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Review Article

From Foucault to Tillyard: Spenserian Careers Disclosing New Historicist Secrets

Spenser's Secret Career. By Richard Rambuss. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Pp. xv, 164. \$39.95.

Appearing to promise sensational revelations, Rambuss's witty title actually refers to Edmund Spenser's management of personal and political secrets in his secretarial and bureaucratic career that supplemented his poetic endeavors. In contemporary manuals such as Angel Day's *The English Secretary*, "the secretary function" was primarily defined by responsible handling of entrusted secrets, Rambuss argues, and thus the relation of Spenser's official employment to his poetry is to be understood accordingly. A highly typical instance of American New Historicist inquiry into the socio-political implications of literary texts, Rambuss's text further indicates some current limitations of such critical practice.

Since previous studies had either passed over or largely discounted the interaction of Spenser's official activities with his poetic development, as in Richard Helgerson's widely influential *Self-Crowned Laureates*, Rambuss's study enhances the critical repertoire by providing a well-written and often rewarding introduction to its subject. His analysis also provides further evidence that Spenser's command of poetic means of secrecy empowers his texts to depart from political orthodoxies. In terms

of New Historicist controversy about the status of the subject, he finally sides with Louis Adrian Montrose against Stephen Greenblatt's simplistic assumptions that the subject was virtually determined by dominant Elizabethan ideologies and state power.¹

Though much to be welcomed, then, Rambuss's treatment of his topic invites some significant objections. Since Spenser's biography is largely unknown, study of his poetry according to his official career is so problematic that an entire book attempting to do this should explicitly define a credible procedure. Besides ignoring relevant methodological issues, Rambuss wishfully massages the inherent inconclusiveness or dubiety of some evidence. His account of Spenser's *Complaints* (1591) as "a revisionary career move" against the "secretarial poetics of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*," for example, must assume that Spenser "seems to have felt" resentment about the extent of its rewards at court, and specifically some difficulties in obtaining his royal pension of £50 per annum. But this "seems" is really much more emphatic than the immediate textual context indicates: only in the endnote does Rambuss admit that an anecdote of 1662 is his sole biographical evidence, and it "may well be apocryphal" (80, 143-4, n.40). Moreover, he ignores that pension's purchasing power; the annual rent for Spenser's 3,000-acre estate of Kilcolman was only £20, for example, and the poet had earlier leased a house in Dublin for £3 annually. Though even the existing evidence could have been used more effectively, the lack of new Spenserian biographical discoveries is also disappointing, given Rambuss's provocative title.

Nor does this study sufficiently contextualize the relations between Spenser's two careers. There is no discussion of the conditions of humanist endeavor, which sought to combine literary knowledge and creativity with civic service; yet that would have been the cultural matrix for Spenser's understanding of his dual role. Despite Spenser's broad knowledge of contemporary European writing, Rambuss's inventory of poetic career models for Spenser mentions only one sixteenth-century continental writer, Marot, but not the most obvious counterpart, Ariosto. Yet inquiry into such broadly parallel careers could have helped supplement the deficiencies of Spenserian biography, through comparison and contrast, and by helping to define some norms for the extent of his expectations. Moreover, though acknowledging that Spenser and other Elizabethans were "attempting to resituate poetry from a marginal posi-

tion . . . to a place of high cultural importance" of its own (80), Rambuss never defines the relation of that endeavor to the secretarial thrust of his argument, which thus becomes exaggerated. He ends up promulgating a specifically Spenserian "secretarial poetics" in dubious isolation from related socio-cultural factors.

Likewise, though Rambuss begins by acknowledging the importance of allegorical poetics for Spenser studies, he never considers the way in which secretive aspects of Spenser's official career interacted with the poetic secrecies theoretically and practically involved in allegory anyway. Yet, if Spenser's bureaucratic functions revolved around secrecy as Rambuss claims, the nature of that interaction is really the fundamental issue in assessing the relationship between Spenser's official and poetic careers. Only thus could Rambuss's study have fully developed the potential of its topic according to the logic of its own approach.

Perhaps most regrettable is Rambuss's general underestimation of the capacities of Spenserian secrecy, and it paradoxically accords with perspectives of E. M. W. Tillyard: a relatively inept former literary historicist ritually adduced to demonstrate the putative superiority of New Historicism to its precursors.² In defining the Spenserian secret, Rambuss claims that, rather than involving hidden signifieds, it is constituted instead by the "veil itself," "used to *make* a secret out of something that might otherwise be easily known" (3; cf. 53). While Rambuss's identification of the implied significance of allegorical veiling is insightful, his rather patronizing account of Spenserian mysteries resuscitates Tillyard's unfounded confidence in easy answers and stable textual reproduction of set "cultural backgrounds." Spenserian fictions do not contain hidden or elusive matters, Rambuss similarly assumes: the texts merely indulge in disguised repetition of standard Elizabethan perceptions, inwardly repeating what was common outward knowledge anyway. Not surprisingly, then, almost all Rambuss's readings of particular Spenserian texts just reposition elements of previous interpretations within his framework of "secretarial poetics," rather than attempting the much more challenging work of identifying new scope for previously unnoticed allegorical content. Ironically, this investigation of Spenserian secrecies largely excludes itself from them by dismissing their potential at the outset.

So, for example, Rambuss simply equates Spenser's queen of Faery, Gloriana, with Elizabeth I (ch. 3). But Gloriana ultimately relates to

Christian ideas of transcendental glory, so that she only corresponds to Elizabeth insofar as the latter can be seen to body forth ideals invested in the monarch through her supposedly divine authorization. Hence, despite Rambuss's typically New Historicist focus on authorial "self-promotion" and politics in *The Faerie Queene*, their development is much more complex than he allows, and inextricably involved in ideologies of transcendence of which he takes little or no account, despite their manifest importance in that text.³

In these ways, Rambuss's study clarifies some broader difficulties current in much New Historicism. Ironically, by fostering appearances of substantive difference, new perspectives and terminological repertoires can obscure inadvertent recurrence to the very assumptions that are ostensibly discarded, so that, in effect, shades of Tillyard arise bedecked in Foucauldian guises. Also, New Historicist political analysis of literature often oversimplifies the politics of former cultures. Elizabeth's government, for example, was to some extent theocratic, so that some textual reflections of Elizabethan politics can profoundly involve religion, as in *The Faerie Queene*. However, perhaps to preclude "mystification" by such former cultural assumptions, many New Historicists forsake historical scholarship through insufficient consideration of religion in their inquiries into the operations of Elizabethan power. Yet Marxist critics such as Alan Sinfield, Joseph Kavanagh, and Christopher Hill effectively address politico-religious questions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts through recourse to theories of ideology.⁴ Finally, through such devices as "arbitrary connectedness," in which disparate fields become mutually superimposed through critical *fiat*, New Historicism can encourage and rationalize pragmatic quests for provisionally attractive shortcuts in primary research and historical contextualizations.⁵ Produced in the ever more quantitatively evaluated context of a vanishing academic "job market," New Historicist writings too tell implicit tales of institutional politics, pressures, and careerism. At present, Montrose's work probably best points the way to a higher excellence. However, like Spenser's poetry, academic writing speaks to conditions of patronage, and the time-devouring rigors of strong historical scholarship especially require greater provisions for research time from universities and grant agencies, not the destructive cutbacks of recent experience.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Montrose and Bernard; Greenblatt's recent "Culture" moves toward their position.
2. See, for example, Selden 104-5.
3. Cf. Borris 68-9, and Fruen.
4. Like Rambuss, Greenblatt and Jonathan Goldberg, for example, tend to underestimate religious implications of Elizabethan politics in Spenser's texts. See Borris 69.
5. On "arbitrary connectedness," see Thomas 40-67.

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