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Spenser and Europe: Britomart after Brexit  
by Willy Maley

But (Lord) how she in everie member shooke,  
When as the land she saw no more appeare,  
But a wilde wildernes of waters deepe:  
Then gan she greatly to lament and weepe.<sup>1</sup>

“Fog in Channel – Continent Cut Off” is an old mock headline that sums up British – specifically English – insularity and anti-European sentiment, or at best indifference to the continental landmass off the coast of Dover.<sup>2</sup> Edmund Spenser crossed that channel, and another to the west, in his pursuit of a life beyond England. Spenser is our contemporary, and never more so than now, at a moment when a British breach with Europe is conjuring up the ghosts of the Reformation, and the British Government is looking to Ireland to bolster its power, as risky a strategy today as it was in Spenser’s time.<sup>3</sup> In a recent survey of Renaissance studies, Katherine Eggert observes: “If contemporary politics spark dissertation topics, ones that we see in print after a suitable lag time for writing and publication, then Brexit and the rise of Trumpism might lead us in upcoming years to expect a decline in first books on globalism and an uptick in studies of protectionism, theories of business and trade, and xenophobia”.<sup>4</sup> In lieu of such a time lag, and in light of the tendency for history to repeat itself, I want to explore some of the implications of Brexit for Spenser studies, and for our perception of the poet’s relationship with England, Ireland, Britain, Europe and the world.<sup>5</sup>

Three relatively recent interventions in Spenser studies by David Baker (“Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe” and “Britain Redux”) and Paul Stevens (“Spenser and the End of the British Empire”) invite us to rethink the relationship between Britain and Empire within Spenser studies and beyond.<sup>6</sup> Baker and Stevens suggest that the “new British history” and imperial history are outmoded, because Empire is over, and a more transnational and multilingual approach is called for in approaching both Spenser and British history. Those essays have assumed greater relevance in the context of the outcome of the 2016 United Kingdom Referendum on membership of the European Union. Insofar as the British Empire remains the elephant in the room for Britain’s relationship with Europe and sense of itself in the world, Stevens’ argument can appear premature or wishful thinking. Insofar as British history – or ignorance thereof – remains a driver for anti-European sentiment, Baker’s well-intentioned appeal for more culturally diverse approaches comes up against the bulwark of Britishness that acts as a brake on such diversity.

The UK decision to withdraw from the EU has echoes of an earlier era. It also has Spenserian overtones, with “Belge” – Belgium, or the European Parliament at Brussels – being abandoned in favour of “taking our country back” (for “country”, read “imperial monarchy”, including constituent parts that voted to remain in Europe).<sup>7</sup> This time, unlike Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, there appears to be no Arthur to rescue Belge, a red cross placed against her name. According to David Baker: “Edmund Spenser lived at a time when the charged relation between [...] Britain and Europe [...] was changing drastically”.<sup>8</sup> Spenser lived through the aftermath of an historic moment in Anglo-European relations, when Henry VIII broke

with Rome, a decision with profound consequences for British state formation. Following this breach, Wales was incorporated into England and Ireland was changed from papal lordship to subordinate kingdom. Moves already afoot to bring Scotland aboard continued from the Rough Wooing through to the Treaty of Berwick and beyond. The question is: to what extent would Spenser have understood Brexit? As a good English European in terms of his cultural and intellectual formation, as well as his reforming interests, he might have applauded his nation's efforts to assert itself and to challenge any existing European setup that appeared to marginalise England/Britain. As an English colonist, he may have welcomed the "Global Britain"/Commonwealth angles of some supporters of Brexit. Yet in other ways Spenser may have found the whole project dubious, because, like the Reformation, progressive strands that proposed an outward-looking perspective – a reformed Europe with England at its head – were entwined with more inward-looking attitudes. Such insularity and isolationism, as witness the cautious foreign policy to which the Leicester-Sidney circle took exception, is echoed in events in our own time. Like Brexit, the Henrician Reformation was fuelled by a grassroots movement that felt betrayed by the politicking that followed. Promises of greater freedoms were not fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

The Reformation was not an event, but, as Milton well knew, and spelt out in *Of Reformation* (1641), a messy and protracted and ongoing process. Milton, mapping out the reasons "why a complete *Reform* was not effected" pointed, among other things, to Edward VI's "Warre with *Scotland*".<sup>10</sup> If the Reformation is unfinished business, the same can be said of Brexit. The vote has taken place. The "nation" – or two nations of a composite monarchy or multi-nation state – has spoken, but the implications of that decision to withdraw have not been realised. Indeed, it could be argued that Brexit is more than an echo of the Reformation – it is Milton's unfinished business being put back on the agenda. What kind of "nation" is Britain? And what place does it have in Europe. With another Elizabeth on the throne – and mindful of the fact that there never was an Elizabeth I of Scotland – the sense of history repeating itself has to be balanced with a sense of an arrested process playing out.<sup>11</sup>

Spenser was actively engaged in several key events that shaped the Tudor state, including the Desmond Rebellion (1579-83), which secured his and England's Irish foothold, and through the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and Dowager of France, the occasion for "one of the most notable of Spenser's interventions in the affairs of Britain and Europe".<sup>12</sup> Mary's cousin Elizabeth, in keeping with the Act in Restraint of Appeals, could claim a title greater than queen. Baker observes of Mary's execution: "As in this episode, the histories of Britain and Europe impinged on Spenser's works [...] through the mediating involvement of the woman he called his 'Glorious Empress'".<sup>13</sup> According to Baker:

In dealing with the great powers of her day, Spain and France, this queen worked to keep all parties – most of them men, of course – off balance and to avoid, as much as possible, direct confrontation. For the most part, these tactics suited the exigencies of a small, vulnerable kingdom that was geographically peripheral to Europe without being detached from its political struggles.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the roots of English objections to Europe in the early modern period go back before the Reformation, to the pope's donation in 1494 of the "New World" to Spain and Portugal.<sup>15</sup> Then, as now, it was all about Empire, and all about the Atlantic archipelago, because it was all about keeping Europe out of Scotland and Ireland, viewed as England's backyard. Like Scotland, Ireland was an integral part of Europe, and England's aim here was also to shut the door, in this case to Spain. The defeat of the Armada in 1588 "signalled the emergence of England as a genuine sea power and demonstrated that England could hold its own against an empire".<sup>16</sup> But England could only hold its own against an empire by becoming the empire it had declared itself to be in 1533, and by holding Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Although Spenser in the *View* advised against mixing the Irish and the Scots, by the time his "Two Cantos of Mutabilitie" appeared the Ulster Plantation was well underway and the old out of the frying pan and into the fire trick had been pulled off. Eudoxus, we recall, asked Irenius about "that advice [...] to draw in Scotts, to serve against [O'Neill]". Irenius answers at length, concluding: "This then were but to leape out of the pan into the fire: For the cheifest caveat and provision in reformation of the North, must be to keep out those Scottes".<sup>17</sup> After 1609, the Scots were inextricably invested in the North of Ireland and bound to the nascent British state and Empire.

The breach with Rome would rumble on in wars, invasions and occupations, in competition for colonies and in territorial and political disputes, but England, insulated and weaponized as Britain, had arguably turned its back on Europe. It is this history that lies behind recent developments. If Spenser can be seen as an eloquent exponent of the nascent English-cum-British Empire then he was also a resolutely European intellectual, who would hesitate long before turning his back on Europe. One could argue that in a different Europe the Spenser who carried letters to France in 1569 would not have been fleeing Ireland in 1598. Remember that the Reformation created a crisis for younger sons, who, no longer able to enter the monasteries were forced to seek their fortune elsewhere. The expanding Tudor state, and specifically the colonies, provided a perfect platform for their ambitions and desire for land.

Britain is now passing through another breach with Rome, in this case the 1957 Treaty of Rome that laid the foundations of the European Union, and the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon (known as the "Reform Treaty") that put in place the conditions for a member of the Union to withdraw. This is a constitutional continental crisis on a par with the events of the 1530s. Indeed, the ghost of the Reformation has been raised in order to address this historic shift, in the shape of the so-called "Henry VIII clauses", and this has raised grave constitutional questions for British lawyers and legal historians.<sup>18</sup> The clauses are succinctly described on the UK Parliament website:

The Government sometimes adds this provision to a Bill to enable the Government to repeal or amend it after it has become an Act of Parliament. The provision enables primary legislation to be amended or repealed by subordinate legislation with or without further parliamentary scrutiny. Such provisions are known as Henry VIII clauses, so named from the Statute of Proclamations 1539 which gave King Henry VIII power to legislate by proclamation.<sup>19</sup>

In the wake of Brexit, along with the Statute of Proclamations the 1533 Act in Restraint of Appeals to Rome and the 1534 Act of Supremacy are back on the table. A

“Divorce Bill” with profound implications for the future of Europe. The Empire strikes back, and ironically what it strikes back at is another Empire, bearing in mind that the 1533 Act stated that: “Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, so hath been accepted in the world”.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the Reformation was an archipelagic and European phenomenon and not merely an English one. It was also on one level a German intellectual import. Conflating the Reformation with Brexit arguably erases the European aspect of Protestant thought.<sup>21</sup> Which is why my focus here is on the colonial and empire-building aspects of the two processes. Both the English Reformation and Brexit can be seen to be bound up with an appeal for the restoration of sovereignty – “taking our country back”. Or in the words of Donald Trump commenting on Brexit from a Scottish golf course and borrowing from his own lexicon: “Make Britain great again”.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of Brexit, Shakespeare’s histories are being ransacked for evidence of the roots and fruits of an earlier breach with Europe.<sup>23</sup> Whatever its merits as a production, the 2016 anti-Brexit *Cymbeline* at Stratford is an example of harnessing Shakespeare in the interests of European union, and that particular play is itself a classic instance of history as allegory, revisiting the past in order to address the present.<sup>24</sup> The transition from Tudor Reformation to Stuart Union is neatly encapsulated by Christopher Hodgkins in a series of questions that touch on, but extend beyond, Spenser:

I ask what it meant for the part-Welsh queen of England in 1577 to hear Dee call her Arthur’s descendant and a British empress, and for her to read in the 1590s of Spenser’s Britomart and her seer’s glass and of Merlin’s mirror. And what did it mean for the Scottish King James VI to ascend the English throne in 1604 and, claiming Arthurian descent, to rename his combined kingdoms with their ancient title of “Great Britain”? And what did it mean for James in 1610 to view Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, a tragicomedy of British resistance and eventual submission to imperial Caesar, set at the time of Christ’s first coming?<sup>25</sup>

Hodgkins spends a whole monograph engaging with these questions, but his immediate answer captures the complexities and contradictions arising from Janus-faced nationalism:

This Tudor-Stuart project of expansive imperial recovery clearly meant that, like the early Protestant humanists before them, English writers from Dee and Hakluyt to Spenser and Shakespeare returned to “ancient” textual sources, recovering and reinventing the Matter of Britain. Yet as they did so, these writers combined often discordant elements that represented complicated responses to their own colonized past: medieval accounts of an inherited Trojan imperial identity intertwine with classical accounts of a native noble savagery. In the former, devolutionary view, British civility and empire preceded Rome’s imperial conquest; indeed, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthur, like Malory’s, can claim that “mine ancestors did of yore obtain possession of Rome.” In the latter, tutelary view – derived from Tacitus through the Henrician antiquarian Polydore Vergil – hardy British wildness

was seasoned and trained by Roman imperial discipline but also was seduced and undermined by Roman dissipation.<sup>26</sup>

To speak of the “Tudor-Stuart project” is arguably to assume a continuity that is itself questionable. Spenser’s Britomart could not have foreseen the Stuart succession, just as Irenius never envisaged planting the Scots in Ulster as a strategy that would prove advantageous to the English.

The European flag – the flag of the European Union – is blue with a circle of twelve yellow stars. The stars stand for solidarity among the twenty-seven member states. Now Britain, like Texas, is angling to be a lone star state. The issue is whether it can go it alone, and what “alone” means for a multi-nation state. What might Spenser have to tell us about secession, union, disunion and empire that can orient us now?<sup>27</sup> Spenser’s relationship with Ireland has clouded the fact that as an Elizabethan Englishman he witnessed the beginnings of the “British Empire”, although there is a strong strand of Spenser scholarship that acknowledges this fact.<sup>28</sup> As Catherine Bates reminds us: “When Arthur reads a book called *Briton moniments* [...] it represents a history of history, a monument to other ‘moniments’ – of empire, of victory, of success – that find themselves inscribed on the cityscapes and countryside of Britain: it is the written record of a history that has already left its record on the land”.<sup>29</sup> Yet despite *Briton moniments*, and our awareness that the poet was living through the birth of Britain as well as the beginnings of the British Empire, “Spenser and Ireland” is such a key coupling that other contexts – “Spenser and Britain”, “Spenser and Europe” – tend to get sidelined. Baker is surely right to suggest that Spenser was a key figure in the forging of the nation, an architect of the idea of Britain long before it emerged as an established entity:

In the later years of the sixteenth century [...] “Britain”, was not yet assembled as an effective political union. Strictly speaking, “Great Britain” would not come into existence until 1801. But Spenser invested in the imagining of such a polity throughout his career, and some of our conception of “Britain” as a splendid fusion of disparate nations we owe to him.<sup>30</sup>

This “splendid fusion of disparate nations” might rankle with those for whom the formation of the British state entailed conquest, colonisation and coercion, but Baker’s point still stands. Spenser played a crucial role in the making of Britain. “Britain”, however, generally gets short shrift within Spenser studies. There is a curt mention in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*.<sup>31</sup> “Europe” fares no better. It doesn’t even earn an entry on its own, though there is a brief entry on the myth of “Europa”, individual entries on “influence and reputation in” France and Germany, and a fruitful entry on “French Renaissance literature”.<sup>32</sup> Discussing the political allegory of Book V, David Daiches spoke of “the modern reader, who neither agrees with the Elizabethan concept of justice nor retains any interest in the political problems of Spenser’s Europe”.<sup>33</sup> Yet Spenser was a European, as much as his fellow colonial servant, Lodowick Bryskett, whose father, Antonio Bruschetto, came to England from Genoa, “and was granted letters of denization on 4 December 1536”.<sup>34</sup> Bruschetto was caught up in Italian efforts aimed at reconciling England to Rome.<sup>35</sup> Spenser’s familiarity with European poets such as Du Bellay, Marot, Petrarch, Ronsard and van der Noot has been noted.<sup>36</sup> From classics to contemporaries, from Virgil to van der Noot,

Spenser knew the European tradition. He was also intimately acquainted with thinkers like Bodin and Machiavelli.<sup>37</sup> Beyond Europe, there is the “New World”.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the break with Rome was bound up with that “New World”, driven by competition for colonies between nation-states that each aspired to imperial status. Spenser’s work is riddled with moments where European history and myth meshes with contemporary politics, most perplexingly in *Muiopotmos*, where the Bull (Papal, Spanish) that carries off Europa represents a continent being pulled in different directions, as Europe was at the time.<sup>39</sup> Like the plight of Irena, held captive by Grantorto, the plight of Europa, carried off by continental powers with papal grant of colonial privileges is a call to arms for England:

*Arachne* figur’d how Jove did abuse  
*Europa* like a Bull, and on his backe  
Her through the sea did beare.<sup>40</sup>

Ireland, although firmly located within the Old World and within Europe, after a series of European invasions and occupations, was recolonized and occupied by the “New English” and treated like part of the “New World”. The persistent double image of the poet and planter, the colonial Spenser and the cultured Spenser, has proved notoriously hard to shake off. Patrick Cheney and Lauren Silberman’s attempts to present a “Worldmaking Spenser”, one “refusing bifurcation”, were dogged by the world-taking activities of the English in Ireland:

The collective picture of Spenser that emerges is of a poet who is central to the formation of early modern Europe and to the continuing expansion of Western Europe. In this “postcolonial” age aggressively bent on “de-canonizing” Spenser for what Louis Montrose memorably terms Spenser’s “racist misogynist elitist imperialist biases” [...], our picture may be more than controversial; it is worldmaking.<sup>41</sup>

De-canonizing – or decolonizing – Spenser has its limitations. Globalizing him, whether in order to place him in the world as a worldmaker, or within a set of interlocking milieus that would include, in a European context, Ireland but also Scotland, France, Spain, Italy, and Holland, makes more sense.<sup>42</sup> Spenser was certainly “central to the formation of early modern Europe”, central to and shaped by. The fact that he grew up in, and wrote in, what was in some ways – but only some ways – a post-European England/Britain has tended to obscure his European pedigree. In 1569 a teenage Spenser was apparently carrying correspondence from France for Henry Norris, Elizabeth’s ambassador there. The same year the young poet-courier published epigrams and sonnets from Petrarch and Du Bellay as part of Jan van der Noot’s *Theatre for Worldlings*.<sup>43</sup> Translating French and Italian verses for a Dutch poet – those are strong European credentials. Spenser was made in Ireland, but he was also made by England turning back to and turning its back on a certain idea of Europe and towards another idea, that of Empire. Brexit Mark I was a shaping force. Without the trauma of the break with Rome and the need to recover – and invent – a distinct national tradition, there would be no *Faerie Queene*. Speaking of “the matter of just memory”, Andrew King observes:

Like the Elizabethan antiquaries, Spenser sought to recover England’s Middle Ages as part of a Reformed nation’s full and rich history. [...] It is just that

*The Faerie Queene* should remember classical and humanist culture since these are the common inheritance of Europe. But it is also especially just that *The Faerie Queene* should remember and redeem its more particular past, the native traditions of romance writing that need not be scorned, either on literary grounds or because they predate the Reformation.<sup>44</sup>

If Spenser was a poet of exile, where was he in exile from, England or Europe?<sup>45</sup> Of course, it could be argued that there was no “Europe” as a coherent political, economic or cultural formation in the sixteenth century, outside of papal power, trade, traffic, a community of scholars, a common history and a shared language of learning in Latin. Then again, nor was there a coherent entity called “England”, as is evident from the extent to which the Tudor state’s rejection of Rome was bound up with Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and with imperial ambitions that would entail establishing a new England further afield. Spenser was part of these emergent colonial movements as the nascent British Empire began to take shape, but Europe remained a huge presence in Spenser’s work, and although it was never home for Spenser in the way that Ireland became, it is a persistent presence in his poetry.

Commenting on *Complaints*, Anne Lake Prescott and Andrew Hadfield nail beautifully the double bind at the heart of the break with Rome, first through the fall of the Roman Empire, then through the Reformation: “Rome’s fall, however tragic, however indicative of mutability’s cruelty to flesh and cities, thus made room not only for modern poets but also for modern cities and modern empires”.<sup>46</sup> Less convincing is their concomitant claim: “For Protestants [...] the sight of Rome’s fall [...] was a reminder that modern Rome, the Rome of the Popes and, in anti-Catholic apocalyptic polemic, the Rome of the Whore of Babylon with her cup of abominations and her many-headed beast, would fall too, making room not for English empire but for God’s (Protestant) New Jerusalem”.<sup>47</sup> The words “not for English empire” would have given some Protestants pause, because while there was a clear anti-imperialist strand to Reformation thought there was also – and the Act in Restraint of Appeals exemplifies this – a strong strand of imperial aspiration.<sup>48</sup>

British history is to blame both for Spenser’s supposed exile to Ireland and for the tendency to view him largely within an English or Anglo-Irish framework rather than a Continental context. British history is central to *The Faerie Queene*, as are Anglo-European relations. But British history is at once both very old – as old as Caesar and Boadicea – and relatively new. John Pocock’s plea for British history as a new subject – “the plural history of a group of cultures situated along an Anglo-Celtic frontier and marked by an increasing English political and cultural domination” – came at a crucial moment, in the wake of Britain joining in 1973 the European Economic Community (EEC), which had been established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957.<sup>49</sup> Pocock sensed that unrest in Ireland (again) and the growing influence of the European Union would put paid to Britain:

Within very recent memory, the English have been increasingly willing to declare that neither empire nor commonwealth ever meant much in their consciousness, and that they were at heart Europeans all the time. The obvious absurdity of the second part of the claim is no bar either to the partial truth of the first part, or to the ideological assertion of the claim as a whole; and if it has been psychologically possible for them to annihilate the idea of the



Commonwealth – white as well as nonwhite – it is not altogether beyond the bounds of possibility that “United Kingdom” and even “Britain” may some day become similarly inconvenient and be annihilated, or annihilate themselves, in their turn. With communal war resumed in Ireland and a steady cost in lives being paid for the desire of one of the “British” peoples to remain “British” as they understand the term, it is not inconceivable that future historians may find themselves writing of a “Unionist” or even “British” period in the history of the peoples inhabiting the Atlantic archipelago, and locating it between a date in the thirteenth, the seventeenth, or the nineteenth century and a date in the twentieth or the twenty-first.<sup>50</sup>

A peace process in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, within a European framework, appeared to end conflict there, but the British decision to withdraw from the European Union potentially imperils that peace by threatening to place a “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is meantime shoring up the British Government in the shape of the Conservative and Unionist Party (more commonly known as the Tories) in order to keep the latter in power. The Royal Irish Academy has meanwhile launched a “Brexit Taskforce” aimed at allaying the potential negative consequences for academic research.<sup>51</sup>

Spenser can be viewed as a writer who challenged notions of purity, as when Irenius quickly qualifies his apparent slur against the Spanish in response to Eudoxus’s reproach: “I thinke there is no nation now in Christendome, nor much further, but is mingled, and compounded with others: for it was a singular providence of God, and a most admirable purpose of his wisdom, to draw those Northerne Heathen Nations downe into those Christian parts, where they might receive Christianity and to mingle nations so remote miraculously, to make as it were one blood and kindred of all people, and each to have knowledge of him”.<sup>52</sup>

Lest we get carried away by Spenser’s apparent Christian-assimilationist view, it’s worth bearing in mind that he advocated the extermination of the Irish in pursuit of English colonial ambitions. Then again, this sixteenth-century Brexit is tied to the fact that the pope’s donation of the so-called “New World” to Spain and Portugal had already split Europe as the Old Empire (Rome) tried to hold onto its power. Dutch and English counter-claims would put paid to that plan. It could be argued further – as Milton does in *The History of Britain* (1670) – that England was freeing itself from a series of yokes – Roman, Danish, Saxon, Norman and Roman again.<sup>53</sup> The irony, not lost on Milton, was that this unyoked entity might ironically come to resemble another Rome, as the newly-independent England morphed into the British imperial monarchy. Likewise, today Britain looks to its former colonies for support as it faces economic meltdown in a post-Brexit environment.<sup>54</sup>

“Taking our country back” takes different forms. According to Marc Shell, “some American republicans argued that independence from England – and from British imperialism – required independence from English [...] with [...] shades of English anti-Normanism”.<sup>55</sup> Shell’s footnote delves into Spenser:

The English colonists’ rebellious discussions of ridding the United States of the English language and concomitant English political institutions were

themselves variations of English nationalist demands, common since Anglo-Norman times, that the English language be purged of its “foreign” elements, chiefly Norman, and that pure English become, as Edmund Spenser puts it, “the kingdom of our own language”.<sup>56</sup>

According to Paula Blank: “In the Renaissance, the English language became part of a cultural recreation myth according to which, by translating foreign languages into English, the early modern world would be ‘reborn’ as the British empire”.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the period, writers were testing the bounds of what Spenser referred to as “a kingdom of our own language” – not only among the local shires, but among the nations that fell within England’s imperial sphere. By 1603, England’s most immediate neighbors, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, had all been the object of English efforts towards annexation or union, and it is no coincidence that along with the native English dialects, “British” languages, from Irish Gaelic to Lowland Scots, make their first appearances in English literature in this period.<sup>58</sup>

For Blank: “With Spenser, especially, the Renaissance ideal of linguistic community is exposed as a project of ‘translation’ by which one culture, one ‘people’, is transformed into another”.<sup>59</sup>

In the *View*, Spenser invokes Rome as an exemplar of linguistic colonialism:

For it hath ever beene the use of the conqueror, to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all meanes to learne his. So did the Romans alwayes use, insomuch that there is almost no nation in the world, but is sprinkled with their language.<sup>60</sup>

The Roman inheritance and the European legacy more generally were inescapable. As Blank remarks:

Spenser’s incorporation of dialect, foreign words, and neologisms in his diction suggests that the “unfamiliarity” and the novelty of Spenser’s archaisms – the fact that they were, as Puttenham observed, “now out of use with us” – was just as important to him as their antiquity. Their “strangeness” apparently met Spenser’s unusual specifications for a newly authorized English.<sup>61</sup>

In his afterword to *Worldmaking Spenser* David Lee Miller reflects on the challenges of Spenser’s writing, formally, through the claim by Jonson that he “writ no language”, and politically, picking up on Louis Montrose’s pejorative remarks cited in that collection’s introduction:

As postcolonialism and cultural studies provide increasingly dominant paradigms for literary study, will *A View of the Present State of Ireland* dislodge *The Faerie Queene* as Spenser’s best known and most frequently studied text? I hope not.<sup>62</sup>

I hope not too. Spenser's poetry and prose are steeped in European culture, myth, and history, and should be read together as responses to a European crisis that remains relevant. The UK vote to leave the EU, like the election of Donald Trump, occurred on the back of a familiar discourse of exclusion. Empire and globalization have not been successful, but we need to be building bridges, not walls. A typo in Miller's afterword holds out the promise of a reversal of the most recent break with Europe that we are living through: "Enlightenment". I live in hope.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Spenser, *Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie*, in Anne Lake Prescott and Andrew D. Hadfield (eds.), *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2014), 610, lines 285-288.

<sup>2</sup> The history of that waterway, its changing fortunes and fictions, is mapped out in Renaud Morieux, *The Channel: England, France and the Construction of a Maritime Border in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Sara B. Hobolt, "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent", *Journal of European Public Policy* 23, 9 (2016): 1259-1277; Daniel Holder, "Neither Hard nor Soft but Racist? The Good Friday Agreement and the Irish Border after Brexit", *Race & Class*, 10.1177/0306396817725443, accessed 3 September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Eggert, "Recent Studies in the English Renaissance", *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 57, 1 (2017): 181-225, at 197.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent indication of the direction that future studies might take see Brian C. Lockey, "'Equitie to measure': The Perils of Imperial Imitation in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10, 1 (2010): 52-70. Lockey nails the problem of anti-imperialist reformers backsliding into imperial ways of thinking: "At the center of the analogy that links Britomart's conquest of Radegone to the rise of an English imperial stance is the slippery doctrine of equity that also served as the pope's justification for Spanish invasion of England. Throughout the Radegone episode, one sees Spenser caught in a kind of labyrinth, trying to divert his reader away from an obvious analogy that links the doctrine of equity to the principles that justified a Catholic conquest of England itself at the same time that he seeks to provide an imperial stance for Elizabeth based on natural law" (64).

<sup>6</sup> David J. Baker, "Britain Redux", *Spenser Studies* 29 (2014): 21-36; "Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe", in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37-59; Paul Stevens, "Spenser and the End of the British Empire," *Spenser Studies* 22 (2007): 5-26; revised and reprinted as "Final Reflections: Spenser and the End of the British Empire", in Linda Gregerson and Susan Juster (eds.), *Empires of God: Religious Encounters in the Early Modern Atlantic* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2011), 238-256.

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<sup>7</sup> Viola Blackburn Hulbert, “The Belge Episode in the *Faerie Queene*”, *Studies in Philology* 36, 2 (1939): 124-146.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Brexit had its progressive wing, called “Lexit” – Left-wing Brexit – supported by those who felt the European project as exemplified by the EU was a neoliberal one. See Joe Guinan and Thomas M. Hanna, “Forbidden Fruit: The Neglected Political Economy of Lexit”, *IPPR Progressive Review* 24, 1 (2017): 14-24; Owen Worth, “Whither Lexit?”, *Capital & Class* 41, 2 (2017): 351-357.

<sup>10</sup> John Milton, *Of Reformation* (London, 1641), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Every constitutional lawyer with an interest in British – and European, and global – politics is homeworking the Reformation right now and searching into Henry VIII’s powers. The “Back to the Future” theme is crucial to legal and constitutional responses to Brexit. See for example Andrew Dickinson, “Back to the Future: The UK’s EU Exit and the Conflict of Laws”, *Journal of Private International Law*, 12, 2 (2016): 195-210: “Without the benefit of a time machine, the terms of the exit treaty (or treaties) cannot be predicted” (197).

<sup>12</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 39. See Richard A. McCabe, “The Masks of Duessa: Spenser, Mary Queen of Scots, and James VI”, *ELR* 17, 2 (1987): 224-242. Mary’s execution is rarely written on from a European perspective. The French connection tends to get airbrushed out. Mary was after all dowager queen of France as well as queen of Scots and contender for the English throne. Baker touches deftly on this aspect (42-3). See also Julian Goodare, “Mary (1542–1587)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/view/article/18248>, accessed 2 Sept 2017]. For French reaction, see Alexander S. Wilkinson, ‘Spreading News of the Execution: Mary Queen of Scots and the Parisian Catholic League’, in *Mary, Queen of Scots and French Public Opinion, 1542-1600* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 103-127.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland (1633): from the first printed edition*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 111.

<sup>18</sup> See Miklos Kiraly, “Brexit in Context: Some Historical Remarks on the Relationships between the United Kingdom and Continental Europe”, *ELTE Law Journal* 1 (2016): 39-47. In a two-part blog for the London School of Economics one law lecturer delves into the constitutional consequences and the risks of divine right returning to usurp parliamentary democracy. See Joelle Grogan, “The (not so) Great Repeal Bill, part 1: only uncertainty is Certain”, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/79692/1/blogs.lse.ac.uk-The%20not%20so%20Great%20Repeal%20Bill%20part%201%20only%20uncertainty%20is%20certain.pdf>, accessed 31 August 2017; “The (not so) Great Repeal Bill, part 2: How Henry VIII clauses undermine Parliament”, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/79916/1/blogs.lse.ac.uk-The%20not%20so%20Great%20Repeal%20Bill%20part%202%20How%20Henry%20VIII%20clauses%20undermine%20Parliament.pdf>, accessed 31 August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> “Henry VIII Clauses”, <http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/henry-viii-clauses/>, accessed 3 September 2017.

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<sup>20</sup> Hugh MacLachlan, “Arthur, Legend of”, in A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *A Spenser Encyclopedia* (London and Toronto: Routledge, 1990), 64-66, at 66. Richard Brown points out that of course the Reformation was itself a European movement and thus what is at stake is two visions of Europe, one imperial (Roman) and one anti-imperial (but with imperial aspirations in the case of England). This would play out in complex ways once Cromwell came to power in the 1650s and the colonial republic that succeeded the imperial monarchy found itself at war with its Protestant neighbours and erstwhile allies, most notably the Dutch Republic. See John Kerrigan, ‘The Anglo-Scoto-Dutch Triangle: Milton and Marvell to 1660’, in David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens (eds.), *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton’s England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 217-248.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to Richard Brown for this point.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah McCammon, “Make Britain Great Again? Donald Trump’s Remarkable Reaction To ‘Brexit’”, <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/24/483353866/make-britain-great-again-donald-trumps-remarkable-reaction-to-brexit>. See also Georgios Giannakopoulos, “‘Make Britain Great Again’: Anglo-American Thought and World Politics in the Age of Empires”, *Modern Intellectual History* (2017), doi:10.1017/S1479244316000378, 1-14.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Gary Watt, “‘Sovereigns, Sterling and ‘Some Bastards too!’: Brexit Seen from Shakespeare’s *King John*”, *Journal of International Dispute Settlement*, idw028, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jnlids/idw028>, accessed 31 August 2017.

<sup>24</sup> See Rachel Ellen Clark, “The Anti-Brexit *Cymbeline*”, *Early Modern Culture* 12, 1 (2017): 137-139; Lisa Hopkins, “*Cymbeline*, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016”, *Early Modern Literary Studies* 19, 1 (2016), <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/journal/index.php/emls/article/viewFile/334/231>, accessed 16 September 2017. *Cymbeline* is a play in which the insularity of the “sceptred isle” patriots is singularly unappealing and “A Roman and a British ensign wave/ Friendly together” (V.v.480-81).

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Hodgkins, *Reforming Empire: Protestant Colonialism and Conscience in British Literature* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Hodgkins, *Reforming Empire*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> For an altogether different orientation of Spenser and England in this period that offers a sophisticated and worldly perspective on Europe and its others, see Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Beginning with Edwin A. Greenlaw, “Spenser and British Imperialism”, *Modern Philology* 9, 3 (1912): 1-24 through to Andrew Hadfield, “Briton and Scythian: Tudor Representations of Irish Origins”, *Irish Historical Studies* 28, 112 (1993): 390-408; *Shakespeare, Spenser and the Matter of Britain* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and “Spenser, Drayton, and the Question of Britain”, *The Review of English Studies* 51, 204 (2000): 582-599. According to Greenlaw, Spenser was one of those who early identified the benefits of colonialism: “With the great increase of interest in travel and the knowledge that rich territories might easily be brought within British dominion, to say nothing of the success Philip had attained in making his colonies pay the expenses of his wars, they found public opinion gradually coming to their views” (19).

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Bates, “*The Faerie Queene*: Britain’s National Monument”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge

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University Press, 2010), 133-145, at 136. Andrew Hadfield plots the Elizabethan cultural shift from English to British with characteristic subtlety in “From English to British Literature: John Lyly’s *Euphues* and Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*”, in Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds.), *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533-1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 140-158.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 37.

<sup>31</sup> See Hugh MacLachlan, “Britain, Britons”, in A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *A Spenser Encyclopedia* (London and Toronto: Routledge, 1990), 113.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin R. Edwards, “Europa”, in Hamilton (ed.), *A Spenser Encyclopedia*, 256-257; Bernard Tannier, “France, influence and reputation in”, 318-319; Werner Bies, “Germany, influence and reputation in”, 330-331; Anne Lake Prescott, “French Renaissance literature”, 320-321.

<sup>33</sup> David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature: From the Beginnings to the Sixteenth Century*, 4 vols, second edition (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1979) first published 1960), Volume 1, 191.

<sup>34</sup> Richard A. McCabe, “Bryskett, Lodowick (c.1546–1609x12)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3817, accessed 1 September 2017].

<sup>35</sup> For the latticework of links between the Bryskett, Florio and Guicciardini families see Kenneth Bartlett, “Papal Policy and the English Crown, 1563-1565: The Bertano Correspondence”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 23, 4 (1992): 643-659.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 42. An excellent account is offered in Roland Greene, “Spenser and Contemporary Vernacular Poetry”, in Hadfield (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, 237-251. Directions “for a fuller mapping of Spenser’s European career path” can be found in Patrick Cheney, “‘Novells of his devise’: Chaucerian and Virgilian Career Paths in Spenser’s *Februarie Eclogue*”, in Patrick Cheney and Frederick A. De Armas (eds.), *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 231-267, at 234.

<sup>37</sup> Baker, “Historical Contexts: Britain and Europe”, 50-57.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas H. Cain, “New World”, in Hamilton (ed.), *A Spenser Encyclopedia*, 510-511.

<sup>39</sup> For an excellent account of the allegorical implications of the poem see Thomas Herron, “Plucking the Perrot: *Muiopotmos* and Irish Politics”, in J. B. Lethbridge (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 80-118, esp. 101-103.

<sup>40</sup> Spenser, *Muiopotmos*, lines 277-279, in Prescott and Hadfield (eds.), *Edmund Spenser’s Poetry*, 610.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Cheney and Lauren Silberman (eds.), *Worldmaking Spenser: Explorations in the Early Modern Age* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 6, 5.

<sup>42</sup> I am thinking here of course of Ayesha Ramachandran, ‘Cosmic Politics: The Worldly Epics of Camões and Spenser’, in *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 106-146.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Hadfield, “Spenser, Edmund (1552?–1599)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26145, accessed 1 September 2017].

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- <sup>44</sup> Andrew King, “‘Well Grounded, Finely Framed, and Strongly Trussed up Together’: The ‘Medieval’ Structure of *The Faerie Queene*”, in Lethbridge (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, 119-152, at 152.
- <sup>45</sup> Richard A. McCabe, “Edmund Spenser, Poet of Exile”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 80 (1993): 73-103.
- <sup>46</sup> Prescott and Hadfield (eds.), *Edmund Spenser’s Poetry*, 602.
- <sup>47</sup> Prescott and Hadfield (eds.), *Edmund Spenser’s Poetry*, 602.
- <sup>48</sup> The risk of a return to Empire – British supplanting Roman – was there from the outset: “What in sum seems incontrovertible is the attempt by Henry VIII – at least in the early 1530s – to govern his kingdom in a manner which corresponded to late Roman practice amply depicted as this was in the Roman law”. Walter Ullmann, “This Realm of England is an Empire”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30, 2 (1979): 175-203, at 200. See also Richard Koebner, “‘The Imperial Crown of this Realm’: Henry VIII, Constantine the Great, and Polydore Vergil”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 26 (1953): 29-52. It’s been pointed out that the attribution of the origin of the phrase “British Empire” to John Dee overlooks an earlier utterance by a Welshman, Humphrey Llwyd in *The breviary of Britayne* (London, 1572), Fol. 92<sup>r</sup>. See Bruce Ward Henry, “John Dee, Humphrey Llwyd, and the Name of ‘British Empire’”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 35, 2 (1972): 189-190.
- <sup>49</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, “British History: A Plea for a New Subject”, *Journal of Modern History* 47 (1975): 601-628, at 605.
- <sup>50</sup> Pocock, “British History: A Plea for a New Subject”, 602-3.
- <sup>51</sup> “RIA Brexit Taskforce”, <https://www.ria.ie/programmes/policy-and-international-relations/ria-brexit-taskforce>, accessed 16 September 2017.
- <sup>52</sup> Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, 51.
- <sup>53</sup> See my “Saxon Agonistes: Reconstructing and Deconstructing Identities in Milton’s *History of Britain* (1670)”, in Florian Kläger and Gerd Bayer (eds.), *Early Modern Constructions of Europe: Literature, Culture, History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 162-180.
- <sup>54</sup> Sally Tomlinson and Danny Dorling, “Brexit has its roots in the British Empire – so how do we explain it to the young?”, *New Statesman* (9 May 2016), [http://www.dannydorling.org/wp-content/files/dannydorling\\_publication\\_id5405.pdf](http://www.dannydorling.org/wp-content/files/dannydorling_publication_id5405.pdf), accessed 16 September 2017. The myth of the Empire coming to Britain’s rescue has been thoroughly discredited, chiefly because the Commonwealth has existing close ties with Europe. See for example, Veit Bachmann and James D. Sidaway, “Brexit Geopolitics”, *Geoforum* 77 (2016): 47-50; Peg Murray-Evans, “Myths of Commonwealth Betrayal: UK-Africa Trade Before and After Brexit”, *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 105, 5 (2016): 489-498; Eva Namusoke, “A Divided Family: Race, the Commonwealth and Brexit”, *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 105, 5 (2016): 463-476; Sophia Price, “Brexit, Development Aid, and the Commonwealth”, *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 105, 5 (2016): 499-507.
- <sup>55</sup> Marc Shell, ‘Babel in America; Or, the Politics of Language Diversity in the United States’, *Critical Inquiry* 20, 1 (1993): 103-127, at 107.
- <sup>56</sup> Shell, ‘Babel in America’, 107, n. 21.
- <sup>57</sup> Paula Blank, “The King’s English and His Empire”, in *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writings* (2002): 126-168, at 127.
- <sup>58</sup> Blank, “The King’s English and His Empire”, 128.
- <sup>59</sup> Blank, “The King’s English and His Empire”, 148.

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<sup>60</sup> Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Blank, *Broken English*, 119.

<sup>62</sup> David Lee Miller, “The Otherness of Spenser’s Language”, in Cheney and Silberman (eds.), *Worldmaking Spenser*, 244-248, at 247.

<sup>63</sup> Specifically, the hope of a post-British arrangement, a return to the best aspects of the European project, and an independent Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England (WISE) that will offer a solution to the historic imbalance along the Anglo-Celtic frontier. English domination of that frontier has, I would argue, had negative consequences for Europe and the wider world. If Brexit marks the end of Britain, as looks likely, then it opens up the possibility of a genuine post-imperial politics.