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There has always seemed to me to be an air of coercion about the “Letter of the Authors” that Spenser published with the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*. While examples of the humility topos are commonplace in prefaces and dedications in the period, Spenser’s references to “gealous opinions and misconstructions,” to “the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time,” to his poem as seeming “tedious and confused,” as well as the defensive tone of the Letter more generally, suggest something more than conventional posturing. The *Variorum* editors offer the assurance that “Such epistolary prefaces, defending the poetical type to which a work belonged, or explaining its allegorical character, were traditional,” but none of the examples they cite present anything to compare to Spenser’s anxieties in the Letter (1: 312).1

If we do not accept Spenser’s claim that he writes at Ralegh’s request merely to provide “better light in reading” his poem, we might see the Letter as akin to the Commendatory Verses and Dedicatory Sonnets in heralding the poem’s dignity. The obvious analogy for this would be the apparatus published with *The Shepheardes Calennder*. However, the introductory epistle and argument by E. K., no less than his glosses, are notable for their discursiveness and misdirection; they run several times longer than the Letter but tell us comparatively little about the *Calender* and almost nothing that a reader could not gather from the poem itself.2 The example of *The Shepheardes Calennder* suggests that, in the absence of the threat of hostile reception, the poem remains the poet’s statement of its meaning.

We can also read the Letter in the context of its genre—the genre that Spenser invokes in the Letter itself—and conclude that Spenser intends to “proclaim his poem a classic” in Daniel Javitch’s formulation, to make it look like its classical and Italian epic precursors, a text worthy of scholarly controversy. Spenser’s likely model would be the “Allegoria” Tasso published with his *Gerusalemme Liberata*.3 Unlike the Letter, however, Tasso’s preface actually prefaces his poem, and it does not disparage the *Liberata*...
or acknowledge the possibility of its having detractors; and rather than address himself to a particular patron as Spenser does in the Letter, Tasso lectures his readers in general on the theory of allegory and its application to his poem. In one respect not generally noted, the “Allegoria” may present a useful parallel to the Letter. Tasso’s explanation of his allegorical approach and his reductive reading of his own poem were crafted with the Holy Office of the Inquisition in mind, and his “Allegoria,” for all its elegance and learning, seems intended—much more pointedly than Spenser’s Letter—to answer the demand that he show the authorities his papers.

We must return to the Letter itself, then, for an explanation of its purposes. In its opening lines, Spenser states his intention of “auoyding gealous opinions and misconstructions” by discovering to his reader the poem’s “general intention and meaning.” Until very recently, Spenser’s anxious concerns have been regarded as mere convention, further cringing by his pastoral persona to be passed over silently on the way to the Letter’s discussion of The Faerie Queene. Among the few critics who have paused to consider Spenser’s stated purpose for writing his Letter are A. Leigh deNeef, who relates the Letter’s concern with misreading to Sidney’s observation in the Defence that “the grand claims for poetry are always tempered by a recognition that some readers are either too dull or too hardened in vice to be properly affected by it” (“Raleigh” 583), and Wayne Erickson, who argues that Spenser here has in mind Lord Burghley and all those people who will “become the Blatant Beast in Book 6 of The Faerie Queene” (“Spenser and his Friends” 18).

More than twenty-five years ago, Louis Montrose placed at the beginning of an article on Spenser’s modes of courtship in The Shepheardes Calender the following observation on the first of Raleigh’s commendatory verses published with the 1590 Faerie Queene:

Ralegh envisions Spenser as overgoing not Virgil or Chaucer but Petrarch—not the epic poet of the Africa but the visionary love poet of the Canzoniere and Trionfi. The Faerie Queene supplants Laura as the supreme image of the poet-lover’s power to sublimate desire. Ralegh does not envision The Faerie Queene as an exemplary heroic poem but as the verbal courtship of an exalted female whose patronage can satisfy the poet’s material ambitions and whose Idea is a spur to his moral and poetic aspirations. In other words, Ralegh is suggesting that The Faerie Queene and his own Cynthia poems are parallel in strategy and purpose. (“Perfecte Paternne” 34)
Montrose did not pursue the point further, but other Spenserians have, and the essay that follows is another footnote of sorts to this passage. By tracing Spenser's anxiety about the reception of his poem from the proem to Book 3 through the Commendatory Verses and the Dedicatory Sonnets and finally into the Letter itself, I hope to demonstrate that the misreading Spenser seeks to forestall in the Letter to Ralegh originates with Ralegh himself, and that the Letter, far from being a disinterested statement of Spenser's literary theory, constitutes a reluctant attempt by the poet to distinguish his project, generically and thematically, from Ralegh's own poems to the queen.

I

Wayne Erickson argues persuasively that passages from Book 3 and the ancillary texts of the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene* constitute a “dialogue” between Spenser and Ralegh. If Erickson is right, and I think he is, then how we interpret this dialogue depends to an unusual degree on the context in which we place it. Erickson finds the relationship between the two to be essentially collaborative, marked by shared irony, inside jokes, and other “serious fun” (“Spenser Reads” 176). This reflects, in my view, a proleptic reading of the 1590 edition of the poem, one indebted to the playful tone and pastoral leveling of *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, probably written in 1591 but not published until 1595. The Spenser of the mid and late 1590s is confident enough to tease Ralegh in his dedication to *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, to place himself among and declare himself arbiter of Elizabeth's train of court poets, to single out the “rugged forhead” in the proem to Book 4 and to declare peremptorily “To such therefore I do not sing at all” (1, 4).

If we try to reconstruct the perspective of Spenser in the late 1570s and 1580s, a different context and a more cautious poet emerge. Here we find the young Cambridge graduate writing to his friend Gabriel Harvey from London in 1579 of the cautionary example of Stephen Gosson, who dedicated his book to Sir Philip Sidney, and faced scorn for the gesture: “Suche follie is it not to regarde aforehande the inclination and qualitie of him to whome wee dedicate oure Bookes” (*Var.* 9: 6). Spenser wrote this letter the same year and from the same city in which the unfortunate John Stubbs—a writer who might have wisely elected for more “dark conceit” and less “sermoning at large”—lost his right hand for presuming to publish unsolicited royal marriage advice. After leaving England, the Spenser of the 1580s found success in Ireland, but it was a fragile, hard won success: a
confiscated estate of uncertain title and a post in a military administration that looked more like an occupation force than the provisional government of a new colony. Spenser’s pastoral alter ego Colin Clout looks back and volunteers that he needed an invitation to London and an entrée at court to spur him to print his poem.

Despite Spenser’s obvious debt to Ralegh, and in contrast with Erickson’s emphasis on collaboration between the two poets, William Oram has maintained in a series of articles that Spenser’s early depictions of Ralegh evidence a decided ambivalence. In Spenser’s dedicatory sonnet to Ralegh, for example, Oram detects a “muted criticism” (“Raleghs” 345) of Ralegh’s choice of genre, a view Oram later restates more forcefully: “it sets Spenser against Ralegh and criticizes the latter as a poet” (“What Did Spenser” 165). He notes that “when they first knew one another, Spenser and Ralegh were not radically different in rank,” and that Spenser insisted on “keeping his distance from Ralegh” (“What Did Spenser” 166, 173).9

The more cautious Spenser of the 1580s would be unlikely to join Ralegh in the “provocative engagement with power” (“Spenser’s Letter” 144) Erickson finds in the back matter and may have resented Ralegh’s eagerness to involve his Irish neighbor in his own high-risk poetic behavior. As I see it, the wary Spenser of the “dialogue” in the 1590 edition of the poem is separated from the gamesome Spenser of Colin Clouts Come Home Again by the single most important event in Spenser’s poetic career: the awarding of his pension by the queen.10 As Sir John Harington stated with characteristic directness in the dedication of his Orlando Furioso to Elizabeth the same year: “If your Highnesse wil read it, who dare reject it? if allow it, who can reproove it? if protect it, what MOMVS barking, or ZOILVS biting can any way hurt or annoy it?” (xi). Regardless of whether it was more or less generous than Spenser had imagined (if he had imagined being thus rewarded at all), regardless of the irregularity of its actual disbursement, the pension represented the queen’s affirmation of his project and proof against the charge of dangerous presumption that haunts the proem to Book 3, the Commendatory Verses, and Spenser’s Letter to Ralegh.

II

The ostensible purpose of the proem to Book 3 is to offer an apology for the poet’s presumption in figuring the queen in his poem. This proem differs from its two predecessors, which also address the queen and also express the poet’s humility, because the Book of Chastity is the first book in the poem to offer a sustained allegorical representation of the queen.
Spenser states in the opening stanza of the proem that Elizabeth provides the artist with the ideal subject for a portrait of chastity, if so exalted an example of virtue could ever be portrayed “by any liuing art.” In the second stanza, he turns to the inexpressibility topos and the commonplace examples of the ancient painter Zeuxis and sculptor Praxiteles. The third stanza acknowledges the challenge identified in stanza two and proclaims the poet unequal to the task. In particular, he argues that if the great artists of old could not achieve such a feat, he, as an “Apprentice of the skill,” has little hope of success. In this stanza he also addresses the queen directly (“O dredd Souerayne”) and asks her pardon for not being able to “figure playne” her “glorious pourtraict” and choosing instead to “shadow itt” in “colourd showes.”

With his method thus identified, he invokes Ralegh’s poem to Cynthia as an authorizing example. The use of possessive pronouns throughout stanzas four and five and the adoption of Ralegh’s name for the queen (“His Cynthia,” “his heauens fayrest light,” “his mistresse,” “his fayrest Cynthia”) would seem to grant possession of the queen to Ralegh. This effect is heightened in stanza five when the poet goes so far as to solicit permission from his friend to write his own poem in “his mistresse prayse.” With Ralegh’s status thus elevated, Spenser deigns to request a further favor: if the queen takes offense at any part of the poem (“If ought amis her liking may abuse”), the poet asks Ralegh to “mend” it. The last five lines of the last stanza of the proem hint at a change in the poet’s approach. When Cynthia is asked not to refuse to see herself “in mirrours more then one,” given the role ascribed to Ralegh in the previous stanza and his further invocation in this one, Spenser seems ready to ascribe one of the mirrors to Ralegh (5). But he is not: the two “mirrors” are both of the poet’s design, Gloriana and Belphoebe. Also, much of the proem is devoted to the limitations of portraiture, whether through words or paint. In stanza three, as noted above, Spenser describes his own method as employing “colourd showes,” because his more gifted rivals cannot “figure playne” her portrait. But in this final stanza, Spenser seems to claim for himself the power of absolute mimesis, not as a painter of portraits, but as a fashioner of mirrors. Ralegh only “pictured / His Cynthia,” whereas Spenser offers her a mirror (4). Spenser yields place to Ralegh as one who enjoys the queen’s favor, but perhaps he is unwilling to surrender the laurel to him.¹¹

In the course of a largely conventional treatment of the problem of presumption, Spenser both appeals to the precedent Ralegh established with his Ocean to Cynthia and asks Ralegh to intervene, if necessary, on his behalf. Ironically, if Spenser intended an expanded version of the inad-
equacy topos that preceded his earlier two books, he may have outdone himself. In the back matter of the poem, both his statements and those of his fellow poets—especially Ralegh—suggest that he did not protect himself from the charge of presumption with his apology in the proem to Book 3, he invited it.\(^{12}\)

## III

Two themes run through the Commendatory Verses published with the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*: presumption and envy. These writers focus on the dangers inherent in Spenser’s project, because they describe a poem that is centered on the person and qualities of the queen. While much of the rhetoric of these verses appears conventional—typically involving the appropriation of Spenser’s own self-deprecating pastoral persona—the effect of the seven poems taken together is decidedly more cautionary than commendatory.

The authorship of three of the seven commendatory verses has been confidently established, and two of those, the first two poems in the sequence, belong to Ralegh. “A Vision vpon this conceipt of the *Faery Queene,*” the first of the Commendatory Verses, was recently the subject of a compelling and wide-ranging article by James Bednarz. Bednarz begins from the premise that the verse is a “companion poem to *The Faerie Queene* … a sonnet to answer an epic,” and he proceeds to argue, following Montrose, that “Ralegh’s Fairy Queen comes closer to being an epic version of his own Cynthia or Belpheobe—although inflected by Gloriana—than an accurate copy of Spenser’s principal archetype” (“Collaborator” 280, 284).\(^{13}\)

Ralegh’s sonnet, positioned immediately after the Letter in the 1590 edition, presents the first non-authorial reading of *The Faerie Queene*—and it gets the poem wrong in ways that may have had troubling implications for Spenser. It is not merely a question of Ralegh’s willfully or otherwise misreading the poem. The problem for Spenser, as Montrose originally observed, is that Ralegh’s reading is not fabricated out of whole cloth; Spenser had employed Petrarchan conventions to more or less mercenary ends before and would do so again. Ralegh’s misreading begins from a mistake of emphasis: he responds to *The Faerie Queene* as if it were entirely comprised of those passages in which he figures as a character. Thus, there is logic both in the Letter’s being addressed to Ralegh as the source of the misreading and its insistence on foregrounding certain episodes and themes at the expense of others. A second feature of this sonnet also bears on the “dialogue” under consideration. The sonnet is dominated by loss: from the opening reference to Laura’s grave, the “buried dust of
liuing fame,” and Petrarch’s weeping, to the arrival of Oblivion and the bleeding stones and groans of ghosts, the trembling Homer, and the final identification of the “celestiall theife” (4, 14). Not only does this harping on loss establish an odd tone for a commendatory verse, it also reverses the traditional ascription to the Renaissance poet of the power to bestow immortality; the sonnet does not credit Spenser’s poem with immortalizing Elizabeth but with displacing Laura. Thus Ralegh fashions Spenser the poet of Oblivion, the vanquisher of other poets, the thief of fame, and literary renown becomes a zero-sum game in which *The Faerie Queene*’s success can come only at the expense of an earlier poem and its newly disenfranchised poet.

Bednarz is right to note that Ralegh views Spenser’s poem “in terms of his own life and poetry,” that this constitutes a “complex revision of Spenserian paradigms,” and that “Ralegh’s sonnet … implicitly elevates his persona from squire to prince and shifts it from the periphery of *The Faerie Queene* to its conceptual center” (“Collaborator” 278, 279, 283). What Bednarz does not consider is the distortion this Ralegh-centered reading causes to the rest of the poem. To privilege the Petrarchan matter of Ralegh’s *Ocean to Cynthia*, or its Spenserian analogue in Timias and Belphoebe, is to place the virgin queen at the center of a private erotic intrigue. Even without his allegorical depiction of the queen in Book 3, Spenser leaves his poem radically open to this kind of inversion of emphasis by his choice of title and by his extra-narrative attention to Elizabeth in his dedication and proems.

Ralegh’s second sonnet, written in poulter’s measure, elaborates on his first and establishes the themes that most of the other commendatory verses will echo: first, that Spenser has taken as the central subject of his poem the depiction of his queen; second, that this constitutes an act of poetic overreaching; and third, that this fault can only be excused or forgiven by the queen herself. After warning the poet not to trust to the “prayse of meaner wits”—a singularly perplexing statement at the opening of a commendatory verse—the sonnet refers all judgment on the merit of *The Faerie Queene* to the queen herself: “If thou has formed right true vertues face herein: / Vertue her selfe can best discerne, to whome they writen bin” (1, 3–4). Ralegh has rendered the poem a feedback loop of the queen’s representation: its primary purpose is to reflect her virtue, which she alone can judge. Both Ralegh and Spenser imagine that the queen could be displeased by Spenser’s verse portrait. The proem says of Ralegh, “and let him mend, / If ought amis her liking may abuse” (3.Pr.5), but Ralegh’s sonnet says of the queen: “Iudge if ought therein be amis, and mend it by her eine” (6). Spenser’s solution is to appeal to Ralegh for help in mitigating the
queen’s displeasure; Ralegh’s solution, to Spenser’s sure alarm, is to send the poet back to his pen: “Behold her Princely mind aright, and write thy Queene anew” (8). Ralegh sets the conditions for success and then in the next quatrain observes that Spenser’s failure is unavoidable:

Meane while she shall perceiue, how fare her vertues sore
Aboue the reach of all that liue, or such as wrote of yore:
And thereby will excuse and fauour thy good will:
Whose vertue can not be exprest, but by an Angels quill. (9–12) 13

Thus Ralegh establishes the pattern for the remaining commendatory verses: “excuse and fauour.” The audacity of the poet must be forgiven before his work can be received or praised. Ralegh takes up the anxieties that Spenser expresses at the beginning of Book 3 and projects them over the entire poem, as The Faerie Queene becomes no longer an allegorical depiction of a series of moral virtues but an unauthorized portrait of the queen.

The third commendatory verse is by Spenser’s friend and quondam public correspondent Gabriel Harvey, writing under the pseudonym Hobynoll. Harvey writes the longest of the commendatory verses, in which he echoes Spenser’s own description of his ascent from the rustic pastoral to the epic, lifting his “notes from Shepheardes vnto kinges” (5). Harvey hints early in the poem at an explanation for the poet’s “haughtie verse,” ascribing it to “some sacred fury” that “hath enricht thy braynes” (3, 2, 2).16 Two stanzas later, Harvey again alludes to this concern, stating the hope that “higher powers” will “Alow and grace our Collyns flowing quyll” (16, 18). The warning is quiet but carefully phrased: just as Ralegh’s second sonnet urges the queen to “excuse and fauour” the audacity of the shepherd poet’s project, so Harvey asks her to “alow and grace” his efforts.

These subtle references to the poet’s situation give way in the final stanza to a more pointed statement of warning:

But (jolly shepeheard) though with pleasing style,
thou feast the humour of the Courtly trayne:
Let not conceipt thy setled sence beguile,
ne daunted be through enuy or disdaine.
Subiect thy dome to her Empyring spright,
From whence thy Muse, and all the world takes light. (30–36)

The stanza parenthetically identifies the poet’s essential status: though he plays for kings and “the Courtly trayne,” he remains a shepherd. The
fixing of Spenser in his pastoral place is made more apparent by the three warnings Harvey includes in two terse lines. He advises the poet not to let “conceipt” beguile his “setled sence”—not to forget, presumably, that he is still a shepherd. The next line, however, notes the twin threats of “enuy” and “disdaine.” Unlike the risk of conceit, which by definition must lurk within the poet himself, envy and disdain are external dangers that may come from other readers of the poem. The closing couplet suggests the poet’s only remedy: “Subject thy dome” to the queen. Like Ralegh, Harvey refers ultimate judgment on the poem to its eponymous ideal reader.

The verse from W. L. also acknowledges the risk inherent in the poet’s choice to write a poem about the queen but offers a different excuse for his presumption. W. L. seeks to authorize Spenser’s boldness by claiming that Sidney put him up to it: “So Spencer was by Sidneys speaches wonne, / To blaze her fame not fearing future harmes” (15–16). W. L. credits Spenser with better sense: “Loth that his Muse should take so great a charge, / As in such haughty matter to be seene” (9–10). The closing couplet casts Spenser’s achievement as Promethean, a triumph that needs to be excused: “What though his taske exceed a humaine witt, / He is excus’d, sith Sidney thought it fitt” (23–24).

“To looke vpon a worke of rare deuise,” the last of the commendatory verses, is signed by “Ignoto.” As Erickson has suggested, there is some reason to believe that this poem was written by Spenser himself. This last commendatory verse is more about writing commendatory verses than about the poem it purports to commend. The first two stanzas of the poem present the commender’s paradox: if he does not grant a work “the deserued prise” it proves his “judgement to be naught” or else “doth shew a mind with enuy fraught” (3, 5, 6). If he does praise the work, it might “raise a jealous doubt that there did lurke, / Some secret doubt, whereto the prayse did tend” (9–10). The second stanza concludes that commendatory verses are not only unnecessary, they are self-defeating: “For when men know the goodnes of the wyne, / T’is needesse for the hoast to haue a sygne” (11–12). In the third stanza, after a four line preamble in which the writer considers what the act of commendation will tell readers about himself and his character, he finally delivers his commendation: “I here pronounce this workmanship is such, / As that no pen can set it forth too much” (17–18). This is arch cleverness: the writer has hardly set forth any praise at all, but in hailing the poet’s workmanship and not his poem, he follows the principle set forth in stanza two and avoids the suggestion of “secret doubt.”

After devoting only two lines of his twenty-four line poem to actual commendation, in the final stanza the writer describes his verse as “a garland”
he has hung at the door (19). (The garland recalls the “needlesse” sign of stanza two whose presence signals the opposite of its written message.) He defends his choice as a concession to custom—the poem (“the ware”) does not require commendation, but “such hath been the custome heretofore”—and closes the poem with the wine metaphor: “And when your tast shall tell you this is trew, / Then looke you give your hoast his utmost dew” (20, 21, 23–24). The closing couplet places the reader of the verse in the vexed position of the commendatory verse writer who is exhorted to acknowledge and reward the poet, the “hoast,” for the quality of his poem. “To looke vpon a worke of rare deuise” does not call attention to the presumption of *The Faerie Queene*. It does, however, raise the prospect of inappropriate responses to the poem by readers whose “judgement” may be “naught,” or who are “with enuy fraught,” or harbor a “jealous doubt,” “secret doubt,” or “enuires tuch.” Unlike the earlier verses from Ralegh, Harvey, and W. L., this commendatory verse shifts the risks associated with misreading the poem from poet to reader, who may reveal by his or her failure to “yield it the deserued prise” either a lack of judgment or an envious nature.

Spenser’s dedicatory sonnet to Ralegh, the eighth of the ten original sonnets and the fourteenth of the augmented group of seventeen, rehearses Spenser’s pattern of deference to his patron. He begins by questioning the wisdom of sending his poem to Ralegh, “the sommers Nightingale, / Thy soueraine Goddesses most deare delight” (1–2). He then evokes their rivalry only to yield place to Ralegh—“Thou onely fit this Argument to write”—and to admit his own status as a trespasser (5). He also yields his poem to Ralegh’s, disparaging *The Faerie Queene* as “this rusticke Madrigale” and “vnsauory and sowre” (3, 8). The last four lines mark a turn in the sonnet, however, away from exaggerated humility and hyperbolic praise to a nuanced critique of a poet-courtier who may be wasting his efforts in the wrong genre: “Fitter perhaps to thonder Martiall stowre, / When so thee list thy lofty Muse to raise” (11–12). He also offers his poem as a substitute for Ralegh’s: “till that thou thy Poeme wilt make knowne, / Let thy faire Cinthias praises bee thus rudely showne” (13–14). Here and in the proem to Book 3, Spenser asks Ralegh for permission to write a poem to the queen. As I read the dialogue between Spenser and Ralegh in the 1590 edition of the poem, Spenser’s dedicatory sonnet furthers the problems that Spenser will try to correct in the Letter: the sonnet offers *The Faerie Queene* as another version of Ralegh’s *Cynthia* poems and reduces Spenser’s epic to the misleading task of showing “faire Cinthias praises.”
IV

It has been my intention to arrive at the Letter after advancing arguments on two fronts. First, Spenser and Ralegh were not as likely to collaborate on the production of the back matter as has sometimes been supposed; if there was a game underway between them, it was one in which Ralegh was placing liberal bets at Spenser's expense. Second, Spenser's proem to Book 3 and Ralegh's commendatory verses are intimately linked and together lay the groundwork for a reading of Spenser's poem that assigns it a Petrarchan rather than Homeric line of generic descent. The presumption and risk of royal censure implicit in this reading of Spenser's project is alluded to by several other commendatory verse writers, and further invited by Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Ralegh, where the poet revisits the confusion of Cynthia with the Faery Queen and Cynthia with The Faerie Queene.

All of this may well be conventional; we need not suppose that Ralegh or his fellow commendatory verse writers conspired against the poet or that Spenser's audience would be unfamiliar with the paradoxical combinations of humility and presumption that sometimes graced the peripheries of early modern texts. Ultimately, the suggestion that this is more than convention comes not from these writers or their poems but from the response to them that we find in the Letter. In the aggregate, Spenser's first readers offer a vision of the poem that is wildly inconsistent with the "general intention" that Spenser sets forth in the Letter: none of the commendatory verses mention Arthur, or the poem's goal of moral instruction, or any of the particular virtues illustrated in its first three books. A reader who had only the Commendatory Verses as a guide to the content of The Faerie Queene would likely conclude that Spenser had undertaken without permission either a love poem to Elizabeth or a kind of Elizabethiad whose sole object was the depiction of the person and virtues of the queen. One of the functions of the Letter, then, is to foreground the didactic program that figures prominently in Books 1 and 2 and to shift attention away from the encomiastic and amatory elements of Book 3.

Spenser's reasons for writing the Letter impinge directly upon only a small part of its content, for Spenser clearly chose to disclose more to his readers than was necessary to confirm its genre and subject matter. To illustrate how Spenser's defensiveness might influence our reading of the Letter, I will focus here on his opening address to Ralegh, his description of the queen's place in the allegorical scheme of The Faerie Queene, and the question of the Letter's absence from the 1596 edition of the poem.
SIR knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed, and this booke of mine, which I have entituled the Faery Queene, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I have thought good aswell for auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof, (being so by you commanded,) to discover vnto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occasioned.

The opening sentence of Spenser's Letter is notable for its identification of the problem that the Letter seeks to address ("auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions") and its proposed solution to that problem ("to discover vnto you the general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I have fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occasioned"). Spenser implies that the opinions and misconstructions can be avoided by clarifying the poem's "general intention," by making a distinction between what is central and what is peripheral. If we may infer from the prescribed solution the nature of the problem, then the misreadings he is concerned about are not local, involving a particular character or instance of unintentional historical reference, but grow out of much larger matters of emphasis.22

The Letter's treatment of the queen provides the best illustration of this strategy of forestalling misreadings by emphasizing one meaning or feature of his poem over another. It is startling to compare Elizabeth's role in the proems with her diminished place in the Letter, where she is located last in a series of allegorical declensions:

In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land. And yet in some places els, I doe otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall Queene or Empresse, the other of a most vertuous and beautifull Lady, this latter part in some places I doe expresse in Belphoebe, fashioning her name according to your owne excellent conceipt of Cynthia, (Phoebe and Cynthia being both names of Diana.) 23

Spenser once again distinguishes between his "generall intention"—the chief concern of the Letter and his answer to anticipated misreading of his poem—and the particular. Primacy of place is given to the moral rather
than historical allegory, as Spenser names “glory” and not Elizabeth herself as the primary referent for the Faery Queen. So the Faery Queen signifies glory first and most generally, and then she represents the queen as a sovereign monarch. This version of the queen “in some places els” is divided again, this time into “a most royall Queene or Empresse” and “a most vertuous and beautifull Lady.” Even the association of the queen as a “beautifull Lady” with Ralegh’s Cynthia cannot be proposed without further qualification: “the latter part in some places I doe expresse in Belphoebe” (emphasis added).24 The Elizabeth of Ralegh’s love poem is located at the very bottom of the hierarchy of meanings; the Letter barely affords her a place in the poem. In this respect the Letter and the proem to Book 3 are mirror images: the proem exaggerates the queen’s role in the poem, while the Letter subordinates her to a degree not consistent with the text.

Finally, the position of the Letter in the publication of the 1590 edition fits its function as essentially preemptive and remedial.25 The Letter was not printed as a preface to the poem—as it is in some modern editions—because its principal purpose was not to provide information helpful to a reader on a first reading of the poem.26 The Letter is appended to the poem because it is primarily intended to correct misreading. Given its placement, it literally preempts the readings of the poem offered by Ralegh and the other commendatory verse writers that follow it in the 1590 edition. This also can explain why the Letter was dropped from subsequent editions of the poem: by the time of the printing of the second installment of the poem in 1596, the concerns it was intended to address, especially the ominous predictions of the Commendatory Verses, had been proven baseless.

One surprising feature of the Letter—and the one that prompted my reading of the dialogue in the ancillary texts outlined above—is its departure from Spenser’s typical practice as a poet. Readers of The Faerie Queene learn quickly that the poet prefers to describe a character or scene at length before revealing its allegorical label.27 In this way, he teaches his reader how to interpret the world of the poem and, by extension, the world outside of the poem. In the Letter, though, Spenser appears to reveal the structure and meaning of his allegory with an unsettling forthrightness. As the Letter indicates, the “better light” Spenser promises is not intended to enable the reader’s discovery, but for the poet “to discouer vnto” the reader the general meaning of his poem.

The difference is profound. Midway through Tasso’s “Allegoria,” he writes: “But enough of the impediments, within and without, which man encounters, since even if the Allegory of every detail has not been
made explicit, from these principles anyone can hunt it down by himself” (417). This element of instruction is largely absent from the Letter. Jan Kouwenhoven astutely notes that

the information [the Letter] provides, whether correct or not, does not answer the kind of questions the poem raises. It does nothing to relieve uncertainty about “how the allegory works.” Instead it says what the allegory means. And it does this so summarily as to make itself useless, or so it would seem, for anything but the most superficial interpretation. (8–9)

Spenser decides that the way to avoid misreadings is not to teach his reader a better method to read, but to provide that reader with an easily-grasped correct reading. The less Spenser he.

My concern in this essay has been to muddy the waters that surround the provenance of the Letter, to contextualize Spenser’s explanatory gesture in the web of the back matter of the poem and the relationships inscribed there. My preliminary view is that the questions that have most vexed modern readers of the Letter—its investing the poem with a “multiple unity” and its inaccuracies in describing the plot of the poem—are probably related to Spenser’s reasons for composing the Letter. I must confess that I find the notion that Spenser would correct a misreading of his poem by offering a misreading of his poem almost irresistible. This would bring us to a conclusion that A. C. Hamilton briefly entertained and then dismissed in 1961: that Spenser got the details wrong on purpose. This would not, or would not only, constitute a deliberate misrepresentation of his poem; it would be an act of defiance, a refusal to reduce definitively and completely his poem to match the expectations of readers whose sensibilities or motives he found suspect.

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Notes

1 The editors of the Variorum cite Tasso’s allegory, Harington’s “Briefe Apologie of Poetry” that prefaces his Orlando Furioso (1591), Whetstone’s preface to Promos and Cassandra (1578), and Nashe’s “To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities,” which serves as the introduction to Greene's Menaphon (1589) (1.312). I discuss Tasso’s precedent below; Harington’s “Apologie” is much more elaborate and less occasional than Spenser’s Letter; Whetstone presents merely a synopsis of his plot; and Nashe’s “To the Gentlemen Readers” is a brawling and conventional rant on the state of learning in his day.

2 As Thomas Cain has observed so pithily of the glosses, they “raise unhelpful assistance to a new power” (Spenser, Shorter Poems 6).
3 See Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming A Classic*. On the circumstances that prompted Tasso to construct and record his prose allegory *after* finishing his poem, see Murrin 87–107. On the likelihood that Spenser had Tasso's example in mind, see Treip 96–100. Tasso's “Allegoria” is a dense document with a complex composition history that stretches across several versions and many of the poet's personal letters. Murrin and Treip, along with Lawrence Rhu, have done heroic work in teasing out its implications for readers of Spenser.


5 Erickson, “Spenser’s Letter” 142–47; “Spenser Reads” 175–84. In his 1992 article, “Spenser’s Letter,” Erickson brought coherence to the piecemeal tradition of scholarship on the Letter and suggested new possibilities for reading the text in light of more recent developments in the study of early modern literature and culture. Much of my thinking about the Letter was influenced by Erickson's work in this essay.

6 In another article, Erickson summarizes his view: “In the Letter, in the Verses, in the dedicatory sonnet to Ralegh, in the Timias and Belpheobe episodes, and in the proem to Book 3, Spenser collaborates self-consciously with Ralegh to enact innovative play while engaging, depicting, and dissecting the contemporary discourse of patronage” (“Spenser and his Friends” 17). Erickson does note the ominous tone that runs through the Commendatory Verses—“earnest warnings directed at Spenser's monumental and potentially dangerous project” (“Spenser and his Friends” 14)—but sees their caution subsumed into the larger rhetorical strategy of the back matter.

7 The dedication to *Colin Clouts* begins: “Sir, that you may see that I am not alwaies ydle as yee thinke, though not greatly well occupied, nor altogether undutifull, though not precisely officious, I make you present of this simple pastorall” (*Shorter Poems* 525). On the “learned throng,” see *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* 368–455.

8 On Stubbs’s fate and its possible impression on Spenser, see Buckman. Jean Brink has argued against modernizing the date of the Letter and instead assigned it a composition date of January 23, 1589 (“Dating”). While this is, as she notes, more consistent with the dating of other Spenserian texts, it does not square nearly as well with what we know—and what we can infer—of Spenser's biography in these years.

9 Erickson identifies other members of the Oramist party as Patrick Cheney in *Spenser’s Famous Flight*, Jeffrey Morris in “Poetic Counsels,” and James Bednarz in “The Collaborator as Thief” (although Bednarz begins his article by arguing for collaboration between the two poets). See Erickson’s “Spenser Reads” 176.

10 In his discussion of Spenser's depiction of Ralegh in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene* and in *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, William Oram notes the change I describe here: “Why should Spenser have given two such different accounts of Ralegh in poems most probably written within a year or two of one another?” (“Raleghs” 354). Oram looks to the difference in genre (allegorical romance v. pastoral) for his tentative answer; I suspect that the change has more to do with Spenser's newfound confidence after receiving the queen's favor and a corresponding independence from Ralegh. I thus consider myself to hold a modified Oramist position on the question of Spenser's early relationship with Ralegh. A summary of the few details we have about the pension can be found in Ruth Mohl's biographical essay on Spenser in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (670).

11 The mirror motif runs through each of the first three proems, but only in the proem to Book 3 does it take on this added significance. In the proem to Book 1, Elizabeth is herself the mirror: “O Goddesse heavenly bright, / Mirour of grace and Maiestie diuine” (4), but Spenser holds the mirror in the proem to Book 2: “And thou, O fayrest Princesse vnder sky, / In this fayre mirrhour maist behold thy face” (5). The metaphor becomes more complex in the second installment: the proem to Book 5 has a mirror image, as vices and virtues are
reversed (4), while the proem to Book 6 has a false mirror—"Yet is that glasse so gay, that it can blynd / The wisest sight, to thinke gold that is bras" (5)—and a true one—"As in your selfe, O soueraigne Lady Queene, / In whose pure minde, as in a mirrour sheene, / It showes" (6). On the proems, see deNeef, Spenser 91–141, and D. L. Miller, Two Bodies 130–51.

12 I do not consider in this essay Spenser's depiction of Ralegh in the Timias/Belpheobe episode in Book 3 for reasons of space and because the conversational thread I am tracing begins in the proem to Book 3. One could argue, however, that the presumption Spenser apologizes for in the proem is aptly illustrated by his boldness in rendering Ralegh's relationship to the queen as an inset story of unrequited love. The Timias/Belpheobe episode has spawned its own critical tradition, to which Bednarz's "Ralegh" and Oram's "Spenser's Raleghs" can serve as useful introductions.

13 Compare Erickson: "Ralegh's poem posits a Petrarchan version of Spenser's (and Arthur's) faery queen that suggests Cynthia and, by extension, Belpheobe, the source of Timias's unremitting frustration" ("Spenser Reads" 181). See also Montrose, "Perfecte Paterne" 34–35. I am in general agreement with Bednarz's conclusions about the sonnet, with two caveats. The first concerns the sequence of composition of Ralegh's sonnets and Spenser's Letter. Bednarz contends that "the 'Vision' reacts to The Faerie Queene in light of the letter's explanation" and that "[w]ithout Spenser's gloss, it would have been impossible for Ralegh to have intuited this pattern—to have understood that Arthur's dream of the Fairy Queen, buried in a subordinate action of the first book, was meant to provide a point of origin for the entire poem" ("Collaborator" 280–81, emphasis added; 282). While this is reasonable so far as it goes, we need not assume that the only way Spenser could have shared this "gloss" with Ralegh was through the Letter. Based largely on evidence from Colin Clouts Come Home Again, most critics accept Spenser's claim to have read and discussed the poem with Ralegh at some length prior to bringing it to England. Bednarz also notes the similarity of phrasing between the first line of Ralegh's sonnet—"Me thought I saw the graue, where Laura lay"—and Arthur's description of his dream: "Me seemed, by my side a royall Mayd / Her daintie limbes full softly down did lay" (1.9.13) ("Collaborator" 282). This would be decisive evidence indeed if Ralegh had echoed a line from the Letter; the fact that the similarity links Ralegh's sonnet to the text of the poem does not require the introduction of the Letter to explain the influence. My second caveat concerns Bednarz's assertion of collaboration between the two poets. Much like Erickson, Bednarz contends that the two poets "engage in an open evaluation of their status as collaborators in the serious game of shaping an Elizabethan court mythology" (279). Remarkably, Bednarz discusses at length Ralegh's depiction of Spenser as a thief, but only in one passing reference does Bednarz refer to the possibility that Ralegh might have interpreted Spenser's appropriation of a version of his own poetic project as thievery. (Oram, though, notes this possibility: "What Did Spenser" 169). Bednarz concludes, without adducing textual evidence for the claim, that Ralegh admired Spenser's willingness to steal as the practice of a strong poet, even though in the same article he notes that Ralegh criticized Sir John Harington for borrowing too much from Martial in his epigrams. (On Spenser as thief, see 294–98; for the passing reference, 299; on Ralegh's upbraiding of Harington and the latter's characteristically clever response to a "fellow Thiefe," see 296–97.)

14 We need not look far to find examples of this familiar trope. The closing couplet of Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Lord Hunsdon reads: "Liue Lord for euer in this lasting verse, / That all posteritie thy honor may reherse." Also Sir John Norris is enjoined: "Sith then each where thou hast dispredd thy fame, / Loue him, that hath eternized your name" (13–14). Spenser remembers the lesson. In Colin Clouts Come Home Again, he writes, "Her power, her mercy, and her wisedome, none / Can deeme, but who the Godhead can define," finding in her, "The image of the heavens in shape humane" (346–47, 351).
Compare the poem that follows Harvey's, by R. S., which names Spenser “this Bryttane Orpheus” (4).

“I daresay Ignoto sounds suspiciously like Immerito coyly addressing his book at the opening of The Shephearde Calender or Spenser sophistically defending Faeryland in the proem to Book 2 of The Faerie Queene” (“Spenser” 21). Some circumstantial evidence exists for Erickson’s suspicion. First, the Spenserian cadence of the lines and the fact that only this verse and Harvey’s are not identified by initials—perhaps the Immerito of Spenser’s letters to Harvey has become the Ignoto of the Commendatory Verses, progressing from unworthy to unknown. Also, the poem refers to Spenser as “a workman,” The Faerie Queene “a worke,” and the quality of the poem as its “workmanship,” which taken together might suggest the kind of low pastoral self-esteem Spenser affected throughout his career. Finally, the phrase “worke of rare deuise” from the opening line occurs early in Book 3 of The Faerie Queene to describe a tapestry in Malecasta’s castle:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The wals were round about appareiled} \\
\text{With costly clothes of Arras and of Toure;} \\
\text{In which with cunning hand was pourtrahed} \\
\text{The loue of Venus and her Paramoure,} \\
\text{The fayre Adonis, turned to a flowre,} \\
\text{A worke of rare deuice and wondrous wit. (3.1.34)}
\end{align*}
\]

The “worke of rare deuise / The which a workman setteth out to view” of the commendatory verse sounds like the metaphorical suggestion of a tapestry or painting (1–2).

Interestingly, the poem anticipates here the twin concerns (“gealous opinions and misconstructions”) that Spenser cites as the reason for writing his Letter to Ralegh.

The Oxford English Dictionary notes this occurrence in 1552: “The Englysh prouerbe is this. Good wyne nedeth no signe” (“Sign” 1. 6. a).

This sonnet is discussed at length by Oram, “What Did Spenser” 169–73. Erickson offers a useful bibliography on “the Dedicatory Sonnets as expressions of Spenser’s relative intimidation” (a reading from which he dissent), “Spenser and his Friends” 16 n. 5. On the textual difficulties posed by the Sonnets see Brink, “Materialist”; on the political significance of their arrangement, see Stillman.

The turn recalls the last stanza of the proem to Book 3, where Spenser also seems to recoil after excessive subservience. On Spenser’s critique of Ralegh here, see Oram, “What Did Spenser” 169–72.

This would render less likely, for example, anxiety over the possible interpretation of Lucifera as a representation of Elizabeth as the occasion for the Letter. On this reading, see McConnell 52–54. For Oram’s suggestion that this is the kind of “mischconstruction” Spenser has in mind, see “Raleghs” 343 n. 6.

On this passage and the concept of the division of the queen’s person, see D. L. Miller, Two Bodies.

Even as the poet concedes a place in the allegory to Ralegh’s Cynthia, he dilutes the reference by mentioning at the same moment other mythological substitutes which Ralegh surely would have known.

On the difficulties of assigning a place to the Letter to Ralegh vis-à-vis the poem it describes, see Gordon Teskey’s cleverly reasoned “Positioning Spenser’s Letter to Ralegh.” Alexander Judson neatly if accidentally captures the paradox inherent in most readings of the Letter: “On January 13, 1590, he finished a short preface in the form of a letter to Ralegh, which he placed at the end of the poem” (140).
Tasso’s “Allegoria” was first printed as a preface to *Gerusalem Liberata* (see Treip 97). The other three examples cited by the *Variorum* editors in note 2 above were also prefatory to their respective works.

On this feature of the poem, see Goldberg 24–26 and passim.

The one exception to this that I find in the Letter is Spenser’s distinction between the practice of a “Poet historicall” and an “Historiographer,” where he pauses to explain to the reader the concept of beginning a narrative in *medias res*.

Compare this from the Letter’s penultimate sentence: “that from thence gathering the whole intention of the conceit, ye may as in *a handful* gripe al the discourse” (emphasis added).

See Robert Browning’s “House”:

> “*With this same key*
>  
> *Shakespeare unlocked his heart,*’ once more!”

Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he! (994–95)

The characteristically evocative phrase is from Nohrnberg 35. On the Letter’s inaccuracies, see Bennett 24–52 and Erickson’s chronological bibliography on the topic, “Spenser’s Letter,” 167 n. 4.

A. C. Hamilton writes, “If the letter is so at variance with the poem, one must infer that Spenser deliberately misrepresents what he wrote. Since such an inference is so unreasonable, one must assume that it describes an earlier plan which was modified during the actual writing” (*Structure* 51).

On stubbornness as “one of Spenser’s most enduring characteristics” see Oram, “What Did Spenser” 173.

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