Spenser and the Stuart Succession

Had Edmund Spenser not died in 1599, he had good reason to fear the future when James VI ascended to the English throne. As is well known, Spenser aroused James’s wrath through his portrait of the trial of Duessa in *The Faerie Queene*, V, ix, a transparent allegory of the trial and execution of Mary Queen of Scots on 8 February 1587. The English ambassador in Scotland, Robert Bowes, wrote to Lord Burghley on 1 November 1596 that James refused to allow the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* to be sold in Scotland and ‘further he will complain to Her Majesty of the author as you will understand at more length by himself’.¹ On 12 November, Bowes wrote again explaining that the problem stemmed from ‘som dishonourable effects (as the King deems thereof) against himself and his mother deceased’. Although Bowes claimed that he had persuaded James that the book had not been ‘passed with privilege of Her Majesty’s Commissioners’, James ‘still desire[d] that Edward [sic] Spenser for his fault be duly tried and punished’.² Nor was the affair over yet. On 5 March 1598, George Nicolson, a servant of Robert Bowes, wrote to Sir Robert Cecil that Walter Quinn, a poet later to enjoy a successful career at the courts of James and Charles I, was ‘answering Spenser’s book, whereat the king is offended’.³ The work, assuming it was ever completed, has not survived.

Spenser’s relationship to the Stuart claimants to the throne was clearly a key feature of his mature work published in the 1590s, as Richard A. McCabe has conclusively demonstrated.⁴ Nevertheless, a series of questions about Spenser’s representation of an event that had taken place nine years before the publication of the second edition of *The Faerie Queene* remain unresolved. In attacking Mary, was Spenser deliberately trying to blacken the name of her son and thwart his chances of becoming the king of England, as James clearly suspected? If so, are we justified...
in reading Mary as James in Spenser's published poetry, or does the non-appearance of James in the poem indicate that Spenser was not making any attempt to offend the Scottish monarch and may have been genuinely surprised at the diplomatic row that ensued? Does Spenser's allegorical representation of Mary demonstrate that he was asking readers to infer a moral significance from a historical event, which, like the legend of King Arthur, was ‘furthest from the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time’, in the words of the Letter to Raleigh appended to the first edition of the poem? Or, does it show that Spenser reused and refigured work he had written earlier, as Josephine Waters Bennett suggested was his habitual method of composition? There is no surviving evidence that will enable us to answer these questions with any certainty. Nevertheless, ignoring the issues involved impoverishes and distorts our comprehension of the context in which Spenser produced his *magnum opus*, something that has been a main aim of recent criticism of the poem. Furthermore, as I shall hope to demonstrate in this chapter, there is a direct relationship between the way in which we assume that Spenser composed his poetry and its allegorical significance. Our judgements concerning Spenser's political involvement, acumen and belief help to determine how we read the wider significance of *The Faerie Queene*. In this chapter, I will analyse the extant evidence of Spenser's complex and problematic attitudes towards Mary Stuart and James VI of Scotland. Such hermeneutic decoding poses central questions about the nature of Spenser's allegorical purpose in *The Faerie Queene* and his intentions when writing the poem.

James VI of Scotland had a distant, complex and often difficult relationship with his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. While he may have been much more sympathetic to her than is often assumed, her execution must have come as some relief because it cleared the way for James to realise his ambition to become king of both England and Scotland. It marked the end of Mary’s rather half-baked plans, conceived in 1581, some 13 years into her captivity in England, that she and her son would rule Scotland jointly as an ‘Association’. James, who had not seen his mother since 1567, when she had abdicated her Scottish throne and fled to England after the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, apparently declared, ‘I am now sole king’. James had a powerful claim to the English throne through his mother’s descent from Henry VII and the same ancestry of his grandmother, Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox, who had passed her claim on to her grandson when she died in 1578.