

Lecture Series on
Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*
Book I Canto I: Lecture 2

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**Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
As time her taught in lowly Shepherds weeds,
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;
Whose prayes having slept in silence long,
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds
To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:
Fierce warres and faithful loves shall moralize my
song.
Helpe then, O holy Virgin chiefe of nine,
Thy weaker Novice to performe thy will,
Lay forth out of thine everlasting scryne**

- Explanation: The text begins with the invocation of the muses. There are nine muses in Greek mythology. They are: Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia (Polyhymnia), Urania, and Calliope, who was their chief. Their father was Zeus, and their mother was Mnemosyne (“Memory”).
- The poet urges the muses to help him write on the lofty subject, which shall include fierce wars and faithful loves.

The antique rolles, which there lye hidden still,
Of Faerie knights and fairest Tanaquill,
Whom that most noble Briton Prince so long
Sought through the world, and suffered so much ill,

That I must rue his undeserved wrong:

O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong.

And thou most dreaded impe of highest Jove,

Faire Venus sonne, that with thy cruell dart

At that good knight so cunningly didst rove,

That glorious fire it kindled in his hart,

Lay now thy deadly Heben bow apart,

And with thy mother milde come to mine ayde:

- Explanation: The poet wishes to take out the scrolls of ancient Briton lays and talk about the Arthurian legends. He considers himself weak-witted to undertake such a herculean task, and asks for divine grace to shine upon him.

Come both, and with you bring triumphant Mart,
In loves and gentle jollities arrayd,
After his murdrous spoiles and bloody rage allayd.
And with them eke, O Goddess heavenly bright,
Mirrour of grace and Majestie divine,
Great Lady of the greatest Isle, whose light
Like Phoebus lampe throughout the world doth shine,
Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eyne,
And raise my thoughts too humble and too vile,
To thinke of that true glorious type of thine,
The argument of mine afflicted stile:
The which to heare, vouchsafe, O dearest dred a-while.

- Explanation: The number of Graces varied in different legends, but usually there were three: Aglaia (Brightness), Euphrosyne (Joyfulness), and Thalia (Bloom). They are said to be daughters of Zeus and Hera (or Eurynome, daughter of Oceanus) or of Helios and Aegle, a daughter of Zeus.
- The Great Lady of the greatest Isle is Gloriana or Queen Elizabeth I

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A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Y cladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruell markes of many a bloody fielde;
Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters
fitt.

- Explanation: Here the Redcrosse knight has been described as being gentle, dressed in shining armour with a silver shield. He bears many scars from previous battles as marks of victory.
- The knight rode an angry horse, and the knight seemed perfectly fit for fierce encounters.

ii

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he
wore,

And dead as living ever him ador'd:

Upon his shield the like was also scor'd,

For soveraine hope, which in his helpe he had:

Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,

But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;

Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.

- Explanation: The Redcrosse knight bore a blood red cross on his breast.
- The knight was righteous and faithful. He was also fearless.

iii

Upon a great adventure he was bond,
That greatest Gloriana to him gave,

That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,
To winne him worship, and her grace to have,
Which of all earthly things he most did crave;
And ever as he rode, his hart did earne
To prove his puissance in battell brave
Upon his foe, and his new force to learne;
Upon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

- Explanation: The Queen of the Fairyland, Gloriana had assigned a mission to the knight. The mission was to slay a dreadful dragon.