INTRODUCTION TO BOOK TWO

We do not use the word "temperance" very often these days, so let's begin by defining the term: a temperate person has mastery over his or her impulses. Most of us want this level of self-control—but how do we get there? Whether we are trying to spend less time on social media, working to get in better shape, or fighting against reckless spending, it can be difficult to resist temptation. For over two thousand years, humans have recognized this internal struggle, attempting to figure out how temperance works and how it fits inside a larger moral framework. We all admire and desire restraint, but how do we achieve it? Do we simply flex our willpower, or is God's assistance required?

Spenser wrote his book on temperance under the influence of several ancient moral frameworks. In Book One, you read stories based upon a Protestant Christian concept of holiness. In Book Two, however, we meet a different sort of hero—a faerie knight named Guyon who mirrors a classical hero—"a type of Hercules" who demonstrates "some of the qualities of *pius Aeneas*."[1] If you have already studied the history of virtue in classic literature and philosophy, you have a head start on Book Two. For others, the following introduction offers a brief overview.[2] Because the field is complex, the summaries I provide do not fully represent each movement (or all that happened between them). Hopefully, however, this introduction will grant a few touchpoints to help you move through Book Two with common language and a bit more insight.

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

Plato's *Republic* included temperance as one of four key virtues (the other three being wisdom, courage, and justice).[3] Cicero's *De Officiis* offered a nearly identical list about three hundred years later.[4] Within five hundred years, leaders of the Christian church were finding ways to incorporate Greek ethics into their interpretations of Biblical morality, and in 377 CE, Ambrose of Milan (a teacher of Augustine) linked Plato's framework to the Christian virtues. He seems to have coined the term "cardinal virtues" during the funeral of his brother Satyrus in 378 CE.[5]

---

[1] Tonkin 1989:87.
[2] Of course, many cultures have studied virtue beyond those mentioned here. I have narrowed this overview to sources that would have influenced Spenser (directly or indirectly) most heavily.
[3] Plato, *The Republic: Book IV*. "Wisdom" is sometimes called "prudence." "Courage" is sometimes called "fortitude." "Temperance" is sometimes called "discretion." Depending on author and translation, you might run into such terms if you do follow-up reading in listed resources. Book V of *The Faerie Queene* focuses on justice, so bank some of what you learn in this introduction for future reference.
[4] M. Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*: Section I.15.
[5] Roland Edward Houser 2004:32–33. This source provides beautiful information about what this term likely meant to Ambrose.

About forty years later, Augustine unified the four cardinal virtues under a single heading: charity (or love)—for all sin is ultimately a violation of love. While most of us can eke out a few scattered virtues here and there, Augustine taught that complete virtue cannot be achieved during the human lifetime. Our inability to live a flawless life led Augustine to declare: "What hope is there, then, unless mercy exults in its superiority over judgment?"[6] As a result, the love necessary for driving all virtue is deeply embedded in the tender redemption of Jesus.

While Augustine acknowledged the four virtues of the ancient Greeks, he shifted their impetus, rooting them in a grace-driven, grace-dependent Christian framework. He was not the first person to propose such a nucleus for all morality, but his writings had a huge impact on future generations of Christians.

ARISTOTLE'S MEAN

Aristotle (a student of Plato) was one of Spenser's strongest influences. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he divided virtues into categories: *moral* (achieved through active mastery of our habits) and *intellectual* (achieved through instruction).[7] Temperance was one of his eleven moral virtues. The concept of *the mean*—a perfect middle course between unhealthy extremes—was critical to Aristotle, and references to *the mean* are found throughout *The Faerie Queene*. *Temperance* was Aristotle's mean between the deficiency of insensibility (taking too little enjoyment in pleasures) and the excess of profligacy (indulging in pleasure too much).[8]

THE SEVEN VIRTUES AND BEYOND

Around 410 CE, Aurelius Clemens Prudentius wrote a poem called *Psychomachia* ("The Battle of the Soul"). In this poem, Prudentius generated a list of seven virtues to oppose the seven deadly sins. Pope Gregory I made a few changes to Prudentius' list in about 590 CE, combining the four cardinal virtues with three Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. He also connected human ability to manifest virtue to the power of the Holy Spirit "in order that both faith and works may be perfected at the same time."[9]

In his *Summa Theologica* (1270 CE), Thomas Aquinas outlined the intellectual, moral, cardinal, and theological virtues as well the Gifts, Beatitudes, and Fruits of the Holy Ghost. He meticulously explained how all of these categories overlap, where they are distinct, and how

---

[6] Edmund Hill 1990:104.
[7] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books II–VI.
[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III.10–12.
[9] Peter Lombard (ca. 1100–1160) and Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1160–1236) also contributed significantly to the Christian discussion on virtue, though I do not have room to summarize their work here. See Houser 2004:40–43 to read more. Pope Gregory's writings can be found in Volume III—The Sixth Part, Book 35, Section 42 of *The Books of the Morals of St. Gregory the Pope, or an Exposition on the Book of Blessed Job*, accessed June 19, 2022, http://www.lectionarycentral.com/gregorymoralia/book35.html.

each works in the life of a Christian.[10] Like Augustine, Aquinas ultimately acknowledged that while some aspects of virtue can be performed by the human in his own power, “He that fails to acknowledge the truth, has no true virtue, even if his conduct be good,” making faith an integral part of the virtuous life.[11]

So, while Spenser respected Greek wisdom and gleaned heavily from it, he was also influenced by a thousand years of Christian teaching that placed the virtues of Plato and Aristotle firmly within a context of dependence on the grace of God. Will Spenser’s new protagonist simply learn to master his own impulses, or (like the Red Cross Knight) will he find the end of his own strength and learn to rely on something even greater? This last question captures the biggest, oldest dilemma of Book Two—and, I believe, unlocks it.

A STRANGE TRANSITION

Enter Sir Guyon, the hero of Book Two, and the knight assigned to teach us about temperance. Whether he *represents* temperance or whether his journey simply *helps us understand* temperance has long been a matter of debate. Regardless, he is regularly put into situations that expose the sorts of temptations humans feel when they are drawn toward dangerous extremes. After watching the Red Cross Knight fumble his way into maturity, it is easy to expect a similar setup in Book Two. We might open the book ready for a protagonist who makes obvious mistakes and learns through them. Instead, Guyon seems to project a sense of flawlessness, possessing restraint that appears superhuman.

Frankly, I could not stand Sir Guyon the first time I read Book Two. His goodness felt clinical and soulless—an obedience that checked off all the proper boxes while running short on heart. Not only is he robotically obedient, he is also severe, attempting to devote the infant Ruddymane to a life of vengeance.[12] A question arises: does Spenser undermine his core teaching of Book One with Guyon? We see little evidence that the mercy and humility of the Christian gospel are directing him. After proving human reliance on constant, sustaining grace, why would our poet feature a knight who hardly seems to need it? If temperance is an application of the holiness we have just learned, why does this virtue operate by human willpower?

This sudden shift has led to much debate among Spenserian scholars. To give you a taste of this conversation, I have summarized three theories on Book Two before sharing a few of my thoughts under the Book Two Introduction tab in the Supplemental Materials category of our website (https://faeriequeene.com). If you have not yet read Book Two, perhaps it would be best for you to do so before reading external thoughts on Guyon’s tale. However, if (like me) you hit

[10] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Part I–II*.
[11] Aquinas 2007:863.
[12] Spenser II i 61. See also Tonkin 1989:93.

a rut on your first pass through this book, know that a little companionship awaits you. Feel free to access this essay whenever you are ready for it.