Spenser

Description

This course approaches Spenser’s epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, as an influential example of the genre of romance. Romance—a type of literature filled with questing knights, monstrous beings, and enchanted landscapes—predates Spenser, but Spenser plays an important role in creating the modern idea of romance as a lost past retrieved in an imaginative world of fiction. Students in the course will learn how romance, though frequently characterized as juvenile, meditates on issues ranging from gender and sexuality to nature, self-discipline, and the relation between modernity and tradition. By examining Spenser’s afterlife in the eyes of later authors, illustrators, and educators, students will see how *The Faerie Queene* became an important symbol of England’s “romantic” past, and the complex role it has played in questions of national identity, colonialism, and the value of literature in education. At the end of term, we will glance at some works of fantasy that echo Spenserian concerns and themes in the present.

Texts

Calendar

Week 1: Spenser’s Life and the Cultural Status of Fantasy
1/9: Introduction
1/11: W. B. Yeats, “Introduction” to Poems of Spenser
   C. S. Lewis, from Spenser’s Images of Life
1/13: The Shepheardes Calender, “To His Booke,” “Preface” and “October”

Week 2: Early Career; The Framework of The Faerie Queene
1/16: MLK
1/18: Shepheardes Calender, “April,” “May”
   Patricia Parker, from Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode

Week 3: Gender and Sexuality
1/23: 3.1-2
   Kathryn Schwarz, from Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance
1/25: 3.4-5
   Handout on Britomart and Women’s Education
1/27: Presentations and Open Discussion

Week 4: Matter and Nature
1/30: 3.6, 3.8
   Anthony Esolen, “Spenserian Chaos: Lucretius in The Faerie Queene”
2/3: Presentations and Open Discussion
   Short Paper due

Week 5: Spenser’s Visual Poetics
2/6: 3.11-12 (be sure to read both 1590 and 1596 endings)
   Jane Grogan, “Spenser’s Gallery of Pictures”
2/8: Velma Richmond, from The Faerie Queene as Children’s Literature
2/10: Presentations and Open Discussion

Week 6: Passions and Self-Control
2/13: 2.1-2
   Gail Kern Paster, from Humoring the Body
2/15: 2.5-6
2/17: Presentations and Open Discussion

Week 7: Monstrous Bodies and Colonialism
2/20: 2.9, from A View of the Present State of Ireland
2/22: 2.11-12
   Stephen Greenblatt, from Renaissance Self-Fashioning
2/24: Presentations and Open Discussion

Week 8: Fantasies of Nationhood
2/27: 1.1-2
   Benedict Robinson, from Islam and Early Modern English Literature
3/1: 1.4-5
   Veronica Ortenburg, from In Search of the Holy Grail: The Quest for the Middle Ages
3/3: Presentations and Open Discussion
   Final Paper Proposal due
Week 9: Allegory and Illusion
3/6: 1.7-8
   Neil Gaiman, from *The Sandman*
3/8: 1.9-10
3/10: Presentations and Open Discussion

Week 10: Mutability and Spenserian Afterlives
3/13: 7.6-7.8
3/15: Miyazaki Hayao, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (screening to be arranged)
3/17: Presentations and Open Discussion

**Final Project due during exam week**
Assignments

Participation (10%): Discussion will be an important component of class. If a student is shy or has other difficulties with speaking in class, I'm happy to hear their thoughts in office hours or by email.

Weekly Writing (10% blog entry, 5% responses): Each week, five students will post a blog entry to our course website by 8 pm Wednesday (750 words). All other students will write a response to one of the blog entries by 8 pm Thursday (300 words). Blog entries and responses must include at least one quotation from the week’s reading different from other entries and responses. Students are allowed to miss two responses.

Presentation on a Spenserian Word (20%): 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 assignment, each student will have an assigned week where they choose an unfamiliar, surprising, or interesting word from the week’s reading and research its meaning using *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *Spenser Concordance*. In Friday’s class, they will give a 5-7 minute presentation with a handout or slide explaining the word’s meanings, and leading the class through a discussion of one of the stanzas in which it appears. The handout or slide will also be uploaded to our Canvas site.

Short Paper on Spenser’s Sounds (20%): *The Faerie Queene* is famous for the auditory pleasures of its verse, the enchanting texture of rhymes and alliteration. For this assignment, students will choose one stanza of *The Faerie Queene* and, first, draw up lists of which words are linked together by rhyme, assonance, or alliteration (handout on formal terms given in class). Then, students will write a 3-4 page essay on how the auditory effects of the stanza affect its verbal meaning. How do the words linked by sound alter, undermine, or re-enforce what the stanza seems to be saying? The best papers will also explore how the sounds and meanings together reflect on some topic related to class discussion.

Final Paper (35%): For the final project, students will submit a proposal several weeks before the project is due outlining their plans. Students will have three options for this project:

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 5-7 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 Spenserian material.

2) Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, *The Faerie Queene* was frequently published in an anthology-like format that disregarded Spenser’s narrative sequence and organized the poem’s sections according to theme. Imagine your own short anthology of four entries, with a table of contents, at least one visual image drawn from the early modern period, and new titles for each of the entries. Write a 4-6 page introduction that explains the reasoning behind the anthology, as well as what these pieces gain from being juxtaposed with one another.

3) Choose a work of fantasy in any medium and compare it to one or a few cantos of *The Faerie Queene*. Write a 5-7 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 aids us in new understandings of both.