

Bruce Danner. *Edmund Spenser's War on Lord Burghley*.

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As readers from Spenser's day to our own have recognized, two of the poems published in the 1591 collection of *Complaints*, "The Ruines of Time" and "Mother Hubberds Tale," contain passages of thinly veiled attack on Elizabeth's chief minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley. A long-standing critical tradition, originating with the great early twentieth-century Spenserian, Edwin Greenlaw, linked these attacks to events occurring well before the publication of *Complaints*. Greenlaw interpreted an episode in "Mother Hubberds Tale" as satire on the Alençon marriage negotiations underway in the late 1570s, and he speculated that this unwelcome reflection on affairs of state caused Spenser to be posted to Ireland in 1580, a career-long exile for which he blamed Burghley ever afterwards. It is a clever hypothesis whose elements hold together exceptionally well — too well, according to Bruce Danner, who hardly believes a word of it. In the introduction to this book he explains why, demonstrating convincingly that nothing in the substance of the attacks on Lord Burghley or in the recorded responses to those attacks needs to be assigned a date before 1590.

If the attacks did not stem from those earlier events, what did precipitate them, and how should they inform our reading of *Complaints*? After the introduction dismantling Greenlaw's hypothesis, part one of Danner's book offers his own theory. Correlating passages in the dedicatory sonnets to the 1590 *Faerie Queene* with references in the 1596 edition to "a mighty Peres displeasure" (6.12.41.6), Danner proposes that Burghley may have misread the Amoret and Scudamour episode in book 3 as representing the ill-fated marriage of his daughter Anne Cecil to the Earl of Oxford, and that Burghley's disapproval compelled Spenser to rewrite the ending of the 1590 version. According to Danner, Spenser's anger at Burghley stems from these events, but as articulated in *Complaints* it becomes something more, a means for Spenser "to fashion his own authenticity" (23) by opposing a court culture whose failings Burghley exemplifies. Part two of Danner's book offers interpretations of three of the poems in *Complaints* along these lines. "The Ruines of Time" is read as an assertion of Spenser's continuing loyalty to his early employer, the Earl of Leicester, after his death in 1588, with the dangerous attacks on Burghley confirming the poet's sincerity, while "Virgils Gnat" reimagines Spenser's past connection with Leicester as one of reciprocal honesty and trust, and "Mother Hubberds Tale" portrays Spenser's own stance as that of principled withdrawal from a degraded contemporary scene. The book's third part and its afterword consider the legacy of *Complaints*, especially for Restoration satire, as well as the implications of Danner's argument for critical accounts of Spenser as an unswerving apologist for the Elizabethan regime.

Spenserians will read Danner's book with profit. From now on, no one is likely to casually accept the elements of Greenlaw's hypothesis as fact. As for Danner's alternative explanation, his conjecture about Burghley's misreading of the Amoret

and Scudamour episode, readers will make up their own minds based on the evidence that Danner provides, but this reviewer was unpersuaded. What Danner's book does make admirably clear is what the attacks on Burghley must have signified in 1591, and the various ways that Spenser used those attacks to consolidate his own position as a man of integrity. Ultimately we may need to remain agnostic about the causes of Spenser's animosity toward Lord Burghley, but Danner's book evokes more fully than any previous study the literary effects of that animosity as registered in the 1591 volume of *Complaints*.

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