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Review of the book, "Bruce Danner, Edmund Spenser’s War on Lord Burghley"

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Bruce Danner, Edmund Spenser’s War on Lord Burghley

by Rachel E. Hile


In this book, Bruce Danner offers a tightly focused and convincing argument explaining Edmund Spenser’s animus against William Cecil, Lord Burghley, creating a narrative of the “war” by thoroughly outlining the historical context and then analyzing the “battles” in numerous works of Spenser’s poetry in the 1590s. He argues strenuously against the early twentieth-century critics who drew conclusions about the Spenser-Burghley disagreement that depended upon speculative arguments centering on a 1579 composition date for *Mother Hubberds Tale* and controversy over the Alençon marriage plans. Danner offers a new analysis of the conflict, which he believes began when Spenser included in the 1590 *Faerie Queene* a fulsome dedicatory sonnet to the Earl of Oxford, Burghley’s son-in-law, who had humiliated and angered the Cecil family with his cruel and cavalier treatment of his wife, Burghley’s daughter Anne, up to her death in 1588.

Danner divides the book into three parts. Part I, with two chapters, sets forth Danner’s argument regarding Spenser’s initial offense to Burghley. Chapter 1 provides the detailed historical information on Lord Burghley’s family life on which Danner rests his interpretive claims regarding *The Faerie Queene*’s dedicatory sonnets. Scholars of early modern English literature often hold a caricatured view of Lord Burghley—one part Polonius, one part Dick Cheney; Danner creates a more nuanced but still recognizable portrait of the man, finding a way into the task of humanizing him by narrating the story of his love for his daughter, with the corollaries of his justified hatred of her husband and his own personal shame at having favored the imprudent match of his daughter to his ward, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. Oxford—absent on a yearlong tour of the Continent at the birth of his first child, Elizabeth, in 1575—had preemptively denied his paternity of any child born to Anne, an insinuation that presumably played some role in the flat refusal in the early 1590s of another of Lord Burghley’s wards, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to marry Elizabeth, despite heavy penalties exacted by Burghley (39–40, 71–72). On his return to England in 1576, Oxford refused to reconcile with Anne and continued obdurate for another five years, until his own fortunes had declined so much that he needed to reconcile with the powerful Cecil family, and thus resumed living, unhappily, with his unhappy wife (40–46). Still, though acknowledging the sincerity of
Burghley’s concern for his daughter, Danner finds a characteristic selfishness motivating him: “With the sobs of Anne still resonant in his letter, Burghley is petulant and riddled with his own concerns, exhibiting less guilt over the countess’s misery than frustration over his own dishonor and material liabilities” (47).

Chapter 2 continues Danner’s portrait of Burghley as a complex personality: loving but not affectionate, proud and self-regarding in part because of anxiety about his relatively humble origins, ambitious not only for himself but also his loved ones, but willing to manipulate or pressure anyone to further the interests of himself or his family. In this chapter Danner makes a case for why Burghley might, with reason, have taken offense at the 1590 *Faerie Queene*. Danner has already demonstrated that the injuries Oxford inflicted on the Cecil family were deep and lasting, and the preceding discussion enables the reader to see how Burghley, with his particular point of view, may have viewed the juxtaposition of the dedicatory sonnet to himself and that to his son-in-law, the latter calling attention to Oxford’s veiled presence in the allegory of the work and the former inviting Burghley as reader to penetrate the veil of allegory to the deeper meaning. Danner hypothesizes that Burghley might have taken Spenser up on the invitation and found ready parallels between Amoret and Scudamour and his daughter’s marriage: “The victim of a terrifying and debilitating assault upon her chaste body, Amoret has correspondingly endured a long separation from her husband, whose tendency to passionate excess renders him incapable of effecting her rescue, requiring the aid of the exemplary figure of chastity, Britomart” (73).

Part II focuses entirely on the 1591 *Complaints* volume, with one chapter each devoted to *The Ruines of Time*, *Virgils Gnat*, and *Mother Hubberds Tale*. Several ideas and concerns connect these chapters: (1) Danner repeatedly emphasizes the importance of reading these poems in the context of 1591, rather than 1579, as numerous critics following Edwin Greenlaw have done. (2) Danner presents criticism of Burghley and praise of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Francis Walsingham in these poems as two sides of the same coin, with both actions serving to indicate a consistent political position in Spenser and a presentation of himself as an independent poet who celebrates those who merit it, not those who can reward him. (3) To replace attention to the French marriage negotiations of 1579 as the historical context, Danner offers 1591’s uncertainty regarding the political future of Burghley’s son and political heir, Robert Cecil, specifically whether the queen would appoint him to succeed Walsingham as her secretary.

In chapter 3, we see a continuity with the methods of the previous chapters: where chapter 2 focused on reading *The Faerie Queene* and its dedicatory sonnets
through the eyes of Burghley in order to argue against twentieth-century critics who dated the Spenser-Burghley animosity to 1579, this chapter reads *The Ruines of Time* through the eyes of multiple contemporary readers, in particular John Florio, to argue against new-critical scholars who disparaged the unity and power of the poem. In doing so, Danner aims to correct present-day scholars’ tendency to focus on *Mother Hubberds Tale* as the major source of offense in the *Complaints* volume; Danner argues that *Ruines* is the more politically dangerous poem, in that it “criticizes Cecil without the mediating fiction of an allegorical beast fable” (92). The main purpose of *Ruines*, of course, is to praise Leicester and his family, but the close proximity of praise of Leicester to blame of Burghley leads Danner to read the two actions as connected.

Chapter 4 argues against readings of *Virgils Gnat* by Greenlaw, Richard Rambuss, and David Lee Miller that depend upon a 1579 historical context and that take for granted an allegory in which the gnat represents Spenser and the shepherd Leicester. Instead, Danner offers a 1591-focused reading in which the dead, unappreciated Leicester is the dead, forgotten gnat who needs a poet-shepherd (Spenser) to memorialize him. This reading views *Virgils Gnat* and *The Ruines of Time* as “virtually companion poems” (138): “While the works engage Leicester from opposite directions, they work together in establishing Spenser as politically selfless, willing to criticize Leicester in the prime of the nobleman’s life and to revere his memory after his death” (134). The chapter may seem a bit out of place in a book devoted to Spenser’s war against Burghley; Danner returns his focus to Burghley at the end of the chapter, but arguments for the relevance of Burghley to this poem, such as his interpretation of Burghley as the “Oedipus” that Spenser warns in the dedicatory sonnet, do not feel as central or compelling as the chapter’s fine allegorical readings of poet, patron, and the work of memorialization.

I came to this book already curious about how Danner would treat *Mother Hubberds Tale*, given that scholars have paid immeasurably more attention to the role of this poem in the contentious relationship between Spenser and Burghley than to the other poems Danner analyzes, making it more difficult for Danner to provide fresh insights to the conversation. But he succeeds, advancing in chapter 5 a persuasive thesis about the performance of ambition under Elizabeth, finding similarities between Burghley and Spenser in that both found it expedient “to frame their own desires within the larger context of the institutions that enabled them, construing ambition in terms of service, just as the Elizabethan courtier was constrained to portray self-interest as ‘love’” (183). Spenser’s criticism in *Mother Hubberds Tale* of the Fox’s ambitious building projects (*MHT* 1173–82) serves as the entrance point to Danner’s argument, because of its apparent topical reference to the extravagance of Burghley’s estate at Theobalds. Danner provides the
historical background on Theobalds, but also, in keeping with his insistent interest on the importance of events of 1591 to a reading of Spenser’s *Complaints*, interprets the significance of the entertainment organized to welcome Elizabeth upon her visit to Theobalds in 1591, an occasion of extreme significance for Robert Cecil, whom Elizabeth knighted and whom Burghley named the heir to Theobalds during this visit. Danner finds in Burghley’s pose of retirement, symbolized by using a hermit character to deliver his welcome to the queen, parallels with Spenser’s depiction of the “virtuous withdrawal” of the ideal courtier in *Mother Hubberds Tale* (181). Once again in this chapter, we see Danner taking the time to add nuance to the caricature portrait of Burghley that his reader is likely to hold, and this more complex Burghley ends up looking more like Spenser than Spenser himself might prefer.

Part III, “After the *Complaints*,” includes one chapter and an afterword, and they move quickly, perhaps too quickly in the case of chapter 6, which examines Spenser’s comments in the 1596 *Faerie Queene* on slander and the “great peer” whom he has displeased through the lens of the rhetorical figure metalepsis, or the substitution of a remote cause for a nearer cause. In particular, Danner argues that Spenser aims in 1596 to convince his readers that Burghley took offense from the 1590 installment of the epic, thus dating their conflict to 1590, not 1591. An extension of Danner’s ideas on metalepsis and slander to the historical experience of Lord Grey and Spenser’s fictionalization of the episode in Book V of *The Faerie Queene* seems promising, but ultimately this short chapter feels too rushed to fully develop the implications of these ideas. The afterword, however, is just right. Danner finds in William Butler Yeats a nice stand-in for many readers of Spenser: someone who loves the poetry but comes to hate what he believes Spenser stood for politically. Danner reminds us of Stephen Greenblatt’s influential reading of Spenser as a poet who worshiped state power and notes that Louis Montrose, in attempting to defend Spenser of this charge, fails to reference the *Complaints* volume. Here, in the afterword, Danner circuitously offers an argument for the importance of his book: by bringing careful attention to what the *Complaints* mean for our understanding of Spenser’s politics, this book offers a more complete view of what motivated Spenser, providing a rationale for admiring both the poetry and the man. Danner suggests that Yeats, despite his criticisms of Spenser the man, implicitly understood this; he reads Yeats’s multiple allusions to two lines from *The Ruines of Time* (“whiles the Foxe is crept / Into the hole, the which the Badger swept,” *RT* 216–17) and finds in both poets “a point of common cause, a restless dissatisfaction with the cultural status quo and the determination for the poetic voice to be heard in protest. Ultimately, the lair that the fox cannot foul is the domain of art and its power to survive the transitory moment” (214–15).
One of the things I find most interesting about Danner’s authorial persona is his willingness to dispute—generally politely—the work of other critics. So, for example, in the Introduction, in addition to taking issue with Greenlaw, Danner mentions by name three contemporary critics (Richard Peterson, Richard McCabe, and Andrew Hadfield) who err, in Danner’s opinion, by not stating directly that Greenlaw’s interpretation cannot be sustained in light of the recently discovered letter by Thomas Tresham (edited by Peterson) that confirms that *Mother Hubberds Tale* was indeed called in shortly after the publication of the *Complaints* volume in 1591 (3). Here and elsewhere in the text, Danner’s ways of questioning or criticizing other scholars’ arguments seem fair-minded and dispassionate contributions to the ongoing scholarly conversation about the works of Edmund Spenser. This occasionally turns to something more like truculence in the footnotes, as when, for example, Danner uses a 900-word-long footnote to attack the argument of Thomas Herron’s article on *Mother Hubberds Tale* (226–228 n47). For me, this crossed into the realm of “excessive” long before the end of the footnote.

Still, the sheer length of that 900-word-long footnote will give the reader a sense of how seriously Danner takes the work of the footnote in general—I especially enjoyed Danner’s careful separating of wheat from chaff in dealing with the scholarship of the nineteenth-century scholar/forgery John Payne Collier in the footnotes to chapter 5. The now-all-too-common absence of a bibliography makes it harder to find the sources cited elliptically in later footnotes, but the publisher mitigates this problem somewhat by providing full bibliographic information anew when a previously referenced source is cited in a new chapter. Still, given the amount of actual arguing, rather than just citing, that Danner does in the footnotes, it is a shame that the indexer, with a handful of exceptions, did not include the footnote text as part of the indexed material. In dealing with the primary literary texts, Danner provides sensitive readings of Spenser’s poems, showing thorough knowledge of the entire corpus of Spenser’s work and of the secondary scholarship on Spenser. Some readers may be disappointed by Danner’s overreliance on certain key secondary historical scholarship and biographical works, as for example the multiple citations of Alan Nelson’s *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool University Press, 2003) in chapter 1 or of James Sutton’s *Materializing Space at an Early Modern Prodigy House: The Cecils at Theobalds, 1564–1607* (Ashgate, 2004) in chapter 5. Although this material is illuminating to literary scholars of Spenser, the lack of attention to primary historical research limits the usefulness of this book to historians.

Despite these limitations, Danner creates a convincing argument by offering a narrative of the Spenser-Burghley conflict that makes more sense than the 1579-
based readings: it makes sense that Burghley would be offended by the references to allegorical depictions of the Earl of Oxford; it makes sense that he would be vague about the reasons for his anger; and it makes sense that Spenser would thus view him as arbitrary, humorless, and censorious. Beyond this rough outline, which must of course remain speculative, Danner’s analysis of the *Complaints* to show how Spenser responded to his sense of being treated unfairly provides a compelling portrait of Spenser as a complex but principled man whose “loyalties to the English state were in no way incompatible with the capacity to question, resist, insult, even ridicule its institutions and principal figures” (211). He thus implicitly creates an argument for the worth of his own project: clearly these “shorter” poems are not “minor” at all.

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