

Preface Books

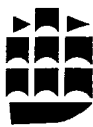
# A Preface to Spenser

Helena Shire



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*Helena Shire*



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In reading Spenser we have to be wary and miss the irony

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# Foreword

The concept of the European renaissance provides historians with what is called a problem of periodization. It springs up in different countries at different times between the 14th and 16th centuries, and when it does it is never entirely distinct from the Middle Ages that preceded it. In England, at any rate, it came late. Not yet evident in the work of Chaucer, the full force of artistic innovation (is there such a thing as *progress* in the arts?) is delayed until the time of Shakespeare two hundred years later. This was also the time of Spenser, the most distinguished non-dramatic poet of the English renaissance and the subject of this book.

Helena Shire's *A Preface to Spenser* details the growth of a renaissance poet and scholar's mind, revealing how much he owed to a formally structured education and how much he built upon this foundation as he extended his range in both ancient and recent models and created for himself an eclectic body of knowledge in literature, symbolism and art. In the process he prepared himself as philosopher, moralist and even philologist as well as courtier, lover and poet. If, however, he was to make the most of these gifts, he needed patronage to offer him room at the top and political and diplomatic arts to keep him there. In Spenser's case, as we see, the outcome, a post in Ireland, was a liability as well as a reward, yet it had the virtue of providing for him a political reality with which to test his academic studies of a god-possessed universe.

Extreme care, attention and clarity mark the expositions in the following pages. All readers, no matter how experienced, will find the intricate diagrams a fascination; visual aids that enhance and sharpen the sensitive explication of the poetic texts. They are the true maps of the renaissance. Throughout this distinguished book so many concepts are presented: the poetry of the cosmos, the symbolic nature of the months of the year, the hidden meaning of numbers and the imaginative and intellectual constructions that went to the full language of the renaissance arts. Religion, morality and monarchy are all enshrined there and Spenser's long poems were built out of them.

*A Preface to Spenser* is the fruit of an intense commitment to the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The sensitive awareness and erudition that inform it provide an outstanding intellectual and artistic preparation for the student not only of Spenser but of the entire poetic tradition of more than two centuries and of the whole western world.

MAURICE HUSSEY General Editor

# Introduction

The aim of this Preface is to bring Spenser's poetry into touch with the modern reader so that he can share the enjoyment, the stimulus to mental and moral questioning and the experience of 'learning' and enlightenment that an Elizabethan reader felt:

Thy muse hath got such grace and power to please  
with rare invention bewtified by skill  
As who therein can ever joy their fill!

For a short book on a great and complex writer of an age long past this is no easy matter. It concentrates therefore on the needs of a generation who know no Latin and seldom can 'derive' a word in their heads to try to get at the poet's full meaning, who must seek many a mythological reference in an encyclopaedia and who will not easily relish an implied quotation from Vergil—but who have a serious interest in the past as relevant to the present (and the agony in Ireland is writ large in Spenser's poetry and prose), who have a lively interest in astrology and symbols, and who may find that an imaginative excursion into an ordered universe gives deep satisfaction to a mind under pressure from disintegration and the threat of chaos.

With this aim in mind I have shown how words are made to work under Spenser's hand and how new concepts find expression in pun or name conceit. (The reader who has sampled James Joyce's *Ulysses* will find he is on known ground.) I have tried to show how to read allegory from the inside—to 'ride with the Knight', not appraise from a critic's stance—and to learn from that revealing experience how to make deeper and wider judgments about good and evil in man and society, in the process coming to know oneself better. For a reader of Orwell or one eager to tackle Kafka the challenge is exhilarating.

The passages for particular study are of necessity long, as above all what is new for today's reader is the need to be constantly aware of the whole as the part is entering his mind—to be conscious of the form of the poem as an aspect of its meaning. Diagrams are included as they help here, enabling the reader to 'see' the poet's whole meaning, the interaction of part on part in a complex artistic creation. In that 'seeing' lies the 'truth' aimed at by a renaissance poet, the 'delight' and 'instruction' experienced by his reader.

In reading Spenser we have to be 'wary and wise' like Guyon, and all the time. The best word is E.M. Forster's: 'Only connect!'

H.M.S.

## Eudoxa to Irenaea

## Spenser's Poetry

...it is learned wythout hardnes, such indeede as may be perceived of the leaste, understoode of the mooste, but judged onely of the learned.

Introductory Epistle to *The Shepheardes Calender* 1579

Spenser in what he saith hath a way of expression peculiar to himself; he bringeth down the highest and deepest mysteries that are contained in human learning to an easy and gentle form of delivery... which showeth he is master of what he treateth of, he can wield it as he pleaseth. And he hath done this so cunningly that if one heed him not with great attention, rare and wonderful conceptions will unperceived slide by him that readeth his words, and he will think he hath met with nothing but familiar and easy discourses.

Sir Kenelm Digby, 1638

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### *Acknowledgements*

A general and introductory book such as this must needs draw upon authorities in many fields. Books I have found particularly useful are included in the Bibliography. If anywhere I quote a passage without such acknowledgement I offer sincere apologies. I owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Helen M. Roe, whose vivid conversation first led me to see Spenser 'from the other side of the water', and whose vast knowledge of Ireland's antiquities has informed my steps; also to two professors of Spanish, Arthur Terry and Frank Pierce who showed me the renaissance lyric and heroic poem in European dimensions, and to my brother Professor Duncan M. Mennie for support in ventures into Gaelic of Ireland. Discussion with several generations of university pupils played a lively part in this book's development. My unending gratitude goes to the series editor Maurice Hussey and the publishers for their unending patience with a book that was so long agrowing.

H.M.S.

The passages from Spenser in this book are in the text of the Variorum Edition—with minor modernizations of spelling for clarity in incidental quotations only.

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## Part One

### *The Background*

# Chronological table

(Thick vertical dividing line indicates Spenser's presence in Ireland)

LIFE	EVENTS
1552 Edmund Spenser born	Reign of Edward VI Ronsard <i>Amours</i> ; sonnets and odes Raleigh born
1553	Accession of Mary Tudor
1554	Mary marries Philip of Spain Philip Sidney born
1557	Tottel's <i>Miscellany</i> —plain style iambic poetry
1558	Accession of Queen Elizabeth Act of Uniformity Act of Supremacy Homily of Obedience
1559	
1560	Puttenham <i>Art of English Poetrie</i>
1561 Foundation of Merchant Taylors' School in London. Spenser a scholarship boy	O'Neill's rebellion in Ireland
1564	Sack of Antwerp: refugees in London Shakespeare born
1566	Translations: Turberville <i>Mantuan's Eclogues</i> ; Drant <i>Horace's Art of Poetry</i> ; Golding <i>Ovid's Metamorphoses</i> Revolt of the Netherlands
1568	Mary, Queen of Scots, abdicates, flees to England, is imprisoned there Accession of infant James VI Clement Robinson <i>A Handefull of Pleasant Delites</i>

- |      |  |  |
|------|--|--|
| 1569 | A Theatre . . . of <i>Voluptuous Worldlings</i><br>Spenser at Pembroke Hall,<br>Cambridge                  |  |
| 1570 | Friendship with Harvey   | Pope excommunicates and<br>deposes Elizabeth as heretic<br>and bastard<br>Ascham <i>The Schoolmaster</i><br>Castelvetro <i>Poetica d' Aristotele</i>                 |
| 1572 | Spenser graduates  | Camoens <i>Os Lusíadas</i> :   |
| 1573 |  | Ronsard <i>Franciade</i><br>Du Bartas <i>Judith</i> ; Tasso<br><i>Aminta</i><br>Gascoigne <i>Hundred sundry<br/>flowers</i><br>Massacre of St<br>Bartholomew's Night |
| 1574 | Plague in Cambridge<br>Spenser leaves . . .  |  |
| 1575 |  | Ronsard <i>Sonnets pour Hélène</i><br>Tasso <i>Gerusalemme Liberata</i><br>Sidney's 'Arcadia' begun<br>Anabaptists burnt in<br>England                               |
| 1576 | Spenser graduates M.A.   | The Theatre built in<br>London<br>Sack of Antwerp<br>Frobisher's voyage  |
| 1577 | Spenser visits Ireland<br>'in the north parts'—<br>Northamptonshire,<br>Lancashire                         | Execution of Morrogh<br>Obrien<br>Drake's voyage round the<br>world<br>Blackfriars Theatre in<br>London  |
| 1578 | Secretary to Young, Bishop<br>of Rochester<br>'Dreams, Legendes,<br>Pageants, sonetts, Court of<br>Cupide' | Lyly <i>Euphues</i><br>Du Bartas <i>Sepmaine</i>   |

1579	In London—service of Lord Leicester: perhaps a continental journey Exchange of letters with Harvey <i>The Shepheardes Calender</i> 1579/80	Catholic influence in Scots court Simier in London, on behalf of Alençon Jesuit mission to England Leicester married to Lettice Knollys Countess of Essex, falls from royal favour
1580	Married by April (to Machabyas Chylde?) To Ireland, Secretary to Lord Grey	Sidney <i>Arcadia</i> , first version Penelope Devereux marries Lord Rich 'Astrophel and Stella' Battle on River Ure. Siege and massacre at Smerwick
1581		Alençon in England Mulcaster <i>Positions</i>
1582	Leases New Abbey, Kildare Birth of a son, Sylvanus	Sidney's <i>Arcadia</i> , second version Mulcaster's <i>Elementarie</i> Return and disgrace of Lord Grey
1583		Du Bartas; second <i>Sepmaine</i> Death of arch-rebel Desmond
1584	With Sir John Norris ? birth of a daughter Katherine ? death of his first wife	Raleigh's failure in Virginia
1585	Deputy to Bryskett as Clerk of Council of Munster	Hooker's sermon <i>On Justification</i> 'Munster a graveyard' Norris leaves to serve under Leicester in the Netherlands
1586	Sonnet to Harvey <i>Foure Letters and Certaine Sonnets</i>	Settlement of Munster Babington Plot Trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots Sidney dies at Zutphen Composition of Connacht Webbe <i>Discourse of English Poetrie</i>

1587	Sarah, Spenser's sister marries in Munster	Marlowe 'Tamburlaine' Pope proclaims a crusade against England Drake at Cadiz
1588	Spenser acquires Kilcolman	The Armada Fraunce <i>Arcadian Rhetoric</i> mentions Spenser's 'Faerie Queene'
1589	Raleigh visits him there Journey to England 'The Faerie Queene' Bks I-III entered December 1	Marlowe 'Jew', 'Faustus' Drake and Norris to attack Spain
1590	Litigation with Lord Roche Brief return to Ireland (May 30) <i>The Faerie Queene I-III</i>	Sidney <i>Arcadia</i> Victory of Henri IV at Ivry
1591	<i>Complaints: Ruines of Time</i> <i>Teares of the Muses</i> Virgil's Gnat. Prosopopoia or Mother Hubbard's Tale. Muiopotmos, Ruines of Rome (du Bellay), Visions of the World's Vanitie (of Bellay, Petrarch) <i>Daphnaida</i> <i>Shepherd's Calender</i> (4) Spenser granted a pension	English forces aid Henri IV Sidney <i>Astrophel and Stella</i>
1592	Harvey <i>Three Letters; Four Letters</i>	Sylvester tr. <i>Sepmaine</i> — Bartas <i>Weekes</i>
1593	Litigation	Henri IV becomes a Catholic Hooker <i>Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity</i> Sidney <i>Arcadia</i> (revised) Shakespeare <i>Venus and Adonis</i>
1594	Marriage to Elizabeth Boyle	Shakespeare <i>Lucrece</i> Daniel <i>Delia</i> (sonnets)

1595	<i>Colin Clout's Come Home Againe</i> 'Astrophel' <i>Amoretti and Epithalamion</i> Peregrine Spenser born	Raleigh's voyage to Guiana Southwell executed Sidney <i>Defence of Poesie</i>
1596	<i>Fowre Hymnes</i> <i>Prothalamion</i> <i>Faerie Queene I-III, IV-VI</i> <i>Shepherd's Calender</i> (5) 'A View of the present state of Ireland'	Raleigh and Essex storm Cadiz Spanish aid to the Irish King James protests at 'Duessá'
1597		Bacon's <i>Essays</i> 'Second Armada' dispersed
1598	'A View' entered for printing but not passed Appointed Sheriff of Cork Kilcolman sacked Return to London	Sidney <i>Arcadia</i> ; <i>Astrophel and Stella</i> Philip II dies. Edict of Nantes. Tyrone rebellion Spanish fleet for Ireland dispersed by gales
1599	Died in London	



# I Spenser's Life

‘Why Colin since thou foundst such grace  
With Cynthia and all her noble crew  
Why didst thou ever leave that happie place  
In which such wealth might unto thee accrew?  
And back returnedst to this barren soyle  
Where cold and care and penury do dwell.’

*Colin Clout's Come Home Again* 1591

‘That there may be an Art of our English Poesie  
as well as there is of the Latine and Greeke.’

George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* 1560

‘The great contentment I sometimes enjoyed by his Sweete society,  
suffereth not this to passe me, without Respective mention of so true  
a friend.’

Robert Salter (1564–1646),  
from *Wonderful Prophetes from the Beginning  
of the Monarchy of this Land* (1626)

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## ‘Mery London, my most kindly Nurse’

The full life story of Edmund Spenser is difficult to tell for several reasons. Over the first twenty-five years, one half of his life-span, records or personal documents are sparse. His fortunes and feelings from childhood on can be glimpsed in certain passages of *The Shepheardes Calender*, printed in 1579; but these facts, happenings and opinions have been woven into a grand design of poetic art and are difficult to disengage from it. For the second half of his life his career as a civil servant in Ireland has left traces in official documents, some from his own pen, and the general course of his fortunes can be followed in terms of offices held, properties owned and legal business transacted. His political treatise written in 1596, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, illuminates his subject, but the concern is general, not personal. Our information is such that over his lifetime an important fact may be known—his passing from the service of the Earl of Leicester in London to take up an appointment in Ireland—but we cannot interpret it. We cannot tell for certain why this came about, either for what reasons or to what end; nor can we ascertain whether the choice was his, or what disappointment, acquiescence, gratitude,