

The Poetry of John Milton: *Faerie Queene's* Influence on *Paradise Lost*

Milton was among Renaissance literary theorists who believed that people who lived in northern climates (like England) were almost incapable of composing the greatest kinds of literature. Since the Greeks, the Romans, and the Renaissance Italians were considered to have produced the greatest writers and they all lived in warmer latitudes, the theory was that there might be a causal connection. In Book Nine of *Paradise Lost*, Milton even speculates that he might never finish writing his epic because of the *cold climate* effect. When it comes to great Classical Epics, Milton seems to have had a point: *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Orlando Innamorato*, and *Jerusalem Delivered* were all written near the Mediterranean Sea. And, what was written in northern climates to compare with such great epics? For many Renaissance theorists, the answer was “Not much.”

Significantly, however, we have to make an exception for Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Milton admired Spenser very much and referred to him as a teacher greater than Thomas Aquinas. *The Faerie Queene*, in its broadest sense, is about young King Arthur's various adventures while he is on a quest to seek out the glorious Faerie Queene. When Milton was a young man, his first idea for an epic plot was of King Arthur waging wars under the Earth. C.S. Lewis points out the obvious similarities between the two book concepts and argues that if Milton had ever composed the poem, it would have been heavily Spenserian. The great epic Milton actually did compose, *Paradise Lost*, also reflects Spenser's influence. Both are grand epics written in English, which articulate and extol the high virtues to which Christians should aspire. The Redcross Knight and Adam are remarkably similar as supremely holy, pure, and virtuous men who fall deeply into sin, then repent, and finally struggle to re-learn how to walk in a state of grace. The most obvious Spenserian influence is how closely the snake-woman, Sin, in Book Two of *Paradise Lost* resembles Spenser's Error in Book One of *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, that whole scene where Satan first encounters his incestuous family, Sin and Death, resonates with Spenser's allegorical style. Arguably other scenes do as well, such as the way the demons are forced to *celebrate* their victory over Adam and Eve by eating the apples filled with ashes (though this scene also seems to owe a debt to Dante as well).