

# The New Poet Has A Birthday

By JEWEL WURTZBAUGH

When Edmund Spenser made immortal poetry of his great Queen's reign, he hoped that his "labors" would "live with the Eternitie of her Fame." That hope has been richly fulfilled; for, if time has burnished the contemporary glory of Elizabeth Tudor, it has been scarcely less kind to her most famous poet. Read by some generations more than by others, Spenser has not been neglected by any generation, despite changing tastes and criteria. And now, on his four-hundredth anniversary, he is in the peculiarly happy position of having a new interest quickened in his verse, particularly in his masterpiece, *The Faerie Queene*.

This interest stems, in part, from a current interest in symbolism, a first cousin in figurative language to allegory, upon which Spenser chiefly depends; thus, the poet is more intelligible to contemporary lovers of poetry than he was to readers of perhaps some other generations. Modern poetry is primarily intellectual. Spenser, a highly sophisticated artist, often reminds his readers that he is addressing himself to "the learned throng," or educated group; and, however metaphorical he may become, his delicate or heavily weighted image always represents a mental state. If the audience of the modern poet is a limited but choice one, so has Spenser's been in every generation for four hundred years. His reader may, therefore, feel complimented.

The poet lived in an age rife with change. A new world had just been discovered. Of a new heaven breaking through the old Ptolemaic sky whispers were much louder; indeed, some wise heads said that a whole new universe was in the making. Red-haired Elizabeth Tudor was queen now, but she had to watch her throne with a sharp, Machiavellian eye. Courtiers rose and fell as the tide. Both noble and lowly heads went to the chopping block. Life was insecure, uncertain.

Nor were matters better in the outlying countries. In Scotland, Mary Stuart had stirred a strong brew of trouble, and her son, heady, scholarish James, was demanding that Spenser, the poet, be tried and

punished for printing "some dishonourable effects . . . against himself and his mother," in Book V of *The Faerie Queene*. Wales was constantly in rebellion. When Lord Grey of Wilton was sent in 1580 to quell the tempestuous Irish, Spenser accompanied him as secretary and remained in what he always called "that savage country" until the Irish burned his castle, and drove him and other servants of the English crown from their land.

Before the poet went to Ireland, he had attended the Merchant Taylors' School, had taken an M.A. degree at Pembroke College, Cambridge University, had been for a time secretary to John Young, who became Bishop of Rochester, and, somewhat later, had served the queen's favorite, the Earl of Leicester. He was never a poet in an ivory tower. No man of his time touched the life of his age at so many points, intellectual, religious, political, military, and geographical. No man understood better the varied and mutable character of the age. From his first poem to the last great cantos of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser plays upon the theme of mutability as a musician might upon some motif for sonata or symphony,

*His choicfull sense with euerie change  
doth flit.*

*No common things may please a wauer-  
ing wit.*

"All that moueth doth in **Change** delight," he says. But, if Spenser was fascinated by change, his yearning for security often made him fearful. Then comfort lay in the Christian assurance that there would come a time

*when no more Change shall be,  
But stedfast rest of all things firmly  
stayd  
Vpon the pillours of Eternity.*

That we live in an age of equally rapid changes, amazing scientific achievements, and ceaseless wars again brings us very close to the poet. In the white heat of excitement and danger, even in moments of intense delight and wonder, we too are apprehensive of—perhaps we scarcely know; but, in tremulous state, we long, not unlike Spenser, for a strong, solid rock of cer-

tainty to which to attach ourselves. However close we may feel to the poet, though, he had an advantage which we lack. His age, despite many and swift changes, had not lost its values. It had a standard of conduct, a body of ethics upon which to rely; whereas, having discarded an older standard as inadequate today, we have had neither the time nor perhaps the will to formulate a new ethical creed. We speak of peace, and, at the same time, arm ourselves for war.

But Spenser, an idealist in a world as material as our own, was no coward. He believed that poetry was a subtle and enchanting influence to virtue and that love had the power to "civilize, enlighten, and propel men's souls," and because he believed these things, he was determined that love should civilize, enlighten, and propel his England into something better. Love should reach and move the hearts of Englishmen through beauty—the beauty of poetry. He could, and he would, sing and charm Englishmen into living greatly. So, his *Faerie Queene* is not only an allegory and an epic-romance, but a conduct book; "the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline," that is, "to train and mold an exceptional person into a man of good life and manners."

Arthur, supposedly the hero of the poem, is not then the old, hardened king of some earlier romances, but a young prince who represents the virtue of magnanimity and whose mission, therefore, is to seek Gloriana or great glory. He is not unlike any gifted and noble-minded young man setting out today to compose a magnificent symphony, build a splendid bridge, or solve some extremely difficult scientific problem. Nor is he unlike the young poet who envisioned Englishmen stirred to new greatness through the beauty of poetry.

Because Elizabeth was an ideal to her courtiers and, likewise, the means by which any poor poet might amend his fortunes, Spenser undoubtedly would have liked to make her the chief figure of his poem. But his masters, Homer, Vergil, Ariosto, and Tasso, had left him no epic pattern with a woman as its hero. He could have lauded Elizabeth in a poetic court of virtues, for nothing pleased her more than to be praised as a virgin queen and to be acclaimed for virtues which she perhaps did not always possess. It is not unlikely the genesis of the poem was a court of virtues. But every poet whom he admired had composed a work of larger scope, and Spenser too was ambitious. Not willing to give up his own

dream of greatness, he employed Prince Arthur as a necessary device in his epic scheme and created Gloriana and her court in Faery Land to honor the queen: "In that Faery Queene (Gloriana) I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdom in Faery land."

When the poem was first published in 1590, it consisted of only three books and was unfinished. On the suggestion of his friend, Sir Walter Raleigh, who thought an incomplete poem might be confusing to readers, Spenser affixed a letter of explanation. In the letter he reveals that the Faery Queene was to hold a holiday feast for twelve days and that upon each day of the feast a knight representing one of twelve "private morall" virtues was to beg an adventure or mission of Gloriana, the twelve adventures making, thereby, a poem of twelve books, which, if "well accepted," the poet hints he may be encouraged to increase to twenty-four books, the epic number, by including the "polliticke" virtues in Arthur's person after he became king.

In 1596 Spenser published the first three books with three new books, making a total of six. This was all of *The Faerie Queene* published in Spenser's lifetime; but, in 1609—ten years after Spenser's death—Mathew Lownes, a printer, brought out the six books together with "Two Cantoes of Mutabilitie: which, both for Forme and Matter, appeare to be parcell of some Booke of the *Faerie Queene*, under the Legend of Constancie." Lownes does not mention an unfinished eighth canto tied up with the two numbered VI and VII, and especially treasured because it is so personally revealing. Nor does Lownes state how these additional cantos fell into his hand, whether he secured them from Mrs. Spenser, some friend of the poet, or the heirs

of the first publisher, the well-known Elizabethan printer, William Ponsonby. Whether they were early work which the poet discarded or his last, they are masterly written, and they must have been numbered by Spenser. A mere printer would have numbered them one, two, and three.

When Sir James Ware, the Irish antiquary, in 1633, published Spenser's state document, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, he prefaced his edition with a life of the poet, in which he related the exciting story of the "lost" books of *The Faerie Queene*; i. e., when Spenser, with other civil servants of the English crown, was forced to leave Ireland, he sent his servant or messenger ahead of him into England with the manuscript of the other books of *The Faerie Queene*, and the servant lost the manuscript. The story is substantiated by Sir James Ware's being an antiquary of note in a position to know the facts, by his association with Archbishop Ussher, the friend of Spenser from whom he secured the manuscript of *A View of Ireland*, and by his closeness in time to Spenser. In the seventeenth century searches were made for the lost manuscript but without success in finding it.

Although I have never looked for the manuscript myself, I have studied very carefully the efforts which, from time to time, have been made to locate it. That is how I happened to learn, in 1935, from the late Charles W. Whibley, who knew a very great deal about Spenser's life in Ireland which has never been printed, that it is still generally believed in Ireland that Spenser completed his poem. There is a tradition, he said, that one of the Nagles, a family into which Spenser's family later married, was "the servant," who went ahead of Spenser into England with the manu-

script. This gentleman is said to have been later a captain of the guard in Germany and to have taken a master's degree at the University of Paris. It is extremely doubtful that any one will ever discover the "lost" books, if they were written, but who knows? Long-vanished manuscripts have turned up! And I might as well say that nothing keeps me from going on a "mission" to look for them but a bag full of gold pieces and the necessary leisure!

The books of *The Faerie Queene* which we have treat the virtues of holiness, represented by the Redcrosse Knight or St. George, who, in his inexperience is, like most of us, an easy victim of pride and indolence, a fact which, together with his general loveliness, endears him to us; temperance, represented by Sir Guyon, a highly disciplined knight, who illustrates perfectly Aristotle's "mean"; friendship, "the concord of minds," represented by Sir Camel and Sir Triamond, each of whom fights not for his own honor but for that of his friend; justice, represented by Sir Artegall, who, assisted by his iron squire, Talus or law, acts as a judge and eventually sets the Lady Irena or Ireland free from Grantorto or great wrong; courtesy, represented by Sir Calidore, perhaps Sir Philip Sidney, whose mission is to conquer the Blatant Beast, or social, political, and religious slander; and chastity, which is not rightly chastity at all, but noble love which inspires to high achievement, as illustrated in Britomart or British Arms, who goes in search of Artegall, the Knight of Justice.

But Britomart, an amazon or woman warrior, also represents Elizabeth as the defender of English power. Her virtue was so important to Spenser—Englishmen, you remember, were to be transformed through love—that she dominates not only the third book, properly hers, but Books IV and V. She is a magnificent, but very human figure, who, unlike Spenser's other knights, never commits sin, but is constantly restless, being in love. Having seen Artegall in a magic globe, the mirror of her own mind, she recognizes him at once; and he, with no image, is enchanted by her beauty.

Any mention of Britomart suggests immediately that the charm and loveliness which the poet creates are to be discovered not only in the large, so-called "purple" or grand passages, to which, as in the manner of tapestry, the poem was considerably patterned, but often in small details. Such a detail appears in the description of the Redcrosse Knight's first adventure, his encounter with Errour or physical sin, whose dwelling is "a darksome hole," the symbol of ignorance in which error breeds, to which, when Redcrosse enters, his "glistening arm-

#### About the Author

*Ever since Dr. Wurtzbaugh joined the staff of the Department of English in 1926, she has been extraordinarily active not only in teaching and scholarly research but also in all educational and cultural activities. She was president of the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, 1941-44; she established the Intelligencer, the Council's magazine; she was secretary-treasurer of the South-Central Modern Language Association, 1946-1951, president, 1951-52; and she was responsible for the success of the conference held at the University in April, 1952, in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Edmund Spenser. The poet has been the principal subject of her life-long and loving study, but she has in addition done research at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and the British Museum on John Donne, John Hughes, and other writers.*



or," Christian wisdom, gives a "little glooming light, much like a shade."

**T**he details are often realistic. Malbecco, for example, is "old and withered like hay"; and Florimell, an exquisite lady in garments "wrought of beaten gold," is so frightened that her face is "through feare as white as whales bone," a suggestive figure when one remembers the many uses which Elizabethans made of whalebone. When Britomart releases Artegall from a thralldom which, much to his shame, had put him into woman's dress (an incident illustrating, in the historical allegory, Elizabeth's peace policy in Ireland), she is so tender of his embarrassment that she will not look at him in petticoats but holds her own heart in suspense until he is back in knightly armor! The wood-god Faunus, wishing to spy upon Diana, the goddess of the chase, bathing in a forest pool, bribes one of Diana's nymphs for the privilege which he wishes with "Queene—apples and red Cherries from the tree," delightful enough temptation to make any poor nymph forget her loyalties. In his victory foolish Faunus, however, "could him not containe in silent rest," but, "breaking forth" in gleeful laughter, is detected by Diana, and duly and harshly punished.

Although it is a long passage, there is no more realistic scene in **The Faerie Queene** than that just after the Redcrosse Knight has fulfilled his mission by killing the Dragon, or spiritual sin. Throngs of people—all manner of people—gather to look at the dead but still horrible monster. Spenser tells us that

*Some feard, and fled; some feard and well it faynd;  
One that would wiser seeme, then all the rest,  
Warnd him not touch, for yet perhaps remaynd  
Some lingring life within his hollow brest,  
Or in his wombe might lurke some hidden nest  
Of many Dragonets, his fruitfull seed;  
Another said, that in his eyes did rest  
Yet sparckling fire, and bad thereof take heed;  
Another said, he saw him moue his eyes indeed.*

A mother, when her "foolehardie" child drew too near and with the Dragon's talons played, "her little babe reuyld," and to her

*gossips gan in counsell say;  
How can I tell, but that his talants may  
Yet scratch my sonne, or rend his tender hand?*

So the spectators "diuersly themselves in vaine . . . fray,"

*Whiles some more bold, to measure him nigh stand,  
To proue how many acres he did spread of land.*

That so realistic a scene should occur in such a romantic poem is amazing, despite its value in the moral allegory. Amusingly enough, I never read the lines, though, without recalling a not too dissimilar scene at the University of Oklahoma one rainy April morning in 1927.

Stretched its full length on the sidewalk in front of the Journalism Building, the most appropriate place for publicity, lay, that morning, a huge gray wolf—dead—the trophy bagged by University students (we were very young and small then) when coyotes were too freely marauding sheep and cattle on neighboring farms. The street between the Journalism Building and Buchanan Hall, where the English Department was housed, not paved then, was that morning a deep mud puddle. But rain and mud did not deter staff and students. They thronged across the street to see the dead gray wolf—even Professors T. H. Brewer, S. R. Hadsell, J. H. Marshburn, and L. N. Morgan. It was, in fact, one of those learned gentlemen, who touched the poor wolf with the toe of his muddy shoe to see—just as in Spenser—whether the animal had any life. But I, who "feard and fled," live to wonder what wolves Spenser must have seen in "savage" Ireland!

**T**he episode is so skillful that it deserves to rank with more magnificent passages which are intended to glorify beauty, such as the exquisite Pageant of the Seasons and Months in the "Mutabilitie Cantos"; the Masque of Cupid, which concludes Book III triumphantly; the incomparable canto of the Garden of Adonis, where, as in the "Mutabilitie

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#### BENEDICTION

By JOHN H. KYLE

Gilded blades (my former horns)  
Now fertilize the valleys of heat  
While pastoral cannons

Surely  
Softly  
Sweetly

Hypnotize the living  
Fools who thought me safely dead  
Here is your promised land  
Your grinning graves  
The bricks  
That you shall only scrape forever  
O Had you not forgotten  
Pan

Cantos," time is the only enemy of life; the Bower of Bliss, in sheer sensual loveliness, rivaled only by the Rhine-maiden scene in **Parsifal**; and lastly, the Despair Passage, the very summit of that weighted and tired beauty of which Spenser alone seems master.

But that Shakespeare and Milton were both familiar with the alluring speeches of Despair when he tempts the Redcrosse Knight to suicide is apparent in Hamlet's soliloquies and the speech of Chaos in **Paradise Lost**. "For what hath life," Despair says,

*that may it loued make,  
And giues not rather cause it to forsake?  
Feare, sicknesse, age, losse, labour, sorrow, strife,  
Paine, hunger, cold, that makes the heart to quake;  
And euer fickle fortune rageth rise,  
All which, and thousands mo do make a loathsome life.*

Read the last line out loud and you will discover at once the remarkably fine "lengthening" effect which it gives to the stanza Spenser originated for **The Faerie Queene**.

The poet can create startling beauty of image and sound without the stanza, however, as is illustrated in **Colin Clouts Come Home Againe**, a poem in which he describes the journey he and Sir Walter Raleigh made from Ireland to England to show Queen Elizabeth **The Faerie Queene**:

*So to the sea we came; the sea? that is  
A world of waters heaped up on hie,  
Rolling like mountaines in wide wilderness,  
Horrible, hideous, roaring with hoarse crie.*

More subtly beautiful are the verses of **The Epithalamion**, which commemorates his marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. When the wedding festivities are over, and the bride and groom have retired to their chamber, the moon keeps watch, a fact which makes the poet query,

*Who is the same, which at my window peepes  
Or whose is that faire face, that shines so bright,  
Is it not Cinthia, she that neuer sleeps,  
But walkes about high heauen al the night?*

No one knows exactly when Spenser was born, for there is no record of his birth; at least, none has been discovered. Spenser tells us in Sonnet LX of **The Amoretti**, though, that "since the winged God his planet cleare" began in him to move, "one yeare is spent," which he says, "doth longer vnto me appeare, / then al those fourty which my life outwent." His courtship, as indicated in **The Amoretti**, covered a period of about eighteen months, beginning

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and our forest trees, let us not, pray, turn out those "contributions" which have no purpose but to get ourselves promoted. Here I trust the publishers will aid us by declining to print what we should not have written. If the great work is in us, it will be done for love. If it is not there, let us live in an obscurity which will at least be harmless.

I am going to say one thing more, which is specific to our times. All of us are justly anxious for the state of the world, which now moves, seemingly helpless, from crisis to crisis while disaster lurks around the corner. The historian will take what comfort he can, remembering that the barbarians have been always with us, and that the assault on liberty has been perennial. But he is more vulnerable than most, for his heart is more involved. His life is committed to inherited values now gravely threatened. He has formed a professional attachment for monuments and archives which he knows are too often the first victims of war. The center of his world is apt to be Oxford or Paris, and he knows that next time it may be this place, his own private Jerusalem, which is destroyed.

Yet he has work to do, and it is important work. To do it he must discover, somehow, a Stoic peace of mind. Here, by way of suggesting that our plight is not unprecedented, I am going to close by quoting—with the change of a single word—part of a message by Governor DeWitt Clinton to the New York legislators in 1814. They were asked to vote money for the ordering of their archives and the copying of relevant documents abroad. Meanwhile their state was about to be invaded by British troops.

Clinton wrote, "Genuine greatness never appears in a more resplendent light, or in a more sublime attitude, than in that buoyancy of character which rises superior to danger and difficulty; in that magnanimity of soul which cultivates the arts and sciences amidst the danger of war; and in that comprehension of mind which cherishes all the cardinal interests of a country, without being distracted or diverted by the most appalling considerations."

As Clinton then, so we now, must embody in our work an act of faith. Faith in these labors, that they will be relevant to our children. Faith in ourselves, that we shall somehow guide the present. Faith in our inherited ideals, that they will possess the future. For by the light of faith we shall find courage in our hearts now. And in the strength of inward peace we shall yet, as I trust, break through the way to some outward and material peace for our descendants.

# Books

*DISCOURSES ON RELIGION.* By *Gustav E. Mueller.* *Bookman Associates, New York, 1951.*

## The Significance of Religion in Human Experience

By J. CLAYTON FEAVER

*Discourses on Religion* is made up ostensibly of five monologues, but it soon becomes apparent that it is basically five dialogues, each speaker in dialogue with the one before him or with the reader. In its monologue form, the speaker voices his response to and understanding—sometimes misunderstanding—of religion. In its dialogue form, each succeeding speaker examines and makes reply to the questions, doubts, and objectives of the preceding speaker. Also each speaker seems to be conversing with the reader. As I read these discourses, I found myself engaged in conversation with the speaker. Sometimes the conversation took the form of a sharp debate: I disagreed with the speaker or pleaded for clarification. At other times I agreed with his point of view, or was amused with his illustration, or was thrilled with his insight. Whatever the turn of my response, however, I was stimulated to carry on a conversation, as it were, with each of the five participants.

Probably the chief design of the *Discourses* is to stimulate interest and thought in the field of religion. The book is not primarily a source reference, though it speaks wide study and knowledge of religion. It is not a history of religion or an analysis or defense of religious practices and ideas. Rather I believe it might best be described as a poet's effort to make articulate deep insight into the meaning and significance of religion in human experience. To be sure, Dr. Mueller has injected a good

bit of constructive criticism into his *Discourses*; but his main accomplishment, achieved with enthusiasm and good humor, lies in his ability to prompt in the reader both a feeling for religious truth and a decision to investigate its importance to human life and achievement. I should judge that the book will appeal both to those with extensive training in religion and to laymen. Those with special training will find a certain fascination in the wide variety of religious experience which the *Discourses* suggest, and the layman will be stimulated to re-think his own religious presuppositions and to open his mind to wider interpretations.

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## The Poet's Birthday . . .

in 1592. Sonnet LX was likely written c. 1592–1593. If he were forty years old then, Spenser was born in 1552 or 1553.

Chaucer had been dead for a hundred and fifty years, and the state of English poetry was so deplorable that some questioned whether great poetry could be written in the English language. *The Shepherdes Calendar*, in 1579, helped to put an end to such conjecture. In an epistle prefixed to the twelve pastorals which make up *The Calendar*, Spenser is called "the new poet," a title which has followed him down the centuries because of its appropriateness; for, Spenser, from his first verses to his last, was an experimental poet. He never ceased to innovate. His experiments in language, rhythmic patterns, and subject matter not only re-invigorated English poetry but changed its trend completely. Is it so surprising, then, that he should have believed that he could move the hearts of his countrymen to greatness in living through the beauty of poetry?

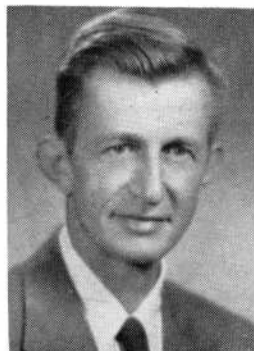
Of Chaucer, Spenser said,

*well of English undefyled,*

*On Fames eternall beadroll worthie to be fyled.*

What better could we say of Spenser on his four-hundredth anniversary?

### About the Author



*Dr. Feaver joined the faculty in 1951 as Kingfisher College Associate Professor of the Philosophy of Ethics and Religion, the first endowed professorship in the University. He had previously held the pastorate of the Bridgeport Memorial Church, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and had taught at Berea College. Dr. Mueller is a poet and philosopher with many publications to his credit both in the United States and Europe.*