

# FAERIE QUEEN AND THE HOLY KNIGHT RED CROSSE

Seth Myers on Red Crosse's  
Symbolic Virtue of Holiness

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* tells a tale on many levels, including an ode to Queen Elizabeth (after whom the poem is titled) and an allegorical critique of the Roman Catholic Church, but it is the moral story of virtue and specifically the Christian one of the battle against sin which provides its most profound insights.<sup>1</sup> Written between 1589 and 1596, Spenser followed in the footsteps of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1580) which drew liberally from classical authors such as Homer, Virgil and Ovid; however, *The Faerie Queene* is most notable for its use of such a literary heritage to illustrate the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 1590 (Books I-III) and 1596 (all XII books), Spenser's alignment with the Anglican Church (est. 1533 courtesy of Henry VIII) and favoring of Protestant Queen Elizabeth over her predecessor, half-sister Roman Catholic Mary, led Spenser to include various allusions to the politics of the day within the poem, so that such "personages and events are never named but are concealed by veiled allegorical references which Spenser's contemporaries could readily recognize." Harold M. Priest, *Cliff's Notes on Spenser's The Faerie Queene* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 16. Digital edition.

struggle of faith and the battle against sin. Thus, while mimicking other Arthurian literature in intertwining the nation-founding mythology with Christianity, Spenser is closer to Dante, who supplied canto after canto loaded with classical figures and imagery which attested to the Christian account. This comes despite *The Faerie Queene's* twelve books being patterned after the twelve virtues expounded by Aristotle. Where Dante deployed the virtuous, pagan Roman poet Virgil to explore classical virtues and a Christian Beatrice to expound Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity, Spenser follows suit by depicting the struggles of various Knights Errant as episodes in the journey of faith and battle against sin. We trace this motif across various episodes of *The Faerie Queene's* Book I, the tale of Red Crosse the Knight who symbolically represents the virtue of Holiness.

Spenser first shows how Christian virtue offers the strength and resources that virtue uninformed by Christian truth can only partially give. Spenser would seem to offer an implicit ode to Dante, whose *Inferno* opens with finding himself lost in some dark woods, which is exactly where Red Crosse's adventures begin: with the lady Una, "so pure and innocent, as that same [milk white] lambe," who shows her value as a guide (like Dante's Christian Beatrice).<sup>2</sup> Una encourages Red Crosse to summon both courage and faith to battle the monster Error. However, Una soon becomes separated from Red Crosse, who is then led by the deceiving and duplicitous guide, Duessa, for much of the story until

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), Canto I.4.

Una reappears (just as Beatrice accompanied Dante in the final book of his *Divine Comedy*).<sup>3 4</sup>

Una embodies the symbolism that is rife throughout *The Faerie Queene*, as does the lion who accompanies Una in her search for Red Crosse. Both demonstrate Spenser's Dantean point that, whatever help virtue may offer, it is only Christian virtue that is sufficient in one's battle against sin along the journey of faith. Una's guidance actually strengthens Red Crosse, whereas Duessa's weakens him. The lion is closer to the classical virtue of Dante's pagan but virtuous guide Virgil, as it represents virtue or natural law, valuable on its own but of limited power when not fully redeemed by the Christian faith. The lion at first frightens Una, a foretaste of its power, though such power is settled by Una's beauty and innocence,

how can beautie maister the most strong,  
And simple truth subdue avenging wrong<sup>5</sup>

before helping her secure lodging and vanquishing robbers. The virtuous lion himself yet falls prey to godlessness, as Sansloy (translated as "without God's law") kills it before capturing Una.

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<sup>3</sup> Significant mileage could be made from further comparison of Dante and Spenser; for reference, see Seth Myers, *Dante for Moderns* in *AnUnexpectedJournal*, Volume 3, Issue 3, Fall 2020 *Medieval Minds* issue; online <https://anunexpectedjournal.com/dante-for-moderns/>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Faerie Queene* is typically compared to Renaissance poetry such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* about Charlemagne and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* on the First Crusade, medieval romances with both fantastic and classical aspects, as discussed in Priest, *Cliff's Notes on Spenser's The Faerie Queene*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, III.6.

However, where the natural law virtue of the lion fails to Sansloy's godlessness, the religious impulse of woodgod creatures, Satyrs and Fauns, allow them to recognize (and even worship) the Christian truth that Una symbolizes, and they drive the lustful Sansloy away from Una. The wood gods thus show how ancient religiosity (Greek and Roman idolatry), uninformed by Christian truth, might even go further than natural law in respecting, if not fully understanding, Christian truth. Thus,

They in compassion of her tender youth,  
And wonder of her beautie soueraine,  
Are wonne with pittie and unwonted truth,  
And all prostrate upon the lowly plaine,  
Do kisse her feete, and fawne on her with  
count'nance faine<sup>6</sup>

A Satyre named Sataryane then accompanies Una, and battles Sansloy, but ultimately is unable to actually defeat his godless foe. By contrast, when Red Crosse battles Sansfoy (translated "without faith"), he defeats his foe precisely because of the power of his Christian faith, as the crucifixion cross, red as Christ's blood, protects Red Crosse until he eventually defeats him. Christian virtue alone allows Red Crosse to continue his journey.

The contrast between the power of Christian virtue and that of vice could not be made more clearly than

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<sup>6</sup> FQ, VI.12.

with the comparison of the House of Pride and the House of Holiness. When Duessa leads Red Crosse to the House of Pride, “a stately Pallace . . . which cunningly was without mortar laid, / Whose walls were high, but nothing strong nor thick, / And golden foile all ouer them displaid” — an impressive but weak façade — he is confronted with Queen Lucifera. Her Lucifer-inspired pride shows in that no one but herself “made her selfe a Queene” and “did usurpe with wrong and tyrannie.”<sup>7</sup> The house itself is anything but a fortress, as it “did on . . . weak foundation ever sit / For on a sandie hill.”<sup>8</sup> The attendants of the house are anything but, in fact the exact opposite of, helpful virtues: the beasts Idleness, Gluttony, Lechery, Avarice, Envy, Wrath pulling a wagon driven by “Sathan, with a smarting whip in hand” over top of “Dead skulls & bones of men, whose life had gone astray.”<sup>9</sup> Their victims, and those of pride in particular, thus lie by the thousands in the palace’s dungeon. Red Crosse’s visit to the House of Pride weakens him, but not before, armed with Christian virtue, he battles Sansjoy and is on the verge of defeating him when Sansjoy disappears in a black cloud, taking a trip to Hades to seek relief by the hands of a Greek physician.

By contrast, when Red Crosse finds himself weakened from his various battles, Una leads him to the House of Holiness, where Caelia (“Heavenly spirit” or Holy Spirit) ministers to him, along with her three daughters, named after the very Christian virtues that

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<sup>7</sup> FQ., IV.12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.36.

Dante espoused: Fidelia (Faith), Sperenza (Hope) and Charissa (Charity). Further, explicitly named symbolic characters such as Patience offered “salues and med’cines . . . [and] added words of might” to “ease” and “asswag’d the passion of his plight,” while “bitter Penance with an yron whip . . . and sharp remorse his hart did pricke and nip” and “sad *Repentance* vsed to embay . . . the filthy blots of sinne to wash away. So in short space they did to health restore.”<sup>10</sup>

The House of Holiness offers strength and hope, though often by the humble means of shame and repentance, while the House of Pride (also) delivers exactly the opposite of what it appears to offer, instead of strength the consumption of its entrants. It is also not without irony that it is outside the walls to Pride’s Palace that its natural ally, Sansjoy (the robbing of joy, joy being the happy result of a trip to the estate of Holiness) is defeated, while “joy” is an apt description for how RedCrosse left the Holiness’s Estate, replenished and refreshed. Likewise, Charity and her brood of offspring are described as joyous and Una is “ioyd [joyed] to see” Red Crosse when he returns.<sup>11</sup>

Spenser finally shows the unique and fully salvific efficacy of Christian faith in Red Crosse’s final battle, that against the dragon plaguing Una’s family’s land for which *The Faerie Queene*’s Gloriana commissioned Red Crosse originally. That the battle symbolizes the ultimate battle against sin, that of Christ on the Cross, is indicated when Red Crosse requires three days to complete the battle, the same number of days that

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<sup>10</sup> FQ., X.24, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., X.33, 68.

Christ was in the tomb. Further, at the end of each of the first two days, Red Crosse receives strength offered by Christian sacraments. The well of life, which “vnto life the dead it could restore,/ and guilt of sinfull crimes cleane wash away,” indicates baptism, and restores Red Crosse at the end of the first day.<sup>12</sup> At the end of his second day of battle, Red Crosse falls next to the tree of life, from which flows both fruit from the Garden of Eden as well the life-restoring work of Christ on Calvary, depicted by

as from a well, a trickling stream of Balme

life and long health that gracious ointment  
gaue,

And deadly woundes would heale and reare  
again

The senseless corse aoppinted for the graue.<sup>13</sup>

Red Crosse has thus reached the point of final battle and gains victory due to the series of previous battles won on the strength of Christian virtue. Spenser’s message could not be more clear: only virtues, encouraged by friendships, and tempered by the deeper magic of Christian truth, can provide the strength to battle sin and complete one’s journey of faith. For a more comprehensive treatment of Spenser, one may read Ben Lockerd’s *The Sacred Marriage: Psychic Integration in The Fairie Queene*, or J.R.R. Herring’s article

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<sup>12</sup> FQ, X.30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., X.48.

in this same issue on Spenser, Lewis, virtue, and the True West.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin G. Lockerd, *The Sacred Marriage: Psychic Integration in The Fairie Queene* (London: Associated University Press, 1987). Prof. Lockerd was one of the instructors of J.R.R.H. and myself,, along with Josh Fullman whose article also appears in this issue. I aspire to reading his fine book someday, as the cover lauds it for its “application of Jungian psychology to the love theme in the central books of TheFairie Queene” and “elucidat[ing] the connection Spenser makes between spiritual unfolding and the complementary interaction of masculine and feminine elements throughout the poem.”



# Bibliography

## Faerie Queen and the Holy Knight Red Crosse

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