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INTRODUCTION

General Ends and First Essentials

The generall end . . . of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.

—EDMUND SPENSER, *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, 1590

The first essential is, of course, not to read *The Faery Queen*.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, “THE FAERY QUEEN,” 1947

NEAR THE end of book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser’s Knight of Temperance, Sir Guyon, enters the library of a virtuous maid named Alma, spies a book titled the *Antiquitee of Faery Lond*, and settles down to read. Seventy stanzas later, he is still at it: “Guyon all this while his booke did read, / Ne yet has ended, for it was a great / And ample volume” (2.10.70.1–3).¹ His sojourn in Alma’s library marks a rare interval of calm in the knight’s otherwise tempest-tossed career, but the quiet of the scene is misleading: in a poem that persistently identifies hermeneutic skill with heroic action, the meaning of reading itself proves unsettlingly hard to parse. For the *Antiquitee* is no page-turner; on the contrary, it consists of a comically monotonous litany of the descendants of one Elfe, progenitor of faerie kind: Elfin, Elfinan, Elfinell, Elfant, Elfar, Elfinor, Elficleos, Elferon, and so on. Guyon’s absorption in it is thus rather baffling: Is he truly fascinated by the faerie genealogy, or have its repetitious rhythms lulled him into a stupor? Is he engaged, enthralled—or merely bored stiff? And what do the fixity and intensity of his gaze portend for his allegorical function in the poem: Is reading without end an exemplary feat of temperate self-mastery or an uncharacteristic lapse into self-indulgent excess? What, finally, are the implications for us: Is Guyon a cautionary figure for the reader of Spenser’s poem, our parodic double, or an aspirational ideal? The uncertainties of the episode can’t be resolved or evaded, pressed home by an odd, inter-linear shift in tense—“Ne yet *has* ended”—that fleetingly conjoins Guyon’s

experience to our own. However we interpret it, the conjunction is a timely one: two books, twenty-two cantos, more than a thousand stanzas, and some ten thousand lines into *The Faerie Queene*—which is to say, not quite a third of the way through—we might well pause to wonder about the motives and merits of readerly persistence. What is this great and ample volume, and why are we still reading it?

It is the peculiar and discomfiting genius of *The Faerie Queene* to call reading into question. Few works have a greater capacity to inspire pleasure, few do more to tax readers' patience, and none, perhaps, has a stronger propensity to fill them with self-doubt. Written at a moment when right reading was at once a stringently regulated ideal and, in Anthony Grafton's words, a "complex and protean enterprise," *The Faerie Queene* invests the work of interpretation with extraordinary, even existential, power: in the densely coded, relentlessly violent world of Spenser's poem, learning to read in the precise fashion that a particular text or occasion requires is the means to narrative survival.² As a consequence—and as those of us who study and teach the poem are fond of pointing out—*The Faerie Queene* is filled with testimonies to the necessity of readerly judgment, intuition, and tact. In addition to books like the *Antiquitee*, the inhabitants of Spenser's fictive universe scrutinize prophecies, spells, letters, inscriptions on walls, tapestries, armorial sigils, the workings of divine providence, the features of the faerie landscape, and each other's faces; they live, move, and have their being in a realm of infinite signifying potential—and limitless opportunities for distraction and confusion. Readers of *The Faerie Queene* thus continually read alongside and over the shoulders of readers in *The Faerie Queene*, sharing in their perplexity, profiting from their insights, and learning from their mistakes. As Judith Anderson writes, "the poem itself . . . teaches us at once how to read and how vital this process is."³ That doubling of interpretive effort imbues the experience of the poem with a rare sense of dynamism and depth: like some vast and versified hall of mirrors, the poem repeatedly confronts us with the image of our engagement with it, and summons us to do better. But it can be unnerving, too. For all its faith in the transformative power of reading well, *The Faerie Queene* is a showcase of hermeneutic excess and incompetence, its pages littered with botched encounters between readers and texts. And as Guyon's ceaseless and possibly pointless contemplation of *The Antiquitee of Faerie Lond* suggests, the poem subjects reading to a deeply skeptical accounting, weighing its costs and benefits with an exacting eye; as often as not, reading comes up short.

The vertiginous, self-deprecating wit of the figure of the still, still-reading Knight of Temperance is an index of the lengths to which Spenser's poem will go in order to anticipate and share in the imagined scene of its reception: even our boredom and exhaustion have a place in its pageant of readerly dispositions. To put it another way, it can be extraordinarily hard to come up with a response

of *The Faerie Queene* that doesn't in some way seem to have been scripted—and often also challenged, rebuked, amended, revised, or discarded—in advance. And yet the poem retains a fundamentally welcoming stance toward the contributions of readers. Its intricacy and immensity may be overwhelming, but they yield a fractal-like distribution of interest: famously difficult to comprehend, *The Faerie Queene* is nonetheless susceptible of interpretation at every scale. As Isabel MacCaffrey observes, “open-endedness is built into [*The Faerie Queene*] both formally and thematically because, by calling attention to the process whereby we understand the fiction itself, it sheds light upon the process whereby all understanding takes place.”⁴

Spenser's name for this iterative, looping, dialectical process of understanding—the reading of reading, as we might call it—is “discipline.” In the “Letter of the Authors expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke,” addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh and appended to the 1590 first edition, the poet famously declares that the “generall end” of his poem “is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.” The vagueness of the indefinite article—is the object of the poem's fashioning imaginary or real, a singular abstraction or anyone who happens to pick it up?—is the point: *The Faerie Queene* works by concentrating abstract qualities in particular fictive beings and inviting individual readers to identify themselves with broadly universal types. The result is a deliberate blurring of instruction and entertainment, purpose and whim. Rather than delivering his moral precepts straight, Spenser explains, “I conceived [they] should be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, than for profite of the ensample.”⁵ In an elaboration of the age-old alchemy of profit and pleasure ascribed to poetry by Horace and others, *The Faerie Queene* works to transform instincts of enjoyment common to any literate person—an appetite for narrative, a sympathetic interest in the experiences of fictional characters—into mechanisms of moral, spiritual, and intellectual refinement, aiming at a perfect synthesis of desire and skill. The allegorical champions of each book are the exemplary results of this fashioning, but so, too, at least in theory, are the readers who accompany them on their adventures: their discipline begets our own.

That, in a rather different sense than Spenser intended, is one of the central claims of this book. As scholars have long recognized, when it appeared in print in the 1590s, the epic grandeur, formal intricacy, and moral seriousness of *The Faerie Queene* played a crucial role in transforming the writing of English from a merely useful or amusing pursuit to a legitimate vehicle of eloquence, ambition, and national identity—though the poem was also maligned for its allegorical obscurity and stylistic oddity.⁶ But in the decades and centuries that followed, that same obscurity and oddity helped to make the reading of English

into a discipline in the modern sense of the word: a specialized body of knowledge with its own proprietary techniques of research, analysis, interpretation, and commentary. Indeed, the very features that curbed the poem's influence as a model of literary practice made it an ideal object of literary analysis. Conspicuously eccentric and yet inarguably important, *The Faerie Queene* proved a reliably generative source of critical judgment and scholarly inquiry. Moreover, the stresses it placed—or was perceived to place—on readers' abilities and expectations yielded a crucial sense of distinction among them, between amateurs and experts, mere literacy and literary criticism, reading as pastime and reading as profession.

When we say that *The Faerie Queene* teaches us how to read, then, what we really mean is that it teaches us—and helps us teach others—how to read in specific and rarified ways. When students begin her course on Spenser, Judith Anderson explains,

while they are natively bright enough, they have not learned (or been taught) to pay attention to the words, sentences, or logical sequences of writing. Perhaps more significantly, they are not aware in a conceptual sense that such features of their reading might be useful, interesting, even enlightening. . . . [They] desire to read only realistically—characterologically, so to speak—and not simply to ignore, but to want to ignore, alternative and especially complicating dimensions of significance in the hope that these unfamiliar, puzzling things would go away.⁷

The Faerie Queene, however, refuses to submit to such pedestrian longings: “Ill-informed efforts to read . . . autonomously, psychologically, or novelistically” fall flat, while failures to attend to the dense verbal circuitry result in embarrassing mistakes. “There is,” Anderson concludes, “nowhere successfully to hide in it”: “we either engage . . . the reading process it models” or “get lost in ways of which we cannot avoid becoming aware.”⁸ Other contributors to the 2003 special issue of *Pedagogy* in which Anderson's essay appears make similar claims for its capacity to turn ordinary students into English majors, or to show them why they might prefer art history or engineering instead.⁹ This function as a divining rod of readerly promise and commitment is one that *The Faerie Queene* has long assumed in the study of English—for as long, indeed, as that study can be said to have existed at all. Beginning in the decades just after the poet's death and thanks in part to the influence of his own former schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, an early advocate for classroom instruction in English language and literature, the exemplary role once exclusively played by classical authors like Virgil and Cicero was increasingly open to vernacular poets.¹⁰ As Richard Frushell writes in his study of eighteenth-century grammar schools, “the English major was born and the course set for curricular and canonical change in the

schools largely because of the growing popularity, ubiquity, and importance of such native models for imitation as Spenser.”¹¹ There is another side to this story, however: the progressive isolation of *The Faerie Queene* from the broadly, if aspirationally, accessible realm of what Gerald Graff calls “general culture” to the proprietary domain of literary scholarship.¹² Indeed, one of the primary aims of this book is to elucidate the process by which Spenser’s conception of readerly discipline informed and eventually gave way to our own, such that the moral and intellectual challenges of interpreting *The Faerie Queene* became almost exclusively identified with the attainments of a professional class, and the poem itself all but illegible without them. The result is an unusually complex, almost parasitic interdependence of reader and text, the identity and integrity of each reliant on the exceptionality of the other.

The application of my argument in this book is thus wider than it might seem—as capacious, in fact, as the oppositional poles of my title suggest. To the extent that we identify literature as our disciplinary home and criticism as its constitutive act, I argue, we bear the imprint of Spenser’s fashioning, whether we read *The Faerie Queene* or not. But that claim is not meant to reify the poet’s own account of how his poem works, for the mechanisms by which *The Faerie Queene* has wrought its influence on readers are by no means as smooth or well regulated as the 1590 “Letter of the Authors” suggests. On the contrary: those who have sought in *The Faerie Queene* the gentle and virtuous fashioning promised by the poet have frequently found themselves struggling in the grip of less benign reactions, from boredom and bafflement to irritation, outrage, obsession, intoxication, and sheer exhaustion. Indeed, for many—perhaps most—of Spenser’s readers, the experience of his poem has been the opposite of disciplined: not a steady progress toward understanding but a wild careening from one error or embarrassment to another.

That pattern of reaction and overreaction is both *The Faerie Queene*’s signature effect on readers and its distinctive contribution to the history of literary criticism. For as Anderson testifies, it is precisely the errors and embarrassments to which its readers are prone that make the poem such an effective disciplinary tool. Striving to moderate the excesses and correct the defects of other readers, a long line of critical custodians and scholarly guides have developed ever more elaborate protocols for understanding and enjoying it, and ever more stringent guidelines for how it can’t or shouldn’t be read. In the process, they have stumbled into errors and embarrassments of their own, providing fodder for future corrections, admonitions, and prohibitions. Along the way, the ability to read *The Faerie Queene* properly has become identified with a growing and contradictory list of readerly endowments: intellectual sophistication and child-like innocence; historical expertise and a taste for anachronism; the willingness to proceed slowly and carefully, with an eye for verbal nuance, and a

capacity to digest vast quantities of verse at one go; a blithe disregard for critical fashion and an ease with the lexicon and etiquette of a scholarly elite. But the values attached to such attainments are not inherent or immutable, and their association with Spenser's poem is anything but stable. In the course of its reception history, *The Faerie Queene* has also been identified with such dubious readerly tendencies as laziness, immaturity, bad taste, amoral aestheticism, rank partisanship, special pleading, and the sophomoric pleasures of calling other readers out—in short, with what one might call the *indiscipline* of literary criticism. Even as it plumbs the origins of some of our most cherished disciplinary norms, from editorial objectivity to the care and handling of old books, the history of Spenser's readers also offers the discipline's current denizens a more expansive, less idealized perspective on its defining act: a vantage point from which it is possible to conceive of reading as neither a heroic achievement nor a solipsistic indulgence, but a practice open to improvisation, prone to unintended consequences, and subject to unforeseen detours and reversals.

Spenser's immersion in the pedagogical, intellectual, and hermeneutic ferment of humanism and the Reformation no doubt made him sensitive to such reversals. Certainly it made him doubtful of the ease with which readerly values could, or should, be transmitted: as Jeff Dolven has shown, *The Faerie Queene* is studded with confrontations between would-be teachers and their obstinate or wayward pupils.¹³ What is more, the poem itself perpetually models or solicits interpretive strategies it then dismisses as false, inadequate, or unnecessary; reading perpetually begets not reading. Disabling though it may seem, this self-contradictory impulse serves as both a structural principle and an organizing theme, helping to spur the transition from one legend of virtue to the next and ensuring that its questing knights never quite arrive at their destinations. Taking its cues from the poem's own volatile structure, this book charts a similarly errant and erratic course across what we blandly call its reception history—which, on closer and more curious inspection, turns out to be a record of ongoing tension between *The Faerie Queene's* designs on readers and readers' designs on *The Faerie Queene*. What results is neither a reading nor a reception history in the usual senses of those terms but a dynamic hybrid of the two: a series of illuminating case studies of reading in extremity, avidly, obsessively, idly, and doggedly, at great length and in sudden bursts of diligent intensity, under duress and in defiance of the rules, in the unlikeliest of circumstances, for the strangest of reasons, and to no apparent end at all.

As a letter sent to the editors of the London daily paper the *Spectator* in July 1712 poignantly attests, reading *The Faerie Queene* can make not reading an

increasingly attractive, even necessary-seeming, proposition. “I am now in the country, and reading in Spencer’s fairy-queen,” it begins. “Pray what is the matter with me?”¹⁴ The problem wasn’t that the poem proved uninteresting—or rather, that wasn’t the only problem. Instead, immersion in it had produced a bewildering array of psychosomatic reactions, from wild enthusiasm to a stultifying dullness: “when the poet is sublime my heart burns, when he is compassionate my heart faints, when he is sedate my soul is becalmed.” Alternately exhilarated and enervated, thoroughly discombobulated, and uncertain how or if to proceed, the letter writer—who signs him- or herself “M.R.”—ends by imploring the *Spectator’s* editors to devote a portion of each upcoming Saturday issue to glossing the poem’s opening book one stanza at a time, in a manner “short but compendious”: “I long to have the *Spectator* upon Spencer bound in my pocket together.”¹⁵ That request was, unsurprisingly, denied: a stanza-by-stanza commentary on book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* would have taken nearly a dozen years of *Saturday Spectators* to complete, and its dimensions would strain even the roomiest pocket. But a single issue of the paper, published November 19, 1712, did offer “loose Hints” for coming to grips with Spenser’s poem: “it requires explication.”

The plea of the *Spectator’s* hapless correspondent sounds with endearing frankness a note of consternation that echoes across *The Faerie Queene’s* reception history. Those who address themselves earnestly to the poem frequently come away baffled: “Of the persons who read the first Canto, not one in ten reaches the end of the First Book, and not one in a hundred perseveres to the end of the poem,” Thomas MacCauley dryly observed. “Very few and very weary are those who are in at the death of the Blatant Beast.”¹⁶ Others, however, pick it up on impulse and find themselves helplessly enthralled, spurred by a devotion at once unsustainable and impossible to shake. As C. S. Lewis put it, “I never meet a man who says that he *used to* like the *Faerie Queene*.”¹⁷ For its part, the *Spectator’s* response to M.R.’s letter neatly summarizes generations of critical counsel, to the disaffected and devoted alike: *The Faerie Queene* models holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy; it induces unmanageable extremes of passion and aversion; it requires explication. From the beginning, however, the relation of commentary to text has been vexed by the immensity and internal heterogeneity of the poem itself, which makes any effort at supplementation seem at once extraneous and inadequate to need. As is frequently the case for *The Faerie Queene’s* questing knights, such help as readers receive along the way is inevitably either intrusive and overwhelming or too little, too late.

The 1590 “Letter of the Authors,” in which Spenser vowed to “discouer vnto [readers] the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned,” is an exemplary case in point.¹⁸ Placed at the back of the first

print edition, the “Letter” offers a partial and distorted retrospect on what precedes it, a description not of the poem we have just read but of some longer, better organized, and perhaps less interesting work. Neither as thorough nor as comprehensive as promised, but containing a good deal of irrelevance, it offers something closer to what the *Spectator*’s editors termed “loose hints.” Some of those are misleading—for instance, the account of the origins of Guyon’s adventure flatly contradicts what we read in book 2—and all are at least partly conjectural, since the three books printed in 1590 were supposed to be the first of a projected dozen. That unfulfilled ambition for the poem—the vision of what James Nohrnberg calls the “duodecimal” *Faerie Queene*—is telegraphed on the title pages of both editions printed in Spenser’s lifetime as well, which advertise it as being “Disposed into twelue books, Fashioning XII. Morall vertues,” despite the fact that one edition contains just a quarter and the other only half as many books.¹⁹ Even before turning to the opening lines, then, readers of *The Faerie Queene* were coaxed into sharing an unattainable vision of the poem’s capacities and their own. To put it another way, the poem primes readers for disappointment; what the *Spectator*’s correspondent experiences as a bewildering lapse of readerly competence and confidence is a sensation Spenser’s text elicits literally by design.

Indeed, the mere prospect of *The Faerie Queene* may carry an intolerable weight of expectation: the dream of the different and better self who would read it. A century and a half after the letter to the *Spectator* was written, a fictional would-be reader, Anthony Trollope’s Lady Lizzie Eustace, undertook a similar course in Spenserian self-improvement with still more dispiriting results. Retreating to Scotland with a well-curated selection of morally improving books, *The Faerie Queene* chief among them, Lady Eustace finds herself unable to read anything but her paid companion’s cheap romances:

She had intended during this vacant time to master the “Faery Queen,” but the “Faery Queen” fared even worse than “Queen Mab.” . . . For poor McNulty, if she could only be left alone, this was well enough. To have her meals, and her daily walk, and her fill of novels, and to be left alone, was all that she asked of the gods. But it was not so with Lady Eustace. She asked much more than that, and was now thoroughly discontented with her own idleness. She was sure that she could have read Spenser from sunrise to sundown, with no other break than an hour or two given to Shelley,—if only there had been some one to sympathise with her in her readings. But there was no one, and she was very cross.²⁰

Crossness, compounded in equal parts of frustration with the poem and frustration with oneself, is very often the result of an attempt to read *The Faerie Queene*. Hence the need for what the *Spectator* calls “explication” and Lady

Eustace “someone to sympathize with”—and the likelihood of its failure to satisfy.

Such failures are, of course, generative in their way; the 1590 “Letter of the Authors” was only the beginning. In the centuries that followed, *The Faerie Queene* has nurtured a vast and spreading ecosystem of explanatory supplements, from footnotes, endnotes, and marginal glosses to prefaces and appendices, concordances, encyclopedias, and readers’ guides. In time, such supplements have come to seem more like scaffolding, an indispensable support to poem and readers alike. But they function as protective fencing, too, warning away the uninitiated and ill-equipped: like the textual equivalent of an endangered species, *The Faerie Queene* now lives almost exclusively in the secure environs of the classroom. Trollope’s novel and the letter to the *Spectator* suggest that this was not always the case: there was a time, centuries even, when a lone lay reader might encounter *The Faerie Queene* in the wild—or, at least, on a country estate. But the novel and the letter also suggest that such encounters were nonetheless fraught with anxiety and informed by an inchoate sense of duty. For the vast majority of readers, past and present, it is a book we read not because we want to but because we have to, or feel we should.

Inevitably, the atmosphere of obligation that surrounds *The Faerie Queene* shapes readers’ responses to it, typically for the worse. Those who love poetry frequently fail to love this particular poem, and those who love this particular poem must learn to do so, usually with some initial difficulty. Exceptions merely prove the general rule: recalling the story told by John Keats’s boyhood tutor, who claimed that the young Keats raced through *The Faerie Queene* “as a young horse would through a spring meadow—ramping!”²¹ Henry A. Beers, an eminent scholar of British and American literature at the end of the nineteenth century, ruefully observed,

It must be confessed that nowadays we do not greatly romp through “The Faëry Queene.” There even runs a story of a professor of literature at an American college who, being consulted about Spenser by one of his scholars, exclaimed impatiently, “Oh, damn Spenser!” Still, it is worthwhile to have him in the literature, if only as a starter for young poets.²²

Of course, young poets themselves have not always proved grateful for the start. Studying English at Oxford in the early 1940s, Philip Larkin left a resentful note in his college library copy of the poem: “First I thought *Troilus and Criseyde* was the most boring poem in the English language. Then I thought it was *Paradise Lost*. Now I know that *The Faerie Queene* is the dullest thing out. Blast it.”²³

Such judgments are less distinctively characteristic of what Beers calls “nowadays” than he (or we) might suppose. In fact, it is hard to say which came first: *The Faerie Queene*’s reputation as a poem for studious dullards or its function

as a foundation for the academic study of English. Even in the early seventeenth century, when John Milton was a pupil at St. Paul's, his schoolmaster Alexander Gill incorporated extracts from *The Faerie Queene* into a pioneering textbook on English rhetoric and orthography, and a hint of Larkin's schoolboy churlishness is palpable in Milton's qualified approbation in *Areopagitica* for the poet he terms "our sage and serious . . . Spenser" and deems "a better teacher than *Scotus* or *Aquinas*."²⁴ For having invoked Spenser as teacher, Milton promptly proceeds to forget his text, offering a notoriously inaccurate summary of the Cave of Mammon episode in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*. (Milton's association of *The Faerie Queene* with the classroom might also account for the fact that in *Paradise Lost* Spenserian allegory, in the personified figures of Sin and Death, is pointedly confined to Hell.) The impulse both to laud the didactic content of Spenser's poem and to purge it from memory persists across the eighteenth century. As *The Faerie Queene* secured a place in the classrooms of Eton, Winchester, Westminster, and other elite grammar schools, the pedagogical structure of the classroom increasingly made its way inside the text, in the form of ever more elaborate glossaries, annotations, and editorial apparatuses.²⁵ An entry in an anonymous commonplace book from the early eighteenth century hints at the stultifying consequences for readers: "Spenser was a great genius," it dutifully begins. "[He] endeavoured . . . to make instruction instead of story the object of an epic poem. His execution was excellent, and his flights of fancy very noble and high, but his design was poor and his morality lay so bare that it lost its effect."²⁶

In reaction against such damningly faint praise, later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century proponents of *The Faerie Queene*—the so-called Romantics—found it increasingly necessary to warn potential readers against taking the poem too seriously, lest they lose all will to begin. "If they do not meddle with the allegory," William Hazlitt famously advised the timid, "the allegory will not meddle with them."²⁷ And yet, as David Hume confessed, without a certain self-punishing instinct, readers of Spenser's "peculiarly tiresome" poem were unlikely to persevere. "This poet contains great beauties," he declares,

yet does the perusal of his work become so tedious that one never finishes it from the mere pleasure which it affords. It soon becomes a kind of task reading, and it requires some effort and resolution to carry us to the end. . . . Upon the whole, Spenser maintains his place upon the shelves of our English classics; but he is seldom seen on the table.²⁸

That "but" might equally be a "because": *The Faerie Queene's* place on the shelves of English classics was guaranteed in part by the rarity of its appearances on the

tables and in the hands of readers. By the same token, the poem's sterling reputation did as much to repel readers as to attract them.

Indeed, by the twentieth century, it seemed to Virginia Woolf that the chief obstacle facing a would-be admirer of *The Faerie Queene* was the cloud of irreproachable virtue in which the enterprise of reading it was shrouded. "Dare we then at this time of day come out with the remark that *The Faery Queen* is a great poem?" she wonders at the start of her wry, witty, and ultimately appreciative essay on the poem. "So one might say early rising, cold bathing, abstention from wine and tobacco are good; and if one said it, a blank look would steal over the company as they made haste to agree and then to lower the tone of the conversation." Hence her paradoxical counsel to those eager to develop a taste for Spenser's poem: "The first essential is, of course, not to read *The Faery Queene*."²⁹

Woolf wrote from experience. After deliberately avoiding all contact with the poem for more than five decades, she took it up shortly before her fifty-third birthday and was startled to find herself liking it: "I am reading the *Faery Queen*—with delight," reads her diary entry for January 23, 1935. "I shall write about it."³⁰ But for all the pleasure she took in her belated discovery of the poem, she had no regrets about the belatedness. On the contrary, the gratifications of reading it were in her view necessarily delayed. "Put it off as long as possible," she urges:

Grind out politics; absorb science; wallow in fiction; walk about London; observe the crowds; calculate the loss of life and limb; rub shoulders with the poor in markets; buy and sell; fix the mind firmly on the financial columns of the newspapers, weather; on the crops; on the fashions. At the mere mention of chivalry shiver and snigger; detest allegory; and then, when the whole being is red and brittle as sandstone in the sun, make a dash for *The Faery Queen* and give yourself up to it.³¹

As the rhythms of her prose elegantly suggest, putting something off can be a way of heightening its appeal as well as holding it at bay. And in practice, not reading *The Faerie Queene* served Woolf as both prelude to and prophylactic against the otherwise too absorbing experience, at once captivating and claustrophobic, of reading it. In Spenser's Faerie Land, she observes, "we are confined in one continuous consciousness," "liv[ing] in a great bubble blown from the poet's brain." And a habit of ironic detachment proved a useful stay against "the indistinctness which leads, as undoubtedly it does lead, to monotony."³² Within weeks of beginning the poem, she was plotting her escape from it: "I

now feel a strong desire to stop reading *F.Q.*,” reads a diary entry for February 27, 1935. “As far as I can see, this is the natural swing of the pendulum.”³³

Indeed, the contradictory extremes of Woolf’s encounter with *The Faerie Queene*—attraction and repulsion; eagerness and exhaustion; delight and a strong desire to stop—are poles between which Spenser’s readers have continually ranged. “I am almost afraid I must go and read Spenser, and wade through his allegories and drawling stanzas, to get at a picture,” Horace Walpole wrote to a friend when planning the gardens at his country estate.³⁴ “Spenser I could have read forever,” countered Sir Walter Scott, recalling his youthful obsession with a poem he “devoured rather than perused”: “I could repeat whole Cantos . . . and woe to the unlucky wight who undertook to be my auditor, for in the height of my enthusiasm I was apt to disregard all hints that my recitations became tedious.”³⁵ Another teenage devotee, Robert Southey, devised a plan to complete the poem’s six missing books and, even late in life, spoke with regret of his failure to follow through. “Without being insensible to the defects of the Fairy Queen,” he wrote to Walter Savage Landor, “I am never weary of reading it.”³⁶ For his part, Landor termed Spenser’s poetry “a Jargon” and classed him “among the most inelegant of our Writers.”³⁷ Such diversities of opinion are not simply the result of changing tastes; all of the examples above are drawn from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and almost any period would afford a similar range. Unreasoning animus and passionate attachment are the twin hallmarks of *The Faerie Queene*’s reception history. The two can hardly be thought separately, as Woolf helps us to see, for the resistance the poem engenders in readers is often merely the obverse of the diligence it demands and the devotion it threatens to inspire. As a result, wild enthusiasm can give way to weariness and distaste in the space of a single encounter with the poem, much to the bemusement of the reader himself. “I don’t wonder that you are in such raptures with Spenser! What an imagination! What an invention! What painting! What colouring displayed throughout the works of that admirable author!” Samuel Richardson wrote to Susanna Highmore in 1750. “[A]nd yet,” he adds, “for want of time, or opportunity, I have not read his *Fairy Queen* through in series, or at a heat, as I may call it.”³⁸

Want of time and opportunity are trusty excuses for Spenser’s reluctant admirers, and far from being a modern innovation, “putting it off” is a venerable—indeed, the very oldest—technique for accommodating oneself to his poem. The first mention of *The Faerie Queene*’s existence comes in a letter Spenser wrote in the spring of 1580 to his friend and former college tutor Gabriel Harvey, then reader in rhetoric at Cambridge University. In the letter the young writer, whose first book had been published pseudonymously a year earlier, pleads for the return of his fledgling manuscript. It had evidently been in Harvey’s possession for some time: “I praye you hartily send me it with al expedition,” Spenser writes,

“and your frendly Letters and long expected Iudgement wythal, whyche let not be shorte, but in all pointes suche, as you ordinarilye vse, and I extraordinarily desire.”³⁹ But Harvey’s reply, when it came, merely prolonged the wait: the answering letter ranges across several pages and a host of unrelated topics before finally, reluctantly arriving at the object of Spenser’s extraordinary desire: “In good faith I had once again nigh forgotten your *Fairie Queene*. And must you of necessity haue my Iudgement of hir in deede?” In a now notorious passage, Harvey proceeds to dismiss the poem as a travesty of its author’s talent—“Hobgoblin run away with Apollo”—and ends by suggesting that Spenser write something, or anything, else instead. He then bids his friend farewell, “till God or some good Aungell putte you in a better minde.”⁴⁰

This unsympathetic response earned Harvey the scorn of critics in his own time and after, helping to secure his reputation as a self-regarding pedant. But the plea that “God or some good Aungell” put Spenser “in a better mind” prefigures many subsequent responses to *The Faerie Queene*: awe at the poet’s abundant gifts is nearly always touched with irritation, bemusement, or anxiety at the extravagant uses to which he put them. In the decades that followed its appearance in print, Thomas Nashe chastised Harvey for failing to appreciate the music of its “stately tuned verse” but admitted to being daunted himself by its “strange contents”: “perusing [it] with idle eyes,” he confesses, “I streight leapt over to the latter end.”⁴¹ Ben Jonson reportedly complained that, “in affecting the Ancients, [Spenser] writ no language” but added that he would “have him read for his Matter.”⁴² In his *Orlando Furioso* John Harington deemed *The Faerie Queene* an “excellent Poem” but hinted in his *Epigrams* that the meaning of its allegory escaped him, terming that “a question fit for higher skills.”⁴³ In his sonnet sequence *Delia*, Samuel Daniel celebrated Spenser’s achievement but politely declined to imitate it, writing, “Let others sing of Knights and Palladines, / In aged accents, and vntimely words.”⁴⁴ Eager to distinguish his epic and historiographical undertaking in *Poly-Olbion* from *The Faerie Queene*’s “Elfin Story,” Michael Drayton urged readers to treat the earlier work as “a Poeticall authority only,” not seeking for truth in its myths, legends, and “too fabulously mixt stories.”⁴⁵

Within a century, the idea that *The Faerie Queene* itself was a too fabulous mixture of folly and genius—Hobgoblin and Apollo, as Harvey names them—had become a formula, and readers of the poem were repeatedly cautioned to take care in disentangling one from the other. Even proponents conceded that reading it required certain defensive measures. John Hughes, who produced the first annotated edition in 1715, counseled readers to focus on a single book at a time, confessing that “the whole frame of it wou’d appear monstrous.” Thomas Warton, author of the first scholarly commentary, noted that the episodic structure lent itself to reading selectively—and warned that those who tried to read

it straight through would discover it did not “constitute one legitimate poem.”⁴⁶ Hazlitt’s advice not to meddle with the allegory was echoed and intensified by James Russell Lowell, who judged that the poem’s “true use” was not as an incitement to thinking but a temporary respite from it: “as a gallery of pictures which we visit as the mood takes us, and where we spend an hour or two at a time, long enough to sweeten the perceptions, not so long as to cloy them.”⁴⁷ Even an avowed Spenser completist like Alexander Grosart, whose ten-volume 1882–84 edition of the poet’s *Works* aimed at countering the circulation of his verse in anthologized extracts, admitted that “[t]he novice must read him wisely” and “in our ‘fast’ days . . . commonly has not time to do so” and proposed a careful study of the House of Holiness and the Cave of Mammon episodes as a reasonable substitute for reading *The Faerie Queene* as a whole.⁴⁸

Woolf’s joking dictum that the first essential for enjoying *The Faerie Queene* is not to read *The Faerie Queene* was thus the *reductio ad absurdum* of a critical tradition as old as the poem itself—and a surprisingly effective one at that. From the late sixteenth century through the end of the nineteenth, not reading *The Faerie Queene* wasn’t the opposite of reading it, but reading’s indispensable adjunct; acquiring a taste, or merely a tolerance, for Spenser’s poem was very much a matter of learning what to disregard, how to select or skim, and when to stop. But even as Woolf’s essay brilliantly synthesizes this tradition of counsel, it also marks its terminus. For at the moment she took up Spenser’s poem, the paradoxical ideal of reading with which it had long been identified—at once sophisticated and naive, learned and playful, admiring and ironically detached—fell prey to a fierce, two-stage conflict within the young field of literary study, first between what Chris Baldick terms “professional Knowledge” and “amateur Taste” and then between the scholarly specialists in philology and literary history and a new breed of critics eager to popularize the techniques of what came to be known as “close reading.”⁴⁹ In the long run, that conflict helped to birth the modern English department. Along the way, however, it thoroughly upset the delicate balance of attraction and avoidance that had enabled so many readers’ relationships to *The Faerie Queene*. Indeed, by the time Woolf’s essay appeared in print, a decade after it was written, reading and not reading had altered from complementary strategies of engagement with Spenser’s poem to defiantly assumed postures of allegiance to rival conceptions of the practice and purpose of literary criticism.

In the contest between amateurs and professionals, scholars and critics, that shaped English as a discipline in the first half of the twentieth century, *The Faerie Queene* was firmly enlisted on the side of expertise.⁵⁰ The association was

in many ways mutually beneficial: “In the first three decades of the twentieth century,” David Hill Radcliffe points out, “more was written about Spenser than in the previous three hundred years,” while “in the decades prior to 1965, more dissertations were written on Spenser than any other writer save Shakespeare.”⁵¹ Both facts bespeak the more general shift of poetry from popular cultural forms and institutions like the anthology and the lecture tour to the exclusive domain of academic specialists.⁵² But they also attest to the special sympathy that seemed to obtain between *The Faerie Queene’s* educative ambitions and the aspirations of those who longed to establish British and—more often—American college and university programs in English on the same rigorous footing as the doctoral degree courses imported from Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. The remoteness of the poem’s language, the density of its allusions, the abundance of sources to be traced and identified, the intricate obscurity of its allegory, the wealth of topical references and historical trivia: everything in the poem that had once been seen as an obstacle to readerly interest conspired to make it an ideal object of academic research. As Radcliffe writes, “The classic problems in Spenser studies were exactly the kinds of problems that philological scholarship was best able to address,” and the very interpretive difficulties that earlier generations of critics sought to ameliorate or ignore were prized by scholars who saw them as validations of their training and effort.⁵³

To a significant extent, however, *The Faerie Queene’s* status as a rite of disciplinary passage was due to the influence of a single scholar—who, for his part, believed that literary scholarship owed a great deal to *The Faerie Queene*. In *The Province of Literary History*, his 1931 defense of academic scholarship against what he saw as an encroaching critical amateurism, Edwin F. Greenlaw hailed Spenser as a literary historian *avant la lettre*, “an antiquary who delved in the old documents and records,” “compiled . . . sources,” and “studied folk customs, old etymologies, monuments and tapestries,” and he traced the origins of a properly rigorous tradition of English literary historicism to Warton’s 1854 *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser*. “[S]cholarship and poetic imagination united to produce [Spenser’s] epic,” he declared, “[and] scholarship, and not criticism, whether in Elizabethan days or ours, produces readers of the poet, which is the end and aim of literary investigation.”⁵⁴ In addition to being a Spenserian, Greenlaw was also, as Graff describes him, “one of the imposing figures of early twentieth-century scholarship”: a staunch proponent of historicism and philology, a highly successful builder of institutions, a committed teacher and mentor, and an influential presence in the growing business of academic publishing.⁵⁵ What one contemporary resentfully dubbed “the Greenlaw trust”—an expansive network of former students, advisees, colleagues, and collaborators cultivated over the course of his career as editor of *Studies in Philology* and

Modern Language Notes, dean of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina, professor of English at Johns Hopkins University, and founding editor of the Johns Hopkins University Press series of Monographs in Literary History—was in many ways a *Faerie Queene* trust, kept afloat on a steady stream of graduate theses, doctoral dissertations, journal articles, editions, bibliographies, and monograph-length studies of the poem, culminating a year after Greenlaw's death with the appearance of the first two thickly researched and painstakingly annotated volumes of the Spenser *Variorum*.⁵⁶

For all his professionalizing genius, however, Greenlaw was wont to idealize literary study, treating it as a quasi-spiritual vocation. In this respect, too, *The Faerie Queene* was well suited to his vision: the preface to his and James Holly Hanford's 1919 *The Great Tradition* cites its ambition "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in gentle and vertuous discipline" as an apt summation of their own scholarly and pedagogical aims.⁵⁷ Indeed, in taking Spenser's poem as both object and exemplar of disciplinary rigor, Greenlaw and his acolytes could understand their piecemeal labors on it as part of a vast and venerable intellectual project. Thus the conclusion to Jewel Wurtsbaugh's 1936 survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship on *The Faerie Queene*, published as part of the new Hopkins series, identifies the poem's early editorial history as a crucial inflection point in the "history of scholarship at large":

The fumbling, but increasingly successful efforts of [editors and scholars such as] Hughes, Jortin, Birch, Church, Upton, and Todd towards greater accuracy of the text represent the slow process by which scholars came to have a regard for careful, painstaking research [and] the breaking down of an old canonical rigidity and narrow dogmatism that judged a work of art by standards of a later time rather than by such criteria as had originally inspired it. . . . Thus slowly reaching out, weighing evidence pro and con, learning by error, and more and more carefully scrutinizing fact, Spenserian scholars were drifting towards something more vital than meaningless parallels and minute matters of diction. . . . [I]t was not merely the question as to whether Spenser borrowed from Chaucer or Ariosto in a particular instance, but rather that Jortin, Upton, Warton, and Todd were painfully and laboriously struggling toward "the truth that sets men free."⁵⁸

With its application of the words of Christ in the Gospel of St. John to the editorial history of a sixteenth-century poem, this is a startlingly grand, even grandiose, rendering of the advance of literary scholarship—a rendering, indeed, that bears more than a casual resemblance to the plot of *The Faerie Queene*'s opening book: a quest for enlightenment proceeds painfully and laboriously, through error and out of bad old dogmas, toward a glorious revelation of truth. However strained the parallel, it suggests that scholars like Wurtsbaugh and

Greenlaw found more in Spenser's poem than a seemingly bottomless trove of textual cruxes, bibliographic puzzles, and historical arcana; they discovered a powerfully appealing myth for their own academic labor, a way of imbuing the deskbound drudgery of scholarship with the spirit of an epic romance.

Needless to say, this is not how many of their contemporaries saw either literary scholarship or *The Faerie Queene*. A year after *The Province of Literary History* appeared in print, T. S. Eliot professed doubt as to whether Spenser's poem had value to anyone but literary historians: "Who except scholars, and except the eccentric few who are born with a sympathy for such work, or others who have deliberately studied themselves into the right appreciation, can now read through the whole of *The Faerie Queene* with delight?"⁵⁹ The mocking query inverts the proud conviction that reading Spenser was a badge of scholarly achievement: *The Faerie Queene*, Eliot implies, was a poem only a PhD could love. W. L. Renwick offered a similarly dry take on the heroic labors of Greenlaw and his colleagues in a 1933 review of the new Spenser *Variorum*, observing that the poet had "long engaged the fealty of American scholars—was, indeed, all but abandoned to them."⁶⁰ But among those eager to rescue English literature from the dry and instrumentalizing touch of scholars (or the vulgar clutches of Americans), *The Faerie Queene* was rapidly becoming anathema: outdated, overrated, and inessential to both literary history and the practice of literary criticism.

Although he offers a brilliant and appreciative analysis of the workings of Spenser's stanza in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1931), William Empson therefore forecloses the necessity of any further critical engagement with the poem on the grounds that, "having said that every use of the stanza includes all these uses in the reader's apprehension of it, I may have said enough."⁶¹ And even a single stanza was more Empson's influential younger colleague, F. R. Leavis, could bear: "We don't read Spenser anymore," Leavis announced to students in his poetry seminars at Cambridge University—"as if," one later wrote, "reading Spenser were some kind of vice."⁶² In Leavis's characteristically intemperate view, it more or less was. A brief approving mention of *The Faerie Queene* by I. A. Richards in his study of Coleridge was, for Leavis, "comment enough" on the weakness of that entire book; E.M.W. Tillyard's admiration for the poem as a foundational English epic struck Leavis as an egregious instance of that scholar's "tendency to find new burdens for the literary student"; even Eliot's grudging willingness to class *The Faerie Queene* among "long poems . . . in the first rank" was indicted by Leavis as a mark of his unregenerate "conventionality."⁶³ The fact that in the same essay Eliot described Spenser as one of those poets "who are very important, but whom we don't like" was hardly sufficient: in Leavis's sharply revised canon of English poetry, a contemporary observed, "Spenser was not so much attacked as dismissed."⁶⁴ Attacked *and* dismissed was

better yet: writing in *Scrutiny*, the journal Leavis founded and for many years edited, Derek Traversi accused Spenser of having “crush[ed] the true poetic genius of English,” describing the moralizing vision of *The Faerie Queene* as “a disembodied and destructive intellect preying on the body to kill the soul.”⁶⁵

As admiration for the techniques and style of the Cambridge critics spread to the United States, so too did their prejudice against Spenser.⁶⁶ In American colleges and universities in the 1940s and '50s, dislike for *The Faerie Queene* served as a calling card among partisans of what came to be known as the New Criticism. Such critics had their own notions of professional exclusivity: “It is not anyone who can do criticism,” John Crowe Ransom declared in his 1937 polemic “Criticism, Inc.,” and the sort of learning painstakingly acquired in the service of understanding a poem like *The Faerie Queene* was the most likely disqualification for doing it: “the more eminent (as historical scholar) the professor of English, the less apt he is to be able to write decent criticism.”⁶⁷ Ransom couldn't wholly escape Spenser: first at Vanderbilt and then at Kenyon College, he “grimly taught *The Faerie Queene*” as the curriculum required but made his dislike of it widely known; “though he found Spenser's allegory without intellectual meat,” his student Robert Lowell later recalled, “it amused him like a crossword puzzle or a blueprint for his garden.”⁶⁸ His Kenyon colleague and fellow New Critic Allen Tate concurred, complaining that its “art . . . oversimplifies experience,” its characters “remain homogeneous throughout,” and “the action has no meaning apart from the preconceived abstractions.”⁶⁹ At Yale, another bastion of New Criticism, the task of teaching Spenser was delegated to the department Anglo-Saxonist, while Cleanth Brooks, another of Ransom's former students, mocked members of what he called “the *Faerie Queene* club”: the “small minority of pedants” who had managed to read it all the way through.⁷⁰ To Brooks, the poem was merely a primitive (and failed) attempt “to unite the intellect and the emotions when they begin to fall apart.”⁷¹ When a colleague gamely attempted to persuade him of its interest as a formal failure, the author of *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) is said to have retorted, “I like forms that work.”⁷²

The jibe is revealing. Although critics on both sides of the Atlantic cast their objections to *The Faerie Queene* in terms of aesthetic principles—the poem was too loosely organized, too crudely didactic, and too hard to understand without reference to the taboo subjects of history and biography—those objections were also, at bottom, pragmatic: it was simply too long to fit neatly with the confines of the interpretive forms, the seminar and the essay, that secured the closeness of close reading. For the Leavisites, the New Critics, and their fellow travelers, the great achievement of the English Renaissance was the lyric poem, a form made for seminar-length discussion and essay-length analysis. Spenser was discarded in favor of hitherto lesser contemporaries: *The Well-Wrought Urn* invokes a single stanza from *The Faerie Queene* in a postscript to underscore a point

about a poem by Robert Herrick, while Yvor Winters's history of sixteenth-century verse champions the poems of Fulke Greville and George Gascoigne as exemplars of the period, dismissing *The Faerie Queene* as an "elaborately decorative" dead end by a poet "concerned largely with the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake."⁷³ Even Mark van Doren, who included *The Faerie Queene* among the "ten great poems" in *The Noble Voice*, his 1946 study of epic tradition—a genre that would seem to license, if not necessitate, a certain sprawl—struggled to suppress his impatience with its size. "[M]any, indeed, have found it monotonous in its variety and therefore, since it is endless, dull," van Doren admits. What sparks of genius it contained could not save it from irrelevance: "there [is] too much bulk to rescue."⁷⁴

"The grounds of our aversion [to Spenser] lie deeper in our contemporary culture than we can dig," observed Merritt Hughes in an essay written to mark the four-hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth in 1552.⁷⁵ But as the twentieth century reached its midpoint, that ground began to yield unexpected fruit. A generation "brought up," in Hayden Carruth's words, "to regard *The Faerie Queene* with disdain . . . and hence to suspect its readers of callowness, pedantry or worse," turned to the poem in reaction against their teachers. Seizing gleefully on the very qualities in it that those teachers most deplored—"the longest poem in English! that allegorical bore! what interminable rhymes! what ghastly pseudo-diction!"—the new generation of Spenserians rejected both the orthodoxies of traditional historicism and the New Critics' iconoclasm, taking the poem's resistance to the protocols of scholarship and close reading alike as an incitement to reading otherwise.⁷⁶ Indeed, without meaning to, in making *The Faerie Queene* a limit case of readerly capacity—for good or ill—traditionalists like Greenlaw and renegades like Leavis and Ransom had combined to invest the poem with a power to undermine their own totalizing claims, revising disciplinary norms well beyond the confines of Spenser studies itself. As Northrop Frye explains in the preface to *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), his groundbreaking attempt at a "synoptic account of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism . . . began [as] a study of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*." But reading the poem as it both allowed and required rapidly exceeded the affordances of criticism as Frye had been taught to understand it: "The introduction to Spenser became an introduction to the theory of allegory, and that theory obstinately adhered to a much larger theoretical structure"—the structure of "the whole work of scholarship and taste concerned with literature which is a part of what is variously called liberal education, culture, or the study of the humanities."⁷⁷

Frye wasn't alone in sensing both a challenge and an opportunity in *The Faerie Queene*, particularly in its most unfashionable and unrewarding aspects. The same year that *The Anatomy of Criticism* was published, Harry Berger Jr.'s *The Allegorical Temper* made a case for the revelatory potential of Spenser's elaborate style, which, he revealed, far from being merely ornamental, was rich with the very ambiguities of meaning prized by Empson and the New Critics.⁷⁸ In the decade that followed, Angus Fletcher and Rosamund Tuve produced accounts of Spenserian allegory that reclaimed that much-maligned feature as an engine of speculative argument, formal ingenuity, and readerly engagement.⁷⁹ In 1976, Paul Alpers's *The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene"* made a paradoxically profound case for dwelling on what he called "the surface of the poem," allowing its apparent inconsistencies to modify, complicate, and enrich readers' responses.⁸⁰ That same year, Nohrnberg's nine-hundred-page-long *Analogy of "The Faerie Queene"* embraced the immensity of the poem and "the conspicuous heterogeneity of its matter" as occasions for dazzling excursions across the whole of classical, medieval, and early modern culture.⁸¹ Spenser's investment in romance—which most twentieth-century critics, with the signal exception of Lewis, either ignored or deplored—was reclaimed, too, in Patricia Parker's *Inescapable Romance* (1979) and Jonathan Goldberg's *Endlesse Worke* (1981), each of which married the poem's errant, error-filled plotting to the open-endedness of deconstructive analysis.⁸² Inspired by feminist and Marxist theories, Maureen Quilligan and Louis Montrose found in Gloriana, the absent center around which *The Faerie Queene* revolves, a supremely rich case study in the history and politics of gender, sexuality, and authorship.⁸³ And a single, seminal chapter in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) made Guyon's wasting of the Bower of Bliss—a crux on which countless prior readings had foundered—a touchstone of the New Historicism and a signal trace of "the early, tentative, conflict-ridden fashioning of modern consciousness."⁸⁴

By the early 1980s, when studies by Goldberg, Greenblatt, Montrose, and Quilligan appeared in print, it was clear that the pendulum of reading and not reading *The Faerie Queene* had swung back in favor of reading it. Those who had deemed it unreadable hadn't simply gotten the poem wrong; they had gotten the discipline wrong, too. "I went to work on Spenser, partly because the New Critics thought Spenser was bad," Harry Berger Jr. later recalled. "So I figured, well, I'd show 'em."⁸⁵ But as the remark suggests, *The Faerie Queene* maintained a paradoxically oppositional relation to the field of academic study it helped to establish: reading it was both an assertion of mastery and a declaration of independence, a way of fitting in and acting out all at once. *Reading and Not Reading "The Faerie Queene"* channels both aspects of this relation. It owes an obvious debt to those who claimed (and reclaimed) *The Faerie Queene* as an object of study and a locus of theoretical and methodological innovation. But it is

equally indebted to those who tried to read the poem and failed, or went astray, and to those who refused to read it at all. Indeed, in the chapters that follow, even as I work to generate new insights from Spenser's poem, I often do so by aligning myself with readers short on understanding, skill, objectivity, patience, learning, curiosity, broadmindedness, sophistication, and all of the other intellectual virtues with which we tend to associate literature in general and *The Faerie Queene* in particular. Such limited, resistant types make up an unusually large proportion of Spenser's readers, and their responses to his poem can be as telling as those of their more successful or pliant counterparts.

My aim is not necessarily to endorse their perspectives on the poem, but to adopt them as clarifying, usefully distorting, or prismatic lenses on the experience of reading it, enlisting their impulses and assumptions against the complacencies of my own critical and scholarly formation. For from the late sixteenth century on, readers of Spenser's poem have met its challenges and expectations with their own peculiar demands, refashioning both its language and its material form in conformity with the dictates of circumstance, necessity, and desire. As a result, the poem has been repeatedly and at times radically revised, including by the poet himself: depending on where, when, or who is reading it, *The Faerie Queene* might consist of one book, three books, six books, or more; it might contain learned annotations or no gloss at all, elaborate editorial apparatuses or fanciful illustrations. Some versions of the poem purport to be comprehensive, while others cheerfully carve it into pieces; some burden it with additional meanings and some try to get rid of allegory altogether; one is in rhyming couplets and quite a few are in prose. Such transformations have influenced how *The Faerie Queene* has been received, but they are also products of that reception, traces of the efforts publishers, editors, critics, scholars, and assorted amateurs have made to render an unusually rich and recalcitrant text legible to themselves and others.

Not all of their efforts succeeded: no one adopted Gill's 1621 effort to render the poem in a made-up alphabet of Anglo-Saxon letter forms, and Bronson Alcott's attempt to teach the poem to five-year-olds in his nineteenth-century Massachusetts school went swiftly and predictably awry. And those that did can now seem woefully misguided: despite its canonical prestige, *The Faerie Queene* has long flourished in what Michael Warner calls "the enormous shadow of uncritical reading."⁸⁶ Where critical reading is alert, informed, and attentive, detached, reasonable and self-reflective, uncritical reading is everything else: "identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction." As it happens, these are all modes of engagement that *The Faerie Queene* not only permits but at times solicits or even requires. Indeed, the list of prohibited identities Warner cites as foundational to the scholarly critic—"Don't read like children, like vacation readers on the beach, like

escapists, like fundamentalists, like nationalists, like antiquarians, like consumers, like ideologues, like sexists, like tourists, like yourselves”—is a concise accounting of the kinds of readers who predominate in the poem’s reception history and the pages that follow.⁸⁷ Their misdeeds in relation to the text are many: they change its spellings; ignore, or overemphasize, the allegory; take images, phrases, and entire stanzas out of context; fixate on the fates of particular characters; indulge in unpersuasive, anachronistic, and self-serving analogies; pick fights with other readers; deface the margins of their books; and—bored, distracted, or otherwise occupied—give up on the poem altogether.

Rather than seeking to exclude or amend their wrongheaded responses, this book cherishes them, as an index of the poem’s own ambivalently mixed signals, a sensitive barometer of shifts in literary culture, and an indispensable archive of repressed or forgotten episodes in the history of reading itself. In doing so, it seeks to capitalize on a mode of interference that *The Faerie Queene’s* own history makes inevitable, for whether we are conscious of their influence or not, readers of Spenser’s poem encounter the text through the mediation of other readers. Competing ideals, ambitions, and methods of reading thus inform and interact with one another in the course of any single encounter with it, turning the text from neutral ground into a plain on which historical and fictive readers meet, form alliances, quarrel, and fight the occasional pitched battle. Present to us in the guise of editorial apparatuses and critical commentaries, adaptations and appropriations, scribbled marginalia and (what is more difficult to perceive) our own unexamined assumptions, former readings of *The Faerie Queene* are like Guyon’s reading of the *Antiquitee of Faerie Lond*: both in the past and not yet ended. Indeed, as I have learned repeatedly in the course of researching and writing this book, old readerly habits die hard or not at all, and their effects extend into the present, even—perhaps especially—when they have been vehemently repudiated. In crafting my arguments about Spenser’s poem and its place in the history of reading, I have therefore worked from the assumption that my own reading of the poem is necessarily shaped, and can be usefully enriched, by association with the habits of readers past. A willingness to recognize their readings at work in my own is both an essential form of disciplinary humility and a valuable source of disciplinary insight. It is also, I hope, a stimulus to disciplinary creativity: *Reading and Not Reading “The Faerie Queene”* claims reception history not simply as a record of how reading used to happen but as a still vital matrix for the ways we read now.

For instance, for all their blunt insensitivity to the rewards of reading *The Faerie Queene*, the Leavisites and the New Critics were keenly attuned to an aspect of reading it that the poem’s critical champions have tended to underrate or, worse, ascribe to the defects of its readers: the problem of time. The fact that

it is impossible to complete *The Faerie Queene* in a single sitting, that one looks up from it to discover the light has changed or one's coffee gone cold; the fact that periods of immersion in it are necessarily broken by intervals of inattention, and that when we return to it, it can seem an altogether different work: these inconvenient realities are the basis of some of the poem's most salient insights into the nature of readerly experience, but they are also genuine obstacles to understanding and enjoying it. As Christina Lupton argues, the question of "when we read"—along with the fantasy of a time in which there was enough time to do so properly—is inseparable from the phenomenon of literacy itself: "ever since people like us have had access to books, the time we've spent with them has been defined as fragile, hard to come by, and good to hope for."⁸⁸ But for Spenser's readers, the problem of time has another dimension as well: for as long as people have had access to *The Faerie Queene*, the time they've spent with it has seemed dauntingly expansive, hard to justify, and potentially good for nothing. The question it persistently poses is not just "When do we read?" but "When will we do anything else?"

Acknowledging that problem as real—not an excuse or admission of failure, or even a challenge for pedagogy and criticism to surmount, but the challenging condition of reading itself—puts us in a better position to appreciate the significance of the fact that the book Guyon reads in book 2, canto 10 is both extremely (perhaps interminably) long and conspicuously dull. If we could comprehend the motive for Guyon's absorption in the *Antiquitee of Faerie Lond*, or set some reasonable limit on it, that absorption would not be nearly so arresting, or so provocatively at odds with the legend in which it appears. Of all the virtues in *The Faerie Queene*, temperance is the least suited to reading the poem itself, and the one that draws closest to our anxieties about the future of reading in an era of limited attention and proliferating content. As Ann Blair has shown, these are anxieties Spenser and his contemporaries shared, and in the face of which they invented or refined a host of time- and labor-saving devices, from the alphabetical index to the genre of the reference book.⁸⁹ Modern literary scholars, by contrast, although we rely on such devices every bit as much as our early modern precursors, have tended to embrace the expenditure of time as a mark of readerly distinction, valorizing our own reading practices as a synthesis of concentration, understanding, and pleasure: what Stanley Fish calls "the paying of a certain kind of attention."⁹⁰ Amid ongoing debates about the ideal aims, methods, and objects of critical reading—close versus distant, surface versus depth, suspicious versus reparative or "just"—there remains a broad consensus about the value of attention itself.⁹¹ But because *The Faerie Queene* makes such extreme and incommensurate demands on the attention of its readers, it cannot easily be enlisted on any particular side in those debates. Rather, it illuminates their reflexively oppositional character: the "versus" that

implicitly or explicitly structures any bid for a new and better way of reading, and the alternatives that are thereby sacrificed.

At the end of book 2, canto 10, Guyon has to put aside the *Antiquitee of Faerie Lond* for an unexpectedly homely reason: the owner of the castle in which he is staying appears to tell him that dinner is waiting. In its blithe dispensation of readerly discipline, the episode anticipates a scene in *Lionel Asbo: State of England*, Martin Amis's 2012 satire of British cultural decline, in which the novel's proudly antisocial title character discovers his nephew, Des, immersed in writing something:

“What are you doing with that there pen? What’s that you writing?”

Guiss it.”

Des thought fast. “Uh, it’s about poetry, Uncle Li.”

“Poetry?” said Lionel and started back.

“Yeah. Poem called *The Faerie Queene*.”

“The *what?* . . . I despair of you sometimes, Des. Why aren’t you out smashing windows? It’s not healthy.”⁹²

Amis’s satire is aimed squarely—perhaps too squarely—at the sort of reader who worries about the future of literature in an age of reality TV and perpetual online entertainment. Its humor often relies on the unsubtle contrast between thuggish Lionel and polite, bookish Des, who, as one reviewer noted, is a thinly veiled stand-in for his creator: “We know that he has full authorial approval, not least because—not unlike Amis—he is an etymology pedant and a usage bore, with a near-religious reverence for the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.”⁹³ But the humor of this particular scene is more layered. For one thing, we know Des is lying: he’s not writing about poetry, he’s writing a letter to a local advice columnist confessing that he has begun a sexual affair with an older woman, who happens to be his grandmother and Lionel’s mother. As has so often been the case in its reception history, *The Faerie Queene*, which Des may not have read at all, serves merely as a badge of readerly virtue—and a reliable conversation-stopper. But, of course, Lionel does have a response, and that response gives the joke a further, unpredictable spin, for even readers won over by the general thrust of Amis’s moralizing critique might be struck with momentary horror at the prospect of an afternoon spent reading, writing, or merely thinking about *The Faerie Queene*: Why not smash windows instead?

It is a perspective for which the poem itself has the occasional spasm of sympathy: one way of understanding Guyon’s destruction of the Bower of Bliss in book 2, canto 12 is as a window-smashing correction to the profligate stillness of his reading in canto 10. Obviously, if the choice is between reading and vandalism, reading looks to most of us like the right thing to do. But if the choice is between reading one way and reading another, between reading this book and

reading something else, or between reading and going to dinner or reading and saving a life—which is another, equally valid way of understanding what Guyon does in the Bower of Bliss—the calculus gets harder. This as much as anything seems to be what Spenser means by discipline: the making of hard choices among rival goods, without expectation of any ultimate confirmation that we have chosen well. The sequential structure of *The Faerie Queene* promises progress toward perfection, but that progress never accrues. Instead, the commencement of a new quest entails the abandonment of already proven modes of interpretation, and within each book—sometimes, within a single canto or stanza—readers are forced to unlearn one kind of reading in order to perform another. And although the poem treats this learning and unlearning as a life's work, it pauses now and then to consider if it might not also be an unconscionable waste of time. Not reading is an option *The Faerie Queene* never allows us to foreclose—reading's first essential, its inevitable endpoint, and a possibility all the way through.

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