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Spenserian Satire

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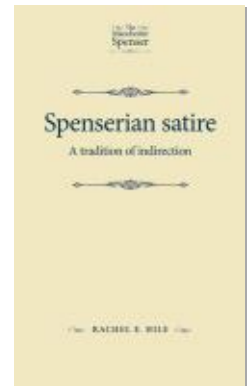
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Introduction

We know that all texts are indeterminate, incomplete ... but some are *extra*-indeterminate, written by design to be *extra*-incomplete, to require, more than other texts, that the reader transfer meaning from other texts and from other semiotic fields altogether in order to correctly interpret the meaning. This book focuses on one such type of text, what I call “indirect satire,” by which I mean satirical writing that the reader cannot understand *as satire* without this intersemiotic transfer of meaning into the textual interpretation. Sometimes, in the densely allusive literary culture of the early modern period, intertextual transfer suffices to “get” the joke, and much of this book will focus on indirect satirical writing that uses intertextuality, especially with Spenser’s works, to create its satirical meanings. However, intersemiosis is a broader term than intertextuality, and another project of this book is to explore literary fame and ideas of “the Author” as a semiotic system used by the satirical poets discussed in this book in order to position themselves within the literary field and to clue the reader to search for indirect satirical meanings. By looking at textual indeterminacy in this way, I am thinking about the *process* of interpretation, rather than the *products* of interpretation, in order to shift the focus away from efforts to “fix,” through interpretive certainty, texts that were written with the goal of resisting all such certainty in order to protect the author from punishment or censorship.

Speaking of *The Faerie Queene*, T.K. Dunseath wrote in 1968, “Unless the study of historical allegory can further the larger understanding of Spenser’s poem, its single pursuit becomes self-serving, a pointless exercise in scholarly ingenuity” (Dunseath, *Spenser’s Allegory*, 6). Surely he was reacting, entirely consistently with New Critical scholarly fashion, against the worst excesses of what came to be known—once the New Historicism had been born—as the “old historicism,” the often entirely too ingenious searching after point-for-point correspondences between

poem and history. The approach characterized literary scholarship of the early twentieth century but was especially pronounced in studies of satirical and allegorical works, where scholarship often ended with identification rather than interpretation. In Spenser studies, the endless wrangling of early twentieth-century scholars over the “true” identities of *Mother Hubberds Tale*’s Fox and Ape, or of *Muiopotmos*’s Clarion and Aragnoll, at the remove of almost a century, seems ... academic, perhaps even unimportant.¹ To be fair, though, more recent attempts to connect Spenser’s satirical poetry to his historical moment suffer from the same indeterminacy, leading to interpretive proliferation: Is Radigund a mirror for Queen Elizabeth or an allegorical representation of Mary, Queen of Scots?² In *Mother Hubberds Tale*, does Spenser criticize the English or the Irish political situation?³ And so on.

Different waves of critical fashion have responded to this textual indeterminacy differently. The Old Historicists erred on the side of ignoring it, asserting a certainty regarding identifications that the sheer number of competing identifications rules out. The New Critics avoided the question, focusing their attention on the text; concomitantly, the privileging of text over context meant a critical devaluation of clearly topical satires as holding little interest for present-day readers. The New Historicists provide more nuanced readings of connections between text and historical context, and certainly more cautious identifications.

In the present study, I occasionally attempt to provide identifications of various satiremes (i.e., the smallest meaningful unit of a satire), and there are, assuredly, plenty of close readings of texts. However, I focus here primarily on reading satirical texts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in relation to one another, with specific attention to the role that Edmund Spenser plays in that literary subsystem. I aim to argue a number of points, which will be of interest to varying audiences. For Spenser scholars, who recognize Spenser’s supremacy in “serious poetry” of the period and have carefully studied his influence on epic, pastoral, and lyric poetry, my analysis of Spenser’s reputation as a satirical poet will contribute to our understanding of Spenser as “the poet’s poet.” For scholars of satire, I offer a fuller discussion and theorization of the type of satire that Spenser wrote, what I call “indirect satire,”

1 See Danner (*Edmund Spenser’s War*, 190–91), for a summary of some early twentieth-century identifications of the characters in *Mother Hubberds Tale*; for a sampling of some identifications proposed for *Muiopotmos*, see Chapter 4 below.

2 See, respectively, Villeponteaux (“Not as women,” 218) and Stump (“Two deaths,” 99).

3 See, respectively, Herron (“Reforming the fox”) and Danner (*Edmund Spenser’s War*, chapter 5).

than has been provided elsewhere. Spenser's satire does not fit well into the rather blunt categories of Juvenalian, Horatian, Menippean that have been used to taxonomize satirical writing from the classical era up to the eighteenth century, but including him with the complaint tradition is also imprecise.⁴ A theory of indirect satire benefits not just Spenser studies but satire studies as well. Finally, for scholars of English Renaissance satire in particular, who have tended to focus on the formal verse satires of the 1590s to the exclusion of attention to more indirect forms such as Spenser's, this book is a corrective, an invitation to recognize the merits of, and acknowledge the wider influence of, a style of satire that has received little attention.

The world that Milton made: a speculation on Spenserian satire

So what happened to indirect satire, the form of satire in which Spenser was so influential? I believe that, in England, this satirical tradition simply withered away when the increasing freedom of the press rendered it less useful, less necessary. We can presumably agree on the innumerable intellectual, moral, and political benefits that follow from freedom of expression. To the extent that we give credit for the widespread enjoyment of this freedom to John Milton, whose arguments in *Areopagitica* (1644) contributed to the loosening of restrictions on the press in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we also owe him gratitude for the flourishing of satirical writing in eighteenth-century England. However, this greater freedom, which allowed satirists to write with fewer constraints and less fear, meant the decline of the tradition of indirect satirical writing, a type of satire exemplified by Edmund Spenser and imitated or alluded to by numerous other writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Greater freedom of the press made a dead end of England's indirect satirical tradition, which developed out of the medieval complaint and reached its apex with Spenser and the Spenserian satire of his contemporaries, and thus we can, if we wish, blame John Milton for the scholarly neglect of the Spenserian tradition in satire.

Whether or not you join me in blaming Milton, I aim in this book to write Spenser back in to the history of satire, considering the ways that he and others who followed his lead responded to the censorship

4 Richard Danson Brown, focusing on the "newness" of Spenser's poetic project, describes the poems of the *Complaints* volume as "renovation of traditional complaint" (*The New Poet*, 11). Whereas Brown looks at the ways that Spenser diverges from traditional complaint, I here analyze some of the same works as outliers to the tradition of satire, and thus, from different directions, we both find Spenser forging his own path.

conditions of their day by creating satires more indirect than the harsher English genealogy of satire that paid homage to the Roman Juvenal, such as the verse satires fashionable in the 1590s and the more urbane but no less caustic satirical writings of the eighteenth century. Alvin Kernan famously considered the “satiric personality” recognizable in any number of early modern English satirical works, the personality vividly expressed in the unseemly narrative voices of the formal verse satires of the 1590s (Kernan, *Cankered Muse*). Kernan’s privileging of the rough “satyr” approach to satire represents a fairly common critical approach, which has led to neglect of Edmund Spenser’s contributions to the mode. John Peter’s 1956 dismissal of Spenser’s satirical work seems to have set the tone: “Spenser . . . whatever his interest in another context, is hardly a key-figure in the development of Satire. His allegorical method is distinctly medieval . . . , more easily related to the allegorical method used elsewhere in his own poems than to any trend or tradition that we examine here. Beyond Drayton’s *The Owle*, moreover . . . it seems to have had very little contemporary influence” (Peter, *Complaint and Satire*, 132–33). This despite Hoyt Hudson’s painstaking article, published more than twenty years earlier, detailing the Spenserian debts of five other beast fables in addition to *The Owle*. In the same year as Peter’s book, Ellen Douglass Leyburn, despite her sympathy for the allegorical mode of satire, nevertheless damned Spenser’s best-known satire, not for being allegorical but for failing allegorically: “*Mother Hubberds Tale* is passionate satire, but it fails as a work of art because the satire is not allegorically realized” (Leyburn, *Satiric Allegory*, 136). In general, the prescriptivism of mid-twentieth-century approaches to satire left Spenser forgotten or undervalued because his contributions to the mode fit poorly with various ideas about how satire *should* work.

Unfortunately, not only early modern English scholars but theorists of satire as well have tended to focus on the harsher varieties of satire, and this leads to blind spots in the critical endeavor: if a theory of satire seems a better fit with John Marston than with Spenser—as do Robert C. Elliott’s idea of satire as stemming from magic rituals of exclusion and Fredric Bogel’s more recent and comprehensive view of satire as a broadly social ritual of exclusion (Elliott, *Power of Satire*; Bogel, *Difference Satire Makes*)—then the very definition will make Spenser seem less important as a satirist, and thus those interested in Spenser will privilege his other works and those interested in satire will examine other writers, and never the twain shall meet. Broad theories of satire that aim to account for the “satiric impulse” or “satire through the ages” will of necessity ignore the

outliers, but, in the case of Elizabethan Spenserian satire, the works lie outside of the historical mainstream largely because of the political situation in which the authors wrote—it seems unfair to blame them for not meeting some imaginary ideal of “satirical-ness” when hands and lives were on the line (as with John Stubbs and John Penry, respectively, with Stubbs losing a hand in 1579 for authoring *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf* and Penry his life in 1593 for his role in printing the Martin Marprelate tracts). Annabel Patterson describes political censorship in Elizabethan England as “so pervasive that it rose to the forefront ... as the central problem of consciousness and communication”; she believes that, far from being misunderstood or obfuscated, “the prevailing codes of communication, the implicit social contract between authors and authorities, [was] intelligible to all parties at the time, as being a fully deliberate and conscious arrangement” (Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 17). Cyndia Clegg, aiming to persuade readers that the extent of literary censorship in Elizabethan England was less than scholars have traditionally thought, works against her own argument by concluding her book with the observation that “literature became the object of scrutiny when poets exceeded their liberty or when the conditions of reading drew a literary text into the political domain,” suggesting a depoliticized understanding of what literature *is* that is at odds with the historical record (Clegg, *Press Censorship Elizabethan*, 224). The subtext seems to be that literary authors were safe as long as they made no attempts to make anything happen in the real world with their scribbles—poets’ “liberty to speak,” radical in Skelton’s *Speke Parrott* and a touchstone for poets for the next century, in this view extends to the point of impact or influence, and then dies.

The censorship of Stubbs’s *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf*, an aggressive Puritan warning against Queen Elizabeth’s possible marriage with the Duc d’Alençon, coincided with Spenser’s first independent publication and serves as an important context for thinking about how the young man approached the issue of a poet’s “liberty to speak.” In November 1579, Stubbs had his right hand chopped off as punishment for writing *Discovery of a Gaping Gulf*; a distributor, William Page, lost his hand as well, but printer-publisher Hugh Singleton received a pardon.⁵ In the following month, Singleton brought out Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calender*. Numerous scholars have examined the implications of this publishing relationship with reference to what it tells us about Spenser’s politics

5 See Clegg (*Press Censorship Elizabethan*, chapter 6) for details of the incident. For details of the life and career of Hugh Singleton, see Byrom, “Edmund Spenser’s first publisher.”

and religion;⁶ I mention it here to support my contention that Spenser, throughout his career, had a sensitive awareness of the *realpolitik* of the dissent system in England. His writing shows him to have been thoughtful and deliberate—perhaps even cautious—leading to his desire to maintain the equilibrium of the system by voicing criticisms indirectly. He was no Stubbs, which benefited him when he did disturb the system with his 1591 *Complaints* volume, because although the authorities “punished” the book by calling it in, the author’s career continued to flourish, and the £50 annuity awarded to Spenser in recognition of the 1590 installment of *The Faerie Queene* continued to be paid until his death.⁷

Scholars have found satire, at least episodically, in *The Shepheardes Calender*, in *The Faerie Queene*, and in the poems of the *Complaints* volume, and Spenser’s ideas, shared with many contemporaries, about the moral leadership role of the true poet confirm the sense that Spenser viewed himself as more a teacher than an entertainer. He managed to express a number of criticisms of those in power, but indirectly enough to make the criticisms deniable if necessary, and in this he followed the practice of earlier English poets such as John Skelton and Thomas Churchyard. Scott Lucas describes the strategy as the attempt “to seek rhetorical forms that could at once maximize the communicative function of their works while minimizing the chance that hostile readers could use their own words against them as evidence of offensive intent” (Lucas, “Diggon Davie,” 152). This need to balance communication with obfuscation complicates analysis, especially at the remove of four hundred years, but finding traces of this effort again and again in Spenser, and in poets who imitated or alluded to his satirical works during and after his life, suggests the need to create a more detailed and rigorous theory of indirect satire.

6 Beginning with Byrom, of course, but also see more recent comments (with more nuance regarding Singleton’s Puritanism) such as Norbrook (*Poetry and Politics*, 63) and King (*Spenser’s Poetry*, 234–36).

7 *Complaints* was entered in the Stationers’ Register December 29, 1590; the annuity was awarded to Spenser in February 1591 (new style), and the letter from Sir Thomas Tresham that gives news of the recall of copies of *Complaints* was dated March 19, 1591 (new style). For a discussion of the annuity with reference to the publication of *Complaints*, see Brink (“Who fashioned Edmund Spenser?”) and Hile (“Edmund Spenser”); for the timing of the publication and censorship of *Complaints*, see Peterson (“Laurel crown”); for the ongoing payment of the annuity, see Berry and Timings (“Spenser’s pension”). In a recent unpublished paper, Jean R. Brink has argued that Spenser sold his pension to Thomas Walker (Brink, “Spenser’s death revisited,” 49th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 8–11, 2014). Whether Berry and Timings or Brink is correct does not affect my point here, which centers on Spenser’s staying sufficiently in the good graces of the court that his pension was not affected by the uproar over the *Complaints* volume.

Critics working on satire in the past two decades have deplored the limited influence of recent literary theory on studies of satire, with Dustin Griffin blaming the complexity and diversity of satire, which make categorization and generalization difficult, and Fredric Bogel blaming the resistance to theory among scholars of eighteenth-century literature (Griffin, *Satire*, 31; Bogel, *Difference Satire Makes*, 5). The attempts by these and other scholars to rectify this situation through more careful attention to theoretical understandings of satire are all to the good, but because these more recent satire theorists have largely focused on the eighteenth century, their findings are of limited applicability in understanding the characteristic approach to satire of poets like Spenser and his admirers and imitators in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Those theorists who have addressed allegorical satire have tended to do so cursorily and often unsatisfactorily: Dustin Griffin lumps together allegorical satire with the grab-bag of Menippean satire; Kirk Combe categorizes it as belonging to the complaint tradition of satire, but his undisguised preference for the “satire” that he contrasts with his strawman “complaint” limits the usefulness of his observations on the “sniveling grievances and blurry hopes for amelioration” that he sees as characteristic of the complaint; George A. Test follows Ellen Douglass Leyburn in collapsing the distinction between satire and allegory by stating that both work by “indirection,” a conclusion that, because of its generality, is difficult both to argue against and to use productively (Griffin, *Satire*, 109; Combe, “New voice,” 77; Leyburn, *Satiric Allegory*, 7; Test, *Satire*, 187).

I do not believe that all satire necessarily operates through indirection; however, indirect methods of satirical signification characterize Spenser’s practice and are thus the focus of this study. Before looking at specific examples of satirical writing in Spenser and his imitators, I devote the first chapter to an analysis of indirect meaning-making in satire, discussing how allusion, symbol, and analogy can work to create allegorical satirical meanings that invite the reader to project insights from the text to the real world. Chapter 1 explores the literary, natural-historical, symbolic, and allegorical meanings that Spenser’s culture attached to foxes in order to give a sense of the complexity of Spenser’s use of animal imagery to create indirect satire in his most famous satirical character, the Fox of *Mother Hubberds Tale*. This book does not offer an exhaustive analysis of Spenser’s entire corpus of work, instead examining a few key texts before shifting the focus to Spenser’s influence on and meaning for younger poets who imitated him in their own satirical works. Chapter 1, however, closes with a sketch of Spenser’s career as a satirist, aiming to create a

sense of story and to connect the story of Spenser-as-satirist with better-known discussions of Spenser's career trajectory from such scholars as Richard Helgerson and Patrick Cheney.

Chapter 2 begins by discussing previous scholarly work on Spenserian satires—with reference to the ideas on indirect satire outlined in Chapter 1—before moving to an application of these ideas to two Spenserian contexts. First, I discuss Spenser's self-designation as "the New Poet" in *The Shepheardes Calender* as an allusion that signals satirical intent. Whereas the "Old Poet" referenced is clearly Chaucer, the phrase "new poet" itself serves as an allusion, setting up a satiric genealogy connecting Spenser to John Skelton and, through him, to Catullus (a poet who, though "new" to Cicero, was an "old" poet when the young Virgil briefly imitated him before rejecting his style to form his own). In the second half of the chapter, I consider Spenser's use of allegorical satire and allegory *as* satire in *Daphnaida*, analyzing the ways that Spenser signals readers to interpret the poem satirically through playful use of allegory and metaphor.

With Chapter 3, I move the discussion from Spenser to a wider circle of influence, starting with two somewhat reductive views from contemporaries of what Spenser "meant" in the literary system of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Two friends, Joseph Hall and William Bedell, wrote works that suggest an image of Spenser as an uncomplicated, straightforwardly decorous poet. Hall repeatedly alludes to well-known Spenserian images, which he imports into his own satires in *Virgidemiarum Sixe Bookes* in order to contrast them with his own disgusting imagery, suggesting an impatience with Spenser's well-known delicacy and decorum. The less truculent Bedell implies a similarly uncomplicated view of Spenser in his poorly executed Spenserian poem, *The Shepherd's Tale of the Poudre-Plott*, which takes as inspiration the Spenserian pastoral satire of *The Shepheardes Calender* and produces instead pastoral panegyric for King James I. In these two views of what "Spenser" meant to the writers of his time, we see the side of Spenser that Karl Marx later immortalized as "Elizabeth's arse-kissing poet."

But other writers found in Spenser, and particularly in his indirect satirical tools of allusion and allegory, inspiration for creating their own puzzlingly indirect works, and Chapter 4 provides two case studies. I explore the intertextual relationships between Thomas Nashe's *Choise of Valentines* and Spenser's "March" and between Tailboys Dymoke's *Caltha Poetarum* and Spenser's *Muiopotmos*, arguing that these poets use allusions to and intertextuality with Spenser to signal that the reader ought to read for allegorical satire. In Nashe's case, I believe that he creates his

Choise of Valentines in part to take satirical aim at Spenser himself, or, rather, the oversimplified version of “the decorous Spenser” discussed in Chapter 3, to suggest the foolishness of subscribing to idealizing views of love while also offering some sly insults to Frances Walsingham and Queen Elizabeth. The offense to the Queen is clearer, though still indirect, in *Caltha Poetarum*, and the second half of Chapter 4 uses that work to consider the possibility that some contemporary viewers found satire on Queen Elizabeth in Spenser’s *Muiopotmos*. The chapter closes with a coda that aims to bring together the two halves of the chapter through a brief discussion of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.

Where Chapter 3 examines connections between literary works and their writers’ ideas about “Spenser” as an author, and Chapter 4 puts five literary texts into conversation with one another, Chapter 5 considers two early works of Thomas Middleton with reference to the social and political context of the turn of the seventeenth century, with special attention to how the Bishops’ Ban of 1599, which banned several books and restricted the future publication of satirical works, affected the literary subfield of satire in England. Following the 1591 calling-in of Spenser’s *Complaints* volume, which included the satirical animal fable *Mother Hubbard’s Tale*, authors largely avoided publishing anything like an animal fable. I find, though, that the young Thomas Middleton wanted to signal his allegiance with the values and ideas espoused by Spenser, and that he does this indirectly in his 1599 *Micro-Cynicon* through allusions and analogies that render his formal verse satires circuitously Spenserian; his efforts to avoid offending were unsuccessful, and *Micro-Cynicon* was burned by order of the Bishops’ Ban. Five years later, Middleton published a much more obviously Spenserian work that, with its nostalgia for Queen Elizabeth’s reign and use of talking insects and birds, suggests more fully the ongoing importance of Spenser as an inspiration to the young poet Middleton before he became the dramatist Middleton. The chapter closes by briefly contrasting the pervasive Spenserianism of the young Middleton with John Donne’s perhaps faddish use of animal fable in his *Metempsychosis; Poëma Satyricon*.

The final chapter looks at two moments in the early seventeenth century: Michael Drayton’s response to the change of monarchs in two poems, *To the Maiestie of King James* from 1603 and *The Owle* from 1604, and George Wither’s self-fashioning as a Spenserian satirist in a series of four texts a decade later, from *Abuses, Stript and Whipt* (1613) to *The Shepheards Hunting* (1615). In both cases, I find the authors signaling their allegiances to Spenser indirectly, with Drayton creating in *The Owle*

an animal satire that references Spenser by alluding to his poetic forebears and Wither including pervasive animal and beast fable imagery in his formal verse satires in *Abuses, Stript and Whipt*. Significantly, though, the imprisonment that Wither endured as punishment for publishing *Abuses, Stript and Whipt* led to such an increase in his reputation as a courageous poet that he felt confident enough, in *The Shepherds Hunting*, to allegorize his own life and situation in ways that depict him as the new Spenserian satirist.

This book does not offer an unbroken and comprehensive narrative; rather, these are “explorations” or case studies, but nevertheless, there *is* a story here. Building on Annabel Patterson’s characterization of political censorship in Elizabethan England as “the central problem of consciousness and communication” (*Censorship and Interpretation*, 17), this book aims to suggest the story of a code, the indirect satirical code that took many forms, only one of which was the Spenserian variety examined here. Indirection in satire is fun—the ingenuity required to crack the code offers pleasure to writer and reader alike—but it was also, in the period under consideration here, deadly serious, because a misstep could lead to censorship or imprisonment. Thinking about Spenser as both a real author grappling with these issues himself *and* as an idea, touchstone, or inspiration for other authors later trying to negotiate the same conflicts will, I hope, suggest to other scholars the potential fruitfulness of thinking more deeply and thoroughly about the forms that indirect satire can take.