ABSTRACT

VALERIE ELAINE VOIGHT. False Females: Metamorphosis and Mutability in The Faerie Queene. (Under the direction of Dr. Margaret Simon)

Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene is suffused with the presence of Queen Elizabeth I. She appears both as the motivating force behind Spenser’s epic, is invoked in the proems to several books of the poem, and is embodied within the poem in characters such as Gloriana and Belphoebe. Recent critical studies of the poem have emphasized Spenser’s ambivalent treatment of his queen and have established parallels between Elizabeth and antagonists within the poem such as the Amazon Queen, Radigund. However, the False Florimell, a character who appears episodically throughout the central books of the poem, embodies the most salient critique of Elizabethan iconography within the poem. Spenser’s characterization of the False Florimell strongly parallels features of anti-Elizabethan propaganda and embodies several of the contradictions inherent in several of Elizabeth’s modes of political self-representation, most notably the political androgyne, the vestal virgin, and the Petrarchan mistress. Each episode in which she appears serves to destabilize the rhetoric and visual iconography of what has been termed the Cult of Elizabeth. In her physical description, her behavior, and the spectacles and competitions that she creates, she serves as a threatening inverse not only of the Elizabethan avatar of Gloriana as defined within the poem, but of the major tactics that constitute Elizabeth’s self-representation during the majority of her reign. The narrative of the False Florimell, one of the longest narratives within the body of the poem, demonstrates Spenser’s deep ambivalence about the authority of his female monarch and critiques Elizabethan court ceremonies in order to highlight the unstable, dissembling rhetoric behind the politics of Elizabeth’s self-representation.