard because of accusations of incest against her mother, Elizabeth had to have been keenly aware of the importance and uncertainty of familial identity. Marguerite de Navarre's poem explores the multiplicity of familial relationships that the soul metaphorically enjoys with God and includes a subversive subtext celebrating the potential power of incest for women. Maureen Quilligan offers a detailed exploration of the relationship between Elizabeth's youthful introduction to the religious and political possibilities of incest found in the poem and her later management of self-presentation through familial metaphors. Arguing that Elizabeth's mature rhetorical manipulation of her own identity had its genesis in this translation from her youth, Quilligan points out a portion of Elizabeth's translation which reads, "Thou dost handle my soul (if so I durst say) as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife," which presages her later rhetorical use of each of these familial positions with relation to her country.<sup>8</sup> Quilligan asserts that for Elizabeth the "slipperiness of the familial positions is . . . the central point of the poem" and that it allows her a very early identification with "all the problematic family relationships of her own life" that she learns to exploit with famous mastery.<sup>9</sup> I argue that because the multiplication of identities so crucial to Elizabethan politics and power has its beginnings in her translation of a mirror genre text and because this text was reprinted four times during Elizabeth's reign, the fourth time coincidentally in the same year (1590) that the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* were published, the mirror genre was not only well

known to the Queen but also personally significant and therefore Spenser's exploitation of this genre in *The Faerie Queene* would have sharply resonated with Elizabeth, heightening her attention to the relatively subtle instructive nature of the text that accompanies its blatant adulation.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the many volumes of mirror literature available to readers in the Elizabethan period, including Elizabeth's translation, we can assume that the well-educated and literary Spenser was acquainted with various versions of this genre, and his willingness to incorporate it into his own work is demonstrated by the ideas and images drawn from the extremely popular *Mirror for Magistrates* in his own work. Jerry Leath Mills, for example, notes that one of the dedicatory sonnets for *The Faerie Queene* is addressed to Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, who wrote the *Induction* for the *Mirror for Magistrates*, as well as other marks of its influence on *The Faerie Queene* including "details for the castle of Alma."<sup>11</sup> Further, Spenser would very likely have known George Gascoigne's 1575 work *The Glass of Government* and his 1576 *The Steele Glas*, a mirror poem satirizing English society which "orchestrates its censure around . . . the crystal glass mirror" and may, indeed, have drawn on this text for his criticism of the deceptive qualities of Elizabethan mirrors in the Proem to Book Six.<sup>12</sup> Rayna Kalas explains that crystal glass mirrors were becoming popular in England during the sixteenth century and soon would supplant the earlier steel glass mirrors as the technology of choice. Because steel required polishing to be useful as a mirror, Gascoigne argues that the newer glass mirrors, which require no effort to use, are deceptive in the images they produce and metaphorically lead to moral and religious corruption. In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser echoes Gascoigne's concern with his own comments regarding the deceptive possibilities of "glasse so gay that it can blynd / The wisest sight" that has apparently displaced more sober and traditional means of viewing oneself and the world (6.Proem.5.5-6). Throughout *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser shows his understanding of the metaphorical potential of mirror tropes as well as their traditional and contemporary deployments. He carefully exploits the possibilities offered generally by the hortatory mirror genre, and specifically by Elizabeth's *Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, for self-analysis and cautionary exhortation that allows Britomart and her mirror to function both as flattering praise and as instructive advice to Queen Elizabeth I.

### **Spenser's Mirrors of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene***

In Books One through Three, the first part of *The Faerie Queene*, we can trace Spenser's skillful introduction of the mirror trope into the poem in both of its forms as well as his use of literal mirrors to increase its efficacy for hortatory purposes. According to Grabes, close association of a literal mirror and the mirror of the soul is vital to the effective hortatory function of the genre. Notably, of the examples listed above only

Gascoigne's *The Steele Glas* blatantly exploits the relationship between the metaphorical mirror of inner contemplation and the literal mirrors used by sixteenth-century men and women. In art the literal mirror and its metaphoric function seem to be easier to integrate than they are in narrative, perhaps due to narrative's more linear nature. Debora Shuger's study of the mirror and the development of reflexive self-consciousness in art and literature characterizes literal and metaphorical references to mirrors in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as "odd" partly because they almost never reflect the face of the viewer, but instead, denying the viewer a subject position, they offer an oblique view of an exemplary or cautionary image.<sup>13</sup> Shuger's article includes numerous examples of art showing people looking into literal mirrors and, instead of their own reflections, seeing reflections of death, heaven, the Virgin Mary, or other representations of their inner spiritual states.<sup>14</sup> Because it allows the simultaneous depiction of a person looking into a literal mirror and depiction of his or her metaphorical reflection, visual representation of mirror exhortation offers the viewer an immediate amalgamation of real personal experience and transcendent meaning. The person depicted looking into the mirror acts as a signifier of literal meaning while the metaphorical reflection takes on the significance of myth, or what Roland Barthes might call its mythic form. The viewer is immersed simultaneously in both levels of meaning.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a literal mirror in a text can impart a degree of simultaneity to the trope like that experienced by viewers of art by imaginatively calling up a visual image of a person looking into a mirror along with the moral implied in the described reflection. The reader then is able to integrate that image of real personal experience with the transcendent meaning of the text both intellectually and quasi-visually. In much mirror literature, however, the literal mirror essentially vanishes, and its place is taken by the subject matter or the text itself. This sublimation of the literal mirror robs the metaphor of some of its power as a direct commentary on the behavior and character of individuals and of its impact as directed exhortation. The first mirror reference in *The Faerie Queene* is entirely metaphorical, but as Spenser deepens his use of the metaphor we can find literal mirrors depicted, as well. By Book Three Spenser's skillful incorporation of the literal mirror and its "idealizing function," to use Grabes's terminology, fully integrates the mirror genre into the poem and increases the significance of the work's reflection of Elizabeth beyond a frivolous courtly model of flattery to one of powerful social, political, and personal significance.<sup>16</sup>

In the opening Proem of the poem, as I have noted above, Spenser introduces the mirror as a motif by calling Elizabeth the mirror of Grace, suggesting that Elizabeth's herself is a reflection of the perfect Platonic form of Grace. This is, of course, conventional courtly adulation in which the mirroring function, rather than a literal mirror, is used to reveal a

“truth” of inward perfection that is not outwardly visible, but this instance of mirror use cannot be considered more significant than any other hyperbolized flattery one might find in medieval or Renaissance literature. In Book One Spenser also introduces the hortatory mirror genre into the poem as another mirror, a “real” one, appears, this time in the hands of Lucifera, the queene of the House of Pride. Lucifera

. . . held a mirrhour bright,

Wherein her face she often viewed fayne,

And in her selfe-lou’d semblance tooke delight. (1.4.10.6-8)

This case in which a literal mirror is used to reflect the face of its viewer might at first seem to oppose Shuger’s “oddness” of literary mirroring; however, the allegorical quality of this reflection obviates the apparent contradiction. Lucifera’s vanity is the vice depicted, and as she herself functions as an allegorical representation of this and other vices, she must see her own “selfe-lou’d semblance” for the vice to be openly displayed.<sup>17</sup> Spenser makes it more than clear in this passage that vanity is one of Lucifera’s many sins, and here both viewer and image are cautionary examples. The fact that a literal mirror is portrayed makes the cautionary statement more comprehensible and vivid than a more oblique version could be. This admonition against vanity, functioning as an introduction of the mirror genre that Spenser will develop later, appears to be directed to readers in general rather than explicitly directed at Queen Elizabeth I, as later admonitions will be. By the end of Book One, all readers, including the Queen, have been warned against the vice of vanity and have been made aware of the metaphorical importance of mirrors and of their potential deployment through both the courtly and the hortatory models.

In Book Two Spenser develops and deepens the mirror trope by conflating the two models of admiration and admonition. The Proem to Book Two refers to the *text* as “this fayre mirrhour” in which Elizabeth may find herself, England, and her own ancestry depicted (2.Proem.4.5-9). This use of the mirror has the potential to be taken as courtly praise as well as instruction to the Queen and is doubtless intended to function as a simultaneous exercise of both modes of mirror usage. Since temperance is the virtue explored in Book Two, one might read this passage according to the courtly model as a flattering indication that Spenser intends to show the temperance that is a virtue already inherent in Elizabeth, England, and her ancestry. Intentionally *not* referring to Elizabeth alone but also to her realm and her history, this flattery is much more political and less personal than that given in Book One where Elizabeth is called the mirror of Grace. However, Book Two's Proem can also be read as an exhortation to temperance directed at Elizabeth and England through the mirror of the text similar to the warning against vanity found in Lucifera and her literal mirror. Because there is no literal mirror in this section of the poem, the

text itself functions as the mirror, and the exhortation is, therefore, weakened by the lack of immediacy and simultaneity that a literal mirror adds to the trope. Nevertheless, because it is explicitly directed to the “fairest Princesse vnder sky” who is instructed to find here a reflection of her own face, her “owne realms in lond of Faery,” and her own “great auncestry[,]” the exhortation functions much more personally, even if also politically, than the cautionary image of Lucifera and her vanity, which lacked any explicit direction to Queen Elizabeth I, functioned in Book One (2.Proem.4.6-9). Thus, Spenser has developed the mirror trope in three distinct ways: first, by allowing this portion of the text to function ambiguously as both a laudatory mirror of Elizabeth's temperance and a hortatory mirror to encourage that virtue, he has combined the two models into one image; next, he has generalized and weakened the courtly model by including Elizabeth's land and history with her person as objects of his flattery; and finally, he has begun to personalize the hortatory model, intentionally directing the exemplary aspects of the text toward Elizabeth rather than toward readers in general. Without abandoning the socially and politically safe positions of courtly flatterer and general moralist that the conventional uses of mirror tropes in Book One establish for him, in Book Two Spenser lays the groundwork for Book Three's more pointed, and possibly more precarious, use of those tropes to instruct and exhort the Queen.

In Book Three Spenser takes the development of the mirror trope to its deepest level, moving almost entirely away from the shallow flattery of the courtly model to a level of serious instruction directed at his queen. Book Three's title, “The Legend of Chastity,” establishes it as the book most obviously associated with Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen and, through her control of her public image, the personification of chastity. The Proem to Book Three seems designed to offer insight into the most important aspects of the ensuing narrative as they relate to Elizabeth's virtues and glories, but it tends to obfuscate and disguise as much as it reveals. Like the Proem to Book Two, this Proem explicitly invites Elizabeth to find reflections of herself in the book; however, unlike the previous Proem, this one does not include her land and history in the invitation. Thus, it *appears* that this book will regress to a more courtly use of the mirror than that found in Book Two. This obfuscation continues in lines five through eight of stanza five of the Proem, which read,

Ne let his fairest *Cynthia* refuse,  
 In mirrours more then one her selfe to see,  
 But either *Gloriana* let her chuse,  
 Or in *Belphoebe* fashioned to bee.

What these lines clearly say, of course, is that Elizabeth is reflected in two characters, *Gloriana*, who is the Faerie Queene herself, and *Belphoebe*, who is the Diana-esque virgin huntress of the forests of Faerieland. The

final line of the stanza indicates that Gloriana mirrors the public self or royal body, of Queen Elizabeth I and that Belpheobe mirrors the private self or womanly body, of Elizabeth. Each of these metaphors falls into the same category as Spenser's first use of the mirror in Book One because each is overtly flattering to the Queen, or would be if Book Three consisted of material elaborating the perfections of these two characters. What actually occurs in Book Three, however, does not correspond to this obvious meaning because Gloriana does not appear in or figure into the action of this book at all and Belpheobe's part in it is minimal at best. Her appearance is quite overshadowed by the story of her birth; and her twin sister Amoret's upbringing in the Garden of Adonis, a place devoid of any idealization of virginity, dominates that section of the tale. Amoret, however, is absent from the list of mirrors for Elizabeth that are given in the Proem. The relative absence of Gloriana and Belpheobe in the body of Book Three along with Amoret's absence from the Proem essentially foreclose the potential of these characters to be the reflections of courtly praise that should be present in the mirror trope. By Book Three, then, Spenser has rendered this model in its entirely conventional form a dead end, and he is free to fully develop the hortatory possibilities of the mirror genre.

By offering the either/or proposition of Gloriana and Belpheobe in the Proem, Spenser at first appears to limit the possibilities for mirroring Elizabeth in the book, but by saying that she is reflected in "mirrours more then one" line six of this stanza opens the possibility of mirroring beyond the conventional courtly *topos* of adulation. Spenser further opens and strengthens the possibilities for mirroring in Book Three by introducing a physical mirror into the plot, thus intensifying the effectiveness of the trope nearly to the level of mythic form through juxtaposition of the literal and the metaphorical. The literal mirror of Book Three is, of course, the one in which Britomart sees first herself, then virtues, and finally the image of her future husband Artegall. As the character who looks into a literal, or "real," mirror, then, Britomart is already aligned with the *Cynthia* of the Proem, and of the many possible characters in the poem who might represent Elizabeth, Britomart is by far the most apt choice. A maiden warrior, Britomart reflects Elizabeth's unmarried status and her position as military leader of England. The magical power of Britomart's chastity, which is figured in the "secret powre vnseene" (3.1.7.8) of her spear, is not unlike the power of Elizabeth's own chastity, which allowed her to maintain undivided power over her kingdom and her own destiny. And the aspects of Britomart's characterization that seem to be most problematic to seeing her as an avatar of Elizabeth are, in fact, those that best represent Elizabeth's rhetorical use of identity politics throughout her reign. For example, Lesley Brill has argued that Britomart's transvestitism and knightly behavior render her "almost bisexual"; her armor disguises

her sex and renders her so androgynous that she both performs as and is often mistaken for a man.<sup>18</sup> Following this line of reasoning, then, she can be seen more as an allegorical figure of chastity for either sex than as a specific figure of Elizabeth. Moreover, Bruce Thomas Boehrer suggests that because Britomart is destined to marry, she "is not Elizabeth, yet they are both 'the matter' of Spenser's song," and Mary Villeponteaux argues that "to present Britomart as a representation of the Queen is awkward, since Britomart, unlike Elizabeth, is only a temporary virgin, and . . . her importance . . . [lies] not so much in her martial prowess as in her 'wombe's burden,'" which eventually is going to be Elizabeth herself.<sup>19</sup> These objections, however, can be answered by looking at the way in which mirror literature enlarges the discourse of identity for Elizabeth and at her own deployment of that discourse throughout her reign to solidify her political position through rhetoric of often contradictory familial relationships and identities.

Spenser's use of Britomart, the maiden with the mirror, as an exemplary figure for Elizabeth in the mode of hortatory mirror literature depends on the same "slipperiness" of identity that pervades Elizabeth's translation of *Le miroir de l'ame pecheresse*. Recalling that Elizabeth became acquainted with mirror literature early in her life, we can use an examination of her translation of Marguerite de Navarre's work to understand Elizabeth's own variable identity better. Elizabeth's "Glass of the Sinful Soul," is historically notable for its place in the juvenilia of a cultural icon and literarily notable for its form and language, especially as they contrast with Marguerite de Navarre's original poem; but its most important feature for the purposes of this project is its content, especially the speaker's construction of herself in a large variety of familial relations to God. Susan Snyder explains the multiplication of identities in the poem as the speaker's means of working through her burden of sin and guilt. Her confession and restoration to God is expressed through identification with characters from Biblical narrative:

The speaker of the poetic monologue presents herself as a wretched sinner, who has violated and betrayed her relationship with God . . . Parsing out that relationship into a series of familial paradigms - daughter, mother, sister, wife - she explores each area of defection through an exemplary episode from the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

Each episode posits the speaker as a new character, a different expression of her own identity, and these multiple identities place the speaker in various contradictory and, all taken at once, incestuous relationships with God. Rather than creating problems in this human-divine familial model, however, these contradictory and incestuous relationships strengthen and deepen the bond she has with God. Thus, early in her life Elizabeth learned that familial identity positions could be seen metaphorically, that one could slide easily from one to another without loss of one's essential

identity, and that maintaining various identity positions is ultimately beneficial. Lena Cowen Orlin discusses Elizabeth's carefully crafted exploitation of "fictional familial relationships," or what might (outside of Orlin's specific argument) also be called metaphorical family relationships. In a 1566 speech to Parliament, Elizabeth positions herself as her father's daughter and as sister to Edward and Mary, and Orlin points out that she also positions herself at various times as sister and mother to James I; sister and daughter to various foreign princes and potentates; and as wife, husband, and mother to England.<sup>21</sup> Especially with regard to her relationship to her own kingdom, she could even slide easily from one gender to the other.<sup>22</sup> As Maureen Quilligan notes, Elizabeth develops an "iconic position as virgin wife and mother of the family of England. [She constructs herself as] . . . nursed by the nation, married to the nation, and mother to the nation."<sup>23</sup> Through strategic manipulation of her own identity, Elizabeth strengthens her bond with her people, capitalizing on the implied familial duties each one requires of the other; therefore, just as the people of England owe her layers of filial, maternal, and marital duty, she owes and, according to her self-portrayal, gives them the same. Presenting herself as both supplier and due recipient of these many strata of familial devotion, Elizabeth maintains and enhances her political power. Throughout her reign Elizabeth clearly manages to negotiate a variety of contradictory and convoluted identities not entirely unlike the multiplicity of identities she had come in contact with in mirror literature as a child. Thus, any identity associated with Britomart is an identity shared by Elizabeth in one rhetorical moment or another. Britomart simultaneously inhabits the positions of daughter of a king, heir to a throne, magically empowered virgin, androgynous warrior, potential wife, and future mother of a queen and the nation she represents through her political body. Rather than fragmenting and thus weakening her, these various positions layer one on another, strengthening and augmenting both her character within the work and her connection to the queen she represents. As Britomart's literal mirror and its reflection of her beauty and power complement and extol the Queen who finds herself mirrored there, the courtly convention of mirror use intersects with the edifying function of the hortatory mirror also represented by this literal mirror and its reflection of virtues appropriate to a prince.

Because Britomart can be understood to be a uniquely appropriate representation of Elizabeth, the images that she sees when she looks into the mirror become especially important to an understanding of what Spenser may have intended to say to Elizabeth through the instructive mirror genre. The first time this specific mirror is mentioned in Book Three, it is called "*Venus looking glas*" in which, as the narrator explains, Britomart has seen "her louer" (3.1.8.8-9). This initial explanation of the mirror is quite similar to other Neo-platonic depictions of the engendering

of *fin amor*. Notably, in *The Romance of the Rose*, the lover is ensnared by Cupid when he gazes into "the Mirror Perilous."<sup>24</sup> Looking into a fountain, the lover's gaze is drawn to two fabulous crystals, usually interpreted as the eyes of the beloved, that reflect an image of incredible beauty, and he, of course, falls in love. The first brief account of Britomart's mirror gazing is a highly truncated allusion to this *fin amor* tradition but certainly not so truncated or vague that a reader familiar with *fin amor* would miss it. However, a more complete account of the events leading to Britomart's search for Artegall is given in canto two. Here we learn that the mirror is magical and is in fact one that "[t]he great Magicien *Merlin* had deuiz'd" (3.2.18.6). Although it is called "a mirrhour," (3.2.17.4), it is soon described as a "round and hollow shaped . . . world of glas" (3.2.19.8-9). The mirror's original purpose aligns it with the medieval mirror-for-princes genre, a more specific version of the hortatory mirror literary tradition on which Spenser is drawing. Merlin gives this mirror, described as a "famous Present for a Prince," to King Ryence so that he can see trouble before it comes and thus circumvent it (3.2.23.6). The mirror "treasons could bewray, and foes conuince," revealing both internal and external enemies that might endanger the kingdom (3.2.21.8). In the Middle Ages, a manuscript in the mirror-for-princes genre sometimes would be lavishly bound and ornamented to be given to a young and inexperienced ruler (or potential ruler) so that he could learn how to govern well and avoid problems both within and without his kingdom. A prince who read and heeded the instruction in the mirror text could be expected to conduct himself in such a manner that his kingdom would be safe from outside forces as well as the dangers of his own abuse of power.<sup>25</sup> We are not told when Merlin presented this "famous Present" to the king, but its purpose is significantly similar to the purposes of its literary counterparts, and presumably when Britomart finds it in her father's closet it has been in use for some time. Significantly, Britomart is quickly described as King Ryence's "onely daughter and his hayre[.]" a status which not only makes her a suitable heir to the mirror as a cautionary and instructive device especially designed for young rulers or rulers-to-be, but also places her firmly in the same princely category occupied by Elizabeth when she came to the throne (3.2.22.4). With both Mary and Edward dead at the time of her accession, Elizabeth was, indeed, Henry VIII's only daughter and heir. As a potential prince, then, Britomart rightly consults the mirror given to her father. When the extraordinarily beautiful Britomart first sees herself in the mirror, her image is described as "vaine" or useless (3.2.22.6) because, as has already been shown, in the mirror genre there is no value to a literal reflection of one's person. Britomart, however, does not fall into the same trap of sinful vanity that characterizes Lucifera; on the contrary, her reflection leads her to an enlightening vision of positive princely attributes. The next lines,

"Tho her auizing of the vertues rare, / Which thereof spoken were" have appeared at times to present a difficulty because some readers have understood them to mean that in her vanity Britomart prefers to view her own image over the vision of virtues available in the mirror, equating this moment with Britomart's first temptation to Narcissism; however, this interpretation seems to involve a misreading of the transitional adverb "tho" which in Spenser's work, as in earlier texts, means "then" or "next" rather than "although" (3.2.22.7-8). Therefore, correctly understood, these lines reveal that Britomart, shaking off any enticements to vanity, next views the "vertues rare" that are spoken of in the mirror. One might easily say that Britomart reads about virtues in Merlin's mirror-for-princes just as any real prince might do in an actual mirror text. Following her apprehension of this vision of virtues, Britomart begins to "bethinke of [a topic], that mote to her selfe pertaine," in a sense applying the virtuous wisdom of the mirror to her own condition (3.2.22.9).

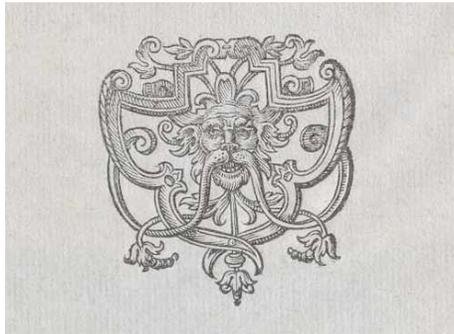
At this point, Britomart begins to wonder whom she will marry, and in answer the mirror presents her with the image of Artegall, the Knight of Justice. If one reads purely allegorically here, one must see that Chastity will marry Justice, and, taking Merlin's prophecy into account, this marriage will eventually result in the "royall Virgin" who will reign in peace (3.3.49.1-9). On another level, however, Artegall, the destined husband of Britomart, must represent the destined husband of Elizabeth who can be identified through Elizabeth's own rhetoric. For example, in a 1559 speech given by Elizabeth to Parliament, she declares "I am already bound unto an husband, which is the kingdom of England[,]" while in a later conversation Elizabeth presents herself as "a wife . . . [who] loves her people."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the destined husband reflected in Britomart's mirror and in Elizabeth's speech is England itself. Britomart's resulting single-minded passion for Artegall, her determination to save him from captivity, and her ultimate submission to him can all be read as positive models for Elizabeth to emulate in her care of the country. In fact, all of the remainder of Britomart's adventures and all of the virtues of princes that she exemplifies in the text are results of her encounter with this literal mirror and, thus, may be logically interpreted as continuations of its influence. From the time she sets out to search for Artegall, Britomart never loses sight of the object of her quest and pursues it honorably. Although some of her adventures may appear to divert her from her task, they are, nevertheless, encounters only made possible by her search for the image the mirror has provided and offer opportunities for her to exhibit and hone the virtues she has seen along with her beloved in her mirror. Britomart conducts herself with "constant mind," "stedfast corage," and "stout hardiment," all "virtues rare" that one would expect in a prince (3.1.19.1-9). After battling Marinell, Britomart rides past "pearles and pretious stones of great assay," and, not tempted in the least

to stop for them, she demonstrates complete lack of avarice, another very important princely virtue (3.4.18.5-9). Britomart's chase of Ollyphant, who is a decidedly negative example of sexual turpitude, further aligns her search for Artegall with the virtue of chastity; when Britomart seems to delay the search in her lengthy attempt to help the imprisoned Amoret, she is also infusing her quest with the virtues of generosity and altruism. Thus, Book Three of *The Faerie Queene* represents Spenser's strongest statements of exhortation directly to Elizabeth so far. He expects Elizabeth to recognize a positive representation of her many selves in Britomart and to find examples of virtues conducive to a successful life and reign in her reflection. Knowing the importance of the hortatory mirror genre to this period as well as its personal importance to the Queen, we can see that Spenser would have been right to expect Elizabeth to read his exhortations to constancy, courage, persistence, generosity, chastity, and altruism through Britomart and her mirror.

The second part of *The Faerie Queene*, published six years after the first three books, does not show the same systematic development of the mirror trope that can be found in Books One through Three. Instead, Spenser continues to use the mirror of Britomart that he has already developed in the first part as a means of exhorting his queen. Books Four and Five of *The Faerie Queene* are the last two in which Britomart appears. In the remainder of her adventures, Britomart continues the tireless search for Artegall that began with her literal gaze into Merlin's mirror. The instruction to the Queen provided by Britomart's further adventures, however, is of a different quality than that found in Books One through Three. By 1596 England had entered difficult economic times, and political unrest was more prevalent than in the years immediately following the glorious defeat of the Spanish Armada when the first three books were published. Although, or perhaps because, Britomart still represents the martial might of the Queen, her eventual meeting with Artegall is marked by violence as much as it is by love. Britomart's final acts, setting Artegall free from Radigund's prison, restoring his masculinity, and granting him mastery over the kingdom, are perceived by both narrator and the people of the kingdom as marks of admirable "wisdom" which cause them to "hearken . . . to her loring" (5.8.34-42). This last virtue reflected in Britomart's final search for Artegall, then, includes a somewhat darker cautionary image for Elizabeth. Britomart's voluntary submission to Artegall indicates that a wise prince should allow true authority to rest in the hands of her husband, which in Elizabeth's case and by her own admission is England. Indeed, it is only by relinquishing authority that this prince will enjoy the praise and obedience of her people.

Britomart's disappearance from *The Faerie Queene* at this juncture seems appropriate. Although Elizabeth continues to be positively reflected in other characters such as Mercilla, the "mayden Queene of high

renowne" introduced in Book V, once the lessons have been given the mirror-for-princes closes (5.8.17.2). The remainder of the poem deals with high stakes, international politics rather than the personal attributes of a good ruler, and although Spenser continues to use mirror images both metaphorically within the plot and in direct address as flattery to the Queen, no more literal mirrors figure into the text. Its hortatory quality seems largely to give way to a darker and somewhat less hopeful tenor. Nevertheless, the martial maiden who so aptly represents the best of Elizabeth and her reign remains in the memory of the reader, as she must have in the mind of the Queen, as an instructive reflection of what a ruler should strive to become.



<sup>1</sup> See for example Bruce Thomas Boehrer, "Carelesse Modesty: Chastity as Politics in Book 3 of the *Faerie Queene*," *English Literary History* 55.3 (1988) and Leslie Brill, "Chastity as Ideal Sexuality in the Third Book of *the Faerie Queene*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 11.1 (1971).

<sup>2</sup> For a general discussion of Spenser's use of mirrors as largely conventional see Herbert Grabes, "Mirrors" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990): 477-78. For a general view of the narcissistic dangers the mirror presents to Britomart, see Terrance Edwards, "Narcissus," also in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1968): 3.1.61 and Edmund Spenser, "Colin Clout's Come Home Again," in *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*, ed. Hugh MacLean and Anne Lake Prescott, (New York: W.H. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993): 513. At the end of the nunnery scene, Ophelia laments the disintegration of Hamlet's appearance, behavior, and attitudes in comparison to the paragon that he once was, including his previous status as "the glass of fashion," and Spenser glowingly describes Mansilia, who bears up "great Cynthiaes traine" as the "paterne of true womanhead,/And onely mirrhor of feminitie" (509-513). Further, in *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956), Ruth Kelso asserts that early modern "Platonists could argue that beauty of body is an index to beauty of the soul" (82).

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman-

Pearson Education), 2001. All references to the primary text will henceforth be given parenthetically by book, canto, stanza, and line numbers where appropriate. This flattery also includes his identification of Elizabeth with both Gloriana and Belpheobe, both excessively positive characterizations of beauty and purity.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982): 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Lake Prescott, "Pearl of the Valois and Elizabeth I," in *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret Patterson Hannay, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985): 61, 65. Prescott notes that Marguerite was "[c]harming, witty, and pious . . . [and had] been for many years . . . close to the center of political power [in Europe]. Although she was a Catholic, Marguerite had "sympathy for reform[.]" openly attacked the pope and bishops, and was on excellent terms with Henry VIII both before and after his break with the Catholic Church.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Maureen Quilligan, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press: 2005): 40. For the complete text of Elizabeth's translation as well as a discussion of its later political significance, see also Marc Shell, *Elizabeth's Glass, with "The glass of the Sinful Soul" (1544) by Elizabeth I, and "Epistle Dedicatory" & "Conclusion" (1548) by John Bale*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, 73.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Books One through Three of *The Faerie Queene*, though first published in 1590 and thus seemingly associated with Elizabeth's old age and the troubled end of her reign, were first mentioned by Spenser in letters to Harvey in 1580. Certainly far from complete at that early date, the first three books of the poem are nevertheless substantially a product of the more prosperous earlier years of Elizabeth's reign and are generally addressed to the younger, still marriageable, and immensely popular Elizabeth of the 1570's and 1580's. See the Chronological Table in Hamilton's edition of *The Faerie Queene* for more detail.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Leath Mills, "The Mirror for Magistrates" in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*.

<sup>12</sup> Rayna Kalas, "The Technology of Reflections: Renaissance Mirrors of Steel and

Glass," *The Journal of Medieval and Modern Studies* 32.3 (2002): 519.

<sup>13</sup> Debra Shuger, "The 'I' of the Beholder: Renaissance Mirrors" *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*, ed. Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 22.

<sup>14</sup> Shuger, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Levers, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 109-159 for a thorough discussion of the theoretical interaction of language and meta-language in such images. The modern images Barthes discusses operate more subtly than these medieval portrayals of mirrors; however, the semiotic functioning is substantially the same. His metaphor of the "turnstile" operation of the mind when viewing such an image has significantly influenced my thinking here.

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<sup>16</sup> Grabes, *The Mutable Glass*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> As Shuger points out, in mirror art there are “exception[s] that tend to confirm the rule: when mirrors are used to view one’s own face, they almost invariably signify vanity or related vices” (31).

<sup>18</sup> Brill, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Boehrer, 559, and Mary Villeponteaux, “Displacing Feminine Authority in the *Faerie Queene*,” *SEL, 1500-1900* 35.1 (1995): 54.

<sup>20</sup> Snyder, Susan, “Guilty Sisters: Marguerite de Navarre, Elizabeth of England, and the

*Miroir de l’âme pécheress*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 50.2 (1997): 445.

<sup>21</sup> Lena Cowen Orlin, “The Fictional Families of Elizabeth I,” *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women*, ed. Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995): 89; 90; 94; and 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Quilligan, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry W. Robbins, ed. Charles Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962): 102.

<sup>25</sup> See John Bowers, “Thomas Hoccleve and the Politics of Tradition,” *The Chaucer Review* 36:4 (2002): 352-69 for the suggestion that the advice given in mirror texts was treated with little respect by its intended recipients who simply mined the texts for advice that corresponded with their own desires and opinions. For insight into the artistic and material aspects of medieval presentation of manuscripts to patrons and rulers, see Allen Farber, “Christine de Pizan and Establishing Female Literary Authority,” [History of Northern Renaissance Art Homepage](http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth214_folder/christine.html), 30 Jan. 2006.

[http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth214\\_folder/christine.html](http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth214_folder/christine.html).

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth I, “Speech 3, Version 2 1559: Her Answer to [the Commons] Petition that She Marry,” in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, et al, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 59 and Orlin, 88-90.