Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters
Haziran/June 2024 – *41*(1), 46-55
doi:10.32600/huefd.1302429

Araştırma Makalesi – Research Article
Geliş Tarihi / Received:25.05.2023 Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 23.07.2023

"Turning Others' Leaves": The Politics of National Literary Identity in Renaissance England[1]

"Başkalarının Sayfalarını Karıştırırken": Rönesans İngilteresi'nde Millî Edebiyat Kimliği Politikası

Himmet UMUNÇ[*]

Abstract

The origins of the sense in Renaissance England for a distinct English literary identity may be traced back to Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower in the fourteenth century. However, it was with the Elizabethan generation of writers and poets in the second half of the sixteenth century that this sense became a serious concern and constituted the essence of their literary politics at the time. In fact, at a time when political, ideological, cultural, economic, commercial, and colonialist nationalism was on the rise in Renaissance Europe, it would not be unusual for the Elizabethans to pursue radical policies of nationalism in every sphere, including most importantly the formation of a national literary identity. Accordingly, for the literati of the time, especially for the generation of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and their contemporaries, literary creativity and originality and, consequently, independence from foreign influence were to be prioritized and privileged over imitation and traditionality. Therefore, they increasingly turned away from the imitation of Continental literary norms and explicitly rejected Petrarchan populism; instead, they were involved in a deliberate and focused engagement in a process of theoretical and pragmatic politics for the creation of national literature. The new national literature they envisaged was not only to be authentic and native in identity but also to match up the intellectual standards of Renaissance humanism and literary performance at large. So this article is an analytical and argumentative attempt, with the main focus on Sidney and Spenser, to demonstrate in what ways and by what perceptions the Elizabethans were motivated for the formation of a national literary identity.
Keywords: Renaissance English literature, Sidney, Spenser, Elizabethan literary nationalism, Elizabethan politics of English literary identity, Renaissance English poetry.

Öz

Rönesans İngilteresi'nde belirgin bir İngiliz edebî kimliği oluşturma düşüncesinin kökenlerini, ondördüncü yüzyıl şairleri Geoffrey Chaucer ve John Gower'a kadar sürdürmek mümkündür. Ancak bu düşünce, çok ciddi olarak, onaltıncı yüzyılın ikinci yarısında, Elizabeth I döneminin yazar ve şairler kuşağı nezdinde öne çıkan bir ilgi konusu olmuş ve onların edebiyat siyasetinin özünü oluşturmuştur. Aslında, Rönesans Avrupası'nda siyasal, ideolojik, kültürel, ekonomik, ticarî ve sömürgeci milliyetçiliğin yükselişte olduğu bir dönemde, Elizabeth I döneminde de özellikle millî bir edebiyat kimliğinin oluşumu dâhil, her alanda radikal politikalar izlenmesi

[1] This article is an expanded version of the paper with the title "Turning Others' Leaves? The Politics of National Literary Identity in Renaissance England," originally presented as a sub-plenary lecture at the "ESSE Conference 2022," Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany, 29 August-2 September 2022.

[*] Prof. Dr. Başkent University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of American Culture and Literature. E-mail: umunch@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-5163-4121

olağan bir durumdu. Dolayısıyla, dönemin edebiyatçıları için, özellikle Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare ve çağdaşlarının oluşturduğu kuşak için, edebî yaratıcılık ve özgünlük, nihayet yabancı etkilerden bağımsızlık, öncellenmeli ve taklitçiliğin ve gelenekselliğin önüne geçilmeliydi. Bu nedenle, Kıta Avrupası'nın edebiyat modellerinin taklidinden giderek vazgeçtiler ve Petrarca'ya olan aşırı rağbeti açıktan açığa reddettiler. Buna karşılık, millî bir edebiyatın yaratılması için, bilinçli ve odaklanmış olarak, kuram ve uygulamaya yönelik bir edebiyat siyaseti sürecini ortaya koydular. Ön gördükleri yeni millî edebiyat, sadece özgün ve yerli değil, aynı zamanda Rönesans hümanizmasının ve genel edebiyat üretiminin düşünsel standartlarına uygun olmalıydı. İşte bu makale, Elizabeth I dönemi edebiyatçılarının, millî bir edebiyat kimliğinin oluşumu için, hangi düşüncelerle ve ne gibi yöntemlerle hareket ettiğini irdeleyen ve tartışan bir çalışmadır. Bu amaçla, özellikle Sidney ve Spenser üzerinde durulmaktadır.
Anahtar sözcükler: Rönesans İngiliz edebiyatı, Sidney, Spenser, İngiliz edebiyat milliyetçiliği, İngiliz edebî kimlik politikası, Rönesans İngiliz şiiri.

Introduction

What follows is a modest attempt to demonstrate in what ways and by what perceptions the writers and poets in Renaissance England were theoretically and pragmatically involved in a deliberate and focused engagement for the creation of a national literature. My main focus will be, among others, on Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Although the origins of the sense for a distinct English literary identity may be traced back to Chaucer and Gower in the late Middle Ages, it was with the Elizabethan generation in particular that this sense came to be dominant and constituted the essence of their literary politics. For this generation, innately fostering "a developing sense of Englishness,"[2] creative originality, and independence from Continental literary influence, was to be prioritized and privileged over imitation and traditionality of form and topicality. Accordingly, the new national literature, free from imitation of Continental norms of writing and dominant Petrarchan populism, was not only to be authentic and native in identity but also to match up the standards of Renaissance humanism and literary performance at large. In fact, the sixteenth century in Renaissance Europe increasingly witnessed a widespread rise of political, ideological, cultural, economic, commercial, and colonialist nationalism that gestured to the evolving concept of nation-state. Similarly, Renaissance English politicians, intellectuals, writers and poets were also motivated to pursue radical policies of nationalism in every sphere, including most importantly the formation of a national and independent literary identity.[3]

At the outset it may seem somewhat anachronistic to associate the modern political term "nationalism" with the Renaissance literary context. As commonly admitted, the modern political concept of *nationalism* and nationhood mainly arose out of the politics and philosophy of the French Revolution. Yet, as regards the Renaissance, the term "nationalism" has been used in this article for a literary and cultural rather than political framework of reference. It has also been used in affiliation with the broader and more emotive term "patriotism." This is because the Renaissance idea of nationalism was fully embedded in the Renaissance idea of patriotism, which, to the Renaissance mind, culturally meant giving priority to one's own national language, literature, history, moral values, and identity, and thus to one's own nationhood. Unlike the collective and holistic Christian identity and selfhood of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance idea of nationhood and patriotism became essentially defined by a nation's historical, cultural, racial, institutional, legislative, judicial and various other characteristics, which all constituted the essence of national identity. So, in the aftermath of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance may also be regarded, among others, as the rise and formation of national identity through national languages and literatures. Therefore, the politics of literary nationalism in Renaissance England can also be perceived within this general context.

[2] Shoulson, p. 355.
[3] See McGovern's article for a concise account of the rise of mercantilism and economic nationalism in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance England.
[3] Charlton, p. 241.
[4] Krailsheimer, p. 16.
[5] See Charlton, pp. 240-241.

The Rise of Literary Nationalism in Renaissance England: Sidney and Spenser

A major aspect of the rising literary nationalism on the Renaissance Continent and England was the growing importance and popularity of the vernacular as a national medium of literary expression. In other words, the vernacular during the Renaissance period came to be "recognized as worthy not only for translations but also original works."[4] In this regard, the poetical quality and use of the vernacular was of prime importance. This was because, as A.J. Krailsheimer states, in Renaissance Europe

> "poetry was seen as the ultimate test of the vernaculars, and thus the element of national and linguistic prestige was always important."[5]

Accordingly, this led, especially among Continental Renaissance writers, to an increasing publication of various treatises for the defence of the vernacular. The best known among them were Cardinal Pietro Bembo's *Prose della Volgar Lingua* (1525) in Italy and Joachim du Bellay's *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Françoyse* (1549) in France.[6]

The privileging of the vernacular on the Continent as a national medium of literary expression also had its constructive impact on Renaissance England and further enhanced the growing awareness among Tudor and Elizabethan intellectuals for a rhetorical refinement and lexical enrichment of the English language. In fact, from the fifteenth century onwards, from William Caxton to Roger Ascham and Thomas Elyot, it was deeply felt that, as the national language, English had to be upgraded and standardized to make it an effective and refined national medium of public instruction and literary expression.[7] Compared especially with Italian and French as the advanced Continental vernaculars, English was considered to be devoid of any rhetorical and literary elegance. For instance, the Tudor physician and traveller Andrew Boorde disparagingly complained that

> "the speech of England is a base speech to other noble speeches as Italian, Castilian and French."[8]

However, this kind of negative sentiment gradually lost its significance through improvement and efficiency in education and language teaching in Renaissance England. In this regard, one may recall Spenser's teacher Richard Mulcaster at Merchant Taylors' School in London, who, in his English teaching book *The First Part of the Elementarie* (1582), wrote with a strong patrotic sentiment as follows:

> "I do not think that any language be it whatsoever is better able to utter all arguments, either with more pith or greater plainness than our English tongue is. […] I love Rome but London better; I favour Italy but England more, I honour the Latin but I worship the English."[9]

Mulcaster further emphasized that English was to be the language of national literature; rhetorically he asked:

> "But why not all in English? […] It is our accident which restrains our tongue, and not the tongue itself, which will strain with the strongest, and stretch to the furthest."[10]

[7] See Charlton, pp. 120-123.
[8] Qtd. in Charlton, p. 120.
[9] Qtd. in Charlton, p. 120.
[10] Qtd. in Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste,* p.13.

Despite Mulcaster's enthusiastic and patriotic defence and self-assurance as such, the question whether English had attained perfect literary excellence was still an important concern among the Elizabethans, most explicitly for Sidney and Spenser. For instance, in offering in his *Defence of Poesie* a brief critique of the contemporary English literary writings,[11] Sidney voiced his disappointment that only a few of these writings had what he called "poeticall sinnews in them."[12] However, as regards *The Shepheardes Calender,* which Spenser had dedicated to him, he was somewhat in dilemma in his appreciation of the poem. He argued that, although Spenser's poem was commendable for its poetical quality, stylistically it was crude because of its linguistic archaism and violated the traditional decorum of the pastoral discourse:

> "The Sheepheards Kallender hath much Poetrie in his Egloges, indeed woorthie the reading, if I be not deceiued. [Yet] that same framing of his style to an olde rusticke language, I dare not allow: since neither *Theocritus* in Greeke, *Virgill* in Latine, nor *Sanazara* in Italian, did affect it."[13]

In fact, as a rising new national poet in the late 1570s, Spenser, on the other hand, was consciously attempting by his use of an affected archaism to revive the old lexical richness of the English language that he believed Chaucer and Gower had demonstrated in their works. Essentially Sidney did agree with Spenser about the valuable contribution that Chaucer and Gower had made to the development of English as a national poetical language:

> "[…] in our English, wer *Gower*, and *Chawcer,* after whom, encoraged and delighted with their excellent foregoing, others haue folowed to bewtify our mother toong, aswel in the same kind as other arts."[14]

Moreover, Sidney was firmly convinced that, as the national language, English was "most fit to honour *Poesie,* and to bee honoured by *Poesie.*"[15] Evidently it was in view of this very fact that, with a growing sense of literary nationalism, Spenser obviously felt indebted to Chaucer and Gower. Therefore, out of strong patriotic sentiments, he must have chosen them deliberately as his models for style. However, despite Sidney's stylistic objection, a defence (*apologia*) for Spenser's archaism was offered by the anonymous commentator "E.K." of *The Shepheardes Calender.*[16] In his letter ("epistle"), addressed to Gabriel Harvey and dated 10 April 1579,[17] E.K. praised Spenser's linguistic patriotism and strongly supported his use of an archaic style in *The Shepheardes Calender*:

> "[…] in my opinion it is one special prayse, of many whych are dew to this Poete, that he hath laboured to restore, as to theyr rightfull heritage, such good and naturall English words, as haue ben long time out of vse and almost cleane disherited."[18]

In order to set off Spenser's linguistic nationalism and patriotism, E.K. also complained in his letter how the beauty of the English language had been disregarded and how borrowings from other languages had spoiled it:

> "our Mother tonge, which truely of it self is both ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse, hath long time ben counted most bare and barrein of both. Which default when

[11] See Sidney, *The Defence,* sigs. H3^{v}-H4^{r}.
[12] Sidney, *The Defence*, sig. H3^{v}.
[13] See Sidney, *The Defence*, sig. H3^{v}.
[14] Sidney, *The Defence*, sig. B2^{r}.
[15] Sidney, *The Defence*, sig. K1^{v}.
[16] The identity of Spenser's anonymous commentator "E.K." has never been established; actually he may have been a close and learned associate of the Sidney-Spenser literary circle or, as generally assumed, a pseudonym that Spenser may himself have used to promote his pastoral work *The Shepheardes Calender*.
[17] For a text of the letter, see Spenser, pp. 416-419.
[18] Spenser, p. 417.

> as some endeuoured to salve recure, they patched vp the holes with peces and rags of other language, borrowing here of the french, there of the Italian, euery where of the Latine, not weighing how il, those tonges accorde with themselves, but much worse with ours."[19]

Accordingly, for Spenser, Chaucer's style of writing was to be principally emulated in poetry as a model and guide because Chaucer was, in E.K.'s words, "the Loadestarre of our Language."[20] Again in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser paid tribute to Chaucer, or "Dan *Chaucer*" as he called him, by referring to him as the "well of English vndefyled."[21] Thus, through his allegiance to the national linguistic and cultural heritage of medieval England, Spenser clearly brought to the fore a strong sense of literary nationalism that was on the rise among the young Elizabethans from the 1570s onwards.

So with Spenser in the forefront, the process for the enrichment and development of the English language in Renaissance England constituted part of the politics of national literary identity. More broadly, the process was related to what Stewart Mottram calls in the political, cultural, and economic sense "the complexities of English identity formation" in the early modern period.[22] The process was further expedited through extensive translations and language learning as well as by means of borrowed words and appropriate neologisms.[23] Ultimately the Renaissance English acquired so much literary and communicative versatility that, without this quality, as Charlton states, "the language of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature could hardly have developed as it did."[24]

Besides the enrichment and development of English as a literary language, another major issue that cut across the politics of national literary identity was the English Renaissance adaptation or imitation of the traditional literary genres for the creation of a distinctively authentic and purely native literature. Obviously, for Sidney and his contemporaries, who inherently saw their literary mission as "service to Queen and country,"[25] this was a far more challenging and complex issue, given the widespread prevalence of Petrarchanism and the increasing influence of Renaissance Italian and French literature. In this regard, the young Elizabethans subscribed to the view that, within the context of Renaissance humanism at large, the new English literature was to be distinctly native in content but traditional in form. In other words they pioneered in literature what one may call, borrowing Martin Elsky's phrase, "the rise of English national consciousness."[26] Indeed, as John Buxton points out,

> "the Elizabethans were not attempting to copy the ancients [one may add, also the Continentals], rather to learn from them the means of creating something new."[27]

Therefore, the works to be written and produced were to be "self-confidently English" as Buxton further puts it. Instead of repeating and imitating the Continental clichés of expression, stylistic variations, and moods of feeling, Sidney, and Spenser under his influence, turned to their own cultural, social and political native sources in order to pioneer the creation of the new national English literature. Essentially their attitude and policy can be considered to have been a significant component of English nationhood and Englishness in the political and cultural sense. In other words, they adopted what Annabel Patterson terms "the politics of self-representation."[28] In this regard, Sidney's Sonnet 1 in his *Astrophel and Stella*[29] can be viewed as a kind of literary manifesto. The sonnet metaphorically epitomizes Sidney's politics for an indigenous national literature diacritically independent from

[19] Spenser, p. 417.
[20] Spenser, p. 416.
[21] Spenser, p. 222 [*The Faerie Queene,* IV.ii.32].
[22] Mottram, p. 297.
[23] See Charlton, pp. 239-246.
[24] Charlton, p. 241.
[25] Helgerson, p. 893.
[26] Elsky, p. 393),
[27] Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste,* p. 12.
[28] Patterson, p. 44.
[29] For quotation and textual reference, Ringler's edition of Sidney's poems has been used in this article.

foreign influences.[30] Textually considered, in the octave of the sonnet, the poet lover, who wishes to write a sonnet for his beloved, has been "'turning others' leaves" and carefully studying for imitation the conceits, styles, prosody and devices ("inventions fine") used by other poets, whether classical and Continental. Yet, as further implied metaphorically in the sestet, his efforts prove futile because mere imitation does not lead him to any poetical spontaneity, creativity and originality:

"But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;"

moreover, classical and Continental metrical patterns used in poetry did not suit the phonetic and structural properties of English:

"Others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way."

Therefore, in the end, the poet lover, already frustrated and dejected, is rebuked by his "Muse" for his dependence on alien poetical forms and examples. He is further instructed by the Muse to focus on his own self and experience for literary creativity and national identity:

"'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'"

The failure that the poet lover experiences in his attempt to write poetry basicly stems, to use Richard Lanham's words, from "the difficulty of writing poetry with a stale and borrowed rhetoric."[31] Of course, in the Renaissance sonnet tradition, this means unquestionable submission to the dominant poetical fashion of Petrarchanism since Petrarch's lyrics and sonnets, as Heather Dubrow points out, "enjoyed an extraordinary vogue throughout much of Europe in the early modern times."[32] As a young upcoming poet, seeking poetical self-achievement and literary recognition, Sidney recognized that Petrarchan clichés and poetical formats were of no use for his personal poetical distinction. He also clearly saw in terms of literary politics that the formation of a national English literary identity was to be constructed upon the native cultural and literary heritage and aesthetically in a form and style that would appeal to his English audience.

Evidently, in their adaptation of the classically-oriented and popular Renaissance literary genres, Sidney, Spenser, and their contemporaries were motivated both by an aesthetic purpose and a national desire to enhance their own creativity and take a leading role in the formation of the new national English literature. Thus, they felt that they had first to liberate themselves from what one may call a dominant *literary and stylistic colonization*, which was cumulatively Continental but particularly Italian and French. Yet, on the other hand, they were also aware that, in adapting the traditional literary genres, they had to imitate or maintain the established norms of these genres. This was important for self-learning and a diacritical literary identity. In this regard, Jean-Claude Carron's general discussion of the contributory and motivating impact of imitation in the Renaissance as a whole can be recalled. For Carron, imitation provided Renaissance poets and writers:

[30] See Umunç, "Sidney's Sonnet 1," pp. 113-116 for a commentary.
[31] Lanham, p. 100.
[32] Dubrow, p.15.

> "the means to achieve a modern poetics. Through imitation, the poets could appropriate for their time what their period was ready to assimilate. In doing so they were able to recognize, in spite of the distance that alienated them from the past, the possibility of continuity which would be understood as a 'historical' and personal dialogue. Imitation gave rise to the idea of a 'rebirth'among the poets; it provided the means to develop a 'second nature' through assimilation and appropriation of the model."[33]

Carron further emphasizes the motivating, formative, and guiding role of the Renaissance practice of literary imitation:

> "One imitates not in order to copy others, or to overtake them on their own ground, but rather to become oneself, to achieve self-recognition. Identification—but with oneself—was the goal. […] Poets imitate less what the models were able to be than what they were able to do, that is, they imitate for their own sake."[34]

When we turn to Spenser, for example, in adapting the pastoral genre, he changed its traditional format of topography, typology, and nomenclature. Instead, he used an English pastoral landscape and nomenclature. In writing his pastoral, he was indebted, only in conceptual and generic terms, to the major classical and Renaissance pastoral poets from Theocritus and Virgil to Mantuan, Sannazaro and, in E.K.'s words, "diuers other excellent both Italian and French Poetes"[35] as his sources of imitation and inspiration. Indeed, Spenser's use of an English context for *The Shepheardes Calender* can be seen as the domestication of the classical pastoral and its Continental Renaissance polarization. In a sense, one may claim, in constructing *The Shepheardes Calender,* he anglicized the established and traditional norms of pastoral and used them for his English version of the genre. For instance, the Elizabethan educator and critic William Webbe was exceedingly enthusiastic in his praise of Spenser for adapting the Virgilian pastoral and transforming it into a genuine English and national genre. In his book *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586) he wrote:

> "But nowe at the last hath England hatched vppe one Poet of this sorte, in my conscience comparable with the best in any respect: euen Master Sp[enser] Author of *The Sheepeheards Calender,* whose trauell in that peece of English Poetrie, I think verely is so commendable, as none of equall iudgement can yeelde him lesse prayse for his excellent skill, and skyfull excellency shewed foorth in the same, then they would to eyther *Theocritus* or *Virgill,* who in my opinion, if the coursenes our speeche (I meane the course of custome which he woulde not infringe) had beene no more let vnto them, then theyr pure natiue tongues were vnto them, he would haue (if it might be) surpassed them. What one thing is there in them so worthy admiration, wherevnto we may not adioyne some thing of his, or equall desert? Take *Virgil* and make some little comparison betweene them, and iudge as ye shall see cause."[36]

So for Webbe, Spenser's pastoral was not a mere imitation but an English adaptation of the genre that not only embodied the generically established norms but also was equal in quality and creativity to its classical models. In the eyes of Webbe and certainly other Elizabethans, Spenser had proved himself to be the Virgil of Renaissance England.

Textually analyzed, the Englishness of Spenser's pastoral is displayed through various native references in the eclogues. For instance, in addition to the usual classical pastoral names such as Phyllis, Daphnis, Tityrus, Menalcas, and so forth, he also uses such native names as Colin, Piers, Willy, Diggon Davie, Morrell, and Rosalind along with some unusual and metaphorical names like Hobbinoll, Perigot, Wrenock, and Lobbin. Thus he set the example of an English pastoral nomenclature that was further to be enriched by such native names as, for instance, Drayton's

[33] Carron, p. 570.
[34] Carron, p. 570.
[35] Spenser, p. 418.
[36] Quoted by Cummings, pp. 57-58).

shepherds Rowland, Winken, Perkin, and so forth. Similarly in his depiction of a pastoral landscape, he used the scenery of the native English countryside. Instead of the Virgilian and thereby traditional pastoral *locus amoenus,* he preferred to situate his pastoral in an English geography. Indeed traditionally the Virgilian *locus amoenus* invariably included an Arcadian setting with spreading trees, cool shades, sacred streams, green pastures and with the Mediterranean flora that consisted of pine trees, osiers, laurels, willows, olive trees, sacred groves of poplars, narcissuses, hyacinths, myrtles and so forth. Yet Spenser's pastoral setting is genuinely English and consists of the native English flora such as briars, hawthornes, brambles, oaks, cowslips, kingcups, gillyflowers, daffodils, daisies, lilies and violets, thus creating an impression of the typical English countryside with rows of hedges. Moreover, it is "on the hils of Kent"[37] instead of Theocritus' Sicily or Virgil's idealized Arcadia that his shepherds keep their flocks. Also, instead of the oaten flute or Pan's pipe used by shepherds in the traditional pastoral as the conventional musical instrument, Spenser's shepherds play bagpipes. In the pastoral tradition the seasons are conventionally spring and summer. In Spenser's case his pastoral world is exposed to the changing effects of the four seasons and becomes rather dystopian in the winter season due to the rigours of a northern climate: an unsettled and "lowring wether," a "clodie welkin," frosty nights, "bitter blasts," the blustering Boreas. So one may conclusively stress that, through all these native depictions and references, Spenser gave the pastoral genre a national and culturally authentic sense of Englishness. Similarly, it was also with such a sense of Englishness that, after his *Shepheardes Calender,* he embarked on his grand project of *The Faerie Queene* as a national epic romance and indeed, in Buxton's words, as "[a] great patriotic poem."[38] Accordingly, considered within the politics of Renaissance English literary nationalism, *The Faerie Queene* was designed as, in Patterson's words, "the greatest representation of Elizabethanism as a national ideology."[39] Generically, Spenser transformed the classical form of epic into what one may call *a mixed mode* by blending it with medieval chivalric romance. Thus, he created an epic romance which was diacritically English in form and content. In constructing his poem, Spenser situated it historically within the medieval context of the national Arthurian heritage. Allegorically, through his mythopoeic depiction of a chivalric world of romance, involving heroic quests, love and moral excellence, and ruled over by the fairy queen Gloriana, he idealized and celebrated Elizabeth I, her court and reign. Of course, studied critically and with reference to Renaissance humanistic and mythographical writings, Spenser's poem with its sophisticated allegorical depth that can be palimpsestically explored embodies multiple layers of discourse and meaning. Consequently its polysemic dimensions have always been open to, as A. Bartlett Giamatti puts it, "so many differing, often contradictory or hostile approaches."[40]

Spenser's close social and literary association with Sidney[41] obviously provided him with a stimulating and creative intellectual environment and enabled him to witness at first hand Sidney's literary nationalism and view of the state of English literature at the time. Especially there was an urgent need to defend literature against an aggressively growing Puritan fundamentalism, most graphically represented by Stephen Gosson's harsh polemics in his infamous book *The Schoole of Abuse*. The publication of this book in 1579 apparently motivated Sidney to write *The Defence of Poesie.*[42] However, he did not mention Gosson's name directly and obviously wished to avoid getting involved in a cheap polemic. On the other hand, he voiced his dislike of anti-literary Puritan discourses by referring to them as the "idle tongues [that] barke at [poets]."[43] In fact he wrote *The Defence of Poesie* in the first place as a theoretical and critical treatise on the art of poetry, largely

[37] Spenser, p. 424 (the February Eclogue).
[38] Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste,* p. 11.
[39] Patterson, p. 63.
[40] Giamatti, p. 234.
[41] In his letter, dated 5 October 1579, Spenser wrote to his Cambridge humanist and academic associate Gabriel Harvey (1545?-1630) as follows: "as for the two worthy gentlemen, Master Sidney, and Master Dyer, they haue me, I thanke them, in some vse of familiarity" (Spenser, p. 635). On Spenser's relationship with Sidney's literary and social circle, including the poet Sir Edward Dyer, primarily interested in occult and esoteric matters, see Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney,* pp. 99-101.
[42] See Umunç, "Sir Philip Sidney," pp. 111-118).
[43] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. C2^{v}.

derived from classical sources and extensive Renaissance humanist commentaries on the subject.[44] More importantly, the treatise could also be regarded as a kind of handbook for the creation of a national literature that is not to be inferior in quality to the literary products of the Continental Renaissance and in full compliance with traditional generic norms and practices. Indeed for Sidney, the English literary performance at the time was regretfully poor despite the fact that, as he patriotically stressed, "in our plainest homelines, yet neuer [had been] the *Albion* Nation without *Poetrie*."[45] However, he lamented that, while "embraced in all other places",[46] poetry "should onely finde in our time a hard welcome in England".[47] Therefore, he further stated, the poetry written in his time was mere versification, slavishly imitating others and devoid of quality and any native creativity:

> "Idle England […] now can scarce endure the paine of a penne. Vpon this necessarily followeth, that base men with seruill wits undertake it, who thinke it inough if they can be rewarded of the Printer. […] These men no more but setting their names to [poetry], by their own disgracefulnesse, disgrace the most gracefull *Poesie*".[48]

For him, they were not true poets but versifiers or what he referred to as "bastard Poets."[49] Their verses, which lacked "poeticall sinnewes in them",[50] were nothing but

> "a confused masse of words, with a tingling sound of ryme, barely accompanied with reason. Our Tragidies and Commedies, not without cause cryed out against, obseruing rules neither of honest ciuilitie, nor skilfull *Poetrie*".[51]

Clearly, his dejection enhanced his sense of literary nationalism. As a cultivated Renaissance courtier and, for Buxton, "an epitome of grace,"[52] he considered it his mission to patronize and encourage the rising generation of new poets. He believed that England was "the Mother of excellent mindes"[53] and could rightly demonstrate what he called "the sacred misteries of *Poesie*"[54] through its learned and innovative capacity. Yet he died young in 1586 after having been fatally wounded in his fight for the liberation of Holland from the Spanish hegemony. Consequently he was deprived of the chance to witness the climactic literary productivity of the 1590s and thereafter. Still one may imagine: had he survived to see both Spenser's monumental national epic romance and the works of the young Elizabethans, he would certainly have felt most satisfied that his vision of a national literature, created with an inspiring sense of Englishness in all respects, had been fulfilled. Among the young Elizabethans that distinguished themselves by their literary creativity were Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, George Peele, Thomas Nashe, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, John Lyly, Thomas Watson, and Thomas Kyd. As "the epitome of his […] nation," to recall Kiernan Ryan,[55] Shakespeare in particular would have greatly impressed him through the generic variety and sustained Englishness of his drama as a perfect amalgamation of his dramaturgical and poetical creativity.

---

[44] See Umunç, "Sir Philip Sidney and Literary Criticism in Renaissance England," pp.107-118. Among the humanist commentaries on poetry the most popular and widely known were Robortello's *In Librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Explicationes* (Florence, 1548), Fracastoro's *Naugerius sive de Poetica Dialogus* (Venice, 1555), Minturno's *De Poeta […] Libri Sex* (Venice, 1559), and Scaliger's *Poetices Libri Septem* (Lugduni, 1561). In his treatise, it is often to Scaliger (sig. F3^{v}, H1^{r} *et passim*) and Fracastoro (sig. H2^{r}) that Sidney explicitly refers.

[45] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. G2^{v}.

[46] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H2^{v}.

[47] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H2^{v}.

[48] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H2^{v}.

[49] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H2^{v}.

[50] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H3^{v}.

[51] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H4^{r}.

[52] Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste,* p. 7.

[53] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. H2^{r}.

[54] Sidney, *The Defence,* sig. K1^{v}.

[55] Ryan, p.10.

Conclusion

For Sidney, Spenser, and their contemporaries, the literary adaptations or appropriations they made from the classical and Renaissance humanistic literary heritage signified a learning and formative process in order to develop their own creativity and indigenous national literature. It was a process of what Carron calls "innutrition."[56] Adaptation, appropriation or, simply, imitation was perceived and practised by them as a kind of constructive and stimulating guidance for personal and innovative writing. So through their theoretical and generic discussions and also by their sense of literary Englishness, the writers and poets in Renaissance England demonstrated their dedication to the creation of a national English literature and thus privileged their politics of national literary identity.

Conflict of interest:	The author declares no potential conflict of interest.
Financial support:	The author received no financial support for the research.
Ethics Board Approval:	The author declares no need for ethics board approval for the research.

References

Buxton, J. (1966). *Sir Philip Sidney and the English renaissance.* Macmillan.

Buxton, J. (1965). *Elizabethan taste.* Macmillan.

Carron, J. (1988). Imitation and intertextuality in the renaissance. *New Literary History, 19*(3), 565-579. https://doi.org/10.2307/469089

Charlton, K. (1965). *Education in renaissance England.* Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Cummings, R.M. (Ed.) (1971). *Spenser: The critical heritage.* Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Dubrow, H. (1995). *Echoes of desire: English petrarchism and its counterdiscourses.* Cornell University Press.

Giamatti, A. B. (1966). *The earthly paradise and the renaissance epic*. PrincetonUniversity Press.

Elsky, M. (2001). Ben Jonson's poems of place and the culture of land: From the military to the domestic. *English Literary Renaissance, 31*(3), 392-411. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2001.tb01194.x

Helgerson, R. (1978). The new poet presents himself: Spenser and the the idea of a literary career. *PMLA, 93*(5), 893-911. https://doi.org/10.2307/461777

Krailsheimer, A.J., (Ed.) (1971). *The continental renaissance, 1500-1600.* Penguin.

Lanham, R. A. (1972). Astrophil and Stella: Pure and Impure Persuasion. *English Literary Renaissance, 2*(1), 100-115. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1972.tb00992.x

McGovern, J. (1970). The rise of new economic attitudes - Economic humanism, economic nationalism - during the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, A.D. 1200-1550. *Traditio, 26*, 217-253. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362152900004992

Mottram, M. (2013). Literature, locality and nation in recent renaissance studies. *Renaissance Studies, 27*(2), 297-301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00831.x

Patterson, A. (1986). Re-opening the Green Cabinet: Clémont Maro and Edmund Spenser. *EnglishLiterary Renaissance, 16*(1), 44-70.

Ryan, K. (2015). *Shakespeare's universality: Here's fine revolution.* Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare-Bloomsbury.

Shoulson, J. S. (1999). Proprietie in this Hebrew poesy: George Wither, Judaism, and the formation of English national identity. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 98*(3), 353-372.

Sidney, P. (1971). *The defence of oesie.* Scolar Press.

Sidney, P. (1962). *The poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (W. A. Ringler Jr, Ed.). Clarendon.

Spenser, E. (1966). *Poetical Works.* J.C. Smith & E. de Selincourt (Eds.), *Oxford Standard Authors Series*. Oxford University Press.

Umunç, H. (1995). Sidney's sonnet 1: An epitome of his literary policy. *Journal of English Language And Literature* (Hacettepe University, Department of English Language and Literature), *3*, 113-116.

Umunç, H. (1989). Sir Philip Sidney and literary criticism in renaissance England. *Journal of Human Sciences, 8*(1), 107-118.

Webbe, W. (1586). *A discourse of English poetrie*. Modern Humanities Research Association.

[56] Carron, p.570.