Spensership: A Judicial Review

I know it will be said by many, that I might have been more pleasing to the Reader, if I had written the story of mine owne times; having been permitted to draw water as near the well-head as another. To this I answere, that who-so-ever in writing a modern historie, shall follow truth too neare the heeles, it may happelie strike out his teeth.

(Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*)

I CENSORSHIP

My last act of salvaging brings me to the very brink of the present. The present is a dangerous place to live, and present views of Ireland are notoriously vexed. In this chapter I want to tackle the question of censorship as it impinges upon a key text in Spenser’s corpus. It is significant that Spenser’s prose dialogue, entered in the Stationers’ Register in April 1598 as ‘A viewe of the present state of Ireland’, was first published, thirty-five years later, by an Irish antiquarian as *A View of the State of Ireland*. Against Ware’s editorial intentions, it was viewed with ire, not as ancient history but as all-too-topical, and as a text it continues to be haunted by the present.

One of the most decisive interventions in Spenser studies in recent years must surely be Jean Brink’s painstaking review of the evidence for Spenser’s authorship of the *View*. Brink’s work, which has already provoked considerable debate, is important enough to merit a chapter to itself, and I want here to address some of the vexed issues raised by her exemplary textual scholarship. The assumption that the *View* was censored in 1598 has been commonly held for so long that it has become orthodox and dogmatic. While critics may disagree as to why it was suppressed, they are united in their belief that it did suffer an act of official censorship. According to Nicholas Canny the *View* ‘failed to obtain official approval for publication’. Ciarán Brady concludes that ‘after years of redrafting his text was refused
publication by the Master Stationers in 1598, to remain unpublished for the next thirty-five years'. John Breen maintains that: ‘Permission to publish was not granted and the View was first published in 1633.’

Jonathan Goldberg’s contention is that Spenser went too far: ‘Why should the government suppress a work that states its case? The answer can only be that it is a case that cannot be stated.’ Goldberg cites the defence of Grey as a crux of controversy: ‘the official position on Lord Grey was censorship, recall, humiliation’.

Goldberg’s claim that Spenser was too faithfully representing the views of the government is countered by those critics who maintain that it was his defence of Lord Grey that prompted the suppression of his treatise. Thus Elizabeth Porges Watson insists:

> The correlative to Spenser’s endorsement of a discredited administration is his undisguised contempt for Grey’s successors in office. The View was... not surprisingly rejected for publication.

Ciarán Brady is convinced that it was Spenser’s exposure of the shortcomings of English law that lay at the heart of official objections to the View. Other critics see Spenser’s tract as being generally critical of what they imagine to be a coherent official policy. Tracey Hill contends that Spenser’s View was refused a licence ‘because he was criticising English governmental policy for being insufficiently firm on the unruly Irish; any such critique would have been unacceptable to the authorities’.

Tom Healy argues that Spenser wrote the View ‘not as a vindication of Elizabethan policy towards Ireland but as a document highly critical of it under a necessarily respectful guise’.

But what was Elizabethan policy towards Ireland? Certainly not something that remained constant between 1558 and 1603. Multiple strategies were employed, from plantation, sword and famine, to surrender and regrant.

Kenneth Gross shares Brady’s view that it was Spenser’s critique of law that underpinned the suppression of his treatise, but sees this as part of a fundamental and far-reaching critique of political culture: ‘There runs through the dialogue a deep strain of scepticism about the place and power of such structures of order as myth, custom and law.’ Since that section of the View was ‘perhaps the most pungent, if not the most original, portion of the dialogue; one wonders’, writes Gross, ‘if its ominous suggestions were not the sole reason why the dialogue was never published in Spenser’s lifetime, no matter how seriously the court advisors may have read it’. Thus there is a strain