Spenser

Description

This course is about the first major epic poem in English, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. It looks at this poem as a philosophical forerunner to the what we now call fantasy—sharing a set of concerns with later artistic movements like Romanticism and authors like C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Philip Pullman. While fantasy is often seen as a lower or popular genre, it asks a series of probing questions about modern life—about the relation of humans to the natural world, the powers of technology, the longing for a sense of belonging and tradition, and the complex ways gender and sex are understood. As we will see, Spenser engages these questions through innovative revisions of generic convention, playing with heroes that are bumbling idiots, inventing female knights pursuing dream-lovers, mixing low and high culture, and creating enigmatic allegories. By reading Spenser’s poem alongside essays by later authors, later illustrations and adaptations of his work for popular audiences, and academic discussions of fantasy in contemporary society, we will strive to think about how Spenser’s poem was both unique in its moment and asks critical questions for our era.

Required Materials


You must acquire the exact edition listed above in a print version. You cannot use a digital edition. The total cost of the above editions on Amazon is around $45, cheaper if you rent or buy used.

Note: There are two audiobook recordings of *The Faerie Queene*, through Librivox [here](https://librivox.org/) and Audible [here](https://www.audible.com/). Audiobooks should not be your main way of reading the poem, but they can be useful as a way to get a flavor of the book aloud, or those days when you’re in a pinch.
Calendar

All readings are tentative and may be changed.

Week 1:
1/4: Introduction
1/6: Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 1.1-2 (book 1, cantos 1 and 2)

Week 2:
1/11: *TFQ* 1.3-5, C.S. Lewis, from *Spenser’s Images of Life*
1/13: *TFQ* 1.6-8, Amitav Ghosh, from *The Great Derangement*

Week 3:
1/20: *TFQ* 1.11-12

Week 4:
1/25: *TFQ* 2.1-2, Gail Kern Paster, introduction to *Humoring the Body*
1/27: *TFQ* 2.3-4

Week 5:
2/1: *TFQ* 2.5-6, W.B. Yeats, “Introduction,” handout on Spenser’s Irish Readers
2/3: *TFQ* 2.7-9

Week 6:
2/8: *TFQ* 2.11, Stephen Greenblatt, “To Fashion a Gentleman”
2/10: *TFQ* 2.12

Week 7:
2/15: *TFQ* 3.1-2, Kathryn Schwarz, “Dressed to Kill: Looking for Love in *The Faerie Queene*”
2/17: *TFQ* 3.3-4

Week 8:
2/22: *TFQ* 3.5-6
2/24: *TFQ* 3.7-8, Library Day: Spenser Illustrated and Adapted

Week 9:
3/3: *TFQ* 3.11-12

Week 10:
3/8: Mutabilitie Cantos 7.6-8
3/10: Philip Pullman, from *La Belle Sauvage*
Assignments

Attendance (20%): Attending all class sessions, prepared and having done the reading, is important and counts toward your grade. Showing up to class over ten minutes late will count as an absence. However, there are ways to make up any absences! See the Policies section below for details and contact me if you’re unsure about anything. Don’t come to class if you’re sick—even just a little. Follow all university guidelines about when you should isolate.

Discussion Posts and Responses (25%): Each week, half the class will submit a discussion post about Tuesday’s reading. The post should be about two substantive paragraphs. It should start by looking at a particular moment in the reading, give a quotation, and then raise some problem about the meaning of this passage. That problem could be, for example, how to interpret one of the lines, why a character behaves in a particular way, or how the ideas of the passage logically fit with the rest of the poem. Then, the post should offer some preliminary answers using textual evidence from the reading. You do not need to have a fully worked out thesis—your job is to start a discussion. The rest of your post can either discuss a second problem raised by the passage, or connect your discussion with other parts of the poem or one of our secondary readings. Discussion posts will be due on Sunday before midnight.

The other half of class will post a response of one substantive paragraph to one of the discussion posts. The response should address the problem raised in the post by analyzing the quoted passage, connecting it to another moment from the reading, or re-framing the problem in some way. Responses are due Monday before midnight.

At the beginning of the term, students will be divided into two groups that alternate weeks for posting and responding. You are allowed to miss one post—with Responses counting as half a post—without penalty. Posts will be graded on thoughtfulness, use of evidence and reason, and contribution to course conversations.

In-class Presentation (25%): Students have two choices for the in-class presentation, explained below. Whichever option you choose, you should email me by Wednesday evening letting me know your topic. Presentations will be 5-7 minutes in Thursday’s class, and must include a handout or slide. The handout or slide will also be uploaded to our Canvas site. Presentations will be graded on accuracy, organization, clarity of presentation, and insight into passage.

1. Spenserian Word: The language of The Faerie Queene can be difficult for a modern reader at first. This is not only because of the poem’s age, but because Spenser loved to invent new words, recover older meanings, and play with puns and etymology. For this option, students will choose an unfamiliar, surprising, or interesting word from this week’s reading and research its meaning using The Oxford English Dictionary or Spenser Concordance. In Friday’s class, they will give a presentation explaining the word’s meanings, and leading the class through a discussion of one of the stanzas in which it appears.

2. Spenserian Allusion: The Faerie Queene is filled with characters, descriptions, and events borrowed from other stories and texts. For this assignment, you will choose one such allusion from the week’s reading. (The notes in the Longman edition will help you to locate these allusions.) Your presentation should 1) give some information about the source text Spenser is borrowing from, 2) include some of the original’s text that Spenser is drawing on, and 3) lead the class through a discussion of one of the passage in The Faerie Queene in which the allusion appears.

Final Project (30%): There are several options for the final project, all roughly 4-6 pages in length. Students will submit a proposal several weeks before the project is due outlining their plans. Projects
will be graded on: meeting all requirements, quality of argument, use of analysis and evidence, organization, written clarity, and originality. Options include:

1) Choose one of the critical works we’ve studied to engage a different section of *The Faerie Queene* than the critic’s original article. Write a 4-6 page essay that asks how the criticism opens new ways to understand the section under consideration, as well as how the critic’s approach might be challenged or refined by taking into account the new Spensrian material.

2) Choose a work of fantasy in any medium and compare it to one or a few cantos of *The Faerie Queene*. Write a 4-6 page essay that focuses on a specific topic across both works relevant to course themes, involves close attention to the language or media format in which the works are presented, and shows how comparing the two works gives us a new understandings of both.

3) Locate one or two passages in *The Faerie Queene* that describe the effects of sight and/or vision. First, analyze these passages on their own terms: what do they say about the power of looking or images? Second, choose one or two particularly visual passages of *The Faerie Queene* to analyze as examples of the theory you outline. Finally, choose one illustration of a scene from the poem and analyze how it fits or challenges the theory of vision you describe in Spenser. 4-6 pages.

4) Choose one canto of *The Faerie Queene*, and adapt it into a new medium for a modern audience. Media may include prose, comic book, text-based computer game, and more. In a 2-3 page introduction, explain what audience your adaptation is aimed at, what its pedagogical goals are, how it has adapted Spenser to suit that audience and those goals, what difficulties it faced in recreating the poem, and how it addressed those difficulties.
Policies

COVID, Absences, and Make-Up: No one is completely sure what this term will be like. I’ve designed the course so that you can make up any attendance or assignment you have to miss. If anything I haven’t thought of comes up, contact me and we’ll come up with a plan.

If you need to miss a class, you can email me a one-paragraph extra discussion post about that day’s reading to make up. The post should be on a different passage and topic than your other discussion post or response for the week. You have one week after your absence to submit your make-up post, but contact me in advance if you need more time.

If you have to miss class the day you are scheduled to present, you can record your presentation (Zoom should work) and email me the file or link. You have one week after your absence to submit your recorded presentation, but contact me in advance if you need more time.

English Language Learners: Anyone can succeed in this class whether or not English is their primary language. You will likely have some additional challenges: readings and assignments will take longer to complete, and participating in class discussion may be more intimidating. If you’re encountering any difficulties with readings, assignments, or participation, come to office hours and we can discuss.

Late Assignments: I give out extensions readily, but you need to ask in advance. Exceptions may be given for emergencies, illness, and other unforeseeable situations.

Masks: Everyone is expected to wear a mask properly (covering nose and mouth) during class. This is for the safety of you and your classmates, myself, and all the people we come into contact with, too. If you ever aren’t wearing a mask correctly, I will remind you and provide you with a mask if you don’t have one. If you still are unable to, you’ll have to leave class. If that’s not possible, I will cancel our session.

Plagiarism: All work must be your own and written solely for this class. Plagiarism can be unintentional, so be careful and make sure you understand the rules. If you’re not certain, ask me. I encourage you to look at the library’s guides for citing sources and avoiding plagiarism (https://library.uoregon.edu/citing). The same link will also allow you to access the university’s official policy toward academic misconduct; you should read over the policy if you’re unclear on what counts as cheating or plagiarism. If you’re struggling with an assignment, I encourage you to contact me. It’s better to submit an assignment late, unfinished, or in poor quality than risk the penalties for plagiarizing.