

## Spotlight On

### The Faerie Queene: England Through the Looking Glass

In Spenser's long, complex, and unfinished poem *The Faerie Queene*, the word *faerie* does not mean a wee, airy creature dancing among the flowers. Rather, *faerie* suggests grand, heroic beings whose superhuman powers come from their own virtue and piety. The Faerie Queene herself (who does not even appear in the existing poem) is Gloriana, an idealized portrait of Queen Elizabeth, and her realm is at once the England that Spenser loved and a strange, imaginary country.

The poem is a romantic or chivalric **epic**. Unlike the classical epics of Virgil and Homer, romantic epics have an open form, with multiple characters and multiplying plots spreading out in all directions. The marvels, knights, ladies, battles, tournaments, enchantments, dragons, giants, dwarfs, and demons derive from the medieval romances of chivalry, such as the tales of King Arthur.

But its lively stories are only the surface of *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's moral purposes are especially evident. In a letter to Raleigh, Spenser said that he intended his work to be an **allegory**: Each leading character in the twelve projected books was to embody one virtue or quality; taken together, they would characterize a truly noble person. The heroes or heroines of the six completed books exemplify holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy.

The poem is a tremendous feat of rhyming: Each nine-line iambic stanza has only three rhymes—*ababbcbcc*. The last line's extra foot makes it hexameter. This line, called an **alexandrine**, often sums up a stanza or finishes it off with a striking image. This verse form, which Spenser created for *The Faerie Queene*, is now called the **Spenserian stanza**.

Trying to experience Spenser's immense poem by reading only a few verses is like trying to experience the ocean by looking at a teacup of sea water. However, the three stanzas that follow, describing the hideous Duessa, show Spenser's delight in heroic violence and the gusto with which he describes ugliness.

#### “The Fowle Duessa”

from *The Faerie Queen*

Edmund Spenser

So as she bad, that witch they disaraid,  
And robd of royall robes, and purple pall,  
And ornaments that richly were displaid;

Ne sparèd they to strip her naked all.  
5 Then when they had despoild her tire and call,  
Such as she was, their eyes might her behold,  
That her misshapèd parts did them apall:  
A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old,  
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.  
10 Her craftie head was altogether bald,  
And as in hate of honorable eld,  
Was overgrowne with scurfe and filthy scald;  
Her teeth out of her rotten gummes were feld,  
And her sowre breath abhominably smeld;  
15 Her drièd dugs, like bladders lacking wind,  
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;  
Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind,  
So scabby was, that would have loathd all womankind....  
Which when the knights beheld, amazd they were,  
20 And wondred at so fowle deformèd wight.  
“Such then,” said Una, “as she seemeth here,  
Such is the face of falsehood, such the sight  
Of fowle Duessa, when her borrowed light  
Is laid away, and counterfesaunce knowne.”  
25 Thus when they had the witch disrobèd quight,  
And her filthy feature open showne,  
They let her goe at will, and wander wayes unknowne.

from **Amoretti**

**Edmund Spenser**

**Sonnet 30**

My love is like to ice, and I to fire;  
How comes it then that this her cold so great  
Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,  
But harder grows the more I her entreat?  
5 Or how comes it that my exceeding heat  
Is not delayed by her heart frozen cold,  
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,  
And feel my flames augmented manifold?  
What more miraculous thing may be told  
10 That fire which all thing melts, should harden ice,  
And ice which is congealed with senseless cold,  
Should kindle fire by wonderful device?  
Such is the power of love in gentle mind,  
That it can alter all the course of kind.

## Sonnet 75

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washèd it away;  
Again I wrote it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.  
5 “Vain man,” said she, “that doest in vain assay,  
A mortal thing so to immortalize,  
For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eke my name be wipèd out likewise.”  
“Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devise  
10 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 when as death shall all the world subdue,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

## Making Meanings

### Sonnet 30 / Sonnet 75

#### First Thoughts

1. How would you feel if someone in love with you had written these poems? Does your gender affect your response? How?

#### Shaping Interpretations

2. What **paradoxes** can you find in Sonnet 30? How would you explain them?

3. Fire and ice poems are meant to be clever, but in Sonnet 30, the **speaker** also says something serious about the power of love. What is it?

4. In what sense is the love of the two people in Sonnet 75 still alive today?

5. In Sonnet 75, what **image** does Spenser use for love's impermanence?

#### Extending the Texts

6. Some attitudes toward love and toward men and women have changed since these sonnets were written. Do you find the speaker's feelings dated or still relevant? Why?