Spenser in San Juan: Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting, March 2023

By Joe Moshenska (University of Oxford)

The Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting featured a series of panels sponsored by the International Spenser Society and organized by Namratha Rao and Susanne Wofford. These themed panels offered a rich variety of approaches to Spenser's work, in terms of both the methodologies on which the papers relied and the aspects on which they chose to focus. Rather than offering a summary of the papers delivered, this brief account is offered in a spirit of meta-reflection: why these panels at this particular moment? What were their implicit intellectual and disciplinary horizons?

The roundtable on "Spenser and Women Writers," chaired by Mihoko Suzuki, featured remarks from Danielle Clarke (Aemilia Lanyer), Patricia Phillippy (Anne Bradstreet), Tanya Schmidt (Margaret Cavendish), Josh Reid (Hester Pulter), and Kim Coles (Katherine Philips), which drew out numerous trajectories of influence and resonance. The implicit wider question that this panel raised for me was: with whom does Spenser belong? The connections drawn out were fascinating, and led me to reflect on pedagogical as well as scholarly challenges: where to fit Spenser into one's teaching when he threatens to crowd out other kinds of authorial voice? If I were to teach Spenser with Margaret Cavendish rather than, say, Philip Sidney, what connections would this

foreground in students' experiences and which would then need to be explored by other means? Might doing this reveal proto-Cavendishian aspects of Spenser that I had not recognized, as well as Spenserian aspects of Cavendish?

The first of a trio of panels that made up a rich and full day of Spenserian activity was "Spenserian Labour." It featured papers by Archie Cornish, Margo Kolenda-Mason, William Mcleod Rhodes Jr., and Andrew Wadoski. This panel, perhaps unsurprisingly, was the one that provoked the most openly meta-reflective discussion, which to some extent inspired this set of reflections. While each paper focused on specific scenes of Spenserian labor, in both the *Amoretti* and *The Faerie Queene*, it seemed quite clear that to both the speakers and the audience, the perceived timeliness of the topic arose from a collective sense that reflecting on the labor of reading, teaching, and writing about literature is a necessary task in our current moment: Spenser's work might remain a rich resource for these activities because it is both a challenge and an inexhaustible stimulus to the modes in which we read and write. The larger question of this panel might be framed thus: what kinds of labor does Spenser require of us? If reading Spenser is work, what kind of work is it? If it isn't, what might then it be? And do we want to justify the continued reading and teaching of Spenser as a form of labor re-imagined, or as a refusal of the demand that meaning be measured in terms of the proper laboriousness required to grasp it? (I particularly recall Archie Cornish's comment in the discussion that he strongly dislikes the phrase "I work on X," one that we often deploy in giving accounts of ourselves as scholars. What exactly is this "working on"?)

The meta-question posed by the next panel, "Spenserian Communities," felt very much like an extrapolation from these problems of labor. The question of whether spending time with Spenser is work is or an escape from work is inseparable from the forms of collectivity within which we undertake our engagements, and here too his poetry seems to have anticipated our critical predicaments, replete as it is with both ideals and nightmares of community. If the meta-question posed by the roundtable on "Spenser and Woman Writers" was "with whom does Spenser belong," the question hovering above this panel was "with whom do Spenserians belong"? The obvious answer might be: with one another. But these papers—by Cora Fox, Laura Francis, Annie Khabaza, and Vincent Mennella—were also warnings against the false lures of community, temptations of community as the promise of unthinking homogeneity rather than tensile vibrancy. The

collective admonition seemed to be to celebrate Spenserian community while guarding against complacency or self-congratulation.

The final panel, "Spenserian Metamorphoses," posed the meta-question: what might Spenser become? The papers by Jessica Beckman, Jim Ellis, Shannon Kelley, and Karolina Grzybczak explored the forms of transformation that Spenser's poems describe and embody. They varied widely in topic—Spenserian character, human-arboreal hybrids, and parallels with pastoral poems written by Spenser's Polish contemporary Szymon Szymonowic were the foci of discussion—while collectively illuminating the ways in which the metamorphoses in Spenser's poetry are fecund and monstrous in equal measure. This duality seems to anticipate or figure this poetry's own propensity to seem both endlessly fungible, open to serial interpretation, and stubbornly, recalcitrantly, admirably and infuriatingly just what it is.

I write these reflections while reading the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn's remarkable book *How Forests Think*, which is full of startling ethnographic accounts of transformation and metamorphosis in Amazonia: dead relatives, for example, who live on as werejaguars, returning to and preying on the family homestead.[1] Kohn's book manages to capture the rich and entangled forms of Amazonian life, thought and transformation, while also attesting to the ways in which the metamorphic emergence of one kind of life involves the implicit non-emergence of many others: the realization of one possibility is the death of countless no-longer-possibles. This account, rhapsodic and melancholic by turns, resonates for me with this set of panels, and my experiences with Spenser more broadly. "Spenserian Metamorphoses" felt like an apt ending to a rich series of papers which captured both the several directions in which the study of Spenser's work is developing and changing, and the troubling background of disciplinary anxiety and uncertainity against which these developments are framed. They captured criticism as the act of making possible: demonstrations of what is possible now, hopes for what will remain possible or manage to emerge in years to come.

The panels helped to display the extraordinary range of ways that Spenser inspired women writers in the centuries after his poetry was published. "One big take away," Susanne Wofford reflects, "has been to discover how important Spenser really was,

[1] Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

perhaps because of the way *The Faerie Queene* opens up and, indeed, encourages the imagination of new worlds and new possibilities." On this topic, Wofford and Suzuki will be coediting a collection with additional papers from Mary Ellen Lamb (Mary Wroth) and Namratha Rao (Mary Sidney).