

Censorship in Renaissance England

The Fate of Edmund Spenser

Andrew Hadfield

A strong case can be made that the problem of censorship in Renaissance England has often been misunderstood; or, rather, interpretation of the control of published material has been misdirected. Analysis of early modern censorship usually concentrates on the issue of whether the authorities wanted to censor everything and control the freedom of the press, a case put forward a long time ago by F.S. Siebert. Siebert's analysis was refined and expanded by Janet Clare, and rethought and recast by Annabel Patterson, who argued that the issue of censorship established a cat and mouse game between censors and writers, each side understanding the rules of the game (more or less), with problems only occurring when the shared hermeneutic code was violated. For Clare censorship was programmatic and was 'developed alongside other measures which sought to eradicate Catholic iconography and to bring doctrine and ritual into conformity with the new faith' (*Art made Tongue-tied* 23). For Patterson, Elizabethan England developed a culture of '*functional* ambiguity, in which the indeterminacy inveterate to language was fully and knowingly exploited by authors and readers alike (and among those readers, of course, were those who were most interested in control)' (Patterson 18). Clare argues that the rules were by

no means as easy to follow as Patterson assumes, but they both agree on the common culture of shared values that operated under Elizabeth. And as Clare argues in a later essay, censorship had a profound effect on writing: 'It is evident that the concerns of censorship could not have failed to interact with the creativity of practising dramatists and to have induced degrees of compromise, ambiguity and re-presentation of material.' ('Censorship and Negotiation' 29).

Not everyone agreed and a revisionist assault was launched on this mode of thinking, reminding readers that censorship was not, in fact, that extensive in early modern England. Debora Shuger made the case that the censors were really concerned to prevent defamation and slander, rather than to silence the expression of oppositional views. For Shuger, 'Tudor-Stuart censorship practices have no *direct* bearing on current debates', and she argues that debates about censorship in Elizabethan England are 'devoid of ideological substance or anything that might be construed as political *theory*' (91). For Shuger, the problem is all about individuals making up defamatory lies about courtiers, and, writing about John Stubbs's *Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* (1579), a tract that attacked Elizabeth's proposed marriage to François, Duc d'Alençon, Shuger argues: 'This is not "discussing public policy", at least not in the current sense of the phrase, but *scandalum magnatum* – inventing or spreading "false news" about the monarch, royal ministers, or chief peers – the crime for which Stubbs was convicted and which cost him his right hand' (Shuger 92-93; Kaplan). Shuger does not add, in the manner of crime programmes of recent memory, 'A fate he so richly deserved' – but it is a barely suppressed conclusion.

Cyndia Clegg, in her important work on Elizabethan censorship, makes a similar case for the defence of the realm, which, if anything, is even more of a conservative apology:

once she [Elizabeth] had issued the proclamation [against Stubbs], had she not proceeded by law against the libellers, she would have been perceived as ineffectual in domestic affairs. In taking the actions she did – suppressing the text with considerable fanfare and calling for the libellers' deaths when the statute under which they were prosecuted specified the loss of their hands – she dealt herself a hand full of trump cards for both domestic and international relations. (Clegg 1344)

Elizabeth gave herself a ‘full hand’ in depriving Stubbes of his. What Patterson argues is a sign of things going wrong, Clegg sees as an example of them going right. Of course, it is vitally important that proper debate takes place to think about the complex issues that censorship generates. We should bear in mind first that very few people have ever believed in removing all regulations from the circulation of published material and second that it is important to correct assumptions that censorship in the early modern period can be read in the same terms as it is today. We should simply assume that the suppressed are good and the suppressors bad. But what such apologies for Elizabeth reveal is how hard it is to keep debates on censorship under control, how easily emotive language creeps in, and how confused and complicated arguments can become when there are a whole series of issues at stake, pulling in different directions.

Instances of non-censorship reveal how easy it was to slip through controls. The most spectacular example is probably that of Edmund Spenser and his representation of Mary Queen of Scots in the second edition of *The Faerie Queene*. The case becomes even clearer if we bear in mind that Spenser was known to the authorities as a problematic and confrontational writer who had overstepped the mark on a number of previous occasions. Spenser had already suffered the fate of having one of his works ‘called in’. The recently discovered letter by Sir Thomas Tresham indicates that Spenser’s volume of *Complaints*, published in 1591, did indeed arouse the anger of the authorities, as had long been assumed, presumably for his insulting representation of Lord Burghley as a fox of low cunning (Peterson). Whether the poem circulated in manuscript in the late 1570s, and forced Spenser to leave England for Ireland in 1580, as was once assumed, remains an unproven speculation (Greenlaw; Bradbrook). It is worth noting that the poem, which clearly does incorporate some earlier material and refers back to events in the 1570s, was only published as part of the major outpouring of the poet’s works after he acquired a house and the status of a gentleman with the acquisition of his estate at Kilcolman in 1589, a fact which may have greater significance than has hitherto been realised. And it is also worth noting that *The Shepheardes Calendar*, Spenser’s first major work, comments on controversial public events, including the projected Alençon match (for which Stubbs lost his right hand and Sir Philip Sidney was rusticated) and the replacement of the

radical puritan Edmund Grindal as Archbishop of Canterbury, by the more pliant and conservative John Whitgift (McLane).

Yet, despite this chequered history Spenser dedicated both volumes of *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) to the queen and received in return, a life pension of £50 per annum on 25 February 1591, soon after his visit to court when he may have presented a copy to Elizabeth (Maley 54-6). Nevertheless, Spenser produced a concentrated and sustained attack on the court in Book V, canto 9, when he represented the trial and execution of Mary Queen of Scots, a passage that directly caused an international crisis and which could have had dire consequences for the poet had he not been at a safe distance from London in his estate in southwest Munster.¹ He even recovered from this crisis and lived in relative prosperity in Ireland until he was made sheriff of Cork in September 1598 as the English presence in Ireland came under severe threat from Spanish and Irish forces, showing just what you could get away with: or, perhaps, what had to be condoned (Maley 72).

Spenser transgressed in at least two ways. First, in representing Mary Stuart, the mother of the man most likely to become the next king of England, James VI of Scotland, as *Duessa*, who is elsewhere represented as the whore of Babylon, hardly a tactful portrait. Mary is described as a traitor, and Spenser appears to be demonstrating his explicit support for the ‘Bond of Association’, a promise made by a group of interested parties that should the life of Elizabeth be threatened then they would seek to execute those who sought to confront and oppose her, an obvious attempt to have Mary killed and the focus for militant Catholic opposition removed (Guy 331-2). *Duessa*/Mary only faces execution when a group of courtiers, led by the figure of Zele, back *Mercilla*/Elizabeth into a corner and force her to accept the true extent of her fellow queen’s crimes against her:

First gan he [Zele] tell, how this that seem’d so faire
And royally rayed, *Duessa* hight
That false *Duessa*, which had wrought great care,
And mickle mischief vnto many a knight,
By her beguiled, and confounded quight:

1 For comment on this episode, see McCabe, and Hadfield ‘Spenser and the Stuart Succession.’

But not for those she now in question came,
Though also those mote question'd be aright,
But for vyld treasons, and outrageous shame,
Which she against the dred *Mervilla* oft did frame.
(V.ix.40)²

Spenser's description represents Duessa, a crowned queen, as a traitor, in itself a perilous act given that the treason laws could punish a subject for imagining ('compassing') the queen's death and convicted traitors had to be executed (Bellamy). Mary was, of course, already dead by this point, but the poem points out the dangers for subjects who had to live in a nation which contained two anointed queens each with competing claims to the crown (McLaren). Moreover, Spenser represents Elizabeth as feeble and indecisive, placing her own personal fears and feelings as a woman above those of her need to act publicly and regally as a queen in the concluding two stanzas of the Book:

Artegall with constant firme intent,
For zeale of Iustice was against her bent.
So was she guiltie deemed of them all.
Then *Zele* began to vrge her punishment,
And to their Queene for iudgement loudly call,
Vnto *Mervilla* myld for Iustice gainst the thrall.

But she, whose Princely breast was touched nere
With piteous Ruth of her so wretched plight,
Though plaine she saw by all, that she did heare,
That she of death was guiltie found by right,
Yet would not let iust vengeance on her light;
But rather let in stead thereof to fall
Few perling drops from her faire lampes of light;
The which she couering with her purple pall
Would haue the passion hid, and vp arose withal.
(V.ix.49-50)

No one would dispute that Elizabeth was in a difficult position, having to choose between two undesirable outcomes: executing a fellow

2 All references to Edmund Spenser from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* edited by Hamilton.

monarch, and so weakening her own position as a ruler beyond the law; or preserving a traitor who threatened her safety and whose death was desired by many of her most influential subjects and supporters. But Spenser clearly represents the queen as unable to cope with the rigours of her position, forcing her advisers to make the decision and so avoiding responsibility for ruling the realm. Elizabeth is shown putting her own emotions before the needs of her people, hiding herself under the purple cloak of state, exactly what a monarch should not do. Justice dictates what must be done, but the queen tries to avoid doing the right thing.³

No one appears to have taken exception to this passage in England, suggesting that it was not read, perhaps because the work was dedicated to Elizabeth and so was assumed to be relatively innocuous, or because such criticism was accepted, tolerated, even encouraged. As Peter McCullough has pointed out, sermons critical of the queen were regularly preached at court with the queen expected to listen to the comments of the divine in question. Only rarely did things go wrong: ‘on the first Sunday in Lent, 1579, Elizabeth tired of hearing a preacher warn of the destruction that awaited herself and her country if she married the Catholic Duc d’Alençon... rose from her window seat, turned her back to the pulpit, and walked out’ (McCullough 47). The exception proves the rule. A culture of criticism thrived in England and Elizabeth had to work very hard to prevent her subjects from commenting on her personal life. Despite her decrees that her marriage could not be discussed in parliament it was, leading to the imprisonment of Peter Wentworth in 1593, the last of his three incarcerations (Neale). Wentworth had gone too far – again – but his words and actions had not curtailed his parliamentary career, whatever the desires of the authorities. When the aged Elizabeth acknowledged to the historian, William Lambard, that Richard II was an allegorical representation of her projected fate when her predecessor’s deposition was played throughout the streets of London, she was only recognising how hard it was - and how fruitless – to control and stamp out oppositional discourse, let alone, understandable gossip and panic (Headfield *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* 16).

While the passage was not greeted with the hostility it perhaps warranted in England, its significance was detected over the border in

3 For a very different reading on this subject, see Suttie.

Scotland. Robert Bowes, the English ambassador in Scotland, wrote to Lord Burghley (someone who was already ill-disposed towards Spenser), on 1 November 1596 that the king would not allow the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* to be sold in Scotland and ‘further he will complain to Her Majesty of the author as you will understand at more length by himself’(Maley 67-8). Clearly a large crisis was taking place because less than a fortnight later, only just long enough for correspondence to have passed back and forward from Edinburgh to London, on 12 November, Bowes wrote again explaining that James was offended by ‘some dishonourable effects (as the King deems thereof) against himself and his mother deceased.’ Bowes reported back that he had managed to correct one particular misconception of the king’s, that the book had an official stamp of approval, but this had not quenched James’s ire and he ‘still desire[d] that Edward [sic] Spenser for his fault be duly tried and punished’(Maley 68; *Calendar of State Papers* 723). Spenser was not punished and if there is more immediate correspondence it has not survived. But the affair was not over yet. On 5 March 1598, George Nicolson, one of Bowes’ servants, wrote to Sir Robert Cecil that Walter Quinn, a poet who travelled south and served under James I and Charles I, was ‘answering Spenser’s book, whereat the king is offended’(723).

This fascinating episode tells us much about the theory and practice of censorship in early modern Britain. James’s misunderstanding of the dedication to the queen is revealing in itself and shows how much he wished to control the book market and how he imagined it was overseen elsewhere. Dedications of books to leading figures did not mean that the author had solicited the dedicatee’s consent and could result in a furious riposte. It is clear that Stephen Gosson had not consulted Sir Philip Sidney when he dedicated *The School of Abuse* to Sidney in 1579, an oversight which was the formal reason for Sidney writing *An Apology for Poetry* later that same year (Sidney 21-8). More seriously still – and more directly related to the subject of censorship – Dr John Hayward dedicated his controversial and problematic *The Life and raigne of King Henry III* to Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, at a spectacularly inopportune moment in 1599, one that almost seemed deliberately designed to cause trouble for the earl by linking him to plans to secure the succession for himself (Hayward; Clegg). It would appear that James could simply not imagine that this lack of control would be allowed to take place in England, providing further

corroborating evidence that the reasons why a monarch did not control the press was because he or she lacked sufficient power and authority, something James learned when he became king of England in 1603. Soon after James tried to have Spenser punished he published a political treatise in the form of an open letter to his eldest son, Henry, *Basilicon Doron* (1599), which advised the prince to suppress the writings of his political opponents:

I would have you well versed in authentick histories, and in the Chronicles of all nations, but specially in our owne histories ... the example whereof most neerley concernes you: I meane not of such infamous invectives, as *Buchanans* or *Knoxes* Chronicles: and if any of these infamous libels remaine until your dayes, use the Law upon the keepers thereof. (James 243)

James imagined that a monarch controlled the press and could prohibit what he or she liked, which was why Bowes had to correct the monarch and wrote back to London claiming he had successfully persuaded the Scottish king that English print laws were different. It is also worth noting that James's reference to the histories of John Knox and George Buchanan as 'libels' seems to support the point made by Debora Shuger, that early modern censorship was really about defamation, but only if we accept the term at face value and believe that when a monarch claimed he or she was acting to suppress untruth the motive was sincere (Kaplan).

Spenser's representation of Mary is indeed offensive and it is hard to see how he could imagine that it would not be thought of as 'libel' by any supporter of the Stuart claim to the throne. James had a complex relationship with his mother who he saw for the last time in 1567 just before she fled to England, the year of James's birth. James may not have been especially fond of Mary, but any attempt to associate him with her treachery was likely to reduce his chances of his cherished goal of succeeding to the English crown (Doran). The question that has to be asked is why Spenser felt the need to represent Mary as Duessa in the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* given that her execution had taken place nearly ten years previously (8 February 1587). The most likely answer must surely be that James was right to see Spenser's portrayal of his mother as a hostile act, one that deliberately

represented her in terms of Buchanan's writings, as a murdering, adulterous whore who put her own desires before those of the people she was supposed to serve (Elizabeth's misconceived support of her fellow queen runs the risk of being seen in similar terms) (Hadfield, 'Spencer and Buchanan'). Spenser was probably worried about a pincer movement that could unite Ireland and Scotland against England, an especially dangerous situation if the Irish received support from Spain, probably associating James with Mary (Maley 1997). He was either prepared to take the risk of his work being censored but felt he had to publish what he thought was right; or he miscalculated and felt that only those in the know would read his works properly and understand what he was really saying, the dedication to the queen being part of the attempt to disguise what he was doing. We do not know whether he suffered for his comments, whether his path to preferment was blocked, or if he was simply left alone. It is worth bearing in mind that Barnabe Rich was able to comment in 1615 that 'those wordes that in Englande would be brought within the compasse of treason, they are accounted with us in Ireland for ordinary table taulke' (Bradshaw et al. 10). Again, the issue is not the toleration of treason in Ireland by the English authorities, but a recognition that, away from the centre, more has to be permitted – or even encouraged – if it helps to achieve the goals of the crown.

This point seems to have been grasped by Spenser in the dense action of canto 9. The canto shows Artegall and Talus defeating the shape-shifting Malengin, a figure of a Jesuit or Irish rebel, but then being shunned at court because the courtiers do not understand what is taking place in their dominions or the need for harsh military action. This disjunction between the values and horizons of the court and the urgent need for action is then highlighted and satirised in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* and is the central theme of *A View of the Present State of Ireland*.⁴ But, most significantly of all, Spenser actually draws our attention to an act of violent censorship through the harsh treatment meted out to the poet, Bonfont, now transformed into Malfont, who the knights pass as they enter the state room of Mercilla:

There as they entred at the Scriene, they saw
Some one, whose tongue was for his trespass vyle

4 For comment, see Hadfield, 'Chapter Eight: Spenser.' (forthcoming)

Nayld to a post, adiudged so by law:
For that therewith he falsely did reuyle,
And foule blasphemie that Queene for forged guile,
Both with bold speeches, which he blazed had,
And with lewd poems, which he did compile:
For the bold title of a Poet bad
He on himselfe had ta'en, and rayling rymes had sprad.

Thus there he stood, whylest high ouer his head,
There written was the purport of his sin,
In ciphers strange, that few could rightly read,
BON FONT: but *bon* that once had written bin,
Was raced out, and *Mal* was now put in.
So now *Malfont* was plainly to be red;
Eyther for th'euell, which he did therein,
Or that he likened was to a welhed
Of euill words, and wicked sclauders by him shed (25-6).

Much can be said about this resonant and disturbing image. In producing it at such a crucial and controversial juncture in the narrative Spenser appears to be both inviting censors to read this canto with especial care – his Scottish readers duly obliged – and commenting on the process of censorship based on his own earlier experience and his anticipation of what fate might befall him after the publication of his current poem. It is hard to imagine that we are supposed to accept the fate of Bonfont as simply deserved and just (Norbrook 118). Spenser correctly identifies the legal issue behind Bonfont's fate. He has been punished for uttering 'wicked sclauders', and his poems have been read as blasphemous attacks on the queen, insulting her with 'lewd poems' and 'forged guile.' Again, it is hard to imagine that these comments are to be taken at face value, especially if we bear in mind that the actual description of his crime is hard to read because it is written in 'cyphers strange', an obscurity that neatly mirrors the need to bring subversive ideas out into the public domain because they are invariably hidden and only meant to be read by the initiated. The syntax that describes the fate of the poet is deliberately ambiguous because the sentence seems to be about to reveal the nature of his crimes, but then simply announces his name in capitals, 'BON FONT', drawing our attention to his original title and so placing less emphasis on the change to 'Mal', in itself a declaration

of support for the punished. The two stanzas indicate that Spenser was well aware of the ways in which the law operated, but was not prepared to accept such definitions as just and fair without debate. That his notorious dialogue about Ireland, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, circulated so extensively in manuscript indicates that his understanding of the law met with widespread approval, as that work openly debates the functioning of the law and runs the risk of transgressing in exactly the same terms as Bon Font (Hadfield, *Spencer's Irish Experience*).

A View is another work of Spenser's that appears to have attracted the hostile attention of the censors, as it was entered into the Stationers' Register and then not published until thirty five years after the poet's death. However, it is not clear that the dialogue was censored because it offended readers. It may not have appeared in print either because of a dispute between members of the Stationers' Company over copyright, or because of its subject matter - virtually nothing was published on Ireland in the 1590s during the nine Years War (1594-1603) - which might indicate that Spenser had little to do with its attempted publication (Hadfield, *Spencer's Irish Experience* 78-84). Spenser's literary career tells us a great deal about censorship in late Elizabethan England. What it would seem to suggest is that censors did not read books that carefully and that only if you pushed your luck, or were unfortunate, did you get into trouble. Readers can, of course, make their own decision about which category Spenser falls into.

The problem with debates about censorship in Renaissance England is that they often concentrate on the will of the censor, the formal desire to suppress material, resulting in arguments about whether the authorities - the monarch, the privy council, the church - were right to act as they did.⁵ This leads to the assumption that what is at stake is how people thought at the time and that they acted as they did through a freely made choice. But the factor that really needs to be added to the debate is the issue of what was actually possible. The assumption made by those eager to defend freedom of speech and to criticise the behaviour of the authorities is that more censorship than was really necessary took place, that the monarchy and its supporting structures exercised its will against the people. The contrary assumption made by

5 In addition to the above sources, see Dutton; see Duke and Tamse (eds.) for details of the mechanisms of censorship.

those eager to defend the authorities is that less material was censored than has been assumed and that it only happened on the rare occasions when it was absolutely necessary (Stubbs himself might have agreed, as he cried out ‘God save the queen’ after his hand was severed and then went on to become an MP loyal to the crown) (Stubbs). Annabel Patterson’s argument that a series of rules developed that were agreed by both sides develops out of the shared assumptions of modern scholars. The mechanisms of the early modern state and the constraints – or lack of them – placed on authors by material and physical limitations are what the historian of censorship needs to explore.

The point is that there may well have been a desire to censor more than was actually censored but a recognition that it was not possible to control the press as tightly as the authorities wanted. The rules of the game were not necessarily understood or agreed by each side. Cyndia Clegg does indeed start to make this case:

The cultural practice of literary censorship ... looks less like an efficient government system, stringently enforced and compliantly followed, than an improvisational play of competing personal interests acted out on stage of perceived national emergency. (Clegg 217)

If this is a correct analysis of the situation – and I think it is – then a number of further assumptions can be made about the state of licensing in Elizabethan England. The phenomenon of mass printing was a new development and was clearly something that was difficult to control. Books produced in England numbered less than two hundred per annum before the middle of the century, an amount that could be surveyed by a small team of censors should the need have arisen. After the incorporation of the Stationers’ Company in 1557 book production starts to increase to levels that go well beyond what could easily be surveyed and digested, even if numbers produced had not yet reached the explosion of print in the 1640s.⁶ After the Star Chamber decree of 1586 texts for publication were supposed to be submitted to the Stationers’ Company by publishers for vetting by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. As Janet Clare points out, this was an ‘impractical procedure,’ especially given the demands on the

6 For analysis, see Hellinga and Trapp; Barnard and MacKenzie.

time of two such prominent clerics. Instead, ‘from 1588 a number of subordinate clerics were also inspecting and authorising works for print’ (Clare, *Art Made Tongue-Tied* 38). But the implicit assumption that Clare makes, that censorship therefore worked, does not follow automatically or logically. These subordinate clerics did not necessarily read works very well, if at all, and did not necessarily agree or confer with each other. The mechanism of censorship was, at best, ramshackle, at worst, blind. There may have been a desire to censor, but there was no will; or, at least, no means of enforcing that will.

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Summary

Using the example of Edmund Spenser, a writer who was frequently in danger of having his work censored, this article argues that analysis of Elizabethan censorship in recent times has often been misdirected. Scholars have argued about the behaviour of the authorities and whether what they decided to allow into print was reasonable. As a study of Spenser's work indicates there may well have been a desire to censor more texts more heavily, but there was no apparatus available to enforce such a policy. Only when texts drew attention to themselves, often when causing a particular incident, was the punitive mechanism of the law employed.

Biography

Andrew Hadfield (1962) is Professor of English at the University of Sussex, having previously worked at the universities of Leeds and Aberystwyth and as a visiting professor at Columbia University, New York. He works on a number of areas, mainly concerned with the relationship between literature, politics and other cultural contexts, and is the author of many works on early modern literature, including Shakespeare and Republicanism (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Literature, Travel and Colonialism in the English Renaissance, 1540-1625 (Oxford University Press, 1998); and Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance (Cambridge, 1994). He is also editor of Renaissance Studies and a regular reviewer for The Times Literary Supplement. He is about to start work on a biography of Edmund Spenser.