

Britomart's Spear and Merlin's Mirror: Magics Meaningful and Meaningless in *Faerie Queene* Book III

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In the narratives of contemporary pop culture, a girl imbued with magical ability is often depicted as strong but conflicted: the magical ability at once symbolizes her special power as a woman, and yet often proves a burden. (Once thinks, for example, of Buffy the Vampire Slayer or the magical girls of Japanese anime). In the West, such characters derive from a tradition of female knights and magic users; yet they are the product of an empirical post-enlightenment culture which understands and regards magic in quite a different way from the medieval and early modern cultures which created stories about similar kinds of characters.¹ This essay

¹ Genevieve Guenther suggests “the relationship between magic and Spenser’s poetry should be understood in light of the historical reality that magic was a living cultural practice in early modern England” (196), underscoring the fact that magic works powerfully with a Renaissance audience as a metaphor for poetry precisely because magic was regarded as a real practice in the culture. Arguably, one reason for the recent popular interest in magical heroines is that writers no longer have

examines the function and symbolism of magic in the Renaissance narrative of Britomart, the female knight in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

We first encounter Britomart in Book III. Though she is not herself magical, this initial episode does link her to magic in interesting ways. We realize how Spenser invests the idea and image of magic with meanings that develop important themes in Britomart's (and indeed Spenser's overarching) story. Critics have noted the connection between Spenser as poet and the various magicians in the poem (Archimago, Merlin, and Busyrane) who arguably can be read as artist-figures.² While acknowledging that Britomart is surely presented as a positive figure designed to honor Elizabeth I, feminist readings often highlight the way in which the power of these magician-poets challenges and even wounds the female characters, ultimately setting Spenser and his poetry in critical opposition against the power and authority of the queen herself.³

to negotiate the same cultural taboos and suspicions about magic which their predecessors did. In a culture where magic describes not an aspect of reality but is purely a historical idea (that is, a past culture's idea about reality which has subsequently been discredited as a true account of reality), magical characters can more easily be accepted as heroes. Magic no longer means a specific phenomenon which is strange, frightening, and possibly dangerous, but stands as a symbol for anything that is strange, frightening, and possibly dangerous. The image of the outcast magic user is a perfect metaphor for the angst and isolation that defines the experience of many modern people (not just teenagers or girls). While the plot of these modern narratives focus on the stigma of magic and of having magical abilities, there is no real world stigma attached to magic as such because (for those who take a rational scientific view of the universe) magic does not exist. Magic is a literary construct, pure symbol. In a sense, the magic is insignificant.

² See Guenther 194-196. Also Cheney, for whom the trope of "good magic" is essential to our "participat[ion] in the process of allegorical reading so crucial to the spiritual and moral transformation Spenser aims to create in our lives" (4).

³ Mary Villeponteaux finds the poem contains an "uneasiness with a narrative situation in which an extremely powerful female knight threatens our sense of patriarchy and suggests, through her unacknowledged representation of Elizabeth, that the queen's rule does the same" (58). Susan Frye contends, "Spenser's text . . . screens the poet's own concerns with his praise. In fact, all of book 3, particularly its final two cantos describing the captivity and rape of Amoret at the

However, I suggest that it is significant that the magic associated with both Britomart and Merlin proves relatively insignificant in the story. Highlighting how the poem underplays the impressiveness both of Britomart's magic spear and of Merlin's wizardry, I examine how the dismissive attitude toward magic defuses its mystique and is the mechanism by which Spenser connects the themes of Elizabeth's virtue and of the poet's status in these cantos. I argue that the way in which this section of the poem repeatedly de-emphasizes the significance and the power of magic cleverly allows Spenser at once to advance an argument for Elizabeth's greatness (as a virtuous queen) and for his own (as a poet of a significant power rivaling that of any wondrous magic recorded in romance).

i. Britomart's spear: the insignificant magic of men

When the renowned Sir Guyon encounters a mysterious knight and is defeated, he is full of "great shame and sorrow of that fall he tooke" (III.i.7.1). The narrator suggests that the knight should not grieve, however,

hands of Busyrane, provides a text through which to examine the ongoing attempt to confine the queen's self-sufficient Chastity within male control" (118). Elizabeth Spiller sees Merlin as a creative father figure who takes over Britomart's narrative and allows Spenser to realize himself, more so than Elizabeth, in the poem: "an act of creation, Merlin's prophecy displaces not just Britomart's emotional regnancy but also her later physical giving birth. Although understood as an important maternal figure, Britomart never gives birth within the narrative of *The Faerie Queene*: as readers, all we have is Merlin's story. . . . Merlin's surrogacy of the text thus points us back to Spenser himself in ways that allow us to reconceptualize our understanding of Spenser's ability to 'create' himself in and through *The Faerie Queene*" (87). However, while the connection between the dark magic of Busyrane and of Spenser may be debatable, I would argue that Merlins' magic and Spenser's poetry are less ambivalent in their celebration of Elizabeth. Rebecca Dark makes the important point that if one takes into consideration the tradition of mirror literature in the Renaissance, then Merlin's "mirror, in fact, transforms Britomart into both an entirely appropriate avatar of and a completely legible message to the poem's most prominent audience member, Elizabeth" (2).

for he was defeated not through any fault of his own, but by a “secret power unseene,” a “speare enchanted” (III.i.7.8-9). What would presumably upset Sir Guyon even more than the loss itself, speculates the narrator, is a second truth of which Guyon is also unaware:

But weenedst thou what wight thee ouerthrew,
 Much greater grieffe and shamefuller regret
 For thy hard fortune then thou wouldst renew,
 That of a single damzell thou wert met
 On equall plaine, and there so hard beset (III.i.8.1-5)

It might seem at first that Britomart is unable to stand on her own, without magical or masculine assistance. But by setting up the revelations about her magic and her sex as he does, the narrator deftly sidesteps the issue of whether Britomart needs the magic because she is weak; interestingly, it is as if the magic does not really matter.

Guyon is unaware of two important bits of information: his opponent was using a magic spear; his opponent was a girl. However, it is only after consoling Guyon with the fact that the spear was enchanted that the narrator mentions Britomart is a girl. That the narrator reveals these two facts to us in that order suggests the following: the fact that the spear is magical may console Guyon, but that fact does not make the idea of being defeated by a girl any more palatable to him. For Sir Guyon, losing to a magic wielding enemy is acceptable; losing to a girl is not, regardless of whether she was using magic. So for him, the magic of Britomart is unimportant.

Similarly, the magic is unimportant for the narrator, though for a different reason, given that he does not necessarily share Guyon’s view of Britomart or of women in general. With respect to the magic spear, he offers his own point of view, which he implies Guyon should share, by directly saying that Guyon should not grieve (“Let not thee grieve”). With

respect to Britomart's sex, by contrast, the narrator imagines only what Guyon himself would feel if he, Guyon, learned the truth ("But weenedst thou ..."). Note the narrator could have said, "Guyon, I have some bad news: you were defeated by a girl. But take heart; she was using a magic spear, so there is no shame in losing to a girl." The narrator does not say that, however, and in fact makes the point that the two met "on equall plaine," an observation which distances the narrator's perspective from Guyon's. When the narrator notes that Guyon and Britomart met "on equall plaine" he implies not so much that he thinks Guyon should be embarrassed by the fact, but rather that Britomart should feel no embarrassment at having required magic to win. Having met on a field with all other things being equal, the magic does not really change anything, taking nothing away from Britomart who acquitted herself as an equal before a fellow knight.

The narrator's generous view of her becomes clearer at the beginning of canto ii, when he observes that there are few poets who recount the story of warrior maids like Britomart, even though there are a number of them in history:

Here have I cause, in men iust blame to find (III.ii.1.1)

..enuious Men fearing their rules decay,
 Gan coyne straight lawes to curb their [women's] liberty;
 Yet sith they warlike armes haue layd away:
 They haue exceld in artes and policy,
 That now we foolish men that prayse gin eke t'enuy. (III.ii.2.5-9)

The excellence of Elizabeth is envied and denied in the same way and for the same reason as the warrior maids in history. By recording Britomart's narrative, the poet champions them both. In the allegory, the warrior maid employs only limited magic because in the reality of (or at least in the

Spenserian propaganda of) Elizabethan England, the Queen establishes her authority on equal ground. Her literary ancestress is not a magical girl, but a woman of virtue, specifically of a principled chastity that generates a power from within her greater than any magic she might receive from without.

Whatever magic Britomart does employ is not a metaphor for some special quality she possesses ("a magic within"), as it might be for, say, a witch character in modern pop culture. Britomart's special quality is her chastity, to the extent that she becomes the metaphor for chastity in the abstract. Her function as an allegorical figure also helps to explain why the spear is magical and yet the magic is insignificant to the extent that it does not define her as a woman who needs special help to become a champion among knights and a hero in her own right. Certainly the spear is essential to her victories:

...for no powre of man
 Could bide the force of that enchanted speare,
 The which this famous Britomart did beare;
 With which she wondrous deeds of arms atchieued,
 And ouerthrew, what euer came her neare,
 That all those stranger knights full sore agrieved... (IV.iv.46.3-8)

However, in the context of the larger allegory, Britomart is Chastity incarnate. The action here is not so much Britomart defeating the knights, but Chastity defeating immoderate desire. In that sense, the spear is emblematic of the power of Chastity. And of course Britomart (the woman)'s chastity is not a magic or a power external to her, but a virtue within her that she cultivates.⁴

⁴ Whether superheroes (Buffy the Vampire Slayer) or magic users (the Halliwell sisters), both types of modern fantasy heroines differ from heroines like Britomart in one particular way. As a non-magical, non-altered human being, Britomart

The history of the spear also potentially explains why its magic properties do not necessarily lessen the significance of Britomart's achievements. The spear was fashioned by Bladud, one of Britomart's royal ancestors (III.iii.60). He and the power of his "sweet science" are briefly mentioned earlier in Book II (II.x.25-26). Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* provides a fuller, though still brief account, in which Bladud is clearly identified as a magician of some kind, "a most ingenious man who encouraged necromancy throughout the kingdom of Britain"; yet he seems more of a scientist and engineer who:

built the town of Kaerbadum, which is now called Bath, and who constructed the hot baths there which are so suited to the needs of mortal men In her [Minerva's] temple he lit fires which never went out and which never fell away into ash, for the moment that they began to die down they were turned into balls of stone He pressed on with his experiments and finally constructed a pair of wings for himself and tried to fly through the upper air. He came down on top of the temple of Apollo in the town of Trinovantum and was dashed into countless fragments. (*History of the Kings of Britain*, Book ii.10)

Britomart has a right to this armor and, symbolically, it reinforces her connection to the past and future of England, as outlined in Merlin's

achieves her quests, and so demonstrates her heroic status, through the exercise of her natural abilities. Occasionally she has help, sometimes magical, along way. For the most part though, she makes use of the same potential – physical, spiritual, intellectual – available to her male counterparts. The modern daughters of Britomart are not so much the super heroines and the magical girls, as the very human and existentially ordinary Eowyn or Lara Croft, who become extraordinary by maximizing the same potential talent they would have if they were men (Aragorn or Indiana Jones). Spenser's point in tracing Elizabeth's lineage back to Britomart and not to some unearthly ancestor is precisely that the human Elizabeth becomes extraordinary in the same way as Britomart, through the exercise of virtue.

narrative about her destiny. But why must the spear be magical and why establish her connection to Britain's past with reference to Bladud and not some other less magical king? The reference to Bladud seems unnecessary and, again, one might suspect the link is a backhand way of suggesting that as a woman Britomart needs extra help from a man and his magic.

As with many elements in Spenser, the situation is made all the more complex and ambiguous because the spear and its magic power are introduced in the beginning of Book III long before the mention of its origin and maker (reserved for the end of III.iii). Reading forwards and back among the references to the spear, the effectiveness and even the true nature of Bladud's magic becomes ambivalent. He was powerful, but like Merlin ultimately defeated. In his case he overextended his power and like Icarus fell from the sky (a point not explicitly made in the *Faerie Queen* but which would be known to anyone familiar with Spenser's source in Monmouth). As for the spear he made, it is essentially all powerful:

For neuer wight so fast in sell could sit,
But him perforce vnto the ground it bore (III.iii.60)

Throughout the history of the spear, anyone could make use of this spear's enchanted power to achieve any goal. That seems the significant point here as, in Britomart's case, the emphasis is not so much on her power as on what she uses the power for. Bladud is a worthy ancestor to Britomart in that he did accomplish some admirable goals (as outlined in Book II, bringing peace to the land, constructing healing baths to help the sick). Still, Monmouth's history paints a less altruistic portrait of him, and he appears more as someone fascinated with the magic itself more so than its applications. It is his unrestrained pursuit which causes his downfall and the magic associated with this particular weapon seems especially anarchic. The wielder needs have no particular nobility or virtue to wield it. Judith

Anderson suggests that the reason Britomart loses the spear, never to recover it, is that Spenser feels the need to protect her from the fate which consumed the overreaching Bladud: "perhaps to shield Britomart from such hubris, her Bladudian spear is rendered ineffectual in her climactic battle with Artegall, and it goes missing/unmentioned in her battle with Radigund" (78). Yet we might also say that the virtue of Britomart – which notably involves a measure of restraint which Bladud seemed not to possess and the lack of which ultimately destroyed him – seems all the more significant in light of her ancestor's dubious history. She does borrow power and to some extent requires the magic, but she exercises the power more nobly than the spear's maker. In defeating her fellow knights, she tempers their excessive desire either for a woman (as in the episode of the six knights of lust [III.i.28]) or for the power of the weapon itself (as in the episode with Guyon, the knight of temperance who is himself tempted by the mighty spear [III.i.10]). Thus once again we are invited to wonder about the significance of the magic and why Britomart might need it, only to be reminded again that there is something more beyond the magic which the magic calls our attention to and which ultimately diminishes the significance of the magic itself.

There are, of course, significant differences between Elizabeth and Britomart, notable among them that while Elizabeth reigns successfully alone, Britomart eventually is conquered by Artegall and takes him as her lord (IV.vi.40-41). The power of Chastity does in the end give way to the power of a love which is worthy, and the warrior maid surrenders to the knight who is a worthy champion of her. Britomart and her narrative find completion only in submission and in union with a man. What that aspect of Spenser's epic ultimately reveals about its understanding of the feminine and of gender relations is a related, but distinct, issue from what the narrative's use of magic suggests about gender. The limited role of magic in Britomart's victories implies that, as in her very first encounter against

Guyon, her virtue and her maintenance of that virtue allow her to meet and even defeat men on an equal plane. The equality which a life of virtue allows her to attain is separate from the issue of her independence, of whether she can or should remain independent of men, of whether her status as a heroine requires her to be dependent in the end. In terms of how the trope of magic functions in the text, her not being dependent on magic implies that magic is a force that pales in magnitude before virtue and, of course, love.

ii. Merlin's mirror: the significant magic of poets

In the Britomart story, magic is a metaphor neither for virtue nor love. So what does it represent, metaphorically speaking? One answer, of course, is that it represents nothing at all; that it is simply a plot element in a fantasy/romance narrative. In some modern fantasy worlds, magic exists as a force which makes people and objects more powerful than they otherwise would be, but it is a trope that has no direct connection to a reality outside the romance narrative. However, Spenserian allegory has a richness that invites extended interpretation. Britomart's encounter with the wizard Merlin and his magic mirror establish magic as a trope for a particular kind of intellectual power, namely the poetic imagination:

[The mirror] virtue had to shew in perfect sight,
 What euer thing was in the world contaynd,
 Betwixt the lowest earth and heuens hight,
 So that it to the looker appertaynd...
 Forthy it round and hollow shaped was,
 Like to the world it selfe, and seem'd a world of glas. (III.ii.19.1-4, 8-9)

Nor man it is, nor other liuing wight:
 For then some hope I might vnto me draw,

But th'only shade and semblant of a knight,
 Whose shape or person yet I neuer saw,
 Hath me subieted to loues cruell law... (III.ii.38.1-5)

The world of glass is, generally speaking, a world of poetry, of images which capture the world and present it to the viewer. More specifically, this glass functions as Spenserian poetry in that it offers the viewer not every aspect of the world, but that which "to the looker appertain[es]". Merlin's mirror displays not just what Britomart wants to know (who her husband will be), but what she needs to know (what her destiny is, who she is and so why her husband will be who he is). Arguably this is Spenser's function in Elizabeth's world, playing Merlin to her Britomart. As moral allegory, the poetry pertains both to Elizabeth and to the general reader, presenting what any moral person needs to know about virtue, a Horatian blending of delight and instruction.

Interestingly, although the images in Merlin's mirror seem to be more realistic than the allegories of Spenser's own work, they function in a similar way. The mirror reflects the images found in the faery realm, and so is realistic to the extent that it faithfully reproduces its own world. But "to shew in perfect sight" here means more than to reproduce a physical image perfectly. The true virtue of the mirror is that it reveals to the looker what they most need to know that he or she might clearly see what is best for them (as in the case of Britomart and her future husband). The image only becomes perfect and the "perfect sight" achieved by the looker when the image is interpreted. For Britomart, Artegall is initially "only shade and semblant of a knight," "nor man it is, nor other liuing wight." One reason she needs Merlin is to help her make sense of the image, to help her to achieve it in her reality. But part of that process involves understanding exactly who Artegall is, why Britomart feels as she does, how this image contains within it the essence of her destiny. As is the case

with the images of Spenser's poetry, the images of Merlin's mirror must be interpreted, their superficial exterior penetrated. Only when the image of Artegall is interpreted can Britomart truly be said to have achieved "perfect sight."

That narrative is Merlin's special province is made even clearer when he tells Britomart about the history of Britain and about her special place in it. Significant as she is, powerful as she is, the ability to see her place in that history belongs to Merlin; it is his function to reveal her power and significance to her. The magic he works derives from his very words. He begins telling the history of Britain and then suddenly says, "Behold the man, and tell me Britomart, / If ay more goodly creature thou didst see" (III.iii.32.1-2). Perhaps Merlin as he speaks also conjures an image for Britomart to look at, but there is no indication of that in the text. When he finishes, the impression Britomart has is that Merlin has experienced a "sudein fit" (III.iii.50.5), "as ouercomen of the spirites powre" (III.iii.50.2), as if he has been seeing visions that only he could see, "that secretly he saw, yet note discoure" (III.iii.50.4). Yet the story is one that she is expected to see, to visualize, to recall as an image in the same way she does the events perceived in the mirror. Once again, the images must be interpreted, and in this case Merlin elucidates for her their greater meaning:

It was not, Britomart, thy wandering eye,
 Glauncing vnwares in charmed looking glas,
 But the straight course of heavenly destiny,
 Led with eternall prouidence, that has
 Guided they glauce, to bring his will to pas (III.iii.24.1-5)

Not luck or even the charmed magic of the glass itself guides Britomart's experience of the image in the mirror. Destiny is the larger force at work. The narrative Merlin tells begins well before Britomart and ends well after her time with the ascension of Elizabeth I; it is a narrative of her personal

destiny, showing her the meaning her life could have if she chooses the path of virtue which is in her power. The greatest of Merlin's arts is his capacity for viewing the world in a way that yields a narrative capable of making clear the greater worldly purpose of which the individual could take part, the greater virtue of which they may be capable. It is not the magic merely of a seer with visions of the future, but of the poet and his moral imagination whose images contain a vision of a "perfect sight", a better self and better world, for the observer to unlock through interpretation.

This particular aspect of Merlin's magic seems all the more significant given that most of the references to magic in the cantos with Merlin tend to be negative or at least dismissive of the power of magic. Impressive as Merlin's architectural magic is, it tends to isolate him from other men (III.iii.7.6-9) and relies distressingly on the enslavement of spirits ("cruel feends" [III.iii.8.9]) who work endlessly and mindlessly on a project that will never be completed (III.iii.9-11). Powerful as Merlin himself is, having "in Magicke more insight, / Then euer him before or after liuing wight" (III.iii.11.8-9), he is no match for the power of immoderate love which destroys him (III.iii.10.6-7, 11.1-2). While Britomart seeks out Merlin to help her deal with the effect of seeing Artegall's image, about all his magic can do is locate Artegall in physical space; and even then the prediction lacks the specificity that Britomart's nurse believes magic will achieve (III.ii.45.7-9), as Merlin merely suggests Britomart adventure in Faeryland until she finds Artegall (III.iii.26.3). The nurse's futile attempts to cure Britomart's love sickness with "idle charmes" fail (III.ii.50-51), and Merlin himself mocks their hope that the answer to their problems is to be found in magic:

Therewith th'Enchaunter softly gan to smyle
And to her said, Beldame, by that ye tell,

More need of leach-craft hath your Damozell,
 Then of my skill: who helpe may haue elsewhere,
 In vaine seeks wonders our of Magicke spell. (III.iii.17.1, 4-7)

The wizard could no lenger beare her bord,
 But bursting forth in laughter, to her sayd;
 Glauce, what needs this colourable word,
 To cloke the cause, that hath it selfe bewrayed? (III.iii.19.1-4)

Why, wonders Merlin, do Britomart and Glauce insist that Britomart's condition "doth course of naturall cause farre exceed . . . [and] seemes some cursed witches deed, / Or euill spright, that in her doth such torment breed" (III.iii.18.6, 8-9)? From Merlin's point of view, love only seems like magic when one uses a "colourable word"; to speak of curses and witches and spirits in this case is to obscure the true nature of Britomart's situation. To a certain extent, "magic" is a "colourable" word throughout the Britomart cantos. It is not quite as powerful or significant as it might first seem to be.⁵

The negative associations which demean and devalue his magic reinforce the point that only the magic of the narrative, only Merlin's role as poet, has genuine power and lasting significance. Given that in the sum of the poem's representative figures, Merlin equals Spenser and Britomart equals Elizabeth, the simultaneous elevation and deflation of the Merlin character reflects, too, Spenser's own image of the Renaissance poet's ambivalent state, of power and submission. Merlin/Spenser is vital to

⁵ The incorporation here of the popular theme of Merlin's laughter may recall us to the use of the same material in the medieval story of the heroine knight Silence. The laughter functions differently, but Silence's encounter with Merlin also reveals the limits of Merlin's magic. Merlin has retreated into isolation and become nearly mad. Silence is tasked with bringing him to court because the King believes it is an impossible task which will force Silence to stay away from the court indefinitely. Silence, however, outwits Merlin and proves her mastery of him, without resorting to any magic of her own, relying merely on her own cleverness.

Britomart/Elizabeth in that his powers make her journey to virtue and in history possible; yet in the end she is the heroine and must achieve for herself the possibilities which his magic/poetry envisions for her. Traveling backward in time, he sees the vistas of the future that awe and empower the woman in the present, but is left merely to serve her by recording her achievements as she moves ahead of him, away from him, into her future. Pygmalion-Higgins-like, he is situated at once inside and outside her history, a tutelary sculptor in her youth and a deferential recorder set at a distance in the wake of her ascendancy. The Merlin figure, and the meaningful and meaningless magic he commands, perhaps reflects the lover-poet-subject's ambivalence about his ambiguous master-servant role, a subtle assertion and deferential acknowledgment of his influential, obedient place.

The joy and sometimes frustration of Spenser is that its length and the multiple layers of its allegory resist exhaustive explanation. Certainly there is more to be said about the way in which Spenser uses the trope of magic across the breadth of the *Faerie Queene*. What strikes me as particularly interesting about the Britomart episode is the way in which it is structured to initially suggest that magic is critically important, only to allow that assumption to fall away upon closer examination. Moreover, given that magic is a historically important trope because it is one which connects our own modern (especially pop) culture to that of the Medieval period and the Renaissance, Britomart provides us a window into early modern history and a place to begin considering the complex ways in which magic has been and continues to be invested with rich and ever-adapting meanings in Western culture.

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ABSTRACT

**Britomart's Spear and Merlin's Mirror:
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This essay examines the function and symbolism of magic in the narrative of Britomart, the female knight in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Though she is not herself magical, the initial episode in Book III where we first encounter Britomart does link her to magic in interesting ways. We realize how Spenser invests the idea and image of magic with meanings that develop important themes in Britomart's (and indeed Spenser's overarching) story. I argue that the way in which this section of the poem repeatedly de-emphasizes the significance and the power of magic cleverly allows Spenser at once to advance an argument for Elizabeth's greatness (as a virtuous queen) and for his own (as a poet of a significant power rivaling that of any wondrous magic recorded in romance).

Key Words | Magic, Britomart, Spenser, *Faerie Queen*, Elizabeth I