

Faerie Queene Historical Context

Humanism and Education

Tudor England in the sixteenth century was a place of great change. There were significant social, religious, and political changes during this time, and together, these changes created an atmosphere of danger and tension. One of the earliest transformations was the way in which English boys and young men were educated. Education had always been an issue that focused on men, since there was little interest, nor perceived need to educate females, but as the fifteenth century drew to an end, the emphasis on education changed. Instead of educating boys and young men for a lifetime serving God, as members of the clergy, there was a new emphasis on careers in government, requiring a different sort of education.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, two men, the English Sir Thomas More and the Dutch Desiderius Erasmus, were cultivating an intellectual movement that became known during the Renaissance as Humanism. According to the doctrine of Humanism, the education of a Christian gentlemen should be every society's primary concern. An important component of this education was a focus on the preparation of a young man for public service. As a way to achieve this goal, there was also a new emphasis on rhetoric and classical texts, and on a need to learn Latin grammar, the language of diplomacy. Latin had always been taught as necessary for the clergy, but now, it became clear there were other uses. Each country conducted its international business in Latin, and with international travel and trade, there was a greater need for men to assume these new duties. In this new world, there was a close connection between universities and the government. The sons of nobility attended colleges, but so too, did an increasing number of commoners, many of whom were destined for government service. Initially, humanism combined classical learning with Christianity or Catholicism. In humanism's early development, More was an enthusiastic supporter of Greek Classical texts, but he was also a Catholic who chose to die rather than agree to take the oath that acknowledged the king as head of the church in England.

With the adoption of a new religion, the second-generation movement of humanism included Protestantism. Like many men of his period, Spenser was a strong advocate of Humanism, and so, one of his desires in composing *The Faerie Queene* was to create a model for the ideal gentlemen. Spenser was enamoured of chivalry and the medieval world, where men were honorable and where men adhered to a code of behavior that emphasized morality and truth. In composing his epic, Spenser sought to educate the public to chivalric ideals by recalling the medieval romance, which he thought presented a better society. Spenser's text not only revives the classical epic, which in its purest form, had not been used since Virgil, but it emphasizes the ideals of charity, friendship, and virtue, which are the hallmarks of the humanistic movement. In addition, Spenser uses allegory to tell his story, and allegory is a medieval tradition, which recalls the importance of allegory in biblical teaching. The setting of Spenser's epic is medieval England, but the topic is Renaissance in origin. As Philip Sidney argued in his *Defence of Poesy*, poetry has merit in its ability to make education sweeter and easier

to swallow. Spenser accomplished this by resurrecting the medieval romance and the chivalric knight as instruments to demonstrate the righteousness of the Church of England.

Religious Turmoil

In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser is reflecting the Renaissance emphasis of leading a life of beneficial action. At the same time, his text reflects the real-life tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, which was formally established by Elizabeth I in 1559. The pope's response to the queen's action was her excommunication in 1570, but officially, there was little notice of the pope's actions. After the formal establishment of the Anglican Church, some of the tension of the past twenty-five years dissipated, primarily because the queen was more tolerant of religious choice and less likely to endorse the extreme prosecution that Mary I favored. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and abbeys in 1534, it was not because he would not tolerate dissenting religious views. Certainly he had no use for the Catholic Church, but that was primarily because the pope refused to permit his divorce. And, to assure the succession of any heir he might have after divorcing his first wife, Henry required that his citizens take an oath that recognized him as head of the Church of England. But Henry was never vehement about religion. The king dissolved the monasteries and abbeys to claim the land, buildings, monies, and expensive art and jewelry that lay inside. Henry VIII understood that eliminating the Catholic Church would make him rich; it was simply a sound economic move.

After Henry died, his young son, Edward VI became king and for a while the religious component of Tudor life remained stable. But the young king did not live long, and at his death, his elder sister, Mary, became queen. During the brief years of Mary's reign, 1553-1558, religious intolerance and religiously inspired murder became commonplace. Mary, who was Catholic, immediately reinstated Catholicism as the official religion in England. Moving quickly, she outlawed Protestantism to please her new bridegroom, Philip of Spain. Protestants were persecuted, and hundreds were burned at the stake when they refused to convert to Catholicism. Mary's ruthlessness earned her the nickname, "Bloody Mary."

In contrast to Mary's rule, Elizabeth I seemed a refreshing new breath in the kingdom. She was young and beautiful, full of energy and vibrant. And although she quickly established Protestantism as the official religion, she manifested none of the intolerance of her older sister, Mary. The legacy of Mary's reign was a fear of Catholicism and a determination to permit no Catholic in government, nor should Catholics have any power. The immediate effect of Mary's reign was that any plotting that was discovered, any subversion that was detected, any unexpected crisis, could well be credited to Catholic sympathizers. Although Elizabeth's reign was prosperous and relatively peaceful, religion still remained a force that could divide the people. Spenser reflects these fears and determination in *The Faerie Queene*.