

The Spenser Review



British and Irish Spenser Seminar: 2

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The British and Irish Spenser seminar reconvened for its second meeting of the year at King's College, London, on Friday, April 21, 2023. The day's events followed the same pattern as our previous meeting, with two panels made up of papers by PhD students and post-doctoral researchers followed by a plenary lecture. Professor Lucy Munro kindly compiled the following account of the day's conversations.

Our first panel, "Spenserian Physicalities," featured papers by Archie Cornish, Eli Cummings, and Emily Martin. Cornish's paper, "Space and Spenserian Allegory: Some Proposals," characterized the standard interpretation of the relationship between space and allegory as "an invasion of material spaces by ideas," in which allegory appears at a meeting point between space and the material. Focusing on the difficulty that characters within *The Faerie Queene* face in reading the poem's landscapes, and looking at Redcrosse's encounters with Error and Despair, he argued, in contrast, that allegory "is itself a spatial conceit," and that allegorical space is material space. Cummings's paper, "Reading the Famished Body Within and Beyond *The Faerie Queene*," took as its starting point the rescue of Redcrosse in Book 1, Canto 8, a passage anthologized by Robert Allott in *England's Parnassus* under the heading "Of a starved Man." Cummings reflected on the affective

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dimensions of Spenser's depiction of starvation, comparing the effects of allegory and providentialism, and juxtaposing *The Faerie Queene* with not only Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* but also a 1590 pamphlet describing famine in Paris, *The Coppie of a Letter Sent into England by a Gentleman, from the Towne of Saint Denis in France* (1590), which shares with the *View* the distinctive phrase "anatomies of death." She urged us to recognize the unfamiliarity and strangeness in terms such as "pity" or "rue" when they appear in early modern contexts. Martin's paper, "Ignaro and the Key to Allegory," examined the Orgoglio sequence in Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*, pointing out that scholars interested in the role of objects in the poem have generally overlooked Ignaro's keys, which link him iconographically with St. Peter. She looked first at attacks on images of St Peter by Reformation iconoclasts, who often focused on the face and hands, comparing Ignaro—who appears to be faceless—with the mutilated image of the faceless St Peter. She then turned to the keys themselves, arguing that they represent both the value of interpretation and its impossibility.

The panel was followed by a wide-ranging discussion of the relationship between knowledge, space and embodiment, the history of reading, the ethics of pity and mercy, the lock as a symbol for allegory, and the idea of the labyrinth.

The second panel, "Spenserian Temporalities," featured papers by Annie Khabaza and Conor Wilcox-Mahon. Khabaza's paper, "'Fairly Finish'? Speculative Epic and the Logic of Endings in *The Faerie Queene* and Stanihurst's *Aeneid*" reexamined Spenser's imitation of Virgil and, in particular, the pressure that Virgilian inheritance places on endings. She compared *The Faerie Queene* with Stanihurst's translation of the first four books of *The Aeneid*, which presents an unsettled ending in which the Trojans leave Carthage in turmoil. But whereas Stanihurst retains some political optimism and hope for a Catholic Ireland, identifying as "the Dubliner" even after decades away from Ireland, Spenser moves further and further from the idea of a singular ending, inhabiting, like Virgil, an "unsettled middle ground." Wilcox-Mahon's paper, "Protraction in *The Faerie Queene*," opened with *Amoretti* 87, suggesting that the model that it offers of the "sad protract" can be used to read *The Faerie Queene*. Focusing on Book 4, Canto 3, which recounts Cambel's battle against the three sons of Agape, he argued that this

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sequence presents mortal existence itself as a form of dilation. Protraction is manifested on a stylistic as well as a narrative level, through the sequence's use of simile—single figures are compared with a succession of different things, and no comparison is allowed to stand for very long before it is succeeded. Protraction “fills up space” and allows “neither change nor meaningful analysis”; it helps to animate a kind of auto-critique in this book, leaving the reading in the position of the befuddled Cambel.

The conversation following this panel focused on questions relating to Spenser's representations and uses of temporality, especially the relationship between temporality and literary form, and the prominence of Book 1 in the papers presented at this seminar.

The keynote lecture was Lorna Hutson's “Chastity and Coastlines in *The Faerie Queene*,’ or ‘How England Became an Island.’” This work is part of a larger project on England's “insular imagining” and the ways in which this one country imaginatively stands in for the entire island in the work of early modern English writers. Hutson started by examining the legal implications of the access of James VI of Scotland to the English throne, and the widespread denial of the historical fact that England had (repeatedly) tried to conquer Scotland, most recently in the 1540s. She quoted Sir Thomas Craig's *De Unionis Regnorum Britanniae Tractatus* (1605): “there are many people in England so little informed upon their past history as to deny absolutely that any English king ever thought of subduing Scotland by force of arms.” This historical denial is part of a “misrecognition” of England as an island that emerges from the concern of both politicians and writers with its boundaries, rivers and coastline. In the later Elizabeth and Jacobean periods, this “misrecognition” can be seen in the Ditchley portrait and its elision of Scotland, and in literary works such as Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Drayton's *Polyolbion*.

Hutson argued that England becomes an island by dominating the sea, and that writers such as Spenser participate in this process. She looked in detail at the marriage of the Thames and Medway in Book 4 of *The Faerie Queene*, examining its sources, such as John Leland's *Cygnae Cantio* and William Harrison's tracing of England's rivers in Holinshed's *Chronicle*, and arguing its representation of chastity is linked to geopolitics. Where writers such as John Dee made a claim for Elizabeth's domination of coastline and sea, Spenser

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depicts the meeting of Thames and Medway in the estuary, a seaward turn that would fuel England's imperial ambitions.

The discussion that followed the lecture ranged widely over questions of foreignness and the law, Spenser's uses of chorography and the sea, his treatment of Scotland, Ireland and Northern England, the representation of race, Spenser's reference to "a nation strange with visage swart" in his account of Scotland, and his linking of chastity with whiteness.