

# The Faerie Queene



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDMUND SPENSER

Edmund Spenser was born in London around 1552, although many details of his birth, even his parents' names, aren't known for certain today. He wasn't from an upper-class background, and so he received aid when he went to Pembroke College (now part of Cambridge). In 1580, he went to Ireland to fight Catholic rebels, fighting next to the famous British explorer and writer Walter Raleigh. Legend has it that he began writing *The Faerie Queene*—by far his most famous work today—while sitting under a tree in North Cork, Ireland, that lived until it was struck down by lightning in the 1960s. Spenser published the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* in 1590. Its publication earned him a modest life pension from Queen Elizabeth, but he didn't earn greater favor in the court and ended up spending much of his life in Ireland. He continued to write both long and short works, including the next three books of *The Faerie Queene*, which were published in 1596. Spenser died at age 46 while in London after being driven out of his castle in Ireland by Irish forces, and he is buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Faerie Queene* is dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, and her reign is one of the most important historic events that provide context for the poem. For about a thousand years prior to the reign of Henry VIII, England had been a predominantly Catholic nation, but Henry VIII's disagreements with Pope Clement VII about the issue of divorce ultimately prompted England's transition toward Anglican Protestantism. The transition was often tumultuous—at one point, when the line of succession was disputed, the Protestant Lady Jane Grey ruled for nine days before being deposed and executed by the Catholic Mary Tudor (called "Bloody Mary" by her critics). Queen Mary herself, however, reigned for only a few years before being deposed and executed by her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth I, solidifying England's status as a Protestant nation. Violence between Catholics and Protestants didn't end, particularly in Ireland, where Spenser himself participated in the fight on behalf of the Protestants who supported Queen Elizabeth.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Both the style and subject matter of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* are deeply indebted to works that came before it, particularly from ancient Greece and Rome and from the Middle Ages. In fact, the whole writing style of the poem was

archaic at the time Spenser wrote it, using words and phrasing that would have been more common in the time of writer Geoffrey Chaucer ([The Canterbury Tales](#)), who lived a couple hundred years before Spenser. Chaucer is specifically mentioned in *The Faerie Queene* and Spenser even re-uses some of Chaucer's characters. Spenser's constant references to Greek and Roman gods reflect the strong influence of classical epic poems on his work. Some of the most important influences are Homer ([The Iliad](#) and [The Odyssey](#)), Virgil ([The Aeneid](#)), and Hesiod (a source for many Greek myths, particularly in [Theogony](#) and *Works and Days*). *The Faerie Queene* itself went on to become influential, and one of its most notable immediate successors is John Milton's [Paradise Lost](#), which is also a long epic poem that blends Greek and Roman myth with Christianity.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Faerie Queene
- **When Written:** Sometime between 1587 and 1596
- **Where Written:** North Cork, Ireland
- **When Published:** 1590 for the first three books, 1596 for the next three
- **Literary Period:** Elizabethan
- **Genre:** Epic Poem, Fantasy
- **Setting:** A mythical medieval-inspired place known as "faerie land"
- **Climax:** Each of the six books has a different climax in which one of the Faerie Queene's subjects uses their virtue to defeat a villain.
- **Antagonist:** False knights and pagans
- **Point of View:** Although the first-person narrator is a character, most of the book is told in the third person.

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Long Live the Queene.** Although Edmund Spenser is not as widely read today as his contemporary William Shakespeare, *The Faerie Queene* has been cited as an influence on a wide range of pop culture works, ranging from books like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and [The Phantom Tollbooth](#) to the movie series *Star Wars* to the TV show *The Crown* and the video game series *Dark Souls*.

**Stuck on the To-Read Pile.** Although *The Faerie Queene* is dedicated to Elizabeth I and features several characters modeled on her, there is no conclusive evidence that she read even one of its over 36,000 lines.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Faerie Queene* is broken into six books (with surviving fragments of a seventh book). Although the books share a narrator and some other recurring characters, for the most part, each book tells a self-contained story with different protagonists representing various virtues and with different antagonists that represent the heroes' opposites.

In Book I, the Redcross Knight, who represents holiness and who serves the Faerie Queene, travels with his lady Una and her dwarf. He has an enchanted **shield** that protects him with a red Christian cross on it. His ultimate goal is to find and slay the dragon that has been terrorizing Una's parents at their castle in Eden, but he has many adventures and faces many challenges before then. At one point, they encounter the fierce half-woman half-serpent monster Error, whom Redcross manages to slay. Later, the evil wizard Archimago disguises himself as a friendly old man and uses his illusion magic to make Redcross believe Una has been unfaithful, causing him to continue his journey without her. While separated from Una, Redcross is further led astray by the tricky sorceress Duessa in disguise as a fair maiden. A trio of Saracens named Sansfoy, Sansloy, and Sansjoy also cause trouble, fighting with Redcross and trying to kidnap Una while she's alone. Luckily, Prince Arthur comes to the rescue—he is the same Arthur who will eventually become the legendary King Arthur, and he protects Una and forms a friendship with Redcross. At the darkest part of the journey, Redcross encounters the monster Despair, but Una saves him at the last moment. After recovering for a while at a holy house, Redcross is finally strong enough to go slay the dragon, which he does after a fierce three-day battle. Redcross and Una can finally be married, although Redcross has to leave soon in order to fulfill his duties to the Faerie Queene.

Book II switches over to Sir Guyon, who represents temperance and who, like the Redcross Knight, also goes on adventures in service of the **Faerie Court**. After being defeated in the previous book, Archimago tries to convince Guyon to attack the Redcross Knight, but he's unsuccessful. Guyon then happens to run into Amavia, a woman who is dying. She tells him how her knight was killed by the evil pleasure-seeking witch Acrasia. On his way to Acrasia, Guyon ends up on an island devoted to idle pleasure, but his own temperate personality helps him escape it. Similarly, his temperance helps him in combat against hot-headed knights like the fiery Pyrochles. At last, Sir Guyon makes it to Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, which is filled with men who have fallen under her spells. Guyon resists temptation and destroys the bower, freeing the men it once held.

Book III focuses on Britomart, who represents chastity and who is unusual because she's the only major knight in the book who is a woman. She originally comes from Britain, but after seeing a vision of her eventual husband Arthegall (shown to her

by the famous wizard Merlin), she becomes obsessed. She trains in knightly ways so that she can set out in search of Arthegall, taking along her nurse Glaucy to act as her squire. Britomart meets and gravely wounds a knight named Marinell, who has been warned to avoid women but who will go on to marry the fair maiden Florimell (who is renowned for her chastity and wears a **gold belt**) in a later book. Britomart also meets Scudamore, who is looking to free his lady Amoretta from the evil wizard Busirane. Britomart tracks Busirane down and allows him to live on the condition that he free Amoretta at once.

Book IIII focuses partly on Cambell and Triamond, who embody the virtue of friendship. When Cambell holds a tournament to find a man worthy of marrying his sister Canacee, the three brothers Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond enter. Cambell slays Priamond and Diamond, and their souls get transferred to Triamond, who manages to hold his own against Canacee in marriage. Having earned Cambell's respect, Triamond and Cambell become great friends, with Cambell even marrying Triamond's sister Cambina. Meanwhile, many characters from the previous book continue their adventures. Without knowing each other's identities at first, Britomart and Arthegall meet and fight in a tournament, with Britomart being victorious. When they take off their helmets, however, Arthegall falls in love with Britomart and Britomart recognizes Arthegall as the man from her vision. Later, Amoretta is captured by a "savage" carle and Scudamore tries to save her. Arthur and his squire, Timias, help Amoretta escape the evil man, and eventually she is reunited with her beloved Scudamore.

Despite Britomart and Arthegall declaring their love for each other in Book IIII, Book V sees Arthegall traveling on his own (with his iron companion Talus) and representing the virtue of justice. Though Arthegall is a powerful man who subdues and punishes anyone unjust who stands in his way, he ends up defeated and captured by the Amazon queen Radigund, who humbles him and locks him up in a dungeon. Talus manages to inform Britomart of this situation, and she comes to rescue Arthegall, beheading Radigund in the process. Freed from captivity, Arthegall returns to his original goal of freeing an innocent woman named Eirena from an evil tyrant called Grantorto. He beheads Grantorto, and Eirena is restored to her rightful place on the throne.

Book VI follows Sir Calidore who, at the request of the Faerie Queene, is pursuing a monster called the Blatant Beast and who represents courtesy. Though Calidore is a good knight, he considers leaving it all behind when he witnesses the pastoral lives of some shepherds and particularly when he meets the beautiful shepherd's daughter Pastorella. Calidore lives peacefully with the shepherds for a while until suddenly some brigands attack and ransack the village. Many shepherds are killed or captured, and Calidore leads a daring rescue to get Pastorella back. After saving her, however, Calidore decides

that he must continue his quest to subdue the Blatant Beast, which continues to threaten the reputations of noble knights and ladies. Calidore finds the beast, muzzles it, and forces it to follow him like a tamed animal. Eventually, however, the Blatant Beast breaks free, and it continues to roam the world.

Only two cantos from the middle of Book VII survive. Mutabilitie (also called Change) is descended from titans and argues that she should rule heaven instead of Jupiter, but her challenge is unsuccessful. The seventh book, like *The Faerie Queene* in general, doesn't have a definitive ending because Spenser died before completing his planned 12 books.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Gloriana (The Faerie Queene)** – Although she never appears in the story, the Faerie Queene, whose name is Gloriana, gives the poem its title and motivates much of its action—characters like the Redcross Knight, Sir Guyon, and Calidore serve her, while the recurring character Prince Arthur spends most of the book searching for her after seeing her in a vision. Gloriana rules judiciously over **Faerie Court** in faerie land and is admired by everyone who knows her—she is the paragon of a good ruler. Since *The Faerie Queene* is dedicated at the beginning to Queen Elizabeth (who reigned when Spenser wrote it), it seems clear that the character of the Faerie Queene is meant to be a flattering stand-in for her. More broadly, the Faerie Queene represents a unified and peaceful Protestant nation, which contrasted with the real Britain Spenser lived in, where there was bloody conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

**Narrator** – Although the narrator of the poem doesn't draw attention to himself for much of the story, he addresses the reader in the proem for each book and sometimes comments on the action, particularly in the first couple stanzas of a canto. The narrator resembles narrator characters from ancient Greek and Roman epic poems, often calling on the Muses to help tell his story better.

**Arthur** – Arthur, who is a prince during the events of *The Faerie Queene*, is the same Arthur from British mythology who eventually goes on to become King Arthur with the help of the powerful wizard Merlin. Rather than appearing as the protagonist of any of the poem's books, he appears as a helper figure in multiple books for knights like the Redcross Knight and Sir Guyon, sometimes accompanied by his loyal squire Timias. True to his legendary origins, Arthur is a larger-than-life figure who is not only one of the strongest and bravest knights in the story but also one of the most courteous and charitable. Arthur spends much of the story looking for the Faerie Queene, whom he saw in a dream, and like her, he represents an idealized version of Britain that was meant to reflect favorably on the real-world leadership of Queen Elizabeth.

**Redcross Knight** – The Redcross Knight is the protagonist of the first book of *The Faerie Queene* (and he also makes brief appearances in later books). His lover is the lady Una, and he becomes friends with Prince Arthur. The Redcross Knight is part elf and he wears dented armor, but his most distinctive feature is his **shield**, which features a red design in the shape of a Christian cross—the origin of his name. The Redcross Knight is a version of St. George (a real religious figure), who, according to legend, slayed a dragon. Like the legendary St. George, the Redcross Knight does eventually slay the dragon that is terrorizing Una and her family at their castle, although even after completing this heroic feat, the Redcross Knight continues to wander as part of his service to the Faerie Queene. As his shield suggests, the Redcross Knight embodies the virtue of holiness, and though he can be temporarily misled by tricks or foiled by strong adversaries, he always triumphs in the end.

**Arthegall** – Arthegall is a brave knight who is first introduced as the lady knight Britomart's future husband in Book III and who later goes on his own journey as the protagonist of Book V (in order to free Eirena from the clutches of Grantorto), where he represents the virtue of justice. Though Arthegall is bested by Britomart when they meet and fight due to a case of mistaken identity, he is a strong knight whose ideas about justice are strict and uncompromising. He rides with a metal man at his command named Talus who sometimes fights on his behalf, and he wields a powerful sword known as Chrysaor. Although Arthegall is ultimately a heroic character, he does occasionally go too far and has to be held back from slaying too many people. This demonstrates how justice can be tricky to carry out, even for a great knight like Arthegall.

**Britomart** – Britomart is the protagonist of Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, and she is a strong knight from Britain who represents the virtue of chastity. After Merlin shows her a vision of Arthegall with the promise that he'll be her future husband, Britomart is obsessed and trains in the ways of a knight so that she can set out to find him. She is accompanied by her old nurse Glaucé, who acts as a squire. Even among the noble knights of the story, Britomart is one of the strongest, defeating her future husband Arthegall when they end up fighting due to a case of mistaken identity. With her helmet on, Britomart is frequently mistaken for a man, and she frequently surprises people when she takes it off. Although Gloriana is perhaps the character most associated with Queen Elizabeth, the virginal warrior Britomart also shares some resemblance with the queen, and her very name suggests pride in Britain.

**Sir Guyon** – Sir Guyon is the protagonist of Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, and he is a brave knight who embodies the virtue of temperance. He serves Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, and is guided for much of his journey by an old Palmer (pilgrim) who helps Sir Guyon stay on the right path and avoid temptation. Like the Redcross Knight, Sir Guyon comes from

faerie land, and he meets Redcross shortly after Redcross's victory over the dragon. When Sir Guyon encounters the dying woman Amavia, he finds out that she was mortally wounded by the evil sorceress Acrasia. Acrasia, who lives in the Bower of Bliss, represents excess and the opposite of temperance, and so it becomes Sir Guyon's mission to defeat her, which he does at the end of Book II.

**Sir Scudamore** – Sir Scudamore is a brave knight who falls in love with Amoretta when he sees her in the temple of Venus while obtaining the **shield** of love, and he ends up being the protagonist for much of Book III. When Amoretta is captured by the evil man Busirane, Scudamore is distraught and devotes himself to searching for her. Though he fights at first with the fellow knights Arthegall and Britomart, he eventually comes to see them as allies, and Britomart is the one who ultimately frees Amoretta from her imprisonment at the hands of Busirane.

**Calidore** – Calidore is the protagonist of Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, and he is a well-liked knight from **Faerie Court** who serves the Faerie Queene and who embodies the virtue of courtesy. At the request of his queen, he sets out to stop the Blatant Beast, although he gets distracted along the way and nearly gives up his whole quest in order to live a pastoral life.

**Duessa** – Duessa is an evil witch who is originally introduced as the lady of the pagan Sansfoy. In fact, she isn't a fair lady but an old hag who disguises her appearance. In Book I she tricks the Redcross Knight (by pretending to be a faithful woman named Fidessa), but she is found out and punished by being exiled into the woods. She continues to deceive noble knights, however, and is eventually put on trial in Book V. Duessa represents the opposite of the true and virtuous Una, and she seems to also represent Catholicism, which could appear similar to Protestantism on the surface, but which for many Protestants in Spenser's time was considered a false religion, just as Duessa is false.

**Una** – Una is a fair maiden who loves and eventually marries the Redcross Knight. Her parents are king and queen of a kingdom located where the Biblical Garden of Eden was located, and their castle has been taken over by an evil dragon. Although Archimago tricks the Redcross Knight into believing Una was sleeping with someone else, one of Una's defining qualities is that she is always faithful to the Redcross Knight and always trusts in him, even when she is kidnapped or in trouble. She embodies the role of a virtuous woman in the poem.

**Florimell** – Florimell is a fair maiden who undergoes numerous misfortunes on her way to eventually marrying Marinell. She wears a **gold belt**, which she loses when she is attacked by a wild beast and which Sir Satyrane recovers. At one point, a hag creates a false version of Florimell that is so convincing that some people, like Braggadochio, believe it's even better than

the real Florimell. Florimell is attacked at sea and rescued by Proteus, but Proteus tries to woo her and eventually imprisons her in his dungeon. At last, however, Florimell is let out, and her marriage to Marinell is a grand event held at Proteus's house.

**Sir Satyrane** – Satyrane is a wandering noble knight who helps Una out of a forest when she is separated from the Redcross Knight. He fights Sansloy in Book I before later reappearing in Book III to help save the fair maiden Florimell from a fearsome hyena-like beast. His name, which is similar to "satyr" (a half-man half-goat), suggests his close association with nature and the forest.

**Amoretta (Amoret)** – Amoretta (sometimes also called Amoret) is a beautiful maiden and a twin sister of Belphebe, who is taken from her nymph mother at a young age and raised by Venus. Sir Scudamore falls in love with Amoretta when he sees her in the temple of Venus, but eventually they get separated. Britomart helps protect Amoretta from an enchanter named Busirane who torments her until eventually she is at last reunited with Scudamore.

**Archimago (The Sire)** Archimago (originally introduced as "the Sire") is an evil wizard who specializes in deception. He causes problems in Book I when he tricks the Redcross Knight into believing that his lady Una has become lusty and unfaithful to him, causing him to leave without her. He reappears near the end of Book I but is foiled again by Redcross.

**Sansfoy** – Sansfoy, Sansloy, and Sansjoy are three Saracens (an old term that usually meant Muslims or sometimes "pagans" in general) who are brothers and who each oppose the noble Redcross Knight on his journey. Sansfoy is the first of the brothers to be introduced (along with his lady Duessa, who is a witch in disguise). When he is slain, his brothers promise to avenge him, but over the course of the poem, they too are slain, despite often receiving unfair advantages in battle.

**Braggadochio** – Braggadochio is a recurring villain who first appears in Book II after stealing Sir Guyon's horse. He travels with Trompart, a servant who is forced into serving Braggadochio and soon learns how to flatter him. As his name suggests, Braggadochio boasts a lot but often can't back up his boasts with actions, choosing to run away from conflict. Braggadochio represents the opposite of a good knight, showing some outward signs of bravery but ultimately proving himself to be nothing more than a coward.

**Acrasia** – Acrasia is an evil, pleasure-seeking sorceress who lives in the Bower of Bliss and who is the main antagonist of Book II. Since Book II is about the temperate Sir Guyon, Acrasia represents the opposite of temperance, luring men like Sir Mordant to their deaths by causing them to seek too much pleasure. Ultimately, she is defeated by Sir Guyon, which demonstrates the superiority of the virtue of temperance.

**Timias** – Timias is Arthur's faithful squire who accompanies him on many of his quests. Like Arthur, Timias is always ready to



help passersby in need. He eventually falls in love with the fair huntress Belphoebe, but after being tempted by another woman (Belphoebe's twin sister Amoretta), he forces himself to do penance by living humbly until he is worthy again of her love. Eventually, Timias completes his penance and is restored in Belphoebe's favor, and he reunites with Arthur.

**Talus** – Talus is Arthegall's metal companion and seems to be something like an early version of a robot. He wields a flail and can be merciless, with Arthegall often having to restrain him from slaying too many people. Talus represents an absolute idea of justice, which is balanced out by the more nuanced ideas of justice expressed by Arthegall and other characters.

**Belphoebe** – Belphoebe is a huntress maiden of the forest who eventually becomes lady of Timias (the squire of Arthur) after rescuing him in the woods. When Timias is tempted to be unfaithful to Belphoebe with her twin sister Amoretta, she becomes angry with him, and he spends a long time doing penance and living humbly until he is finally worthy of her again. With her chastity and her warrior spirit, she is another character that resembles Queen Elizabeth.

**Marinell** – Marinell is a knight who lives by the sea and who has been told by his mother, the nymph Cymoent, to avoid women because one will be his downfall. But he is quick to pick fights and challenges Britomart, not realizing (because she's wearing armor) that she is a woman. Marinell ends up badly wounded. Eventually, he recovers and ends up marrying the fair maiden Florimell in a grand ceremony held at the house of Proteus.

**The Dragon** – The climax of Book I is when the Redcross Knight confronts the dragon that has been terrorizing the castle of Una's parents, the king and queen. The dragon is a fearsome foe who takes many days to defeat, showing how strong the powers of evil are. In the end, however, the dragon falls to the Redcross Knight, echoing the legend of St. George, the brave knight who slew a dragon.

**Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond** – Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond are three brother knights who, for most of their lives, do everything together. They have a sister named Cambina who eventually marries Cambell. Their mother gets a warning from the Fates that the three brothers won't live long, so she makes a deal that when one brother dies, his soul will be passed on to the next one. Eventually, the three brothers enter a tournament to face Cambell in battle for the hand in marriage of his sister Canacee. Cambell slays Priamond and Diamond, but with the help of his brothers' souls, Triamond fights Cambell to a draw and emerges triumphant. Triamond marries Canacee, and he and his new brother-in-law Cambell bond over shared knightly values. Their friendship is on display at a tournament of knights where the two collaborate to help each other, and it provides a sharp contrast with the false friendship of Blandamour and Paridell, which breaks down under adversity.

**Blandamour** – Blandamour is a crooked knight who keeps company with equally disreputable knights like Paridell and Braggadochio. He is boastful and fickle, falling in love with Amoretta first, then "Florimell" (actually a false Florimell that is actually a sprite in disguise). When a big tournament of knights is held, Blandamour does poorly, emphasizing his inferiority to the more virtuous knights in the story.

**Proteus** – Proteus is a god with the gift of prophecy who warns Marinell that a woman will be his downfall. At one point, he rescues the maiden Florimell but then tries to woo her unsuccessfully and ends up keeping her as a prisoner in his dungeon. Eventually, however, Proteus relents, and the wedding of Marinell and Florimell takes place in his house.

**Paridell** – Paridell is a knight that Sir Satyrane meets after they are both denied hospitality at Malbecco's castle. Eventually, Malbecco relents and lets them inside, but Paridell soon runs off with Malbecco's wife Hellenore, only to abandon her in the woods soon afterwards. Paridell is noted for his fickleness and sometimes even changes sides mid-battle.

**Cambell** – Cambell is the brother of Canacee, the friend of Triamond, and the husband of Cambina (Triamond's sister). Though Book III mentions Cambell and Triamond's virtuous friendship in the subtitle, they play a relatively small role in the book. Cambell is a powerful—at times, seemingly invincible—knight who one day welcomes any challengers who would like to marry his sister. Cambell defeats and slays Triamond's brothers, Priamond and Diamond, but due to a deal their mother made with the Fates, Triamond acquires the souls of his two dead brothers and comes to a stalemate with Cambell. The two become friends and support each other later in the tournament of knights.

**The Blatant Beast** – The Blatant Beast shows up briefly at the end of Book V, then becomes the main villain of Book VI, with Calidore chasing after it. The beast is doglike and known for having lots of teeth and all kinds of tongues—some human and some animal. The beast's fearsome mouth reflects how it is an embodiment of slander and gossip, since its poison bite can destroy otherwise reputable knights and ladies. Though Calidore defeats and muzzles the Blatant Beast for a while, it eventually escapes through unknown means, suggesting how powerful and enduring slander can be.

**Grantorto** – Grantorto is a tyrant who is the main villain of Book V and who imprisons the innocent Eirena. Arthegall is on a quest from the Faerie Queene to defeat him and free her. To lure Arthegall to him, he sets a deadline that he will kill Eirena if Arthegall doesn't come to challenge him personally by a certain date. Arthegall just barely makes the deadline, and the two of them fight. Though he is strong, Grantorto ends up with his ax stuck in Arthegall's shield, and so Arthegall decapitates him, freeing Eirena.

**Cymochles** – Cymochles is an evil knight who has pledged

himself to the pleasure-seeking sorceress Acrasia and who clashes with Sir Guyon. Eventually, he teams up with the fiery knight Pyrochles, in hopes of taking down Sir Guyon together. Though Cymochles is a mighty knight, his mistake is pledging his loyalty to the tricky Acrasia.

**The Lion** – The Lion is a fearsome wild animal that is nevertheless tamed by Una's grace and beauty. It travels with her and protects her after she is separated from the Redcross Knight, although eventually it is slain by Sansloy. Lions have symbolic significance in both the Bible and British history, and this Lion represents how the faithful like Una will be protected when they need it most.

**Orgoglio** – Orgoglio is an evil giant who schemes with Duessa and who defeats a weakened Redcross Knight in battle, taking him prisoner in his dungeon. Though Orgoglio is a powerful and proud fighter, Prince Arthur manages to defeat him in battle, and when Orgoglio dies, all that remains is an empty bladder—showing how empty Orgoglio's pride really was.

**Merlin** – Merlin is one of the most famous wizards in literature, although he plays only a minor part in *The Faerie Queene*. As with other versions of his character, he plays a role in helping young Arthur on his way to becoming king, and he also plays a role in the story of the knight Britomart, showing her a vision of her eventual husband Arthegall.

**Eirena** – Eirena is a fair maiden who is being held captive by a tyrant named Grantorto. Arthegall spends much of Book V trying to free her (although he gets sidetracked along the way) until at last Grantorto sets a deadline where Arthegall must challenge him in battle by a certain date or Eirena will die. Locked in a dungeon, Eirena doesn't realize that Arthegall comes to her rescue in time and believes that she will be condemned to death, until she finds out at the last minute that Arthegall has defeated Grantorto.

**Despair** – Despair is a monster who leads brave knights to kill themselves. Sir Terwin is one of its many victims. The Redcross Knight encounters Despair and is tempted by him, but ultimately is saved when Una stops him from stabbing himself. This frustrates Despair and causes the monster itself to attempt suicide, but despite causing other knights to die, Despair is doomed to always stay alive.

**Canacee** – Canacee is the sister of Cambell and eventual wife of Triamond. In order to find a worthy husband for her, Cambell organizes a tournament where he will personally face all challengers. During the tournament, Cambell slays Priamond and Diamond, but their youngest brother Triamond survives and gets to marry Canacee, cementing the friendship between him and Cambell.

**Sir Turpine** – There are actually two characters named Sir Turpine. One is captured by Amazons serving their queen Radigund and eventually put to death. The more significant Sir Turpine, however, is a rude man in Book VI who torments

Calepine and Serena. Eventually Arthur confronts him and defeats him, letting him live if he gives up the knighthood, but Sir Turpine doesn't change his ways. Finally, Arthur, with help from the savage man, defeats Sir Turpine again and steals his armor, tying Turpine upside-down to a tree as a warning to other false knights.

**Mercilla** – Mercilla is a just and merciful queen who, like the Faerie Queene and Britomart, is another flattering stand-in for the real Queen Elizabeth. One of her most notable actions is to hold a trial for the false sorceress Duessa, which could be interpreted as a reflection of the real-life trial of the deposed Catholic monarch Queen Mary by the new Protestant monarch Queen Elizabeth.

**The carle** – The carle is an unnamed wild man who lives in the woods and who rapes and eats women. He captures Amoretta and Aemylia. Though he is based on racist stereotypes of a "savage," he may also be a parody of Catholics, who believe in literally eating the body of Christ during communion (which is "cannibalism" to Protestants like Spenser who believe the Eucharist is only symbolic).

**Dame Coelia** – Dame Coelia is the mother of Fidelia, Speranza, and Charissa. She is the matron of a holy house where the Redcross Knight recovers after his encounter with Despair, and her virtue, along with that of her daughters, helps fortify the Redcross Knight for the final part of his quest in Book I.

**Placidus** – Placidus is a squire being chased by the evil Corflambo who asks Arthur for help. His friend Amyas has been imprisoned where Corflambo's daughter Poeana watches over him. Poeana loves Amyas, so Placidus pretends to be him in order to escape. After Corflambo is dead, Arthur asks Placidus to overlook his daughter Poeana's past sins, and Placidus takes her as his wife.

**Squire of Dames** – The Squire of Dames is a squire who was asked by his lady to "do service unto gentle Dames." When he ends up winning favor in the hearts of 300 women, however, his lady scolds him and tells him to do the opposite, finding 300 women who will reject him.

**Fidelia, Speranza, and Charissa** – Fidelia, Speranza, and Charissa are the three daughters of Dame Coelia, who runs a holy house where the Redcross Knight recovers after his encounter with Despair. The three daughters represent faith, hope, and charity respectively, and their virtue helps the Redcross Knight heal not only physically but spiritually as well.

**Sir Calepine** – Sir Calepine is the knight of the lady Serena. When Serena is wounded by the Blatant Beast and Calepine tries to carry her across a river, Sir Turpine just watches them and laughs. He continues to have conflict with Sir Turpine until at last Arthur defeats the rude Turpine and takes away his knightly equipment.

**Mirabella** – Mirabella is a fair lady who has been condemned to roam the world with Scorn and Disdain tormenting her as

punishment. She comes from low birth, but her beauty led men to their doom, causing Cupid to punish her. Though her punishment is painful, she accepts it, wandering around until she saves as many men as she “killed.”

**Pastorella** – Pastorella is a fair maiden who lives among shepherds and who temporarily distracts Calidore from his quest to find the Blatant Beast. Coridon is the shepherd most in love with Pastorella, but she prefers Calidore. She and other shepherds get kidnapped by brigands, but Calidore saves them, although eventually he has to leave to continue his quest to find the Blatant Beast.

**Hellenore** – Hellenore is the wife of Malbecco. He is a stingy and jealous man who tries to hide his wife from visitors. Resenting her husband, Hellenore runs off with the visiting knight Paridell, but he soon abandons her. Left all alone, Hellenore eventually gets taken in by some satyrs in the woods and decides to stay with them.

**Mutabilitie (Change)** – Mutabilitie (also called Change) is the protagonist of the two cantos that survive from Spenser’s seventh book in *The Faerie Queene* (he planned twelve books but only fully completed six). She is descended from titans and tries to argue that she is more powerful than Jupiter and so should rule heaven, but she is unsuccessful.

**The Lady of Delight (Malecasta)** – The Lady of Delight (also called Malecasta) is the lady of a castle themed after Venus. When she sees Britomart in her armor, she thinks Britomart is a man and falls in love with her. But when she tries to embrace Britomart at night, Britomart fights back and runs away.

**The Palmer** The Palmer is an elderly religious pilgrim who travels around with Sir Guyon and helps the knight grow in virtue. The holy man isn’t just a physical guide for Sir Guyon but also a spiritual one, often functioning in the role of Sir Guyon’s conscience. He wisely discourages Sir Guyon from getting into needless fights with other knights and heeding the songs of deceptive mermaids, and encourages him to develop the virtue of temperance, or self-restraint. He can also pacify wild beasts with his staff. When he is separated from the Palmer, Sir Guyon is more susceptible to various temptations. Thanks to the Palmer’s guidance, Sir Guyon ultimately becomes wiser and more moderate over the course of their travels.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Sansloy** – Along with his brothers Sansfoy and Sansjoy, Sansloy is a Saracen (an old term that usually meant Muslims or sometimes “pagans” in general) who opposes the noble Redcross Knight on his journey. After Sansfoy is slain, Sansloy promises to avenge him, but he is eventually slain himself.

**Sansjoy** – Along with his brothers Sansfoy and Sansloy, Sansjoy is a Saracen (an old term that usually meant Muslims or sometimes “pagans” in general) who opposes the noble Redcross Knight on his journey. After Sansfoy is slain, Sansjoy

promises to avenge him, but he is eventually slain himself.

**Glauce** – Glauce is Britomart’s elderly nurse who acts as something like a squire to her after Britomart ventures out in search of her future husband Arthegall. She is sensible and often provides Britomart with advice.

**Una’s Dwarf** – Many characters in *The Faerie Queene* have a dwarf who acts as a servant and helps them while traveling. Una’s dwarf is the most significant of these characters, often acting as an intermediary between his lady and the Redcross Knight whenever Una is in trouble.

**Pyrochles** – Pyrochles is an evil knight who, spurred on by Furor and Occasion, clashes with Sir Guyon. His servant is Atin, and he eventually allies himself with Cymochles. Pyrochles is strongly associated with fire—his shield reads “Burnt Do I Burn”—and this represents his hot temper.

**Furor and Occasion** – Furor is a wounded man who acts like he’s insane, and Occasion is his blind hag mother. Together, the two of them inspire violence and discord wherever they go.

**Lucifera** – Lucifera is the lady of the House of Pride, a crucial stop on the Redcross Knight’s journey. She is the daughter of Pluto (god of the underworld). She is a tyrant who rides around on beasts named after the seven deadly sins.

**Cambina** – Cambina is the sister of Priamond, Diamond, and Triamond. Although Cambell kills two of her brothers, she eventually marries him, cementing the friendship between Cambell and Triamond (the surviving brother, who marries Cambell’s sister Canacee).

**Radigund** – Radigund is queen of a tribe of Amazons who temporarily capture and humble Arthegall. Her maid Clarinda watches Arthegall when he’s in captivity. She is a proud and powerful warrior, but when Britomart comes to rescue Arthegall, she ends up beheading Radigund in battle.

**Amavia** – Amavia is a dying woman who inspires the temperate Sir Guyon to seek revenge on Acrasia, the evil witch who killed Amavia’s lover Sir Mordant. She dies soon after speaking to Guyon.

**Sir Mordant** – Sir Mordant is Amavia’s lover and becomes one of many men who fall under the sorceress Acrasia’s spell. He is so deeply under her spell, in fact, that when he tries to escape her Bower of Bliss, he dies soon afterwards.

**The Savage Man** – The savage man from Book VI (not to be confused with the carle, who is also described as a savage man) has noble blood in him, despite his rough outer appearance. He helps Arthur, Sir Calepine, and Serena as they oppose the rude Sir Turpine.

**Phaedria** – Phaedria is a fair lady who escorts both Cymochles and Sir Guyon to an island dedicated to idle pleasure. Though Sir Guyon is tempted by the island’s delights, the temperate knight ultimately comes to his senses and flees.

**Malbecco** – Malbecco is a very greedy man who doesn't like providing hospitality to knights in her castle, including Paridell and Sir Satyrane. When Paridell runs off with Malbecco's wife Hellenore and also sets Malbecco's money on fire, Malbecco goes to save the money first.

**Scorn and Disdain** – Scorn is a fool with a whip and Disdain is a giant (and a cousin of Orgoglio) with a heavy iron club. Together, they travel with Mirabella and punish her on Cupid's behalf for "killing" men with her beauty.

**Cymoent** – Cymoent is a water nymph and the protective mother of the knight Marinell, who warns him to avoid women, then takes care of him after he is gravely wounded by the lady knight Britomart.

**Busirane** – Busirane is an evil sorcerer who kidnaps the fair Amoretta and tortures her. Britomart defeats him, however, and in exchange for his life, he agrees to let Amoretta go.

**Coridon** – Coridon is a shepherd who loves Pastorella and competes (unsuccessfully) for her affection against Calidore. When many shepherds are kidnapped by brigands, Coridon escapes to ask Calidore for help and help him free Pastorella.

**Venus** – Venus is the goddess of love and the mother of Cupid. A temple to Venus plays a key role in Book III when Scudamore travels there to retrieve a shield and meet Amoretta.

**Ate** – Ate is an old hag who rides with the false sorceress Duessa in Book III, and she is known as the mother of all discord, having been a powerful force throughout history. She specializes in creating arguments and tries to get knights to fight with each other.

**Serena** – Serena is the lady of Sir Calepine. She gets badly wounded by the Blatant Beast, but Calepine cares for her. Sir Turpine, meanwhile, rudely refuses them any hospitality, despite Serena's grave injuries. She is captured by cannibals but eventually Calepine frees her.

**Clarinda** – Clarinda is the maid of the Amazon queen Radigund, and she watches over Arthegall when he's in Radigund's captivity. She schemes to win Arthegall's affection and is disappointed when he remains faithful to Britomart.

**Blandina** – Blandina is the lady of the rude Sir Turpine. She schemes with him and tries to protect him from Arthur.

**Error** – Error is a half-woman, half-snake monster that lives in darkness. When she dies, her children eat her flesh until they themselves burst and die.

**Mammon** – Mammon is a personification of greed who tries (unsuccessfully) to tempt Sir Guyon with extravagant wealth while Sir Guyon is in the underworld.

**Munera** – Munera is the sorceress daughter of the Saracen Pollente who spends her time lying on a heap of gold. Arthegall and Talus punish her greed by chopping off her hands and feet, then throwing her body to drown in mud.

**Bead-men** – The seven Bead-men live in the house of Dame Coelia, where the Redcross Knight recovers after encountering Despair. They represent the opposite of the seven deadly sins from the House of Pride.

**Contemplation** – Contemplation is an old man that the Redcross Knight meets while staying at the holy house of Dame Coelia. Though he is full of grace, he sometimes gets too distracted by his own heavenly thoughts.

**Mercy** – Mercy lives in the house of Dame Coelia, where the Redcross Knight recovers after encountering Despair. She is the embodiment of the virtue mercy, and she guides him to meet contemplation.

**Briana and Crudor** – Briana is a lady who torments traveling knights because the knight Crudor is too proud to accept her love. Calidore intervenes and gets Crudor to accept Briana, causing her to repent of her past ways.

**Poeana** – Poeana is the daughter of the evil man Corflambo, and she oversees his dungeon. She falls in love with Amyas but gets tricked when Placidus pretends to be him. After the death of Corflambo, she becomes less proud and marries Placidus.

**Sir Sanglier** – Sir Sanglier is an immoral knight who beheads his own lady and steals the lady of a squire that he likes better. Arthegall tracks him down with Talus and forces him to carry around the head of his former lady as punishment.

**Care** – Care is a blacksmith who makes a lot of noise and doesn't let Scudamore get any sleep when he visits.

**Pollente** – Pollente is an evil Saracen who charges a toll on a bridge and gives the money to his daughter Munera. He ends up being slain in a fight with Arthegall.

**Corflambo** – Corflambo is an evil man who rides a camel and can kill with his stare. He chases the squire Placidus and has a daughter named Poeana. Arthur beheads him.

**Amyas** – Amyas is a squire and a friend of Placidus. He gets imprisoned by Corflambo, where Corflambo's daughter Poeana keeps watch in the dungeon and falls in love with him. Eventually, with help from Arthur, Amyas's friend Placidus gets him free.

**Melibee** – Melibee is a peaceful shepherd and Pastorella's father. When several shepherds are kidnapped by brigands, Melibee ends up being killed.

**The Sultan and Adicia** – The Sultan and Adicia are a husband and wife who plot to overthrow the just queen Mercilla. Arthegall foils their plot, killing Sultan. Adicia is so enraged by this that she goes off wandering the world and turns into a tiger.

**Sir Bellamoure and Claribell** – Sir Bellamoure and Claribell are Pastorella's parents, although they were separated from Pastorella shortly after her birth and don't see her again until she happens to visit their castle after being rescued by Sir



Calidore. (This Claribell is different from Philemon's lover.)

**Tristram** – Tristram is a noble young man who is the son of a British king. Calidore is impressed to see Tristram defend himself from an attacking knight even though Tristram doesn't have armor of his own.

**Sclaunder** – Sclaunder (like "slander") is an old hag who lives in the woods and spreads poisonous words about noble knights.

**Priscilla and Aladine** – Priscilla and Aladine are lovers, although Aladine comes from a lower status than Priscilla. Aladine gets badly wounded, but Calidore helps by killing the knight who injured him.

**Bracidas** – Bracidas is the elder brother of Amidas and is in a land dispute with him that Arthegall helps solve. His betrothed, Philtera, leaves him for his brother, while his brother's betrothed, Lucy, ends up with Bracidas instead.

**Amidas** – Amidas is the younger brother of Bracidas. During a land dispute, the two of them end up swapping fiancées, with Philtera going to Amidas and Lucy going to Bracidas. Arthegall helps them resolve their dispute.

**Geryoneo** – Geryoneo is a landlord with six arms and six legs who feeds Belgae's children to a monster. He puts up a fight in battle against Arthur before being slain.

**Aemylia** – When Amoretta is captured by the carle, Aemylia is already one of his prisoners, and she explains to Amoretta how dangerous and wicked the carle is.

**Sir Ferraugh** – Sir Ferraugh is a morally questionable knight who thinks he is stealing Florimell from Braggadochio, although actually he only steals false Florimell (an evil sprite who is disguised as her).

**Alma** – Alma is a courteous lady who hosts Sir Guyon and Arthur at a castle where they have some leisure time and read about the history of Britain. Her castle is under siege by swarms of enemies, led by Malegar.

**Philemon** – Philemon and his lover Claribell get killed when Furor and Occasion stir up trouble. (This Claribell is different from the one who is married to Sir Bellamoure and is the mother of Pastorella).

**Maleffort** – Maleffort is a guard who helps Briana try to win the love of Crudor. He resorts to evil tactics, and so Calidore cuts his head off.

**Sir Terwin** – Sir Terwin is a knight who died after an encounter with the monster Despair.

**Sir Trevisan** – Sir Trevisan is the knight who warns the Redcross Knight and Una about how the knight Sir Terwin died after encountering Despair.

**Philtera** – Philtera is a greedy woman who leaves Bracidas for his younger brother Amidas when Amidas suddenly gets a little more land.

**Lucy** – Lucy is abandoned by her betrothed, Amidas, when

Philtera comes for him instead. She tries to kill herself but ends up saved by Amidas's older brother, Bracidas, and marries him instead.

**Belgae** – Belgae is a poor woman oppressed by the evil tyrant Geryoneo, who kills her children. Some of her surviving children ask Mercilla for help.

**Malegar** – Malegar is the captain of the swarms of enemies that attack Alma's castle. Arthur defeats Malegar easily, although he's surprisingly durable, surviving even being cut in half.

**Fradubio and Fraelissa** – Fradubio and Fraelissa are lovers who get turned into trees by the evil sorceress Duessa.

**Night** – Night is a woman who wears all black. Duessa visits with her while staying at Lucifera's House of Pride, and Night promises her that the Redcross Knight will pay for slaying Sansfoy.

**Corceca** – Corceca is the blind mother of Abessa who at one point hosts Una and the Lion. She thoughtlessly recites hundreds of prayers a day, which is a criticism of and parody of Catholicism.

**Kirkrapine (A Criminal)** – Kirkrapine is a criminal who loves Abessa. He is slain by Una's Lion when he tries to sneak in to see Abessa.

**Colin Clout** – Colin Clout is a shepherd known for his skill playing pipes and who originally appeared in another pastoral poem that Spenser wrote.

**Abessa** – Abessa is daughter of the blind mother of Corceca who loves the criminal Kirkrapine.

**Æsculapius** – Æsculapius is a god of medicine who, in mythology, was sent to the underworld for being too good at stopping death. He helps heal Sansjoy's wounds (from battling the Redcross Knight) for Night and Duessa.

**Elissa, Perissa, and Medina** – Elissa, Perissa, and Medina are three sisters who cause discord between Sansloy, Sir Huddibras, and Sir Guyon, trying to distract Guyon from his service to the Faerie Queene.

**Malengin** – Malengin is an evil man who steals from travelers and lives underground. Talus finds him and dismembers him as punishment.

**Sir Sergis** – Sir Sergis is a knight who travels with Arthegall when he's on his way to defeat Grantorto and free Eirena.

**Samient** – Samient is a damsel who tells Arthegall about the good queen Mercilla.

**Argante** – Argante is an evil giantess who captures the Squire of Dames.

**Ollyphant** – Ollyphant is a giant who is Argante's even greedier brother.

**Sir Huddibras** – Sir Huddibras is an evil knight and an ally of

Sansloy.

**Sylvanus** – Sylvanus is an old forest god who still enjoys pleasure. He and his fauns and satyrs (half-men, half-goats) save Una from Sansloy in the forest.

**Diana** – Diana is the virgin huntress goddess of the woods.

**Cupid** – Cupid is the mischievous god of love and the son of the goddess Venus.

**Jupiter** – Jupiter is king of the gods and one of the most powerful among them.

**Burbon** – Burbon is the knight who warns Arthegall about Grantorto's threat to kill Eirena if Arthegall doesn't show up by a certain date.

**Atin** – Atin is the servant of the fiery knight Pyrochles.

**Malvenù** – Malvenù is the porter at Lucifera's House of Pride.

**Ruddymane** – Ruddymane is an orphan saved by Sir Guyon.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### VIRTUE, ALLEGORY, AND SYMBOLISM

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is divided into six books, and each book explores a different virtue: holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy. While there are recurring characters who appear in multiple books, the main character is different for each book and is always a knight who represents the book's central virtue. For example, the protagonist of Book I is the Redcross Knight, who embodies the book's theme of holiness. His name comes from the red Christian cross emblem on his shield, which has magic power to protect him. Later in the book, it's revealed that the Redcross Knight is in fact a version of St. George, an English saint famous for slaying a dragon, further confirming the character's holiness.

The obstacles that the Redcross Knight faces on his way to slay the dragon are all full of holy symbolism. For example, he encounters a monster named Error, which is a half-serpent with a knotted-up tail and which prefers to live in the darkness. The monster's name makes the symbolism clear: Error represents errors, with its knotty tail and preference for darkness showing how errors thrive on confusion and ignorance. But while Error is a fearsome monster, the Redcross Knight manages to slay it by chopping off its head, providing a visual representation of how holiness is able to overcome errors. Though the allegory with Error may seem simple, *The*

*Faerie Queene* is dense with these kinds of symbols and often contains shocking imagery, such as when Error's children eat its corpse until they gorge themselves and explode. Echoing the Bible, stories from Greek and Roman mythology, and the work of previous writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser structures *The Faerie Queene* so that each section has a clear moral. While it's never a surprise when virtue triumphs over evil, Spenser portrays this conflict in creative ways, using surprising imagery and poetic language to bring everyday moral problems to life for readers.



### BRITISH IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* begins with a grand dedication to Queen Elizabeth (the reigning monarch in Britain at the time) in which he writes that all the labor that went into his poem is dedicated to her. The character of the Faerie Queene herself (also called Queen Gloriana) is always virtuous and correct, making her a flattering stand-in for the real-life Queen Elizabeth. Other characters also have clear parallels to Elizabeth, such as the chaste but powerful knight Britomart, who is famously a virgin like Elizabeth and whose very name seems to suggest Britain. Britomart is in fact British, and when she fights on behalf of her homeland, it's no accident that she defeats every evil knight she encounters and astonishes many with her beauty.

While the flattering portrayals of Queen Elizabeth are the most notable examples of British nationalism in Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene* also explores and glorifies British identity in other ways. One of the most noteworthy and unusual cantos in the poem is Book II, Canto X, where the action temporarily pauses while the noble knight Sir Guyon reads a long account of British history. Like *The Faerie Queene* itself, the book that Guyon reads freely mixes real history with mythology, portraying England as an ancient land of giants and monsters that endured numerous reversals of fortune and changes in leadership before finally arriving at its glorious modern form. Spenser invokes Britain's connections to both mythology and an ancient past, not only to praise Queen Elizabeth, but also to help foster a sense of British identity and tradition that endured well beyond Elizabeth's reign.



### PROTESTANTISM

Though Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* draws influences from a variety of different religious traditions—including the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome—it is also an unapologetic defense of Anglican Protestantism. Many of the book's themes, like justice or friendship, are not necessarily religious, and others like holiness or chastity play a role in many different religions. Nevertheless, a close look at the events and characters in *The Faerie Queene* reveals that many of the villains in the story are

specifically coded to represent real-world opponents to Protestantism.

On the one hand, there are the external threats to Protestantism, often referred to in the poem as “paynim” (pagans) or Saracen. Book I, for example, has the evil trio of Sansfoy, Sansloy, and Sansjoy who oppose the Redcross Knight and try to steal away his lady Una. Book II has Pyrochles and Cymochles, the pagan knights who quarrel with the noble Sir Guyon, attempting to steal his armor while he’s injured and refusing to change their ways even after being granted second chances. These characters are often explicitly or implicitly rendered as Muslim and sometimes originally hail from Persia, recalling battles between Christianity and Islam during the Crusades as well as in Spain in the fifteenth century. These characters are often irredeemably evil, with personalities that are greedy, violent, and unrepentant.

The other big threat to Protestantism explored in *The Faerie Queene* is internal: Catholicism. At the time of the poem’s publication, England was in a period of fierce religious conflict, with the Protestant Queen Elizabeth having recently dethroned and beheaded the Catholic Queen Mary. This conflict is re-enacted in Book V, when the merciful Queen Mercilla makes the difficult decision to punish Duessa, a false sorceress who led men astray by disguising herself as beautiful. The tricky Duessa could reflect the contemporary Protestant belief that while Catholic practices might appear outwardly beautiful, they were inwardly false and deceptive. While Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* deals with big, universal themes about virtue, its specific depictions of other religions often reveal a preference for Protestant doctrine and, in doing so, sometimes reflect anti-Catholic and other common biases of the time.



## DECEPTION AND LIES

Throughout Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, evil characters disguise their identities and tell lies in order to trick heroic characters into doing things they wouldn’t otherwise do. Archimago in Book I is one of the earliest examples of this type of trickster character, using magic and some mischievous sprites in order to trick the Redcross Knight into believing that his chaste lady Una has been unfaithful to him. Even more extreme is the Blatant Beast that Sir Calidore pursues in Book VI. It is slander personified: a doglike monster with many tongues, some human and others animal, in order to represent the many ways that slander ruins the reputations of knights and ladies with its lies. Though Calidore tames the beast for a while, the poem ends with the beast let loose again, showing the enduring and uncontrollable power of deception.

According to Spenser, the most dangerous thing about deception is that it can make an evil thing appear like a good

one—or even better than a good one. This is most humorously illustrated with the case of false Florimell in Book III, where the fair maiden Florimell competes in a beauty contest against a replica of herself (made from snow for skin, lamps for eyes, and gold wire for hair) that is controlled by an evil sprite. The episode shows how deception can be seductive—but it also shows how the allure of deception is temporary, since false Florimell is eventually outed as a fake, just like previous trickster characters like Archimago and Duessa get their comeuppance. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser portrays how the glamor of lies and deception can lead even virtuous characters astray, but he also shows how true virtue and honesty win out in the end.



## LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Throughout Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, there are two types of relationships that occur again and again. One is love (typically between a knight and a lady) and the other is friendship (often between equally matched knights who share common goals, or between knights and squires). In Spenser’s epic poem, characters’ morality often comes through most clearly in their relationships with others, meaning that heroic characters are kind and courteous in their relationships while villainous characters are selfish and uncaring.

One of the most noteworthy love stories in *The Faerie Queene* is the romance between Britomart and Arthegall. Though their courtship represents an ideal version of love, this doesn’t mean there aren’t obstacles along the way. First, Britomart searches for a long time for Arthegall, enduring heartsickness and maintaining her chastity, all in the hopes of one day meeting her destined husband. After meeting, Britomart and Arthegall don’t immediately fall in love—due to mistaken identity, the two end up actually fighting each other in battle. Even when Britomart and Arthegall do confess their love, they can’t be together immediately because Arthegall is called off to complete his knightly duties. Though there are fairytale elements to the love between Britomart and Arthegall, what’s even more noteworthy is their patience and endurance for overcoming obstacles.

In a similar vein, many of the noble knights that meet in *The Faerie Queene* also form enduring friendships that are built on sacrifice and endurance. Arthur appears as a character in several books, helping the other knights on their quests, but his most notable relationship is with his squire Timias. Timias and Arthur feel affection for each other, but they also feel a sense of duty. When Timias fails in his squirely duty by disappointing the fair huntress Belphebe, he is too ashamed to see Arthur again until he first performs proper penance to Belphebe. In the poem, knights operate according to a code, and while knights who follow this code form friendships based on shared duty, knights who disregard the code often end up on their own, at

least until they serve their punishment. By comparing and contrasting examples of love and friendship in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser shows how healthy relationships can be based on mutual duty and sacrifice, while superficial relationships can be easily torn apart by greed and selfishness.



## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* has a complicated relationship with women. On the one hand, the poem reflects biases against women that were prevalent when it was written. Under *coverture*, a legal practice that was common in England in the 1500s and for centuries afterwards, women had no legal status, being "covered" by their husbands, and so they couldn't own land in most cases unless they were widowed. The Amazon queen Radigund is an example in the poem of a woman who tries to place herself above men, and rather than celebrating her, Spenser portrays her as cruel, egotistical, and ultimately deserving of being beheaded, suggesting that Radigund was wrong to challenge women's place in the status quo. Nevertheless, this situation is complicated by the fact that *The Faerie Queene* is dedicated to a woman (the real-life Queen Elizabeth) and the fact that one of the strongest, most heroic characters in the entire story is the lady knight Britomart, who represents the nation of Britain itself in the poem.

Despite Britomart's immense physical strength, she shares one thing in common with the many honorable but helpless damsels that populate the poem—she is always chaste and faithful, unlike the evil women in the story who are lusty and tricky (traits that some of the evil men share as well). Though Britomart bests her future husband Arthegall in battle, she respects his authority and doesn't challenge him when he leaves her to go off on his own to fulfill his duties to the Faerie Queene. Britomart's virgin status seems to have been inspired in part by Queen Elizabeth, whose own unmarried state was controversial at the time, but which Spenser portrays as a positive aspect of Britomart. Like Elizabeth, Britomart is an exception among women, perhaps in part because her knight's armor allows her to look like a man. *The Faerie Queene* features several powerful and virtuous women (in addition to Britomart, there's the righteous queen Mercilla and of course the Faerie Queene herself), but rather than challenging the status quo, these women uphold it, deferring to men and stopping women like Radigund or Duessa who would disrupt the social order. Such portrayals of exceptional women could have helped lessen the fears of contemporary readers who worried about Queen Elizabeth's unusual status as an unmarried woman on the throne.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SHIELDS

In *The Faerie Queene*, shields are more than just a piece of combat equipment: they represent a knight's identity. Perhaps the most famous shield in the book is the one that belongs to the Redcross Knight and gives him his name. The shield has a red emblem on it in the shape of a Christian cross, and it is enchanted to protect the Redcross Knight from danger. Symbolically, this suggests that Redcross's faith is what protects him from danger—which is appropriate since he is the character who embodies the virtue of holiness. In general, shields seem to be associated with heroic characters—Arthegall also has a recognizable shield that helps him defeat the villain Grantorto when his ax gets stuck in the shield. This could reflect how good knights, like shields, are protectors. Nevertheless, a few evil characters do have prominent shields, perhaps most notably Pyrochles, whose shield reads "Burnt Do I Burn." These evil characters with shields don't necessarily contradict the positive image of shields—they simply show how sometimes evil knights adopt characteristics of good knights, even if they can only offer a pale imitation.



## FLORIMELL'S GOLD BELT

The gold belt of Florimell (also sometimes called a girdle) symbolizes chastity and, in particular, how true chastity is worth as much as gold—if not more. Florimell is one of the most chaste and beautiful women in the story. Her belt, which makes its wearer worthy of chaste love and which originally belonged to Venus, first becomes significant when a beast attacks Florimell and the belt gets left behind, leaving some characters like Sir Satyrane to fear that Florimell has died. Later, the gold belt plays a key role in a tournament of knights, when a beauty contest among the ladies leads to the belt being given as a prize to a false version of Florimell created by a hag. The belt rejects its new wearer, slipping off, and many other women at the tournament try to wear the belt, only to find it also slipping off of them, too. This suggests that chastity—particularly of the kind Florimell demonstrates—is rare among women and should be valued. (Notably, the chaste Amoretta is able to wear Florimell's belt, suggesting that she is similarly worthy of chaste love.) The return of the gold belt back to the real Florimell in Book V suggests that false women and false chastity won't hold up to scrutiny, whereas patience and endurance like Florimell's will be rewarded.





## FAERIE COURT

Faerie Court symbolizes the virtuous ideal for which a good knight should strive. While Faerie Court is never directly depicted in *The Faerie Queene*, it is frequently referenced as an ideal for how a proper knight should act. While many of the heroes in the epic poem face moments of weakness or moments when they are tempted or misled, the Faerie Queene herself seems to be infallible. Serving the Faerie Queen is such an important duty that the Redcross Knight places service to her above his devotion to his lady Una, and similarly, Arthegall temporarily leaves Britomart in order to help carry out a request for the queen. While Faerie Court can be interpreted as a stand-in for the court of real-life Queen Elizabeth, it arguably takes on even greater significance, embodying the concept of duty itself and even taking on a religious dimension. The service that the various knights in the story render to their Faerie Queene resembles the duty and sacrifice that a good Protestant Christian would render to God. Faerie Court exists in the story as a distant idea of perfection, just as heaven is a distant idea of perfection in Christianity, and this is why service to the Faerie Court is the highest priority for many knights.





## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Faerie Queene* published in 1979.

### Book I: Proem Quotes

☞ Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,  
As time her taught in lowly Shepheards weeds,  
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,  
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,  
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 39

#### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is from the proem (introductory part) of the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, and it introduces the narrator of the poem, who is very much a character of his own. The narrator starts this long epic poem by calling on the help of his Muse. Muses are ancient Greek and Roman goddesses of the arts and sciences, and many ancient epic poems (like Homer's *Odyssey* or Vergil's *Aeneid*) also started with the

narrator asking the Muses for help telling the story. Both the plots and the characters of *The Faerie Queene* draw inspiration from classical epic poetry, and so Spenser references the style of these poems as well.

One of the first things that Spenser's early readers would have noticed about his poetic style was that it was very archaic, using words and spellings that were more common hundreds of years ago. Today, it's possible to see these archaic touches by comparing the style of *The Faerie Queene* to the writing of William Shakespeare, who wrote around the same time as Spenser but whose English looks a little closer to today's version of the language. This archaic style reflects the nostalgic and sometimes conservative themes of the poem, which often involve preserving a status quo.


### Book I: Canto I Quotes

☞ A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,  
Y clad in mightie armes and silver shielde,  
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,  
The cruel markes of many a bloody field;  
[...]

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,  
The dear remembrance of his dying Lord,  
For whose weete sake that glorious badge he wore,  
And dead as living ever him ador'd:  
Upon his shield the like was also scor'd

**Related Characters:** Redcross Knight

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 41

#### Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces The Redcross Knight, the protagonist of the first book of the poem and one of the overall most important characters in it. Many characters in the poem get only brief descriptions of their physical appearances that cover one or two important features, so the Redcross Knight's several lines of description actually make him one of the most intricately described heroes in the story.

The "dints" on the Redcross Knight's armor suggest that he is no new knight, but rather a veteran who has been through plenty of battles before. Even great knights in the poem get wounded, and what separates them from weaker knights is how they keep fighting. The most significant part of the

Redcross Knight—which gives him his name—is the bright red crucifix insignia that he wears on his clothes and on his shield. This establishes that the Redcross Knight is a Christian warrior (and as later parts of the poem will establish, specifically an Anglican Protestant warrior). Christianity is an essential part of *The Faerie Queene*, informing the whole poem's morality, even though Spenser also takes heavy influence from non-Christian religions, particularly the religions of ancient Greece, Rome, and sometimes Egypt.

## Book I: Canto IV Quotes

☞ Young knight, what ever that does armes professe,  
And through long labours hunttest after fame,  
Beware of fraud, beware of ficklenesse,  
In choice, and change of thy deare loved Dame

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Redcross Knight, Duessa, Una

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote by the narrator of the poem comes at the beginning of Book I, Canto IV and poses some advice directly to a potential reader. Many cantos begin with commentary from the narrator, sometimes framed as advice to a reader, other times just presented as general musings. Often, these commentaries deal with the virtue or vice that is most important to the action of the canto. Here, for example, the narrator warns of “fraud” and “ficklenesse.”

While the narrator's advice is general, it could also be interpreted specifically as a warning to the Redcross Knight to beware the tricky sorceress Duessa and trust instead the faithful Una. The poem often works on both a general and specific level at the same time, with the individual actions of the characters meant to represent broader moral issues that could apply to almost anyone. This specific commentary by the narrator deals with the concept of authenticity, particularly for women, and this is a subject that will come up again and again in the poem. The poem is full of women like Duessa who appear sweet on the surface but only want to lead men to their dooms. Women in the poem can save men and represent the highest form of virtue, but this seeming admiration for women is mixed with the constant anxiety that women who appear virtuous might not be what they seem.

## Book I: Canto IX Quotes

☞ Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,  
Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart,  
Ne divelish thoughts dismay thy constant spright.

**Related Characters:** Una (speaker), Redcross Knight, Despair

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is spoken by Una to the Redcross Knight when he is confronting Despair, one of the most significant episodes in the first book of the poem. Fittingly enough, the Redcross Knight's encounter with the monster Despair is an allegory for him confronting his own despair and facing up to all the ways he has potentially sinned by abandoning his lady, Una. Despair is a monster who kills knights by providing them the means to commit suicide, and the Redcross Knight seems to be on the verge of killing himself when Una intervenes at the last minute.

The scene of the Redcross Knight confronting Despair is powerful because some of Despair's arguments do make sense and sound logical on the surface. While Despair tells a slanted version of events, he nevertheless causes the Redcross Knight to feel regret by reminding him of real actions he took in the past. Up until this point in the poem, Una has been a largely passive character who is essentially helpless without someone like the Redcross Knight to protect her. Here, however, she illustrates that her relationship with the Redcross Knight is not always a one-way partnership with him as protector—her own virtue helps fortify him, and at crucial moments, it can even help save him.

## Book I: Canto XII Quotes

☞ Now strike your sailes ye jolly Mariners,  
For we come unto a quiet rode,  
Where we must land some of our passengers,  
And light this wearie vessel of her lode.

**Related Characters:** Narrator (speaker), Redcross Knight, Una

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 202



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## BOOK I: PROEM

The narrator of the poem calls out to a muse, imitating the style of other famous and renowned poems like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. He promises to tell of the great battles and loves of knights and ladies. He asks the Muse Clio in particular to help him tell the story better, as well as the gods Cupid and Mars. He ends by praising Queen Elizabeth of England.

A "proem" is a type of introduction that was particularly popular in ancient Greek and Latin epic poetry. The narrators of these poems often asked the Muses (goddesses who inspired art, science, and poetry) to help them tell their stories. The narrator makes this connection to classical poems even clearer by mentioning Virgil's *Aeneid*, which was from ancient Rome. *Orlando Furioso* actually was not an ancient poem—it would've been published only a few decades before *The Faerie Queene*—but it, too, looked to the past for inspiration. This shows how, while Spenser had a lot of admiration for past poets, he also read peers and more contemporary works.



## BOOK I: CANTO I

A knight in armor dented from fierce battle rides across a plain. He is a faithful knight who wears a red cross on his chest and his **shield** (and so he is called the Redcross Knight). He has been sent on a quest to slay a dragon by the great queen of **Faerie Court** in fairy land, Gloriana.

Gloriana (aka *The Faerie Queene*) is the stand-in for Queen Elizabeth, who is mentioned by name in the proem and in the poem's dedication. While some have speculated on Spenser's motives for dedicating the poem to Elizabeth (for example, if he was trying to flatter her to win a place in her court for himself), if one takes the poem at face value, it is a celebration of Elizabeth's rule and of British culture in general. As the subtitle to this book suggests, the Redcross Knight represents the virtue of holiness, and so it's fitting that his shield has a red Christian cross on it. The shield is so important that it gives the knight his name.



A lovely lady (Una) mounted on a white donkey rides alongside the Redcross Knight. She is very innocent and seems to have a hidden concern in her heart. She is virtuous and comes from a royal lineage. Riding behind the lovely woman is a dwarf, who carries the things the woman will need on her journey.

Una is the first of many virtuous ladies in the poem defined by her innocence and chastity. While chastity plays a role in many religiously inspired works, it is particularly significant in *The Faerie Queene* because Queen Elizabeth (to whom the poem is dedicated) was an unmarried queen—something that was very unusual at the time.



It begins to storm, and the Redcross Knight and the lovely lady are forced to take shelter in some trees. After the storm passes, they have a hard time finding their way back to the path they were taking earlier. The paths go in many different directions, so they end up taking the path that looks most beaten-down from use.

Characters in the poem often aren't named the first time they appear. Although the lady in the poem is named Una, her name isn't actually used until later in this book.



The Redcross Knight, the lovely lady (Una), and the dwarf arrive at a cave deep in the woods. The lady cautions about danger ahead. But the knight argues that it's better to overcome fear of the unknown and bravely go forward. The lady replies that she knows the dangers of the area better, and that a monster called Error lives in the cave.

The Redcross Knight remains determined to enter the cave, despite the lovely lady's warnings. He goes forward and sees Error, which is a half-serpent, half-woman monster, lying on the ground with her tail in knots. She is surrounded by thousands of offspring that suck poison out of her.

Error sees the Redcross Knight and backs away, preferring to remain in darkness. But the knight uses his sword to force Error to stay in the light, angering her, and prompting her to attempt to attack with her stinger. The knight responds with a strike that hits the monster's shoulder.

Error is stunned, but soon her body rises back up. The monster wraps around the Redcross Knight, trapping him. The lovely lady cries out that the knight must use his faith to strangle the monster, or else he'll be strangled first. The knight gets one hand free and grips the monster fiercely, causing her to release her own grip.

Error vomits out poison, mixed with various books and papers as well as eyeless frogs and toads. The Redcross Knight nearly chokes on the awful smells, but the monster's foul offspring can't hurt him. The knight gathers his strength and this time manages to successfully chop Error's head from her body. Black blood spews out.

Error's offspring gather around her body and suck the remaining life out of it. The offspring eat so much that they burst, killing themselves. The lovely lady congratulates the Redcross Knight, saying that he is worthy of his armor (which bears the red cross symbolizing Christianity).

The Redcross Knight mounts his steed again with the lovely lady and rides back the way they came. Eventually, they come upon an old Sire in long black clothes, with a long beard and a book hanging around his belt.

*All of the knights in the poem follow a code of conduct called chivalry. One of the worst things a knight can do is appear cowardly, and so in this case, the Redcross Knight doesn't back down from the challenge of the unknown cave.*



*Many of the characters and particularly the monsters in the poem have very literal names, with forms that represent what their names mean. Errors, for example, have a "poisonous" effect on the soul, and so the monster Error has poison in her blood.*



*Errors are often made due to ignorance, and so it makes sense that the monster Error prefers to stay in the darkness. Being "brought to light" is what causes Error to weaken.*



*While the knights in the poem are powerful and brave, they are not impervious to the many villains they face. Even a knight as holy as Redcross is vulnerable to Error (as well as to error), something that foreshadows later events in the poem.*



*Error's offspring are an important part of her character, since the implication is that errors lead to more errors. The presence of books and papers in her vomit symbolizes false teachings—which, for Spenser, included non-Protestant Christian teachings.*



*By chopping Error's head off, the Redcross Knight solves the root of the problem. Without Error's head, even her children can't survive, and so this section shows how, while errors can multiply, they can also all be destroyed together with decisive action.*



*Although there's an overarching plot and plenty of recurring characters, the poem has an episodic structure, and once one adventure concludes, it's on to the next one.*





The Sire salutes the Redcross Knight. He begins to tell the knight of a nearby evil creature, which the knight eagerly asks about. The Sire advises the knight to rest before confronting the evil creature, and so they all go back to the old Sire's home.

*One of the key parts of chivalry is that a good knight will always help people in need, and so this is why Redcross is interested in defeating the evil creature.*



The old Sire lives in a humble home in a dale by the edge of the forest, not far from a small chapel. It turns out, however, that the Sire is actually an evil sorcerer called Archimago. While the Redcross Knight and the lovely lady are asleep, Archimago looks up some curses in his magic books. He summons legions of flying sprites.

*The Sire, who turns out to be the evil wizard Archimago, is just one of many characters in The Faerie Queene who turn out to be different than they appear on the surface.*



Archimago sends two sprites in particular to trouble the Redcross Knight in his sleep. One sprite gives the knight dreams of lust, while the other takes the shape of the lovely lady (whose name is Una) and seems to lay beside him.

*Just as chastity is associated with the virtuous characters in the poem, lust is a trait associated with villains and flawed characters. Here, Archimago tries to stir up lust in the Redcross Knight in order to draw him to the dark side.*



At first, the Redcross Knight is enchanted by Una's beauty, but when she offers him a kiss, suddenly he realizes that something is wrong. He is so angry that he almost decides to slay her, but he calms his anger and decides to test her instead. The false Una tearfully confesses her love to the knight, but the knight, troubled by what he hears, nevertheless resists her temptations and eventually falls back asleep.

*The Redcross Knight isn't immune to temptation, but ultimately, his commitment to chivalry allows him to stay chaste. In fact, he is so committed to chastity that he considers slaying Una (or at least the sprite pretending to be Una) in order to keep his virtue.*



## BOOK I: CANTO II

The sprites go back to their master, Archimago, and report their failure. Archimago transforms one of the sprites to look like a young squire, then puts the squire in bed next to the sprite that looks like Una. Archimago then wakes the Redcross Knight and tells him to go witness the shameful things that his supposedly chaste lady is doing.

*Many of the villains in the poem have access to a sort of shapeshifting magic, able to disguise not only their own appearances but the appearances of others as well.*



The Redcross Knight sees the two sprites disguised as Una and the squire, entwined together in bed, and he nearly slays them but is restrained by Archimago. He goes back to his own bed in torment, and at dawn, he and the dwarf speed away on their horses.

*The illusion magic of Archimago is convincing and it leads Redcross to mistakenly believe that his lady Una has been unfaithful to him.*



Una wakes up and weeps to see that the Redcross Knight and the dwarf are gone. She tries to catch up with them in vain. With Una alone in the woods, Archimago sees an opportunity. The crafty sorcerer decides to disguise himself as the Redcross Knight.

*Without a knight like Redcross around to protect her, a lady like Una is vulnerable. With a couple of notable exceptions, most of the virtuous women in the poem are helpless, perhaps reflecting ideas about gender when the poem was written.*

