

# Renaissance and Reformation

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### Teskey, Gordon. Spenserian Moments

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scientific history, transregional exchange, and cross-cultural encounters in the early modern world.

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**Teskey, Gordon.**

***Spenserian Moments.***

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 529. ISBN 978-0-674-98844-6 (hardcover) US\$45.

Gordon Teskey, an editor of Milton, has long been a fine reader and scholar of Spenser, combining learning, style, and perceptive interpretation. This book, like his recent monograph on Milton, is the culmination of decades of work on this great epic poet and older contemporary of Shakespeare. Spenser, whom Harry Levin once told me was “an acquired taste,” was a Londoner and friend of Gabriel Harvey at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where, as a sizar—building on his time as a poor boy at Merchant Taylors’ School—he would further his study and understanding of Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and music as well as literature in English, French, and Italian. Spenser was not affluent and perhaps he was hungrier, as Marshall McLuhan, also a Cambridge scholar, once said of James Joyce—perhaps also referring to himself—that a lack of riches made him hungry for learning (once said in conversation at the University of Toronto in 1978–1979). Spenser was talented at an early age; his English versions of poems by Joachim Du Bellay and a translation of a French version of a poem by Petrarch appeared at the beginning of a tract, *A Theatre for Voluptuous Worldlings*, in 1569. He left Cambridge in 1574 during the plague, something that might resonate with us in our own pandemic.

Teskey has a deep understanding of Spenser’s learning, language, and sense of tradition. He sees Spenser’s “striving to enrich the word itself for further meaning” (xi) as a connection with the past and the poetic tradition of Chaucer, “whom he called a ‘well of English undefyled’ (*FQ* IV.ii.32)”; yet he also notes Spenser’s “striving for enrichment by the ancient languages, by the ancient epic poets, Homer and Virgil, and by philosophers, especially Aristotle, whom the

poet would have studied at Cambridge—and of course Plato, the philosopher of poets” (xi). This kind of resonant language was something Milton, Joyce, and others came to use, drawing on etymology and allegory. Teskey argues, which seems counter-intuitive but is intuitive, that Spenser, while striving to be more ancient, was more modern.

The poet of tradition is the poet of innovation, in our terms and not those of the Renaissance. Teskey plays with this paradox, calling—in his epigraphs and his opening—on Goethe and Adorno in formulating what he calls “poetry as improvisation, in particular, improvised thinking” (1). Adorno’s “Offenes Denken” (open thinking) and the lines in Goethe’s *Faust*—“Ich hatte nichts und doch genug: / Den Drang nach Wahrheit und die Lust am Trug” (I had nothing and yet enough: / The urge for truth and the pleasure in deception [illusion])—provide Teskey with a way into Spenser. For Spenser, the “imaginative illusion” of poetry leads to truth, something Plato questions as he is sceptical of poetic truth and, being poetic himself, sees it as illusory and misleading ([xvii], 1). Teskey views poetry, through Spenser’s example, as having “energetic powers” that can “change the world by changing how we feel and act” (1). Truth and illusion are intertwined and hard to distinguish, and Teskey, contra Plato, sees the delight of illusion as the means of thinking the truth of poetry. Poetry, for Teskey, is allegory; in its resonance, poetry points beyond itself. Teskey aptly understands *The Faerie Queene* “as an ongoing creative project into which the unpredictable enters with time” (2). Teskey is interested in the aesthetic and artistic qualities of Spenser’s poetry, “in its generation of moments for thinking” (3; see 2). According to Teskey, Spenser’s language is harmonious and rich like the classics, and his metaphors and similes astonish, deepen meaning, and provoke thought; his poetry “is an active and exploratory thinking” (4). Teskey remembers, as an undergraduate, reading by the Otonabee River an allegory at the end of the Mutabilitie Cantos where art meets nature in time, past, present, and future (4–5). Teskey’s book is not unlike Spenser’s in design: the pursuit of allegory, or what Spenser called in the Letter to Raleigh “a continued Allegory, or darke conceit” (6).

A few of the brilliant examples of Teskey’s momentary interpretation of Spenser, his hermeneutics that are of the moment but that endure beyond it, are mentioned here. Teskey envisions *The Faerie Queene* as “an allegory at war with its own incipiently totalitarian design,” while echoing Angus Fletcher in saying that allegories “are the natural mirrors of ideologies” (12). In terms of epic,

Teskey defines Spenser partly in contrast to Milton. Whereas Spenser's epic poetry is ideologically incoherent, subversive, uncertain, tentative, exploratory, surprising (his thoughts astonish himself), pulsatile, momentary, full of weather, Milton's poems are not. Instead, they are "architectonic structures" that "stand out of time, rigidly sublime and immobile, like mountains without weather" (12). Teskey celebrates Spenser's "open enterprise of creative thought" (12) and he returns to the image of the river in talking about Spenserian moments—feeling one's way from moment to moment in the tension between contemplation and energy—which "are like whirling eddies at a bend in a river, turning at once into themselves and releasing their energy downstream" (17; see 18).

Teskey discusses Spenser in terms of other poets beyond Milton: for instance, Ariosto, Harvey, and Shakespeare. Contrary to Harvey's wish in a letter, Spenser proceeded with *The Faerie Queene* (22). For Teskey, *The Faerie Queene* synthesizes systems of allegory and romance, of "transcendental reference and momentary crisis," which are, to each other, necessary and inimical, producing with the reader a "dynamic form of aesthetic pleasure" (48). *The Shepheardes Calender* broke new ground and so was hard to understand, although "nothing would be the same after" (55) and was, through Colin's longing for Rosalind, "a rehearsal for this larger structure of longing that is *The Faerie Queene*" (56). This long poem is a dynamic mixture of epic, romance, and allegory (91); an unfinished present absence, absent presence, contains a Georgics in pursuit of truth, England planting in savage Ireland (127). Teskey relates Henry VIII's Crown of Ireland Act of 1542 and the circumstances of its implementation to "the always incomplete but ambitious mastery of terrain, so amply described in the *View of the Present State of Ireland*, are also the conditions of the great poem" (129). Allegory, which presents itself as secondary, is a concern for Teskey, who likens it to symbol, its imaginary opposite (169–70). Transcendence and embodiment, which add to and contradict each other, are a dynamic "at the very center of our experience of the allegorical personification and indeed of allegory" (198). Paradoxically, an "allegorical character's death is the moment when that character is most alive as meaning" (199). The position of the Letter to Raleigh forces us to give up seeing *The Faerie Queene* as an object but instead elicits the energy in us (227). Teskey relates Spenser to Renaissance literary theory, which began in Italy in the sixteenth century (228); he proposes a field theory of allegory (241) and considers thinking in moments in *The Faerie*

*Queene* (265, 284). I agree that it should be read moment to moment; that is how I first experienced the poem and still do. Discussing “thinking moments” in *The Faerie Queene*, Teskey compares Spenser with Donne (285), explores how poet and reader join in thought (309), and says this poem “is Spenser’s actual thinking,” “an intellectual action: a poetic releasement of the self for moving into nearness with wisdom” (326), the thinking of history in Spenser’s romance (327, 342). Teskey explores change in the allegory of the city of Paris (367), notes in the context of courtesy and graces that Spenser was laid to rest beside Chaucer (368, 397), and sees the mutability of poetry as it seeks to confer “a visionary firmness, an identity, on the fleeting world of experience” (414). Moreover, in regard to the poem and Spenser himself, Teskey observes the allusions to “*travailleurs*: those who travel; those who are in travail in this world, who struggle in pain to bring something forth, like *The Faerie Queene*” (434). In his allegory of the Colossi of Memnon in the Afterword, Teskey ends with the question of *The Faerie Queene*: “how much of this work escapes being won over for meaning and falls into the shadow of that *almost*” (448). It may be that all great poetry, interpretation, and scholarship are almost, asymptotic, and endless. Teskey’s work is well worth reading.

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