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The Angel in the Allegory and the Monster in the Middle: Feminist Theory in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, conventionally read as an allegorical text, moves beyond its figurative nature to reveal consummate, patriarchal archetypes ascribed to women. The divinely depicted, irreproachable Una and the egregiously characterized, malevolent Duessa seemingly represent two androcentric, polarized feminine paradigms. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, these two classifications are the angel-woman and the monster. According to Gilbert and Gubar, "for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called the 'Female Will'" (819). The angel, attributed with "virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness" is placed in the life of the male to guide and act as a spiritual refuge (816). Una, the traveling companion of the Red Crosse Knight, is conventionally viewed as such a woman through her roles of heavenly teacher and virtuous lover. Critics, however, commonly define Duessa, the manipulative seductress, as the monster-woman. This monster-woman is touted as evil for "assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action'" (819). Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that there exist two types of female in every literary work also leads them to assert that perhaps the angel "can manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot—stories as well as strategies" (818). Gilbert and Gubar clearly assert that the angel-woman and monster are singular,

distinct creatures. However, Una is given seemingly “masculine” characteristics, while Duessa is capable of embracing the angel as a means to an end. Spenser’s Una and Duessa do not defy the idea that there is an angel and monster. Instead, the two central female characters represent the idea that the angel-woman and the monster possess both flaws and attributes. Una’s assertiveness with the Red Crosse Knight and Duessa’s manipulation of the angelic ideal dispel the notion that the angel and monster are two separate entities. Instead, the two opposing patriarchal projections unite in the women of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*.

The angel-woman projection is commonly associated with appearance. Anne Paolucci asserts, “The immediate visual impact is, for Spenser, the most important single indicator of character and constitutes the central motif in his delineation of women” (22). Paolucci’s argument strengthens the idea that Spenser’s male views determine what characteristics are present in a woman who is portrayed as a figure of divinity. Many of the attributes ascribed to Una by Spenser are those that may be found in the angel-woman. In a clear example of angel-like features, Spenser describes Una, writing,

A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside,
Upon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
Under a vele, that wimpled was full low,
And over all a blacke stole she did throw” (I.1.28-32).

Joan Fitzpatrick argues that Una’s physicality is “associated with whiteness and purity, which is another link with Elizabeth the ‘Virgin Queen’” (14). While Una’s “much whiter” appearance can be associated with Elizabeth, Spenser writes of her chastity first, suggesting that her virginity is paramount to her other characteristics. Spenser attributes Una with purity, one of the most common idiosyncrasies of the angel-woman.

As Spenser characterizes Una’s virginal countenance foremost, he places particular emphasis on the method in which she outwardly,

actively represents her purity. Una is clad in clothing that illustrates her personal modesty. Her face is under “a vele, that wimpled was full low” (I.1.31). The inclusion of the veil in Una’s visage seemingly denotes her modesty and her attempt to cover her beauty. In “Chaste but Not Silent: Reading and Female Piety,” Caroline McManus asserts that Una “strives to keep her body inviolate and hidden (especially her face), and yet reveal enough of her truth and beauty” (228). By modestly hiding her beauty through the veil, Una reveals the patriarchal hegemonic ideal of a woman. The concealment of her beauty is a potential means of power. In denying herself the influence of her beauty, Una rejects a portion of herself to conform to the ideal. In Spenser’s letter to Raleigh, he states, “The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (716). Una’s description is a method in which Spenser displays the correct method of “fashioning” a “noble” woman. The praise of Una’s chastity and the inclusion of her modesty make her the ideal angel-woman of Spenser’s time, a model that he is trying to “fashion” for other women.

McManus’s assertion that Una must conceal her beauty and truth stems from *Canto 6*. The canto is the most overt representation of how Una not only physically appears as the angel-woman but also how she performs the role of the angel. Gilbert and Gubar state that, based on conduct books, the female “should become her husband’s holy refuge from blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a ‘life of significant action,’ as well as, in her ‘contemplative purity,’ a living memento of the otherness of the divine” (816). While not directed at a husband, Una’s actions in *Canto 6* reflect her angelic quality of being a “holy refuge” and a humanly divine figure. After the Red Crosse Knight departs from Una because of her alleged, treasonous sexuality, the heroine comes to a place inhabited by a “troupe of Faunes and Satyres” that saves her from being raped by the Sarazin, Sansloy (I.6.61-72). After her rescue, Una becomes a goddess figure for the troupe, a position she

does not accept willingly.

During which time her gentle wit she plyes,
To teach them truth, which worshipt her in vaine,
And made her th' Image of Idolatryes;
But when their bootlesse zeal she did restraints
From her own worship, they her Asse would worship
fayn (I.6.167-71).

Catherine G. Canino asserts that this passage corroborates her ideas that the creatures become “docile and respectful” in the presence of Una (120). Canino simplistically states that Una’s very presence transforms the creatures. In saying so, Canino detracts from Una’s action during her time in the wood. Una’s mere presence does not calm the creatures, and while her beauty does place them in a state of awe, the most significant aspect of Una’s stay is her angelic performance while attempting “To teach them truth” (I.6.168). Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* pre-dates the idea of the angel-woman, but the idealized angel is the domesticated maternal figure found in the home. Though Una is not specifically located inside of the domestic sphere, her typographical maternity is demonstrated in her attempt at instruction. Sarah Plant states, “Spenser draws upon traditional imagery in the absence of an established English Protestant tradition and conflates this image with the developing one of women’s role as spiritual helpmate and educator of the young” (52). Plant asserts that Una’s instruction is a result of the absence of the church and an emerging feminine role of spiritual guidance, a function present in the characterization of the angel-woman. Though the creatures’ “bootlesse zeal” prevents them from accepting her message, Una continues to perform her angelic duty. Una’s performance is one that characterizes her both maternally and divinely as she is at once nurturing the troupe and enlightening them concerning the identity of the true deity.

Critics commonly consider Duessa, a woman with dual identities, to be Una’s monstrous opposite. When talking to the archaic spirit Night, Duessa speaks, “I that do seeme not I, Duessa

am” (I.5.231). Though she utilizes a form similar to Una when first introduced, Duessa’s true appearance reveals her nature that is significantly divergent from Una’s own:

That her misshaped parts did them appall
A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.
Her craftie head was altogether bald,
And as in hate of honorable eld,
Was overgrowne with scurfe and filthy scald;
Her teeth out of her rotten gummes were feld,
And her sowre breath adhominaibly smeld;
Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind,
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;
Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind,
So scabby was, that would have loathd all womankind.
(I.8.412-23)

Critics compare Duessa’s false form to that of Una’s natural physicality. Joan Fitzpatrick writes, “Duessa is the opposite of Una whose outward beauty is a manifestation of inner goodness” (21). Fitzpatrick compares Duessa’s “seeming” fair appearance to Una’s patriarchal projected image. In doing so, Fitzpatrick does not equally compare the two women, as she does not examine the two real forms against one another. Thus, the comparison does not truly illustrate how vilely Duessa is characterized. Seemingly the monster, Duessa is stripped of both her outer beauty and her traditionally feminine maternity.

While appearing in her real image, Duessa is wrinkled with scabby skin, a bald head, and no teeth. Sheila Cavanagh describes Duessa, “As the villain with a thousand faces, Duessa magnifies the dangers often perceived as inherent within the female sex” (329). By creating a woman so hideous that even all womankind would hate her, Spenser detracts from Duessa’s power. The witch’s greatest asset is her ability to manipulate those around her, and without her false angelic appearance she is incapable of doing so. In disposing of

her beauty, Spenser displays a projection of male fear upon women. Through Duessa, beauty acts as a method through which women are capable of subverting men. Spenser betrays a patriarchal fear of the power of beauty and a man's inability to control that power.

Not only does Spenser strip any form of self-authority from Duessa, but he also portrays her as barely a woman at all. Spenser takes away what should be her inherently feminine ability to mother children, a trait found and praised predominately in the angel. Fradubio, the man now trapped as a tree, describes one of Duessa's most monstrous features:

A filthy foule old woman I did vew;
That ever to have toucht her, I did deadly rew.
Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous,
Were hidd in water, that I could not see,
But they did seeme more foule and hideous,
Then woman's shape man would beleewe to bee. (I.2.359-64)

Fradubio's revelation about the woman in whose company he had been illustrates how Spenser desexualizes Duessa to create a more masculine figure. Gilbert and Gubar utilize Duessa and the Queen of the House of Pride, Lucifera, when they state, "The secret, shameful ugliness of both is closely associated with their hidden genitals—this is, with their femaleness" (820). Spenser's distortion of Duessa's "neather partes" and his description of her "dried dug" not only contributes to her hideous façade but also implies an inability to mother. The "dried dug" are an overt commentary on her inability to lactate and sustain life. In characterizing her this way, Duessa becomes an understandable choice for *The Faerie Queene's* monstrous woman.

Una's beautiful physicality and maternal performance compared with Duessa's manipulation of men and hideous exterior allow the simplistic labels of angel-woman and monster to be applied. These labels, however, do not account for deviations in character nor do they explain the influence of patriarchal ideals on women. Una, while truly beautiful and pure, does contradict her position as the

angel when she affirms her authority as both an intelligent woman and assertive female. Duessa, who exerts manipulative power and overt sexuality, attempts to conform to the boundaries placed upon women much like the angel.

McManus concludes, "The role of spiritual guide thus seems to have been embraced enthusiastically by many early modern Englishwomen, perhaps because this was one area in which they could openly excel" (226). Una is a peculiar spiritual guide for the Red Crosse Knight, as she is at once meant to be his submissive betrothed and a divine influence. Contrary to her traditional label as the angel, Una does not conceal her ideas or her superior intelligence:

"Yea but," quoth she, "the perill of this place
I better wot then you, though now too late
To wish you backe returne with foule disgrace,
Yet wisdom warnes, whilst foot is in the gate,
To stay the stepe, ere forced to retrate.
This is the wandring wood, this Errours den,
A monster vile, whom God and man does hate:
Therefore I read beware." (I.1.109-16)

Una's second warning serves as a means of asserting her ideas despite the Red Crosse Knight's disagreement. In response to her first plea, her partner replies, "'Ah Ladie,' said he, 'shame were to revoke / The forward footing for an hidden shade'" (I.1.106-07). Despite his disapproval, Una stands firm in her belief. Though acting for her betrothed's own good, Una still breaks free of her angelic bonds that call for submission to his will. Gilbert and Gubar state, "Assertiveness, aggressiveness—all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action'—are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle of 'contemplative purity'" (819). Una takes "significant action" when she not only warns the Red Crosse Knight but also explains to him that she is perhaps more intelligent. Una declares that she is "better wot" than her companion. In doing so, she reveals her own ability to

manipulate when stating that her mind is perhaps more keen than the man whom she accompanies. Una's angelic form is not wholly pure; instead, her character has a monster which "resides within" herself (Gilbert and Gubar 820).

Gilbert and Gubar's statement that assertive behavior creates a monster characterizes Duessa as a malevolent female. However, the authors describe the plight of the angel-woman, stating, "The aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty—no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman—obliged 'genteel' women to 'kill' themselves (as Lederer observed) into art objects" (817). The angel is required to manipulate her exterior to please male dominated society. Duessa, whose true form is hideous, manipulates her identity to travel alongside men, "A goodly lady clad in scarlot red, / Purpled with gold and pearle of rich assy, / And like a Persian mitre on her hed / She wore, with crownes and owches garnished" (I.2.110-13). Duessa has "killed" herself into an art object, the very action that the angel is known to do. Though Spenser draws overt connections to the biblical whore of Babylon in order to contrast her with Una, Duessa is nonetheless conforming to the hegemonic ideal of a female. Spenser begins the description of Duessa by stating that she has a "faire companion," much like the beginning of Una's own description. Through the personal choice to distort her own natural person, Duessa is able to perform the angel-woman by killing herself into one, a task well known to many of these idealized women.

Both Una and Duessa possess distinctive qualities that create the inclination of critics to label each quickly in the simplistic categories of angel-woman and monster. Una, with her beauty and virtue, corresponds with Gilbert and Gubar's characterization of the angel-woman. Duessa, customarily seen as Una opposite, is hideous in her true form and through her actions, appears as the logical choice for the monstrous figure in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. The labels of angel-woman and monster, however, are not incompatible. Instead, both Una and Duessa capture aspects of both angel-woman

and monster. Through assertive behavior and her own intelligence, Una attempts to garner control over a life-threatening situation. Duessa, by manipulating herself to conform, "kills" her true form to adopt a patriarchal aesthetic. By simply applying these labels, the complexities of Una and Duessa are bypassed, and the complexities of women are pushed aside into categories that create simple stereotypes.

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