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Spenser's The Faerie Queene, Book I

Edmund Spenser

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE AGE WHICH PRODUCED THE *FAERIE QUEENE*

The study of the *Faerie Queene* should be preceded by a review of the great age in which it was written. An intimate relation exists between the history of the English nation and the works of English authors. This close connection between purely external events and literary masterpieces is especially marked in a study of the Elizabethan Age. To understand the marvelous outburst of song, the incomparable drama, and the stately prose of this period, one must enter deeply into the political, social, and religious life of the times.

The *Faerie Queene* was the product of certain definite conditions which existed in England toward the close of the sixteenth century. The first of these national conditions was the movement known as the *revival of chivalry*; the second was the *spirit of nationality* fostered by the English Reformation; and the third was that phase of the English Renaissance commonly called the *revival of learning*.

The closing decade of Queen Elizabeth's reign was marked by a strong reaction toward romanticism. The feudal system with its many imperfections had become a memory, and had been idealized by the people. The nation felt pride in its new aristocracy, sprung largely from the middle class, and based rather on worth than ancestry. The bitterness of the Wars of the Roses was forgotten, and was succeeded by an era of reconciliation and good feeling. England was united in a heroic queen whom all sects, ranks, and parties idolized. The whole country exulting in its new sense of freedom and power became a fairyland of youth, springtime, and romantic achievement.

Wise and gallant courtiers, like Sidney, Leicester, and Raleigh, gathered about the queen, and formed a new chivalry devoted to deeds of adventure and exploits of mind in her honor. The spirit of the old sea-kings lived again in Drake and his bold buccaneers, who swept the proud Spaniards from the seas. With the defeat of the

Invincible Armada, the greatest naval expedition of modern times, the fear of Spanish and Catholic domination rolled away. The whole land was saturated with an unexpressed poetry, and the imagination of young and old was so fired with patriotism and noble endeavor that nothing seemed impossible. Add to this intense delight in life, with all its mystery, beauty, and power, the keen zest for learning which filled the air that men breathed, and it is easy to understand that the time was ripe for a new and brilliant epoch in literature. First among the poetic geniuses of the Elizabethan period came Edmund Spenser with his *Faerie Queene*, the allegory of an ideal chivalry.

This poem is one of the fruits of that intellectual awakening which first fertilized Italian thought in the twelfth century, and, slowly spreading over Europe, made its way into England in the fifteenth century. The mighty impulse of this New Learning culminated during the reign of the Virgin Queen in a profound quickening of the national consciousness, and in arousing an intense curiosity to know and to imitate the rich treasures of the classics and romance. Its first phase was the *classical revival*. The tyrannous authority of ecclesiasticism had long since been broken; a general reaction from Christian asceticism had set in; and by the side of the ceremonies of the church had been introduced a semi-pagan religion of art—the worship of moral and sensuous beauty. Illiteracy was no longer the style at court. Elizabeth herself set the example in the study of Greek. Books and manuscripts were eagerly sought after, Scholars became conversant with Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and the great tragic poets Sophocles, Euripides, and Æschylus; and translations for the many of Vergil, Ovid, Plautus, Terence, and Seneca poured forth from the printing-presses of London. The English mind was strongly tempered by the idealistic philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and the influence of Latin tragedy and comedy was strongly felt by the early English drama.

Along with this classical culture came a higher appreciation of the *beauty of mediævalism*. The romantic tendency of the age fostered the study of the great epics of chivalry, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, and of the cycles of French romance. From the Italian poets especially Spenser borrowed freely. Ariosto's fresh naturalness and magic machinery influenced him most strong-

ly, but he was indebted to the semi-classical Tasso for whole scenes. On the whole, therefore, Spenser's literary affinities were more with the Gothic than the classical.

Spenser was also the spokesman of his time on religious questions. The violent controversies of the Reformation period were over. Having turned from the beliefs of ages with passionate rejection, the English people had achieved religious freedom, and were strongly rooted in Protestantism, which took on a distinctly national aspect. That Calvinism was at that time the popular and aristocratic form of Protestantism is evident from references in the *Faerie Queene*.

Spenser lived in the afterglow of the great age of chivalry. The passing glories of knighthood in its flower impressed his imagination like a gorgeous dream, and he was thus inspired to catch and crystallize into permanent art its romantic spirit and heroic deeds. Into the framework of his romance of chivalry he inserted a veiled picture of the struggles and sufferings of his own people in Ireland. The *Faerie Queene* might almost be called the epic of the English conquest of Ireland. The poet himself and many of his friends were in that unhappy island as representatives of the queen's government, trying to pacify the natives, and establish law and order out of discontent and anarchy. Spenser's poem was written for the most part amidst all these scenes of misery and disorder, and the courage, justice, and energy shown by his countrymen were aptly portrayed under the allegory of a mighty spiritual warfare of the knights of old against the power of evil.

Spenser's essay on *A View of the Present State of Ireland* shows that, far from shutting himself up in a fool's paradise of fancy, he was fully awake to the social and political condition of that turbulent island, and that it furnished him with concrete examples of those vices and virtues, bold encounters and hair-breadth escapes, strange wanderings and deeds of violence, with which he has crowded the allegory of the *Faerie Queene*.

II. THE AUTHOR OF THE *FAERIE QUEENE*

Edmund Spenser was born in London near the Tower in the year 1552. His parents were poor, though they were probably connected with the Lancashire branch of the old family of Le Despensers, "an house of ancient fame," from which the Northampton Spencers were also descended. The poet's familiarity with the rural life and dialect of the north country supports the theory that as a boy he spent some time in Lancashire. Beyond two or three facts, nothing is known with certainty of his early years. He himself tells us that his mother's name was Elizabeth, and that London was his "most kindly nurse." His name is mentioned as one of six poor pupils of the Merchant Taylors' School, who received assistance from a generous country squire.

At the age of seventeen, Master Edmund became a student in Pembroke Hall, one of the colleges of the great University of Cambridge. His position was that of a sizar, or paid scholar, who was exempt from the payment of tuition fees and earned his way by serving in the dining hall or performing other menial duties. His poverty, however, did not prevent him from forming many helpful friendships with his fellow-students. Among his most valued friends he numbered Launcelot Andrews, afterward Bishop of Winchester, Edward Kirke, a young man of Spenser's own age, who soon after edited his friend's first important poem, the *Shepherds Calender*, with elaborate notes, and most important of all, the famous classical scholar, a fellow of Pembroke, Gabriel Harvey, who was a few years older than Spenser, and was later immortalized as the Hobbinoll of the *Faerie Queene*. It was by Harvey that the poet was introduced to Sir Philip Sidney, the most accomplished gentleman in England, and a favorite of Queen Elizabeth.

Spenser's residence in Cambridge extended over seven years, during which he received the usual degrees of bachelor and master of arts. He became one of the most learned of English poets, and we may infer that while at this seat of learning he laid the foundations for his wide scholarship in the diligent study of the Greek and Latin classics, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Vergil, and the great mediæval epics of Italian litera-

ture. On account of some misunderstanding with the master and tutors of his college, Spenser failed to receive the appointment to a fellowship, and left the University in 1576, at the age of twenty-four. His failure to attain the highest scholastic recognition was due, it is supposed, to his being involved in some of the dangerous controversies which were ripe in Cambridge at that time "with daily spawning of new opinions and heresies in divinity, in philosophy, in humanity, and in manners."

On leaving the University, Spenser resided for about a year with relatives in Lancashire, where he found employment. During this time he had an unrequited love affair with an unknown beauty whom he celebrated in the *Shepheards Calender* under the name of Rosalind, "the widow's daughter of the glen." A rival, Menalchas, was more successful in finding favor with his fair neighbor. Although he had before this turned his attention to poetry by translating the sonnets of Petrarch and Du Bellay (published in 1569), it was while here in the North country that he first showed his high poetic gifts in original composition.

After a visit to Sir Philip Sidney at Penshurst, Spenser went down to London with his friend in 1578, and was presented to Sidney's great uncle, the Earl of Leicester. He thus at once had an opportunity for advancement through the influence of powerful patrons, a necessity with poor young authors in that age. An immediate result of his acquaintance with Sidney, with whom he was now on relations of intimate friendship, was an introduction into the best society of the metropolis. This period of association with many of the most distinguished and cultivated men in England, together with the succession of brilliant pageants, masks, and processions, which he witnessed at court and at Lord Leicester's mansion, must have done much to refine his tastes and broaden his outlook on the world.

In personal appearance Spenser was a fine type of a sixteenth century gentleman. The grace and dignity of his bearing was enhanced by a face of tender and thoughtful expression in which warmth of feeling was subdued by the informing spirit of refinement, truthfulness, simplicity, and nobility. He possessed a fine dome-like forehead, curling hair, brown eyes, full sensuous lips, and a nose that

was straight and strongly moulded. His long spare face was adorned with a full mustache and a closely cropped Van Dyke beard.

The *Shepherds Calender* was published in the winter of 1579 with a grateful and complimentary dedication to Sidney. It is an academic exercise consisting of a series of twelve pastoral poems in imitation of the eclogues of Vergil and Theocritus. The poem is cast in the form of dialogues between shepherds, who converse on such subjects as love, religion, and old age. In three eclogues the poet attacks with Puritan zeal the pomp and sloth of the worldly clergy, and one is devoted to the courtly praise of the queen. It was at once recognized as the most notable poem that had appeared since the death of Chaucer, and placed Spenser immediately at the head of living English poets.

In 1580 Spenser went over to Ireland as private secretary to Lord Grey of Wilton, the Artegall of the Legend of Justice in the *Faerie Queene*. After the recall of his patron he remained in that turbulent island in various civil positions for the rest of his life, with the exception of two or three visits and a last sad flight to England. For seven years he was clerk of the Court of Chancery in Dublin, and then was appointed clerk to the Council of Munster. In 1586 he was granted the forfeited estate of the Earl of Desmond in Cork County, and two years later took up his residence in Kilcolman Castle, which was beautifully situated on a lake with a distant view of mountains. In the disturbed political condition of the country, life here seemed a sort of exile to the poet, but its very loneliness and danger gave the stimulus needed for the development of his peculiar genius.

"Here," says Mr. Stopford Brooke, "at the foot of the Galtees, and bordered to the north by the wild country, the scenery of which is frequently painted in the *Faerie Queene* and in whose woods and savage places such adventures constantly took place in the service of Elizabeth as are recorded in the *Faerie Queene*, the first three books of that great poem were finished." Spenser had spent the first three years of his residence at Kilcolman at work on this masterpiece, which had been begun in England, under the encouragement of Sidney, probably before 1580. The knightly Sidney died heroical-

ly at the battle of Zutphen, in 1586, and Spenser voiced the lament of all England in the beautiful pastoral elegy *Astrophel* which he composed in memory of "the most noble and valorous knight."

Soon after coming to Ireland, Spenser made the acquaintance of Sir Walter Raleigh, which ere long ripened into intimate friendship. A memorable visit from Raleigh, who was now a neighbor of the poet's, having also received a part of the forfeited Desmond estate, led to the publication of the *Faerie Queene*. Sitting under the shade "of the green alders of the Mulla's shore," Spenser read to his guest the first books of his poem. So pleased was Raleigh that he persuaded the poet to accompany him to London, and there lay his poem at the feet of the great queen, whose praises he had so gloriously sung. The trip was made, Spenser was presented to Elizabeth, and read to her Majesty the three Legends of Holiness, Temperance, and Chastity. She was delighted with the fragmentary epic in which she heard herself delicately complimented in turn as Gloriana, Belpheobe, and Britomart, conferred upon the poet a pension of £50 yearly, and permitted the *Faerie Queene* to be published with a dedication to herself. Launched under such auspices, it is no wonder that the poem was received by the court and all England with unprecedented applause.

The next year while still in London, Spenser collected his early poems and issued them under the title of *Complaints*. In this volume were the *Ruins of Time* and the *Tears of the Muses*, two poems on the indifference shown to literature before 1580, and the remarkable *Mother Hubberds Tale*, a bitter satire on the army, the court, the church, and politics. His *Daphnaida* was also published about the same time. On his return to Ireland he gave a charming picture of life at Kilcolman Castle, with an account of his visit to the court, in *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*. The story of the long and desperate courtship of his second love, Elizabeth, whom he wedded in 1594, is told in the *Amoretti*, a sonnet sequence full of passion and tenderness. His rapturous wedding ode, the *Epithalamion*, which is, by general consent, the most glorious bridal song in our language, and the most perfect of all his poems in its freshness, purity, and passion, was also published in 1595. The next year Spenser was back in London and published the *Prothalamion*, a lovely ode on the marriage of Lord Worcester's daughters, and his four *Hymns* on Love

and Beauty, Heavenly Love, and Heavenly Beauty. The first two *Hymns* are early poems, and the two latter maturer work embodying Petrarch's philosophy, which teaches that earthly love is a ladder that leads men to the love of God. In this year, 1596, also appeared the last three books of the *Faerie Queene*, containing the Legends of Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy.

At the height of his fame, happiness, and prosperity, Spenser returned for the last time to Ireland in 1597, and was recommended by the queen for the office of Sheriff of Cork. Surrounded by his beloved wife and children, his domestic life was serene and happy, but in gloomy contrast his public life was stormy and full of anxiety and danger. He was the acknowledged prince of living poets, and was planning the completion of his mighty epic of the private virtues in twelve books, to be followed by twelve more on the civic virtues. The native Irish had steadily withstood his claim to the estate, and continually harassed him with lawsuits. They detested their foreign oppressors and awaited a favorable opportunity to rise. Discord and riot increased on all sides. The ever growing murmurs of discontent gave place to cries for vengeance and unexpressed acts of hostility. Finally, in the fall of 1598, there occurred a fearful uprising known as Tyrone's Rebellion, in which the outraged peasants fiercely attacked the castle, plundering and burning. Spenser and his family barely escaped with their lives. According to one old tradition, an infant child was left behind in the hurried flight and perished in the flames; but this has been shown to be but one of the wild rumors repeated to exaggerate the horror of the uprising. Long after Spenser's death, it was also rumored that the last six books of the *Faerie Queene* had been lost in the flight; but the story is now utterly discredited.

Spenser once more arrived in London, but he was now in dire distress and prostrated by the hardships which he had suffered. There on January 16, 1599, at a tavern in King Street, Westminster, the great poet died broken-hearted and in poverty. Drummond of Hawthornden states that Ben Jonson told him that Spenser "died for lack of bread in King Street, and refused 20 pieces sent to him by my Lord of Essex, and said He was sorrie he had no time to spend them." The story is probably a bit of exaggerated gossip. He was buried close to the tomb of Chaucer in the Poets' Corner in West-

minster Abbey, his fellow-poets bearing the pall, and the Earl of Essex defraying the expenses of the funeral. Referring to the death of Spenser's great contemporary, Basse wrote:—

"Renownèd Spenser, lie a thought more nigh
To learnèd Chaucer, and rare Beaumont, lie
A little nearer Spenser, to make room
For Shakespeare in your threefold, fourfold tomb."

"Thus," says Mr. Stopford Brooke, appropriately, "London, 'his most kindly nurse,' takes care also of his dust, and England keeps him in her love."

Spenser's influence on English poetry can hardly be overestimated. Keats called him "the poets' poet," a title which has been universally approved. "He is the poet of all others," says Mr. Saintsbury, "for those who seek in poetry only poetical qualities." His work has appealed most strongly to those who have been poets themselves, for with him the poetical attraction is supreme. Many of the greatest poets have delighted to call him master, and have shown him the same loving reverence which he gave to Chaucer. Minor poets like Sidney, Drayton, and Daniel paid tribute to his inspiration; Milton was deeply indebted to him, especially in *Lycidas*; and many of the pensive poets of the seventeenth century show traces of his influence. "Spenser delighted Shakespeare," says Mr. Church; "he was the poetical master of Cowley, and then of Milton, and in a sense of Dryden, and even Pope." Giles and Phineas Fletcher, William Browne, Sir William Alexander, Shenstone, Collins, Cowley, Gray, and James Thomson were all direct followers of Spenser. His influence upon the poets of the romantic revival of the nineteenth century is even more marked. "Spenser begot Keats," says Mr. Saintsbury, "and Keats begot Tennyson, and Tennyson begot all the rest." Among this notable company of disciples should be mentioned especially Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne. If we include within the sphere of Spenser's influence also those who have made use of the stanza which he invented, we must add the names of Burns, Shelley, Byron, Beattie, Campbell, Scott, and Wordsworth. When we consider the large number of poets in whom Spenser awakened the

poetic gift, or those to whose powers he gave direction, we may safely pronounce him the most seminal poet in the language.

