INTRODUCTION

It is the central commonplace of Renaissance literary theory that the purpose of poetry is to please and instruct. Criticism’s stewardship of poetic pleasure is not my subject here, at least not directly; what I am concerned with is teaching, toward which our attitude is often confused. Modern critics are intellectual citizens of a long, post-Romantic epoch in which didactic poetry has enjoyed a diminished reputation. We have come to favor other purposes for poems, other ways of reading them, and where a didactic design is palpable we do not feel bound to its lesson—we may indeed feel more obliged to upend it. At the same time, we still speak reflexively not only of what we learn from the writing of the period, but about what this or that book “teaches” us, and versions of the phrase “the education of the reader” are in wide currency. As a matter of critical idiom it is possible to move easily and without much self-consciousness between talking about what a book means and what it has to teach, as though they were effectively the same thing. When this happens, the notion of teaching becomes as broad as meaning itself.

Among the consequences of this confusion is that we can lose sight of just how formidablely complicated the relation once was between the enterprises of fiction-making and instruction. For us moderns, poetry and school are on the most familiar, if not the easiest, terms. In the English-speaking world we have had almost five hundred years to get used to the idea that what we now call literature should have a place at the center of the curriculum. In the later decades of the sixteenth century, however, that place was

A note on texts: I have made an effort to cite the most widely available editions, which means that quotations from earlier periods are sometimes modernized, sometimes not. In the case of unedited texts, and also of works by Edmund Spenser (whose poetry is customarily printed in original spelling), I have tacitly modernized u to v, v to u, and i to j where appropriate.
new, and it was consolidated in the midst of what has been described as an educational revolution—when schools were being founded at an unprecedented rate, and Elizabeth’s government was taking an unprecedented interest in what was taught there, and how. The culture of teaching that was English humanism moved poetry and pedagogy to new prominence in intellectual life and pressed them closer together than ever before. Any poet of the age knew that he should be writing to teach: Horace, and Sir Philip Sidney, said as much. But the question of how to teach had a new complexion. Should that poet, trained at St. Paul’s or Winchester or Merchant Taylors’ and perhaps at one of the universities too, teach the way he was taught? Should he write for the reader educated in the new humanist schools; should the design of his work anticipate and flatter that reader’s training? Where would such choices place him among his countrymen, at a moment when this intellectual and pedagogical program had an increasingly complicated place in national life?

Questions about how to make good the obligation to instruct are fundamental to the literature of the period, and any number of books could be written on the subject, probing the didactic accommodations and evasions of lyric poetry, or the drama, or epic. The present study offers a framework for thinking about literary didacticism across all these cases: it asks what such a forceful “culture of teaching”—I borrow the phrase from Rebecca Bushnell—might mean to a teaching poem, and it aims to clarify what counted as teaching for the humanists, and as learning. But it assays this project by way of a handful of works from a dissident and defiantly extracurricular genre, the romances written by John Lyly (Euphues), Philip Sidney (Arcadia), and Edmund Spenser (The Faerie Queene). No fictions of the time were more preoccupied with teaching. The men who wrote them were all trained in the humanist grammar schools, trained there to read poems, even to write them. Taking up this particular literary kind provided them with a uniquely powerful language and laboratory for thinking about what Spenser called the fashioning of a gentleman.

Yet for all that they are not didactic poets—notwithstanding their profound investment in pedagogy, and notwithstanding more than four hundred years of reading them as sage and serious teachers. Over the following

2. In his letter to Raleigh, Spenser writes that the purpose of his poem is “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (The Faerie Queene, ed. Hamilton, 714). Subsequent citations to the poem are by Book, canto, and stanza number in parentheses in the text.
chapters I want to diagnose a counterimpulse, not a different kind of teaching but a skepticism or even despair about the very possibility of teaching. More than any generation before them school had defined for these writers the prestige and the good of poetry, and it had given them the tools to write, even taught them how to think. But they also had reasons, like many of their generation, to feel that they had been betrayed by that training and the promises it had made them. When they rejected the protocols of instruction bequeathed by their teachers, they turned against instruction itself as a literary project; because, for all that they were still fashioned in those schools, they also turned against themselves. Their skepticism and self-doubt smolder at the historical roots of English humanism.

Two scenes of instruction will set the stage: scenes that both represent teaching (among their characters) and aspire to do it (in teaching the reader), a doubleness typical of much that follows.

Faire Lady, then said that victorious knight,
The things, that grievous were to doe, or beare,
Them to renew, I wote, breeds no delight;
Best musicke breeds delight in loathing eare:
But th’only good, that growes of passed feare,
Is to be wise, and ware of like again.
This daies ensample hath this lesson deare
Deepe written in my heart with yron pen,
That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men.3 (1.8.44)

These words are spoken by Spenser’s Prince Arthur two-thirds of the way through the first book of The Faerie Queene; they are a study in lesson-making, but they look back on a grim sequence of events. Redcrosse, the knight who set off with such millennial promise in canto i, has been seduced by the enchantress Duessa, and has come to grief in the dungeon of the giant Orgoglio. Rescuing him takes Arthur through chambers washed with the blood of guiltless babes, and when the prisoner is brought back up to daylight he is enfeebled and emaciated, his flesh “shronk up like withered flowres” (1.8.41). The governing tone is horror. Now, however, the giant is dead, Duessa is bound, and Redcrosse’s destined bride Una is standing by:

3. I have discussed this episode and the structure of the Spenserian stanza in more detail in my article, “The Method of Spenser’s Stanza.”
it falls to Arthur to make sense of what has happened. The stanza offers its characteristic shape to the lesson he draws, a nine-line sermon that broods its way through the eccentric, double-take rhyme scheme to wind up at the wise hexameter, self-balanced on its medial caesura. “That blisse may not abide in state of mortall men.” The long line is the nub of the lesson, and its sententious authority squares the teaching inside the poem with the address to its reader outside.

The way to the sententia, however, is troubled by an anxiety, a peculiarly pedagogical anxiety, that pervades the whole poem. What Arthur is trying to do is to take an experience of suffering and make it useful; what Spenser is trying to do (at least, one of the things he is trying to do) is to distill several stanzas of narration into a portable moral. Both might be said to be teaching, a teaching that here is something like an act of translation, or representation, or even generic modulation. The prince begins by parsing “grievous things” into those done and those suffered, a distinction reassuring in its conventionality. Next, a modest concessio, allowing that there is no pleasure to be had in recalling past pains. The way is being prepared for the assertion of a moral. But the difficulty of the task already begins to make itself felt in that word “renew,” which is topos enough to call up another scene of bitter memory: Dido’s hall at the beginning of Aeneid II, where Aeneas is pressed to tell the fall of Troy and hesitates for fear that he will only renew (renovare) his grief. Such renewing is the first risk Arthur’s pedagogy encounters, the risk that the act of instruction will merely repeat the pain it is meant to transmute.

“Best musick breeds delight in loathing ear,” says the prince, pressing on: for those who fear the pain of memory, music—perhaps the music of a comforting rhetoric, such as Una has supplied in the preceding stanzas—offers solace. Now he raises an opposite risk, the temptation to displace painful experience altogether by a sweet senselessness. Fixed momentarily on the horns of this dilemma, he turns with the stanza’s middle line toward an answer: the only good that can come of past suffering is to learn not to repeat it, to be “ware of like again.” Here we come to momentary rest at a

4. Virgil, Aeneid, 2:3. “Renew” is Surrey’s word in his translation: “O Quene, it is thy wil, / I shold renew a wooc can not be told” (The Aeneid of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, ed. Ridley, 49).
5. A. C. Hamilton surveys the confusions prompted by the line in his edition, noting eighteenth-century emendations of “delight” to “dislike” or “no delight”; he goes on, “If the text is kept, possible paraphrases are: ‘music best breeds delight, not a recital of grievous matters’; or ‘only the best music, not a recital etc., may breed delight’” (The Faerie Queene, ed. Hamilton, 111n).
proper lesson, one that in its ease of statement and practical difficulty may be as close as we will get to a motto for *The Faerie Queene*. But Arthur is not finished, and it is in the next three lines that the didactic project becomes most urgent and compacted. He reflects on “This daies ensample,” giving a kind of boundedness and point to what has happened, drawing the line of an example around its edges. Just as quickly, he moves to the “lesson deare” of that example, and then comes the iron pen, the stylus that writes this lesson on the tender parchment of the heart. There is a lot of didactic technology in play, and the final violence of the image—it startles awake a sleeping metaphor from Jeremiah—chastens the lines’ swift movement from ensample to lesson to the alexandrine.\(^6\) It is as though at the next-to-last minute the teacher fears that the comfort of the lesson might displace too much of the pain that called for it; as though the act of inscription, the act of teaching itself must be made painful for the lesson to stay. All the same comes the lesson in the last line: “That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men.”

Just what kind of a lesson a maxim makes will be much to the point in what follows. For now, there are three things to observe. First, instruction here might be said to be a matter of representation, of somehow transmuting raw experience (or narrative) to lesson—giving it an intelligible shape, making it into useful knowledge. Second, the instructive movement from day to example to lesson is jerky, self-conscious, and uncertain. And third, it is very hard to say how this lesson is received. Arthur speaks these words primarily to Una, but she does not respond, at least not right away, and when he turns to Redcrosse the knight is obdurately silent. How do we know they understand?

Now, the second scene of instruction:

Take a sentence or two in the beginning of that little booke, called *Sententiae pueriles*:

*Amicus opitulare*...

If you will, you may aske them by a question of the contrary, Must you not helpe your friends? The childe answereth, Yes. Then bid him give you a sentence to prove it; he answereth, *Amicus opitulare*.

---

6. “The sinne of Judah is written with a penne of yron, & with the point of a diamond, & graven upon the table of their heart” (*Genesis Bible*, ed. Berry, Jer. 17:1).
It would be hard to imagine a more different pedagogical occasion. The first was out of doors, ad hoc, precariously near to tragedy, and full of anxious triple-thinking; here we have a systematic procedure that sounds native to the schoolroom. There are, however, at least two important similarities between the schoolmaster’s script (from John Brinsley’s manual, *Ludus Literarius*) and Arthur’s pedagogical excruciations. The first is the importance of the *sententia* as the stuff and the proof of learning. Brinsley’s pithy formula—*amicis opitulare*, aid your friends—is precisely what the student is supposed to know, in just that minimal order of words. Each of the little exchanges finds its satisfaction and closure there. Spenser’s Arthur may not call for an echo of his own hard-won maxim, but he too brings his lesson to an end by offering up such a formula. In both cases, the *sententia* is the genre in which knowledge is consolidated: in the speaking of it, learning is made recognizable. The work of teaching is to give knowing this shape.

The second similarity between these scenes is the restless energy devoted to the problem of whether or not the student understands. Arthur anticipates several ways that the day’s example could be misconstrued. Brinsley, for his part, replays his little scene of instruction three times, varying the approach in each. Compared to Arthur, he may seem confident and systematic, taking the question through the “places” of distribution and comparison in order to disrupt the dead repetition of catechism. But doubt haunts his method. All of the pedagogical ingenuity on display in *Ludus Literarius* is unfolded, in dialogue form, as the good schoolmaster Philoponus’s response to the failed schoolmaster Spoudaeus, whose laments are a catalog of everything that can go wrong in the humanist classroom. “I my selfe have so long laboured in this moyling and drudging life,” Spoudaeus complains at the outset, “without any fruite to speake of, and with so many discouragements and vexations in stead ofe any true comfort, that I waxe utterly weacie of my

7. Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius*, T4r-T4v. Peter Mack discusses this passage in “Renaissance Habits of Reading,” where he takes a dim view of Brinsley’s pedagogy: “What is troubling is the degree of simplification and the drilling” (4).

8. On the places see chapter 1.
place, and my life is a continuall burden unto me." The specter of such fruitless labor—labor for which no result can be shown—is renewed by Spoudaeus in question after question, and it drives the manual’s preoccupation with proving that students have understood something. Brinsley’s reforming ambition is a refrain: "to teach schollars to understand whatsoeuer they learn, & to be able to give a reason of every thing why it is so... Legere & non intelligere negligere est [to read and not to understand is not to read]."

This preoccupation with understanding—understanding as something uncommonly hard and elusive—is a special mark of the later sixteenth century. Historians of humanist education often compensate for a patchy record by emphasizing the continuity of schoolroom practices throughout the English Renaissance, drawing on later writing to illuminate earlier decades. I will avail myself of the same strategy more than once. But it is only possible because the school manuals themselves were changing, becoming over time, like Brinsley’s, far more specific both in their critiques and in their remedies. Such doubts as Spoudaeus’s are the engine of that explicitness. From Elyot to Ascham to Brinsley and beyond, English writing about education offers more and more examples, more and more specific exercises, more and more classroom detail; it has recourse to an ever-growing repertoire of textbooks, and is more and more explicit about how to use them. There is a parallel development in the era’s printed catechisms, which, according to Ian Green, devised increasingly sophisticated means to distinguish “between, on the one hand, the mechanical parroting of words and, on the other, a real understanding of their meaning and commitment to their implementation.” (The pressure of England’s long
wrestle with Reformation theology—with its problems of inward assurance and outward evidence—is felt in both contexts.) One might assume that urgency about ordinary understanding as the fruit of classroom labor would be a historically constant preoccupation. What else do teachers ever care about? But over this period it is the subject of increasingly obvious and intense concern—harder and harder, it would seem, to be sure of.

That gathering doubt is the subject of this book. As early as the 1560s, the great success of humanism as a reform movement is accompanied by a gradually rising tide of dissatisfaction with its methods, dissatisfaction particularly with the ways its students were trained to read. Such restlessness stems at least partly from testing its program in an ever-wider field, and giving its students time to age into disillusionment. The consequence is a loss of faith in the forms of understanding that had been cultivated day to day in institutions where an increasing proportion of privileged Englishmen spent their formative years, and where they learned not only to read but (to the extent that these can be separated) also to write, and to think. Brinsley’s _Ludus Literarius,_ printed in 1612 after a career of schoolmastering that began in the previous century, is an attempt to breathe new life into those forms. _Sententia_ remains his all-purpose answer, but he integrates his maxim into a more flexible regime of questioning. Spenser’s wilderness displacement of the scene of instruction, by contrast, depends at least as heavily on the same final form—it encourages us to read for the same _kind_ of lesson, even if that lesson sounds more Calvinist than humanist—while leaving us far less easy with its authority.

Much of what follows is an attempt to fit scenes like these together: to show first how both might emerge out of a growing crisis of confidence in the humanist program, and second, how romance could offer a literary landscape within which to critique that program and experiment with alternatives. The idea that romance in particular would register this discontent might seem counterintuitive, and for some good reasons. Romance is the literary kind most tendentiously foreign to school. It went unrecognized among the classical hierarchies of genre that structured the humanist curriculum, and it was not until the next century that the label became at all familiar in English criticism. Its boundaries are notoriously blurry: the canonical works we might now be inclined to regard as its cornerstones—the

"short-answer method" for doing philosophy with speechifying rhetoricians in the Gorgias, 449c.
Odyssey, or the first six books of the Aeneid—were read under other auspices. Above all, the schoolmasters hated it. There will be occasion in what follows to linger over the rich scorn of men like Ascham and Francis Clement for Italian tales and Arthurian matter.14

At the same time, this very distance from the classroom makes romance a promising vantage for thinking twice about instruction, in the way pastoral is good for thinking about cities. As with country and city, the distance is not as great as the schoolmasters often proclaimed. Romances tend, for example, to be stories of younger people with something to learn, and they tend to put those young people in the way of some kind of real-world lesson—the tantalizing promise, so important to what follows, of learning by experience. To that extent they are narratives of education in a polemically extracurricular sense of the word, and hence rivals of the schoolroom's own account of how to grow up and grow wise. Moreover, like any poet in an age that defended poetry for its instructive power, these romancers were obliged to teach, or at least to reckon with that imperative. All this made their works a uniquely sensitive register of the changing relations between literature and school in the decades of humanism's first triumph, when secular poetry was first assuming its new (and now so familiar) position at the center of the curriculum.

This network of problems, particularly the connection between the romance and the humanist schoolroom, is not new to modern criticism. There is no want of studies of the impact of grammar-school training on writers like Marlowe, Shakespeare, or Milton. The rhetorical discipline and virtuosity cultivated in the classrooms where they labored over Lily's Grammar and Aphi tonius's exercises make an unmistakable contribution to their literary art. (Milton excepted, these studies have tended to focus on the drama: soliloquies are obvious descendants of the declamation, schoolboys cut their teeth on Terence, and at some schools, including Spenser's and Sidney's, the boys performed Latin plays at holidays.)15 There are accounts too of the relation of romance to the intellectual and institutional context of

14. The most complete account of what I mean by "romance" I defer until chapter 2, where I allow Roger Ascham's polemic to gather some representative texts. The terms of the Italian debate over romance—the multiple plot, the appeal to a popular audience, the recalcitrance to rules generally—are all significant to the works I consider here. The most important aspect of this mostly unregulated literary kind for my purposes is its extravagant narratives, with their tolerance for accident and error.

15. See for example, Altman, The Tudor Play of Mind, and Bate, Shakespeare and Ovid, especially pp. 1–48 and 101–17; Mulder, The Temple of the Mind, treats the influence of rhetorical training on other genres, including lyric and epic. On Milton see Clark, John Milton at St. Paul's School, and DufRoché, Milton among the Romans.
late-century humanism; it has long been recognized that the fictions of those two decades are almost exclusively the work of young men trained in the grammar schools and universities.16 Finally, many critics have worried the problem of what these romances have to teach on their own terms, working in modes descended sometimes from the reader response criticism Stanley Fish made famous with *Surprised by Sin* (a book that gave the phrase “education of the reader” to any number of subsequent studies), sometimes from the tutorials in indeterminacy offered by critics of a deconstructive bent.17

But while the present book owes a debt to all this work, its project is quite different. It is about humanist reading practices, insofar as the fictions I will consider turn out to be preoccupied with the ways they will be encountered, understood, and remembered by their audience. But I take such problems of reading to be inseparable from teaching, and bound to the ur-scene of instruction for the writers I consider, the Elizabethan grammar school. School will be a heuristic—the first, best window onto humanism as a culture of teaching—but also the shaping origin of a range of compositional and interpretive habits, and a scene to which the imagination of these writers (especially Lyly and Sidney) returns with surprising frequency and intensity. The very act of reading will emerge as much harder to separate from teaching—teaching with all of its problems of knowledge and authority—than is at all intuitive for us today. A particular crucible for such problems will be scenes like Arthur’s, where a poem is bound to the double business of staging a scene of instruction and instructing its reader. This study will dwell on such scenes in order to ask, what does teaching look like? What lesson is at stake? What would it mean to get it? Does the teaching here succeed, or fail? Each of these encounters, by the overdetermined accident of its historical moment, is set near the beginning of the long-running success of the humanities in the West. We still have a great deal to learn from what these reluctant teachers first saw there.

A final word, or nearly final word, on the perversity of my central claim. I take the very possibility of literary didacticism in these poems to be emptied out: their writers lose faith in the idea that literature can teach, because they

16. Richard Helgerson’s *The Elizabethan Prodigals* has been the most generative such account; Kinney’s *Humanist Poetics* and Maslen’s *Elizabethan Fictions* make more recent contributions.

17. Many such accounts will be cited in what follows. See for example Parker’s *Inescapable Romance*, or Astell’s “Sidney’s Didactic Method in The Old Arcadia.” Ascoli’s *Ariosto’s Bitter Harmony* is a particularly idiosyncratic and resourceful treatement of the educative powers of romance.
cannot free their books—their teaching books—from a culture of teaching that they take to be compromised, even bankrupt. Such an argument flies in the face of hundreds of years of reading *Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* as though they were written to instruct us. How could it be true to say they are not? A full answer can only be given in what follows, but let me suggest three ideas worth keeping in mind along the way. First, the fact that a book will not teach—and though teaching is a protean thing, I will try to be exacting about the forms it can take, and particularly the forms in which it would have been recognized in the period—does not mean we cannot learn from it. In the course of our lives we learn a great deal, perhaps most of what we know, in situations that do not have a particularly didactic structure. Learning does not entail teaching any more than teaching does learning. (Another way of putting it: I do not want to mistake a resistance to teaching for just another kind of teaching.) Second: our own endless disagreement over exactly what these books do teach might just give us some pause; the particular interpretive recalcitrance that makes them so interesting may have something to do with a stance toward instruction per se.

And third: our confidence in instruction generally may just be on less certain footing than we often allow ourselves to recognize. What do our own students really learn? What are the instruments that we use to test them intended to show; how well do they work; what do they protect them, and us, from recognizing? One might say, of course students learn something in our classes. But do they learn what we teach? Do they really understand? Questions like these can precipitate us into a skepticism that makes the sheer diversity and unaccountability of experience in any classroom seem impossibly inconsistent with the aims we frame for the enterprise. To profit by this book, the reader will have to give him- or herself at least partly over to such worries; I hope it will be tonic to explore them, if not to dwell there. What happens to the mind that does will be amply documented in what follows.

Chapter 1 will be occupied almost entirely with the schoolroom, so before venturing there, one more glance at *The Faerie Queene*. Throughout the book I will treat instruction as a representational problem with two aspects: the representation of knowledge, and of knowing; what the stuff being taught looks like, and what it looks like to learn it. One-half of that double problem is worked out in Arthur’s lesson-making. The other half waits on the knight to speak. Since Redcrosse will not break his silence, Una leaps in to answer the question he cannot, the question of what to do with Duessa. “To doe her
die (quoth Una) were despight; / And shame t'avenge so weake an enemie; /
But spoile her of her scarlot robe, and let her fly” (1.8.45). What follows
over the next three stanzas is the canto’s infamous blazon of Duesa’s
nakedness, the animal menagerie of her “neather parts” (48). Fascination
and disgust charge the description in equal measure. When it is over, the
role of teacher—pointing, naming, explaining—seems to have passed to
Una herself:

Such then (said Una) as she seemeth here,
Such is the face of falsehood, such the sight
Of fowle Duessa, when her borrowed light
Is laid away, and counterfauncse knowne. (1.8.49)

Here is another lesson, by way not of a maxim but a new emblem, made by
stripping away a veil to reveal the seductress’s nature. This is what falsehood
looks like when it can no longer borrow other lights or other clothes, says
Una. It has always been Duesa’s beautiful face that has given trouble, as
her ally Night, half-deceived herself, reminds us: “In that fayre face / The
false resemblance of Deceit, I wist / Did closely lurke” (1.5.27). Now
that we can see her face clearly, how can we but turn away in disgust? How
could we ever be deceived again?

This lesson seems to be a comfort: Duesa flees into the woods in shame,
and the three travelers retire to a nearby castle “To rest them selves, and
weary powres repaire, / Where store they fownd of al, that dainty was and
rare” (1.8.50). It is a great power of allegory to define, judge, and move all at
once, and in her act of unveiling Una has fashioned an image of falsehood
that will forever banish its power to seduce. The result is a potent act of
pedagogical representation, and a kind of allegory-making-as-teaching that
goes on all the time in the poem. But at a minimum the lesson is lost on
Redcrosse: not only will he not speak, but the next canto has him falling
victim to Despaire. Nor is it clear what use this particular lesson—however
gratefully received—could ever have been to him, or to any of us. Una wants
to point to what falsehood really looks like, but it is the face of falsehood
she claims to have revealed. And is it not the point about falsehood that its
face is always beguiling, always different from its nature? Perhaps the role
of the teacher is to make the truth obvious, but here that impulse betrays its
aims. Una has made an emblem of falsehood that abstracts it—in that act of
pointing, “Such is the face”—from the narrative within which its operations
have been made so painstakingly intelligible. Falsehood never looks like that.
The claim that it does has a comforting music to it, but will not help when the next Duessa comes along.

If this kind of poetic teaching is a mistake, or prone to mistake, that mistake goes to the heart of The Faerie Queene’s didactic procedures as an allegorical poem. Mistakes more generally—malfunctions and abuses of teaching, dogged failures to learn—go to the heart of my own story. There is a kinship between the failed schoolmaster Spoudaes and Edmund Spenser, and the most reliable fact about teaching and learning in romance is that they will go wrong. That observation more than any other gave this book its first impetus: why, in these supposedly didactic fictions, do we encounter such a relentless parade of failed instruction? Why does no one ever learn anything in romance? And what are we to learn from that?