



### **We're meeting at Pondsides: Kalamazoo, 2023**

By Sean Henry (University of Victoria)

First of all, the swans still haven't come back. When Western Michigan University (WMU) reworked the pond at the bottom of Goldsworth Valley a year or two before the pandemic, the swans that lived on the pond and nested on its banks disappeared. However, May 2023 did see the return of the International Congress of Medieval Studies at WMU in person in Kalamazoo, Michigan—and, with it, the return in-person of Spenser and Sidney at Kalamazoo, the conference-within-a-conference double act we just call “Kalamazoo.”

The atmosphere is difficult to describe to someone who has never attended. As a whole, the conference is rich in both scholarship and opportunities for people-watching: habit-clad theologians, historians of textiles, Chaucerians and Danteans, experts on the Mongol horse, scholars of medievalism in gaming...the array of scholarly interests and Kalamazoo “types” goes on and on. The program offers many temptations to learn about the unexpected, as do the book exhibits. Perhaps it's an effect of being surrounded by thousands of medievalists (and therefore clinging together in sixteenth-century solidarity), or perhaps it's an effect of meeting in the same city year after year, but Spenser and Sidney at Kalamazoo breed loyalty with their combination of “friendship and scholarship together,” as Bill Oram described it in his opening remarks to this year's sessions. And it was good to be back.

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For this first in-person conference since the pandemic, numbers were down: around 1,500 were in physical attendance (about a thousand less than in 2019), with another 700 attending hybrid sessions virtually. Some twenty or twenty-five people gathered for the Spenser and Sidney sessions. The Spenserians and Sidneians take turns hosting a named lecture every other year; this year was the Sidneians' turn to host their Van Dorsten Lecture (which Roland Greene delivered), so Spenser at Kalamazoo consisted of nine papers in three sessions on Friday, May 12th.

The first session opened with Julian Lethbridge's "Spenser Is Not Boring: Developmental Responses to Criticisms." Lethbridge offered challenging, wide-ranging statements about Spenser's verse and meaning, arguing that scholarly readers do too little to reach Spenser on his own terms, which exist in his words and in the unspoken conventions beyond the page (such as genre and formula). Lethbridge linked the natures of Spenser's verse—both the more elaborate and the unadorned beyond "the razzmatazz of golden words"—to his teaching. Spenser is more medieval than we tend to think, and his system of virtues is interlocking, each requiring the others: "You cannot be virtuous alone."

Next, in the judicious and thoughtful "A Decade of Style," David Wilson-Okamura assessed recent interest in Spenser's style, balancing his own work with that of Lethbridge, Richard Danson Brown, Paul Hecht, and Jeff Dolven. "Spenser experimented with style his whole life, and was still experimenting when he died," Wilson-Okamura states, but "there is some disagreement about what Spenser was trying to achieve with his style." Questions about stanzas and ornamentation emerge in comparing ideas about Spenser's style: how much is functional and how much is ornament for ornament's sake?

Paul Hecht argued that theories of Elizabethan prosody need re-evaluation, particularly those grounded in the work of Derek Attridge. We should be (as the title of Hecht's paper states) "Giving It Another Listen," employing performance and making poetry ourselves, thereby setting aside our preconceptions about sixteenth-century attempts to reconcile Latin verse theory with English poetic practice—or, at least, qualifying them in experience, since experience shows that "with practice, it's possible for human beings to hold in their minds and bodies astonishingly complex and conflicting rhythms" at once.

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The first three papers after lunch approached Spenser through ecocriticism. Charlie Serigne proposed a satiric pattern in Spenser's representations of forest growth in "Foliage, Shadow, and Indirect Satire in the 1590 Faerie Queene." Serigne examined the Wandering Wood, the growth around Despair's cave, the Bower of Bliss, and the Garden of Adonis, suggesting ways in which these trees function as indirect satire. Some of Serigne's readings were experimental and more debatable—such as the barren grown around Despair's cave indirectly referring to the succession crisis—but the whole pattern was thought-provoking and demonstrated the necessity of our continued recalibration of our sense of how Spenser engaged with the natural world in many ways and in different modes in his works.

Samantha Marie Schaefer's "In the Tongues of Trees: Ecocriticism, Ecosemiotics, and Science in Spenser and Virgil" drew upon semiotics and ecology to read Fradubio and Polydorus. As Schaefer observes, "The essential mystery of the bleeding tree is not just the infliction of violence, but the experience of matter that perceivably suffers from a human standpoint." Schaefer offered a salutary grounding of her analysis of Spenser and Virgil in the real-world consequences of human–tree interactions and the ways in which we perceive those interactions.

In "Spenser's Ethics of Reading Ecologically in The Faerie Queene," Jennifer Vaught argued for activity. Spenser stresses bodily and mental movement as key to ethical and moral growth for both characters in the poem and readers gain "experiential knowledge of the world based on the senses, intellect, and affections." Vaught pointed to readerly experience with the poem as sensuous and phenomenological. She persuasively demonstrated how Spenser parallels both the pedagogical theories of his old schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, and recent theories about mobility and walking in his insistence on kinetic engagement with the world.

Jamie H. Ferguson opened the last panel with a presentation on his project of "Translating Du Bellay with Spenser." Ferguson illustrated the usefulness of employing mildly archaic diction and language that echoed Spenser to convey both Du Bellay's meaning and effect in English by comparing his work with another modern translation. Among other benefits, archaisms have proven to allow Ferguson to draw out allusiveness from the original text in his versions. Cotgrave's French dictionary (1611) is central to Ferguson's interesting work.

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Nathanial B. Smith looked at Alma, arguing in “Alma’s Affective Soul: The Limits of Neostoicism in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*” that she “does not disinterestedly judge, guide, and control the body from on high; she also hears, sees, feels, and—crucially—cares about her guests and castle.” Through this care, Smith argued, Spenser critiques Neostoic accounts of subjectivity based on self-control, where Alma embodies the nurturing care implied by her name.

The panels of Spenser at Kalamazoo concluded with Richard Danson Brown’s “Almost Everything Its Opposite: Authority in *The Faerie Queene*.” Brown presented a 1559 engraving based on a drawing by Bruegel the Elder showing sixteenth-century justice in all its gruesomeness as an analogy and foil for Spenser’s representations of punishment in Book V. Although Spenser is nothing like a modern liberal in his attitudes towards justice and punishment, he also doesn’t necessarily fully endorse the images of authority in his epic, whether Mercilla, Artegall, or Talus. In the end, Brown concluded, “We live in this imperfect world, Spenser seems to be saying, where the pressure of the real on the ideal is often intolerable.”

Friday ended with group dinner and the “business meeting,” which at Kalamazoo means sitting in a circle, reading something aloud as a group. These evenings turn into casual, insightful seminars on whatever work the group reads, ranging from textual analysis to a chance to share experiences teaching the text. This year, we read two of *The Fowre Hymnes*: “Beautie” and “Heavenly Beautie.” Saturday was devoted to Sidney, as usual, and ended that evening with an abbreviated meeting of the International Porlock Society (one highlight was a poem Richard Danson Brown wrote about observing sparrows in Kalamazoo). Elsewhere at the conference, two papers on Spenser also appeared on a panel devoted to Gower in the Early Modern: Linda Burke’s “Scattered Rhymes: New Observations on Gower among the Early Moderns (Especially Spenser and Shakespeare)” and R. F. Yeager’s “The *Confessio Amantis* and *The Faerie Queene*.” I regret I did not hear them delivered.

Overall, the mood of this return to Kalamazoo caught my attention. Yes, there were papers that made my mind whirl and click into action, but the whole affair seemed mainly about seeing friends and making new ones. Shoptalk, of course, but so much conversation about how people were, how they weathered the past three years, how they grieved those three years in their ways (so often, since they’ve been hard for everyone), and how (in

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spoken and unspoken ways) seeing one another in that place and getting to talk about these things we care about felt like the return of a long hoped-for spring. This conference was the first I attended in person since the pandemic, so I might have been attuned to different things as a result, or it may have been a result of our experiences over the past three years (when it feels like we all aged ten), but the scholarly felt more personal. We remembered Judith Anderson and Arthur Kinney, two giants of scholarship and loyal Kalamazonians, who died during the pandemic. Several people observed how Judith's spirit seemed to hover over the question-period discussions in terms of her scholarship and interests.

Despite the best efforts of the virtual conferences of 2021 and 2022, the return to Kalamazoo in person showed how necessary being together is for that blend of "friendship and scholarship together" that marks these gatherings in western Michigan. Yet I must mention 2020, when the conference was cancelled outright in the confusion and worry of those first months of the pandemic; some thirty Spenserians nevertheless gathered on Zoom to see one another—a guerilla and unofficial "Spenser at Kalamazoom." Human connection felt so fragile at that moment, so seeing these friendly colleagues (or collegial friends) under those circumstances at that time is something I shall always remember and value.

We can still hope about the swans.