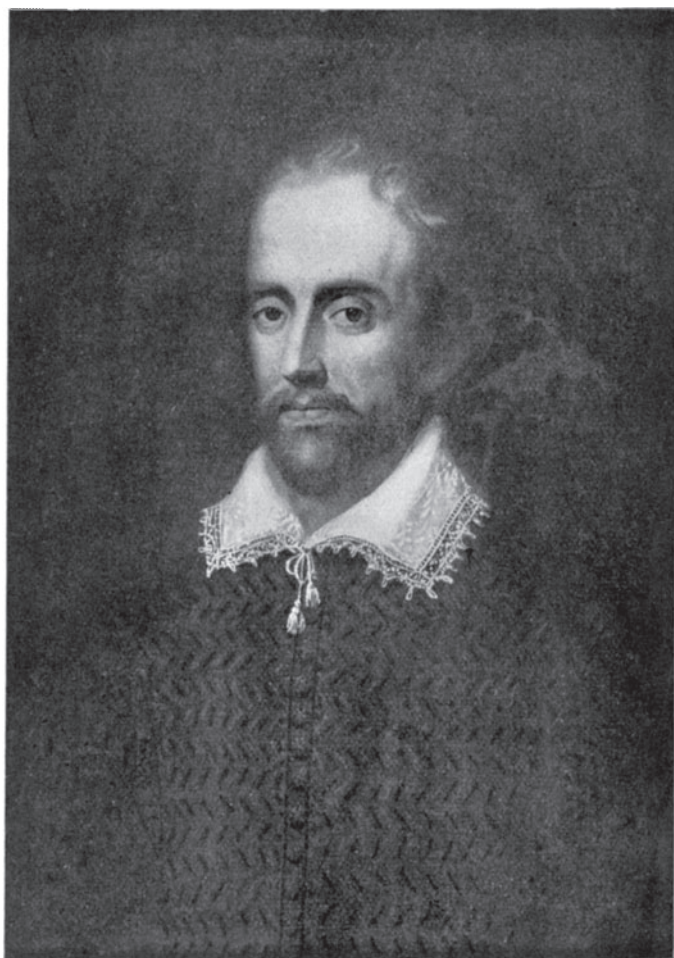


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EDMUND SPENSER

From the portrait at Pembroke College

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STORIES FROM SPENSER

BY

MINNA STEELE SMITH

FELLOW OF NEWNHAM COLLEGE

CAMBRIDGE

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TO
DOROTHY AND CECILY

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PREFACE

THIS little book of stories from Spenser is intended to form a volume of the series admirably begun by Miss Macaulay's *Stories from Chaucer*. The selections from Spenser in the present volume are taken from the first two books of *The Faerie Queene* with a few episodes from Books III and IV. While *The Faerie Queene* is far too long to reproduce in one volume and lacks the unity of structure which the drama of the pilgrimage gives to *The Canterbury Tales*, it is written in a language which, in modernised spelling and with occasional notes, offers little difficulty to readers of to-day. Short passages of Spenser's verse have, therefore, been inserted at frequent intervals in the prose paraphrase in order that young readers may be made familiar with the music and cadences of Spenser's poetry. Much, too, of Spenser's vocabulary and diction has been retained with a view to preserving as many characteristics of his style as was compatible with an abbreviated prose rendering of the stories. It is hoped that this little book may prove attractive and make its readers wish one day to read the original.

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Preface

For the Introduction and Notes I am greatly indebted to Mr de Selincourt's preface to the Oxford edition of Spenser, to Dean Kitchin's editions of Books I and II of *The Faerie Queene*, and to Miss Winstanley's editions of the same books.

M. S. S.

December, 1918

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| 2. PEMBROKE COLLEGE—from Loggan's print, c. 1688 facing 7 | |
| <p>Pembroke College (where Spenser resided 1569–1576) was founded by the rich and noble widow of the Earl of Pembroke in 1347. Various buildings had been added at different times before Spenser's day. Loggan's print shows the west front of the College with the Chapel at the south end. Behind the Chapel is the Master's Garden. To the left of the garden is, first, the Master's Lodge, then the Hall with the Library over it, and still further to the left the Kitchen. Beyond the Hall and Library is the Fellows' Garden.</p> | |
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE Faerie Queene is Spenser's most important and distinctive work. His minor poetry is of great beauty and of especial interest as throwing light on the poet's thought and feeling, but it is as the poet of *The Faerie Queene* that Spenser lives in the minds of most of his readers.

General plan of The Faerie Queene

Spenser on his title page calls his poem *The Faerie Queene, disposed into twelve books, fashioning XII morall vertues*. But *The Faerie Queene* as we have it consists of six books only, each of twelve cantos, and two cantos of a later book; so we have little more than half of the whole poem, and much that we need to know in order to understand the general plan of the poem is not contained in the completed half. The *Faerie Queene* does not appear in person in the poem; the adventures of the various knights are very loosely connected with one another, and the allegory underlying the story is sometimes, particularly in the later books, difficult to follow. We are, therefore, very glad to have from the poet's own hand some indication of the general purpose and plan of the poem. These hints are given in a letter from Spenser to his friend Sir Walter Raleigh, published in 1590 with the first three books. In this letter he tells us that his poem is an allegory, the general end of

which is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline. To make his subject attractive he clothes it in an historical fiction and selects the figure of a central hero, following the example of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto and Tasso. In his hero Arthur, he portrays a brave knight perfected in the twelve private moral virtues. The particular virtue, however, which Arthur represents is Magnificence (i.e. magnanimity or greatness of soul) which is the perfection of all the virtues and contains them all. Of the twelve virtues, Spenser makes twelve other knights the patrons, e.g. the Redcross Knight of Holiness, Sir Guyon of Temperance, Britomart, a lady knight, of Chastity; whose several adventures fill the first three books. The story, if told in chronological sequence, would open with the events reserved for the twelfth and last book of the poem. This book was to tell how the Faerie Queene (by whom Spenser means Glory in his general intention, but in his particular treatment the most excellent and glorious person of our sovereign the queen) kept her annual feast twelve days, upon which twelve days the occasions of the different adventures happened which were undertaken by the twelve knights.

The story does not show the gradual progress to a final conclusion which we expect to find in a great epic; nor is the allegory consistent enough or sufficiently clearly brought out to give unity to the whole. The hero, Arthur, the embodiment of the twelve virtues represented separately by the other knights, differs little from them in ethical significance or knightly achievement. In the same way the moral teaching of the poem as a whole is somewhat vague and inconclusive, possibly from the poet's

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failure to reconcile the conflict between the ideals of the renaissance with its keen appreciation of beauty in every form, and the sterner demands of a puritan religion with its manifold restraints and ascetic philosophy. But, in spite of its incompleteness and faulty structure, *The Faerie Queene* remains a great work of art. Though it lacks the grand simplicity and directness of the *Iliad*, the mystic intensity of the *Divine Comedy*, the sublimity of *Paradise Lost*, it has a “quaint stateliness” all its own, sometimes clothed in sweet simplicity, sometimes in rich elaboration, but always bearing witness to the poet’s unfailing sense of beauty.

The title Faerie Queene

Spenser meant to introduce the Faery Queen in person in the twelfth book holding her annual court at which she assigns to each knight his special adventure. She would thus supply a connecting link to the stories told in the twelve books and would play a more important part than she does in the uncompleted poem. But, even so, her significance as an allegorical figure would still have been greater than as an actor in the story. As Gloriana or Glory, the impelling motive in each knight’s quest, or as Elizabeth, the maiden queen of an England awakening to national self-consciousness, she means more to us than as a queen holding her yearly festival.

The title might well suggest a story about the fairies of popular folklore—little elvish beings such as Queen Mab or Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. But in Spenser’s poem *faery*, whether applied to the queen or to the knights, does not imply diminutive stature; the word is used rather

to describe the denizens of a remote imaginary world. The enchanted forests in which these “elfin” knights lose their way, the dragons they slay, the witches and sorcerers they meet, their immunity from physical needs, the unchanging seasons—all belong to a world very unlike our prosaic workaday life, a beautiful far away land which Spenser rightly calls Faeryland.

Chivalry in The Faerie Queene

Even were there no magic or faery incidents, the stories of knights riding fully clad in armour, ever ready to do battle for the right with spear and sword, the single combats in which each champion maintains his lady’s matchless beauty, the tournaments with their rigid code of knightly practice belong to the age of chivalry which had already lost its greatest splendour when Chaucer wrote his *Knight’s Tale*.

Under the feudal system chivalry became a social institution: the knights formed an exclusive aristocratic order with a characteristic code of morality and distinctive social habits. The crusades did much to develop the sentiments and practices of chivalry among the nations who sent of their noblest and bravest to the Holy Land to oppose the infidel and reconquer the Holy Sepulchre. Before the first Crusade, knights though brave and loyal, were often violent, haughty and undisciplined. In the pursuit of their common enterprise they learned mutual forbearance and something of the courtesy which distinguished Chaucer’s knight:

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And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
 And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
 He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
 In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
 He was a verray parfit gentil knyght.

The crusades, by affording to all who had taken the cross of whatever rank or nationality an opportunity for deeds of daring and knightly conduct, tended to unite all the warrior knights of Christendom into one great fraternity. The knight was no longer regarded as a member of an exclusive social caste but as a man actuated by knightly ideals. The true knight was ever fearless in danger, true to his word, faithful to his lord, unfailing in courtesy, especially to woman—like Bayard *un preux chevalier, sans peur et sans reproche*. Hence chivalry came to mean not only knights collectively but the ideals which actuated them, the high sense of honour and loyalty which governed all their actions.

After the time of the crusades, chivalry as an organisation lost much of its importance. A changed method of warfare, due in part to the invention of gunpowder, gave less scope for personal encounters in which the combatants could win renown. Tournaments and jousting became a mimic warfare and occasions for pageantry and lavish display rather than for a trial of strength between valiant knights. The knight's faithful service of his lady which at first tended to raise the position of women, at a later date degenerated into artificial gallantry or even encouraged immorality. It was the extravagances and the meaningless outward forms of a decadent chivalrous practice which

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furnished Cervantes with a fruitful theme for satire in his *Don Quixote*.

Long after chivalry as an institution had ceased to exist, the ideals of chivalry lived on, freed from the exclusiveness and the exaggerations which had sometimes tarnished the conduct of medieval knights, and modified to some extent by the changing ethical outlook of a later time. Already Chaucer realised that chivalrous action is not the prerogative of the high-born, but that it is the deed that ennobles the doer (cp. *Wife of Bath's Tale*) and that even the poor clerk can be as "gentil" as the knight (cp. *Franklin's Tale*).

Allegory in The Faerie Queene

Besides the choice of knights as the chief figures of the story, another feature of *The Faerie Queene* connects it with earlier literary art. This is the allegorical form. The medieval mind delighted in allegory and symbolism. This is shown in the *Bestiaries*, the *Morality Plays*, and the *Roman de la Rose*.

It is quite possible to read *The Faerie Queene* for the sake of the story and the poetry, and to disregard the allegorical interpretation. In fact this is the course recommended by Hazlitt and Lowell; but most readers would agree that we lose much of the moral dignity of the poem if we wilfully ignore what Spenser tells us of his intention. It is true that in the later books of *The Faerie Queene*, following Ariosto's example, he allows the story to wander on and introduces incidents and descriptions which throw no light on the spiritual truths he would enforce. Such,

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however, is not the case in the first two books on the virtues of Holiness and Temperance, where the account of the knights' adventures helps us to realise Spenser's conception of the temptations which can be overcome by the man possessing these virtues. But besides the moral allegory there is the political one. This is less clearly brought out: it is attached rather to isolated personages and events than to the general design and is therefore less important for a just appreciation of the poem. But neither the religious nor the political allegory is rigidly consistent or invariably clear; partly on account of the mingling of the two forms of allegory, so that one person may stand both for an abstract quality and for a living historical character; partly because Spenser's poetic imagination sometimes led him to develop the characters to suit the scene or incident he is describing rather than in strict accordance with the original allegorical intention.

The varying emphasis laid upon the allegory which sometimes reflects the deep seriousness of a philosophic outlook, at other times is lost in a vision of actual loveliness; its changing range, now implying the ceaseless conflict of humanity with evil, now suggesting the rough manners of a single courtier; its varied nature, sometimes religious, sometimes moral, sometimes political, sometimes personal, are characteristic of the marked contrasts and unresolved discords of Spenser's age as well as of his circumstances and his temper.

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Spenser's poetic style

In attempting to discover wherein the beauty of Spenser's style consists it is difficult to distinguish beauty of thought from beauty of phrase and beauty of sound, so intimately are they blended. Nevertheless there are certain distinctively Spenserian qualities of style which are the result of literary devices, and their frequent use shows that they are used deliberately. Among such poetic qualities perhaps the most striking is the exquisite music of his verse. A favourite device for producing melodious effect is the repetition of the same sound whether by employing words with the same initial sound (alliteration), or by an accumulation of related sounds, generally liquids or sibilants, in one passage. Hardly a stanza but affords examples of alliteration. Cp. Spenser's description of Honour in Bk II. iii. 41:

In woods, in waves, in warres she wonts to dwell,
 And will be found with *p*erill and with *p*aine;
 Ne can the *m*an, that *m*oulds in idle cell,
 Unto her happie *m*ansion attaine:
 Before her gate high God did sweat ordaine,
 And wakefull *w*atches ever to abide:
 But easie is the way and *p*assage *p*laine
 To *p*leasures *p*allace; it may soone be spide,
 And day and night her dores to all stand open wide.

Other devices, such as the repetition of the same word and the elaboration of phrase, give a certain leisureliness to Spenser's poetry. By expanding his thought he seems to allow time for it to sink into and linger in the reader's mind.

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In descriptions this love of amplifying and dwelling on his words adds richness and impressiveness, but it impedes the poet when he attempts to pourtray action. It is in his descriptions of persons—think of our first sight of Una, Archimago, Ignaro—or of places—think of Archimago's hermitage, or the Cave of Despair, the Bower of Bliss—or of allegorical figures—such as Mammon, Lucifer and her train, the three daughters of Caelia—that Spenser's highest powers find fullest play. In pourtraying action the details he gives are apt to retard its progress. In the description of combats between the Redcross Knight and his foes we do not feel that each fresh incident brings us nearer to the final climax (cp. Bk I. v. 6–13). This is especially the case in the long drawn out contest between the knight and the dragon in Canto XI.

Spenser's diction

In many respects Spenser's language differs even more than Shakespeare's from our own. He purposely uses archaic words and inflections, some taken from older writers, especially his master Chaucer, and some from dialect. He also makes frequent use of Latinisms as well as words and idioms borrowed from French and Italian, and is fond of coining words of his own. But even though Spenser displeased his contemporaries by his archaic language and was a stumbling-block to later writers by his defiance of grammatical and philological rules, the diction which results from his experiments is wonderfully harmonious and succeeds admirably in producing the imaginative effect at which he aimed.

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Spenser as a representative of his times

The faery element, the setting in an age of chivalry, the implication of a deeper meaning, and still more, an ideal quality of thought and an imaginative richness of description give to Spenser's poetry a remoteness from commonplace realism which is one of its most striking characteristics. In spite of this quality of aloofness or remoteness Spenser's poetry is the product of its own time; in fact Spenser is often considered the most representative poet of the Elizabethan age. He does not give us life-like portraits of Elizabethan courtiers, soldiers or adventurers; we have no song of victory on the defeat of the Spanish Armada; no exultation in the growth of England's national prosperity. But though no full-length portraits or historical descriptions occur in the poem, real persons and events have left their mark on *The Faerie Queene*. In drawing his valiant knights Spenser must often have thought of his friend Sir Philip Sidney whose untimely death on the battlefield of Zutphen filled England with mourning, of Sir Walter Raleigh, the fearless voyager and colonist, of Sir Grey de Wilton who had sought to bring justice and order to the savage Irishry. Indeed, it is possible to detect in individual knights traits which belonged to living personages, e.g. Leicester's passion for Queen Elizabeth in Prince Arthur's undying love for the Faery Queen. Again, Duessa's attempt to wean the Redcross Knight's affections from Una probably contains a shadowy allusion to the struggle between the Romish and the Reformed Church. In later books of *The Faerie Queene*, notably Book v, there are a number of historic allusions in more explicit form.

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But interesting as such specific references to contemporary persons and events are, it is not here that Spenser's claim to represent his age is to be sought. It is rather in reflecting the larger movements of his time, in the spaciousness of his poetic outlook, in the spirit of high adventure, in the lofty patriotism centreing in the person of the Maiden Queen. With a setting of medieval chivalry, we have a gorgeousness, a splendour and profusion of artistic resource, in plan, description and imagery, which would be inconceivable before the renaissance had opened the eyes of the educated world to the riches of the past, the joyousness of the present and the endless possibilities of the future. The Bower of Acrasia, the Cave of Despair are unthinkable as the product of an earlier century. It is this mingling of new and old, this rich medley of classical, medieval and renaissance learning, together with elements contributed by his own time, that makes Spenser a typical Elizabethan.

Spenser "the poets' poet"

While in these ways Spenser was a representative of the Elizabethan age, it is to qualities distinctively his own that he owes his perennial appeal to lovers of poetry. Charles Lamb has called Spenser "the poets' poet," and the testimony to his influence on them by poets of most divergent schools is very significant. Pope, the writer of terse heroic couplets, excelling in the use of trenchant satire in an age which despised the romantic and "gothic" vagaries of the Elizabethan period, tells of the unchanging delight in boyhood and old age with which he read *The*

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Faerie Queene. Milton, the greatest poet of the seventeenth century, accounted Spenser a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas. In the period of the romantic revival, Spenser was one of the first of the Elizabethan poets to win the favour of poets in revolt against the restrictions of pseudo-classicism. Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats all consciously submitted to his influence.

The secret of the fascination which Spenser exerts on all lovers of poetry and in so marked a degree on poets lies in the peculiarly poetic quality of his genius. This shows itself in his unwavering devotion to the beautiful, whether of outward form or spiritual perfection; also in the romantic glamour enfolding his enchanted landscapes, which is able to bear his readers far from the weariness, the fever and the fret of daily life. This power which has charmed young and old in the past will surely do so no less in time to come.