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The Faerie Queene (1590)

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

The poet and his time Edmund Spenser was born into the prime of the Elizabethan Renaissance in England, and, along with writers like Shakespeare, Sidney, and Marlowe captured the energies of a golden moment, when British commerce, naval power, and cultural synergy were at their peak. Queen Elizabeth I was the awe-inspiring sovereign whose presence surmounted the independent and sea-savvy Britons, whose sense of historical centrality coincided with their growing self-consciousness as a world culture.

Elizabeth and her cultural moment Around the Queen gathered a large number of courtiers—men of wit and intelligence, and in many cases (Sidney, Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh) true scholars, familiar with the oldest traditions of English literature and history. In the case of Elizabeth herself, who plunged into the study of Greek, and like the youngsters educated throughout the realm, the classics played a daily role in the formation of the Elizabethan mind. So did the ‘mediaeval,’ that component of British culture which was increasingly awakening nostalgia, romance, and a sense of popular-regional histories among ordinary English people. Spenser is deeply influenced by the ethos of this milieu around the Queen, and by his sense, during wide travels in England and Ireland, of the rapidly developing national character that was apparent on all side of him.

The Faerie Queene in its time *The Faerie Queene*—i.e. Queen Elizabeth I—is a long epic poem composed by Edmund Spenser. The first three books of the poem were published in 1590; they were then republished in 1596, with Books IV-VI. The poem is more than 36,000 lines in length, and contains more than 4000 stanzas, making it one of the longest poems in English. In six books the poet follows the adventures of several knights, each of them devoted to one virtue in particular—chastity, honor, justice—and committed, in each instance, to making the world more available to the virtue he represents.

The text of the poem *The Faerie Queene*—courtly, linguistically archaic (early modern English), and knightly—presents a lather of styles and attitudes, from courtly adulation, through robust defense of the virtues, to delight in epic language and the splendors of the Greco-Roman tradition which underlies the present text at every point. (The lengthy peroration to the Muses, at the opening of Book One, is a vivid Homeric reminder. Spenser’s Muse is invoked to sing of the poet’s adventures, this time in quest of true virtue, and of course to aid the humble poet in his effort to consecrate the most important tribute possible, to the Queen.) Spenser himself, like his contemporary, Philip Sidney, and like such Europeans as Castiglione, Macchiavelli, Campanelli, Montaigne, was deeply educated into Classical languages and cultures, and brought that foundation of reference to the front of his texts, elevating pagan perspectives into a consistent chivalric Christianity.

The management of The Faerie Queene The conduct of this enormous, ultimately unfinished work is turned over to the world of *faerie* (especially of the Arthurian legends which thrived throughout the late mediaeval period in England.) *Faerie* was an imaginative zone found by Spenser in his reading of Chaucer, and especially of the Italian epic poets Tasso (1544-1595) and Ariosto (1474-1533), whose visions of Christianized chivalry were dominant for the Renaissance mind in sixteenth century Britain. Lords, ladies, warriors and evil dwarves abound in this imagined zone of culture, which so perfectly represented the fancy and dreams of the Elizabethan mind. While this pagan romanticism provided a soft landing from the mediaeval into the early modern, it coincided with the tumultuous Protestant redirection of Elizabethan England, which was to provide temporary dominance to the Anti-Papal themes of sixteenth century Europe, and which in England, as in Montaigne’s France, was to bathe in the long bloody stretch of Religious Wars, which were to usher in so many of the truly modern conditions of seventeenth century Europe.

The Beginning of Stanza One of Canto One of The Faerie Queene Dissected:

The uptake of Stanza One into Stanza Two Given the complexity of Spenser's poem, as a whole, with its innumerable characters, plot and sub plot, Canto One of *The Faerie Queene* should serve as our model and example, before we make any effort to summarize the entire remaining epic. Canto One deserves our close attention.

The first Canto of the poem opens thus:

*'Lo I the man,' whose Muse whilome did maske,
As time her taught, in lowly Shepheard's weeds,
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,
For trumpets stern to change my Oaten reeds,
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;
Whose praises having kept in Silence long,
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areads
To blazon broad amongst her learned throng.
Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my song.*

Meaning and metrics Although Spenser rarely sacrifices meaning to metrical consistency, he does contrive to bring that consistency to the reinforcement of meaning. Let us say that the meaning of this initial stanza, a major upgrade to the poet's artistic assignment, is sharply and even alarmingly uptoned by the Muses' command to 'moralize his song.' The protracted hexameter, which furnishes the final line of the stanza, jacks up the command to memorialize lords and ladies. Now the poet's mandate is to fight the world's battles on behalf of virtue. The hexameter in question draws out the full dignity of the poet's charge, which has been nobly modested by reference to the 'lowly Shepheard's weeds' in which he used to dress himself, in the old days, when he was a pastoral poet, and had not yet been called on to 'blazon broad' the 'wars and loves' in which the issues of morality are central.

Classical presences in Spenser The opening stanza of the *Faerie Queene* picks up the proem to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both, to that poet's Achilles and Odysseus, but does so with a gorgeous self-reference to the overwhelmed guy, 'I myself,' who is left with the burden of rising to deal with the moral issues generated by the great of this world. Spenser, quite in the diction of major poetry in his own time, is preoccupied with his own unworthiness to perform the high task demanded of him by his Muse. Not infrequently, as in this first stanza of the First Canto, he completes the work of his already tasking eight-line opening, only to leave the stanza at a dignified point of rest, before the taking up of a new proposal and response.

Flow and transition in Spenser For the sake of showing Spenser at his typical best, master of flow, transition, and over-vision, we should look also at the beginning of the second stanza of the poem, which follows immediately on the iambic hexameter with which Canto One concluded, burdening the poet with the obligation to treat the highest moral issues:

*Help, then, O holy Virgin chiefe of mine,
Thy weaker novice to performe thy will;
Lay forth out of thine everlasting scryne
The antique rolls, which there lie hidden still,
Of Fairie knights and fairest Tanaquil,
Whom that most noble Briton Prince so lo
Sought through the world, and suffered so much ill,
That I must rue his undeserved wrong.
O help thou my weak wit, and sharpen my dull tong.*

One Stanza to the next A perfectly hewn second stanza rounds off the closure of poetic humility, by which Spenser acknowledges his modesty, and his unreadiness to carry out his high calling. The narrator imprints the challenge of that calling by reaching into a dark zone of memory and

magic, the Arthurian Age in which there was still vivid memory of Tanaquil, the archetypal good mother of the original Roman state, and in which archaic English—*scryne* for *shrine* or *bookcase*—*could be employed* in daily speech. Spenser unhesitatingly deploys such references, in constructing his land of *Faerie*. One has to imagine a sophisticated audience—it was the same people, beyond doubt, who were making of Shakespeare's plays a national entertainment—for whom even more than a suspension of disbelief, indeed an onset of willed enchantment, was the foundation stone of literary commitment.

The shape of the whole poem We have opened the magic box of the first canto of *The Faerie Queene*, and made several observations: of the diction, the dominant stanzaic form, the realm of *Faerie*, from which the highly 'poetic' moralizing of the whole creation is drawn, and the skill with which complex prosody is woven into the adroit sketches of personhood, that first will of the modest poet. What we need in addition, in order to take the measure of the *Faerie Queene*, is some access to the larger unity of the poem.

Fairyland Gloriana, the Queen of Fairyland, holds court for a broad selection of knights and ladies, drawn straight from the traditional imagination of the Arthurian Middle Ages; Arthur himself is the central figure in this wide cast of *faerie* characters, and is endlessly attracted to Gloriana herself. He is one with the whole project that drives Gloriana to further the mission of the knights who are awaiting their mission assignments.

The assignments The first of those assignments, as we have seen, is that given to the Red Cross Knight (who 'represents' *holiness*), the second is given to the Knight of Temperance, the allegorical banner for Lord Guyon, the third mission is for the Briton Queen of Chastity, Britomart, the fourth for the *Knights of Friendship*, the fifth assignment is that given to Sir Artegall, the Knight of Justice, while the final remaining assignment is devoted to Sir Caledore, the Knight of Courtesy. It is each Knight's mission to procure the appropriate honors and freedom for all victims who find themselves in need of his or her unique protection. The protections in question are conferred by the virtue in whose charge the individual knights find themselves. Allegory links each knight to his deeper meaning.

Allegory The function of allegory, in Spenser's England, where all major literature was assumed to clothe itself in moral significance, is to say more than just what it says, while implying even more than that. The Red Cross personifies holiness, the Reformation Church of England free of Papism, St. George and the true cultural spirit of Britain. By parallel, Una, the lovely lady who rides through the forest beside the Red Cross Knight, personifies truth and the true religion. In the second stanza Prince Arthur incarnates magnificence and private virtue as well as Protestantism, while Gloriana, whom Arthur loves, and who activates the whole fleet of missions, represents spiritual glory and her supreme other, Queen Elizabeth. The sequence of allegorical relationships plays out through the ongoing explosion of characters who find themselves implicated in the virtue-missions central to all six books.

Characters What kind of characters are constructed by an allegorical literature of Spenser's kind? It is often remarked that Shakespeare—say in creating Falstaff or Prince Hal or Prospero—finds his way to the center of a character, out from which he lets an organic creation deploy itself. Anywhere you touch such a character it is fully alive. The greatest advocates of Spenser's work will not claim such organic power for him, yet they have other insights to offer, into the variety of ways available to the poetic characterologist. Spenser's greatness as a maker of figures springs from the 'modest-deep' portrait he makes of himself, as the poet charged with a mission, a moral missionary. In each of his character portraiture he retains the aspirations of moral evaluator, and struggles through shadow into light with an ennobling but subtle music.