Reflecting Courtly Flaws Through “Dark Conceit:”
The Didactic Aim of The Faerie Queene

By Lindsey Scott

In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser attempts to walk a fine line between the two extremes of contemporary writings: the blind flattery of the courtly poetry and the ever-dangerous blunt disapproval. Rather than condemning the queen and her court, Spenser attempts to encourage his readers to recognize the faults reflected in the “dark conceit” his allegory in order to improve and edify his royal audience.

**The House of Pride**

Spenser's treatment of the House of Pride depicts the emptiness of courtly performance that characterized the Elizabethan court. Performances of courtly love could determine courtiers' success in gaining the Queen's attention and favor (Baker 41). However, as Spenser's House of Pride episode suggests, this kind of exaggerated performance breeds an environment of artificiality. Spenser undercuts the House of Pride courtiers' seeming “courtsie” throughout the passage (1.4.14.4). Their performative “deuise[s]” extend beyond their vain appearance to the way that they welcome the Redcrosse Knight. Although he is often fooled by artifice, the vividness of the courtiers is evident even to the Redcrosse Knight.

Spenser also lays the foundation against these performative traits with the description of the House of Pride itself. While Spenser begins by describing the House of Pride as “A stately Pallace,” he quickly undermines the building's stateliness appearance with its shoddy construction.

**Spenser's Own Experience**

Spenser’s failure to prosper at court might have the potential to complicate his altruistic didactic aim. However, his participation and earnest attempt to become involved in court culture suggests that the poet is not above reproach in his involvement in a highly flawed system. Therefore, Spenser's didactic aim becomes even more salient when considering the poet's experience at court renders him included in the reproach. Spenser hopes to help Queen Elizabeth and courtiers recognize and reject the competition, performance, and artifice that he himself was implicated in.

**The Court of Philotime**

Spenser uses Philotime and her court to demonstrate the negative outcome of a system that functions based on competition like the Elizabethan court. The dynamic of “cliques and favorites” that characterized the Elizabethan court resulted in an atmosphere that was highly polarized and competitive (Baker 41).

Philotime, the female monarch, is responsible for wielding the great chain of "Ambition" and encouraging more parties to partake in her cutthroat court (2.7.46.8). Spenser’s allegorical reflection is able to covertly demonstrate how Elizabeth I’s role as “aloof mistress” engendered the culture of competition at court. Spenser makes it clear the courtiers of Philotime were no less responsible for playing into the ruthlessness of the system. The system depends on the toxic cycle of people ensuring their place on the chain by throwing “his fellow downe” (2.7.47.9).