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The Woman Ruler in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

By James E. Phillips, Jr.

In an earlier paper¹ I attempted to describe the concern of political theorists in sixteenth-century England and Scotland with the problem of government by women. The controversy aroused by the subject extended from the accession of Mary Tudor to the death of Elizabeth, and, for the greater part of that period, involved three well-defined attitudes. Seeking theoretical justification for their active opposition to Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart, a group of Puritan extremists, headed by John Knox, Christopher Goodman, and George Buchanan, argued that, according to the laws of God, of nature, and of nations, women have neither the right nor the ability to rule. This position was attacked by Anglican spokesmen for Elizabeth and Catholic supporters of Mary Stuart. Both of the latter groups maintained that women are qualified by nature to govern, and that any woman called by God has the right to do so. The third faction involved in the dispute agreed with the extreme Puritans that women in general are not equipped to exercise political authority, but claimed that God sometimes sees fit to endow certain exceptional women rulers with the necessary qualifications. This was the attitude taken by such moderate Puritans as Calvin and Bullinger, and eventually, when he wished to reconcile Elizabeth, by Knox himself.

There are indications in the *Faerie Queene* that Edmund Spenser was familiar with the arguments in the controversy, and that he, too, considered the theoretical aspects of feminine government in connection with the specific individuals and incidents which he undoubtedly figures forth in the allegory of his poem. It should not be surprising to find evidence of the gynecocratic controversy in a work crowded with the figures of women rulers, and designed to live with the eternity of the fame of the chief representative of feminine sovereignty. But the problem has been almost ignored by students of Spenser. The royal ladies in the epic have received their share of critical attention, to be sure, but investigation has been

¹ *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, V, 5–32.
directed primarily toward finding actual counterparts in Elizabethan England for the figures in the *Faerie Queene*.\(^9\) Kirby Neill is almost alone in recognizing the necessity for examining the poet's material on the woman ruler, in connection with contemporary literature on the subject.\(^8\) "Spenser," he writes of the Radigund episode in Book V, "is dealing with the problem of Mary Stuart, and this was one of the theoretically vital issues: her right as a woman to succeed to the English throne."\(^4\) But Neill has for the most part limited his study of the background to the brief notes in John Scott's *A Bibliography of Works Relating to Mary Queen of Scots: 1544–1700*; consequently, he was unable to give an adequate account of the methods, materials, and points of view in the gynecocratic controversy, or of the way in which these elements are reflected in the *Faerie Queene*.

In the light of a fuller survey of contemporary literature on the subject, many passages in Spenser's work reveal themselves as pertinent to the problem of gynecocracy. From these it is possible to determine with some clarity and accuracy the scope and nature of Spenser's attitude. Professor Padelford suggested, some years ago, that the poet's views were similar to those of Knox in the *First Blast*


\(^8\) "Spenser on the Regiment of Women," *op. cit.*, p. 197.
of the Trumpet, but did not develop the suggestion in any detail. A more thorough analysis of the evidence, both external and internal, indicates that Spenser adopted, rather, the compromise position taken by Calvin and, after the accession of Elizabeth, by Knox. The practical necessity for condemning the two Marys and praising Elizabeth made the development of such a philosophy of female government as inevitable for the poet as for the followers of the reformer.

The external evidence which would link Spenser with the Genevan theory of feminine government is perhaps more suggestive than conclusive. However, the poet’s leaning toward the Reform, or Low Church, attitude on other points has been previously recognized by scholars. That Spenser in this respect followed the moderate rather than the radical Puritans seems to be the consensus of opinion among his students. Mr. Padelford thus summarizes his own extensive studies of the poet’s Puritanism:

I think the examination of the evidence has now been carried far enough to justify the conclusion that Spenser as a young man was a Low Churchman belonging to that earnest part of men who, without any disloyalty to the church, felt that it needed purifying, needed to be relieved from political machinations, needed a better educated and a more godly clergy, needed to be protected against the encroachments of Rome.

Elsewhere Mr. Padelford, discussing Calvin and Spenser, observes that

the comparison of these two writers impresses one with the very great extent to which the poet had conformed, through direct influence or indirect, to the teachings of the great theologian.


Although moderate in his own views, Spenser was not unfamiliar with expressions, by more radical Puritans, of complete condemnation of female government. He was well acquainted, for example, with George Buchanan’s History of Scotland, which contained, in an oration assigned to James Kennedy, Archbishop of Saint Andrews under James III, a complete exposition of the antifeminist argument. Spenser not only cited Buchanan’s work extensively in his own View of the Present State of Ireland, but also acknowledged this indebtedness with praise for the author:

I doe giue most Credite vnto Buckhanam, [for] that he him self beinge an Irishe Scott, or Pict by nation, and beinge verie excellentlie learned and industrious to seeke oute the truth of these thinges concerninge the originall of his owne people, hath both sett downe the testymonies of the Auncientes trulie, and his owne opynion withall verie reasonablie, though in some thinges he doth somewhat flatter.\(^9\)

Less direct, but perhaps worthy of note, is the link between Spenser and Christopher Goodman, whose treatise, How Superior Powers Oght to be Obeyd, together with Knox’s First Blast, had in 1558 led the attack on feminine government. Sir Henry Sidney, father of Spenser’s friend, and predecessor in Ireland of Spenser’s superior, Lord Grey, not only befriended Goodman, but actually sought to restore him to the good graces of the English court, from which his attack on women rulers had alienated him. Sir Henry made Goodman his chaplain in Ireland in 1566, and early in the following year recommended him, though unsuccessfully, for the posts of Bishop of Dublin and Dean of St. Patrick’s.\(^{10}\) In urging Goodman’s appointment to the latter position, Sidney wrote to Cecil: “Sir, I think you did know this man in Scotland; he hath been in my house almost

\(^9\) A View of the Present State of Ireland, ed. W. L. Renwick (London, 1934), p. 52. Harvey’s evident familiarity with Bodin’s République and the circulation of the book at Cambridge make it possible to conjecture that Spenser was also familiar with this source of arguments against gynecocracy. For a summary of the evidence which suggests Spenser’s acquaintance with Bodin’s work, see H. S. V. Jones, Spenser’s Defense of Lord Grey, in University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature (1919), pp. 48–49. Mr. Padelford acknowledges the significance of the evidence, but can find little trace of Bodin’s influence on Spenser’s political thinking in general. (“The Political, Economic and Social Views of Spenser,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XIV, 399.)

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a year; if ever man on earth, since the apostles’ days deserved to be held a saint, he is one. Sir, the whole Church of this realm shall be bound to pray for you if you prefer [him] to that place, and I shall think it a great grace done to myself so to place him.” In Buchanan’s work, and, if he knew it, in Goodman’s, Spenser would find much of the traditional material employed by radical and moderate Puritans, alike, in assailing the ability of women in general to rule.

Spenser’s name is also linked indirectly with the names of men known to have shared Calvin’s cautiously qualified views on gynococracy. The Earl of Leicester, Spenser’s patron, seems to have been looked upon by representatives of the Genevan faction in the controversy as a friend at court. As Strype says of the politico-religious situation as a whole, “At the Council Board they [the Puritans] had professed friends; such as the Earl of Leicester, Sir Ralph Sadleir, and divers others.” In 1559 John Aylmer, at that time still identified with the Genevan reformers, had dedicated his reply to Knox, An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes, agaynst the late blowne Blaste, concerninge the Gouernment of Wemen, to the Earl of Bedford and young Robert Dudley. A few years later, when Knox was trying to establish his revised opinion on feminine government in England, he was able to regard Leicester as a possible source of sympathy and aid for the reform movement in all its aspects. Thus, he writes to Dudley in 1563:

Seing that it hath pleased your honour to call me to that familiaritie, that by writeing I may conferr with your Lordship, men myght judge me more then foolish yf I should lyghtlie esteame so great a benefitt, or yit neglect the opportunitie so liberallie offered: . . . God hath placed you in favour, credith, and in some authoritie, by which ye may greatlie advance the puritie of religion, yf uprighthlie ye will apply your witts and power thereto. I am not ignorant that ye shall have many hinderars, and that many terrible blocks shalbe cast befor your feitt, yf you ones purpos openly to walk in that straitt way that leadeth to lyef.

23 Later, of course, Aylmer was to leave the more radical reform movement and to become identified with the established-church party. His relations with Leicester change accordingly. Aylmer’s ambitions for a bishopric in 1569, Strype tells us, were “in all probability . . . opposed by the Earl of Leicester, who began now to be acted very much by puritanical counsels.” (Op. cit., I, 549.) If Morell in the July eclogue of The Shepheardes Calender is to be identified with Aylmer, we can assume that Spenser, also, was aware of the alteration in the former Genevan exile.
24 Works of John Knox, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1864), VI, 530.
Another indication of Leicester's association with those holding Calvinist views on female government is Golding's dedication to the Earl of his translation, published in 1572, of Bullinger's *Con- fotation of the Popes Bull... against Elizabeth*, with its passage defending gynecocracy under exceptional circumstances. On the other hand, Cecil, who so often is found on the opposite side in controversies involving Leicester and Spenser, consistently appears as the foe of Genevan doctrines concerning women rulers. Again, as Strype summarizes the situation in general, "the Church party had but two or three fast friends there [in the Council], whereof the Lord Burghley, Lord Treasurer, was the chief." Knox's statement that Burghley was "worthy of hell" probably did little to alter the Secretary's attitude. Cecil, who had assailed the Scot as obnoxious, suppressed his books, and caused an answer to be written against the *First Blast*, is perhaps one of the "hinderars" and "terrible blocks" to which Knox refers in his letter to Leicester. At any rate, the Secretary had made his position in the whole matter of gynecocracy perfectly plain in 1559, when he wrote: "Mais- ter Knox,—Non est masculus neque foemina: omnes enim, ut ait Paulus, unum sumus in Christo Jesu."  

The circumstantial evidence that Spenser is to be associated with Puritan rather than with Catholic and Anglican doctrine in the matter of feminine government is substantiated by the evidence in the *Faerie Queene*. But it becomes clear that, familiar as he apparently was with the attitude of such extremists as Buchanan, his expressed theory in the epic is an exact statement of the moderate Calvinist argument that, although government by women is against the laws of God and nature, God sometimes sees fit to raise up notable exceptions to the general rule. In the fifth canto of Book V the poet tells how Artegaill is overcome in battle by Radigund, queen of the Amazons, and is taken as a prisoner to her stronghold. There, with other men, he is required to perform womanly tasks, while women occupy themselves in masculine fashion with military and political affairs. Subsequently, Britomart vanquishes Radigund, rescues

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58 London, 1572; p. 43.  
27 *Works of John Knox*, VI, 55.
Artegall, and restores male authority, but not before Spenser has pronounced his verdict upon the Amazonian political establishment in particular and female government in general:

Such is the crueltie of womenkynd,
When they haue shaken off the shamefast band,
With which wise Nature did them strongly bynd,
T'obay the heasts of mans well ruling hand,
That then all rule and reason they withstand,
To purchase a licentious libertie.
But vertuous women wisely vnderstand,
That they were borne to base humilitie,
Vnlesse the heauens them lift to lawfull soueraintie.18

The treatment of particular women rulers, good and bad alike, elsewhere in the Faerie Queene—Britomart, Lucifera, Duessa, and Mercilla, for instance—consistently exemplifies the theory which Spenser expresses here. It should be noted at this point that Spenser agreed with Calvin as to the source of all royal authority. That source is God. In describing the weaknesses of women in general, and the qualities of exceptional women which enable them to rule successfully, Spenser no more than Calvin, I believe, intends to set up standards by which subjects shall accept or reject a ruler. For, according to Calvin, "Car puis qu'on ne peut resister aux Magistrats sans resister à Dieu... sous ceste obeissance je compren la moderation que doyvent garder toutes personnes privees, quant és affaires publiques: c'est de ne s'entremettre point de leur propre mouvement, de n'entreprendre point temerairement sur l'office du Magistrat."19 The same concept of authority is evident, not only in the passage from the Faerie Queene just quoted, but also earlier in Book V, when Artegall tells the Giant in the second canto that God "maketh Kings to sit in souerainty; He maketh subjectts to their powre obay."20 These passages indicate that Spenser could not accept the doctrine of popular sovereignty, supported by Knox, Goodman, and Buchanan, which maintained

20 V, ii, 41.
that rulers are “constrained to make use . . . of that right or priviledge which the People had conferred upon them.” Rather, in describing the disabilities of women in general and the exceptional qualities of a chosen few, Spenser, like Calvin, is seeking primarily to justify the ways of God to men.

Spenser’s unfit women rulers are uniformly presented in terms of those faults which, according to moderate and extreme Puritan theorists alike, disqualify the sex as a whole for government. Lucifer, Duessa, and Radigund are clearly women who “haue shaken off the shamefast band” to “purchase a licentious libertie.” In this respect they are similar to the “Proud wemen, vaine, forgetfull of their yoke”—Semiramis, Sthenoboea, Cleopatra—whom the Red Cross Knight beholds in the dungeons of the House of Pride. Knox, it will be recalled, had not only accused women of cruelty, falsehood, pride, covetousness, and oppression, but had also denied them the right of inheritance to positions of authority and had branded them usurpers. Like charges are brought by Spenser against the woman ruler. The mistress of the House of Pride, daughter of sad Proserpina, queen of hell,

Made her selfe a Queene, and crownd to be,  
Yet rightfull kingdom she had none at all,  
Ne heritage of natieue soueraintie,  
But did usurpe with wrong and tyrannie  
Vpon the scepter, which she now did hold:  
Ne ruld her Realmes with lawes, but pollicie,  
And strong aduizement of six wisards old,  
That with their counsels bad her kingdom did vphold.  

Later, the right and the ability of Duessa as a queen are questioned, not only on grounds of treason and misconduct similar to the charges made against Mary Stuart, but also on grounds akin to those brought against female government in general. Knox, for example, had written of “the oppression and injustice which is committed against

23 Works of John Knox, IV, 410. It should be recalled in this connection that denial to women of the right of inheritance was the substance of the Salic law defended by Bodin.
24 I, iv, 12. The significant line here is that which describes Lucifera as a self-made queen who falsely claims “thundring Ioue, that high in heauen doth dwell . . . for her syre.” (I, iv, 11.) Her authority is spurious, because Spenser tells us explicitly that she is not one of those women specially called by God to government.
realms and nations . . . by the reason of this monstriferous authori-
tie and empire of Women;"28 and Buchanan argued more specifically
that a woman should

prescribe to herself those Bounds, which Nature itself hath appointed,
her Sex requires, Custom allows, and the Laws, made by the consent of
almost all Nations, do approve: But they, who would have her forget her
Sex and Station, do perswade her to break thro' all Bonds of Law, and
to disturb the Order of things appointed by God; received by Use; and
allowed in all well-govern'd Cities and Countries.29

Again, Duessa, as a woman ruler, is charged by Kingdom's Care, 
Authority, the law of Nations, the "publicke cause" of the common
people, and Justice.30 Not only for what she does but for what she
is, Duessa fails to qualify as a governor.

In the picture of Radigund and the Amazonian state in Book V,
Spenser's condemnation of feminine government most closely re-
sembles his contemporaries' attacks on the institution. Like them,
he cannot deny the military bravery and skill which some women
display, and which are essential requirements of a governor. In fact,
he elsewhere is enthusiastic in his praise of these particular qualities
in women. Nor does he deprive Radigund of commendation on this
score. He describes the Amazonian as

A Princesse of great powre, and greater pride,
And Queene of Amazons, in armes well tride,
And sundry battels, which she hath atchieued
With great successe, that her hath glorifide,
And made her famous, more then is belieued.31

28 The First Blast of the Trumpet, in Works, IV, 402.
29 History of Scotland (London, 1722), II, 57. Cf. also Bodin, who writes that under
a woman's sovereignty "the Commonweale must needs so be in great daunger: For that
the people being of a great and courageous spirit, will deeme a womans government
but ignominious, and not long to be endured; some both by their speaking & writing,
scoffing and deriding their sexe, outhersome their womanly wantonnesse, and others
their womannish intollerablenesse: whereas nothing is more daungerous vnto an estate,
than to haue them which beare the soueraignty contemned and derided of their
subjects, of the maintenence of whose majestie, dependeth the preservation both of the
lawes, and of the estate, which should bee troden vnder foot for the womans sake,
against whom there shall never want mockings, reproaches, slanderous libels, and
so in fine rebellions & ciuill war, especially if she (impatient of such vnworthy reproach)
shall secke to bee thereof reuenged, which can hardly without ciuill tumult bee done."
(The Six Booke of a Commonweale [1606], pp. 746-47.)
30 V, ix, 43-44. 31 V, iv, 33.
But Spenser agreed with the antifeminists among his contemporaries that the possession of martial fortitude, taken alone, gives women no just claim to sovereignty over men. Admirable as such prowess may be, any authority based exclusively upon it is a violation of natural law and order and is bound to produce an abnormal state of political and social affairs. In his *Dialogue of Monarchy* (1552), Sir David Lindsay lauds the feats of warlike heroines of the past, but concludes:

Ladyis no way I can commend,  
Presumptuouslye quhilk doith pretend  
Tyll vse the office of ane kynng,  
Or Realmes tak in gouernyng,  
Quhowbeit thay wail3eant be and wycht,  
Goyng in Battell lyke one knyght,  
As did proude Pantasilia,  
The Princes of Amasona,  
In mennis habyte, aganis reassoun.  
Siclyke I think dirisioun.²⁰

Buchanan points out that the military successes of undeniably valiant women in history were followed by losses and civil turmoils that belied the legitimacy of their leadership. He concludes, therefore, that

'Tis no less unbecoming a Woman to pronounce Judgment, to levy Forces, to conduct an Army, to give a Signal to the Battel, than it is for a Man to teiz Wool, to handle the Distaff, to Spin, or Card, and to perform the other Services of the Weaker Sex? That which is Liberality, Fortitude, and Severity in Men, is Profusion, Madness, and Cruelty in a Woman. And again, That which is elegant, comely, and ornamental in a Woman, is mean, sordid, and effeminate in a Man. Do not They therefore that endeavour to confound and mix those things, which Nature, of her own accord, hath distinguished; do they not, I say, seem to you, not only to disturb, but also to overthrow, the State of the Kingdom, which is founded upon so good Laws and Customs? This they do, when they would obtrude on us the Government of a Woman.²⁰

It is exactly such a picture of unnatural perversion and disorder which Spenser presents in the Amazonian government of Radigund. Here the poet becomes repetitious in his insistence that the disturb-

²⁰ *History of Scotland*, II, 56.
ance of normal order produced by female rule goes beyond political relationships to the basic relationships ordained by God to exist between men and women. Terpine, chided by Ar tragedall for yielding "to proude oppression Of womens powre, that boast of mens sub-

ition," replies with an account of Amazonian conduct that seems to be almost an echo of Buchanan:

For all those Knights, the which by force or guile
She doth subdue, she fowly doth entreate.
First she doth them of warlike armes despoile,
And cloth in womens weedes: And then with threat
DOTH them compell to worke, to earne their meat,
To spin, to card, to sew, to wash, to wring;
Ne doth she giue them other thing to eat,
But bread and water, or like feeble thing,
Them to disable from reuenge aduenturing.81

When Ar tragedall himself has been vanquished by Radigund, the Amazonian queen causes him, in turn,

. . . . . to be disarmed quight,
Of all the ornaments of knightly name,
With which whylome he gotten had great fame:
In stead whereof she made him to be dight
In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame,
And put before his lap a napron white,
In stead of Curiets and bases fit for fight.82

So deprived of the habiliments of his natural rank and function, Ar tragedall is taken by Radigund to her stronghold, where the corruption of natural law and order is complete:

There entred in, he round about him saw
Many braue knights, whose names right well he knew,
There bound t’obay that Amazons proud law,
Spinning and carding all in comely rew,
That his bigge hart loth’d so vncomely vew.
But they were forst through penurie and pyne,
To doe those workes, to them appointed dew:
For nought was giuen them to sup or dyne,
But what their hands could earne by twisting
linnen twyne.

81 V, iv, 51. 82 V, v, 20.
Amongst them all she placed him most low,
And in his hand a distaffe to him gaue,
That he thereon should spin both flax and tow;
A sordid office for a mind so braue.
So hard it is to be a womans slaue."

Spenser would obviously agree with Knox that "Amazones were monstruouse women, that coulde not abide the regiment of men, and therefore killed their husbandis." The dramatic action of the Radigund episode affords a concrete example of the principal contention of the general theory set forth in V, v, 25. With all her physical courage and military skill, Radigund is clearly not one of those exceptional women called to authority by God. Rather, her regime represents "the crueltie of womenkynd" when they assume political authority—the consequences of "a womans tyrannous direction" and of "th'insolent commaund of womens will." Like Lucifera and Duessa, Radigund exhibits those characteristics of the sex which make most women unfit to govern realms.

In a work designed on a colossal scale to flatter Elizabeth, however, it was more to Spenser's purpose to dwell, not on the general rule in the Calvinist philosophy of gynecocracy, but on the exceptions lifted by heaven to lawful sovereignty. Accordingly, he describes certain women rulers at length and in terms of the qualities and attributes recognized by cautious Calvinists under given conditions, but more elaborately developed by the Anglican and Catholic profeminist writers of the period. In Gloriana, Mercilla, and, above all, Britomart, we see, not only the ideal woman ruler of Aylmer and his followers, but also Calvin's "women so endowed, that the singular good qualities which shone forth in them, made it evident that they were raised up by divine authority."

Whether they were defending gynecocracy universally or on exceptional grounds, writers had first to demonstrate that certain women called by God to government are endowed with the physical courage and prowess necessary in a ruler whose task involves active military leadership. John Leslie states the problem as most Catholic

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37 Calvin to Cecil, after Jan. 29, 1559, in Zurich Letters, tr. and ed. for the Parker Society by Hastings Robinson (Cambridge, 1846), p. 76.
and Protestant apologists recognized it, and answered it as they did, when he wrote:

And that ye thincke also that thowghe for all other respectes, a Woman myght be a governesse yet consideringe, that she must have the managinge of Martiall expoytes, which in deede maye seame in no wyse agreable to a Woman, and ys suerlie the difficultiste matter of all in our case and question, and that you can not, or wyll not be satisfied, vnsesse ye maye for this, and all other dowbtes, be by scripture perswaded: Lo then I bringe to you one authoritie of holie scripture, to serve all turnes.  

In addition to Deborah, his "authoritie," Leslie recalls also "the cowragiouse Amazones," "zenobia the Queene of the Palmeryes;' Artemisia, and "our manlie voadica" [Bonduca]. Thereby he follows the customary method of replying to charges that women are unfit physically to govern—the enumeration, from biblical and classical history, of notable "viragoes," or masculine women celebrated for military exploits. Such catalogues of successful women rulers, detailing their moral and intellectual excellences as well as their achievements in war, are a characteristic feature of the gynecocratic literature of the period. Most often mentioned among the women praised chiefly for their martial deeds are Zenobia, Artemisia, Bonduca, Semiramis, Dido, Thomiris, Camilla, Valasca, Penthesilea, Hippolyta, Judith, and Hester. Deborah was of course the favorite

80 A defence of the honour of ... Marie Quene of Scotlantde (1569), fol. 141. Cf. also Sir Thomas Craig, who wrote in 1609 that some men argue, wrongly, that "Reason, which is infused by God into the minds of Men shows us plainly, that it belongs not to a Woman to raise an Army, to exercise Souldiers, or lead them on against an Enemy, or give the signal to Battel, shou'd she do it, 'twou'd be abhorred as a Bad Omen. And yet if a Woman be the only Heiress of a Kingdom, she must preside in Military and Civil affairs, in all Councels and Deliberations." (The Right of Succession to the Kingdom of England [1709], pp. 26–27.)

80 Op. cit., fol. 141".

Among the more elaborate catalogues of this sort are those found in Edward Gosynhill, Praye of all women (1548); Cornelius Agrippa, Nobility and Excellence of Womankind (tr. Clapham; 1542); Edward More, Defence of Women (1560); Leslie, A defence of the honour of ... Marie; David Chambers, Discours De La Legitime Succession Des Femmes ... & du gouvernement des princesses aux Empires & Royaumes (1579); George Whetstone, The English Myrror (1586); Anthony Gibson, A Womans Woorth (1599); Sir Thomas Craig, The Right of Succession to the Kingdom of England (written in 1609); I. G., An Aprologie for Women-kinde (1605); Lodowick Lloyd, The Choyce of Jewels (1607). Opponents of female government made use of the same device, of course, and often of the same examples. See, especially, Bodin, op. cit., p. 747. Catalogues of women rulers, cited particularly for their moral and intellectual qualifications, will be considered below.
singly out by Calvin and his more conservative followers, in praising the strength and courage of exceptional women; Calvin himself calls her an "illustrious example" of a woman endowed with "a certain heroic spirit."*4 Aylmer's long list of examples, including those named above and many drawn from scriptural history, proclaims that Deborah "shall marche in the first ranke and haue the first place both for thantiquite of the tyme, the authoritie of the story, and the happy successe of hir reigne."*4 The end of the century saw little change either in the praise bestowed upon martial heroines or in the list of examples employed in justifying such praise.*4 A complete catalogue of viragoes will be found among the three thousand women who, Heywood claims, are lodged in the sheets of his Gunaikeion. Of particular interest here and in his later Exemplary Lives and memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World are the British martial women whom he notes, and especially Elpheda, Margaret, the wife of Henry VI, and Elizabeth Tudor herself.

Although he condemned military activity by women as unnatural and indecorous when it was made the basis of illegitimate political authority, Spenser nevertheless agreed that some women are equipped, when called by God to government, with the physical strength and courage necessary for successful leadership in war. He

*4 Corpus Reformatorum, xliii, p. 125; tr. in P. Hume Brown, John Knox (London, 1895), I, 228.

*5 An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes (1559), sig. D2r.

*6 Cf., e.g., the following passage from I. G., Apologie for Women-kinde, sigs. C4r–D1:

Those that can gosuerne well, no vertues want,
But of braue Queenes the number is not scant
That in times past with glory and renowne,
Many a Kingdome ruled haue and towne.
The warlike Almainges this doe testifie,
So doth the Carthaginian Historie.
The Blacke Moores brag of hardie Meroe,
The Bohemians of their Valasque,
Large Siria commends Zenobia,
The grim sterne Goths their Amalasuntha.
Sage Theodora did the Empire sway,
And men vnworthy, thence did chace away.
Semiramis drye Egipt did possesse,
Whome Nilus ouer-flowings still doe blesse.
And doth not England sing Eliza's prayse,
Who farre excelled all before her dayes?
Was neuer Prince which ruled with more peace,
Or did more gently subjects pains release,
And terrors vnto proud high mindes encrease.


is, in fact, enthusiastic in his praise of such exceptional viragoes. Thus, in Book III he writes, with reference to Britomart:

Here haue I cause, in men iust blame to find,
That in their proper prayse too partiall bee,
And not indifferent to woman kind,
To whom no share in armes and cheualrie
They do impart, ne maken memorie
Of their braue gestes and prowesse martiall;
Scarse do they spare to one or two or three,
Rowme in their writs; yet the same writing small
Does all their deeds deface, and dims their glories all.

But by record of antique times I find,
That women wont in warres to beare most sway,
And to all great exploits them selues inclind:
Of which they still the girlond bore away,
Till enuous Men fearing their rules decay,
Gan coyne streight lawes to curb their liberty;
Yet sith they warlike armes haue layd away,
They haue exceld in artes and pollicy,
That now we foolish men that prayse gin eke t'enuy."

Not only is Spenser's commendation of martial women similar to that found in contemporary writings, but he also uses the same examples customarily cited by defenders of female ability. In Book II he describes the feats performed by Bonduca and concludes:

O famous moniment of womens prayse,
Matchable either to Semiramis,
Whom antique history so high doth raise,
Or to Hypsiphil' or to Thomiris."

Later, Britomart is told:

And sooth, it ought your courage much inflame,
To heare so often, in that royall hous,
From whence to none inferiour ye came,
Bards tell of many women valorous,
Which haue full many feats aventuresous
Performd, in paragone of proudest men:
The bold Bunduca, whose victorious
Exploits made Rome to quake, stout Guendolen,
Renowned Martia, and redoubted Emmilen."
A few stanzas farther on, Spenser presents his most elaborate eulogy of Britomart and the type which she represents:

Where is the Antique glory now become,
That wileme wont in women to appeare?
Where be the braue atchieuements doen by some?
Where be the battels, where the shield and speare,
And all the conquests, which them high did reare,
That matter made for famous Poets verse,
And boastfull men so oft abasht to heare?
Bene they all dead, and laid in dolefull herse?
Or doen they onely sleepe, and shall againe reuerse?

If they be dead, then woe is me therefore:
But if they sleepe, O let them soone awake:
For all too long I burne with enuy sore,
To heare the warlike feates, which Homere spake
Of bold Penthesilee, which made a lake
Of Greekish bloud so oft in Trojan plaine;
But when I read, how stout Debra strake
Proud Sisera, and how Camill' hath slaine
The huge Orsilochus, I swell with great disdaine.

Yet these, and all that else had puissaunce,
Cannot with noble Britomart compare,
Aswell for glory of great valiaunce,
As for pure chastitie and vertue rare,
That all her goodly deeds do well declare.  

But, while women may be praised for their valor in battle, this quality alone does not make them acceptable as rulers, or indicate that they are exceptions raised by God. For, according to Spenser, as to his contemporaries, the right and ability to rule require not only valor but certain moral and intellectual qualities as well. Again Leslie suggests the requirement when he writes of Judith:

As her stomacke and cowrage was manlye and stowte in that acte, so was she not onlye a noble vertuouse woman, but a meruelouse wise woman with all, and so was taken & iudged to be of all the people. Whereby yt will followe by good reason, that in case she had bene the gouernesse of all the people, her governemente wolde haue bene aswell profitable to the common welle, as conformable bothe to nature & the holye scripture also.  

47 II, iv, 1–3.  48 A defence of the honour of ... Marie, fol. 143v.
Defenders of gynecocracy were certain that women do possess the virtues necessary to government. Thus, Sir Thomas Elyot, in *The Defence of Good Women*, argues:

Ye sayde more ouer, Caninius, that the wyttes of women were apte onely to trifils and shrewdenes, and not to wisedome and ciuile policie. I wyll be plaine to you.... Ye haue twyse graunted, that naturall reason is in women as well as in men.... Than haue women also Discretion, Eleccion, and Prudence, whiche do make that wisedome, which perteyneth to gouernaunce.  

Knox, in his more moderate expressions on the subject of female government, stressed godliness as the essential quality in an acceptable woman ruler; godliness, according to his letters, is the one virtue which can except a woman who possesses it from the otherwise universal injunction against queens. As he puts it to Elizabeth herself, “I say, that nothing in my booke contained, is, or can be prejudicial to your Grace’s just regiment, provided that ye be not found ungrateful unto God.”  

Also, from the ecclesiastical tradition came the concept of queens as “nursing mothers” of church and nation. As Calvin pointed out to Cecil, with reference to Isaiah’s prophecy, queens are by this prerogative “distinguished from females in private life;” for, as the Genevan leader says elsewhere, queens “shall supply everything that is necessary for nourishing the offspring of the Church.”

More generally, however, women rulers were defended on the basis of the classic virtues which they possessed. And, again, the

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40 *The Defence of Good Women* (1540), sigs. Diiiiv–Dv. Elyot continues with historical examples of women well qualified in both wisdom and courage to govern states.

50 *Works*, VI, 49.

51 Isaiah 49:23: “And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they [the Gentiles] shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”

52 Calvin to Cecil, after Jan. 29, 1559, in *Zurich Letters*, p. 77.

53 *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, tr. William Pringle (Edinburgh, 1850–53), IV, 39. In their capacity as nurses, Calvin continues, queens, like kings, not only maintain true religion in doctrine and in ecclesiastical government, but also “they at the same time supply the pastors and ministers of the Word with all that is necessary for food and maintenance, provide for the poor and guard the Church against the disgrace of pauperism; erect schools, and appoint salaries for the teachers and board for the students; build poor-houses and hospitals, and make every other arrangement that belongs to the protection and defence of the Church.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.)
characteristic method of argument was to cite instances of illustrious women who exemplified the qualities necessary in a woman ruler. As David Chambers expressed it in his *Discours De La Legitime Succession Des Femmes*: “Car il ny a homme si aueuglé, estant aucunement versé és histoires tant ecclesiastiques que prophanes, qui ne trouue vn nombre infiny de femmes, qui pour leur prudence, scauoir, & autres bonnes qualitez en toutes facultez, pourront estre estimez dignes de telle vacation.” Edward More, in his *Defence of Women*, listed examples of queens famed for their temperance, mercy, and wisdom, as well as for their fortitude. Leslie wrote in the same vein: “Nowe that manie common weales haue bene commendable and worthelie gouerned by them, and that in theyre gouernemente lacked neyther witt, policye, dexteritye, prudence, liberalitie, iustice, nor mercye . . neyther any other thinge mete for a Prince, I could easeli declare!” George Whetstone, making a specific attack, in *The English Myrrore*, on Knox’s *First Blast*, set forth views similar to Leslie’s, in a passage of particular interest because of its reference to a more famous author’s opinion: “There haue beene women, that in all maner of artes, qualities, and vertues, which haue equalled the perfittest of men. Innumerable are the testimonies of womens profound learning, pure chastitie, rare constancie, patient martyrdome, and a number most valiant, whereof *Chawcer* reciteth nine Woorthies aanswerable to the nine Woorthies of men.” Heywood’s words can be quoted to summarize the thought of the century which preceded him; of Elizabeth he writes: “She that was a *Saba* for her wisedome, an *Harpalice* for her magnanimitie.

"For an interesting example of a catalogue of this character see Thomas Bentley, *The Monument of Matrones* (1582), in which will be found, among a vast number of other things, “A briefe catalog of the memorable names of sundrie right famous Queenes, godlie Ladies, and vertuous women of all ages, which in their kind and countries were notable learned, and whereof some marked with this marke * were the authors of a great part of this booke, as shall appeere: set foorth in alphabeticall order.” (Sig. B7*6r.)

"Discours De La Legitime Succession Des Femmes*, fol. 23.

"Defence of Women* (1560), sigs. Biii–Biv.

"A defence of the honour of . . Marie*, fol. 140°. Of female learning in particular, Leslie says elsewhere: “What thinge ys there that reason, wytt and vnderstandinge maye reache to, that woman hathe not, or maye not atchieve and attayne? For learninge, there haue bene manye women exactlie learned in Musicke, Astronomye, Phylosophye, Oratoyre, Physyeke, in Poetrie, in lawe and Deuinittye.” (Fol. 139.)

Spenser's "exceptional" women rulers are marked by these same virtues praised in contemporary gynecocratic literature. Britomart, in addition to her martial valor, manifests as well the essential moral and intellectual virtues. Her name is a byword for chastity and temperance. Moreover, among the Amazons she is adored as a goddess, admired for her wisdom, and hearkened to for her "loring." Mercilla sustains "The sacred pledge of peace and clemencie," although, "when as foes enforst, or friends sought ayde," she sternly draws the sword "that all the world dismayde." She possesses other virtues: she is "For her great bounty knowne ouer all;" and around her throne "Sate goodly Temperance in garments clene, And sacred Reuerence, yborne of heauenly strenne." But, as Spenser concludes in his apostrophe to this "gratious Queene," "thine owne people do thy mercy praye much more." Gloriana, of course, embodies all these virtues acclaimed in women rulers by defenders of gynecocracy in the sixteenth century. Guyon recalls her as

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. . . . . . \text{that great Queene,} \\
\text{Great and most glorious virgin Queene aliue,} \\
\text{That with her soueraigne powre, and scepter shene} \\
\text{All Faery lond does peaceably sustene.} \\
\text{In widest Ocean she her throne does reare,} \\
\text{That ouer all the earth it may be seene;} \\
\text{As morning Sunne her beames dispredden cleare,} \\
\text{And in her face faire peace, and mercy doth appeare.} \\
\]

In her the richesse of all heauenly grace
In chiefe degree are heaped vp on hye:
And all that else this worlds enclosure bace
Hath great or glorious in mortall eye,
Adornes the person of her Maiestie;
That men beholding so great excellence,
And rare perfection in mortalitie,
Do her adore with sacred reuerence,
As th'Idole of her makers great magnificence."
Later, Guyon hails Gloriana as

. . . the flower of grace and chastitie,
Throughout the world renowned far and near,
My liefe, my liege, my Soueraigne, my deare,
Whose glory shineth as the morning starre,
And with her light the earth enlumes clear;
Far reach her mercies, and her prayers farre,
As well in state of peace, as puissance in warre.

And on the same occasion Arthur eulogizes her as

. . . . . . . that Princesse bright,
Which with her bounty and glad countenance
Doth blesse her seruaunts, and them high aduaunce.

Like Britomart, Gloriana far more closely resembles the ideal woman ruler portrayed in the contemporary literature than she does the living queen whom she is intended to mirror. The qualities by which the "exceptional" women governors in the epic, and consequently the great exception herself, are identified, are consistently those discussed in the gynecocratic literature of the day—valor, wisdom, religion, mercy, virtue, bounty, temperance, clemency, prudence, liberality. These were not, according to Puritans, qualities possessed by women in general.

That such women as Britomart, Mercilla, and Gloriana are clearly exceptions elevated by God to the dignity of thrones is made finally evident by the virtue of justice which all possess in common. For, according to Renaissance theorists, justice was the chief requisite of a ruler, male or female, and the chief function of the ruler as God's representative. In its broadest sense justice was defined as the virtue by which each man is treated as he deserves according to his station and conduct in life. It is "a constant and perpetuall desire to giue vnto euerye man, that which to him belongeth," or, in Buchanan's words, "that [virtue] which doth regard every Member, and cureth it so as to be kept in its Function." Primarily for the

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66 II, ix, 4. 67 II, ix, 5.


68 De jure regni apud Scotos, p. 9.
administration of such justice God establishes rulers as his appointed lieutenants on earth. Thus, Bullinger wrote, quoting Plutarch: "Princes are the ministers of God for the oversight and safeguard of mortal men, to the end that they may partly distribute, and partly keep, the good things that he doth liberally give, and frankly bestow upon them." Earlier in the century Thomas Starkey had similarly proclaimed that "thys ys the office and duty, breuely to say, of hedys and rularys, aftur thys maner dylygently to se the admynistratyon of justyce to the hole commynalty." In executing justice rulers most completely fulfill their obligation as representatives of the source of all justice, or, as Bullinger concludes, "The magistrate therefore is of God; his office is good, holy, pleasing God, just, profitable, and necessary for men: and the rulers, which do rightly execute their office . . . are his elect instruments, by whom he worketh man's health and safeguard."  

That women can execute justice as the lieutenants of God was recognized on more than one occasion by defenders of gynecocracy. For example, David Chambers wrote that "le principal occasion de creer magistrats est pour administer iustice selon les loix: tellement que la difference du sexe, n'est pas requis pour les executer: mais la prudence & vsage de raison." Sir Thomas Craig argued on scriptural authority that God may grant this ability to women and accordingly qualify them as his chosen representatives:

And if we acquiesce, as we ought in the declar'd will of God in holy Scripture, we shall find that Deborah, tho' a married Woman and Subject to a Husband, reign'd over the Lord's people notwithstanding, what else can be meant by her judging the People of God, but her reign over them for that time? For Judging is the chiefest part of Government, we are not to strive about names of Authority when we find the Power exprest by them, to be the same; . . . Yea she adds, That the Lord made her have Dominion over the mighty. This place of Scripture might serve for all, tho' I doubt not, but she had an extraordinary call from God. One thing is observable, that God endow'd Women with the same perfections, and has equally manifested Himself in them, as he has in men."  

95 Fiftie Godlie and Learned Sermons, Divided into Five Decades . . . Translated out of Latine into English by H. I . . . 1587 (Parker Society; 1849-51), II, 309.  
98 Bullinger, op. cit., II, 314.  
99 Discours De La Legitime Succession Des Femmes, fol. 14*.  
100 Right of Succession to the Kingdom of England (1709), p. 83.
Spenser, too, conceives of political justice as a manifestation of divine will, and of a good ruler as its instrument. On the supremacy of justice among the virtues necessary in a ruler he writes:

Most sacred vertue she of all the rest,
Resembling God in his imperiall might;
Whose soueraine powre is herein most exprest,
That both to good and bad he dealeth right,
And all his workes with Iustice hath bedight.
That powre he also doth to Princes lend,
And makes them like himselfe in glorious sight,
To sit in his owne seate, his cause to end,
And rule his people right, as he doth recommend.\(^3\)

Nought is on earth more sacred or divine,
That Gods and men doe equally adore,
Then this same vertue, that doth right define:
For th'heuens themselues, whence mortal men implore
Right in their wrongs, are rul'd by righteous lore
Of highest Ioue, who doth true iustice deale
To his inferiour Gods, and euermore
Therewith contains his heauenly Commonweale:
The skill whereof to Princes hearts he doth reueale.\(^8\)

Such an instrument of divine justice is Gloriana, “th’Idole of her makers great magnificence,”77 who, Contemplation tells the Red Cross Knight, “is heauenly borne, and heauen may iustly vaunt.”78 Such an instrument also is Mercilla, “dealing righteous doome,”79 “Deal-ing iust judgements, that mote not be broken For any brybes, or threats of any to be wroken,”\(^80\) and finally, “Dealing of Justice with indifferent grace.”\(^81\) For her administration of justice, and for the manifestation of mercy with which the execution of justice should be tempered, Mercilla’s authority is explicitly hailed as divine in origin and nature. Twice she is called “sacred,”\(^82\) and she is attended by those virtues that “also doe, by [Jove’s] diuine permission, Vpon the thrones of mortall Princes tend.”\(^83\) Finally, the chief virtue which she embodies, mercy, is likewise described as of divine origin:

Sith in th’Almighties euerlasting seat
She first was bred, and borne of heauenly race;
From thence pour’d down on men, by influence of grace.\(^84\)

\(^77\) V, Intro., 10. \(^78\) I, ii, 41. \(^79\) V, ix, 23. \(^80\) V, ix, 36. \(^81\) V, ix, 36. \(^82\) V, ix, 32. \(^83\) V, vii, 1. \(^84\) I, x, 59. \(^85\) V, ix, 24. \(^86\) V, ix, 24. \(^87\) V, vii, 36. \(^88\) V, viii, 19; V, ix, 20. \(^89\) V, x, 1.
But it is in Britomart, as she overthrows Radigund and the Amazonian system of government, that we see most clearly how God, by endowing a woman with the virtue of justice, singles her out as an exception to the general law of nature that forbids female government. Having vanquished Radigund in battle and entered her stronghold, Britomart remains for a period,

During which space she there as Princess rained,
And changing all that forme of common weale,
The liberty of women did repeale,
Which they had long vsurpt; and them restoring
To mens subiection, did true Justice deale:
That all they as a Goddesse her adoring,
Her wisedome did admire, and hearkned to her loring.

For all those Knights, which long in captiue shade
Had shrowded bene, she did from thraldome free;
And magistrates of all that city made,
And gaue to them great liuing and large fee:
And that they should for euer faithful bee,
Made them sweare fealty to Artegall.85

Because women act out of their natural vocation and assume a dominion not recognized by divine law, the Amazonian political society and the principle of gynecocracy which it represents are unjust. For, as Knox wrote, "What soever repugneth to the will of God, expressed in his most sacred Worde, repugneth to Justice: but that Women have authoritie over men, repugneth to the will of God expressed in his Worde, and therfore . . . all suche authoritie repugneth to Justice."86 Thus, Spenser's Amazons have "shaken off the shamefast band, With which wise Nature did them strongly bynd;" and consequently have violated the justice which gives each thing a place and a reward according to its kind. The result is a completely perverted, unjust social and political situation. But, because she demonstrates her ability to administer justice by forcing women into the "base humilitie" to which they were born under "mans well ruling hand," Britomart clearly identifies herself as one of those exceptional women, instruments of divine justice, whom the heavens "lift to lawfull soueraintie." The episode of Radigund and Brito-

85 V, vii, 42-43.  86 First Blast, in Works, IV, 400.
mart, therefore, not only exemplifies Spenser's own expressed theory of gynecocracy, but also reaffirms our conviction that his position is precisely that of the moderate Calvinists. For it is with reference to the latter that we can most consistently explain his selection of a woman to overthrow the unnatural institution of female government.

It would be wrong to conclude that Spenser, in his description of women rulers both good and bad, had only the theories and methods of the gynecocratic literature as his inspiration. Certainly, as Dr. Wilson has made clear in *England's Eliza*, the virtues of godly queens, and of Elizabeth especially, are commonplace in writings far beyond the range of treatises concerned with the problem of government by women. And, just as certainly, the specific vices, public and private, of the Marys, provided many of the characteristics of Spenser's ungodly queens. But the fact that these elements as set forth in the *Faerie Queene* consistently exemplify the general theory expressed by Spenser in V, v, 25, seems to indicate that the poet went beyond mere echoing of current flattery or vilification of individuals, to the theoretical problem of gynecocracy itself. Not only did he present in allegorical guise the actual Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart, and Elizabeth as personalities and as political figures, but, on a different level of allegory, he also presented good and bad queens, according to the standards prevalent in the gynecocratic discussion of his day. Associated as he was with Calvinist views on other questions, familiar as he was with leading expositions of Puritan theories of female government, and faced as he was with the same practical problem which faced Calvin, Bullinger, and eventually Knox himself, with regard to the Marys and Elizabeth, it was inevitable that these standards which Spenser expressed in a general theory and illustrated in specific figures should correspond with those of the moderate Genevans.