

**Kristen Abbott Bennett**

## **Re-conceiving Britomart**

### **Spenser's Shift in the Fashioning of Feminine Virtue between Books 3 and 5 of *The Faerie Queene***

In Books 3 and 5 of *The Faerie Queene*, the crux of virtue is that one must be able to *conceive* the difference between right and wrong. But what happens when, according to popular 16th-century belief, “conception” – the ability to generate both intellectual knowledge and biological progeny – is limited to the males of the species? Is the female knight of Chastity an oxymoron? This essay examines Spenser’s shift in his representation of Britomart’s “virtue” in the 1590 and 1596 versions and the implications generated for the fashioning of both Britomart and her female readers – especially Queen Elizabeth. I will show how Spenser espouses a traditional Aristotelian (one-sex) model of creation in Britomart’s story in Book 3 in order to demonstrate his shift to an egalitarian, dual-sexed model in her reprisal in Book 5. Spenser’s revision of Britomart’s capacity for “conception” and the resulting implications for fashioning her “virtue” will also be analyzed via the palimpsest of allusions to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Plutarch’s *The Myth of Isis and Osiris*, and Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*.

In his prefacing letter to Walter Raleigh in the 1590 version of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser claims that the purpose of his “darke conceit” is “to fashion a gentleman, or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.”<sup>1</sup> Of concern here is the problem “conceit” poses for the fashioning of virtue in Britomart – the titular knight of Chastity prominent in Books 3 and 5 of *The Faerie Queene*. By definition, “conceit” connotes a duality of intellectual and biological conception that is profoundly problematic when exploring Spenser’s representation of Britomart’s virtue. A well-known example of conceptual duality in this sense is found in the first scene of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in which Kent says to Gloucester, “I cannot conceive you,” and Gloucester replies, “Sir, this young fellow’s mother could; whereupon she grew round-wombed. . .”<sup>2</sup> Nowhere in *The Faerie Queene* is this conceptual dyad more

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1. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1987 [1590]), p. 15.

2. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 1153–1184, 1.1.12–15.

pronounced than in Britomart's character. But what happens when, according to popular sixteenth-century belief, "conception" – that is, the ability to generate both intellectual knowledge and biological progeny – is limited to the males of the species? Since "virtue" invokes an imperative of moral decision making, the ability to "conceive" becomes critical. Is Spenser's female knight of Chastity an oxymoron?<sup>3</sup>

This essay analyzes Spenser's shift in the representation of Britomart's virtue in the 1590 and 1596 versions of *The Faerie Queene* and addresses the implications this shift generates for the fashioning of both Britomart and her female readers. In Book 3 of the 1590 publication, we witness Britomart create a "monster" of her mind that is feeding "within [her] bleeding bowels."<sup>4</sup> After her nurse's herbal remedies fail to help, Britomart is taken to Merlin. Via his prophecy, Merlin fashions Britomart's future and cures her of her ills. The success of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, legitimized by a generous pension awarded to Spenser from Queen Elizabeth, is called into question when the poet reprises Britomart's story six years later in Book 5.

When Britomart conspicuously reappears in Book 5, Spenser does not recall her in order to fulfill Merlin's prophecy, but instead confers on her another prophecy. Although both prophecies appear to be oriented toward Britomart's future marriage and progeny, the origins of initiation and conception are critically different. In Book 3, Merlin initiates Britomart's prophecy, but in Book 5, her character is able to dream of her future independently. Elizabeth Fowler aptly observes that Spenser's "theoretical contribution [to Renaissance poetics] is to identify character as the primary technical tool for producing architectonic effects."<sup>5</sup> These discordant prophecies seriously disrupt the poetic architecture of Britomart's representation of chastity between Books 3 and 5 to problematize Spenser's fashioning of feminine virtue in *The Faerie Queene*.

Spenser raises the stakes of fashioning feminine virtue by directly invoking Queen Elizabeth I in the proem to Book 3 as both the addressee and the subject of the poem in her "mirroure" character Britomart.<sup>6</sup> The Elizabeth/Britomart construct extends to Elizabeth's embodiment of the English monarchy in the etymology of

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3. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2nd ed.) defines "virtue" in this sense, still in use since the thirteenth century, as "Conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality; voluntary observance of the recognized moral laws or standards of right conduct; abstention on moral grounds from any form of wrong-doing or vice" (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000; accessed through Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts, 29 June 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.temp8.cc.umb.edu/entrance.dtl>>).

4. Spenser, 3.2.39–40.

5. Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003), p. 182.

6. Spenser, 3.Pr.3–5.

Britomart's name: "martial Briton." Was it Elizabeth's insistence – famously against Lord Cecil Burghley's advice – on rewarding Spenser for the first edition of *The Faerie Queene* that sparked the poet's recognition of a problem with his initial representation of Her Majesty? Historical evidence is slight, but it is not outlandish to suggest that Elizabeth's favor may have motivated Spenser to change the way he "fashioned" feminine virtue between the 1590 and 1596 versions of *The Faerie Queene*. Moving forward, I will suggest that Spenser follows a then-traditional Aristotelian, or one-sex, model of creation in Britomart's story in Book 3, in order to demonstrate his shift to an egalitarian, dual-sexed model in the reprisal of her character in Book 5. I will then interrogate Spenser's revision of Britomart's capacity for "conception" and the implications for fashioning her "virtue" in Book 5 through the palimpsest of allusions to dual-sexed models of virtue represented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Plutarch's *The Myth of Isis and Osiris*, and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

In the 1590 version of *The Faerie Queene*, it is difficult to pin down just how Spenser intends to "fashion" the "morall vertues" of his female readership.<sup>7</sup> Pre-modern faith in the transformative power of poetry cannot be overestimated. Ironically, the same Burghley who scoffed so at the lifetime pension awarded to Spenser for the 1590 *Faerie Queene* is commonly believed to have paid Shakespeare to write persuasive sonnets that might convince his ward, Henry Wriothsley, Earl of Southampton, to marry. Capturing the sixteenth-century faith in the puissant nature of poetry, Spenser's friend and contemporary, Sir Philip Sidney, claims "the ever-praiseworthy Poesy is full of virtue-breeding delightfulness."<sup>8</sup> The phrase "virtue-breeding" is significant for us because the root word of "virtue" is the Latin *vir*, or "man."<sup>9</sup> Sidney is – implicitly or explicitly – suggesting that (manly) "virtue" has the potential to breed, or generate, progeny independently. Indeed, Sidney's claim falls directly in line with the then-popular Aristotelian model of creation that limits the power of initiation of both knowledge and progeny to males of the species. According to Aristotle's philosophy, "conception," biologically and intellectually, takes place when man's *idea* fertilizes the female. In his text, *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle explains:

[Men and women] differ in their *logos*, because the male is that which has the power to generate in another, while the female is that which can gener-

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7. Spenser, p. 15.

8. Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002), pp. 15–17.

9. "Virtue" is itself sexually contradictory – although the base word is "man," the gender of the declension is feminine. Cf. Frederic Wheelock, *Wheelock's Latin*, 6th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

ate in itself, *i.e.*, it is that out of which the generated offspring, which is present in the generator, comes into being.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle's theory was popular in the 16th century, perhaps in part because the Christian trope of Adam's rib lends credibility to his male-dominated model. Thomas Laqueur translates the one-sex mindset for modern readers in *Making Sex*: "Anatomy in the context of sexual difference was a representational strategy that illuminated a more stable extracorporeal reality. There existed many genders, but only one adaptable sex."<sup>11</sup> "Adaptation," of course, is determined by the males of the species.

According to the foregoing model, the role of women is limited to that of a kind of walking womb; they can transport "conception," but cannot "conceive" themselves. Elizabeth Spiller has observed that strict adherence to this one-sex model would make it impossible for Spenser to "fashion" a female reader at all: "If reading is an act of making and a way of producing knowledge, then in some important sense this means that only men can truly be readers of *The Faerie Queene*."<sup>12</sup> Given the prominent Britomart/Queen Elizabeth exemplum of Spenser's fashioning of feminine virtue, if Spiller is correct, then Spenser has a problem. As A. Bartlett Giamatti observes, we cannot disregard Spenser's great hope of fashioning his queen:

He would teach his Queen to overcome the debates of religion, the division of party, the dangers of foreign war, the discontinuity of childlessness, and to win for her people and her land the unity she embodied. He also presumes to show her, within the body of his poem, how the poet's power was in its way as splendid as hers.<sup>13</sup>

Britomart is not only Spenser's knight of Chastity but, again, the "mirroure" character in which Spenser hopes Elizabeth "[her] selfe [she] couet to see pictured."<sup>14</sup> But if Elizabeth-as-reader cannot be fashioned, what might this mean for Elizabeth-as-Britomart? Katherine Eggert has described Spenser's "fashioning of his queen into an appropriate object for poetry" as "anxiety ridden" with good cause.<sup>15</sup>

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10. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps, W. H. D. Rouse, L. A. Post, and E. H. Warmington, trans. A. L. Peck (1943) (London: Heinemann, 1953), 1.2.12.

11. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), p. 35.

12. Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580–1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 84.

13. A. Bartlett Giamatti, "Elizabeth and Spenser," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: U of Toronto P; London: Routledge, 1990), 238–42, p. 240.

14. Spenser, 3.Pr.4.

15. Katherine Eggert, *Showing Like a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000), p. 15.

At first it seems ironic that Spenser fashions Britomart as dual sexed; she is a sensually beautiful woman who, more often than not, disguises herself in a man's armor. It is tempting to claim that Spenser composed Britomart as a male/female knight to overcome the problems posed by a single-sexed, Aristotelian model of creation. Inconveniently, however, that is not the case. It is more likely that Spenser initially constructed Britomart as half-male knight, half-maiden in order to mirror Elizabeth's "two bodies." In *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst Kantorowicz expands upon the mystical and political duality of the king's person. This "two bodies" concept was originally documented in Edmund Plowden's *Reports*, written during the fourth year of Queen Elizabeth's reign. At the time, the crown lawyers were debating the validity of a lease made by the underage Edward IV, since deceased, regarding lands in the Duchy of Lancaster. Kantorowicz explains that it was this case that prompted the lawyers to invent the idea of the "King's Two Bodies" in order to preserve royal interests in the property. Kantorowicz cites Plowden's explanation as follows:

For the King has in him two Bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic . . . [The latter] is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the people, and the Management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body.<sup>16</sup>

Incorporated as one person, the concept of the "two bodies" of the king, or, in this case, the queen, challenges Elizabethan jurists to preserve both the unity and the separation of these two bodies simultaneously.

Queen Elizabeth further complicates the construct of the "King's two bodies" by virtue of the fact that she is a woman. In her renowned speech to her troops at Tilbury, Elizabeth translates the legal definition of the "King's two bodies" in a manner that articulates her recognition not only of her "two bodies," but also of her two sexes: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too."<sup>17</sup> In the context of then-current events, we recognize how Spenser's fashioning of Britomart as dual sexed powerfully reinforces her relationship with Elizabeth so that Britomart may "mirroure" her more accurately. For Spenser, the direct relationship between the two women is, all

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16. Ernst A. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), p. 7.

17. Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, "Women in Power," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. 1, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 2006), *The "Golden Speech,"* p. 700.

puns intended, a double-edged sword. Just as Elizabeth may reap the praise generated by Britomart's character, any flaws in Britomart – intentional or otherwise – might be interpreted as criticism of the queen.

Britomart's story is first told in Book 3, the Book of Chastity, in the 1590 publication of *The Faerie Queene*. Following her introduction in the first canto of Book 3, Spenser describes the still-anonymous knight of Chastity using masculine pronouns. From the perspective of Redcrosse and Guyon, the narrator relates Britomart's approach, emphasizing a masculine misunderstanding in the very repetition of these pronouns:

They spide a knight, that towards pricked faire,  
 And *him* beside an aged Squire there rode,  
 .....  
*He* them espying, gan *himsel*fe prepare,  
 And on *his* arme address *his* goodly shield. . .<sup>18</sup>

Readers are deceived for a full four stanzas before the narrator reveals the dominant knight in battle with Redcrosse and Guyon as the “damzell” Britomart.<sup>19</sup> While Redcrosse and Guyon are still unaware of Britomart's sex, Spenser affects dramatic irony as the knights reconcile and bond with “manly might.”<sup>20</sup>

In her next adventure, Britomart actively retains her disguise as a male knight at Castle Joyeous. Here, at Malecasta's, the chaste knight is paradoxically placed in an overtly sexual environment. Amidst the description of a lavish mural of the sexually charged story of Venus and Adonis, and a dominant theme of debauchery, Spenser interrupts the scene with an uncharacteristically didactic stanza directed to his female readers:

Faire Ladies, that to love captivèd arre,  
 And chaste desires do nourish in your mind,  
 Let not her fault your sweet affections marre,  
 Ne blot the bounty of all womankind;  
 'Mongst thousands good one wanton Dame to find:  
 Emongst the Roses grow some wicked weeds;  
 For this was not to love, but lust inclind;  
 For love does always bring forth bounteous deeds,  
 And in each gentle hart desire of honour breeds.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Spenser, 3.1.4 (my emphasis).

19. Spenser, 3.1.8.

20. Spenser, 3.1.13.

21. Spenser, 3.1.49.

The literary conventionality of the preceding lines, in the vein of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, masks their thematic significance for Britomart. The irony of this invocation for women to "nourish" chaste desires in their *minds* so that they will *breed* the desire for honor foreshadows what we will come to recognize as Britomart's conceptual "pregnancies" in Books 3 and 5. In its placement in the narrative, this stanza serves as a kind of deferred epigraph, as well as a portentous allusion to Britomart's poetic plight. In light of Spenser's construct of "fashioning," the subtext of the knight of Chastity's fertility, both physical and imaginative, breeds almost as many problems as the monstrous Error from Book 1 has children.

In Book 3, Spenser allegorizes Britomart's character development – or lack thereof – via descriptions of her state of mind. After defeating Guyon with her "enchanted speare," a suggestive pun emblematic of her dual sexuality, Britomart chooses not to "chace" Florimell: "The whiles faire Britomart, whose constant mind / Would not so lightly follow beauties chace, / Ne reekt of Ladies Loue, did stay behind. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Britomart's "constancy" of mind emerges as that which Spenser magnifies by situating her in the following scene at Castle Joyeous. At Malecasta's, the revelers "make loue & merriment," but Britomart "auoided quite."<sup>23</sup> Joanna Thompson argues that "Britomart's contact with lust . . . provides her with more than just a knowledge of right and wrong; it provides her with an opportunity to grow in the face of adversity."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Thompson does not address the problem that although Britomart "auoided" the orgy taking place, there is no suggestion that her saturation in a scene of unadulterated lust has provided her with any knowledge whatsoever. The only thing Spenser makes clear in this scene is that Britomart is tired from her "long watch, and late dayes weary toile."<sup>25</sup> There is no evidence in this scene that Britomart is making any kind of decision based on the information available – moral or otherwise. Britomart simply wants to go to sleep. Recognizing that another common sixteenth-century definition of "virtue" is "abstention on moral grounds from any form of wrong-doing or vice," it appears that Britomart may be seen to demonstrate little of the quality.<sup>26</sup> Britomart's "constancy" is not represented as an adherence to some kind of moral code, but rather as a static state of mind lacking either reflective or generative properties. Thus far, Britomart's chaste "virtue" appears to be embodied in her sexual ignorance.

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22. Spenser, 3.1.9, 3.1.19.

23. Spenser, 3.1.57–58.

24. Joanna Thompson, *The Character of Britomart in Spenser's "The Faerie Queene"* (Le-wiston: Edwin Mellon, 2001), p. 46.

25. Spenser, 3.1.58.

26. *OED Online*, 14 December 2007.

Britomart's virtueless virtue is magnified in contrast with Sir Guyon's preceding quest for Temperance in Book 2. Granted, Guyon's vicious attack on the Bowre of Blisse is far from "temperate," but the fact remains that he is motivated by a moral rationale developed through trial and error in the course of his quest for virtue. In canto 12, readers witness Guyon applying his acquired knowledge:

Much wondred Guyon at the faire aspect  
Of that sweet place, yet suffred no delight  
To sincke into his sence, nor mind affect,  
But passed forth, and lookt still forward right,  
Bridling his will, and maistering his might.<sup>27</sup>

Requiring that he "bridle his will," so that his senses will not affect his mind, Guyon's version of "constancy" stands in stark contrast with Britomart's unconscious portrayal of the quality.

In Book 3, then, Britomart's character does *not* develop as we see Guyon's; her chastity is constant, but untested. Sheila Cavanagh claims that Britomart's unconscious constancy is necessary in order to preserve her "chastity":

The portrayal of Britomart's behavior [at Malecasta's castle, and in her refusal to "chace" fair Florimell] cannot be explained away as representative of a single-minded devotion to her quest, nor can these incidents be dismissed as amusing but irrelevant details in the epic. Britomart's intellectual dullness performs a unique function in the development and preservation of her particular virtue. In order to uphold the version of chastity lauded in *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart cannot acquire insight or understanding. . . Although male knights are similarly blind at times, there is no other figure whose ignorance is similarly central to her/his virtue.<sup>28</sup>

Cavanagh's commentary begs a review of our conceptualization of "chastity" itself. Notably, the dominant quality of "chastity" is absence. Although "purity" is the primary definition of chastity, purity itself is defined as an absence of contamination. Additional connotations reinforce negative space: "Abstinence from all sexual intercourse. . . Exclusion of meretricious ornament. . . Exclusion of excess or extravagance."<sup>29</sup> Cavanagh and other feminist scholars have argued that the nature of chastity is one of predication-by-absence, thereby prohibiting chastity from joining the men's club of virtue. But the fact is that abstinence involves choice. Lacking the

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27. Spenser, 2.12.53.

28. Cavanagh, Sheila T., *Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires: Female Sexuality in "The Faerie Queene"* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), pp. 141–42.

29. *OED Online*, 14 December 2007.



ability to inform such a decision herself, Britomart's innocent "constancy" is that which separates her from the "virtue" her title represents.

In the next canto, Britomart's "constancy" dissolves, but not through any conscious act of her own. The cause of dissolution is the image of Arthegall, whom she had seen in her father's magic mirror. Obsessed with the image, Britomart lies to Redcrosse in the hopes of gleaning information, claiming that Arthegall has done unto her "foule dishonour and reprochfull spight."<sup>30</sup> Upon hearing Redcrosse's defense of Arthegall, Britomart "woxe inly . . . glad," and, strangely, describes her joy as analogous to giving birth:

The royall Mayd woxe inly wondrous glad,  
To heare her Loue so highly magnifiede,  
.....  
The louing mother, that nine monethes did beare,  
In the deare closet of her painefull side,  
Her tender babe, it seeing safe appeare,  
Doth not so much reiouce, as she reioyced theare.<sup>31</sup>

Because this is the story of the knight of Chastity, the foregoing metaphors of pregnancy and delivery are disconcerting. Readers will instinctively perceive the simile in these lines: she felt "as if/like" a rejoicing mother. But Britomart's maternal empathy extends beyond the realm of the affective to that of the physical insofar as she "woxe inly." The conspicuous imagery of gestation in the preceding lines suggests that Britomart is, in a sense, pregnant.

Textual evidence reinforces an Aristotelian model of male initiation by suggesting that conception took place when Britomart first saw Arthegall's reflection:

Yet him in euery part before she knew,  
However list her now her knowledge faine,  
.....  
To her reuealéd in a mirrhour plaine,  
Whereof did grow her first engrafted paine. . .<sup>32</sup>

The phrase "him in euery part before she knew" could literally mean that, as we know, Britomart saw Arthegall's image before seeing him in person. "Him in euery part" is, however, also suggestive of physical interaction, and intimates that Arthegall somehow escaped the bounds of the mirror to enter Britomart. Because the

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30. Spenser, 3.2.8.

31. Spenser, 3.2.11.

32. Spenser, 3.2.17.

result of her vision is “engrafféd paine,” i.e., something that has been grafted, or inserted, these lines imply a form of intercourse by which Britomart has conceived. The repetition of terms related to the forms of knowledge – “knew,” “list,” “knowledge” – determines that Arthegall informed Britomart’s conception and thus destroyed the “constancy” of her mind. In the foregoing stanza, Spenser portrays Britomart’s conception as dependent on Arthegall’s cognitive insemination. The power of initiation lies in Arthegall, the male, and thus reinforces Spenser’s adherence to an Aristotelian version of conception at this point in the narrative.

Reading *The Faerie Queene* through the lens of Britomart’s story in Book 3, we can follow Aristotelian logic until we begin to witness the deterioration of her mental faculties. Ironically, Britomart’s response to her “engrafféd paine,” or as Spiller has called it, her “perverse pregnancy,” is not the joy Britomart initially expressed to Redcrosse, but rather “melancholy.”<sup>33</sup> Britomart “felt herself opprest,” and experienced “ghastly feares,” while her nurse, Glauce, “importund [her] not to feare / To let the secret of her hart to her appeare.”<sup>34</sup>

Glauce’s request for Britomart to confess the “secret of her hart” will be echoed by the priest at the Church of Isis in Book 5, with critically different implications. At this point in Book 3, Britomart’s gory confession phraseologically recalls Spenser’s earlier descriptions of Errour, the monstrous mother-serpent of Book 1. Upon being mortally wounded by Redcrosse, Errour spews forth her unborn “cursed spawn . . . of deformed monsters [that] sucked vp their dying mothers blood” until their “bellies swolne with fulness burst, / And bowels gushing forth” they too die.<sup>35</sup> Britomart echoes the parasitic imagery in a similar manner: “It is O Nurse, which on my life doth feed / And suckes the bloud, which from my heart doth bleed.”<sup>36</sup> Britomart continues to recall Errour as she describes her own “bleeding bowels . . . entrails flow[ing] with poysnous gore . . . running sore.”<sup>37</sup> Britomart’s rhetorical reminders of Errour emphasize the accrual of “monstrous” imagery that culminates in Glauce’s anxious inquiry: “Why make ye such a Monster of your mind?”<sup>38</sup>

Pre-modern implications for the metaphorically pregnant Britomart making a “monster” of her mind are manifold. In the sixteenth century, it was popularly believed that women’s thoughts had great impact on the physical fashioning of their children. Marie H el ene Huet refers to the lost text of Empedocles that first de-

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33. Spenser, 3.2.29; Elizabeth Spiller, “Poetic Parthenogenesis,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 40 (2000) 63–79, p. 69.

34. Spenser, 3.2.31, 34.

35. Spenser, 1.1.22, 1.1.25–26.

36. Spenser, 3.2.37.

37. Spenser, 3.2.39.

38. Spenser, 3.2.40.

scribed how women, although lacking the power to initiate conception, once impregnated, have the power to deform their progeny:

Following Empedocles' theory, it was long believed that monsters were the result of a mother's fevered and passionate consideration of images; monsters were the result of an imagination that imprinted on such progeny a deformed, misshapen resemblance to an image – that is, to an object that did not participate in their creation.<sup>39</sup>

The idea that women have the power to mark their offspring is also reinforced in Ambroise Paré's influential sixteenth-century medical text, *Of Monsters and Prodigies*. In this work, Paré, while still essentially espousing an Aristotelian model of initiation, describes the enormous influence the feminine imagination has on progeny.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Glauce's desperate attempts to "vndoe her daughters loue" by giving Britomart "abortifacients" to induce a miscarriage does not seem extreme.<sup>41</sup> Glauce fears Britomart will give birth, quite literally, to a "monster."

Of course, Britomart does not give "birth" in Book 3, but Spenser has conceived an image of monstrous natality in his readers that, by virtue of association, extends to Queen Elizabeth. Like Britomart, Elizabeth retains her virginity, but she also carries with her connotations of motherhood. In her article "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," Mary Fissell cites prevailing contemporary conceptualizations of Elizabeth by way of Thomas Bentley, who "refers to the Queen as 'the most naturall mother and noble nurse' of the Church of England, but then in the next clause highlights her status as a virgin."<sup>42</sup> Leaving the spectral Virgin Mary out of the equation, the concept of a "virgin mother" itself implies monstrosity. The pre-modern male anxiety surrounding the prenatal power of a woman's imagination to deform her progeny is, via Elizabeth, exponentially extended to the nation of England itself. In "two bodies" of the Queen, the potential for monstrous natality dilates into the potential for monstrous nationality. Positing this concept of monstrous natality/nationality might seem extreme to modern readers, but it was not far from her – male – subjects' thoughts when Elizabeth was crowned in 1558:

The Marian exile Christopher Goodman asserted in 1558 – the year of Elizabeth I's accession to the throne – that Deuteronomy 17:15, which in-

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39. Marie-Hélène Huet, "Monstrous Imagination: Progeny as Art in French Classicism," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991) 718–737, p. 720.

40. Cf. also Spiller and Lacqueur's analyses of Paré's theories.

41. Spenser, 3.2.51; Spiller, "Poetic Parthenogenesis," p. 74.

42. Mary E. Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," *Representations* 87 (2004) 43–81, p. 70.

structs the Israelites to choose a ruler only from among their “brethren,” allows a country to pass over female candidates for the throne in order to find a man more suitable to the job, and hence “to avoyede that monster in nature, and disorder amongst men, whiche is the Empire and government of a woman.”<sup>43</sup>

Elizabeth’s matriarchal monarchy was certainly seen by some as a “monster in nature,” an idea that Spenser, intentionally or not, summons in his descriptions of the “monster” of Britomart’s mind. The threat is assuaged, however, when Spenser invokes Merlin, the most powerful *man* in Faery Land, to “cure” poor Britomart of her feminine freakishness.

When the knight and her nurse reach Merlin, Glauce explains Britomart’s symptoms and begs Merlin to cure her charge. In this well-known scene Merlin famously prophesizes Britomart’s future marriage and progeny. Via his prophecy, Merlin revises Britomart’s “monstrous conception” as the future of the English monarchy, ironically culminating in the birth of Elizabeth I. Because the wizard is responsible for “curing” Britomart, Spiller has observed that Merlin displaces female reproduction with male. But we must remember that Britomart’s conception was initiated by Arthegall. I believe Spiller comes closer to the mark in her following comment:

If Britomart does not know what to do with her idea, Merlin is able to take that monstrous idea, diagnose it, and transform it into his own narrative. As an act of creation, Merlin’s prophecy displaces not just Britomart’s emotional pregnancy but also her later giving birth.<sup>44</sup>

By virtue of his prophecy, Merlin syncretically defers Britomart’s “pregnancy” until a future marriage, while preserving the construct of her chastity. Contextualized with the models of conceptual initiation discussed thus far, Merlin’s masculine intervention in the 1590 publication of *The Faerie Queene* appears to confirm Spenser’s adherence to the Aristotelian tradition in his conception of Britomart thus far. The problem is that Merlin’s prophecy was never realized in either the 1590 or the 1596 version of the poem. Instead, Spenser chose to write another prophecy for Britomart. The question remains: why?

It is only by exploring the palimpsest of allusions to Ovid, Plutarch, and Apuleius in Book 5 of the 1596 *Faerie Queene* that we can answer the foregoing question convincingly. The proem to Book 5 contains the first prominent suggestion of a shift in Spenser’s representation of feminine knowledge from 1590 to 1596. In the first

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43. Eggert, p. 58.

44. Spiller, *Science, Reading and Renaissance Literature*, pp. 82–83.

stanza, the tone has changed from one of optimism to one of lament: “the world is runne quite out of square . . . And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse.”<sup>45</sup> The allusion that follows, to Ovid’s story of Pyrrha and Deucalion in *The Metamorphoses*, suggests that Spenser might share Jove’s frustration with his original creation. Instead of Jove’s flood, however, Spenser will refashion both characters and readers via poetry.

Spenser’s frequent echoes of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* throughout *The Faerie Queene* reverberate with varying effects throughout the poem, but resound almost metonymically in the course of Britomart’s transformation in canto 7. Cora Fox’s analysis of Spenser’s mode of Ovidian imitation surrounding the character of Adicia in canto 8 is useful to foreground Britomart’s transformation in canto 7:

Imitating Ovid’s metamorphic aesthetic, Spenser signals not just his reliance on Ovid’s literary style or materials, but also his engagement with the ironic and shifting ideologies that characterize *The Metamorphoses* . . . reveal[ing] a deep and conflicted cultural engagement not just with Ovidian stories but with Ovidian gender politics and constructions of female subjectivity.<sup>46</sup>

Spenser’s thematic allusion to Ovid’s story in this proem predicates Book 5 as a whole. In Arthur Golding’s Elizabethan ‘Englishing’ of the *Metamorphoses*, Deucalion, one of two survivors of Jove’s flood, twice explicitly laments his inability to “facion” men.<sup>47</sup> He and Pyrrha wonder how they might repopulate their world, and they pray for grace at the chapel of Themis. Recognizing that Themis is the goddess of the laws of nature juxtaposes creative power with equity in an emblematic parallel to Spenser’s Book of Justice. In Ovid’s story, Themis answers the survivors’ prayers, and allegorically instructs the two to dig up their “grandaumes bones” and cast them over their shoulders.<sup>48</sup> Pyrrha initially interprets this instruction literally, and requires Deucalion’s help to translate “bones” as “stones” from the earth. Pyrrha then conceives her role, and

The mankinde was restored by stones, the which a man did cast.  
And likewise also by the stones which a woman threw,  
The womankinde repayred was and made againe of new.<sup>49</sup>

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45. Spenser, 5.Pr.7.

46. Cora Fox, “Spenser’s Grieving Adicia and the Gender Politics of Renaissance Ovidianism,” *ELH* 69 (2005) 385–412, p. 385.

47. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding, ed. John Frederick Nims (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry, 2000), 1.427, 430.

48. Ovid, 1.453.

49. Ovid, 1.490–92.

Spenser's direct invocation of an Ovidian bi-sexual model of creation in the poem proleptically transforms the former Aristotelian version into an egalitarian archetype. In context with Ovid, and with the Plutarchan and Apuleian versions of Isiac myth, Britomart's accumulation of creative power at the Church of Isis in canto 7 illustrates Spenser's "metamorphoses" in his representation of the sexual origins of generation.

Spenser's double invocation of Isiac myth to represent the embodiment of, and location of, Britomart's transformation reinforces the intentionality of his allusion to Plutarch's version of the myth. Indeed, I believe that Spenser is appropriating the myth of Isis much in the same manner that Plutarch appropriated it from the Egyptians. Daniel Richter analyzes Plutarch's initial motivation in his article "Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation":

In the *de Iside*, Plutarch's tendency is to interpret Egyptian material in light of the Greek poetic and philosophical tradition. Mythic material unsuitable for such interpretation, described in the *de Iside* as "barbarous" and in the *de Audendis poetis* as "fabrication" is to be cast out . . . As the hermeneutic with which the material will ultimately be interpreted is Greek, this seems to make eminent sense.<sup>50</sup>

By revising Isiac myth in context with Britomart's patriotic heritage, Spenser follows Plutarch in establishing a new – and English – hermeneutic with which his readers will interpret his poem. Spenser's revision of an interpretive methodology, in context with the only female titular knight in this epic, likewise implies a shift in the way English women will both read and be read in this canto.

Spenser's prominent employment of Plutarch's myth in canto 7 again juxtaposes Britomart's narrative with implications of physical and intellectual creation. Isis is, according to Plutarch, "particularly wise and wisdom-loving, seeing her very name doth seem to indicate that knowing and that gnosis is more suitable to her than any other title."<sup>51</sup> Upon her arrival at the Isis Church, Britomart is taken to the "idol" that portrays the goddess: "The which was framed all of siluer fine, / So well as could with cunning hand be wrought. . . / One foote was set vppon the Crocodile, / And on the ground the other fast did stand."<sup>52</sup> Spenser's reiteration of "cunning" to describe Isis, both here and in the third stanza, carries with it a double meaning of both knowledge and creation. The poet's use of "cunning" is, on one level, referent

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50. Daniel Richter, "Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 131 (2001) 191–216, p. 202.

51. Plutarch, *Concerning the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris*, ed. and trans. G. R. S. Mead (Whitefish, NT: Kessinger, 2005), 2.1.

52. Spenser, 5.7.6–7.

to pure knowledge; however, the implied pun is significant. “Cunning” is a synonym for the 13th-century usage of “quaint,” signifying “cunning, proud, ingenious.” “Quaint” and “queyent” are popular Chaucerian puns for both the medieval and modern obscene synonyms for the birth canal.

Spenser’s exploitation of this pun is directly reinforced by the concurrent allusion to Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, and the repetition of “cunning” and “queint” in reference to Britomart juxtaposes implications for both her chastity and her knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Arguably, the purpose of this double entendre is twofold: First, Spenser’s fashioning of the reader is most often effected by representing the opposing poles of our moral compass; thus the lewd magnifies the chaste. Second, representing the construct of chastity is no longer Britomart’s primary allegorical purpose; instead, a shift has been made to explore the evolution of her “cunning.” In Book 3, Britomart’s primary function was to embody the virtue of chastity, a subtext of which was the problematic fertility of the female intellect. Now, however, we see a reversal of priorities: the fertility of the feminine mind is a dominant theme in the allegory, and chastity emerges as a secondary plot.

Spenser’s symbolic allusion to the Isaic crocodile in Book 5, canto 7, will come to represent a conceptual crisis emblematically in Britomart’s dream. “Rold” around Isis’ feet, the crocodile is commonly glossed as a representation of the harmony of the universe: “with her wreathed taile her middle did enfold.”<sup>54</sup> Plutarchian crocodiles, however, are kin to Leviathan, the monstrous enemy to all of creation, *excepting* Isis and her disciples:

And Isis [they say] on learning this, searched for them in a papyrus skiff  
(baris) sailing away through the marshes; whence those who sail in papyrus  
hulls are not injured by the crocodiles, either because they fear or rather  
revere the Goddess.<sup>55</sup>

Significantly, Isis, in her emblematic representation of creation and knowledge, sails in a “papyrus,” or paper, skiff in Plutarch’s allegory. The image engendered is of “knowledge” on “paper,” and by virtue of the allusive context, Spenser suggests that the palimpsestic qualities of his poetic methodology extend to the two versions

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53. Cf. Geoffrey Chaucer: “But atte last the statue of Venus shook, / And made a signe, wherby that he took / That his preyere accepted was that day” (*The Knight’s Tale*, ed. A. C. Spearing [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995], p. 161, ll. 1407–1410), and Spenser: “To which the Idoll as it were inclining, / Her wand did moue with amiable looke, / By outward shew her inward sence desining. / Who well perceiuing, how her wand she shooke, / It as a token of good fortune tooke” (5.7.8).

54. Spenser, 5.7.6.

55. Plutarch, 18.2.

of *The Faerie Queene* itself. Here, in the narrative of Book 5, attention is called once more to the fact that Merlin's prophecy was never realized – Spenser is rewriting it as Britomart's dream.

Britomart's dream is one of transformation: physical, sexual, and cognitive. Upon falling asleep at Isis's church, Britomart dreams that she has been transformed into Isis herself. Admiring her transformation, Britomart is suddenly imperiled by a hideous tempest of "holy fire" threatening "the Temple."<sup>56</sup> "Temple" is a potent pun. On the surface, the temple appears to be that of Isis, where Britomart sleeps. But "temple" also invokes connotations of the human body, defined by the *OED* as "any place regarded as occupied by the divine presence; *spec.* the body of a Christian."<sup>57</sup> This Pauline context from which the association of temple and body can be made extends to connote intelligence – specifically in its function of maintaining chastity:

Flee fornication. Euerie sinne that a man doeth, is without the bodie: but he that comitteth fornication, sinneth against his owne bodie. Know ye not that your bodie is the temple of the holie Gost, *which is* you, whom ye have of God? and ye are not your own.<sup>58</sup>

The common metaphorical association of anatomical "temples" with the human intellect has perhaps evolved from the Christian conception of a unified body and spirit that controls human will.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the contextual collision of implications associated with the "holy fire" threatening Britomart's "temple" suggests that her tempest is *internal*: her mind and body have *generated* these "outrageous flames."<sup>60</sup> The effect is an incendiary image of Britomart's cognitive and sexual awakening.

While Britomart is blazing, the crocodile at her feet awakens and devours the foreboding flames. After a moment, he threatens to devour Britomart also, but she beats him back, he submits, and their exchange follows:

Him selfe before her feete he lowly threw,  
And gan for grace and loue of her to seeke:  
Which she accepting, he so neare her drew,  
That of his game she soone enwombed grew,

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56. Spenser, 5.7.14.

57. *OED Online*, 27 July 2009.

58. *The Geneva Bible: The Protestant Bible of the Reformation 1560*, intro. Lloyd E. Berry (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 1Cor. 6.18–19.

59. Cf. secondary definition of "temple": "The flattened region on each side of the human forehead" (*OED Online*, 27 July 2009).

60. Spenser, 5.7.14.



And forth did bring a Lion of great might;  
 That shortly did all other beasts subdew:  
 With that she waked, full of fearefull fright,  
 And doubtfully dismayd through that so vncouth sight.<sup>61</sup>

In the course of her passionate dream, Britomart “accept[s]” the crocodile’s love, and bears a “lion” of his “game.” Spenser’s punning on Britomart’s awakening “dismayd” conveys her distress, but more importantly, the pun suggests that she has lost her virginity. Indeed, she has begotten and borne a lion-child. In this stanza, Spenser calls attention to both the knight of Chastity’s loss of innocence and her developing awareness of her own fertility.

On a literal level, Britomart’s impregnation by a crocodile is bestial and clearly disturbing. As we have seen, however, the crocodile is the enemy to all of creation with the exception of the mother of creation, Isis, and those who sail in “papyrus hulls” (poets?). And, in Plutarch’s version, as signature beasts of the Nile, the crocodiles are witnesses to Isis’s aqueous asexual reproduction:

And as they hold the Nile to be “Osiris’s efflux,” so, too, they think earth Isis’s body – not all (of it), but what the Nile covers, sowing (her) with seed and mingling with her; and from this intercourse, they give birth to Horus.<sup>62</sup>

Isis procreates via the dispersal of “Osiris’s efflux” in the Nile; and creative power appears shared between the male and female sexes. Despite, or perhaps *because* of her ability to reproduce independently, Isis’s chastity remains intact, but it is a *fertile* form of chastity that is engendered by her male-female nature:

For which cause they call the Moon Mother [Isis] of the cosmos, and think that she has a male-female nature – for she is filled by the Sun and made pregnant, and again of herself sends forth and disseminates into the air generative principles.<sup>63</sup>

In the foregoing passage Plutarch directly expresses his opposition to a one-sex, Aristotelian model of creation. Isis, “of herself,” has the capability of sending “forth and disseminat[ing] into the air generative principles.” Britomart’s dream-state engagement with the crocodile suggests that she has reproduced in a similarly chaste manner, and shares the same generative principles of wisdom and creation as Isis.

Just as Spenser invokes Plutarch’s version of Isiac myth on multiple levels of his allegory, so too does he invoke multiple allusions to Apuleius’s novel *The Golden*

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61. Spenser, 5.7.16.

62. Plutarch, 36.1.

63. Plutarch, 42.7.

*Ass: or Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, translated by William Adlington and published in 1566. The theme of Isiac conversion in the novel itself echoes Plutarch and compounds the Isiac connotations attached to Britomart's story in Book 5. In the main plot of *The Golden Ass*, Lucius's story of transformation from a man into an ass culminates in his conversion to the Isiac religion and subsequent restoration to human form. Lucius's story is, however, interrupted midway through by an old woman telling the story of Cupid and Psyche in the manner of a play-within-a-play. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser draws from both the central narrative and the subplots of Apuleius's novel to emphasize Britomart's "metamorphoses" in her dream in Book 5, canto 7.

Britomart's monstrous dream of the crocodile alludes to the story of Cupid and Psyche and notably invokes a process of *testing* feminine virtue – specifically Psyche's love for her husband. In *Shakespeare's Favorite Novel*, John Tobin observes that Spenser "based the dream of Britomart and the impregnating serpent (amphibian) lover upon the experience of Psyche whose initially invisible husband she thought to be a monstrous serpent."<sup>64</sup> In Adlington's translation of the myth, Venus entrusts Cupid with punishing Psyche, a mortal, for her "disobedient beauty," but instead he falls in love with Psyche and carries her off to his palace to make her his wife.<sup>65</sup> According to divine law, mortals may not lay eyes on the gods, and therefore Psyche is never permitted to *see* her husband. Although he comes to her bed at night, he remains invisible. Cupid explains to Psyche that no matter how tempted she may be she must never attempt to uncover his identity. As the story continues, Psyche necessarily dissembles about her husband's identity, and her unscrupulous sisters plant the idea that her husband is not human, but a serpent. Frightened, Psyche contrives to discover the identity of her "serpent" by lamplight and discovers the god of love instead. Psyche's discovery shatters her domestic bliss; Cupid flees, and Venus is again enraged. Although both she and Britomart are described as "dismayed" by their nighttime visions, after Psyche miraculously survives the three tasks Venus sets as her punishment, the latter will enjoy a happy ending, resulting in marriage and progeny. Perhaps Spenser employed this echo with the intention of Britomart doing the same, but as the poem remains unfinished, we will never know. The allusion does, however, invoke a model of testing feminine virtue in the tasks set by Venus, a model that Spenser had previously limited to the male titular knights of virtue.

Britomart's dream of transformation also invokes elements of the main plot in *The Golden Ass*, recognizable in the echo of Lucius's conversion to the Isiac religion

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64. J. J. M. Tobin, *Shakespeare's Favorite Novel* (Lanham: UP of America, 1984), p. xiv.

65. Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*, trans. William Adlington (1566) (London: Heinemann, [1915] 1971), p. 191.

at the conclusion of the novel. Instead of beginning his story with a character like Britomart, who is representative of virtue, Apuleius introduces Lucius as a personification of sinful behavior. Lucius's insatiable appetite for indiscriminate sex is matched only by his insistent curiosity about black magic. At the beginning of the novel, Lucius seduces Fotis, a witch's servant, in the hopes of learning something of her mistress's craft. Lucius is successful, and Fotis steals from her mistress magic ointment with transformative powers. Experimenting with the hope of becoming a bird, Lucius instead finds himself physically transformed into an ass. Retaining his human intelligence, Lucius has numerous asinine adventures, including a sexual affair with a married woman from Corinth. Just as Britomart's crisis is affected in the altered repetition of prophecies regarding her future, Lucius's crisis emerges in the altered repetition of sexual encounters. Despite his enjoyment of bestial sex with the Corinthian matron, the prospect of public fornication with a murderess becomes too much for him. Lucius escapes, repents, and prays for salvation.

Lucius' prayers are answered by Isis. In exchange for the goddess's aid in his restoration to human form, Lucius vows obedience to her commandment "and addict to [her] religion, meriting by [his] constant chastity [her] divine grace."<sup>66</sup> When Lucius converts to the Isiac religion and priesthood, his conversion is from a life of asinine judgment to one of rational virtue – specifically the virtue of chastity. Spenser's thematic allusion to Lucius's conversion to chastity reinforces the transformation of Britomart's character and narrative. Spenser no longer represents chastity as defined by the absence of sex, but as a virtue achieved by moral choice, and one that is now embodied by men and women alike.

In context with the allusion to Lucius's conversion to the Isiac priesthood, the presence of the Isiac priest at Britomart's awakening magnifies Spenser's revision of chastity from Book 3 to Book 5. In Book 3, chastity is portrayed as a quality of the feminine, but not a quality of virtue as we know it in its active form of being a moral choice. In Book 5, Spenser emphasizes the virtuous qualities of chastity both by permitting the titular knight of virtue to conceive the knowledge necessary to make a moral choice, and by his masculine characterization of the chaste priest. Upon observing Britomart's distress, the Isiac priest echoes Glauce's plea in Book 3: "Say on (quoth he) the secret of your hart."<sup>67</sup> In light of this exploration of conceptual initiation, it is important to recognize that in Book 3 Britomart could not explain her problem directly, but only describe her symptoms – and only to Glauce. And it was Glauce, not Britomart, who begged Merlin to cure her "deare daughters deepe engrafted ill." Finally, Merlin assumed agency over Britomart's future in his initia-

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66. Apuleius, p. 551.

67. Spenser, 5.17.19.

tion of her prophecy.<sup>68</sup> In Book 5, however, the prognosis itself has not changed significantly, but Britomart's agency in it has. Speaking for herself, she shares her dream with the priest, and he replies as follows:

Magnificke Virgin, in that queint disguise  
.....  
How couldst thou weene, through that disguised hood,  
To hide thy state from being vnderstood?  
Can from th'immortall Gods ought hidden bee?  
They doe [see] thy lineage, and thy Lordly brood. . .<sup>69</sup>

In these lines the priest juxtaposes Britomart's physical representation with her intellect. His invocation of her as a "virgin" in "queint disguise" is symbolically dense. On a literal level, she is a virgin in disguise, but in context it appears that what she hides under her "disguised hood" is the knowledge that she is in some manner pregnant. The accusatory tone in which the priest asks how Britomart could "weene," or think to hide her "state," implies Britomart's awareness of her "conception." Despite the fact that the priest generally echoes Merlin in his interpretation of her dream – the Crocodile is Osiris to her Isis, and they will marry and bear a "lion-like" child who will bravely preserve their legacy – Britomart is this time the progenitor of both her pregnancy and her prophecy.<sup>70</sup> Although the unfinished state of the poem leaves Britomart's physical pregnancy unresolved once again, intellectual "conception" is realized in the independent gestation of her prophecy. Britomart's newfound ability to conceive is her first step toward realizing her titular virtue.

Britomart's transformation is underscored by her subsequent actions in the remainder of Book 5, canto 7. After coming to terms with the implications of her revealing dream, Britomart's task remains to fight the Amazon queen, Radigund, in order to free her still-prophesied future husband, Arthegall. After a few touch-and-go moments in this bloody battle, Britomart prevails and Radigund is beaten into the ground – literally. And now, for the first time in the poem, we witness Britomart thinking critically about what to do next:

the wrothfull Britonesse  
Stayd not, till she came to her selfe againe,  
But in revenge both of her loues distresse,  
And her late vile reproach, through vaunted vaine,

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68. Spenser, 3.3.18.

69. Spenser, 5.7.21.

70. Spenser, 5.7.22–23.

And also of her wound, which sore did paine,  
 She with one stroke both head and helmet cleft. . .<sup>71</sup>

Not only does Britomart “come to herself,” a phrase suggesting cognitive self-possession, but she also appears to be taking the measure of Radigund’s offenses. Significantly, before Britomart decapitates her rival she comes up with three reasons to do so. The fact that Britomart is now, unlike in Book 3, rationalizing what constitutes morally correct behavior is emphasized two stanzas later, when she encounters Talus indiscriminately murdering the remaining Amazons: “That she his fury willed him to slake / For else he sure had left not one aliue, / But all in his reuenge of spirite would deprue.”<sup>72</sup> When Britomart kills Radigund, she analyzes her motives and generates a rationale to justify revenge. In her tempering of Talus’s thoughtless revenge, it is clear that Britomart is now capable of both recognizing virtue and determining fair punishment. Thus, in canto 7 of the Book of Justice, it appears that the story of Justice is more Britomart’s than Arthegall’s. Not only has Spenser revised his model of cognitive creation so that it may extend to women, but this model emerges as truly egalitarian.

It is tempting to summarize our argument here, but it is at precisely this point in the allegory that Spenser evokes a traditionally dramatic form of Aristotelian recognition in Britomart’s freeing of the imprisoned Arthegall. While Britomart was transforming herself from a woman impersonating a male knight of virtue into a cognizant knight of virtue at the church of Isis, Radigund was stripping Arthegall of his masculinity by garbing him in women’s clothing. Most editors gloss this scene as based on the myth of Hercules and Omphale:

The Roman poets . . . elaborate the story, making Hercules dress as a woman and carry the distaff to spin wool. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance the story was used as an exemplum of the reason overcome by the passions, i.e., man dominated by woman.<sup>73</sup>

By defeating Radigund, Britomart overcomes passion and imbues herself with an all-conquering “rationale.” Indeed, it seems that Spenser could not think of a more rational action for Britomart to take than to recover the social order by restoring the sexual hierarchy. Feminists might despair, thinking Spenser misses an opportunity via this Amazonian vignette to invert a sexist hierarchy, but it is important to recognize that Amazon rule is grounded in the unreliable and deforming “passions.” Therefore, to have restored the Amazonian model would have been a step

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71. Spenser, 5.7.34.

72. Spenser, 5.7.36.

73. Roche, “Notes” in Spenser, p. 1196.

backward for women, not forward. Spenser's significant shift, not only in his representation of the power of the feminine intellect between the 1590 and 1596 versions of this poem, but combined with the raising of his expectations for feminine virtue in Book 5, emerges as truly revolutionary.

Despite Spenser's elegant framing of Britomart's story, the fact remains that in Book 3 she is a poor role model for women. Britomart's "virtue" is consistently effected only by her ignorance, and thus, by foregoing definitions of the quality, lacking. Although the Aristotelian model of creation remains viable in sixteenth-century circles, it is apparent that Spenser recognized that strict adherence to this model thwarted his poetic desire to "fashion" feminine virtue. Had Spenser been concerned only with fashioning masculine virtue, he might have abbreviated his purpose in the prefacing Raleigh letter to "fashion a gentleman," instead of appending the qualification "or noble person of vertuous and gentle discipline."<sup>74</sup> In the course of exploring Britomart's transformation, there are several ways we can attempt to trace Spenser's re-conception of Britomart between Books 3 and 5.

It is quite possible Spenser may have been influenced by the growing popularity of neo-Platonic philosophy at the end of the sixteenth century. Marcilio Ficino's late fifteenth-century Latin translations of Plato and Plotinus had certainly made their way to England, but as Isabel Rivers observes, "It is not known how far Spenser was familiar with Platonic literature. . . [He] may have used Ficino's translation of Plotinus when he wrote *Four Hymns*."<sup>75</sup> Still, Britomart's dream-state transformation into Isis is one that loosely conforms to Ficino's model, bringing her closer to God and to the divine intellect that will permit her to make moral choices. Rivers explains:

In Ficino's system, which is similar to that of Plotinus, each order in the universal hierarchy (God, angels, mind, soul, body) naturally aspires to that above. Man constantly strives to reach God. However, because of the intermediate position of the soul, man can look upwards or downwards; he is free to reach toward the truth or ignore it. This emphasis on human choice and aspiration differs significantly from the emphasis on divine grace and election in Protestant thought.<sup>76</sup>

The "warlike Maide" resting her "earthly parts" under Isis's statue suggests that before her dream, Britomart resides in her most human, bodily state.<sup>77</sup> Her "wondrous vision" of herself as Isis, then, represents a transformation which ideally sug-

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74. Spenser, p. 15.

75. Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

76. Rivers, p. 36.

77. Spenser, 5.7.12.

gests that she has “skipped” through the neo-Platonic hierarchy of being to acquire the qualities of divine love, intelligence, and reason to overcome the problems posed by the single-sex Aristotelian model of conception.<sup>78</sup>

Another way to look at Spenser’s revision is to infer that he changed his mind about the philosophy of creation, and thus changed the construct of Britomart’s mind as well. Or, perhaps, he recognized that according to the Aristotelian model he favored in regard to Britomart’s character in Book 3, it would not be possible to “fashion” his female readership, specifically Queen Elizabeth. By revising the construct of feminine conception that had been established in Book 3, Spenser is able, six years later in Book 5, to have at least the potential to achieve his goal of fashioning his female readers, his queen, and by extension, his country. For how could England be virtuous if her leader could not? It is feasible to propose that at some point following publication Spenser recognized the paradox created by his stated intentions in the first edition of *The Faerie Queene*. And, it is not inconceivable that his audience with the Queen following the publication of the 1590 edition prompted his recognition. Whatever the specific tipping point may have been, the palimpsest of the power of feminine creation in Book 5 makes Spenser’s allegorical intentions absolutely clear. By invoking Themis, Pyrrha, Isis, Psyche and Lucius to re-contextualize Britomart, Spenser abolishes the single-sex Aristotelian model of the 1590 edition and replaces it with an egalitarian model in the 1596 version. In giving his characters – male and female – the power to generate knowledge, Spenser neutralizes the classical gender bias regarding the conception of “virtue” to bring forth a more modern English version of the quality. By “Englishing” his version of “virtue” via Britomart’s character in the second installment of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser follows through on his intention to “fashion” virtue in his readers, his countrymen, and especially his queen.

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78. Spenser, 5.7.13.