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# Images of Ancient Egypt and the Gender Politics of The Faerie Queene

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# IMAGES OF ANCIENT EGYPT AND THE GENDER POLITICS OF *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

by

GENAVIEVE ALT

(Under the Direction of Julia Griffin)

## ABSTRACT

My thesis argues that Edmund Spenser uses radically different representations of Ancient Egypt to explore complex ideas about gender roles in the *Faerie Queene*. Book III emphasizes the negative view of Egypt perpetuated through the Book of Exodus and Greek understanding of the mythological king Busiris. Book V emphasizes the positive view of Egypt through the many benevolent myths surrounding the goddess Isis. Spenser uses images of good and evil Egypt to discuss the abolition of normative gender roles. The introductory section will introduce the mythology surrounding Isis followed by a discussion of the literature referenced throughout. The first chapter centers on Book III of the *Faerie Queene* as well as the allegorical use of evil Egyptian imagery to illustrate the oppressive dangers of courtly love. Chapter two will focus on positive images of Isis in the *Faerie Queene* and demonstrate an ideal of female power. I summarize the major allegory of Book V; this is followed by a discussion of the Cult of Isis, the benevolent imagery of the goddess in various works of literature, and the iconography of Isis Church. The primary icons I will focus on are the Crocodile, the Lion, and Isis herself, with discussion of their relevance to Spenser and his use of them to symbolize the complexities of justice in the public sphere and, in the private sphere, between the sexes. I will also explore the abolition of normative gender roles through Britomart's triumph over Radigund. Many Spenserian scholars have discussed Egypt, and most have discussed gender relations, but little has been done to unite them. This paper will discuss the imagery itself and how Spenser's

employment of Egyptian iconography and myth leads to the revelation that androgyny had a virtuous and dangerous side which complicated popular gender assumptions of the 16th century.

INDEX WORDS: Egypt, Gender, Gender politics, *The Faerie Queene*, Isis

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, my daughter, and my late father. We have had our ups and downs, but my desire to make you all proud is what has pushed me to complete this milestone. I

love you all dearly,

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Methodology**

Using Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, the myth of Busiris, Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* and the Geneva Bible, I aim to lay the groundwork for understanding the historical significance of the opposing views of Egypt in the English Renaissance and their impact on the overall power struggle between the sexes. With the help of Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, Ovid's story in the *Metamorphoses* about Iphis and Isis, together with Jane Aptekar's book *Icons of Justice* and other scholarly studies of the *Faerie Queene*, I illustrate the shifting view of gender in Elizabethan England.

#### **Evil Egypt**

During the sixteenth century, there were two prevailing views of Egypt; "the evil Egypt of biblical tradition and the venerated Egypt of Horapollo's recently discovered *Hieroglyphica*" (Brooks-Davies 615). The "evil" image of Egypt was primarily taken from the Hebrew Bible's Book of Exodus. The pharaoh of Egypt refuses to release the Israelites from slavery, even after suffering through the infamous ten plagues which culminated in the death of every first-born son. Spenser used the negative representation of Egypt in the Exodus story in the writing of Book III of the *Faerie Queene*.

#### **The Book of Exodus in The Geneva Bible**

I will be quoting from the Geneva Bible. It is the version that Edmund Spenser likely used during his lifetime. Composed in Geneva, Switzerland between 1557 and 1560, the Geneva Bible became the most influential book for English Protestants during the Protestant Reformation. Biblical imagery is scattered throughout the *Faerie Queene* but as previously

mentioned, the Book of Exodus plays its most significant role in Book III cantos XI and XII: Britomart in the House of Busirane.

### **The Busiris Myth**

In Book III of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser places the cruel magician Busirane opposite his knight of chastity, Britomart, in the fight over Amoret, a young woman whom Busirane has abducted. Busiris originated in Greek mythology, intertwined with the twelve labors of Heracles. In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses Busiris, blending Greek and Egyptian myth inside the House of Busirane. He draws on the tyrannical masculinity of the character Busiris to create his demonic, lustful assailant of married love. Spenser's use of overtly masculine Greek and Egyptian mythology in Book III blends with the negative biblical view of Egypt in the Renaissance which he juxtaposes with the benevolent and powerful goddess Isis in Book V.

### **Good Egypt**

The "good" or "venerated" representation of Egypt during the 16th century was primarily personified through the goddess Isis. The pharaoh of the Exodus narrative was a hyper-masculine, cruel man who enslaved the Israelites out of fear and desire for control. By contrast, the goddess Isis remained a positive, benevolent representation of Ancient Egyptian culture as well as positive femininity. She also played a significant role in many Greek and Roman texts, each building upon her loving, equitable nature and her affinity for humanity. The *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollon, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* and Ovid's story of Iphis and Isis in the *Metamorphoses* each illustrate the power of a positive female presence which Spenser explores by juxtaposing Britomart and the Amazonian queen Radigund in Book V.

Spenser's use of her in the Christian world of the *Faerie Queene* stems from the Renaissance writer's desire to "baptize" the good pagan things from antiquity "in order that the

truth might be represented allegorically” (Davidson 74). Isis was “a symbol which represents a truth” (74); thus Spenser could “baptize” her pagan connections and use her to represent equity and femininity while remaining within the bounds of Christianity. His use of Isis as a Christian symbol of truth and equity allows her to be a representative of Britomart who also represents Queen Elizabeth and the entire British monarchy. Without her metaphorical baptism, Isis holds no sway as a pagan deity but rather, when given a new, Christian existence, she becomes the all-powerful female embodiment of equity who keeps masculine justice in check and guides humanity.

### **The Hieroglyphica**

Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* is a two-book collection of popular hieroglyphic images and their meanings. The oldest known copy of the *Hieroglyphica* is from Florence and dates from the year 1419.<sup>1</sup> The ancient text was first translated into English around 1422 with its first edition being printed in 1505. Over the next hundred years, another 30 editions were printed with various translations, elaborations and commentaries. The interest in Egypt during the Renaissance made Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* the authority on hieroglyphics and Ancient Egyptian culture. Writers like Spenser and Shakespeare would have, undoubtedly, known the text and used it in their works.

Translated into Greek in the 3rd Century C.E, Horapollo’s text, however inaccurate it has proven to be in the subsequent centuries, emphasizes the sophistication and civility of Ancient Egyptian culture. As the study of Egypt has evolved, Horapollo’s hieroglyphics have been

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<sup>1</sup> According to George Boas the oldest copy of the *Hieroglyphica* is “inscribed as having been bought on the island of Andros in 1419” (15). There were four copies of the text in Florence in 1940 which Boas speculates “may have been there since the fifteenth century” (15).

gradually proven to be false. Book I is the most accurate, meaning it was likely authored by a contemporary of the Ancient Egyptians who had some knowledge of their language and everyday life. Book II, however, has no verified hieroglyphs. This section also contains references to Greece, Rome, and animals such as the beaver and elephant of which the Ancient Egyptians had no knowledge. It also contains several repetitions of Book I, which supports the idea that it was probably written by a Greek or Alexandrian several centuries after Book I.

The *Hieroglyphica* illustrated the Renaissance idea of Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism was an idealist philosophy according to which everything derives from a single intellectual principle. The movement stemmed from an Egyptian named Plotinus who believed that there was meaning in all physical objects. By his reasoning, the hieroglyphs were signifiers of the meaning behind each physical thing depicted. The Egyptian hieroglyphs were understood as art, the way in which Egyptians could better express their world and, as Plotinus explains,

the Egyptian sages, either working by right reasoning or spontaneously, when they desired to represent things through wisdom, did not use letters descriptive of words and sentences, imitating the sounds of pronunciation and propositions, but drew pictures, and carved one picture for each thing in their temples, thus making manifest the description of that thing (qts. In Boas, 8).

Hieroglyphs are symbolic representations used to communicate ideas. Emblems contain a “set of meanings” in layers. Clement of Alexandria categorized them as having a literal meaning, a figurative meaning which he referred to as “tropological” (Boas 21), an allegorical meaning and, on occasion, an anagogical meaning, which is a spiritual or supernatural meaning. By this thinking, the

hieroglyphs of Horapollo were literally pictures of birds, beasts and fish; allegorically, they meant certain gods and goddesses, certain times and seasons; tropologically, they might mean man’s good and evil traits; analogically, they conveyed such hidden messages as were expounded in the bestiaries (qtd. In Boas 21).

The emblematic focus of the 16<sup>th</sup> century can be seen in dense poems like Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" as well as Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The *Hieroglyphica* provided emblems that could be used in literature. As we see in Chapter Two, these visual constructs become a way to express the inversion of traditional gender roles through Egyptian iconography.

### Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*

Over the centuries, many iterations of the myth of Isis and Osiris have been recorded. The version most likely used by Spenser when working on the *Faerie Queene* is that of the Greek writer and philosopher, Plutarch. Plutarch was born in 46 AD and is best known today as a biographer, but also wrote many non-biographical essays about various myths. Egypt figured largely in his biography of Marc Antony titled the *Life of Antony* and he also wrote the fullest account of the story of Isis and Osiris to date. His version of the myth is the one that most correlates to the images of Isis and positive female power put forth in the *Faerie Queene*.

In Plutarch's version of the ancient myth, the five primary deities in the Egyptian pantheon are born from a union between the Greek god Hermes and Rhea;<sup>2</sup> "but Hermes, being enamoured with the goddess, consorted with her" (12). During their gestation, Isis and Osiris also become "enamoured of each other and consorted together in the darkness of the womb before their birth" (12) which leads to the conception of their son Horus. Plutarch writes,

on the first of these days Osiris was born, and at the hour of his birth a voice issued forth saying, "The Lord of All advances to the light . . ." On the second of these days Areuris was born whom they call Apollo, and some call him also the elder Horus. On the third day Typhon was born but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt forth. On the fourth day Isis was born in the regions that are ever moist and on the fifth Nephthys, to whom they give the name of finality and the name of Aphrodite . . . (12).

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<sup>2</sup> Greek Titan. She is the wife and sister of Cronus, father of the traditional Greek pantheon.

At the time Plutarch is retelling the myth, the goddess had already become a cross-culturally venerated deity. The version of the myth that Plutarch puts forth places Isis in a positive position of power alongside her brother Osiris who takes control of Egypt. Their brother Typhon grew jealous of Osiris and “contrived a treacherous plot against him” (13). After Osiris is murdered, Isis immediately sets out to find him. Plutarch relates that she “wandered everywhere at her wits’ end; no one whom she approached did she fail to address” (14) as she desperately sought anyone with knowledge of his resting place. Eventually, she finds the body near Byblus.<sup>3</sup> Typhon discovers them and chops Osiris into 14 pieces and scatters them throughout Egypt. Isis discovers this new treachery and again begins searching for her husband’s body. While Isis is searching for her husband’s remains, Horus and his uncle Typhon begin vying for the throne of Egypt.

Isis is a catalyst for action, but does not perform the actions like Horus, Set or Osiris himself. Instead, she illustrates positive female power. Instead of being swallowed up by the masculine battle between Typhon and Horus like her sister Nephthys, Isis chooses to find her husband and reunite his soul with his body. Isis alone has the power to breathe life back into Osiris and she alone has the audacity and compassion to spare the life of her brother Typhon. As we shall see, the positivity of female power exhibited by Isis in the myth is exemplified through Book V of the *Faerie Queene*.

### **The Golden Ass**

Written near the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, Apuleius’ novel *The Golden Ass* recounts the adventures of the protagonist Lucius after being transformed into a literal golden ass through his practice of witchcraft. The author, Lucius Apuleius, was a Platonic philosopher and writer

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<sup>3</sup> “Byblus” is Byblos, a city in Lebanon.

known best for this work, the only surviving Latin novel. While it is a work of fiction, the author shares his name with the unfortunate Lucius in the text and draws on various autobiographical details; this can be seen with the incorporation of the goddess Isis, whose cult was widespread throughout Greece and Rome until 551.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> book of the novel, Lucius cries out to the heavens for deliverance. In response, a goddess descends and converses with him. In this exchange, Apuleius identifies the goddess as Isis and connects her to all ancient mythologies. Isis states:

I, mother of the universe, mistress of all the elements, first born of the ages, highest of the gods, queen of the shades, first of those who dwell in heaven, representing in one shape all the gods and goddesses (XI 5).

Her identification as “all gods and goddesses” unites the various mythologies of Greece, Rome, Egypt as well as an unknown number of cultures who share similar mythologies. The importance of this revelation cannot be overstated. If Spenser was following Apuleius’ assertion, then his Venus in the Temple of Venus in Book IV, and his Isis in Book V are the same person. Britomart even appears to become Isis in her vision of the goddess in Book V. In the conclusion to this paper, we will see that Britomart is synonymous with the great virginal Queen Elizabeth; thus, with Apuleius’ uniting of mythologies, Britomart-Elizabeth is synonymous with Isis-Venus, making her not only all-powerful, but also divine.

### **“Iphis and Isis” in the *Metamorphoses***

As we shall see in the discussion of Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, the Roman poet Ovid also has his own version of Isis in his *Metamorphoses*. In Book IX, the goddess is identified with Io, a mortal woman said in Greek mythology to be a consort of Zeus. She appears to Telethusa, a pregnant peasant woman whose husband has ordered the death of their infant child if it isn’t a boy. In response to her prayers, Isis visits her and promises to protect the child if Telethusa

ignores her husband's commandment; Telethusa agrees. Shortly after the dream, Telethusa gives birth to a healthy daughter whom she disguises as a boy, giving her the unisex name "Iphis." The child is raised as a boy, and Isis makes good her promise to protect the child.

The tale of Iphis and Isis in the *Metamorphoses* is another example of the benevolence and positive feminine power of the goddess which Spenser draws upon in his representation of Isis in Book V. "Iphis and Isis" illustrates the image of the goddess as what would become a Virgin Mary figure who intervenes in the lives of mankind through equity, kindness and love.

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is a compendium of Renaissance learning; one of the less remarked elements is Egypt and its connection to the gender politics of Books III and V. Through the use of the Exodus story, the Busiris myth, the *Hieroglyphica* and secondary sources on the goddess Isis, I shall now illustrate how the opposing representations of Ancient Egypt reflect the transition of the normative gender structure of the English Renaissance.

## CHAPTER 2

## BOOK III

As we have seen, writers were fascinated with Ancient Egypt. During the English Renaissance, the opposing views of Egypt evoked complex interpretations of both the good legend, and what could be called the “Black legend”<sup>4</sup> of Egypt.

The *Faerie Queene* explores private and public responsibility as well as the shifting climate of gender. Spenser’s various knights are all active in both the private and public sphere and must deal, in turn, with various monsters and quests that correlate to the moral issues of day to day life. Each book of the poem is dedicated to the adventure and quest of a virtue personified by a knight who is sent on a specific quest by the Fairy Queen, Gloriana. Despite borrowing from such influential writers as Ariosto, Plutarch, and Ovid, the *Faerie Queene* is the first distinctly English epic poem. Ancient Egypt appears in the poem in both its good and evil incarnations and provides a way to explore both sexual and political conflict. In Books III and V of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses dichotomous images of Egypt and Egyptian myths to complicate the construction of gender, providing him with a way to challenge the normative gender roles of his culture.

### **Book III, Egypt and Gender**

Book III tells the story of Britomart, the knight of chastity. Chastity for Renaissance Protestants was more than simple virginity. The Medieval church emphasized chastity as virginity through their celibate clergy, despite the elevation of marriage as a sacrament. This

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<sup>4</sup> Augustyn, Adam, et al., refers to the “Black Legend” of Spain which consisted of negative imagery associated with Spain, its people and Catholicism. The “Black Legend” was particularly popular amongst Non-Spanish Protestant historians whose anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish propaganda centered around King Phillip II (1527-1598) and his anti-Protestant policies.

confusion “left chastity as a virtue largely undefined except by specifying limits” (Roche 270).

Protestant chastity in the sixteenth century was described by John Bodenham in 1597 as

the beauty of the soule and purity of life, which is onely possessed of those who keepe their bodies cleare and undefiled and it consisteth eyther in sincere virginity, or in faithful matrimony” (qtd. in Roche 270).

The prevailing Catholic view was that celibacy was the purest state of existence for humanity.

The clergy were all expected to abstain from sexual intimacy; the sacrament of ordination precluded the sacrament of marriage. However, in Protestant churches, a chaste marriage, where both parties were virginal and pure upon consummation, was an acceptable alternative to a celibate life, providing equal purity in the eyes of the Lord.

The courtly love allegory of Book III plays into the sexual politics expressed through the images of Egypt that emerge throughout Britomart’s narrative. In the courtly love allegory, Busirane’s assault on Amoret is the assault on married love by base desire. Busirane is an evil male magician and is also linked with the pharaoh of the Exodus narrative and the evil Busiris of Greek mythology. These connections are not accidental. Spenser’s allegories imply a deeper level of gender politics that he characterizes using Egyptian imagery and allusions.

The Egyptian allusions in Book III begin in canto two, before Britomart embarks on her quest to find her destined husband, Artegall. Britomart is the daughter of King Ryence who is given a “looking glasse/right wondrously aguiz’d” by the wizard of Arthurian legend, Merlin (ii 18). The looking glass is described as a mirror, which seems to then transform into a spherical “world of glas” that allows the individual to see “What ever thing was in the world contaynd/Betwixt the lowest earth and heavens hight” (ii 19). Spenser compares Merlin’s

looking glass to an imaginary tower built by “Ptolomae,” or Ptolemy, an astronomer from the second century AD as a prison for his beloved, Phao;<sup>5</sup>

Who wonders not, that reades so wondrous worke?  
 But who does wonder, that has red the Towre,  
 Wherein th’Aegyptian Phao long did lurke  
 From all men’s vew, that none might her discovre,  
 Yet she might all men vew out of her bowre?  
 Great Ptolomae it for his lemans sake  
 Ybuided all of glasse, by Magicke powre,  
 And it also impregnable did make;  
 Yet when his love was false, he with a peaze it break (ii 20).

Phao is a derivative of the verb “to shine” in Greek,<sup>6</sup> thus Spenser’s imagined relationship between Phao and Ptolemy references his experimentation with light. The Ptolemy to whom Spenser refers was a second century Greek astrologer from Alexandria who “experimented with optics to explore the properties of light” (Stephens 37). Phao was his “light” and he builds her a glass tower where she can see all the men in the world, but they cannot see her in return.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Ptolemy’s building of this impressive, impregnable tower where he locks his beloved away, she still slips through his fingers. Their love becomes “false” and, despite the strength of the tower, Ptolemy shatters it with a “peaze” (blow) which crashes it to the ground.

Spenser’s creation of this tower built to house a woman immediately intertwines Egyptian imagery and complex gender relations with Britomart’s story. He identifies Phao as “th’Aegyptian” and tells us that she “long did lurke/ From all men’s vew, that her might none discovre/Yet she might all men vew out of her bowre” (ii 20). Phao is hidden behind the glass of

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<sup>5</sup> While the Ptolemy that Spenser refers to is historical, his lover Phao appears to be Spenser’s invention. There is no reference to her in history.

<sup>6</sup> In a footnote in her edition of *The Faerie Queene*; Book III, Dorothy Stephens: “her name comes from the Greek verb meaning “to shine” (36)

<sup>7</sup> In a footnote in her edition of *The Faerie Queene*; Book III Dorothy Stephens notes that, “Spenser imagines that Ptolemy had a beloved, Phao, for whom he built a glass tower -- the magical optics of which allowed her to see out while preventing others from seeing in” (37)

the tower, invisible but able to see out. Similarly, Britomart's female form is hidden from the world behind her armor while she is simultaneously able to see out. We know that, ultimately, Ptolemy shatters the tower because "his love was false" (ii 20) but the true nature of her imprisonment is completely unknown; is it voluntary or involuntary? Is it to keep her safe or is he keeping her against her will out of a warped sense of love? Phao's tower offers an array of interpretations.

In the context of Britomart's story, Phao's tower represents the oppressive patriarchal social structure of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Phao is objectified. Ptolemy builds the tower to hide her from "all men's view" which suggests the social limitations placed on women. Ptolemy eventually shatters the tower, whether the results for Phao are good or bad. In her story, Britomart too must shatter the feminine role that contained her, though she too will find herself facing a complex world of gender relations.

Just as Spenser uses Phao to introduce the constraints on femininity we will see in Britomart, he uses Ptolemy to introduce the oppressive masculinity of Busirane. Ptolemy and Busirane both imprison women. We are never explicitly told that Phao is bad or the reverse. However, the image of the woman imprisoned by a man who is then freed from the outside implies that the pair are there as archetypal prototypes for Britomart and Busirane. The Ptolemy/Phao relationship is a forerunner of the relationships between Busirane, Britomart and Amoret in cantos xi and xii. Viewed in this way, Phao and Amoret are both subjugated by oppressive, hypermasculine men who seek to maintain control over them both physically and sexually. Busirane and Ptolemy are themselves the oppressive patriarchal tyranny of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The brief description of Phao and the tower foreshadows the House of Busirane where

the androgynous Britomart rescues Amoret –traditional womanhood– from the oppressive masculine tyranny of the magician Busirane.

### The Busiris and Exodus Allegory

Busiris was a tyrannical ruler of Egypt who practiced human sacrifice to appease Zeus. Busiris is the son of Poseidon and Lysianassa, the daughter of Epaphus, son of Zeus and Io. Epaphus was raised in Egypt where he eventually became pharaoh.

During his reign, Egypt goes through a severe famine that lasts for nine years. In the ninth year, a seer from Cyprus named Phrasius appears in Egypt and tells Busiris that he could stop the famine if he agrees to annually sacrifice foreigners to Zeus. The Roman poet Ovid relates his version of the myth in Book I of his *Ars Amatoria*,

Egypt is said to have lacked the rains that bless its fields, and to have been parched for nine years, when Thrasius approached Busiris, and showed that Jove could be propitiated by the outpoured blood of a stranger. To him said Busiris, “Thou shalt be Jove’s first victim, and as a stranger give water unto Egypt.” Phalaris too roasted in his fierce bull the limbs of Perillus; its maker first made trial of his ill-omened work. Both were just; for there is no juster law than that contrivers of death should perish by their own contrivances (57).

During his labors, Heracles arrives in Egypt, where he is immediately seized and brought to the altar for slaughter. Heracles eventually overpowers his captors and slays Busiris and his son. The sacrificial offerings to Zeus in the Busiris myth are also echoed in the ritualistic environment of Busirane’s house. Busirane abducts Amoret during the wedding feast where for “Seven moneths he so her kept in bitter smart/ Because his sinfull lust she would not serve” (IV.i 4). During her internment at the House of Busirane, the evil magician exerts his masculinity over Amoret by casting numerous spells to force her into sexual submission.

Busirane's strange rituals and incantations are offered to the sinister god of lust, Cupid. Each night, Amoret is paraded around in a sickly procession of courtiers -- each correlating to a danger related to lust, control, and sexual power. The parade can be interpreted as a ritual to force Amoret's sexual submission to Busirane. His spells wreak havoc on her heart, which has a "wide wound" that Busirane has "Entrenched deep with knyfe accursed keene" (xii 20). Busirane seeks not only to possess Amoret's physical body, but her entire being. Spenser uses Busirane's abduction of Amoret to illustrate the assault of masculine tyranny on women; he is not satisfied with simply hiding her away in his home, he must attain complete control over her entire being to find satisfaction.

Ritualistic elements are scattered throughout canto xii. Just before Britomart rescues Amoret from his clutches, Busirane is seen "Figuring straunge characters of his art/And with living blood he those characters wrate/Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart" (xii 31). The "straunge characters" recall a non-Egyptian perception of hieroglyphics which, in Greek, literally translated to "sacred carvings."<sup>8</sup> Busirane's sacred carvings drawn with the blood of Amoret's heart further connect the ritualistic elements of his house to human sacrifice. He is offering blood and pagan prayer to Cupid; Amoret's blood is the ink he's using to write the spell that is torturously killing her.

Douglass Brooks Davies has suggested that Busiris is the same pharaoh from the Exodus story. Davies asserts that "The pharaoh from whom the Israelites escaped was understood to be Busiris" and that Busiris is the "prototype for the tyrannical Busirane" (234). In the same way that Moses delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt, so too does Britomart seek to deliver

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Etymology of "Hieroglyphics" from Greek

Amoret. The allusion to the Exodus story is strengthened when Britomart enters the House of Busirane. Spenser writes,

Therewith resolv'd to prove her utmost might,  
Her ample shield she threw before her face,  
And her swords point directing forward right,  
Assayld the flame, the which efstoones gave place,  
And did it selfe divide with equall space,  
That through she passed, as thonder bold  
Perceth the yielding ayre, and doth displace  
The soring clouds into sad showres ymolt (xi 25).

Britomart throws her shield to part the flames that guard the entrance to the castle, just as Moses raised his hands to part the Red Sea in Exodus; “And Moses stretched forth his hand upon the Sea, and the Lord caused the Sea to run back by a strong East wind all the night, and made the Sea dry land, for the waters were divided” (14:21). Spenser inverts the biblical story by placing Britomart on par with Moses and Amoret on par with the entire nation of Israel. He takes hyper-masculine Moses and juxtaposes him with androgynous Britomart, further highlighting her own masculine traits. The allegory that lies at the heart of this inversion is the shifting structure of gender. In Book III, Britomart alone as the female knight of chastity is the only one capable of rescuing Amoret from the oppressive tyrannical masculinity of Busirane; if a male hero rescued Amoret from Busirane, the normative gender structure would remain intact – man alone can rescue woman – thus perpetuating the notion that women need male protection and guidance which aligns with patriarchal ideology. By connecting Moses and Britomart while simultaneously inverting the gender structure of the hero, Spenser effectively illustrates the shattering of traditional gender roles.

### **The Parade Ritual and Tyrannical Masculinity**

Spenser describes Doubt, Daunger, Feare, Hope, Dissemblance, Suspect, Griefe, Fury, Displeasure and Pleasaunce before introducing the abducted Amoret. She is led into the chamber

between Despight and Cruelty. Spenser describes Amoret as having “Deathes own ymage figurd in her face” and her “brest all naked, as net yvory” with a “wide wound therein/Entrenched deep with knyfe accursed keene” (XII ixx-xxi). As Britomart watches, the triumphant god Cupid comes into the room followed by the climax of lust: Reproach, Repentance and Shame.

This strange ritual highlights the ideas of masculine oppression and tyranny. Busiris slaughtered foreigners to appease a god. He performed a sacrificial ceremony to please Zeus in order to win the favor of the god and keep famine at bay. Busirane’s abduction and attempted sacrifice of Amoret echoes the Greek myth. Busirane and Busiris are subjects of a masculine god, a relationship they maintain to exert their own power and control over others. They are both cruelly domineering, but Spenser introduces Britomart in a Moses role; a woman who can thwart the masculine tyranny which Spenser associates with Egypt. Spenser’s use of Egyptian imagery in Book III is not simply bad, but rather identified with tyrannical men.

Busirane represents the evil Egypt of biblical tradition as well as the cruel, villainous Busirane of Greek mythology, both of whom can only be defeated by individuals aided by a deity. In Heracles’ case, it was his divine birth that aided him in the many tasks set for him; in Moses’, he had the support of the Hebrew God. While Spenser’s Britomart is not explicitly imbued with power from God, she is his embodiment of chastity. Since chastity is a Christian virtue, Britomart has the power of Christian God behind her, just as Moses had the power of the Hebrew God. Chastity in Spenser’s time was a woman’s virtue. It is right, then, that Britomart, the female knight of chastity, is the only one capable of defeating the oppressive masculine tyranny that Busirane represents.

The Egyptian imagery throughout Book V further complicates the structure of gender in *The Faerie Queene*. Britomart’s androgyny swings from predominantly masculine to

predominantly feminine. Spenser unites Britomart with the non-virginal goddess Isis, proposing a new understanding of the virtue of chastity. Where Book III draws on negative Egyptian imagery and myth to illustrate tyrannous masculinity, Book V uses Isis to emphasize positive feminine power.

## CHAPTER 3

## BOOK V; EQUITY, BENEVOLENCE, AND ISIS

Book V of the *Faerie Queene* follows the story of Artegall, Spenser's embodiment of justice. The first half of the book explores the various ways that justice plays a significant role in life while the latter half of the book "explores the limitations of law and the necessity of its being supplemented by equity" (O'Connell 281). Law would be unduly harsh and often unfair without equity to assist it. Equity, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "The recourse to general principles of justice (the *naturalis æquitas* of Roman jurists) to correct or supplement the provisions of the law" (II 3). This definition of equity as a means of supplementing "provisions of the law" was established between 1528-1530 and reinforced again in 1588 while Spenser was working on the *Faerie Queene*. This specific definition looks to larger principles of fairness which leads to a softening of common law. In the *Faerie Queene*, the equity that Isis represents then is not just fairness, but rather a universal justice that softens the rigidity of the law. Spenser identifies equity in canto vii with the Egyptian goddess Isis. The positive, venerated view of the goddess stems from several ancient texts that Spenser would have been familiar with.

**Benevolent, Venerated Isis in Ancient Literature**

In Plutarch's version of the myth of Isis and Osiris, Typhon grows jealous of Osiris, slays him and attempts to seize the throne of Egypt for himself, ousting his nephew Horus. Isis decides to intervene on her son's behalf and captures Typhon, providing her with the opportunity to slay him which she decides not to do. Plutarch writes:

Now, the battle, they relate, lasted many days and Horus prevailed. Isis, however, to whom Typhon was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go. Horus could not endure with this equanimity; he laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head (19).

Isis' refusal to slay her brother demonstrates her equity. Strictly retributive justice would occur if she took Typhon's life as recompense for Osiris', leading her to destroy the person who so destroyed her beloved. Instead, Isis is motivated by a more merciful, expansive sense of what is right. Isis' mercy allows Horus to fulfill his destiny as the rightful heir to the Egyptian throne. Isis' fairness earns her the ire of her son. Horus' attempt to remove his mother's "royal diadem" is significant as the diadem is the symbol of her power. In his attempt to take it from her, Horus is symbolically saying that she is unfit to remain Queen of Egypt. Isis endures her son's anger because Typhon's death, however cathartic it would be for her, is unjust; "Isis, however, to whom Typhon was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go" (19). Isis' refusal to intervene between Horus and Typhon, even after Typhon has brutally murdered her husband, makes her even more fit to rule Egypt. She is able to separate her feelings and allows Horus to triumph over his uncle without help.

As previously discussed, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* recounts the story of the peasant Ligdus and his wife Telethusa whose infant daughter Iphis is raised as a boy to hide her true gender. Before Iphis' birth, the goddess Io,<sup>9</sup> who is identified with Isis, promises to protect the child so long as Telethusa agrees to raise her regardless of her gender. Iphis eventually becomes betrothed to the beautiful Ianthe. The pair fall in love, but Iphis, knowing she is a girl, is unable to cope with the burden of this union that can never be: as she states that "Cows do not burn for cows, nor mares for mares" (IX 1054). On the eve of the wedding, Iphis and her mother pray to Isis saying, "Oh holy Isis . . . deliver us, I pray you, from our fear" (IX 1116). Isis responds,

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<sup>9</sup> Norton Anthology of World Literature Shorter Fourth Edition. In this version of "Iphis and Isis" in the *Metamorphoses*, Martin writes that Io is "Identified with the Egyptian Isis, goddess of fertility, marriage, and maternity, whose cult was widespread in the Roman world" (604).

doing as she claimed she would if the child were raised and cared for, and she transforms Iphis into a man as she makes her way to her wedding with Ianthe.

Isis is a powerful symbol of femininity. She is tied to maternity, fertility and marriage in Egyptian tradition which translates well in Ovid's tale of Iphis' metamorphosis. Isis stands alone as the equitable judge and jury. She exudes the same power she is given in Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*; just as Isis alone had the power to rebirth the great male god Osiris, only Isis can transform young Iphis into a man, allowing her to wed her beloved Ianthe. Isis stands as a symbol of powerful and benevolent femininity. She is the gentle, female embodiment of equity that tempers cruel, masculine justice which Spenser explores throughout Book V of *The Faerie Queene*.

As we saw in the introduction to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* briefly quoted at the beginning of this paper, the novel provides another example of Isis' equity and feminine power. The story follows the protagonist, Lucius. Each book in the novel follows a different misadventure that Lucius undergoes, eventually culminating in his appeal to an unnamed goddess to return him back into a man:

by whatever name, in whatever manner, in whatever guise it is permitted to call on you: do you now at last help me in this extremity of tribulation, do you rebuild my wreck of my fortunes, do you grant peace and respite from the cruel misfortunes I have endured: let there be an end of toils, an end of perils. . ." (171).

Lucius knows not which goddess will answer him – if any – but makes a point of emphasizing that he will make his prayer “in the silent secrecy of night” (170), implying that the moon would be up: this directly correlates to the goddess Isis, who was believed to be the moon to her

husband Osiris' sun.<sup>10</sup> Apuleius' allusion to Isis is confirmed when she finally appears and tells Lucius

I, mother of the universe, mistress of all the elements, first born of the ages, highest of the gods, queen of the shades, first of those who dwell in heaven, representing in one shape all the gods and goddesses. . . The Phrygians, first born of mankind, call me the Pressinuntian Mother of the gods; the native Athenians the Cecropian Minerva; the island dwelling Cypriots Paphian Venus; the archer Cretans Dictynnan Diana; the triple tongued Sicilians Stygian Proserpine; the Ancient Eleusians Actaeon Ceres; some call me Juno, some Bellona, others Hecate, others Rhamnusia; but both races of Ethiopians, those whom the setting sun shines, and the Egyptians who excel in Ancient learning, honor me with the worship which is truly mine and call me by my true name; Queen Isis (172).

Isis is described as the all-mother of the universe. She is “first born of the ages, highest of the gods” who is “representing in one shape all gods and goddesses,” (172). Isis is made into an androgyne like Britomart in *The Faerie Queene*. She is “all gods and goddesses” but comes to aid Lucius in the powerful female form of the Egyptian Isis. She doesn't barter with him or tell him he must offer her something before she aids him but instead she comes to him and tells him she will help and only *after* she has fulfilled her promise is he expected to devote himself to her. Isis intervenes in the lives of mortals purely out of the desire to help them. She assists Lucius in his time of need just as she does Telethusa and Iphis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Spenser builds upon this benevolent image of the goddess with Britomart in Isis church.

### **The Statue of Isis, the *Hieroglyphica* and the Iconography of Book V**

There are several character allegories throughout Book V that must be understood to follow the Egyptian iconography. Spenser writes

Well therefore did the antique world invent,  
That Justice was a God of souveraine grace,  
And altars unto him, and temples lent,  
And heavenly honours in the highest place;  
Calling him great Osyris, of the race

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<sup>10</sup> R.E. Witt “There were just two Egyptian gods who were both eternal and primeval, Osiris the sun and Isis the moon” (38).

Of th'old Aegyptian Kings, that whylome were;  
 With fayned colors shading a true case;  
 For that Osyris, whilst he lived here,  
 The justest man alive, and truest did appeare (vii 2).

The Egyptian god Osiris is identified with justice. Osiris becomes synonymous with justice, like Artegall. Osiris and Artegall, then, are fused together – each represents raw justice. Spenser then discusses Isis. He writes

His wife was Isis, whom they likewise made  
 A Goddess of great power and soverrainty,  
 And in her person cunningly did shade  
 That part of Justice, which is Equity (vii 3).

Isis becomes synonymous with equity. She is a moderator to the justice her husband doles out. Just as Osiris and Artegall become synonymous, so too do Isis and Britomart. Each is there to balance the scales of justice with their destined partner. Osiris and Artegall also represent masculinity while Britomart and Isis represent virtuous femininity.

Britomart's visit to Isis church shifts her quest from the search for her destined partner to the triumph of positive female power over negative female power. After her visit, Britomart also transforms from being primarily represented as an androgyne to being overtly feminine. The goddess visits Britomart in a dream and shows her a future that must come to pass. Britomart's time in the temple hearkens back to the cult of Isis that pervaded ancient Greece and Rome. The goddess' devotees bring Britomart to Isis' statue which is situated in the center of the shrine and tended both day and night.

Isis' statue is described as “framed all of silver fine/So well as could with cunning hand be wrought/And clothed all in garments made of line/Hemd all about with fringe of silver twine” (vii 6). She has a “Crowne of gold” on her head to “shew that she had powre in things divine” and that “at her feete a Crocodile was rold/That with his wreathed taile her middle did enfold”

(vii 6). Isis is also depicted with a “slender wand.” The goddess’ representation is stately and divine. To Horapollo, humanity looks to the sky for divine guidance and each star can be thought to represent a different deity. Isis is the brightest of the stars,<sup>11</sup> outshining the others as well as guiding humanity who watch her from below. In the same way, Spenser places Isis on a pedestal in his Isis Church where the goddess can watch and guide the devout.

### The Crocodile

The crocodile wrapped around the statue of Isis represents both positive and negative masculinity that only the goddess herself can temper. Spenser tells us that Isis is standing with “One foote. . . upon the Crocodile” which represents her power to “suppresse” both “forged guile/And open force” (vii 7). The crocodile also represents masculinity in its dangerous and procreative iterations. Horapollo writes “When they wish to represent a plunderer, a fecund man, a madman, they draw a crocodile, because it is a fecund<sup>12</sup> and has many offspring and raves” (I 67). The fecundity of the crocodile as it coils itself around the feminine Isis represents its procreative masculinity in contrast to her fertile and maternal femininity; women are the repository of men’s life-giving seed. Isis’s stance “upon the crocodile” represents her power and control over masculine lust.

According to Horapollo, the crocodile’s mouth is used to represent an eating man and its tail is also used to signify strength and courage.<sup>13</sup> The open mouth can also be thought of as a mouth that raves, a representation of the “madman” referenced by Horapollo in I 67. The

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<sup>11</sup> Nilous, Horapollo. *Hieroglyphica*, “Isis is a star, called Sothis by the Egyptians, by the Greeks the Dog-Star, which appears to rule over the other stars” (I 3).

<sup>12</sup> The Boas translation uses “fecund” as a noun. The Oxford English Dictionary does not recognize this.

<sup>13</sup> II 80 “A Man Eating; When they wish to indicate a man eating, they draw a crocodile with its mouth open.” I 70 “Shadows; To express shadows, they draw the tail of a crocodile, since the crocodile does not produce disappearance and destruction except by striking its victim and reducing it to immobility with its tail. For in this part of it lie the crocodile’s strength and courage.”

“courage and strength” of the tail connect to fecundity. The tail itself, as a single characteristic, can represent a phallus, simply by shape. It also hearkens to the power of the crocodile as an apex predator because only the strongest in the animal kingdom pass on their genes; the crocodile who is able to have many offspring must be powerful in order to survive. The “plunderer” must also have strength to overcome its enemies (and victims) as well as courage; thus, these various aspects of the crocodile connect back to Horapollo’s initial explanation of it as a “plunderer, fecund and madman.” Spenser uses these images of the crocodile and applies them to the statue of Isis and Britomart’s dream vision at its feet.

Britomart is welcomed into Isis Church and “There did the warlike Maide her selfe repose/Under the wings of Isis all that night,” where she is visited by the goddess in a dream that “did close implie/The course of all her fortune and prosperitie” (vii 12). Britomart dreams of herself “doing sacrificize to Isis” dressed as a priest of Isis before slowly becoming indistinguishable from the goddess by donning a “Crowne of gold” and becoming “adorn’d with gems and jewels manifold” (vii 13), like the statue. The temple where Isis resides (and Britomart visits) is racked by a wind that forces the “holy fire” on the altar to crash onto the floor, setting the temple on fire. In an instant, the sleeping crocodile at Isis’ feet awakens and devours the flames and the storm that threaten the temple. The crocodile then turns its attention to Britomart and “He gan to threaten her likewise to eat/But that Goddesse with her rod him backe did beat” (vii 15). The crocodile submissively accepts Isis-Britomart’s subjugation and becomes friendly -- with unexpected and extraordinary results.

As the crocodile simultaneously represents Artegall, justice and Osiris, the impregnation of Isis implies that “Isis and Osiris as fertilizing forces reach full sexual equality” (Witt 44).

Equalizing their roles in justice as well as procreation places the two on par with one another, effectively morphing them into an androgynous being.

This interpretation of the crocodile also ties into Apetekar's assertion that the Crocodile in Britomart's dream is attempting to perform "a sexual attack" (88), implying that Artegall-crocodile is a threat to chastity that the goddess of marriage and love, Isis, must subdue in order to guide Britomart to her destiny - destiny which is symbolized by the birth of the lion. Isis was the "upholder of the marriage covenant" (Witt 41), so her subjugation of the lustful crocodile is representative of the sacred marriage bond. In "wedding" the savage Artegall-Crocodile, Isis-Britomart removes the threat that Aptekar claims the crocodile poses. The attempt of the crocodile to devour Britomart also represents its "mad" persona. It is rigid justice raving against and trying to destroy equity. In this context, Isis' reprimand of the crocodile demonstrates the need of justice for equity.

When Spenser describes the statue of Isis, he makes a point of saying that the crocodile's body is beneath the goddess' feet, but its tail is wrapped around her midsection. This description of the crocodile and Isis paints the beast in a positive light. According to Horapollo, the tail of the crocodile "does not produce disappearance and destruction except by striking its victim and reducing it to immobility with its tail. For in this part of it lies the crocodile's strength and courage" (I 70). The crocodile-Artegall-justice is coiled around its mistress, Isis-Britomart-equity, ready to use its tail to enforce the justice of Faerie Land. The tail is where the crocodile holds all of its "strength and courage" and this is the part of its body that wraps around the goddess' abdomen "That with his wreathed taile her middle did enfold" (vii 6). Isis' "middle " is, of course, representative of her womb. The crocodile's tail protecting her middle foretells the birth of the lion in Britomart's vision as the lion has traditionally symbolized courage, strength

and regality. Spenser is using the crocodile to simultaneously represent procreation and justice, while also symbolizing Osiris who, along with his sister-wife Isis, was the curator of justice in Egyptian mythology. The beast is no longer the violent, beastly “fecund,” but is now the arbiter of justice, the bringer of life and a protector.

The statue of Isis must be split into two distinct images to fully understand the allegory. The image of Isis with the crocodile underfoot implies that justice is something that needs to be quelled by Isis-equity or else it will wreak havoc. In the dream, Britomart is almost devoured by the crocodile, but Isis stops it, bringing it to heel at her feet. The second half of the image represented by the statue is that of the tail wrapped around the goddess. The crocodile’s head and its tail represent two separate ideas; one is the pillager, the “unrestrained lust” that Aptekar refers to in *Icons of Justice*. In the same sense, the tail of the crocodile represents a positive, protective, and fertile iteration of the beast that must be present to offset the negative persona under the goddess’ foot. In this way, Artegall becomes both a negative and positive synonym of the crocodile just as Britomart is a synonym for Isis.

### **Female Power; Britomart vs. Radigund**

Britomart, having become synonymous with Isis, is the embodiment of equity and stands as an image of positive female power. After she leaves Isis Church, she faces the Amazonian Queen Radigund to save Artegall who has been enslaved by Radigund after his defeat in Canto v<sup>14</sup>. Britomart and Radigund are equally matched. Spenser writes,

Full fiercely layde the Amazon about,  
 And dealt her blowes unmercifully sore:  
 Which Britomart withstood with courage stout,  
 And them repaide againe with double more.  
 So long they fought, that all the grassie flore  
 Was fild with bloud, which from their sides did flow,  
 And gushed through their armes, that all in gore

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<sup>14</sup> Book V.v, stanzas 12 -26

They trode, and on the ground their lives did strow,  
Like fruitless seede, of which untimely death should grow (V.vii 31).

The women are both fierce androgyne warriors; however, Britomart represents a positive image of powerful womanhood because of her union with Artegall. Radigund is guile, a feminine trait shared by villainous women like the Greek Medea who delights in the manipulation and destruction of her former spouse by poisoning his bride and murdering their shared progeny. Radigund is unchecked female power; she seeks to suppress masculinity in all forms as exemplified by forcing her captive male knights “to be dight/In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame” (V.v). She dresses them as women to strip them of their dignity and their masculinity. By contrast, Britomart seeks to restore it.

Britomart’s connection to Isis identifies her as a positive, powerful female figure. As we have seen, Spenser uses Egyptian imagery to denote positive and negative as well as masculine and feminine. In this way, Britomart’s synonymy with Isis marks her as a positive female force capable of triumphing over her foil, Radigund, whose very existence threatens the delicate balance of gender politics within *The Faerie Queene*. Unlike Radigund, Britomart never claims the throne for herself. She seeks only to be united with Artegall just as Isis never claims the throne of Egypt for herself, but rather seeks to continue acting as her Osiris’ right hand above as he operates below.

### **The Lion**

In Britomart’s dream, the union of Isis and Osiris, Britomart and Artegall leads to the birth of a lion, at which point Britomart wakes up. Britomart speaks to one of the priests and asks for an interpretation of the dream as she is disturbed by its ambiguity. He explains to her that after she marries Artegall, she “a sonne to him shalt beare/That lion-like shall shew his powre extreme” (vii 23). The lion “is the traditional royal beast” (Aptekar 62) and the lion “begotten by

Artegall and Britomart in the vision in the temple of Isis" represents the British crown, as Spenser has "firmly established Britomart to be the royal British ancestress" to Queen Elizabeth (Aptekar 62). The lion's prominence as the king of beasts make it a natural symbol for royal power and strength for "he is the king of beasts as the king is the prince of men" (Aptekar 62).

Unsurprisingly, the lion also has a place in Egyptian mythology. Horapollo writes that "they place lions under the throne of Horus, showing the symbol of the beast beside the god" (I 17). Horus is the first son of Isis and Osiris. It is through battle with his uncle, Typhon-Set, that the young Horus ascends the throne of Egypt after his father's death. The lion referenced here represents spiritedness which correlates to strength and power. The lion sits at the feet of the god Horus, ready to spring into action. Horus, then, is the rightful ruler of Egypt just as Britomart and Artégall's son, the lion, is the rightful ruler of Britain. The lion in the *Hieroglyphica* is a regal beast that protects the son of the true and beloved god, Osiris. Similarly, the lion-son of Artégall and Britomart represents the British monarchy which helps protect and perpetuate Protestant Christianity.

The lion is not gendered; however, the priest of Isis refers to it as Britomart's future "sonne." Britomart's androgyny doesn't threaten the succession, unlike Queen Radigund who would rather emasculate and destroy than perpetuate the continuation of masculinity. More fully discussed in the conclusion, the reign of Elizabeth I was fraught with fear concerning the Queen's gender. There was much speculation about the ability of a woman to rule; however, Spenser's blending of masculine and feminine traits and his inversion of traditional gender roles in the Isis-Osiris/Britomart-Artégall allegory in Book V implies that gender makes no difference in one's ability to lead. The lion, representative of the British monarchy, is not assigned a gender by Spenser. It is rather an asexual being that embodies the fierceness, justice, and equity of both

divine parents -- Isis and Osiris. This allusion also implies that justice and equity are the progenitors of the monarchy itself. Elizabeth I, then, is the direct descendent of not only the divine Isis and Osiris, but of justice and equity. The British crown is to be feared, respected, and venerated as the supreme arbiter of equitable justice -- regardless of gender.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

The *Faerie Queene* allegory extends to the British crown as well as Spenser's own life. Queen Elizabeth I, who came to the throne after the death of her half-sister Mary Tudor, was generally seen as a benevolent, powerful and unmarried female ruler - the first of her kind. Elizabeth never married, never produced an heir, and took it upon herself to act as both masculine and feminine ruler. In a famous speech made to British troops at Tilbury on August 9, 1588, Elizabeth acknowledged her dichotomous gender roles, saying "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too."<sup>15</sup> The representation of Elizabeth as embodying both masculine and feminine traits is allegorized in Books III and V of the *Faerie Queene* through Britomart. At the very beginning of Britomart's story in III.ii, Spenser introduces the looking glass given to her father by the wizard Merlin. According to Dorothy Stephens, "Queen Elizabeth regularly consulted an astrologer, John Dee, who used a crystal ball" (36). The representation of the looking glass as a mirror and a crystal ball, then, directly connects Britomart to Queen Elizabeth. Throughout her story, Britomart dresses and lives as a man, but beneath she has the body of a woman which she guards from everyone except from the crocodile who represents her true mate -- Artegall. Spenser's allegorical connection to Queen Elizabeth is further illustrated by the vision Britomart receives from the goddess Isis in V. vii 12-16. This vision culminates in the birth of a lion which is explained to Britomart as a "sonne" she bears to Artegall, who is "Lion-like" (V.vii 22). This lion-child is the origin of the British monarchy. Britomart and Artegall, Equity and Justice, are the progenitors of the British crown from which Elizabeth derives. Britomart's masculine and

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<sup>15</sup> Queen Elizabeth's Speech to the troops at Tilbury, July 1588. *The British Library*

feminine traits are representative of Elizabeth as much as Elizabeth herself embodies them. Spenser seamlessly interconnects the two ideas, each providing strength to the other.

In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser also calls upon his own experiences, which he allegorizes through various characters in the poem. The crocodile in Book V represents not only Artegall and justice, but also Osiris. Spenser writes that “For that same crocodile Osyris is/That under Isis feete doth sleepe forever” (vii 22). Isis and Osiris were venerated above all other gods. Osiris embodies justice, taking his place as the judge of the dead in the underworld after his resurrection, and Isis embodies equity, which leads her to meddle in the affairs of humans and benevolently aid them. The predominant representation of the crocodile in the *Hieroglyphica* refers to it as a “plunderer, a fecund, a madman” (I 67), all of which are evident in Britomart’s dream-vision. The Artegall-crocodile, while representing justice, also embodies negative connotations of justice. As Spenser saw with the suppression of the rebellions in Ireland, “justice” can oftentimes be bloody and appear more as “plundering.” Artegall, as the enforcer of the Queen’s justice, must do what is needed to maintain peace and order throughout the kingdom and that does include plundering or pillaging enemies. The correlation between Artegall and the crocodile, then, could possibly allude to reservations Spenser had about the violence in the Elizabethan justice system. Spenser served as secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton who was sent to quell the Desmond Rebellions on behalf of Elizabeth I. C.S. Lewis, Clifford Davidson and others have suggested that Spenser’s writings show a fondness for Lord Grey and support the harsh and bloody method practiced against the Irish. It has been asserted that there is a connection between Artegall, Lord Grey and the Crocodile which seems to complicate Spenser’s feelings towards the man and his military methods. The crocodile has more negative

connotations than positive ones, and I think it is safe to assume that the crocodile's representation as a plunderer can be and is applied to both Artegall and Lord Grey.

The *Faerie Queene* incorporates various elements of the Elizabethan world into a complex, cohesive story. Spenser's use of Egypt to represent positive and negative paved the way for other writers like John Milton and William Shakespeare. Early in his poetic career, Milton dismisses the gods of Egypt among the other false deities silenced by the birth of Christ, as seen in his "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity." 15 years later, however, he puts them to very different, positive use in the *Areopagitica*. "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" uses the Egyptian deities to represent the cleansing of evil from the world when Jesus is born in Bethlehem;

And sullen Moloch, fled,  
 Hath left in shadows dread  
 His burning idol all of blackest hue:  
 In vain with cymbals' ring  
 They call the grisly king,  
     In dismal dance about the furnace blue.  
 The brutish gods of Nile as fast,  
 Isis and Orus, and the dog Anubis, haste.

Nor is Osiris seen  
 In Memphian grove or green,  
 Trampling the unshower'd grass with lowings loud;  
 Nor can he be at rest  
 Within his sacred chest,  
     Naught but profoundest Hell can be his shroud:  
 In vain with timbrel'd anthems dark  
 The sable-stoled sorcerers bear his worshipp'd ark (Milton 207-222).

Moloch was a Canaanite deity referenced in the bible prior to the introduction of Christianity. The pagan deity is forced to flee along with the Egyptian deities Isis, Orus, Anubis and Osiris whom Milton describes as "brutish." Milton proclaims that "Naught but profoundest Hell" can await these pagan idols since Christ has come. Milton's reference to the Egyptian gods is

negative -- they are brutish and evil which is why they will end up in hell. His representation of the Egyptian religion aligns with the images of pre-Christian paganism discussed in the Book of Exodus with reference to Moloch. While Spenser uses stories to create an Egyptian subtext in the *Faerie Queene*, Milton's Egypt is just another evil, non-classical system of beliefs that are treated as Moloch and subsequently pushed out of the world by the birth of Christ.

By contrast, Milton provides a positive view of Egypt in his treatise on the dangers of censorship, *Areopagitica*:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after Him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *Ægyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortall feature of lovelines and perfection. Suffer not these licencing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyr'd Saint (*Areopagitica* 1644).

Here, Milton portrays Isis and Osiris differently, using the positive view of the pair to promote his concerns over the dangers of censorship. Milton places Isis and Osiris opposite cowardice. He unites their images with "Truth" who has been "hewd" into "a thousand peeces" by the deceivers that choose to censor it, while simultaneously uniting the "deceivers" with Typhon. The truly moral person will seek truth everywhere, just as Isis sought for the dismembered parts of her beloved husband. Although Milton doesn't bring out the gender roles of the two gods, this recalls Spenser's use of Isis and Osiris to balance the scales of justice and equity in Book V of the *Faerie Queene*. He makes this the foundation of the British Empire through the union of Britomart and Artegall, the progenitors of the British monarchy.

Pervasive Egyptian imagery also appears in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* uses Isis as a symbol of prayer and protection throughout as well as various hieroglyphics such as the crocodile to illustrate lust and fecundity. The central struggle in *Antony and Cleopatra* is not only one between Rome and Egypt, but also a power struggle between a woman and two men who seek to possess her.

Shakespeare builds upon Spenser and Horapollo's interpretations of the hieroglyphics, particularly the crocodile. The crocodile is also used to represent a male "fecund" which relates to its prolific ability to produce lots of offspring. Traditionally, the crocodile was also seen as "an outright emblem of lust" (Aptekar 88) as is in the work of writers like Shakespeare. In his tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare can be interpreted as using the crocodile to allude to Antony's penis:

Lepidus: What manner o'thing is your crocodile?

Antony: It is shaped, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth. It is just so high as it is and moves with its own organs. It lives by that which nourisheth it, and, the elements once out of it, it transmigrates.

Lepidus: What color is it of?

Antony: Of its own color too.

Lepidus: 'Tis a strange serpent.

Antony: 'Tis so, and the tears of it are wet (II vii 41-49).

Antony and his men are drinking together, and they begin to discuss Egypt where he has been residing on behalf of the Roman Empire. On the surface, Lepidus is asking Antony about Egypt and Antony essentially tells him nothing. Lepidus says "Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operations of your sun. So is your crocodile" (II vii 26-28). While "your" in early Modern English refers to "that thing you know about" rather than "of you," I believe this conversation can also be read as an allusion to Antony's blatant affair with Cleopatra. She could be the "Serpent of Egypt" that has been rather bluntly "bred," as she has already had one child by Julius Caesar, Caesarian, and ends up having three more by Antony.

Shakespeare would have been aware of the allegorical uses of the crocodile and his use of it to reference a penis correlates to the fecundity of the crocodile in the *Hieroglyphica*. The language used has salacious implications, such as “serpent of Egypt,” “bred,” the crocodile being “shaped like itself,” and being “Of its own color” with its “wet” tears -- these all imply something beyond an innocent representation of a Nile Crocodile. Just as Isis’ statue has the Osiris-crocodile wrapped around it to represent sexual congress, so too does Cleopatra become an Isis figure, with Antony becoming the crocodile that wraps around her.

*Antony and Cleopatra* also explores the question of queenship and female power. The role of Isis in the play is significantly smaller than her role in *The Faerie Queene*, but Spenser’s androgynous knight, Britomart and her representation of Queen Elizabeth I are echoed in Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. Cleopatra is the sole, female ruler of a large and powerful country that is under siege from the Roman Empire. Cleopatra shifts between early modern versions of masculine and feminine throughout the play -- her vain, jealous, and possessive disposition towards Antony gives way to a militant, masculine disposition when Egypt is threatened by Caesar. Just as Britomart portrays an outwardly male exterior while hiding a feminine interior, Cleopatra also builds a masculine façade around her.

Shakespeare complicates the division of positive femininity and negative masculinity in Cleopatra. The positive, female Egypt she represents is fertile and kingly, but Cleopatra herself defies traditional ideas of virtue. She has maintained power over Egypt through sexual relationships with powerful men (Caesar and Antony). In a very masculine display, she uses these relationships and her femininity to manipulate and control her male enemies, simultaneously displaying her intelligence, cunning and guile. Where Britomart is the chaste androgyne in *The Faerie Queene*, Cleopatra is unchaste yet also revered. The Romans speak of

Cleopatra with voyeuristic contempt, referring to her as the “Royal wench” (II.ii 236) until the discovery of her body where she finally shows them her queenly side. She is described by Caesar as “Bravest at the last/She leveled at our purposes and, being royal/Took her own way” (V.ii 334-336). Cleopatra is his enemy, yet he is in awe of her. She “looks like sleep/As she would catch another Antony/ In her strong toil of grace” (V.ii 344-346). Even in death, Cleopatra possesses her feminine charm and power. Caesar claims she “looks like sleep,” but is still capable of catching “another Antony” and continuing to obstruct the Roman Empire. He recognizes her “grace” and the queenliness she only shows after her death. Shakespeare’s veneration of Cleopatra builds upon the strong, female leader trope present in the *Faerie Queene*.

Her connection to Isis is through her power as a single, female ruler who is beloved by her people. Spenser uses Isis to represent good, feminine Egypt, uniting her with equity and the British monarchy. Shakespeare similarly paints his Cleopatra as an Isis figure: “She/In th’ abiliments of the goddess Isis/ That day appear’d, and oft before gave audience/As ‘tis reported, so” (III.iv 16-19). Cleopatra appears in the vestments of Isis to further demonstrate her absolute power as both a woman and a queen. By dressing as Isis, Cleopatra also shows that she stands as both masculine and feminine parent to Egypt. She echoes Queen Elizabeth I as well as Britomart, both of whom Spenser unites with Isis to illustrate the positive view of Egypt. Cleopatra is not straightforwardly good or evil in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but her character and her condition as a dichotomous, powerful female ruler driven to protect her country and her people establishes her relationship to Spenser’s Britomart, Queen Elizabeth and Isis.

*The Faerie Queene* explores the fluidity of gender roles through positive and negative images of Egypt. Egyptian allegory flows throughout the *Faerie Queene*, oscillating between good and bad, moral and immoral, right and wrong. The evil, male magician Busirane in Book

III represents not only the pharaohs of the Busiris myth and Exodus narrative, but also tyrannical masculinity. By contrast, Spenser's Isis is a positive image of powerful femininity. The use of Egypt as a moral compass in literature begs to be explored. As alluded to, several subsequent writers employed Egyptian allegories to serve their own agendas. Perhaps, once we finally understand the magnetic pull that ancient Egypt has over western culture, we can begin to understand the power and beauty that so captivated the literary minds of the 16th and 17th centuries.

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