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**EDMUND SPENSER'S  
«FAERIE QUEENE»: LOST  
WORLD LITERATURE AND  
FLOURISHING CRITICAL  
PARADIGM  
(«Королева фей»  
Эдмунда Спенсера)**

Предлагается новый вариант прочтения поэмы Э. Спенсера с точки зрения современных тенденций в гуманитарных науках, причем особый акцент делается на попытку преодолеть традиционную дихотомию поэзии и политики.

**Ключевые слова:** Эдмунд Спенсер, «Королева фей», эпическая поэма, Возрождение, гуманизм, история английской литературы, современные тенденции литературоведения, литературная классика, жанровые каноны, преподавание литературы.

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It has been said a long time ago that books have their fate. They have, and it is very much like the destiny of man. They share with us the great incertitude of ignominy or glory — of severe justice and senseless persecution — of calumny and misunderstanding — the shame of undeserved success. [...] No secret of eternal life for our books can be found amongst the formulas of art [...] because the formulas of art are dependent on things variable, unstable and untrustworthy; on human sympathies, on prejudices, on likes and dislikes, on the sense of virtue and the sense of propriety, on beliefs and theories that, indestructible in themselves, always change their form — often in the lifetime of one fleeting generation.

(Joseph Conrad, "Books": 1905)

**The critical paradigm**

Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* provides a fine test case for Conrad's statement about the insecure fate of books. The discrepancy between a lacking general readership of the epic poem and its continuing and widening critical reception has been a phenomenon since the 1970s at the latest, and not only in Britain (cf. also R.M. Cummings about the clash between 17<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spenser criticism [1995: 1]). Peter Bayley (1971), Harold Bloom (1986), Donald Stump (1992) and Andrew Hadfield (1996) shall be referred to here as four representative critical

voices that expressed their concern about a growing clash in twentieth-century Spenserian criticism between the decreasing reception by the general reader and the increasing reception by scholars and critics, professors and students. This, to use a phrase by Andrew Hadfield, characterizes «Spenser's paradoxically canonical yet marginalised role — an unread 'classic'» [Hadfield, 1996: 3].

In Germany, the situation as to the reception of Spenser is yet more pointed because English is a foreign language here. Additionally, the German Spenser reception is different also from the German Shakespeare reception: In college and university classrooms Shakespeare's works are currently read in English, whereas elderly Germans still take resort to the charming German translations provided by famous German classical and Romantic poets. The artistic qualities of these translations make them stand out as unique creative achievements of *German* poetry so that the British genius is almost felt to be a *German* poet and playwright. Besides, Shakespeare has been firmly integrated into German criticism and scholarship over the centuries. By contrast, there is no chance at all of a general readership of Spenser's works at present. There are various reasons for that, among them lacking translations. "Attempts at translation were made in the *Teutscher Merkur* (1788) and the *Deutsche [sic!] Monatsschrift* (1795)," reads R.M. Cumming's comment on German translations of Spenser [Cumming, 1995: 26]. I have only come across one translation of the five first cantos of Book I of *The Faerie Queene: Fünf Gesänge der Feenkönigin von Edmund Spenser*. In freier metrischer Übertragung von Dr. G. Schwetschke. Halle 1854. Additionally, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is not even widely read in the original by students and scholars of English literature in Germany. In the context of describing the changes in and tasks of modern literary scholarship, of pointing out the necessity to explore the reasons for critical judgments on literature, and addressing the issue of the literary canon, Karl Heinz Göller in 1975 therefore not unreasonably suspected that *The Faerie Queene* belonged to the canon still only because nobody found time to read it once more so that its status as a classic stood as yet unquestioned [Göller, 1975: 41]. His statement is in agreement with a later one by Terry Eagleton on the issue of the literary canon: "But it does mean that the so-called 'literary canon', the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature', has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time." (Eagleton 1996: 10) Only recently the scholarly interest in Spenser has been revived in British Literary and Cultural Studies in Germany due to the growing significance of feminist, cultural, and postcolonial studies. The more welcome and important it is to see some of his major works (selections from *The Shepherd's Calendar*, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Prothalamion*) recommended for German students of English literature [cf. Jansohn et al., 1995: 34]. A full reading of the 3.848 stanzas of *The Faerie Queene*, however, would be a too ambitious and, besides, unrealistic enterprise.

In contrast to Germany, the reception history of Spenser in Great Britain is long-established and heterogeneous. Many of the most important writers in the English language studied, praised or condemned him/his works for various reasons, according to their individual bias and/or the prevailing notions of their times. Writers, critics and scholars left a rich corpus of secondary literature which offers a huge variety of opinions and judgments. A closer study of the dynamics of that history makes it evident that the critical paradigm of Spenser evaluations has kept changing almost every fifty years, and in the twentieth century yet more rapidly [cf. Bimberg, 1981].

Compared once more to the Shakespeare paradigm, the Spenser paradigm exhibits dissimilarities as well as similarities. It is dissimilar in the sense that in Shakespeare's case drama had to lose its inferior status as entertainment first and gain the higher status of literature before the English playwright could become a *literary* classic. The critical assessments undertaken by John Dryden [cf. Bimberg, 1995], Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson [cf. Bimberg, 1986 und 1987] are important landmarks in this process. In his own time Shakespeare ranked below Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher. By contrast, Spenser achieved recognition as a major *poet* in his lifetime already. The similarities in the reception history of both writers become evident in various parallel critical approaches and judgments, for example those by Pope and Johnson when weighing up the so-called virtues and defects of modern writers.

The reasons why the current Spenser reception, compared with Shakespeare, is so difficult may be seen in the fact that (apart from quantitative factors such as the length of works) Shakespeare escapes political or ideological classification more easily and allows for more interpretative freedom on the recipient's part. Especially Shakespeare's plays appear as more modern and appealing than Spenser's epic poem. This is due to various factors: the different generic conventions, structures and systems of communication inherent in drama and poetry, and the qualities of universality or historicity in the construction of the works' meanings. In a play, we hear multiple voices, experience various perspectives on an issue, a presentation of various points of view as expressed by different dramatic personae. In contrast to that, the reader of an epic poem is more strongly guided by the comments and points-of-view of the lyrical subject, which often reflect the writer's personal stance. Furthermore, the plurimedial qualities of plays and the internal and external dramatic/theatrical communication make for more openness in recipients' responses, invite them to fill the lacunae with their individual associations, allow them more space for forming their own opinions, and stimulate idiosyncratic readings more easily. Last but not least Shakespeare's representations seem to be more universal and timeless, whereas Spenser's appear as more time- and culture-bound, more strictly historical.

However, if one follows the critical reception of Spenser until the present one is impressed by its diversity and burgeoning interests. Spenser studies, like Shakespeare studies, have made ample use of text-, author-, context- and reader-oriented critical approaches. We find textual criticism, readings of individual works, biographical studies, historical criticism, theoretically informed studies etc.. Spenser and his oeuvre have been subject to studies from the perspectives of various theories such as Literary Positivism, psychoanalytical criticism, Historical Criticism, Marxist Theory, New Criticism, Reader-Response Theory, New Historicism, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Cultural Materialism, feminist, gender, postcolonial, gender, and cultural studies. At the same time a closer look reveals that critics and scholars have been polarized in their responses. The dichotomy of poetry vs. politics or aesthetics vs. ethics forms a major dividing line in Spenserian criticism. Respective opinions start in Spenser's time and continue into our own. Just look at the characteristic phrases that critics have coined over time to characterize the writer, e.g. Anne Clifford's "the Prince of Poets in hys time", Gabriel Harvey's "learned Shepheard", William Camden's "the prince of the English poets of our age", Thomas Nashe's "Virgil of England", Michael Drayton's "Grave morrall Spenser", John Milton's "our sage and serious Poet Spencer [...] a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas", Karl Marx's "Elizabeth's arse-kissing poet" or Simon Shepherd's "penpusher in the service of imperialism".

When I was working on my dissertation at the end of the 1970s, this controversy was at its very height. The contrast between poetry and politics constructed by quite a number of scholars and critics had been standing unquestioned for some time, but I grew very suspicious about it soon. Time was ripe to check these assumptions and give it a fresh reflection.

### **Poetry and politics in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*: tensions between utopia and history, ideal and reality, humanism and political pragmatism**

In the course of my own Spenser research I finally arrived at the conclusion that the above stated contrast between poetry and politics so much made of in criticism was actually untenable and needed to be revised. The issue had in fact been wrongly put all the time: It is *not* the case that Spenser's views and stance as a poet contrast vehemently with his views as a politician. The contrast does not consist between *The Faerie Queene* and *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1633). Rather, Spenser's views as a human being and his views as a politician and government official contrast strongly — but these contradictions trouble the poet Spenser and are fully embodied and given voice to in his poetry. Moreover, Spenser's 'politics' is not a matter exclusively of Book V in *The Faerie Queene* into which the poet integrated his political experiences in Ireland particularly

strongly. Rather, Spenser's poetry, the whole *Faerie Queene*, integrates his political positions and attitudes so provoking for current readers and fully reflects them with all their inherent tensions and contradictions. His poetry is therefore no less controversial or debatable than his politics. The epic poem and the political tract can well and must indeed be used for mutual illumination.

Consequently, my own view of Spenser [cf. Binder, 1979 and 1980, Bimberg, 1989] places him as a major writer whose political attitudes may not agree with current notions of political correctness, but whose poetry gives voice to and reflects upon the socio-cultural conflicts of his time in striking and even provoking ways. Explorations of these literary representations have significant insights to offer — into the complex artistic, socio-cultural, historical, political, philosophical and religious dynamics of the English Renaissance, socio-cultural history at large, the workings of literary criticism, and the colonial and postcolonial discourse. Especially the parallels and differences between Shakespeare and Spenser offer lots of possibilities to expand, correct and revise common images of the Renaissance and come up with more differentiated views about the period. Like Shakespeare, but in completely different ways, Spenser appropriated and recreated the mental and physical reality of the English Renaissance (to some extent also that of antiquity and the medieval period) for his own poetic purposes, artistically shaping and transforming his subject matter into a poetic construct which embodies his own unique world view. This creative product displays both time- and culture-bound notions as well as ideas that transgress the concrete historical conditions and reach into our own time. Spenser's literary representations provoke the discerning reader to think about a whole variety of issues that have always marked outstanding works in the history of both national and world literature: concepts of man and society, the ideal notion of man, the ideal form of government, individual and social values, norms of behaviour, social peace and harmony, personal freedom and its limits, the role of government, the dangers triggered by a misuse of power, the concept of nation-state, conflicts of gender, class, and ethnicity, fundamental issues of identity etc..

In writing *The Faerie Queene* the poet set out "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (*F.Q.*, *A Letter of the Authours*, 15). He chose the well-known, long-lived and popular subject matter of the legend of King Arthur in order to mediate to his readers in allegorical form contemporary values of living and education. Wanting to address the learned reading audiences of his time, the aristocracy and the upper-middle classes, with the intention of contributing to their moral improvement [cf. Greenblatt, 1980 on the Renaissance self-fashioning of the gentleman], he made deliberate use of the genre of the epic poem. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) would actually be the next and last successful effort to create a grand national epic

bound up with the normative and social functions of literature, before the newly emerging genre of the novel would take over, continue and diversify these narrative traditions and strategies for reading audiences with different social backgrounds.

Not surprisingly an infinite number of studies has been produced on the six virtues that Spenser managed to incorporate into the epic before his death in 1599: holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice and courtesy (the original scheme was much more elaborate). However, the emphasis on these single character traits, human qualities, skills or attitudes, should not make us blind to the extremely important coherence between them, i.e. the interrelationship between these individual normative values and Spenser's general concept of the ideal of man. In their entirety the virtues represent Spenser's ideal of man as he conceived of it under the political and socio-cultural conditions prevailing at the end of the sixteenth century in England and Ireland (and on the European continent).

The English Renaissance as a historical period of transition from a feudal to a bourgeois/early-capitalist society was an age characterized by such heterogeneous forces and intellectual stimuli as humanism, the Reformation, and the geographical discovery and exploration of the New World. Shakespeare's works reflect the cultural and ideological diversity of his time through poetical and dramatic/theatrical representations of conflicting, i.e. backward, conventional or more modern/progressive views, attitudes and stances. Spenser does no more and no less than that: he presents contemporary political, ideological, and social conflicts that are characteristic for that transitional period. To brand him, who lived in the same historical period and also discussed the challenges of his time, as a backward or conservative writer from the start, who glorified outmoded feudal ideals, would be a simplistic and reductive approach. The contrast between Shakespeare and Spenser is constituted by various differences consisting in the individual circumstances of the authors' lives, in the political convictions formed and expressed, and the modes of presentation employed.

Spenser offers a kind of political compromise as a 'solution' for the various conflicts that England was facing at the end of the sixteenth century. This becomes evident in his reshaping the ideal of the feudal knight, which is recreated and modified in *The Faerie Queene* in view of the emergence of early capitalism in Britain: Spenser fashions and furnishes the ideal of the feudal knight with character traits and characteristics of activity that are less significant for facing the challenges of the medieval period and the feudal world, but much more relevant for tackling the conflicts of the transition from feudalism to early capitalism. He keeps his heroes getting involved in adventures and going on quests such as redressing injustice in the service to a ruler or a gentle lady. They engage in conquests, defences (cf. the episodes with Artegall and Irena; Arthur

and Sultan; Britomart and Radigund; Artegall, Arthur and Samient; Artegall, Arthur and Guyle; Artegall and Burbon; Artegall and Belge) and wars and aid and rescue weaker people. Yet all these stories have their specific historical, political and religious implications. Significantly, the allegories of *The Faerie Queene* place the protagonists within the contemporary context of England's development into a nation state. The epic heroes and heroines defend the economic and political stability and independence of England and its national security by defeating and/or destroying class as well as foreign enemies.

Spenser's heroes (to some extent also his heroines, for instance Britomart) are therefore champions and advocates of feudal as well as already capitalist and national interests. Apart from their personal loyalty to feudal lords and their military protection of them, other motives are already becoming central, such as safeguarding the welfare and progress of the whole country and securing a strong central political rule. The historical situation of England's growing political, economic, and religious conflicts with other developing European nation-states (e.g. Spain, France, the Netherlands) and its colonies (Ireland), heightened the challenge yet. Fulfilling these tasks required an increasing amount of willingness and readiness in the protagonists to take personal risks. Consequently, the danger of a loss of power and status in the case of failure increased tremendously. The expansion of the ideal of the feudal/medieval knight by the character trait of national consciousness (to the disadvantage of the Irish, the colonial other, and other foreigners on the European continent) is shown in a particularly impressive way in *The Faerie Queene* in many battle scenes, in the protagonists' motivation for battle, their high preparedness for taking action. Especially Britomart, Artegall and Arthur offer numerous examples in this respect. They are aware of the fact that their victory or defeat is going to impact the fortune or fate of their country decisively.

More concretely, Spenser provides his heroes and his female knight, Britomart, with virtues and qualities that he regarded as indispensable at the time of the emergence of the social system of early capitalism and the political system of the modern nation state. On the one hand, his protagonists have to help to shake off the fetters of feudalism, on the other they have to forestall the negative effects of early capitalist developments. Their range of activities is therefore much broader, more varied and much more challenging than that of the knight at a feudal court; they are, as it were, 'global players' of early modernity already. Moreover, only those knights are praised and glorified in *The Faerie Queene* that lead an active life and are committed to missions serving the general welfare or do not behave selfishly at least. Spenser's model knights are those who do not strive for personal enrichment, social or political advantages, and who risk their lives for aims that go far beyond the satisfaction of strictly personal or private desires.

Historical models for such heroes were probably provided to some extent by

personages like Sidney, Raleigh, Dudley, Devereux and other noblemen whose achievements were well-known to Spenser through his personal contacts with them or with the court of Elizabeth I. Spenser's ideal of man is represented by the national-conscious aristocrat, to some extent also the middle-class citizen. The compromise in Spenser's concept of virtue, which according to his representations is the result both of noble *birth* and useful *activity* or personal achievement, can in fact be seen as an expression of the poet's intermediate position of socially locating the seat of virtue somewhere between nobility (or the upper classes) and the middle classes.

The particular selection and construction of Spenser's virtues reveals the impact of the social reality of his time on his ethic notions and moral concepts. They indicate that Spenser sought to come to terms with trends in his environment that he was dissatisfied with, regarded as dangerous or even condemned: *Holiness*, which was no special virtue in Thomas Aquinas yet (only that man could be holy who had achieved all the other virtues named by him), appeals to readers at the end of the sixteenth century, when lots of challenging ideas and events had shaken the medieval world picture long since, to respect divine authority for the sake of maintaining the security of secular rule in England. *Temperance* demands self-restraint from the citizens as a presupposition for fulfilling those tasks important for the progress of the nation. *Chastity* encourages the women (at least those of aristocratic birth) to join in these tasks and activities within prescribed limits. *Friendship* and *justice* are an expression of the desire for social harmony in the conflict-shaken period of transition from medieval to early modern. *Courtesy* sees to it that the differences prevailing between the social classes are respected and kept. Observing the demands of this virtue means aiming to prevent radical changes within the social order and hierarchy. The nature of courtesy thus approaches that of holiness; a circle is closed thematically.

The increasing complexity, broadening spheres of activity, and growing degree of effectiveness of the individual virtues demonstrate their climactic ascent towards Spenser's general ideal of man and society as characterized by socio-political and religious harmony in the nation-state, i.e. law and order, stability, and security. The hierarchy of 'order and degree' has to be maintained in this ideal, yet its achievement calls for the active engagement of the citizens to some extent as well.

Obviously Spenser arrived at these conclusions by way of incorporating the results of his own alert perception of and reaction to the economic, political and ideological changes in his home country as well as in some neighbouring countries. Additionally he made use of a number of highly diverse old and contemporary ethic theories fusing them in a unique poetic vision. His concept of virtue thus presents an idiosyncratic synthesis of ancient and Christian-



humanist ideas that displays both aristocratic as well as specifically national features and qualities. The most delicate point in that ethic system is his notion of what virtue is and who can achieve it. These definitions reflect indeed his own social position and personal world view: In Spenser virtue is indicative of a noble mind, but it is presented as bound up lastly with noble birth, probably because the poet was afraid of revolutionary impulses for radical social changes had he chosen to propagate the equality of all people on the basis of the same skills and achievements. Virtue in Spenser is thus a contradictory, ambivalent combination of divine gift and human achievement which integrates emotional, rational and habitual aspects and components. The addressees of his epic and its ethic requests were probably mainly the aristocracy and the upper-middle classes of his time.

The special character of Spenser's conception of virtue, which has also pantheistic touches, is the result of his ambivalent position as to the question of the shape and course of human life in a world shown ultimately to be determined by divine authority. It is also a consequence of his conflict between acknowledgement of divine omnipotence and arbitrariness on the one hand, and emphasis on man's own responsibility, the necessity of self-reliant, independent/autonomous and responsible action, and man's capability for it on the other. The 'solution' offered by Spenser after all agrees with the contemporary state of home affairs and the conditions of domestic power (the modern term would be 'the Elizabethan compromise between Crown, aristocracy and middle classes'): The citizens are to use their power and skills within a certain frame of action set by God and secular government respectively, for the sake of the nation, i.e. mainly the ruling classes. In this they are neither to be too passive nor too bravely aspiring in order to keep the social balance, to maintain the existing order, and shape it in a way acceptable for the upper and the middle classes.

Due to the humanist erudition of Spenser it comes as no surprise to the reader that he contrasts the corrupted morals of the majority of his contemporaries with the supposedly perfect virtuousness of the Golden Age of antiquity, which is idealized by him. According to him this virtuousness is only surpassed yet by perfect virtuousness in heaven. On earth, in his historical present, Spenser only finds a few traces left of the virtuous living flourishing in antiquity - at the court of Elizabeth I, which is imitated and recreated by him in an idealized form in the fairy court of Gloriana. Spenser's ideal of the fairy court reconciles the contrast between heaven and earth, the Golden Age of antiquity and Elizabethan England. Taking his starting point from social reality, Spenser artistically heightens those phenomena in his poetic rendition that he is enthusiastic about (e.g. the growth of knowledge; the increase in education; the refinements of art and culture; the expansion of the range of human activities through discoveries and conquests; the economic, political and military victories over rivalling

nation-states etc.) and thus contrasts them more strongly with those aspects that he regards as negative (e.g. social instability; materialistic greed; the impact of money on human relationships etc.). By way of inviting and encouraging his contemporary readers to imitate the deeds of his model protagonists Spenser aims to let his ideal of man and society become social reality.

Apart from the fact that this concept and these poetic/narrative strategies contain strong didactic impulses (pragmatic conception of literature, effects on readers), his whole epic poem is thus characterized by stances, attitudes and positions that are conflicting with each other. The special effect of the interaction of poetry and politics in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is visible in the tension between utopia and history, ideal and reality, humanism and political pragmatism: His heroes and heroines fulfil the artistic function of mediators in this contrast between reality and ideal. As literary constructs they approach the absolute (humanist/utopian) ideal of heavenly perfection in virtue with the help of God and other human beings, trusting in their own capabilities and effectiveness, yet without being able to fully achieve that ideal on earth: They remain human beings that are subject to short-comings, mistakes and failure. Utopia, poetry's very own unique creative potential, is reduced in the end to what is historically possible or already achieved.

Spenser emphasizes the contrast. He juxtaposes his ideal representations with examples taken from the rough social reality of his time. The pastoral idyll of Book VI for example is destroyed by the invasion of the robbing and slave-trading brigants. The fact that Spenser shows not only positive and harmonious phenomena, but simultaneously provides his readers with contrasts existing in social reality as well, reveals him as a writer fully capable of expressing diverse views and also social critique.

In all this Spenser does not plead the case for unrestricted human liberty. His critical remarks and suggestions for alteration, correction and improvement do not encroach upon the foundation of the existing political, economic and social conditions. As to such fundamental issues as the political rule of the country, the state religion or foreign politics he largely agrees with the opinions shared and the course of action taken by the ruling classes in England then, probably not out of hypocrisy, but due to his own insights, views and patriotic convictions from whose literary presentation, however, he was hoping to gain success and preferment. His ideal of man is restricted in its attainability to those who actually participated in the rule of England and Ireland, and his ideal of society largely justifies the prevailing conditions and sanctions the historical status quo. The characteristic contrast often emphasized by Spenser between his ideal notions and socio-political reality (which he wishes to reduce through the education towards virtuousness) and the fact that he desires no significant changes nonetheless, extends through the whole epic. The whole *Faerie Queene*

thus reveals considerable contradictions and tensions.

To what extent it dawned upon the poet (half a century before the English Revolution) that the social contrasts could no longer be concealed, reconciled or smoothed over and would finally deprive his ideal projections of their last chance for practical realization, cannot be said with certainty. Spenser may have been convinced of the power of poetry, yet he does not give in to a euphoric delusion about the ethic, moral or didactic potential of effectiveness of his epic for changing the world for the better: Book VI, dedicated to the virtue of Courtesy, culminates dramatically in the inexorable early-capitalist reality violently forcing its entry into the idyll of the shepherds' contemplative life to which the Knight of Courtesy had retreated temporarily. The climax in Meliboe's statement that "each hath his fortune in his breast" (*FQ*, Book VI, Canto IX, stanza 29, line 9) is followed by the murder of the shepherd. Obviously man was not ready and prepared yet to rise completely above 'God-given' circumstances. The early-capitalist development swept over those people who meant to find peace, harmony and security by keeping aloof from it.

Spenser's concept of virtue is ultimately bound up with an ideal of society that clearly reflects concrete features of the historical reality of his time. At a closer look it seems as if the poet managed to reconcile his ideal notions with the social and political conditions/the requirements of contemporary England without, however, finding it in his heart to fully smooth over the remaining inconsistencies, problems, and difficulties.

### **Current trends in Spenser scholarship and criticism**

Spenser has provided and still provides ample opportunity for scholars and critics to test their critical and theoretical assumptions on him. He continues to invite sophisticated work-oriented as well as extensive context-oriented studies. Twentieth-century scholarship and criticism in particular have demonstrated an impressive variety of critical approaches to Spenser caused by rapid developments in literary theory and provoked last but not least by the complexity of Spenser's oeuvre itself, which in its turn continues to offer methodological challenges. Harold Bloom may have had reason enough to speak of "the increasingly ephemeral role of Spenser even among academics" in the middle of the 1980s (Bloom 1986: 1), nonetheless the currently flourishing critical paradigm is evident in a number of recent developments in Spenser scholarship and criticism.

#### ***1. New biographical research on Spenser***

After years of a differently focused research Spenser, the man and author, has been rediscovered. His image is being recreated and modified. Whereas in

Shakespeare research attempts to either reconstruct the playwright's life from his works or to interpret his works autobiographically proved to be a critical dead end, the respective efforts undertaken in the research on Spenser (cf. Rambuss 1996: 2-3) were crowned with more success, but have had their short-comings as well. For quite a number of scholars A.C. Judson's *The Life of Edmund Spenser* from 1945 still stands out as the standard modern biography of Spenser, but its limitations have been sufficiently pointed out [cf. Brink, 1991: 155-56 and Brink, 1994: 201; Hadfield (ed.), 2001: 34; Burrow, 112]. In 1994 Willy Maley undertook an attempt in his *Spenser Chronology* to redress the "lack of a proper synthesis of the literary life of Spenser [...] and the historical life of Spenser" [Maley, 1994: xiii]. In 1996 Richard Rambuss pleaded for an abandonment of the dangerous approach of using Spenser's poetry as a "starting point for our critical and biographical approaches to him [because it] championed the poetical Spenser by effacing other aspects of his life and career." [Rambuss, 1996: 16/17]. He criticized the positivistic, „old-historicist“ accounts of Spenser's biography and stressed the need to decenter „the poetic Spenser“ and place him in a colonial and bureaucratic context [Rambuss, 1996: 2]. His studies exemplify the revival of biographical research on Spenser with different methods, foci and new results that plead for a de-canonization of Spenser and a new discussion of canon issues in general.

New Historicist studies in particular have added significant insights as to the position of the professional poet in the English Renaissance society. Gary Waller regards this aspect of Renaissance and especially of Spenser studies as very rewarding and refers to Richard Helgerson's special contribution to it [Waller, 1994: 6]. He particularly mentions Helgerson's article "The New Poet Presents Himself: Spenser and the Idea of a Literary Career" from 1978 in this respect. This particular development in Spenser research seems to parallel a trend that Kevin L. Cope regards as significant and symptomatic in current American eighteenth-century studies [cf. e.g. new biographies of Dryden, Pope, Defoe, Fielding and other writers; Cope, 1992: 43].

## ***2. The intersection of biographical research and other branches of Spenser research***

As has become evident above already, current biographical research on Spenser is frequently not undertaken for biography's sake, but because of its bearing upon other branches, fields and areas of research. Revisionary views of Spenser's career led to differentiated assessments in other fields too. One excellent recent example for a particularly prolific and rewarding intersection of biography, textual history, cultural poetics, and textual politics is pointed out by Jean R. Brink. Tracing the history of the first printing of *Complaints*, he questions, modifies and reinterprets the results of earlier studies by Richard

Helgerson (1983), Jonathan Goldberg (1981) and Thomas H. Cain (ed.: 1989) in the sense that Spenser, though he engaged in literary self-presentation, exercised no total control over the publication of his works. Brink refutes the traditional assumption that Spenser was in London while *Complaints* was printed and therefore authorized it [Brink, 1991: 153-68]. Furthermore, he makes a special point of criticizing once more the fact that “In scholarship on Spenser, bibliography and biography are used to reinforce each other.” [Brink 1991: 163]. A similar intersection of biography and interpretation is demonstrated by Brink in a later article where he is concerned with exploring the impact of the discovery of several Chancery Bills in the Irish National Archives on Spenser’s biography (clarification of important facts relating to his marriages; provision of a more accurate context for interpreting surviving records concerning suits and property transactions) and the interpretation of his works, e.g. *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (Brink 1994: 203, 206, 207), and also by Donald Bruce in two articles from 1994 and 1995.

### ***3. Re-assessments of the impact of Spenser’s Irish experiences on his poetry***

It cannot be denied that the special quality of the relationship between the life and the writing provoked the dichotomy between ethic and aesthetic judgments so characteristic throughout the reception history of Spenser, triggered heated discussions and polarized scholars and critics. It were particularly the studies and opinions of W.B. Yeats and C.S. Lewis [cf. Hadfield, 1996: 6], so influential for twentieth-century Spenser criticism, that helped to disseminate and cement the characteristic dichotomy. The attempts by writers, scholars and critics to come to terms with Spenser the person and the heterogeneous and complex character of his oeuvre unfortunately often resulted in rather limited/one-sided studies which did not sufficiently take into account the historical conditions of the time, i.e. did not judge the author and his works in the context of his own time. They often praised Spenser’s poetic achievements while condemning his political attitudes and positions. Ciarán Brady interpreted the phenomenon in 1986 as the result of efforts undertaken by scholars to come to terms with Spenser’s conflicting ideas by strictly separating them from each other [Brady, 1986: 17]. F.I. Carpenter had reflected on the contrasting images of Spenser as poet and civil servant at the beginning of the 1920s already. Because of this characteristic contrast he recognized the greater importance (in comparison with Chaucer) of dealing with Spenser’s career as an office-holder for coming to terms with the poet [Carpenter, 1922: 405]. It is remarkable that only since the 1980s Spenser research seems to have begun to take this hint at the interrelationship between colonial post and poetic career more seriously. My own doctoral dissertation

completed at an East-German university in 1980 was in fact undertaken precisely with that scholarly desideratum in mind. It offered more tolerant views on Spenser, pointing out the intricate connections between poetry and politics, acknowledging the contradictoriness and complexity of his positions, and taking into account the unique qualities of the various poetic, historical, and political text sorts. Regrettably, several factors prevented these ideas from being made public to the international scientific community: At the time of the Cold-War Era mutual communication between Spenserians in the East and in the West was difficult. Today, in times of the global village, it seems as if paradoxically enough language barriers still prevent English-speaking scholars from considering results of German research ...

However, up from the 1980s stronger attempts can be discerned in scholarship and criticism to overcome the dichotomy between poetry and politics. This is also due to the bearing of new biographical research on other branches of Spenser research outlined above. Studies of this kind have become particularly productive through exploring the interrelationship between laureateship, patronage, politics, and the heterogeneous discourse on Ireland at the end of the sixteenth century. Significant contributions in this area have been made in different ways particularly by Stephen Greenblatt (1980), Ciarán Brady (1986 and 1988), N.P. Canny (1988), Simon Shepherd (1989), Richard Rambuss (1993 and 1996), Gary Waller (1994), Willy Maley (1994 and 1997), Colin Burrow (1996), Christopher Highley (1997), Andrew Hadfield (1996, 1997, 2001), Anne Fogarty (1996) and Julia Reinhard Lupton (1996).

#### ***4. The application of the latest trends in literary theory to Spenser***

As has become evident from the preceding observations, Spenser continues to be a target for the application of the latest trends in literary theory or, as Andrew Hadfield has put it: “[...] Spenser criticism is inextricably bound up with some important modern movements in literary and cultural analysis.” [Hadfield, 1996: 17] Major recent contributions include studies by Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Greenblatt, Richard Helgerson, Harry Berger Jr. (1988), and Louis Adrian Montrose (1986 and 1990). Among the topics researched on in most recent times are for instance issues of gender, class, ethnicity, identity, power, and ideology.

The research on Spenser has indeed become much more intricate and sophisticated during the 1980s and 1990s. Generally speaking a renewed interest in issues of history within literary studies in the Renaissance can be observed. In American New Historicism and British Cultural Materialism this has led to a historical re-situation of canonical literary texts. Louis Montrose describes this process in his essay “Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History” as a textual construction of critics who are themselves historical subjects,

according to the general belief in the historicity of texts and the textuality of history [Montrose, 1986: 5–8, 11]. Andrew Hadfield confirms this trend in Spenser criticism:

It is important to recognise that a history of Spenser criticism in the twentieth century tells a strange, circular story which does not conform to the narrative of “shock of the new” iconoclasm sweeping away the cobwebs of bourgeois liberal humanism’, beloved of some radical literary guides. In many ways what has happened has been something of a return to the contextualising criticism which led to the *Variorum Edition* (1932-49) [Hadfield, 1996: 4]

### **5. Spenser’s integration into teaching programmes**

Additionally to research, a new dimension has been added to the critical paradigm more recently by the integration of Spenser into the teaching programmes of British Literary and Cultural Studies. Once Spenser is no longer regarded as an *infant terrible*, and the more intricate correlation between his poetry and his political views is grasped and studied, the way is open for exploring timely ways of sensitively and competently teaching him at college/university. This addresses issues of reading curriculum, course design, and methods of teaching, i.e. literary didactics — a field no less demanding and requiring no less ingenuity on the part of the teaching staff. The more so because only through encouraging the present and the future generations of young academic readers the critical paradigm may be kept alive!

A promising step for beginners in teaching as well as long-experienced teaching staff is offered by *Approaches to Teaching Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, edited by David Lee Miller and Alexander Dunlop in 1994. Remarkably enough Spenser is included here in a series devoted to approaches to teaching *world* literature, yet without ignoring the fact that “Spenser has never had the readership other major authors enjoy; [...] *The Faerie Queene* may be the most undervalued classic in the canon of English poetry.” [Miller, Introduction to Miller and Dunlop [eds.] 1994; 40]

The protean quality of Spenser’s work is pointed out to be both a major challenge for and the charm of a better and more frequent teaching. Consequently the publication is realistically seen by its contributors as an introduction to the field rather than a firm precept that could be copied world-wide. The range of suggested topics, methods and approaches is therefore broad and varied, covering aspects of language, cultural and comparative studies, narratology etc. [Miller, Introduction to Miller and Dunlop [eds.] 1994: 37].

As Spenser has provided a life-long training and inspiration for me, I have no doubt that he has a lot to „teach“ to present and future students of English: A dialectical thinking about the correlation between past, present and future and about the continuities, breaks and caesuras of history; an awareness of

the complex reflection of society in literature; historical consciousness; the realization that there are no eternal literary and cultural values that are clearly defined once and for all; an insight into the fascinating transformation processes of cultural identity; an awareness of the critical paradigm; the recognition of the significance of social harmony and justice for democratic societies.

### Conclusion

The turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century has not witnessed a slackening of interest in Spenser studies. It is evident that Spenser keeps on puzzling, irritating, but also inspiring scholars, and there is no reason why this should stop. He provides challenges to scholars' individual notions about literature and its functions, theoretical and critical assumptions, the value of reading literature at all, the relationship of literature and society and many other significant issues.

As a result of studying these recent developments in literary criticism one can say that a timely and competent critical response to Spenser now means to allow for a broad range of diverse meaningful and valid interpretations. This is only right and proper in view of our greater awareness that scholars' and critics' textual readings are informed by their individual premises which are determined by their diverse personal socio-cultural and political backgrounds and their operating in a world of increasing complexity. It is indeed the outspoken value of literary and cultural studies to re-consider and re-evaluate texts, question former assumptions, employ new perspectives and come up with modified insights. This is even more necessary at a time when dramatic social changes are under way worldwide, when the humanities' self-definition is being put to a test, when educational values and principles of democracies are being redefined. The history of Spenserian criticism attests to Spenser's and *The Faerie Queene's* function as critical and theoretical touchstones. This supports the prospect that Spenser will be keeping scholars and students busy and the paradigm of his critical reception alive.

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