FEMINISM IN THE FAERIE QUEENE

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Abstract: Edmund Spenser in “The Faerie Queene” lays bare the oppositional dynamics of Petrarchan sexuality and he also broadly looks at the ‘fetishization of female virginity’. Sexual orientation in "The Faerie Queene" is sympathetically hierarchical. Artegall dressed as a lady is an embarrassment and a figure of disgrace; Radigund enabled as a man is a usurper. A knight may not surrender his legitimate privileges; a lady may not lay hold of what is beyond her. Britomart needs to practice in arms only to disapprove and suppress corresponding presumption in another of her sex. Spenser’s obvious concern with cross-dressing as it is performed by Radigund and Artegall discovers and does reveal the problematic character not just of cross-dressing previously in the poetry but of identity establishment all through the poetry. The men of “The Faerie Queene” function within a cultural system that clearly and equally define proper roles to men as much as it does for women. The portrayal of women’s sexuality as dangerous forces a male perspective on the female reader. Women in “The Faerie Queene” bring forth danger, caution and duplicity. The present paper tries to unfurl the issues of feminism, cross-dressing and gender in Edmund Spenser’s epic poetry Faerie Queene. After comprehending the ‘rules of patriarchy’, The Faerie Queene comes out to be a site of ‘probability’ and as a ‘feminist text’.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Cross-dressing, Sexuality, Assemblage, Petrarchan sexuality.

In sixteenth century England, inheritance of throne by a female prince constituted practical and representational crisis. The state was considered to hold proprietary interest in ‘sexuality and procreation’.

Spenser’s intentions are clearly aforesaid in his “Letter to Raleigh “that asserts his debt to courtesy tradition – “fashioning a gentleman or a noble person in virtuous & gentle discipline”. His goal to counsel virtues that are admirable for men hints his discrimination inviting “gender trouble “in this epic. Feminist literary critics of Spenser confront the complexity concerning the representation of women in this epic.

The Faerie Queene was a standout and emerged out as a literary masterpiece. Coleridge remarks on The Faerie Queene; “a mental space that invites a reading of epic as an extended dream vision” has overlooked the evil females in dream visions as a threat to male virtue in this epic. Illustrations such as; Red Crosse knight’s shaken faith after a false vision of Una engaged in lawless mating leading him to great fury, Arcasia’s bower of bliss symbolising as a locus for luring knights in decadent pleasures, Phaedra as an impediment in cymochles martial quest etc is termed by critics as “knights fear of emasculation” & “ misogynistic anxieties”. Spenser’s allegory in book III modelling Britomart as central figure symbolising chastity, merlin’s prediction of her “from thy womb a famous pro genie shall spring, out of the auncient Trojan blood…renowned kings, and sacred emperours” affirming the genealogy of Britain. During Elizabethan reign the state was uneasy about her chastity and held great interest in
“sexuality and procreation”, Spenser delineates the politics of his time by stressing on Britomart’s dynastic role as a vehicle of critique for queen’s chastity. David Wilson-okamura argued that idea of Spenser critiquing queen Elizabeth’s spouseless life has now proceeded into “the realm of critical orthodoxy”. This epic has glimpses of Spenser’s shift from celebrating Elizabeth as magnificent empresses to his disillusionment of reforming Elizabethan Ireland under feminine guidance where he was a civil servant. Clare Carroll argued through an example that Radigund subduing knight Arthegall embodies Spenser’s critique of “womanish polices towards Ireland”.

Spenser in “The Faerie Queene” lays bare the oppositional dynamics of Petrarchan sexuality and he also broadly looks at the ‘fetishisation of female virginity’. Sexual orientation in "The Faerie Queene" is sympathetically hierarchical. Arthegall dressed as a lady is an embarrassment and a figure of disgrace; Radigund enabled as a man is a usurper. A knight may not surrender his legitimate privileges; a lady may not lay hold of what is beyond her. Britomart needs to practice in arms only to disapprove and suppress corresponding presumption in another of her sex.

The introduction of Petrarchism in sixteenth century brought the concept of “male desire” – arising from unrequited love- his concept became source for many Elizabethan sonneteers including Spenser’s works. Petrarchan dangers of love is conspicuous throughout in different images, idioms of haunting love in this epic & has become a constant debate of feminist critics. Nancy Vickers in her 1982 essay: “Diana Described” argued Petrarchan tradition is “the male poet’s aggressive fragmentation of the beloved’s body”. Such fragmentation is apparent in Book III-virgin Amoret abducted by Busyrane on her own bridal feast is most debated episode of Spenser’s feminist critics. The ‘house of Busyrane’ symbolise the psychic fear of defloration that tyrannise the virgin and Busyrane alludes to explicit Petrarchan torture. The predatory violence in these lines is remarkable:

And her before the vile Enchaunter sate,
Figuring straune characters of his art,
With liuing blood he those characters wrate,
Dreadfully dropping from her dying hart. . .(III-Xii-21)

According to critics Busyrane’s literal action of writing in blood is –“a writing that literalizes the dangers of Petrarchan conventions & dominance over the woman”.

The predation of male gaze is apparent In book VI, a group of cannibals resolve to slaughter Serena, they rape her visually & verbally with phrases full of sadism “yuorie necke, her alabaster Brest/ her paps ,which Like white silken pillowes were” & in book III where false Florimell body is assembled by old hag to pacify her lewd son’s desire clearly exposes the fetishism & male appetite based on appearances.

In The Faerie Queene gender is assertively hierarchical where Arthegall forced cross-dressing by Radigund, an amazon, is portrayed with shame and disgust affirming natural inferiority of women against men. When Arthegall is made captive of our proud amazon the crisis is defined with pejorative as:

“In stead whereof she made him be dight
In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame”

Whereas the cross-dressing of Britomart & Radigund is taken in positive light concerning her adventures and rescue of others in danger . The armour disguising Britomart becomes a symbol of masculinity that helps her to perform in knightly fashion and assume male-identity without which her quest of meeting Arthegall wouldn’t have become successful. Judith butler’s notion is used by feminist critics to conclude that “gender , never just simply an essence is more often a performance – of cross-dressing, transvestitism, gender confusion ,gender subversion & gender excess”.The portrayal of Radigund as an Amazonian usurper hints the anxiety of males concerning female superiority , she overturns the social order and so Spenser is forced to restore it through Britomart by killing Radigund, critics contended that captivity of Arthegall under Radigund is parallel to “Spenser’s own subordinate role in serving queen Elizabeth”. Radigund works as a foil to Britomart’s character “Britomart restores the body politic to its proper shape by insisting that liberty and subjection are gendered attributes”. Female superiority is belittled by asserting the social order in favour of men. In the clash b/w Britomart and Arthegall, the knight displays pity once her hair are released and his conduct is rehearsed when same happens during his combat with Radigund asserting that “feminine face has been fatal to martial action”. So, the sexual politics of this epic is exposed as gendered.
Spenser’s obvious concern with cross-dressing as it is performed by Radigund and Artegall discovers and does reveal the problematic character not just of cross-dressing previously in the poetry but of identity establishment all through the poetry. The Redcrosse Knight, as per the Letter to Raleigh, was just “a tall, clownishe younge man” before he put on his armor, at which instance he unexpectedly turn into “the goodliest man in al that company”. Though he is consequently superior and became capable of playing a knightly role, he continues to be oblivious and likely to commit faults. Britomart, yet in complete armour, preserves her lengthy feminine tresses; even outside her armour, she maintains the capacity to combat henchmen of Malecasta. Terpine’s fear at the idea subjugation by the 22 Amazons highlights the definiteness of such a conversion, a change that Artegall withstands but by that he stays nonetheless influenced: his resume to masculinity is not a coming back to the similar masculinity with that he started. His re-fabrication in a moderated — and hence enhanced — masculinity accentuates the way in which a metaphorical personality, and by extension a human subject, can be altered through re-fabrication. Spenser’s deliberate allegory makes possible a consciousness about gender as constructed and re-constructed, not just within Spenser’s poetry but in the realm all around it too.

Stretching all the way across such a model of identity is the issue of where ‘agency’ is centered. As Drew Daniel mentions in “The Melancholy Assemblage” usually and in his argument of court portrayals more predominantly, “identities are often assembled very deliberately, bodies and objects placed in specific postures and positions in order to exploit pre-existing models of melancholy”. This deliberate value is significant as it sits an inordinate agency in the hands of the individual being assembled, but when an assemblage has been formed, we are no more referring of a person who can potentially outline his or her assemblage with freedom but alternatively about a collaborative hybrid with a continuing authority of its own. However, Britomart, Artegall, and Radigund, their assemblage takes on a life of its own beyond their command. Objects, activities, human beings, and prevalent social environments blur collectively into a totality, and out of that the assemblage arises. Agency is de-centered not just from the human subject but from other objects also, each one of that sculpts the identity. Furthermore, assemblages are reminisced even when they are no more contemporary. The probability persists that alternative forms will resurface and that a ‘crossdressing phase’, even if it is only a period, will leave its sign on successive assemblages, as on the assemblages of Artegall and Radigund.

The implicit male gender of the speaker is given prominence from the beginning of the poem and this is evident in the first line of the epic poem. The implicit maleness of the voice of speaker provides the foundation for much of the feminist criticism that follows. Sheila Cavanagh in “Wanton Eyes and Chaste Desires” argues that “the earlier readings of Spenser’s epic poem ignore the different perspectives that male and female readers might bring to the text”. She thereby tries to “reclaim the woman’s part,” by putting forth Spenser’s refusal to associate ‘feminity’ with ‘true virtue’ and his attempt to masculinize ‘virtue’. Pamela Joseph Benson and Lauren Silberman declare Spenser as a “proto-feminist”.

The poem is itself dominated by men attempting to understand their proper social positions, whether grooms, husbands, warriors, or knights. The men of “The Faerie Queene” function within a cultural system that clearly and equally define proper roles to men as much as it does for women. The portrayal of women’s sexuality as dangerous forces a male perspective on the female reader. Women in “The Faerie Queene” bring forth danger, caution and duplicity. Spenser establishes complicated relationship with the physique and sexual power of women. In all the instances, the men judge the woman by her outward appearance. “The Faerie Queene” gives more importance to gender rather than actions, thereby excusing the male’s intemperate acts as caused by the female.

In Book I, the character of Duessa exposes male anxiety about female power. Moreover, she is much like Queen Elizabeth.

Books III and IV are the most concerned with the presentation of gender and have been the locus of much of feminist criticism. Book III and IV of "The Faerie Queene" address the issue of "making sense of the sensual world by subjecting conventional discourses of love to critique". Spenser coordinates an effective basic knowledge at the sexual philosophy of his opportunity while enrolling the quality of the social powers and philosophical preferences that help that belief system. The Spenserian study of traditional sexual belief system turns out to be a piece of a social talk that, after few centuries, created woman’s rights. The flight of Florimell across the four cantos of Book III illustrates a metaphorical expression of the problematic nature of masculine desire. Florimell flies across every social
domain of Early Modern England and provides a clear view of the male desire for female objectification. Amoret, however stationary as a result of male dominance, is rendered passive and is acted upon instead of being capable of action. Spenser’s most consistently damselled female character, Amoret fulfills the prototype of the “maiden in distress”. Contrasted against Florimell’s active resistance, her immobility and physical captivity clearly depict the psychological effect of monstrous male domination. Book IV investigates how the review position, the yearning for and accentuation on causes figured fancifully by the narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice, is involved in the sexual legislative issues of the male perspective, which drives the female ‘other’ to a ‘question’ and an event for male rivalry and comradeship (an issue talked about in different courses by René Girard, Luce Irigaray, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick).

The central books of “The Faerie Queene” are undoubtedly concerned with negotiating and analyzing the proper socially constructed roles of women in society. The stories of Amoret, Florimell and Britomart explore distinct moments of feminine virtue in the attempt to maintain their chastity that is deemed central to their social value. Every woman of the epic is highly influenced by patriarchal system that controls and challenges their autonomy over their actions as well as their bodies. Spenser utilizes three comprehensive and pervasive metaphors to articulate and criticize male sexualities: ‘lust is beastly’; ‘sex is cannibalism’; ‘love is war’. Each of these metaphors describes specific moments of stages of sexual gratification and necessitates its own social rules.

Preceding modern psychoanalytical writings that discuss male fears about the ‘exhausting possibilities of sexuality’, “The Faerie Queene” provides a testimony for the threat. ‘Jacques Lacan’ describes as "the castrating and devouring, dislocating and astounding effects of feminine activity". The central books explore violence against women or in the name of women, in order to assess and critique the ‘accepted Early Modern conceptions of masculinity’.

Though women are excessively criticized in the poem and treated as mere ‘objects’ but a departing feature is noticed to this characterization of women in the following lines where Spenser even indicates that “it’s the duty of queens to make sure their female subjects learn their proper place”, when Britomart is in Radigund’s city:

“During which space she there as Princess reigned,  
And changing all that form of common weal,  
The liberty of women did repeal,  
Which they had long usurped; and them restoring  
To men’s subjection, did true Justice deal.”

There’s such a lot that’s worthy of admiration about this citation. One ramification is that ‘women’ of relatively strong character and not ‘men’ are the correct individuals to police ladies and oppose the tendency to feminism. Another is, obviously, the supposition that women with authority and power aren’t awful. In any case, maybe the most endearing thing about these lines is the announcement that true Justice is not essentially “populist”.

Through reading the physical interruptions, we can start to comprehend the ‘rules of patriarchy’, and after such acknowledgment “The Faerie Queene” comes out to be a site of ‘probability’ and as a ‘feminist text’.
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