

The March of the Seven deadly Sins

From *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser

Book I, Canto IV, Stanzas 17-36

17

So forth she¹ comes, and to her coach does climb,
Adorned all with gold, and garlands gay,
That seemed as fresh as *Flora* in her prime,
And strove to match, in royal rich array,
Great *Juno's* golden chair, the which they say 5
The Gods stand gazing on, when she does ride
To *Jove's* high house through heavens brass-paved way
Drawn of faire Peacocks, that excel in pride,
And full of *Argus*² eyes their tails dispredden³ wide.

18

But this was drawn of six unequal⁴ beasts, 10
On which her six sage Counselors did ride,
Taught to obey their bestial behests,
With like conditions to their kinds⁵ applied:
Of which the first, that all the rest did guide,
Was sluggish *Idleness* the nurse of sin; 15
Upon a slothful Ass he chose to ride,
Arrayed in habit black, and amis⁶ thin,
Like to an holy Monck, the service to begin.

19

And in his hand his Portess⁷ still he bare,
That much was worn, but therein little red, 20
For of devotion he had little care,
Still drowned in sleep, and most of his days dead;
Scarce could he once uphold his heavy head,
To look, whether it were night or day:
May seem⁸ the wayne⁹ was very evil led, 25
When such an one had guiding of the way,
That knew not, whether right he went, or else astray.

20

From worldly cares himself he did esloyne,¹⁰
And greatly shunned manly exercise,
From every work he challenged essoine,¹¹ 30
For contemplation sake: yet otherwise,
His life he led in lawless riotize;¹²
By which he grew to grievous malady;
For in his lustless¹³ limbs through evil guise¹⁴
A shaking fever reigned continually: 35
Such one was *Idleness*, first of this company.

¹ Lucifera, goddess of Pride; the most important of all the deadly sins.

² Argus was the thousand-eyed monster whose eyes Juno stole for the peacock.

³ spread

⁴ different

⁵ natures

⁶ hood

⁷ A book of prayers

⁸ It may seem

⁹ Wain; wagon or open cart

¹⁰ withdraw

¹¹ challenged essoine: claimed exemption

¹² riotousness

¹³ feeble

¹⁴ behavior

21

And by his side rode loathsome *Gluttony*,
Deformed creature, on a filthy swine,
His belly was up-blown with luxury,
And eke¹⁵ with fatness swollen were his eyne,¹⁶ 40
And like a Crane his neck was long and fine,¹⁷
With which he swallowed up excessive feast,
For want whereof poor people oft did pine;¹⁸
And all the way, most like a brutish beast,
He spewed up his gorge, that¹⁹ all did him detest. 45

22

In green vine leaves he was right fitly clad;
For other clothes he could not wear for heat,
And on his head an ivy garland had,
From under which fast trickled down the sweat:
Still as he rode, he somewhat²⁰ still did eat, 50
And in his hand did bear a boozing can,
Of which he supt so oft, that on his seat
His drunken corpse he scarce upholden can,
In shape and life more like a monster, then a man.

23

Unfit he was for any worldly thing, 55
And eke unable once²¹ to stir or go,
Not meet²² to be of counsel to a king,
Whose mind in meat and drink was drowned so,
That from his friend he seldom knew his foe:
Full of diseases was his carcass blue,²³ 60
And a dry²⁴ dropsy through his flesh did flow:
Which by misdiet daily greater grew:
Such one was *Gluttony*, the second of that crew.

24

And next to him rode lustful *Lechery*,
Upon a bearded Goat, whose rugged hair, 65
And whally²⁵ eyes (the sign of jealousy,)
Was like the person self,²⁶ whom he did bear:
Who rough, and black, and filthy did appear,
Unseemly man to please faire Ladies eye;
Yet he of Ladies oft was loved dear', 70
When fairer faces were bid standen by:
O who does know the bent of women's fantasy?

¹⁵ also

¹⁶ eyes

¹⁷ thin

¹⁸ starve

¹⁹ so that

²⁰ something

²¹ at all

²² fit

²³ livid

²⁴ thirst-producing

²⁵ greenish

²⁶ the person self: the very person

25

In a green gown he clothed was full faire,
 Which underneath did hide his filthiness, 75
 And in his hand a burning hart he bare,
 Full of vain follies, and new fangleness:²⁷
 For he was false, and fraught²⁸ with fickleness,
 And learned had to love with secret looks,
 And well could²⁹ dance, and sing with ruefulness,
 And fortunes tell, and read in loving books,³⁰ 80
 And thousand other ways, to bait his fleshly hooks.

26

Inconstant man, that loved all he saw,
 And lusted after all, that he did love,
 Ne³¹ would his looser life be tide to law, 85
 But joyed weak women's hearts to tempt, and prove³²
 If from their loyal loves he might then move;
 Which lewdness filled him with reproachful pain
 Of that foul evil,³³ which all men reprove,
 That rots the marrow, and consumes the brain:
 Such one was *Lechery*, the third of all this train. 90

27

And greedy *Avarice* by him did ride,
 Upon a Camel loaden all with gold;
 Two iron coffers hung on either side,
 With precious metal full, as they might hold,
 And in his lap an heap of coin he told;³⁴ 95
 For of his wicked pelf³⁵ his God he made,
 And unto hell him self for money sold;
 Accursed usury was all his trade,
 And right and wrong alike in equal balance weighed.

28

His life was nigh unto death's door yplast,³⁶ 100
 And thread-bare cote, and cobbled shoes he ware,
 Ne scarce good morsel all his life did taste,
 But both from back and belly still did spare,
 To fill his bags, and riches to compare;³⁷
 Yet childe ne kinsman living had he none 105
 To leave them to; but thorough³⁸ daily care
 To get, and nightly fear to lose his own,
 He led a wretched life unto him self unknown.³⁹

²⁷ novelties
²⁸ loaded
²⁹ knew how to
³⁰ erotic
³¹ not
³² try
³³ foul evil: syphilis
³⁴ counted
³⁵ wealth
³⁶ placed
³⁷ acquire
³⁸ through
³⁹ friendless

29

Most wretched wight,⁴⁰ whom nothing might suffice,
Whose greedy lust did lack in greatest store,⁴¹ 110
Whose need had end, but no end covetise,⁴²
Whose wealth was want,⁴³ whose plenty made him pore,
Who had enough, yet wished ever more;
A vile disease, and eke in foot and hand
A grievous gout tormented him full sore, 115
That well he could not touch, nor go,⁴⁴ nor stand:
Such one was *Avarice*, the fourth of this faire band.

30

And next to him malicious *Envy* rode,
Upon a ravenous wolf, and still did chaw
Between his cankered⁴⁵ teeth a venomous toad, 120
That all the poison ran about his chaw;⁴⁶
But inwardly he chawed his own maw⁴⁷
At neighbor's wealth, that made him ever sad;
For death it was, when any good he saw,
And wept, that cause of weeping none he had, 125
But when he heard of harm, he waxed wondrous glad.

31

All in a kirtle⁴⁸ of discolored say⁴⁹
He clothed was, ypainted full of eyes;
And in his bosom secretly there lay
An hateful Snake, the which his tail upties 130
In many folds, and mortal sting implies.⁵⁰
Still as he rode, he gnashed his teeth, to see
Those heaps of gold with griple⁵¹ Covetise,
And grudged⁵² at the great felicity
Of proud *Lucifera*, and his own company. 135

32

He hated all good work and virtuous deeds,
And him no less, that any like did use,⁵³
And who with gracious bread the hungry feeds,
His alms for want of faith he doth accuse;
So every good to bad he doth abuse:⁵⁴ 140
And eke the verse of famous Poet's wit
He does backbite, and spiteful poison spews
From leprous mouth on all, that ever writ:
Such one vile *Envy* was, that fifth in row did sit.

⁴⁰ person

⁴¹ plenty

⁴² covetousness

⁴³ poverty

⁴⁴ walk

⁴⁵ corroded

⁴⁶ jaw

⁴⁷ guts

⁴⁸ jacket

⁴⁹ discoloured say: multicolored wool

⁵⁰ covers up

⁵¹ grasping

⁵² grumbled

⁵³ practice

⁵⁴ abuse: as both verb and noun

33

And him beside rides fierce revenging *Wrath*,
Upon a Lion, loath⁵⁵ for to be led;
And in his hand a burning brond⁵⁶ he hath,
The which he brandisheth about his head;
His eyes did hurl forth sparkles fiery red,
And stared stern on all, that him beheld,
As ashes pale of hew and seeming dead;
And on his dagger still his hand he held,
Trembling through hasty rage, when chol⁵⁷er in him swelled.

34

His ruffin⁵⁸ raiment all was stained with blood,
Which he had spilt, and all to rags yrent,
Through unaduized rashness woxen wood;⁵⁹
For of his hands he had no government,
Ne cared for blood in his avengement:
But when the furious fit was overpast,
His cruel facts⁶⁰ he often would repent;
Yet willful man he never would forecast,⁶¹
How many mischieves should ensue his heedless haste.

35

Full many mischiefs follow cruell *Wrath*;
Abhorred bloodshed, and tumultuous strife,
Unmanly murder, and unthrifty scath,⁶²
Bitter despight, with rancorous rusty knife,
And fretting grief the enemy of life;
All these, and many evils moe⁶³ haunt ire,
The swelling Spleen,⁶⁴ and Frenzy raging rife,
The shaking Palsy, and Saint *Francis*⁶⁵ fire:
Such one was *Wrath*, the last of this ungodly tire.⁶⁶

36

And after all, upon the wagon beam⁶⁷
Rode *Satan*, with a smarting whip in hand,
With which he forward lashed the lazy team,
So oft as *Sloth* still in the mire did stand.
Huge routs⁶⁸ of people did about them band,
Shouting for joy, and still before their way
A foggy mist had covered all the land;
And underneath their feet, all scattered lay
Dead skulls & bones of men, whose life had gone astray.

⁵⁵ unwilling

⁵⁶ sword

⁵⁷ anger

⁵⁸ disordered

⁵⁹ grown mad

⁶⁰ deeds

⁶¹ foretell

⁶² damage

⁶³ more

⁶⁴ Temper; also the bodily organ in which anger was thought to be created.

⁶⁵ Saint Francis' Fire: a skin disease characterized by shiny red inflammation

⁶⁶ tire: train or procession

⁶⁷ shaft

⁶⁸ crowds

Spenser's parade of the Seven Deadly Sins, 'refined' by Pope Gregory the Great (540 AD - 605 AD), as they appear in *The Faerie Queene*:

Lucifera represents the first of the seven deadly sins. She is **Pride**. Pride arrives in a royal state glittered with gold and other fine things. Spenser compares Pride to a Peacock. The Peacock signifies pride because of their glorious tails which they show off to the world.

Idleness or **Sloth** followed Pride (Lucifera) on to the scene. Idleness chose to ride on a "slothfull" (stanza 18 book 1) or lazy ass. He is dressed in all black and resembles a monk. He loved to sleep and that is what he did most of the day. He could barely lift up his heavy head. He led the rest of the deadly sins which is weird considering he could not lift his head to see if he and they were going the right way.

Gluttony rode on a filthy pig directly behind Idleness. Spenser describes him as a deformed man or creature with a huge belly. His neck is long and his body is swollen. He used his long neck and huge frame to "Swallow up excessive feast" (Stanza 21 Book 1). In addition to all of this he was vomiting as he rode his filthy pig. Gluttony had little to no clothes on and was sweating profusely because of the heat. As he rode, he ate. Spenser says he looked more like a drunken monster than a man.

Lust or Lechery rode behind Gluttony. He arrived on a "bearded goat" (Stanza 24, Book 1). He had the sign of jealousy on him and dressed in black over his filthy body. Spenser describes him as fake and fickle, with baited fleshy hooks.

Avarice rode on a camel directly behind Lust. His camel was packed with gold and valuables. He held a pile of coins in his lap and constantly gazed upon his money.

Envy arrives upon a "ravenous wolf" (stanza 30 book 1) who is chewing a poisoned toad in its mouth. This wolf is chewing on its own mouth while the poison runs down his chin. Envy would cry at any time for no reason and was only happy in death or destruction.

Wrath arrives on a lion. This is significant because the lion is the king of beasts and has the power and anger to destroy. He has a burning brand resting about his head, and in his hand he holds a dagger. He is the last of the seven deadly sins to arrive following Lucifera.

Spenser's final published version in 1596 consisted of six books, each centered on a knight who embodied one of six virtues:

- Book I: Holiness
- Book II: Temperance
- Book III: Chastity
- Book IV: Friendship
- Book V: Justice
- Book VI: Courtesy

Summa Theologica: St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) reaffirmed that pride (or "vainglory") is rebellion against the authority of God. Aquinas reasoned that some sinful acts are venial rather than deadly: They arise from the temptations of everyday life and have the effect of weakening the bonds of trust and fellowship among people. Lust, for example, threatens the crucial relationship between parents and children. Such actions become elevated to deadly sins when they arise from the spiritual failing of pride and therefore threaten the soul's acceptance into the kingdom of God.

Dante's *Inferno* (1314): The poet Virgil brings Dante down through the nine circles of Hell. Sinners condemned for the less serious sins of the flesh (lust, gluttony, avarice and sloth) were in the upper circles of Hell. Those condemned for sins of the spirit (pride, envy and anger) were placed in the deepest circles of Hell.

Chaucer's (1342-1400) *The Canterbury Tales*: The Parson's Tale, the last of the Canterbury Tales, is in the form of a sermon about penitence. It includes a long discussion of the Seven Deadly Sins, but since it is in prose rather than poetry, and is considered the dullest of the Tales, most readers are inclined to skip it.