

## Edmund Spenser

Born in London, **Edmund Spenser** (1552? - 1599) was educated at the newly-founded Merchant Taylors School (a school opened in 1562 for the children of tradesmen) under its famous master Mulcaster. He then went to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. He obtained a place in Leicester's household (1579), and perhaps had some contact with Philip Sidney there, before being named secretary to the newly-appointed lord deputy (governor) of Ireland, Lord Grey of Wilton, in 1580. From then until his death he only returned to London three times: once for over a year in 1589, just after he had bought Kilcolman Castle; again in 1596; he died during a final visit in 1599, after his Irish home had been destroyed by rebels in 1598. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, at the expense of the earl of Essex.

He married once just before leaving for Ireland; in 1594 he married Elizabeth Boyle, who seems to be the subject of the sonnets *Amoretti* and the bride of *Epithalamion*. Otherwise, little is known of Spenser's private life, apart from what his poems claim to tell us of him. He seems to have begun writing during his Cambridge days, translating some sonnets and "visions" by Petrarch and the French poet Du Bellay. His first major work was *The Shepheardes Calendar*, published in 1579. During the 1589 London visit, which may have been prompted by a visit made to him in Ireland that year by **Sir Walter Raleigh**, he published the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* which he had been writing for a number of years. In 1591 a publisher edited Spenser's minor verse as *Complaints*, which contains a variety of shorter poems, some of them scornful of courtly life. Disappointed at not being given a job in London, he returned to Ireland. In 1595, *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* (*marriage song*) were published together. In 1596 he seems to have returned to London deliberately to publish the next three books of *The Faerie Queene*, together with *The Fowre Hymnes*, staying at the house of the earl of Essex. In 1609, a folio edition of *The Faerie Queene* was published, containing a fragment of Book VII, the so-called *Mutabilitie Cantos*, written in the same meter as the epic.

### *The Shepheardes Calendar*

The Renaissance interest in **pastoral poetry**, inspired by the great classical models of the eclogues of Theocritus and Virgil, is hard to understand without a realization that the pastoral mode permitted an indirect approach to political and even religious topics too sensitive for direct discussion. The eclogues of Virgil were known to contain references to the politics and society of his time; pastoral poetry was a favorite form of Renaissance satire, and should not be dismissed as a mere exercise in escapism.

The Latin eclogues of Mantuan (1448-1516), and the great French protestant poet Clément Marot (1496-1544), gave Spenser the idea of his first major work. But behind them stands the *Arcadia* (1504) written by the Italian humanist and courtier Jacopo Sannazaro of Naples (1455-1530). This work offers a prose account of the adventures of Sincero, a visitor to the innocent shepherds of Arcadia. Into the prose are inserted twelve poems of great metrical complexity. This *Arcadia* became the model for European pastoral literature for the next 200 years.

The form of the calendar, with a poem for each month, was a popular one, and the first edition of Spenser's *Calendar* (1579) included an emblematic woodcut picture illustrating each month's eclogue. In addition, the work was published with a series of notes and glosses by a mysterious E.K. who sometimes helps and sometimes hinders the reader by his explanations.

Spenser is the first English poet to be influenced by the French *Pléiade*, a group of 7 writers led by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585) whose ideals were expressed by Joachim du Bellay in his 1549 treatise *La Deffense et illustration de la langue francoyse* (defence and illustration of the French language) which argued that the vernacular was capable of a poetic elegance and literary dignity equal to that of Latin. Du Bellay published the first sonnet sequence in French in 1549-50.

Spenser had become part of the radical protestant milieu at Cambridge, as can be seen by his association with Leicester and Sidney; the medieval English literature read by these strongly nationalistic intellectuals included *Piers Plowman*, *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, and the pseudo-Chaucerian *Ploughman's Tale*. In each of these works the corrupt and greedy clergy are satirized and criticized by plain-speaking simple country-folk. It is significant that Spenser takes the name Colin Clout as his own *persona*; the name was used by Skelton for the blunt-speaking countryman in satirical verse attacking corruptions in the church.

Spenser blends the classical eclogue, in which simple shepherds speak and sing, with this native tradition. Spenser's eclogues for May, July, and September lament the lack of true shepherds, playing on the link between "shepherd" (Latin *pastor*) and the church's ministers (pastors) found in the New Testament. In order to strengthen his links with the native tradition of reformist prophecy, Spenser introduces many archaic words into his verse, something for which he was criticized by Sidney; his spelling is usually preserved in modern editions. The following text from May criticizes the worldly ambition of many of the clergy, a problem which was not changed by the break with Rome:

The time was once, and may againe retorne,  
 (For ought may happen, that hath bene beforene)  
 When shepeheardes had none inheritaunce,  
 Ne of land, nor fee in sufferaunce:  
 But what might arise of the bare sheep,  
 (Were it more or lesse) which they did keepe.  
 Well ywis was it with shepheards thoe:  
 Nought having, nought feared they to forgoe.  
 For *Pan* himselve was their inheritaunce,                   (*Pan = Christ*)  
 And little them served for their mayntenaunce.  
 The shepheards God so wel them guided,  
 That of nought they were unprovided,  
 Butter enough, honye, milke and whaye                   (*cheese*)  
 And their flockes fleeces, them to araye.                   (*dress*)  
 But tract of time, and long prosperitie  
 That nource of vice, this of insolencie,  
 Lulled the shepheards in such securitie  
 That not content with loyall obeysaunce  
 Some gan to gape for greedie governaunce  
 And match themselve with mighty potentates,  
 Lovers of Lordship and throublers of states...

According to E.K., there are various kinds of eclogues: plaintive, recreative, and moral. If those centred on the corruptions of the church by its clergy (May and July) and the danger represented by unreformed catholic priests (September) are "moral" eclogues, April is the finest "recreative" poem, with its celebration of "fayre Elisa, Queene of shepheardes all":

Ye daynty Nymphs, that in this blessed Brooke

doe bathe your brest,  
Forsake your watry bowres, and hither looke,  
at my request:  
And eke you Virgins, that on Parnasse dwell,  
Whence floweth Helicon the learned well,  
Helpe me to blaze  
Her worthy praise,  
Which in her sexe doth all excell.

It is not possible to contain the whole *Shepherd's Calendar* in a single definition. Spenser was conscious that Virgil had begun his poetic career with pastoral poetry, before advancing through his Georgics to the summit of the poet's art in the epic. This is the theme of the October eclogue, in which Cuddie and Piers debate the possibility of higher poetry in an ignorant world. Cuddie is discouraged:

The dapper ditties, that I wont devise,  
To feed youths fancy, and the flocking fry,  
Delighten much: What I the bett forthy?  
They han the pleasure, I a slender prize.  
I beat the bush, the birds to them do fly:  
What good thereof to Cuddie can arise?

*(Piers reminds him that he is writing to instruct and improve)*

Cuddie, the praise is better than the prize,  
The glory eke much greater than the gain:  
O what an honor is it, to restrain  
The lust of lawless youth with good advice:  
Or prick then forth with pleasaunce of thy vein,  
Whereto thou list their trained wills entice.

*(A little later he proposes a further, heroic set of topics)*

Abandon then the base and viler clown,  
Lift up thyself out of the lowly dust  
And sing of bloody Mars, of wars, of jousts.  
Turn thee to those, that wield the awful crown,  
To doubted Knights, whose woundless armour rusts  
And helms unbruised wexen daily brown.

The *Calendar* was at least partly intended to show Spenser's poetic skills, and establish his reputation as the leading protestant poet. It is a showcase of many kinds of verse and reaches its climax in November, with an Elegy on the death of an unidentified woman (Dido), modelled on one by Marot:

Shepherds, that by your flocks on Kentish downs abide,  
Wail ye this woeful waste of nature's work:  
Wail we the wight, whose presence was our pride:  
Wail we the wight, whose absence is our cark. *(grief)*  
The sun of all the world is dim and dark:  
The earth now lacks her wonted light,  
And all we dwell in deadly night,

O heavy hearse.  
Break we our pipes, that shrilled as loud as lark,  
O careful verse.

Why do we longer live, (ah why live we so long)  
Whose better days death hath shut up in woe?  
The fairest flower our garland all among,  
Is faded quite and into dust ygo.  
Sing now ye shepherds' daughters, sing no moe  
The songs that Colin made in her praise,  
But into weeping turn your wanton lays,  
O heavy hearse,  
Now is time to die. Nay time was long ygo,  
O careful verse.

(...)

But maugre death, and dreaded sisters' deadly spite  
And gates of hell and fiery furies' force  
She hath the bonds broke of eternal night,  
Her soul unbodied of the burdenous corpse.  
Why then weeps Lobbin so without remorse?  
O Lobb, thy loss no longer lament,  
Dido nis dead, but into heaven hent.  
O happy hearse,  
Cease now, my Muse, now cease thy sorrows' source,  
O joyful verse.

### Italian epic poetry

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is rooted in the European Renaissance struggle to produce a modern epic poem worthy to stand beside the works of Homer and Virgil. A survey of this should precede discussion of Spenser's own work.

Mention has been made of the new attitude toward the poetry of Classical times. In the 16th century, "emulation" (striving to do as well as or better than the best others can do) was an acceptable form of aspiration. The highest form of poetry, since Aristotle, had been recognized as the epic and it was humiliating not to be able to point to any contemporary works equal to those of Homer or Virgil. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, poets in every part of Europe strove (in vain) to produce such a work.

For Spenser and his contemporaries, the most impressive modern epic was the *Orlando Furioso* (Roland Insane) (1532) by **Ludovico Ariosto** (1474-1535) which had been inspired by an earlier poem by the fifteenth century poet **Boiardo**, *Orlando Innamorato* (Roland in love) published in 1495. The court of the Este family at Ferrara in the later 15th century was deeply interested in the 12th century French romances about Brittany, as well as the heroic stories found in the *Chansons de Geste*. Matteo Maria Boiardo (1441-94) combined the two in his unfinished poem about Roland in love.

A summary of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*:

Angelica, the pagan daughter of the king of Cathay, arrives at Charlemagne's court intending to carry off christian knights to serve her father; several, including Orlando, try to woo her. Angelica drinks from a magic fountain and falls in love with Rinaldo, who drinks from the opposite fountain, which makes him detest her so much that he runs away until they arrive at her home. There Orlando comes to rescue her from a dangerous siege, carrying her off to France where Charlemagne is fighting Agramant, king of the Moors. Angelica and Rinaldo again drink from magic fountains, in the reverse order, so that he now loves her, and she detests him. Orlando fights Rinaldo until Charlemagne stops them, entrusting Angelica to Namor, duke of Bavaria.

**Ludovico Ariosto** (1474-1535) undertook to continue this strange story for the Este family, who claimed to be descended from Rogero, one of the heroes of French heroic verse. Ariosto's poem is one of the greatest works of European literature, and has always been greatly admired, although serious-minded critics have at times found it rather too entertaining for their taste. Its opening lines inspired not only Spenser, but also Milton:

I sing of knights and ladies, of love and arms,  
of courtly chivalry, of courageous deeds,  
all from the time the Moors crossed the sea  
from Africa and wrought havoc in France.  
I shall tell of the anger, the fiery rage  
of young Agramant their king, whose boast it was  
he would avenge himself on Charles, Emperor of Rome,  
for King Trojan's death.

I shall tell of Orlando, too, setting down  
what has never before been recounted in prose or rhyme  
(...)

A summary of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*:

As the poem begins, Orlando hears that Angelica has escaped from Namor, and neglects the call of his duty to Charlemagne to follow her. Meanwhile Rogero has fallen in love with Bradamante, Rinaldo's sister who is a warrior, and their adventures are interwoven with those of Orlando and Angelica. Angelica finds a wounded Moorish foot-soldier, Medoro, and falls in love with him while caring for his wounds. They marry and pass an idyllic honeymoon alone in the woods. Orlando happens to hear of this and becomes mad; he runs naked through the country, destroying everything. At last Astolfo makes a journey to the moon with St John, riding on the hippogriff, and finds there the land of lost things; he recovers Orlando's lost wits, and brings him back to his senses in time to kill Agramant in a final battle.

Ariosto tells the tale with humour and considerable irony. Spenser failed to follow him in this, but took the external romance material of love and knightly prowess, and greatly increased the moral and allegorical levels of meaning. Ariosto's work was so popular that it was published in 154 editions before 1600 and inspired a number of other Italian poets to write long verse romances on similar topics.

The rise of Aristotelian classicism soon after Ariosto had finished his work brought demands for deeper seriousness and artistic unity. This led **Trissino** to write an epic *L'Italia liberata dai Goti* (Italy freed from the Goths) published in 1547 that is mainly notable for having shown Milton (thanks to Tasso's *Mondo creato*) that epic could be written in blank verse. In 1560 **Bernardo Tasso** published *Amadigi*, a return to the complex chivalric romance with interwoven narratives.

**Torquato Tasso** (1544-95) was Bernardo's son; he too spent many years at Ferrara and was finally confined there in a state of madness from 1579 until 1586, then banished to wander in poverty until his death in Rome. The story of Tasso's sufferings, including a love affair that may not be historically true, has become a central image of the Romantic view of the poet's life in works by Byron, Goethe, and Donizetti. The mental agony that Tasso underwent perhaps helps explain the tragic shadows that dominate his great epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem set free) that he finished in 1575, and published in 1580-1.

Where Ariosto enjoys comic detachment from the human situations he is describing, Tasso identifies with them in all their ambiguity; where Ariosto tells stories that are obviously fantastic, Tasso follows the classics in writing about true history. He chooses the 11th century First Crusade siege and capture of Jerusalem by Godfrey of Bouillon as his setting; thus there is religious conflict, Christian against Moslem, and heroic military action. The parallels with Homer are many: Jerusalem stands for Troy, Goffredo for the *Iliad's* Agamemnon, while Rinaldo is modelled on Achilles in his withdrawal from battle. The adventures which these heroes are exposed to, though, are unlike anything in Homer. Again, as in the romances, the centre of interest lies in the tragic complexity of relationships between man and woman.

#### A summary of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

At the start of the poem the Christian army has been besieging Jerusalem for six years. Rinaldo, a paragon of strength and beauty, utterly proud, has left the Christian army because his honor has been challenged. The poem is largely focussed on his relationship with Armida, the niece of the magician King of Damascus, who represents the Eternal Feminine with her intensely sensuous appeal. She lures him away, intending to kill him. In contrast to Rinaldo, the Norman Tancred is destroyed by his love for the beautiful Clorinda who fights on the pagan side. Meeting her by chance at night, unaware of her identity, he mortally wounds her before discovering who he has been fighting.

The Christians need wood to build a new siege-tower, but the forest has been bewitched and all who enter it go mad with fear. Tancred is stronger, but when he cuts a tree, it bleeds, then speaks with Clorinda's voice. Rinaldo has been taken to the Isles of Fortune, a paradise of sensual voluptuousness, after the hatred of Armida for Rinaldo changes to love. Yet the appeal to his thirst for glory brings him back; he alone sees the forest as a place of bliss, and destroys it. Finally, Jerusalem falls, Rinaldo confronts Soliman in single combat, defeats him, and the poem ends.

For Spenser, the tragic tone of Tasso's work must have been more congenial than the humour of Ariosto. Tasso's work marks the entry of the Renaissance discovery of the individual into literature and is a milestone in the development of the "romantic" vision of human relationships. Spenser could not follow him so far, but there are striking influences. Spenser and Tasso both offer images of sensuality having immense appeal, even as we

recognize their destructive, unreal nature. Tasso's sonnets, it should be remembered, gave Spenser many models for the *Amoretti*, while his theoretical works, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* and *Discorsi del poema eroica*, had a great influence on such poets as Daniel, Milton, Cowley, and Dryden.

### *The Faerie Queene*

When he published the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* in 1589, Spenser prefaced them with a letter addressed to **Sir Walter Raleigh** in which he outlined what he claimed to be his "whole intention". The letter even includes a narrative account of his plan for the final, 12th book. This letter, confused and confusing, was not included in the 1596 edition of the completed six books, and it ought not to be taken as a reliable guide to what we find in the existing text. Yet the 1596 edition's title page still proclaims that the poem contains 12 books "fashioning 12 moral virtues" which echoes the words of the letter to Raleigh:

The general end therefore of all the book is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline. (...) To some I know this method will seem displeasent, which had rather have good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, than thus cloudily enwrapped in allegorical devices.

The claim that this poem is a "courtesy book" designed to instruct the noble reader should not be taken too narrowly. The poem is first and foremost one of the greatest works of imaginative literature in English. Spenser makes an apology in his letter for the use of "an historical fiction", realizing that an opinion was growing up in certain protestant circles against every form of literary imagination. His own genius lies in the recreation of images, and this is a fruitful way of approaching the poem.

The *Faerie Queene* is full of images taken from classical poetry, from the Bible, and from the medieval romance tradition; in many ways, Spenser recomposes the images, making them yield new meanings through the use of various kinds of allegory, religious, moral and historical. As moral allegory, the kind that Spenser learned from Tasso, events such as journeys and battles can be interpreted in terms of the quests and struggles in individual human existence. As historical allegory events in the poem refer indirectly to contemporary society or recent political events in Spenser's world. There are also moments when we encounter simple personification, as in characters named "Ignorance" or "Despair." Yet all the events can and must be read first as part of the poem's on-going fictional narrative. The virtue that forms part of the title of each Book of the work has in some cases caused more trouble than it should in interpreting the contents!

The work in its surviving form, if we exclude the *Mutability Cantos*, consists of six Books, each containing 12 cantos, and each with an introductory prologue of a few stanzas. Following the example of Ariosto and almost all the other Italians, Spenser writes in epic stanzas. The "Spenserian stanza" used in the *Faerie Queene* was his own creation, and represents a tremendous poetical achievement. There are nine lines rhyming *ababbcbcc*, all but the last having 10 syllables, the last 12. The use of only three rhymes in each stanza parallels the pattern of *rhyme royal* (*Troilus and Crisseyde*) and *ottava rima* (Wyatt) stanzas. Equally important is the variety employed in the use of end-stopping and enjambment, by which Spenser maintains the rhythm of his narrative:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did mask,            (*previously*)

As time her taught, in lowly Shepherdes weeds,           *(clothes)*  
Am now enforst a far unfitter task,  
For trumpets stern to change mine Oaten reeds,  
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;           *(noble)*  
Whose praises having slept in silence long,  
Me, all too mean, the sacred Muse areeds           *(instructs)*  
To blazon broad amongst her learned throng:  
Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my song.

When he published the *Shepherdes Calendar*, Spenser had remained nameless. Now, publishing his epic, he turns like Virgil to a nobler task. The first Book begins:

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plain,  
Y-clad in mighty arms and silver shield,  
Wherein old dints of deep wounds did remain,  
The cruel marks of many a bloody field;  
Yet arms till that time did he never wield:  
His angry steed did chide his foaming bit,  
As much disdainng to the curb to yield:  
Full jolly knight he seemed, and fair did sit,  
As one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit.

This **First Book** tells in a quite new way the traditional story of Saint George, the patron saint of England; Redcrosse (so called from his coat of arms, that of England) is no mere martial hero. His story epitomizes the Holiness which in the Calvinistic view of Spenser's protestantism was the essential quality of every true Christian. Part of Redcrosse's problems come from his difficulty in distinguishing between Una and Duessa; Una is clearly a representation of the "true" Church, veiled and often helpless compared with her corrupt and deceptive rival.

The adventures of Redcrosse depict the history of the salvation of an individual soul; at first content to imitate others (using old armour), the hero does not realize his own limitations. He is able to see through the superficial deceptions of the House of Pride, all the temptations of worldly society, but is easily made prisoner by Orgoglio. The giant's name also means "pride" but in this case it is theological pride, the sin of thinking that a person can live a good life entirely by their own strength. From Orgoglio's prison, Redcrosse is rescued by Arthur who represents God's special providence for England, and so for all humanity.

Redcrosse recognizes that he is utterly weak and helpless, and it is at this point that he finds himself tempted by Despair. Una, acting as the Grace offered in the true Christian Church, saves him from this and brings him to the House of Holiness where he is restored to health and strength. Now he is able to live by a strength given by faith, not simply by his own human nature. Even so, during the fight with the dragon which is part of the original St George legend but also recalls one of the fundamental images of the Christian victory in the Apocalypse, Redcrosse is in frequent need of supernatural refreshment.

During the three days of the fight, the well of life and the tree of life restore the exhausted hero; these indicate that in the Church there are the "Means of Grace" or sacraments by which the individual Christian is day after day renewed in his fight against Satan. Thus Redcrosse gains a victory and is able to gain the hand of Una; but the marriage is delayed, both for the demands of the poem's structure, and because the wedding in question cannot take place until the Last Judgement.



None of the other five books has the unity or the self-contained power of the first; yet it is wrong to isolate Book I for the intention of Spenser goes beyond it and the other five books certainly expand and challenge its almost too tidy vision of human existence.

**Book II**, “Sir Guyon, or of Temperance” tells a tale parallel to the first. Guyon and the Palmer accompanying him find Amavia with her baby, its hands bloodstained. The nearby fountain cannot cleanse its hands. The baby is left at the castle of Medina. Braggadochio steals Guyon’s horse, Belpheobe encounters Braggadochio with Trompart. Pyrochles fights Guyon and frees Furor before going to Acrasia’s bower in search of Cymochles. Cymochles is persuaded to visit Phaedria’s island, Phaedria takes Guyon there, without the Palmer; the two knights fight until Phaedria parts them. In *Canto vii* Guyon visits the Cave of Mammon, where he sees the throne of Philotime (Mammon’s daughter) and the Garden of Proserpine where he is tempted. He emerges safe but exhausted.

In *Canto viii* Arthur saves Guyon from Pyrochles and Cymochles. In *Canto ix* Guyon tells Arthur about the Faerie Queene; they drive off the besiegers of the Castle of Alma and explore it. Arthur reads the history of the kings of Britain, up to his own still unknown father; Guyon reads of the kings of Faerie (descended from Prometheus’s creation Elf). Arthur fights with Maleger. Finally Guyon visits and destroys Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss.

**Book III**, “Britomartis, or of Chastity”: in *Canto i* Guyon and Arthur meet Britomart, disguised as a knight; as they pursue Florimell they are separated. Britomart arrives at the Castle Joyeous and meets Redcrosse. Britomart tells of her quest for Arthegall; in retrospect we learn how she fell in love with Arthegall after seeing him in a magic mirror, left home, and consulted Merlin in his cave. He told her the identity of her lover, as well as describing the future destiny of their descendants, the British kings. After this, she set out disguised as a knight. Meanwhile, Arthur has gone on following Florimell, whose story he hears. His squire Timias has been pursuing a forester, who wounds him. He is helped by Belpheobe, with whom he falls in love.

In *Canto vi* the birth of Belpheobe, and her twin sister Amoret, is told. Begotten by the power of the sun, they emerge from their mother’s womb as she sleeps; Diana and Venus each take one child, Venus takes Amoret to grow up in the Gardens of Adonis, which are described. Florimell nearly falls into the power of a witch and her son. Satyrane enters the quest for Florimell. But a false Florimell is made by the witch for her son; this is stolen and causes confusion. Britomart forces a way into Malbecco’s castle, where Paridell seduces Malbecco’s wife. In *Canto xi* Britomart and Satyrane are separated. Britomart meets Scudamor and undertakes to rescue Amoret who is in prison in the House of Busyrane. There she sees the Masque of Cupid, and frees Amoret.

**Book IV** tells the story of “Cambel and Telamond, or of Friendship”. Amoret at last discovers that Britomart is a woman. Finally they meet Cambel and Triamond with their wives Canacee and Cambine (from Chaucer’s *The Squire’s Tale*); their story is told. The false Florimell chooses Braggadochio after a tournament for Florimell’s girdle. In *Canto v* Satyrane visits the House of Care. In *Canto vi* Britomart fights with Arthegall, who then begins to woo her before setting out on his quest, while Britomart and Scudamour go looking for Amoret. Belpheobe and Timias rescue Amoret from Lust, Arthur finds Amoret with Aemilia, they set out together. In *Canto x* Scudamour tells how he wooed Amoret in the Temple of Love. *Canto xi* celebrates the marriage of the Thames and the Medway. Marinell falls in love with Florimell, she is released

**Book V**, “Artegall, or of Justice” is for many readers the most arduous. Artegall, brought up by Astraea, sets out on his quest, and after various adventures overthrows the giant Democracy. In *Canto v* he is imprisoned by Radigund. Britomart is told of this, and in *Canto vii* visits Isis Church before killing Radigund and rescuing Artegall. Arthur and

Artegall rescue a prisoner, catch Guile, and see the trial of Duessa. The rest of the book tells of Artégall's adventures until at last he meets Envy, Detraction, and the Blatant Beast.

Finally **Book VI**, "Calidore, or of Courtesy" is centered on Calidore. It shows various victims being rescued from the uncourteous, who are punished. Arthur and Timias are reunited, then parted again. In *Canto ix* Calidore first comes upon Pastorella, whom he woos. He sees the Graces dance, and rescues Pastorella from a lion; she is captured by brigands, and wooed by their captain who saves her when the others want to sell her. Calidore disguises himself and rescues Pastorella, whose lost parents are discovered. Calidore conquers the Blatant Beast.

### The *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*

When Matthew Lownes published a folio edition of Spenser's works in 1609, after the six books of the *Faerie Queene* he added two isolated cantos numbered vi and vii and a third, numbered viii, only two stanzas long. It is not clear how Spenser conceived their relationship with the *Faerie Queene*. Lownes wrote that "both for Forme and Matter" they "appear to be" part of some lost later book but scholars are divided on this. The contents of these cantos form an artistic whole in themselves, although the stanza form is the same as in the rest of the work. It is hard to see how they could have been integrated into any wider scheme of the kind found in the other books.

The main narrative is comic though serious. At the start of *Canto vi*, the figure of Mutabilitie comes barging into the cosmos and forces her way into a meeting of the gods, claiming the right to rule over the cosmos, dethroning Jove. Jove is gentle and they agree to submit the case for trial by an impartial judge.

In *Canto vii*, the case is tried by Dame Nature, sitting on Arlo Hill in Ireland. Mutabilite evokes the way that change is found everywhere in the cosmos and calls up the Seasons and the Months, Night and Day, and the Hours, ending with Life and Death, as witnesses to her claim.

In the middle of *Canto vii*, there is inserted an independent tale modelled on Ovid and Lucian telling a pseudo-myth to explain the origin of two Irish rivers. The tale itself is a retelling of the Actaeon myth, but here the wood god Faunus, having seen Diana bathing, is pursued by hounds only until he is exhausted. The nymph Molanna is punished by stoning and she is transformed into the river Behanagh which flows into the river Funcheon; since the Funcheon was personified as Fanchin, with whom Molanna was hopelessly in love, it is a happy tale in praise of the Irish landscape.

Dame Nature then gives her verdict, which is against Mutabilitie's claim. All things received their essential nature at the Creation, she says, and the processes of change that they undergo do not cause their destruction but bring to fulness their potential qualities. Therefore, "over them Change doth not rule and raigne; / But they raigne over change, and doe their states maintaine." (VII vii 58)

At the end of the cantos, in *Canto viii*, Spenser has placed a moving prayer to be granted unending rest in God's eternal changelessness. The *Mutabilitie Cantos* are beautifully written and deserve to be read on their own terms, without anxious efforts to force them into a larger framework where they do not fit.

### *Amoretti and Epithalamion*

While the *Faerie Queene* is still the subject of intense critical interest, and has often been hailed by poets as one of the most interesting poems in the English language, Spenser's sonnets are more respected than admired. It is assumed that some, at least, of the *Amoretti* were written to express his courtship of Elizabeth Boyle, his second wife. Yet many of the sonnets are conventional, more or less translated from continental models, and at times oddly hostile to the unfeeling lady:

54.  
Of this world's theater in which we stay,  
My love like the spectator idly sits  
Beholding me that all the pageants play,  
Disguising diversely my troubled wits;  
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,  
And mask in mirth like to a comedy:  
Soon after when my joy to sorrow flits  
I wail and make my woes a tragedy.  
Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,  
Delights not in my mirth nor rues my smart:  
But when I laugh, she mocks, and when I cry  
She laughs and hardens ever more her heart.  
What then can move her? if not mirth nor moan,  
She is no woman but a senseless stone.

There seems, though, to be an increasingly happy tone in the sequence, although it is much debated whether it really has any overall narrative structure. The later poems depict a sincerely loving couple:

75. (beach)  
One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away:  
Again I wrote it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.  
“Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain assay  
A mortal thing so to immortalize;  
For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eek my name be wiped out likewise.”  
“Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devize  
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:  
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize  
And in the heavens write your glorious name.  
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

At the end of the 1595 edition, there comes the *Epithalamion*, one of the great English poems. The name of the poem is that of a genre, the “marriage song” that is found in many occasional poems of this period. This particular poem, though, seems to transcend its generic limits. Often the epithalamium was an excuse for more or less bawdy references to the wedding night; here, though, the poet seems to be celebrating his own marriage as the central event that gives cosmic significance to the 24 hours of the day in which it occurs.

The poem is remarkable for its complex numerical structure, a form of poetic architecture that makes the poem an emblem of its own message. It has 24 stanzas, the first 16 devoted to the noise of the daytime events, the final 8 marked by a contrasting night-time silence. This is correct, since in midsummer Ireland (and England) have only eight hours of night. Each of the stanzas ends with a refrain varying around the words “The woods shall to me answer and my echo ring” (stanza 1) for day, and from stanza 17 “The woods no more shall answer, nor your echo ring” for night. The poem has 365 decasyllabic lines but also includes 68 shorter six-syllable lines; the 365 represent the year, as do the 52 weeks, the 12 months, and the 4 seasons, that added together yield the figure 68 for the number of short lines.

At the very centre of the poem, stanzas 12 and 13 represent the moment of the church ceremony:

Open the temple gates unto my love,  
 Open them wide that she may enter in,  
 And all the posts adorn as doth behove,  
 And all the pillars deck with garlands trim  
 For to receive this Saint with honor due,  
 That cometh in to you.  
 With trembling steps and humble reverence  
 She cometh in before th’Almighty’s view,  
 Of her ye virgins learn obedience,  
 When so ye come into those holy places,  
 To humble your proud faces:  
 Bring her up to th’high altar, that she may  
 The sacred ceremonies there partake,  
 The which do endless matrimony make,  
 And let the roaring organs loudly play  
 The praises of the Lord in lively notes,  
 The whiles with hollow throats  
 The choristers the joyous anthem sing,  
 That all the woods may answer and their Echo ring.

Behold whiles she before the altar stands  
 Hearing the holy priest that to her speaks  
 And blesseth her with his two happy hands,  
 How the red roses flush up in her cheeks  
 And the pure snow with goodly vermill stain,  
 Like crimson dyed in grain,  
 That even the angels which continually  
 About the sacred Altar do remain  
 Forget their service and about her fly,  
 Oft peeping in her face that seems more fair  
 The more they on it stare.  
 But her sad eyes still fastened on the ground  
 Are governed with goodly modesty  
 That suffers not one look to glance awry,  
 Which may let in a little thought unsound.  
 Why blush ye love to give to me your hand,  
 The pledge of all our band?

(*serious*)

Sing ye sweet angels, Alleluia sing,  
That all the woods may answer and your echo ring.

Before and after these two central stanzas come ten stanzas, divided by their contents into sections of 3-4-3 stanzas; the first and last stanzas of the poem are an introduction and conclusion. In each stanza there are a number of short six-syllable lines contrasting with the longer ten-syllable lines. The poem's day is at the same time an image of the year which was so often seen as an image of the whole of a person's human life. Unlike many other poems of this genre, the stanzas depicting the wedding night are the most solemn of all, full of the thought of fertility, childbirth and blessing:

And ye high heavens, the temple of the gods,  
In which a thousand torches flaming bright  
Do burn, that to us wretched earthly clods  
In dreadful darkness lend desired light;  
And all ye powers which in the same remain,  
More than we men can fain, *(imagine)*  
Pour out your blessing on us plenteously,  
And happy influence upon us rain,  
That we may raise a large posterity,  
Which from the earth, which they may long possess,  
With lasting happiness,  
Up to your haughty palaces may mount,  
And for the guerdon of their glorious merit *(reward)*  
May heavenly tabernacles there inherit,  
Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.  
So let us rest, sweet love, in hope of this,  
And cease till then our timely joys to sing,  
The woods no more us answer, nor our echo ring.

The complete work of Spenser amounts to three times more lines of poetry than the complete poetry of John Milton. Both of them are difficult poets, dauntingly formal and unattractive to twentieth-century minds in search of easy materials. They represent the permanent challenge of the classical tradition in a non-classical age.

#### Further Reading on Spenser

*The Spenser Encyclopedia* ed. A.C. Hamilton. University of Toronto Press; Routledge. 1990.

Elizabeth Heale. *The Faerie Queene: A Reader's Guide*. Cambridge University Press. 1987.

William Allan Oram. *Edmund Spenser*. New York: Twayne. 1997.