

Spenser's Castle of Venus: Erotica and the  
Recumbent Woman in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*

It has been said, by some who have reason to know, that the fourth book of Spenser's *The Fairy Queene* is not an independent book at all, but a continuation of Book III and the exploration of the various aspects of love. C. S. Lewis, in his *Allegory of Love*, says that "we are justified in treating them [Books III and IV] as a single book on the subject of love" (338); in *A Preface To The Faerie Queene*, Graham Hough Calls Book IV "a sequel to Book III" (180); and critics throughout the discipline seem to accept the union of these two books as a matter of course. Given the topic and structure of these two books and their relationship to the poem as a whole, one would tend to agree that they are indeed one. "It is because love is the author of universal concord that Spenser begins Book IV with an apostrophe, not as one might have expected, to a pair of archetypal representatives of friendship, such as Damon and Pythias, but to a 'Queene of Loue'" (Wells 97). One might further say that Books III and IV are central to the poem, and not only central but, by virtue of their multifaceted topic, actually form the epicenter from which the force, the energy of *The Faerie Queene* radiates outward.

Not so readily apparent is the fact that the basis and source of the several aspects of love explored herein is erotic love--the epicenter of the epicenter, as it were. "The love or desire or passion which the Neoplatonists tried to sublimate into a vehicle for aspirations toward eternal life and spiritual perfection is in Spenser treated practically, as an emotional bond between a man and a woman, *initially erotic in nature*, but in its virtuous expressions leading to a quest for progeny and for worldly honor and fame [*italics mine*]" (Sims 450). Love

motivates all of the major players in Spenser's poem, and that love is (at least initially) erotic.

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Erotic love, sex, in its most basic form, is fun: it's happy-making, satisfying, life-renewing; it feeds a heart-hunger that is inherent in every human being. The fact that Spenser invested so much of the erotic into *The Faerie Queene* tends to suggest that he was aware of, and in support of this oldest art. Admittedly, much of the positive eroticism in *The Faerie Queene* is veiled, while the negative aspects are openly flaunted, but given the "moral" atmosphere of the times in which he lived and the queen to whom the poem is dedicated (and from whom he wished to curry favor), Spenser's reticence on the subject is perhaps understandable. However, the fact that he so successfully buried his positive perspective of erotic love from the gaze of the critics of his time doesn't explain why so many of his modern critics are so reluctant to unearth it and shine a little critical daylight in there.

Unfortunately, the criticism to date tends to take one of two tacks regarding the erotic nature of some to the scenes in *The Faerie Queene*. Tack one is to ignore it; the critic interprets the erotic scene as something else, usually an allegory of a higher, more spiritual emotion or motivation. Tack two has the critic rooting out the erotic wherever he finds it and holding it aloft as a blazon of the abandon-hope-all-ye-who-enter-here variety, as if Spenser intended his representation of the erotic to act as a moral warning of the most negative, bible-belt kind. One finds that those critics who do attempt to deal with the erotic in a straightforward manner (and there are a few--a very few), almost universally choose the most obvious (and negative) passages--the Bower of Bliss and the House of Busirane spring immediately to mind. What has been almost completely lacking in the criticism of *The Faerie Queene* so far is an examination of erotic love as a positive, motivating force in the poem. One of the most