

INTRODUCTION TO BOOKS THREE AND FOUR

Welcome to Volume II of *The Faerie Queene*. The introduction to Volume I contains important information about the goals, methods, and limitations of this series, as well as explanations of various genres, techniques, and patterns found in this poem. It is important for you to understand how my rendering works and what it can never offer, so I hope you will read that first introduction before progressing too far here.

In Books Three and Four, I begin to use more of the poet's original language. Where I would have written "noble" or "final day of life" in Volume I, I might use terms like "goodly" or "utmost date," respectively. These Elizabethan words hold meanings that modern replacements cannot entirely replicate, and by reading them in context, I think you will begin to understand how they work. Such exposure should help you transition to Spenser's original text more easily, when you decide to tackle it.

I also allow for longer and more complex phrasing in this volume, reflecting the density of some of Spenser's sentences. And you will notice less scene-by-scene commentary since you are now familiar enough with Spenser's style to do some interpretative work on your own. However, if you want or need more help at any point, trace my leads back to the scholars featured in my notes. They are wonderful companions for your journey.

THE STORY FORM CHANGES

You are likely to notice a few changes as you begin Book Three, both in content and style. To understand these shifts, let us take a brief look at Spenser's progression from Book One.

Book One—The Book of Holiness

The plot of Book One is modeled on the medieval chivalric romance, though it is heavily influenced by Virgil and other ancient writers, demonstrating Spenser's familiarity with "all the principal ancient poets and moralists."¹ The Red Cross Knight's tale also provides a gentle introduction to the rest of Faerie Land. Rosemary Freeman describes Book One as "a prelude in which the form he [Spenser] chose is more easily grasped. Although the first book stands alone as a story, it also helps us learn how to read the poem and what may be discovered in its other sections."²

¹ B. E. C. Davis 1933:59.

² Rosemary Freeman 1970:87.

Book Two—The Book of Temperance

In Book Two, Spenser's plot leans more heavily upon the *Nicomachean Ethics* and classical interpretations of temperance. Especially in the first seven cantos of this book, we watch a largely Greek hero attempt virtue in his own strength before discovering his limits.

Although temperance is ultimately victorious, Book Two also leaves us with some troubling questions. After watching “the evil powers of femininity misused”³ in Acrasia (a symbol of unbridled, lethal lust), it might seem as if Spenser is censuring powerful women along with their desires. One might wonder if all his significant female characters will be portrayed in stereotypical extremes, appearing either as saints like Una and Cælia or villains like Duessa and Acrasia.

Book Three—The Book of Chastity

Yet, enter Britomart of Book Three—a daunting, turbulent, powerful, imperfect, brave, noble female knight who begins her quest only after being overwhelmed with the desire to find the man she loves. Here, Spenser seems to embrace more complexity, or as Humphrey Tonkin writes: “Book III signals a broadening of Spenser's concerns and a sophistication of his mode of argument. It is a richer, more complex structure than Books One and Two.”⁴ Guyon's quest creates a clean divide between good and evil while Britomart's quest proves that “even those forces at first sight vicious or destructive can be brought to serve positive ends.”⁵ Because Britomart is given the dignity of emotional nuance, the tone of Spenser's poem changes; simplicity passes the baton to paradox.

Some critics have argued that Books Three and Four begin to fragment after the tight structures of Books One and Two, the poet becoming “confused, indifferent, or careless.”⁶ However, as Thomas Roche has noted, the themes of Books Three and Four (chastity and friendship) demand a more elaborate story framework than holiness or temperance.⁷

In Book Three, Spenser implements techniques borrowed from Ludovico Ariosto's episodic romance.⁸ Ariosto was a sixteenth-century Italian epic poet, and his *Orlando Furioso* flits between scenes, moving “lightly from one theme to another, from one mood to another.”⁹ The writings of Ariosto and Spenser are significantly different in tone and theme, however. Tonkin insists that “Spenser's work is emphatically not an English imitation of Italian

³ Humphrey Tonkin 1989:113.

⁴ Tonkin 1989:112.

⁵ Tonkin 1989:123.

⁶ Thomas Roche 1964:vii.

⁷ Roche 1964:vii.

⁸ Roche 1964:3. Tasso and Boiardo were also influences (Tonkin 1972:3).

⁹ Susannah McMurphy 1924:13.

literature.”¹⁰ Rather, a friend of Spenser’s (Gabriel Harvey) states that the poet’s intention is “to emulate, and hope to overgo” the *Furioso*.¹¹

How does such emulation appear? Several of Spenser’s characters are modeled on Ariosto’s, as well as some of his “language and imagery.”¹² Spenser’s canto structure also reflects Ariosto’s influence. Prior to Book Three (and especially prior to Book Four), Spenser’s cantos generally focus on a single setting. As we move forward, however, his story begins to jump more rapidly between locations and characters, narrative strands intersecting without much separation. As the pacing of these intersections accelerates, Spenser allows the complexity of his world to unfold.

This complexity extends to the protagonist of Book Three. In fact, Britomart shares the limelight with another woman, Florimell. Though Britomart and Florimell are quite different, both of their stories reveal aspects of the chaste life. And, as Freeman has noted, “neither story reaches its end in Book III; each develops during Book IV and reaches its conclusion in Book V, where Justice attains its right of winding up unfinished personal relationships.”¹³ While Britomart remains the key character of the book, “her story does not govern its sequence as the Red Crosse Knight and Guyon governed theirs.”¹⁴ Similarly, the title knights of Book Four operate within a network of characters who demonstrate the virtue of friendship.

Allegory does not disappear in Books Three and Four. Characters, locations, and events continue to represent meaning in a manner Tonkin has affiliated with “the Renaissance emblem.”¹⁵ However, overt symbolism does generally become more subtle as the plot softens its linear, didactic mode. Thankfully, Spenser’s wit and depth save his early books from being boring or oppressive, but in Books Three and Four, psychological complexity and episodic flutter do the hypnotic work of a more natural form of storytelling.

A FEARSOME CHASTITY

Britomart repeatedly defies conventional standards for an Elizabethan woman. Spenser has already given us a taste of feminine power in the huntress Belphœbe; yet, now he gives us an entire book featuring a warrior woman on a quest. Before you sigh and say, “Annd . . . Spenser assigns the *woman* chastity. How quaint,” realize that he is not advocating for the modern use of that term. Spenser’s chastity is not simple sexual restraint; it is a rigorous, positive pursuit of love—not just a work of negation—and it requires strength, creativity, courage, and endurance.

¹⁰ Tonkin 1972:3.

¹¹ Abraham Stoll 2006:x.

¹² Davis 1933:86.

¹³ Freeman 1970:184.

¹⁴ Freeman 1970:185.

¹⁵ Tonkin 1989:137.

His chaste hero is not sitting before a fire embroidering; she is charging villains, rescuing captives, and leaving an active, redemptive imprint on the world. Furthermore, while in Elizabethan times, men were primarily seen as chivalric and women pastoral, Britomart “combines in a single person generative beauty and martial strength.”¹⁶

Spenser offers a preview of Britomart’s force early in Book Three when she unhorses Guyon (the knight of Temperance and protagonist of Book Two) during a head-to-head challenge. After this, she fells Marinell, a powerful celibate warrior famed for his strength. Though Britomart and Marinell are both virgins, her virginity (unlike Marinell’s) is not an end in itself. She does not simply fight to abstain from sex. She fights in pursuit of a destined, sexual union of equals. In doing so, Britomart reverses traditional chivalric patterns by chasing a man who will help her produce offspring to protect the nation of Britain, instead of waiting for a man to fight off enemies to win her love.¹⁷

Britomart is no moralistic prude. In fact, when she must dry off after her clothing is soaked during knightly travels, she disrobes in the presence of Paridell, Satyrane, and the Squire of Dames, unflinchingly exposing her womanly form in Malbecco’s home. She has already proven her physical strength to these men, and they fear her power. Now she walks in the pragmatism of a warrior, taking any step necessary to accomplish her ultimate goal. Clearly, there is more to Spenser’s chaste hero than timid, wilting reserve. Her quest requires a wholehearted, active pursuit of good—the work of doing, choosing, and battling. Instead of simply hiding meekly in a high tower until she can be properly deflowered, she goes forth into the world to face struggle after struggle, aching, longing, weeping, conquering, lamenting, rescuing, and redeeming. Her purity is a spear, not a cage.

Does this strength qualify Britomart as a feminist? That is a tough question. There are many definitions and divisions of feminism, and the term continues to gather complexity over time. C. S. Lewis does not consider Britomart a “real feminist” like Radigund of Book Five because she was not the kind of “virago” he associated with feminism. He notes that she has only “temporarily taken the role of a knight errant . . . to find her lover” while “her outlook has always been entirely feminine.”¹⁸ However, Lewis’s understanding of terms like “feminine” or “feminism” might differ significantly from yours or mine.

Ultimately, Britomart uses her strength to restore male rule to the Amazons in Book Five. This is historically significant because more than one adviser had urged Spenser’s queen to marry a man who could become king. She had resisted for several reasons, among them, knowing that marriage would mean a loss of her own authority. Spenser navigates his culture’s

¹⁶ Tonkin 1989:111.

¹⁷ Tonkin 1989:112.

¹⁸ Lewis 1967:105.

distaste for female rulers in *The Faerie Queene* by making a specific exception for Britomart's leadership, allowing for feminine rule when "the heauens them lift to lawfull soueraintie"¹⁹—implying this calling had also been given to Elizabeth I.

Throughout Spenser's epic, we find episodes in which Spenser presents the strengths of women, and episodes where he reverts to stereotypes. In Book Three, Spenser contrasts the balanced relationship of Artegall and Britomart with the imbalanced relationship of Malbecco and Hellenore.²⁰ So, at the very least, he is elevating a mighty match of equivalent warriors over a marriage based purely on masculine domination.

THE GARDEN OF ADONIS

As you have surely noticed by now, locations can serve an important narrative role in *The Faerie Queene*. Tonkin writes: "When Spenser wants to discuss principles or concepts, he organizes them spatially, turning them into gardens or houses. By describing the layout of these locations, he can describe the relationships among the abstract principles for which the locations are metaphors."²¹ Perhaps you remember the disguised, crumbling foundation of the House of Pride (Book One) or the metaphorical significance of rooms within Alma's house (Book Two). In Book Three, Canto Six, the Garden of Adonis packs similar meaning.

Most critics agree that the Garden of Adonis contrasts directly with Acrasia's Bower of Bliss since it contains parallel but opposing qualities and characters. Here, we meet the real Genius instead of the false Genius of the Bower. Here, we find an immoderate beast (a boar) bound in submission instead of Acrasia's open lust. Here, we find a realm of generation instead of a realm of death. As you encounter this garden, consider not only how it contrasts with other locations in *The Faerie Queene*, but also how it relates to a theme of chastity.

UNION OF DIANA AND VENUS

Take note of this unusual alliance in Canto Six. Diana and Venus are traditional adversaries, but they join forces temporarily to find Diana's son, Cupid.²² While searching for him, the two goddesses stumble upon newborn twins, daughters of Chrysogone. They adopt one child each, naming one baby Belphœbe and the other Amoret, each child growing to model characteristics of her adoptive mother. As you read, you may want to consider this rare union of feminine strength and feminine love during the absence of Cupid.

¹⁹ Spenser V v 25.9.

²⁰ Spenser reaffirms equality between Artegall and Britomart in the Temple of Isis in Book V.

²¹ Tonkin 1989:120.

²² See C.S. Lewis's chapter "Belphoebe, Amoret, and the Garden of Adonis" in his *Spenser's Images of Life* to read in more depth about a possible interpretation of both the Garden of Adonis and Spenser's use of the *Venus naturalis* (1967:45–63).

OPPONENTS OF CHASTITY

Book Three introduces quite a few opponents to chastity. Studying how these characters attack, distort, falsely mimic, or otherwise discourage a chaste life can help deepen our understanding of Spenser's celebration of this virtue. In particular, we will encounter:

- **a forester** who chases Florimell, attempting to violate her (Canto One)
- **Malecasta**, a lustful female ruler (Canto One)
- **Marinell**, a celibate son of a sea nymph who initially opposes marriage (Canto Four)
- **Time** in the Garden of Adonis (Canto Six)
- **a bound boar** in the Garden of Adonis (Canto Six)
- **a witch, her son, and her beast** (Canto Seven)
- **Argante/Ollyphant**, perverse twin giants (Canto Seven)
- **the Squire of Dames**, a comedic unchaste figure (Canto Seven)
- **False Florimell**, an imitation of true beauty formed by evil (Canto Eight)
- **an old fisherman and Proteus**, captors of Florimell (Canto Eight)
- **Paridell/Malbocco/Hellenore**, the seducer, the oppressive husband, and his unfaithful wife, respectively (Cantos Nine and Ten)
- **Busirane**, kidnapper and torturer of Amoret (Canto Eleven)
- **Cupid and members of his Masque**, the dark side of this deity who enjoys oppressing his victims²³ (Canto Eleven)

A RELIGIOUS SHIFT

Books One and Two of *The Faerie Queene* are largely rooted in Christian models of redemption. Flagrantly in Book One and more subtly in Book Two, Spenser focuses on human weakness sustained by salvific grace. Both books show the limitations of human power at the end of their seventh cantos. Both show subsequent victories based on divine intervention.

Book Three is largely secular in comparison. Though Christian imagery is still present here and there, Spenser breaks from overt theology. Having established the core of all true righteousness through Saint George's quest, and having revealed the limitations and redemption of temperance through Guyon's, the poet addresses additional virtues with creative vigor. In fact, Britomart prays to non-Christian gods, engages in superstitious pagan practices, and struggles inside of a largely secular context while we are given only an occasional reminder that "feeble is the power of self-protection." However, the introduction to Volume I addresses the capacity of the Renaissance mind to derive Christian truth from non-Christian imagery. So, such a narrative shift does not necessarily indicate a major ideological change in the poet himself.

²³ Tonkin 1989:130.

THE TWO ENDINGS TO BOOK THREE

Spenser's 1590 publication of *The Faerie Queene* included Books One through Three. However, he made significant changes to the ending of Book Three before releasing a complete collection of Books One through Six in 1596. Though only a few final stanzas are involved in this revision, the plot of Book Three twists substantially as a result of these alterations. In the 1590 ending, Scudamour and Amoret are reunited. In the 1596 printing, however, their reunion was removed. C. S. Lewis suggests that parts of this first ending would likely have been reintroduced later in the epic had Spenser completed his twelve-book plan.²⁴ In the appendix of Volume II, I have included a rendering of Spenser's first ending to Britomart's tale.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN BOOKS THREE AND FOUR

Critics have placed limited value on Spenser's 1589 letter describing *The Faerie Queene* to Sir Walter Raleigh, arguing that the poet does not entirely comprehend the fullness of the work he has created.²⁵ Nonetheless, Spenser's separation of private and public virtues in this letter is still worth noting. He originally states that six books will address private virtues and six, public virtues. However, this switch seems to occur in Book Four, since holiness (Book One), temperance (Book Two), and chastity (Book Three) are private virtues with public consequences while friendship (Book Four), justice (Book Five), and courtesy (Book Six) tend to exist most clearly in the public sphere.

As you read, note how easily the plot of Book Three flows into Book Four, providing a smooth connection between the private and public spheres. Some scholars think Spenser allows the plot of Book Three to stretch into Book Four to blend the private virtue of chaste affection with the public virtue of friendship—unifying love in its diverse forms. Tonkin writes: "Most critics are agreed that the two books form a more or less continuous argument (which actually runs over into Book V) concerned with the psychology and, one is tempted to add, sociology of love."²⁶ Britomart's character also begins to reflect this transition in Book Four, finally allowing Amoret to discover that she, too, is a female and drawing her into a deep, platonic friendship.

WOMEN PURSUING MEN IN BOOKS THREE AND FOUR

It is also interesting to note how many women are either actively searching for—or end up stumbling upon—men in Books Three and Four of *The Faerie Queene*. The traditional chivalric model presents a male facing challenges to win a female. Yet, in these two books, the inverse is often shown instead, both in positive and negative ways. For example:

- Britomart pursues Artegall (Book Three, Canto Three)
- Florimell pursues Marinell (Book Three, Canto Five)
- Æmylia goes to meet Amyas (Book Four, Canto Seven)

²⁴ Lewis 1967:36.

²⁵ Lewis 1967:139.

²⁶ Tonkin 1972:9.

- Pœana pursues Amyas/Placidus (Book Four, Cantos Eight and Nine)
- Amoret wanders, looking for Scudamour (Book Four, Canto One)
- Belphœbe rescues Timias (Book Three, Canto Five)
- Argante the giantess pursues any man she desires (Book Three, Canto Seven)

Looking back, we see hints of such pursuits in previous books. Una sought the Red Cross Knight after being abandoned by him (Book Three, Canto Three). Remember also the tragic stories of Satyrane’s mother seeking her husband (Book One, Canto Six), Duessa seeking the Red Cross Knight (Book One, Canto Seven), and Amavia seeking Mordant as he was trapped in Acrasia’s bower (Book Two, Canto One).

TWINS, TRIPLETS, SETS OF FOUR IN BOOKS THREE AND FOUR

Just as in Books One and Two of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses twins, triplets, and sets of four to provide symmetry, friction, and meaning in Books Three and Four. For example, selfishness, competition, and duplicity are present in the alliance of Blandamour, Paridell, Ate, and Duessa, while selflessness, harmony, support, and trust characterize bonds among Cambell, Triamond, Cambina, and Canacee. The perversion and abuse driving the twins Ollyphant and Argante opposes the nobility and honor of the twins Amoret and Belphœbe. The masque scene in Busirane’s house contains a number of opposing pairs intentionally coupled. And the three sons of Agape display the classical concept of friends existing as “the single soul in several bodies.”²⁷ As you read, keep in mind Spenser’s tendency to use groupings strategically, and you will likely notice many more connections than those I have listed here.

BOOK FOUR

Alan MacColl compares Book Four of *The Faerie Queene* with Shakespearean romantic comedy. Like many of Shakespeare’s works, Book Four contains instances of “separation and loss, of alienation and misunderstanding, of the trials of parted lovers, of disguise, failure of recognition and just-missed meetings.”²⁸ In the end, these diversions lead to “recognition, reconciliation, and joyful union.”²⁹

In terms of structure, Books One and Two focused primarily on a single hero, and Book Three held closely to two main characters. Book Four, however, follows a tangled rumpus of relationships—all centered around the theme of friendship—while the unifying chivalric quest takes a back seat. But does this rumpus stick together along the way, and does it land somewhere definite?

The plot of Book Four is definitely the most complex of any book in *The Faerie Queene*.

²⁷ Tonkin 1989:134.

²⁸ Alan MacColl 1989:26.

²⁹ MacColl 1989:26.

However, I do not think you will find it difficult to follow—rather, it is a great deal of fun! I can offer a few broad critical strokes in this introduction, but Tonkin (1989) and MacColl (1989) wrote in-depth analyses of this book,³⁰ and both are well worth your time.

STRUCTURE IN BOOK FOUR

Because Book Four has no primary hero, some critics have found its structure a bit baffling. Spenser certainly darts back and forth between story lines, but current movies and television shows also jump around quite a bit, so I do not anticipate comprehension problems for most modern readers. If you find you need a little clarity, however, Tonkin has divided Book Four into five sections:

1. “[T]he adventures of Blandamour, Paridell, Ate and Duessa” (Canto One through part of Canto Four)
2. “Satyrane’s tournament” along with “the subsequent quarrel over the false Florimell” (begins partway through Canto Four)
3. “[T]he flight of Scudamour and Artegall with Britomart and the subsequent recognition” (Cantos Five–Six)
4. “[A] group of stories concerning Amoret and Belphœbe” (Cantos Seven–Ten)
5. “[T]he meeting of Florimell and Marinell and the marriage of the Thames and the Medway” (Cantos Eleven–Twelve)³¹

TENSION AND RELEASE

The torture of Amoret in Busirane’s castle is overwhelming, and readers can find it difficult to move on through Faerie Land after witnessing such inhumanity. Mercifully, Spenser offers two episodes of healing within Book Four, “places of revelation and renewal.”³² The first of these redemptive scenes features Scudamour’s journey to the Temple of Venus, and the second presents a personified marriage of two rivers.

Why would Spenser introduce such settings after breaking our hearts? Perhaps he did so because a simple didactic statement is rarely strong enough to counterbalance the pain of terror while “ritual, symbol” and “myth” are more capable of doing such work.³³ We can find similar tactile mechanisms in other familiar literature. Consider the transcendent symbols of Revelation, or the ritual of Abraham’s covenant in which a fire pot passes through a split animal,³⁴ or the mythic nature of the story of Jonah. These stories function differently in us than the more linear book of Romans. Both image and prescriptive truth can heal. But in a moment of overwhelming pain, a

³⁰ These resources are listed in the Volume II bibliography.

³¹ Tonkin 1989:136. Tonkin then divides Book IV into halves, a thematic break occurring at the tournament in Canto VI. Here, he writes, the book begins “with the redefinition of the chastity presented in Book III in the light of the friendship defined in the early episodes of Book IV” (1989:137).

³² MacColl 1989:28.

³³ MacColl 1989:28.

³⁴ Genesis 15.

clinical analysis of ethics might move us less than the image of a compassionate God taking on human flesh to hold the darkness of the world inside himself so He could rescue us. By giving us the strong imagery of the Temple of Venus and the marriage of the Thames and the Medway, the horror of Book IV offers some emotional closure.³⁵

³⁵ MacColl 1989:28–29.