QUEENSHIP AND POWER

Spenser's Heavenly Elizabeth

Providential History in *The Faerie Queene*

Donald Stump

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Queenship and Power

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For my father,
whose love of history and literature proved contagious

For Eleonore, Nathan and Monica, Monica and Adam
who had to wait a long time to see what was being written
in the study at the top of the stairs

and for Carol, Bill, and Carole
who have been dear and faithful friends in the search
for the Faerie Queene

Preface

When, in my senior year of college, I decided to leave the study of cellular biology, it was an unexpectedly powerful encounter with the English Renaissance that drew me away. Two of my finest teachers, John Crossett and Sheldon Zitner, introduced me to Shakespeare, Milton, and especially Spenser–with just enough knowledge of the classics and the Bible to allow me to glimpse the greatness of the texts I was reading. Having learned from my father to love history and literature, I was fascinated by the strange beauty and violence of the Arthurian dreamscape that is *The Faerie Queene.*

In graduate school and in my early teaching career, I benefitted from several scholars who, despite the reigning orthodoxy of the New Criticism, shared my interest in historicist approaches to Spenser. I learned, for example, a great deal from the work of Frank Kermode, Michael O'Connell, Thomas Cain, and Robin Headlam Wells. The more I read, however, the more I wondered whether I did not need to know a great deal more about Queen Elizabeth than I did, and I have been studying her and her court with increasing fascination ever since. Over the last few years, I have stepped back from work on Sidney and Renaissance drama to see just how much my reading about the queen might change my reading of *The Faerie Queene*. The change was more than I expected, and *Spenser's Heavenly Elizabeth* was the result.

The greatest surprise was the recognition that the various figures of Elizabeth woven through the poem tended to age along with the queen, providing allegorical parallels to the dangers and crises that marked the course of her life. Setting Spenser's "mirrours more than one" of the

queen over against one another, in sequence, brought out insights and nuances that were new to me.

The other surprise was that the figures of Elizabeth were more integral than I had thought to the poet's overarching aim to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline." The widely held view that Spenser began with concepts—theological, ethical, political, and psychological—and then drew on current affairs to provide passing illustrations of their complexities began to seem inadequate. The more closely I considered the literary portraits of Elizabeth, the more it seemed that her life, "clowdily enrapped" in a "darke conceit," provided the primary structure around which the various conceptual allegories were arranged. Drawing on the interest and the celebrity appeal of Elizabeth and her court, Spenser had found a way to teach abstract points using concrete contemporary events, not simply as illustrations, but as the very tools of instruction. At least in its portraits of the queen, the poem is just what Spenser said it was in his letter of introduction to his friend Sir Walter Ralegh, a "continued Allegory" written to celebrate Queen Elizabeth in all her fascination and lived complexity.

In exploring that complexity, I have drawn on four centuries of commentary on *The Faerie Queene*, including marginalia written by the poet's contemporaries, the reflections of editors and antiquarians from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, more rigorous scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a great deal of recent scholarship and criticism. Beyond such reading, however, I have benefitted from years of good talk and happy collaboration with friends and colleagues who share my interest in Spenser and the queen.

Much of my early thinking about them was talked through with the late Carol Kaske, whom I met for weekly "Spenser lunches" over the course of many delightful summers in Ithaca, New York. Carol was a magnet who drew students and scholars from Cornell University and Ithaca College to delightful spots overlooking Lake Cayuga for sandwiches and lively conversation about everything medieval and Elizabethan.

Much that I know more specifically about the queen and the history of her reign I learned through many years of friendship with Carole Levin, with whom I founded the Queen Elizabeth I Society. Since she knows most everything there is to know about Elizabeth, and also knows most everyone who takes a serious interested in her, Carole has been a wonderful guide to the world of Elizabethan historical scholarship that plays such a prominent role in this book.

My thinking about *The Faerie Queene* owes more than I can say to years of lovely, long talks over conference meals with William Oram. In an act of true friendship, Bill brought his remarkable skills as an editor and his encyclopedic knowledge of *The Faerie Queene* to bear on the final manuscript of this book, providing voluminous comments and suggestions without which it would have been much the poorer. I also owe more than I can say to Susan Felch, with whom I collaborated on the Norton Critical Edition *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, and to Linda Shenk, with whom Carole Levin and I co-edited the collection *Elizabeth I and the 'Sovereign Arts.'* Both have taught me much and been good companions on the way.

Over the years, other colleagues and friends have read and commented on parts of the project at various stages in its development. My special thanks to Thomas Roche for his advice and suggestions on some of my early work. More recently, Carole Levin, Roger Kuin, Jennifer Rust, and Joshua Held have read chapters to be sure that I was getting my history and my theology straight. Special thanks, too, to scholars who attend the annual Renaissance sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo for their ideas at a special session in 2017 to come up with ideas to explain why Spenser came to such a different opinion of the queen from that held by his literary twin, Sir Philip Sidney. That discussion started me on the road to my concluding chapter.

Finally, let me offer a special note of appreciation to the late A.C. Hamilton. Like all students and readers of Spenser, I owe Bert a great debt for the remarkable commentary in his two magisterial editions of *The Faerie Queene* and for his tireless and brilliant work as principal editor of *The Spenser Encyclopedia*. I also have a more personal reason, though, for being grateful. Bert never approved of the sort of topical reading of *The Faerie Queene* that is the stuff of this book. So thoughtful on the subject was he, however, both in personal conversation and in print, that to meet his objections was obviously the best way to avoid the mistakes that have so often marred historicist interpretation. I hope I have, and if not, it isn't Bert's fault. He did his best.

St. Louis, USA Donald Stump

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PART I

Spenser's Method and Artistry

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Spenser's Art of Royal Encomium

This study explores the relation between Edmund Spenser and the ruler he served as a provincial official and a poet for most of his adult life. Though, by his own account, he met her only once, he reflected deeply on her as a woman and a queen, depicting her from many angles in a number of imaginary characters in his great and influential romance epic, *The Faerie Queene*. The most celebratory of these depictions is Gloriana, a fairy monarch who never actually appears in the poem but who is praised at the opening of most of its books and mentioned occasionally along the way. She it is who inspires the knights celebrated in the poem and sends them into the world to defend goodness and justice. Five lesser figures also serve as what Spenser calls "mirrours" of the queen: Una, Belphoebe, Britomart, Mercilla, and Cynthia. The sheer richness of detail and complexity of perspective created by the interplay of so many portraits of Elizabeth is difficult to comprehend, much less to sort out. Few modern readers—even those with a professional interest in the poet—know the queen's background, her life story, her theological, ethical, and political views, and the history of her age and reign in sufficient detail to grasp the implications of Spenser's wonderfully allusive (and illusive) allegorical depictions.

My own study of Elizabeth's life has left me with two impressions: that Spenser's representations are remarkably well informed and astute, and that they are odd. Since their astuteness is the subject of the remainder of the book, let me focus here on their oddity, which is readily suggested by comparison with a contemporary writer who was in many ways the

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poet's model.[1] Throughout his literarily brilliant but politically marginal career, Spenser looked to Sir Philip Sidney for inspiration. Like Sidney, he focused his literary interests in the genres of the complaint, the love sonnet, pastoral poetry, and the romance epic. Like Sidney, too, he spent much of his career seeking the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, hoping to gain a position of influence in her government during the years when England was taking its first steps toward its eventual prominence in the affairs of Europe and the world. And like him, he was a militant Protestant, anxious that Elizabeth should consolidate her power against conservative elements opposed to her reformation of the English Church and against the enemies besetting Protestants abroad. Given the close affinities between the two poets, the oddity is that Spenser diverged so widely from Sidney in his representations of the queen.

In his greatest work, the pastoral romance-epic *Arcadia*, Sidney alludes to Elizabeth in several ways, none of them flattering.[2] A fictional stand-in for Sidney himself—named appropriately "Philisides" to echo the sound of his name and also to call to mind the poet's self-image in his sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*[3]—joins in the pastoral singing matches of the Arcadian shepherds. One of his songs recounts a dream-vision warning of dangers to the state arising from the queen's negotiations to marry a foreigner. As Blair Worden and others have argued, the song "As I My Little Flock on Ister Bank" offers a stinging response to Elizabeth's infatuation with a French Prince of the Blood, François Hercules, Duke of Anjou. Although Queen Elizabeth is never touched on directly, the implications of the eclog are clear. By desiring to marry a French, Catholic prince and to conceive a royal heir of divided nationality, she threatens to sacrifice the peace, freedom, and safety of her people.

Nor is Philisides's vision of the disaster looming in the French marriage a side issue. As scholars have demonstrated, concern about the crisis

[1] On the extent of Sidney's influence on him, see Donald Stump, "Edmund Spenser," in *The Dictionary Literary Biography*, vol. 167: *Sixteenth-Century British Nondramatic Writers*, edited by David A. Richardson (Detroit, MI: Bruccoli Clark Layman, Gale Research, 1996), 228–63.

[2] See Donald Stump, "Mapping the Revisions to *Arcadia*: Geo-political Decision-Making in Sidney and Virgil," *Sidney Journal* 30, no. 2 (2012): 1–31, especially 29–31.

[3] In Latin, Philisides means "star lover," as does Astrophil.

pervades *Arcadia*.[4] In many ways, the political situation in Greece parallels that in England in matters that were of deep concern to Sidney and the forward Protestant faction at court dominated by his uncle, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. The peril, in their view, lay in the queen's reluctance to take decisive steps to defend England from insurrection and invasion. The stages by which the orderly and peaceful state of Arcadia devolves into civil disorder are very like those that Sidney had warned Elizabeth about in a letter to her written in 1579 to dissuade her from the Anjou match. In the New *Arcadia*, the danger posed by the French marriage appears in the story of Queen Helen of Corinth, widely recognized as a half-concealed figure for Elizabeth.[5]

At first glance, a gulf separates Sidney's figures of the queen from Spenser's dazzling and adoring representations. None of Spenser's "mirrours" of Elizabeth resembles even remotely Sidney's Basilius, the besotted ruler of Arcadia, or his infatuated Queen Helen. Instead, we have the luminous figure of Gloriana, a divine figure shedding light on the world and inspiring the poet as one of his muses.

> O Goddesse heauenly bright,
> Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,
> Great Ladie of the greatest Isle, whose light
> Like Phoebus lampe throughout the world doth shine,
> Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eyne,
> And raise my thoughtes too humble and too vile,
> To thinke of that true glorious type of thine…. (I.proem.4)[6]

[4] See, for example, Edwin Greenlaw, "The Captivity Episode in Sidney's *Arcadia*," in *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 54–63; Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 177–79, 263–64; and Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney's* Arcadia *and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), especially 127–206.

[5] Dennis Kay, "'She Was a Queen, and Therefore Beautiful': Sidney, His Mother, and Queen Elizabeth," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 43 (February 1992): 18–39; Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 211. Worden sees Helen as an idealized version of Elizabeth, but he overlooks her abandonment of royal responsibility in not assisting Basilius and in succoring the rebel Amphialus during the Arcadian civil war. See 133, 136, 243–44.

[6] *The Faerie Queene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, 2nd ed., text edited by Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London: Longman, 2001). All subsequent references are to this edition.

Unlike Sidney's dark, critical depictions of the queen, Spenser's are luminous.

That arresting contrast provides the starting point for this study. It turns out to be more difficult to explain than one might suppose. The 1580s and 1590s, when Spenser was composing *The Faerie Queene*, were hardly sunny. Internationally, England was subjected to a series of assassination plots against Elizabeth supported by her enemies on the continent, two major rebellions in Ireland, the collapse of a key alliance with France, and no less than three attempts to crush her regime with the overwhelming force of the Spanish Armada. War with Spain would drag on until Elizabeth's death in 1603. Nor was the period a good one for the queen domestically. In the 1590s, England suffered bad harvests, food riots, a rebellion by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and the disastrous effects on the economy of costly, unremitting war with Spain.

One would think that, as advocates of the forceful expansion of a Protestant sphere of influence to include all the British Isles and nearby areas of Europe, Spenser and Sidney would have seen their queen with similarly gloomy and anxious eyes. In this study, I undertake to explain the grounds for Spenser's far more celebratory vision of her and the part she played in establishing England's outsized role in world affairs in the centuries that followed. Though critical of her leadership in many respects, his characterizations of her are grounded in views of human nature and divine providence that differ sharply from those of his more famous and politically engaged mentor and model. I will return to the contrast between Spenser and Sidney at the end of this study.

1 Heavenly Queen: The Problem of Over-Idealization

As is so often the case with Spenser, something as seemingly simple as praise for the queen turns out to be surprisingly complex. The first difficulty is that, to modern ears, his celebrations of Elizabeth ring false because they seem overly idealized. Even judged by his own standards, as laid out in the explanatory Letter to Ralegh printed in the first installment of *The Faerie Queene*, they do not seem defensible. There, Spenser sets out his primary aim, which was to educate a "*gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline*," a goal that he intended to pursue in both its "*Ethice*" and its "*polliticke consideration*."[7] Given his deeply

[7] Letter, in Hamilton, *Faerie Queene*, 714.

ingrained Christian Humanism, it is difficult to reconcile that aim with the luminous depictions of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*. Those of us who are acquainted with the details of her life and her extraordinarily accomplished but all-too-human character are likely to regard his depictions as exquisitely beautiful but misleading, if not outright false.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, the poet's self-presentation as a teacher of ethical and political probity is difficult to reconcile with such praise, however common it may have been at the Elizabethan court. To Humanists of the poet's stripe, to delude a monarch about her nature and capabilities was not a minor matter. In virtually all the discussions of praise most widely known to the Elizabethans, flattery was roundly condemned as demeaning to those who practiced it, dangerous to the state, and repugnant to every right-thinking person. To advise monarchs to govern humbly, temperately, and wisely was a councilor's highest calling. To puff rulers up as if they were gods was to tempt them to trust their own impulses in ways likely to end in disaster. In holding rose-colored "mirrours" up to his queen, Spenser seems to be doing just that, exalting her as if she were a celestial being reflecting the very light of God and dispensing justice as if from the very throne of heaven. For a man like Spenser to flatter the queen in that way ought to have been unthinkable.

But was it? Everything we know about the poet suggests that he was ambitious, and that fact must give us pause. The continual, energetic crafting of a public persona that occupied him throughout his life suggests that his intent was not simply to teach, delight, and move others to virtue but also to win fame and so to influence the queen and her government. He had begun his adult career as a writer with an audacious act of self-promotion, dedicating *The Shepheardes Calender* to his celebrated acquaintance Sidney and arranging its printing in a finely illustrated, annotated edition, as if he were a celebrated writer. A year later, he joined with a friend, the well-connected Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey, to publish an exchange of letters displaying their learning and their lofty connections. In remarks on early drafts of *The Faerie Queene,* Spenser positioned himself as both the English Ovid and the English Virgil. He later advertised the first installment of his ambitious poem by taking one of the earliest and most celebrated book tours of the modern era, traveling to London in the company of the influential royal counselor and favorite Sir Walter Ralegh. The journey, which lasted from 1589 to 1590 or perhaps early 1591, included an audience in which he read to the queen and received from her a singular honor, a substantial royal

pension.[8] Following up on his initial success, Spenser soon published an account of the trip in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, along with a flurry of shorter works that appeared in 1596. Spenser's will to rise was relentless, lending plausibility to the suspicion that, in addressing his greatest poetic achievement to Elizabeth and the luminaries of her court, the poet was engaged in a self-interested campaign to advance his own literary and political career.[9]

We may be inclined to shrug off such concerns, supposing that in flattering the queen, Spenser was only following the fashions of his day. Sidney's more exalted position made it easier to address her without flattery so long as he expressed his criticism in respectful letters or in readily deniable fictions. As a minor figure, Spenser had to be more circumspect. In *The Shepheardes Calender*, published in late 1579 at the height of the furor over the French marriage, he included veiled criticisms of Elizabeth so bold that he thought it prudent to withhold his name from the title page and, in the poem "To His Booke," to call on Sidney for protection until the work is "past ieopardee."[10] In the famous tribute to Elizabeth as "Queene of shepheardes all" in the April Eclog, he also included a glowing tribute to the queen. That such a supremely gifted writer deflected anger away from himself with flattery in that way, particularly in a cause such as the Anjou affair that was of vital importance to the Protestant faction with which he identified, seems a betrayal of the very ethical and political aims that defined him as a writer.

I say "seems" because thinking him inconsistent in this matter is not our only option. Another possibility is that, as modern readers, we are simply missing something that renders his praise of Elizabeth less extravagant and self-serving than it seems. And there is reason to think that we are. For one thing, elsewhere in his works, Spenser vehemently denounces sycophants. For another, he continually sticks his neck out in controversial matters in ways likely to offend Elizabeth. There is no evidence that his contemporaries saw him as a flatterer, and they were in a

[8]The only tangible evidence of the queen's reaction is her unusually generous grant to the poet of fifty pounds per year for life. See Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 231–40.

[9]Hamilton, *Faerie Queene*, 727–35.

[10]Greenlaw, *Variorum*, vol. 7: *The Minor Poems, Part I*, edited by Charles Grosvenor Osgood, Henry Gibbons Lotspeich, and Dorothy E. Mason (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), 5.

better position than we to judge, having been thoroughly steeped in traditions that excoriated false praise.

An initial question for this study is, then, whether the descriptions of Elizabeth that strike us as flattery may not have seemed to Spenser and the most perceptive of his original readers straightforwardly true. Close reading of *The Faerie Queene* and its sources supports such a view. That Spenser was no whitewasher of the queen's character cannot, of course, be definitively proven, since we have no way of penetrating his intent. Once we understand the broader cultural context in which he wrote, however, and look more closely at his elevated representations of Elizabeth, a different way of reading them emerges.

My argument is that between Spenser's view of human nature and our own lies a great divide. Seeing the queen—and indeed all human beings—in terms radically different from those of most modern readers, he could say things from the heart, with a firm and realistic grasp of the implications of his words, that most of us simply could not say of a political leader without feeling degraded in our own eyes and in those of people we respect.

To give a full hearing to both sides of the argument, I begin Chapter 2 with modern perceptions of sycophancy, starting with Karl Marx's famous sneer that Spenser was the Queen's "arse licking poet." After examining evidence for that view, I turn to perceptions of flattery in the literary and ethical culture of Elizabethan England, focusing on major ancient and contemporary authors who informed his education at the Merchant Taylor's School and Cambridge University. I then turn to the works of Spenser himself, notably the attacks on sycophants in *Mother Hubberds Tale, The Teares of the Muses*, and the *Amoretti*. From the last of these, the principles guiding the poet's representations of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene* begin to emerge, with important implications for a right reading of the heroic poem.

Undertaking that reading is the task of the remainder of the book. I begin with an exploration of the relation between Gloriana and Elizabeth in Chapter 3, and then explore other figures for the queen woven into the action of the poem in Chapters 4–6, and finish my coverage of royal allegories with an examination of connections between them and the Woman Clothed with the Sun prophesied to bring about the Second Coming of Christ. My conclusion returns to the question of Spenser's remarkable divergence from Sidney in representing the queen.

2 The Humanists: Moral Instruction and the Uses of History

Chapter 3 opens with a question inextricably connected with the problem of royal idealization. How are we to sort out the relation between the historically specific topical allegories of queen and court in *The Faerie Queene* and the more general moral, theological, historical, psychological, and cosmological allegories among which they jostle for attention? In both editions of the poem published during Spenser's lifetime, the poet announces a deceptively simple aim, promising on the title page "twelue books, Fashioning xii. Morall vertues," and promising in his Letter to Ralegh "*to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a braue knight, perfected in the twelue priuate morall vertues, as Aristotle hath deuised, the which is the purpose of these first twelue bookes*" (Letter, 715). I say "deceptively" because it is hard to see that most of the episodes contribute to that larger purpose. The problem is not only that four of the seven virtues celebrated (holiness, chastity, courtesy, and constancy) are not from Aristotle, but also that so much of the poem is not about Arthur at all but about knights and ladies less exemplary than he. In two of the books, moreover, even Arthur goes off course in his quest for Gloriana.

What, moreover, are we to make of the very different impression of the prince and of the other heroes of individual books suggested by the Letter to Ralegh? There, Spenser characterizes himself as a "*Poet historicall*" and treats his enormous undertaking as "*an historicall fiction*" that renders into quasi-medieval verse "*the historye of king Arthure*" (715–17). Although, in this, he claims to be following "*all the antique Poets historicall*," from Homer and Virgil to Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, the claim is strange. Hardly anything in the action of the poem has much to do with Arthur as he is represented in the "histories," however fanciful, that were available to the poet and his original English audience. Nor does most of the material in *The Faerie Queene* derive from Arthurian romance.[11]

[11] See Hugh MacLachlan, "Arthur, Legend of," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, Donald Cheney, W.F. Blissett, David A. Richardson, and William W. Barker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 259–89.

This fact raises an obvious question: Why did Spenser so insistently call his fictions "historicall" and treat "history" as the ideal mechanism for teaching "Morall vertues"? Certainly, *The Faerie Queene* looks back to a legendary British past comparable to that represented in the epic accounts of the Trojan War, the conquests of Charlemagne, and the siege of Jerusalem that Spenser took as his models. Had he drawn on earlier material about Arthur as king, his subject would have fit the pattern. Instead, however, he focused on Arthur as a young prince and mostly made up his stories about him out of whole cloth. The elements of the narrative that can rightly be called historical are designed to reflect the Elizabethan rather than the Arthurian past.

To single out recent events in that way puts Spenser at odds with Sidney, who in his *Apology for Poetry*[12] famously draws on Aristotle's *Poetics* to argue that history is a less effective moral teacher than poetry:

> Aristotle himself, in his discourse of poesy, plainly determineth this question, saying that Poetry is *philosophoteron* and *spoudaioteron*, that is to say, it is more philosophical and more studiously serious than history. His reason is, because poetry dealeth with *katholou,* that is to say, with the universal consideration, and history with *kathekaston*, the particular: 'now', saith he, 'the universal weighs what is fit to be said or done, either in likelihood or necessity …, and the particular only marks whether Alcibiades did, or suffered, this or that.'[13]

Because a history of Alcibiades's career must cover many things ("this or that") that are of no ethical interest, a poem that focuses only on certain episodes is a better teacher. One wonders why a poet intent on "*fashioning a gentleman or worthy person in vertuous and gentle discipline*," as Spenser asserts he is in his Letter to Ralegh, would use the term "historicall" to describe what is in fact almost entirely fictional and falls short of

[12] Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, edited by Geoffrey Shepherd (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), 105–7. There is reason to doubt that Sidney actually saw history as a teacher inferior to poetry. His advice to his brother Robert and his friend Edward Denny prescribes extensive reading in histories and none at all in works of poetry. See Stump, "Mapping," 3–6.

[13] Sidney, *Apology*, 109.

exemplary morality? At best, the word "historicall" confuses the issue of universality.[14]

In this study, I argue that Spenser took a very different view of history than did Aristotle. In devising the "darke conceits" and "veiled" allegories of *The Faerie Queene*, he aligned himself, not with the Greek philosophical tradition, but with that of the ancient Hebrews and Christians, who conveyed insights into divine law, morality, theology, politics, and other subjects through accounts of their past as the chosen people of God.

3 The Poet: Fictional History as Ethical Allegory

It is understandable that many who read *The Faerie Queene* today should view its references to the life of Queen Elizabeth and others of her era as something of a distraction. Time spent in footnotes is time away from the colorful, romantic world of the poem. Nor have many recent academic critics been especially interested in topical readings of the poem, though New Historicism has brought fresh attention to Spenser's relations with the queen, the royal court, and government policy. Just as Erich Auerbach, in his day, thought the crowds of historical figures in Dante's *Divine Comedy* a distraction from the lessons they were intended to illustrate, so contemporary critics too often consider Spenser's allusions to Elizabethan political affairs a sideshow.[15] The challenge, then, is to understand why Spenser gave the queen and the history of her age such emphasis in the Letter to Ralegh and the dedicatory sonnets, and why we should care. Few commentators have concerned themselves with the extent to which *The Faerie Queene* is what Spenser, in the Letter, terms a "continued Allegory" of contemporary events,[16] and only one

[14]Since Spenser wrote the Letter to Ralegh before Sidney's *Apology* appeared in 1595, he may not have known the argument. It may, however, have come out in discussions of literary theory with Sidney at Leicester House in 1578–1579. See Hadfield, *Life*, 106–8.

[15]Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 175–76.

[16]See J.E. Whitney, "The Continued Allegory in the First Book of the *Faerie Queene*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 19 (1888): 40–69 (*Variorum*, 1: 455–58); Lilian Winstanley, *The Faerie Queene*, *Book I* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1915) (*Variorum*, 1: 460–65); and Frederick Padelford, *The Political and Ecclesiastical Allegory of the First Book of the "Faerie Queene"* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1911) (*Variorum*, 1: 466–73). See also Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne* (New York, 1971); Michael O'Connell, *Mirror and Veil: The Historical Dimension of Spenser's*

that I know of has sought, in a concerted way, to explain the enduring importance that such a time-specific allegory might have.[17]

As I discuss in Chapter 3, most critics find the *gravitas* of the poem in its ethical, theological, and political ideals. The curious thing about Prince Arthur and the other principal heroes of *The Faerie Queene,* however, is that none of them is entirely exemplary. Why would Spenser create a fiction, call it history, hold it up as a means to instill virtue in others, and then focus on tangled and morally compromised actions of just the sort that poetry is supposed to avoid? The failings of virtually all Spenser's most ethical characters stand in stark contrast to the far more consistently exemplary nature of a classical hero such as Virgil's Aeneas. To understand Spenser's ethical intentions, and their relation to his notion of heroism, it is necessary to turn from classical epic to the Bible. As I argue in the later sections of Chapter 3, understanding the implications of scriptural accounts of the image of God turns out to be important in perceiving the ethical universals that underlie the poem—and, more to our purpose, the way in which they are represented in allegorical figures of Queen Elizabeth and her principal men.

4 The Queen: Elizabeth as Gloriana

That the Gloriana of the proems represents the queen is the most obvious of Spenser's topical allegories. As I argue in Chapter 3, however, the Faerie Queene is a far more complicated figure than has generally been recognized. With deep roots in the Old and New Testaments and more recent ones in English folklore and Elizabethan royal iconography, Gloriana represents a triangulation to accomplish three overriding aims of the poet: to celebrate the queen as part of a project, shared by Sidney and others, to create for England a distinguished national literature; to gain honor as an epic poet of the caliber of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso by depicting figures developed around the English founding myth

"Faerie Queene" (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Thomas H. Cain, *Praise in "The Faerie Queene"* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978); and Robin Headlam Wells, *Spenser's "Faerie Queene" and the Cult of Elizabeth* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1983).

[17] John D. Staines, "The Historicist Tradition in Spenser Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 733–56.

of Arthur and the Round Table; and, in doing so, to set forth, in the fleeting details of a fictional Arthurian history, exemplary patterns of personal virtue and vice and of social justice and political disorder.

To reconcile these jostling aims, Spenser devised a dominant central character based on the truths of scripture as well as on the particulars of Elizabethan history. Invoking Gloriana as a "Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine," he presents her as a queen so reflective of the "exceeding light" of God that he is forced to enfold her countenance "In couert vele …/ That feeble eyes your glory may behold" (I.proem.4). The descriptions of Gloriana in the proems are a tissue of scriptural allusion, fashioned from the creation story in Genesis, the epiphanies of Moses and Elijah on Mt. Sinai and of the disciples at the Transfiguration of Jesus, and the theology of the human person developed in the Epistles of St. Paul. The view of human nature that emerges from these appropriations allows Spenser to praise the flawed person of Elizabeth as loftily as he does and still remains true to his ethical convictions.

In calling Gloriana is a "true glorious type" of the English queen (I.proem.4), Spenser borrowed from scriptural exegesis a term commonly used of an exemplary person in the Old Testament who resembles and foreshadows a still more perfect person in the New Testament. Moses and Elijah are, in that sense, "types" of Christ. In an innovative leap of poetic creativity, Spenser fashioned an entire imaginary world in which characters from the dim Arthurian past serve as "types" of an early modern Christian queen and her principal courtiers.

In focusing on the elaborate web of reflections of his own nation and age in *The Faerie Queene*, I do not mean to suggest that other webs of meaning are not important. One of Spenser's most remarkable gifts as a writer was the ability to convey discretely, yet simultaneously, multiple kinds of fictive and historical meaning. Many episodes in the poem involve purely conceptual allegories, representing abstract principles through the words and actions of the characters. To the extent that historical types are implicated, they do not detract from conceptual meaning. They illustrate it. Throughout the book, I look for opportunities to bring out the interplay of the conceptual and the topical, though my stress is necessarily on the latter.

5 The Critics: *The Faerie Queene* as "Continued Allegory"

This study takes seriously an idea that has not been carefully reconsidered for many years. It explores Spenser's own claim in the Letter to Ralegh that he was writing a "continued Allegory," not only to fashion moral virtues but also to celebrate the reign of Elizabeth. From Spenser's lifetime to the 1930s, it was widely accepted that incidents in the poem allude to events involving the queen and her reign. Early twentieth-century academic scholars such as J.E. Whitney, Lilian Winstanley, and Frederick Padelford, who are now known as "Old Historicists," were the most learned and productive of those who took Spenser's claim seriously. With the coming of the New Criticism, however, their influence waned.

Since World War II, sceptics of a continued topical allegory have been widely influential. Most notable among them have been the greatest of the twentieth-century editors of Spenser's works, Edwin Greenlaw and A.C. Hamilton. Although trained as a historicist, Greenlaw grew wary of topical interpretations, drawing the conclusion, in his influential *Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory*, that the contemporary allusions in *The Faerie Queene* are always simple and fairly obvious and are included only "by way of illustration or compliment or ornament, never sustained for long, never based on an intimacy of detail…."[18] Another influential mid-twentieth-century critic, Albert Gough, took the more radical but similar view that "a complete and consistent [historical] allegory is not to be looked for. It is Spenser's habit to give a hint of a political meaning, and then to confuse the trail."[19] A.C. Hamilton agreed, contending that even the best historicist criticism involves a "reductive translation that confounds the comprehensiveness of the allegory" and that history is so full of possible analogs that "Competing claims have tended to cancel each other and discredit the whole approach."[20] In his valuable and influential monograph *The Structure of Allegory in "The Faerie Queene,"* he portrayed most historicist interpretations as random and contrived, arguing that "Identification of characters in the poem with certain

[18]Greenlaw, *Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), 96.

[19]Greenlaw, *Variorum*, 5: 211.

[20]Introduction to Book I, in *The Faerie Queene*, 1st ed., edited by A.C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977), 24.

historical figures fetches the wildest interpretations—subtle, logical, and beyond all imagination. Any other identification serves as well, for each is highly selective. What may logically fit one episode twists and stretches the others upon the rack of the reader's own dark conceit." Driving the point home by showing that Book I can be read as an allegory of the Russian Revolution, he went on to raise his primary concern. It was simple. Focusing on contemporary allusions draws readers away from the primary aim of the poem, which was, in his view, to teach the "moral or spiritual."[21] Accordingly, the annotations in his remarkable editions of *The Faerie Queene* explain only the most obvious of the poet's contemporary references, and *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, for which he was the general editor, gives relatively little attention to the poem's allusions to Elizabeth and her reign.

What Hamilton, Greenlaw, and those who accepted their strictures against extended topical interpretation did not notice was the reductive nature of their position. To keep to the fore questions that they saw as important, they pushed others to the rear, and in the process ignored two important points. One is that, judging from his own comments, Spenser was interested in drawing out of the particulars of Elizabethan history the very universals that most interested the New Critics.[22] The other is that, in teaching universals by this means, Spenser was primarily concerned that his readers be informed in noble discipline. Given that overriding intent, what better way to engage them than by invoking ethical quandaries encountered at the highest levels of their own government. National struggles and debates that they had lived through themselves would have lent compelling immediacy to the ethical issues that Spenser was raising. I cannot think that, had he foreseen that a modern reader might one day apply insights from the Legend of Holiness to the Russian Revolution, Spenser would have been displeased. Such an analysis would have demonstrated precisely what he had marshaled all his ingenuity and imagination to convey: a deep understanding of human nature, our vulnerability to false shows of rectitude, our love of power and display, our witting or unwitting flirtations with the Satanic, our susceptibility to discouragement and despair, and our

[21] *The Structure of Allegory in "The Faerie Queene"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 9.

[22] Michael O'Connell suggests that "The moral allegory is necessarily *prior*; the reader must see into himself before he is prepared to see into history" (68). I suspect that the reverse is true, at least in the initial "fashioning" of virtue.

too-ready belief that we can simply attack a pervasive social evil and defeat it, once and for all. To understand one young and idealistic sixteenth-century revolutionist such as the Redcrosse Knight is to understand many in later centuries.[23]

Readers closer to the reign of Elizabeth, and more personally invested in the issues and events that shaped it, saw much that was topical in the poem. The earliest known commentator, John Dixon, who around 1597 scribbled his thoughts in the margins a first edition of *The Faerie Queene*, identifies Una as Elizabeth, Arthur as a distant ancestor of the queen, the Great Dragon slain by Redcrosse as "Antichristian religion," and Duessa as Mary, Queen of Scots, a "Romanish Harlot" whom Dixon regarded as the most important "maintainer" of false Catholic religion in England while she lived.[24] At about the same time, James VI of Scotland recognized his mother, Mary Stuart, in the character of Duessa in Book V and penned a furious letter to the English government asking that Spenser be punished. In the seventeenth century, John Dryden asserted that "the original of every knight was then living in the court of Queen Elizabeth; and [Spenser] attributed to each of them that virtue, which he thought most conspicuous in them."[25] In the eighteenth century, John Upton—the first editor of *The Faerie Queene* to include extensive annotations—wrote that it balances two kinds of content, "moral allegory with historical allusion," and identified a number of its topical references, including links connecting Francis, Duke of Anjou, and his emissary Jean de Simier with Braggadocchio and Trompart in Book II.[26] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott also saw the poem through a historical lens, treating the adventures of the Knight of Holiness in Book I as "a peculiar and obvious, though not a uniform, reference to the history of the Church of England as established

[23] Against critics who deny the applicability of the topical allegory to other times and cultures, O'Connell rightly argues that Spenser "avoids limiting … sacred myth to fulfillment here and now; other godly princes and other history, past or future, may equally partake" (43). See also Kermode, 12–32, 36–59.

[24] John Dixon, *The First Commentary on "The Faerie Queene,"* edited by Graham Hough (Privately printed, 1964), annotations on I.i.3, vii.1, x.60, xi.motto, xii.motto and 10. On Scott, see Staines, 733–56, especially 736.

[25] "Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire," in *Essays of John Dryden*, edited by W.P. Ker, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 2.28.

[26] Upton, ed., *The Faerie Queene*, 2 vols. (London, 1758), Preface xxxl and I.xiii.50n., II.iii.4n., quoted in *Variorum*, 1: 264, 2: 206.

by Queen Elizabeth."[27] When, in the early twentieth century, the Old Historicists brought concerted academic study of Elizabethan history to bear on the poem and the possibility that it was a "continued Allegory" of contemporary affairs, they provided detailed support for many of the general claims and specific identifications of earlier commentators.[28] More recently, "New Historicist" critics have opened up further episodes to topical interpretation, though with an emphasis less on historical reference per se than on Spenser's anthropology, his psychology in relation to the queen, and his place in the politics and culture of nascent English nationalism and imperialism.[29]

Not all claims put forward on either side of the debate are defensible, and it is not easy to say whether those who look to the poem for the moral and spiritual or who seek in it the historical and political perceive it more clearly. The Letter to Ralegh suggests that Spenser saw it both ways and that he was not interested in offering much guidance on the relation between the two. Nor would we expect him to. His project, after all, was to create an elaborate "darke conceit," one that teases and evades so as to entice readers into a process of discovery. As he says in his Letter to Ralegh, "*the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for profite of ensample*." To reach them, it is better to offer a poem "*coloured with an historicall fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read*," than to "*haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts*." The solution Spenser arrived at was to teach moral discipline by presenting it "*clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises*" (Letter, 715–16). What better way to do that than to take advantage of interest in a great and popular queen and the dramatic crises that she managed to survive, all "enwrapped" in heroic and nationalistic stories about the youth of King Arthur. To seek clarity of meaning is to misunderstand the author's entire procedure, which is to invite us see through the clouds and take away with us whatever we discover that is of value.[30]

[27] Scott, review of *The Works of Spenser*, edited by H.J. Todd (1805), *Edinburgh Review* 7 (1806), 203–17.

[28] See the appendices on the "Historical Allegory" in individual volumes of the *Variorum*.

[29] Staines provides a useful overview of New Critical, New Historicist, and political criticism (744–51).

[30] On the open-endedness of the invitation, see Staines, 736–37. As Thomas P. Roche, Jr., has observed, "When the structural patterns of the narrative coincide with the structural patterns of any other events of nature or supernature, we as readers are entitled to