



FIERCE WARS

and Faithful Loves

Book I of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

UPDATED AND ANNOTATED by **ROY MAYNARD**



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Introduction

C.S. Lewis had this to say about his favorite writer, Edmund Spenser: “Beyond all doubt, it is best to have made one’s first acquaintance with Spenser in a very large—and preferably illustrated—edition of *The Faerie Queene*, on a wet day, between the ages of twelve and sixteen.”

I met Edmund Spenser and his *Faerie Queene* somewhat later (as I recall, I was about twenty-two). But I felt I had met him before. Perhaps it was when I warmed myself in front of the hearth-fires in Tolkien’s Rivendell. Or as I jostled for a view of the tournament when Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* couched his lance. Spenser was certainly present in many of the best parts of Lewis’ books. So reading Spenser for the first time was something like meeting a dear friend of a dear friend. I knew after the first few words that Spenser and I were going to get along wonderfully.

We did, and that’s the reason for this volume. I suppose I could sum up my introduction to Spenser in these few words: *Hey! Look what I’ve found!* (Please note that I said I *could* sum it up, if I was so inclined, but I’m not, so keep reading.)

The Faerie Queene, written at the close of the sixteenth century, is a long-neglected Christian classic, an allegorical tale of knights and dragons and sin and saving grace. In many ways, it was the last major piece of medieval literature. About ten years after *The Faerie Queene* was published, a Spaniard named Miguel de Cervantes came along and dealt the death-blow to literature of chivalry (his *Don Quixote* savagely mocked knighthood and medieval conventions). Even before Cervantes, tales of knights and ladies had fallen out of fashion. Happily for us, Spenser was not a follower of fashion.

Spenser (a contemporary of William Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney) told friends he wished to construct an English epic—a British

Aeneid—which would idealize England just as the *Aeneid* had idealized the foundation of Rome. The central figure would be Prince Arthur, prior to his kingship. Spenser planned twelve books; he completed only six before his death. The portions of the work we have are magnificent. They are also, in our day, virtually ignored.

There are reasons; frankly, Spenser's poem is a difficult read. But consider it in this manner: If I invite you over to my house for dinner, I could cook you hotdogs or I could cook you steak. In all modesty, I am an excellent grill man. My steak is chosen lovingly at the meat counter, marinated overnight, grilled only when the coals are *just so*, seared first and then slowly coaxed to the heights and depths and internal color of Steak Perfection. On your plate, the steak shies modestly away from your knife; you needn't cut it, you just wave the knife over it, and it divides itself into perfect bite-size pieces.

Then there are the hotdogs. I get the 99-cent 10-pack (that's because I don't mind getting the ones that say "composed of meat and meat-like products"). I'll heat them, stick them on buns, and they're your problem after that.

Think of Spenser's poem as the Renaissance poetry equivalent of Roy's Steak. It's not quick and easy, but it's worth the time and effort.

The Faerie Queene is an allegory; that is, it's telling us several different stories in addition to the surface story of the Redcross Knight and his Lady. It's a story about a young Christian's struggles to become more Christ-like. It's the story of the Reformation in England. And it's a story of British politics in the sixteenth century. On top of that, it's a great knights-and-noble-deeds epic with some kissy parts thrown in.

The difficulty for us lies mostly in the verbose, archaic language and the now-obscure allusions. I can't make any excuses for Spenser in these areas; Shakespeare, who was writing at the same time, is much more intelligible to us. And I've seen government documents that are less wordy. But I can explain why Spenser wrote the way he did: those were the rules. He was writing an epic; he followed the poetical models, and he did so brilliantly. The stanzas are eight lines of perfect iambic pentameter, with an "alexandrine" (slightly longer line) closing. He followed the rulebook with classical references and obligatory episodes. Virgil's *Aeneid* had a trip to the underworld; Spenser's Duessa travels there as well. Homer's giant (the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*) used a full-grown tree as a club, and so does Spenser's Orgoglio.

And Spenser obeyed the rules of medieval rhetoric. He employed *amplificatio* (ways of amplifying his poem) such as *expolitio* (conveying

the same type of thought in a number of different ways); *circumlocutio* (referring to people and things without using their proper, mundane names); *ornatus* (switching around the order of the words); and *diversio* (digressing while right in the middle of an exciting part). Many of these devices will be aggravating for modern readers—but only at first. Soon, the pace of the story (along with the comfortable, loping meter) proves infectious.

Also, Spenser followed closely the Italian epic, drawing heavily from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (*The Madness of Roland*). He pays his respects to Dante, just as Milton will pay his to Spenser half a century later.

The same sort of literary mining occurs today. Here's an example: a farmboy, who yearns for excitement and glory, is given a wondrous sword and an impossible mission. With the help of new friends, he succeeds, saves the princess, and his destiny is fulfilled. Is it *Star Wars* or is it *The Faerie Queene*? Both, of course.

But Spenser has something George Lucas doesn't: a clear understanding of the Gospel and of the temptations that face Christians. In a very real sense, Christians fight Una's dragon every day. Christians face down the faith-hating Saracens and crane their necks to take in full measure the giant of Pride.

That's why it's high time the Faerie Queene send her knight to battle once more.

There are a few things that will help make Spenser more accessible to modern readers. First, I have updated the spelling; in places, this has thrown off the meter slightly. For that, I apologize, but I think the trade-off is a bargain. One secret to enjoying Spenser is to read him fluidly. Archaic spellings such as "battaile" for *battle* and "deawie" for *dewy* make for choppy water.

A second help is to know beforehand a few of Spenser's favorite archaisms (old words no longer in use). Many of the words were already archaic when Spenser wrote the poem, and for that reason, I have left them in the text, rather than substituting a modern term. But there aren't that many, and they're fairly easy to remember. Here's a partial list:

- dight**—dressed, adorned
- wight**—creature, living thing
- whilome**—formerly, before now
- wax**—to grow
- courser**—war-horse
- palfrey**—a slow, gentle horse
- puissance**—power, might, strength

sore—greatly
corse—a body (living or dead)
 (to) **prick**—to spur, to ride fast
quite—requite, respond in kind
imp—child (not necessarily negative)
brand—sword
eke—also

There are a few words we know that show up in forms strange to us. *Wit* is a word we use, but Spenser uses it, in different places, to mean *to know*, *knowledge*, and *ability*. Furthermore, he includes the variations *weet* (to know or guess), *wot* or *wote* (to know or guess), *weeting* (knowingly or expectingly), and *unweeting* (unknowingly or unwittingly). *Weeds* means clothes (it sounds strange, but no stranger than calling them *threads*). *Bootless* does not mean underdressed for a cowboy; it means *useless* or *ineffective*. And Spenser uses the word *fair* as often **and as loosely** as politicians use the word *important*. He uses it to mean pretty, handsome, polite, solid, just, and righteous.

I have defined these and other difficult words to the right of the text; but pretty soon, you're going to be surprised at how smoothly Spenser starts to flow for you.

And a third tip for enjoying Spenser is, *read it aloud*. Often, the ear can decipher and unscramble meaning better than the eye can. I can prove this to you; listen to any conversation you have today, but listen as a stenographer. If you were to write down, syllable-for-syllable, what you and your friends actually say, it wouldn't make much sense. It would be filled with um's and uh's and mmm-hmmph's, sentence fragments and dangled participles and out-of-place pronouns. But your ear makes sense of it all. I think you'll find that it works for Spenser, too.

One last piece of advice: don't give up. Your Spenser-skills will build up just like any other muscle or ability you exercise. Will it be worth the effort? C.S. Lewis thought so. In fact, he says Spenser is good for you:

What he [Spenser] feels on one level, he feels on all. When the good and fair appear to him, the whole man responds; the satyrs gambol, the lances splinter, the shining ones rise up. There is a place for everything and everything is in its place. Nothing is repressed; nothing is insubordinate. To read him is to grow in mental health.

The eginning . . .

Blood rushes to the cheeks of the youth; he considers for a moment how to answer his neighbor. Truth wins out.

“Georgos,” he says softly.

The bearded man next to him grins and glances at the youth’s rough clothing, craggy hands, and sun-blanced hair. “That means *plow-boy* in the ancient tongue, does it not? It suits you well, boy.”

The youth fights his anger and embarrassment. Is this man a noble? Does he sit at yonder table, beside an Elven knight? Does he discourse with the Faerie Queene herself? No. He’s a bystander, a commoner, like the youth himself. His manners are no better; there are bits of that meat-pie he was eating still lodged in his beard. *At least I know how to wipe my face*, the youth tells himself. The crowds sit on benches and on the polished marble floor of the the torch-lit Hall. They’re mostly here for the spectacle, though they eat occasionally from packs and from the trays passed through (oh, the generosity of that good queen!). Gloriana’s birthday it is, and her health all are celebrating. Though she is less than a stone’s throw away, the youth has trouble making out the courtly conversation—it’s all but drowned out by the *shushing* of various of his neighbors (more precisely, he thinks, his neighbors’ wives).

The youth refocuses his anger and attacks a hunk of beef he has unwrapped on his lap. It is biting salty, and he wishes, yet again, for a cup of the wine the porters are bringing in by the barrelful. He would receive a measure, to be sure, when the time came to toast the queen’s health and lineage. But for now, the alternatives are two: he could walk over to the cisterns and get a drink of brackish water—and maybe lose his place,

his seat so close to the queen. Or he could ignore his burning thirst, as he ignored the flies and gnats and crying babies and his neighbor's crude jests and jibes, and concentrate on the high words being spoken by the nobles.

He picks the latter. He re-folds the linen around his meal and bends down to stuff it back into his pack.

He hears a universal gasp; he starts up, eyes searching for what he's missed.

She's beautiful, but beautiful and sad like the echoing chants of the friars he heard when he was young. Knife-edge sad like the prayers of a widow. Spirit-soaking beautiful like his fields in the fall.

With small footsteps—how humble, how graceful!—she makes her way to the queen's table. She speaks. He can't hear her, but like one of those gnats or flies, the news buzzes through the crowd fast and erratically. She's a princess of some sort, or a Lady at least. Her kingdom—no, her father's kingdom—has been attacked—no, conquered—by a fierce dragon. She brings a horse and armor, she brings the pleas of her noble parents, and she brings her own self, as pledge to the knight who will fight the dragon and redeem the kingdom.

"Aye, boy, there's the job for you," grins Pie-Beard, elbowing the youth. "You'll not need your plow-pony; she's got the courser ready for you."

As much to anyone else as to the bearded man, the youth asks, "Will the queen appoint a champion?"

"Aye, she'll have to," guffawed Pie-Beard. "No one's likely to volunteer! It's killed four knights so far, the girl tells."

"That's no girl," the youth says. "She's a Lady."

"And you're a farmer; what's that to you? Do you care to fight her dragon yourself?"

"And well I might." *I might. And well I might.* The youth turns the rash idea over in his head. Did he not come to the court to win fame? To become something more than the impoverished farmer his father was? *Burnt to a cinder, he thinks, or plowed under my own field after miserable years of too much rain or too much drought. Where's the dilemma in that?*

"Well I might, Mr. Pie-man," he says, standing. "And why not me? I've a strong arm. I've faced down beasts before. And is it not her custom to grant favors during her birthday-feasts?"

The Lady needs a champion, he thinks to himself, and I need any favor at all.

Pie-Beard nudges a neighbor. "The boy's going to join up!"

The youth burns again, but he sets his jaw and marches forward. He dodges a running child and steps over a muddy, mild dog. He starts to feel

an odd sensation as he nears the Great Table; it's as if he is only watching while someone else—an awkward youth, one he doesn't know—approaches the queen. "I'll fight for the Lady," he hears that youth say.

The queen looks bemused. The Lady looks horrified. "Oh, your majesty," he hears her say softly. "Oh . . . I . . . He hasn't the look of experience to him."

As if she cannot hear the Lady, the queen's expression slowly changes. She seems to see something, to *know* something.

"The armor," the queen says. "Bring it. Try it on the boy. If it fits, then he's your champion. It is said, 'All that is gold does not glitter.'"

ROY MAYNARD

THE FIRST BOOKE OF THE FAERIE QVEENE
Contayning
 THE LEGENDE OF THE
 KNIGHT OF THE RED CROSSE,
 OR OF HOLINESSE

1

Lo I the man, whose Muse ¹ whilome ^o did mask,	<i>formerly</i>
(As time her taught), in lowly Shepherds' weeds, ²	
Am now enforced ^o a far unfitter task,	<i>forced to undertake</i>
For trumpets stern, to change mine Oaten reeds,	
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;	
Whose praises having slept in silence long,	
Me, all too mean, ^o the sacred Muse areeds ^o	<i>unfit/advises</i>
To blazon broad amongst her learned throng: ³	
Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize ^o my song.	<i>teach through</i>

2

Help then, O holy Virgin chief of nine, ⁴	
Thy weaker Novice to perform thy will,	
Lay forth out of thine everlasting scryne ^o	<i>container for holding scrolls</i>
The antique rolls, which there lie hidden still,	
Of Faerie knights and fairest Tanaquill, ⁵	
Whom that most noble Briton Prince ^o so long	<i>Arthur</i>

¹ Classical epics, such as the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, began with prayers to the Muses, goddesses of creativity. Spenser's epic is thoroughly Christian, but he sticks to the classical model by referring to *his* Muse, meaning his creativity. He does not worship his Muse as goddess, though she is *sacred*, in that his creativity is a gift from God.

² Spenser's previous work, the *Shepherds Calendar*, was a pastoral poem, peaceful and pleasing in tone. Here he's saying that he is called to compose a warlike, martial poem. He'll exchange his *oaten reeds* (his gentle pan flute) for *trumpets stern* (the bugles of battle).

³ I.e., to add his poem to the great epics of literature.

⁴ He is not speaking of Mary, but probably of Clio, the oldest (*chief*) of the nine sister Muses. Clio is the Muse of History. He could mean Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry.

⁵ Gloriana, the Faerie Queen herself. She represents the glory of Heaven.

Sought through the world, and suffered so much ill,
 That I must rue^o his undeservéd wrong: *to regret or mourn*
 O help thou my weak wit, and sharpen my dull tongue.

3

And thou most dreaded imp^o of highest Jove, *precocious child (Cupid)*
 Fair Venus son, that with thy cruel dart
 At that good knight so cunningly did rove,^o *shoot*
 That glorious fire it kindled in his heart,
 Lay now thy deadly Heben^o bow apart, *ebony wood*
 And with thy mother mild come to my aid:
 Come both, and with you bring triumphant Mart,^o *Mars, the god of war*
 In loves and gentle jollities arrayed,
 After his murd'rous spoils and bloody rage allayed.

4

And with them eke^o O Goddess heavenly bright,⁶ *also*
 Mirror of grace and Majesty divine,
 Great Lady of the greatest Isle, whose light
 Like Phoebus^o lamp throughout the world doth shine, *Apollo, the sun god*
 Shed thy fair beams into my feeble eyne,^o *eyes*
 And raise my thoughts too humble and too vile,
 To think of that true glorious type^o of thine, *image, she represents (Christ)*
 The argument of mine afflicted^o style: *lowly*
 The which to hear, vouchsafe,^o O dearest dred^o a while. *give / reverence*

⁶ Queen Elizabeth, who, in addition to being the political ruler, was also the head of the Church of England.

anto I.

*The Patron of true Holinesse,
Foule Errour doth defeate:
Hypocrisie him to entrappe,
Doth to his home entreate.* ⁷

1

A Gentle Knight was pricking° on the plain, *riding swiftly, spurring*
Clad in mighty arms° and silver shield,⁸ *armor*
Wherein old dents of deep wounds did remain,
The cruél marks of many a bloody field;
Yet arms until that time did he never wield.
His angry steed did chide his foaming bit,
As much disdainig to the curb to yield.⁹
Full jolly° knight he seemed, and fair did sit, *charming*
As one for knightly giusts° and fierce encounters fit. *jousts*

2

But on his breast a bloody° Cross he bore, *red*
The dear remembrance of his dying Lord,

⁷ These preambles explain what will happen in each canto. They're written in iambic verse, but not Spenser's usual pentameter. Instead, there is a combination of meters: four metrical *feet* per line, then three, then four, then three again. It's called *ballad stanza*. That means that you can sing this to the tune of *Gilligan's Island*. Go ahead. Try it.

⁸ The armor of God (Eph. 6:11-17).

⁹ His powerful, impatient horse chewed (*chide*) the bit and strained at the curb, the part of the bit that controls the horse.



The Prince of Poets



Edmund Spenser was born in either 1552 or 1553 in London. He received a classical education at the Merchant Taylors School. Spenser attended college at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge University, receiving a bachelor of arts degree in 1573, and a master of arts degree in 1576.

He first went to work for the Bishop of Rochester (John Young). He then served under the Earl of Leicester (Robert Dudley). In 1580 he was appointed secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland. In 1581, Ireland became his home. He eventually acquired an estate called Kilcolman (complete with a castle), near the cities of Cork and Limerick.

Spenser was married twice. He married Machabyas Chylde in 1579. In 1594, she died, and he married Elizabeth Boyle.

Spenser's first published works were verses he helped translate while still at the Merchant Taylors School (it was a long allegorical poem, called *The Theatre of Worldlings*, by Jan van der Noodt). His first independent work was published in 1579. It was *The Shepherdes Calendar*, a "pastoral" poem, which was fashionable in literary circles then. But *The Faerie Queene* was his greatest work, and he began it in 1580. Even his friends looked down on it. Until Spenser came along, English was not thought to be a suitable language for an epic. But in the ten years he spent preparing the first three books, he never lost faith in his poem. And after it was published in 1591, he was rewarded by Queen Elizabeth (to whom the poem is dedicated) with a yearly stipend of fifty pounds.

The next three books were published in 1596, along with another poem, *Fowre Hymnes*.

In 1598, rebels in Ireland rose up, led by the Earl of Tyrone, in an attempt to wrest control of Ireland from the English. Though the rebellion eventually failed, Spenser's estate, Kilcolman, was captured by the rebels. He was forced to seek shelter in Cork. From there, he carried a bundle of letters from the Lord Deputy to the Privy Council (the queen's advisors). He arrived in Westminster on Christmas Eve, 1598. On Jan. 13, 1599, he died there.

He is buried in Westminster Abby, and inscribed on his tomb are the words, "The Prince of Poets."

For whose sweet sake that glorious badge he wore,
 And dead as living ever him adored.¹⁰
 Upon his shield the like was also scored,^o
 For sovereign hope, which in his help he had.¹¹
 Right faithful true he was in deed and word,
 But of his cheer^o did seem too solemn sad;
 Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was dreaded.¹²

marked

face

3

Upon a great adventure he was bond,^o
 That greatest Gloriana to him gave,
 That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,^o
 To win him worship,^o and her grace to have,¹³
 Which of all earthly things he most did crave.
 And ever as he rode, his heart did yearn
 To prove his puissance^o in battle brave
 Upon his foe, and his new force to learn,
 Upon his foe, a Dragon,¹⁴ horrible and stern.

bound

*land
praise*

might

4

A lovely Lady rode him fair beside,¹⁵
 Upon a lowly Ass^o more white than snow,
 Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
 Under a veil, that wimpled^o was full low,
 And over all a black stole^o she did throw,
 As one that inly^o mourned. So was she sad,
 And heavy sat upon her palfrey^o slow.
 Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
 And by her in a line^o a milk white lamb she lad.^o

donkey, symbol of humility

*folded around her chin
a long cloak, showing modesty
on the inside
a gentle, calm steed*

on a leash / lead

¹⁰ He loved the risen Lord; see Revelation 1:18.

¹¹ Here's one of those word-order switches we discussed in the introduction. What Spenser means is, *His hope was in the help promised by his Lord*.

¹² This is not an experienced knight; he's never wielded weapons nor faced real-live foes. He probably fears, deep down, that he'll turn out to be a coward when he goes into combat.

¹³ He sought the grace of Gloriana—the grace of Heaven—but he wasn't trying to win his salvation. The Redcross knight symbolizes the Christian seeking to live for Christ. The goal is sanctification, not salvation.

¹⁴ Satan is portrayed as a dragon in Revelation 20:2.

¹⁵ Boy is this one mixed up: *A lovely, fair Lady rode beside him*. This is Una, the maiden who symbolizes Truth. She is the daughter of the King and Queen whose land is assailed by the dragon (i.e., Adam and Eve). She wears a veil because the Truth is too severely beautiful for men to look upon directly.

5

So pure and innocent, as that same lamb,
 She was in life and every virtuous lore,^o *knowledge*
 And by descent from Royal lineage came
 Of ancient Kings and Queens, that had of yore^o *in the past*
 Their scepters stretched from East to Western shore,
 And all the world in their subjection held.
 'Til that infernal fiend with foul uproar
 Forwasted^o all their land, and them expelled. *laid waste to*
 Whom to avenge, she had this Knight from far compelled.

6

Behind her far away a Dwarf¹⁶ did lag,
 That lazy seemed in being ever last,
 Or wearied with bearing of her bag
 Of needments^o at his back. Thus as they passed, *her stuff*
 The day with clouds was sudden^o overcast, *suddenly*
 And angry Jove¹⁷ an hideous storm of rain
 Did pour into his Leman's lap so fast,
 That every wight^o to shroud^o it did constrain, *living thing / shelter*
 And this fair couple eke^o to shroud themselves were fain.^o *also / desirous*

7

Enforced to seek some cover nigh^o at hand, *close*
 A shady grove not far away they spied,
 That promised aid the tempest to withstand:
 Whose lofty trees clad with summer's pride,
 Did spread so broad, that heaven's light did hide,
 Not pierceable with power of any star.¹⁸
 And all within were paths and alleys wide,
 With footing worn, and leading inward far.
 Fair harbor that them seems; so in they entered are.

8

And forth they pass, with pleasure forward led,
 Joying to hear the birds' sweet harmony,
 Which therein shrouded from the tempest dread,

¹⁶ The Dwarf symbolizes human reason. Reason is useful, but ultimately inadequate. Reason must be guided by divine truth, i.e., Scripture.

¹⁷ Here *Jove* is the sky, and his *Leman* is his beloved. Her *lap* is the ground.

¹⁸ This is getting easier, isn't it?