

INTRODUCTION

The Story of the Redcross Knight

IN Book I the story is more connected and the moral allegory is more carefully and consistently worked out than in any of the subsequent books.

From the title of Book I, “the legend of the Knight of the Redcross, or of Holiness,” we learn that the knight’s adventures represent the difficulties and dangers which beset the path of the religious man in his endeavours after holiness. The quest on which the knight sets out is to free Truth (represented by the spotless maiden Una) from cruel persecutors. Before setting out he dons the armour of a Christian, which had already received many blows in the defence of Truth.

At the beginning of the story the Knight of Holiness and Una (or Truth) have gone but a little way when they miss the path in the Wandering Wood and the knight has to wage a deadly fight with Error. He slays the monster, and they then meet with Archimago (or Hypocrisy) who be-guiles the Redcross Knight into thinking ill of Una; so he forsakes her and continues his way alone. Separated from Truth, he encounters Sansfoy (Infidelity), whom he vanquishes, and Duessa (False Religion), to whose allurements he falls a prey.

Una meanwhile searches high and low for her knight. Her beauty and innocence make even the savage lion a willing attendant. In her wanderings she comes to the dwelling of Corceca (Blind Devotion or Superstition) who

vainly tries to close the door against her. The lion forces an entry and in the night slays the robber of churches who was bringing his spoil to Superstition's daughter.

Archimago now devises new trials for Una, whom he hates bitterly. Disguised as the Redcross Knight he follows her and deceives her with specious explanations of his absence. She gladly forgives him and they go on their way together. They meet with Sansloy (Lawlessness) who overcomes Archimago and carries Una away captive after slaying her lion.

Meanwhile the Redcross Knight is led by Duessa to the House of Pride which is under the sway of Lucifera (Pride) and the other six deadly sins. The knight is attacked by Sansjoy (Joylessness) and would have slain him in the fight had not Duessa used magic arts to save the pagan's life. While she conveys him to Hades to be healed of his wounds the knight learns of the evil plight of the dwellers in the House of Pride and escapes.

Una is rescued from Sansloy by the satyrs who pity her sufferings and worship her beauty. With the help of Sir Satyrane she escapes from the forest. They meet Archimago disguised as a pilgrim who tells Una that the Redcross Knight has been slain by a paynim. Satyrane hastens in search of the doer of this deed and soon finds Sansloy with whom he fights fiercely. Una, alarmed by Sansloy's attempt to re-capture her, makes her escape.

When Duessa discovers that the Redcross Knight has left the House of Pride she follows him and overtakes him resting by an enchanted fountain. He drinks of the enervating waters and lays his armour aside while he dallies with Duessa. He is forthwith surprised and overcome by

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the giant Orgoglio (Carnal or Worldly Pride) and carried captive to his castle. Orgoglio allies himself with Duessa and makes her ride on a seven-headed beast.

Una learns from the knight's dwarf of his master's captivity. On the way to Orgoglio's castle she meets with Prince Arthur, who slays the giant, strips Duessa of her splendour and liberates the Redcross Knight. After hearing from Prince Arthur of his lineage and devotion to the Faery Queen, Una and the Redcross Knight go on their way together. They meet with Sir Trevisan who leads them to the Cave of Despair. Here, the knight, who is weak from his captivity, is tempted by the thought of his past errors to yield to the suggestions of Despair and take his own life. He is saved from so doing by Una who guides him to the House of Caelia (Holiness or Heavenly Grace). The ministrations and instruction which he receives here restore him to health and courage, so he is able to proceed with Una to the kingdom of her parents where he slays the dragon (Satan, the enemy of mankind).

The Story of Sir Guyon

In Book II Spenser adheres to his plan of selecting a knight as patron of one of the twelve moral virtues and making his adventures the theme of one book. The virtue which Sir Guyon represents is Temperance which, in contrast to Holiness in Book I, is treated from an ethical rather than from a religious point of view. By Temperance is meant wise moderation, the due control of one's moral as well as one's physical nature: the adventures which Sir Guyon meets with represent the temptations to indulge in sensual pleasure or to yield to passion. The temptation

to which greatest prominence is given is that typified by Acrasia and the Bower of Bliss. It is to overcome the sorceress with her allurements to self-indulgence that Guyon is first summoned by the palmer from Faeryland; and the book ends with the capture of Acrasia and the demolition of the Bower of Bliss. The quality of moderation is personified in Medina with her dignified and courteous demeanour in contrast to the unrestrained merriment of Perissa and the peevish gloom of Elissa. Sir Guyon is taught the folly of unbridled anger by the example of the madman Furor and the paynim brothers Pyrocles and Cymocles. The whole of Canto VII treats of the temptation to gratify worldly ambition by the acquisition of excessive wealth. The god Mammon and his various offers to the knight present in a strikingly imaginative form a temptation which taxes all Sir Guyon's strength; it is only the divine care watching over his hours of weakness that saves him from the violence of his foes. The wanton mirth of the maiden Phaedria who plies her little bark on the Idle Lake is a less baneful form of the temptation to sensual indulgence represented by Acrasia.

The various temptations to excess, whether of uncontrolled passion, inordinate ambition or voluptuous sensual enjoyment, which the knight must meet and overcome before he is perfected in temperance, give the poet opportunities for turning his power of imaginative description to most happy account, so while Book II has not the religious elevation which we find in the allegory and chief characters of Book I, there are numberless passages in it which are rightly considered among the most poetical and typically Spenserian in *The Faerie Queene*.

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The Story of Britomart

After the first two books of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser abandons his plan of taking as the theme of one book the adventures of a single knight representing a special virtue. Perhaps he realised that Prince Arthur, who as the embodiment of all the virtues rescues each of the twelve knights when in difficulty, was not a sufficient link to bind the books together. He therefore retained in the story characters already made familiar in earlier books and also introduced personages destined to receive fuller treatment in later books. Hence when we try to follow the adventures of any one hero or heroine we meet with threads of other stories which cross and recross one another and become inextricably intertwined. In some cases Spenser himself fails to trace them to their end.

Book III is entitled "The Legend of Britomartis, or of Chastity"; nevertheless Britomart plays a prominent part also in Books IV and V, which treat of friendship and justice, and nowhere does she appear merely as the allegorical impersonation of an abstract and somewhat negative virtue. Rather she appeals to us by her rich beauty, by her unflinching bravery, her loyalty both in love and friendship, as well as by her maidenly fancies and reserve. Spenser thus shows us that the ideal of feminine virtue in Elizabethan times was something wider and deeper than the ascetic renunciation of human affections, as in monastic ages, or the conventional exaltation of the fair sex, as in the age of chivalry, or the puritanic contempt for personal charm, or the offensive prudery of Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*.

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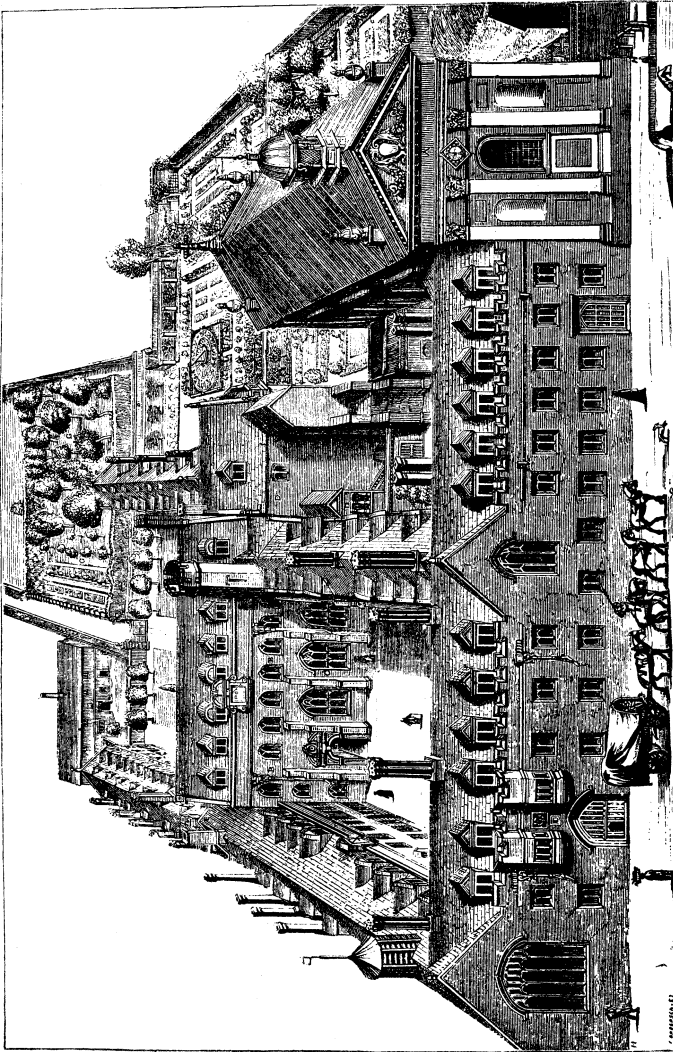
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It is true that Una, Britomart, Amoret and other heroines of *The Faerie Queene* in addition to their allegorical significance were undoubtedly intended by Spenser to stand for Queen Elizabeth. But the flattery paid to a praise-loving sovereign by this idealisation of her beauty and virtue, as well as by the apostrophes to her so frequent in the poem, must not blind us to the breadth and elevation of Spenser's conception of true womanliness. His heroines delight us no less by their moral loveliness than by their outward beauty. Moral frailty, however fair the garb in which it is cloaked, never fails to call forth the poet's reprobation. In his Platonic philosophy earthly beauty is the visible embodiment of perfect, or heavenly, beauty—as he tells us in *The Hymn in Honour of Beauty*:

So every spirit, as it is most pure,
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
So it the fairer bodie doth procure
To habit in, and it more fairely dight
With chearefull grace and amiable sight;
For of the soule the bodie forme doth take;
For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make.

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CHRONOLOGY OF SPENSER'S LIFE

- 1552 Edmund Spenser born in London.
 1561 Sent to Merchant Taylors' School.
 1569 Enters Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, as a Sizar.
 1570 Gabriel Harvey made Fellow of Pembroke Hall.
 1571 Edward Kirke enters Pembroke Hall as a Sizar.
 1576 Spenser graduates M.A.
 1576–7 or 8 Spenser in north of England.
 1577 or 8 Becomes a member of the Earl of Leicester's household in Leicester House, Strand.
 1579 *The Shepheards Calender* published anonymously, dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney.
 1580 Spenser goes to Ireland as Secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton, Lord Deputy of Ireland.
 1586 Death of Sir Philip Sidney.
 Spenser given a grant of land in Munster from the forfeited estates of the Earls of Desmond, and settles in Kilcolman Castle in County Cork.
 1589 Spenser visited at Kilcolman by Sir Walter Raleigh.
 Arrives in London in November.
The Faerie Queene, Books I–III published with dedication to Queen Elizabeth.
 1591 Queen Elizabeth grants Spenser a pension of £50 a year.
Colin Clout's Come Home Again written in Ireland.
Complaints published.
 1592–4 *Amoretti* written.
 1594 Spenser married to Elizabeth Boyle (?).
 1595 *Amoretti*, *Epithalamion*, *Astrophel* published.
 1596–7 Spenser in England.
 1596 *The Faerie Queene*, Books IV–VI published.
Astrophel, *Four Hymnes*, *Prothalamion* published.
 1598 Rebellion of the Irish in Munster.
 1599 Kilcolman Castle attacked and burned. Spenser escapes to England.
 Jan. 16th. Death of Spenser. Buried in Westminster Abbey.
 1633 *View of the Present State of Ireland* published.

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ST GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

From a woodcut in *The Faerie Queene* 1596