



# FIERCE WARS

*and Faithful Loves*

Book I of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

Updated and annotated by  
Roy Maynard

Roy Maynard, *Fierce Wars and Faithful Loves:*  
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For my son, CALVIN,  
I hope you never outgrow a love  
for knights and noble deeds.



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## The eginning . . .

Blood rushes to the cheeks of the youth; he considers for a moment how to answer his neighbor. Truth wins out.

“Georgos,” he says softly.

The bearded man next to him grins and glances at the youth’s rough clothing, craggy hands, and sun-blanching hair. “That means *plow-boy* in the ancient tongue, does it not? It suits you well, boy.”

The youth fights his anger and embarrassment. Is this man a noble? Does he sit at yonder table, beside an Elven knight? Does he discourse with the Faerie Queene herself? No. He’s a bystander, a commoner, like the youth himself. His manners are no better; there are bits of that meat-pie he was eating still lodged in his beard. *At least I know how to wipe my face*, the youth tells himself. The crowds sit on benches and on the polished marble floor of the torch-lit Hall. They’re mostly here for the spectacle, though they eat occasionally from packs and from the trays passed through (oh, the generosity of that good queen!). Gloriana’s birthday it is, and her health all are celebrating. Though she is less than a stone’s throw away, the youth has trouble making out the courtly conversation—it’s all but drowned out by the *shushing* of various of his neighbors (more precisely, he thinks, his neighbors’ wives).

The youth refocuses his anger and attacks a hunk of beef he has unwrapped on his lap. It is biting salty, and he wishes, yet again, for a cup of the wine the porters are bringing in by the barrelful. He would receive a measure, to be sure, when the time came to toast the queen’s health and lineage. But for now, the alternatives are two: he could walk over to the cisterns and get a drink of brackish water—and maybe lose his place,

his seat so close to the queen. Or he could ignore his burning thirst, as he ignored the flies and gnats and crying babies and his neighbor's crude jests and jibes, and concentrate on the high words being spoken by the nobles.

He picks the latter. He re-folds the linen around his meal and bends down to stuff it back into his pack.

He hears a universal gasp; he starts up, eyes searching for what he's missed.

She's beautiful, but beautiful and sad like the echoing chants of the friars he heard when he was young. Knife-edge sad like the prayers of a widow. Spirit-soaking beautiful like his fields in the fall.

With small footsteps—how humble, how graceful!—she makes her way to the queen's table. She speaks. He can't hear her, but like one of those gnats or flies, the news buzzes through the crowd fast and erratically. She's a princess of some sort, or a Lady at least. Her kingdom—no, her father's kingdom—has been attacked—no, conquered—by a fierce dragon. She brings a horse and armor, she brings the pleas of her noble parents, and she brings her own self, as pledge to the knight who will fight the dragon and redeem the kingdom.

"Aye, boy, there's the job for you," grins Pie-Beard, elbowing the youth. "You'll not need your plow-pony; she's got the courser ready for you."

As much to anyone else as to the bearded man, the youth asks, "Will the queen appoint a champion?"

"Aye, she'll have to," guffawed Pie-Beard. "No one's likely to volunteer! It's killed four knights so far, the girl tells."

"That's no girl," the youth says. "She's a Lady."

"And you're a farmer; what's that to you? Do you care to fight her dragon yourself?"

"And well I might." *I might. And well I might.* The youth turns the rash idea over in his head. Did he not come to the court to win fame? To become something more than the impoverished farmer his father was? *Burnt to a cinder, he thinks, or plowed under my own field after miserable years of too much rain or too much drought. Where's the dilemma in that?*

"Well I might, Mr. Pie-man," he says, standing. "And why not me? I've a strong arm. I've faced down beasts before. And is it not her custom to grant favors during her birthday-feasts?"

*The Lady needs a champion, he thinks to himself, and I need any favor at all.*

Pie-Beard nudges a neighbor. "The boy's going to join up!"

The youth burns again, but he sets his jaw and marches forward. He dodges a running child and steps over a muddy, mild dog. He starts to feel



---

an odd sensation as he nears the Great Table; it's as if he is only watching while someone else—an awkward youth, one he doesn't know—approaches the queen. "I'll fight for the Lady," he hears that youth say.

The queen looks bemused. The Lady looks horrified. "Oh, your majesty," he hears her say softly. "Oh . . . I . . . He hasn't the look of experience to him."

As if she cannot hear the Lady, the queen's expression slowly changes. She seems to see something, to *know* something.

"The armor," the queen says. "Bring it. Try it on the boy. If it fits, then he's your champion. It is said, 'All that is gold does not glitter.'"

ROY MAYNARD



# anto I.

*The Patron of true Holinesse,  
Foule Errour doth defeate:  
Hypocrisie him to entrappe,  
Doth to his home entreate.* <sup>7</sup>

1

A Gentle Knight was pricking° on the plain, *riding swiftly, spurring*  
Clad in mighty arms° and silver shield,<sup>8</sup> *armor*  
Wherein old dents of deep wounds did remain,  
The cruél marks of many a bloody field;  
Yet arms until that time did he never wield.  
His angry steed did chide his foaming bit,  
As much disdainig to the curb to yield.<sup>9</sup>  
Full jolly° knight he seemed, and fair did sit, *charming*  
As one for knightly giusts° and fierce encounters fit. *jousts*

2

But on his breast a bloody° Cross he bore, *red*  
The dear remembrance of his dying Lord,

<sup>7</sup> These preambles explain what will happen in each canto. They're written in iambic verse, but not Spenser's usual pentameter. Instead, there is a combination of meters: four metrical *feet* per line, then three, then four, then three again. It's called *ballad stanza*. That means that you can sing this to the tune of *Gilligan's Island*. Go ahead. Try it.

<sup>8</sup> The armor of God (Eph. 6:11-17).

<sup>9</sup> His powerful, impatient horse chewed (*chide*) the bit and strained at the curb, the part of the bit that controls the horse.



*The Prince of Poets*



Edmund Spenser was born in either 1552 or 1553 in London. He received a classical education at the Merchant Taylors School. Spenser attended college at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge University, receiving a bachelor of arts degree in 1573, and a master of arts degree in 1576.

He first went to work for the Bishop of Rochester (John Young). He then served under the Earl of Leicester (Robert Dudley). In 1580 he was appointed secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland. In 1581, Ireland became his home. He eventually acquired an estate called Kilcolman (complete with a castle), near the cities of Cork and Limerick.

Spenser was married twice. He married Machabyas Chylde in 1579. In 1594, she died, and he married Elizabeth Boyle.

Spenser's first published works were verses he helped translate while still at the Merchant Taylors School (it was a long allegorical poem, called *The Theatre of Worldlings*, by Jan van der Noodt). His first independent work was published in 1579. It was *The Shepherdes Calendar*, a "pastoral" poem, which was fashionable in literary circles then. But *The Faerie Queene* was his greatest work, and he began it in 1580. Even his friends looked down on it. Until Spenser came along, English was not thought to be a suitable language for an epic. But in the ten years he spent preparing the first three books, he never lost faith in his poem. And after it was published in 1591, he was rewarded by Queen Elizabeth (to whom the poem is dedicated) with a yearly stipend of fifty pounds.

The next three books were published in 1596, along with another poem, *Fowre Hymnes*.

In 1598, rebels in Ireland rose up, led by the Earl of Tyrone, in an attempt to wrest control of Ireland from the English. Though the rebellion eventually failed, Spenser's estate, Kilcolman, was captured by the rebels. He was forced to seek shelter in Cork. From there, he carried a bundle of letters from the Lord Deputy to the Privy Council (the queen's advisors). He arrived in Westminster on Christmas Eve, 1598. On Jan. 13, 1599, he died there.

He is buried in Westminster Abby, and inscribed on his tomb are the words, "The Prince of Poets."

For whose sweet sake that glorious badge he wore,  
 And dead as living ever him adored.<sup>10</sup>  
 Upon his shield the like was also scored,<sup>o</sup> *marked*  
 For sovereign hope, which in his help he had.<sup>11</sup>  
 Right faithful true he was in deed and word,  
 But of his cheer<sup>o</sup> did seem too solemn sad; *face*  
 Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was dreaded.<sup>12</sup>

3

Upon a great adventure he was bond,<sup>o</sup> *bound*  
 That greatest Gloriana to him gave,  
 That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,<sup>o</sup> *land*  
 To win him worship,<sup>o</sup> and her grace to have,<sup>13</sup> *praise*  
 Which of all earthly things he most did crave.  
 And ever as he rode, his heart did yearn  
 To prove his puissance<sup>o</sup> in battle brave *might*  
 Upon his foe, and his new force to learn,  
 Upon his foe, a Dragon,<sup>14</sup> horrible and stern.

4

A lovely Lady rode him fair beside,<sup>15</sup>  
 Upon a lowly Ass<sup>o</sup> more white than snow, *donkey, symbol of humility*  
 Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide  
 Under a veil, that wimpled<sup>o</sup> was full low, *folded around her chin*  
 And over all a black stole<sup>o</sup> she did throw, *a long cloak, showing modesty*  
 As one that inly<sup>o</sup> mourned. So was she sad, *on the inside*  
 And heavy sat upon her palfrey<sup>o</sup> slow. *a gentle, calm steed*  
 Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,  
 And by her in a line<sup>o</sup> a milk white lamb she lad.<sup>o</sup> *on a leash / lead*

<sup>10</sup> He loved the risen Lord; see Revelation 1:18.

<sup>11</sup> Here's one of those word-order switches we discussed in the introduction. What Spenser means is, *His hope was in the help promised by his Lord.*

<sup>12</sup> This is not an experienced knight; he's never wielded weapons nor faced real-live foes. He probably fears, deep down, that he'll turn out to be a coward when he goes into combat.

<sup>13</sup> He sought the grace of Gloriana—the grace of Heaven—but he wasn't trying to win his salvation. The Redcross knight symbolizes the Christian seeking to live for Christ. The goal is sanctification, not salvation.

<sup>14</sup> Satan is portrayed as a dragon in Revelation 20:2.

<sup>15</sup> Boy is this one mixed up: *A lovely, fair Lady rode beside him.* This is Una, the maiden who symbolizes Truth. She is the daughter of the King and Queen whose land is assailed by the dragon (i.e., Adam and Eve). She wears a veil because the Truth is too severely beautiful for men to look upon directly.

5

So pure and innocent, as that same lamb,  
 She was in life and every virtuous lore,<sup>o</sup> *knowledge*  
 And by descent from Royal lineage came  
 Of ancient Kings and Queens, that had of yore<sup>o</sup> *in the past*  
 Their scepters stretched from East to Western shore,  
 And all the world in their subjection held.  
 'Til that infernal fiend with foul uproar  
 Forwasted<sup>o</sup> all their land, and them expelled. *laid waste to*  
 Whom to avenge, she had this Knight from far compelled.

6

Behind her far away a Dwarf<sup>16</sup> did lag,  
 That lazy seemed in being ever last,  
 Or wearied with bearing of her bag  
 Of needments<sup>o</sup> at his back. Thus as they passed, *her stuff*  
 The day with clouds was sudden<sup>o</sup> overcast, *suddenly*  
 And angry Jove<sup>17</sup> an hideous storm of rain  
 Did pour into his Leman's lap so fast,  
 That every wight<sup>o</sup> to shroud<sup>o</sup> it did constrain, *living thing / shelter*  
 And this fair couple eke<sup>o</sup> to shroud themselves were fain.<sup>o</sup> *also / desirous*

7

Enforced to seek some cover nigh<sup>o</sup> at hand, *close*  
 A shady grove not far away they spied,  
 That promised aid the tempest to withstand:  
 Whose lofty trees clad with summer's pride,  
 Did spread so broad, that heaven's light did hide,  
 Not pierceable with power of any star.<sup>18</sup>  
 And all within were paths and alleys wide,  
 With footing worn, and leading inward far.  
 Fair harbor that them seems; so in they entered are.

8

And forth they pass, with pleasure forward led,  
 Joying to hear the birds' sweet harmony,  
 Which therein shrouded from the tempest dread,

<sup>16</sup> The Dwarf symbolizes human reason. Reason is useful, but ultimately inadequate. Reason must be guided by divine truth, i.e., Scripture.

<sup>17</sup> Here *Jove* is the sky, and his *Leman* is his beloved. Her *lap* is the ground.

<sup>18</sup> This is getting easier, isn't it?


*Elves*


If you've opened this book with notions of Tinkerbell-like fairies and toy-making elves, think again. The inhabitants of Spenser's Faerie Land aren't the modern, gentle version; they're the wild *Longaevi*, the Longlivers, of medieval myth. C.S. Lewis, a professor of medieval literature, paints them for us in his book, *The Discarded Image* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964). He says we must put the word "fairy" out of our minds:

[T]hat word, tarnished by pantomime and bad children's book with worse illustrations, would have been dangerous as a chapter title [we might say book title]. It might encourage us to bring to the subject some ready-made, modern concept of a fairy and to read the old texts in the light of it. Naturally, the proper method is the reverse; we must go to the texts with an open mind, and learn from them what the word *fairy* meant to our ancestors. (p. 123)

The medieval faeries are much like men and women in appearance, but with some frightening differences. In *Beowulf*, they were counted as god-hating monsters along with ogres, giants and the other races descending from Cain. In the medieval poem *Isabel and the Elf-Knight*, the "elf-knight is a sort of Bluebeard," Lewis says (p. 124). And Milton, in *Comus*, lists fairies with the hags, ghosts and goblins of the night.

Shakespeare's fairies are a little kinder, but certainly no tamer. Robin Goodfellow (Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) is mischievous (he plays in the butter-churn so that the dairy-maid can't churn her cream, for example).

Over the centuries, fairies have devolved into the wispy, insect-like waifs we think of now, and elves have shrunk into Santa's helpers and cereal-selling leprechauns.

One guy got it right, though; J.R.R. Tolkein's elves, such as Legolas and Galandriel, revive the graceful but fierce race the medievals knew.

Seemed in their song to scorn the cruél<sup>19</sup> sky.  
 Much can they praise the trees so straight and high,  
 The sailing Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,  
 The vine-prop Elm, the Poplar never dry,  
 The builder Oak, sole king of forests all,  
 The Aspen good for staves, the Cypress funeral.

## 9

The Laurel, meed<sup>o</sup> of mighty Conquerors *trophy*  
 And Poets sage, the Fir that weepeth still,  
 The Willow worn of forlorn Paramours,<sup>o</sup> *lovers*  
 The Yew obedient to the bender's will,  
 The Birch for shafts, the Sallow for the mill,  
 The Myrrh sweet bleeding in the bitter wound,<sup>20</sup>  
 The warlike Beech, the Ash for nothing ill,<sup>21</sup>  
 The fruitful Olive, and the Platane<sup>o</sup> round, *the plane tree, sycamore-like*  
 The carver Holme,<sup>o</sup> the Maple seldom inward sound. *holly*

## 10

Led with delight, they thus beguile the way,<sup>o</sup> *while away the time*  
 Until the blustering storm is overblown.  
 When weening<sup>o</sup> to return, whence they did stray, *expecting*  
 They cannot find that path, which first was shown,  
 But wander to and fro in ways unknown,  
 Furthest from end then, when they nearest ween,<sup>22</sup>  
 That makes them doubt, their wits be not their own.  
 So many paths, so many turnings seen,  
 That which of them to take, in diverse doubt they been.

## 11

At last resolving forward still to fare,  
 'Til that some end they find or<sup>o</sup> in or out, *either*  
 That path they take, that beaten seem'd most bare,  
 And like<sup>o</sup> to lead the labyrinth about. *likely*

<sup>19</sup> When a letter is accented, it is to be stressed, even if it sounds strange. So *cruél* is pronounced "krew-ell," instead of "krewl." Likewise, *banishéd* is pronounced "ban-ish-ed," instead of "ban-isht."

<sup>20</sup> Myrrh, one of the gifts to Christ at His birth, was used at His death to embalm His body.

<sup>21</sup> It must have slipped Spenser's mind, but the ash has another vital role: it's used for baseball bats.

<sup>22</sup> They're farther into the forest than they suppose.