

SPENSER'S THE FAERIE QUEENE

4. THE SPENSERIAN STANZA.—The *Faerie Queene* is written in the Spenserian Stanza, a form which the poet himself invented as a suitable vehicle for a long narrative poem. Suggestions for its construction were taken from three Italian metres—the Ottava Rima, the Terza Rima, the Sonnet—and the Ballade stanza. There are eight lines in the iambic pentameter measure (five accents); *e.g.*—

v -/- | v -/- | v -/- | v -/- | v -/-
a gen | tle knight | was prick | ing on | the plaine

followed by one iambic hexameter, or Alexandrine (six accents); *e.g.*—

v -/- | v -/- | v -/- | v -/- | v -/- | v -/-
as one | for knight | ly giusts | and fierce | encount | ers fitt

The rhymes are arranged in the following order: *ab ab bc bcc*. It will be observed that the two quatrains are bound together by the first two *b* rhymes, and the Alexandrine, which rhymes with the eighth line, draws out the harmony with a peculiar lingering effect. In scanning and reading it is necessary to observe the laws of accentuation and pronunciation prevailing in Spenser's day; *e.g.* in *learned* (I, [i](#)), *undeserved* (I, [ii](#)), and *woundes* (V, [xvii](#)) the final syllable is sounded, *patience* (X, [xxix](#)) is trisyllabic, *devotion* (X, [xlvi](#)) is four syllables, and *entertainment* (X, [xxxvii](#)) is accented on the second and fourth syllables. Frequently there is in the line a cæsural pause, which may occur anywhere; *e.g.*—

"And quite dismembred hath; | the thirsty land
Dronke up his life; | his corse left on the strand." (III, [xx](#).)

The rhythm of the meter is also varied by the alternating of end-stopped and run-on lines, as in the last quotation. An end-stopped line has a pause at the end, usually indicated by some mark of punctuation. A run-on line should be read closely with the following line with only a slight pause to indicate the line-unit. Monotony is prevented by the occasional use of a light or feminine ending—a syllable on which the voice does not or cannot rest; *e.g.*—

"Then choosing out few words most horrible." (I, [xxxvii](#).)

"That for his love refused deity." (III, [xxi](#).)

"His ship far come from watrie wilderness." (III, [xxxii](#).)

The use of alliteration, *i.e.* having several words in a line beginning with the same letter, is another device frequently employed by Spenser for musical effect; *e.g.*—

"In which that wicked wight his dayes doth weare." (I, [xxxix](#).)

"Sweet slombring deaw, the which to sleep them biddes." (I, [xxxvi](#).)

5. VERSIFICATION.—In the handling of his stanza, Spenser revealed a harmony, sweetness, and color never before dreamed of in the English. Its compass, which admitted of an almost endless variety of cadence, harmonized well with the necessity for continuous narration. It appeals to the eye as well as to the ear, with its now languid, now vigorous, but always graceful turn of phrase. Its movement has been compared to the smooth, steady, irresistible sweep of water in a mighty river. Like Lyly, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, Spenser felt the new delight in the pictorial and musical qualities of words, and invented new melodies and word pictures. He aimed rather at finish, exactness, and fastidious neatness than at ease, freedom, and irregularity; and if his versification has any fault, it is that of monotony. The atmosphere is always perfectly adapted to the theme.

6. DICTION AND STYLE.—The peculiar diction of the *Faerie Queene* should

receive the careful attention of the student. As a romantic poet, Spenser often preferred archaic and semi-obsolete language to more modern forms. He uses four classes of words that were recognized as the proper and conventional language of pastoral and romantic poetry; viz. (a) *archaisms*, (b) *dialect*, (c) *classicisms*, and (d) *gallicisms*. He did not hesitate to adopt from Chaucer many obsolete words and grammatical forms. Examples are: the double negative with *ne*; *eyen*, *lenger*, *doen*, *ycladd*, *harrowd*, *purchas*, *raught*, *seely*, *stowre*, *swinge*, *owch*, and *withouten*. He also employs many old words from Layamon, Wiclif, and Langland, like *swelt*, *younglings*, *noye*, *kest*, *hurtle*, and *loft*. His dialectic forms are taken from the vernacular of the North Lancashire folk with which he was familiar. Some are still a part of the spoken language of that region, such as, *brent*, *cruddled*, *forswat*, *fearen*, *forry*, *pight*, *sithen*, *carle*, and *carke*.

Examples of his use of classical constructions are: the ablative absolute, as, *which doen* (IV, [xliii](#)); the relative construction with *when*, as, *which when* (I, [xvii](#)), *that when* (VII, [xi](#)); the comparative of the adjective in the sense of "too," as, *weaker* (I, [xlv](#)), *harder* (II, [xxxvi](#)); the participial construction after *till*, as, *till further tryall made* (I, [xii](#)); the superlative of location, as, *middest* (IV, [xv](#)); and the old gerundive, as, *wandering wood* (I, [xiii](#)). Most of the gallicisms found are anglicized loan words from the French *romans d'aventure*, such as, *disseized*, *cheare*, *chappell*, *assoiled*, *guerdon*, *palfrey*, *recreaunt*, *trenchand*, *syre*, and *trusse*. Notwithstanding Spenser's use of foreign words and constructions, his language is as thoroughly English in its idiom as that of any of our great poets.

"I think that if he had not been a great poet," says Leigh Hunt, "he would have been a great painter."

"After reading," says Pope, "a canto of Spenser two or three days ago to an old lady, between seventy and eighty years of age, she said that I had been showing her a gallery of pictures. I do not know how it is, but she said very right. There is something in Spenser that pleases one as strongly in old age as it did in youth. I read the *Faerie Queene* when I was about twelve, with infinite delight; and I think it gave me as much, when I read it over about a year or two ago."

The imperishable charm of the poem lies in its appeal to the pure sense of beauty. "A beautiful pagan dream," says Taine, "carries on a beautiful dream of chivalry." The reader hears in its lines a stately and undulating rhythm that intoxicates the ear and carries him on with an irresistible fascination, he sees the unsubstantial forms of fairyland go sweeping by in a gorgeous and dreamlike pageantry, and he feels pulsing in its luxuriant and enchanted atmosphere the warm and beauty-loving temper of the Italian Renaissance. "Spenser is superior to his subject," says Taine, "comprehends it fully, frames it with a view to the end, in order to impress upon it the proper mark of his soul and his genius. Each story is modified with respect to another, and all with respect to a certain effect which is being worked out. Thus a beauty issues from this harmony,—the beauty in the poet's heart,—which his whole work strives to express; a noble and yet a laughing beauty, made up of moral elevation and sensuous seductions, English in sentiment, Italian in externals, chivalric in subject, modern in its perfection, representing a unique and admirable epoch, the appearance of paganism in a Christian race, and the worship of form by an imagination of the North."

A GENTLE Knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruel 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.

And 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.

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.

A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside,
Upon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
Under a vele, that wimpled was full low,
And over all a blacke stole she did throw,
As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,
And heavie sat upon her palfrey slow;
Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.

So pure and innocent, as that same lambe,
She was in life and every vertuous lore,
And by descent from Royall lynage came
Of ancient Kings and Queenes, that had of yore
Their scepters stretcht from East to Westerne shore,
And all the world in their subjection held;
Till that infernall feend with foule uprore
Forwasted all their land, and them expeld:
Whom to avenge, she had this Knight from far compeld.