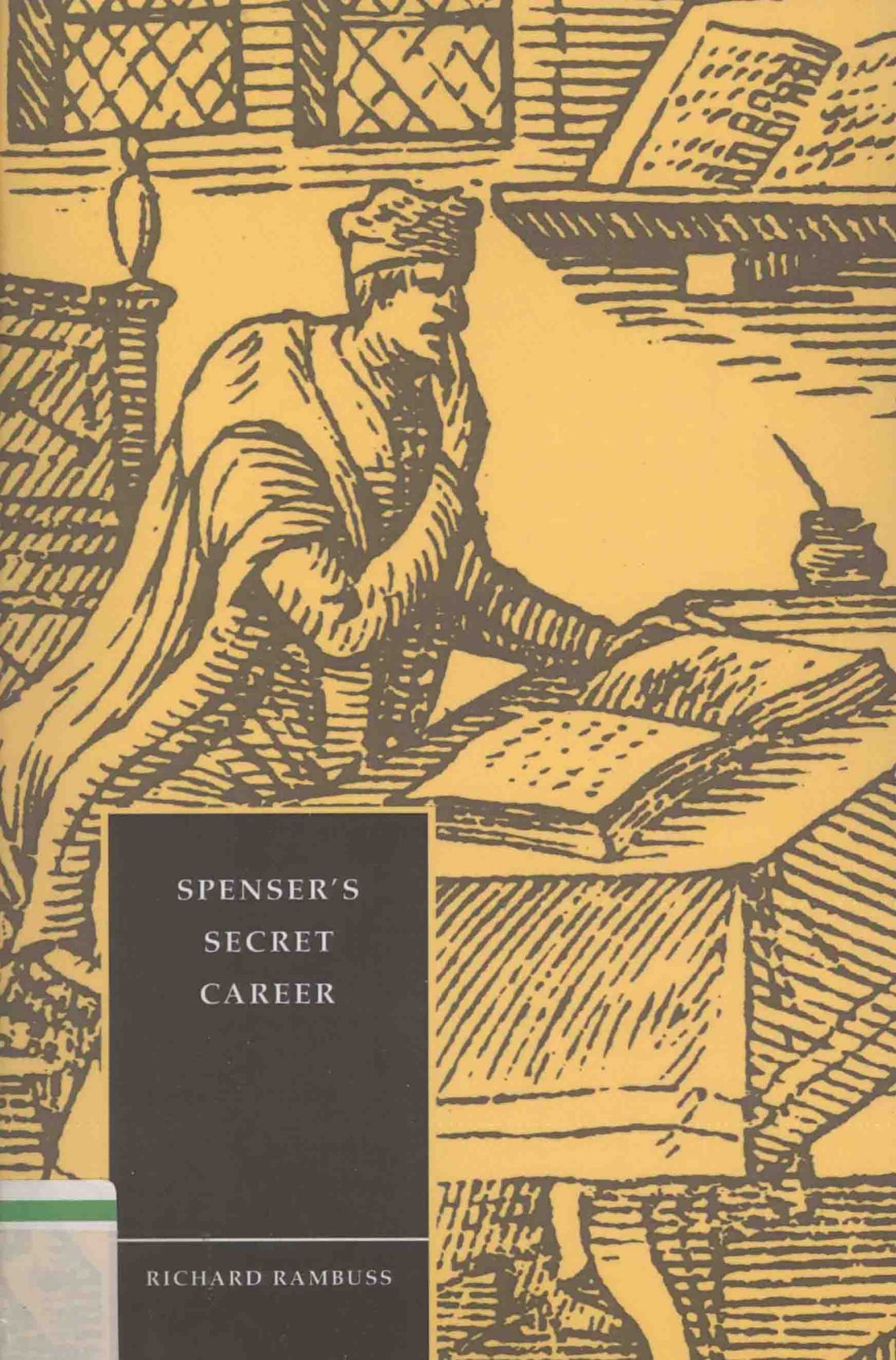

SPENSER'S SECRET CAREER

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Abbreviations

EHR	*English Historical Review*
ELH	*English Literary History*
ELR	*English Literary Renaissance*
MP	*Modern Philology*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
SpStud	*Spenser Studies*
TSLL	*Texas Studies in Language and Literature*

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

In *Positions* (1581), his collection of educational theorems, schoolmaster Richard Mulcaster offers this one on poetry:

> For when the poetes write sadly and soberly, without counterfeating though they write in verse, yet they be no poetes in that kinde of their writing: *but where they couer a truth with a fabulous veele*, and resemble with alteration.[1]

Curiously, Mulcaster seems to be claiming here that what is most essentially poetic about poetry is neither its form nor its matter, but rather its production of a "fabulous veele," a mystified operation of covering up and secreting that privileges the latent over the manifest, the allegorical over the straightforwardly didactic. More than postulating a poetics of secrecy (in the sense that any number of other poetics could be imagined, such as, say, a poetics of power or a poetics of desire), Mulcaster insists that poetry is not poetry unless it constitutes – and is itself constituted by – a secret.

Mulcaster's dictum that secrecy, particularly in the discursive form of allegory, inheres in all poetry is fairly conventional in Elizabethan discussions of poesie. Thomas Nashe, for instance, conceives of poetry in the preface to *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (1589) as "the very same with Philosophy," except that the poet's practice is inherently "a more hidden & diuine kinde of Philosophy, enwrapped in blinde Fables and darke stories."[2] Similarly, George Chapman at the beginning of *Andromeda Liberata* (1614) contends that "Learning hath delighted from her Cradle to hide her selfe," and that the "misteries and allegorical fictions of Poesie" have always served Learning as a sort of "Hieroglyphickes" to "conceale, within the vtter barke ... some sappe of hidden Truth."[3] Chapman's remarks point beyond the seductiveness and aesthetic appeal of mystification (what is hidden appears to be both more desirable and more important) to its elitist social function. The operations of poetic hermeticism, that is, also function to close out an entire set of readers – those whom Chapman names "the base and prophane *Vulgare*, [Truth's] ancient enemies." Philip Sidney, though more wry in his endorsement of

this kind of Neo-Platonism, likewise builds a principle of social and intellectual exclusiveness (and exclusion) into his conception of poetic hermeticism. In his *Apology for Poetry* (published 1595), he declares that "there are many mysteries contained in Poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by prophane wits it should be abused."[4]

These, too, are the terms used by Edmund Spenser, Mulcaster's best-known pupil, to describe *The Faerie Queene*. That poem, Spenser discloses in his "Letter of the Authors," is presented as "a continued Allegory, or darke conceit," which has "clowdily enwrapped" its moral and political precepts in "Allegoricall deuises."[5] Like his contemporaries, Spenser uses these veiling "deuices" as a decorous adornment for his poem. And also like them, no doubt his "darke conceits" serve at times (though Spenser doesn't say this) as a protective measure against possible censorship, as part of a cover of what Stephen Greenblatt has termed "deniability."[6]

Without desiring to neglect either of these two functions, however, my study looks to expand the context of Spenserian secrecy. I do so by considering Spenser's deployment of secrets and secrecy (not, as we shall see, necessarily the same thing) in relation to the poet's *other* career. For, in addition to his career as a national poet, Spenser also managed a relatively high-profile career as a secretary, his two-year tenure with Lord Grey in Ireland being only the best known in a succession of similar employments. I explore the ways Spenser's secretarial and bureaucratic career, which is usually allotted only cursory mention in accounts of his professional and social ambitions, coincides with and even informs his poetic career. In tracing the various ligatures between Spenser's two careers, I situate his poetic texts in relation to a developing Renaissance discourse on secretaryship, articulated in a variety of secretarial manuals, letterwriters, and bureaucratic treatises. Focusing in particular on Angel Day's *The English Secretary* (1586), a letterwriter that doubles as both a poetics and a proto-professional training manual for those who wanted to become secretaries, I show how contemporary discussions of the social and discursive practices of secretaryship, as well as the various subjectivity and power effects that accrue around it, intersect in identifiable and important ways with Spenser's poetic project.[7]

Secrecy is among the chief points of contact between those two careers. The *management* of secrets – protecting them, discovering them, even creating them – is closely bound up with Renaissance conceptions of the secretary's office. Angel Day, we shall see, points to a generative etymological linkage between *secretary* and *secret*. This derivation, I suggest, provides a professional context for the attention to secrets that is maintained throughout nearly all of Spenser's poetic texts and self-presentations – from the various ways he "secretly shadoweth himself" in the

anonymously published *Shepheardes Calender*, to his circulation of exorbitant lists of texts he claims to have written but is withholding from publication, to the intimations in his published letters to Gabriel Harvey of secret meetings with the queen and covert commissions from the Earl of Leicester, to the extended "darke conceit" of *The Faerie Queene*. I examine how the various secret circuits of these texts – as well as the several *kinds* of secrets and secrecies Spenser manipulates in them, some of which are meant to be deciphered, while others are not – collude and compete with each other in his bids for patronage and employment both as a secretary (that is, as Day puts it, a repository for secrets), and as a poet whose texts are deliberately, theatrically, invested with the power of secrets known and sometimes uncovered.

D. A. Miller has suggested in *The Novel and the Police* that an analysis of the kinds of knowledge it is felt needful to veil in secrecy would tell us much about a given culture or historical period.[8] If, then, Spenser seems always to be intimating that he is covering a secret in (of? about? beside?) his text, *what is that secret*? Does it have to do with ambition, work, sex – the usual content of bourgeois concealings? Or is "the secret" something else?

As a way of approaching this question, let us return to Mulcaster's "position" on poetry and the hermeneutical problem it raises: "they be no poetes in that kinde of their writing: but where they couer a truth with a fabulous veele." What is given priority in this formulation? Is it the actual *what* of the secret, its content? Or is it the allegorical veil that covers it?[9] In other words, do we first have a secret, a hidden signified that requires, as it enters into writing, a cover in order to protect it from penetration? Or does the veil itself, the operations of secrecy, come first? Is it that which is used to *make* a secret out of something that might otherwise be easily known? For Mulcaster, as well as for Spenser, I suggest that the latter expression comes closest to the mark. The unspecified "truths" Mulcaster refers to are not *a priori* secrets; they become such, become "secreted," in the text of the poet. What is inlayed in the text – and what Spenser's poetry insists on displaying at every turn – is not so much secrets, but *secrecy* itself.

Secrecy circulates through and traverses nearly all of Spenser's texts, and it provides the deep structure of those texts. It is the veil that hides (and makes) secrets – whether that veil actually covers knowledge of something, or whether it serves merely as a hollow shell – which creates the tableau for writing. There are, to be sure, "real" secrets veiled and on occasion revealed in the works and the career maneuverings I will discuss in the following pages: unspeakable aspirations for professional

advancement; hidden desires; an unnamed (unnameable) beloved; a powerful patron's secret marriage; and so forth. But in addition to particular "secrets," this book is equally concerned with investigating the *forms* of secrecy and their interplay in Spenser's careerist negotiations, as well as in conceptions of subjecthood, gender, power, and writing in Spenser's texts and his culture.

Turning as it does on structures of concealment and disclosure, this book attempts, in short, to reopen the question of Spenser's career, to tell another story about that career. It does so by taking issue with prevailing new historicist accounts that regard Spenser's careerism as being shaped entirely by service to the court, and concurrent with this, as being dictated by a singleminded pursuit of laureateship along a Virgilian career trajectory from pastoral to epic. I show instead that Spenser's career goals are far more various and never strictly Virgilian. Moreover, I aim to show that his other career, the open secret of his secretaryship, signals a sustained engagement with forms of service and advancement other than the poetic. *Spenser's Secret Career* also takes issue with traditional conceptions of Spenserian secrecy as simply in the service of the higher knowledge of an hermetic poet.[10] Spenser's regular reliance on tropes of veiling and withholding, which an older school of criticism rightly identified as a central way in which meaning is deployed in his poetry, acquires a careerist resonance when read against the fact that Renaissance secretaries were thought of as repositories of secrets. The secrecy of Spenser's poems is thus redeployed both as an ever available strategy for self-promotion, as well as the way in which Spenser measures his distance from aristocratic and royal power.

1 Professional secrets

> I believe I undertook amongst other things not to disclose any trade secrets. Well, I am not going to.
>
> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

In his important and influential book *Self-Crowned Laureates*, Richard Helgerson contends that Spenser, and following him Jonson and Milton, constituted themselves as poets laureate by programmatically, virtuosically, differing from the prevailing models for a literary career.[1] For Spenser, this effort involved distinguishing himself from the poses of amateurism and literary depreciation routinely struck by his contemporaries. Aristocrats such as Sidney and Harington, as well as writers of humbler birth like Chapman and Greene, all routinely dismissed their own verses as insignificant trifles and youthful distractions from the more serious affairs of life. But Spenser, Helgerson argues, set out "to redefine the limits of poetry, making it once again (if in England it ever had been) a *profession* that might justifiably claim a man's life and not merely the idleness or excess of his youth."[2] The price of such an ambitious agenda was steep, however. In order to erect a platform of national importance for his poetry and forge a claim on laureateship, Spenser, as Helgerson sees it, had "publicly ... [to] abandon all social identity except that conferred by his elected vocation." That is, only when he "ceased to be Master Edmund Spenser of Merchant Taylors' School and Pembroke College, Cambridge, and became Immeritô, Colin Cloute, the New Poete" could Spenser garner the mantle of England's Virgil.[3]

Working from a dual perspective that takes into account the place of the poems in a conspicuously managed literary career, as well as the prevailing cultural conditions that shaped Renaissance literary production, Helgerson has provided one of the most fully developed treatments of Spenser's major poems. Helgerson rightly emphasizes both that the poet is always presenting and promoting himself along with his text, and that literary authorship is itself a shiftingly delineated cultural construct. Nonetheless, the influential narrative of the Spenserian career that gets produced in *Self-Crowned Laureates* raises some serious

questions about the shape and the aims of Spenser's poetic production, questions which I will use as the launching point for advancing a rather different account of Spenser's career – or, more precisely, careers.

To begin with, it is not always apparent that there exists such a marked break between Spenser and his contemporaries in terms of how they publicly represented their literary endeavors. As late as the dedication to *Fowre Hymnes* (1596), to cite a single instance, we too find Spenser deprecating the first two hymns as trifles composed "in the greener times of my youth" (p. 586), and thus speaking in the same idiom of "prodigality" that Helgerson attributes to the Elizabethan amateurs from whom he wants to set his laureate apart. Nor does it now seem especially productive to take at face value (as Helgerson apparently does) the reiterative, mannered dismissals by Elizabethan writers of their literary efforts as no more than leisurely "toys." Critics such as Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Adrian Montrose, and Frank Whigham, who have taught us to ask not only what texts mean but also what they do – that is, by what operations they perform their cultural work – show convincingly that Renaissance *otium* was regularly *negotium* of the most serious proportions.[4]

Apart from these objections, one might still wonder exactly what it could mean for Spenser to have abandoned, as Helgerson maintains, any social identity apart from the laureate persona he is seen to be single-mindedly fashioning for himself. Not unlike the still prevailing cliché that Spenser is no less than – but also no more than – the "poet's poet,"[5] Helgerson's claim sounds like an endorsement of some version of poetic transcendency, of the belief that the greatest writers somehow must, or even can, detach themselves from their determining social and historical circumstances. Indeed, Helgerson approvingly cites Robert Durling's ecstatic verdict in *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* that Spenser's poetic ambitions are justified by "the transcendency which spoke through him."[6] The uncritical echo of Durling aside, it may be that all Helgerson intends to do here is to signal that with Spenser we have an originative attempt by a Renaissance author to reshape his cultural conditions in such a way that they would allow for a separation of the literary as a domain apart: a version of poetic transcendency more akin to Ben Jonson's (ultimately deeply self-interested) proclamation in 1623 that Shakespeare is not of an age but for all time.[7] Yet even if we again hold at bay due skepticism about any poet's ability to achieve this kind of transhistorical ascendancy by insulating the literary from the impingements of other, more this-worldly interests and constraints, we still must ask whether or not this is in fact what Edmund Spenser did. To put it more simply: did Spenser maintain a public identity in addition to

that of his self-presentation as "Englands Arch-Poet"?[8] Or was Spenser's poetic career his only career?

The answer, of course, is no. Spenser may have lived by his pen, but what he wrote wasn't always dictated by the muses of poetry. Practically from the time of his Cambridge graduation in 1576 to his death in 1599, Spenser made a living by means of a succession of administrative appointments and secretaryships, both private and civic. This is to say that he managed at once *two* public careers: one as a self-declared national poet, and the other as a relatively successful secretary and professional bureaucrat. The possibility of a singular career as a poet may never have occurred to him, and, given his social and financial ambitions, could hardly have had much appeal for him.[9] Yet nearly every critical account of Spenser's career has either absolutely privileged the poetic career over the secretarial one, or, as is most often the case, essentially ignored the latter career altogether.[10] By focusing primarily on *The Shepheardes Calender* and the initial framing of Spenser's career around his relations with the Earl of Leicester, I argue in this chapter and the next one for a resituation of Spenser and his various public self-presentations within the more complicated terrains of the "double career" in order to consider first how his literary performances give access to the ways his other career as a secretary was being pursued, and second how being a secretary informs the kinds of poems Spenser writes. Central to both of these questions, we shall see, is the matter of secrecy – of how and why Spenser recurrently deploys secrets, and how that secret deployment underwrites each of his careers.

Before we turn to the *Calender*, however, it might be useful to review Spenser's various secretaryships and bureaucratic offices.[11] According to Edward Phillips and Thomas Blount, two of his seventeenth-century biographers, Spenser first traveled to Ireland not in 1580 in the retinue of Lord Grey, but in 1577 as a secretary to Sir Henry Sidney, Philip's father and then Lord Deputy of Ireland.[12] Although some more recent biographical accounts have questioned the likelihood of this early Irish assignment, others have pointed to the purported eyewitness account in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* of a grisly 1577 scene of execution and cannibalism as corroboration that Spenser was indeed in Ireland at this time. If this first secretarial assignment in Ireland remains open to question, however, we do know that in 1578 Spenser secured the position of personal secretary to John Young, the Bishop of Rochester. This is an appointment that Spenser the poet publicizes in the "September" eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* when Colin Cloute is designated Roffy's (Rochester's) servingman, his "selfe boye" (176). Moreover, Spenser presented his friend Gabriel Harvey with a copy of *The Trauailer of James*

Turler (1575) bearing the inscription "*Ex dono Edmundi Spenseri, Episcopi Roffensis Secretarii.* 1578."[13] The post was a good beginning for Spenser, and it should come as no surprise that he would want to publicize the position he had landed. Young's own career had been on the rise, and he had gained a promising succession of preferments, as well as a measure of fame from the opportunity to preach before the queen. Yet sometime during the next year, perhaps in search of an even better position, Spenser left Young's employment. His 1579–80 letters to Gabriel Harvey, published as "Three Proper and wittie, familiar Letters" and "Two Other very commendable Letters," place him at this time within the Leicester–Sidney circle and mention his attendance at court. One of these letters, ostentatiously addressed from "Leycester House. This 5 of October, 1579" (p. 638), suggests that Spenser had been able to secure some important place in the service of this powerful earl. That is certainly the impression Spenser intended to create when he refers in the same letter to his impending mission to France on confidential business for Leicester. Exactly what place Spenser occupied in Leicester House at this time is unknown, but a likely possibility is that he again held some kind of secretaryship, and in *The Ruines of Time* he renames himself Leicester's Colin Cloute, echoing and superseding Colin's nomination in *The Shepheardes Calender* as Roffy's boy.[14]

Spenser's next appointment came in the summer of 1580, when he left for Ireland to take up a new position as secretary to Lord Grey, the recently appointed Lord Deputy. Spenser held this post for two years, until Grey was recalled in September of 1582. His secretary did not accompany him back to England, however; instead, Spenser remained in Ireland, where he continued to acquire medium-level administrative positions and as much expropriate Irish land as he could. Ever watchful of opportunities for advancement, he had gained, even before Grey's departure, the additional office of Clerk in Chancery for Faculties. As holder of this fairly lucrative post, Spenser was responsible for the registration of licenses, dispensations, and grants under the authority of the Archbishop of Dublin.[15] Records show that Spenser was later appointed Commissioner of Musters in County Kildare in 1583 and 1584, prebendary of Effin in 1585, and, most importantly, Clerk of the Council of Munster in 1584. The latter office, which Spenser first held as deputy to his friend Lodowick Bryskett, entailed his attendance as secretary to both Sir John Norris, president of the Council, and to his brother Thomas, the Council's vice-president. Sometime in 1593 or 1594 Spenser sold his Munster clerkship. In 1598 he was nominated Sheriff of County Cork, "being a man endowed with good knowledge in learning, and not unskillful or without experience in the service of the wars."[16] Letters reported in the

Irish Calendars of State Papers indicate, however, that Spenser continued in some capacity his service as secretary for the Norris brothers up until at least a month before his death in January 1599.[17]

I have surveyed here what might be termed Spenser's "professional" biography in order to challenge the view, explicit in Helgerson's account and implicit in most others, that the only career Spenser had worth considering was his poetic one, and that his administrative employment was simply of (to use Helgerson's term) "minor" significance.[18] Moreover, among Spenser's various bureaucratic appointments I have emphasized his secretaryships and secretarial services for several reasons. First, because Spenser began his career as a secretary, and from that point on secretaryship constituted for him a relatively sustained profession to be pursued alongside, and even in tandem with, his poetic endeavors. Secondly, because it was a secretaryship that brought Spenser to Ireland, his home for the last two decades of his life, and, once there, that secretaryship which opened the doors for his accumulation of additional offices and other marks of favor. And finally I have foregrounded Spenser as secretary because, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 2, there are significant points of contact to be mapped between the socio-rhetorical formulations of Renaissance secretaryship, especially in its relation to the handling of secrets, and the unfolding of Spenser's poetics as a constant trafficking in secrets and structures of secrecy. Indeed, one of the principal claims of this study is that Spenser's vocational aspirations and agendas as a poet are never cordoned off from his professional pursuit as a secretary of office, status, and political influence.

"Ouerture" and "Couerture"

As a starting point let us consider the companion eclogues "June" and "Julye" of *The Shepheardes Calender*, a work largely composed during Spenser's employment as John Young's secretary. Both eclogues are overtly careerist in topic and aim. "June" reflects chiefly on literary vocation and the staging of Colin Cloute's poetic career: what kind of poet should he set out to be? "Julye," on the other hand, attends to more "professional" affairs, recounting in the form of a fable the advancement in office and subsequent downfall of Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of Canterbury and patron of Spenser's own employer at the time, John Young. That "June" and "Julye" are to be read in tandem is suggested by their parallel structuring around the topoi of hill and dale as allegories of social position and positioning. These eclogues give us access to how Spenser, at the beginning of his career, was negotiating his own place in the world. Moreover, I want to suggest that the pairing of "June," with its