The Room Where It Happens: Reflections on the Sixteenth Century Society and Conference, 2022

By Sarah Van der Laan (Indiana University)

"Location, location, location," began the call for papers for the International Spenser Society-sponsored sessions at the 2022 Sixteenth Century Society Conference. The smallest of the three annual conferences at which the ISS sponsors sessions, SCSC has been a special place for me since I was a graduate student: an intimate, welcoming environment where work genuinely still in progress can be shared with a supportive and helpful audience; an egalitarian community where the biggest names in the field will show up at 8:30 on a Sunday morning to engage with graduate students delivering their first conference papers; a playful space where I can get away with titling a session "Does Size Matter?" Through the extraordinary efforts of organizers including Scott Lucas (who convenes the English literature and Sidney-Spenser tracks) and the ISS's own Chris Barrett (who convenes the pedagogy track) and the dedication of the numerous Spenserians and Sidneians who return every year, SCSC provides an ideal incubator for research and friendships alike.

SCSC was the first of the larger conferences to return to in-person meetings after the Covid-19 pandemic in San Diego, CA in October 2021. (A side note: all conferences should now take place in San Diego, whose mild weather makes discussions of Spenser over fish tacos and margaritas at outdoor waterfront tables possible at any time of year.)

The Spenser Review

By its second post-pandemic iteration, in Minneapolis, MN in October 2022, a post-Covid conference identity had begun to emerge: a bit smaller, yes, but, if anything, even warmer, even more determined to reap the many benefits of conferencing in person—and not to take them for granted. The hugs for old friends lasted a moment longer, tinged with relief at sharing each other's company once more and regret for the lost opportunities (already too rare) to reunite with far-flung friends. The question-and-answer sessions spilled over even further into the coffee breaks, as attendees reveled in the pleasure of trading ideas in real time and the fizzing energy created by smart people sharing good work in good company. And, as the reflections below from several presenters on ISS-sponsored sessions reveal, the nurturing environment for graduate students and for new work from scholars at all levels of the profession survived unscathed.

SCSC enjoys a richly deserved reputation as an especially graduate student-friendly conference. A well-attended mid-sized professional conference open to students even at relatively early stages, it offers a generous provision of dedicated professional development workshops and travel grants for graduate students. It fills professional and human needs that have only deepened in an age of rising travel costs and shrinking research funds: a need to witness the real-time development of current conversations in the discipline; a need to learn where the bar for a professional conference paper lies, how to ask good questions, how to chair a panel; a need for experience in presenting work to and handling questions from a mixed audience of scholars at all stages; a need to forge a network of friends and mentors beyond one's institution. As the longtime organizer of the ISS's SCSC panels, I was gratified and reassured to witness another year's round of new connections forming between emerging and established Spenserians, new scholars taking their first (and impressively assured) steps into the world of professional conferences, new friendships being forged in the slightly unlikely venue of a downtown Minneapolis sports bar with an extensive cocktail list.

The ISS has launched its new Anne Lake Prescott Graduate Conference Travel Grants to help graduate students present their work on ISS-sponsored panels at SCSC, MLA (Modern Language Association), and RSA (Renaissance Society of America)—and gratefully accepts donations toward these and other graduate student prizes—and this year's grants brought students from as far afield as Ireland and Massachusetts to attend their first international conference; both winners reflect below on their first encounters

with the larger Spenser community. But the terrifying expense of conference travel is only worthwhile if the conference remains the overwhelmingly positive experience that has drawn me back to SCSC almost every year since I was a graduate student: if established scholars continue not only to encourage their students to attend, but to also attend and present papers and chair panels themselves. As I step aside after six years of organizing the ISS's SCSC sessions, then, let me encourage all of you who have read this far to submit abstracts to the ISS calls or directly to the SCSC's many disciplinary tracks and to help keep the SCSC fertile ground (dare I say a Garden of Adonis?) for Spenser studies and the Spenserian community.

2022's four ISS-sponsored sessions brought together scholars from every stage of the profession and every corner of the Spenser community. The conference began with a bang, as chair Chris Barrett promised Spenserian karaoke while introducing an ISS panel in the first Thursday afternoon session. "Spenserian Epic in the World" examined the engagements of Spenserian epic with and by the historical world, in and beyond Spenser's historical moment. Annie Khabaza placed Spenser in conversation with his contemporary Richard Stanihurst to illuminate the role of Ireland in Spenser's poetic and political imagination in shaping both his English epic project and his view of English involvement in Ireland as epic conquest. Ayesha Ramachandran revealed that the contemporary poet Joshua Whitehead's queer Indigenous rewriting of Spenser forces us to reexamine not only Spenser's authority, but also the lyric's implication in, and potentially transformative power over, society.

ISS offerings continued with a pair of Saturday morning panels. "Spaces of Heroism in *The Faerie Queene*" considerd the intertextual, generic, and in-world environments in which Spenser constructs, tests, and seeks to instruct readers in his ideas of heroism. Christine Coch showed us that Spenser uses the disjunction between epic action and garden space in the middle books of *The Faerie Queene* to question epic's methods for cultivating virtuous readers, in a Protestant challenge to humanist optimism about heroic poetry's value as art aimed at refining human nature. Andrew Levie unpacked Spenser's engagements with the narrative voices, forms, and locations of Virgil, Geoffrey, Ovid, and Chaucer to challenge the developing sixteenth-century English vision of themselves and their British-Trojan history. And Sarah Van der Laan explored the ways

in which Spenser transforms Ariosto's intertwined interrogations of gender and knighthood as construct and performance through his repeated rewritings of the "custom of the castle" trope in Ariosto's Rocca di Tristano episode.

"How to Read Spenser: Parenthetically, Intratextually, Intertextually" interrogated the units in which we conceptualize and read *The Faerie Queene*, the practices by which we assemble those units into larger structures, and the ways in which those units demand to be read against each other, within and beyond the confines of Spenser's poem. Chris Barrett linked together parentheses across *The Faerie Queene* to show how the parenthesis becomes an illuminating and instructive figure for the Spenserian modes of epic romance and allegory and how a refusal to be constrained by grammatical convention may teach the reader to more fully explore—and enjoy—Spenser's "unruly" poem. William Oram considered a pair of episodes at opposite extremes of the poem, in Books 1 and 6, that ask the reader to read them in different ways and thus to consider the different modes of narration that prevail in each book and the implications of those modes for the poem's ethics and ethical evolution. And Vincent Mennella read Spenser's worldmaking against Italian intertexts to see Spenser constructing an intertextual allegory of English politics, counterintuitively contracting from the global to a comparatively local sphere.

Finally, in a show of unflagging virtue that Spenser would have approved, forty audience members gathered at 8:30 on Sunday morning, coffee in hand, for "Spenser, Matter, and Metaphysics," which considered the collisions, contiguities, and collaborations of the material and the metaphysical in *The Faerie Queene* and its early reception. David Landreth explored the unique metaphysics of Books 2 and 6 through the material manifestations of Disdayne in each book, while Victoria Pipas proposed a *translatio materiae*: a recurrent process of transmutation that resists transcendence in favor of material renewal in Book 1.

The ISS is hardly the only source of Spenserian riches at SCSC. A panel on "Space and Cosmography in the Works of Edmund Spenser" featured papers from Bethany Dubow ("Errour as Errant Cause: Timaean Cosmology and the Stranger Mathematics of *The Faerie Queene* 1590–96"), Andrew Fleck ("The Shepherd of the Ocean: Royal Maritime Iconography in *Colin Clout* and *The Ocean to Cynthia*"), and Penny McCarthy ("Espèces d'espaces: Georges Perec, Edmund Spenser and Ludic Space"). A panel on "Religion and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*" brought together Brian Lockey ("Christendom

The Spenser Review

Reconfigured: Catholic and Protestant Responses to *The Faerie Queene*"), Judith M. C. Owens ("Spenser's Groaning Ghosts"), and David Lee Miller ("The Queene's Eclipse: Gloriana and the Grail on Mt. Acidale"). "Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*" featured Gillian C. Hubbard ("Studiousness, Misogyny and Temperance in *The Faerie Queene*"), Mary Villeponteaux ("The Name of the Rose: Pastorella and Poetry in Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*"), and Jean R. Brink ("Front Matter in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590)"). Ernest P. Rufleth presented "Canonical Creation: Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* and Spenser's *Amoretti and Epithalamion*" on a panel on print culture. And the plenary Spenser Roundtable, a Thursday evening tradition, brought together two Spenserians— Brent Dawson and Ayesha Ramachandran—and the distinguished Persianist Paul Losensky to discuss "Global Spenser."

Below, some ISS panelists reflect on the experience of attending SCSC 2022. (Reflections curated by Chris Barrett.)

David Landreth (UC Berkeley)
"Disdayne between Worlds"

This was an attempt to argue that the physical discrepancies between the two appearances of the giant Disdayne in *The Faerie Queene*—in Book 2 canto 7, as Mammon's porter, and in Book 6 cantos 7–8, as Mirabella's traveling jailor—were surface manifestations of a discrepancy of metaphysics between the two books. In both Disdayne is invincible and is vividly unfleshly in his material composition. But in Book 2, he's indestructible because he is dense and solid metal, while in Book 6, he is held together by irreducible social relations, despite the brittleness of his feet of clay. I argued that Disadyne's status as "worldling" *par excellence* was the same in both instances, and that the difference between the instances showed how different were the fallen worlds of the two books—that of Book 6 defined by the diffuse whispery materiality of envious slander, that of Book 2 by the idolatrously totalized matter of avarice. It was splendid to work through these ideas in discussion with Victoria Pipas' analysis of matter in translation, and she and I were delighted to find so many colleagues so generously and energetically engaging with us even at 8:30 on Sunday morning. We got real affirmation that our shared sense of the

poem as having a metaphysical arc (in choreographing its intertexts and across its own books), across which materiality itself is subject to change, had legs. I was guided to acknowledge that, in trying to get at the complexity I found in Book 6, I was treating the version of materiality in Book 2 as simple; just because Mammon reduces all material relations to monetary ones does not mean his analysis should obtain in the world beyond his cave. It might make more sense to construe avarice as a reductive instance of idolatry rather than vice versa; but I do still think the worldliness of book 2 amounts to an over-prizing of the explanatory power of material causes (grouping such causes as humours and occasions alongside the rarity and physical properties of gold).

Victoria Pipas (Harvard University)
"*Translatio materiae*: Spenser's Poetics of Matter"

The 2022 Sixteenth Century Society Conference in Minneapolis was my first in-person conference, and it certainly will not be my last SCSC. I was grateful to find an academic and social home at the conference among the members of the International Spenser Society, who represent a vibrant community of scholars. The panels and dinner hosted by ISS were especially welcoming to graduate students and early career faculty; as a second-year graduate student, I experienced first-hand how supportive, inquisitive, and warm the Spenserian community is, traits I had already begun to sense in so many "Spenser at Random" Zoom meetings over the past couple of years. I was extremely grateful to present my paper alongside David Landreth (UC Berkeley) on the "Spenser, Matter, and Metaphysics" panel, graciously chaired by Sarah Van der Laan. David's paper, entitled "Disdayne between Worlds," inspired thinking on how matter flows through and in all books of *The Faerie Queene*, persuasively making an argument for Spenserian matter whose nature and decay are respective to each book's virtue. My own paper, which was a product of a master's thesis, was entitled, "*Translatio materiae*: Spenser's Poetics of Matter." It represented a portion of the greater work by the same title that I had not yet had the opportunity to present in a conference setting. My paper identified a new *translatio* in Spenser's poetic corpus, *translatio materiae* (the "movement" or "change" of "matter"), related to the first classical and then humanist paradigms of *translatio imperii et studii*, yet pertaining instead to the movement and change of decaying or

despoiled diegetic matter in Faeryland. I argue that, while Spenser finds a model for matter's movement and change in poetic predecessors like Joachim du Bellay, represented matter in his own poetry displays a tendency to persist and transform in ways that resist the teleology and linearity of imperial *translatio* paradigms. Instead, Spenserian matter might persist dangerously in the narrative, as does the material substance of Errour and then her spawn, or it might be erased from the narrative through its transformation into the naturalistic imagery of simile, such as occurs in Arthur's erasure of Orgoglio the giant. My conference paper and the larger work from which it derives treat the exchange of such *translatio materiae* imagery between and across Spenser's *Complaints*, particularly the *Ruines of Time* and the *Ruines of Rome: by Bellay*, and the first book of his *Faerie Queene*. Presentation of a paper at SCSC allowed me to give voice to central questions and anxieties about my argument: did the principle I was describing pertain only to matter's movement and change in Book 1, or could it be understood as governing matter in all of *The Faerie Queene*? Was I describing Spenser's theory of materialism, in which case more discussion of Lucretius and even Ovid were needed, or was I arguing for a new way of reading Spenser's own theory of *imitatio* as a materially contingent, and therefore unpredictable, uncontrollable process? Extremely thoughtful and discerning questions from the audience encouraged me towards possible solutions to these and other problems. Furthermore, offers from various scholars to talk or read through my paper after the conference were very appreciated. The feedback I received, formal and informal, as a result of SCSC was invaluable to my thinking and catalyzed a successful revision of the full-length paper. It has now been published as "*Translatio Materiae*: Spenser's Poetics of Matter" in *The Review of English Studies* 74.315 (June 2023) pp. 421-37 (available digitally here) and will be available in a forthcoming print issue of the journal as well. I am greatly looking forward to returning to SCSC this fall in Baltimore and eagerly anticipate so many more wonderful discussions with the Spenserian community.

Chris Barrett (Louisiana State University)
"Reading Parenthetically in an Epic; or, Why Nothing Really Matters in *The Faerie Queene*"

The Spenser Review

This SCSC paper included some thoughts about parentheticality I have been developing in a couple directions. Some elements of thinking about parenthetical reading and ecology are appearing in an essay on "Muiopotmos" forthcoming in an essay collection on "Spenser and Animal Life," edited by Abigail Shinn and Rachel Stenner. Other elements form part of a chapter in my current book project on the ecopoetics of the obvious. What does it mean to say that something is obvious? And how can we think about obviousness in the time of the hyper-obvious climate crisis? The parenthetical, reliant on a supposedly obvious regime of importance, is one site at which the obvious might be redefined in more generative ways. The panel and q-and-a at the 2022 SCSC session I was lucky enough to be a part of really helped me in this regard: for example, hearing Bill Oram talk about the characters in Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene* as defined by their relationships to one another crystallized for me the ways the parentheticals of Book 6 perform this kind of ecological interconnection, linking thought and idea in imbricated and complex webs of interrelation.

Vincent Mennella (Southern Methodist University)
"Spenser's Worldmaking Allegory: A Repurposing of Eastern-Mediterranean Signifiers"

After considering a number of different directions "Spenser's Worldmaking Allegory" might take from the textual cruxes in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, I noticed that Spenser's allusion to Bacchus and Hercules bringing the East and the West to justice at the beginning of Book 5 was borrowed from Tasso's Fortunate Isles episode in *Gerusalemme liberata*, so I questioned why Spenser would make the allusion in Book 5 rather than in Book 2's Bower of Bliss episode that translates so much of the Fortunate Isles episode rather literally. Thomas Herron and I spoke at great length about how Spenser borrows material from Tasso, and one point of interest that arose out of our conversation was the question of how Spenser possibly expands upon or contracts moments from Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. Do Redcrosse Knight and Una offer a contraction of the narrative of *Gerusalemme liberata* when they enjoy the Liberated Eden, and is Calidore's courtship of Pastorella an expansion of Tasso's Song of the Rose? Paridell's and Britomart's contrasting narratives about the Fall of Troy establish that Spenser experimented with condensing classical sources given the Malbecco episode's

relation to Ovid's *Heroides* and Homer's *Iliad*.

Andrew Levie (National University of Ireland, Galway)
"Spenser's Intertextual Fabliau of III.ix:A Suitable Setting for the Fall of Troy and the Rise of Britain?"

Presenting this paper at SCSC 2023 enabled me to clarify how I thought Spenser was engaging with the legacy of Trojan historiography. Although I envisioned it as a sly critique of the Tudors' right to rule, the feedback from my talk also encouraged me to consider how Spenser would have encountered and experienced earlier historiographic texts. Hearing David Lee Miller's paper, which discussed the same section but through a religious lens, also reminded me of Spenser's kaleidoscopic range of shifting themes within his poetry. Although daunting and overwhelming, I have learned to mute Despair's voice and to instead view the ubiquitous nature of Spenser's work as holistic aids to my doctoral studies. Subsequent conversations with individuals, such as Tom Herron, encouraged me to think about how this section of the text speaks to other historiographic sections of *The Faerie Queene*, especially in relation to Ireland. As a result, I now find myself investigating Spenser's fusion of historiographical accounts with the topographical features found in his poetry. Without delivering this paper or hearing others present theirs, I doubt I would find myself within these subsequent realms of mutable research.

Sarah Van der Laan (Indiana University)
"Construction Sites: Gender, Knighthood, and the "Custom of the Castle" in the *Orlando furioso* and *The Faerie Queene*"

Many of us have alternative titles for our papers; this year's SCSC paper lives in my head as "Your Fave Is Problematic (Part II)." I've long been troubled and puzzled by *The Faerie Queene*'s reactionary responses to some of the most capacious explorations of human experience in its Greek and Italian predecessors, and during the pandemic this unease spilled into a detailed comparison of the first and final appearances of Britomart and her acknowledged model, Ariosto's Bradamante, which I presented at SCSC in 2021. Nowhere else could such a critical reading of Spenser's approach to female knighthood have met

with such an engaged, constructive response from a roomful of Spenserians willing to take on board what I had to say and wanting to help me construct the strongest, fairest case I could make for my findings—and I'm tempted to say that no other scholarly community would have reacted without the least shred of hostility to such a critique. (I'm embarrassed to say that I can't remember the names of every sage questioner, but Bill Oram, Tiffany Werth, and visitor from Italian studies Shannon McHugh deserve special mention.) Emboldened by this constructive commentary and utter lack of defensiveness, this year I continued my comparison of Spenser and Ariosto into a reading of *The Faerie Queene*'s repeated rewritings of the *Orlando furioso*'s "Rocca di Tristano" episode. Again I argued that the comparison reflected little credit on Spenser's gender politics and exploration of gender norms, and again I encountered an open and receptive audience (special thanks to Bill Oram, Ayesha Ramachandran, Chris Barrett, and Tess Grogan) who asked thoughtful and probing questions that helped me expand, sharpen, and nuance my argument—an argument that is now exploding into a book chapter and an article...or possibly two? Spenser at SCSC works its magic again.