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Feminine Leadership: Spenser's Britomart and Lewis's Reason

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Scholars have debated the apparent sexism in many of C. S. Lewis's writings and in his views on female clergy.¹ Without addressing these particular issues of importance in Lewisian studies, this paper will analyze Lewis's choice of a female virgin in the role of Reason who topples the giant "Spirit of the Age" in his early allegory, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). Besides the obvious influence of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* on this work, Edmund Spenser's knight Britomart from *The Faerie Queene* provides the model of a strong feminine leader who steps in to show the would-be hero how to subdue one's competing impulses on the journey to moral ascendancy.² This paper will first review some of Britomart's pivotal scenes in Spenser that reveal this important aspect of her characterization, and after identifying the crucial passages wherein she instructs her male counterparts on fulfilling their gender roles, both by word and by deed, I will then turn in the latter portion of this study to some comparable moments where Reason instructs the protagonist John in Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

In Books 3 and 4 of *The Faerie Queene* we meet Britomart, a lovesick girl who dons a suit of knightly armor on her Quest to find the man whose image she has seen in a mirror, Sir Artegall, one of several knights she meets in battle but over whom she wields a surprising amount of influence by example. Indeed, Britomart fulfills this important function of bettering a male character in the epic multiple times. As the figure of Chastity, Britomart demonstrates what Christian eros

should look like leading up to and within the matrimonial bonds: not a barren spirit bereft of all passion or desire, but one with erotic attraction wedded to *agape* and dedicated to the betterment of the beloved, so that such desires are satisfied at the right time, to the right degree, and without objectifying one's partner.

Early in her Quest (Bk 3.4.25-30), Britomart unhorses Sir Marinell, the prude boy who scorns all women due to his mother's overprotective smothering. After their skirmish, Britomart leaves him there simpering on the beach. He has much more to learn from others, but she has at least knocked him off his high horse, so to speak, preparing him to learn further. He is brought to his senses and toughened up by such experiences, readying Marinell for his courtship with Florimell and their lavish wedding later in the epic (Bk 5).

Though naïve and fearful of her own passions for Artegall, Britomart herself is far from being a frigid killjoy in the realm of Love. She is beautiful and vigorous, displaying a "careless modesty." She astounds her onlookers when divesting herself of the mannish costume of armor to reveal the feminine frock she had tucked underneath and the loveliness of her limbs and the golden luster of her ringlets of unbound hair when the helmet was unlaced (3.9.20-24 and 4.1.13-14). None of the other knights had encountered a woman like this before—all they had ever known of womanhood in Faerie-land were either the loose and seductive Eve or the completely

virginal Mary. But Britomart confronts these corrupt courtly lovers, especially Sir Paridell, with the reality that women can choose to be more than either of these extremes. Spenser uses Britomart to redefine chastity and show what it can mean for Christians.

In the episode that forms the climax of Book III, one of the most riveting in the whole epic, Britomart steps in to save Scudamour's betrothed Amoret from the clutches of the evil wizard Busirane. The distraught Scudamour is powerless to wrest his fiancée from the inner chambers of this enchanter's stronghold, where Lust itself has her in fetters as an object of desire. Britomart must show this helpless knight the way to stand one's ground against the illicit assaults of Cupid, whose darts infect most lovers with the taint of possessive, objectifying lust. Book III, Canto XI, stanza 11, shows Scudamour's confession that his own corrupt nature makes him powerless to release her from the chains of lust: in his own words he is "a vile man" and an "unworthy wretch to tread upon the ground / For whom so faire a Lady feels so sore a wound." We found out much later in Bk IV, canto X, just how wretched he is from his own account of wooing of Amoret in the Temple of Venus—that before she was even abducted by Busirane on their wedding day, Scudamour himself had behaved like a typical courtly lover, following the model in *La Romance de la Rose* in breaking down her natural defenses. In a stark contrast to Britomart and Artegall's courtship, Scudamour had bought Amoret by fighting his way in and taking her by force (4.1.2) and even against her tearful entreaties (4.10.57).³ Nevertheless, Britomart now kindly responds to his plight (stanzas 14-15, 18), even offering to rescue Amoret or die trying. In stanza 19, he tries to dissuade her from taking his place, saying that it's better for him just to die of passion. But Britomart, putting him back in his armor and back on his steed (stanza 20), finally tells him to "man up" (stanza 24). In their own words (beginning with Scudamour):

What is ther else, but cease these fruitlesse paines, / And leave me to my former languishing? Faire Amoret must dwell in wicked chaines, / And Scudamore here dye with sorrowing. / Perdy not so; (said she) for shamefull thing / It were t'abandon noble chevisaunce, / For she of peril, without venturing: / Rather let try extremities of chaunce, / Then enterprised prayse for dread to disavaunce.

Britomart takes Scudamour to task for languishing in despair instead of setting out to make his best effort toward her rescue, even in the face of apparent doom; what she may not realize (and what Scudamour may be lamenting) is that his own moral shortcomings as a lover, according to Spenser's higher notions of "chastity," prevent him from taking this very step. His despair is directed not only at Busirane's power, but at his own wretched condition as one enthralled by courtly love, which Busirane's House merely reflects back at him.

After she wins her way past the flaming walls to the interior of the wicked enchanter's House, Britomart succeeds where typical lovers fail, because she waits quietly, but attentively, for Cupid's pageant to pass her by, yet remains unmoved by the spectacle of lusts in Busirane's sensual galleries. She stands sentinel over her own passions. She is, in the words of Busirane's tantalizing motto in the gallery, "bold," but "not too bold." She does not demand to lay hold of that which she desires.⁴

Part of Britomart's secret strength to stand against carnal temptations is that her own sexuality is masked to others and even to herself. Since she is naturally endowed with strength, being "tall, / And large of limbe" (3.3.53.6-7), Britomart has chosen in Book III to seek out her beloved Artegall by "riding out" in the guise of a chivalrous knight, instead of passively waiting to be discovered by a suitor. Britomart thus deals with her new-found lovesickness by taking action. As Spenser relates, the "Briton mayd: Who for to hide her fained sex the better, / And maske

her wounded mind, both did and sayd / Full many things so doubtfull to be wayd" (4.1.7). Her behavior as well as her knightly costume and accoutrements bewilder and even frighten Amoret after being rescued by the bold maid in mannish armor.

By donning the outer emblems of masculinity, Britomart is able to meet men on common ground, gaining their respect first by beating them at their own martial games, and then their amazement at her stunning beauty when removing her armor and her helmet at a wayside inn. By venturing forth *incognito* Britomart avoids having to attend constantly to her own status as an object of desire. She is empowered to meet all men, even her chosen fiancée, on their own terms, as an equal.

Yet she is not without erotic desires; she has keenly felt the pangs of love. According to Roger Sale: "Britomart is or becomes chastity by this combination of masculine hero and feminine wounded, of Cupid's mastery without her weak passivity" (143). The rescue and reunion of Amoret with Scudamour ends with the two symbolically becoming one flesh as they embrace, just as in Britomart herself romantic love is embodied now as maid and hero combined (Sale 145). Though she bears the outer signs of masculine assertiveness, which serve to counterbalance her inner passions, we must remember that the armor is a guise, and that Britomart is not sufficient unto herself. The knightly costume helps her, and others whom she meets, to achieve a wholeness met within matrimony.

As Adam McKeown explains, the story of Britomart "begin[s] with sexual awareness... her marriage is fixed by fate... Britomart... takes up arms...effectively gendering herself male." Yet she cannot

conceal her feminine beauty or control its effect on those who behold it... Indeed, this guise of masculinity only emphasizes . . . the surrender of the feminine self in marriage. The guise thus signifies the desire and desirability of the woman beneath it, as well as the

consummation of those desires. Rather than desexualizing the woman or safeguarding her chastity, the guise recalls and continuously enacts the sexual union" (57-58).

I might tweak McKeown's interpretation here by saying that her armor protects Britomart by wedding her continuously to her ideal male partner, making her sexually unavailable to others and even to herself apart from Sir Artegall. Lewis reminds us that "It is the married couple, united in the relation called one flesh, that is the *Imago Dei*" (38).

After "winning" Amoret from the enchanter Busirane, Britomart opens her heart to the frightened maiden, commiserating with her on the fickle fortunes of love, both having been separated from their male partners. In conducting her safely and compassionately, Britomart models for Scudamour the proper way to woo his bride with Chaste love instead of the passionate overtures of a conqueror.

Not only does she help other lovers to reconcile, but she also instructs her own betrothed, Artegall, after their brief but intense courtship, in the ways of masculine justice (an impartiality she has demonstrated against other foes in her quest, as learned early on, during her encounter with Malecasta). After meeting each other's martial blows, Britomart and Artegall fall in love and exchange marital vows, but before they can marry, Artegall sets off on his own Quest to learn the virtue of Justice as the protagonist of Book IV. In his wanderings he encounters the Amazon queen Radigund, who conquers and feminizes him, making Artegall don women's garb and perform women's work with the spindle. Britomart must free him by beheading Radigund, teaching him true justice toward tyrants as opposed to the false pity he had shown her. "In other words," Lewis writes, "Artegall is in his right place only when he is guided, even ruled, by Britomart" (103). Juxtaposing the characters of Radigund and Britomart in this episode of

Artegall's rescue, Spenser contrasts feminine subversion with matrimonial equality.

In the course of these adventures (including a strange dream vision of a tryst with a crocodile in the Church of Isis), Britomart learns what her own gender role within marriage is to be: not to sport the armor of a male knight indefinitely, but to submit in matrimonial obedience to begetting the royal lineage leading to Elizabeth I. Again, to quote Lewis, "There is nothing of the virago or feminist about Britomart. True, she has temporarily taken the role of a knight errant. But she became one only in order to find her lover; her outlook has always been entirely feminine" (105). For the time being, she roves throughout Faerie-land taming husbands and training would-be lovers in the art of love without cupidity, possession, or self-glorifying conquest of the beloved.

Whereas Spenser's epic allegorizes six different virtues that are separately embodied, one in each knightly protagonist of *The Faerie Queene*, Lewis's allegory concentrates on one protagonist, the young man John, whose Quest involves learning the proper place for Virtue, Reason, Faith, in the exclusive pursuit of Joy. John certainly struggles with lust on his way, but not to learn Chastity as his goal. As important as Chastity is to one's development, it is not the central lesson to be learned, but one of many on the road to something far greater. As Lewis relates in *Mere Christianity*, "If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual" (95).

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, John's quest bears no relation to that of matrimony; the shield-maid of Reason comes to his aid, but not directly in overcoming of the distractions of lust. That is a stage in his journey that occurs quite early. In trying to recapture the thrills of seeing an Island of enchanters in the West (his vision of Joy or *sehnsucht*), John's vain attempts quickly degenerate as he finds only a naked brown girl down the lane from his home, past the window of a ruined wall

through which he had glimpsed the Island. After indulging in erotic pleasure with brown girls to the point of dissipation, John realizes that this was not what he desired with his vision of the Island – this pleasure is too weak. The passions of eros are far from the *sehnsucht* that drives him to seek out the Island in the West.

Setting out from home, resolved to find this Island whatever the distance, John encounters the music of Mr. Half-ways and his lovely daughter Media, whose romantic charms turn out to be another dead-end to lustful languishing in the same vein as his dalliance with the brown girls. He presses on to encounter the aesthetic movements of the disillusioned 1920s (called The Clevers), next meets Mammon, upon whose materialism these effetes unwittingly depend, then sees the Giant mountain, the "Spirit of the Age" (representing the stale intellectual climate that bars his progress). Near this mountain, he meets Mr. Enlightenment (a stand-in for Freud), who has quarreled with his father the Old Mr. Enlightenment, a man much more like a Puritan, whom John had met earlier. Enlightenment Jr. tells him that the Island is only his wishes or dreams, made up to conceal his own lusts from himself, so that he could still feel good. Suspecting a troublemaker, he casts John into a dungeon near the foot of the mountain, where the Giants' eyes penetrate through the cell's grating with an X-ray effect that reveals the innards and guts of the prisoners' bodies by making their skin and outer layers transparent. The Spirit of the Age thus "sees through" all romantic sentiment, revealing only the animal side of human feelings and impulses, reducing all experience to bestial functions.

And so Lewis's knightly maiden who comes to the essential aid of the would-be hero is not the personification of Chastity, but of something more central that can be of assistance to all other virtues: Reason itself. When John is completely powerless, locked in the dungeon at the foot of the Mountain, Reason breaks her own chains and gallops before him, just after John's common sense

has awakened. She comes to his rescue and outwits the Giant in a riddle contest that exposes his lies, riding straight through his lap, stabbing him in the heart, and toppling him with a landslide. Wiping her sword clean on the moss, she then strikes the dungeon door to free the other prisoners, but like the dwarves in *The Last Battle*, they have grown cynical, wary of being duped yet again; and disbelieving that this change in regime is real, they do not wish to come out. As she explains to John, *disbelief* in the Landlord (or God, in the world of *Pilgrim's Regress*) is a wish-fulfillment dream, not the other way around, as the Freudians would have it (64). It is more convenient to invent ways to ignore God and forget him.

Because Reason is so fundamental, the light by which other virtues and vices are seen clearly, she does not meet John on equal terms as Britomart meets her fellow knights. Reason remains aloof, outpacing him on her great steed by whose stirrup he had traveled: "May I come with you, lady?" said John. "You may come until you are tired," said Reason," and in Platonic fashion, she explains that she can show him only what he already knows, or remind him of things in the dark part of his mind (the unconscious), but that "I have nothing to tell you of good and bad" (58), and likewise later when he requests her blessing as she leaves him, "I do not deal in blessings and cursings" (64). In other words, Reason exists prior to value judgments, but her strident clarifications are too much for many to remain long in her company. Mr. Sensible calls her "that mad woman riding about the country dressed up in armour" (79). It is her younger sisters, Philosophy and Theology, she says, who are the only ones who could tell scientists about the world beyond the Landlord's country, but they refuse to listen (59).

She can only tell John the meaning of her riddles, the third of which—"By what rule do you tell a copy from an original?"—answers his direct question about whether the Island is merely sexual longing since both are so alike. Reason concludes that if two things are alike, "then it is a further question

whether the first is copied from the second, or the second from the first, or both from a third" and that "Some have thought that all these loves were copies of our love for the Landlord" (59).

As Mr. Wisdom later tells him, the lie of the Giant and Freudians—that glimpses of Joy like John's Island are merely a screen to conceal our own lusts—is something that

a solitary boy, in the fancies of his adolescence, can expose and see through in two years. This is but wild talk. There is no man and no nation at all capable of seeing the Island, who have not learned by experience, and that soon, how easily the vision ends in lust: and there is none also, not corrupted, who has not felt the disappointment of that ending, who has not known that it [lust] is the breaking of the vision[,] not its consummation. The words between you and Reason were true. What does not satisfy when we find it, was not the thing we were desiring (123).

Reason later shows John again how to conclude his Quest in Book 9, chapter two, by telling him, as Britomart told Scudamour, to "man up." She boldly, even threateningly, confronts John as he tries to scramble out of the hermit's cave at night and flee the final stages of his conversion near the base of the chasm called *Peccatum Adae* (the sin of Adam):

When the complexity of fears seemed to admit no increase, a sharp, commanding voice out of the darkness suddenly startled him with such a shock that he seemed not to have been frightened till then. 'Back!' said the voice. John crouched motionless from the balance of fears. He was not even sure that he *could* turn on this bit of the ledge. 'Back,' said the voice, 'or else show that you're the better man.' The lightning tore open the darkness and flung it to again. But John had seen his enemy. It was Reason, this time on

foot, but still mailed, and her sword drawn in her hand. 'Do you want to fight?' she said in the darkness. (163)

John suppresses an impulse to grab her mailed ankle when he realizes that they both (himself and Reason) would tumble into the gulf together if he did so. Feeling her steel at his throat, he shuffles back quickly to resume his progress (or rather, regress) toward salvation. He realizes he cannot flee this moral step. To turn back would not merely be cowardice, it would at this point offend his very reason.

The question may be asked why Lewis dressed up human Reason, as did Spenser with his figure of Chastity, in the guise of a female knight.⁵ One may further inquire, why then Reason as the virgin warrior, and not Wisdom or some other faculty? The ancient Greeks personified wisdom as the goddess Pallas Athena who mentored wily Odysseus, and Boethius made Lady Philosophy the embodiment of wisdom who comforted him on death row. But Lewis was writing neither an epic, nor a consoling philosophical meditation, but an allegory. The conventions of that genre call for a plenitude of characters to act within narrowly designated roles, and so the defamiliarizing effect of a female virgin outfitted with mailcoat, shield, and sword was a suitable choice for the stark, pure, and trenchant effects of human reason that intrude upon our more animal impulses. Lewis also characterizes the key to John's conversion with other feminine roles: Contemplation, who enables him to fly right up to his Island by night, affording him a clearer and purer experience of it; and Mother Kirk, old and apparently feeble, and according to some outdated or a bit insane, yet the only one capable of carrying him across the great chasm separating him from his heart's desire. But in Lewis, wisdom is not female as it is in many other traditions; that part is played by old Mr. Wisdom, the father of many unruly children who chafe at his rigid diet and languish in perpetual limbo with expectant longing for Joy, but also without hope.

Lewis's allegory, like Spenser's epic, achieves its moral with the startling picture of a bold young woman striding across a treacherous landscape with naked sword drawn and with her feminine qualities masked in armor, the better to teach young protagonists how to lead more fulfilling masculine lives.

Notes

¹As for instance, in the Summer 2007 issue of *Christian Scholars Review*, a colloquium issue entitled "C. S. Lewis and Gender" featuring articles by scholars such as Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Adam Barkman, Doris T. Myers, Joe R. Christopher, Harry Lee Poe, and Diana Pavlac Glyer.

²Lewis overtly nods to Spenser a number of times in *Pilgrim's Regress* in such moves as entitling the first chapter of Book 4 "Let Grill be Grill" after a line from the Palmer in *Faerie Queene* Bk 2 (about beastly men who forsake their humanity) and as referring to John's "brown girls" (17) and other *sensual cheats* in his Afterword with the allusion to "false Florimels" (203-204).

³Lewis finds Scudamour's role in the Temple of Venus to be that of any typical male lover, due to the focus in this portion of the epic on the moral contrast to Busirane's House; as Lewis writes, "Scudamour, taken by himself, is hardly a personification at all; he is the lover, the husband, any husband, or even *homo* in search of love" (*Allegory* 345). Of course, there is much in this episode providing Spenser's view of normative, healthy *eros* and the pursuit of the beloved. However, I find Scudamour's mode of "winning" Amoret less than pure or ideal based on such terms of possessiveness and conquering as noted, though I acknowledge that my perspective is not necessarily that shared by Spenser's audience.

⁴"Be bold, be not too bold": perhaps this motto has an ambiguity, or even an irony, that not only Busirane missed but C. S. Lewis as well. If the galleries in Busirane's castle (figured by him drawing the blood of Amoret, as argued by Adam McKeown) are meant to show Cupid's conquests in making captives of courtly lovers who end their lives in misery and infamy (as he can proudly boast), then the motto that confounds Britomart might merely be an echo of the rules in courtly love dictating that the lover be assertive in pressing his suit, but not overbold by transgressing etiquette or decorum or the sensibilities of the Lady. But since Britomart is unschooled in the social customs and fashions of courtiers in their sophisticated games of *amor*, the motto for her becomes something ironically moral and spells the key to her ingress to Busirane's secret dungeon. By waiting attentively (but not letting herself succumb to the carnal depictions in the galleries or Maske), Britomart thus has her wits about her, and the motto has the opposite

effect of that intended by the enchanter. He was spelling out the typical rule for a courtly lover; she, ignorant of those rules, had trouble deciphering them and so her naivete actually spelled her success.

⁵Besides the character Bradamant in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Britomart's predecessors might include Joan of Arc, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Camilla in *The Aeneid*, or the British tribal leader Boudicca, depending on the writings available to Spenser and those he may have consciously examined as models of strong female leaders and warriors. As of the time of revising this paper for the conference proceedings, I have not yet pursued this line of inquiry to find out the scholarly consensus.

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