

“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.

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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 nd 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>