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A Time and Place for Premarital Desire:  
Positive Uses of Lust in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*  
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In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, published in 1590, Lust rides into the tale on a goat as a part of false princess Duessa's train of sins. The goat is not a particularly attractive creature. It is described as having "rugged haire, \ And whally eyes," a surly, wild look that can hardly make for an aesthetically pleasing steed (I.iv.24.209-210). But the appearance of its rider is, if possible, worse. In addition to possessing the unkempt hair and jealous eyes of the goat, Lust (or Lechery) is also "rough, and blacke, and filthy" (212)—so filthy that the key descriptor of his green clothing is that it "hide[s] his filthinesse" (218). He bears the signs of syphilis on his person (26.232) and carries a "burning hart" wherever he goes (25.219). He is "unseemely" (24.213), "false" (24.213), and "fraught with ficklenesse" (25.221). He is, in short, utterly repulsive. And so too must be the person who entertains the emotion he represents.

Lust's "inherent" repulsiveness has served as the groundwork for many theories regarding sexual longing in *The Faerie Queene*. With the exception of Spenserian scholar Lesley Brill, academics examining the poem tend to build their arguments around the assumption that Spenser's description of the physical embodiment of lust and his educational intentions in creating the work cannot allow lust to be anything but evil.<sup>1</sup> But in assuming that Spenser intended desire to play an entirely harmful role in *The Faerie Queene*, scholars have overlooked many details of the story or accounted for them in an unsatisfactory manner. Moreover, in order to create new, more nuanced theories regarding lust in Spenser's poem, it is necessary to move beyond this tendency to take the uselessness of sexual longing as a given. It is only after one ceases to read lust in *The Faerie Queene* as an inherently negative feeling that previously undiscussed patterns in the text begin to emerge.

In *The Faerie Queene*, it would appear that Spenser is proposing that lust, although a sin, can have a positive use when experienced by members of the upper class who have the well-developed mental faculties required to consciously redirect their sexual energies toward a higher cause. This becomes apparent when one notes that all of the upper-class heroes of Book Three of *The Faerie Queene* feel a strong sexual desire for other characters and that it is just this desire that allows them to accomplish a number of their great feats. By analyzing the stories of characters who do and do not redirect their sexual energies, I demonstrate that because the tale's heroes are members of the upper class and therefore possess more developed minds, they are able to use their lust to serve a positive purpose outside of marriage for both male and female characters.

The majority of the players in *The Faerie Queene* divide into two neat categories: characters who are punished for their lust and characters who are not. Each group has a few defining characteristics. The characters who emerge from a lustful situation relatively unscathed are typically described in glowing, grand terms. They have an "amiable grace" (III.i.46.1), "prowd portance, and [a] princely gest" (ii.27.3). Put simply, Spenser has created them to be noble, both in demeanor *and* social rank, as none of them has a job that can be viewed as a trade. The characters who do not suffer for their lust do not produce goods, collect, or sell. They are upper-class citizens and have the qualities associated with their lofty place in society. Unpunished characters also never make serious attempts to consummate their lust outside of

marriage. In the moments they feel most weakened by their desires, they quickly choose a course of action other than intercourse to engage in. They thus use their sexual energy to accomplish more socially acceptable goals. Characters who are punished for their lust, conversely, make no attempt to stifle their urges. They act on them, and they do so immediately. Spenser has bequeathed his punished characters with average occupations—they are not knights, squires, lords, or ladies—and his narrator often refers to them simply by the title of said occupation, as in the case of the forester and the fisherman. Finally, punished characters are more often than not described using negative terms. The forester, for example, is said to have a “terrible looke” (III.i.17.8) and “clownish hand[s]” (9).

The divide between the two groups is clear. Social class determines the personality, virtue, and intelligence of the characters in *The Faerie Queene*, and, in the process, it determines how they handle their sexual desires. Characters who are members of the upper class (or who are merely active in court life, as in the case of Timias) are reasonable and noble enough to not act on their sexual urges. They channel their sexual energies into a quest or a battle and profit from having experienced the emotion because it led them to succeed in an honorable pursuit. Working-class characters, because they lack education and do not have the proper breeding necessary in Spenser’s universe to have been born inherently good, cannot possibly possess the reason and self-control to sublimate their lust. They must act on their urge and then be punished for the transgression. This is why they suffer.

Lust in the poem, then, serves the purpose of providing readers with an example of how noble people “in vertuous and gentle discipline” (Spenser 451) use an inevitable human instinct for higher purposes. Lust cannot be completely done away with. Its inevitability is obvious in the never-ending supply of possessive, lustful beasts (most men, one an actual animal) available to pursue Florimell both literally and figuratively and the fact that not even honorable individuals such as Prince Arthur and Sir Guyon, who represents temperance, are strong enough to refrain from joining in the chase. Britomart and the gods mentioned in the tale are also not immune to desire and sometimes even give in to the emotion. Lust is ever present, and it is sinful. However, handled properly, it does not need to produce sinful results. Spenser himself appears to support this interpretation in the poem. His narrator announces at the outset of Canto Five:

Wonder it is to see, in diverse mindes,  
 How diversly love doth his pageaunts play,  
 And shewes his powre in variable kindes:  
 The baser wit, whose ydle thoughts always  
 Are wont to cleave unto the lowly clay,  
 It stirreth up to sensuall desire,  
 And in lewd slouth to wast his careless day:  
 But in brave sprite it kindles goodly fire,

That to all high desert and honor doth aspire. (III.v.1.1-9)

Spenser’s use of the phrases “diverse mindes” (III.v.1.1), “baser wit” (4), and “brave sprite” (8) seems to imply that a certain personality entails a certain, fixed type of reaction to lust (or love). Therefore, if one is in possession of a “brave sprite” (8) akin to that of Britomart, Prince Arthur, or Timias, one automatically has the power to use lust as a “goodly fire” (8) to fuel him or herself through a difficult upcoming task. One simply needs to learn how to use lust as these three characters have.

Knowledge of how to “[kindle] a goodly fire” (III.v.1.8) from the flames of her baser desires is particularly prominent in two specific scenes: Britomart’s night spent at Malecasta’s Castle Joyeous and her encounter with Marinell. Brill examines Britomart’s ability to “[convert] ... sexual energies into “coosen passions” (19) in each of these instances in his article, “Chastity as Ideal Sexuality in the Third Book of *The Faerie Queene*.” He asserts that in both scenes, “Britomart’s success depends” on her lustful “energies” and the “full and virtuous expression” of them and points out that a pattern can be found in the book of Britomart first experiencing passion and then a warrior’s fury (15).

Britomart is unquestionably guilty of lustful gazing during her stay at the Castle Joyeous. At this point in the tale, she has not only looked upon an image of her love in an enchanted mirror but has also taken in all the sights of Malecasta’s hedonistic palace—“a monument to sensuality,” as Brill says (20). She has witnessed the goings on of the “many beds ... for delight” (III.i.39.2-4) spread about the room and stared at the tapestries fraught with pictures of the very physical relationship between Venus and Adonis. She has gazed, and she has gazed lustfully. And it is her gazing that allows the knight of lecherous gazing to injure her.<sup>ii</sup> According to Brill, Britomart has “displac[ed] ... her sexual energy,” which *should* be channeled into strength for battle, “towards lust,” and her misplaced energies make it perfectly plausible that Gardante is able to wound her (20). It is only once Britomart realizes that the people of the castle live a “loose life” (67.4) and that she can no “lenger there be stayd” (3)—that she needs to fight through the crowd to escape the debauched place, and immediately—that she is successful in fighting and can no longer be harmed. Readers watch as Britomart rapidly shifts her energies from contemplating the inappropriate behavior of the people defending the castle to ferociously attacking them. The juxtaposition of the two actions makes it very clear to readers that the reason Britomart is so suddenly “[fierce]” (66.1) and “dreadfull” (4) is that she has performed for the first time the quick re-appropriation of sexual energy into productivity that will continue to aid her in her quest for the remainder of Book Three.

If Britomart’s transformation of desire into productivity is fairly obvious in Malecasta’s castle, it is *glaringly* obvious in her fight on the beach with the cold-hearted knight Marinell. Brill highlights that in describing Britomart’s sudden change from moping, lovesick teenaged girl, “sighing softly sore” (III.iv.11.1), to powerful warrior, Spenser himself uses the phrase “converting” (19). Spenser writes that Britomart, upon spying Marinell approaching in the distance and preparing herself for battle, is “[c]onverting” (12.8) “[h]er former sorrow into suddein wrath” (6). He also explicitly states that Britomart’s angst *transforms* “into vengeance powre” (Brill 19, Spenser 13. 9). Spenser here presents re-appropriation as a means of handling lust in a healthy way.

However, Spenser presents similar healthy uses of lust in other places in the text, as well. Although Brill claims Britomart is the sole character capable of re-appropriating her sexual energies (15), *The Faerie Queene* actually suggests that at least two other characters can do the same thing. Through examining the causes of each character’s quest, and acknowledging that none of the three is punished in an irrevocable way for experiencing lust, it becomes obvious that the way Prince Arthur and Timias handle their lust is not terribly different from the way Britomart acts on hers. All three characters begin their quest fueled by sexual desire—Britomart for Artegall, Prince Arthur for Gloriana, and Timias for Florimell. It is not possible to excuse Britomart for her lustfulness just because she has a guarantee of marrying the man she is chasing. Britomart leaves home and disobeys her father *before* she hears Merlin’s prophecy that the two

will wed. In fact, she does so in order to meet him. Britomart's journey is fueled by the same source as Arthur's constant questing in Gloriana's name and Timias's slaying of the forester who dared try to hurt Florimell: lust. But it does not lower the integrity of Britomart's quest to compare it to that of Timias's or Prince Arthur's. On the contrary, it raises the frequently questioned morality of Timias's and Prince Arthur's intents in their interactions with Florimell and leaves Britomart's untouched.

Timias makes aggressive efforts to channel his lust in two different instances in Book Three of *The Faerie Queene*: first in his brutal combatting of the forester brothers and later in his dealings with the virginal Belpheobe. His first battle with his sex drive begins almost as soon as Book Three does. When Florimell, the "fairest Dame alive" (III.i.18.8), stampedes past Prince Arthur; his squire, Timias; Sir Guyon; and Britomart, all but Britomart's head seems to turn. The men "[gaze] after her a whyle" (17.1), seemingly mesmerized by her golden apparel and hair, until a "griesly Foster ... [rushes]" (2) out of the woods after her, clearly intending to rape her. Suddenly, the men leap to action. They know they must save the young woman from "shamefull villany" (18.5), and they "all [spur] after fast" (4) to reach her as quickly as possible. However, their motives in joining the chase seem to be a bit more complicated than merely hoping to rescue the damsel. Spenser writes that the men feel "gealosity" (2) upon seeing the forester lose control of his sexual urges, and their envy adds a disturbing undertone to the entire passage. The men are feeling lustful as they realize that a young, beautiful woman is about to be ravished. The question then arises: Are the men racing because they know that the faster they ride, the faster Florimell's anguish can be abated? Or are they only racing because they know that the faster they ride, the better their chances are of reaching Florimell first and winning her as a "goodly meede" (8)?

In the case of Timias, the answer to this final question is decidedly "no": the young squire is not spurring his horse on merely in hopes of earning Florimell's body as a prize.<sup>iii</sup> Instead, he has put his lust aside and is riding for the first purpose: abating Florimell's anguish. Timias's sublimation of sexual energies and the pure intentions it produces become evident in examining exactly who it is Timias is chasing and the way he reacts upon capturing that person. For while Timias feels the same lust for Florimell as Prince Arthur and Sir Guyon, as is apparent in his being included with the other men in staring at her and envying the forester, he does not choose to pursue the object of his desire. Rather, Timias joins the chase with the intent of catching her aggressor (III.i.18.9). His conscious decision to deny his sexual desires and not test his chastity is a triumph over lust. But just because Timias has succeeded in the mental struggle to make the right choice, it does not then follow that he has rid himself of the sexual energies that made making the choice necessary in the first place. They must still be expended somewhere, somehow. In short, they must be redirected. Timias, upon finally getting his chance to reap vengeance on the forester, remembers how he "late Affrighted had the fairest *Florimell*" and immediately becomes filled with "fiers fury, and indignat hate" (v.23.1-3, original emphasis). His feelings for Florimell give him the strength he needs to kill the man. Despite being wounded, Timias rises up and is able to "cleft his head in twaine" (6). Although phrases indicative of conversion are not present here, the transformation of passion into a warrior's fury *is*.

Timias transitions from impassioned young man to valiant warrior once more after he falls in love with Belpheobe, whom he feels he can never marry, and therefore never consummate his love for, because she is above him in class and committed to lifelong chastity.

Spenser allows readers to observe the transition in an extensive, detailed account of Timias's inner turmoil:

Long while he strove in his corageous brest,  
 With reason dew the passion to subdew,  
 And love for to dislodge out of his nest:  
 Still when her excellencies he did vew,  
 ...  
 The same to love he strongly was constraynd:  
 ...  
 “Unthankfull wretch” (said he) “is this the meed,  
 With which her soverain mercy thou doest quight?  
 Thy life she saved by her gracious deed,  
 But thou doest weene with villeinous despight,  
 To blott her honour, and her heavenly light.  
 ...  
 Dye, rather, dye, and dying doe her serve,  
 ...

Dye, rather, dye, then ever from her service swerve. (III.v.44-46)

The trajectory of Timias's lust here is quite easy to follow. At first, the squire feels that his sexual longing for Belphoebe—indicated by his desire to “blott her honour” (45.5)—is something debasing and illicit that he must conquer. He thus tries “with reason dew the passion to subdew” (44.2). However, as I have already established, Spenser never suggests in his text that lust is something one can easily stamp out. Reason, although meant to control passion, cannot do so completely. This means that for Timias, merely recognizing that he cannot be with Belphoebe because of class differences (44.7) and that his wish to consummate his love for her is a “villeinous despight” (45.4) is not enough to quell his longing for her. Timias himself seems to discover this quickly: “Still when her excellencies he did vew, \ ... The same to love he strongly was constraynd” (44.4, 6). Using logical thinking clearly will not “dislodge out of his nest” his feelings for Belphoebe (3). Instead, Timias must provide his amorous feelings with an emotional outlet; he must expend his sexual energies through action. The squire realizes this and settles upon such a line of action at the end of the passage: “Dye, rather, dye, and dying doe her serve” (46.1). He elects to use his passion to serve Belphoebe as long as he should live and, in doing so, renders himself a much safer man to keep such close company with a woman determined to remain a virgin. In other words, Timias transforms from a man made miserable by the agony of experiencing intense love and longing (43) to a warrior with a purpose through the sublimation of his lust.

Prince Arthur seems to have made this same transformation to help him cope with his feelings for the Faerie Queene. Much like Timias, Prince Arthur must realize that he can never be more than a courtly lover to the beautiful woman with whom he believes he once spent the night (I.ix.13-14). He has no chance of consummating his desire for Gloriana, who, as a representation of Queen Elizabeth, will never marry. Yet he cannot simply ignore his lustful feelings<sup>iv</sup>. He must find a healthy way to express them somehow—and, as a protagonist of the story readers are meant to admire, he necessarily does. Prince Arthur himself informs readers of

his choice to channel his sexual energies into productive action as he explains the beginnings of his love for Gloriana to Una, saying that he has vowed “To seeke [Gloriana] out *with labour*, and long tyne” (15.7, emphasis added). This is the reason that Prince Arthur has been travelling Faerie Lond, aiding its people and frequently saving the day. He is expressing his desire for Gloriana in a way that is socially acceptable and sure to please her until he may finally meet her in person once more and request specific orders on how to serve her. He is also relieving some of the torment of unconsummated love in the process.

Of course, not every character in *The Faerie Queene* is capable of finding a healthy outlet for his or her sexual energies in the manner Britomart, Timias, and Prince Arthur are. Several other players in the tale fail to refrain from acting on their lustful urges immediately, and they suffer dire consequences as a result. The forester, the fisherman, and the allegorical embodiment of lust, for instance, are respectively decapitated (III.v.23.6), beaten with a staff by a god (viii.31.8-9), and shot through the throat with a bow and arrow (IV.vii.31.4-5) for their hedonistic crimes. The men’s gruesome punishments seem to suggest that these three characters are meant to serve as lessons for readers, exhibiting the unappealing fate to which giving in to lust may lead. However, upon examining the men in closer detail, it becomes apparent that Spenser is utilizing the characters for a far deeper purpose than simply communicating the lesson that lust is bad. He is actually using the forester, the fisherman, and the embodiment of lust to articulate to his noble audience that only members of the lower class do not possess the mental faculties necessary to redirect their lust and to imply that behaving in the hedonistic fashion these characters do is to lower oneself to their working-class level. Spenser is using the forester, the fisherman, and the embodiment of lust as a warning.

The nature of Spenser’s warning becomes clear most readily when one notes the similarities between the three characters. As previously stated, they all appear to be from a lower class and, as a result, inherently possess certain crass traits because of their station. Spenser affixes very specific (and unappealing) physical qualities and characteristics to the men to imply what necessarily follows from being born into a low station in life. The embodiment of negative desire that must be acted upon immediately and harmfully, Lust, has such a low station in society, he is not even a part of it. Lust is a “wild and salvage man” who lives in the woods (IV.vii.5.1). He cannot wait for what he desires or control his urges. This is evident in the fact that he abducts Amoret to use for his vile purposes (“ravin and rape Of men and beasts”) upon merely seeing her (7). In addition to being out of control, Lust is also hideous. He is “[a]ll overgrowne with haire” (5.4) and has a bad habit of storing left-over meals (which could consist of either animals or humans) in his obscenely low hanging bottom lip (6.1-3). Reading Lust as a purely allegorical figure, one must take his personal traits as universal traits associated with the emotion he represents. The primary characteristics of negative lust, then, are a low place in society, a grotesque appearance, and an inability to delay or sublimate a reaction to sexual stimuli. The forester and fisherman certainly possess these traits. The forester is “rude hart[ed]” (III.v.16.9) and “coward[ly]” (15.2). His body is large and unwieldy and he has “clownish hand[s]” and gigantic limbs (i.17.8-9). The fisherman is equally loathsome. He is also dubbed rude by Spenser (viii.23.6), having “never good nor manners knew” (26.1), and, considering his skin is “congealed” (25.1), is just as unattractive as the forester.

From examining the fisherman, the forester, and the embodiment of lust, it becomes apparent that if Spenser is criticizing anything unflinchingly, it is not lust as a whole or lust when experienced by one gender or another but the way lust is handled by those born into the lower

classes. Spenser is setting up for the “gentleman or noble person” (*The Faerie Queene Books Three and Four* 451) he knows will read his work an example of what will necessarily happen if he fails to control his desires: he will look like a working-class man. Only lower-class members of society, after all, fail to control their desires in the first place, as only they do not possess the mental capacities to subvert their sexual urges. Thus, it naturally follows that if a noble person is unsuccessful in utilizing his skills of sublimation, he, too, must appear “rude hart[ed]” (III.v.16.9), “coward[ly]” (15.2), and lower-class. And for an aristocratic audience, this is, perhaps, a more effective warning against committing one of the Seven Deadly Sins than the threat of being beaten or decapitated.

Although the majority of the characters in *The Faerie Queene* neatly divide into the two categories discussed above, however, there are a few exceptions. Most notable are Malbecco and Paridell. These two men, despite being a wealthy landowner and a “knight faire” (III.viii.44.7) and “gentle” (47.1), respectively, seem to be either unable or unwilling to redirect their sexual energies toward a higher cause. Malbecco lets his covetous lust for his young wife, Hellenore, so overrun him that he first tries to take the extreme measure of secreting her from society (ix.5.6-7) and later is transformed by his jealous desire into a grotesque monster (x.60.7-9). Paridell, meanwhile, consummates his premarital desire for Hellenore instead of “kindling” his lust into a “goodly fire” (III.v.1.8) and using it to fuel his search for Florimell. Both characters are of the upper class, yet neither taps into an ability to make positive use of lust.

At a first glance, Malbecco and Paridell might appear to pose a major problem to the theory that noble persons possess the potential in Spenser’s work to channel their sexual energies toward a higher cause. However, because of the didactic nature of Spenser’s work, the men’s failure to sublimate their lust is actually not a problem at all. Spenser uses the third book of *The Faerie Queene* to present a wide variety of human beings experiencing an even wider variety of amorous emotions in hopes of teaching his readers a lesson. Malbecco and Paridell simply communicate different lessons to Spenser’s audience than Britomart or the fisherman. The elderly Malbecco, though a member of the upper class, does not seem to possess any of the qualities Spenser typically bestows upon his aristocrats. He is not “amiable” (III.i.46.1) or “princely” (ii.27.3) but rather is “a cancred crabbed Carle ... that has no skill of Court nor courtesie” (III.ix.3.5-6). It is thus only natural that he not possess the aristocratic ability to redirect his sexual energies, either. The message Malbecco sends to a “gentleman or noble person” (*The Faerie Queene Books Three and Four* 451) is simple: nobility is found not in money but in gentility and courtesy, and a person without the intrinsic morals and strengths of the upper class cannot truly be considered upper-class at all. Malbecco is punished for acting on his lust in spite of his noble status because he is not, in essence, noble to begin with. Paridell, on the other hand, demonstrates to Spenser’s audience the dire consequences that are sure to follow if lust is, indeed, indulged in by a courtier. Paridell is a knight. It is his duty to protect all women and to devote himself to one for his own spiritual betterment. Yet when he allows lust to control his actions, he forgets about saving Florimell, flirts hollowly and crassly with Hellenore (III.ix.28.4, 29.6-8), and ultimately abandons both women to fend for themselves in the wild. There is no place for uncontrolled lust at court. When Paridell fails to repurpose his lust, he also fails to act as a knight.

In the end, lust still rides through the pages of *The Faerie Queene* on a goat. It (and its steed) is still an ugly, foul emotion, “rough, and blacke, and filthy” (I.iv.24.212). However, perhaps it does not need to ride purely in the direction Duessa’s train of sins leads it. After

analyzing the way noble characters in the poem use their lust for good causes, it would seem there is a chance that it does not need to ride with the other sins at all. Spenser suggests through the characters of Britomart, Timias, and Prince Arthur that although it is impossible to abolish lust completely, people can take the goat's reins for themselves and lead it in a different direction. And perhaps, when lust is in the control of the person experiencing it, rather than a glaring man clutching a human heart, it can finally become a *bit* less unappealing.

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<sup>i</sup> See the works of J.W. Saunders, Robert Durling, Arlene N. Okerlund, and Spenser's contemporary John Milton for examples of this tendency.

<sup>ii</sup> Spenser affirms the undeniably sinful nature of Britomart's gazing to his audience through this wound. Gardante, as a knight of specifically *lecherous* gazing, would not have been able to harm Britomart had she not been behaving lustfully.

<sup>iii</sup> It is, to be sure, "no" for Sir Guyon and Prince Arthur as well, although Spenser admittedly provides readers with less concrete evidence for Sir Guyon and Prince Arthur subverting their lust than he does for Timias. I believe that one must assume that the knights would never act on their darker motivations for rescuing Florimell simply because of the way Spenser has designed the men. Sir Guyon, functioning as an allegory for temperance, could never perform such an intemperate act as rape, and it would not be fitting to have Prince Arthur, alleged ancestor of Queen Elizabeth and all around hero, to engage in premarital sex. Readers must accept by faith the fact that Sir Guyon and Prince Arthur are sublimating their lust and throwing all of their energy into rescuing Florimell merely for the sake of helping a woman in danger.

<sup>iv</sup> Which are made apparent in the sensuous nature of his supposed encounter with Gloriana, which may have actually been a dream (I.ix.13-14) and the "great passion" (16.137) and "fire" (139) with which he speaks of the dream.