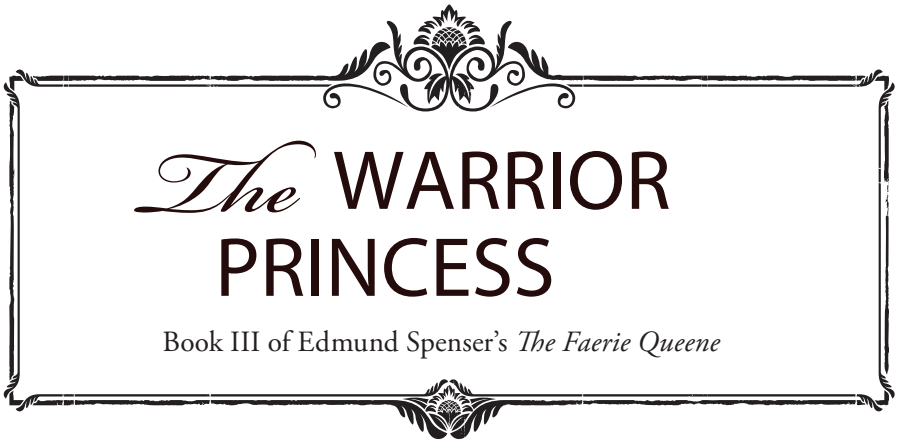

The WARRIOR PRINCESS

Book III of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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INTRODUCTION

Edmund Spenser's tomb at Westminster Abbey has the inscription, "The Prince of Poets." Leaving aside Homer, Virgil, and the Ramones for the moment, we could have a lively debate on whom that makes the "king." But Spenser was one of the greats. If you've read Books I and II of his unfinished English epic, *The Faerie Queene,* you know that by now.

A devout Christian, he was primarily concerned with what we would now call "preaching to the choir," but not in a bad way. He focused on the sanctification of Christians, rather than evangelism of non-Christians.

In my view, his concern seemed to be that the English Reformation (conceived in Henry VIII's vanity and confirmed in the blood of his innocent wives) would set aside virtue, as Henry had done, in favor of political gain. Spenser wrote of a Christianity many of us would recognize. It was based upon biblical concepts such as the fall of man and the need for grace (even for kings), and it dealt with tough issues, such as temptation, "apostasy" (backsliding), lust, and even sex.

He wrote for adults. I'd have to give Book III a PG rating (in some parts, PG-13), because there are portions unsuitable for children. Yet this edition is no "adaptation" for the young, like the Charles and Mary Lamb book on the "Stories of Shakespeare." You'll get the real thing here—lust, sexual innuendos, and torture, among other things. There are portions that might (should) make you blush. Yet that was Spenser's intent. No one can accuse this guy of overlooking sin when it should have been pointed out and condemned.

Spenser was a contemporary of Shakespeare but gets far less attention these days. Part of the reason is he wrote in what was, even at the time, archaic language (old words, tough to follow even for the few literate people of the day), and he mixed allegory with preachiness (the word I'd use is didacticism).

But he also did some pretty good storytelling. I've always said Book I of *The Faerie Queene* is basically *Star Wars: A New Hope,* but cooler. (You have your farm boy, your distressed princess, your betrayals, even your magical sword, though Luke's was called a "lightsaber"; and Spenser has a monster that barfs on its victims, which George Lucas didn't.)

Yet while Spenser's language might seem out of touch with the times, Spenser himself wasn't. He saw his queen (Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry VIII) for what she was: both a symbol (a replacement in the hearts of the people for the Virgin Mary they left behind with Catholicism) and a fallen human being. I think that's one reason we never actually meet her character—her avatar, if you will, Glorianna—in the text of the poem. His letter about the epic mentions her and gives some back-story, but she never actually shows up in his poem.

As Douglas Brooks-Davies of the University of Manchester wrote in his 1996 updated edition's introduction to the poem, "He dedicated it to an empress. But in his daily life he saw (and, if he is a poet worth reading, he sympathized profoundly with) the wretched state of those over which she ruled."[1]

Brooks-Davies goes on to discuss her purported virginity but also her fury at those of her "favorites" in her court who went and got married (Leicester, Raleigh). Elizabeth was no saint, and Spenser knew it.

But like any sub-creator, to borrow a concept from Tolkien, Spenser had some say-so over the world he was fashioning. As Brooks-Davies points out, he wrote about how things ought to be, not necessarily how they were.

Who can blame him? Spenser's England was a country in the midst of religious and political turmoil. The Reformation had not yet taken a firm hold nor had it fully found its theological feet. There were dragons of all kinds in his England: theological, philosophical, and moral—not to mention the international threats and internal political instability. Spenser's role, as he saw it, was to help ground the new faith in the hearts of the English.

One thing that draws me to Book III of *The Faerie Queene* is the main character, Britomart (her name is a combination of Britania and of Mars or Martial, indicating war). Elizabeth was a wartime queen; she faced the Spanish Armada, among many other threats. Spenser saw the strength women were truly capable of. While I wouldn't call him a sixteenth-century feminist, I would commend him for recognizing that female characters can be strong and still remain women. For most of the book, Britomart is disguised as a knight-errant, and only a few learn her secret before it's too late and they're looking up at her sword or lance-point.

This fascinates me because I have two daughters myself. Even if no publisher was involved, I think this project would be worthwhile as something to pass on to them as they get older and find themselves assailed by a culture that glorifies

1. Douglas Brooks-Davies, *The Fairy Queen by Edmund Spenser* (London: Everyman Classics, 1987 and 1996).

THE THIRD BOOKE OF THE FAERIE QVEENE.

Conta ynin g THE LEGEND BRITOMARTIS.

or OF CHASTITY.

It falles me here to write of Chastity[1],
That fairest vertue, farre aboue the rest;
For which what needs me fetch from Faery
Forreine° ensamples,° it to haue exprest? *foreign / examples*
Sith it is shrined° in my Soueraines° brest,[2] *enshrined, preserved / Sovereign's*
And form'd so liuely° in each perfect part *lively*
That to all Ladies, which haue it profest,
Need but behold the pourtraict of her hart,
If pourtrayd it might be by any liuing art.

But liuing art may not least part expresse,
Nor life-resembling pencill it can paint,
All were it Zeuxis or Praxiteles:[3]
His daedale hand would faile, and greatly faint,
And her perfections with his error taint:
Ne° Poets wit, that passeth Painter farre *nor*
In picturing the parts of beautie daint,
So hard a workmanship aduenture darre,
For fear through want of words her excellence to marre.° *deface*

1. As with previous Canon Press modernizations, we have included the preface in the original spelling.
2. It would be ridiculous for Spenser to begin a book about Chastity without praising Queen Elizabeth, one of the most famous virgins in all history.
3. Zeuxis and Praxiteles were famous Greek sculptors. Even they could not represent chastity with all their skill.

How then shall I, Apprentice of the skill,
That whylome° in diuinest° wits did raine,° *formerly / divinest / reign*
Presume so high to stretch mine humble quill?
Yet now my lucklesse lot doth me constraine
Hereto° perforce. But ô dred° Soueraine° *to this / great / sovereign*
Thus farre forth pardon, sith that choicest° wit *best*
Cannot your glorious pourtraict° figure plaine *portrait*
That I in colourd showes may shadow it,
And antique praises vnto° present persons fit. *unto*

But if in liuing° colours, and right hew,° *living / hue*
Your selfe you couet° to see pictured, *covet*
Who can it doe more liuely, or more trew,° *true*
Then that sweet verse, with Nectar sprinckeled,° *sprinkled*
In which a gracious seruant° pictured *servant*
His Cynthia, his heauens° fairest light?[4] *heaven's*
That with his melting sweetnesse rauished,° *ravished*
And with the wonder of her beames bright,
My senses lulled are in slomber° of delight. *slumber*

But let that same delitious° Poet lend *delicious, pleasing*
A little leaue° vnto a rusticke Muse *leave*
To sing his mistresse° prayse, and let him mend, *mistress's*
Ne° let his fairest Cynthia refuse, *nor*
In mirrours° more then one her selfe to see, *mirrors*
But either Gloriana let her chuse,° *choose*
Or in Belphoebe fashioned to bee:
In th'one her rule, in th'other her rare chastitee.[5]

4. Spenser is going to use the same verse utilized by Sir Walter Raleigh in his poem to Elizabeth, whom he called Cynthia (Diana, goddess of Virginity).
5. While Raleigh praised Elizabeth as Cynthia, Spenser will praise her by reflecting her in the virtues of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, and in Belphoebe, another virgin warrior maiden. These characters are Elizabeth's reflections or "mirrours."

Canto I.

Guyon encounters Britomart,
Fair Florimell is chased:
Duessa's trains° and Malecasta's — *plans*
Champions are defaced.° — *defeated*

1

The famous Briton Prince and Faery[1] knight,
After long ways and perilous pains endured,
Having their weary limbs to perfect plight° — *put right, healed*
Restored, and sore wounds right well cured,
Of° the fair Alma[2] greatly were procured,° — *by / pleaded with*
To make there longer sojourn and abode;
But when thereto they might not be allured,° — *persuaded*
From seeking praise, and deeds of arms abroad,
They courteous leave took, and forth together yode.° — *rode forth*

2

But the captived Acrasia° he sent, — *a villainess of Book II*
Because of travel long, a nigher° way, — *nearer*
With a strong guard, all rescue to prevent,[3]
And her to Faerie court safe to convey,
That her for witness of his hard assay,° — *trial*
Unto his Faerie Queene he might present:[4]
But he himself betook another way,

1. Whatever you do, don't think of "fairy" in terms of Walt Disney characters or pretty little winged things. In Spenser's world, fairies are more synonymous with the elves of Tolkien's Middle Earth. You don't want to mess with these guys. By the way, these are our old friends, Arthur and Guyon, described as faery because they are knights of Gloriana, the Fairy Queen.
2. Alma is a woman who helps feed, help, and restore battered knights. See Book II, Cantos IX-XI.
3. They wished to prevent her rescue since she still has allies.
4. He sent her to Glorianna to be judged.

To make more trial of his hardiment,[5]
And seek adventures, as he with Prince Arthur went.

3

Long so they traveled through wasteful ways° *wilderness*
Where dangers dwelt, and perils most did wone,° *dwell*
To hunt for glory and renowned praise;
Full many countries they did overrun[6]
From the uprising to the setting sun,
And many hard adventures did achieve;
Of all the which they honor ever won,
Seeking the weak oppressed to relieve,
And to recover right for such, as wrong did grieve.

4

At last as through an open plain they yode,° *rode forth*
They spied a knight, that towards pricked° fair, *spurred*
And him beside an aged Squire there rode,
That seemed to couch under his shield three-square,
As if that age bade him that burden spare,[7]
And yield it those, that stouter could it wield:
He them espying, began himself prepare,
And on his arm address his goodly shield
That bore a lion passant in a golden field.[8]

5

Which seeing good Sir Guyon, dear besought
The Prince of grace,[9] to let him run that turn.
He granted: then the Faery° quickly raught° *Guyon / grabbed*
His poignant° spear, and sharply began to spurn *piercing*
His foamy steed, whose fiery feet did burn
The verdant° grass, as he thereon did tread; *green*
Not did the other back his foot return,

5. That's what knights did; they looked for hard tasks.
6. Sounds a little extreme to me.
7. It appeared too heavy for him (he was old).
8. This is an important detail. A "lion passant" is a lion walking (in this case, on a gold background). It symbolizes strength (obviously), bravery, and, above all, royalty.
9. As a favor, Arthur let Guyon take this challenge.

But fiercely forward came without dread,
And bent his dreadful spear against the other's head.

6

They been met, and both their points arrived,
But Guyon drove so furious and fell,
That seemed both shield and plate it would have rived;° *splintered*
Nevertheless, it bore his foe not from his saddle,
But made him stagger, as he were not well:
But Guyon self, ere well he was aware,
Nigh a spear's length behind his crupper° fell, *the rear end of a horse*
Yet in his fall so well himself he bare,
That mischievous mischance his life and limbs did spare.[10]

7

Great shame and sorrow of that fall he took;° *he was embarrassed*
For never yet, since warlike arms he bore,
And shivering spear in bloody field first shook,
He found himself dishonored so sore.° *seriously*
Ah gentlest knight, that ever armor bore,
Let not thee grieve dismounted to have been,
And brought to ground, that never wast before;
For not thy fault, but secret power unseen,
That spear enchanted was, which laid thee on the green.

8

But ween[11] thou what wight° thee overthrew, *creature*
Much greater grief and shamefuller regret
For thy hard fortune than thou wouldst renew,
That of a single damsel[12] thou had met
On equal plain, and there so hard beset;
Even the famous Britomart it was,
Whom strange adventure did from Britain fetch,° *arrive*
To seek her lover (love far sought alas),
Whose image she had seen in Venus' looking glass.° *Venus, goddess of love*

10. He landed well and did not hurt himself.
11. Some words and their variations are common in Spenser. *Ween, wot,* and *wit* all mean "to know" or "to realize."
12. Hah! It was a girl!

9

Full of disdainful wrath, he fierce uprose,
For to revenge that foul reprochful shame,
And snatching his bright sword began to close° *catch up*
With her on foot, and stoutly forward came;
Die rather would he, then endure that same.
Which when his Palmer[13] saw, he began to fear
His toward° peril and untoward blame, *upcoming*
Which by that new encounter he should rear:° *experience*
For death sat on the point of that enchanted spear.

10

And hasting towards him began fair persuade,
Not to provoke misfortune, nor to believe,
His spear's fault to mend° with cruel blade; *lose to*
For by his mighty science he had seen
The secret virtue of that weapon keen,° *sharp*
That mortal puissance[14] might not withstood:
Nothing on earth might always happy[15] been.
Great hazard were it, and adventure foolhardy,
To lose long gotten honor with one evil hand.° *deed*

11

By such good means he him discouraged,
From prosecuting his revenging rage;
And eke° the Prince like treaty handeled,° *also / persuaded*
His wrathful will with reason to assuage,° *diminish*
And laid the blame, not to his carriage,° *abilities*
But to his starting steed, that swerved aside,
And to the ill purveyance of his page,
That had his furnitures° not firmly tied: *saddle, armor*
So is his angry courage fairly pacified.

12

Thus reconcilement was between them knit,
Through goodly temperance, and affection chaste,

13. Guyon has a Palmer or a holy man as his sidekick (see Bk. II, Canto I).
14. *Puissance* meant strength, power, or might. It's one of Spenser's favorite words, so be looking for it.
15. In this case, he means "lucky."

And either vowed with all their power and wit,
To let not others' honor be defaced,
Of friend or foe, whoever it debased,
Nor arms to bear against the other's side:
In which accord the Prince was also placed,
And with that golden chain of concord tied.
So goodly all agreed, they forth aside did ride.

13

O goodly usage° of those antique times, *tradition*
In which the sword was servant unto right;[16]
When not for malice and contentious crimes,
But all for praise, and proof of manly might,
The martial° brood accustomed to fight: *warlike*
Then honor was the meed° of victory, *reward*
And yet the vanquished had no despite:° *abuse*
Let later age that noble use envy,
Vile rancor to avoid, and cruel presumption.

14

Long they thus traveled in friendly ways,
Through countries waste,° and also well edified,° *desolate / developed*
Seeking adventures hard, to exercise
Their puissance, whilome° full sternly tried: *at times*
At length they came into a forest wide,
Whose hideous horror and sad trembling sound
Full grisly seemed: therein they long did ride,
Yet tract of living creatures none they found,
Save bears, lions, and bulls, which roamed them around.

15

All suddenly out of the thickest brush,
Upon a milk-white palfrey° all alone, *gentle lady's horse*
A goodly lady did by them rush,
Whose face did seem as clear as crystal stone,
And eke° through fear as white as whale's bone: *also*

16. If you forget the whole Goths and Vandals thing. But Spenser is being poetical: in the good old days, being a knight meant something.

Her garments all were wrought of beaten gold,
And all her steed with tinsel trappings shone,
Which fled so fast, that nothing might him° hold, *the horse*
And scarce them time gave, her passing to behold.[17]

16

Still as she fled, her eye she backward threw,
As fearing evil, that pursued her fast;
And her fair yellow locks behind her flew,
Loosely dispersed with puff of every blast: [18]
All as a blazing star doth far outcast
His hairy bulk, and flaming locks wide-spread,
At sight whereof the people stand aghast:
But the sage wizard° tells, as he has read, *wise man*
That it implies death and doleful dreariness.

17

So as they gazed after her a while,
Lo where a grisly forester[19] forth did rush,
Breathing out beastly lust her to defile:
His tiring jade° he fiercely forth did push, *horse*
Through thick and thin, both over bank and bush
In hope her to attain by hook or crook,
That from his gory sides the blood did gush:
Large were his limbs, and terrible his look,
And in his clownish[20] hand a sharp bore spear he shook.

18

Which outrage when those gentle knights did see,
Full of great envy and fell° jealousy, *great*
They stayed not to advise who first should be,
But all spurred after fast, as they might fly,
To rescue her from shameful villainy.
The Prince and Guyon equally believe

17. Seriously, guys, a beautiful woman comes running out of the forest on a horse? Does this happen every day? Do we really want to trust this situation? Think about it.
18. Windblown hair. Another sign. Think about this.
19. One who lives in the forest, often an outlaw.
20. In this case, it means "peasant."

Herself pursued, in hope to win thereby
Most goodly meed,° the fairest dame alive: *reward*
But after the foul forester Timias did strive.

19

The whiles fair Britomart, whose constant° mind, *unchanging*
Would not so lightly follow beauty's[21] chase,
Nor reckoning of lady's love, did stay behind,
And them awaited there a certain space,
To weet° if they would turn back to that place: *know*
But when she saw them gone, she forward went,
As lay her journey, through that perilous pace,
With steadfast courage and stout hardihood;
Nor evil thing she feared, nor evil thing she meant.

20

At last as nigh out of the wood she came,
A stately castle far away she spied,
To which her steps directly she did frame.
That castle was most goodly edified,° *strenghtened*
And placed for pleasure near that forest side:
But fair before the gate a spacious plain,
Mantled with green, itself did spread wide,
On which she saw six knights, that did arraign° *attack*
Fierce battle against one, with cruel might and main.° *force*

21

Mainly° they all at once upon him laid, *with great force*
And sore beset on every side around,
That soon he breathless grew, yet not dismayed,
Nor ever to them yielded foot of ground
All had he lost much blood through many a wound,
But stoutly dealt his blows, and every way
To which he turned in his wrathful strike,
Made them recoil, and fly from dread contempt,
That none of all the six before, him dared to attempt.

21. Now, which is the smarter of the three? From here on out, we are going to go with Britomart rather than with Guyon or Arthur!

22

Like dastard curs,° that having at a bay *hounds*
The savage beast closed in, in weary chase,
Dare not adventure on the stubborn prey,
Nor bite before, but roam from place to place,
To get a snatch, when turned is his face.
In such distress and doubtful jeopardy,
When Britomart him saw, she ran a pace
Unto his rescue, and with earnest cry,
Bad° those same six forbear that single enemy. *commanded*

23

But to her cry they would not lend an ear,
Nor ought the more their mighty strokes to cease,
But gathering him round about more near,
Their direful rancor rather did increase;
Until that she rushing through the thickest press,
By force dispersed their compacted group,
And soon compelled to listen unto peace:
Though began she mildly of them to enquire
The cause of their dissension and outrageous ire.

24

Whereto that single knight did answer to the same;
"These six would me force by odds of might,
To change my beloved, and love another dame,[22]
That death me better was, then such a plight,
So unto wrong to yield my wrested right:
For I love one, the truest one on ground,
Nor wish me change; she the Errant Damsel hight,° *known as*
For whose dear sake full many a bitter stand,
I have endured, and tasted many a bloody wound."

25

"Certainly," said she, "then be ye six to blame,
To weene° your wrong by force to justify: *to teach*
For knight to leave his lady were great shame,

22. Force him to foreswear the woman he loves (Una), in favor of another woman.