

APOCALYPSE, THE ESCHATON, AND THE POETICS OF IMPERFECTION

SPENSER'S NARRATIVE FORM AND ALLEGORICAL MODE

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Course:
Time:
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Course Website:

COURSE DESCRIPTION

As his most important contribution to English poetry, Edmund Spenser brought an unprecedented degree of nuance and accomplishment to the allegorical mode, so any study of his poetic style must aim primarily to articulate the complexity of Spenserian allegory. As a mode that historically develops from a way of reading to a way of writing, allegory has many theoretical and practical variations; Erich Aurbach describes some of them in his essay "Figura," but the thing to remember is that allegory always centers upon interpretation, especially the discovery of real or imagined irony. As such, a reader approaches a text that he or she determines to be allegorical as a text in which sense is imperfect. Recently critics have been fascinated with and sometimes baffled by the importance Spenser grants to incomplete poetic representation, for (1) even though he is the most famous allegorical poet in the English language, Spenser in fact challenges the notionally perfect method of allegorical signification, and (2) Spenser is increasingly comfortable ending *The Faerie Queene* with an unfinished story, an incomplete Book VII, indeed a "Canto imperfite." This seminar examines the role of imperfection in Edmund Spenser's poetry, suggesting that this theme stems from a certain "theology of imperfection" he finds in *Revelation*.

COURSE ARGUMENT

I argue that Spenser develops a poetics of imperfection, using the episodic narrative form of romance in conjunction with the breakdown of stable allegorical signification – unending plots and unsteady imagery – and I also suggest that Spenser models this poetics of imperfection on God's authorship of human being, as imagined in the Renaissance reading of *Revelation*.

Thus imperfection is the constitutive feature of Edmund Spenser's allegorical mode, which attaches to this poetic device a certain "theology of imperfection" Spenser finds in Christian humanist readings of the Biblical *Revelation*. A definition of the theology of imperfection unfolds over the course of this study, but we can initially think of it in contrast to a form of adventism that focuses solely on the Christian salvation to come – a theology voiced by many of Spenser's peers, especially in lyric poetry. In general, poetry of the adventist theology operates solely on the narrative-level – claiming to offer, unproblematically, a representation of the divine promise for salvation – while the poetics informed by the theology of imperfection obsesses over meta-narrative anxieties – questioning the very possibility of representing the divine as the poet tries to do just that.

Spenser's students have long recognized his debt to *Revelation*, but this recognition, with very few exceptions, stalls at the demonstration that Spenser models his beasts, whores, and heroes on those in *Revelation*. Spenser uses the book of *Revelation* as more than a reservoir of allegorical imagery, though, for his peculiar pattern of narrative resolution imperfected, in which every end is a new beginning, comes as much from the Biblical *Revelation* as from the Renaissance genre of romance. Using *Revelation* as a gloss, this seminar addresses the imperfections in Spenser's poetry, especially *The Faerie Queene*, both the temporal imperfections of narrative form and the spatial imperfections of the allegorical mode.

I tell the story of Spenser's graduation from the unapologetically adventist eschatology he learns from Jan Baptista Van Der Noot to a more complicated position that tries to reconcile Christ's promise of the perfection to come with the experience of imperfection in the here-and-now. There are glimpses of this graduation in Spenser's early translations, *A Theatre for Worldlings* and *The Visions of Bellay*, and the poetics of imperfection are writ large on Spenser's ecclesiastical poems in *The Shepheardes Calender*. The tension between the confession of perfection and the experience of imperfection peaks in the first book of *The Faerie Queene*. The resolution of this tension – the final shift in terms from contradiction to paradox – is not fully realized in Spenser's poetry until the very dusk of his life and career, however, in the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene* and the *Cantos of Mutabilitie*. Finally, I demonstrate the effects of the poetics of imperfection on a reader by looking at Spenser's appearances in the writings of the other great poet of the English Renaissance, John Milton, who himself recognizes the importance of audience participation in the construction of poetic sense.

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REQUIRED TEXTS

The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser, ed. William A. Oram, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, second edition, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 2006).

COURSE SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION

- Session 1 Apocalypse, the Eschaton, and the Poetics of Imperfection: Spenser's Narrative Form and Allegorical Mode
Session 2 The Union and Separation of Scudamour and Amoret: Spenser's Narrative Form and the Poetics of Imperfection
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): III.xii.43-47
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): III.xii.43-45
Session 3 The Union and Separation of Edmund and Walter: Spenser's Allegorical Mode and the Poetics of Imperfection
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): "A Letter of the Authors"

ALLEGORICAL IDOLATRY AND NARRATIVE ICONOCLASM IN *THE SHEPHEARDES CALENDER* AND *COMPLAINTS*

- Session 4 Monologue and Dialogue in the Ecclesiastical Poems of *The Shepheardes Calender*
Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579): May, July, and September
Session 5 *Rota Colini*: First and Second Nature and the Career of Colin Clout in Spenser's Early Poetry
John Skelton, *Colyn Clout* (1521; p. 1545)
Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579): January, April, June, and October
Session 6 "Continuallie subject unto chaunge": Shattering Allegory in Spenser's *Prosopopoia*
Edmund Spenser, *Complaints* (1591): *Prosopopoia. Or Mother Hubberds Tale*
Session 7 Castles in the Cry: Idolatry and Idealism in Spenser's *Ruins* Poems
Edmund Spenser, *Complaints* (1591): *Ruins of Rome* and *The Ruins of Time*

SPENSER, *REVELATION*, AND THE POETICS OF IMPERFECTION

- Session 8 *Revelation* and the Poetics of Imperfection: Apocalypse, the Eschaton, and Christian Allegory
The Bible and Holy Scriptures ("The Geneva Bible," 1560): *Revelation*
Session 9 Allegorical Interpretations of *Revelation* in Renaissance England
John Bale, *The Image of Bothe Churches* (1545)
Jan Baptista van der Noot, *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1568)
Session 10 *Revelation* and Spenser's Translations: Millennial Poetry and the Problem of the Present
Francesco Petrarca, *Rime Sparse* (1327-68): 323
Joachim du Bellay, *Songe* (1568)
Edmund Spenser, Contributions to *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1568)
Edmund Spenser, *The Visions of Petrarch* (1591)
Edmund Spenser, *The Visions of Bellay* (1591)

THE ADVENT AND THE ADVENTURE:

THE POETICS OF IMPERFECTION IN *REVELATION* AND *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, BOOK I

- Session 11 "In secret shadow, far from all mens sight": Truth, Error, and Faith in *The Faerie Queene*, Book I
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): I.i
Session 12 "As Eagles eie, that can behold the Sunne": The Hermeneutics of Faith in *The Faerie Queene*, Book I
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): I.vi-vii.28 and ix.21-x
Session 13 The Capture and Release of Duessa: Spenser, *Revelation*, and Narrative Dissolution
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): I.vii.29-ix.20
Session 14 "Who then would thinke": The Death of the Dragon, Archimago's Imprisonment, and Narrative Closure in the Poetics of Imperfection
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): I.xi-xii

GUYAN AND ENGLAND:

NATURALIZING IMAGE AND NARRATIVE IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, BOOK II

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- Session 15 “The end of all our traueill”: Temperance, Moral Labor, and Guyon’s Destruction of the Bower of Bliss
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): II.i-ii and xii
- Session 16 The Idolatry of Allegory: Labor, the Disenchantment of Temperance, and the Individuation of Guyon in the Cave of Mammon
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): II.vi-viii.17
- Session 17 Living History and Making Sense at the Castle of Alma: Imperfection and Interpretation in *Briton Moniments*, Merlin’s Prophecy, and the Temple of Isis
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): II.viii.17-ix, III.iii.25-62, V.vii.1-24

ALL FOR NOW:

SPACE AND TIME AT THE END OF *THE FAERIE QUEENE* (1590), BOOK III

- Session 18 Spenser and the Erotics of History: Gender, Virtue, and Providence in Britomart’s Heroism
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): III.i-iii
- Session 19 “Good by paragon / Of euill”: Education and the Poetics of Imperfection in the Tragedy of Malbecco
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): III.ix-x
- Session 20 Belphoebe and Amoretta: Divinity, Chastity, and the Poetics of Perfection at the House of Busiraine
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): II.iii, III.v.12-vi, and III.xi-xii

HALF-TOLD TALES IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, BOOK IV: ROMANCE AND LOVE IN THE ENGLISH EPIC

- Session 21 *Rota Colini*: First and Second Nature and the Career of Colin Clout in Spenser’s Later Poetry
Edmund Spenser, *Colin Clovts Come Home Againe* (1591; p. 1595)
- Session 22 “Call up him that left half told”: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and the Poetics of Imperfection in Canacee’s Marriage
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Squire’s Tale
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): IV.i-v
John Milton, *Il Penseroso* (1645)
- Session 23 Scudamore and the Concord of Love and Hate: The Contrariety and Inconsistency of the Shield of Love,
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): IV.vi-x
- Session 24 “O what endlesse worke have I at hand”: Narrative Interruption, Poetic Exhaustion, and the Deferred Fate of Florimel
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): III.iiii.45-v.12 and III.vii-viii
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): IV.xi-xii

BREAKING THE LAW:

THE FORM AND CONTENT OF EQUITY IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, BOOK V

- Session 25 Justice in an Imperfect World: The Art of Equity in *The Faerie Queene*, Book V
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): V.Pr.-iiii
- Session 26 Law, Gender, and Injustice in Radegone
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): V.v-vii
- Session 27 “His course of Iustice he was forst to stay”: Historical Allegory and the Poetics of Imperfection at the Castle of Mercilla, Belge, and Ireland
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): V.viii-xii

THE POLITE PLOT OF *THE FAERIE QUEENE*, BOOK VI: SPENSER’S NARRATIVE MANNERS

- Session 28 “Course is often stayd, yet never is astray”: Narrative Interruption and the Digressions of the Blatant Beast
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): V.xii.27-43, VI.i.1-10, V.iii.24-26, VI.iv.9-16, VI.v.11-17, VI.v.39-40, VI.vi.1-15, VI.ix.1-6, VI.x.1-3, and VI.xii
- Session 29 “The triall of true courtesie”: Digression, Narrative Interruption, and Caladore’s Constancy
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): VI.Pr.-iii.26 and VI.ix-xi
- Session 30 Inhospitability and the Irony of Narrative Interruption in *Faerie Queene*, Book VI
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): VI.iii.26-viii
- Session 31 Apocalypse, the Eschaton, and the Poetics of Imperfection in the Cantos of Mutability
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): VII.vi-viii

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PROSEMINAR ASSIGNMENTS

<u>Due</u>	<u>Assignment</u>
Daily	Forum posts, around 250 words each, due by midnight the night before class
Sign-Up	10-15 minute presentation to the class, including a close reading, a thesis, and questions for discussion.
Week 6	1000-word (four pages) essay on an episode in <i>The Faerie Queene</i> (1590).
Week 8	1000-word (four pages) essay on an episode in <i>The Faerie Queene</i> (1596).
Final	3,000-word (ten pages) research article on the allegorical mode and/or narrative form of <i>The Faerie Queene</i> .

SEMINAR ASSIGNMENTS

<u>Due</u>	<u>Assignment</u>
Weekly	Forum posts, around 250 words each, due by midnight the night before class.
Sign-Up	10-15 minute presentation to the class, including a close reading, a thesis, and questions for discussion.
Week 5	5-minute research plan to be developed with instructor and discussed with fellow students in class.
Week 6	10-item annotated bibliography (items may be sources, analogues, articles, adaptations, or artworks).
Weeks 7-9	300-word abstract for your research article (to be read in class and discussed).
Final	7,500-word (25 pages) research article to be developed and written in consultation with the instructor.

POLICIES

Reading: There is a considerable amount of reading required for each meeting of this course. Please budget your time. Needless to say, you may not get to all the reading every week, but you should focus on the primary text and get to as much of the secondary readings as possible. This is the minimum you will have to do to participate in the on-line discussions, which are mandatory. I expect students specializing in early-modern literature to read all assignments, and these students should also take a leadership role during on-line and class discussion.

Attendance and Participation: Early in the quarter we shall pause to talk about strategies for effective seminar discussion. I assume you will come to class, always, and always prepared to contribute; make perceptive comments and ask intelligent questions in class discussion; come to office hours, and e-mail me, to discuss ideas; and be a generally decent human being.