

## **Drawing on Spenser's Epic Poetry (The Faerie Queene) for Creative Writing World Creation: O What Endlesse Worke Haue I in Hand**

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### **Abstract**

Creative writing literature has explored a variety of concepts to facilitate students' writing. One area that has received a considerable amount of attention is the reading-writing relationship. Following the belief that this phenomenon facilitates students' writing (e.g., narrative fiction), creative writing courses offer an array of reading opportunities, but one that is often overlooked is epic poetry. This is unfortunate as epic poetry includes some of our greatest literary works (e.g., the *Odyssey*, *Illiad*, *Beowulf*, *The Green Knight*), many of which have been readdressed in various genres. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (FQ), for instance, offers an abundance of reading-writing opportunities but has been under-addressed in creative writing literature. To illustrate the potential boon of this work, I, via a close reading, illustrate how FQ is a bountiful source for creative writing in the way of fantasy world creation with regard to language, geography, characters, and allegory.

Keywords: creative writing, Spenser; *Faerie Queene*, epic poetry, reading-writing relationship

A variety of concepts have been explored to facilitate students' writing. One area that has found solid ground is the reading-writing relationship (Shanahan & Lomax, 1988). That is, those who read more tend to be better writers. Specifically, reading positively affects students' "ability to write in that a well-read person simply has a much larger and richer set of images of what a text can look like" (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p. 28). This sort of argument is commonly accepted in creative writing courses, as a writing course is "simultaneously a course in reading" (Bizzaro, 1994, p. 234), where student writers explore established authors' writing processes (Bishop, 1990).

Following this, students are exposed to an array of reading-writing opportunities in creative writing courses, but one that is often overlooked is epic poetry. This is unfortunate as epic poetry in the bard tradition of retelling (Notopoulos, 1964; Sammons, 2017) has spurred some of our greatest works (e.g., *The Odyssey*, *The Illiad*, *Beowulf*, *The Green Knight*), many of which have been creatively revisited in various genre. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (FQ), for instance, an epic text often taught in English literature courses, offers abundant reading-writing opportunities but has been under-explored in creative writing literature.

To address the potential boon of FQ, I, via a close reading, illustrate how FQ is a bountiful source for creative writing courses in the way of fantasy world creation, specifically with regard to language, geography, characters, and allegory.

### **A Creative Writer's Close Reading of Spenser's Faerie Queene**

The first encounter students usually have with FQ is in undergraduate English literature classes, where they begin a reader's journey into a fantastic new land, a faerie land. Creative writing teachers, too, can approach the text through a genre study that students are familiar with, fantasy, either at a basic level drawn from creative writing texts (e.g., DeMaria's 2013 *The College Handbook of Creative Writing*) or through more genre-specific ones with writing guides (e.g., Card et al.'s 2013 *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*), as this can draw students backward into an old faerie world that at least looks somewhat familiar (Monta, 2003).

As students begin to explore FQ's fairie world creation, they often encounter a full stop because they come up against what appears to be a formidable wall of language in the Middle English versions of FQ. Understanding that creating and making choices about language is an essential step in fantasy world creation, students can become more accepting of their difficulties in deciphering FQ. Some may also find encouragement knowing that the language of FQ is much like Tolkien and other fantasy writers' work whose fictional languages are intelligible because they are based, however, loosely, on real human languages (Card et al., 2013); thus, the Middle English in FQ can be seen as only a different form of modern English students are accustomed to. Others may even find solace that Spenser took exceptionally great care to make the language anachronistically challenging, even for Elizabethan readers, to bring it in closer proximity to his Chaucerian model: "Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyld" (Spenser, 1987, IV.ii. 32.8).

Locating particular points of reference (e.g., word building) for the model in notions of Chaucerian vocabulary such as *whilome* (before), *areeds* (advises), and *weene* (know), and places where Spenser added "y" prefixes in the past participles of words like "ykindled" and "ydrad" or where he changed spellings in entirely new ways can facilitate understanding. Students might even find humor in the fact that such wordplay annoyed Spenser's contemporaries. If, however, none of these solaces put students at ease, they may find the often given advice towards Middle English texts helpful: Readers who digest some of the vocabulary through its context will discover that they are soon able to move comfortably on and continue down the textual path.

Having begun to find the language of Spenser's world more comprehensible, students continue to venture further into FQ and explore another part of world creation, its geographical landscape. Approaching the pages at the entrance to Spenser's faerie world, students often spy a few signposts placed off to the side in the notes of the Penguin Classics edition, which contain vital information to guide them through the allegoric geography of the world in FQ. Teskey (1996), for example, explains that Spenser, much like many fantasy authors who begin with the story first and world creation after, began with the subject and then cloaked it in allegory. Heale (1987) further explains that while it is true that Spenser may have a grounded vision, he

“deliberately cultivates mystery to convey a sense that he is dealing with supernatural and therefore hidden secrets” (p. x). Highley (1997) further substantiates this, explaining that Spenser deliberately scattered themes into smaller isolated pieces throughout the narrative so that students must piece together items that are quite distant from one another to draw conclusions about characters and events.

Accepting that they are reading a deliberately cultivated mystery, students may begin to explore the new geographical landscape and peer into the distance towards Book II, where they piece together clues and realize that they are standing on very old ground. Here, they can discover the genius loci of the river motif to be a literary return to Genesis’ Garden of Eden, as each of the rivers which converge in the text (Euphrates, Gehons, and Phison) have similar origins in Genesis (2.10-14): “Which Phison and Euphrates floweth by,/And Gehons golden waues doe wash continually” (Spenser, 1987, I, p. vii. 43.1-9).

Having gained an understanding of the language and located a geographical starting point, students explore the next step in world creation, character creation, and may begin to recognize familiar ones. The Red Crosse Knight, for example, can be envisioned as the embodiment of St. George as he is identified in Book I:

But on his brest a blodie Crosee he bore,  
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,  
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,  
And dead as liuing euer him ador’d. (I.i. 2.10-13)

Remembering other canonical readings common in academic studies where St. George is one who wishes to conform to the will of God, whether or not students make the connection from the 5<sup>th</sup>-century legend that God thrice resurrects him from the dead or from Caxton’s *Legenda Aurea* where he kills the dragon and creates the basis for the Order of the Garter (Thurston, 2006) (e.g., “The noble order of hight of Maidenhead”, I.vii.46.2), they may begin to piece together a string of other clues about the characters. First, for instance, focusing on the name of the land “holyness” (Spenser, 1590/1979, p. 16) and recalling that the Old English form of the word *holy* is *whole* (Brookes-Davies, 1996), students may ascertain that Una, another character, the one that the Red Crosse Knight is venturing on the quest for, is the offspring of Adam and Eve, the inhabitants of Eden in Genesis. Students may do this as a result of seeing the allusion to her, her parents, the land they rule, and, bolstered again, by the rivers which converge there:

The forlorne Maiden, whom your eyes haue seene  
Am th’only daughter of a King and Queene,  
Whose parents deare, whilest equall destinies  
Did runne about, and their felicities  
The fauourable heauens did not enuy,  
Did spread their rule through all the territories,  
Which Phison and Euphrates floweth by,  
And Gehons golden waues doe wash continually. (I. vii.43. 2-9)

Reflecting on the clues they have gathered, students may determine the result of the Red Cross Knight's betrothal to Una, coupled with the destruction of Orgolio, to be much as Maclean and Lake (1993) point out: That these events represent the old Adam whose pride "That with his tallness seemed to threat the sky" (I. vii. 8. 4) and "sought usurp God's place" (p. 83), the result of which is the Red Crosse Knight becomes the new Adam for mankind, for he is now dedicated to God.

Finally, students, feeling that they have pieced enough of the work together to begin to make sense of some of the language, geography, and characters, may reflect on their original understanding of the text and realize that they have only seen one of its many allegoric layers, which is the next part of world creation. Gazing at the landscape again through a fog of interpretations to search for additional allegoric layers, the mist on the faerie, like topos, begins to rise.

Here, students meet Heathe in the side notes of the text, who explains the origin of this new clarity: While "readers may think they recognize a biblically inspired faerie land," the landscape is "prevailingly English" because Spenser "is a poet deeply concerned with the world in which he lives" (p. ix). Considering Heath's words and accepting his advice that "the poem demands and copiously rewards re-reading and close attention to its details" (p. ix), students may begin to reexamine the characters in this new view of FQ, and, following Heathe's tutelage, much like epic heroes who descend to the river Styx, look back in time to discover Spenser's thoughts about the work's characters and their customs. Here, they find Spenser's historical hand waving again, and hear whispers: Do not forget what the censors did. FQ had to be written with "darke conceit" (Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh).

Shaken by the whispers "darke conceit," students may continue to wonder about allegoric layers as they move on. Understanding that FQ was written after Mother Hubbard and Sheperds Calendar, works that caused Spenser's earlier fears, students may recognize the veiled dissension of "darke conceite" that begins to surface and piece together other historical clues from the side notes, e.g., Phillip Stubbes had his hand cut off for criticizing the Queen, and Duke d'Alencon had to go into exile.

Referencing "darke conceit", Sheperd (1989) explains Spenser "could produce official imagery, but he could not gloss over contradictions which shaped his own social circumstances" (p. 51), for "even the Spensers of the world get fed up with authoritarian government." Thus, in FQ, Spenser "attempts to sort out apparent inconsistencies in the state he served." Consequently, "the structure is not merely insecure but it is a *planned deception*" (p. 35) because the instructive tone of the virtuous moral satire as well as the related veiled allegory towards the Queen of England, England, and her Church "allows Spenser to be politically bold while appearing to be moral" (p. 36).

Returning to the moral allegory regarding the liberation of Adam and Eve from the serpent, students might recall that they may have interpreted it earlier to be a personal rebirth of the soul of man, but they may see other allegorical layers as well, as poetry

encourages the consideration of multiple layers of meaning (Thakur, 2021). First, they may view it as supportive of the Queen's Protestant criticism of the Catholic Church: "Beware of fraud, beware of ficklenesse" (I.IV.1.3). Students might, however, consider the opposite side of this dual allegory flowing from "The house of mightie Prince it seemd to bee" line and the house described in the surrounding stanzas:

And all the hinder parts, that few could spie,  
Were ruinous and old, but painted cunningly (I.IV.5.8-9).

Vacillating among the veiled allegory in the stanzas within Cantos IV, students may again take heed of Heale's (1987) advice: Spenser possessed a grounded vision yet intentionally fostered an air of mystery to give the impression of engaging with the supernatural and, in turn, hidden enigmas. In essence, he purposefully fragmented themes within his work, requiring students to link these disparate elements, which are distant from each other, in order to formulate conclusions about characters and events (Highley, 1997).

Looking at the stanzas of the work non-sequentially, a new narrative presents itself. Tying parts of Cantos eight and three into these four sections, for instance, students may see, as Sheperd (1989) does, how Spenser used "darke conceit" to covertly criticize the economic effects the Queen's lavishness had on her subjects:

In glistring gold, and peerelesse pretious stone:  
Yet her bright blazing beautie did assay  
To dim the brightnesse of her glorious throne,  
As enuyng her selfe, that too exceeding shone. (I.IV.8. 5-9)

Great troupes of people traueild thitherward  
Both day and night, of each degree and place,  
But few returned, hauing scaped hard,  
With balefull beggerie, or foule disgrace,  
Which euer after in most wretched case, (I.IV.3.1-4)

Having refashioned their first interpretations by exploring the "darke conceit" that lies scattered among the cantos and thus accepting that purposive dualities may indeed exist, students, ascending from the Styx to times closer to their own, emerge from their textual interpretations and, much like another historical reader-writer, Virginia Woolf, who drew on the Faerie Queene for impetuses in her own writing (e.g., the novel *Orlando*, 1928/1993a), may come to understand that "reading is a complex art," and, like Spenser's allegory, "the mind has many layers" (Woolf, 1993b, p. 672). Like Woolf, they may also begin to realize "that the greater the poem the more of these are roused and brought into action."

Here, students can find practical and timely relevance for their reading of FQ as a source for their own writing, as the poem, as a result of our focus on these layers, Woolf explains, "changes with time, so that after four hundred years it still corresponds to something which we,

who are momentarily in the flesh, feel at the moment” (p. 15) and can draw on for our own writing.

### Conclusion

When creative writing students first read Spenser’s FQ, they “enter a quite unfamiliar world in which the significance of the characters, episodes, and logic of their sequence is far from obvious” (Heale, 1987, p. ix). However, I posit that they may soon come to realize that “the poem demands and copiously rewards re-reading and close attention to its details,” for, “with more knowledge and greater familiarity, much that at first seems inexplicable or insignificant finds its place and takes on meaning” (p. ix).

Following this, I contend that creative writing students may understand the significance of Spenser’s words, “O what endlesse worke haue I in hand” (Book IV). Accepting further that no two Spenser authorities fully agree on the allegories within FQ (Day, 2002), creative writing students, having read and reread the text, may begin to accept that their own interpretative powers of FQ have value and can provide a kaleidoscope of inspirational catalysts for concerns in their own time which they, as a result of the reading-writing relationship, can use to create language, geography, characters, and allegory for their own world creation writing ventures in the fantasy genre.

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