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Petticoats and Spurs: Female Armor in Spenser's "Faerie Queene" and Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"

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In early modern British society, upper-class women wore their personal appearance like a suit of armor. Both Britomart in Spenser's Book 3, Canto 1 of *Faerie Queene* and Belinda in Pope's *The Rape of The Lock* wear their clothes and (in Belinda's case) makeup as their armor, both literally and figuratively. Both paragons of British womanhood suffer unwanted advances, their image publicly besmirched as a result. Even though Belinda dresses to show off her beauty and Britomart dresses to conceal it, both women use their array as a form of protection from the lecherous, cruel, and male-dominated world around them. Both feel safe from societal gaze in the bedroom and safe from attack while amongst nobility, and both women have this safety violated. When this happens, they feel compelled to attack to defend the remnant of their honor.

For Spenser, Chastity is a virtue to be held in a very high regard. Britomart, as the knight he posits as the allegory of Chastity, has her whole identity wrapped up in protecting her virtue. Unlike other good women of this epic, who serve as typical chivalric damsels in distress, Britomart cross-dresses in a suit of armor. To Spenser, female Chastity is not only the passive lack of sex in one's life, but actively fighting against lust. In a world where homosexuality is so ignored, disguising a woman as male protects her from the male gaze. This allows Britomart to engage in chivalric things like duels and a quest to find true love. Here, the allegory of Chastity is seemingly paradoxically searching for her sexual mate. Spenser believes in a union of Diana and Venus: that in his world perpetual virginity is not the goal- Britomart preserves herself for her true partner, and then will stay faithful to him. This represents a very Protestant set of family values, as opposed to the Catholic position, which celebrates nuns and the complete lack of sex in holy female's lives. Britomart's position as a future mother allows her to be worked into the narrative as an ancestor of the British monarchy. The role of the bloodline is very important to the legend of monarchy, and Britomart's male knight attire includes a shield with the coat of

arms of the legendary Brute, ancestor of Britain, highlighting Spenser's deep-rooted national pride. Like Queen Elizabeth I Tudor, the patroness this work is dedicated to, acted as a woman performing a traditional male role as a queen regnant, Britomart is praised for her "masculine" virtues of steadfastness and being warlike.

Since women in Spenser are seen as either weaker than men or seductive and evil, Britomart's proximity to masculinity is seen as respectability instead of gender deviation. She does not concern herself with vanity or looking pretty, but yet remains pretty despite that. Thus, she feels that her prettiness, and in turn, her gender must remain hidden. In Stanza 42, the Red-cross Knight takes off his armor upon entering Castle Joyous, "But the brave Mayd would not disarmed bee, / But onely vented up hjer umbriere, / And so did let her goodly visage to appere." By only revealing her beautiful face, Britomart then becomes an androgynous being assumed male. Immune to the male gaze, the naïve and trusting Britomart opens herself up to the predatory gaze of a Spenserian enchantress. While innocence and naïveté often go hand in hand, Spenser seems to be encouraging women to be innocent yet world-weary, always on guard.

Pope seems to have the same advice for Belinda, however in a more humorous rather than grave tone. While Belinda is certainly more worldly and aware of the threat of men to her honor, she is too confident in her ability to protect herself. She is blissfully unaware of the elemental spiritual forces aiding and harming her along the way. That being said, however, Belinda also dons a suit of armor, albeit a much more traditionally feminine one. Rather than hiding her beauty, Belinda seeks to highlight and augment it. She protects herself in the opposite way that Britomart does: by becoming as desirable to the male gaze as possible. A coquette, she uses her skills at flirting to keep everyone interested in her but becoming so divinely beautiful that she is totally out of reach. She then relies on the mechanisms of polite society and etiquette

to protect her from assault. When those rules are broken, however, she is left completely undefended and must fight off her attacker. The humor in Pope comes in in that she is not raped, but rather robbed of a lock of hair. Mock epic raises the trivial to the register of the dramatic, however it still manages to point out that underneath all the pomp and elegant politeness and powdered wigs of the 18th century aristocracy, men can still be lecherous and predatory.

Belinda begins to don her metaphorical armor in the safety of her bedroom. In her virginal unmarried state, nobody but her inconsequential (due to classism and mystical sylphs) maid Betsy can see how she looks undressed, without makeup, jewelry, and hairstyling. This gives Belinda the ability of keeping up the illusion that she always looks a certain way. Nobody sees her flaws and imperfections and nakedness. Since the men around her only see the perfect and primed picture she paints for them, they assume that her nakedness must be just as divine. It is very important to Belinda to keep up “the sacred rites of Pride” (I.128), because as a woman in this aristocratic world she is only valued for her outward appearance and social graces. Pope seems to simultaneously make fun of her but also sympathetically admit she has no choice but to do this. Belinda’s morning ritual is raised by the mock epic to holy terms: “Each silver vase in mystic order laid. / First, robed in white the nymph intent adores, / With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers” (I.121-3). The scene becomes oddly pagan and religious, which is ironic due to Christian preaching against Pride and Vainglory. Belinda’s position as a Christian woman still concerned with her appearance is an irony Pope loves to poke fun at, throwing in a line about a sparkling cross she wears that Jews would kiss and “infidels” would adore. This use of overly serious religious vocabulary to describe Belinda’s makeup and jewelry drives much of the opening part of the poem. Betsy is even described as decking the “goddess with the glittering spoil” (I.132) of all the world, pointing out the far off places the materials of Belinda’s imported

cosmetics and combs come from. As a humorous paragon of the British aristocracy, Belinda literally dresses herself in the Empire, from her elephant ivory combs to her whalebone hoopskirt and Arabian perfumes. Her outfit, face, and even scent are products of military exploits. This connection between her beauty routine and putting on arms continues in the following excerpt:

Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
The busy Sylphs surround their darling care;
These set the head, and those divide the hair,
Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown;
And Betty's praised for labours not her own. (I.137-148)

Here, beauty is seen as an armed and dangerous female weapon to be used against men. However, unlike in Spenser where evil witches use weaponized female sexuality to entrap men, Belinda entraps men in a state where all want but none can have her. The temptress witches like Malecasta and Acrasia seek to destroy the chastity of good men, Belinda uses the same machinery to protect her chastity from dangerous men. In the safety of her bedroom, Belinda feels safe enough to don her weapons and go out into society with no fear. However, for Belinda and Britomart, their bedrooms and literal or metaphorical weapons do not prove safe enough.

Both Pope and Spenser point out the unfortunate fact that in a society where a woman's chastity is valued above any other quality, her safety is completely reliant on men acting by the rules that chivalry demands of them. Only in the absence of men can a woman of these times ever feel completely safe. And yet, Spenser suggests, there is still the threat of evil women to worry about that some are too naïve to even consider. In Stanza 58, Britomart waits until everyone is asleep to take off her armor, and goes to sleep peacefully, never dreaming someone would hurt

her in this safe space. Britomart feels completely safe in the threatening Castle Joyous, ignorant of Malecasta's unholy lust for her. The very mechanism of Britomart's protection from lust, cross-dressing, has opened her up to a new threat. This, however, is far from Britomart's imagination as she prepares for rest in the bedroom, the only place where a single woman can feel safe enough to don or take off her armor: the illusion of the dressed up self.

While the image of Britomart asleep and carefree in her white smock in the private space of the bedroom evokes the sort of Spenserian ideal of feminine purity she represents, Malecasta's bedroom and clothes serve as a foil to those of Britomart. Malecasta's bedroom is open for the public to see. It is a known fact she sleeps with every knight she pleases to. The lady of delight adorns her body and the walls of Castle Joyous with sumptuous and suggestive cloth ("The wals were round about appareled / With costly clothes of Arras and of Toure," Stanza 34). There's an extended description of a sensual tapestry depicting Venus and Adonis. Spenser seems to blame Venus's wily beauty over Adonis's hubris in this tapestry, which seems odd given the holy nature of their love as later depicted in the Garden of Adonis. Malecasta is described as bedecked in jewels and sumptuous fabrics, lying on decorated cushions and giving everyone flirty eyes. As Malecasta prepares to seduce a presumed male Britomart in stanza 59, there's an interesting passage that reads: "And under the blacke vele of guilty Night / Her with a scarlot mantle covered, / That was with gold and Ermines faire enveloped." Here, interestingly enough, Britomart's undressed state represents her purity whilst Malecasta's sensual clothing betrays her wicked intents. Even the description of the "black veil of guilty night" gives the reader a sense that beautiful and sensual clothing can tempt someone onto sin. Spenser is a master of sensual imagery, and it really shines through in his language surrounding predatorily sexual witches. The sensual imagery is so thrilling that the reader might be tempted by these figures as well, playing

on the male gaze to point out how strong it can be. In Spenser's sexist view, men are very easily tempted, and it is up to women to wield their power over men wisely and kindly. Pope makes light of this more traditional view of a noblewoman's power over men, writing about Belinda:

This nymph, to the destruction of mankind,
Nourish'd two locks, which graceful hung behind
In equal curls, and well conspir'd to deck
With shining ringlets the smooth iv'ry neck.
Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.
With hairy springes we the birds betray,
Slight lines of hair surprise the finney prey,
Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair. (II.19-28)

This passage is particularly important to the narrative of the poem because we finally get to see the titular lock. However, it is also quite revealing in that the reader discovers that Belinda, à la Estella from Dicken's *Great Expectations*, actively seeks out to break men's hearts. The role of the heartbreaker in upper class British society makes a lot of sense considering the way social hierarchy and the marriage market worked. Like Britomart, Belinda's ultimate goal is to find a suitable husband, continuing the Protestant ideal of marriage being prized over the cloisters of the convent. However, unlike Britomart, who lives in a literal Arthurian Fairyland where everyone is a knight or princess and class distinctions need not be worried about, Belinda exists very much in the real world. While the sylphs and gnomes add an element of fantasy to her story, they are really symbolic and secondary to the main plot, used mostly as a device to aid Pope into elevating this story into epic form for humorous effect. Being a heartbreaker is extremely advantageous because if a woman gets a man desperately pining after her, she suddenly becomes desirable. By rejecting that man she implies that she belongs to a higher social circle than he does and then suddenly she may find herself with higher ranking or more eligible suitors. The more men she has pining after her, the better, because then she can become a prized commodity.

Pope brilliantly uses hair, a central image to this narrative and an obsession of Rococo society, to illustrate this by making her hair itself the snare with which she entangles men. Finally, when she's broken as many hearts as she can before she gets too old to be valuable on the marriage market, she can select the highest ranking or wealthiest or most socially advantageous suitor as her husband, haven risen her prospects in the ranks of the upper class as far as she can.

While this capitalistic approach to romance and heartbreak may make Belinda seem rather cruel, one must keep in mind that she is in a battle and there are enemies and danger at every turn. She competes with the other women of her class, who can either be allies like Thalestris or possible backstabbers like Clarissa. Within the rules and pomp of this society, one faux pas could send her reputation right to the gutter. And of course, the greatest threat is that she herself ends up falling in love or being seduced. However, Pope seems to be pointing out that Belinda is not aware of all the dangers she's in. Luckily, she has the sylphs to protect her from many unseen threats that, while frivolous on the surface, could put her in serious social ruin:

to curl their waving hairs,
Assist their blushes, and inspire their airs;
Nay oft, in dreams, invention we bestow,
To change a flounce, or add a furbelow.
This day, black omens threat the brightest fair
That e'er deserv'd a watchful spirit's care;
Some dire disaster, or by force, or slight,
But what, or where, the fates have wrapt in night.
Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
Or some frail china jar receive a flaw;
Or stain her honour, or her new brocade,
Forget her pray'rs, or miss a masquerade;
Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;
Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall. (II.97-110)

Here, the trappings, clothes, and accessories of aristocratic British womanhood serve as symbols of Belinda losing her outward shield. She uses her clothes, makeup, wit, charm, and reputation as a heartbreaking coquette virgin as armor, protecting her from accusations of being a boring prude

like Clarissa or of being a disrespected harlot. She walks a delicate tightrope of flirting and rejecting, enticing then refusing. While it is funny to watch the sylphs worry about such frivolous things as if they could cause the apocalypse, for Belinda this is her reality. What Pope seems to be getting at is that no wonder Belinda is so mortified by the baron cutting her lock because, given the world around her, why wouldn't she be? Again, Pope uses a mixture of religion and material objects to point out the absurdity of Belinda's situation. While, like Britomart, she must fear losing her virginity, staining her honor, forgetting her prayers, or losing her heart, Belinda must also fret about broken china, stained brocade, masquerade invitations, and lost necklaces.

Like Spenser, Pope is brilliant at conjuring up sensory images to drive his point home.

Both use clothes as a way for them to represent what the women fear:

Haste, then, ye spirits! to your charge repair:
The flutt'ring fan be Zephyretta's care;
The drops to thee, Brillante, we consign;
And, Momentilla, let the watch be thine;
Do thou, Crispissa, tend her fav'rite lock;
Ariel himself shall be the guard of Shock.
To fifty chosen Sylphs, of special note,
We trust th' important charge, the petticoat:
Oft have we known that sev'n-fold fence to fail,
Though stiff with hoops, and arm'd with ribs of whale.
Form a strong line about the silver bound,
And guard the wide circumference around. (II.111-122)

Here, we see the theme of female armor continued as Ariel rallies the sylphs around Belinda's clothes and outfit in order to protect her. This really hammers home the point that when Belinda gets on the boat for this party, she is metaphorically marching into battle. Each sylph is sent to protect a certain part of Belinda's armor. However, even this army of spirits cannot protect Belinda from social embarrassment and humiliation. Pope brilliantly picks these creatures because they are made out of air, and thus can do nothing against the unrelenting steel of the baron's scissors. The martial sense of urgency in this passage sets up the upset for when the lock

is cut. When that happens, Belinda has no choice but to lash out and protect the rest of her dignity from further humiliation. Once a woman's honor is even slightly stained or flawed, it can never be undone, no matter how innocent she is. Thus, she must lash out and fight to keep the rest of her reputation lily white, lest the stain grow and envelop her reputation entirely. While the stain here may be tiny and seem inconsequential, to Belinda this is something that can never be undone. All hope is not lost, but the illusion that she is an untouchable goddess of beauty has momentarily been broken. And once a piece of china has even the slightest chip or flaw, it can never be completely mended. One can only handle it with extreme care from then on.

This idea of the fragility of female honor and that even the slightest misstep or stain is a wrong never irreversible is very present in the *Faerie Queene*. Britomart has a very similar reaction as Belinda does to what on the surface seems like an innocent misunderstanding. Britomart, in the false security of her bedchamber, finds the lecherous Malecasta climbing into her bed. Britomart has foolishly removed her protective costume, her armor, and as a woman in a state of undress she, like Belinda, has been caught in a state of vulnerable nakedness. The way Belinda and Britomart choose to present themselves outside of the private space of the bedroom is their hard outer shell identity, and Britomart's prized soft inner shell she was saving only for the eyes of her future husband has eternally been compromised. To protect her chastity and regain as much of her warlike identity as possible, Britomart leaps out of bed and grabs her sword, causing the witch to scream. Britomart had not allowed Malecasta to see her as an innocent sleeping girl, and now that she has been seen that way she must rectify that at once and reestablish her warrior identity without the armor on to do it for her. Malecasta's scream wakes the whole castle, who come rushing to Britomart's bedchamber in stanza 63:

And those six Knights that Ladies Champions,
And eke the Redcrosse knight ran to the stownd,

Halfe armd and halfe vnarmd, with them attons:
Where when confusedly they came, they fownd
Their Lady lying on the sencelesse grownd;
On th'other side, they saw the warlike Mayd
All in her snow-white smocke, with locks vnbownd,
Threatning the point of her auenging blade,
That with so troublous terrour they were all dismayde.

Britomart is in a state of undress that exposes her femininity and desirable body to a great number of both men and women. This upsets her, as seeing her in just her shift is a privilege she was preserving for her future husband. Spenser's allegorical knights are not always perfect examples of the values they represent, but they learn more about those values along the way in their adventures. For Britomart, she learns that it is not enough simply to be innocent to be chaste, one must avoid danger and realize the threats out there. After one of Malecasta's knights wounds her with a sword, special attention is given to her lily white smock again in stanza 65: "yet was the wound not deepe, / But lightly rased her soft silken skin, / That drops of purple bloud thereout did weepe, / Which did her lilly smock with staines of vermeil steepe." Red is a color associated with sexuality and Malecasta, and the red stain on her lily white smock is evocative of the breaking of the hymen, traditionally associated with losing one's virginity. While Britomart hasn't really lost her chastity, she brushed close to losing it, and because she was not wise and as careful as she should have been this smock will never be unstained again. Here, again, we see clothes being used to explain a character's identity. Just as losing a lock of hair ruins Belinda's night, the stain on Britomart's nightgown cannot be undone:

Tho whenas all were put to shamefull flight,
The noble Britomartis her arayd,
And her bright armes about her body dight:
For nothing would she lenger there be stayd,
Where so loose life, and so vngentle trade
Was vsd of Knights and Ladies seeming gent:
So earely ere the grosse Earthes gryesy shade
Was all disperst out of the firmament,

They tooke their steeds, & forth their iourney went. (Stanza 67)

Britomart, shaken, puts her armor back on and rides into the night, ending up sleeping in the rain in her armor outside. She immediately tries to regain what is left of the illusion of her identity. While the stain on her once perfect honor is sad, it is perhaps necessary because she will never again put herself in that sort of danger. Spenser puts his character through this brush with shame to show how easily one can fall into the danger of sin and shame.

Pope makes a similar point for laughs instead of somber moralizing. The relationship between the feminine world of clothes, accessories, social-romantic jockeying, etc. and that of war and soldiers is played to humorous effect via mock epic. The normal accounts of military victory have been replaced by a battle of belles and beaux in their stuffy, ribbon-covered 18th century outfits over a social slight. Indeed, the trinkets and clothing that these aristocrats brought with them on this pleasure cruise become the instruments of war. A card game becomes a battle. The sylphs try to warn Belinda of impending doom by tugging thrice on her diamond earring instead of sounding an alarm. Thalestris (named after a warrior Amazon queen) and Chloe simply use their facial expressions to “kill” men. Again, we see women using their beauty as a weapon, except now on the offensive instead of the defensive.

It is interesting to note that the aforementioned Chloe protects Clarissa from an assault from Sir Plume, considering the whole party’s contempt for Clarissa’s moralizing speech, and also the fact that Clarissa may be a gender traitor. In this competitive marriage market, women can be allies or enemies. Clarissa, who claims to be above all of this social nonsense, “drew with tempting grace/ A two-edg'd weapon from her shining case; / So ladies in romance assist their knight / Present the spear, and arm him for the fight” (III. 127-9). She provides the baron with

the very weapon he used to attack Belinda, which started this whole battle in the first place. She, like Malecasta, teaches female readers to be weary not only of men but also of other women.

That being said, unlike Britomart, Belinda does have many female allies, most notably the warlike Thalestris, who calls the whole battle into action: "To arms, to arms!" the fierce virago cries, / And swift as lightning to the combat flies. / All side in parties, and begin th' attack; / Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack" (V.37-40). When Thalestris calls the women "to arms," immediately Pope draws the reader's attention to the fact their weapons are objects a reader would see these objects as the antithesis to weapons. Feminine things are passive; it is the job of the men to go about fighting wars. When the rules of civility between men and women are broken by the baron, all goes to savagery and these seemingly civilized, passive, flirty, and non-threatening women become terrifying Amazons thirsting for blood, using the very trappings the British patriarchy has forced on them as weapons against men: "incens'd Belinda... drew a deadly bodkin from her side" (V.86-87). Once a man shows Belinda she is not safe in his presence, she uses a hairpin to show he is no longer safe in hers.

Power dynamics, beauty, agency, honor, and sexuality all weave complicated webs in the fabrics of these two stories. Like an 18th century woman's gown, both texts include layers upon layers of meaning around what a woman wears or how she chooses to present herself and what that reveals about society as a whole. Both authors believe that women should have armor around them to protect against lechery, temptation, and slander. Yet, both seem to think the best course of action is for women to responsibly weaponize themselves. These attitudes shaped the way women think about the way they dress and act for centuries to come.