Joseph Spence, friend of Alexander Pope, once recorded that after he read a canto in Spenser to his—Spence's—mother, then between seventy and eighty years of age, "she said that I had been showing her a collection of pictures."¹ This seems to have been the earliest expression of a fancy that was to persist as a critical commonplace across the centuries. Like Thomson's Seasons on a smaller scale, The Faerie Queene was taken to be the quintessence of poetic pictorialism, a vivid and extensive exemplification of ut pictura poesis, and Spenser therefore was "the painter's poet" par excellence.² In 1829, Hazlitt said that he was "a poet to whom justice will never be done till a painter of equal genius arises to embody the dazzling and enchanting creations of his pen."³ In effect, the artists' challenge was to translate The Faerie Queene into the visual medium to which it had such intimate affinity, and this in a period when the art of the Renaissance masters was the criterion by which the most ambitious painting was judged. It may well have been that, as a writer in the Art Journal observed in 1855, when Spenserianism in English art was finally declining, The Faerie Queene was "the most difficult poem in our classics that a painter can work from. It is more easy to paint from Shakespeare or Milton, or indeed any of our poets, than it is to work from Spenser."⁴ No such painter as Hazlitt called for ever appeared, but as the record of some 175 paintings from The Faerie Queene suggests, there was no lack of aspirants.⁵

During the eighteenth-century decades when a revived Spenserianism served as one of the first harbingers of Romanticism in poetry, subjects from The Faerie Queene were regularly seen at the exhibitions and elsewhere.⁶ William Kent designed engravings for the edition of 1751: "the most execrable performance you ever beheld," wrote Horace Walpole to a friend, "—the graving not worse than the drawing: awkward knights, scrambling Unas, hills tumbling down themselves, no variety of prospect, and three or four perpetual spruce firs."⁷ But Walpole, whose sympathies and prejudices were deeply rooted in the neoclassicism of the time, was as unequipped to deal fairly with Spenserian subjects as Kent was unequipped, for the same reason, to portray them. Fuseli with his imaginative reach was somewhat better qualified, and two of his early watercolors (ca. 1769) were The Appearance of the Fairy Queen to the Dreaming Arthur and The Cave of Despair. Benjamin West exhibited three Spenser canvases at the Royal Academy, Una and the Lion (1772), The Cave of Despair (1773) (pl. 257), and Fidelia and Speranza (1777). Una was a favorite role in which ladies chose to be depicted in fancy pictures. The eldest daughter of Lady Diana Beauclerk sat to Reynolds in the character (RA 1780), Miss Isabella Saltonstall to George Stubbs (pl. 17), Miss Clark to Northcote (RA 1806), and an unnamed lady to Sir William Beechey as late as 1821. John Singleton Copley posed his three children as the Red Cross Knight, Fidelia, and Speranza (pl. 258). Four paintings from The Faerie Queene were commissioned for Macklin's Poet's Gallery: Richard Cosway's Sans-Loy Killing the Lion, Fuseli's The Vision of Prince Arthur, John Opie's The Freeing of Amoret, and the very minor artist Elias Martin's Amoret Rapt by Greedie Lust. Stothard made twelve Spenserian designs for Aikin's edition of Dr. Johnson's collection of the English poets (1802). He thought so much of one of
these, *Una Surrounded by Satyrs*, that he hung it in his drawing room in Newman Street for the remaining thirty years of his life.8

Spenser was one of Keats's literary enthusiasms, and among those with whom he shared it was his friend Joseph Severn, who was inspired by Keats's reciting *The Faerie Queene* to paint *Una and the Red Cross Knight* in

---

257. Benjamin West, *The Cave of Despair* (RA 1773) (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection). West was one of the first artists to realize the suitability of *Faerie Queene* subjects for treatment in the grand style. He had exhibited *Una and the Lion* the previous year, and in 1777 would show *Fidelia and Speranza*. In this painting, the Red Cross Knight beholds the “piteous spectacle” of Sir Terwin, captive of Despair (bk. 1, canto 9).

258. John Singleton Copley, *Study for the Red Cross Knight* (RA 1793) (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection). A sketch for the finished painting, which is at the National Gallery, Washington. The American-born artist cast his namesake son (later Baron Lyndhurst, three times lord chancellor) as the Red Cross Knight and his daughters Elizabeth and Mary as Fidelia and Speranza. The scene is *The Faerie Queene*, bk. 1, canto 10.
Charles Eastlake, *Una Delivering the Red Cross Knight* (RA 1830) (Sir John Soane's Museum, London). The moment in the Cave of Despair immediately following the one depicted in pl. 257; another rescue scene, this time from contemplated suicide, with *putti* added to enhance the Spenserian—Renaissance—flavor. Eastlake painted it reluctantly. He received the commission from Sir John Soane in 1824, but the banality (thus early) of the specified subject discouraged him. He finally got around to it in 1828.

The picture won the gold medal at the Royal Academy schools in 1819—the first time the prize had been awarded in eight years—and it was exhibited at the Academy the next year. At least one reviewer greeted it in the spirit in which critics at that moment were mauling the “cockney” Keats: “We despair,” he said, “of this painter ever making an artist. He has [started] out by striding after Fuseli on the stilts of literature. He has outdone every one of his faults, and has given eminent proof of his qualifications for the Presidency of the Academy at the Court of the Anthropophagi.”

Keats’s early mentor, Leigh Hunt, was also a devoted Spenserian. Like Hazlitt, Hunt habitually thought of Spenser’s poetry in terms of the Old Masters; and in the *New Monthly Magazine* for June 1833, under the title “A New Gallery of Pictures: Spenser, the Poet of the Painters,” he offered an anthology of Spenserian pictorial beauties, introduced with the most extravagant praise any painter-in-words ever received:

His “Faerie Queene” contains a store of masterly, poetical pictures, as capable of being set before the eye as those in a gallery; . . . he includes in his singular genius the powers of the greatest and most opposite masters of the art, of the Titians in colouring and classical gusto, the Rembrandts in light and shade, the Michael Angelos in grandeur of form and purpose, the Rubenses in gorgeousness, the Guidos in grace, the Raphaels and Correggios in expression, and the Claudes and Poussins, and even the homely Dutch painters, in landscape. Spenser can paint a ditch, a flower-garden, an enchanted wood, a palace, a blacksmith’s shop, an elysium. He can paint nymphs wanton or severe; warriors, satyrs, giants, ladies, courts, cottages, hermitages, the most terrible storms, the most prodigious horrors, the profoundest and loveliest tranquillity. His naked women are equal to Titian’s, his dressed to Guido’s, his old seers to Michael Angelo’s, his matrons and his pure maidenhood to Raphael’s, his bacchanals to Nicholas Poussin’s; and for a certain union of all qualities in one, we know not his equal.

Eleven years later (1844), Hunt revived the conceit in his chatty anthology *Imagination and Fancy*, with a largely fresh selection of passages to be painted. The combined galleries contained thirty hypothetical canvases, excluding half a dozen duplications.

In enticing readers to *The Faerie Queene* solely on the strength of the pictures with which the poem abounded, Hunt was doing his bit to educate a steadily growing reading public whose natural taste in art ran to literary subjects more readily identified with everyday life. As Archibald Alison wrote at this time, "the Fables of Ariosto or Spenser will never rival in their influence with the great bulk of mankind the simple tales in which Burns and Scott and Shakspeare have drawn characters and awakened emotions familiar and common to all mankind." Perhaps not, but there was no harm in telling them of the delights of *The Faerie Queene*; and immediately after the "New Gallery of Pictures" appeared, *Blackwood’s Magazine* published (1834–35) a series of long articles by "Christopher North" (John Wilson) that supplemented Hunt’s missionary efforts on another front. Archaic language apart, the multileveled allegory of *The Faerie Queene* was considered the most formidable barrier to its wider appreciation, and Wilson added to lavish encomia a patient explication that set out to teach *Blackwood’s* readers more than they probably ever cared to know about allegory or Spenser. Thus instructed, however, within a few years they would have been the first to realize that Spenser’s homage to Queen Elizabeth was neatly applicable to the new Gloriana who had succeeded to her throne, and that pictures from *The Faerie
Queene might have more contemporary significance than met the casual eye.

But comprehension of allegory was not indispensable to the appreciation of a picture from The Faerie Queene. As Hazlitt observed, "It might as well be pretended that we cannot see Poussin's pictures for the allegory, as that the allegory prevents us from understanding Spenser." There was, after all, the perennial attraction of chivalric themes, the many combat-and-rescue operations, the lush pictorial coloration, all of which were very much to early Victorian taste. That the incidence of pictures from The Faerie Queene, after holding steady at one to three a year between 1800 and 1840, markedly increased in the next fifteen years is not necessarily evidence that the poem had found more readers. It was said at the time that it was "little read," except—possibly—by artists.* But there is no reason to believe that as a consequence paintings from Spenser sold any less quickly than those from other literary sources.

Throughout The Faerie Queene's career in art, book 1 provided most of the subjects. (In Hunt's first dream gallery, ten picturable passages came from there, as against only four each from books 2 and 3 and none from the rest of the poem.) The main attraction was Una, who was portrayed in some forty canvases, both portraits and tableaux. William Hilton was something of a specialist in Una pictures; he showed her in a single action, seeking shelter in Corceca's cottage, at least four times between 1831 and 1835. Leading patrons of the time, especially those who did not share the developing taste for genre subjects, were partial to pictures from this book. From Richard Westall, the wealthy collector and antiquarian Richard Payne Knight commissioned (RA 1807) the scene in which the sorcerer Archimago "causes the Red Cross Knight to lust after a spirit, posing as Una." In 1824, Sir John Soane ordered from Charles Eastlake Una Delivering the Red Cross Knight from the Cave of Despair (pl. 259), a subject Eastlake, even then, rightly considered to be trite. Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort valued Faerie Queene subjects as much as they did subjects from Milton's Comus. In 1847, the Queen bought W. E. Frost's Una (pl. 260) off the wall at the Royal Academy as a gift for her husband.

*In 1848, the Illustrated London News (10 June, p. 378) commented that the poem was "too little read by painters but replete with fine subjects." Two years later, Thomas Uwins, replying to a remark by one of his patrons, wrote: "Nobody reads him [Spenser] but the artist; and the artist finds the 'Faery Queen' so full of the combinations which lend themselves to painting, that he loses his chance of pleasing the public in the love of pleasing himself."

Uwins, however, was an embittered witness. The previous year, he had exhibited Sir Guyon Arriving at the Bower of Bliss (also described as Sir Guyon . . . Destroys the Enchantments That Have Tempted His Companions from Their Duty). "People passed by it," he complained, "as if it was so much blank wall, and went on to a mountain scene, which to my feelings was full of nothingness" (Mrs. Uwins, A Memoir of Thomas Uwins [London, 1858], 1:124).
261. Henry Howard, *The House of Morpheus* (RA 1821) (Petworth House). Howard, who exhibited 259 paintings at the Royal Academy alone in the course of half a century, treated all his literary subjects in the neoclassic style he had first exercised as a young contributor to Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery. This chaste scene, from the middle of his career, typifies his handling of the many Spenserian subjects he chose. It represents the “great passion of unwonted lust,” a series of dreams in the course of which the Red Cross Knight is led to believe that Una is false to him (bk. 1, canto 1).

262. Sir John Gilbert, *The Slain Dragon* (RA 1886) (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). After eleven cantos and a three-day battle, the Red Cross Knight has completed his mission to slay the dragon; and Una, plucking up her courage, comes to get a closer look at the “huge and horrible mass” whose tail extends behind the tree (bk. 1, canto 11).

Prince Arthur’s dream vision of the Faerie Queene was the subject of six or eight paintings. A scattering of pictures was drawn from elsewhere in book 1: Abraham Cooper’s *Sir Trevisan Fleeing from Despair* (1822; his Royal Academy diploma picture), Henry Howard’s *The House of Morpheus* (pl. 261), Sir John Gilbert’s *The Slain Dragon* (pl. 262), Charles Gere’s *The Finding of the Infant St. George*, and Henry Thomson’s *The Mother Finding Her Infant Playing with the Talons of the Dragon Slain by the Red Cross Knight* (RA 1806).

Paintings from book 2 were dominated by moments from the twelfth canto, set in the Bower of Bliss. This passage afforded an opportunity to paint “four naked damzells,” among other delights. The best-known picture from this book, however, was Etty’s (RA 1832). It depicted an earlier episode (canto 6) in which Sir Guyon encounters Phaedria as he seeks a ferry to the Floating Island, only to be attacked by his enemy Cymocles, whom Phaedria had temporarily diverted from his revenge-seeking by the application of what in Etty’s time were called her “charms.” When Edward FitzGerald saw the second version at the Royal Academy in 1835 (pl. 61), he reported to Thackeray, “Etty has boats full of naked backs as usual: but what they mean, I didn’t stop to enquire.”

The first five cantos of book 3 were almost wholly neglected, except for a late painting by G. F. Watts (pl. 264). Several subjects were taken from the sixth canto, however: the birth of Belphoebe and Amoret (stanzas 1–4: W. L. Leitch’s painting of this subject [pl. 265] was commissioned by the Prince Consort), *Venus in Search of Cupid, Surprising Diana at Her Bath* (stanzas 11–25; 1820 version by William Hilton), and *Venus Visiting the Body of Adonis in Secret* (stanzas 46–51). From the seventh canto came, at various times, *The Witch’s Son Bringing Presents to Florimel* (stanza 17) and *Florimel Escaping from the Monster* (stanzas 22–27). Beginning with Stothard’s *Britomart Taking Off Her Helmet and Revealing Her Sex* (RA 1786), there was a whole series of representations of that classic discovery...
scene in canto 9. Among them was F. R. Pickersgill’s Britomart Unarming (RA 1855), which the Illustrated London News, deciding that the knight on the left resembled Sir Philip Sidney, declared was “truly Spenserian.” “How exquisitely,” it rhapsodized, “has Spenser painted Britomart for the pencil of Mr. Pickersgill. . . . It is said by Spenser himself that the poet’s wit surpaseth painter’s far in picturing parts of ‘beauty daynt’; but Spenser, had he seen Pickersgill’s composition from his great poem,

263. George Frederic Watts, Una and the Red Cross Knight (RA 1869) (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). By the time Watts painted this picture, Una and her chivalric companion had been staple subjects of British art for almost a century. The scene, from the very opening of The Faerie Queene, typifies the interest Spenser’s poem held for a new generation of artists, some of whom, like Watts, prized it especially for its heavy content of moral allegory.

264. George Frederic Watts, Britomart and Her Nurse (RA 1878) (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery). Britomart’s nurse describes to her the signs of the future she sees in the magic mirror: the figures of the Red Cross Knight, Sir Guyon, and Sir Aleyn (bk. 3, canto 2). This is one of the numerous paintings that featured mirrors either as literal reflections or as auguries—a frequent device in Victorian poetry as well as art.

265. William L. Leitch, The Birth of Belphoebe and Amoret (before 1857) (Royal Collection, Copyright Reserved). Leitch was a landscapist who taught watercolor painting to Queen Victoria and other members of the royal family. In this picture, he reverted to the old practice of placing an identifiable group of human beings in what was essentially a scene from nature. The event shown is the birth of twins to the highborn fairy Chrysogone (bk. 3, canto 6).
Frederick R. Pickersgill, Amoret, Aemylia, and Prince Arthur in the Cottage of Slander (RA 1845) (Tate Gallery, London). In this scene from *The Faerie Queene* (bk. 4, canto 8), the artist concentrates on the three figures of Amoret, Aemilia, and Prince Arthur; but in the poem, Spenser devotes most of the dozen stanzas (23–36) to a horrific description of the hag Slander. This hag is scarcely loathsome, but Pickersgill was no Fuseli, nor was he painting at a time when witches such as Fuseli depicted agreed with the public appetite.

* Hilton's canvas had a peculiar fate. In 1839, after his death, his former students presented the picture to the National Gallery in his memory. After eight months on the wall, it was realized that the asphaltum and wax that had been mixed with the pigments had never properly hardened, and, as the *Art-Union* put it in 1847, "one of the evil consequences has been that an eye of the female figure has slipped down a quarter of an inch, and there formed a perfect festoon in alto-relievo" (p. 109). The restorer John Seguier knew of no remedy. "Under these unfavourable circumstances," the *Art-Union* reported, "the picture has been for the present withdrawn, and hung upside down in one of the private apartments, in the hope that the eye may slip back to its proper position." This desirable improvement may have been accomplished when the painting was restored in 1860, but it did not bestow permanent health on the much-suffering canvas. "The work," says Robin Hamlyn, assistant keeper of the British collection, Tate Gallery, "is now classified by our Conservation Department as a 'complete wreck' and a prewar photograph shows that Serena's mouth has slipped somewhat, revealing a rather bituminous grin of most unpleasant proportions!" (Private letter, 27 July 1983.)
tually unrepresented in the art galleries except for a scattering of paintings that merely borrowed their mottoes from Spenser's text.

JONSON

Some twenty paintings were derived from Ben Jonson's plays, the most notable ones from *Every Man in His Humour*, which Garrick adapted in 1751. Reynolds painted him as Kitely in 1768; the artist gave the original to his friend Edmund Burke and made at least four copies. Fuseli depicted for *Bell's British Theatre* the scene between Matthew and Bobadil, and in 1848 Maclise painted a new Kitely: John Forster, friend and biographer of Dickens (pl. 268).

Peter Van Bleek painted a scene from *The Alchemist* as early as 1738, and the play gained in popularity on the stage, and therefore in art, when Garrick assumed the role of Abel Drugger and later produced his own adaptation of Jonson's text. Zoffany's painting of the last scene of the second act (RA 1770) was famous; it is sometimes said to have laid the foundation for the artist's fame as a theatrical painter. Reynolds, in one of the first recorded transactions in British art in which the seller made a profit, bought it from Zoffany for 100 guineas and resold it to the Earl of Carlisle for £125. Scenes from the play were among the favorite subjects of later theatrical artists; George Clint, for example, showed two different ones at the Royal Academy in 1816 and the British Institution the following year. Several paintings catalogued simply as *The Alchemist* probably were repetitions of a familiar subject in European art, but to viewers who knew their own English drama, they would have contained echoes of Jonson's play.

The necromancy in Jonson's *Masque of Queens* inevitably attracted Henry Fuseli, who showed at the Royal Academy in 1785 *The Mandrake: a Charm*. "Shockingly mad, madder than ever, quite mad," was Horace Walpole's equally inevitable judgment. Fuseli repeated the subject for the Academy show of 1812, when Robert Hunt, declining to pass judgment on the artist's health of mind, reported receiving a frisson from "the squalid hag, . . . her uncouth and cowering position, her ugliness and malignant satisfaction of face peeping under a hood."