

# “FOUR-FOLD VISION SEE”: ALLEGORY IN THE POETRY OF EDMUND SPENSER AND WILLIAM BLAKE



*The Characters in Spenser's Faerie Queene (c. 1825), by William Blake. Petworth House, The Egremont Collection (acquired in lieu of tax by H.M. Treasury in 1957 and subsequently transferred to the National Trust), ©NTPL/Derrick E. Witty.*

I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball:  
It will lead you in at Heavens gate,  
Built in Jerusalems wall.

William Blake, *Jerusalem* plate 77

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“Four-fold vision see”: Allegory in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser and  
William Blake.

Two volumes: volume one of two.

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## **“Four-fold vision see”: Allegory in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser and William Blake.**

This thesis examines the role of readerly engagement in the allegorical poetry of Edmund Spenser and William Blake. An analysis of their poetry reveals important affinities between the two poets. Not only was Blake aware of Spenser’s work, he can be seen to incorporate and build upon Spenser’s self-conscious poetic style in order to engage readers in the active process of interpretation. Meaning in their poetry can be shown to unfold gradually by way of complex interactions between the reader and the text, interactions fostered by the reader’s imagination and the (differently) visual quality of the two poets’ works. Blake promotes this way of seeing as being “four-fold,” the ability to perceive on several dimensions.

The first chapter of this thesis looks at the definitions and attitudes towards allegory from the early sixteenth century onwards, showing how the mode has been constantly redefined. Chapter two investigates the self-conscious nature of allegory through an analysis of the placement of words, metaphors, unconventional language, and the way the poems may be read by readers. Both poets encourage a heightened awareness of the process of reading which may be termed allegorical. Blake owned his own printing press allowing him greater control over the words and design of his text. This enabled him to be more forceful in his communication of images and ideas than Spenser. Chapter three focuses upon the multiple (and contradictory) ways in which the text may be interpreted by the reader. Allegory is a means of communicating and simultaneously disguising criticism. Both poets can be seen to use it to voice resistance to forms of authority, even as they encourage readers to recognise these meanings within their texts. Spenser and Blake had to combat different forms of censorship with differing strategies. Whereas Spenser felt compelled to uphold the status quo, Blake sought to deconstruct rigid social conventions. Chapter four explores the relation between allegory and the imagination. Spenser uses allegory to inspire the imagination, whereas for Blake the imagination encourages allegory. The imagination is a means of pushing readers towards further learning and a deeper appreciation of allegorical meaning. Chapter five analyses Spenser and Blake’s verbal and imagistic visuality in relation to allegory. Blake’s illustrations promote further reader engagement, while Spenser’s illuminations are a part of his metaphorical and allegorical text. Both poets use the visual to trigger imaginative readerly interaction and to promote new ways of perceiving and relating to their poems.

## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	6
Illustrations.....	7
Abbreviations.....	9
Introduction.....	10
Critical Reflections on Spenser and Blake	18
Blake’s reflections on Spenser	23
Blake’s <i>Characters in Spenser’s Faerie Queene</i>	26
Emblems: a basis for allegorical and visual reading	36
Structure and outline: the content and limitations of this thesis	55
Chapter One: On Allegory.....	61
Spenser’s “darke conceit”: Allegory in the sixteenth century	63
Spenser’s allegorical <i>Faerie Queene</i>	73
The space in between: the seventeenth century	81
Allegory in the eighteenth century	86
Spenser in the eighteenth century	91
Allegory and the symbol	96
Blake’s “four-fold vision”	98
Allegory in the twentieth century and beyond	106
Chapter Two: Allegory and Language.....	121
Censorship, propaganda and interpretation	122
“Sharpen my dull tong”: Spenser’s allegory	135
The biting tongue of the Blatant Beast	138
“Be bolde ... but not too bolde”: allegorical re-reading as relearning	144
“A book that all may read”: Blake’s allegorical re-reading	153
“Tearing” the book	158
“Me-tals”: letters testing the mind’s mettle	162
Endless work: impulsive vision within disciplined allegorical reading	168
Blake’s struggle against the “mind-forg’d manacles” of slavish censorship	171
Chapter Three: Allegory, Resistance and the Reader.....	179
Spenser’s <i>Faerie Queene</i> – mirroring grace and majesty	181
Book Five: stretching the limits of allegory and Justice	197
Courtliness and courtesy	205
Transgression defies containment: the breakdown of Spenser’s allegory?	215
“In soot I sleep”: Blake’s allegorical reassessment of social attitudes	223
Blake’s allegorical re-writing of the Bible	243
Chapter Four: Allegory and the Imagination.....	253

The sixteenth-century imagination	255
Imagination in <i>The Faerie Queene</i>	264
<i>The Faerie Queene</i> as a “glassy globe”	272
Calidore’s vision of the Graces on Mount Acidale	274
The evolution of “fancy” and “imagination”	282
Blake’s imagination	288
Albion in <i>Jerusalem</i> – an allegory of the fallen mind	294
Golgonooza: city of imagination	300
Blake’s sublime imagination	304
The Vortex: using the sublime to guide reader’s to new perspectives	310
Spenser and Blake: the limits of the allegorical imagination	313
Chapter Five: Allegory and the Visual.....	316
Spenser: the “Poet of the Painters”	318
The Bower of Bliss as a process of allegorical visualisation	326
John Bender’s visualisation of Spenserian “pictorialism”	331
Vision in Isis Church	333
Medieval influences on Blake’s illuminated verse	338
<i>Ut pictura poesis</i> – debating the integration of art and poetry	343
The hidden or veiled within the process of unveiling and enlightenment	349
Blake and Spenser’s “four-fold vision”	363
Turning full circle: The textual-imagistic nature of Blake’s work	367
Afterword: Visual Allegory: Arthur’s Shield and Albion’s Sleep .....	372
Bibliography.....	383

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## Illustrations

William Blake's illuminated verse and is reproduced from *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books*, introduced by David Bindman. Every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge copyright.

### Figure

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## Abbreviations

Quotations from Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are from *The Faerie Queene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London: Longman, 2001). Quotations from Spenser's other poems are from *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, edited by William A. Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989). Quotations from *A View of the Present State of Ireland* are from the first edition published in 1633, edited by Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

Quotations from William Blake's poems are from *The Complete Poems*, edited by Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 2004). Quotations from Blake's prose are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), unless otherwise stated.

### Spenser's Work

<i>FQ</i>	<i>The Faerie Queene</i>
<i>SC</i>	<i>The Shepherds Calender</i>
<i>View</i>	<i>A View of the Present State of Ireland</i>

### Blake's Work

<i>A</i>	<i>America</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Europe</i>
<i>EG</i>	<i>The Everlasting Gospel</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>The Book of Ahania</i>
<i>BL</i>	<i>The Book of Los</i>
<i>BU</i>	<i>The Book of Urizen</i>
<i>FZ</i>	<i>The Four Zoas</i>
<i>J</i>	<i>Jerusalem</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Milton</i>
<i>MHH</i>	<i>Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>
<i>SI</i>	<i>Songs of Innocence</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Songs of Experience</i>
<i>VLJ</i>	<i>A Vision of the Last Judgement</i>

### Common Abbreviations

<i>E</i>	Erdman, ed. <i>The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.
<i>PL</i>	<i>Paradise Lost</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pilgrim's Progress</i>
<i>Sp Enc</i>	<i>The Spenser Encyclopaedia</i>