

# **Theses**

**Pajtók Ágnes**

**“She knew the wayes to win good will”**

**Reading Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* From a Gender Point Of View**

## **Aims**

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate female characters in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, and to reveal the peculiarities of three distinct groups of women appearing in the romance: chaste women who set a positive example, evil temptresses whose punishments serve as deterrents and the group in the middle who resemble earthly women. Since women of this latter kind do not possess the typical, clear-contoured, glowing bodies of Spenserian females, they do not emerge from the romance as figures to pay much heed to. Due to their lack of glamour, these women are usually dismissed as two-dimensional and uninteresting. Yet, if we devote some attention to them, their vital importance and special position in the romance becomes visible. Since these secondary characters are not representations of certain virtues, they have a more spacious scope regarding their actions, and display colourful variants of typical female behavioural patterns, which warrant a deeper investigation.

## Structure & Method

After the introduction, the second chapter covers a female-centred context of the romance by observing the history of its reception, with special emphasis on female responses, and by reflecting on the uniqueness of the Elizabethan era and its imprints on Spenser. This latter part of should be useful when analysing the appearances of women in *The Faerie Queene*. The last section of providing a context for the analysis of the romance focuses on conduct books and draws a picture of sixteenth century behavioural patterns that were acceptable and condemnable. This outlook serves as a background for the investigations of female sexual behaviour in the romance, since although the rules of conduct books cannot be applied entirely to *The Faerie Queene*, they are still closer to the romance's world than our twenty-first century notions of right and wrong behaviour.

The third chapter, (*Appearance*) concentrates on the pictorial facade of the romance, and emphasises the different implications of female figures. For instance, that in *The Faerie Queene* there is an abundance of grandiose heroines who appear glamorous and glittering, embody the ideal woman, and are set as desirable role models to follow. However, not all women of excessive pulchritude are undoubtedly virtuous. There are evil temptresses whose demeanour is impeccable. Because of their discernible looks, these enchantresses also have an unequivocal position. Yet, through their severe punishment, they also become part of a didactic story of proper behaviour. Their allure triggers too much attention to allow the ethical scheme of the romance to be disrupted, hence, they have to be denounced. Finally, this chapter also highlights the rudimentary nature of the portrayal of middle women in comparison to the chaste or the evil ones.

The fourth chapter (*Behaviour*) sheds more light on the peculiarities of the less easily definable and almost invisible middle women, by looking closely at their stories, and

deducting similarities appearing in these plotlines. By contrasting the groups of good, bad and middle women of *The Faerie Queene*, the conformity of the former two, and the uniqueness of the latter will become conspicuous.

Since a meticulous reading can reveal a deeper significance, which is often concealed by seemingly superficial forms, the distinct groups of women can be discerned most clearly by concentrating on the text itself. Thus, the two main chapters of *Appearance* and *Behaviour* are going to be based on a close reading of the romance, whose poetic richness offers an endless source of literary analysis.

### **Findings**

The behavioural pattern middle women represent displays a unique voice in the romance. These women make mistakes and disobey, yet are always forgiven: despite being adulterous, wanton, suicidal and dishonest, they are never punished. Letting middle women err and then exempting them, questions the entire message about the nature of the appropriate female in the romance. This doubt is underscored by the cadence of women's fate. While chaste women are never given blissful satisfaction in married life, the destinies of middle women are always fulfilled, and most of them are endowed with their desired aims.

The assumption is that the occurrence of middle women in the romance world is not coincidental. Through them, elements of life filter into the romance, and show a facet of reality behind the rigid rules of society and conduct books. Middle women also paint an ironic picture of sixteenth century society: through these characters, we see that virginity is not a physical, but a social constraint, we witness that women lie to their husbands for their prospective long-term happiness, and that love is not a constant emotion, but an undulating

one. Through middle women, the romance becomes what it condemns. It gives way to a new kind of carnal woman with an intriguing, complex background, and the ability to make decisions, even though they are incorrect.

Meanwhile, the emphatic and conspicuous, chaste women can carry on being exemplary, and serve as examples for a potential female audience, offering models of celibate chastity and virtuous marriage.

### **Conclusion**

The incongruities between female appearances and behaviour reveal the emergence of middle women. The lack of their portrayal suggests their unimportance, yet their rebellious behaviour has other implications. This is a category of women who neither belong to virtue nor sin, and who bear unusual traits.

Through juxtaposing chaste, sinful and middle women, a double standard in the romance can be grasped. To grandiose visible heroines, and wicked temptresses the strict official rules apply, whereas, the unimportant women are measured against the rules of everyday common sense. Yet – very importantly – these women are still classified as acceptable, or even virtuous. The narrator, slightly scolding them, never passes serious judgement. The evidence for the accepted virtuousness of middle women is the condemnation and destruction of sinful ones. Middle women can be beautiful and tempting, but their serious crimes never remain unpunished. Had the middle women been deemed unchaste – similarly to sinful ones – they would have had to face similar retribution, since the narrator does not allow any character go unevaluated. Hence, the main moral dilemma of the romance is neither to give the deserved punishment of the evil, nor to praise the chaste, but how to treat and judge the human, benevolent errors of the

middle ones. The conduct books say that those who transgress shall be punished, on the other hand, common sense suggests the opposite. In the case of middle women, Spenser employs the latter approach: he does not go against his altruistic feelings, but displays a more lenient attitude by giving happiness to fallible women, who do not even resent their own sins and who do not acknowledge their own actions as sinful.

The emerging women of no importance naturally manage to appear as autonomous characters, whereas women of high prestige fail to attain independence. Instead, they get lost in the jungle of good conduct. They have too much of a burden to carry: they have to display impeccable conduct both on the private and public level, and it's this unbearable weight that drowns them.

Had *The Faerie Queene* been constructed as a mere courtesy work in honour of Elizabeth I, it might have remained merely as lifeless cliché, but since it gained more life and individuality than a pure didactic dedicatory piece, restricting itself to the usage of courtly patterns would not have been satisfactory. Yet, the work is not vigorous enough to totally transcend the rules of convention and become a work of fresh thought and honesty.

Occasionally, grandiose heroines are on the verge of freedom, but in their case it is unacceptable, hence they have to be hindered. The romance is a struggle between two forces: tradition, which the author really wants to follow, and his human self, which he wants to harness and suppress, but whose natural tone keeps surfacing in the stories of middle women.