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 978-0-521-09160-2 - Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet
 Anthea Hume
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

1

Introduction

In *A Theatre for voluptuous Worldlings* the young Spenser translated the French of Marot, itself a version of the Italian of Petrarch, with an enjoyment which is obvious despite the rhythmic stiffness of inexperience:

Then heauenly branches did I see arise,
 Out of a fresh and lusty Laurell tree
 Amidde the yong grene wood. Of Paradise
 Some noble plant I thought my selfe to see,
 Suche store of birdes therein yshrouded were,
 Chaunting in shade their sundry melodie.

But elsewhere in the *Theatre*, following his Flemish model, he sounded with equal conviction the note of Protestant fervour:

I saw a Woman sitting on a beast
 Before mine eyes, of Orenge colour hew;
 Horrour and dreadfull name of blasphemie
 Filde hir with pride.

Spenser was only sixteen or seventeen when he made these verse translations for Jan van der Noodt, but in a number of ways they anticipate his preoccupations of later years. Throughout his writing life the poet continued to reveal in his work both an enthusiasm for the humanist inheritance and a zealous, even militant Protestantism. His knowledge of the literature of antiquity and of Renaissance Italy and France has received sympathetic critical study during our own century – his debts to Virgil and Ovid, to Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso, to Marot and du Bellay, to Renaissance Neoplatonism, mythography and iconography, have been admirably scrutinised – but the impact of his Protestantism on his imaginative writing has been treated with more reserve. Certainly the Elizabethan Protestant milieu of the 1570s and 1580s is not on the face of it the most congenial area for enquiry; yet if we neglect this part of his mental

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[More information](#)

Introduction

world we are likely to find ourselves in possession of views of his poems which indicate more about our own assumptions than about his. The present study starts from the wish to redress an imbalance in Spenser scholarship by adding a fuller awareness of Protestant culture to our sense of his Renaissance humanist inheritance.

No doubt the occupational hazard implicit in looking into sermons and biblical commentaries in order to increase appreciation of a poet's work is that the poems may be reduced to sounding like treatises. There must be a way, however, of doing justice to the role of Protestant thought and vocabulary in Spenser's writings without minimising the equally important role of classical, mediaeval, Ariostan and Neoplatonic components. Spenser's peculiar genius, after all, was for synthesis. What seems now to be necessary is that the reader should be willing to give as much imaginative attention to the Elizabethan Protestant elements in the synthesis as to the classical or Italian.

If indefinite space were available, most or all of Spenser's poems would call for examination, but in the interests of brevity the book confines itself to *The Shepheardes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene*. Perhaps this is the moment to explain that an intention to study the Protestant aspects of Spenser's art in these two poems does not necessarily imply a resolve to identify the various pastors in *The Shepheardes Calender* with Elizabethan bishops, or to interpret each of the fountains in *The Faerie Queene* as an image of baptism. I am working from the assumption, discussed in Chapter 8, that Spenser's poems are not so much enigmatic as richly suggestive, and hence that if read carefully they have a notable power to explicate themselves; but in cases where words and images have lost their force through twentieth-century remoteness from an Elizabethan Protestant milieu, I shall try to re-animate the relevant context.

My approach as far as possible will be through a reading of the poems, rather than through an account first of 'the tradition' and then of the works. All the same, it seems a good idea in this introductory chapter to consider some of the cross-currents in Elizabethan Protestant religion and politics, and to attempt to establish a satisfactory theory about Spenser's position within that world. In the second chapter more detailed, internal evidence for the theory will be supplied from *The Shepheardes Calender*. I shall be maintaining that Spenser's Protestantism was of the militant variety associated with the Leicester circle, and that in the late 1570s, the

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[More information](#)

Introduction

years of *The Shepheardes Calender*, his religion requires the label 'Puritanism'. Definitions of course will be essential to the argument, but they will gain in substance and intelligibility if they emerge from discussion of specific doctrines, factions and personalities in the Elizabethan world.

The case for Spenser's Puritanism has not been fashionable in recent decades. Nevertheless it received the support of a number of scholars in the early years of this century: by 1914 Lilian Winstanley, J. J. Higginson, and F. M. Padelford had all argued that Spenser was a Puritan or that he held beliefs near to those of the Puritans.¹ In 1930 W. L. Renwick included some useful Puritan material in his commentary on *The Shepheardes Calender*.² But opinion was moving the other way. Higginson's book in particular, with its speculative identification of figures in the *Calender* with historical individuals and its neglect of the fact that Spenser had been secretary to Bishop Young of Rochester in 1578, rightly carried little weight. Spenser's evident belief in episcopacy, indicated by his service under Young, his praise of both Grindal and Young in *The Shepheardes Calender*, and probably reflected in E. K.'s 'Maye' gloss which supported 'fatherly rule' in the church, seemed to undermine any 'Puritan' reading of his work. In 1950 Virgil K. Whitaker argued that Spenser's sympathies lay with 'the conservative party in the Anglican church', and that he spoke for those who were attempting 'to preserve as much as possible of its Catholic heritage'. The poet was to be seen 'as the religious fellow of Hooker and ancestor of Herbert'.³ Paul E. McLane in his book on *The Shepheardes Calender* described Spenser as 'a faithful, if conservative, son of the English Church', who was 'clearly anti-Puritan'. He remarked that 'Spenser's dislike of Puritanism is, of course, obvious enough in his poetry.'⁴ Subsequently William Nelson warned readers against assuming that Spenser necessarily shared the religious opinions of the Leicester party, which 'inclined rather to the left than to the right in the religious controversy'. Spenser, he claimed, 'was not one of those who wrote polemical essays on the subject of the religious disputes of his day... He was a moderate Protestant of the kind of Richard Hooker, the great apologist of the religious compromise.'⁵ Peter Bayley, for his part, acknowledged that Spenser attacked church corruption in *The Shepheardes Calender*, but stated that 'this does not make him a Puritan'.⁶

It is possible that behind the modern consensus on the subject of

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[More information](#)

Introduction

Spenser's religious beliefs lie some quite understandable personal preferences. These can reveal themselves through the tone in which points are made. A certain satisfaction, for example, is audible when a critic speaks of 'the re-capture of Spenser from the ranks of the Calvinists and his return to a more ordinary and unobtrusive place among the usual Anglicans of his decades'.⁷ The tone of relief hints at the tastes of liberal-minded scholars, who are naturally reluctant to link Spenser with what appears to be an intemperate zeal, let alone with the doctrine of predestination. Yet it would not, in actual fact, prove easy to 're-capture' the Protestant Spenser of the 1570s and 1580s from the Calvinists, so far as the theology of salvation is concerned. The doctrine of the Elizabethan church in this period was predestinarian and, in effect, Calvinist, regardless of the position taken up by individuals in the controversy about the 'apparell', ceremonies, and church government. Whitgift, official voice of the hierarchy in these years for the rebuttal of Cartwright's Presbyterianism, was a Calvinist in his theology of salvation. As he himself often reiterated, he was not disputing with Cartwright about 'the doctrine of the Gospell' which both accepted, but about 'externall matters'.⁸ Inevitably his discussion was punctuated by endorsements of the concept of 'the electe'.⁹ Article xvii of the Thirty-nine Articles asserted the doctrine of predestination, while the Book of Homilies underlined that of natural depravity ('of our selues, and by our selues we haue no goodnesse, help, nor saluacion: but contrarywyse, sinne, dampnation, and death euerlasting').¹⁰

One must not neglect the fact that in the 1590s new emphases and new directions in English Protestantism began to claim attention, for example, Baro's rejection of reprobation, Bancroft's and Whitgift's arguments for the apostolic foundation of episcopacy,¹¹ above all Hooker's stress on natural law and the capacities of human reason. And it is true that these ideas had received some expression in sermons of the 1580s. But their impact was not felt until the 1590s, while their consequences belonged to the following century. The doctrine of the Church of England in the Elizabethan period remained 'Calvinistic'¹² and Spenser cannot be rescued or 're-captured' from the theology of his times.

But we have still to consider the ways in which Puritans differed from their fellows. In part it was a matter of the special intensity of their commitment: Protestants of 'the hotter sort' were 'called

Introduction

Puritans'.¹³ However, more specifically, the central concerns for Puritans may be summarised as a desire for 'further reformation' of the Church of England in the light of the scriptures, a preoccupation with the need for an educated, preaching ministry, a hatred of episcopal pomp and wealth, and a particularly fervent opposition to Roman Catholicism. The omission from this list of any reference to theories of church government is crucial: modern historical scholarship has uncovered the extent to which Puritans differed among themselves on the question of the acceptability of episcopacy. After 1570 some of them campaigned for a Presbyterian polity (the abolition of archbishops and bishops, the election and equality of ministers). This formed the subject of Field and Wilcox's *Admonition to the Parliament* (1572) for which the authors were imprisoned, and of the anonymous *Seconde admonition*. Cartwright expounded the same polity in his Cambridge lectures of 1570, and in his *Replye* and *Second Replie* to Whitgift. Travers's *Ecclesiasticae disciplinae... explicatio* (1574) was also an exposition of the Presbyterian system. Nevertheless, by no means all Puritans endorsed the aims or methods of the Admonitioners. Veteran and much respected Puritan leaders such as Laurence Humphrey, Thomas Sampson, John Foxe and Anthony Gilby withheld their support from the Presbyterian campaign. Humphrey believed that 'in some points and terms' the Admonitioners 'are too broad and overshoot themselves'.¹⁴ Gilby, a former Genevan exile and now preacher at Ashby de la Zouch, exercised a moderating influence from the provinces,¹⁵ although he remained in sympathetic contact with the younger Puritan leaders. He did not denounce episcopacy as such, but sent reminders to bishops about the true conduct of their office. He urged Bishop Cooper of Lincoln to

come amongst us sometimes in Christian humility, laying aside all popish lordliness, and so exercise your good gifts amongst your brethren that we of your great light may receive some light.¹⁶

With the advent of Grindal to the throne of Canterbury in 1576 the future looked promising for 'moderate episcopalian Puritans' (a useful phrase I have borrowed from the historian M. M. Knappen)¹⁷ since the new archbishop was known to be favourable towards their cause. His efforts were directed towards the reform of the ecclesiastical courts, the encouragement of an educated, preaching ministry, and

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the severer punishment of recusancy. Above all he supported the prophesyings, which were a product of Puritan zeal without being inherently Presbyterian activities.¹⁸ It was his refusal to agree to their suppression despite the Queen's command which led to his fall in June 1577. For a time it had looked as though the moderate Puritan programme might have been carried through under archiepiscopal leadership, but now it was clear that the struggle would have to continue.

Especially relevant to the present discussion is the position taken up by members of the governing class towards individual Puritans – particularly the stance of the Earl of Leicester's so-called 'progressive' party, which included Sir Francis Walsingham, Leicester's brother the Earl of Warwick and his brother-in-law the Earl of Huntingdon, the Earl of Bedford, Sir Francis Knollys and others. The foreign policy of this group was marked by a vehement spirit of opposition to Spain and to Roman Catholicism, which explained their advocacy of an expedition to aid the Netherlands and their hostility to the projected marriage between the Queen and the Catholic Duke of Alençon. Evidently the concerns of the Puritans and of 'progressive' nobles coincided to a remarkable extent. Leicester provided support and patronage both for moderate Puritans such as Laurence Humphrey, and for more extreme figures including Presbyterians like Field and Wilcox. He seems to have assisted these two in obtaining their release from prison in 1573; he used his influence to procure Field a preaching licence from Oxford University in 1579, and he accepted dedications of two works by Field in 1579–81.¹⁹ He bestowed the Mastership of his Hospital at Warwick on Cartwright in 1586. Leicester's personal religious convictions may have been a good deal less than fervent, but discretion and self-interest disposed him to assist Puritans of various shades, while the same motives deterred him from promoting the Presbyterian movement as such.²⁰ Walsingham's private beliefs seem to have been more committed. His household, for example, was 'a perfect hotbed of Puritanism';²¹ and Robert Beale, who wrote against the inquisitorial methods of the bishops, was his brother-in-law and intimate friend. He gave Cartwright £100 towards a confutation of the Rheims New Testament, and provided funds to establish a lectureship at Oxford for the Puritan John Reynolds. Yet it is noticeable that he resisted rebellious tactics, looking instead for religious reforms to be achieved with royal consent, as he made plain

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

in a letter of 1578 to William Davison: 'I would have all reformations done by public authority.'²² The Earl of Huntingdon gave protection and patronage to Anthony Gilby, the Puritan lecturer mentioned in a previous paragraph, to his son Nathaniel Gilby, fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Thomas Sampson (who became Master of Wyggeston Hospital at Leicester), John Stockwood, schoolmaster at Tonbridge, and innumerable others, while the funeral sermon of another of Leicester's brothers-in-law, Sir Henry Sidney, was delivered at Penshurst in 1586 by the moderate episcopalian Puritan Thomas White.

We have now come to a point at which we may attempt to place Spenser in this Elizabethan ecclesiastical world. The salient facts from his biography are perhaps the following. When he was sixteen or seventeen the young poet contributed to Jan van der Noodt's *A Theatre wherein be represented as wel the miseries and calamities that follow the voluptuous Worldlings, As also the greate ioyes and plesures which the faithfull do enjoy. An Argument both profitable and delectable, to all that sincerely loue the word of God*, printed by Henry Bynneman in 1569. Van der Noodt was a Protestant refugee from Antwerp, who had fled from the Low Countries to England in the year of the Duke of Alva's arrival with an army to stamp out heresy. His Protestantism was of a fiercely committed kind, though the man was also, we should remind ourselves, a poet and a humanist. The *Theatre* was clearly intended to have a wide circulation, since van der Noodt put it out separately in Flemish, in French and in English. Spenser's part was to translate into English the twenty-one 'Epigrams' and 'Sonets' which opened the volume. After the sonnets came van der Noodt's impassioned prose exposition of their meaning. This starts as an exhortation against worldliness, rapidly develops into a full-scale attack on the Church of Rome, then modulates into a discussion of the meaning of the vision of the New Jerusalem and ends with an account of the temperate life of the faithful. Spenser's part in this volume might be brushed aside as youthful hackwork; but the continuing importance to him of the 'vision' form, which he used later in *The Ruines of Time* and *Visions of the Worlds Vanitie*, and of the themes and images contained in the lines quoted at the start of this chapter, suggests an affinity with van der Noodt's intellectual and religious world rather than the mechanical fulfilling of a commission.

After the *Theatre* came the Cambridge years, 1569–76. These

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 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

were years which coincided with Cartwright's Presbyterian preaching, followed by his removal from his chair, and with the Admonition controversy. In 1572 reports of the St Bartholomew massacre crossed the Channel. Some awareness of the issues of religious controversy was inevitable – and obviously was not lessened when he attained, in 1578, the secretaryship to a bishop who was a friend of Grindal.²³ In 1579 Spenser entered Leicester's service, visiting Leicester House during months of high drama produced by the Alençon marriage negotiations. While still in the Earl's service he published *The Shepheardes Calender*, dedicated to Leicester's nephew, Philip Sidney, and selected for his poem the printer Hugh Singleton, who was well known for his allegiance to the Puritan cause. He had been printing works for Foxe, Bale and Coverdale in the 1540s and 1550s, and had issued some reprints of Coverdale in the 1570s. In the summer of 1579 Singleton printed an attack on the projected French marriage, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* by John Stubbs, Cartwright's brother-in-law, for which both Stubbs and Singleton were condemned to lose their right hands; but Singleton escaped the penalty, apparently through a last-minute pardon.²⁴ *The Shepheardes Calender* was the next work to come from his press.

Spenser's move to Ireland meant, of course, a new patron and employer, Lord Grey of Wilton. Grey was a committed Protestant, whose horror at the St Bartholomew massacre is recorded in one of his letters, while a letter which he received from Sir Henry Sidney on the subject of the role of lord deputy expressed confidence in Grey's religious beliefs:

But nowe to beginne, and that with Godde Almightye. As I knowe you are reldigious, so I wishe your lordshippe to frequent sermons and praier in publike places; it would comferte the fewe protestants you have there, and abashe the papistes, wherof you have many.²⁵

Spenser admired Grey and endorsed his stern efforts to suppress rebellion in Ireland, including the slaughter of foreign soldiers at Smerwick. Years later, in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, he praised 'that right noble Lord' who ruled the troubled country 'like a most wise pilot'.²⁶

It seems to me that Spenser's contribution to van der Noodt's radically Protestant book, his choice of the Puritan Hugh Singleton as the printer for his first adult published poem, his loyalty to his

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

patrons, Leicester and Grey – and in particular his continuing allegiance to the memory of Leicester after the Earl's death, to which *Prothalamion* bears striking witness – together suggest rather strongly that he shared in the militant Protestantism of the circle in which he moved. In addition to this, I think that a close reading of the ecclesiastical eclogues of *The Shepherdes Calender*, which will be undertaken in Chapter 2, reveals that in the late 1570s the poet's religious position must be described as that of a 'moderate episcopalian Puritan'. Spenser supported episcopacy as did many other Puritans; but his management of the arguments in the *Calender*, I shall claim, indicates that he participated during those years in the zealous Puritan search for reform of ecclesiastical abuses. Parts of *Mother Hubberds Tale* were written at this time also, in the same spirit. This was an historical moment at which Puritanism possessed a keen intellectual and spiritual appeal to idealistic minds. A. G. Dickens has remarked that 'the vast majority of Elizabethan Englishmen who cared deeply about religion' were in fact either Roman Catholics or Puritans.²⁷

Identifying Puritans with any certainty in the 1590s, however, is more difficult than recognising them in the late 1570s. The reason for this is that the Puritan movement – as distinct from Puritan religion – to some extent disappeared from view in the 1590s as a result of the death in 1588 of its 'patron-general', the Earl of Leicester, and the deaths of his brother Warwick and Sir Francis Walsingham in 1590. Moreover, a 'temporary exhaustion of old controversies by the Puritans and their opponents'²⁸ allowed Puritan energies to be directed now more than ever into sermons, devotional treatises and the cultivation of the Christian life. Hence there is no clear yardstick of controversy by which we can measure whether Spenser in the 1590s retained the Puritan position of his young manhood or not. His poetry was certainly deeply involved with the subject of the Christian life, as we shall show in Chapters 4, 5 and 6; but we do not intend to enter into a discussion as to whether this proves he was still a Puritan. The religion to which he adhered throughout his life was a fervent Protestantism which requires the label 'Puritan' during a specific period. This is the reason why the present study carries the title which it does, rather than the alternative, 'Edmund Spenser: *Puritan* Poet'. I have tried to avoid assertions for which I cannot produce evidence.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09160-2 - Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet
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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

Terminology is in any case less important than a recognition of the part played in the making of Spenser's major poems by a Protestant/Puritan vision. Chapters 2 and 3 will consider *The Shepheardes Calender* from this angle, spending more than the usual amount of time on the ecclesiastical eclogues precisely because they often receive less than their due. In Chapter 4 the question of the proper frame of reference for *The Faerie Queene*, originally raised by A. S. P. Woodhouse, will be tackled again in the hope of laying certain notions to rest. We shall not work through *The Faerie Queene* book by book – many excellent studies have already completed that task for the present generation – but Book I will be read rather closely in a context provided by other Protestant writings, while Books II to VI will be treated in a more high-handed fashion. My particular concern is their 'vision cantos'. Two large topics which involve the whole poem will occupy the final chapters: Chapter 7 will put forward a theory about the distinction which Spenser invented between Britons and Elves, and Chapter 8 will examine the basic critical question of whether *The Faerie Queene* is intended, at least in part, to be an esoteric poem.