Cite this:
Sanchez, Melissa E. "White chivalry in *The Faerie Queene*." *Throughlines*. www.throughlines.org/suite-content/white-chivalry-in-the-faerie-queene. [date accessed].

White chivalry in *The Faerie Queene*

Melissa E. Sanchez

The first movie ever screened inside the White House was *The Birth of a Natio*n, a 1915 silent drama directed by D.W. Griffith, based on Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novel, *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*. The film was a sensation with white audiences: adjusting for inflation, it is still one of the highest grossing movies of all time, and it helped establish Hollywood as the nucleus of the American film industry. After his personal screening, President Woodrow Wilson famously praised it as "history written in lightning."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, objected to such credulous fandom, and they organized nationwide petitions and protests against showings of *The Birth of a Nation*. These efforts addressed the reality that Dixon's film is a three-hour-long piece of white supremacist propaganda that recounts a mythologized version of the Reconstruction era. White actors in blackface depict formerly enslaved persons as barbarous, lustful, and malevolent threats to the newly unified nation.

The critical moments of the film's plot render the white supremacist myth that freed Black Americans will rape and murder white women and children if the chivalric Klansmen, the heroes of the film, do not rescue these innocent victims and the nation they represent.

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I start here with *The Birth of a Nation* because its ideology is blatant and its imagery allegorizes the United States itself as a helpless white ciswoman to be saved by chivalrous white knights. And with the film's imagery in mind, we can turn our gaze to the past. We often think about the logics of white supremacy being situated in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, the Antebellum south, Jim Crow, and thereafter. But these images—the chivalric white masculine hero, the fair and chaste damsel in distress, the threat of the racialized other—have histories that predate the birth of the United States and the Ku Klux Klan.

Reading Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* with special attention to his use of allegory can help us trace the long and constantly mutating ideology of chivalry and its foundational role in perpetuating white supremacy.

Spenser gives concrete form to abstract concepts like sexual excess, perversion, and criminality by personifying them as blackened pagan, Islamic, or Indigenous characters. Unlike individual, verisimilar representations of non-white, non-Europeans (such as Shakespeare's Othello or Caliban), allegory is universalizing. Blackened infidels personify the concept of depravity because they express the ostensibly inferior minds and morals of their entire races. Reading Spenser illuminates the historical operations of race and racialization as structural technologies, not descriptive categories.

Spenser's romance expands the allegorization of England's self-styled Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I, who is the dedicatee of *The Faerie Queene*. In art, literature, and political writing, Elizabeth's white and untouched body served as a concrete image of England's intact borders, as well as its imperial ambitions.

The Faerie Queene prophesizes the moment when "the Briton blood their crowne again reclame" to rule a vast global empire. Spenser depicts threats to this future as threats to gendered and sexual norms, as white knights rescue white cisgendered ladies

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from characters named Lechery, Fancy, Lust, Pride, and Disdain. At the same time, these white knights are themselves endangered by Muslim, Indigenous, pagan, and Amazonian women who lie about sexual assault, lure men into danger and emasculate them.

The poem also repeatedly punishes white ciswomen with sexual violence when they forget, even for a minute, that they need the protection of white cis men. *The Faerie Queene*'s perverted African, Islamic, Indigenous, and gender-deviant men thereby serve a double ideological function. On the one hand, they personify external threats to English women and nation; on the other, they allegorize the base instincts within white ciswomen themselves—instincts that endanger the reproduction of the English "race."

For instance, when Amoret is abducted by Lust, it is because "nought affeard" she wanders around all alone. The "proud and insolent" Mirabella, who swears that she is "borne free, not bound to any wight, and so would euer liue and loue her own delight," becomes the prisoner of Disdain, who is "Like to the Mores of Malabar" and swears by the false gods "Turmagant and Mahound."

Spenser frames his romance as a pedagogical text meant "To fashion a gentleman or noble person." And what his allegory teaches is a chivalric logic in which white ciswomen's fear and white cismen's aggression are equally necessary to making white nations great (again). Today, the myth of white chivalry continues to fortify white men's entitlement to public space, economic opportunity, and political power by casting them as saviors of a nation menaced on all sides by foreign, Black, brown, and gender nonconforming enemies. It also underlies the logics of deportation, incarceration, and transphobia.

In 2024, the names of white ciswomen and girls allegedly killed by undocumented men featured prominently in Republican campaigns. And since 2025, the White House and the Department of Homeland Security continue to raise the specter of violence against

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paradigmatically white "American women and children." In truth, only 3% of ICE detainees have criminal convictions for any offense whatsoever, but facts have posed no obstacle to this reiteration of white supremacy's chivalric logic.

In the most recent twist on this logic, the "loyal white knights of KKK" promise to protect "the safety of our bathrooms" and locker rooms to keep cis damsels safe from trans women. Meanwhile, politicians propagate the fear that allowing gender-affirming care to minors will turn potential white knights into victims of "gender ideology" before they even reach manhood. As Donald Trump repeatedly asserted in his 2024 campaign, "There are some places your boy leaves for school, comes back a girl." If all the white cis boys become trans girls, who will protect cis girls and women—and America itself—from Black, brown, and trans assailants bent on invasion and conquest?

If we study the evolving connections of these white supremacist myths from the past, we can appreciate the consistency of their operations across time and place. Learning to read literary allegory reveals that its chivalric codes are neither benign nor abstract. They constitute a pernicious and dangerous weapon, one that we can dismantle only after we learn to identify its structure and understand its logic.