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INTRODUCTION

READING THEOLOGY / READING *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

Those of us who have the good fortune to teach Spenser have all witnessed our students' insistent, sometimes desperate yearnings for the comfort provided by a nurturing footnote. Most students and many of their teachers will on occasion grasp at any prop that might lighten the pleasurable but sometimes scarcely tolerable burdens imposed by this poet's unique combination of eclectic learning, conspicuous archaism, and prodigal inventiveness. It is no surprise that many such students, at length turned professors, have frequently set out to manufacture aids for readers, earnestly seeking to help others control the poem, as we sometimes think we have come to control it, by establishing beachheads in its "backgrounds." Nor is it surprising that religious doctrines have long been welcomed as reliable sources of stabilizing contexts.

What could be more definite, after all, than religious doctrine? The Bible, biblical commentaries, doctrinal treatises, sermons, and articles of religious belief all continue to be treated, by Spenser specialists and Renaissance scholars generally, as if their meanings were easily available, unambiguous, and therefore unproblematically applicable to literary interpretation. Our widely shared inclination to treat these materials so simply and confidently stems in part from the aggressive assertiveness of doctrine itself. The varied genres which belong to theological discourse have frank and comprehensive designs upon readers. Yet the habit of treating doctrine as if it were both simple in itself and a ready mechanism for interpreting literature also manifests an oversimplification we often impose more broadly on the idea of "history." Because humanistic studies lack absolute standards with which to adjudicate interpretive conflicts, literary scholars frequently turn to history, on the wishful assumption that it provides a place to stand "effectively free of the kind of epistemological and methodological disputes that agitate their own area of inquiry." Late-twentieth-century historiography has cast doubt on that assumption.[1]

One aim of this book is to cast doubt on that assumption as it is applied

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to the content and the history of theology. But I want to perform this task of unsettling easy assumptions without resorting, by way of the always tempting binary impulse, to the opposite conviction – that religious contexts and content, once shown to be problematic, have also been exposed as useless. I proceed instead in the conviction that scholarly interest in Spenser's doctrinal contexts and commitments can illuminate us, not only as readers of his works, but as readers of many other Elizabethan and Jacobean texts that draw on theology, and as students more generally of Renaissance culture. Many colleagues share this opinion, of course, and scholarly engagement with the religious contexts of Spenser's works has remained strong in recent years. Much of the scholarship this interest has yielded proceeds, however, without paying sufficient heed to the topics that organize the bulk of this Introduction: (1) the variability that characterizes processes of perception in general and of reading in particular, (2) the roles which generic categories can play in the process of reading Spenser, (3) the uneven reception of Protestant orthodoxies in sixteenth-century England, and (4) the pervasive complexity, occasional indeterminacy, and not infrequent self-contradiction of theological doctrines themselves – even those that fall within the restricted range of "Reformed Protestant orthodoxy."

We will take up these topics now, in the sequence I have just given. The Introduction will then conclude with two sections readers may want to know about here. These include, first, an excursus that begins to suggest how the theological and interpretive sections of this book might guide responses to many significant portions of Spenser's oeuvre; and, second, an overview of chapters 2–6, where our main business is to examine The Legend of Holiness in detail.

THE FLUIDITY OF PERCEPTION

Studies of Spenser's theological contexts incline unselfconsciously to adopt a common strategy: the poet's convictions are inferred from passages in his poems, read in light of what little evidence remains of his political and social affiliations; this inferentially constructed "Spenser" is then considered solid enough to validate further interpretive inferences. Overtly or obliquely, hypothetical reconstructions of the author's political, religious, or literary allegiances provide the ground on which interpretive authority finally rests. This is as true of books by, say, Stephen Greenblatt and John Guillory, who are not primarily concerned with theological matters, as it is of studies that focus on those concerns, by

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(for instance) Anthea Hume and John King.[2] The unquestioned reliance on authorial intention which these books share does not significantly diminish their differing sorts of value.

Yet much is to be learned by acknowledging and tracking the operations of the circularity that makes guesses about authors' intentions our primary guarantees of the accuracy of meanings discovered in their works.[3] I intend to acknowledge the inescapable intentionalism of my own interpretations, and to recognize this intentionalism as a consequence of the hermeneutic circle that circumscribes acts of reading. According to the accounts that most persuasively describe it for me, reading is a process governed by anticipations, guesses about the meanings and nature of the whole utterance we are encountering. Because these guesses condition and help to constitute the reception of details we encounter in sequence, the texts we read are always somewhat like Narcissus' pool. To a significant degree, they reflect us, what we already are, know, and desire. Reading need not, however, become the self-deluding and potentially self-destructive mirroring which this image implies. While we are reading, most of us persistently imagine an author whose linguistic traces allow us not only to construct ideas that match our own but also to notice other views that extend or conflict with them. This mirroring-with-a-difference helps ensure that the "making" which occurs in acts of reading can "also always [be] a finding."[4] More or less consciously, too, most of us also apply tests of validity to determine which of various possible interpretations of any work or passage seems most plausible. According to Paul Armstrong's helpful formulation, these tests can be labeled "inclusiveness" (the interpretation's capacity to account for what readers judge to be a sufficiently extensive array of the text's details), "intersubjectivity" (the interpretation's power to persuade people that it is reasonable), and "efficacy" (the interpretation's capacity to solve interpretive difficulties without creating new ones).[5] I will persistently if implicitly invoke these tests in the following pages.

This somewhat paradoxical recognition – that readings can be subject to processes of validation and yet that texts, their meanings, and the authors we perceive through them are products in part of our own imaginings – can exert a healthy influence on interpretive practices. The paradox should at least make us less assured about the ideas we take to be a literary author's favorite dogmas. The further recognition that readers can create part of what they find even in doctrinal texts might also induce us to become less dogmatic about dogma. Shifting our attention from authors to readers may be, as Harry Berger has said, a small

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leap for an old new critic to make. But despite the forceful start provided by Paul Alpers nearly a quarter century ago, this shift has not often been energetically and persistently achieved in Spenser studies.[6] And Spenser studies have not yet begun to recognize that the documents which propagate religious doctrine – in spite of their authors' efforts to impose more limits on interpretation than literary texts normally do – remain subject nonetheless to the constructive activities of readers. In the following chapters, I seek always to be attentive to the ways readers might construct not only the meanings of Spenser's texts but also the content of what we believe to be his doctrinal contexts. Sustained study of primary theological sources provides ample evidence that the "textuality" which characterizes history, as new historicism and compatible theories understand "history," also characterizes what it is possible for us to know of the history and content of religious doctrine.[7]

Even those of us who become convinced that readers themselves supply much of what they believe they find in texts often unconsciously revert, while practicing literary interpretation, to two articles of implicit faith: that meaning is contained in the text, and that the author's deliberate intentions led him or her to put it there.[8] The kind of evidence that most effectively helps me resist such relapses, and helps my students begin to see how they construct as well as discover meaning in texts, is (literally) graphic evidence. E. H. Gombrich's studies of "the beholder's share" in perception and interpretation provide especially effective assistance in this.[9] The profusion of vivid examples Gombrich adduces from the visual arts helps to explain why the Shakespearian or Spenserian texts I teach semester after semester invariably look somewhat different, excite classroom discussions that have differing content and emphases, and yet (at least in the heat of discovery and presentation) possess me and some of my students with the illusion that our current construction of the work is, quite simply, true and for all time.

What Gombrich illustrates convincingly is the usefulness of the idea that perception is controlled by "schemata" or "frames."[10] As cognitive psychology describes them, these mental structures filter out some features of the object under scrutiny, make other features perceptible, and supply still other features which are not empirically present in that object. In their filtering and accessing functions, the schemata operate like "formats" of the sort computers employ to "specify that information must be of a certain sort if it is to be interpreted coherently." Schemata are less rigid than formats, however, because they also function as "plans for finding out about objects and events, for obtaining more informa-

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tion to fill in the format." The information that fills in the format at one moment in the cyclic process becomes a part of the format in the next, and so helps to determine how further information will be accepted. The schemata do not absolutely determine what can be perceived, for "at any given moment," an individual schema "resembles a *genotype* rather than a *phenotype* . . . It offers a possibility of development along certain lines, but the precise nature of that development is determined only by interaction with an environment."[11]

Because schemata develop over time, divergent perceptions of an object can become available to the same viewer at different moments of perception. This divergence is the more likely to occur because the schemata provide material that supplements what is actually there, in the world, painting, or text. Among numerous wonderful instances of the degree to which viewers co-create works of art by projecting expected specific patterns onto inchoate shapes or blank screens, Gombrich adduces the illustration reproduced here. (See next two pages.) In what is actually a mere "series of luminous dots" that appear in Altdorfer's "The Virgin amidst Angels," we are induced to "see" infinite multitudes of angels. By means of gradual transitions, "[t]he artist leads the willing beholder from the charming angels in the foreground to more and more indistinct shapes and thus makes him project a vision of infinite multitudes of the heavenly host into the sparkling dots that fade into the distance." We succumb, in short, to a very persuasive illusion, and become convinced that we see more detail and locate more definite meaning than could be found, by empirical means, in the objects themselves.[12]

The guesses that interpret shapes *as* something can also modify our perceptions of their visible form, their very scale and orientation. Particularly striking instances of this control of perception by interpretation appear in unstable figure-ground and counterchange patterns. The checkerboard pattern, so commonplace that we seldom notice its instability, can become the focus of complex visual explorations if placed in a context in which we are stimulated to attend. This is also true of "certain forms of Gothic tracery which are apt to dissolve and reform in front of our eyes."[13] In sequence, the viewer's eye selects some features of the design, draws connections between them, and allows others to recede into the background. Because individual interpreters' particular assemblages of cognitive schemata control perceptions not only of the appearance but of the meaning assigned to things, a common yet puzzling phenomenon need not disturb us: meaning is available first, and the stimulus only later or not at all; meaning can "[come] to consciousness

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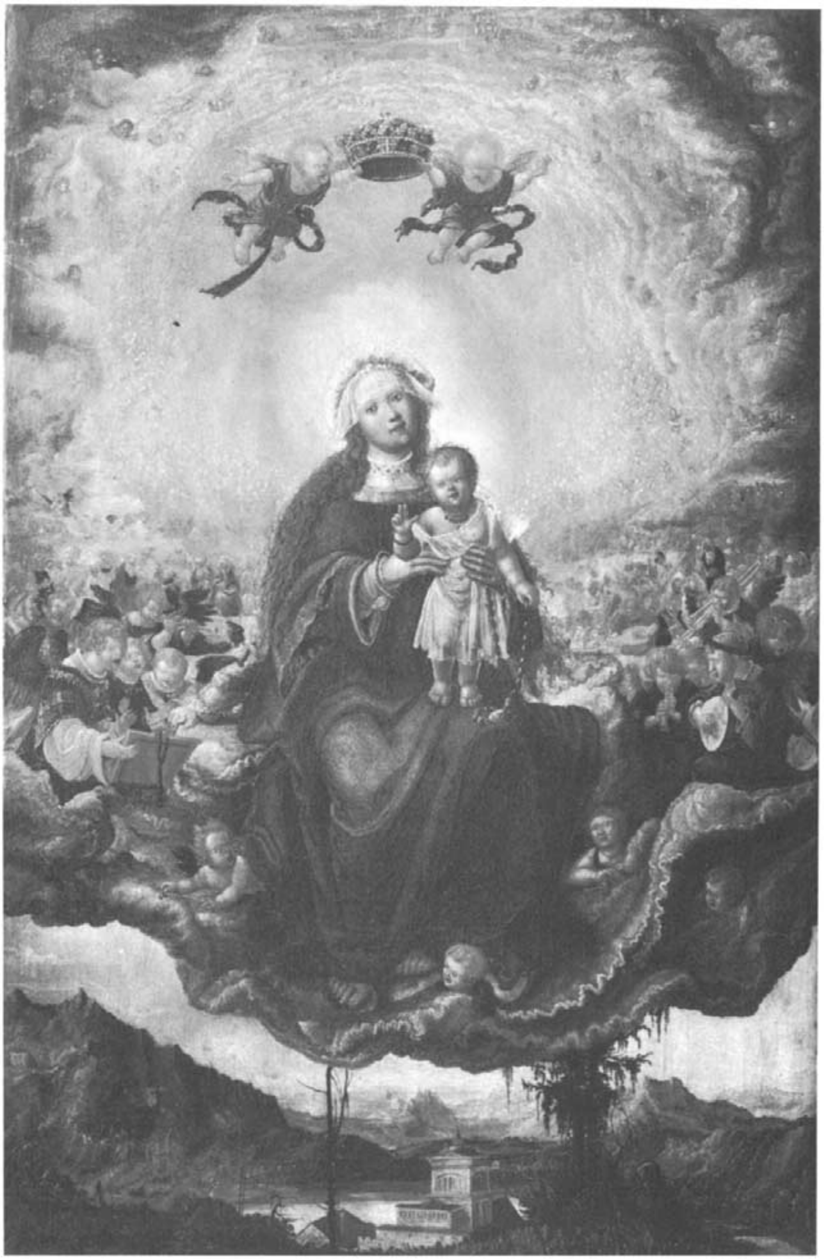

Plate 1. Albrecht Altdorfer: "The Virgin amidst Angels" (c. 1525)
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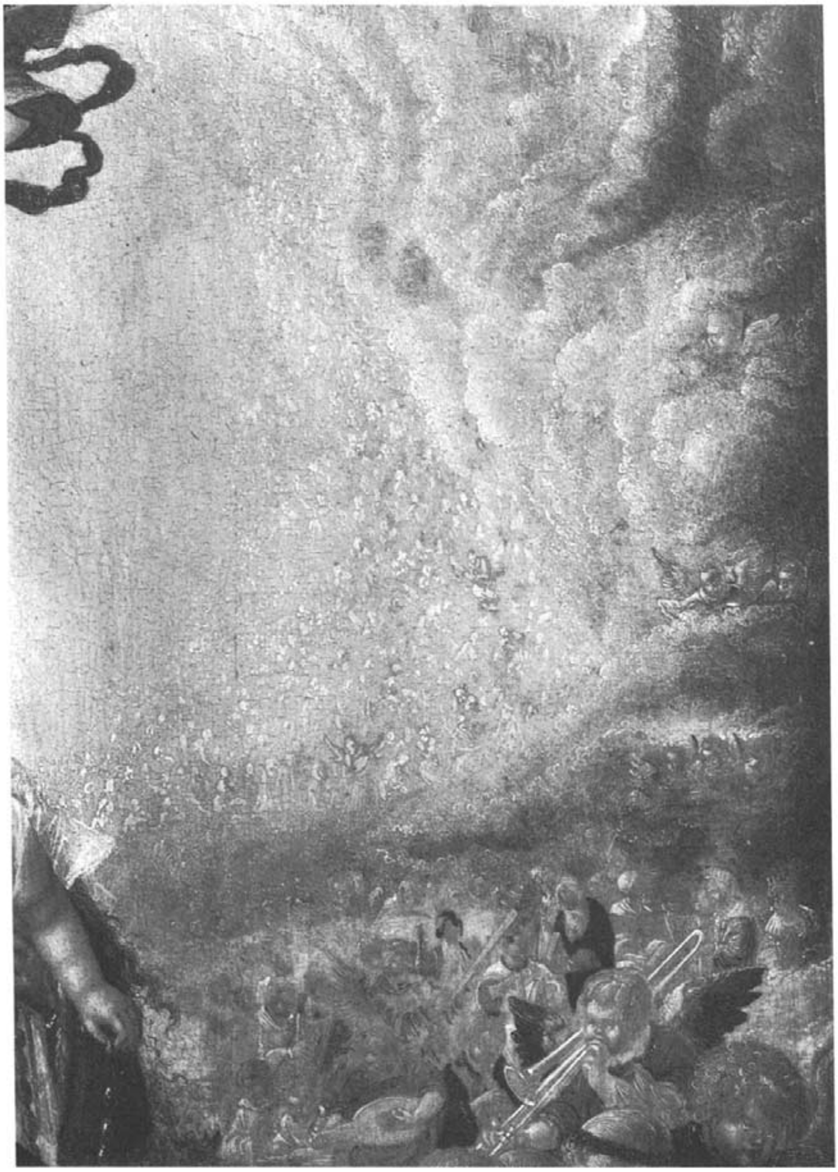

Plate 2. Albrecht Altdorfer: "The Virgin amidst Angels" (c. 1525) – detail
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before (or without) the physical properties on which it allegedly depends."[14] When this happens, the interpreter has simply resorted to "the etc. principle," the assumption that the utterance or visual object we have just begun to perceive will display other features of the type to which we have unconsciously assigned it.[15]

CONTINGENCIES OF READING

When joined to a theory that takes into account the temporal dimensions of reading and the interpretive functions of genre, these analogies from the visual arts provide a persuasive description of the experience of reading *The Faerie Queene.* In acts of reading, as Wolfgang Iser describes them, the element of Gombrichian illusion arises from projections by which readers fill indeterminate places in texts, anticipate what will follow, and selectively remember what has come before.[16] Automatically assigning passages to familiar types of language, readers perceive detail and grasp implications of the sort those types have previously exhibited. The anticipated becomes part of the observed. Through these processes of selection and extrapolation, readers perform a version of the operations Renaissance schoolmasters promoted as deliberate strategies when they taught students to seek Christian meanings in the pagan classics.[17] Like those students, modern readers are likely (in less explicitly tutored ways) to imagine some overall sense of the work or passage, some "gestalt." When we "find" that ordering idea, the appropriate patterns and affiliated meanings appear.[18] Memory plays a part in this too. As we shall have occasion to note, *The Faerie Queene* provides numerous illustrations of the reconfiguring that occurs as readers move through its text and continuously adjust recollections of material already read in light of ideas and expectations aroused by passages currently under scrutiny. The text provokes "a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories."[19]

A primary agent of this effect is the poem's diversity of generic signals, signals that often rapidly alter our guesses about the family of linguistic kinds to which successive passages can be assigned.[20] Like cognitive schemata, genres can help us reduce to manageable selections the multiplicity of features which complex linguistic phenomena present. And like schemata, genres can provide materials with which to fill out places of indeterminacy. Even where the text fails to provide them, we can be induced to "see" features of what we merely expect to find in the numerous sub-genres *The Faerie Queene* comprises – romance, epic,

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psychomachia, georgic, idyl, amatory lyric, satire, creed, parable, sermon, and others.

Sometimes as we read *The Faerie Queene* a local shift in the text's generic identity[21] evokes startling implications because the characteristic values associated with the juxtaposed genres are incompatible.[22] In subsequent chapters, we will explore occasions when conflicting types of language – narrative romance and the various genres of theological discourse – meet or overlap. In the Legend of Holiness especially, the persistent confrontation of romance by theological statement and of theology by romance yields some of the text's most striking effects. The opposition of those two major kinds, and of numerous less pervasive ones, ensures that even in the most overtly dogmatic passages of *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, readers can find multiple interpretations. Despite the apparent attempts (through allegorical labels, for example) to limit readers' options, the text of the Legend of Holiness can remain remarkably accommodating. One of my aims is to demonstrate that the Legend not only allows, but also invites, a broader spectrum of particular realizations than critics have been prepared to recognize.[23]

Once we acknowledge that doctrinal ideas exist not as stable backgrounds but as constructs readers assemble from various discursive and literary genres, we can recognize that these readers find themselves in an extraordinarily fluid situation. They will not only undertake the search for meaning with different degrees of seriousness and energy; they will also construct different versions of what they take to be applicable contexts.[24] When constructing doctrinal perspectives from the materials Elizabethan Protestantism made available, moreover, readers will be drawing upon a vast array of ideas that are themselves too extensive and complex, often too self-contradictory, and too active as agents and objects of political contention to supply stable "backgrounds" for anything whatever.

HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY AND THE REFORMATIONIN ENGLAND

Evidence for the assertion with which my previous paragraph concludes often slips from consciousness, especially when commentators ask theology to help them control the protean poetry of *The Faerie Queene*. But many recent historical studies can offset the homogenizing amnesia to which the exigencies of interpretation drive us. For instance, a predominant view of the English Reformation, established in the 1960s by A. G.

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Dickens, presented that movement as a popular one whose theological ideas gained rapid acceptance as the English people welcomed the passing of a decadent religious establishment.[25] This view has recently been judged a product of "whig" interpretive assumptions, which presuppose that the Reformation was caused by progressive forces. Once that assumption takes hold, the interpreter will inevitably see the mere existence of legislation like that which established the religious settlement of 1559 as "evidence for the strength of that [progressive] force." But recent studies of the local effectiveness of the Reformation imply that, on the popular ideological level, its influence developed very slowly. According to this reconstruction, the ideological victories of the Reformation began only in "the middle of the reign of Elizabeth I" when for the first time "the universities produced a generation of committed Protestant ministers who could take the evangelical faith to the parishes."[26]

Even then, the success of the ideological Reformation apparently varied by geographical areas. It appears to have met with early success "in towns such as Bristol, Colchester, Coventry, Ipswich and London," but "[i]n Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Sussex, and Yorkshire, the Protestant Reformation was an Elizabethan (or often mid-Elizabethan) event. For much of the reign of Elizabeth, the Church of England was a prescribed, national Church with more-or-less Protestant liturgy and theology but an essentially non-Protestant (and in some respects anti-Protestant) laity."[27] Ronald Hutton's studies of churchwardens' accounts provide evidence that "parish religion in 1530 was an intensely dynamic and rapidly developing phenomenon," and that in successive phases of the Reformation under Henry, Edward, and Elizabeth, government commissioners displayed surprising and fierce efficiency in seizing "the endowments of chantries, religious guilds, and perpetual obits," removing images and rood screens, and confiscating and liquidating all the accoutrements of late-medieval worship.[28]

Although this meticulousness showed successive governments to be effective at destroying the traditional faith, they proved less competent at establishing a new one. That would have required an extraordinary and well-financed campaign to build up the new religion in people's esteem. Such a campaign never materialized, partly because the rich church properties and materials confiscated in negative phases of the reform were diverted to other uses, and partly because, even when positive success became possible under Elizabeth, her government showed