

The Spenser Review



Spenser at MLA 2023

By Claire Falck (Rowan University)

During a blustery January weekend at MLA 2023 in San Francisco, The International Spenser Society hosted two panels: “Spenser and Visual Culture” and “Spenserian Ecologies.” These two strong and complementary panels, comprising eight presentations in total, showcased some of the exciting ways Spenser scholarship is adapting and developing current and emerging theoretical and methodological trends, thereby enriching our understanding of Spenser’s works, their contexts, and their afterlives. Rather than staging an encounter between twenty-first- and sixteenth-century frameworks that emphasize the discrepancies between Spenser’s modern and early modern audiences, their alterity to one another, these two panels located Spenser’s writings in a variety of epistemological environments—natural, artificial, textual, and phenomenological—that were as familiar to the early modern era as to our own, but which modern readers can easily overlook when considering Spenser’s texts in isolation from their origins and history. Accordingly, two of the most striking common themes to emerge from the panels were, first, the potency and fragility of connection—whether understood in terms of transmission and exchange across forms of art and media, or the interdependence of ecosystems—and, second, the ambivalent and sometimes incalculable power of place and location, imagined physically, temporally, historically, or

The Spenser Review

phenomenologically. While many of the papers dealt with place and environment in the colloquial sense, both panels engaged with the importance of relocating Spenser's work—not by placing his works in foreign contexts, but by clarifying and revealing the complexities of the imaginative environments and networks in which they already exist, and that they continue to generate and influence.

“Spenser and Visual Culture,” which featured papers by Claire Eager, Mathieu Bouchard, Tanya Schmidt, and Victoria Pipas, expanded the visual universe of Spenser's world and writings in intertextual, architectural, material, and conceptual ways. While it is tempting to think about the early modern relationship between verbal and visual art in dichotomous, even adversarial terms, this panel emphasized the multidimensional and interwoven realities of Spenser's visual and textual worlds. Eager's “Spenser's Emblematics of Paradise”—which examined how Spenser was influenced by the printing practices of Dutch humanist art and artists through etching, wood cut, and manuscript illustration—and Pipas's “House, Gardin, Chambre: Tapestry Forms and Courtly Space in *The Faerie Queene*”—which explored how the late Elizabethan fashion of tapestried courtly interiors is reflected in the tapestry palaces of *The Faerie Queene*—both located Spenser's writings in rich, distinctive, and densely textured contemporary visual networks. Taken together, these two papers suggested how much Spenser's famously vivid poetic imagery is in constant conversation and exchange with visual images and spaces of his own everyday world. Complementing these papers, Bouchard's “Louis du Guernier, John Hughes and the Repackaging of *The Shepheardes Calendar* in 1715,” and Schmidt's “Phaedria and Pope Joan” drew Spenser's works into past and future contexts, exploring the unexpected endurance of visual influence through time. Bouchard's “Repackaging of *The Shepheardes Calender*” offered a fascinating analysis of how Spenser's later editors grappled with the legacy of E.K. and particularly examines the case of John Hughes, who excised all of the original woodcuts and E.K.'s commentary from his edition. Examining Spenser's engagement with earlier visual culture, Schmidt's “Phaedria and Pope Joan” studied one specific visual tradition and its impact on Spenser's creation of a minor but memorable character, showing how depictions of the infamous and apocryphal Pope Joan can nuance and deepen our reading of Book Two's transgressive and mirthful Phaedria. Collectively, the panel presented a multifaceted, intricate, and deeply engaging vision of the rhizomatic nature of Spenser's visual and literary

The Spenser Review

imagination, and the ways it continually reaches outwards, forwards, and backwards through time.

Time was also a motif of “Spenserian Ecologies,” the second ISS-sponsored panel, although the powerful presentations, which included papers by Claire Eager, Kyle Pivetti, Joseph Campana, and Tiffany Jo Werth, were more occupied with time in its cataclysmic, traumatic, and apocalyptic aspects, as they explored the specters of ecological crisis, grief, and catastrophe in Spenser’s writings. In her paper, “‘The Fairest Late, Now Made the Fowlest Place’: Spenser’s Climate Crisis and the Pathetic Mode,” Eager (who heroically presented on both ISS panels at MLA!) argued persuasively for a contemporary reexamination of the well-worn critical category of the pathetic fallacy in an ecocritical context. In doing so, Eager explored why and how humans can find themselves emotionally and physically out of step with their environment in Spenser, and the dangerous consequences of attenuated or permanent disjunction between people and the natural world. Arguably, one such deranging consequence is ecophobia, or humanity’s fear of their own environments, which was the subject of Campana’s paper “Make then Break: Ecocidal Manias Old and New.” Campana’s paper offered a compelling analysis of human antagonism towards the nonhuman world, linking famous recent instances of wanton human destruction of natural spaces (such as the vandalization of Joshua Tree National Park in 2019) with parallel instances of environmental destruction in *Faerie Queene*, notably Guyon’s razing of the Bower of Bliss. Providing a valuable counterpoint to humanity’s tendency to dismiss and delegitimize nonhuman experience, Pivetti’s paper, “The Haunted Life of Trees: Spenser’s Early Modern Eco-Trauma” prioritized the perspective and experience of non-human life in Spenser, using the Fraudubio episode of Book One to consider how trees remember trauma and grief, and to ask why Spenser and his classical predecessors so often call upon the figure of the tree to bear the weight of human sin and injury. Finally, Werth’s paper, “Terrestrial Extinction and ‘The Pillours of Eternity’ in Spenser’s *Mutabilitie Cantos*” carried the anxieties and fears of contemporary ecocriticism to their logical conclusion—extinction and the destruction of the earth—and used these stark possibilities as a framework for a persuasive and provocative reading of the end of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* as imagining not a heavenly post-apocalyptic peace but rather a new, unimaginable future world that rises out of the ashes of the old nature.

The Spenser Review

Although superficially these panels would seem to engage with very different aspects of Spenser’s writing and scholarship, their presence alongside one another on the MLA program was mutually illuminating. While each panel possessed distinct internal themes—the nature of influence, transmission, and generative metamorphosis across media in “Spenser and Visual Culture,” and the fragility and tragic capacity inherent in humanity’s relationship with the nonhuman in “Spenserian Ecologies”—together they offer counterpoised, rather than competing, visions of Spenser as a poet deeply invested in the inescapable connectiveness of humanity, nature, and art. The range of topics and issues covered across these presentations clearly demonstrate that these networks are as often harmful and destructive as they are creative and fruitful, which may sound paradoxical, but in fact ultimately reveals how careful an observer and writer Spenser is, and how much he resists easy conclusions and formulae in his works. Spenser is acutely aware that no human being, or human creation, exists in a vacuum, but he is also careful to show that interdependence involves risks and dangers that need to be acknowledged and engaged with, not ignored. As the MLA 2023 Spenser panels powerfully attest, Spenser’s literary imagination is always drawing on intellectual, aesthetic, and natural networks of interconnection, and his texts continue, even now, to participate in ecologies of exchange, destruction, transmutation, and recreation.