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## Introduction: the relevance of Edmund Spenser

While Wilfred Owen, the English First World War poet, was recovering from shell shock at the 13th Casualty Clearing Station in Amiens, France, he wrote to his mother, describing a pleasant spring day out in the nearby countryside. Owen carefully contrasted the horror of the ‘whiz-bangs and machine guns’ to the delight of rural France by recalling a significant literary memory:

The scenery was such as I never saw or dreamed of since I read the *Fairy Queene*. Just as in the Winter when I woke up lying on the burning cold snow I fancied that I must have died & been pitch-forked into the Wrong Place, so, yesterday, it was not more difficult to imagine that my dusky barge was wending up to Avalon, and the peace of Arthur, and where Lancelot heals him of his grievous wound.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the letter refers to Arthur, Lancelot and Avalon, and to an episode that does not feature in Spenser’s poem, means that Owen was undoubtedly thinking of Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* rather than *The Faerie Queene*. But this only serves to emphasise that Owen reads Spenser as the poet of hazy, romantic pastoralism, a writer who conjures up lovely, indistinct pictures of desirable indolence.<sup>2</sup>

Owen’s use of the escapist fantasies he found in Spenser as a means of blotting out the brutal reality of military combat was also employed in a slightly different way by a fellow British officer in the same year. Reporting to the English Association conference, John Bailey ‘related a story of an officer who read the *Fairie Queen* to his men when they were in a particularly difficult situation. The men did not understand the words, but the poetry had a soothing influence upon them. Nothing better could be said of poetry than that’.<sup>3</sup>

The two stories are instructive in a number of ways. First, they both point to the significance of Spenser as a writer. Spenser is still one of the four founding fathers of modern English literature, along with Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. Wilfred Owen, who was lower middle-class in origin,

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not privately educated, and who did not go to university, read Spenser at school.<sup>4</sup> He was following in the footsteps of virtually all English poets of significance since the seventeenth century, who read Spenser and, consciously or unconsciously, either imitated or reacted against his work, notable examples being Pope, Keats, Tennyson and Hopkins.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as these two stories indicate, Spenser was not simply ‘the poet’s poet’, a label which has often reduced him to the marginalised status of an ‘unread classic’.<sup>6</sup> His work enjoyed a wider readership until well into the present century, as the thirty or so children’s versions of *The Faerie Queene* produced since the mid-eighteenth century indicate.<sup>7</sup> There is also a rather neat coincidence in both anecdotes. They suggest that Spenser, a poet whose work was written at the start of the first English/British empire, assumed a special importance for readers fighting in the war that would effectively end the British Empire for good. As this Companion will demonstrate, Spenser was not able to take the notion of ‘Englishness’ – his own or that of others – for granted, but subsequently came to represent one of the key figures in a tradition of writing that was felt to express the very essence of the English nation.

The wide readership of Spenser’s work was closely related to a series of ideological purposes, which is the second point I would like to make. The children’s versions of *The Faerie Queene* were designed ‘to introduce young readers to a work of great literature and to afford moral instruction’.<sup>8</sup> Another use to which the work was put can be seen in the image chosen for the stained glass in the tower entrance at Cheltenham Ladies College, an institution which by 1880 had ‘emerged as a dominant force in women’s education’.<sup>9</sup> The headmistress, Dorothea Beale, wished to provide the young ladies in her charge with suitable images of womanhood to serve as inspirations and exemplars as part of a new architectural programme. She chose the figure of Britomart as an ‘Ideal of Woman’:

She is a real woman, propria persona, not merely the usual appendage of a knight. She sets forth alone, and proves herself no mere satellite, for she owns a squire. We are at once interested in her career, and we long to follow her path, but we soon find ourselves in a labyrinth, and we wish for a guide.

The moral instruction Spenser provided was, for Beale, clearly sympathetic to what she saw as legitimate female ideals. Britomart, she explained, ‘has learned in the quiet home from the example and teaching of a noble minded father, to form a high ideal of manly perfection’. Men could teach women to be like them, but it was a lonely path. Britomart lets her knight, Artegall, go on his quest and ‘bravely, though sadly, she bids him farewell,

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content to wait till their work is done on earth, for that perfect union which is to be realised only in the peace of heaven'.<sup>10</sup>

Beale's appropriation of Spenser indicates the uncertain and ambivalent sexual politics at work in his writing. If the headmistress of England's premier academy for upper-class young ladies felt that Spenser was a kindred spirit, so did the unnamed officer who read his men portions of *The Faerie Queene* to comfort them in the heat of battle, an act that casts Spenser's poetry as a soothing feminine spirit to inspire men to masculine pursuits. Wilfred Owen is undoubtedly making a pointed contrast between the masculine horror of war and the feminine peace of poetry – especially if what he really has in mind is the barge of Phaedria, one of the most frequently represented episodes from Book II.<sup>11</sup> It seems that while women have read Spenser to make them feel more masculine, men have read him to make them feel more feminine.

The third point I would take from my opening examples is that Spenser's work has often been read in diametrically opposed ways, or as a series of paradoxes – one of these being, of course, centred around the question of gender roles outlined above. Another concerns Spenser's relationship to military culture. Owen cites the joys of Spenser's poetry as a pointed contrast to the aggressive horror of war, thereby escaping from the terrors of the front line. The unnamed officer uses the same opposition to calm his men and so inspire them to greater strength in the fight.

This dichotomy cuts right to the heart of the different ways in which Spenser has been read. If, on the one hand, Spenser has been regarded as the poet of sensuous beauty, gorgeous indolence and tempting luxury by critics and writers from the early seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, others have seen him as the poet of empire, military might and expansionist English puritanism.<sup>12</sup> W. B. Yeats, for example, trying to make sense of his admiration for Spenser as a poet and his hatred of Spenser's share in the oppression of his homeland as a colonial settler, resolves the problem through reading Spenser's work in terms of a fundamental opposition which could not be avoided. Yeats argues that Spenser is at his worst when he is being allegorical, precisely because it 'interrupts our preoccupation with the beautiful and sensuous life he has called up before our eyes'.<sup>13</sup> Spenser is incapable of achieving 'that visionary air which can alone make allegory real' because he has 'no deep moral or religious life' (369). He is really a poet of the charming ways of 'Merry England' (365), but had begun 'to look to the State not only as the rewarder of virtue but as the maker of right and wrong, and had begun to love and hate as it bid him' (371). For Yeats, Spenser was at his least poetic (and virtuous) when writing about Ireland, where he lived almost continuously from 1580 until his

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death in 1599, employed as a state official, and eventually becoming a wealthy landowner:

When Spenser wrote of Ireland he wrote as an official, and out of thoughts and emotions that had been organised by the State. He was the first of many Englishmen to see nothing but what he was desired to see. Could he have gone there as a poet merely, he might have found among its poets more wonderful imaginations than even those islands of Phaedria and Acrasia. He would have found among wandering story-tellers, not indeed his own power of rich, sustained description, for that belongs to lettered ease, but certainly all the kingdom of Faery, still unfaded, of which his own poetry was often but a troubled image (372).<sup>14</sup>

Yeats' splitting of Spenser is a brilliant manoeuvre which enables him to separate the wheat from the chaff in Spenser's writings, and then imagine an inspirational exchange between the poets of England and Ireland stripped bare of any political interference. The image of the Englishman blind to the beautiful realities of Ireland recalls Geoffrey Keating's words, targeted at New English historians including Spenser, that they resemble the beetle single-mindedly 'bustling about until it meets with dung of horse or cow, and proceeds to roll itself therein', oblivious to the beauties of 'any delicate flower that may be in the field, or any blossom in the garden'.<sup>15</sup>

However, unlike Keating's harsh comments, Yeats' is a humane, Utopian vision, resolving insoluble problems in the space of cultural encounter, and clearly as much a comment on Yeats' own position in Anglo-Irish politics and letters at the turn of the century as it is a meditation on Spenser himself.<sup>16</sup> Spenser could have been an even greater poet had he paid attention to his surroundings and learnt from them. The bucolic English poet would have learnt from his Irish counterparts who had direct access to the fairyland Spenser conjured up in his imagination.

I have dealt with Yeats' essay at some length because of its perceptiveness and its vast influence. C. S. Lewis, another Anglo-Irishman and probably the most important critic of Spenser in the first half of the twentieth century, made a case similar to that of Yeats, although his political sympathies were rather different. Lewis argued that 'Spenser was the instrument of a detestable policy in Ireland' and that the 'wickedness he had shared begins to corrupt his imagination'.<sup>17</sup> Lewis drew the obvious conclusion that readers should concentrate on the sections of Spenser's poetry which helped them 'grow in mental health', and ignore the nasty Irish parts.<sup>18</sup>

However, looked at another way, Yeats' argument is a clever sleight of hand that cunningly avoids fundamental questions and problems. It is not really possible to divide up Spenser's writing as Yeats – following more than two centuries of critical tradition – wishes to do. Spenser did, in fact, show

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an interest in Irish poetry, as he acknowledges in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, in his much-cited passage on the bards. Irenius argues that the Irish bards are excellent poets but that they lead the young to follow vice rather than virtue. More revealingly, perhaps, Irenius notes that poets are 'had in so high regard and estimation amongst them [the Irish], that none dare displeas them for feare to runne into reproach thorough their offence'.<sup>19</sup> Given that *A View* was aimed at an *English* audience in England and Ireland (it is, in fact, set in England, as Eudoxus' reference to 'that country of Ireland, whence you [Irenius] lately came' in the first sentence of the dialogue demonstrates), Spenser appears to be making a plea that English poets should have as much influence in England as Irish bards have in Ireland. Yeats' lament for Spenser's ignorance therefore looks somewhat misplaced.

There has been a huge recent upsurge in interest in Spenser's involvement in Ireland and its relation to his writing. Perhaps the keynote was sounded by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, undoubtedly the most widely read critical work on the English Renaissance in the last twenty-five years, when he claimed that 'Ireland . . . pervades the poem'.<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt's claim has been taken up with great enthusiasm by a host of subsequent scholars concerned to show that Spenser's part in England's imperial ambitions is signalled and shadowed throughout his work.<sup>21</sup> If that is so, readers must face up to the reality that even the most apparently innocent and dream-like sections of the poem may be reflections on contemporary political problems. There can be no obvious escape to the peaceful idyll of fairyland, as Wilfred Owen, lying dazed and battered in a First World War hospital, hoped. Even the most apparently benign fantasies are political.<sup>22</sup>

A further paradox, and one which is in tune with recent reflections on the purpose and origins of national identity in the British Isles at the current moment, is that while Spenser has been read as an exclusively *English* poet, he was clearly centrally concerned with the problem of *Britain*.<sup>23</sup> As Brian Doyle has pointed out, the 'cultural mystique' endowed upon *The Faerie Queene* by the unnamed officer was a central part of the construction of a patriotic, national English literature which was designed to replace the 'cultural authority previously invested in classics'.<sup>24</sup> Yet Spenser only spent one extended period in England after he made his home in Ireland in 1580, a fact he acknowledges in the preface to *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595), where it is clear that 'home' is Ireland. *The Faerie Queene* opens with the tale of an English Knight, but by Book III concentrates on the adventures of the British woman warrior Britomart, who, significantly, defeats the hero of the first book. The version of the poem published in

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Spenser's lifetime ends with the triumph of a monster, the Blatant Beast, first found on the way back from Ireland. The portrait of Duessa as Mary Queen of Scots caused grave offence to her son, the Scottish king, James VI, who wrote to Elizabeth requesting that Spenser be severely punished.<sup>25</sup> Although *The Faerie Queene* allegorically represents the trial of Mary in detail which no reader could have possibly failed to recognise, her execution is not shown. 'Two Cantos of Mutabilitie', which were published posthumously in 1609, seem to represent the threat of Mutabilitie as a legitimate – though patently undesirable – challenge to the rule of Cynthia/Elizabeth. By the late 1590s it was more than likely that the Tudor dynasty would be supplanted by the house of Stuart, most probably through Mary's son, James, who Spenser had so seriously offended, or, less likely, via the claims of Lady Arbella Stuart.<sup>26</sup> The figure of Mutabilitie, who argues that Jove's right to rule the universe is no more valid than her demand that the Titanic forces of chaos be given their due, is judged to be false by Nature. But the unfinished fragment suggests, especially given its setting in the wilds of Ireland, that the wider territories of the British Isles will threaten the stability that an insular England has usually assumed. Moreover, Mutabilitie's claims, like those of the Stuarts, do sound more convincing than those of Cynthia/Elizabeth, who has to rely on Jove's power to maintain her.<sup>27</sup> Spenser's fear that an Anglocentric government might not be able to cope with the demands of governing Scotland, Ireland, and, to a lesser extent, Wales, was, in many ways, a remarkably accurate prediction of the immediate future when James I ascended to the English throne and attempted to unite the British Isles.<sup>28</sup> The Stuarts did indeed succeed the Tudors, as Spenser undoubtedly feared. As is well known, the English parliament threw James' plan out in 1607 and the projected union never succeeded in making disparate peoples feel part of a larger nation.<sup>29</sup> *The Faerie Queene* registers the fear of an integrated Britain, while also providing a strong sense that the disasters inherent in such a union cannot be ignored or avoided.

The purpose of this companion is to guide readers through the fascinating and complex writings of Edmund Spenser, a poet who is at once central to the canon of English literature, and yet distant from England and its traditions. Perhaps this particular paradox is central to the literary tradition in question, where writers are often at odds with their societies, and rarely fit into straightforward, preconceived categories.<sup>30</sup> Spenser is a writer who spent much of his working life representing the queen, yet may have moved towards republicanism at the end of his life; he desired the 'kingdom of our own language', yet did so much to accommodate alien styles that one observer thought that he wrote no recognisable language at all; he seemed

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to regard himself as an exile in Ireland yet could also refer to it as his home; he produced an enormous volume of work, yet may have been just as interested in his career as a civil servant and landowner; he appears to have started on a Virgilian career path, moving on from the humble form of the pastoral to the major achievement of an epic; but then he moved back again to pastoral and hymns, never completing his *magnum opus*. Interested readers will find more paradoxes and problems in the pages that follow, many of them, it has to be said, recognised by Spenser himself. When the narrator in *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI laments, ‘who knowes not *Colin Clout?*’ (x, 16), it is clear that Spenser is self-consciously lamenting his own obscurity in the very act of promoting one of his pseudonyms. He was on the one hand an author successful enough to have been granted the rare privilege of a £50 annual pension from Elizabeth (25 February 1591). On the other, he was a minor gentleman official in one of the queen’s most remote territories.<sup>31</sup>

The essays in this companion have been commissioned to cover as many aspects of Spenser’s work as can be contained within a manageable volume. Obviously some areas have been covered in greater detail than others, reflecting a greater need and demand for these works. The subjects and topics have been selected to be in tune with contemporary critical concerns, as well as trying to form a balanced assessment of the contexts that informed Spenser’s writing.

Four essays deal with the corpus of Spenser’s works: the pastoral poems, *The Faerie Queene* (two chapters), and the shorter poems. Patrick Cheney analyses *The Shepheardes Calender* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* to show how the questions raised by pastoral poetry shadow Spenser’s writing career. Spenser makes himself central to the concerns of the nation, namely ‘state, church, university and family, with their corresponding figures and leaders: sovereigns, pastors, wise old men, young men in love’ (pp. 79–80). Pastoral, as George Puttenham, argued, is a convenient means of discussing more obvious and dangerous subjects by allegorical or devious means, disguising key subjects in the form of petty debates between shepherds, and so was used by Spenser as a device to frame his life’s work.<sup>32</sup> Anne Lake Prescott performs the heroic task of covering the substantial number of Spenser’s shorter poems in a single essay. As has often been pointed out, many of these would be much better known had Spenser not written *The Faerie Queene*, and even without his *magnum opus*, Spenser would still have had a legitimate claim to be the most important Elizabethan non-dramatic poet. Prescott discusses the *Complaints*, ‘Teares of the Muses’, ‘Virgil’s Gnat’, ‘Ruines of Rome’, ‘Muipotmos’, ‘Visions of the Worlds Vanitie’, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, *Fowre Hymnes*, and *Prothalamion*,

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showing how carefully and deliberately Spenser made use of his knowledge of classical and contemporary European poetry. While always aware of his debt to other writers, Spenser is often keen to rewrite, rethink and revise previous work, sometimes respectfully, sometimes parodically.

The two essays on *The Faerie Queene* try to cover the vast range of the work to give readers a sense of its overall content and structure. Susanne Wofford analyses the first edition of the poem in terms of its representation of the Faery Queen, an epic and romance tradition, classical and Christian writing, and theories of allegory. Reading a carefully selected series of episodes, as a means of demonstrating the demands Spenser places upon his readers, Wofford shows how both characters and readers become entangled in the poet's 'darke conceit'. The poem's endless deferral of meaning is not simply a sign that we must always fall prey to the wiles of a fallen language that cannot express God's grace and glory, but also a means of representing the attributes of the deity, which is why, according to Wofford, Spenser is so keen to draw attention to his narrative mode. Andrew Hadfield argues that Books IV–VII reveal a funnelling outwards of Spenser's concerns as he revises the conclusions made in the first three books, in accordance with a preconceived plan, as a response to changed circumstances and the development of his ideas, or, most probably, a mixture of both. Often the reader is forced to go back to the first edition of the poem and rethink apparent certainties established there as the poem's unfinished quest advances. Eventually, it is unclear whether Spenser simply ran out of energy and time, or whether he had concluded that the poem was impossible to complete. Whatever the truth, *The Faerie Queene* ends with the real fear that the forces of civilisation may not be strong enough to overcome the forces of chaos and darkness.

There are three chapters dealing with the historical context, the first by David Baker on the English and European social and political context, which highlights political theory as well as individual events. Baker judiciously selects a series of key texts that informed Spenser's political thinking – Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*, and Jean Bodin's *Six Books of a Commonweal* – in order to show how Spenser's political thought processes worked, as well as demonstrating his main influences. Richard McCabe's chapter is concerned with Spenser's relationship with Ireland, which has undoubtedly been the biggest growth area in Spenser studies in the last two decades.<sup>33</sup> McCabe shows how deeply Irish culture – in Irish as well as English – influenced Spenser's writing, as well as illuminating the effects Ireland itself had on English writers who lived there. Linda Gregerson's chapter on the sexual politics of Spenser's writing seeks to locate his work in terms of the Petrarchan poetry which dominated love



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poetry in Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century. Spenser has been alternately condemned as a misogynist writer by critics, and praised for his subtle understanding of gender. Gregerson argues that while Spenser may have had a sympathetic and complex appreciation of the limited role afforded to women in Petrarchan discourse, he was troubled – as were most of his male contemporaries – by the question of female rule.

Two chapters detail Spenser's literary contexts and influences, while Paul Alpers demonstrates the extent and significance of Spenser's influence on English literature. Colin Burrow shows the vibrancy of the classical tradition with which Spenser worked. Although Spenser cannot be said to have followed a Virgilian literary career path, as some have argued, Burrow makes it clear that he used Virgil and pseudo-Virgilian poems at key points in his writing. Indeed, Spenser was carefully engaged in European debates about the significance of Virgil's works. Equally, he was sympathetic to Ovid, the poet of exile whose work can be balanced against Virgil's poems of empire. Burrow shows how Spenser both used and complicated such obvious divisions. Roland Greene shows how Spenser has been erroneously read as an English poet when he should be read as a central voice in a European tradition, a problem caused by our post-Enlightenment concentration on national boundaries. Spenser read widely in French, Italian, Dutch and Spanish literature from his teenage years onwards, moving happily from one form and style to another as even the most basic comparative investigation will reveal. His work makes use of episodes that are 'the common property of a continuous European literary culture' (p. 241). Paul Alpers, revising Harold Bloom, distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' adaptations of Spenser from the early seventeenth century to the twentieth. He shows how Marlowe, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats and Yeats all struggle with Spenser's influence and respond to the ideas, style and form of their illustrious precursor to produce 'strong' re-readings of Spenser's poetry in their own work. In contrast, the seventeenth-century 'Spenserians' (notably Giles Fletcher), James Thomson and William Shenstone produce 'weak' responses to Spenser, often allowing their poetic master to swamp their own individual style.

Richard Rambuss analyses Spenser's life and career in order to demonstrate that Spenser was probably as interested in his professional life as he was in writing poetry. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two aspects of his life, as writing poetry was frequently a means of obtaining a job, or a method of advancement.<sup>34</sup> Willy Maley examines the question of Spenser's language and concludes that just as there is a close relationship between Spenser's career as a poet and a civil servant and landowner, so there is between the formal and political concerns of his writing. Maley

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provides further evidence to complement McCabe's claims, suggesting that Spenser needs to be considered as much in the context of the British Isles and its regions as within the confines of the London court. John King examines the question of Spenser's religious beliefs to show how Spenser's understanding of current theological debates structures many of Spenser's major works. Indeed, poems such as 'Mother Hubberds Tale' have to be read as active contributions to religious controversies.

Edmund Spenser is a major English and European Renaissance poet. His complex and diverse output deserves to be read on a number of counts, leaving aside its formal and aesthetic merits: for what it reveals about the complexities of the intellectual milieu of English writers at the end of the sixteenth century; for its vigorous experimentalism; for its political acumen and involvement in contemporary issues; for its acute and ambiguous analysis of sex and gender; and for its active engagement with a colonised Irish culture, to name but a few of the many strands in Spenser's work. Indeed, it is not surprising that Spenser has been claimed as a central part of an English, Irish and Anglo-Irish literary tradition, nor that the most famous poet writing in English today, Seamus Heaney, has felt the need to respond to Spenser's presence.<sup>35</sup> If this companion helps to persuade readers that Spenser's work has a relevance as part of a living as well as a historical tradition, then it will have served its purpose.

#### NOTES

- 1 My thanks to Claire Jowitt and Ray Ryan for comments on an earlier version of this essay. Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 10 May 1917; Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 457.
- 2 Owen undoubtedly has in mind the description of the barge of Phaedria (*FQ*, II, vi), or the passage of Guyon and the Palmer onto Acrasia's island (*FQ*, II, xii).
- 3 Cited in Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 28.
- 4 Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 1.
- 5 Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Pope, Alexander', in *Spenser Encyclopedia*, pp. 555–6; Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1963), pp. 28–30; John Killham, 'Tennyson and Victorian Social Values', in D. J. Palmer, ed., *Tennyson: Writers and their Background* (London: Bell, 1973), pp. 147–79, at p. 178; Bernard Begonzi, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 5.
- 6 See Andrew Hadfield, ed., *Edmund Spenser*, Longman Critical Readers (Harlow: Longman, 1996), p. 4.
- 7 See Brenda M. Hosington and Anne Shaver, 'The Faerie Queene, Children's Versions', in *Spenser Encyclopedia*, pp. 289–91.
- 8 Hosington and Shaver, 'The Faerie Queene, Children's Versions', p. 289.