

Helpful hints to the *Faerie Queene*

To assist you with reading this epic poem, below are some summaries and guiding questions that I hope will help. As always, feel free to email me with more questions. It is complex, but not impossible and I am confident that you will all be able to make your way through this poem – you may even enjoy yourselves. Keep a list of what you notice and questions on what confuses you – we'll tackle it them in class.

Dedicatory Letter to Raleigh

Notice Spenser immediately alerts Raleigh and the reader to the nature of his poem: it is an allegory. Ask yourself: what are the motivations Spenser gives for using allegory? What does he hope to accomplish? Why does he choose the specific subject matter?

Notice who sets the events in motion.

Book I, Canto I

The Red Cross knight is an allegory for holiness, as the title to Book I suggests. The cross on his shield of course represents Christ. His initial companion, and bride-to-be, is the lady Una, who signifies unity and integrity. She represents what Spenser considers to be the true church, as opposed to the Catholic church, which, as you guessed, is represented by Duessa whom we meet in Canto II.

The epic begins as many epics do, and we have a young knight ready to test his skills. As the two travel they take cover from a storm and become lost in the wood of error, where they are “led with delight,” which “beguile[s] the way” (10.1). Remember that error comes from the Latin word that means to wander as well as to err. There he finds a cave wherein hides the monster of error, whom Redcross slays eventually. Notice the description of Error and her “children.”

As they move on they meet “an aged Sire,” whom we learn is Archimago in disguise (as his name suggests – he is a kind of Proteus, a shape-shifter). Archimago (dressed in a manner that reminds one of a friar – another jab at Catholicism) takes the unsuspecting two to his humble abode and as they fall asleep he opens his magic book and conjures two sprites to his side. One he sends to Morpheus’ house (the house of dreams) and after rousing the god of sleep, convinces him to send disturbing erotic dreams to Redcross. The other sprite Archimago fashions to look like Una and sends her to Redcross’ bedroom so that after he wakes from his rather tempting dream he finds (what he thinks to be) Una there by his side. After resisting her aggressive come-on’s, she retires, and Archimago has to think of another way to snag the holy pair.

Canto II

He then decides to use the two sprites again and fashions them to look like Una and another knight, and engages them in amorous play. Archimago then frantically wakes Redcross and says “come look at what your lady is doing.” Redcross is so distraught by this false spectacle that he immediately grabs his dwarf and leaves without his lady. This is an important part of the story because we have for the time-being the hero separated from the true church and his love, and divided they are less powerful. As Redcross flies away he happens to meet a pagan knight (“Sarazin”) named Sans foy (without faith – French). The two battle – as knights often do in epic romance – and Redcross eventually triumphs, winning both Sans foy’s shield and accompanying lady. This lady is no ordinary lady, and instead is Duessa, which of course means duality, or in this case, duplicity. She does not go by the name Duessa, however, and instead calls herself Fidessa, which suggests faithfulness (falsely). She, like Archimago, is a master of deception. He decides to take her as his new companion and after riding for a while, they stop by a tree. The tree, Archimago quickly learns, is no ordinary tree but rather a man who was duped and transformed by one Duessa (his previous situation sounds peculiarly close to Redcross’).

Canto III

We now turn our attention to Una and her plight. As a woman alone in the wild, she is afraid and a potential victim. Fortunately a lion leaps from the forest and, once he recognizes true beauty and royalty (whose Una's parents are will be revealed later), he accompanies and protects her. The two (beauty and the beast) come upon a peasant woman, and eventually her and her mother's house where they ask to rest. Finding they two "rude" women less than generous, the lion smashes the front door and allows his lady to rest herself. We learn that the two are ignorant Catholics, and when a seller of (false) holy relics stops by the lion tears him to pieces. Archimago, who now has taken on the appearance of Redcross, catches up to Una and her lion and pretends to be her former companion. But breaking up this tearful reunion is the knight Sans loy (without law), who is looking to avenge his brother's death. Since he sees the Redcross shield Sans loy attacks, not knowing his enemy is really Archimago in disguise. Sans loy nearly kills Archimago and stops once he realizes it is his old buddy Archimago. As a result Una also learns she has been duped. Sans loy seizes Una, and as the lion attacks to protect his lady Sans loy kills the lion and takes Una away.

Some guiding questions:

Consider how Spenser fears duplicity and visual trickery. How do you resolve this fear with his primary poetic mode of allegory – speaking otherwise than one seems to speak? What are the main differences between Una and Duessa? Why is Redcross able to substitute one for the other? What information is Spenser keeping from us thus far, in other words, what "background" of the story would you like to know?