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Pleasing lines and pleasing rhymes:
finding interpretive pleasure in Spenser's *Amoretti*

In the final couplet of the opening sonnet of his *Amoretti*, Spenser expresses the wish that the “[l]eaves, lines, and rymes” of his book “seeke her to please alone / Whom if ye please, I care for other none.” But what kind of pleasure, exactly, does Spenser wish to generate, and how does he anticipate it will be generated? In this paper, I want to take literally what is perhaps usually read figuratively, and explore reading and interpretation—rather than, say, gratitude or flattery—as sources of pleasure in the *Amoretti*, reading Spenser’s sonnets alongside those of Shakespeare and Sidney. As currently imagined, the paper bifurcates into an exploration of the relationship between reading/interpretation and pleasure as figured in these texts, and a consideration of the role of interpretive pleasure as a pedagogical tool in the teaching both of these texts and of literary interpretation as praxis (a bifurcation that will hopefully come together elegantly—much like a final couplet).

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“Sleepy Business”: Gendered Dreams in Spenser and Shakespeare

My paper begins with the observation that male characters in Spenser and Shakespeare frequently hold their female counterparts responsible for deeds and actions that take place in their dreams. In both *The Faerie Queene* and on Shakespeare’s stage, consequently, these women find themselves unwittingly inhabiting the nightmare landscapes of the men in their lives. Early modern dream manuals consistently insist that dreamers should hold themselves accountable for the feelings and desires to which their dreams give expression. Focusing primarily but not exclusively on Book One of *The Faerie Queene* and *Cymbeline*, my essay examines how characters such as Spenser’s Red Cross and Shakespeare’s Posthumus interpret their dream experiences in a manner that extends and projects this culpability onto Una and Imogen. Ultimately, in both works, the challenge of existing in someone else’s dream leads to tragic destabilizations of female identity.

Claire Eager
SAA Abstract
Pleasure and Interpretation in Shakespeare and Spenser

Pleasure, Paradise, Destruction, Instruction:
Reading Landscape in Spenser and Shakespeare

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

Warranted by Sidney's alignment of pleasing poetry and pleasant landscape, my paper will explore the close but often tense relationship between "pleasure" and "paradise" in Spenser and Shakespeare. In *The Faerie Queene*, descriptions of pleasurable landscapes are frequently invitations to read closely and suspiciously. (And to prepare for an act of destruction.) Yet the means by which Spenser's readers are to study virtue—and the motivation for their continued reading—is found within the sensual pleasures of the text itself. Meanwhile, the *locus amoenus* in Shakespeare is usually metaphorical, standing in for a desired object (lover or landscape) that the speaker hopes to conquer or acquire. Both writers tend to include in their descriptions of such places references to paradise as evidence for just how extreme the pleasures they offer are—or seem to be. To invoke paradise in scenes of violence raises aesthetic and ethical questions for both the pleasures described and the poetry that describes them in such terms. I will argue against the impulse to read the destruction of paradise as the straightforward punishment of pleasure *and* against the reaction to such readings that scorns or denies the intimate connections our two writers draw between them.

What is Iago? Shakespeare and Spenser on Imagination and the Demonic

What is the root cause of Iago's relentless, thorough-going evil? Coleridge saw in his soliloquies "the motive-hunting of a motiveless Malignity." Othello wonders aloud if his nemesis might be a devil. Reading Shakespeare by comparison to his slightly older contemporary, Edmund Spenser, as well as their shared inheritance of Tudor morality plays, I propose that Iago should be understood symbolically, as well as naturalistically. As F. R. Leavis suggests, Iago is "subordinate and merely ancillary": "he represents something in Othello himself." Much as Falstaff might be said to represent, in Pauline language, the "old man" or "flesh" of the protagonist, Prince Hal, or the Fool in *King Lear* can be understood as a symbol of Lear's own repressed conscience, Iago can be seen as a personification of Othello's own imagination. Iago's characterization makes sense, by this light, as a reflection of contemporary anxieties about this suspect faculty of the mind. Iago stands in relation to Othello much as Archimago does to Spenser's *Redcrosse Knight*: in the wake of Protestantism, imagination comes to fill the role that the devil once held in medieval and Tudor drama.

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The Legend of Amoret, or of Discretion

David Landreth

Abstract for "Pleasure and Interpretation in Shakespeare and Spenser"
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Anecdotally, it seems to me that a playful engagement with Spenser is more readily available to my students now than it was when I began teaching *FQ* a dozen years ago. My own developing confidence in presenting the poem as matter for enjoyment is surely a factor here. But I think there are external factors in contemporary culture at work too: the growing sophistication and prestige of contemporary serial forms, such as TV and webcomics; the growing sophistication of media theory addressing and constellating those open-ended forms; the thriving symbiotic relations among appreciation, interpretation, and textual production that fan communities forge through interacting with these forms.

Fan engagement likes to seize upon the possibilities of romance--generically, as the multiplicities of what-if in which the open-ended serial form is "inescapably" entangled (to adapt Patricia Parker), and especially erotically, in the "shipping" of an erotic relation not yet portrayed, or the "slash" encounter of an erotic relation the text does not seem prepared ever to portray. In "Into Other Arms: Amoret's Evasion" (1991), Dorothy Stephens recognized and charted the shadow of a Britomart-slash-Amoret plot in *FQ* Book 4, a recognition that by now seems straightforwardly to govern my students' engagements with that otherwise-ungoverned book. The opening for that engagement is created by the devices of incompetence that hedge round the voice of *FQ*'s narrator, which are at their most acute whenever the narrator attempts to focus on Amoret. Amoret scatters playful, teasing hints of an identity centered on pleasure through the medium of the narrator's oblivious representations, which drape her decorously in a veil of fear. I call this mode of mediated, playful, plausibly-deniable self-assertion on the part of Amoret her discretion. Though this mode of being in the world is more like a Certauldian "tactic" than an Aquinian "virtue," the relation of virtues to tactics is an open field in the second installment of *FQ*: whence my fan-fictive retitling of Book 4 as "The Legend of Amoret, or of Discretion."

Writing soon after Stephens, Alan Sinfield considered in similar terms "How to read *The Merchant of Venice* without being heterosexist"--how, that is, to resist the hetero-normative shape of closure enforced with such overdetermined rigor by that play. Sinfield recommends giving interpretive priority to "the adventurous middle part of a text, as against the tidy conclusion," and many critics since then have enjoyed doing so. But I do think it's worth contrasting the generic, formal, and professional constraints that seem to enjoin "tidiness" and conclusiveness upon Shakespeare's playful middles to the enjoyably open-ended oscillations, evasions, revisions, and plain continuity errors of Spenser's texts, rather than only writing Shakespearean conclusions off as obeisance to ideology. Even the most punitively determinate of Shakespeare's plots, *Measure for Measure*, enfolds in its conclusion a hard kernel of incorrigibility—Barnardine—and the hint of self-determined discretion in the unaccountable silence of Isabella. But the character who finally realizes the formal pleasures of *The Faerie Queene's* mediated engagement within the two hours' traffic of Shakespeare's stage is Cleopatra.

Spenser's Vale of Error and the Pleasure of Poetry

Francis Bacon opens his *Essayes* (1625) with a wonderful image of truth: '*no pleasure is comparable, to the standing, upon the vantage ground of Truth: (A hill not to be commanded, and where the Ayre is alwaies cleare and serene;) And to see the Errours, and Wandrings, and Mists, and Tempests, in the vale below*'. Bacon's vantage point is as a supreme philosopher-king, disinterestedly surveying error. Thirty-five years earlier in *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser had chosen not to take the vantage ground above the 'Wandrings', 'Mists' and 'Tempests', but instead to enter the wood of Error (Canto 1). There Redcross encounters error's horrible embodiment. In this paper I want to investigate what happens to pleasure once inside the wood. Is it only, as Bacon claims, a state produced when in possession of truth, or is pleasure delivered by poetry even when it is not driven by truth? Spenser describes his epic poem as 'cloudily enwrapped in Allegorical devises', shrugging off Bacon's serene clarity and sounding very much like the misty place of error. Despite being a 'scene of instruction', Spenser's faerie land seems to make a little room for the pleasure of poetry.

Keywords:

Landscape; hermeneutics; error; pleasure; truth; poetry; allegory; interpretation

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Pleasure and Interpretation in Shakespeare and Spenser
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Provisional Title and Abstract: The Pleasures of Reading: Spenser and Lucretius

Although interest in the early modern transmission of Epicurean physics and philosophy, especially through Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, has grown exponentially over the past decade, Spenser's engagement with this Latin epic has been strongly contested in ways that Neoplatonic or Ovidian influences have not. Focusing on Spenser's translation of Lucretius's invocation of Venus in Book IV of *The Faerie Queen* as well as selections from the Garden of Adonis and the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, this paper explores how *De rerum natura* informs not only Spenser's representation of pleasure, but also his conception of the pleasures of reading and writing epic poetry. For Lucretius, poetry and philosophy both aim to bring about ethical pleasure and the ultimate end of tranquility. Despite their differences, I argue that examining Spenser's engagement with Lucretius provides one way to re-center pleasure in the larger conversation over early modern reading practices and reception of classical texts, a discourse that has been historically characterized in darker terms from the "anxiety of influence" to the "crisis of exemplarity."

Cathy Nicholson
The Faerie Queene and the Matter With Reading

“I am now in the country, and reading Spenser’s fairy-queen. Pray what is the matter with me?” The complaint of an anonymous correspondent to *The Spectator* in July, 1712, sounds with endearing frankness a note of consternation that resonates throughout *The Faerie Queene*’s reception history. From the poem’s first known reader, Spenser’s friend Gabriel Harvey, who returned an early draft with a plea that the poet write something--anything--else instead, to the novelist Virginia Woolf, who advised would-be connoisseurs of Spenser’s verse that “the first essential is, of course, not to read *The Faerie Queene*,” those who seek in its pages the delight and discipline promised by the author in his dedicatory epistle to the 1590 first edition have frequently themselves struggling in the grip of less benign readerly reactions: boredom, bafflement, irritation, outrage, obsession, intoxication, or sheer exhaustion. Such confused, passionate, intemperate, and even wrongheaded responses to the poem have typically served only as a counterpoint to a more engaged and rigorous tradition of critical reading, but they ought not to be dismissed out of hand, or cited only to be rebuked and rehabilitated. On the contrary, the perceptions and misperceptions, likes and dislikes of Spenser’s readers--good and bad alike--serve as a useful index of the poem’s own ambivalence toward reading, which it treats as both a spiritual discipline and a sensual indulgence, a life’s work and a potentially deadly waste of time. They are also a sensitive barometer of larger cultural and institutional transformations. Indeed, tracking the vexed reception history of *The Faerie Queene* turns out to be an excellent way of charting the history of reading itself: precisely because Spenser’s poem has so often frustrated the desires and expectations of those who have tried to read it, it catalyzes the mixed feelings and contradictory ambitions that have attended the act of reading from the era of commonplacing to the advent of the digital age.

Abstract: Cleopatra's Deaths: Pleasure and Freedom

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This essay develops out of a recent paper by Ayesha Ramachandran, which argues that “to understand ‘pleasure’ as related to the will, to judgement and to intentionality, is to see how the enjoyment of pleasure is profoundly related to the exercise of freedom and individual agency.”¹ In *Antony and Cleopatra*, pleasure with its accompanying self-realization is fully realized only in death. Enobarbus comments about Cleopatra: “I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she has such a celerity in dying.” Enobarbus’ punning, bawdy and suggestive, makes death the characteristic mode of Cleopatra’s exercise of “freedom and individual agency.” This embrace of pleasure and death becomes central to the final acts of the play, in which Cleopatra turns away from “the world” with its dominant values reputation and power. Cleopatra’s death is characterized by an embrace of pleasure and freedom, and a rejection of the world. Shakespeare emphasizes her rejection of the world by making Cleopatra die twice, once when she faints after Antony’s death and again at the end of the fifth act. The essay examines these death scenes as they articulate the play’s concern with pleasure and the creation of a self.

¹ Ramachandran, MLA paper January 2018, p.10

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Whose Pleasure?: Humanist Interpretation in Spenser and Shakespeare

This paper explores the figuration of humanist reading in Spenser and Shakespeare. From Petrarch onward, the humanist representation of philology typically makes a polarizing distinction between sensuous pleasure and informed, textual interpretation. However, this distinction is muddled almost as soon as it becomes conventional, even by early humanist writers themselves. Spenser and Shakespeare in turn evoke the humanist opposition of pleasure and understanding, and their concomitant blurring of this opposition implicates the humanist model on its own terms. Moreover, for these two poets, *ekphrasis* becomes an especially powerful mode through which to suggest such a skeptical attitude toward humanist philology. First, as Krieger and others have pointed out, ekphrasis entails a translation of the material image into text (and vice versa), thus unsettling the terms by which humanist rhetoric stakes its opposition to pleasure. Second, and perhaps less noticeably, ekphrasis multiplies and renders ambiguous the position of the spectator, and thus of the reader. As I hope to show, hermeneutically charged ekphrastic moments in Book 3 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* confound the humanist model of interpretation precisely by dispersing the sources and objects of readerly pleasure.

On the Pleasure of the Pun: Spenser and Shakespeare via Picasso

Colleen Ruth Roseneld

This paper takes up the question of aesthetic pleasure in Spenser and Shakespeare through an unlikely philosophical resource: Picasso's suite of paintings entitled, *Las Meninas (After Velásquez)*. In 1957, Picasso isolated himself on the upper floor of his house with a single photograph of Velásquez's masterpiece. Over five months, he produced fifty-eight studies of *Las Meninas*: this one is a detail of the handmaiden, that one is a detail of the Infanta; here, her face is in profile and there, a double profile; in one, the Infanta's eyes are stacked atop one another and in yet another, the Infanta is the center of a vortex that threatens to consume the room by pulling all of its other inhabitants—dog, handmaiden, dwarf, candle—into the void of her body.

Picasso's *Las Meninas (After Velásquez)* energizes my investigation because its experimental attention to the capacities of form offers an alternative to the more familiar models of knowledge production that have dominated early modern studies in recent decades and of which Michel Foucault's reading of Velásquez's *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* is paradigmatic. Focusing on the Infanta's arresting glance as it fixes the viewer within a system of seeing and being seen, Foucault described how *Las Meninas* clears out a space for the absent monarchs whose reflections appear in a mirror on the back wall. Foucault's reading has influenced a wide range of accounts of cultural and literary forms in the period, from the Elizabethan schoolroom to the Jacobean court masque, and has sustained the field's dominant theory of aesthetic form as the representation of that power which organizes and makes possible all knowledge but which otherwise cannot be expressed. Whereas Foucault's charismatic reading turned on the Infanta's forward-facing gaze, Picasso crucially and repeatedly renders her face as a sharp double profile. Instead of looking in front of her and at the viewer, Picasso's Infanta looks, impossibly, left and right simultaneously. Because her gaze no longer places the viewer in the singular locus of the absent monarchs, the Infanta's new face eliminates the "essential void" that Foucault understood to underwrite all acts of representation. The Infanta's new face permits us to perceive, instead, the dynamism of aesthetic form. The Infanta's centrifugal gaze reveals the impossibility of Picasso's pictorial space and vouchsafes the formal disarticulation of art from the world so as to offer something different from the world.

This paper will take up one of Picasso's renderings as a visual way of thinking through a figure of speech that has been central to the critical legacies of both Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare: the pun. Velásquez's *Las Meninas* features a dwarf with his left foot resting on the haunches of a dog and his right arm raised, forefinger lifted ever so slightly above the rest. Foucault described this dwarf as the bottom right half of an X that marks the spot of the Infanta's gaze. In Picasso's variation, the dwarf is a piano-player: his raised foot lifts to press a pedal and the fingers of his right hand bang away at the keys. When asked about this painting, Picasso described "the little boy with the piano" as "part of the reality of the subject": "a parrot is also a green salad and a parrot. He who makes it only a parrot diminishes its reality." Picasso concludes: "I see things otherwise." In this essay, I will take up Picasso's model of reality and the principle of aesthetic form that sustains it and ask, *How might Picasso's piano-player ask us to read the pun in Spenser and Shakespeare differently?*

Kevin Windhauser

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SAA 2019: Pleasure and Interpretation in Shakespeare and Spenser

Paper Title and Abstract

“Pleasure and Productivity in the Spenserian Library”

Is anyone having fun in Eumnestes’ Library? Spenser presents the library, visited by Guyon and Arthur in Book II of the *Faerie Queene*, as a space capable of provoking responses ranging from admiration to curiosity to nearly all-consuming desire, but seems remarkably ambivalent about clarifying which, if any, of these emotions anyone in the library actually holds. The library’s visitors, Guyon and Arthur, vacillate between a possibly-impressed perplexity at their surroundings (“wondr[ing] at his [Eumnestes] endless Exercise”) and an intense desire to read the library’s contents (“burning both with fervent Fire” at the sight of their titles). Its inhabitants, meanwhile, are framed with likewise ambiguous language; Eumnestes, for instance spends his day “tossing and turning” the books, two verbs that, when used in Renaissance texts to describe the experience of study, have decidedly mixed registers (Lyly, for instance, uses the terms to describe both pleasurable reading and enervating dedication to study).

This essay argues that Spenser’s ambivalent depiction of the relationship between pleasure and productivity in Eumnestes’ library represents the poet’s difficult attempt to theorize the proper function of an English institutional (that is to say, non-household) library, and to calculate the proper relationship between labor productivity and pleasurable reading that should take place there. As textual warehouses, libraries inevitably engaged with the Renaissance (by way of classical rhetorical theory) commonplace that texts should teach by delighting; in this sense, libraries should be largely storehouses of pleasurable material (and Guyon and Arthur’s reactions to the history texts they find seems to indicate this). Yet, as institutional spaces designed with an explicit rationale of supporting the state (something sixteenth-century library creators make very clear, framing their state-supporting libraries as an alternative to the monastic libraries of Catholic England), they are also sites that demand profitable labor. Examining Spenser’s attempt to reconcile these two impulses alongside Renaissance discourses of library-creating, I build on existing readings of Eumnestes’ Library (particularly Jennifer Summit’s argument in 2008’s *Memory’s Library*) by bringing to light Spenser’s engagement with, and contribution to, Renaissance ideas about what working, or playing, in a library should look like.

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Pleasure and Interpretation in Shakespeare and Spenser

**“Content to please their feeble eyes”:
Affect, Ambiguity, and Interpretation in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* I**

This essay will turn to Book I of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* to consider the challenges presented by interpreting affect and the challenging affects that interpretation can provoke. From the very first stanzas of canto one, Spenser confronts his audience with the difficulty of reading emotions. Within this uncertain emotional landscape, I focus on Spenser’s engagement with concepts of contentment, which have been overlooked or dismissed by literary critics. During the early modern period, contentment had a particularly complex and contradictory relationship with pleasure, as the experiences could be treated as aligned, identical, or in opposition with one another. Derived from the Latin *contentus*, which means both contained and satisfied, contentment primarily signified an affective state that holds the individual together—a defense against fickle fortune and unruly passions. Yet Book I repeatedly locates contentment in the act of interpretation, including moments of misinterpretation. By extending Book I’s affective ambiguity even to contentment and by encouraging readers to share in the emotional confusion of its characters, Spenser qualifies contentment as both a topic of and response to his poem. Ultimately, this essay will explore how these scenes of interpretation—with all of the hybrid emotions, mixed pleasures, and qualified contentment that they entail—reflect on the strategies of Spenserian allegory. How do we reconcile a Horatian goal of delighting in order to teach with the poem’s insistence that interpretation always courts conflicting responses and its awareness that affect is especially elusive?