English 300: Merlin
Week XI: Readings of Edmund Spenser's <u>The Faerie Queene</u>

John Hughes, from two of his essays in his edition of <u>The Faerie Queene</u> (1715):

    "By what has been offered in the foregoing discourse on allegorical poetry we may be able, not only to discover many beauties in <u>The Faerie Queene</u>, but likewise to excuse some of its irregularities. The chief merit of this poem consists in that surprising vein of fabulous invention which runs through it and enriches it everywhere with imagery and descriptions more than we meet with in any other modern poem. The author seems to be possessed of a kind of poetical magic; and the figures he calls up to our view rise so thick upon us that we are at once pleased and distracted by the exhaustless variety of them, so that his faults may in a manner be imputed to his excellencies. His abundance betrays him into excess, and his judgement is overborne by the torrent of his imagination.

    That which seems the most liable to exception in this work is the model of it and the choice the author has made of so romantic a story. The several books appear rather like so many several poems than one entire fable; each of them has a peculiar knight and is independent of the rest, and though some of his persons make their appearance in different books, yet this has very little effect in connecting them. Prince Arthur is, indeed, the principal person and has, therefore, a share given him in every legend, but his part is not considerable enough in any one of them. He appears and vanishes again like a spirit, and we lose sight of him too soon to consider him as the hero of the poem."

William Hazlitt, from <u>Lectures on the English Poets</u> (1818):

    "The language of Spenser is full, and copious, to overflowing: it is less pure and idiomatic than Chaucer's, and is enriched and adorned with phrases borrowed from the different languages of Europe, both ancient and modern. He was, probably, seduced into a certain licence of expression by the difficulty of filling up the moulds of his complicated rhymed stanza from the limited resources of his native language. . . . Not that I would, on that account, part with the stanza of Spenser. We are, perhaps, indebted to this very necessity of finding out new forms of expression, and to the occasional faults to which it led, for a poetical language rich and varied and magnificent beyond all former example. . . . It [Spenser's versification] has not the bold dramatic transitions of Shakespeare's blank verse, nor the high-raised tone of Milton's; but it is the perfection of melting harmony, dissolving the soul in pleasure, or holding it captive in the chains of suspense."

C.S. Lewis, from <u>The Allegory of Love</u> (1936):

    "To our own troubled and inquiring age this wisdom [of Spenser] will perhaps show its most welcome aspect in the complete integration, the harmony, of Spenser's mind. His work is one, like a growing thing, a tree; like the world-ash-tree [an allusion to

Old Icelandic cosmography] itself, with branches reaching to heaven and roots to hell. . . . And between these two extremes comes all the multiplicity of human life, transmuted but not fasified by the conventions of chivalrous romance. The 'great golden chain of Concord' has united the whole of his world. What he feels on one level, he feels on all. When the good and the fair appear to him, the whole man responds; the satyrs gambol, the lances splinter, the shining ones rise up. There is a place for everything and everything is in its place. Nothing is repressed; nothing is insubordinate. To read him is to grow in mental health."

Thomas P. Roche, Jr., from <u>The Kindly Flame</u> : <u>A Study of the Third and Fourth Books of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*</u> (1964):

"In Books III and IV of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser breaks the pattern of expectation set up by the narrative structures of Books I and II, turning from the epic structure of Virgil to the episodic romance structure of Ariosto. The shift in narrative technique has been attributed to Spenser's ineptitude in handling the virtues of chastity and friendship or to his returning to an earlier plan to make use of material already written. These explanations, it seems to me, do not suggest recognition of the amazing brilliance and vitality of Books III and IV or of Spenser's superb ability to integrate apparently disparate materials. They rest on the judgment that 'the narrative' and 'the allegory' have somehow gone awry, all coherence gone, as if narrative and allegory were two separate and parallel functions of the poem we find before us. . . .
Thus the main narrative suggests a complexity of correspondences similar to the ancient four senses of allegory. Literally the marriage of Arthur and Gloriana would have been the union of a prince with his loved one after a number of marvellous adventures. Allegorically, by which the Old Law was interpreted in the light of the New, the marriage becomes the fulfillment of the old order of British kings in the new Tudor monarchy. Tropologically, or morally, it means the union of virtue with glory, or for Spenser's purpose, the completion of the perfect gentleman. Anagogically it means Apocalypse. This is the point where the two chronicles would have merged, where the distinctions between England and Faeryland, between the real and the ideal, have no meaning. Apocalypse means completion, the stasis of the completed quest, the return to God. In this sense Arthur's marriage with Gloriana is the unification of England and Faeryland, of Elizabeth and Gloriana. But the Apocalypse is rarely reached in poetry, and the true Apocalypse will make poetry meaningless. We can only speculate on how Spenser would have completed his poem or whether he saw that no poet can survive the crisis of completion."

Rosamund Tuve, from <u>Allegorical Imagery</u> (1966):

"Of course Spenser read Malory. But he must have read so much else which his writing resembles more, structurally, that he surely needed to feel no discomfort about

preserving the traditional role of Arthur; that is preserved (more than if he had copied Malory's incidents) in Arthur as a combined figure for the dynasty, the all-inclusive virtue, the spouse-to-be of the personified realm, the royal house through whom divine power flowed into country and people.

He [Spenser] had a further and more important reason for finding romances congenial. It seems to me that Spenser recognized, from significances given to ancient romance plots in a few great well-know pieces, that romances were a sort of 'historicall fiction' naturally amenable to being read as 'continued Allegory, or darke conceit', though primarily 'historicall' and delighting. One may take quite 'au pied de la lettre' his remarks about most men delighting to read such fictions for variety of matter – this is the reason for and chief effect of romance entrelacement, and the connection is made by Ariosto when he talks of his 'web'; it is too famous as a rhetorical word and much too controversial a point for Spenser to use innocently. Equally serious are the claims about these stories being profitable for 'ensample', which was an early recommendation for urging the printing of romances from manuscripts, and modernizers and introductions did not let it die. Also, the connection with allegory is a proper part of his declared reason why he 'chose the historye of king Arthure', who was furthest from 'suspition of present time' while capable of bearing other than a single significance. The romances chiefly are what is referred to by the phrase, 'many mens former workes' that have made Arthur 'famous' and suitable because of 'the excellency of his person.' "

Paul Alpers, from "How to Read The Faerie Queene" (1968):

"Trust the verse – that is what the reader of The Faerie Queene must learn to do."

Harry Berger, Jr., from "The Faerie Queene, Book III: A General Description" (1969):

"The retrospective view of an ancient warlike environment is amplified in the treatment of Merlin. Thus Spenser's introductory account of the conventional Merlin – everybody's Merlin – is amused and condescending because it is presented in quotation marks as an example of the old mythology. We are shown a Merlin produced by the superstitious mind, the popular imagination which may once have been a fresh and significant cultural force but can no longer be taken seriously. . . . As he [Spenser] continues to parody the tone of the old wives' tale, he adapts the Mage of early legend more and more to his own themes. The direct address to the reader (the old wife conjuring the child) enforces the distance between the contemporary folk environment of the speaker and the early world of the story. . . . The enumeration of Merlin's powers has little to do with his function in Book III, which is limited to prophecy. Rather it seems slanted toward the emphasis on warfare and toward the theme of hostility between the sexes: all Merlin's powers were of no avail in his encounter with the Lady of the Lake, for Spenser's Merlin is a victim of the 'historical' phase of eros to which he belongs . . ."

Stephen Greenblatt, from "To Fashion a Gentleman: Spenser and the Destruction of the Bower of Bliss" (1980):

"Spenser is one of the first English writers to have what we may call a field theory of culture, that is, the conception of a nation not simply as an institutional structure or a common race, but as a complex network of beliefs, folk customs, forms of dress, kinship relations, religious mythology, aesthetic norms, and specialized means of production. Therefore, to *reform* a people one must not simply conquer it – though conquest is an absolute necessity – but eradicate the native culture . . .

Such embodiment [of the Queen] is the characteristic achievement of great drama, of Marlow and supremely of Shakespeare, whose constant allusions to the fictionality of his creations only serve paradoxically to question the status of everything outside themselves. By contrast, Spenser's profoundly *undramatic* art, in the same movement by which it wards off idolatry, wards off this radical questioning of everything that exists. . . . [Spensarian allegory] opens up an internal distance within art itself by continually referring the reader out to a fixed authority beyond the poem. Spenser's art does not lead us to perceive ideology critically, but rather affirms the existence and inescapable moral power of ideology as that principle of truth toward which art forever yearns."

Judith H. Anderson, " 'In liuing colours and right hew': The Queen of Spenser's Central Books" (1982):

"Reluctance to see the extent to which Spenser criticizes the Queen does him a particular disservice in Books III and IV. Here it obscures the relation of ideal or antique image to the present age, a relation of which the Queen is the measure throughout the poem, and thus it obscures the developing relation of Faerie to history and of fiction to life."

Maureen Quilligan, "The Gender of the Reader and the Problem of Sexuality [in Books 3 and 4]" (1983):

"If any of Spenser's books is organized with a gender-specific set of responses in mind, evidence is doubtless clearest in Book III. What can we say about the reader inscribed by its rhetoric? First, the homology between reading and action, whereby the reader is made to take on the perspective of the protagonist/reader of the landscape, establishes a female vantage point. Spenser further insists on Britomart's own responses as gender-specific. The troublesome beginning to the book makes absolute sense if and when we realize that with it Spenser is asking the reader to notice its female perspective."