

5 EDMUND SPENSER

(1552–1599)

Author of *Spenser's Sonnets*

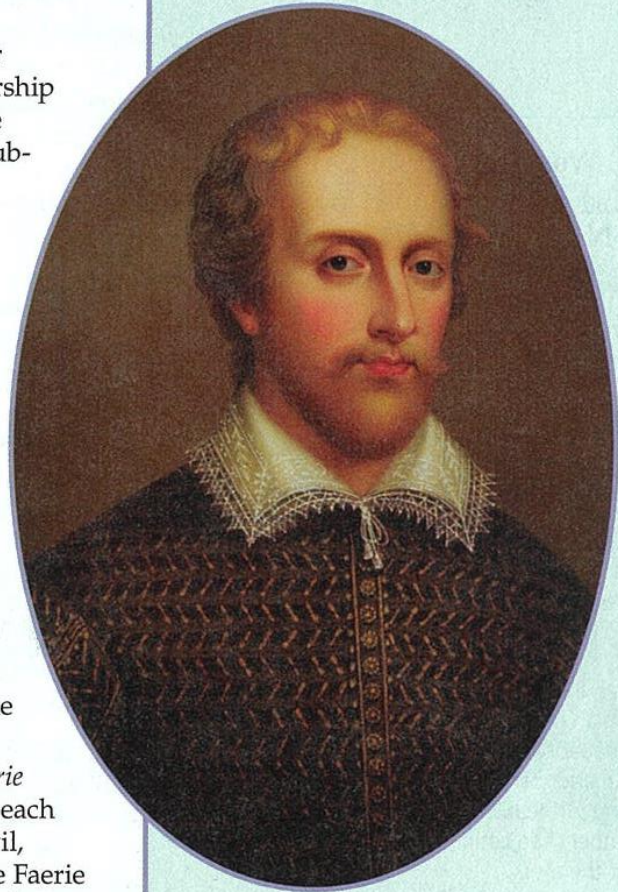
Born into a working-class family, Edmund Spenser attended the Merchant Taylors' School on a scholarship and managed to work his way through Cambridge University. During his university years, Spenser published his first poems.

Pay for Poetry Unlike many other poets of the day, Spenser depended on the payments he received for his work. When the queen's treasurer balked at paying him, he sent this verse to the queen: "I was promised on a time / To have reason for my rhyme. / From that time unto this season / I have received nor rhyme, nor reason." Spenser was paid immediately.

The Faerie Queene In 1580, Spenser took a position as secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland. On a visit to Ireland in 1589, Sir Walter Raleigh (see p. 265) read and was impressed with one of Spenser's unfinished poems. He persuaded Spenser to take the first three books of this long poem to London for publication. That poem became Spenser's greatest work, *The Faerie Queene*.

Written in an intentionally archaic style, *The Faerie Queene* recounts the adventures of several knights, each representing a virtue. This allegory of good and evil, dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I (who appears as the Faerie Queene in the poem), brought Spenser a small pension.

A Poet's Poet Spenser was an innovative poet. In *The Faerie Queene*, he created a new type of nine-line stanza, which was later named for him. He also created a sonnet form, known as the Spenserian sonnet, containing a unique structure and rhyme scheme. His sonnet sequence *Amoretti* is unique among such works—it is addressed to the poet's own wife, not some inaccessible, idealized beauty.



*The noblest mind the best
contentment has.*

—Edmund Spenser

Sonnet

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line lyric poem with a single theme. Each line in a sonnet is usually in iambic pentameter—five groups of two syllables, each with the accent on the second syllable. Sonnet forms include these:

- The **Petrarchan sonnet** is divided into an eight-line octave, rhyming *abbaabba*, followed by a six-line sestet, rhyming *cdecde*. Often, the octave poses a problem that is answered in the sestet. Contrasts between the octave and the sestet allow poets to develop meaning and achieve beautiful effects.
- The **Spenserian sonnet** rhymes *abab bcbc cdcd ee*.

In a **sonnet sequence**, sonnets are linked by theme or person addressed.

900162260

in a sonnet sequence, sonnets are linked by theme or person addressed.

• The Spenserian sonnet rhymes abab bcbc cdcd ee

† SONNET 75 EDMUND SPENSER

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,¹
But came the waves and washèd it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
5 “Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain **assay**,
A mortal thing so to immortalize,
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek² my name be wipèd out likewise.”
“Not so,” quod³ I, “let baser things **devise**
10 To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

-
1. **strand** beach.
 2. **eek** also.
 3. **quod** said.

Vocabulary

assay (a sā') v. try

devise (di vīz') v.
work out or create; plan