

The Faerie Queene

A READER'S GUIDE
SECOND EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUNDS

1. The life

Facts about Spenser's life, especially the early years, are sparse.¹ He was born probably in 1552, and he tells us in *Prothalamion* (1596) ll. 127–9 that his place of birth was London. His parents seem to have been in relatively humble circumstances, although he claimed descent from 'An house of auncient fame' (*Prothalamion* l. 130), the Spencers of Althorp. He dedicated a number of poems to daughters of that family and seems to have received patronage from them (see, e.g., the dedication to *Mutopotmos* (1590), and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595) ll. 536–71).

Spenser was fortunate to attend Merchant Taylors' School which had been recently opened and was run by one of the great English educationalists of the sixteenth century, Richard Mulcaster. As was normal, Mulcaster would have grounded his boys in classical languages and texts, but unusually for his time Mulcaster encouraged the vernacular as fit for the composition of verse and fine prose. As part of his mastery of language and versification, Spenser would undoubtedly have had to compose poems at school in Latin and perhaps Greek, and from the classical languages into English. He would have gained familiarity with the main classical genres and have learned to imitate them. Copiousness, the ability to enrich a topic with variety of vocabulary, was seen as a virtue, and Spenser may well have learned from Mulcaster his interest in adding to the abundance of the English language through the introduction of old and regional words.² Spenser would thus, at school, have had considerable practice in techniques of imitation and composition which became fundamental to his own art. From account books, we know that Spenser attended Merchant Taylors' as a 'poor scholar' and that he received charity payments when he went up to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, in 1569. In the same year, his first verses were published: a number of translations in Jan van der Noot's *A Theatre wherein be represented as wel the miseris and calamities that follow the voluptuous Worldlings, As also the greate joyes and plesures which the faithfull do enjoy*. This was an ardently Protestant work by a refugee from

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Spanish Catholic persecution in the Netherlands. Spenser later revised and republished some of these translations as 'The Visions of Bellay' and 'The Visions of Petrarch' in his volume *Complaints* (1591).

Spenser graduated BA in 1573 and MA in 1576, though he seems to have left Cambridge a little before that date. He next appears in 1578 as secretary to Dr John Young, formerly Master of Pembroke Hall and now appointed Bishop of Rochester. In 1579, letters between Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, a Fellow of Pembroke Hall, make it clear that Spenser was now in London in the service of the Earl of Leicester and apparently enjoying some literary conversations with Leicester's nephew, Sir Philip Sidney (*Works* pp. 612, 623, 636, 638). Evidence of Spenser's political sympathies, especially in Books 1 and 5 of *The Faerie Queene*, suggests that he found the patronage of Leicester, the foremost champion of an anti-Spanish/anti-Roman-Catholic faction within the Privy Council and at Court, particularly congenial. In 1579 Spenser's first major published work, *The Shepheardes Calender*, appearing under the pseudonym 'Immerito', was printed by Hugh Singleton, a Puritan who had recently, and probably through Leicester's protection, narrowly escaped losing his right hand for printing work criticizing Elizabeth's possible marriage with the French Catholic Duke of Alençon. Among other changes and achievements of this momentous year, we can deduce from references in one of Harvey's letters that Spenser married (*Works* p. 632). He seems to have had two children by this marriage, Sylvanus (1582?) and Katherine.

In 1580, even more momentously, Spenser went to Ireland as secretary to the new Lord Deputy, Arthur Lord Grey de Wilton – a post possibly obtained for him through the patronage of the Sidney family. He accompanied Lord Grey on his many official tours: to quell a rebellion in the Wicklow Mountains where the English army was bloodily ambushed; to Drogheda; to Wexford; possibly to Ulster; and more than once to Munster where the Desmond Rebellion kept most of the south-west of Ireland ungovernable by the English. In 1580 Spenser accompanied Grey to the siege of Smerwick on the extreme south-west tip of the Kerry peninsula where 600 Spanish and Papal troops had landed to aid the Desmond rebels. Grey's ruthlessness is graphically illustrated by his order, carried out by one of his captains, Sir Walter Raleigh, to massacre all the common soldiers when Smerwick unconditionally surrendered – a brutal act, although it must be judged in the context of Smerwick's remoteness, the continual dearth of provisions for Grey's own troops, and the logistics of marching an enemy army, almost as large as Grey's own, across rebel country to the security of Dublin.

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The ferocity of Grey's regime in Ireland made him an object of criticism at the English Court and lost him Elizabeth's support. In 1582 his repeated requests to resign were accepted and he returned to England. Spenser stayed on in Ireland having leased New Abbey in Kildare, a forfeited rebel property. Like many of his fellow officials in Ireland, Spenser strongly approved of Grey and his policies (see *View* pp. 106–7). Ludovick Bryskett, a friend and colleague of Spenser's, wrote of Grey that his 'justice is a terror to the wicked, and a comforte unto the good, whose sinceritie very envie it self cannott touche, and whose wisdome might, in the opinion of the wysest that consider his proceedinges, governe a whole Empyre' (quoted in Renwick's commentary on the *View* p. 213).³ Probably in 1584, Spenser became Bryskett's deputy as Clerk of the Munster Council, in which capacity he helped to divide up the confiscated Desmond lands for purchase by English 'undertakers' or settlers. In 1589 he acquired one of these portions of land himself – the 4,000-acre estate of Kilcolman, neglected and hampered by lawsuits, on which he built a 'fair stone house' (Judson p. 130), and where, probably in 1594, he married his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle: a courtship and marriage fictionally represented in *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595).

We know from the letters between Spenser and Harvey (*Works* pp. 612 and 628) that *The Faerie Queene* had already been begun in 1580. In 1588 Abraham Fraunce, a protégé of the Leicester/Sidney family, printed a stanza from Book 2 in his *Arcadian Rhetorike*, so we may assume that the manuscript of some or all of Books 1–3 was circulating in at least the Leicester/Sidney circle by this date. By this time *The Shepheardes Calender* had been through three editions. Fraunce refers to it as being by Spenser, so that it seems clear that Spenser's reputation was growing in England at least among those interested in new writing. In 1590 Sir Walter Raleigh, now a fellow 'undertaker' in Munster, visited Spenser at Kilcolman and then journeyed with him to London. Spenser must have hoped that Raleigh's influence with Elizabeth might bring him her patronage and possibly advancement in England. While in London, he saw Books 1–3 of *The Faerie Queene* through the press, and in February 1591 he gained a pension of £50 a year from Queen Elizabeth. Spenser describes the Queen's munificence in rapturous terms in *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (1595) which gives fictional form to his journey from Ireland to London. In it Cynthia's 'shepherd', Raleigh, accuses Colin Clout, Spenser's persona, of banishing himself in Ireland, 'that waste, where I was quite forgot'. However, once in London, in spite of his praise of the Queen, the life of the Court disgusts him. It is a place of 'dissembling

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curtesie' (l. 700) where 'each one seeks with malice and with strife, To thrust downe other' (ll. 690–1). Colin decides to return to Ireland whose 'utmost hardnesse I before had tryde' (l. 673). Such a rejection of the vices of the Court is conventional in pastoral poetry (see below), but there may be some reflection of Spenser's own experience.

While in London in 1590–1, Spenser collected together some recent and earlier work for publication in a volume entitled *Complaints*. In late 1595 or 1596 Spenser again journeyed to London, partly to see *The Faerie Queene* 4–6, and the reprinting of Books 1–3, through the press. In Ireland there was growing anxiety about renewed rebellion, this time in the north, led by the Earl of Tyrone, augmented by the fear that Spanish and/or Papal forces might try again to land on Ireland's southern coast. While in London, Spenser may have written *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, not published until 1633, but attributed to Spenser by the majority of commentators. The *View*, a wide-ranging dialogue on Ireland and its current situation, advocates, with a typically 'new English' ruthlessness, the subordination of Ireland through the imposition of martial law and widespread clearance of the land and resettlement with English farmers and customs. From such a point of view, Elizabeth's vacillating and placatory policies did nothing but harm by prolonging Ireland's agony.⁴ In 1598 Tyrone openly took up arms against Elizabeth and rebellion spread to the whole of Ireland, including Munster which had been in recent years relatively peaceful. Spenser, like many other settlers, had to leave his house and his possessions and take refuge first in Cork and then in London. There, weeks after arriving, he died. Ben Jonson's famous comment that Spenser 'died for lack of bread in King Street' may be regarded as colourful exaggeration, though no doubt he had lost most of his possessions.

Such, in brief, is the life. Three contexts in particular need a little more development before we turn to *The Faerie Queene*.

2. Spenser and Protestant politics

England under Elizabeth was a Protestant nation which felt itself threatened and isolated by the great Catholic continental powers, particularly Spain. Many English people wished to see England resume the role of champion of godly Protestantism against what they saw as a grand Catholic plot to destroy the true faith. They saw evidence for this in France where the Protestant Huguenot leaders and thousands of their followers were massacred on St Bartholomew's Day 1572; in the Netherlands where the largely Protestant Northern

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States were in revolt against Spanish domination; and in the Bull of Excommunication on Elizabeth of 1570, in which the Pope absolved Elizabeth's subjects from obedience to her laws. Through much of Spenser's lifetime, England felt threatened by Catholic plots at home and the fear of Spanish invasion. Such fears came to a head in 1588 with the Armada, but they by no means passed after that date. The Earl of Essex's expedition to Cadiz in 1596 (celebrated in *Prothalamion* ll. 147–9) was to destroy a new armada.

Fears of Catholic invasion were matched by anxieties about Catholic treachery in England. In 1568 Mary Queen of Scots had fled to England where she was to remain a prisoner for nineteen years until her execution. As the strongest claimant to Elizabeth's throne and a Roman Catholic, she inevitably became the focus for the hopes and plots of those of her co-religionists inside and outside England who wished to see Elizabeth removed and a Catholic, pro-Spanish monarch established in her place. There was a series of plots against Elizabeth involving Mary. In 1586, following the last of these, the Babington plot, Mary was tried, first by a special commission and then by Parliament – reflecting Elizabeth's uneasiness about the legitimacy of such a trial of a foreign monarch. Mary was executed the following February after considerable procrastination by Elizabeth (see below for Spenser's allegorical treatment of these events). In addition to the anxieties centred on Mary's presence, there was the irritant of covert Catholic missionary activity within England, which became increasingly vigorous and effective in the 1580s and 1590s.

During the reign of Elizabeth's predecessor, the Roman Catholic Mary I (1553–8) many Protestants had fled to the continent where they had been influenced by the radically reformist ideas they met there and by a sense of the sufferings of their co-religionists, especially in the Netherlands. When Elizabeth succeeded to the throne in 1558 many exiles returned, hoping to influence the re-establishment of Protestantism and to put England and Elizabeth at the head of an anti-Catholic alliance that would wage an aggressive war against Catholicism's chief champion, Spain. In fact Elizabeth resisted such plans; the Church Settlement was more cautious than the reformers would have liked and her foreign policy was, on the whole, defensive, intervening abroad on as small a scale as possible and only when it seemed necessary to keep Spain's power at bay.⁵

The Earl of Leicester, as we have seen, was the most powerful patron of writers and preachers who held reformist views and he strongly advocated in Council more interventionist policies abroad,

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particularly in the Netherlands.⁶ He came to be identified with the cause of the Netherlands and was the obvious choice as leader of the army which Elizabeth finally agreed to send over in 1586 (see pp. below). Sir Philip Sidney, Leicester's nephew, whose friendship, on however humble a level, Spenser claimed in 1579 and to whom he dedicated *The Shepheardes Calender*, was an ardent advocate of such a militantly Protestant view of England's role in continental affairs.

Spenser's first published work, as we have seen, was a series of translations for a strongly anti-Catholic work by a Protestant exile from the Netherlands. His own *The Shepheardes Calender* suggests, in the ecclesiastical eclogues 'Maye', 'Iulye', and 'September', that Spenser's sympathies coincided with those of the 'moderate Puritan party' (Hume p. 40). We find him, for a while at least, under Leicester's patronage, from which he moved, possibly through the influence of the Sidneys, to the service of Lord Grey, similarly Puritan and anti-Catholic in his views.

Towards the end of his career, in 1596, Spenser wrote *Prothalamion*, a celebration of a marriage taking place at Essex, formerly Leicester, House, 'Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace – Of that great Lord, which therein wont to dwell' (ll. 138–9). Essex, Leicester's stepson, took over the leadership of the militant Protestant party after the deaths of Sir Philip Sidney in 1586 and Leicester in 1588. Spenser celebrates Essex's recent expedition to burn the Spanish ships in Cadiz harbour; his

dreadfull name, late through All Spaine did thunder,
And Hercules two pillors standing neere,
Did make to quake and feare. (ll. 147–9)

The poem places Spenser's loyalties and his hopes for advancement towards the end of his life in the same religious and political context as at the beginning – ardently Protestant and retaining a vision of England as champion of the godly faith against Catholic Spain. This was a vision all but lost by the 1590s as Elizabeth became ever less sympathetic to such views. Spenser's brand of Protestantism and the vision it entails of a special, providential role for England are profoundly important for Spenser's whole conception of his epic poem, but particularly for the allegories of Holiness and Justice in Books 1 and 5.

3. Spenser and Ireland

No aspect of Spenser's biography has caused critics such distaste as his involvement in Ireland. C. S. Lewis' famous remark that 'Spenser

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was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland, and in his fifth book the wickedness he had shared begins to corrupt his imagination' (Lewis (1936) p. 349) typifies many twentieth-century responses. Such a view is, in my opinion, naive: it betrays a yearning to see Spenser as an idealizing, dreamer poet with his gaze fixed far above the murky realities of his own time, as well as a failure to grasp the contexts and complexity of his views on Ireland. Spenser, throughout his poem, is deeply concerned with practical action, in all its imperfection, in a fallen world. Book 5 shares such a concern and examines that practical virtue, justice, in terms of his contemporary experience of its operation. To dismiss Book 5 or Spenser's views on Ireland, because in the twentieth century we find them unpalatable, is to cut ourselves off from some of Spenser's hardest thinking and most vigorous writing.

To the Elizabethans, Ireland was the place where all their fears and anxieties about the fragility of their own commonwealth took nightmare form. It was an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nation in a state of constant turbulence. Repeated rebellions against the harsh imposition of English authority made it an attractive point of entry for a continental invasion force, threatening to bring Antichrist to the very threshold of England. In *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, England seems all that is ordered and civilized in contrast to Spenser's adopted country:

Both heaven and heavenly graces do much more
(Quoth he) abound in that same land, then this.
For there all happie peace and plenteous store
Conspire in one to make contented blisse:
No wayling there nor wretchednesse is heard,
No bloodie issues nor no leprosies,
No griesly famine, nor no raging sward,
No nightly bodrags, nor no hue and cries. (ll. 308–15)

To Ludovick Bryskett it seemed, after the recall of Lord Grey, 'that the secrett Judgement of God hangeth over this soyle' (quoted in *View* p. 213). Spenser's grim picture reflects the ravages Ireland had undergone, particularly in the previous thirty years as Elizabethan Deputies attempted to reduce it to, in English terms, 'civility' – that is, anglicization. Native Irish society, which seemed to the English barbaric and unjust, was in fact a highly coherent, if not particularly peaceful, system, with its own legal codes; a social structure in which loyalty centred on large family groups (or septs); and with an often itinerant lifestyle based on cattle rearing and seasonal transhumance. Typical of the views of the 'New English' settlers are those of

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Edmund Tremayne, like Spenser a servant of the Crown, who described the behaviour of a Gaelic lord in the following terms:

When this great lord is thus in possession of his Country, he is followed of all the warlike people of the same, viz., horsemen, galloglasses, and kern, and with these multitudes he useth the inferior people at his will and pleasure. He eateth and spendeth upon them with man, horse, and dog. He useth man, wife or children according to his own list, without any means to be withstanded or again-said, not only as an absolute king but as a tyrant or a lord over bondsmen. For deciding of causes in controversies he hath a judge of his own constitution and useth the law called the Brehon Law, nothing agreeing with the law of England. If any of his people commit an offence, he is punished or pardoned as pleaseth the lord. If any of his people receive wrong or any offence be done against his Country, this great lord useth the revenge according to his own will, without making any stay for commission for the Queen or her governor. So as, in short terms, a man may say the Irish rule is such a government as the mightiest do what they list against the inferiors.⁷

Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* is typical of the 'New English' response to such perceptions of Irish injustice and disorder, in advocating severe martial suppression of rebels followed by policies designed to transfer allegiance from the sept to the Crown, partly by forcible resettlement and partly by the example of English settlers who would come to live amongst the Irish and teach them the habits of civility (e.g. *View* pp. 95–6, 123–5). Those who thought like Spenser viewed Elizabeth's vacillations, following periods of severity by general pardons, with despair. Her lack of support for Lord Grey was seen by Spenser as a particularly regrettable example of her failure of nerve (*View* pp. 105–6; and see below).

Elizabethan attempts to bring 'the Irish from desire of wars and tumults to the love of peace and civility' (*View* p. 158) notoriously failed. In 1598 rebellion spread in support of Tyrone, and Spenser, with many of his kind, had to flee. For Spenser, Ireland was a tragic theme: 'I do much pity that sweet land to be subject to so many evils, as every day I see more and more thrown upon her, and do half begin to think that it is . . . her fatal misfortune above all countries that I know, to be thus miserably tossed and turmoiled with these variable storms of afflictions' (*View* p. 19). The same note sounds at the end of Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* when Artegall is recalled, before the 'ragged common-weale' (xii.26) can be reformed, and in canto vi of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, where the curse on Arlo Hill reflects what seemed to be a curse on the whole of Ireland and Elizabethan efforts in it (see below). Arlo's restoration must wait for Nature, the agent of Divine Providence. Without such 'heavenly grace', it seems, all would continue to go awry in that land.

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4. Spenser, Queen Elizabeth, and the nature of women

Commenting on the illegitimate rule of Radigund, an Amazon queen, Spenser wrote:

Such is the crueltie of womenkynd,
When they haue shaken off the shamefast band,
With which wise Nature did them strongly bynd,
T'obay the heasts of mans well ruling hand,
That them all rule and reason they withstand,
To purchase a licentious libertie.
But vertuous women wisely understand,
That they were borne to base humilitie,
Unless the heavens them lift to lawfull soveraintie. (5.v.25)

The final line allows for the exception of Elizabeth I's legitimate claim, but it has something of the air of an afterthought. *The Faerie Queene* is dedicated to Elizabeth, and she is its primary addressee, invoked as a mirror of virtue in the introductory poem to each book, but at the same time the poem repeatedly inscribes in its stories a deep unease about the legitimacy of female authority in general, and the shortcomings of Elizabeth's rule in particular.

Given the hierarchical order in which Elizabethans arranged all things, disquiet about the legitimacy of women rulers who reversed the 'natural' authority of men over women was predictable. Most notorious was the tirade by the Scottish reformer John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, published just before Elizabeth's rule began: 'Where women reign or be in authority . . . there must needs vanity be preferred to virtue, ambition and pride to temperance and modesty, and finally, . . . avarice the mother of all mischief must needs devour equity and justice.'⁸ Even John Aylmer, who, after Elizabeth's succession, rushed to put a more moderate view on behalf of English reformers – hoping that Elizabeth might become a champion of their cause – saw female weakness as confirmation of God's power:

Placeth he a woman weake in nature, feable in bodie, softe in courage, unskillfull in practise, not terrible to the enemy, no shiilde to the frynde, wel . . . if he joyne to his strength: she can not be weake . . . Yea his moste wonderfull workes are alwayes wrought in oure most weakenes.⁹

Apart from Gloriana, who, Spenser tells us, shadows the imperial aspect of Elizabeth but who never appears in person in the poem, women in sole authority appear relatively frequently, almost always acting as false doubles for Elizabeth/Gloriana. Their vices, however, frequently point to troubling aspects of Elizabeth's own rule.¹⁰ In

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Book 1, Lucifera, 'a mayden Queene' (iv.8) and the personification of pride, rules over a court which bears a passing resemblance to its Elizabethan double:

Some frounce their curled haire in courtly guise,
Some prancke their ruffles, and others trimly dight
Their gay attire: each others greater pride does spight. (iv.14)

In Book 3, Malecasta presides over a court tyrannized by the amorous service she demands from all who enter its precincts (3.i.26–7), but such a mixing of political and amorous service was a feature of Elizabeth's court: 'political leaders had to behave like lovers and lovers became leaders'.¹¹ The threatening stigma of emasculation felt in a hierarchical world in which ambitious males found themselves forced to pay court to a powerful woman is most fully explored in the Radigund episode in Book 5, in which the Amazon queen punishes her male captives by forcing them to wear women's clothes and do what was regarded as women's work: 'To spin, to card, to sew, to wash, to wring' (5.iv.31). Similar anxieties are apparent in Spenser's complement to Elizabeth's private person figured by the virginal Belpheobe. His lavish praise of her beauty must be set against her effect on the squire Timias, whose name means Honour, but whose service to his mistress prevents him from pursuing service to Arthur and the active virtue which is his proper manly calling (see below).

Radigund's illegitimate female rule is righted by Britomart, the armed female knight who represents the virtue of Chastity in Book 3. She hacks her way into Radigund's fortress and repeals the commonwealth, only to restore rule to the emasculated men she rescues from their drudgery in the dungeons (5.vii 42–3). To twentieth-century eyes, Britomart may at first seem a figure of female emancipation. She is a lone woman, fully armed like a knight, able to hold her own as she crosses the dangerous landscape of Faeryland. From another perspective, however, she represents a thorough critique of Elizabeth I's female authority and example. The virtue she represents is married chastity, a commitment to faithful marriage with all that that entailed in the sixteenth century in terms of female obedience and the wifely duty of child-bearing. Britomart's destiny, Arthur tells her, is to be an 'immortall wombe' and produce a line of heirs culminating in Elizabeth herself (3.iii.29–49 and iv.11). The idealized image in 3.vi, at the centre of this book on the quintessential, and sole, 'female virtue' of Chastity, is of a garden of fertility ruled over by a loving and generative Venus. Elizabeth I's failure to fulfil her female 'nature' by becoming a wife and producing heirs could not be addressed

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directly by Spenser, but her single state, at the end of Merlin's prophecy of a long line of kings, touches on Elizabethan anxieties, acute in the late 1580s and 1590s as Elizabeth turned fifty, about what would happen to her heirless kingdom after her death.

Similar disjunctions between a language of idealizing praise and implicit criticism of Elizabeth's actions may be detected in Spenser's celebration, in Books 1 and 5, of godly English knights, sent out by Gloriana to destroy Catholic continental power and establish godly commonwealths in their place, and the clear evidence of Elizabeth's distaste for, and reluctance to pursue, such a Protestant/anti-Spanish foreign policy. Elizabeth's feminine vacillations may even be detected in the idealized Mercilla (5.ix) who betrays her gender by succumbing to vain pity in her refusal to accept the need for harsh punishment of Duessa/Queen of Scots, a similar soft-heartedness to that which Spenser, and those who thought like him, found so frustrating and damaging in Elizabeth's dealings not only with Mary but also in Ireland (see below).

THE POEM

1. The 'Letter to Raleigh' and Spenser's Project

With the first three Books of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser published 'A letter of the Authors expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke', addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh, in which he states that his intention is 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline', a hubristic statement by a poor scholarship boy of humble origins which points to the moral as opposed to the merely social connotations of 'gentle' and 'noble'. This powerful assertion of his didactic project is supported by an equally hubristic consciousness of the prestigious tradition within which he writes:

I have followed all the antique Poets historicall, first Homere, who in the Persons of Agememnon and Ulysses hath ensampled a good governour and a vertuous man, the one in his Ilias, the other in his Odysseis: then Virgil, whose like intention was to doe in the person of Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando: and lately Tasso . . . by ensample of which excellent Poets, I labour to pourtraict in Arthur, before he was king, the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised.

The 'Letter' is notoriously misleading both in its citation of Aristotle as the source for its virtues (see Tuve chap. 2), and in its account of

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Books 1–3 which conflict with the poem as we have it on a number of points, suggesting that it was still in a process of evolution when the ‘Letter’ was written. Nevertheless the passage I have cited is an important indication of Spenser’s ambitious project. The authors Spenser cites wrote heroic or epic poetry, the supreme genre for the Renaissance, written in the highest style and to be undertaken only after the poet’s skill and knowledge had properly matured. Sidney wrote of it:

[It] is not only a kind, but the best and most accomplished kind of Poetry. For as the image of each action stirreth and instructeth the mind, so the lofty image of such worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy.

(*Apologie for Poetrie* p. 119)

Epic poetry was expected to achieve a number of purposes in the Renaissance. It not only furnished England and its vernacular with an example of ‘the most accomplished kind of Poetry’, it was also expected to celebrate the Nation. Thus the figure of Arthur embodies a myth of past and future national greatness imminently (although never actually) to be allied with the person of Gloriana, by whom is signified, the ‘Letter’ explains, ‘glory in my general intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our souveraine the Queene, and her kingdom in Faery land’. For Spenser, Gloriana embodies, with a steadfastness not always visible in the historical Elizabeth, an idealized female sovereign, representative of national greatness, who is both Muse and patron to her knights, sending them out to do heroic deeds and rewarding them lavishly for their success.

The distinction maintained throughout the poem between Briton and Faery may be seen as part of Spenser’s concern to celebrate his nation as well as particular virtues. Hume has shown that the British characters are those with a historical role, however legendary (Hume chap. 7). Through repeated British/Tudor genealogies, Spenser traces the Tudor ancestry, like that of Aeneas, back to Troy (Gloriana’s capital is called Troynovaunt), but heroic Troy’s British progeny far outstrips the Roman. The genealogies place the Tudor dynasty at the culmination of a providential plan unfolding through history, with Gloriana’s Court as its idealized mirror.

Like Sidney, Spenser has a conception of the epic as a didactic genre, inflaming ‘the mind with desire to be worthy’. As Gloriana signifies both ‘glory’ and Elizabeth, so Arthur, for example, has both a national and moral significance: ‘in the person of Prince Arthure I sette forth magnificence in particular, which vertue . . . (according to Aristotle and the rest) it is the perfection of all the rest, and

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conteineth in it them all'. Rosemond Tuve has shown how the traditions of the virtues which Spenser inherited had converted magnificence into a form of Fortitude, the fourth of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. According to one treatise, well-known in the sixteenth century, magnificence 'is an hye werke and happy achyvyng. Our Lord Jhesu Cryst . . . calleth this vertu perseveraunce by whyche the good knyght of God endureth the evulles unto the ende in that hye waye of *perfectyon* whyche he hath empryed' (quoted by Tuve p. 58). Such a synthesis of Christian values with chivalric ones is very close to Spenser's conception of Arthur. He is the perfect knight, inspired by idealizing love (1.ix.13-15), temperate (2.viii.40-52), friendly in the fullest sense (4.viii.20ff.), just (5.viii) and courteous (6, esp.viii). But he is also, most fundamentally, a Christian knight whose memento from Redcrosse is 'his Saveours testament' (1.ix.19) and whose interventions at moments of crisis, aided by his dazzling shield, make of him an instrument of Divine Grace (e.g., 1.viii.21; 5.viii.37-8).

Arthur breaks briefly into the narrative of each book, often in the seventh or eighth canto, and then disappears until the following book. He is not the focus of the narrative in the way that, for example, Aeneas is in the *Aeneid*. Instead Spenser's poem brings together, with an eclecticism that is wholly characteristic of his methods, the aims of the epic with the techniques of chivalric romance learned from medieval and popular romances such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Bevis of Hampton* (Middle English poems which were frequently reprinted in the sixteenth century), as well as from the more fashionable Italian romance of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532). Each book follows its knight on what is both a chivalric quest through a perilous landscape and a moral journey in pursuit of a complete understanding of that book's virtue in all its facets. Thus Spenser achieves both the moral seriousness of epic and the narrative complexity and episodic fragmentation of interlacing romance.

The interlacing plots characteristic of romance yield Spenser many advantages, allowing for suggestive juxtapositions of characters and episodes through which often subtly varying aspects of his moral themes can be explored. We are confronted with example after example of the virtues we are exploring or the vices which oppose them. In Book 2, for example, anger is seen in different forms and with different significance in Sansloy and Hudibras (ii.19), in Furor, Pyrochles and Phedon (iv; v.1-24), and finally in Guyon himself (xii.83); the unbound and oppressive Proteus of Book 3 (viii.38-41) becomes, when acting legitimately in his own hall, the patron of concord and fertility in Book 4 (xi); or, a final example, the acts and

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outcomes of the opening episodes of Books 5 and 6 are carefully paralleled.

Reading *The Faerie Queene* is, then, a dynamic process. We are asked continually to juxtapose episodes and characters, noting repeated patterns and significant changes. This may at times be confusing. It is at first difficult for the reader to retain details, even names, from one canto to another, let alone from book to book or to distinguish clearly their often complex significance. It must be emphasized that *The Faerie Queene* is not a poem which yields its full richness on first reading. Perhaps more than any other poem in the language, it demands and repays close and attentive re-reading. However, to some extent, the reader's initial experience of confusion is a deliberate effect of the poem. Spenser characteristically confronts the reader as well as his knights with ambiguous characters and episodes whose true significance is sometimes only learned gradually. Our first meeting with the magician Archimago is an example (1.i.29–37). At first he seems innocuous enough, 'An aged Sire, in long blacke weedes yclad' (29). Not until half a dozen stanzas later does Spenser give the reader any sign of the hermit's true nature: 'For that old man of pleasing wordes had store,/And well could file his tongue as smooth as glas' (35). Two stanzas later Spenser makes his real nature clear to us, though not to Redcrosse and Una: 'A bold bad man'. He is not named until fourteen stanzas after his first appearance: Archimago, the arch-magician, a figure of infernal power and intentions.

Nor is the difficulty simply a case of recovering a context more familiar in the sixteenth century than in the twentieth, although that may help. On occasion, Spenser confronts us with allegories which depend for at least some of their effect on a carefully constructed air of mystery. We are given the sense of being in the presence of secrets half-understood. Such are, for example, the Garden of Proserpina in the Cave of Mammon (2.vii.51–64); the House of Busirane (3.xi and xii); the Temples of Venus (4.x) and of Isis (5.vii). These episodes are complex because of the many levels of allusion which demand close and attentive reading, but they also announce themselves as places where the human understanding is at its limit – an effect produced partly through the wondering incomprehension of those who take part in the cantos and partly through their strange and dense imagery, whose meaning is unexplained and resists any final explanation.

Not all Spenser's allegory is so mysterious. In most of the books, core cantos 'of instruction and vision' (Roche p. 128) create a respite from the narrative and illuminate the virtue with which they are concerned by representing it in an ideal form. Such are the Houses of