

What does the faerie  
queene, books 1 and  
2 owe to the  
traditions



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In the latter stages of the sixteenth century when Spenser was composing *The Faerie Queene*, he had a rich heritage of literary tradition to draw from: not only the classical epic poets and ancient philosophers but also more recent Italian epic and the Arthurian legends, told in their fullest form by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Latin chronicles *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Educated at Merchant Taylors' School by leading educationalist Richard Mulcaster, Spenser had a fantastic command of the classical languages and their literature and mythology.

In order 'to pourtraict in Arthur, before he was king, the image of a brave knight,' he 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... then Virgil, whose like intention was to do in the person of Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando: and lately Tasso. ' (Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh). It is obvious to readers of *The Faerie Queene* that Spenser took more than simply the character of his hero from these sources (and others), and equally obvious that he developed them further and more intricately than before.

The structure and atmosphere of *The Faerie Queene* is more in keeping with medieval romance than with the epic tradition. As K. W. Gransden points out, 'the romantic "machinery" of his poem – knights errant, ladies in distress, enchanted castles and gardens, dragons, giants, battles – represents the common inheritance of medieval chivalric legend and romance, as taken over in the Renaissance by Spenser's two great Italian predecessors, Ariosto and Tasso.

Their poems were really a new kind of epic, partly based on classical models and partly on medieval ones. ' (Gransden p. 31) Each book concentrates on the ' quest' of a particular hero and involves the conventions of courtly love and the chivalric code, despite the higher moral theme of the fight between good and evil which is the link running between all six books. There are characters taken from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* - in particular the enchantresses Duessa and Acrasia.

However, as Gransden notes, these take their sources from earlier works, and there are parallel characters to be found in classical literature. There is a wealth of reference to myths used by Ovid: stories of transformation which appear in *The Faerie Queene* include Fraudubio and Fraelissa in Book 1, Canto ii, victims of Duessa, who became trees. (This is also reminiscent of Polydorus' fate in Virgil's *Aeneid* Book 3. ) Guyon rescues Amavia's baby in the first canto of Book 2 and attempts to clean the blood of his parents off the child with water from a fountain.

It proves an impossible task, but instead of using the obvious Christian allegory of original sin, Spenser reverts to the pagan, spinning an Ovidian tale of a nymph, chased by an unwanted lover: to retain her chastity, she was turned into a crying statue by the goddess Diana, and this is the form in which Guyon finds her. The water will not take the blood because it must remain pure. Thus Spenser creates a memorable symbol of chastity, another important element of his ' project'. Critics feel that Spenser took much of his moral philosophy from the classical poets.

He was well-versed in the work of both Natalis Comes and Boccaccio. Both spent much of their time studying ancient myth and classical literature. They saw it not as it might appear on the surface, 'pagan and frivolous', (Lotspeich p. 52) but as a key to unveiling the secrets of man. The ancient poets were, they felt, 'profound speculative and moral philosophers, often inspired by the one God' (ibid. ). Boccaccio describes myth as 'polyseme'- of many meanings. Underneath the 'veil of the fables [is] the accumulated wisdom of the ancients, their speculation on natural philosophy' (Lotspeich p. 2)

And Comes opined that the ancient writers gave us 'the most useful precepts concerning the life of man'. This too seems to be how Spenser saw it: instead of condemning ancient myth and the epic tradition, as Milton does, he seems to actively pay homage to it. 'Mythology, as [Spenser] found it interpreted', says Lotspeich 'was allegorical'. (p. 52) Although The Faerie Queene cannot by any stretch of the imagination said to based entirely on any one source, it is clear that Spenser felt the important moral message to have its origins in ancient myth.

Despite its form and often tone of medieval romance, the opening to The Faerie Queene sets a Virgilian tone in wanting to 'sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds'. As well as similarities in style and language to the classical and medieval poetry, there are more obvious, surface parallels to be drawn. Book 2 is Guyon's journey to the Bower of Bliss, and the influence of the Odyssey is not disguised: it is mainly a journey on water, and ships and guidance are an important part of the moral message of temperance and good governance.

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The final stretch of the journey is the most explicit, with Spenser's own version of Scylla and Charybdis, the Gulf of Greediness and the Rock of Vile Reproach. With two reliable and well-informed guides, Guyon is steered between these, his course representing the middle way of temperance, like the character of Medina who symbolizes moderation between the two extremes of her sisters. We are reminded that temperance is not simply a passive solution between passions but a constant struggle: Guyon is sorely tempted by the 'many Mermayds... making false melodies' (2, xii, 17).

The Bower of Bliss teaches this lesson: it is described as temperate in its climate, yet we are not to be fooled into thinking that this is the kind of temperance Spenser wants us to achieve. By the rejection of such excesses presented to Guyon, again very tempting, he may then find the real, self-disciplined temperance. The Bower of Bliss is not only a parody of Eden, being almost comparable in its apparent beauty, but is also the kingdom of a Circe-like figure. Both Homer and Virgil present certain women characters as enchantresses who stand in the way of the hero's quest: Circe, Kalypso and Dido.

Spenser makes the connection of an evil enchantress before we meet Acrasia in her bower by the portrayal of Jason and Medea on the ivory gates. He subverts the epic technique of ekphrasis by making 'Art' a negative presence: the story on the ivory gates (reminiscent of Virgil's Gate of False Dreams) is a warning and Art is pitted against nature: 'One would have thought, (so cunningly, the rude, And scorned parts were mingled with the fine,) That nature had for wantonness ensued Art, and that Art at nature did repine; So striving each th'other to undermine... (2, xii, 59) The character of <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-the-faerie-queene-books-1-and-2-owe-to-the-traditions/>

Acrasia could also be based on enchantresses in Tasso and Ariosto, but the stronger connection is with Circe when Spenser tells us that she has been turning her lovers into pigs. The moral significance of Grill, who chooses to remain in this form, is that the fight is never over: he has succumbed to excess, ease and luxury, and like many people, will not take the opportunity to save himself, but prefers to take the 'broad and beaten path'. The heroes of Books 1 and 2 both display features of Virgil's hero.

Redcrosse is the protagonist in the Book of Holiness, and Guyon in the Book of Temperance. A very important characteristic of Aeneas is pietas, and although he worships pagan gods, he is seen as a Christian prototype in the kind of devotion and obedience he shows. He is in a sense 'elect': Calvinism was a strong branch of the Protestant religion, and it was believed that some people were predestined to go to Heaven while others were not. At the same time, Spenser creates unfinished heroes: they are flawed, and have much to learn, like Aeneas.

Redcrosse is elect, yet he sins. He represents post-Lapsarian man, the common man made from the Earth: georgos or in fact, Adam. Elizabeth Heale draws the parallels between Aeneas and Redcrosse. Both are 'chosen... for remarkable achievements. Both spend much time in wandering and both are caught in the sexual snares of a woman. Both eventually achieve their quests and are rewarded with marriage.' (Heale p. 25) But she too points out that Spenser builds on the 'model of excellence and piety' to Christianize the hero: Redcrosse is a type of the fallen man, unable by his own efforts to free himself from Duessa or escape Orgoglio's dungeon, and only finally enabled to achieve holiness and accomplish his quest through <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-the-faerie-queene-books-1-and-2-owe-to-the-traditions/>

the powerful intervention of Grace. Beyond Virgil's Aeneid lies the idealized City of Rome, but beyond Spenser's book lies the heavenly Jerusalem. '

(Heale p. 25) Heale calls Aeneas the perfect man, but I think that Spenser used him as a model because he wasn't. Guyon's struggle to achieve temperance is not dissimilar to the process whereby Aeneas learns to overcome furor, hence the character Furor in The Faerie Queene.

Good government of a nation is a result of good self-government, as Roger Ascham explains in *The Schoolmaster*, 1570: '... nobility governed by learning and wisdom is indeed most like a fair ship, having tide and wind at will, under the rule of a skilful master, when contrariwise a ship carried, yea, with the highest tide and the greatest wind, lacking a skilful master, most commonly doth either sink itself upon sands or break itself upon rocks. And even so, how many have been either drowned in vain pleasure or overwhelmed by stout wilfulness, the histories of England be able to afford overmany examples unto us. '

These images are relevant to and prominent in both the Aeneid and Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* (Phaedria, for example, sails in an unpiloted ship, and is a model for lack of temperance and bad governance) and Ascham's ideas are developed in Belphoebe's speech. Belphoebe again presents a classical image, which ' harmoniously mixes the attributes of two quite opposite goddesses, Venus and Diana. She has Venus' beauty without her lustful wantonness, and she has the chastity and fearless virtue of Diana. ' (Heale p. 56) In putting the boastful Braggadocchio in his place, she redefines the hero: ' Abroad in armes, at home in studious kind

Who seeks with painfull toile, shall honor soonest find. ' (2, iii, 40) When Arthur and Guyon find the history books in the House of Alma therefore, their study is endorsed by Spenser, who shared with Sir Philip Sidney the philosophy that to become a better reader was to become a better person. It is of the 'overmany examples' of past mistakes that the knights read, so that the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, and thus skill in steering their ships, can make them better people and as a consequence, better rulers too. The Belpheobe and Braggadocchio episode also provides a link to Spenser's world.

The Faerie Queene herself, Gloriana, was Elizabeth I, the ruler of England when Spenser was writing, and one of the most important aims of Spenser's work was to pay tribute to this great and respected woman. However Spenser saw many aspects of the way of life of people around her of which he did not approve. Much of The Faerie Queene is an implicit criticism of court life: the excesses in the Bower of Bliss, the constant reminder of wanton sexuality, the love of money represented by Mammon: all of these are representations of what Spenser saw around him in Elizabeth's court.

Lucifera in her House of Pride is an antitype of the real Queen, but that is not to say that the Seven Deadly Sins were antitypes of her courtiers: this court may have been more representative of reality than it seems. Spenser may well have seen someone like Braggadocchio as an obvious member of the court: as usual the name gives more than a subtle clue to the character's personality, and he is obviously overwhelmed by the pomp and splendour of court. What Belpheobe's subsequent words show is that he is missing the



point of knighthood: he appears to be a knight but this is merely superficial. True knighthood requires 'painfull toile'.

Dedicating art to a monarch is customary, as can be creating a character to allegorically display the attributes and actions of that monarch. Again we can look to the Aeneid: Aeneas is not only clearly linked to Augustus by lineage but is also presented as a very similar character. While we never actually meet the Faerie Queene, her influence is strong, and she is the driving force behind events. Arthur is abroad, because he is searching for her. He saw her in a dream, and his quest is to find her. The connection between them is important because the Tudors believed themselves to be descended from Arthur.

The history book that Arthur reads may be based on Geoffrey of Monmouth and obviously finishes before he becomes king, but the history of 'Elfin kind' that Guyon reads takes the story to the present day, to the daughter of Oberon (Henry VIII): 'Fairer and nobler liveth none this howre, Ne like in grace, ne like in learned skill; Therefore they Glorian call that glorious flowre, Long mayst thou live, in glory and great powre.' (2, x, 76) Being presented with a royal lineage, be it ancestors or descendants, is an obviously Virgilian technique and puts Arthur on a par with the beloved hero of the Renaissance.

Indirectly of course, this glorifies Elizabeth and the House of Tudors. The two genealogies are kept separate, which may, says Heale, 'be seen as part of Spenser's concern to celebrate his nation as well as particular virtues...

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. (Heale p. 12) Arthur also becomes the virtue 'Magnificence' and the embodiment of Christian grace. Although his character is not in keeping with medieval romance and would be to readers of this genre 'a most unwelcome change in an established character' (Tuve p. 81), he is highly symbolic in Spenser's epic.

Arthur does not need perfecting. In her book *Allegorical Imagery: some Medieval Books and Their Posterity*, Rosemund Tuve quotes a well-known treatise which calls magnificence 'an hye werke and happy achyvyng. Our Lord Jhesu Christ... alleth 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 emprysed. ' This shows a 'synthesis of Christian values with chivalric ones' which is 'very close to Spenser's conception of Arthur. ' (Heale p. 13) He is present in each book, and arrives at points of crisis, representing Divine Grace. He gives freely, without needing recompense for his deed: '... what need Good turnes be counted, as a servile bond, To bind their doers, to receive their meede? Are not all knights by oath bound, to withstond

Oppressours powre by armes and puissant hond? Suffise, that I have done my dew in place. ' (2, viii, 56) Whether characterised by Arthur or not, Heavenly Grace as a concept is an important part of Christian belief.

Redcrosse has to learn that he must work with his God and in unison with the <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-the-faerie-queene-books-1-and-2-owe-to-the-traditions/>

one True Church, in order to be successful. And even Arthur, in a literal rather than allegorical sense, needs God's grace. In the fight with Maleger, he is nearly killed, yet his squire saves him. Spenser wants us to understand that the '... greatest and most glorious thing on ground May often need the helpe of weaker hand;

So feeble is mans state, and life unsound, That in assurance it may never stand, Till it dissolved be from earthly band. Proove be thou, Prince, the prowest man alive, And noblest borne of all in Briton land; Yet thee fierce Fortune did so nearly drive, That had not grace thee blest, thou shouldest not survive. ' (2, xi, 30) The Faerie Queene is ultimately a Christian epic, again not a new idea but unique in the way that it combines so many sources from a very wide span of time, culture and religion and still conveys such a strong message of one God and one correct way of life.

One episode in particular is memorable for its reference to Christianity, yet with a strong relevance to contemporary issues even now, and with its origins in a strongly classical setting. This is the Cave of Mammon. Guyon loses ' his trusty guide' (2, vii, 2), the Palmer, and finds a place of ' desert wilderness' (ibid. ). Immediately the reader is alerted to the parallel of Christ in the wilderness, and the similarities continue. The words ' cover'd with boughs and shrubs from heavens light' (2, vii, 3) present a warning that Guyon is no longer protected, he is in dangerous territory.

Mammon is an antitype of the true God, and is the god of money and the desire for wealth. He calls himself ' God of the world and worldlings' (2, vii, 8) and corrupts Christ's Sermon on the Mount by tempting Guyon to serve

riches rather than God. Mammon's daughter, too, is representative of earthly desires, in this case ambition or glory on earth: Philotime. Both Mammon and Guyon speak of a Golden Age. For Guyon, this was a time of grace and bounty, 'The antique world, in his first flowring youth, Found no defect in his Creatours grace,

But with glad thanks, and unreproved truth, The gifts of soveraigne bounty did embrace: Like Angels life was then mens happy cace; But later ages pride, like corn-fed steed, Abused her plenty, and fat swolne encrease To all licentious lust, and gan exceed The measure of her meane, and naturall first need. ' (2, vii, 16) And that is the golden age to which Mammon refers, the material gold. The desire for wealth is an eternally relevant issue, and our own capitalist society could be criticised in the same way. Heale feels that Spenser firmly links Mammon's kind of 'golden' age to barbarity. Such features of a 'developed' society as mining, ['Then gan a cursed hand the quiet wombe/ Of his great Grandmother with steele to wound... ' (2, vii, 17)] the luxuries of wealth and an excessively sophisticated Court are in this episode signs of degeneration... ' (Heale p. 61) Guyon resists the temptation of this wealth, but his journey takes him through a distinctly classical landscape which Spenser manages to create a mythical tone while presenting a Christian message.

We see Tantalus, the River Cocytus with the wailing souls unable to cross, the gates of Pluto, the Garden of Proserpine. However, we see also Pontius Pilate, 'the falsest Judge ... that... delivered up the Lord of life to die' (2, vii, 62) and the tree of golden apples, symbolic of several myths but most

importantly should probably remind us of the most serious digression of all, <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-the-faerie-queene-books-1-and-2-owe-to-the-traditions/>

that of Adam and Eve in Eden. The whole epic represents Spenser's strong Christian faith, but it is not any form of Christianity that he glorifies.

Protestant Elizabeth took the throne after a struggle against her Catholic half sister Mary Tudor, with her Spanish alliances. The entire country was split over the issue of religion, and Spenser's Protestantism is evident throughout *The Faerie Queene*. But we are also aware his negative attitude towards Catholics. I believe that his condemnation of Beauty who assails 'sight' in the House of Alma and the art in the Bower of Bliss is connected with the way that the Catholics worshipped. Protestant churches are sparse, whereas Catholic churches are often extravagant, with beautiful paintings and shrines.

The Protestant attitude towards Catholics also resulted from a belief that Catholics attempted to buy God's pardon, while Protestants maintained a more respectful distance from God. There is a huge difference between this and the way that a classical author would have presented a relationship between gods and men: it would have been far more direct, with personal intervention and communication. There is explicit criticism of Catholicism which Spenser is careful not to conceal.

Duessa, the evil enchantress, is modelled on the Whore of Babylon, the description of whom in Revelation 12. is described by Protestants as the Papacy. While Una's 'inheritance is... that of the primitive Christian Church, which in the Protestant view had ruled over East and West before the usurpation of the Catholic Church' (Heale p. 27), Duessa is 'the sole daughter of an Emperour, He that the wide West under his rule has, And high

hath set his throne, where Tiberis doth pass. ' (1, ii, 22) This too is clearly connected to Rome and the Catholic Church. Una also has to face the wicked Kirkrapine (plunderer of churches) and his supporters Corceca (blind faith) and Abessa (evocative of monasticism).

Corceca ' day and night did pray Upon her beads devoutly penitent; Nine hundred Pater nosters every day, And thrise nine hundred Aves she was wont to say. ' (1, iii, 13) She hides Kirkrapine in her house with his stolen goods, while he spends his illicit wealth on her deaf-mute whore of a daughter. K. W. Gransden suggests that ' Spenser here is drawing on his experience in Ireland, where he spent many years as a government official, and that he is portraying the excesses of Irish Catholic devotion: a corrupt and ' unreformed' Church in a wild and remote country. (Gransden p. 56)

In many ways, Spenser had a very modern and topical aim for his grand epic, whilst also wanting to relay personal messages. He wrote a tribute to a well-respected sovereign, extolling her virtues and that of her nation. At the same time, he is not afraid to condemn the negative issues surrounding court life and politics, which include the controversial subject of religion, which again is one close to his heart. He also aimed that people should learn by the process of reading his book to become better and wiser.

He could have done this in a bland and didactic fashion. Instead, he takes the structure of the popular genre of medieval romance, a national hero, the images and stories of the ancient world, the style and morals of the beloved epic poets, and makes the core of the book his own faith and the teachings of the Bible, and weaves an intricate web of adventure, love and faith. His

own messages are powerfully conveyed, and he builds on the material of other writers in such a way that he strengthens his own writing and immortalises theirs further.