

Handbook of English Renaissance Literature

Edited by
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17 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590/1596)

Abstract: *The Faerie Queene* is one of the most fascinating and complex poetic projects of the English Renaissance; it is definitely the most ambitious. Based on a Protestant view of the world and England's role in it, *The Faerie Queene* (FQ) uses allegory to present a vision of humanity and human virtues that is at the same time highly abstract and very concrete and localised. Reviving classical and medieval models of narrative poetry (Homer, Ovid and Virgil; Chaucer and Langland), it also incorporates borrowings from contemporary Italian epic romance (Ariosto and Tasso) and English folklore. Its political context is defined by the 1580s and 1590s: it sets out as a celebration of the Elizabethan religious settlement and the queen herself, but it takes on a significantly more pessimistic tone in the later books, particularly with regard to England's colonizing efforts in Ireland. As the *summum opus* of Elizabethan literature, FQ connects past, present, and future in manifold ways, some of which are explored in this chapter.

Keywords: Epic, romance, allegory, history, mythography, prophecy, virtue, justice, violence, Ireland, intertextuality

1 Context: Author, Œuvre, Moment

Frustratingly little is known about Spenser's family and his early years.¹ His father may have been one of two John Spensers who had moved to London from Lancashire and named their sons Edmund, after their grandfather. One of them is documented as a journeyman clothmaker in 1566; either this or the other John was made lord mayor in 1594 and later received a knighthood. We know from one of his poems (*Amoretti* 74) that Edmund Spenser's mother was called Elizabeth, but we do not know whether his immediate family was (or grew) wealthy or poor. In some of his writings, he claims to be distantly related to the Spencers of Althorp, the ancestors of, amongst others, Winston Churchill and Princess Diana. But it is more likely that his branch of the family was of modest means. Born in London, probably in 1552 or 1554, he attended the newly founded Merchant Taylors' School, where he was educated alongside fellow pupils such as Thomas Kyd (↗ 16 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*) by the headmaster Richard Mulcaster – a formidable teacher

¹ I would like to thank Gero Guttzeit and Andrew Hadfield for their perceptive comments on this chapter.

whose humanist ideals of education focused on classical languages but also emphasised writing in English. Spenser was probably fluent in several modern languages such as French and Italian besides Latin and Greek. He matriculated at Pembroke Hall (later Pembroke College), Cambridge, in 1569 and graduated with a BA in 1573 and an MA in 1576. The fact that he was a sizar at Cambridge, meaning that he had to work as a servant for his tuition, and that he received funds from a bequest by a wealthy Londoner, speaks for his family's relative poverty. At Cambridge, he made friends with the scholar Gabriel Harvey; some of their letters – Spenser's only surviving personal correspondence – were published in 1580.

In the late 1570s, Spenser began a life of public service, first as secretary to the bishop of Rochester, then in the employ of the earl of Leicester, a favourite of the queen and an important patron of the arts. At this time, Spenser also knew Philip Sidney (↗ 15 Philip Sidney, *The Two Arcadias*), but there is no evidence that they were particularly close. In 1579, Spenser married Machabyas Chylde, who probably died between 1590 and 1593; they had two children, Sylvanus and Katherine. In 1580, he became one of the secretaries of Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton, newly appointed Lord Deputy of Ireland. Over the following years, Spenser made the troubled and war-torn province of Ireland his home, staying on after Lord Grey was recalled in 1582 and fulfilling various administrative functions in local government, finally as Queen's Justice for County Cork. In Ireland, Spenser profited from the redistribution of huge tracts of confiscated land to English settlers (though his estate was less than a tenth the size of his neighbour's, Sir Walter Raleigh's), but he also became embroiled in a protracted lawsuit with Lord Roche, the former owner of the Kilcolman estate where Spenser established himself as a landowner. His rise to the status of a gentleman is evident in his second marriage, in 1594, to Elizabeth Boyle, a relative of the first Earl of Cork; they had one son, Peregrine. During the Tyrone rebellion, in 1598, their house was sacked and burned. Spenser and his family fled to Cork and later returned to London, where he died a month later on 13 January 1599. He was buried in Westminster Abbey; a memorial was erected in 1620 (biographical details based on Hadfield 2004 and Hamilton 2013, xiv–xix; the standard biography is Hadfield 2012).

Next to his busy life as a colonial administrator, Spenser pursued a poetic career with greater seriousness than any of his contemporaries, at a time when dabbling in poetry was considered an excusable youthful hobby among the social elite but not a vocation. Spenser apparently “considered writing a duty rather than a distraction” (Helgerson 1983, 55). His precocious talent is evident in a number of English translations of French poems, published anonymously in the anti-Catholic compilation *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1569) and later included in his *Complaints* (1591). Many of his early works, written during his Cambridge years, are lost, including a treatise on “The Englishe poete”, which would be an intriguing companion piece to Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (↗ 9 Rhetoric and Literary Theory); but some of his early poetic compositions were probably revised and included in his *magnum opus*, FQ.

Spenser's first claim to fame is *The Shepheardes Calender*, dedicated to Sidney and published anonymously in 1579; this was a bold and challenging debut, a complex literary and typographical work of art that was reprinted four times until 1597. It combines the popular form of the almanac – a calendar with woodcuts – with the classical genre of the eclogue, a Greek and Latin form of pastoral poetry derived from the Greek poet Theocritus (third century BCE) and, most importantly, the highly esteemed Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BCE). To imitate Virgil's first major work, the *Eclogues*, signalled the highest poetic ambition because Virgil had gone on to write the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, the national epic poem of Augustan Rome. For the new poet – as yet unnamed in the book, or only named by the Latin pseudonym 'Immeritô' (an adverb meaning 'undeservedly') – to enter the literary scene in Virgil's footsteps meant that he was embarking on a career as *the* major English poet of his generation. Next to this invocation of classical precedent, Spenser masks himself in the poem as 'Colin Clout', a persona derived from the work of the earlier English poet laureate John Skelton (≈ 10 John Skelton, *The Bowge of Courte*). With further allusions to Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland, Spenser writes himself very consciously into an English vernacular literary tradition, fully aware of the historical distance between these models and his own work. In the spirit of Renaissance humanism, Spenser's text in *The Shepheardes Calender* is surrounded by glosses that make the poem look like an edition of an old text. These learned but playful notes are ostensibly penned by one "E. K." (who may be a fellow student, Edward Kirke, or Harvey, or Spenser himself, or any combination of these). A similar textual organisation in a popular genre can be seen in William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* (≈ 12 William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*).

It is highly likely that Spenser began his epic poem in 1579 at the latest; in April 1580, Harvey mentions in a letter that he has read a part of it, so this must have circulated in manuscript. It is also likely that Spenser worked on it in Ireland whenever his administrative duties allowed, revising and including some of his earlier poetry, such as the lost *Epithalamium Thamesis*. In 1589, he travelled to London with Raleigh, probably seeing the first three books of *FQ* through the press. It was entered in the Stationers' Register on 1 Dec. 1589 and published by William Ponsonby in January 1590 in quarto format, with a letter to Raleigh added to the poem. The work is dedicated to Elizabeth I; it is accompanied by seven commendatory poems, as well as seventeen dedicatory sonnets by Spenser to members of the queen's inner circle and important noblemen, including Lord Grey and Raleigh, but also Elizabeth Carey (a descendant of the Spencers of Althorp) and "all the gracious and beautiful Ladies in the Court" (dedicatory sonnet 17; Spenser 2013, 735). The letter to Raleigh and the other preliminaries, apart from the dedication, are unusually placed at the back of the book. Arguments based on early modern printing-house practices make it more likely that this was not a mistake or a rushed affair but a deliberate strategy in order to create "a direct relationship [...] between the dedication [to the queen] and the opening of the poem" (Bland 1998, 112). In the

later poem *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), Spenser reports on being granted an audience by the queen and reading to her. His claim that she liked what she heard is corroborated by the fact that she granted him a life pension of £50 a year in 1591 – a substantial sum at the time, exceeding £100,000 in today's money.

The second quarto of 1596 prints the first three books and adds another three but leaves out the commendatory verses and dedicatory sonnets as well as the letter to Raleigh (perhaps because the poem had developed away from Spenser's original intentions). As the title pages of both editions proclaim, the poem was to be "[d]isposed into twelue books" (2013, 26), so Spenser had in 1596 published exactly the first half of his poem. It is unclear how much of the second half was written before he died; a fragment supposed to be part of book VII, the "Mutability Cantos", was added to the posthumous 1609 folio. In 1633, the Irish antiquary James Ware claimed that a servant lost "the later part" of *FQ*, but there is no other evidence for this, and it is quite possible that it was either unfinished when Spenser died, destroyed when his house was burned down, or that he had given it up, or indeed that he never intended to complete it.

In terms of publishing, the 1590s were Spenser's decade. Next to *FQ*, other publications include *Complaints: Containing sundrie small Poemes of the Worlds Vanitie* (1591), *Daphnaïda* (1592), *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595), *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), *Fowre Hymnes* (1596), *Prothalamion* (1596) and the fifth edition of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1597). His reputation as a poet was secure. His collected works were printed in 1611, a second edition in 1620. In 1633, *A vewe of the present state of Irelande* was printed in Dublin; most likely by Spenser, this text had been entered in the Stationers' Register in 1598. It had been widely circulating in manuscript, twenty-two copies of which are extant (Cheney 2018). In this controversial document of English colonial presence in Ireland, Spenser defends the brutal suppression of Irish rebels and their foreign allies, in particular the military reprisals of Lord Grey, who had been recalled to England in 1582 after numerous appeals. The text offers an important context to the Irish background of *FQ* (which has been claimed as part of Irish as well as English literature, e.g. in Deane et al. 1991, and belongs to both in fascinating and complex ways; see Maley 1997).

Yet despite his apparent advancement and personal approval by the queen, controversy appears to have followed Spenser, beginning with the question whether his being sent to Ireland was a preferment or some form of punishment. Spenser had incurred "a mighty Peres displeasure (6.12.41)²; this is usually taken to refer to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the queen's secretary and Lord Treasurer, who had been offended by Spenser's satirical poem *Mother Hubberds Tale*, circulated in manuscript in 1579–80, in which Spenser attacked the queen's projected marriage to the French duke of Alençon. Exile in Ireland was still better than having

² All *FQ* references are to Spenser 2013 with book, canto, and stanza number.

his hand cut off – John Stubbs, author of a polemic treatise on the same topic, was less lucky. No manuscript of *Mother Hubberds* has survived, and a (probably unauthorised) printing was confiscated in 1591; the text was included only in the 1612–13 first folio of Spenser's works. He may have incurred Burghley's "displeasure" again by the ending of book III in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, which may have been considered too explicit in its depiction of (marital) erotic love; Spenser rewrote the ending for the 1596 edition but may have made matters worse by discussing this in the proem to book IV, indirectly accusing Burghley of being incapable of love and having a "frozen heart[]" (4.proem.2). The 1596 *FQ* also offended King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) with a passage depicting his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, as the "false *Duessa*" (5.9.40) and justifying her execution in 1587. This caused a diplomatic row; the book could not be sold in Scotland, and the king wanted Spenser "tried and duly punished" (qtd. in Hadfield 2004; cf. McCabe 1987). In addition to his Irish troubles, Spenser had a difficult time negotiating the prickly sensibilities of Elizabethan courtiers, and he had an attentive (if inimical) reader in the king of Scotland. He was a (trans-)national poet, and *FQ* as his major work may well be the most extravagant, epoch-making and (culturally and politically) transgressive work to emerge from the Elizabethan era.

2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

2.1 Allegory

As the letter to Raleigh, appended to the 1590 *FQ*, explains, Spenser's long poem is "a continued Allegory, or darke conceit" whose "generall end" (i.e. purpose) "is to fashion [= educate] a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (Spenser 2013, 714). Allegory, from Greek ἀλλως ἀγορεύειν, "to speak otherwise", is a classical rhetorical figure; for the Roman theorist Quintilian, it "either presents one thing in words and another in meaning, or else something absolutely opposed to the meaning of the words" (1920, 8.6.44). Allegory works by creating a tension between two or more layers of meaning: a surface level (what the words mean literally) and one or more levels beyond the surface. Quintilian, who prefers clarity of expression, does not approve of this. He seems to think of allegory as a rather cheap set of tricks to dupe the ignorant into agreement by means of a pleasing surface (cf. 5.11.17). If not immediately clear to the reader or hearer, these other meanings become enigmatic, "darke" or obscure. The earlier Greek theorist Demetrius held the opposite view, preferring implied meanings to plain and simple ones. For him (1995, 411), "allegory is not unlike darkness and night", striking a hearer with awe and even terror and conferring power and dignity on a speaker. In late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, allegory was a key technique in reading and

interpreting the Old Testament to unfold its fourfold meaning: the literal, allegorical (spiritual), moral, and anagogical (eschatological) levels of the text. The only modern poem before *FQ* to use allegory in a "continued" manner is Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308–1320). By Spenser's time, allegory had become controversial as a way of understanding the Bible because Protestant reformers emphasised the literal sense of Scripture.

In the letter, Spenser justifies his use of allegory in Sidneian terms, echoing *The Defence of Poesie* (↗ 9 Rhetoric and Literary Theory). His allegory consists of a surface that is "delightfull and pleasing to commune sense", inside which is a didactic intention, "good discipline [...] clowdily enwrapped in Allegorical deuises" (2013, 716). Like Sidney, he recommends this Horatian blend of pleasure and usefulness as a better way of teaching "vertuous [...] discipline", i.e. an understanding of the "morall virtues" (715), than trying to inculcate virtuous habits by means of theory alone: "So much more profitable and gracious is doctrine by ensample, then by rule" (716). The ethical framework behind the poem, as Spenser informs Raleigh and the readers of *FQ* 1590, is derived from Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* would have been available in Latin or Italian and in an abridged English translation of 1547. (How faithful *FQ* actually is to Aristotelian ethics is a matter of some debate; see Horton 1990.) Following Aristotle, Spenser announces that he will delineate twelve virtues in "these first twelue bookes" (715) – a rather enigmatic statement since only three books were printed in 1590 and another three in 1596 – and even considers a further continuation if his poem is "well accepted" (715). Each of these virtues is to be represented in the story of one knight from the realm of Arthurian romance, while the legendary King Arthur, who appears in each of the stories, embodies all of these virtues in perfection. Since the stories are set in Arthur's youth, before he becomes king of Britain, Spenser is free to invent rather than follow earlier Arthurian fiction, such as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (printed 1485). After seeing Gloriana, the Faery Queen, in a dream vision, Arthur sets out to find her "in Faerye land" (716). This fantasy setting allows Spenser to connect the geographical and historical reality of Britain with a realm of myth and legend, inhabited by elves and fairies who are not all that different from humans – a far cry from fairy folklore or the twee creatures of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Fairy Queen that Arthur seeks, as Spenser explains in the letter, is meant to represent glory in general and Queen Elizabeth I in particular, while Elizabeth is also "otherwise shadow[ed]" (i.e. represented) in the poem in the character of the "vertuous and beautifull Lady" Belphoebe (716).

The extant books stand for six virtues: holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy; the "Mutability cantos", first printed in 1609, are usually taken to belong to a lost or uncompleted book about constancy. Spenser's "darke" approach to allegory avoids one-to-one correspondences. Rather, readers are encouraged to follow the knights' adventures and draw their own conclusions.

FQ requires active involvement, and it frequently challenges and complicates one's initial assumptions during the reading process. Rather than giving a complete synopsis of the poem and its multiple narrative strands (which would easily fill the space allotted to this chapter and leave readers none the wiser), the following is a brief explication of some key parts (for a more detailed summary, see Zurcher 2011, 5–15). It is intriguing that Spenser himself sums up “the whole intention of the conceit” (718) in the letter to Raleigh, at a time when it was extremely rare for authors to explain their own work, but it is open to debate how serious one ought to take it, since its outline differs in some instances from the poem, his virtues are not identical to Aristotle's, and the letter is no longer included in the 1596 edition.

But the letter offers important information on what has happened before the poem begins. During Queen Gloriana's annual twelve-day feast, a young peasant requests permission to prove his worth in an adventure. The opportunity arises in the form of “a faire Ladye in mourning weedes” (717) who rides on a white donkey and is accompanied by a dwarf. She beseeches the Fairy Queen to help her against a dragon who has imprisoned her parents, “an ancient King and Queene” (717), in a castle. This ‘fair lady’ is Una, often taken to represent truth or the one true church, and she has brought an armour for the young man to wear as her knight. This armour, according to Spenser, is “the armour of a Christian man” (717) as described by St Paul in Ephesians 6.11–17. This Pauline text is also an allegory, describing Christian virtues in terms of weaponry (the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the sword of the spirit, and so on). Clad in this armour, the unproved young man becomes the Red Crosse Knight, or Redcrosse, the champion of holiness and hero of book I.

According to Spenser's plan, each of the twelve days of the queen's festivities was supposed to be the starting point of a new adventure; the adventures are linked to each other and “intermedled” with “many other aduentures” (718); Arthur would intervene in all of them, and one can expect that they would all finally merge when the knights returned to Gloriana's court.

Book I opens with Redcrosse, Una, and the dwarf en route to fight the dragon. But first they have to prove themselves in a series of adventures. Redcrosse is duped by the enchanter Archimago (an embodiment of hypocrisy) to abandon Una and follow Duessa instead; her name, meaning ‘twoness’ or duplicity (from Latin *duo*), might have warned him, but Archimago has transformed this ugly hag into a youthful beauty named Fidessa (‘the faithful one’). Here the tension between manifest surface and latent content, characteristic of allegory in general, is performatively enacted in the poem from the very beginning – it remains crucial throughout. Redcrosse kills the serpent Error and fights against three pagan knights called Sans foy, Sans loy, and Sans joy (French for ‘without faith, law and joy’). Una is taken captive by satyrs; Redcrosse visits the palace of Queen Lucifera and is given an opportunity to resist the devil's temptation. A knight named Orgoglio (‘pride’ in Italian) takes him prisoner. Redcrosse is rescued by Arthur and

reunited with Una. Realizing his mistake, he almost succumbs to Despaire but is saved by Una and taken to the House of Holiness, the spatial manifestation of this book's main virtue. Here he is educated and absolved of his sins, and he is even granted a vision of the New Jerusalem. It also turns out that he is not an elf but a human, in fact St. George himself, England's patron saint. He slays the dragon and is betrothed to Una; but before their wedding he leaves in order to continue serving the queen in further adventures.

This synopsis of book I gives a taste of Spenser's technique of multiple allegorical layering, creating a heady mixture of chivalric romance, English folklore, and Christian literature from the Bible to saints' lives. The road to holiness is littered with temptations, and the knight's journey along this road (as well as the reader's) is an inward journey at least as much as an outward one, in the tradition of the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius (fifth century CE), which depicts the conflict of virtues and vices as a battle of the soul. But in Spenser's case, the different layers do not always add up quite as neatly as in earlier allegorical literature, and in some cases there are multiple possible interpretations for characters such as Una and Duessa (who here embodies duplicity and the whore of Babylon from the Book of Revelation, but in book V is identified with Mary Queen of Scots). Spenser's allegories tend to multiply and create a many-layered texture of potential significance in a rich and complex narrative (see Anderson 2017).

This may well be part of Spenser's programme of teaching the virtues: in the process, readers are encouraged to detect ‘messages’ about a particular virtue but also to experience vicariously, and from different angles, how difficult it is to maintain lofty ideals in the ‘adventures’ of real life. This is, first and foremost, a perennial concern – how to live a good life – for which no simple solution can be offered. Virtue remains problematic for the knights in *FQ*, both male and female, whose stories tend to be open-ended and somewhat frayed at the edges. Like them, readers also have to learn by practice to make compromises between “ostensibly unimpeachable universal [...] ideals” and “the messy circumstances of practical [...] judgment” (Zurcher 2011, 177). For Spenser, the path to virtue is a continual struggle against its enemies, not least the enemy within the self, that his heroes have to overcome in order to be worthy of heroic glory and of their sovereign queen's approval. *FQ* thus presents an allegory of the *vita activa* that its author himself pursued in Ireland. It also presents a fictional testing-ground for Elizabethan ideals, beliefs and convictions, especially with regard to the virtue of justice and the related question of legitimate violence.

2.2 History, Mythography, Prophecy

In using “the historye of king Arthure” (Spenser 2013, 715) as the – flexible – groundwork of *FQ*, Spenser ostensibly follows Homer and Virgil in choosing events

from the distant national past on which to build a foundational epic poem. While modern historians would not consider the Arthurian stories 'history', medieval and Renaissance historiographers by and large cared little for the separation of fact from legend and, given the choice, would write or print the legend. Spenser's treatment of Arthurian material is foundational in the sense that he uses it in a similar way as Virgil uses the story of Aeneas, a survivor of the fall of Troy whose descendants were said to have founded Rome, thus bestowing legitimacy on Roman power over the Mediterranean world and over Greek culture in particular. Similarly, *FQ* links England to classical Greece and Rome in a magnificent act of cultural translation or appropriation (↗ 2 Forms of Translation). Spenser invokes Clio, the Muse of history, to "recount [...] / My glorious Souveraines goodly auncestrye" (3.3.4; cf. 2.10.1). In book II, Arthur and Sir Guyon reach the House of Temperance, where they find two "auncient" books, one titled "*Briton monuments*", the other "*Antiquitee of Faery lond*" (2.9.59–60). Readers are then presented, first, with "A chronicle of Briton kings, / From Brute to Vthers rayne" (2.10.Argument). This chronicle serves to create a link between the Celtic Britons – who lived in Britain before the Anglo-Saxons – and the Trojan Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas who is the legendary founder of Britain. The spurious etymological link between 'Britain' and 'Brutus' was invoked by many of Spenser's sources such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1135). Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, is a descendant of Brutus, linking Britain to classical antiquity (and *FQ* to the *Aeneid*); moreover, his connection to Wales also links him to the ruling Tudor dynasty, which was Welsh in origin, thus reinforcing Elizabeth's right to rule over England, Wales, and beyond. By telling the story of Brutus and his British progeny as the creation of a "mighty empire" in a place of "saluage wilderness" (2.10.5), Spenser also supports British imperial claims in Ireland. The same 'Arthurian' legitimation for Ireland "as subiect to *Britayne*" (2.10.41) is repeated in the *Vewe of the present state of Irelande* (Maley 1997, 102–104). For good measure, book II presents a fanciful fictional history of Faeryland up to Queen Gloriana, which can be decoded, in part, as referring to the Tudor dynasty.

In an even more radical move that links profane and sacred history, Spenser (or his history book within the poem) claims that Christianity came to England directly from Jerusalem rather than by way of Rome (2.10.53), thereby creating priority for an English church independent of Roman rule and bestowing authority on the English Reformation (↗ 7 Literature and Religion). The chronicle breaks off shortly before reaching Arthur's birth and thus the narrative present. The history lesson is continued in the mode of prophecy in book III when Britomart, the (female) champion of chastity, enters Merlin's cave in Wales, where the magician Merlin prophesies to her "a famous Progenee / [...] out of the auncient Troian blood, / Which shall reuiue the sleeping memoree / Of those same antique Peres" (3.3.22).

The device of historical prophecy is another borrowing from the *Aeneid*, where Anchises in book 6 reveals to Aeneas his future descendants up to the peaceful age

of Augustus, i.e. the emperor at the time Virgil was writing. In *FQ*, the place of Augustus is filled by Elizabeth, who is said to be descended from Arthur's half-brother Artegall and Britomart, thus having both human and Faery ancestors. The prophecy culminates in a vision of "eternall vnion [...] / Betweene the nations" of England and Wales (3.3.49) and victory over Spain (i.e. the defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1588). After this, Merlin falls into an ecstatic trance and is unable to reveal what he has seen; Spenser is careful not to extend his prophetic abilities too far into the future. Yet the device of prophecy allows Spenser to project possible or desirable futures, turning *FQ* into a medium of political imagination.

This raises questions about Faeryland's location and ontology, in particular how it relates to England's early ventures into the New World. In the proem to book II, the poet addresses his "most mighty Soueraine" – Elizabeth as the dedicatee and principal intended reader of *FQ* – to defend "this famous antique history" as more than an idle fiction (2.proem.1). In doing so, he compares Faeryland to the recent discoveries of Peru, the Amazon, and Virginia (the English colony named after Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen). He argues that if these existed before they were found, there may well be other still undiscovered places on Earth or even extraterrestrial worlds "in euery other starre" (2.proem.3). Further references to the New World in *FQ* include Peru (3.3.6), Guiana (4.11.22), and Indians (2.11.21, 3.12.8); in 3.5.32, Belpheobe treats Timias's wound with tobacco, a plant that had found its way into English herbals from America in the 1570s (Brady 1956; Knapp 1992). Spenser thus situates his own activities of literary worldmaking in the context of early modern global exploration and speculations about the plurality of worlds (↗ 3 New Ways of Worldmaking; ↗ 11 Thomas More, *Utopia*; ↗ 30 Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*). Faeryland shares geographical space with the real world, but it is placed far back in time (thus anticipating and perhaps inspiring J. R. R. Tolkien's idea to tether his Middle-earth to a distant period in the Earth's past). Its physical boundaries appear to extend from India in the East to America in the West (2.10.72). Its (imaginary) history is linked to the history of Britain and of Queen Elizabeth herself: "In this fayre mirrhour maist behold thy face / And thine owne realmes in lond of Faery" (2.proem.4). It is a place where the actual and the fictional, the real and the imagined, the possible and the impossible can meet.

Yet despite Spenser's claim that he chose a subject matter from the distant past in order to avoid "the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time" (2013, 715), he in fact includes many topical references to contemporary events and persons. His tongue may have been in his cheek when he wrote this, possibly addressing manuscript readers fully capable of decoding these references because they shared not only the same culture but the same political environment of Elizabethan courtly life. Political references increase in the later books. Whereas the fight of Redcrosse against the dragon in book I can be read allegorically as a fight against Catholicism or against the Spanish Armada, or both, references in books IV–VI tend to be more direct, such as the above-mentioned trial of Duessa that is closely modelled on that

of Mary Queen of Scots (see McCabe 1987), and the way violence and rough justice in Ireland are presented in book V.

2.3 Justice and Violence

Readers of *FQ* do not have to wait long to reach the first of many scenes of violence: the killing of the serpent Errorr, who is devoured by her own blood-thirsty offspring, occurs just a few stanzas into the first canto of book I. True to the traditions of epic romance, *FQ* teems with episodes of chivalric combat, tournaments and warfare as well as fights against wizards and monsters: dragons, giants, cannibals, and the elusive Blatant Beast. The heroes' actions are often destructive. One of the most debated scenes in the poem is the destruction of the Bower of Bliss by Guyon, the knight of temperance (or moderation), at the end of book II. In this pleasure garden near the Idle Lake, the enchantress Acrasia seduces knights to inactivity and an erotically charged paralysis; she transforms them into beasts just as Circe had turned Odysseus's companions into swine.³

The Bower of Bliss is one of several *loci amoeni* in *FQ*; it is marked for destruction by its decadent artificiality: "A place pickt out by choyce of best alyue, / That natures worke by art can imitate" (2.12.42). Spenser's description of the Bower is one of the most famous passages in all of English literature and one of the most controversial in Spenser criticism. Guyon has to prove himself by resisting the sensuality of this "false paradise" (Alpers 1990, 105), and the poet does his best to make Guyon's trial the reader's, too, by describing the garden's sensuous and erotic appeal with what William Hazlitt in the early nineteenth century called "voluptuous pathos, and languid brilliancy" (qtd. *ibid.*). C. S. Lewis was the first to apply the psychological concept of voyeurism to this episode (2013[1936], 414), and there is indeed a lot of gazing and peeping going on. This leaves the knights drowsy and, arguably, impotent; Acrasia transforms them into beasts just as Circe had turned Odysseus's companions into swine. Guyon, too, risks losing his "sober" and "stubborn" restraint to the scopophilic "pleasaunce" of the Bower (3.12.58, 65) but then he destroys Acrasia's garden "with rigour pitiless", "And of the fayrest late, now made the fowlest place" (83). He takes Acrasia captive and dis-enchants her victims, although one of these, named Gryll, insults him and prefers living "in filth and fowle incontinence"; Guyon's companion, the Palmer, closes the canto by pointing out that some people – "[t]he donghill kinde" – just won't

be helped: "Let *Gryll* be *Gryll*, and haue his hoggish minde; / But let vs hence depart, whilst wether serues and winde" (87).

Is Guyon's destruction of the Bower of Bliss an immoderate act and thus, paradoxically, a violation of his key virtue, temperance? In an influential reading of this episode, Stephen Greenblatt links the destruction of the Bower to three contemporary contexts: Elizabethan confrontations with the New World, the colonisation of Ireland, and puritan attacks against church decoration, with the added argument that Spenser attacks his own art in this passage (1980, 169–92). More recent readers have rejected this image of Spenser as "an imperialist Puritan zealot", reading Guyon's violent act not as "Spenser's view on temperance" but as his way of "pos[ing] a question to the reader" (Zurcher 2011, 179). Acrasia, after all, is not killed but bound "in chaines of adamant" (2.12.82). Her name can be derived from two different Greek verbs, "meaning both 'absoluteness, unmixedness' and 'incontinence, unrestraint'" (*ibid.*), thus challenging Guyon's apparent abandonment of moderation since the personification of unrestraint is herself, at the end, restrained.

Defeating and sometimes killing, sometimes imprisoning monsters, enchanters or Amazons is usually justified in *FQ* as an act of justice. Distributive and corrective justice are key concepts especially in book V, where the virtue of justice itself is put to the test. Artegall, the champion of justice (and presumptive ancestor of Elizabeth I), has a hard time settling various conflicts, fighting against toll-collecting monopolies and a proto-communist giant who wants to introduce general equality (5.2). Artegall is defeated in single combat by the Amazon Radegund, who imprisons and humiliates him until he is liberated by Britomart; he can then return to his principal task of liberating the lady Irena ('peace') from the tyrant Grantorto ('great wrong') on the 'salvage island' (5.11–12). But he is recalled to Gloriana's court before he can introduce lasting changes to the island. Since this resembles the recall of Lord Grey, Spenser's employer as Lord Deputy of Ireland, and the name 'Irena' or 'Eirena' is close to *Éire*, the Irish for Ireland, Spenser's negotiation of justice is now often read in the immediate context of his own involvement in the Munster plantation and the brutal suppression of Irish rebels and their allies (cf. Fowler 1995, Maley 1997).

The executive arm of Artegall's justice is embodied in his companion Talus, an "yron man" (5.1.12) who deals out rough justice without mercy, an early modern Robocop (Hamilton 2013, 512). Here, too, *FQ* explores the connection between justice and violence, and the boundaries of legitimate violence. Justice is presented as an imperial virtue, with the empress Elizabeth as the mediator between divine and human justice. The universal peace that Merlin prophesies for Elizabeth's empire, however, cannot be realized without military might. Guyon's "rigour pitiless" (3.12.83) is matched with the "resistlesse" Talus's iron flail, "[w]ith which he thresheth out falshood, and did truth vnfold" (5.1.12). Here Spenser comes closest to justifying colonial violence in Ireland as necessary in order "to reforme that ragged coming mon-weale" (5.12.26), and perhaps he refers to the recall of Lord Grey as due to

³ The episode is based on *Odyssey* bk. 10 and 12 (Circe), and on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (Rinaldo being rescued from Armida); this in turn imitates Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* 6–7, where the enchantress is named Alcina (see Hankins 1990).

envy and detraction rather than his excessive brutality. But he also begins to explore how justice is related to mercy, and how it may need to be supplemented or improved upon by courtesy. But the ending of the last completed book leaves another frayed edge, like the enchanted Gryll who would prefer to remain a pig: though Calidore, the champion of courtesy, defeats and muzzles the Blatant Beast, a personification of evil, the poet at the end admits that the Beast has escaped and is at large again – nor will the poet's own “homely verse [...] escape his [the Beast's] venomous despise” (6.12.41). Even all the virtues combined will not lead to a perfect world.

The increasingly darker vision of the later books, which are much less joyful or exuberant and marked instead by a sense of pain and pessimism, may well be due to Spenser's personal Irish experiences and his disillusionment with Elizabethan court politics (see Hadfield 1997, Maley 1997), or a more general expression of what Patrick Collinson has called the “nasty nineties” (1995, 170). Although the multiple allegories and various intertexts of *FQ* turn it into a kind of “meta-text” of Elizabethan culture (Zurcher 2011, 172), the question remains whether it inhabits this culture from a position of dominance or marginality. Spenser's own position in this culture was a marginal one, after all, and his career in Ireland removed him even further from the centre of power. *FQ*'s hubristic praise of Queen Elizabeth, for instance, contrasts with its often (though not consistently) misogynistic portrayal of women; its faith in the monarch contrasts with its distrust of her courtiers and their policies; the open endings and uncertainties that characterize its plot resist any easy assimilation to a stable ideological framework or a single point of view on the world, or worlds, that it unfolds.

3 Aesthetics: Literary Strategies

3.1 Genre and Intertextuality

FQ is not a novel, and its narrative conventions are, for the most part, alien to modern readers (though perhaps less alien to readers familiar with recent instances of the long prose romance, such as G. R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*). It is essential to understand its form and its handling of genre. If one were only to focus on its content, searching for its philosophy or ‘message’, one would end up with a dissatisfying hotchpotch: “a bastard blend of inexact-remembered Aristotle, crude, Calvinist polemic, vacuously complicated star-lore and second-rate Neoplatonism, which as its prefix suggests is already second-rate” (Teskey 2007, 103–104). The truly original force of *FQ* lies in Spenser's handling of his material.

FQ is an epic romance, a hybrid form that inherits elements from classical heroic epic (most notably the *Aeneid*) and related verse narratives such as Ovid's

Metamorphoses, and from the Greek prose romance (e.g. Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, translated into French and English in the mid-sixteenth century) with its stories of adventure and its interlaced episodic structure, which also inspired Sidney (≈ 15 Philip Sidney, *The Two Arcadias*). Epic romance in verse, with multiple plots, gained prestige in the Renaissance through Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* (1483–1495), Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1516–1532), and nearer to Spenser's own time through Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581). In the letter to Raleigh, Spenser explicitly mentions Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso. There are many close parallels and imitations of these and other models in *FQ*. Another important influence comes from folklore: among many others, there are analogues in *FQ* to the fairy-tale of the brave tailor (‘seven at one stroke’) in 2.3; there is a witch who lives in a cottage in a forest (3.7), and there is a detailed variation on the tale of ‘Mr Fox’, the English Bluebeard, in 3.11, when Britomart enters Busirane's castle.

Another vein that Spenser mined for *FQ* is English literature, most notably the poems of Chaucer and Langland. Chaucer is explicitly invoked by name more than once in the poem as a fountainhead of English poetry (“well of English vndefyled”, 4.2.32), and Spenser uses many Chaucerisms in his language. In 4.2–3, he presents a continuation of the unfinished “Squire's Tale” from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; “The Knight's Tale” and “The Tale of Sir Thopas” are also relevant for *FQ*, as are *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and works attributed to Chaucer in the 1561 folio that Spenser probably read. Langland's *Piers Plowman*, written in the late fourteenth century and printed several times in the mid-sixteenth, provided Spenser with the idea of a Christian poem that combined allegory, prophecy, and satire. Another important role-model is Skelton (≈ 10 John Skelton, *The Bowge of Courte*), whose plain-dealing persona ‘Colin Clout’ Spenser adopts in *The Shepheardes Calender* and uses again for a cameo appearance in *FQ* 6.10.

Another obvious intertext is the Bible, which suffuses Spenser's thinking and his language, especially the Revelation and the Psalms. These allusions would have been familiar to his early readers, and some are still easily recognised today: the Solomonic judgment of Artagall in 6.1, for example, or Guyon's temptation in the cave of Mammon in 2.7, echoing Christ's temptation in the wilderness; other, more specific allusions now require explanation (e.g. the books and frogs that Error vomits at 1.1.20, an allusion to a marginal gloss in the Geneva Bible of 1583; see Hamilton 2013, 36 and Zurcher 2011, 170). Reading the Bible provided Spenser and his contemporaries with a method of poetic composition and interpretation that relied on repetition, comparison, and contrast, so that different and sometimes distant parts of a text would illuminate each other.

All these different intertexts form a rich tapestry drawn from many heterogeneous strands. It is astonishing that Spenser can weave them into a text that does not seem like patchwork but – for the most part – quite seamless. Spenser creates through *imitatio*, forming something new out of translations and imitations of prior texts – a schoolroom technique promulgated by humanist education (Zurcher 2011,

162–72). This can be described metaphorically as a process of enfolding and doubling, creating analogies and additional layers of significance in the ‘folds’ of the poem and allowing *FQ* to compress time and space (cf. Deleuze 1992). The episodic style of narration, an imitation of Ariosto’s technique of *entrelacement* (deferring the conclusion of an episode by the ‘interweaving’ of other stories), contributes to this effect by disrupting the chronology of a linear quest narrative – until, in book VI, the quest structure itself is largely dissolved (see Grogan 2009, 150–55).

The very beginning of the poem, for example, imitates the pseudo-Virgilian opening of the *Aeneid*, four lines inserted before the actual start that were still thought to be Virgil’s by Renaissance editors: *Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena / carmen* ... (“I am that man who once sang on a slender reed”, etc.; cf. Peirano 2013):

Lo I the man, whose Muse whylome did maske,
As time her taught, in lowly Shephards weeds,
Am now enforst a farre vnfitter taske,
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds:
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds[,]
(1.proem.1.1–5)

In so doing, Spenser not only imitates (pseudo-)Virgil’s epic opening, as well as Ariosto’s imitation of it in *Orlando furioso* (“*Le donne, i cavalier, l’arme, gli amori / Le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto*”), but, more importantly, he invokes the *rota Virgillii*, the poet’s career from “lowly” pastoral (Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Spenser’s *Shepherdess Calender*) to the “[f]ierce warres and faithfull loues” (l. 9) of epic.

3.2 Language and Verse

While *FQ* may appear archaic in its vocabulary, even ‘medievalist’ in looking backwards to Chaucer as a poetic ideal, Spenser’s idiom is not as old-fashioned as it may seem at first sight. The original typography speaks a different language: the book was set in roman typeface rather than the traditional black-letter, giving it a distinctly modern look and setting a new trend in printing English poetry and prose (Bland 1998, 107). As regards the words, ‘E. K.’ writes in defence of Spenser’s words in *The Shepherdess Calender*: “I graunt they be something hard, and of most men vnused, yet both English, and also vsed of most excellent Authors and most famous Poetes” (qtd. in Zurcher 2011, 165). This is certainly in part due to his borrowings from Chaucer, but he turns these effects into his own quite unique way of guiding and sometimes misleading the reader by “an apparently purposeless distortion of words” (Craig 1967, 447; cf. Stephens 2010). In other words, he does not want to write ‘correct’, ordinary English. As Martha Craig has argued, he uses variant spellings that are “suggestive of philosophic meaning” (451) and that reveal

“the nature of the things named” (450). Spenser often puns on a word or a name in such a way as to communicate something about a character or object, such as spelling *Slowth* instead of ‘sloth’ to suggest the slow nature of idleness. Sometimes these puns rely on a knowledge of other languages (as in the case of the name ‘Acrasia’, discussed above), including Irish. This is why modern editions of *FQ* preserve the original spelling of the early printed versions: Spenser’s spellings are idiosyncratic because they often carry potential additional meanings. As Gordon Teskey points out, Spenser “is not an archaic but an *archeological* thinker” (2007, 118), and this is also true for his particular use of English; the archaic ‘feel’ of the text is a literary strategy that involves etymological thinking (see also Crawforth 2013). Modern editions (above all Hamilton 2013) or online glossaries provide as much help in this regard as any reader might need at the outset.

FQ is one of the longest poems in English, consisting of more than 3,800 stanzas. Spenser invented his own nine-line stanza for *FQ*: eight iambic pentameters followed by an alexandrine (iambic hexameter), rhyming ababbcbb. This is an adaptation of Italian *ottava rima*, a stanza of eight lines with eleven syllables each, rhyming abababcc, used by Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso. Spenser’s handling of his stanza can be seen as emblematic of his use of epic romance: there is no privileging of one perspective, episode or character over another, and there is little in the way of linear progress or narrative suspense. The stanza is a supple and subtle medium that can be alternately dynamic and static, propelling the action forward or stopping time, providing a “continual oscillation between narrative movement and symbolic tableau” (Teskey 2007, 115). Like the folding and doubling technique of Spenser’s allegory and his intertextuality, his verse can be alternately telescopic and microscopic, focusing on minor details of a scene or on “whole civilisations [. . .], holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another” (Empson 1966, 34).

The Spenserian stanza is technically difficult not only because of the four b-rhymes it requires but also because it oscillates between alternate rhyme and rhyming couplets. Beginning like a ballad, it turns into something much more complex after the fourth verse. What makes it complex is the presence of two rhyming couplets, in ll. 4–5 and 8–9. The final couplet with its elongated last line can provide – or deny – the sense of a finished description, a completed thought or a piece of knowledge gained, rounded off by a *sententia*, a statement of (proverbial) wisdom similar to the final couplet of an English sonnet. The first couplet in the middle of the stanza can likewise offer a moment of closure but also of opening or disruption (Empson 1966, 33–34; Dolven 2004, 20).⁴

⁴ In the late seventeenth century, Edward Howard rewrote *FQ* bk. I in heroic couplets, referring in his preface to this *Spencer Redivivus* to Spenser’s “tedious stanza” (Anon. 1687, sig. A3^v); but the adaptation proves – if proof were needed – how essential this form is to the poem.

However, the form also develops over time. In the 1596 *FQ*, there is an increasing number of feminine rhymes (e. g. “complayning” / “disdayning” / “constrayning”, 4.10.43); there is only one in books I–III (at 2.9.47) compared to 169 in IV–VI. This increase has been interpreted as a negative shift in Spenser’s attitude towards women, and towards Elizabeth I in particular (Quilligan 1990), but there is no evidence that feminine endings were considered ‘weaker’ than masculine ones in the Renaissance; on the contrary, as David Wilson-Okamura argues, they were a fashionable import from French poetry, used to achieve “a big, rich sound” (2014, 768).

Spenser’s stanza has been described as “a mimesis of thinking” (Dolven 2004, 22) presenting the mind in action rather than the finished results of thought. It may well express “the ambivalent search for a structure of thinking” (ibid.; cf. Teskey 2007) that characterises the entire poem. Rhyme, as a figure of repetition and variation, also supports the cognitive technique of comparison, analogy, and contrast that shapes the composition of *FQ*, in this case literally enfolding the reader in a sequence of envelope-rhyme quatrains, quintains, and couplets. On an even smaller scale, repetition is present in Spenser’s frequent use of alliteration, creating connections between words and concepts by means of sound.

On the larger scale of comparison, Spenser employs the epic simile and the epic catalogue as devices of rhetorical amplification. The epic simile stops the action and introduces a moment of reflection in which the net of allusion can be cast wide and the horizon of reference is expanded. It usually comprises a stanza beginning with the words “As when [...]” (1.6.1) or “Much like, as when [...]” (1.3.31) and contains a kind of micro-narrative, usually to illustrate a situation by means of familiar imagery (often featuring ships) or a mythological reference. The catalogue or list can range from botany to history (cf. the genealogical line of Elizabeth’s ancestors discussed above), extending the scope of the poem towards an encyclopaedic register. Some catalogues are expanded to scenic tableaux, such as the parade of the seven deadly sins in 1.4 or – the most extravagant of these pageants – the long procession of rivers that come to celebrate the marriage of the Thames and the Medway (4.11); others are much shorter and more curious, like the tree catalogue, which extends over thirteen lines at 1.1.8–9, or the use of asyndeton at 2.9.50, a list of nouns without articles or conjunctions: “Infernall Hags, *Centaurs*, feendes, *Hippodames*, / Apes, Lyons, Aegles, Owles, fooles, louers, children, Dames.” (This does make sense, by the way, in the context of an allegory of the fantastic imagination that contains “infinite shapes of thinges” [2.9.50].)

As the last quotation shows, there is also room for humour in *FQ*, as its high style and epic seriousness are at times undercut by witty asides, parodies, and (intentional) bathos. To give but one example, when Redcrosse fights the dragon, the verse appears to mimic the difficulty of slaying such a beast by heavy alliteration and caesura: “The steely head stuck fast still in his flesh[.]” When his spear breaks, so does the line, with a caesura fittingly at the word “broke”, continuing with a rather unusual metaphor (1.11.22):

Till with his cruell clawes he snatcht the wood,
And quite a sunder broke. Forth flowed fresh
A gushing riuer of blacke gory blood,
That drowned all the land, whereon he stood;
The streame thereof would driue a water-mill.

That water-mill is a fine realistic detail from everyday rural life in the Renaissance, as one might expect to find in a landscape painting, but it is utterly out of place in the heroic context of the St. George legend – perhaps it adds a touch of ‘georgic’ to it, a kind of meta-pun on the saint’s name. Spenser wants to entertain his readers as well as teach them, and the wry sense of humour displayed here and throughout the poem is part of his intentions of mixing instruction with pleasure. Incidentally, Rubens’s *Landscape with St George and the Dragon* (c. 1630; Royal Collection, Windsor), one of the first paintings of an English landscape, shows the Thames and a view of London but no water-mill.⁵

4 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Grave Spenser was no sooner entred [into the afterlife ...] but [...] *Chaucer* call’de him his Sonne, and plac’de him at his right hand. All of them (at a signe given by the whole *Quire* of the *Muses* that brought him thither,) closing up their lippes in silence, and tuning all their eares for attention, to heare him sing out the rest of his *Fayrie Queenes* praises.
(Dekker 1974 [1607], 155)

As this passage from Thomas Dekker’s *A Knight’s Conjuring* shows, Spenser was immediately canonised as the direct successor of Chaucer, and *FQ* was quickly recognized as a major work of English literature, including regret about its incompleteness. Francis Meres, in 1598, lists Spenser in second place (with Sidney in first and Shakespeare in sixth) among poets said to have “enriched” the English language (1598, sig. Nn8^r), comparing Spenser (“so diuine a Poet”) to Homer and adding with regard to the *Faerie Queene*: “I knowe not what more excellent or exquisite Poem may be written” (sig. Nn8^r). William Camden, similarly, wrote that Spenser “surpassed all the English poets of former times, not excepting even Chaucer himselfe” (2014 [1635], 681).

But early readers not only praised Spenser, they actively engaged with his poems and quoted, borrowed or stole from them profusely. There are traces of *FQ* in works by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Nashe, Samuel Daniel, and many other contemporaries.

⁵ While not directly inspired by *FQ*, the painting like the poem appears to stress the connection between St George, the Order of the Garter, royalty (his St George is a portrait of Charles I) and the English countryside.

For example, in *Tamburlaine* part 2, usually dated 1587 or 1588, Marlowe reworks these lines from *FQ* 1.7.32: “Like to an Almond tree ymounted hye / On top of greene *Selinis* all alone, / With blossoms braue bedecked daintily” into

Like to an almond tree ymounted high
Upon the lofty and celestial mount
Of ever-green *Selinus*, quaintly decked
With blooms more white than *Erycina*'s brows

(Marlowe 2003, 4.3.119–122)

The likeliest scenario is that Marlowe read an early manuscript version of *FQ* before it was printed. Yet this is not merely Marlowe quoting Spenser; it is *Tamburlaine* who is quoting from *FQ*, “deluding himself that he belongs to the same medieval chivalric tradition as Arthur, and that his approach to Samarcanda is comparable to Arthur's relief of Una” (Gill 1990, 453). In Shakespeare, likewise, there are numerous traces of Spenser – in particular of the 1590 *FQ* – for instance, Clarence's dream in *Richard III* (1.4.26–33) is heavily indebted to Guyon's visits to the house of Mammon and the Bower of Bliss (Brooks 1979). The Mammon episode from book II is also reflected in *Timon of Athens* (Hashhozheva 2013), parodied in Jonson's *The Alchemist* (↗ 23 Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*), and worried over in several of Milton's works (↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*).

Spenser's impact on English literature was immediate, wide-ranging, and durable also because he chose the medium of print to publish his works rather than having them circulate only in manuscript copies. The first imitation of the Spenserian stanza, Richard Barnfield's *Cynthia*, dates from 1595. Spenser's seventeenth-century imitators are too numerous to mention here (see Hunter 1977, O'Callaghan 2000, Wells 1972); one manuscript continuation of *FQ*, for example, adds three books on the virtues of prudence, fortitude and liberality (Knevet 2015). It is safe to say that all the major English poets that succeeded Spenser, from Milton onwards, were in some way influenced by him, and many learned to write by imitating him. Charles Lamb is said to have given Spenser the epithet of “the poets' poet” (qtd. in Radcliffe 1996, vii). Yet few tried, and fewer still succeeded, to follow him in his chosen genre of heroic epic poetry, and already in the early eighteenth century the Spenserian stanza was used for comic or mock-heroic effects, as in Alexander Pope's *The Alley: An Imitation of Spenser* (1727) or William Shenstone's *The Schoolmistress* (1737).

Many later poets learned to appreciate Spenser through the filter of Milton, whose 1645 *Poems* are heavily indebted to a Spenserian mould, and who might have written his epic poem about King Arthur instead of *Paradise Lost* if Spenser had not already done so (↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*). The rise of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century also owes a large debt to *FQ*, editions of which were published by John Hughes in 1715 and John Upton in 1758; an edition of 1751 added illustrations that refashioned Spenser for an audience with a taste for mystery and

the supernatural. James Thompson's *The Castle of Indolence* (1748) and James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1775) are clearly inspired by such a reading of Spenser. In the Romantic period, Coleridge praises Spenser for the “sweetness and fluency” of his verse, as well as “the exceeding vividness of [his] descriptions” ([1818] 2014, 683), while Wordsworth likewise invokes “Sweet Spenser” in *The Prelude* as “Brother, Englishman, and Friend!” (1985, 3.283, 285). Byron, Shelley, and Southey all wrote poems in Spenserian stanzas. Mary Tighe's *Psyche; or the Legend of Love* (1806) adds an important female facet to Romantic Spenserianism. But the most Spenserian of English Romantic poets is Keats, whose *Eve of St. Agnes* imitates the sensual surface of *FQ*. The last poem Keats wrote before his death was an additional stanza in his copy of *FQ*, a political critique of the punishment of the proto-communist Giant in 4.2 (see Kucich 1991).

The Victorians moralised *FQ* in numerous prose adaptations for children. Charles Kingsley drew on Spenser as a character in his historical novel *Westward Ho!* (1855), while Alfred Tennyson crafted his own version of Arthurian narrative poetry in *Idylls of the King* (1859–1885), in twelve idylls reminiscent of the projected number of books in *FQ*. Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) engages even more directly with Spenserian allegory. In the twentieth century, Spenser's cultural presence began to wane, partly in reaction to his identification with English nationalism and British imperialism. W. B. Yeats effectively split Spenser into a dual personality: an admirable poet of the Irish landscape on the one hand, and a despicable coloniser on the other; this ambivalence continues to this day in Irish literary responses to Spenser from Seamus Heaney to Frank McGuinness (see O'Callaghan 2010). While he is now less frequently read, let alone imitated, Spenser's particular combination of fantasy and everyday realism continues to infuse, indirectly at least, the heroic romance in prose – think *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

But as his cultural presence waned, Spenser was becoming firmly installed in academic curricula around the world. Because *FQ* is such a multifaceted and problematic work, it continues to spark critical debates, and almost any theoretical paradigm has been applied to it. Greenblatt's reading of 1980 is a turning point: where earlier critics emphasised harmony and a coherent world picture (e.g. Fowler 1973), the New Historicists found dissonance and conflict by relating *FQ* to various historical contexts, “including violent colonial expansion, psychosexual drama, and religious strife” (van Es 2006, 3). Deconstructionists found in *FQ* an ‘open’, writerly text, endlessly deferring its central signifier, the queen (Goldberg 1981), while feminist and Lacanian readings sought to understand its Amazonian women and feminised men as fascinating and problematic reflections on gender, power, and eroticised violence (e.g. Bellamy 1992, Sanchez 2011, 57–85, Campana 2012).

More recent critical trends include book history, the materiality of the text and early modern reading practices. Readers interested in Spenser studies should have

a look at the website of the International Spenser Society and the two specialist journals *Spenser Studies* and *The Spenser Review*. A new edition of Spenser's texts is currently being prepared (see Cheney 2018). A renewed interest in literary form combined with insights from cultural history has led to nuanced readings of FQ in recent years. Richard McCabe, for instance, reviews the Bower of Bliss episode as neither an expression of Neoplatonic balance nor of imperial triumphalism but as opening a space for multiple interpretations (McCabe 2002), while Richard Chamberlain (2005, 70–72) reads the same episode “as an allegory of the failure of critical endeavour itself” (van Es 2006, 17). It is only to be hoped that readers will continue to fail in trying to come to terms with *The Faerie Queene*.

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