

Introduction

Edmund Spenser (1554–99) and Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86) are regarded as the two most important sixteenth-century non-dramatic writers. Among English Renaissance writers, there is a remarkable symmetry of birth dates; Spenser and Sidney were born exactly ten years before Shakespeare and Marlowe (1564) and eighteen years before Donne and Jonson (1572).¹ Except for Sidney, who died in his early thirties, all of these writers might well have met each other in sixteenth-century London, a city estimated to have a population of two hundred thousand. In writing Spenser's epitaph, William Camden, the principal chronicler of Elizabeth's reign, said that he had surpassed Chaucer and that he was the greatest poet of his age, *anglicorum poetarum nostri seculi facile princeps*.² Since his death in 1599, Spenser's popularity has waxed and waned with the taste for narrative poetry or allegory, but the judgement of his contemporaries has endured: Spenser has earned a place in the literary canon.³

In *Edmund Spenser, A Life* (2012), Andrew Hadfield perceptively comments that Spenser is 'regarded as less familiar and knowable than his contemporaries, even when their life records are as sketchy as his'.⁴ Hadfield concludes: 'We are presented with a fundamental dilemma: either take what appears in the literary works as evidence of the poet's life or abandon any quest for that life and declare that it is unwritable' (12). Like many who have patiently awaited an archival discovery, the veritable smoking gun that will make all clear about a sixteenth-century figure, I have grappled with the challenge implicit in Andrew Hadfield's statement and come to recognize its good sense. Among the many virtues of

Hadfield's own biographical contribution, *Edmund Spenser, A Life* (2012), is his success in establishing the broad contexts in which Spenser's life was lived. I view my work as complementary to Hadfield's because I have focused more narrowly on Spenser's early life in a study that, I hope, will raise almost as many questions as it answers.

Once it is agreed that Spenser's works are a source of biographical information, then we face the questions: when, where, and to what degree? To address these questions, let us re-examine three seminal examples of autobiographical allusions in Spenserian texts, only one of which has influenced Spenser's received biography. Differentiating fact from fiction when it comes to an author's autobiographical references is always challenging – but particularly so when we reconstruct the lives of early modern figures. When Irenius says that he witnessed an Irish woman drinking blood at the execution of Murrough O'Brien, can we then place Spenser in Ireland as early as 1577 or is the 'I' Irenius uses entirely a fictional construct?

And so have I seen some of the Irish do but not their enemies' but friends' blood, as namely at the execution of a notable traitor at Limerick called Murrough O'Brien, I saw an old woman which was his foster mother took up his head while he was quartered and sucked up all the blood running there out, saying that the earth was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her hair, crying and shrieking out most terribly. (Renwick, 62; *Spenser Variorum*, pp. 112–13, ll. 1935–42)⁵

If Spenser witnessed this execution, then he was in Munster on 1 July 1577 when O'Brien was beheaded by the order of Sir William Drury, President of Munster. To place Spenser in Ireland in 1577 would make the issue of acquaintanceship with the Sidneys relatively moot.

If this autobiographical reference, occurring in a number of manuscripts, were to be confirmed, it would have a stunning impact on our understanding of Spenser's early life and might reshape the narrative leading Spenser to Ireland. It would then be logical to consider the possibility that Spenser accompanied Philip to Ireland when he visited his father in 1576. It would seem likely that he, like Lodowick Bryskett, became Sir Henry's servant and would fully explain Irenius's description of witnessing O'Brien's execution in 1577. In late 1579, when Sir Henry realized that he would not be appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland with Philip as his Deputy, it would be plausible that he recommended Spenser to Grey. This scenario may not have enough external evidence to be entirely persuasive, but it is not implausible. Some biographical issues

can be clarified if we recognize that we are dealing not with a dichotomy between fact and fiction but with a continuum extending from the 'possible' to the 'probable' to the 'likely' to the 'certain'. Perhaps there is insufficient evidence to make a certain, or even a likely, case that Spenser was in Ireland in 1576, when Philip visited his father, or in 1577, when O'Brien was executed, but neither of these supposed visits is improbable.

Two other seemingly autobiographical allusions concern Spenser's visits to the court and meetings with the Queen. In my reading of *Aprill* and *November* in Chapter 7, I raise only in passing the issue of when Spenser first met the Queen. In the *November* eclogue of the *Shepherdes Calender*, however, there is the suggestion that Spenser was introduced to the court, presumably by Philip Sidney, prior to going to Ireland in 1579–80. We are told that Dido-Elissa, whom, following John Watkins, and others, I understand to figure as Queen Elizabeth, did not disdain Colin Clout:⁶

So well she couth the shepherds entertayne,
With cakes and cracknells and such country chere.
Ne would she scorne the simple shepherds swaine,
For she would cal hem often heme
And giue hem curds and clouted Creame.
O heaue herse,
Als *Colin cloute* she would not once disdayne.
O carefull verse.

(95–102)⁷

There is at least the suggestion that Colin Clout had encountered the Queen in line 101 above.

According to the received biography, Spenser was introduced to the Queen and court in 1590 by Sir Walter Raleigh and, on this occasion, Spenser read his works to the court. The evidence is found in the following lines from *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*:

The shepherd of the Ocean (quoth he)
Vnto that Goddess grace me first enhanced,
And to mine oaten pipe enclin'd her eare,
That she thenceforth therein gan take delight,
And it desir'd at timely houres to heare

(358–62)

We cannot document that Spenser *ever* met Queen Elizabeth except for autobiographical passages in his poetry. Why is one autobiographical allusion treated as fact and the other ignored? One explanation may be

that it has become an accepted tenet in Spenserian criticism that Spenser and Sidney never met. It seems consistent, as well as reasonable, to keep both autobiographical allusions, one from the *November* eclogue and the other from *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, in mind when we try to place Spenser in 1579–80 and in 1589–90.

When Spenser entered Pembroke College in 1569, it is likely that his benefactors expected him to take holy orders. It cannot be proved that Spenser seriously considered a career in the church, but in the sixteenth century a young man without property and family connections had few options other than the church or the army. That Spenser considered a career in the church is also suggested by his staying on at Pembroke to obtain the M.A. degree. J.A. Venn, who compiled the biographical records on Cambridge graduates, stated that the 'odds are almost ten to one that a man who had proceeded to the M.A. degree either had taken, or eventually did take, holy orders'.⁸ Spenser completed the B.A. in the spring of 1573, but decided to stay on for the M.A. References to Spenser in the Pembroke College Account Books conclude in 1574. We do not know where he went or what happened next, but I will make the case in Chapter 4, 'Southerne shepherdes boye', that from 1574 to 1578 Spenser was probably in London working for John Young, Master of Pembroke and then Bishop of Rochester in 1578.

There is no solid evidence of why or how Spenser moved from service under Bishop Young to the patronage of Arthur Lord Grey of Wilton. At some point between 1578 and 1579, Spenser exchanged the role of shepherd-priest for that of shepherd-poet.⁹ The *Shepherdes Calender* records this vocational shift as well as functioning as a landmark work of English literature.¹⁰ In Chapter 6, 'Minde on honour fixed', I marshal whatever circumstantial evidence exists to suggest that Spenser knew and was influenced by the Sidneys, who introduced him to the early modern chivalric code. Under their influence, he came to perceive himself as the bard who would sing the epic story of Elizabethan England. Like Philip Sidney, Spenser preferred the knightly service of fighting for Dutch independence or the chivalric adventure of Ireland to the Elizabethan court.

Although I agree with Hadfield's surmise that Spenser's 'real desire was for a literary career' rather than a career in the church (111), it seems probable that Spenser thought that he could combine the two, much as John Hall, George Herbert, and Robert Herrick did. In terms of documentary records, we know very little, but the little we do know points to his connections with London clergymen. Spenser's name, for example, does not appear in the admission records of Merchant Taylors' School.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, ‘Lineage and the “Nowell Account Book”’, we know that he attended this school only because he was the recipient of grants from the estate of Robert Nowell, Attorney of the Queen’s Court of Wards. Once we acknowledge that gaps such as these exist, further research on Spenser’s lineage may assist us in more fully understanding the formative years of Edmund Spenser.¹¹

One of the principal contributions of this study of the early Spenser is that I distinguish Edmund Spenser from Gabriel Harvey. In *Familiar Letters*, Spenser is portrayed as Harvey’s admiring disciple, but this portrait of Spenser was Harvey’s invention.¹² Harvey’s magisterial tone has fuelled speculation that he was Spenser’s tutor, but he cannot have been. Spenser matriculated at Pembroke in 1569 and graduated in 1573. Fellows did not instruct undergraduates until after they had earned the M.A. and become regents. As I discuss in Chapter 3, ‘Pembroke College’, Harvey’s M.A. was not awarded until 1573, the very year that Spenser graduated with the B.A.

To differentiate Harvey from Spenser, in Chapter 5, ‘Gabriel Harvey and Immerito (1569–78)’, I supply the first close reading of Harvey’s *Gratulationes Valdinenses* (1578), a work which Harvey intended to serve as his *Shepheardes Calender*. In Chapter 9, ‘*Familiar Letters* (1580)’, I show that Spenser had already received preferment prior to the publication of *Familiar Letters* and suggest that Harvey orchestrated this academic publication to obtain the position of University Orator. Spenser’s whereabouts at the time are uncertain, but he was probably already in Ireland by the time that the letters were printed. In response to *Familiar Letters*, the Latin play *Pedantius* (1581) was produced at Cambridge, and its authors pick up phrases from Harvey’s published works, such as *Gratulationes Valdinenses*, and so anticipate Nashe’s satiric thrusts at Harvey.

In any biography, particularly of a figure about whom as little is known as Spenser, unproved assumptions are made that shape how evidence is presented. These assumptions derive from circumstantial evidence, not facts. This study is no exception, and it may be useful to make these hypotheses very clear. I question that Spenser aspired to be what Karl Marx described as ‘Elizabeth’s arse-kissing poet’. That does not mean that I think he lacked ambition; far from it. Spenser took seriously the prospect of writing the Renaissance epic; I, however, assume that Spenser, much like Philip Sidney, was ambivalent about the court. In this regard, he was unlike Gabriel Harvey, Lodowick Bryskett, and Sir Walter Raleigh. The early Spenser had literary aspirations, but it is far from clear that he harboured the ambition to figure as a court poet.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Marlowe (1564–93) and William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and eighteen years before John Donne (1572–1631) and Ben Jonson (1572–1637).
- 2 William Camden, *Tomus alter idem: or, The historie of the life and reigne of that famous princess, Elizabeth ...* Trans. Thomas Browne, fourth part of Camden's *Annales rerum ... covering the years 1589–1603* (London: Printed by Tho. Harper for William Web, 1629). RB 600237. The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
- 3 One of the best bibliographical sources is the on-line Edmund Spenser World Bibliography supervised by Donald Stump, St Louis University; it includes everything relevant in *Spenser Newsletter*, *Spenser Review*, and the *MLA International Bibliography* from 1972 to 2009 (<http://bibls.slu.edu/Spenser>). See, also, Thomas Herron, 'Complex Spenser: New Directions in Recent Research', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68, No. 3 (Fall 2015), 957–69; Willy Maley, 'Bibliography: Spenser and Ireland', *Spenser Studies* 9 (1991), 227–42; J.B. Lethbridge, ed., *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006). For a database on Spenser's influence, see *Spenser and the Tradition: English Poetry, 1579–1830*, ed. David Hill Radcliffe (<http://Spenserians.cath.vt.edu>).
- 4 Hadfield, *Life*, 12.
- 5 Spenser, ed. W.L. Renwick, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1934, Scholartis Press; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 62. Most manuscripts contain blank spaces immediately following this section. See, also, Spenser, *View*, pp. 112–13, ll. 1935–42; *Spenser's Prose works*, vol. 10, ed. Rudolf Gottfried in *Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, Charles Grosvenor Osgood, Frederick Morgan Padelford, Ray Heffner, 11 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932–45).
- 6 John Watkins, *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 79–82.
- 7 Spenser, *Shorter Poems*, ed. McCabe, *November*, 95–103.
- 8 *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge from the Earliest Times to 1900*, compiled by John Venn and J.A. Venn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 1: xiv.
- 9 For Spenser's attitude toward the church, see Jeffrey Knapp, 'Spenser the Priest', *Representations*, 81 (2003), 61–78. On the political and religious context, see David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (1984; rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 10 On vocation, see seminal studies by David L. Miller, 'Spenser's Vocation, Spenser's Career', *English Literary History*, 50 (1983), 197–231; Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Patrick Cheney, *Spenser's Famous Flight: A Renaissance Idea of a Literary Career* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
- 11 For what is needed, see Mark Eccles, 'Elizabethan Edmund Spensers', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 5 (1944), 413–27.
- 12 The short title, *Familiar Letters*, refers to the Harvey–Spenser correspondence. Both John Lyly and Thomas Nashe describe this correspondence as 'Familiar Epistles'. For the bibliographical rationale, see Chapter 5, note 5.