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British and Irish Spenser Seminar: 1

By Tamsin Badcoe (University of Bristol), Nicole Fan (University of Oxford), & Emily Martin (University of Oxford)

After a hiatus of some years (a suitably Spenserian interruption extended by the Covid-19 pandemic) the British and Irish Spenser Seminar (BISS) reconvened at University College, Oxford, on Friday, November 11, 2023. Our aim in hosting this gathering was simply to reconstitute the welcoming and intellectually open ongoing conversation that has characterized our own interactions with Spenser studies since we were graduate students and to allow Spenserians to assemble again, in person, for a collegial discussion reflecting on the most exciting new work in our field. While the ISS's online events had allowed a dynamic international community of Spenserians to come together in virtual space, we also felt strongly that it was important to balance these gatherings with newly possible in-person activities. The effects of the pandemic and of academic life being conducted largely online for some years has had a particularly pronounced impact upon those early in their career, depriving early career scholars and graduate students of the chance to share their work with more established scholars and to build the relationships within a community of Spenserians that we have ourselves found so sustaining. With this in mind we invited paper submissions solely from those earlier in their career and heard four wonderful papers from doctoral and freshly post-doctoral students. The day also included a plenary from distinguished Spenserian (and recent recipient of the Colin Clout medal for a lifetime's achievement in, and commitment to, Spenser studies), Professor Susanne Wofford (New York University), entitled "The Hidden Face and Body Revealed:

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Una, Britomart, the Satyrs and the Whiteness of Vision in *The Faerie Queene*". Events concluded with an in-person iteration of our popular Spenser@Random series. We share below a series of reflections from three people present on the day, each at a different stage in their own career, as representative of both the intellectual interest and great collegiality that characterized the day.

Tamsin Badcoe (University of Bristol)

It was a real treat to escape for a day during an ordinary week of autumn teaching to attend the British and Irish Spenser Seminar at the University of Oxford in November. This, as I rediscovered, was the second time I had attended a gathering under this aegis, having traveled to Ireland for the conference "‘Eterne in Mutabilitie’: Edmund Spenser in the Seventeenth Century" organized by Jane Grogan and Andrew Zurcher and held at Kilkenny castle and Ormond castle, Carrick-on-Suir, in May 2009. The event incorporated the annual meeting of the British and Irish Spenser Seminar on the day spent at Ormond castle and, after the full conference had finished, I had the pleasure of visiting Kilcolman castle with Mark Rasmussen and Jennifer Lewin (once again, thank you!): a real adventure that took us in various uncertain directions before we gratefully found our destination. I was in the final stages of writing up my PhD at the time and, while at the conference, my supervisor, Pat Palmer, generously gave me a full printed-out annotated copy of my draft work (which I somehow ended up carrying to the top of Blarney castle while killing time before for a flight home). It was thus with a head full of landscapes and castles that I submitted my thesis a few months later.

Recollecting this now, I am once again reminded of the people and places that have shaped the way that I have come to think about Edmund Spenser, and my first encounter with the British and Irish Spenser Seminar community was formative in ways I am still learning to recognize. As a PhD student I did not come across many other postgraduates or very early career scholars working in similar areas, but the recent meeting in Oxford suggests that the Spenser community is currently thriving at all career stages. I was particularly impressed by the Oxford MSt (master's) students in attendance who were incorporated so generously into the day's proceedings (offering keen attention and insightful questions in return); the opportunity to participate so fully in such a warm

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academic environment will surely foster the cultivation of future Spenserians. One of the real pleasures for me personally at the November event was meeting several people with whom I've been corresponding via email, mostly as a result of acting as the book reviews editor for *The Spenser Review* during a time almost wholly shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The role at *The Spenser Review* has resulted in many new virtual contacts and exchanges with colleagues, but it felt good to put some faces to names. Several conversations took in current book projects, juggling short-term contracts, and the way various institutions are gradually reestablishing a version of equilibrium.

I was struck throughout the afternoon by the exceptionally high quality of the papers, which were serious and scholarly, while also offering moments of playful insight. It was fascinating to hear speakers consider matters of ethics and esthetics in relation to form and imagery as well as the localized matters of Spenser's involvement in Ireland, now a mainstay of Spenserian scholarship. In the second panel, for example, Andrew Levie (University of Galway) spoke on "Spenser's New English: The Golden Mean of Identities in Ireland and England?" and raised questions concerning the ethnicities refracted and cultivated by *The Faerie Queene's* allegories and Trojan inheritances. By considering the role of narrative and mythic history in the production of a "profitable plantation" he drew parallels between Spenser's fictions and the poet's responsibilities as part of Elizabeth I's colonial administration. Tracing the convergences and divergences of Irish and English identities, both Old and New, he reflected on the suggestive pairings of Perissa and Sansloy and Huddibras and Elissa, and Guyon's quest of constant vigilance to tread the middle ground. Following this, Leah Veronese-Clucas (University of Oxford), delivered a paper entitled "In vain I seeke and sew to her for grace': Petition in the *Amoretti*," which considered the interrelated strategic longings of petition, prayer, and epistolary form as a frame for reading the dynamics of martial supplication as it appears across several of Spenser's writings. Elegantly taking in analysis of sonnets 20, 32, and 67 from the *Amoretti*, she argued persuasively for how the massacre of prisoners at Smerwick in 1580 haunts the sequence via images of coercion, entreaty, and submission: a reading that also revealed much of what Spenser's suppresses in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. I very much look forward to seeing what both speakers do next.

Looking back again to the first British and Irish Spenser seminar I attended in Ireland in 2009, it strikes me that Spenserians have perhaps always been adept at

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handling difficulty, including the challenges associated with encountering both complex aesthetic forms and histories of violence; yet, our current early career colleagues seem even more fully open to, and conversant with, what it means to work on an author whose creative imagination is so bound up with the colonial systems in which he was an active participant, even when this is not the main focus of their engagement. Informed by an attention paid to place, time, and the volatile matter of the world, and engaged with postcolonial and critical race theory, our November conversations sought to find better ways of paying attention and better ways of tracing with care the structures with which Spenser was not only complicit but served to create.

Nicole Fan (University of Oxford)

The “day with cloudes was suddeine overcast” and a “hideous storme of raine” was brewing overhead, but a “shadie grove” offered “Faire harbour,” and “so in they entred” (I.i.8).¹ “They” were Redcrosse and Una in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*—but “they” were also us attendees of the 2022 British and Irish Spenser Seminar, who found ourselves ducking into Logic Lane on a similarly cloudy day. Away from Oxford’s bustling High Street and within this convivial convocation, such Spenserian serendipity would only continue to infuse the afternoon. Indeed, it was almost as if the poet himself was directing these coincidences with his characteristic wit, as the seminar commenced with a panel that was rather apropos to our location: “Spenserian Logic.”

Beginning with Kat Addis’s “Platonic ‘Slavery Logic’ and Spenserian Allegory,” we were first invited to consider how a metaphoric system of mind–body relations can ratify a literal apparatus of forced enslavement. As Plato would have it, people must be “governed by the divine and the intelligent mind, preferably what he has within himself, but if not, one imposed from outside” (*Republic* 383). This shift from figurative enforcement to actual oppression is what Addis calls “slavery logic,” which can be seen in operation within Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*. From the ideological “bands of ciuilitie” that determine how a courteous knight should behave (VI.i.26), to the physical “bondage”

¹ A.C. Hamilton et al., ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd edition, (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2001); Plato, *Republic*, *Volume II: Books 6–10*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), IX.590d. Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles.*, trans. by R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

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of “slaues” meant to be sold as profitable commodities (VI.xi.2), the Legend of Courtesy leaves its characters in double binds, empowering them on the one hand while subjugating them on the other. Addis’s insight into these slippages between figurative and literal servitude brought up fascinating questions about the politics of allegory and how we might challenge the “slavery logic” that enfolds the genre itself, given that its hegemonic structures of meaning tend to be imposed on readerly experience.

The inquiry into Spenser’s poetic systems continued with Bethany Dubow’s “Timaeian Cosmology and the Mathematics of *The Faerie Queene*,” which interpreted the poem’s formal structure as a cosmological statement of volatility. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, ideal geometric order is undercut by the simple and yet powerful postulate that “if one is to declare how [the universe] actually came into being...he must include also the form of the Errant Cause” (*Timaeus* 109–11). Dubow pointed out that poetic universes are not exempt: the world of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is similarly disordered by its own Errant Cause, which manifests in the recalcitrance of an unpredictable material world. This rears its head from the outset through the primaeval Error, a fractional character who generates confusion through simultaneously dividing and multiplying into an assortment of “vgly monstrous shapes” (I.i.21). Errancy was shown to be embedded in the linguistic fabric too, as Dubow tracked how Spenser used alliteration and run-on rhymes to exceed the bounds of the stanza form. Far from being trivial moments of divergence, errant lapses proved to constitute the very structure of Spenser’s poetic universe.

At its finest, then, Spenserian logic turns out to be a tricky balance of contraries— one that often leaves readers wandering “too and fro in wayes unknowne” even as it compels them “forward still...Till that some end they finde” (I.i.10–11). Steered by these perceptive scholars, this first panel invited us to dwell in the indeterminacy of Spenser’s poetic world only to propel us towards exciting and incisive questions, ones that felt especially relevant to me at the time. As a graduate student at the beginning of my Master’s journey, I was struck by how the simultaneous rigor *and* creativity of these critical interventions gave rise to fresh insights, even along the well-trodden path of Spenser scholarship. Their thought-provoking approaches aligned with a module that I had been taking on “Slow Reading Spenser,” which was equally innovative in engaging with *The Faerie Queene* through a myriad of philosophical concepts—both historical and anachronistic alike—to make us reconsider our own reading practices. Challenging

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conventional protocols and exploring invigorating possibilities, the widening scope of our critical field is one that Spenser surely would have appreciated. After all, his work had always embraced the “wonder” that “farre exceeded reasons reach” (II.xi.40)—a wonder that keeps us coming back, again and again, like a “wandring knight to seeke” (I.iii.21).

Emily Martin (University of Oxford)

In the days leading up to the British and Irish Spenser Seminar, I was filled with nervous excitement. I knew it would be a great chance for me as a DPhil student to meet early career researchers and established scholars in the field. I was not disappointed. One of the most rewarding aspects of the conference was the kind and supportive approach that many of the more senior scholars, including the keynote speaker Susanne Wofford, adopted towards graduate students. The mixing of graduate students, early career researchers, and scholars was seamless. We all united over the common desire to understand more about Edmund Spenser and his works.

The seminar culminated with Susanne Wofford’s keynote lecture, entitled “The Hidden Face and Body Revealed: Una, Britomart, the Satyrs, and the Whiteness of Vision in *The Faerie Queene*.” Her talk explored the processes of racialization, particularly in critical moments of bodily revelation. The visor raised or veil uncovered are common tropes throughout the differing books of the poem. Her lecture especially focused on what scenes of revelation hide, while proclaiming that they are leaving nothing hidden. Throughout the text, every revelation leads to another revelation, because each one still leaves something concealed which needs to be uncovered.

Wofford explored how the intersection of genre and religion comes to the forefront when we interpret revelation scenes. In classical epic, it is unclear what it is most dangerous to reveal or deny. These are texts in which questions of race, empire, gender and sexuality are both explored and suppressed. In *The Faerie Queene*, allegorical conflicts between Spenser’s knights and various figures identified as “Saracens” have been interpreted as representing the racial other within the character’s inner psychology. However, these interpretations demonstrate that a hierarchy still exists, with the racial other as a representation of inner vices. Wofford discussed how these interpretive debates raise questions about how inclusive Christianity is as a religion: though it claims to be

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accessible to all, this Christian epic retains racialized and gendered hierarchies. Protestantism is especially afraid of unveiling, because revelation can lead to idolatry, as with Una and the satyrs (I.vi. 16, I.vi.19).² When she takes off her veil, Una's face shines like the sun: "Her angels face / As the great eye of heauen shyned bright, / And made a sunshine in the shady place" (I.iii. 4). She reveals other things through her own light, including the vices of others. This is particularly true when Sansloy rips off her veil in a moment of passion (I.vi. 4). As Wofford observed, the satyrs' rescue of Una implies that aspects of classical myth are necessary to save the Christian religion (I.vi. 8). This sequence shows how deeply intertwined Christianity and classical epic are within the poem.

After discussing Una's quest, Wofford went on to show how many of the same ideas and tropes reemerge in Britomart's quest, especially in moments where her armor is removed and her body revealed. Britomart's self-concealment questions whether the revelation of her gender is a moment of transcendence, like Una's revelation as Truth and the True Church at the end of Book 1. Britomart stays covered as much as she possibly can, refusing to take her armor off at dinner in Malecasta's castle (III.i.42). When her face is revealed in her battle with Artegall, she is described as sweaty, and her face is red from exertion: "With that [stroke] her angels face, vnseene afore, / Like to the ruddie morne appeared in sight / Deawed with siler drops, through sweating sore, / But somewhat redder, then beseem'd aright, / Through toylesome heat and labour of her weary fight" (IV.vi.19). Wofford suggested that this may be an implied critique of Britomart, because she is not pure white ("But somewhat redder, then beseem'd aright"). As a point of contrast, Wofford demonstrated how many of the female figures are consistently described as white. Florimell is associated with whiteness in her first appearance (her face is "as white as whales bone," III.i.15); she is repeatedly called "faire Florimell" (III.viii.46), and the false Florimell is even created from snow (III.viii.6). When Serena is stripped by the cannibals, she is repeatedly described as white, explicitly ("snowy breasts," VI.viii.40; "bellie white," VI.viii.42) and implicitly through similes ("like a sheepe astray" VI.viii.36; "yuorie necke" and "alablaster brest" in VI.viii.42). This scene is explored in depth in an article by Melissa Sanchez, which Wofford mentioned in her presentation. This

² A.C. Hamilton et al., ed., *Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene*, 2nd edition, (London: Pearson Education [Longman], 2001); Melissa Sanchez, "'To Giue Faire Colour': Sexuality, Courtesy, and Whiteness in *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 35 (2021): 245–84.

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comparative look at other female figures in the poem allowed Wofford to then show how racialization and sexuality are intertwined. In moments where a figure's gender is revealed, the body is typically eroticized, and we see the sexual fascination and pleasure in revealed body parts emerge. Although idolatrous desire is routinely condemned in the text, Artegall's veneration of Britomart after her identity is revealed is presented as praiseworthy (IV.vi.22). However, scenes of female revelation still cannot fully encompass who these figures are as persons. These moments are limited to a revelation of the body, suggesting that the reader may be complicit in objectifying these women. In the end, Britomart leaves the story unfulfilled and waiting for Artegall's return in Book 5, just as Una also has yet to marry Redcrosse at the closing of Book 1.

Wofford's fascinating paper demonstrated the many parallels between Una and Britomart that emerge throughout the poem. The common themes of revelation and racialization enabled these similarities to come to the forefront. As Una and Britomart are two of my favorite characters, I found this original interpretation of their quests to be especially interesting. It was wonderful to see how Wofford pointed out the intersectional nature of the poem, with scenes on racialization constantly implicated in debates about gender and sexuality. She showed how analyzing scenes of revelation could illuminate many aspects of the poem, not only the religious allegory; as a result, her talk demonstrated how religion, race, gender and sexuality all are inextricable from each other. This critical insight will surely be helpful to scholars writing on Spenser in the future.

The seminar felt like the perfect environment for recent scholarship on Spenser to be collectively engaged with and extended in new and exciting directions; this was true of all the papers, and emphatically so of Susanne Wofford's plenary talk. What was particularly exciting was the way in which Wofford built upon the groundbreaking work contained within the *Spenser Studies* 2021 special issue on race edited by Dennis Britton and Kimberley Coles. The attendees, myself included, were witnessing the continuing development of a new area in Spenser studies. I look forward to attending future meetings of the British and Irish Spenser Seminar with the confidence that future talks will be just as rich.