

INTRODUCTION TO BOOK TWO, CANTO TEN

As you already know, after Guyon's collapse, Arthur and Guyon visit Alma's House of Temperance. Her residence, a lovely and orderly physical space, is a metaphor of the temperate human body, containing rooms that represent affection, bodily processes, and thought. The well-ordered, merry atmosphere of the House of Temperance contrasts with both Mammon's ruthless underworld (Canto Seven) and Acrasia's depraved Bower of Bliss (Canto Twelve).

At the end of their tour of Alma's home, Arthur and Guyon meet Alma's three advisers: (1) Phantastes (sage of the future), (2) a nameless adviser (sage of the present), and (3) Eumnestes (sage of the past.) In this strange, visionary episode, the knights are exposed to iconographic representations of various modes of wisdom. The room of memory is particularly interesting, for this is where Guyon and Arthur spend the entirety of Canto Ten, reading books that describe the histories of their homelands.

So, we find two chronicles in Canto Ten, the first describing the history of Britain and the second describing the Elfin line. This is the first of three extended lists in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser includes more of Britain's rulers in Book Three. Then, in Book Four, he offers a vast record of bodies of water. With each of these three accounts, the poem shifts gears, orients the reader historically or geographically, then moves on with the plot.

This first chronicle doesn't weave smoothly into its surrounding plot. Like the "begats" of the Bible, Canto Ten will likely feel a bit dry to the modern reader. Many critics agree. Jerry Mills describes a number of harsh reactions to this listing of rulers, some scholars writing it off as "tedious and irrelevant," an "unimaginative digression," or part of "an earlier work revamped and interpolated into the epic"—a detraction from the primary theme of Book Two.¹

Spenser seems to have broken his first British chronicle into dynasties separated by three interregna (periods of suspension between reigns). Carrie A. Harper first noted this pattern in 1910, and many critics have adopted and expanded on it since.² I have added titles to this rendering showing you where both the interregna and the various dynasties of Brutus, Donwallo, Coyll II, and Constantine II (Arthur's grandfather) begin.

Why might these separations matter? It's possible that each historical period bears a defining quality. For example, Berger suggests: "The age of Brutus is an age of Nature—primarily of the 'tooth and claw' variety—whereas Donwallo's is presented as an age of Law."³ So perhaps Spenser simply stuck an obligatory and unrelated history section (one he had already written, in fact) in the middle of his poem, or perhaps the organization and narration of Canto Ten support the larger themes of his story.

Certainly, Spenser is imitating other epic lists in his catalog, such as Homer's Greek

¹ Mills 1978:83.

² Harper 1964:94.

³ Berger 1967:94.

cities in the *Iliad*, the genealogies of the Bible, and three historical catalogues in the *Aeneid*.⁴ Much of the material contained in Spenser's history is found in old accounts written by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Raphael Holinshed, though Spenser used up to four sources for a single stanza.⁵ Certainly, Spenser reorganized history here and there to serve his cause, justifying and promoting the dominance of Elizabethan England.⁶ But was he doing anything else, as well?

Jerry Mills suggests Canto Ten serves as an exemplar providing training in prudence for Arthur as he prepares to become king. *Why prudence? you ask. Isn't this a book about temperance?* Prudence fits here because Arthur needs wisdom to help him apply the virtue of temperance properly. Understanding the mistakes of Britain's past will allow him to direct the nation wisely in the future.

Plenty of bad kings in this list show Arthur what not to do. Berger notes:

In the sixty-four stanzas there are perhaps eleven good kings to whom Spenser allots more than a line or two of brief praise; some nine or ten are mentioned in transit; of another nine it is merely stated that they reigned. For the rest, one inordinate example follows another: carnage, anarchy, sedition; murders not only of kings but of fathers, husbands, brothers, children. The twenty-three stanzas devoted to Brutus' line report on seven hundred years of almost uninterrupted mayhem.⁷

Yet, the fourth line of the chronicle, the line of Constantine II, from whom Arthur descends, is not yet corrupted. After reading about the downfall of so many fallen dynasties, Arthur realizes he has a chance to do better. In fact, he has a responsibility to "act so as to preserve this innocence into the future."⁸

In his treatise on kingship, Aegidius Romanus, a student of Aquinas, wrote: "The king must have memory of things past, for by the deeds of his ancestors he knows what he must do in times to come."⁹ As Arthur receives such warnings, he grows in kingly prudence, orienting the chronicle of Canto Ten within the theme of temperance. Historically, prudence was separated into "common prudence" and "the more specialized virtue of governmental prudence."¹⁰ Arthur needs both, but this canto focuses on the wisdom of public leadership.

⁴ Gray 2006:xxii–xxiv.

⁵ Mills 1978:90–92. The most complete work I've been able to find evaluating Spenser's sources was written by Carrie Anna Harper in 1910. (She's the scholar I mentioned above.) Her doctoral thesis was published by Haskell in 1964 under the title: *The Sources of the British Chronicle History in Spenser's Faerie Queene: A Dissertation*, and it's worth examining. R. E. Neil Dodge largely praises the quality of Harper's work, though a few qualifications can be found in his 1912 review in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 11, no.2 (April 1912), 289–291.

⁶ Tonkin 1989:20.

⁷ Berger 1967:90.

⁸ Mills 1978:98.

⁹ Quoted in Mills 1978:88.

¹⁰ Mills 1978:86.

“But have you forgotten that we have two men reading their histories in the same room, not just one?” someone shouts. Great observation, out there. If this canto is just about educating a future king, why is Guyon even present? Could Spenser not find anywhere else to stick him while Arthur learned his lessons? Or does this scene offer an intentional contrast between the line of the Elves and the line of humans?¹¹

After an onslaught of stanzas describing dark British history, Guyon’s lineage certainly seems lavish, fertile, and relatively innocent. Mills says, “As Berger remarks, ‘there is no failure of the seed in Faery,’ adding “the rapid rate at which the line multiplies can only be seen as a direct contrast to the perennially withering stock of the Britons.”¹² For support, he cites C. S. Lewis’s observation that the House of Holiness and the Gardens of Adonis were realms of replication, while the wicked Bower of Acrasia (featured later in the epic) demonstrated “artifice, sterility, death.”¹³ At the time Spenser was writing, Britain was led by an aging queen with no heir, leaving the country in great uncertainty. So readers of *The Faerie Queene* certainly would have noticed (and likely have been envious of) an Elfin monarch who “left three sonnes” who reigned in order.¹⁴

Ironically, Guyon’s lineage also presents an “idealized version of the history of England, particularly the history of the Tudors.”¹⁵ This is meaningful because Elizabeth ended up being the last of the Tudor monarchs. Of course, Elizabeth’s reign would occur long after Guyon’s story supposedly takes place, so this account of his history offers a flattering prediction of future events, “an imaginary, idealized parallel to actual Tudor history.”¹⁶

Why would Spenser include such a contrast between British and Elfin lines? Berger suggests that, due to the consequences of the Fall, a human would be incapable of overcoming an enemy like Acrasia. Therefore, Spenser would need to employ a non-human to face down the Bower of Bliss.¹⁷ Perhaps Berger is correct, but I find this theory unlikely. Not only has Guyon made obvious mistakes, he’s also been called “wicked” by Spenser, fumbling so badly, he requires Arthur’s rescue. Furthermore, Guyon has referred to Christ as his Redeemer, thus acknowledging his sinful state. If his ancestors were innocent—a breed that has escaped the Fall—then Guyon is the rotten apple of the bunch.

I wonder if Spenser is simply using Guyon’s genealogy to compliment his queen before carrying us back into Faerie Land. We’ve endured a long and painful account of British history,

¹¹ Spenser (and Spenserian scholars) use both “Elf” and “Faerie” to describe Guyon. “Faerie” means he is a native of Faerie Land. “Elf” means that his lineage within Faerie Land is Elfin. Both terms emphasize that Guyon is a native resident of this alternate realm.

¹² Mills 1978:98.

¹³ Mills 1978:98–99.

¹⁴ Reynolds 2023:II x 13.4.

¹⁵ Tonkin 1989:89.

¹⁶ Tonkin 1989:89.

¹⁷ Berger 1967:108–109.

witnessing one error after another in Arthur's book. Spenser's readers likely felt that burden. That pain turns to hope through Guyon's line—a nod to the Tudors:

A final observation you might find interesting: it's possible to divide the British chronicle into two sections, with Stanza Fifty as the dividing line. Stanza Fifty tells of the reign of Cymbeline,¹⁸ “during whose time the eternal Lord was made flesh, placed in the womb from Adam's wretched line to purge away the guilt of sinful crimes” (Reynolds 2022: ____). Mills cites Berger's suggestion that Spenser is presenting a post-Christ shift, moving “from human to divine law and from the earthly city of imperial Rome to the City of God.”¹⁹

How might this connect with the theme of temperance? As Erik Gray notes, by reminding us that the Incarnation of Jesus happened at roughly the same time as Rome's invasion of Britain, Spenser emphasizes a critical Christian premise: “temperance is essential, because intemperance makes one vulnerable to attack; but temperance by itself is insufficient without the aid of heavenly grace.”²⁰ If this divide exists in the text, “the historical narrative of Canto Ten recapitulates the lesson taught by the narrative of Book Two as a whole: temperance within ensures safety without, but only with the eventual assistance of grace from above.”²¹ Brooks-Davies offers a similar statement: “At st. 50 we are told of Christ's birth; which means that, just as Book II as a whole moves from the classical view of temperance to a definition of Christian temperance and the necessity for divine love and grace (vii.65–6n.; viii.1–2n.), so does the account of the kings of Britain move from the pre-Christian (man in a state of nature) to Christian (the state of grace).”²²

As a modern reader weary of extreme nationalism, I admire two aspects of Spenser's patriotism in Canto Ten. First, he addresses unflattering historical lessons inside of a house representing the temperate human. By this, he shows us that we are changed when we learn about our past properly. Such lessons are not to be ignored but “internalized,” integrated with “the psychological being of the virtuous man.”²³ Secondly, even though Spenser openly lists the wounds of his homeland, its failures, and its vulnerabilities—he also expresses gratitude for his country through Arthur's response upon finishing the chronicle, “Dear Country! Oh how dearly dear should thy remembrance and perpetual bond be to thy foster child, who received common breath and nourishment from thy hand! How brutish is it not to understand how much we owe to she who gave us whatever good we have.” I find this mix of confession and gratitude refreshing, especially as it sits inside a story that reminds us of our constant need for divine help.

¹⁸ Spenser spells this “Kimbeline.”

¹⁹ Mills 1978:84.

²⁰ Gray 2006:xxiv

²¹ Gray 2006:xxv.

²² Brooks-Davies 1977:171–172.

²³ Tonkin 1989:87.