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Sanctifying a Darke Conceit: Seeing the Bible in the Faerie Queene



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Abstract

Approaching the poem from the perspective of reception history, the present dissertation seeks to show that the Bible's role in *The Faerie Queene* is far more pervasive than has usually been recognized. Rather than see the biblical material as the domain of only certain sections—notably, Book I and perhaps Books II and V—I propose that it is to be seen as a meaningful presence throughout the poem. Indeed, I will argue that it provides a previously unnoticed, unifying structure to the whole.

I begin by giving a brief sketch of the Bible in Spenser's early life. From here, I draw upon the resources of modern biblical scholarship—specifically, Childs' "canonical approach"—to describe the way Spenser read the Bible and, consequently, the ways in which he alluded to it. I go on to discuss the notions of "typology" and "allegory," providing the foundation for a discussion of Spenser's reading not only of the Bible, but of the ongoing narrative of history. Then follows an exploration of the ways Spenser seeks to relate the various legacies of the Classical and biblical past to his Christian, humanist present, which culminates in a description of the Christian canon's structuring role within the poem. This leads to a reflection on this structure's significance through consideration of the various instances of books and of reading that occur in Book I. I then take up this theme again in Book III, in the transformation of Malbecco and in the idolatrous Tabernacle-Temple of Busirane. Drawing upon the early modern discourse concerning images and idols, I conclude with a discussion of *The Faerie Queene* as a unified, poetic sign pointing to the Divine Presence—a function typified in the discarded ending of Book III.

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