

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
Student Name: REBECCA ROBERTS		
Module code: CSEN7026 Module title: EPIC, RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY: SPENSER AND MILTON	Student ID number: 1706723	Educational support needs: Yes/No
Module tutor: DR PETER MITCHELL		
Assignment due date: MONDAY 8TH JUNE 2020		
If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is.		
1st ☐ 2nd ☐ 3rd ☐ 4th ☐ 5th ☐ 6th ☐		
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Assignment Mark

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Agreed Internal Mark:	
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Final Mark	

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board.

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Explore how the inclusion of Spenser's 'A Letter of the Authors... *intention*' in William Ponsonbie's original 1590 edition shaped our understanding of *The Faerie Queene*.

Edmund Spenser's epic creation *The Faerie Queene* is a literary masterpiece integral to the English literature canon; thousands of academics, scholars and students read the work and begin to dissect the characters, poetic language and themes interwoven in Spenser's poetry. Yet there is a magnitude of significant contextual information found in the footnotes of academic editions which are now considered common knowledge, or material to flesh out a newcomer's understanding of *The Faerie Queene*. However, the information gleaned from background research, namely from Edmund Spenser's published letter to his literary patron, Sir Walter Raleigh, is crucial for our understanding of this epic poem: both the published works; and the unwritten six books Spenser tells Raleigh would complete *The Faerie Queene*. The voice of the poet is clear in the letter, explaining his purpose and aims in creating a twelve book epic, and was clearly viewed as intrinsic to the poem by its first publisher, William Ponsonbie, who included it in the original 1590 volume containing Books I-III. Although 'A Letter of the Authors... *intention*' disappeared from the 1596 and 1609 editions and has garnered minimal critical attention, it has since featured in all subsequent editions, although its placement may change across different volumes. It has been clearly accepted as a crucial addition to *The Faerie Queene*, and here we will examine, using the 1590 Ponsonbie edition, just how important it is for the enjoyment of the epic in all its glory.

It is rare in literary study to have proof of an author's intentions, such as Spenser provides us through the epistle to his most prominent literary patron. It allows the reader of *The Faerie Queene* to enjoy the work as he intended: but how? Spenser's opening paragraph expresses his concern regarding "how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed" when the intended purpose "is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline".¹ To avoid this, Spenser provides Raleigh with a written explanation of his epic as one which educates men in twelve different Protestant values through *The Faerie Queene's* narrative following "king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person"². The poet insinuates that the pleasurable pastime of reading can be an incredibly useful teaching tool for broadening Christian values and good religious practice. Spenser, as a devoted Anglican, appears to promote focus on simple

¹ Edmund Spenser, 'A Letter of the Authors expounding his *whole intention in the course of this worke*: which for that it giveth great light to the Reader, for the better vnderstanding is hereunto annexed.', in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 713-18., p. 714.

² Ibid., p. 715.

piety versus what he believed was the corrupt and ostentatious way of Catholicism; the mythological figure of Arthur, he explains to Raleigh in the letter, is a “braue knight, perfected in” the Protestant principles Spenser so values, and therefore is the ideal vessel for his epic poem to accentuate the “twelue private morall vertues” that lay the foundation for “the purpose of these first twelue bookes”.³ This is where our first discussion point appears: ‘A Letter of the Authors... *intention*’ emphasises that the six books published before Spenser’s death in the final year of the sixteenth century do not comprise a finished copy of *The Faerie Queene*. By acknowledging the intended structure of his epic, the poet gives readers a context for the books we do have; we understand that these narratives serve a function in a broader plot than what we read in our editions. It is this function Spenser purports to be the education of Elizabethan Anglican values, including “Holynes,... Temperaunce... Chastity”⁴ in the three books published in Ponsonbie’s 1590 copy, and Spenser’s letter to Raleigh is the instrument which delivers the context allowing readers to fulfil the author’s original aim. Without its inclusion in the first 1590 edition, literary criticism and understanding of the epic could feasibly be varied from the established, canonical interpretation.

However, ‘A Letter of the Authors... *intention*’ did not have permanent placement in published editions of *The Faerie Queene*; not only does the letter move within different volumes, it is also neglected in others. Perhaps most importantly, Ponsonbie does not include the letter to Raleigh in his 1596 version consisting of all six written books, despite appending it in his original 1590 edition. The letter has received minimal exposure in Spensarian criticism: if it is mentioned, it is brief and often considered a byproduct of printing error. Speed Hill considers this in his review of the Longman edition of *The Faerie Queene*, identifying how certain choices of language, spelling and editorial presentation “do not necessarily cohere into an articulated editorial policy”⁵ characteristic of Spenser’s writing. To Speed Hill, the exclusion of ‘A Letter or the Authors... *intention*’ is just a byproduct of Spenser’s diminished role in publishing the 1596 edition, further evidence that it was unlikely “Spenser oversaw a wholesale revision of the accidentals of 1590 in the course of overseeing its reprinting in 1596”.⁶ Andrew Zurcher’s bibliographic exploration of the Ponsonbie’s edition examined here also pays minimal attention to the inclusion of the letter written to Raleigh, despite agreeing the relevance of “an epistle from Spenser to Raleigh giving

³ Ibid., p. 715.

⁴ Ibid. p. 716.

⁵ W. Speed Hill, ‘Review: The Texts of Edmund Spenser’s: “The Faerie Queene”, review of *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, ed. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki, in *Text*, 15 (2003), pp. 372-384. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30227802>> [accessed: 20 April 2020], p. 378.

⁶ Ibid., p. 375.

important context for 'the Authors . . . whole intention in the course of this worke'".⁷ Zurcher also asserts that it was Spenser's lack of involvement in the 1596 printing process which created disparities in the revised text:

"What is more, the confusion surrounding the imposition of these patronage-soliciting poems, along with 'A letter of the Authors ... to Sir Walter Raleigh' and the commendatory verses, went hand in hand with - and was probably caused by - similar kinds of confusion attending on other places in the printing of the poem, where Spenser seems to have withheld or amended his manuscript, during printing, in order to handle with particular care the delicate topical allusions and historical allegories shadowing the Queen, Raleigh, and Leicester."⁸

Both Speed Hill and Zurcher's concerns are focused on the textual variations across Ponsonbie's 1590 and 1596 editions, and in their arguments, the misplacement of the letter to Raleigh in the latter copy is merely a small piece of a significantly larger puzzle, if relevant at all. Little analysis is dedicated to the role and importance of 'A Letter of the Authors... *intention*' in *The Faerie Queene* as a complete text.

Jean Brink, however, considers the importance of the letter somewhat in her breakdown of the 'Materialist History of the Publication of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"'; she argues against the accepted Spensarian narrative of a thoroughly involved poet whom "himself is supposed to have been allowed to supervise the printing... with the full co-operation of the publisher William Ponsonby".⁹ Brink instead observes that such criticism has often "led us to ignore the history of the material text of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*" in favour of a notion which "ignores the evidence furnished by the surviving physical texts."¹⁰ The critic does indeed identify anomalies in this first edition, highlighting a lack of authorial presence in the printing process evidenced by spelling variations and the disordered inclusion of the dedicatory sonnets and the letter, yet limits her explanation of the letter's misplacement to an insistence that no Elizabethan writer "sincerely interested in the presentation of the *Faerie Queene*, certainly not an author seeking patronage, would have approved the way in which the dedicatory material was handled in 1590."¹¹ Even

⁷ Andrew Zurcher, 'Printing "the Faerie Queene" in 1590', in *Studies in Bibliography*, 57 (2005/2006), pp. 115-150. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40372109>> [accessed 18 April 2020], p. 116.

⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

⁹ Jean R. Brink, 'Materialist History of the Publication of Spenser's "Faerie Queene"', in *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, 54.213 (Feb., 2003), pp. 1-26. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3661532>> [accessed 18 April 2020], p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

more curiously, Brink, despite evaluating the ineffectiveness of other scholars disregarding “the material state of actual copies of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*”,¹² reduces the exclusion of ‘A Letter of the Authors... *intention*’ from the subsequent 1596 edition as an inevitable consequence of literary transience: “The ‘Letter of the Authors’, of internally dated 1589, was written a year before the publication of the 1590 *Faerie Queene*... By 1596 it may also have been less likely that the poem would contain twenty-four books.”¹³

In this case, it seems almost myopic to accept that the final outcome negates the original intention; the six books published do of course tell their own individual narratives, but the understanding of a bigger picture (in this case, Spenser’s intended blueprint for *The Faerie Queene*) creates another dimension of the epic poem to its readers, linking it together to align it with this genre. We are made aware of the function of the books in the epic as an entirety, the context which influenced its creation, as well as the allegories significant to the creator. Without Spenser’s endeavour “to direct your vnderstanding to the wel-head of the History”¹⁴ in his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spensarian study would not have the foundation of knowledge as it does, and its placement in all modern editions recognises the contextual significance of ‘A Letter of the Authors... *intention*’ when reading, analysing and exploring *The Faerie Queene*. Its inclusion in the first 1590 Ponsonbie edition shaped the enjoyment and understanding of the epic, direct from the poem’s pen. Readers could not only identify and engage with the Anglican virtues Spenser modelled in the first thirty-six cantos, but could also consider potential morals to come in future books and perhaps even encourage these Elizabethan individuals to “frame the other part of polliticke vertues” in admirable knight Arthur, and promote the value of embodying the qualities and principles of a figure so virtuous “hee came to be king.”¹⁵

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¹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴ Spenser, ‘A Letter of the Authors... *intention*’, p. 718.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 715.

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