The Personification of the Human Subject in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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With three voluminous books as the first installment, *The Faerie Queene* was proposed as a grand epic indeed when Spenser published them in 1590, with introductory dedicatory verses and an appended Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh explaining the purpose and structure of the poem. He alluded to plans for twelve books depicting *the twelve priuate morall virtues* of Aristotle, intermingled with his own version of the Arthurian legend; all in honor and celebration of his sovereign, Queen Elizabeth. He contemplated another twelve books (for a total of 24), focused on the *polliticke vertues*. The second installment appeared in 1596 with the publication of Books 4–6. In the mode of Homer, Vergil, Ariosto, and Tasso, all of whom he names, and arguably Dante (whom he does not mention), Spenser seemed intent on writing the great English epic, and securing his place as England's Poet Laureate—an honor he earned only unofficially, after his death and burial in Westminster Abbey, near the tomb of Geoffrey Chaucer. He set the work in England's mythical Arthurian past, an appropriate move given the Tudor claims of descent from Arthur. As he put it in the “Letter to Raleigh”, by *being coloured with an historicall fiction* the poem would not only be a *delight to read* but also kept itself *furthest from the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time.*

While Arthur served as the work’s consistent epic hero and intervened in each of the six published books, the moral virtues that constitute a ‘noble person’ were each to be represented by particular adventures, often by a relevant quest, that would eventually reveal the ideal of that virtue. Thus, in the first book, the Red Cross Knight (later revealed to be Saint George, the patron saint of England) sets off to free the maiden Una’s parents, who are being held captive by a dragon. Red Cross is the figure for Holiness, but it takes twelve long

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2 “Letter to Raleigh” ll. 18–21.
3 “Letter to Raleigh” ll. 9–12.
Cantos that describe his many misjudgments, Arthur’s life-saving interventions, and Una’s soul-saving efforts before he earns that title. Book Two tells of the trials and tribulations of Guyon, a figure of Temperance, accompanied by the restraining Palmer, in his quest to destroy the pleasure-filled Bower of Bliss. Book Three focuses on Chastity, as figured in the female knight Britomart, who seeks the knight Artesgall after falling in love with his image in Merlin’s magic mirror. As revealed in that mirror, this pair will produce the line leading to the Tudors. In the original publication of 1590, Britomart unites a pair of lovers, Scudamore and Amoret, to conclude the book, which is revised in the second publication, where she frees the captive female lover but her beloved has disappeared so that the lovers’ story may continue. In 1596, Spenser published the second version of the poem, changing the end of Book Three and adding three more books. Book Four celebrates Friendship, not as much through its named heroes Cambel and Telamond as through its myriad examples of devotion. In Book Five, Britomart’s mysterious beloved Artesgall finally appears, figuring the virtue of Justice (and allegorizing the current state of Ireland). The knight of Book Six is Sir Calidore, whose story works out the virtue Courtesie. These six books constitute the material published in Spenser’s lifetime.

A decade after Spenser’s unexpected and early death in 1599, what was apparently (but not conclusively proven to be) his last effort on The Faerie Queene was published by Matthew Lownes in the folio edition of 1609 as Two Cantos of Mutabilitie enumerated as Cantos vi and vii of Book VII with an additional canto viii, called vnperfite and consisting of only two stanzas. There is no evidence to prove that Spenser enumerated these Cantos, or that he didn’t. The verse style unique to The Faerie Queene is consistent, and there’s little doubt that Spenser wrote the lines. While there is a reference, as in the previous books, to a virtue, The Legend of Constancie, there is no knight named. Within each of the six published books, there are often lengthy episodes suspended from the main action of the book. Thus, the material of the Cantos constitutes a complete episode in Spenserian style that recounts the Titaness Mutability’s ascent to the heavens; her frightening challenge to the gods who reign there; her logical and rhetorical appeal to Dame Nature for rule over the heavens in addition to her active earthly rule; and Dame Nature’s expedient and firm denial of this request:

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5 J.B. Lethridge argues that Mutability already rules over the earth and this is never in question. Her petition to Dame Nature is to be ‘sovereign of the gods’ as well as ‘sovereign of Men’. See Lethbridge J.B., “Spenser’s Last Days: Ireland, Career, Mutability, Allegory”, idem (ed.).