The Amalgamation of the character of Britomart in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*:
A study of Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance influences on The Knight of Chastity.

By

Stephanie Danis

Thesis submitted to
The Honors Program, Saint Peter's College

May 4, 2011

Stephanie Danis
Dedication:

I dedicate this thesis to my family, friends, and all the faculty and staff at Saint Peter’s College.

Especially dedicated to Dr. Wifall whose *Survey of English Literature I* class sparked my interest in Spenser, and most specifically in the character Britomart.
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Preface: A look at Spenser’s History and Intentions in *The Faerie Queene*

The works of Edmund Spenser, who was considered the “prince of poets in his tyme,” have a considerably smaller presence in libraries today compared to other poets such as his contemporary William Shakespeare or even John Milton. Still, a considerably large amount of literary study has been conducted in concern over the poet and his masterpiece *The Faerie Queene*. Edmund Spenser was a literary giant at the end of the 16th Century, and was granted a 50 pound a year pension by the Queen for his literary achievements. But he was also an appointed statesman, working as secretary for the Earl of Leicester (the Queen’s supposed lover), and owned land in Ireland granted to him by the English for serving in the Second Desmond Rebellion (Burrow).

Spenser was educated in London at the Merchant Taylor’s School, where he learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew, which influenced his inclusion of such a wide variety of classical sources in his writing. In 1569 Spenser enrolled at Pembroke Hall Cambridge, and studied rhetoric, logic, and mathematics as he worked as a sizar, performing domestic tasks in order to afford the cost of university: modern day work-study (Burrow). In 1579 Spenser published the pastoral poem, *The Shepheardes Calender*. Spenser’s major literary work came later in 1590 with the publication of the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*, which he dedicated to the reigning sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I:

And with them eke, O Godsse heauenly bright,  
Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,  
Great Ladie of the greatest Isle, whose light  
Like Phoebus lampe throughout the world doth shine,  
Shed thy faire becames into my feeble eyne,  
And raise my thoughtes too humble and too vile,  
To thinke of that true glorious type of thine,  
The argument of mine afflicted stile:  
The which to heare, vouchsafe, O dearest dread a while. (I.proem.30)
The poem was published in two parts, and the last three books were published six years later in 1596. Before publishing *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser wrote a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, enumerating his plan for the *Faerie Queene*. He explicitly stated:

I haue followed all the antique Poets historicall, first Homere, who in the Persons of Agamemnon and Vlysses hath ensampled a good gouenour and a virtuous man, the one in his Ilias, the other in his Odysseis: then Virgil, whose like intention was to doe in the person of Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both…(Hamilton 715).

Spenser named just a few of the historical influences behind his allegorical poem, and he also made it clear that he wished to create a story of the history of king Arthur before he was king (Hamilton 715). He explains that his incorporation of the legend of King Arthur was motivated by his desire to fashion a noble and virtuous person who was “coloured with an historicall fiction” and would appeal to his readers (Hamilton 715).

Spenser, in an effort to recreate the glory of Arthurian legend, wrote in a style mimicking Medieval English, manipulating the language by incorporating outdated spellings of Old and Middle English works. Spenser also created an entirely new verse form for *The Faerie Queene*, the Spenserian stanza, consisting of eight iambic pentameter lines concluding with a ninth line of six iambic feet, the rhyme scheme being *ababcbcbc*. The Spenserian stanza form was influenced by the Old French ballad and the Italian *ottava rima*, the Italian form also used by Ariosto (Morton 9). Unlike the traditional *ottava rima* that consists of three similar endings of alternating rhyme, Spenser’s second rhyme is repeated four times and the third rhyme three times (Morton 18). Spenser was also influenced by Chaucer’s stanza form of eight lines employed in the “Monk’s Tale” (Morton 18).

*The Faerie Queene* poem is constructed in an allegorical form, “a mode making use of endless and inadequate analogies; allegories which speak in a voice that keeps comparing in
order to move beyond compare, a voice of continuous metaphor” (Wynne-Davies 84). Spenser wrote to Raleigh:

SIR knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be constructed, and this booke of mine, which I haue entituled the Faery Queen, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I haue thought good aswell for auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof, (being so by you commanded,) to discover vnto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occasioned (Hamilton 714).

Spenser’s allegorical portrayal of the kingdom of England at the period of the Elizabethan age is an indispensable window into understanding the political structure and overall optimism of the time. Not only is Spenser’s allegory an exciting tale following the quests of a collection of knights in the land of Faerie, but it is also a social commentary on the shift from the model of a patriarchal monarchy to a matriarchal one. Spenser’s depiction of the Queen is as an, “image of virtue, both as a pattern for emulation and as a warning against the dereliction of his sacred responsibility” (Wells 21), the responsibility to present the Queen positively. We can consider that the six virtues that make up the subjects of the books of The Faerie Queene should not only be understood as the Renaissance ideal of human conduct, but also as attributes of the queen herself (Wells 21).

Spenser constructed a legend explaining the founding of Britain, which is similar to Virgil’s Aeneid, the epic poem about the task of the creation of the state of Rome. While Spenser embodied the ideals of Renaissance poet wishing to revive the past, he was aware, “that the metaphor of rebirth brings with it a corresponding mortal weakness: people live and breed; they also die and fail to have children” (Burrow 37). Queen Elizabeth (to whom his poem is dedicated to) fails to fulfill that legacy having never produced an heir. The queen influenced many of Spenser’s characters; for instance Gloriana and Belphobe, whom Spenser mentions in his letter
to Sir Walter Raleigh are symbolic of a glorious queen and brave huntress. Britomart, who is not mentioned in the letter, combines these characteristics. Britomart represents chastity, a quality popularized by the “cults of Elizabeth,” and she also represents the strength of Queen Elizabeth, who happened to be a very successful ruler.

Spenser transposed Elizabeth’s virginal and queenly characteristics on to the character of the female knight, Britomart, onto whom he also transferred the role and responsibility of the mother and progenitor of the British line. Spenser borrowed from the Renaissance poet Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, and fashioned the character Britomart, who like Ariosto’s female warrior Bradamante receives a prediction of her “grand dynastic future” (Burrow 37). Spenser’s work may have been considered subversive since, “A dynastic epic written to praise a virgin Queen cannot quite present the nation’s history as the glorious unfolding of a biologically continuous dynasty” (Burrow 36). But Spenser credits Britomart as the, “main agent of dynastic history in the poem” (Burrow 37), which takes place before Elizabeth was even conceived.

The tale of Britomart follows the young martial maid on her quest through *Faerie Land* to find her lover Arthegall. Britomart, as a young maiden, peers into her father’s magic mirror, given to him by the wizard Merlin. In the mirror, Britomart sees an image of a young knight, with whom she immediately falls desperately in love. Unable to reconcile her feelings, Britomart and her nurse Glauce go to Merlin in order to remedy her torturous feelings. Merlin informs Britomart that she was fated to see the image of Arthegall in the mirror, and that her vision is that of her soul mate, and future husband, who will be her partner in the origination of the Tudor dynasty. Britomart thus dresses herself in a suit of armor and sets off with her nurse Glauce on a quest through *Faerie Land* to find him.
Britomart’s first encounter is with the Redcrosse Knight, an important allegorical character who signifies the patron saint of England, St. George (Hamilton). After her encounter with Redcrosse, from whom she learns more about Arthegall, Britomart finds herself at the seacoast in a sad and tormented state, where she likens herself and her emotions to the storm at sea, which she is watching. The knight Marinell then encounters Britomart and she battles him, wounding him close to death. She then finds herself at the house of Malecasta, where her gender and beauty are first revealed. Upon leaving Malecasta’s, Britomart comes across a wounded Scudamore in the forest and vows to help him save his love Amoret from the House of Busirane. Britomart arrives at the House of Busirane, where Amoret is being held captive and walks through a wall of flames through which Scudamore cannot pass. Once inside the castle, Britomart witnesses a masque procession of the faces of Cupid and she sees Amoret with a gaping wound in her chest being tortured by the evil Busirane. Unable to save Amoret without breaking the spell, Britomart forces Busirane out of power with her sword, flees the castle with Amoret, and reunites the two lovers.

Britomart competes in a tournament hosted by the knight Satyrane and wins the top prize, after which she comes into battle with Arthegall, who upon seeing her beauty surrenders himself to her. Arthegall and Britomart fall in love, but then Arthegall must leave to complete his quest. Britomart is understanding and goes about her own quests until she learns that an Amazonian queen, Radigund, has captured him. She is tormented at first because she believes that Arthegall has fallen in love with the Amazonian queen, but she resolves to save him. On her way to save Arthegall she comes across the Temple Isis and sleeps there for the night, prophetically dreaming. When she arrives at the Amazonian kingdom, Britomart defeats Radigund, saves Arthegall, and in her final act defers rule of the Amazonian kingdom to him. Britomart’s act of
yielding the throne to Artheall is an interesting tactic by Spenser because it demonstrates a subversive, but ambivalent view towards women rulers.

The reader is first introduced to Britomart suited in her armor and on quest, but in a flashback the reader sees her as a virginal young maid who experiences love for the first time:

Sad, solemne, sowre, and full of fancies fraile
She woxe; yet wist she nether how, nor why
She wist not, silly Mayd, what she did aile,
Yet wist, she was not well at ease perdy,
Yet thought it was not loue, but some melancholy. (III. ii. 27. 5-9)

But Britomart’s love is not a typical tale of teenage lust; but as Merlin reveals, a fated occurrence:

It was not, Britomart, thy wandering eye,
Glauncing unwares in charmed looking glas,
But the straight course of heuenly destiny,
Led with eternall prouidence, that has
Guyded thy glaunce, … (III. iii. 24. 1-5)

Britomart being named the progenitor of the British line is important because, “This prophecy is in the grand tradition of dynastic romance, promises an endless renaissance of classical heroes through the fertile union of the heroine” (Burrow 37). Without this key element, Spenser’s poem might have still been written about the quest of Prince Arthur for Gloriana, and many different subtexts, but the purpose behind his work would be missing meaning. The power and emphasis of the tale places the reader in a world before Elizabeth’s reign, providing an explanation for how Elizabeth came to be such a powerful figure on the throne. In a very complicated and lengthy description Merlin informs Britomart of the genealogy of the line that will descend from her. Starting with this canto:

Renowned kings, and sacred Emperours,
Thy fruitful Ofspring, shall from thee descend;
Braue Captaines, and most mighty warriours,
That shall their conquests through all lands extend,
And their decayed kingdoms shall amend:
The feeble Britons, broken with long warre,
They shall upreare, and mightily defend
Against their forren foe, that commes from farre,
Till uniuersall peace compound all ciuill iarre.  (III.iii. 23)

Merlin finishes his 26-stanza description with the revelation that Queen Elizabeth will be her offspring:

Thenceforth eternall union shall be made
Betweene the nations different afore,
And sacred Peace shall louingly persuade
The warlike minds, to learne her goodly lore,
And ciuile armes to exercise no more:
Then shall a royall Virgin raine, which shall
Stretch her white rod ouer the Belgicke shore,
And the great Castle smite so sore with all,
That it shall make him shake, and shortly learn to fall.  (III.iii. 49)

This paper will look at literary and mythological influences in Spenser’s poem and especially on his characterization of Britomart starting with important references from the Golden Age. It will continue to move through the Middle Ages and compare the character of Britomart to the typical medieval female stereotype. Lastly, I will explore how Spenser portrayed Queen Elizabeth throughout the work, focusing specifically on how Britomart is both an embodiment of and the antithesis of the Queen. For Spenser it must not have been easy to reconcile the opposing doctrines of members of society, some who supported Elizabeth as a woman on the throne and those who were completely against the matriarchal model. In 16th Century England, the patriarchal ideology that had existed as a standard for so long was challenged by first by Queen Mary of Scots and then by the success of Queen Elizabeth I on the throne (Villeponteaux 53). But through Spenser’s creation of a powerful female knight, he formulated a legitimatized line from which Elizabeth descended.

Britomart is such an important representation of the queen because aside from their mutual powerful personal traits, she shares the same blood as the queen. It is from she, bold and
beautiful knight, from whom the Queen eventually descended. Britomart learns of her ancestry from the “false knight” Paridell (Burrow 36), which Spenser adapted from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the *History of the Kings of Britain*, who claimed that the mythological figure Brutus, a straggler of Trojan forces and founder of Rome:

There there (said Britomart) a fresh appeared
The glory of the later world to spring,
And *Troy* againe out of her dust was reard,
To sitt in second seat of soueraine king,
Of all the world vnder her gouerning.
But a third kingdom yet is to arise,
Out of the Troians scattered offspring,
That in all glory and great enterprise,
Both first and second *Troy* shall dare to equalize. (III. ix. 44)

This third kingdom that Spenser speaks about in the stanza probably refers to the kingdom of Queen Elizabeth, capitalizing on the general agreement among the people of the time that Elizabeth’s reign was a sort of second Golden Age. Spenser presented Elizabeth as, “a portrait of the ideal ruler – a portrait which she would recognize as her own, but which would at the same time serve as a ‘code of conduct’ for her courtiers” (Wells 5), and he hoped that his tribute to Elizabeth would ‘enlarge her prayses’ (Wells 1).
Chapter 1: Classical and Mythological Influences

*The Faerie Queene* is filled with references to the works of Greek and Roman poets of the Classical Period. Spenser alludes to their works in order to create a backdrop for his poem, and he could be certain that many readers would have been familiar with the references. It was the Greeks who named the virginal goddess of hunters and fishermen Britomartis. The name Britomartis is constructed from the word *britus* meaning sweet or blessing and *martis* the word for a maiden--thus her name means, “the sweet maiden” (Britomartis). Britomart’s name also suggests “Brito-mart” or Mars, the martial Britonesse (Hamilton). The name is closely associated to “Brutus” the legendary Trojan warrior whom Spenser cites as her ancestor. Britomart is continually referred to as the Briton Maid and “martiall Mayd” throughout the poem. Another thematic connection from which Britomart’s name is derived, is from the “pseudo-Virgilian” *Ciris*, in which there is a character named Britomartis. Spenser not only used her name, but also modeled the scene of Britomart’s confession to her nurse about her love for Arthegall from *Ciris* (Pugh 127).

The scene of Britomart’s confession is equally indebted to Ovid’s tale of Myrrha in *Metamorphoses*, though Britomart’s love is not derived from lust and thus is a much more innocent manifestation. Ovid’s poem is reflected in Spenser’s writing specifically in the scene when Britomart says to her nurse, “my crime, (if crime it be) I will it reed” (III. ii. 37. 7), which compares to Myrrha’s words, “di,…hoc prohibete nefas scelerique resistite nostro, / sit amen hoc scelus est (Gods,…hinder this impious deed and oppose my crime, if it is a crime’, *(Met. X. 321-23)*) (Pugh 127).

Clearly Spenser intended for his readers to recognize this connection as Glauce comforts Britomart by pointing out the difference between the “lewdnes” (41. 9) of Myrtha’s love, “Not
so th’ *Arabian Myrrhe* did sett her mynd (III. ii. 41. 1) and “that sweet loue” (41. 9) of Britomart: “But thine my Deare (welfare thy heart my deare) / Though strange beginning had, yet fixed is / On one, that worthy may perhaps apeare” (III. ii. 42. 1-3).

Later in the poem, Britomart finds herself in the house of the villainous Malecasta, who tries to seduce Britomart until she learns that she is a female. A wall of Melacsasta’s castle is decorated with a tapestry depicting Ovid’s story of Venus and Adonis (Pugh 122) The inclusion of the tapestry is an interesting literary device used by Spenser to parallel Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to his depiction of Britomart, his figure of Chastity, “Ovid’s Venus, [is] pursuing manly sport through wild places, ‘with her clothes caught up above the knee after the manner of Diana,’ (X. 536) for the sake of love” (Pugh 122). Spenser adopts a peculiar narrative technique by conveying principles and concepts by organizing them spatially (Tonkin 409). As the knights are on their quests they are constant moving among these spatially symbolic places. Spenser invents gardens and houses and describes how each are laid out, in so doing he, “describes the principles and concepts through their spatial interrelationship” (Tonkin 409).

The episode of The Garden of Adonis, “constitutes a celebration of sexual love and of procreation conceived as a cosmic principle of mutability, constructed from the Ovidian materials of Venus, Adonis, and Pythagoras’ speech in Book XV of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (Pugh 121). The episode of the Garden of Adonis is considered, “the principal expression of the metaphor of generation in Book III” (Tonkin 408), he uses the Garden of Adonis to present the idea of generation, and so here Spenser describes just how the creatures of the universe came to be (Tonkin 409).

Ovid, the Roman poet of the Golden Age, described the four ages of humankind, the first being the Golden Age, in which “men gathered their food without labour in an everlasting
spring, all were virtuous by nature, and peace universal reigned” (Yates 27). The period of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign was considered a Golden Age of English history, because it was a time of flourishing arts, literature, and military prowess. Many believed that the reign of Elizabeth sparked a second Golden Age, and it became traditional for Elizabethan poets to compare the goddess Astraea to Queen Elizabeth. Spenser alludes to the Greek poet Aratos claiming that; “the virgin Justice left the world in the Iron Age and came to be in the heavens as the constellation Virgo” (Yates 28). Ovid too equated the Astraea with Virgo in Metamorphoses:

Last [of the Ages of Men] came the Race of Iron (Proles Ferro). In that hard age of baser vein all evil straight broke out, and honour fled and truth and loyalty, replaced by fraud, deceit and treachery and violence and wicked greed for gain... Honour and love lay vanquished, Astraea, virgin divine, the last of the immortals, fled away.

In 1588, young law students of Gray’s Inn produced a pageant play named The Misfortunes of Arthur, in honor of Queen Elizabeth, stating in the prologue, “the students of law are servants of Astraea or Justice” (Yates 59). The play, which takes place in ancient Britain, initiated the prophecy of a British Virgo of Trojan descent:

Let Virgo come from Heaven, the glorious Star:  
The Zodiac’s Joy: the Planet’s chief delight:  
The hope of all the year: the ease of skies:  
The airs relief, the comfort of the earth.  
That virtuous Virgo born for Britain’s bliss:  
That peerless branch of Brute: that sweet remain  
Of Priam’s state: that hope of springing Troy:  
Which time to come, and many ages hence  
Shall of all wars compound eternal peace.  
Let her reduce the golden again,  
Religion, ease and wealth of former world.  
Yea let that Virgo come and Saturns reign  
And years oft ten times told expired in peace.  
A Rule most rare, unheard, unseen, unread,  
The sole example that the world affords.  
(Yates 59 / Thomas Hughes)
Even Spenser alluded to Astraea, whose myth depicts her already having returned to earth in the form of Queen Elizabeth (Wells 117). In Book V, the Book of Arthegall and the virtue of Justice, he writes:

Now when the world with sinne gan to abound,
Astraea loathing lenger here to space
Mongst wicked men, in whom no truth she found,
Return’d to heauen, whence she deriu’d her race;
Where she hath now an euerlasting place,
Mongst those twelue signes, which nightly we doe see
The heauens bright-shining baudricke to enhance;
And is the Virgin, sixt in her degree,
And next her selfe her righteous balance hanging bee. (V. i. 11. 1-9)

In The Faerie Queene, the blessed Astraea has come down to earth in the form of Elizabeth in order to rule the fallen world, a task that requires her to employ a harsh and ruthless brand of justice (Wells 117).

In writing his dynastic epic about the principle of generation, Spenser makes allusions to Virgil’s dynastic epic the Aenied, particularly the scene when Glauce and Britomart descend into Merlin’s cave in order to find out who the man in the mirror Britomart is lusting after could be. But scholars argue that Spenser’s cross-dressing heroine reasserts the powerful feminine principal,” which the Virgilian epic economy identifies with madness, disorder, flux, and defeat” (Pugh 19), associating Spenser’s work more closely with Ovid’s work. Further, while Britomart, who upon entering Merlin’s cave is granted a prophetic vision of her descendents, which imitates Aeneas’ vision of patriarchal descent in the underworld, the intent behind the vision is different. Aeneas receives his vision because of his dutiful rejection of love and because it is the duty of every Roman to sacrifice his private desires, whereas “Britomart’s vision is instigated by her desire and exhorts her to the pursuit of that desire” (Pugh 120).
Britomart, after being convinced by her nurse decides to go on the knightly quest in order to find Arthegall and fulfill her destiny. She, unlike Aeneas, goes on a quest for love. Britomart eventually finds herself at the seaside lamenting at the sea, and her “depiction relies heavily on imitation of Ovid’s sympathetic explorations of female psychology” (Pugh 119). In the manner of her classical predecessors, she finds herself asking rhetorical questions as she meditates on her weaknesses. According to M.L. Stapleton, she upbraids herself in the language that Ovid’s heroines use to criticize the men who desert them in Ovid’s *Heroides* (92).

Spenser borrows more from Ovid as our first vision of the goddess Diana is in the forest where Venus discovers her surrounded by her nymphs, taken from the scene in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* depicting the discovery of the naked goddess bathing (Hamilton 344):

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She hauing hong a bough on high
Her bow and painted quiuer, had vnlaste
Her siluer buskins from her nimble thigh,
And her lanck loynes vngirt, and brests vnbraste,
After her heat the breathing cold to taste;
Her golden lockes, that late in tresses bright
Embreaded were for hindring of her haste,
Now loose about her shoulders hong vndight,
And were with sweet *Ambrosia* all besprinckled light. (III. vi. 18)
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The connection between Britomart and Diana is obvious; they are both women warriors, beautiful, and blonde:

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With that her glistring helmet she vnlanced;
Which, doft, her golden locks, that were up bound
Still in a knot, vnto her heels downe traced,
And like a silken veile in compasse round
About her backe and all her bodie wound:
Like as the shining skie in summers night,
What time the dayes with scorching heat abound,
Is created all with lines of firie light,
That it prodigious seemes in common peoples sight. (IV. i. 13)
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Near the end of her appearance in *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart finds herself in the Temple of Isis. As part of the Egyptian tradition, Isis was considered the goddess of fertility, a myth that spread through the Greco-Roman world, and ties to the expectation that Britomart will be the progenitor of the British line. The goddess Isis is an important figure that Spenser employs in his tale as a figure who, “invites the warrior Britomart, who dresses and behaves as though she were a man, to develop her hidden feminine qualities, and by doing so the goddess enables the heroine to complete her quest” (Macey 279).

The Greek scholar Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris* undeniably influenced Spenser’s Isis Church episode, but the episode was also influenced by the Latin scholar, Apuleius. Spenser draws from Apuleius in the way that he structures the scene at the Temple of Isis, because he like Apuleius, “both juxtapose scenes of idolatrous worship with genuine epiphanies, they both describe metamorphoses in language that evokes the sacred awe associated with ancient mystery religions, and they both assign Isis a leading role in the process through which the hero becomes fully human” (Macey 279).

Spenser and Plutarch’s visions of Isis both identify the goddess with justice:

His wife was *isis*, whom they likewise made
A Goddesse of great power and souerainty,
And in her person cunningly did shade
That part of Justice, which is Equity,
Whereof I haue to treat here presently.  (V. vii. 3. 1-5)

Plutarch places Isis in a secondary role, as the wife of Osiris, but Spenser draws from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* when placing Isis as the central character and not Osiris (Macey 281). The Temple of Isis is such an important scene in Spenser’s poem because it is the point of Britomart’s transformation from warrior woman to queen and progenitor of the British line.
Britomart, like Lucius in *The Golden Ass*, is exhausted upon entering the Isis Temple. When she enters, the priests guide her to the idol of Isis, and she lies herself on the floor in front of the idol in reverence and begins to pray, “She did prostrate, and with right humble hart / vnto her selfe her silent prayers did impart” (V. vii. 7. 8-9). Britomart goes to sleep upon entering the Temple of Isis and like Lucious, succumbs to a prophetic dream, which serves as an answer to her prayer (Macey 284):

There did the warlike Maide her self repose,
Under the wings of Isis all that night,
And with sweete rest her heauy eyes did close,
After that long daies toile and weary plight.
Where whilste her earthly parts with soft delight
Of senceless sleepe did deeply drowned lie,
There did appeare vnto her heaunly spright
A wondrous vision, which did close implie
The course of all her fortune and posteritie. (V. vii. 12. 1-9)

In the dream Britomart finds herself clothed in a “robe of scarlet red” (v. vii. 13. 5), a traditionally royal color. Britomart and Isis lose their individual characteristics and they meld together, “and in the midst of her felicity” (v. vii. 14. 1), “her” being the conjoining of Britomart and the goddess Isis. In the dream the temple is on fire and the crocodile statue underneath Isis’ feet comes alive, which, “that Goddesse with her rod him backe did beat” (V. vii. 15. 9). Isis’ rod pushes the crocodile away from Britomart in the dream, protecting her. Then in a strange part of her vision she gives birth to a lion, “That of his game she soone enwombed grew / And forth did bring a lion of great might” (V. vii. 16. 5-6). The lion is important as it is associated with the lion passant found on the shield of Brutus, part of the Trojan lineage from which Britomart is descended. The dream is like Lucius’s vision, “a highly personalized experience narrated with an abundance of specific detail” (Macey 283) and shares with Lucius’ vision, “an accumulation of symbolic detail and the promise of physical and spiritual transformation, that distinguish
ancient mystery religions such as the Isis cult” (Macey 283). Britomart undergoes a makeover at the Temple of Isis, when she is able to see herself in her vision as a goddess allowing her become the feminine queen evolving out of her role as the Knight of Chastity (Macey 288).

Scholar David Macey says, “Britomart’s vision at Isis Church prepares her for her role as Radegone’s “goddess” of Justice by helping her strike a balance between her role as a warrior and a princess” (289). The idol of Isis represents, “the feminine, maternal, and regal qualities that Britomart carefully concealed during her quest” (Macey 290). When Britomart places herself in front of the idol, Isis is revealed to be a part of Britomart, “The idol of Isis Church is an image (eidolon) of Britomart in her destined role as wife, mother, and queen, and it directs her gaze back to the goddess that she bears within her breast” (Macey 290). The idol of Isis is a mere representation of a portion of Britomart’s complex character, but she is an important image because she represents Britomart’s future moving away from her knightly quest and towards her role as queen, wife, and mother.
Chapter 2: Medieval Influences, Arthurian Legends, and other Romances

At the beginning of Book III, Canto two, Spenser notes that men have forgotten that many noble women warriors have fought throughout the ages:

Here haue I cause, in men iust blame to find,
That in their proper praise too partiall bee,
And not indifferent to woman kind,
To whom no share in armes and cheualree,
They doe impart, ne maken memoree
Of their braue gestes and provesse martiall;
Scarse doe they spare to one or two or three,
Rowme in their writtes; yet the same writing small
Does all their deedes deface, and dims their glories all (III.ii.2)

Spenser introduces the book in which he will follow the exploits of a female knight by praising women and reminding the men of their glorious deeds. Spenser tapped into the Elizabethan view that, “Arthur had come back in the form of Elizabeth, and that she had brought with her some of the atmosphere of that Golden World from which she had returned” (Wilson 25). The Tudors claimed that they were descendents of Arthur’s lineage, the association of his descent from Northern Welsh genealogy links him to the ancestral seat of the Tudors (Hamilton 113), and so Spenser combined the qualities of the Virgin Queen and the glorious Arthur in Britomart.

The medieval philosopher, Geoffery of Monmouth, developed the myth of Arthur being a descendent of a Trojan lineage in the Middle Ages and Spenser adapted the myth to explain Britomart’s ancestry in The Faerie Queene, “For noble Britons sprong from Troians bold / and Troynouant was built of old Troyes ashes cold” (III. ix. 38. 8-9).

Spenser specified in his letter to Raleigh that he wished to include a figure that represented the glory of the foundation of the British line, and so he includes key Arthurian figures in the poem, some appearing as themselves- such as Arthur and Merlin- others representations of the forgotten ideal such as the knights on quests. In Spenser’s work he
references the “Rauran mossy hore,” important in Welsh history as the last stronghold against the Saxons (Hamilton 113), which is an allusion to Arthur’s own Northern Welsh descent:

Unto old Timon he me brought byliue,
Old Timon, who in youthly yeares hath beene
In warlike feates th’expertest man aliue,
And is the wisest now on earth I weene;
His dwelling is low in a valley greene,
Under the foot of Rauran mossy hore,
From whence the riuver Dee as siluer cleene
His tumbling billowes rolls with gentle rore:
There all my daies he trained mee up in virtuous lore. (I. ix. 4)

Spenser casts the character of Britomart out of Welsh descent as well:

In Deheubarth that now South-wales is hight,
What time king Ryence raign’d, and dealed right,
That great Magitien Merlin had deuiz’d,
By his deepe science, and hell-dreaded might,
A looking glasse, right wondrously aguiz’d,
Whose vertues through the wyde worlde soone were solemniz’d. (III. ii. 18)

The connection of the Welsh descent between Britomart and Arthur is important because it legitimizes Britomart as the progenitor of the British line, but also it legitimizes her call to knighthood. When Britomart’s destiny was revealed to her, Glauce her nurse, encouraged her to don a suit of armor and take off on her quest:

Let us in feigned armes our selues disguise,
And our weake hands (need makes good schollers) teach
The dreadful speare and shield to exercize:
Ne certes daughter that same warlike wize
I weene, would you misseeme; for ye beene tall,
And large of limbe, t’atchieue an hard emprize,
Ne ought ye want, but skil, which practize small
Wil bring, and shortly make you a mayd Martiall. (III. iii. 53)

It is through the mouth of Britomart’s nurse that Spenser sets up Britomart for success: “Bards tell of many wemen valorous / which haue full many feats aduenturous / Performed, in paragone
of proudest men..” (III. iii. 54). This encouragement sparks the transition of Britomart from virginal young woman to the knight of Chastity:

Her hearty 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,
That she resolu’d, unweeting to her Syre,
Aduent’rous knighthood on her selfe to don,
And counseld with her Nourse, her Maides attire
To turne into a massy habergeoun,
And bad her all things put in readinesse anon. (III. iii. 57)

Britomart, having decided upon herself to take on the role and duty of a knight, thus must physically prepare herself for such an undertaking by suiting herself in the armor of a Saxon Queen, which had been acquired by a band of Britons:

It fortuned (so time their turne did fitt)
A band of Britons ryding on foray
Few dayes before, had gotten a great pray
Of Saxon goods, emongst the which was seene
A goodly Armour, and full rich array,
Which long’d to Angela, the Saxon Queene,
All fretted round with gold, and goodly wel beseene. (III. iii. 58)

Her armor is even more significant because she bears the “brauе bauldrick” (III. iii. 59), an important symbol of knighthood that appears earlier in the poem where it is worn by Arthur, “Athwart his brest a bauldrick braue he ware” (I. vii. 29) and by the huntress Belphoebe, “Knit with a golden bauldricke” (II. iii. 29). This symbol forges a strong connection between Britomart, Arthur, and the huntress in Belphoebe, which can be traced back even further to the influence of the goddess Astraea, discussed in the chapter of Classical references in The Faerie Queene in this paper.

While we know that Book III features the legend of Britomartis, at the start of the third book Britomart, disguised in her armor, is not referred to as “she” but instead Spenser starts her
quest by calling her a “he”, “And on his arme addresse his goodly shield / That bore a Lion passant in a golden field” (III. i.4). Britomart’s gender is revealed later. Spenser’s use of pronoun at the beginning of the book is a two-fold technique; first he creates mystery around the unknown knight and secondly, Spenser is writing so as to represent Britomart in a way that she is not to be regarded as different from the other knights. Spenser’s doing this is a successful literary technique, because the reader is pulled into the surprise of finding out that Britomart is a woman when she unveils herself at Melacasta’s castle.

Britomart’s spear is considered the weapon of a classical warrior and is also symbolic of her chastity. The spear that she wields is adapted from the Italian Renaissance poet Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, in which his character Bradamante wields a magical spear that can unseat any knight. Similarly, “Britomart is literally invincible because she wields a potent magic spear, “a powerful phallic symbol that at the same time connotes her woman’s chastity” (Villeponteaux 54). Earlier in the tale when Britomart unseats Guyon from his horse Arthur comforts him and explains that the spear that was used to unseat him has magical powers:

Let not thee grieue dismounted to haue beene,  
And brought to the grownd, that neuer wast before;  
For not they fault, but secret power vnseene,  
That speare enchaunted was, which layd thee on the greene. (III. i. 7)

Spenser’s depiction of the strong, beautiful, and powerful woman suited in armor was a unique undertaking at a time when most feared a successful queen on the throne would pose a challenge to patriarchal ideologies (Villeponteaux 53). According to Villeponteaux, Britomart “best exemplifies Spenser’s ambivalent depiction of women’s authority” (Villeponteaux 53) because she possesses feminine characteristics but embodies characteristics entirely separate from the virtues of primary characters in medieval literature. Most women depicted in the
Arthurian legends are helpless creatures who depend on the men, such as Queen Guinevere or Isolde. Britomart is completely different from either of these two women if one just considers her ability to honor the virtue of Chastity, she is able to control her desire, and truly remain chaste. Guinevere has an affair with Sir Lancelot, and Isolde falls in love with Tristan, instead of King Mark to whom she is bethroed. These two characters are not depicted as Spenser depicts the Chastity honored by Britomart, one that is an ideal of Married love (Morgan 274). Also, these two medieval women characters play the role of the doting woman and do not take on a man’s role as Britomart does.

Britomart dresses herself in armor, and she also embodies knightly characteristics such as courage, which she exemplifies through her reaction to the plight of Scudamor and Amoret at the House of Busirane:

So much attention is given to Britomart’s courage because goodwill is the very foundation of charity. It is the altruistic nature of such love that accounts for the fact that the Knight of Chastity is engaged in a deadly struggle, not on behalf of her own love for Artegall (though that would be no less altruistic), but on behalf of Scudmou’s love for Amoret. (Moran 279)

For a young woman on a foreign quest she displays courage by showing mercy for Scudmore, who can do nothing to save Amoret, and proves her goodwill. Mercy, “involves not merely sorrow for another’s misfortunes, but also the determination to remedy them” (Morgan 281). This act of Britomart saving Amoret proves she recognizes the chivalric code of knights, and possesses the fundamental virtues of kindness and mercy.

While Britomart is, “well aware that she is a woman, and she never gives any indication that she sees anything inherently wrong in her own knightly activities, in her defeats of male knights, or in her expectation of rule“ (511 Bowman) she wholeheartedly embraces her adopted
role as a knight. In fact, Britomart is so good as a knight that she even defeats all of the male knights in a tournament organized by the character Sir Satyrane:

So did the warlike Britomart restore
The prize, to the knights of Maydenhead that day,
Which else was like to haue bene lost, and bore
The prayse of prowesse from them all away.
Then shrilling trompets loudly gan to bray,
And bad them leaue their labours and long toyle,
To ioyoud feast and other gentle play,
Where beauties prize shold win that pretious spoyle:
Where I with sound of trompe will also rest a whyle. (IV. iv. 48)

Britomart is so true to her role that the difference of her gender is not an obstacle in respect or appreciation for her knightly accomplishments. Britomart, who is part of a tradition of forgotten female warriors, reanimates a world in which it is possible for women to be a composition of beauty, fierceness, strength, and boldness. Britomart brings a new realm to light, a world in which a female is powerful enough to stand on her own and whose reliance on men is solely reserved for procreation. Britomart is a true product of the medieval legend. Her ancestral ties, tie her to the myth birthed by the medieval historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, and her embrace of her role as knight transcends the strict separation of gender roles. Being the Knight of Chastity, it is important for Britomart to retain her feminine characteristics, as the tradition of chaste characters evolved from the feminine mystique.
Chapter 3: The Renaissance, and the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth I was Spenser’s greatest inspiration. Spenser clearly stated that *The Faerie Queene* was dedicated to Elizabeth, and that he intended for Elizabeth to appreciate the depiction of her character through multiple characters and allusions in the *Faerie Queene*. He writes:

To sing his mistresse prayes, and let him mend
If ought amis her liking may abuse:
Ne let his fairest Cynthia refuse,
In mirrours more then one her self to see (III. Proem. 5)

Spenser indeed captures, “The multiple nature of Elizabeth’s image- monarch, virgin, mother, warrior, lover, goddess” (Walker 176) through his allegorical portrayal, fulfilling his intention and promise through a collection of characters all representing these various attributes of the queen. In his introduction Spenser reveals that Gloriana and Belphoebe are allusions to the Queen, but he fails to mention Britomart who is the representative knight of Book Three.

Britomart is a multi-dimensional representation of Queen Elizabeth’s growth into her role as the reigning monarch. Britomart, more than any other character in the story, represents the Classical and Medieval allusions that were applied to Queen Elizabeth at the time. She presents a changing image of the queen, altered by the confrontation of physical and political realities manipulated into allegory in Spenser’s work (Walker 173). Because Elizabethans started to formulate what Roy Strong calls “The Cults of Elizabeth” Spenser capitalized by writing a story that fragmented the various images of the queen. Scholar David Wilson pinpoints the origins of the cult of Elizabeth as around 1570 after the defeat of the Northen rebellion (2), a time when the regime was stable and the country felt secure under Elizabeth’s rule.

One of the most popular monikers for Queen Elizabeth is that of “The Virgin Queen,” which only evolved after it was clear that she would not marry or bear an heir. Historically,
Elizabeth seemed ready, at the beginning of her reign, to take on the role of a wife, but by the end of her reign the cult of the Virgin Queen evolved out of her lack of an heir and her failure to marry. Spenser wrote *Faerie Queene* late in Elizabeth’s reign, and “through Britomart’s struggles with various manifestations of fleshy force,” he undertakes to depict the sexual as well as the political implications of Elizabeth’s evolving transformation from queen and virgin to Virgin Queen” (Walker 176).

Scholars claim that Elizabeth was able to convert the stigma of her celibacy into “a propagandistic claim that she sacrificed personal interests in the name of public service” (King 30). Critic Frances Yates agrees that the “virginity of the Queen was used as a powerful political weapon all through her reign” (King 31). So, Spenser keeping in line and hoping for a pension, fashioned an image of Queen Elizabeth reminiscent of innocent pastoral virtues, most notably his image of her as the Virgin Queen in *The Shepheardes Calendar*:

> See where she sits upon the grassie greene  
> (O seemly sight)  
> Yclad in Scarlot like a mayden Queene  
> And in ermines white  
> Upon her head a Cromsin coronet  
> With Damaske roses and Daffadillies set;  
> Bayleuaes betweene, and Primroses greene,  
> Embellish the sweete Violet.  (SC, April, 55-63)

This stanza portrays Elizabeth dressed in spring flowers, which presents her as the Virgin Queen of, “an innocent pastoral age” (Wilson 23). Equally important is the implication of this pastoral that the Golden Age has returned with Elizabeth (Wilson 23).

Britomart is Elizabeth’s direct ancestor, and like Elizabeth she is the heir to her father’s kingdom, “Being his only daughter and his hayre” (III. ii. 22). Spenser’s Britomart, however, also embodies her own important roles aside from the Queen’s, the most important being, that she is the ancestor of the Tudor line.
It was clear by the time that Spenser wrote this homage that Queen Elizabeth would not bear any children in her lifetime. Britomart, however, is poised as the predecessor to the entire British line, culminating in the glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth as noted, “Till that by dew degrees and long protense / Thou haue it lastly brought unto her Excellence” (III.iii. 4. 8-9). Spenser sets up the Britomart/Elizabeth connection first when Britomart spyies into her father’s magic mirror (made by Merlin), and sees an image of a young and handsome knight with whom she immediately falls in love. This knight, is Arthegall, “And on his shield enuolved seuenfold / He bore a crowned litle Ermilin” (III.ii. 25. 7-8).

The Ermilin was an important symbol associated with British royalty, and specifically with the Virgin Queen (Hamilton 306). Spenser probably associated the ermine most specifically with the Ermine Portrait (1585), a portrait of Elizabeth seated with a crowned ermine. Arthegall, carrying a symbol of Chastity on his shield, mirrors the virtue of Britomart the observer. Furthermore, the ermine, so closely associated with the image of Elizabeth, represents the Queen in two ways. First, it represents the union of the knight bearing the shield with a symbol of Chastity and the female knight of Chastity, whose union culminates in the birth of the Virgin Queen.

Secondly, Arthegall is used as an allegory for Elizabeth’s dedication to her country and thus God, as told by critic John King, “Although Elizabeth I vowed herself to a life of perpetual virginity, she entered into a symbolic marriage with England as her husband” (John N. King 30). The ‘Legend of Chastity’ makes it clear that Chastity is understood, “in terms of its order to the ultimate end, that is, God” (Morgan 270). In Spenser’s poem, Chastity represents a virtuous love that generally leads up to marriage, “the notions of virginity and chaste sexual love are linked in

1 Appendix 1
the experience of honourable wives, and Spenser signifies these two levels of experience in his representation of Britomart” (Morgan 272). The type of Chastity modeled in the “Legend of Chastity” is ordered towards an ultimate end, that end being God. Britomart, is moved to love Arthegall not merely by a look of a “wandring eye” (Morgan 270), but by “the straight course of heavenly destiny, / Led with eternall providence’ (III.iii.24). Elizabeth too is guided by divine providence to fulfill her role as the reigning monarch of Britain.

Elizabeth had declined to change the gender of the ideal ruler, choosing instead to find ways to speak of herself, legally and metaphorically, as a man” (Walker 84). She did so most notably in her speech to her troops at Tilbury, where Elizabeth presented herself in front of her troops suited in armor, and gave a stirring speech rallying the moral of the troops:

I know I have the body but 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. (Tilbury)

In Sir William Segar’s book, *Honor Military and Ciuill* (1602), he outlines a code of conduct for an Elizabethan knight, and through his work glorifies the Chivalry of the reign of Elizabeth. Segar believed that Elizabeth was a great inspiration to these knights, “Queene Elizabeth, a Prince, of so great magnanimitie and wisedome.. as by imitation of her most noble and princely vertues, the Court of England both for Armes and learning hath in her reign excelled all others” (Wilson 28).

Spenser best exemplifies Elizabeth’s relationship with her knights through Guyon’s explanation of his relationship to Gloriana, the Faery Queene:

She is the mighty Queene of *Faerie*,
Whose faire retrait I on my shield do beare;
She is the flower of grace and chastity,
Throughout the world renowned far and neare,
My liefe, my liege, my Soueraigne, my deare,
Whose glory shineth as the morning Starre,
And with her light the earth elumines cleare;
Far reach her mercies, and her praises farre,
As well in state of peace, as puissance in warre. (II. ix. 4)

This is Elizabeth outside of the character of Britomart - Elizabeth as the reigning monarch and glorious creature.

Later when Britomart leaves the temple of Isis she learns that the Amazonian Queen Radigund has taken Arthegall captive and she takes it upon herself to save him from his enslavement so she makes her way towards the “land of the Amazons” (V. vii. 24. 9). The episode between Britomart and Radigund is an adaptation again of a scene from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. The Amazonian society depicted is similar, and both Bradamante and Britomart display fits of jealousy in response to their lovers captivity. Britomart’s lament is :

There she began to make her monefull plaint
Against her Knight, for being so untrew;…
A while she walkt, and chauf; a while she threw
Her selfe upon her bed, and did lament …
Like as a wayward childe, whose sounder sleepe
Is broken with some fearfull dreames affright,
With forward will doth set him selfe to weepe;
Ne can be stild for all his nurses might,
But kicks, and squals, and shriekes for fell despight:
Now scratching her, and her loose locks misusing;
Now seeking darknesse, and now seeking light;
Then craving sucke, and then the sucke refusing.
Such was this Ladies fit, in her loves fond accusing (V.vi.12-14)

Britomart’s outburst is modeled after Bradamante’s outburst as she waits for Ruggiero, and she grows anxious that he has deserted her. She hears a rumor that he is to be married to Marfisa, the villainesse paralleled in Radigund, and she is launched into a tailspin of jealousy, anger, and misery (Bowman 515).
The scene between Radigund and Britomart can be related to the real life politics between Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth. Elizabeth ordered the execution of Mary because she felt that she threatened her power and safety, as Mary had devised plots to kill the queen. Similarly, Radigund and her control over Arthegall threaten Britomart. Elizabeth evoked an image of the Virgin Queen of England who was favored over the “sexually scandalous Queen of Scots”. She, Elizabeth presented herself as the virtuous bride of her kingdom and Mary a husband-murdering adulteress (Bowman 519). Britomart rejects a model for female autonomy by rejecting the ways of Radigund, which can be important related to Elizabeth’s personal history because of Elizabeth’s own rejection of Mary’s politics and her desire to present herself not as a woman ruler, “Like Britomart, Elizabeth also sanctioned rather than challenged the oppression of other women” (Bowman 520).

The episode of Radigund and Britomart should also be looked at in an Elizabethan context concerning the political debate that raged on in the 16th Century over the validity of women rulers. For example, Radigund’s rule is denounced whereas the divine appointed rule is encouraged. Spenser writes:

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 hey withstand,
To purchase a licentious libertie.
But virtuous women wisely vnderstand,
That they were borne to base humilitie,
Vnlesse that heauens them lift to lawfull soueraintie. (V. v. 25)

This shift of attitude about women rulers from book III canto ii to that stanza shows that Spenser does not reject the validity of female rule, but honors his queen by validating the authority of a woman ruler:
But by record of antique times I find,
That women wont in warres to bear most sway,
And to all great exploites them selues inclind:
Of which they still the girland bore away,
Till enuious Men fearing their rules decay,
Gan coyne straight lawes to curb their liberty;
Yet sith they warlike armes haue layd away,
They haue exceld in artes and policy,
That now we follish men that pryse gin eke t’enuy.  (III.ii.2)

The Amazons were women who killed their husbands, enslaved men, and even murdered their male children. So Elizabeth had to set herself apart from such a connotation in order to separate herself from the fear of female power by the males. She wanted to show that she somehow was different, a woman who was not a threat to men (Bowman 522). Spenser’s setting up of Britomart against Radigund further presses the point that Britomart is a representation of Elizabeth. Because in Spenser:

Britomart conquers and dismantles a society that clearly draws on the Amazon tradition. The concept of the Amazon occupies an ambivalent position in Elizabethan figuration; Elizabeth is both like and unlike an Amazon. She is an independent and powerful ruler, but she chooses to project an image not violent but loving, not sexually predatory but celestial and virginal (Bowman 521).

We can conclude that Spenser’s depiction of Britomart in the episode with Radigund is a psychological allegory that analyses the dynamics of Elizabeth’s court (Bowman 52). This final scene is important as, “Britomart’s actions can be in part explained in terms of the political and ideological constraints faced by the queen” (Bowman 509). Britomart is an allegorical figure and a representation of the physical and psychological elements of the female in power (Walker 178) that Elizabeth embodied.
Addendum: The spread of Spenser’s influence on the Romantics, and the Echoes of the Woman Warrior Today

As a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism appealed to a mythical past because it exalted the qualities of such simpler times motivated by chivalry, romance, and courage. Spenser’s stanza form revived in popularity in the 18th and 19th Centuries when Romantic poets such as Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley started to incorporate it into their works. Critic Edward Morton writes, “For the seventeenth century I was able to find in the regular Spenserian stanza only 18 poems by 5 men; in the eighteenth century my list includes 57 poems by 38 known poets and 8 anonymous writers” (Morton 1).

The first poem John Keats ever wrote is entitled the Imitation of Spenser. The subject is not about any of Spenser’s characters, but Keats adopted the Spenserian stanza form for his poem, of which an excerpt is provided here:

Ah! Could I tell the wonders of an isle
That in that fairest lake had placed been,
I could e’en Dido of her grief beguile;
Or rob from aged Lear his bitter teen:
For sure so fair a place was never seen,
Of all that ever charm’d romantic eye:
It seem’d an emerald in the silver sheen
Of the bright waters; or as when on high,
Through clouds of fleecy white, laughs the coerulean sky. (Keats 19-27)

William Wordsworth, who claimed in his introduction to his poem “The Egyptian Maid,” that the names of the persons in the poem were taken from the medieval writer Sir Thomas Malory was also heavily influenced by Spenser’s work. His poem tells the story of a young girl who is set to marry at King Arthur’s court, but Merlin sinks the ship and the Lady of the Lake saves the young girl. Her body is brought to Merlin’s cave where he reveals that she will marry the knight that heals her (Bull 326). There is no tale in Malory that tells the story of
Merlin revealing a young woman’s destiny to her, but we do find this very occurrence in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* when Britomart enters Merlin’s cave and her future is revealed to her. Some critics have argued that Wordsworth directly borrowed this scene from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, but scholar Malcom Bull argues that Wordsworth “appears to be reworking Spenser’s text” (Bull 326), and was not solely influenced by Ariosto’s. In both poems, Merlin is depicted as living in a cave. In Spenser’s poem Merlin lives in “an hideous hollow cave (they say) / Under a rocke that lyes a little space / From the swift Barry, tumbling downe space” (III.i.8) Merlin, in the *Egyptian Maid* also is found to be living in a cave: “Into a cave had Merlin fled.”

The main action of the poem “The Egyptian Maid” involves a shipwreck:

```
But Ocean under magic heaves,
And cannot spare the Thing he cherished:
Ah! What avails that She was fair,
Luminous, blithe, and debonair?
The storm has stripped her of her leaves;
The Lily floats no longer!—She hath perished. (web. 9)
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While there is no shipwreck in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, part of Britomart’s evolution as a character is affected by her lament at the sea, where she compares her troubles to a shipwreck at sea:

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For els my feeble vessel crazd, and crackt
Through thy strong buffets and outrageous blowes,
Cannot endure, but needes it must be wrackt (III. iv. 9)
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We can see that Wordsworth was influenced by Malory’s tale of Sir Arthur and his knights through his inclusion of the Lady of the Lake character in his poem. But Wordsworth adapts the secretive nature of Merlin’s final words to Glauce and Britomart about her future.

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But yet the end is not. There Merlin stayd,
As overcomen of the spirites power,
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Or other ghastly spectacle dismayd,
That secretly he saw, yet note discoure. (III.iii.50)

Similarly in Wordsworth, Merlin finishes the conversation with the Lady of the Lake without revealing anything “Much have my books disclosed, but the end is hidden” (Bull 326).

Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is a direct influence on Percy Shelly’s poem *Queen Mab*. So many writers in the 19th century were mimicking Spenser and the Spenserian form that scholars debate over whether Shelley’s work was actually directly influenced by Spenser. Critic Dobell remarked, “in *Queen Mab* Shelley treads in the footsteps of predecessors and contemporaries, so far at least as the structures of his versification and the selection of his images and metaphors are concerned” (Baker 81). The names of these predecessors and contemporaries, however, are not mentioned. Baker concludes that there are few lines in *Queen Mab* that are directly from Spenser and the poem has a strong generic resemblance to the 18th century moral allegory, which Spenser strongly influenced (Baker 84).

In the ninth canto and second book of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser tells the tale of Guyon and Arthur in the House of Alma. They are lead to a turret in which the three sages of the Future, Present, and Past time live. Spenser’s character, Eumnestes, the old man of the past, is modeled in Shelley’s description of the sage Ahasuerus (Baker 97). In Spenser’s work he describes Eumnestes as such:

This man of infinite remembrance was,
And things foregone through many ages held,
Which he recorded still, as they did pas,
Ne suffred them to perish through long eld. (II.ix.56.1-4)

The essence of Shelley’s description of Ahasuerus is unmistakably similar:

His port and mien bore mark of many years
And chronicles of untold ancientness
Were legible within his beamless eye. (*Queen Mab*.Vii.73-5)
Baker notes that Shelley’s line, “And chronicles of untold ancientness” is adapted from Spenser’s line “Old records from auncient times derived” (II.ix.57.7). Spenser’s sage is described as feeble but:

Yet lively vigour rested in his mind,
And recompenst him with a better scores.
Weake body well is chang’d for mind’s redoubled force. (II.ix.55.7-9)

Similarly, Ahasuerus is too greatly aged, but:

Yet his cheek bore the mark of youth,
Freshness and vigor knit his manly frame:
The wisdom of old age was mingled there
With youth’s primeval dauntlessness. *(Queen Mab)*

Spenser’s description of “lively vigour” is modeled in Shelley’s work “freshness and vigour” Baker finds this an important point because Spenser only used the word “vigour” twice in the *Faerie Queene*, and Shelley’s use of the noun “vigor” comes out of the reworking of Spenser (Baker 98). These few comparisons produce an unmistakable linkage link between Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Shelley’s *Queen Mab*. Spenser’s literary influence was important to the writers of the 18th and 19th Centuries as a reaction to the vast societal changes going on, and perhaps in these trying times we will see such a resurgence of the popularity of his work.

But Spenser has not only been an important part of literary influence for generations, he should also be credited as a catalyst for the evolution of the role of women warriors, and even for presenting a more forward thinking view than we have today. His representation of Queen Elizabeth through the creation of the dynamic character of Britomart provides a foundation for the prolific evolution of the roles and responsibilities of women. The most common modern image of a woman warrior is of those women who serve in our armies. But shockingly, even
now, these women are placed in two categories of stereotype. As Chris Hanson proposes in a 2002 article about women warriors, “Military women are either super-macho Amazons or frail butterflies whose competence is open to question” (Hanson). Britomart, in the 16th Century already presented the perfect blend of these two polar labels. Women warriors are also found in various incarnations in our movies, literature, and television from the Japanese anime character Sailor Moon, to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, to Xena: the Warrior Princess, a modern day Amazon woman. According to an article in Psychology Today magazine entitled “Warrior Women”:

Young America, the big audience for these shows, seems willing to let warrior women lead in the realm of the betwixt-and-between, morally, sexually, every which way. If the women prove survival is possible in such a world, the men may eventually tag along. But they won’t be ready until they, like Buffy and Xena, can not only tolerate but also learn to relish ambivalence-and, unlike poor fallen Nikita², refuse to let a lack of boundaries demolish their morality. (Ventura 60)

Spenser’s acceptance and depiction of the woman warrior was way ahead of his time, as his depiction solidly conjoined two opposing gender roles into one powerful individual unaffected by such typecasting.

² Villainess in Buffy The Vampire Slayer
Bibliography


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Appendix 1

*Ermine Portrait (1585)*