

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) *Faerie Queene* (A, 368-434)

Edmund Spenser spent much of his career life carrying out administrative roles for the British Crown, in Ireland. The colonizing role of England in Ireland was a rough and contentious one, and over an extended period the colonized were in endless rebellion against their “colonial masters.” Spenser was on the whole one of the tough colonialists. He was increasingly known in England for his poetic work, and admired in England by all including the Queen. However he probably acquired in Ireland the distinctive blend of fantasist—the *Faerie Queen* creator, the myth maker--and realist, whose knowledge of human psychology is sharp and penetrating. In the end he was, in some sense, conquered by the culture he approved of colonizing.

Question: Is The Faerie Queene an ancient or a modern poem?

Spenser was a contemporary of Shakespeare and Marlowe, creators usually associated with the full energies of the Renaissance mind. However Spenser, unlike some of his great contemporaries, consciously looked back on the “archaic past,” shall we say the past of *Piers Plowman* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? Spenser emulated an old fashioned poetic English, which smacked of late Mediaeval writers, and he peopled his *Faerie Queene* with allegorical figures and abstractions of the Virtues and Vices. On the other hand, though, Spenser confronts the human situation with a direct analytical eye that makes him read as anything but “archaic.” The struggles of the Redcross Knight, on behalf of Una, are testimonies of heroic valor and virtue, but the subsequent faithlessness of the Knight sears him with a sense of sin which we can feel on ourselves today. The Virtues and Vices that play through this poem have the bite of real life on them. *Hence the question about the modernity of Spenser. Does he ‘get to you’ as much as Shakespeare? Is Spenser too our contemporary?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Among other things, Spenser is a Renaissance Neo-Platonist, fascinated with the theories of ideal love developed by Plato, but widely popularized during the Hellenizing movements of the Renaissance. Much of the inspiration for Spenser’s work and thought also came from the Italy of his time, which was a source of artistic inspiration in England. You might cross the channel, and take a look at Erwin Panofsky’s great *Studies in Iconology* (London, 1939), which looks at the Neoplatonism in Italian painting of the Renaissance. Anywhere you turn in that book will give you insight into the thought world of Spenser, heir as he was both to Platonism and Italian culture

2. A long set of narrative sequences, concerning the pursuit of virtue, may seem far from what we can imagine enjoying today. Comparative Literature is involved with phases of taste and sensibility, and not least with the tastes of the comparatist him/herself. In other words, there is a reflexive dimension to the critical work of Comparative Literature. From that viewpoint, can you explain what it is, in our cultural reading habits, that puts us far from Spenser’s sensibility, but that put Spenser’s work at the very center of his own time?