

# The faerie queene



The socio-religious climate of sixteenth century post-Reformation England, despite being during a time often noted as one of the most glorious eras in history, was also one of great change, the country tearing itself apart with warring doctrines. Still a large proportion of the population was Roman Catholic, and whilst the rest of England was beginning to adapt to the idea of Protestantism, the frequent monarchical changes, from the austerely Protestant Edward VI, to the assertively Roman Catholic 'Bloody' Mary and then the more compromising yet no less controversial Elizabeth I, left the country with rather a crisis of identity. Various opposing religious and political groups attempted to restore this identity, some more militantly so than others, but in reality all that occurred was an increase in conflict. England also felt especially threatened at this time, isolated from the Roman Catholic continental powers. Furthermore, although England had had time to become more accustomed to the idea of female rulers, it was still a relatively recent concept that seemed to contradict the writings of Paul held in such high esteem by the evangelical Anglican Church, and therefore with the ascension of Elizabeth I in 1533, Britain was in a state of flux. It is important to note that at this time the Calvinist and Lutheran doctrines of the Protestant Church reverberated across the contours of the socio-religious landscape, the details affecting every aspect of every person's life, be they Protestant or Roman Catholic. A major focus in this doctrine was that all worldly activity should be positioned and perceived in context of the Fall of Man, as found in Genesis, and there was a major new emphasis on God's restoration of mankind: '...God...made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ...For it is by grace you have been saved, through

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faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God'. From this, Protestants drew two important points relevant for our study: that each individual is in an almost paradoxical process of salvation (they have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved) and it is only God's grace that can rescue humanity from its (now inherent) corruption. There is an inherent drama in this, as man cannot simply rely on his own efforts in following a set of moral laws in order to achieve salvation, and it is on this spiritual drama that Spenser draws in *The Faerie Queene*, incorporating the themes of living, growing, learning and judging more in a spiritual and moral sense than in a physical one, although Spenser does make gestures at examining age and experience in increasing one's spiritual maturity. We soon realise that in *The Faerie Queene*, living, growing, learning and judging are interlinked and indeed part of each other – for example, by learning to judge wisely, one gains spiritual growth, which is all part of the process of living – and this metaphorical 'growing up' is itself a process taking one nearer or further from God. Spenser exemplifies these theories with a number of illustrations, a few of which I will shortly outline. It is important to remember that Spenser's poem is not designed simply as a 'manual' for perfect Protestant living, but instead should be viewed more as a series of points (arguments, purposes, 'tips', lines of reasoning, etc.) allegorised and presented almost in the style of observations, from which the reader may learn. *The Faerie Queene* knows of its status as fiction – it is not supposed to be realism, even setting aside the fantastical elements in it – and this self-awareness lends to it a persuasive, almost rhetorical edge, which whilst not being didactic, is certainly conscious of- and sensitive in its role as the gentle educator of young inexperienced men in how to be gentlemen. There is a definite sense

of the narrator, who wants to guide the reader, prompting us to respond in particular (often more virtuous) ways, therefore subtly and implicitly influencing us to judge, and thus causing us to learn through the act of reading. Spenser immediately indicates that *The Faerie Queene* is fiction by prefacing each book with 'Proems', speaking directly to the reader in a voice not purely narrative but in fact absorbing the more persuasive quality that induces a response from the reader, even if it is only that they perceive reflections of their own life and world in those in the book. A good example of this occurs in the Proem to Book V, in which Spenser describes a world not unlike the contemporary one: 'For that which all men then did vertue callis now cald vice; and that which vice was hightls now hight virtue, and so vs'd of all: Right is now wrong, and wrong that was is right' (Book V, Proem, 4) By deliberately juxtaposing vice and virtue, wrong and right, Spenser exploits the alliteration to emphasise the apparent oxymorons (particularly in the fourth line) and with the chiasmic symmetry alerts the reader to his satirical criticism of the spiritual degeneration of the world. This reiterates his view that the golden world has been reduced to a 'stonie' one (Book V, Proem, 2), the image of stones not only enlivening the imagination to impressions of bareness, infertility and decay, since organic life cannot easily grow in stony ground, only in 'earthly mould' (2), but also drawing upon Ovid's account in his *Metamorphoses*, of the various ages (gold, silver, etc.) and lamenting that the golden age is past and has fallen away into a disordered one: 'Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square' (1). Spenser is therefore able to draw parallels between the Faerie world and the contemporary world (both the Elizabethan religious and political culture, and in a broader sense, incorporating more universal issues such as injustice, oppression, faith and

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pride), setting the context for the living, growing, learning and judging of and by the various characters in order that the reader constantly links these incidents back to the real world and considers the consequence of this reading on his own life. As already alluded, Spenser incorporates growing, learning and judging into the general process of living, and details various characters' experiences of these in order that the reader himself might learn from them. Because of the almost paradoxical process of salvation (outlined on page 2) the elect Christian still has a 'race' to run before he reaches heaven, as the Palmer tells Guyon: 'But wretched we, where ye haue made your marke, Must now anew begin, like race to ronne; God guide thee, Guyon, well to end thy warke, And to the wished hauen bring thy weary barke.' (Book II, Canto I, 32) Here, the Palmer reminds Guyon and the reader that although God is the one to whom the glory for our salvation should be given, the individual Christian is responsible for 'running the race' to his maximum effort (as the writer of Hebrews famously highlights) even though this effort alone will not win his salvation. Spenser skillfully frames Book II with this truth of the human responsibility with the final stanza of the final canto of Book II detailing how Grille rejects the Palmer's offer to transform him back into a man from a hog. Guyon himself comments on this, almost conspicuously for the reader's sake, demonstrating the depth of infection in which some people are steeped metaphorically pointing to sin's hold on people: 'See the mind of a beastly man, That hath so soone forgot the excellence Of his creation, when he life began, That now he chooseth, with vile indifference, To be a beast, and lacke intelligence.' (Book II, canto vii, 87) By contrasting 'indifference' and 'intelligence', Spenser is again stressing that the onus is on the reader for regeneration, and whilst Christ

can offer salvation, it is still the responsibility of the individual to run their metaphorical race in order to truly live for God. However, Book I of *The Faerie Queene* positively resounds with the most important of the Protestant doctrines, as described early on – that of God and His grace in the place of self-sufficiency. Redcrosse is typologised as the elect Christian, his emblem being the red cross of Christ, and therefore his journey becomes allegorised throughout the narrative as the ‘race’ of Christian life, helped along by God. We are provided with copious examples of God’s providence for Redcrosse, not least in Una, representing in her role the true (Protestant rather than Roman Catholic) church in offering humanity hope. Whilst ‘proud Duessa’ (Book I, viii, 6), identified with the Whore of Babylon (the Protestant interpretation being the Roman Catholic Church) in the description of her rich, pompous clothing (‘scarlet red’, ‘gold’ and ‘pearle’ [Book I, ii, 13]) leads him astray to the House of Pride, Una on the other hand, identified with singleness of truth (her name meaning ‘one’) and also described in terms of her appearance, the overall impression being one of purity and innocence, leads him to the House of Holinesse. Spenser not only deliberately sets Una riding on ‘a lowly Asse more white than snow’, likening her to Christ as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on an ass’s back, and dresses her in white, but in addition has her leading a lamb and then goes on to equate her to the lamb. By doing this, Spenser is linking Una with Christ, the sacrificial lamb that takes on himself the sins of mankind, and so, once again, we can see Spenser’s stressing not only of Una’s symbolising of the true church, but, in a wider sense, of God’s providence for the elect Christian (here symbolised by Redcrosse). In order to truly grow spiritually, Spenser implicitly argues, one must reach the point of reliance on God’s providence. However, nowhere

better do we see grace exemplified than in the penultimate canto of Book I, when Redcrosse fights the dragon, assuming the name of St. George to suggest the restoration of England as a Christian nation (the dragon clearly being drawn from visionary imagery in Revelation) and winning the battle but clearly not just due to his own ability. There are a number of different metaphorical interpretations for this 'final battle', ranging from Christ's victory at Calvary (indicated by St. George's almost resurrected nature on the third 'joyous' day, as on Easter Sunday) to the defeat of the Roman Catholic Church in England (most of the book having been handed over to subtle diatribe) to the individual Christian's victory over sin. The third one is both the most fitting and most satisfying for the reader, as we can see Redcrosse has run his 'race' and reached his 'goal to win the prize' .

However, only with nourishment from the well of life and the sacred tree, images of God's grace in the baptism and Eucharist, is he able to do so, and therefore all the glory is projected onto God and not man. The theme of judgment is also an important one when examining Spenser's preoccupation with processes, and Spenser, in his labouring on the subject of judgment and justice, presents wise judgment as an integral element of Godly living. Judgment is presented as the outworking of virtue, particularly in Book V, aptly entitled 'The Legend...of iustice', where the difficulties and implications of this outworking are addressed. In a socially very fragile nation, social injustice was a particularly potent force for conflict in the sixteenth century, and so the events of Book V have a topical and local quality as well as a universal significance, impacting the reader's life and growth in a fairly immediate way. The link between judging and learning is made in the first canto as Spenser describes how Artegall was raised in

justice and ‘taught to weigh both right and wrong In equall ballance with due recompence’, (i, 7) immediately conjuring up the traditional image of the weighing scales – the sign of justice’s impartiality. Furthering that, Astraea gives Artegall a sword, and Spenser’s description of it, deliberately neglecting to actually call it a sword but instead by its metal – ‘his steely brand’ (8) – in order to emphasise its might, stresses the more actively militant, defensive justice. We then see Artegall’s actual administration of both these forms of justice in the episode when the squire and Sir Sanglier argue over the lady, which he decides to judge: ‘I your cause decide, Perhaps I may all further quarrel end, So ye will sweare my iudgement to abide.’ (25) This assertive language is indicative of Artegall’s confidence in his skills of judgment, and his final judgment confirms this, replicating the judgment of Solomon and thus connecting Artegall emblematically to the wisest and most Godly judge in history as Spenser evokes once again the idea of the impartial weighing scales. The more militant, active (‘sword’) judgment comes when Artegall forces Sir Sanglier to admit his guilt of murdering his lady by carrying her head away, a particularly grotesque image: ‘beare the burden of defame; Your owne dead Ladies head, to tell abroad your shame.’ (28) In Book V particularly, Spenser is preoccupied with the process of judgment as an element of spiritual living, and this is also exemplified in a number of other instances in which Spenser chooses to parallel contemporary issues within each episode. For example, the two challenges of Pollente – both his tyranny and his unmerited weighing and judging – cannot be dichotomised so easily. The impression Spenser gives is that abuse of power leads to dissent amongst the populace and commoners’ attempts to right social wrongs in uprisings – a particularly topical issue with

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the gradual increase of the militant poor in Elizabethan England. Artegall's remark at the false justice of the giant's boast of being able to weigh everything and redistribute it equally that before one can judge ' In euery thing, thou oughtest first to now, What was the poyse of euery part of yore' (ii, 34) is astute commentary both on the current situation and, for the benefit of the reader, in general - how one should judge; Spenser therefore uses this moment to ' touch base' between the allegorical narrative and the very real reader. Artegall (of course, in fact Spenser) therefore sets up a set of scales by which his judgment should itself be judged. Sadly, the limitations of this essay do not permit me to examine in full depth the examples of the way Spenser dramatises the metaphorical journey, the tribulations and the lessons that the elect Christian must experience before reaching Heaven. Other episodes of particular substance including Guyon's journey to the Bower of Blisse, clearly modeled on Odysseus's voyages in order to illustrate the trials and temptations one must overcome in one's life, as well as Redcrosse's restorative experience at the House of Holinesse, incorporating the learning of wisdom and penitence in repentance of his newly-discovered sin, his growth culminating in the sight of the New Jerusalem and promise of a place there one day. It is to achieve this sort of spiritual hope that Spenser includes living, growing, learning, judging and even the act of reading. The first four in particular, working in conjunction in the poem, and enlivened to the reader through the act of reading and responding, were intended by Spenser that their effect would be that the Elizabethan could be ' enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance' just as Paul does in his epistle to the Ephesians.