To open Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* is to encounter immediately the question of what kind of poem one is reading. A nationalistic panegyric that eulogises Queen Elizabeth I, whom Spenser calls ‘O Goddesse heauenly bright, / Mirroure of grace and Maiestie diuine, / Great lady of the greatest Isle’ and, perhaps more honestly, ‘O dearest dred’ (1, proem, 4), *The Faerie Queene* has been described as well-written Elizabethan propaganda or at least as a celebration and extension of the queen's political mythology; as political poetry that is complexly engaged, critical of the queen and her politics; as a Protestant poem more shaped by its Reformation context than by fiction or secular literary ideals; as an inspired Humanist summation of mythology that brings into English a wealth of plot material (mythoi) from Irish, Welsh, Scottish, French, Italian, Latin and Greek sources; and as an anatomy of the imagination, a poetic place in which the literary imagination expatiates and dilates to demonstrate how poetry, moral and political value, and literary form intersect. Spenser's great epic-romance is, at some point or another, all of these things. The great challenge for any reader of Spenser, then, is to understand how these different faces of the poem can be brought into one focus.

Some of this multiplicity can be seen in the complex union of genres that the poem creates. Spenser would have seen his poem as a version of ‘heroical poetry’ (as Sidney calls it in his *Defence of Poetry*), and he identified it with classical epics such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and especially *The Aeneid*, with romance epics such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Tasso's *Jerusallemme liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*), and with Arthurian romance. (He mentions all of these specifically in his 'Letter to Raleigh', and, perhaps more importantly, demonstrates his allegiance to these literary forms by imitation, allusion, and wholesale appropriation of plot and imagery from all of these sources. All of these intense literary reimaginings of his sources illuminate what was involved for Spenser in ‘Englishing’ the wealth of epic
and romance tradition available on the continent at the time that he began *The Faerie Queene*.

**The Faery Queen and the poem’s absent centre**

Spenser not only entwines epic and romance, two genres which have different historical, formal and political implications, but he builds into the very structure of the poem layers of figurative, symbolic and allegorical meanings. What is sometimes called the allegory of the poem is in fact a weave of several allegories with literary symbolisms of several kinds. A look at the treatment of the Faery Queen can show how Spenser builds multiple readings that substantially qualify the celebration of queen and nation.

Spenser describes in his ‘Letter to Raleigh’ a typical romance scenario of a Christmas celebration at the court of the Faery Queen in which on each of twelve days a knight would be given a quest, and he assures Raleigh that this scene will be presented in the last book of the poem:

> The beginning thereofe of my history, if it were to be told by an Historiographer should be the twelfth booke, which is the last, where I deuise that the Faery Queene kept her Annuall feaste xii. dayes, vppon which xii. seuerall dayes, the occasions of xii. seuerall aduentures hapned, which being vnder-taken by xii seuerall knights, are in these xii. books seuerally handled and discoursed. (Hamilton, p. 738)

This scene, however, never appears in the poem as we have it; it is rather that desired centre and ground of meaning that the poem, as a work written in fallen human language in mortal time, cannot represent. Instead of royal or divine or metropolitan centre, the poem consistently presents a periphery, with knights wandering almost as if in exile in forests and plains, far from the civic and religious centre of the plot or its symbols. We begin Book I only after Red Cross Knight has left the court, for instance; we end it as he heads off towards court, leaving Una behind to mourn the incompletion of her marriage. Similarly, in Books II and III the knights are presented almost entirely in isolated landscapes or, if in more social settings, then in parodies of the Faery Queen’s court. In Book III, the absence of that fictional and political centre is particularly felt: although Florimell departs from court to find the wounded Marinell, her headlong rush away from it eventually places her, comet-like, in the middle of the forest of canto I, and the court itself is never shown. The Faery Queen appears only once in the poem, to Arthur in a dream that starts his quest (I, ix) but which leaves him with ‘nought but pressed gras’ (I, ix, 15) as evidence that she even exists. As the telos of Arthur’s quest, and the goal of his epic *labor*, the Faery Queen marks a future promise, a prophesied epiphany, but not one that the poem
can bring to fruition in the fictional time of human action. If Aeneas is to travel and fight in order to found Rome, presumably Arthur travels through the poem in an attempt to unite with the Faery Queen and found a lineage, to become a nation under Elizabeth. When Spenser promises to marry Arthur to a Faery Queen named Gloriana, he presents imaginatively a wedding of ancient British myth, legend and lineage with the brilliant reigning queen, modern emblem of British greatness.

What, then, does this absent Faery Queen stand for? 'The Letter to Raleigh' identifies her both with Glory itself – the elusive glory that the poet and characters seek echoes in her name – and specifically with 'the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene' (p. 737). Spenser is equally (and unusually) direct in the ending of the proem to Book III, where he invokes Elizabeth, saying that she may see herself either in Gloriana or in Belphoebe (III, proem, 5). If Gloriana is a mirror for Elizabeth, then the poem is placing Elizabeth in the embrace of Arthur, becoming figuratively both his beloved and his descendant. Arthur is seen not only as the ancestor or forerunner of the Tudors, but as the prophetic prefiguration of them – Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus, as Malory puts it, the once and future king. The Tudors, and especially in this case Elizabeth herself, are seen as part of a prophetic time scheme in which the current success of the monarchy looks to the past in order to point to a greater glory to come. Richard McCabe reminds us that 'the Faerie Queene is future-oriented in the sense that Arthurian heroism is as much an ideal towards which Britain must strive as an image of past glory'. The absent centre represents a union not yet possible, not yet representable, but one towards which Spenser hopes history will move, if the nation is led in the right direction. Readers are urged to recognise the dark guises through which Spenser's poem can speak with 'a critical voice'.

The marriage of Arthur and Gloriana, then, is a union towards which the poem strives. The missing court at the centre of the poem's fiction points forward to a scene also missing, but imagined as the political goal of the poem – the embrace of Arthur and Gloriana, and the specific view of the nation implied in that union. The nationalism of the poem is thus a more serious project than might be suggested by the notion that the poem either praises the monarch (flattery) or reincarnates a Tudor myth of legitimacy. In fact, by importing this secular prophetic dimension the poem is discovering an avenue by which it can articulate what Spenser saw as crucial failings in the Elizabethan political vision and settlement, beginning with the problem of the succession, but going beyond it to the broader issues that connect nationalism with religion and a wider political destiny.

The poem can be seen to locate itself within the politics of courtiership.
The Faerie Queene, Books I-III

that characterised the 1580s and 1590s. Spenser's images for the human experience contain many images of exile, often explained in religious terms. The knights wandering in the periphery can be read, as Richard Helgerson has done, as figures for the centrifugal feudalism in England itself of the great nobles and their followers who fought to maintain their privilege against the increasingly centralised monarchy. Helgerson sees the poem as siding finally with the rebellious, the wandering, the individually heroic military aristocracy, in spite of its potent praise for the queen. By making Elizabeth I both a muse and the absent but desired centre, Spenser imports a powerful and disruptive set of political meanings into his poem, insisting on both Elizabeth's presence as the very condition of the poem and yet stressing the impossibility of ever representing her, praising her rule yet giving her advice about policy, and satirizing her court. In the House of Pride, for example, Lucifera is 'A mayden Queene' (I, iv, 8) who is described in language very reminiscent of Elizabeth's speeches: 'So proud she shyned in her Princely state' (I, iv, 10). Spenser celebrates female rule and the value of a female separatism that eschews marriage in the figure of Belphoebe, at the same time as he exposes the destructive ravages of a courtiership that provides no place for the male: 'Dye rather, dye, than euer from her seuerice swerue' (III, v, 46), laments Timias, Spenser's figure of Sir Walter Raleigh, while the body of the dead Sir Philip Sidney, now turned in Ovidian fashion into a flower, decks the Mound of Venus in the Garden of Adonis, a representation of the body politic of Elizabeth.

The imbuing of the poem with a national prophetic destiny highlights a second, equally important interpretation of the Faery Queen: as a religious symbol of the unrepresentable nature of the divine, an absence that reminds us of the 'vnperfite' (vii, viii) (unfinished, unperfected, non-perfect, fragmentary, ongoing, as in the imperfect tense in romance languages) of human understandings. The Faery Queen points to the transcendent, the arena of divine knowledge and revelation to which no human being can have access. Protestantism from Luther on defined the relation of the believer to the divine as one of faith and faith alone. Arthur's dream vision of the Faery Queene comes to stand as the paradigm of faith, and indeed Arthur's heroism is in part defined by his act of faith: 'But whether dreames delude, or true it were, / Was neuer hart so rauisht with delight' (I, ix, 14). Arthur makes it clear that his decision - 'From that day forth I lou'd that face diuine' (I, ix, 15) - had to be made without the certain knowledge that human beings desire. It has to be based on an act of faith, and even Arthur cannot tell whether his vision is truth or delusion. Moreover, Arthur's dream, which comes to him when he is sleeping, resembles the scenario in which Red Cross is accosted by the false dream sent by Archimago (in I, i),
and from this episode we as readers have learned all too well the costs of misidentifying a deluding dream. There is no way around this problem, however: Arthur must make his act of faith without the certain knowledge, in hope and belief that the dream is true. The poem proposes a version of Arthur’s act of faith for his readers, a parallel between the knight’s experiences and our experiences with our own heroic journey: we cannot really be any more certain than Arthur is of the truth of his vision.

‘That face divine’ – Arthur’s words describing the Faery Queen remind us that the central tropes for the figurative workings of Spenser’s poem all come with a strongly Christian and Protestant valence, and it is important to see how often Spenser glosses this distance from the centre in religious terms. One particularly beautiful image early in the poem invokes the sense of exile often seen as characteristically humanist. Spenser here explicitly refers to the excitement of the age of discovery – the navigation of the ship over the whole ocean – yet the gloss he gives to this voyaging is Christian as well as geographical. He describes all of human life as a form of ‘wandering’ in ‘the wide deepe’ – one is guided by the light from ‘the steadfast star’ (i, ii, 1) when it is not cloudy, but the image also emphasises the enormous distance from that reliable point of certainty to the wanderers: the ‘steadfast star’ (the pole star, and also Jesus, the incarnate divine being that ‘was in Ocean waues yet neuer wet’) ‘sendeth light from farre / To all, that in the wide deepe wandring arre’ (i, ii, 1). Thus for Spenser the distance of wandering knights from the Faery Court is also a figure for the distance of the human world from God. Precisely because Spenser leaves us wandering in the wide deep, we are faced with a poetics of incompletion.

For this reason, Spenser calls his poem a ‘darke conceit’ (‘Letter to Raleigh’, p. 737), and identifies the kinds of ‘darkness’ that characterise his poem with the images of the ‘covert vele’, the mirror and shadow. In the conclusion to the proem to Book II, Spenser addresses Elizabeth I (and implicitly his future readers), asking Elizabeth’s pardon for using allegorical and symbolic imagery to ‘shadow’ or ‘veil’ her lineage, the story of her nation and the representation of her brilliance as a leader:

And thou, O fairest Princesse vnder sky,
In this faire mirrhour maist behold thy face,
And thine owne realmes in lond of Faery,
And in this antique Image thy great auncestry,

The which O pardon me thus to enfold
In covert vele, and wrap in shadowes light,
That feeble eyes your glory may behold,
Which else could not endure those beames bright
But would dazled be with exceeding light. (ii, proem, 4–5)
These images – mirror, veil and shadow – all are used in biblical episodes and parables to describe the conditions or costs of revelation or epiphany, involving direct vision or understanding of God and the dazzling brightness of the divine. Moses covered his face with a veil after speaking directly to God, because it shone too brightly and frightened the Israelites (see Exodus 34. 30), and during the Middle Ages the veil gained more precise associations with Christian reading practices. But particularly important for Spenser here is the figure of the mirror, because it remains both a religious and a political trope. He takes it from Paul’s famous apocalyptic prophecy in 1 Corinthians 13: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I am known.’

The darkness of Spenser’s allegory is associated here with the darkness of the fallen, mortal state: just as we cannot see God directly or understand the full meaning of divine matters, so we cannot see the brightness of Elizabeth directly without being dazzled, blinded with the glory that would overcome us. In the terms of the religious allegory, the danger is always one of idolatry: if we see the brightness directly, we will try to worship it, worshipping the vision and not what the vision points to.

The tensions in this trope of the brightness of revelation and the dazzled eyes of the mortal viewer are felt more keenly if we look to see how thoroughly this trope defines Spenser’s poetics throughout Book I, and how it is then rewritten in later books to characterise the experience of love. Whenever Una raises her veil in Book I, she dazzles viewers, who respond inappropriately or, as in the case of Sans Loy, violently. Most dangerous to her, perhaps, is the Woody Nation in canto vi, whose response to her revealed beauty is to worship her. They ‘made her th’image of Idolatryes’, and when she tries to prevent their worship ‘they her Asse would worship fayn’ (1, vi, 19). This episode helps to show how direct revelation will fail in the human world. It reflects what for Spenser was the defining Biblical episode about the human inadequacy to revelation, the transfiguration.

The need to shadow divine brightness is emphasised in the transfiguration, which Spenser places on Mount Tabor (vii, vii, 7). Here the disciples’ eyes were dazzled and blinded at the moment when they saw Jesus in his divine glory (Mark 9. 2–8). In the King James version, Jesus ‘raiment became shining’ (Mark 9. 3); Matthew in the Geneva Bible tells us that Jesus’ face ‘did shine as the sunne, and his clothes were white as the light’ (Matthew 17. 2). The apostles Peter, James and John respond by wanting to build a tabernacle on the spot, expressing a desire to worship the vision. They are ‘overshadowed’ immediately by a cloud through which God speaks to them, telling them to listen to the words of Jesus: ‘This is my son, Hear him.’ Spenser interprets the episode as an example of the dangers to
the human believer of revelation so bright that it blinds, leading the viewer to worship that which is revealed in itself. In a stanza identified numerically as a stanza of revelation (associating seven as a holy number because the sabbath is the seventh day, the day when, with his work done, the poet hopes for the great vision), the seventh stanza of the seventh canto of the projected seventh book, Spenser narrates the transfiguration directly for the first time. 'Great dame Nature' is as bright, he tells us, as what the apostles saw on Mount Tabor:

Her garment was so bright and wondrous sheene,
That my fraile wit cannot devise to what
It to compare, nor finde like stuffe to that,
As those three sacred Saints, though else most wise,
Yet on mount Thabor quite their wits forgat,
When they their glorious Lord in strange disguise
Transfigur'd saw; his garments so did daze their eyes. (vii, vii, 7)

This story defines in specifically religious terms the paradigm of vision that Spenser uses throughout Book i and the rest of the poem. If Spenser did not veil his tale with shadows, and treat it only as an indirect reflection of the truths to which he hopes to give poetic form, we too, like the 'three saints' might be tempted to set up our tents and worship, not remembering that the poem is in every moment pointing beyond itself to a divine truth and power outside the limits of human words.

Epic, romance, nation and religion

Spenser begins his poem by alluding to Vergil, echoing a passage in a medieval manuscript long thought to have been Vergil's actual introduction to the Aeneid: 'Lo I the man . . .' Here he imagines his own career following the path of the famous Roman epic writer, moving from pastoral and georgic poetry to epic. This opening seems clearly to identify the poem as epic, and the ambition to tell his nation's spiritual and political history (a part of the dynastic, national and even imperial legacy of epic) strengthens our sense that the central defining quality of this poem must be epic. Epic aims at a largeness of cultural summation, a sense that all the different sides of a culture will be brought to life in the course of the poem. It is important to remember, then, that epic itself has many purposes and many faces. It is not a single, unchanging entity, but a model for a process of thought. The epic elements of the poem include formal generic traits such as Spenser's frequent and significant use of the epic simile; imitations of the descent to the underworld; reference to the gods and other mythological figures as causes or explanations of action; scenes of prophecy, especially, following
The Faerie Queene, Books i–iii

Virgil, dynastic prophecy in the form of epic catalogue; epic realism without recourse to magic as a principal way out of dangerous plot crises; epic invocations; and ecphrastic descriptions of armour and places (compare the description of the Shield of Aeneas or Achilles to the armour of Arthur in i, ix). We might compare the pictures of Troy on the walls of Dido’s Temple to Juno in Book i of The Aeneid – ‘here are tears for passing things’ – to the tapestry of Venus and Adonis in the House of Malecasta (iii, i), but also to the many ecphrases in which Spenser pauses in his narration to describe the physical appearance of a place (as the description of the House of Pride), descriptions which always convey figuratively to the reader the moral significance of the place, precisely what the characters often miss.

The epic qualities of the poem lead us to expect a stress on the mortality and human limits of heroes, and indeed we find it, articulated powerfully even by semi-mythical figures like Arthur and Belphoebe. Belphoebe was raised, after all, by the goddess Diana and was conceived by a nymph ‘Through the influence of th’heauens fruitfull ray’ (iii, iii, 6), in what seems to be a version of an unfallen birth, without pain for the mother though also without the concomitant human consciousness – ‘Vnwares she them conceiu’d, vnwares she bore’ (iii, vi, 26–7; see iii, vi, 6–10, 26–7 for Belphoebe’s conception and birth). Belphoebe, in whom Spenser tells us that he has fashioned a mirrour of Elizabeth I’s ‘rare chastity’ and who herself seems a step closer to being a mythological being than some of the fully human characters, nonetheless articulates the significance of the crucial epic limitation of mortality, and of the related need for an heroic code. Confronted with Arthur’s wounded squire Timias, who thinks she is more than mortal – ‘Angell or Goddesse do I call thee right?’ (iii, v, 35) – Belphoebe explains that she too is placed under the limit of mortality, and is bound to the mortal world by that limit: ‘Ah gentle Squire’, she says,

Nor Goddesse I, nor Angell, but the Mayd,  
And daughter of a woody Nymphe, desire  
No seruice but thy safety and ayd;  
Which if thou gaine, I shalbe well apayd.  
We mortall wights, whose Hues and fortunes bee  
To commun accidents still open layd,  
Are bound with commun bond of frailtee,  
To succour wretched wights, whom we captiued see.  

Belphoebe’s answer is complicated by the classical subtext, for Spenser here alludes to the moment when Aeneas in Book i first sees his mother in disguise as a huntress in the Carthaginian forests. ‘O dea certe’ (O surely you are a goddess) he says famously to her, and indeed he is right, though she denies it. Belphoebe seems to be a second Diana in her behavior and...
chastity. Through the allusion to Virgil, Belphoebe is linked to Venus as well, and in a very Elizabethan way combines Venus and Diana (Elizabeth used both Venus and Diana as figures herself), but, unlike Virgil’s Venus, who is deceiving her son, Belphoebe is truthful and sincere. She is an embodiment of these goddesses, but is placed on earth under human limitation, and is consistently a spokesperson in the poem for the poem’s heroic code (in II, iii for instance). When she appears in front of Timias, then, the poem links her intertextually with an event in which the divine took visible form on the plane of human action, but it uses that allusion to contrast Belphoebe, who is not divine and not immortal and is not in the process of tricking Timias, with Venus, and thereby to define the particular kind of heroism honored in this poem.

Many parts of the poem help to establish an epic context for interpretation. Yet Spenser begins ‘singing’ of ‘Knights and Ladies gentle deeds’ (I, proem, 1) and of ‘A gentle knight’ (I, i, 1), echoing Ariosto’s opening and making the poem sound more like chivalric romance. His narrator seems to be thinking as much of Ariosto, of the vernacular English traditions (of the Arthurian tales, of Chaucer, whom he calls ‘the well of English undefyled’, of Chaucer’s ‘gentle knyght’ and his son the squire, of Malory) and of romance more generally as he is of epic poetry. This is partly because the blending of epic and romance forms had already occurred in Ariosto and had even been argued out in the fights over the Furioso and its genre. Romance sets in motion a different set of principles and expectations, shifting away from epic limitation by imagining a universe more visibly penetrated by spirit, and thus by magic, and also allowing some exceptions to epic linearity: in romance, time is occasionally allowed to turn back, death is not always the absolute human limit, and consequences do not always need to be faced; indeed endings are delayed and with them some of the kinds of recognition and knowledge that might be gained only when finally emerging from the thickets of plot. Don Quixote, an avid reader of chivalric romances, refers to them as inacabables, unending and unendable. Even Malory, who wrote of the death of Arthur, retained the story of Merlin living backward in time, and kept the fictional prophecies about Arthur alive. Romance endings allow for the kinds of prophetic return of the hero that made the Arthurian ‘matter of Britain’ so politically potent in the English sixteenth century.

In Book I a challenge to epic and chivalric behaviour is intrinsic: to try to write an heroic poem about holiness is to confront directly the aggression and violence of the heroic tradition in the service of a faith that is opposed to many of the conventions and values of this kind of story. Perhaps this is why some of the longest extended imitations of epic occur in other books.
In Book 11, canto xii, we see a sustained imitation of Tasso that also looks back towards the Circe of *The Odyssey*. In writing his own Circe book, Spenser looks to the ancient world for a culminating quest appropriate for a knight whose Aristotelian virtue, temperance, is explicitly non-Christian. And in Book III, an extraordinary discussion of epic helps to define Britomart's heroism against the fraudulence of Paridell, a mock-epic descendant of Paris who is ready to seduce his Helen and make Troy fall again. The retelling of the Trojan war story with Hellenore and Paridell as its centre is a tour-de-force example of the wit with which Spenser plays with genre to recast the entire epic tradition. In these cantos (III, ix-x), the fall of Troy is told three times: Paridell tells of the fall of Troy as part of his seduction of Hellenore, but he leaves out what is to Britomart the most important part—and to us the most epic part—the events that happen after the fall of Troy, the story of Aeneas, the plot of the *Aeneid*, the founding of Rome, and the eventual founding of Troynovant. In the midst of a seduction scene out of a *fabliau* or novella, Britomart sits naively embodying heroic idealism and asking Paridell how he could have left out the part of the story that moves one to heroism and future deeds. Britomart completes the story, in turn producing a version of the epic, but hers is not the final account of Troy, either. Since the episode plays with the names of Helen and Paris, and thus implicitly makes Malbecco, the cuckolded husband, into the figure of Menelaus, these two cantos can be read as Spenser's own retelling of the fall of Troy, the great epic topic that fills Book 11 of *The Aeneid* with such grandeur and horror. But Spenser retells the epic as satire and *fabliau*, domesticating the story and reimagining through the *fabliau* the reasons that Helen might have wanted to leave Menelaus. The brilliance of Spenser’s retelling of this great epic tale in such a comic and satiric manner is that it presents a critique even of his idealised Britomart. The claims she makes at the banquet with Malbecco, Hellenore and Paridell about epic and national destiny are eloquent summaries of the poem’s definition of heroism:

There there (said Britomart) a fresh appeard
The glory of the later world to spring,
And Troy againe out of her dust was reard,
To sit in second seat of soueraigne king,
Of all the world vnder her gouerning.
But a third kingdome yet is to arise
Out of the Troians scattered of-spring,
That in all glory and great enterprise,
Both first and second Troy shall dare to equalise.  (III, ix, 44)

This is the serious claim of *The Faerie Queene*: that it is the English equivalent of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and that Britain with its capital of Troynovant
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(New Troy, which becomes London) will reach a greatness equal even to Rome’s. Spenser founds Britomart’s heroism precisely on her understanding of the role of the hero in the post-heroic age: modern heroism as the poem defines it is, as it was for Virgil, a belated heroism coming after Troy, after the great ancient warrior heroes, a heroism of prophecy, of foundations and origins, of the building of a new civilisation in the ashes of the old. This is Spenser’s project and it is Britomart’s, and yet Spenser is willing to satirise her lightly as she sits unaware at the banquet table while Paridell writes in wine his words of seduction to Hellenore and the fall of Troy begins to happen again, but in a private setting. What Britomart articulates here may well be a true ideal for the poem, but it proves remarkably irrelevant to the activities of the scene in which she is in fact participating. Britomart proves as blind as Malbecco to the truth of what is happening around her, and rides to other adventures, a little awkward and naive in her epic idealism. This is not a poem that will ever place itself securely in the epic genre – Spenser invokes a combination of epic, romance and allegory (not to mention fabliau and novella and chronicle) in order to find his path to an epic retelling of British origins.

Allegory and internalisation: a psychological landscape

Spenser’s poem employs extensively two kinds of allegorical writing: (1) the use of personification to represent internal states, qualities, ideas or ideals; (2) the use of typology and what medieval exegesis called ‘the allegory of the theologians’. Spenser’s characters lack what we might feel to be the most important piece of information that would allow them to proceed successfully in their world: that is, the knowledge that they are in an allegory. One of the fictional games that Spenser plays is to present his characters with a situation that appears on the fictional plane of the story to be an external event, while the reader is able to recognise that the poem employs apparently external things or beings as signs of internal psychological events or ideas. Thus the landscape of Spenser’s poem is a psychological one: many of its places and commonplaces represent spiritual or emotional aspects of the characters themselves. To learn to read Spenser’s poem is to learn that everything – a person in the story, a place, a house, a tree or a giant – can represent an aspect of the hero or heroine’s own psyche.

By allegory, modern critics mean theories of how to read figuratively and symbolically – away from the literal meaning – that developed in the ancient world and in the early Christian centuries. The Greek roots of the word allegory suggest that it means ‘to speak other’, and this ‘other-speaking’ seems to have been associated with a form of private speech.8 The
Christian writers of the New Testament began to allegorise in new ways as they appropriated the Jewish Bible and prophetic traditions, claiming that what now became the ‘Old Testament’ prophecies and events are ‘fulfilled’ in the life of Christ and, eventually, in the spiritual lives of Christians. The two traditions combined to produce the earliest formal allegory in Prudentius’ *Psychomachia* (circa 405 BC), a poem representing a war for the psyche or the soul fought between the virtues and the vices, all personified as warriors. The *Psychomachia* represented an important step towards the kind of self-conscious internalising of epic form that characterises *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser both integrates the psychomachian strategies of personifying states and ideas and appropriates the ‘allegory of the theologians’ in Book I and to some extent throughout the poem.

The Sans brothers — Sans Foy, Sans Loy and Sans Joy — whom the Red Cross Knight encounters in Book I, can serve as an example of psychomachian allegory, that is, personification of internal states represented as external, real characters operating in the outer world. The battle with Sans Foy results in a victory for the Red Cross Knight, and yet Sans Foy means ‘faithlessness,’ and he appears instantly in the narrative the moment after the Red Cross Knight has faithlessly abandoned Una to the wiles of Archimago. Sans Foy is a representation of Red Cross’ own faithlessness, yet he is also something bigger — the fact that faithlessness exists as a constant possibility in the world. To meet Sans Foy in battle, then, is already to have succumbed to him: the very fact that the Red Cross Knight has encountered him at all is a sign that he is fast travelling down the broad highway to sin and failure in the quest (a highway that turns out to lead directly to the House of Pride). And indeed the same proves true with all three Sans Brothers. Though the Red Cross Knight appears to conquer Sans Foy, and thus to have taken a small step in the direction of overcoming his faithlessness, many details in the episode hint at a very different story, one that substantiates the allegorical understanding that we gain at the beginning — namely, that the Red Cross Knight would never have had to fight Sans Foy had he not already metaphorically become him. Red Cross immediately takes up Sans Foy’s lady and his shield after his victory. While this may seem like usual chivalric practice (and it is), this action makes the Red Cross Knight look a lot like Sans Foy. In taking up with Sans Foy’s lady, and courting her, he demonstrates that he is faithlessly abandoning Una for Duessa, the woman who will be the greatest threat to the completion of his quest. If anything, then, the Red Cross Knight is worse off, not better, after his so-called victory over Sans Foy, and we are not surprised to learn that Duessa takes him immediately to the House of Pride, proud as he is of his pseudo-victory. Unable to beat Sans Foy by fighting with him, the Red
Cross Knight needs to learn to read his own spiritual and psychological landscape. At the same time, the poem dramatises how difficult this is for anyone by keeping its characters from knowing that these struggles are in fact psychological or internal, rather than simply physical and chivalric.

Examples of psychomachian allegory abound in other parts of the poem as well— in book two, Pyrochles and Cymochles function like the Sans brothers to represent states of mind and being, and the story of Furor and Occasion gives us a vivid picture of the inversions of allegorical logic, with the ‘occasion’ for the fury, which should come before, instead appearing after Furor. But as we leave the absolutes of the book of holiness, we encounter more and more examples of personifications and psychomachian allegories about whose status as representations of internal states we remain in doubt. An example from Book III suggests the problems for interpretation that the constant possibility of reading internally presents. When Britomart arrives at the House of Malecasta, we are not presumably meant to think, as we are of the Red Cross Knight in the House of Pride, that Britomart has somehow committed a failure of chastity in such a way as to bring her to this place. Perhaps simply falling in love could be construed this way— that Britomart, crossing into puberty (III, ii, 39; and III, i, 65) and having her first erotic passions, has lost a kind of innocence that somehow appropriately places her in this house. But, although there may be some truth to this, as she has experienced the wound of love (III, ii, 26), and her fancy has been shaped by the imagined picture of her beloved, little in the poem suggests that Britomart has any difficulty with chastity, especially if we remember that for Spenser chastity meant more than simple virginity—it meant married, faithful and passionate love. But Britomart does have trouble with a society that associates love with courtly excess, indulgence and sensual extravagance. Spenser begins with a representation not of Britomart’s state of mind, but of the literary and cultural conventions that have shaped the discourse of love, literary and cultural conventions that Britomart will have to defeat, and that Spenser will have to overcome, if she is to become a knight who fulfils the highest knightly and romantic ideals. If Britomart is to find her beloved and found a dynasty, as Merlin predicts, then she must conquer any temptation to linger in either a narrative of courtly love, or in lyrical mode that would not give her an heroic and epic destiny. Spenser is challenging the conventions of medieval courtly love and chivalric romance, insisting on a religious and a national as well as a private meaning for his story. In the House of Malecasta, flickers of the more personified sort of place are felt by the reader in the scene in which Britomart is wounded by Gardante (III, i, 65). Placed here on the first step of the ladder of courtly love, and therefore implicitly on the road to
'basciante' (kissing) and 'noctante' (spending the night together) (III, i, 45), Britomart seems momentarily to belong in this house, and her ability to resist the advances of Malecasta, perhaps a figuration of her own wish to climb that same ladder, is profoundly tied to a determination to remain a knight. Britomart seems disinclined to reveal her gender, delays as long as possible taking off her male disguise and when forcibly exposed, fights valiantly against courtly love.

Disciplines of reading in Books I, II and III

So far this account has discussed the 1590 Faerie Queene (Books I, II and III with the hermaphrodite ending) as a unit, but each book presents its own special set of allegories and ways of being understood, and it would be useful to describe some of these differences briefly. Book I, the book of holiness, is concerned in a way none of Spenser’s other books are with a system of absolutes. As the book of holiness, it is concerned with the relation of ‘holiness’ to ‘wholeness’, kinds of unity, ‘one-ness’ and the lack of self-division (Archimago’s effect on Red Cross Knight and Una is to see them ‘diuided into double parts’ I, ii, 9), and it works with a series of puns on dis-pairing. When one has lost one’s unity one ‘dispairs’ and is ‘empaired’; form is associated with wholeness and unity, while being deformed is to invert the synecdoche, moving from whole to part instead of the other way around. One is deformed when one is only a part of a whole human being. Book I also uses as a principal structure the system of typology as we know it from the New Testament, and alludes extensively to the Protestant rereading of the Book of Revelation, finding in its apocalyptic symbolism a main source of inspiration. This system of typology does not work as a structuring principle to the same extent elsewhere in the poem, for the events in Book I happen on a different ontological level from the rest of the story. In Red Cross Knight’s encounter with the dragon, then, an apocalyptic tone tells us that this battle is more than just one man’s heroic mission.

Book II presents a very different challenge, as it is a book based on a classical virtue, temperance, taken from Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics and depending on a model of balance that resists completely the near-apocalyptic implications of Book I. Perhaps because temperance is not compatible with chivalry, Guyon loses his horse early in the book and remains a pedestrian knight, trying to live up to an ideal of inner balance that consistently proves inadequate to the world he moves in. Throughout the book we are in a place of dualities – no absolutes, no single one thing that sums everything up, but a constant balancing between two extremes or two alternatives in order to find the proper human place in the middle. The
iconoclastic explosion that ends the book, which will be examined in the final section of this chapter, provides a useful place to measure the implicit Christian judgement of the ethics being explored in the book, and it suggests that Spenser’s view is that in a fallen world ‘temperance’ often becomes violent repression.

The explosion of eroticism as a principal focus for both human action and mythological imagination is introduced at several points in Book II, most notably in the Bower of Bliss (II, xii), but nothing fully prepares the reader for what is yet again a major shift of gears as we move into a book fully devoted to questions of how to write, and how to act in, a book about love, faithfulness and the body, especially the female body. Book III points towards marriage, as we learn in canto iii when Merlin predicts that Britomart’s union with Armerall will eventually produce the lineage of Elizabeth, but it remains nonetheless a book about an unmarried young woman, who begins the story little more than a girl. The book is therefore, perhaps surprisingly, devoted to patterns of three just as the preceding two books explored the varying symbolic meanings of their own numbers: Britomart, Glaucce and Merlin together construct the plot of Britomart’s quest (no reference here at all to the Faery Queen and her court); while Britomart, Arthur and Guyon begin the book with a joust and form a company. Perhaps the book’s most important articulation of this pattern occurs at the end of the 1590 Faerie Queene, when Amoret emerges from the House of Busyrane to embrace the waiting Scudamour, forming the ideal union summed up in their names: Scudamour plus Amoret becomes Scudamoret, an emblem of marriage as their bodies entwine. Britomart stands outside this embracing pair, ‘half envying their blesse’ (III, xii, 46). In part Britomart wishes that the book devoted to her quest had ended with the romantic union represented here. In a book about faithful love and chaste passion, it seems appropriate that we might end up, as in a traditional comic form, with marriage, and Spenser does give us a representation of marriage here in emblematic form. But Britomart only half envies this union, because, as the allusion to the hermaphrodite suggests, there is also something disturbing about the merging of two into one: Scudamour and Amoret have become ‘like two senseles stocks’ (III, xii, 45a). Book III, for all its interest in love and union, remains finally the book of chastity, and although chastity implies the faithful passion that will lead to marriage, the book remains interested to a significant degree in the way that Britomart holds her body and self separate from the world at large. Whether leaping out of the bed Malecasta has crept into, leaving Marinell on the strand as she rides out of the poem for four cantos, riding away from Malbecco’s house before learning the conclusion of the story, or standing outside the
embracing lovers here, Britomart remains throughout this book someone apart. Her chaste body is almost always encased in an armour that symbolises not only the metal hard façades and disguises that we wear in the social world once we enter the arena of passion, but the very virgin enclosure that seems the source, magically speaking, of so much of her power. The book ends, then, not with the union of two lovers, but with two united plus one apart, making a threesome to end Book III.

Iconoclasm, idolatry and endings

As we have seen, Spenser calls attention over and over in Books I–III to the incompleteness of his writing, of his vision, of his ‘moniments’ to time. But *The Faerie Queene* as it was published in 1590 actually has a clear ending in the reference to the hermaphrodite statue and the embrace of Amoret and Scudamour. When he republishes Books I–III in 1596 Spenser has to break this ending for his narrative to continue. In this revision we see that he associated the incompleteness of his work with narrative itself. Just as he has to release Archimago at the beginning of Book II to get the story going again, so he has to eliminate both the closure and the satisfaction of embrace to get the story going in Book IV. The energies of narrative, then, are clearly connected to the poem’s near constant frustration of desire, and frustration or at least postponement of desire becomes identified with heroism: ‘For dearely sure her loue was to me bent, / As when iust time expired should appeare’ (I, ix, 14). These words are Arthur’s, describing why the Faery Queen will make him wait for his embrace. But ‘just time’ never expires within the time of the narrative, which is the time of desire, the time of longing for a full erotic or religious union. The 1590 *Faerie Queene* stands out dramatically against the poem as a whole, then, for having been created and imagined with a definite and celebratory closure.

It is striking to see how many times characters long for ending or closure. Red Cross Knight, as we have seen, wants to give up on life and questing altogether once he sees the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem (I, x, 55). It is interesting to see that Despair plays on this desire for ending, tempting the knight precisely with the thing everyone wants in the poem, and only twisting it very slightly: ‘Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, / Ease after warre, death after life doth greatly please’ (I, ix, 40), says Despair, and only the last set of the sequence disrupts the rhetoric to reveal Despair’s hidden intent. Port after stormy seas: this is what everyone hopes for, including Britomart (III, iv, 8), whose sea is the sea of emotion and grief at not being able to find her beloved. Spenser uses this figure to end Book I; notably some of the readers and characters get off the boat, but the visit to port is short for the poem:
Now strike your sailes ye iolly Mariners,
For we be come vnto a quiet rode,
Where we must land some of our passengers,
And light this wearie vessel of our lode.
Here she a while may make her safe abode,
Till she repaired haue her tackles spent,
And wants supplide. And then againe abroad
On the long voyage whereunto she is bent:
Well may she speede and fairely finish her intent. (i, xii, 42)

The image as a figure of ending points rather to the temporary nature of the rest in port, and the uncertainty – the wish – that the ‘intent’ of the poem will be reached.

While it is possible to see the incompleteness of the poem as a whole as simply the result of Spenser’s hyperbolic ambition (many readers are not sorry that he was never able to complete the promised twelve books, given the length and complexity of what we do have of it), it seems likely that Spenser himself began to make use of the aesthetics of incompletion – of the fragment – as a way not only to conclude his mammoth work but to re-emphasise yet again his central point about the limitations of what can be represented, especially of the divine or of the transcendent realm, in human art. The broken ending and the resistance to closure are one of his two main ways to avoid idolatry; to keep his poem from leading to a worship of its own images, the poem keeps them dark, broken, incomplete.

Spenser’s other solution to the threat of idolatry is represented in the iconoclasm of the endings of Books II and III. In both books, the titular hero ends the quest by destroying an erotic place associated in part with lyric poetry (carpe diem lyric for the Bower of Bliss, and Petrarchan poetry, especially sonnets, in the House of Busyrane), and other threats to the epic linearity. In Guyon’s case, the episode establishes an extraordinary tension between the virtue of temperance, which presumably should not proceed with the wrath of a tempest, and the Christian context (of the purging of the temple by Jesus), which seems to authorise such anger as appropriate, purgative and health-bringing. In the Bower of Bliss, Guyon could be said to fail because he cannot keep his balance, cannot maintain the middle way in the face of a serious erotic temptation. Spenser’s iconoclastic zeal seems to be associated with his love of the fragment and his belief that the ‘vnperfite’ image will always point beyond itself to the ineffable, and thus will never become an object of idolatrous desire. In destroying the Bower of Bliss and the House of Busyrane Spenser is not simply commenting on the dangers and violence of the literary tradition he has inherited; he is also celebrating the possibility that, imaginatively, we might find our freedom
from that tradition, using it to reshape the very meaning and purpose of heroic poetry.

NOTES

6 See her explanation of the need for heroic labour in II, iii, 40–1.

FURTHER READING


