



“Bad Intro”: Letter from the Editors

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Many would argue, alongside Milton, Keats, and Stevens, that Edmund Spenser often wrote very good poetry. At the same time, few would quibble with the suggestion that his poetic *oeuvre* is uneven. Some of his writing is bad. Unevenness, including lapses into badness, of course, is inevitable for a poet who both wrote so much and whose writing was so persistently experimental. Works like *The Teares of the Muses* and the *Fowre Hymns*, along with that rather dreary sounding catalogue of now lost early works recorded by Gabriel Harvey, might be seen as the necessary precondition of something like the *Epithalamion*. Likewise, for all those moments in *The Faerie Queene* that truly shine, and which have compelled readers' attention for over 400 years, many are simply pedestrian, and many, as Jeff Dolven provocatively claims in his contribution to this issue, might best be read as dead. Spenser's poetry, perhaps equalled only by Milton among the great English poets, has found avowedly unsympathetic readers unhesitant to disparage his writing in public. Such readers are often like the MLA president described by Lauren Silberman, who “allud[ed] to reading Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* as the paradigm of pointless, boring activity.”¹ It is an assessment of this poet's writing, however, to which even his most sympathetic readers are not immune. A word cloud of the most exemplary Spenser

¹ Lauren Silberman, *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in Books III and IV of The Faerie Queene* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

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criticism from 1920 to the present would surely yield notable recurrences of words like dilatory, digressive, and evanescent; failure, endless, and irrelevance. Catherine Nicholson notes in her reception history of *The Faerie Queene*, “because it meanders and digresses, shedding characters and entire plotlines as it goes; above all, because it is so extraordinarily long, Spenser’s poem tests our readerly loyalties and often defeats our instincts to see a story through.”² Even at its best, *The Faerie Queene* is a poem that, as Harry Berger, Jr. notes, can put us to sleep. “I discovered years ago,” he recalls, “that if you try to read the long, flowing, mellifluous line of Spenser’s alexandrine stanzas to students, it is like music to their ears—but music to sleep by.”³ Spenser, that is, is a poet whose greatest artistic virtues and vices are often one and the same, or at the least reside very near to one another.

This issue, “Bad Poetry,” is centered around a collective interest in what happens when we attend to the badness in Spenser’s and Sidney’s writing. Our interest here is neither to excuse it away, nor to reduce our estimation of these canonical poets, but rather to see what interpretive hay can be made with their lapses into badness. Badness here can take many forms. For instance, it can variously be the simple dullness that puts us to sleep; plodding exposition; aimless digression; images that provoke unintended misreadings; and what Kat Addis, in her contribution, describes as “vacuous” and “cartoonish” failures of art. The responses to our initial query about reading for the badness in this poetry oscillate between, and often stage intriguing dialogues across, Historicist and Formalist imperatives. If the question here is partly a definitional project—asking what bad poetry is and why we should care about it—the answers persistently ask us to think about a dynamic crucial both to Elizabethan poets and to their latter-day readers: the relationship between the aesthetic and the political. These were poets, of course, for whom the aesthetic and the political were self-evidently two sides of the same coin. From such a perspective, as Bethany Dubow observes in her piece, just as the poet’s rhetorical failures might reflect policy failures, so the political project of colonization might be read as a materialized poetics, its effectiveness (perversely, to us) legible as a kind of aesthetic merit. From the perspective of modern criticism, Jane Grogan’s reflection on *Muipotmos* and the hybrid genre we now call “minor epic” suggests that a more robust critical engagement with this strange formal detour in English literary history might bring us to the heart

² Catherine Nicholson, *Reading and Not Reading The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 241.

³ Harry Berger, Jr., “Archimago: Between Text and Countertext,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 43.1 (2003): 19-64, citation p. 27.

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of what, exactly, it was that Elizabethan poets were seeking to accomplish in their twinned formal and social experiments.

While evaluative concerns were front and center for poet-critics like Sidney and Spenser, the issue of quality has been sidestepped and marginalised in contemporary literary debates. When asked if a text is any good or not by students, contemporary literary scholars are likely embarrassed by what seems like a naïve or an irrelevant question (and perhaps by our failures, as teachers, effectively to inculcate the methods and assumptions that would foreclose such a question). It is a response reflexively conditioned by our disciplinary training. This can partly be accounted for by the dominance of historicist approaches since the 1980s, when senior people now were starting their careers, and critics like Greenblatt and Montrose were insisting that the most pedestrian records of daily life stood in the same semantic plane as *Hamlet* or *The Shepheardes Calender*. Novel a way of reading as it then seemed, it was an approach with deep roots. John Guillory's recent book, *Professing Criticism* describes the 100-year evolution of modern literary scholarship as, in part, a series of pivots away from the subjective, reifying, and exclusionary practices of aesthetic evaluation in pursuit of ever more objective and demystifying modes of reading.⁴ This issue which has affected several generations of scholars and critics, of course, is not without its benefits. For example, despite its stated interest in advancing literary study beyond the facile evaluative judgments of the belles-lettrists, much of the New Criticism could rightly be faulted for making ex cathedra judgements which were often not much more than the prejudices of a distinguished name, which tended to exclude a diversity of voices. In this way, for all the patina of objectivity, they were not that much different from the founding fathers of modern literary criticism, men like George Saintsbury and Sir Walter Raleigh. Indeed, the changes of the last forty or so years have greatly expanded the range and nuance of our understanding of the literary past. The attention we now pay to the overlap between high and low culture, and to book history and print culture, are just some of the gains of historicist scholarship.

However, we seem to have lost the ability to make judgements about literary quality, apart from when questions of aesthetic value are uneasily conflated with those of political significance. This has been a particular problem with Spenser and Sidney. Many have been happy to follow the judgement of C. S. Lewis that when Spenser wrote

⁴ John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

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badly it was because he was the servant of a bad policy and had allowed that to corrupt his imagination.⁵ The essays on Spenser in this issue interrogate these questions from a range of perspectives and look at different aspects of his work, seeking ways out of the interpretive impasse created by Lewis's reductive elision of the aesthetic and the political. With Sidney, likewise, though the political problems of his career have been less intensely debated, often renewed attention to historical context and family history has occluded questions of aesthetic value. This is particularly the case with the *Arcadia*, the subject of the two essays in this issue by Brad Tuggle and Matthew Harrison. As Tuggle argues, and in ways resonant for both of these poets, "it is precisely in our attention to...bad poetry that we show both our *bona fides* as critics and our critical enjoyment of the work of the poet."

This collection of short pieces grew out of a conference on Bad Poetry in the early modern period held in London in 2023, *Bad Poetry? New perspectives from the 'Drab' Age, c.1450-1600*, essays from which will in due course appear as a volume with Boydell and Brewer.⁶ This special issue should be seen as a supplement to that event, resulting from subsequent conversations with the editorial team of *The Spenser Review*. Our hope is to foster wider conversations about value in literary studies, and to move the dial ever so slightly back in the direction of aesthetic judgement. History and value do not need to preclude one another; in this issue we encouraged the contributors to think about judgement both as a fact of sixteenth-century reading and poetics and as an ongoing category now.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 349.

⁶ See <https://ies.sas.ac.uk/events/bad-poetry-new-perspectives-drab-age-c1450-1600>.