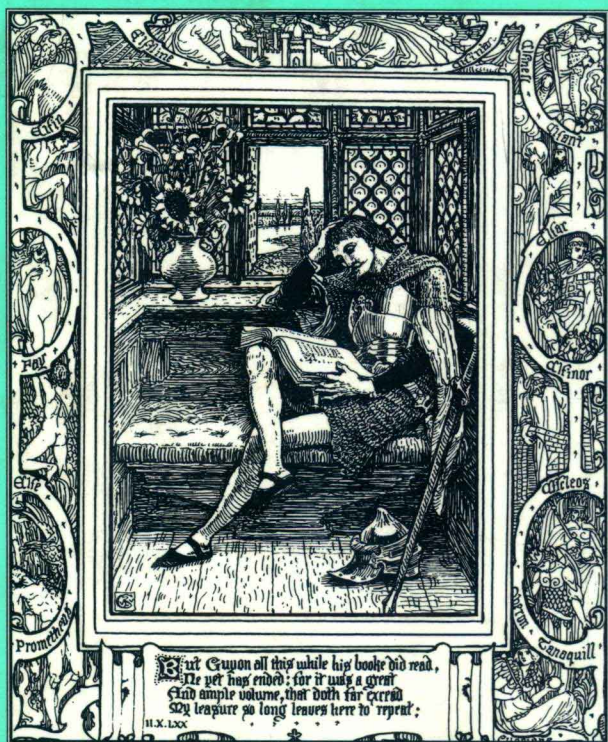


Edmund Spenser

Essays on Culture and Allegory



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Essays on Culture and
Allegory

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Edited by

Jennifer Klein Morrison and Matthew Greenfield

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Edmund Spenser

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Introduction:

Spenser and the Theory of Culture

Matthew Greenfield

In 1980 Stephen Greenblatt called for the development of a new “cultural poetics.”¹ In responding to this call, literary critics have frequently emphasized the “cultural” and neglected the question of “poetics.” The project of this volume involves a return to a recognition of the mutual dependence of the two terms: each of the essays in the volume travels through poetics to the theory of culture. The volume’s contributors share a conviction that the close reading of Spenser can play a crucial role in developing a richer tool-kit for cultural analysis. To explain the roots of this conviction will require a few words about the history of Spenser criticism and its influence on anthropological thought.

One commentator has suggested that the 1980s saw the beginning of a “movement to include theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches” in Spenser studies.² In fact, though, Spenserian criticism has had a markedly theoretical character at least since the 1950s. Spenser studies has always been the site of some of the most advanced literary theory, a high-technology laboratory for the development of new thinking about allegory and related topics including representation, narrative, genre, and agency. In addition to a number of splendid books focused on *The Faerie Queene*, the important contributions to this tradition include Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Angus Fletcher’s *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Maureen Quilligan’s *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*, Patricia Parker’s *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*, and Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*.³ None of these works focuses exclusively on Spenser, but each developed out of an engagement with Spenser studies and a close reading of Spenser’s poetry. Frye, for example, explains that the *Anatomy of Criticism* began as “a study of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*,” but “became an introduction to the theory of allegory, and that theory obstinately adhered to a much larger theoretical

¹ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).

² Mihoko Suzuki, “Introduction,” *Critical Essays on Edmund Spenser* (New York, 1996), p. 5.

³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964); Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, 1979); Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, 1979); and Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

structure" (p. vii). Similarly, Fletcher and Fowler each wrote books on Spenser before or after producing their *summae*, and Quilligan and Parker both made significant professional and intellectual investments in Spenser studies at the beginning of their careers. In his contribution to this volume, Leonard Barkan tells a story similar to Frye's: setting out to write a dissertation on *The Faerie Queene*, he became fixated on a single episode in which Spenser presented an allegory of the functioning of the human body. In the end, his dissertation became a book called *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World*, which treated a broad range of authors.⁴ Like Frye, Barkan found his thinking about Spenser unfolding into a treatment of a more general question of literary theory. This experience clearly has something to do with the intensely theoretical qualities of Spenser's poetry, the way it continuously reflects on its own operations as well as on the structure of the world around it. Barkan found in *The Faerie Queene* not only a fascinating allegorical representation of the body but the kernel of a theory of the representation of the body. Spenser's writing has an uncanny power to turn practical critics into theorists, close readers into the developers of large ideas.

Spenserians have been among literary criticism's leading exporters of intellectual energy. Collectively, their works have had an enormous influence on not only literary criticism but also other disciplines. Anthropology provides a particularly striking example. When Clifford Geertz graduated from Antioch College in 1950 with a degree in philosophy and English literature, he carried some ideas from literary criticism into the social sciences and developed the new methodology now known as interpretive anthropology.⁵ "Doing ethnography," Geertz suggested, "is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior."⁶ This revolt against positivism has had enormous repercussions for many disciplines, and it paved the way for literary critics to begin borrowing ideas back from anthropology several decades later. In making anthropology into an interpretive discipline, Geertz drew especially heavily on the thought of two literary critics. Northrop Frye was one of them.⁷ Although phrases like "symbolic system" and "deep structure" have complex ancestries, it is difficult to avoid hearing in Geertz's use of them the influence

⁴ *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* (New Haven, 1975).

⁵ See Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), esp. p. 98.

⁶ *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 10.

⁷ The other crucial critic was Kenneth Burke. A partial sample of Geertz's references to Frye would include *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 446, 450; *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), pp. 4, 29; Richard Schweder and Robert A. Levine, eds., *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, (Cambridge, 1984), p. 10; and *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, p. 3.

of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. And Geertz's student James Boon used the discussion of romance in *The Anatomy of Criticism* as the theoretical foundation for his own first book, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597-1972: Dynamic Perspectives in Marriage and Caste, Politics and Religion*.⁸

The body of literary theory developed in the laboratory of Spenser studies played an even more prominent role in the next significant development in anthropological theory, the self-reflexive turn of the 1980s. In 1986 the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* helped crystallize the notion that anthropologists needed to become more conscious of the literary, formal, and generic features of their work.⁹ This anthology has exerted an enormous pressure on the shape of the discipline. Even anthropologists who reject the volume's conclusions have been forced to become more self-conscious about the forms in which they write, the stories they tell, and, most destabilizing of all, the allegorical dimension of even the writing of social scientists.¹⁰ One of the crucial contributions of *Writing Culture* was to introduce anthropologists to the concept of allegory. In "On Ethnographic Allegory," James Clifford argued that "Once the ethnographic process is accorded its full complexity of historicized dialogic relations, what formerly seemed to be empirical [and] interpretive accounts of generalized cultural facts (statements and attributions concerning 'the !Kung', 'the Samoans', etc.) now appear as just one level of allegory."¹¹ Clifford describes several of the allegories that frequently inform anthropological writing. The most ubiquitous of these is what Clifford calls "salvage, or redemption, ethnography," which imagines the ethnographic writer as preserving the memory of disappearing cultures: "Every description or interpretation that conceives of itself as 'bringing a culture into writing', moving from oral-discursive experience (the 'native's', the fieldworker's) to a written version of that experience (the ethnographic text) is enacting the structure of 'salvage'. To the extent that the ethnographic process is seen as inscription (rather than, for example, as transcription, or dialogue) the representation will continue to enact a potent, and questionable, allegorical structure" (p. 113). As with Geertz, the work of Spenserians played a crucial role in the formulation of a new direction for the theory of culture. Although Clifford also cites Paul de Man, his primary influences seem to be Northrop Frye and Angus Fletcher. And among the five people Clifford thanks at the end of his essay is the Spenserian Harry Berger, Jr., who was at the time also on the faculty of the University of California at Santa Cruz. Clifford, who co-edited the volume, seems to have helped introduce other cultural theorists to literary

⁸ *The Anthropological Romance of Bali, 1597-1972: Dynamic Perspectives in Marriage and Caste, Politics and Religion* (Cambridge and New York, 1977).

⁹ James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986).

¹⁰ For criticism of the agenda of *Writing Culture*, see the essays collected in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, 1991).

¹¹ "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture*, p. 109.

criticism. Several of the other contributors to the volume make use of Clifford's idea of "ethnographic allegory." Stephen Tyler discusses the now largely discredited but still influential "evolutionary allegory" that undergirds comparisons of "primitive" and "modern cultures."¹² Similarly, Vincent Crapanzano discusses the allegorical frames of three ethnographic texts, and Michael Fischer argues that "the conventions of realism, especially as practiced in traditional ethnography, themselves contain and are made coherent through allegorical metaphors."¹³ However crude some of these uses of literary theory may be, clearly the concept of allegory has had a powerful and enabling effect within anthropology.

Like Clifford, Crapanzano, Fischer, and Tyler, the contributors to this volume understand cultural description as a form of allegory. This belief makes the reading of Spenser a peculiarly fruitful enterprise. Spenser is not only a powerful theorist of allegory and poetics more generally, he is also a profound and subtle ethnographer of both England and Ireland. These two species of theory, the poetic and the cultural, have more than a casual relationship in Spenser's work: each depends on the other. This explains how the essays in this volume can each begin with close reading and end by challenging the ethnographic allegories that shape our own knowledge of early modern Britain.

The first section of the book, "Allegories of Cultural Development," questions the narrative that tells of the emergence of "the modern." The volume begins with Leonard Barkan's essay "Ruins and Visions: Spenser, Pictures, Rome," which centers on Spenser's translations of Du Bellay's *Songe ou Vision* and *Antiquitez de Rome*. Barkan describes these works as the terminal point for a series of translations of cultures across boundaries—transfers of energy from ancient Rome to France to early modern England, from poetry to visual culture and back, and from Catholic to Protestant aesthetics. By the end of Barkan's essay, the binary division between medieval and early modern has come to seem inadequate as a description of the transmission and development of culture. In "Spenser's Currencies," Donald Cheney, writing on *The Shepheardes Calender*, focuses on the idea of literary works as commodities circulated within a market-place. Cheney reveals that this concept of the function of literature and the career of the poet, which is so frequently described as developing in the early modern period, in fact develops in ancient Rome: "Horace addresses his book, his *liber*, as if it were a favorite slave, also a *liber*, who is eager to expose himself to a broader public . . . the well-known dealers there, the Sosii brothers, are seen as pimps offering for sale a *liber* which has been polished with pumice, a substance used to prettify both books and boys. Both offer themselves for sale (*prostar*), and both, the poet

¹² "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in *Writing Culture*, p. 127.

¹³ Crapanzano, "Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description," in *Writing Culture*, pp. 51-76; Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory," in *Writing Culture*, p. 198.

warns, are subject to the fluctuations of market demand.” Maureen Quilligan’s essay, “On the Renaissance Epic: Spenser and Slavery,” also locates the uncanny persistence of Roman thought in a set of ideas that are often characterized as emerging in the early modern period: in her discussion of *The Faerie Queene*, she shows how Spenser’s representation of a developing mercantile, wage-based economy depends on classical epic’s attempt to mediate the social contradictions engendered by slavery. As in the essays of Barkan and Cheney, social formations generally considered distinctively “modern” are revealed as exhumations or simulacra of the classical past.

The second section of the book, “Allegories of Cultural Exchange,” focuses on Spenser’s complex narratives about the relations between England and Ireland. Together, the essays in this section call into question the idea of a distinctively “English” early modern culture. Richard McCabe’s essay is called “Translated States: Spenser and Linguistic Colonialism.” Discussing Renaissance theories of cultural and linguistic change, McCabe describes Spenser’s anxiety about “an alarming tendency for the marginal to displace the central and for the central to decline into ‘barbarity.’” McCabe traces an ambiguous, threatening infiltration of Irish words and Irish culture into Spenser’s writing and English literature more generally. “Colonials Write the Nation: Spenser, Milton, and England on the Margins,” Linda Gregerson’s essay, centers on tensions and contradictions within the idea of a Protestant nation: the nation depends on the drawing of boundaries, while the religion makes universalist claims. English nationalism thus stands “outside the normative domestications of cultural and material practice”—it has only provisional, tentative connections to the English state and its territory. Nicholas Canny’s essay, “The Social and Political Thought of Spenser in his Maturity,” focuses on Spenser’s theories about how English culture might be transported to Ireland and imposed on the Irish. Canny situates Spenser’s thought within a series of ongoing debates within Renaissance pedagogy and political philosophy. Like McCabe and Gregerson, Canny suggests that cultural energy flows across political boundaries in ways that render problematic the idea of a unified national culture.

The third section of the book, “The Functions of Allegory,” raises questions about the nature of the cultural work performed by literature. Kenneth Gross’s essay, “The Postures of Allegory,” suggests that allegory has a powerful defamiliarizing effect: reading a poem like *The Faerie Queene* disorients one, making one’s social world and even one’s own body seem foreign and strange. Allegory blurs, corrodes, and transmutes the symbolic systems out of which cultures are composed: the allegorist creates new cultural possibilities, new “postures.” Susanne Wofford also complicates historicist understandings of Spenser’s epic in an essay called “The Enfolding Dragon: Arthur and the Moral Economy of *The Faerie Queene*.” Wofford suggests that the description of the dragon on Arthur’s helmet is the site of one of a number of deep fissures within the poem. Ultimately, Wofford argues, the allegorical