
In his Allegory of Love ([Oxford, 1936], p. 349), C. S. Lewis wrote that Ireland had corrupted Spenser’s imagination. In the last decade, critics trying to retrieve the Irish conditions of Spenser’s work have returned repeatedly to Lewis’s judgment, taking it not as a warning against topical readings but rather as an invitation to track this “corruption” as it passes from Spenser’s prose tract, A View of the Present State of Ireland, to the iron world of book 5 of The Faerie Queene, and from there into the darker recesses of Faerieland. Although many critics have lanced one or another corrupted spot in the Spenser canon, Andrew Hadfield’s Spenser’s Irish Experience is the first major book-length work I know of that combines a detailed study of Spenser’s prose writings on Ireland with a systematic search for traces of Spenser’s Irish career in his poetry.

Following an introduction on “Spenser, Colonialism, and National Identity,” Spenser’s Irish Experience consists of two chapters dedicated to A View and two chapters on The Faerie Queene, with a concluding chapter on the “Cantos of Mutabilitie.” Hadfield analyzes A View’s use of humanist dialogue, Renaissance political theory, and the body of tendentious histories, anecdotes, and commonplaces about Ireland from which English apologists built their imperial defenses. Hadfield also locates Spenser’s career and thought in the rivalry between two distinct factions of English colonists in Ireland: “Old English” settlers, who were Catholic heirs of the Anglo-Norman invasion, and their “New English” competitors, Protestant settlers of lesser pedigree and greater ambition armed with modern ideas about statecraft and a repeatedly frustrated, somewhat contradictory desire for both more concerted military support and greater administrative autonomy from the Crown. At once settlers, soldiers, bureaucrats, and intellectuals, these educated men and committed Protestants living at the periphery of English society could also be poets—as was the case with Spenser.

The chapter on “The Use of Myth in A View” is especially strong, as it traces with great care the vicissitudes of several key commonplaces inherited from the period of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland and the epochal revision of these medieval motifs in Protestant thought. For example, a prime defense of English sovereignty over Ireland was the papal bull Laudabatler, issued by the English Pope Adrian IV, which assigned to Henry II, dubbed “Lord of Ireland,” the task of reforming the primitive faith of the Irish people (p. 93). For New English apologists like Spenser, religious “reform” remained an organizing impulse behind the argument for English control of its western neighbor, but
it was now a reform programmatically opposed to papal bulls and the geopolitical order they had come to represent. In the sixteenth century, references to the Laudabilitier decisively disappeared from the Protestant discourse on Ireland; in the resulting vacuum, writers like Spenser turned to British legends of Arthur’s ancient conquest of the island. Although the main tradition of progressive English historiography increasingly subjected Arthurian materials to the skeptical tools of modern philology, the same material filled an important ideological gap in the context of Ireland, as borne out in the appearance of Arthur in and between A View and The Faerie Queene (pp. 88–89).

The three chapters on Spenser’s poetry address the 1590 Faerie Queene (bks. 1–3), its expansion in 1596 (bks. 4–6), and the posthumously published “Two Cantos of Mutabilitie,” included in the 1609 folio of Spenser’s great poem. Of these, the first chapter is the weakest, since there is little directly Irish material in the first half of The Faerie Queene. Hadfield’s argument, however, is that such apparently generic motifs as the “salvage nation” of book 1 receive an explicitly Irish resignification in the second installment of the poem, which reflects much more consistently on the Irish setting in which it was produced. The careful, even too-careful work that Hadfield does to elicit intimations of Ireland in the earlier books of The Faerie Queene bears savage fruit in the following chapter. Thus the brief, bracketed, and, as it were, subterranean references to Irish rivers in the river marriage sequence of book 4 burst to the surface, Alpheus-like, in the etiology of Irish waste performed in the Faunus episode of the “Cantos of Mutabilitie.”

Some of the book’s most exciting intellectual work occurs in Hadfield’s reading of book 5, the poem’s most direct view of Ireland. Hadfield analyzes the juridical concept of “equity,” theorized by the French political philosopher Jean Bodin, who reacted to the horror of religiously driven civil war by prescribing absolute monarchy as its only antidote. Following Bodin, Hadfield defines equity as “the notion that mercy and justice can be balanced through the specific actions of the magistrate to override the codes of common and civil law”; derived from natural law, it is a kind of extralegal principle within the law, “a principle of excess, a supplement” in which natural law “fold[s] over itself” (pp. 73–74). The situation in Ireland, also riven by competing religious allegiances between groups claiming to be countrymen—though complicated immeasurably by the colonial situation—led Spenser to use the concept of equity to argue for greater executive power, in the name of the distant Crown, for Ireland’s new class of administrators (pp. 75–76). Hadfield discovers a similar conception at work in the gray world of book 5: “In The Faerie Queene, Book V, as in A View, Ireland provides the context for a defense of equity as a fundamental legal
principle, forcing legislators to move beyond their experiences of the relatively ordered commonweal of England" (p. 157).

It would be interesting to see how Hadfield might move this analysis from a historical and thematic to a poetic or formal level. How, for example, might Spenser's experiments with genre elaborate a kind of poetic "equity," in which the author, in a new act of poetic sovereignty, overrides the laws of genre in order to defend or remap the conflicted grounds of the British poetry those laws are designed to maintain? To ask this question of Hadfield's book, however, is to point to its main limitation: the lack of either a developed literary ear or a dialectical consciousness of the dynamic relationship between history and literature. (For example, the typography of the book does not reproduce the original stanza form of *The Faerie Queene*, with its extended first and ninth lines; by justifying all the lines, the typesetter has brought Spenser's poetry as close to prose as possible.) At times the book threatens to reduce the many worlds of *The Faerie Queene* to the single (if self-divided) world of *A View*. When Hadfield writes of the "Cantos of Mutabilitie" that they invoke "a distant mythical time... when Ireland was the centre of the universe," one cannot help feeling that Hadfield's own project is to restore Ireland to precisely this central place (p. 194). Yet it is Ireland as periphery, and its concomitant casting of Spenser's voice in the historic mold of the Poet in Exile, that gives the island its peculiar resonance, both strangely distant and uncannily near, in Spenser's poetry, in turn forcing Spenser to create a new home in poetry itself. More passages like those on equity, reflexively extended to the generic and allusive operations of the poem, might ultimately lead to a more "equitable" view of Spenser's project in its totality.

Despite my admiration for this ambitious and carefully executed work, I cannot help ending on a cautionary note. It is ironic that the current strain of work on Spenser's Irish career (to which I have myself contributed) may represent the last best hope of preserving Spenser in some modest corner of the English curriculum in the new century. Hadfield acknowledges this when he writes, "I hope to persuade readers that Spenser should not be left to specialists... precisely because his writing poses serious questions for students of colonialism and national identity" (p. 11). Spenser's ethnic policies and trans-British perspective give his work a pointed relevance—at once immensely powerful and painfully restricted—in the contemporary moment. To his credit, Hadfield does not limit Spenser to a single political message or geographical position but, rather, uses the Irish "frame" to fashion a creative (re)access to Spenser's poetry. The enterprise, however, cannot help running a real risk—namely, that the reopening of
Spenser’s work under the rubric of racism will ultimately close off his poetry to future generations of students, scholars, and writers of English across the globe.

Julia Reinhard Lupton

University of California, Irvine


In An Advertisement Touching the Controversies of the Church of England (1591, published 1641), Francis Bacon dismissed the raging debates between English ecclesiastics and Presbyterians during the late sixteenth century as pertaining to matters of no particular religious significance. “The Controversies themselves,” he remarked, “I will not enter into, as judging that the disease requireth rather Rest than any other cure. Thus much we all know and confess that they are not of the highest nature. For they are not touching the high Mysteries of Faith such as detained the Churches for many years after their first peace. . . . Neither are they concerning the great parts of the Worship of GOD . . . but we contend about Ceremonies and Things Indifferent, about the Extern Polity and Government of the Church.”1 In Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton, Achsah Guibbory offers a powerful corrective to the subordinated position that Bacon and scores of like-minded historians, theologians, and critics have assigned to ceremony within the hierarchy of religious causes. For Guibbory, debates over ceremonial practice cannot be explained within the narrow confines of either political or theological conflicts but instead reflect profound differences over both the nature of human experience and the construction of religious community. These differences—between matter and spirit; eclecticism and exclusivism; invention and inspiration; and idolatry and iconoclasm, to name a few—structure the most profound ideological divisions between seventeenth-century ceremonialists and Puritans, whose attitudes toward seemingly indifferent matters like altars or holy days represent, in Guibbory’s view, widely disparate attitudes toward the world.

Ceremony and Community takes as its subject the turbulent decades of the 1630s to the 1660s, focusing on the works of four prominent