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Exorcizing Female Power in The Faerie Queene : The Treatment of Duessa in the Book of Holiness

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The female body is a powerful site of contestation within Spenser's narrative. It is portrayed as indiscernible, often disguised and frequently misread by both the male characters and the readers. Yet, it is precisely the enigma of the female body that lends itself to being the site where power dynamics between the male and the female play out. This notion is most explicit in Spenser's treatment of Duessa. Her centrality as a power broker in the Book of Holiness is undeniable because male power is concentrated in both the physical and linguistic deconstruction of Duessa. Demystifying Duessa becomes a hallmark of male power. Her physical deconstruction takes place through the actual unmasking of her body which is followed by the crucial act of gazing upon it. However, this exorcizing of her power is incomplete unless it is supplemented by the linguistic perversion of the reproductive norms of her body. Thus, Duessa can have neither of the iconic positions of whore or mother. Once she is no longer a Mary Magdalene or a Virgin Mary, her power over the male ceases to exist.

Duessa's physical deconstruction is anticipated from her very entry into the narrative as Sansfoy's companion. The reader's eye is instantaneously captured by the excessiveness of her garments in comparison to Una. The layers of cloth and baubles obscure every part of anatomy as if her body must be hidden. She is introduced with the lines, "A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red,/ Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay" (I.ii.13.3-4). The eye is distracted by the flamboyance that Duessa luxuriates in. The reader is given no hint of her nature. Instead, we are presented with the image of Duessa "clad in scarlot red" (13). In particular, Spenser's choice of "Purfled" that suggests the embroidered nature of her garments is telling for it implies a certain artifice and decorativeness meant to deceive the eye. This emphasis on the intentional distraction is further enhanced by the line, "Shee wore, with crowns and owches garnished" (13). The use of the word "garnished" suggests that Duessa's outerwear is merely an embellishment. Indeed, it mirrors her personality for she rarely lies, she merely embellishes the truth. Thus, the reader's interest and that of the male characters' is piqued for we both are tantalized by the thought of what lies beneath the extraneous.

Snakelike, Duessa begins to shed. She who enters the narrative with false majesty and ostentation is imbued with a striptease-like quality. This striptease echoes the slow but ominous disintegration of her power over the male gaze. The scene in which Fradubio watches her as she bathes is fraught with tension as he struggles to see her as her true self while Duessa maintains control by masking her most vital parts. Fradubio cannot be wrested away from her power because his gaze is not completely fulfilled. His gaze is excised at Duessa's torso and thus glacier-like, the most lethal and powerful parts of her body are "hidd in water" (I.ii.41). The implication of her genitalia being hidden by the water is an interesting notion because it lends a murkiness to her power that Fradubio is incapable of fathoming. Even Spenser's choice of the word "hidd" suggests a complicity on the part of the narrator and Duessa to purposefully obscure her genitalia from Fradubio's view. All Fradubio can rely on is an instinctual wariness that he is bandying with a power that is too sinister for his liking. While Fradubio says with such laughable mock-conviction, "I saw before mine eyes," the reader is aware that he has truly not seen enough of her body to be free from her power (41). Instead, Spenser deflates his confidence with the lines, "But they did seeme more foul and hideous,/ Then womans shape man would beleeeue to bee" (41). In particular, Spenser's use of the word "seeme" and the phrase "would beleeeue to bee" lends a child-like uncertainty in Fradubio's voice. To go a step further, the word "seeme" connotes this sense of enchantment with her nether parts that are not privy to his gaze. Fradubio must see her in her entirety before he can read her "proper hew" (40). Instead of using the word 'colour,' Spenser's germane choice of "hew" suggests that man is not blind to blatant manifestations of evil, only to its subtler and more beautiful shades. One can almost hear Fradubio's voice trailing off as he wonders at what lies beneath. It is this sense of wonder and curiosity that the unseen Duessa evokes in the male characters that makes the spectacle of the female body all the more crucial to their liberation.

Duessa's physical deconstruction culminates in the complete unmasking of her body on Una's orders in a scene that is

disturbing in its voyeurism. Spenser himself draws the reader's gaze to this momentous event when he gives Duessa's disrobing precedence in his introductory argument to the canto. Spenser powerfully transmutes the female body into a spectacle with his vivid and blatantly grotesque descriptions that instantaneously capture the attention of the gaze. He adopts a particularly modern cinematic technique in the manner in which he scans Duessa's body, moving from her head to her feet. Her body is broken down into frames. In each shot of her body, Spenser captures what is most visually arresting in its monstrousness. Consider the meticulous attention paid to every detail of her body in stanzas 47 and 48. Spenser describes her body with such violence that Duessa is repulsive to our every sense. However, two of the most memorable of Spenser's images are his description of her breasts and her skin. This is evident in the lines,

Her dried dugs, lyke bladders lacking wind,
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;
Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind,
So scabby was, that would haue loathd all womankind. (l.viii.47.6-8)

Her naked body is visually astonishing. Spenser's simile "lyke bladders lacking wind" potently conveys the desiccated nature of her body (47). Such a jarring comparison between the breasts that are essentially nourishing by nature and that of the bladder, an excretory organ, creates a circus-like freak show for both the readers and the other characters to gawk at. This graphic description is intensified by the line, "Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld" (47). The phrase "[h]ong downe" make Duessa's body out to be that of scarecrow, a mere husk of her power. It seems to descend into bathos as the reader can imagine her breasts flapping in the wind. Spenser's choice of the word "weld" is significant for it so adroitly conveys the bizarre image of Duessa's breasts that are pregnant with filth. This notion is somewhat problematic because the breasts are typically conceived to be the most visually scintillating part of the female body. Spenser augments the oddity of Duessa's body using the simile "maple rind" to describe her skin (47). Consider the implications of Spenser's particular use of the word "rind". On one level, this very tactile image connotes the roughness of her skin but it also suggests that Duessa's body is to be peeled apart like a fruit. Indeed, Spenser mirrors this visual peeling in his deconstruction of her body where Spenser's use of similes instead of metaphors suggest a disjointedness within her body. We cannot see her as a whole. Instead, she is catalogued in a grotesque blazon. Duessa's body becomes a child's collage. Her body is no more than a motley assortment of images to be viewed. Indeed, one could say that Spenser is the true arch image creator in the poem. However, unlike Archimago, Spenser's shifting images allow for a variety of interpretations to take place. With Archimago, there is only his interpretation that is active.

Once Duessa's body is unveiled, Spenser crystallizes this moment in which he describes the interaction between the male characters and Duessa purely through the locus of viewing. Interestingly enough, it begins with the command of another woman, Una: "And shame t'avenge so weake an enemy;/ But spoile her of her scarlot robe, and let her fly" (45). By beginning the line with the preposition "But," Una's thought process becomes transparent. In the midst of thinking how weak Duessa is, Una instantaneously recognizes her subtle powers. Only a woman would be able to see how imperative it is for Duessa to be unveiled to free the male gaze. It is worth considering that the flamboyance of Duessa's vestments and their false royalty are meant to distract the gaze from seeing her essence. This interaction in terms of viewing is continued in Stanza 46 with the lines, "Such as she was, their eies might her behold" (46). The crucial phrase "their eies might her behold" connotes the momentousness of this sight. In particular, the use of the somewhat tremulous "might" suggests a morbid awe at the spectacle of her body. They must "behold" Duessa to end being visually beholden to her. This leitmotif of being seen carries through in the final stanza of Canto viii where Duessa herself senses that her power has been exorcized. This is particularly evident in the lines,

And from the world that had discovered her wide,
Fled to the wastfull wilderness apace,
From liuing eies her open shame to hide,
And lurkt in rocks and caues long vnespiede. (l.viii.50.2-5)

Spenser's use of the word "discovered" lends both an exploratory and yet exploitative quality to the act of viewing her body (50). It is almost as if Duessa's power has dissipated because she has been colonized by sight. Duessa's act of fleeing into the wilderness echoes Adam and Eve hiding amidst the foliage for they are aware of both their physical and spiritual nakedness. The phrase, "her open shame to hide" is somewhat ambiguous for at one level, it suggests that there is an urgency in hiding her now *seen* body. Yet, on re-reading the lines, it hints that she can no longer parade or display herself as in the House of Pride because she has been exorcized of her power.

Once Duessa has been both stripped and viewed, her physical deconstruction is complete. She can no longer occupy that position of desire as a whore. To obliterate any semblance of power over the male gaze, her possible position as a mother must be perverted. This takes place through the linguistic corruption of Duessa's ability to propagate. At the biological level, her capacity to mother is negated. As Fradubio notes, her true self is that of "a filthy foule old woman" (40). The emphasis on her advanced age is significant for it implies that she lacks the fertility to reproduce others like herself and by extension, to reproduce her power. While Errorr's reproductiveness is made hideous by her fecundity, Duessa's is made monstrous by its absence. This 'biological flaw' is enhanced by Fradubio's unambiguous description of her genitalia as both "misshapen" and "monstruous" (41). Spenser's choice of the word "misshapen" connotes the external deformities of her genitalia that do not obey the laws of nature. To build on that image, Spenser concretizes it with "monstruous". This suggests that beyond the physical deformity, her genitalia is inherently hideous because of Duessa's own poisonous nature.

Even in her allegorical position as the false bride or the Catholic Church, Duessa is denied the ability to birth false knowledge. Like the children of Errorr, Duessa's offspring die prematurely. The seemingly true lies of her bonds of love to Redcrosse are almost immediately dispensed with by true Holiness. The short-lived nature of her false truths also suggests a certain militancy on the part of Spenser in reacting to the Catholic Church. Perhaps, to him, the ubiquitousness of these false truths are immaterial for they are not sustainable.

With no place within the archetypes of a mother, whore or virgin, she cannot hold the male gaze and Duessa is lopped off from the narrative like a diseased limb. The power of the female lies very much in her ability to exemplify these archetypes. Yet, it may be worth considering that it is this inability to classify her that makes her all the more complex than an Una or a Charissa. Her complexity could be thought of as the true but back-handed tribute to Queen Elizabeth as

opposed to the blatant moments of flattery in the poem. After all, does Elizabeth not occupy all these three positions? Is she not the mother of a nation, the desired woman and the virgin queen? Indeed, Duessa's position mirrors the place of women as irreconcilable figures. There is a constant desire to break them down into pieces that can be understood or to pigeonhole them in a familiar box. Duessa escapes this categorization but loses her power within the narrative.

About the Author

Dashini is a senior English major with a concentration in Women's & Gender Studies at Carleton College. She is a Starr Cross Cultural Studies Scholar from Malaysia. She plans to pursue her PhD in postcolonial literature. This paper won the Niles Prize for best short essay in Medieval & Renaissance Studies

Endnotes

1. Hamilton, A.C. Spenser : The Faerie Queene. 2nd ed. : Longman, 2001.

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