

SAA 2025 Seminar – Race and Place in Shakespeare and Spenser

Seminar leaders: Dennis Britton and Hillary Eklund

Respondents: Kat Addis and Debapriya Sarkar

Group 1

“Intertextual Mud: Vergil’s *Georgics* 4 and Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*”

Douglas Cavers, University of Southern California Dornsife

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, when the Egyptian queen, refusing to be led in triumph in Rome, commands “rather on Nilus’ mud/ Lay me stark naked, and let the waterflies/ Blow me into abhorring” (5.2.68-70), she echoes the Roman characters’ fascination with the reported generativity of the Nile’s mud. Unsurprisingly, the play’s “mud” and its concomitant “slime” have generated much interest in ecocritical and new materialist scholarship. My own paper’s intervention will read this mud as thematizing a hitherto untheorized intertextual relationship between *Antony and Cleopatra* and Book 4 of Vergil’s *Georgics*. This book reports a custom of “Pellaeian Canopus” (i.e. in Egypt) in which bees self-generate from bull carcasses left by the Nile (*Georgics* 4.281-314). Beyond the shared geography and the similar imagery of swarming insects, several further allusions connect the characters of Antony and Cleopatra to *Georgics* 4 (in particular, subtle associations with the Proteus and Eurydice myths). Additionally, by attempting to place this Virgilian intertext in the “long textual tradition” that Joyce Green MacDonald reads as forming “the ideological work race did (and does) ...enabled by and proceeded in tandem with the writing of other kinds of difference” (MacDonald1996:62). I hope that attention to this intertextual “mud/slime” may more fully explicate the conditions of early modern place-, race-, and world-making.

“Degraded Matter and ‘Foule iniquitie’: Writing Man’s Others in *The Faerie Queene*”

Eli Cumings, Columbia University

The language of filth clings persistently to the antagonists of *The Faerie Queene* and their environments; they are, the narrator insists, “filthie”, “foule”, and “vile”. Throughout the poem, Spenser seeks to make material and moral filth synonymous, arguing that the presence of dirt marks its bearers as irredeemably degenerate and worthy of rejection, exclusion, and incarceration. In doing so, he departs from the doctrines of Calvin and other post-Reformation thinkers, who sought to disentangle the fact of “matter out of place” from the assumption of moral inadequacy, particularly when it was simply the sign of abject poverty. This short research paper draws substantially on Sylvia Wynter’s Foucauldian genealogy of Man’s emergence from the category of the human and Patricia Akhimié’s exploration of the ‘stigmatizing somatic marks’ which distinguish socially mobile from socially immobile persons. Applying these rich theorisations to *The Faerie Queene*, the paper demonstrates how Spenser mobilizes the language and imagery of filth to naturalise moral and social hierarchies, locating the cause for perceived deficiency in cognitive failure rather than structural disadvantage. In exploring how this superficial mark is invested with metaphysical and ontological meaning, I will both elaborate a pernicious aspect of early modern race-making and indicate its disconcerting persistence in the contemporary world.

“Waist-Deep” in “Scattered Brood”: Black Ground, White Paths in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Faerie Queene*

Justin Shaw, Clark University Atlanta

At the end of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Lucius promises to torture Aaron by burying him “waist-deep” in Roman ground, starving him for food and attention from passers-by. As part of a longer book chapter, I am interested in how being fastened to the ground debilitates and criminalizes Aaron. Moreover, as this groundedness slowly kills Aaron, it racializes him as Black and the un-grounded Romans, who walk by or walk upon him to prove their fidelity to Rome, as white. I turn this examination toward a curiosity about Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, where groundedness is contrasted with virtue. In Book One’s transition from defeating Error to encountering Archimago, Spenser racializes the experience of groundedness vis-a-vis a melancholic stuckness – that is, emotional and social immobility. Melancholy, in the forms of unrelenting grief, unholiness, and despair, separates the beings stuck in nature alongside the path from the knights who move along or through it. This melancholy creates an affect of stuckness that debilitates and dehumanizes the beings in Faery Land, qualifying them merely as dark tests for the knights to overcome, sinful obstacles to eliminate. In both Spenser’s poem and Shakespeare’s play, the melancholic experience of stuckness in the ground frames the parameters of whiteness and blackness.

Group 2

“Edge Effect: Ecotone Whiteness in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*”

Laurel Billings, University of Michigan

This paper is part of a dissertation chapter that heuristically seeks to conceptualize early modern “white events” (George Yancy’s concept) in their social and environmental context. In the section below, I leverage concepts from ecosystems ecology (ecosystem productivity, successional climax, and “edge effect”) to generate a materially enriched understanding of the structures and processes that link whiteness and misogyny, in a particular environment (the coast) and a particular historical discourse (the imperative to “improve” one’s land through monoculture farming).

“Whiteness as Racial Displacement in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: Reading Shakespeare and Fletcher’s Chaucerian Intertexts”

Zainab Cheema, Florida Gulf Coast University

The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613) is often considered to be one of Shakespeare’s problem plays for a myriad of reasons: it is one of his last productions, written in collaboration with Fletcher; it is an adaptation of Chaucer’s *the Knight’s Tale*; and it does not easily fit within the “genres” of Shakespeare’s oeuvre. While commentaries on the play have excavated the tensions of class, gender and sexuality, only a few have discussed the racial imaginaries at work within it. Sujata Iyengar has pointed out the racialization of such memorable lower-class characters such as the Jailer’s Daughter, while Dennis Austin Britton has analyzed how Shakespeare and Fletcher

employ images and metaphors of racial blackness to represent white aristocratic characters such as Arcite and Palamon. In this paper, I build upon Britton's analysis of race to frame whiteness in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* as a strategy of racial displacement employed by Shakespeare and Fletcher vis-à-vis the Chaucerian source text. In other words, I examine Shakespeare and Fletcher's receptions of Chaucer's spatial and geographic representations of the Crusades in the *Knight's Tale*. I also show how Shakespeare and Fletcher displace spatialized imaginaries of race from the Chaucerian source text onto elite aristocratic bodies, problematizing whiteness as a stable racial imaginary. Within context to Shakespeare and Fletcher's intertextual borrowings from Chaucer, I explore *The Two Noble Kinsmen's* interpolation between racialized geographies and forms of embodiment as a form of suspicion towards absolutist (white) power.

“Fair Idols in Spenser and Shakespeare”

Valerie Voigt, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

In the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, Spenser includes two moving idols whose intervention endorses key plot points in the poem: the statue of Venus that authorizes Scudamour's abduction of Amoret in the Temple of Venus (IV.x) and the statue of Isis that grants Britomart's vision in Isis Church (V.vii). Spenser's ekphrastic description of both idols praises their superlative fairness in a way that highlights their association with whiteness and his investment in dynastic race. I read these episodes from *The Faerie Queene* alongside moments from two of Shakespeare's later romances, *Pericles* (1609) and *The Winter's Tale* (1611). Both plays turn on moments of revelation that lead to reconciliation between mothers and daughters: the reunion of Thaisa and Marina in Diana's Temple in *Pericles* and the miraculous statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. In the final scenes of each play, Shakespeare transposes the miraculous statue trope, staging resurrections and reunions that foreground the importance of dynastic lineage.

Group 3

“Elemental Encounters Between Non-Normative Characters in *The Faerie Queene* & *The Tempest*”

Erika Boeckeler, Northeastern University

This paper looks at spaces in which two or more characters marked with physically and/or spiritually significant differences from the main characters interact in *The Faerie Queene* and several Shakespearean plays. How do these two authors curate spaces to allow for multi-racial encounters which may include, but do not necessarily showcase, normative white, Christian, humans?

I've identified four main focal points: 1) material and elemental power in water, air, and on land, 2) geographic expansiveness and mediation, 3) competition and collaboration in the pastoral, and 4) mobility and the multi-racial family. While many scenes from both authors involve more than one of the foci, this paper of necessity narrows into productive pairings.

To offer a suggestive example under the first rubric, “material and elemental power in water, air, and on land,” Book V Canto ii involves interactions in various character combinations between the iron man Talus, Florimell's dwarf Dony, the Saracen Pollente, his cyborg daughter Munera (with golden hands and silver feet), and a Giant who attempts to

publicly weigh the elements and words on a huge scale,. Ideas about justice are explored through elemental power plays and collaborations that draw the material nature of language itself into them. Karan Barad describes reality as the entanglement of material and discursive processes; how do the interactions between these characters and their embodiments bring features of that entanglement to the fore? Denise Ferreira da Silva describes blackness as offering a creative decolonial vantage point that emphasizes global interconnectivity, and deemphasizes being in time, that can also be productively brought to bear on these interactions. Moving into Shakespeare, can we use the intensely charged Spenserian poetic allegory to understand the dynamics of the earthy Caliban and airy Ariel in *The Tempest*?

“him all India obeyd,/ And all that now America men call” (II.x.72.5–6): Authorizing Colonization with Fairies?

Claire Eager, The College of Wooster

This paper considers Spenser and Shakespeare’s uses of a “fairy” paradigm to claim past empires while authorizing—and destabilizing—future colonial acquisition in a racializing world. *Briton monuments* and the *Antiquitee of Faery* record two versions of English history. The latter offers clues to the historic geography of Faery lond; Guyon learns that Elfin’s dominion stretched from India to America. The fairy scenes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* similarly collapse Greek, English, and Indian landscapes into a shifting whole. While the humans are notionally Athenian, the play’s fairy landscape is domestic and English; meanwhile, Titania and Oberon explicitly name the locations of their travels as Greece and India. The composite, syncretic form of the play’s settings serves both dramatic and political purposes. Athens’ Indian-Greek-English fairies serve to extend the map for the play’s most fantastical characters, but also for their English audiences. They knit the strands of exotic, numinous, and mundane—colony as faerie; fairies as ours, and in our gardens— variously together. Politically, as well as aesthetically, the poets begin to claim the world for early modern England.

Yet alongside this poetic imperialism appear unsettling moments of temporal singularity which implicate the distant colonizers in a present moment both troubled and troubling. Athenian fairy war causes English climate change as Titania warns Oberon of the consequences of their ongoing self-serving conflict for crops, disease, and weather at the onset of the Little Ice Age. Spenser’s poem engineers a sudden deictic shift, breaking though the setting of Alma’s castle room to reach into the reader’s own space and time: “But Guyon all this while his booke did read, / Ne yet has ended:” (II.x.70.1–2). The present-tense verb uncannily confuses the scene of Guyon’s reading with the scene of reception. The poem looks forward prophetically to a time when it is complete and in the hands of its audience—and *Guyon is still reading*. Gloriana’s global inheritance extends into a world in which Virginian colonies and Irish plantations are both real and current. As Spenser would learn only too well, however, real colonies do not behave as well as imagined ones.

“Coordinating Racialized Religious Identities in Spenser and Shakespeare”

M Lindsay Kaplan, Georgetown University

While we tend to associate geography with national/ethnic identities, earlier associations of place with religious identity continue to circulate. As David Leshock has noted, in a late medieval

“Christian-centered world, identity is connected with religion” (202); G.K. Hunter demonstrates the extent to which religion continue to shape geographic space into the early modern period. The racialization of religious identity that emerges in medieval Christianity similarly anticipates and influences the early modern racial deployment of geographic and somatic characteristics. Medieval biblical exegesis drew from a matrix of derogating concepts to construct racialized religious identities. While initially formulated to justify the subordination of discrete “infidel” faith groups – heretics, Jews, and Muslims – to Christian truth, these theological discourses also applied figures developed with regard to one group to degrade another (Kaplan 2019). These tropes persisted in early modern discourses and media in two strategies of coordinated racialization: parataxis, in which two different religious groups are brought into comparative inferiority relative to Christianity, and the palimpsestic, which projects and laminates the demeaning identity of one group onto another. In both cases, these coordinated representations serve to ramify racial subordination. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* employs parataxis to demean the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon through the lens of “Jewish” idolatry, effectuating their expulsion from Venice. In Book 1 of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser’s apocalyptic landscape portrays a Muslim/Catholic palimpsest through Duessa and the “Sarazin”, which draws from anti-Muslim Antichrist discourses to reduce the Catholic faith to a form of racialized infidelity.

To the Mighty Giant Who Dared to Dream: The Trouble with Equality in Shakespeare and Spenser

Kirsten Schuhmacher, UC Davis

Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* book 5 canto II introduces readers to the Giant with the Scales whose dream is to make all things equal. He envisions a pre-genesis world where all things are measure in equal parts to each other—essentially desiring chaos. After an argument with Arthegall, the Giant is pushed from a cliff by Tallus and his body is wracked upon the coast like a ship, destroyed. This moment is equal parts haunting and comedic; it is ironic—and quite funny—that a *giant* would wish for equality, yet the violence of his death and the anger of his followers is deeply unsettling. In our modern moment, the Giant emerges as a quite sympathetic character while Arthegall and his iron man of justice, Tallus, emerge as tyrants. The dream of equality is figured as faulty, foolish, and impractical—a dream only of the “lawlesse multitude,” as Spenser describes them. The desire for equality emerges similarly in *King Lear* as Lear’s decision to split his land is the catalyst for the play’s tragedy. The play’s heroes (Lear, Kent, Edgar, and Gloucester) and heroine (Cordelia) are cast from their land, and, for many of these characters, are reconfigured as lower-class wanderers of the heath. In both stories, equality, when put to the test, fails and causes more harm than good. However, as a modern reader and scholar, I find this conclusion unsatisfactory. I wonder about those “lawlesse multitude” and those characters that never make it to the stage in *Lear* but are certainly present—what of Lear’s subjects that fall victim to Goneril and Regan’s whims? This paper thinks through the geopolitics of both texts and interrogates the relationship between the desire for equality—specifically as it relates to land—and social class both within the early modern moment and in our current political climate.

Group 4

“The Call from Beyond: Giving Sycorax Space in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*”

Jareema Hylton, Emory University

This paper focuses on an oft-neglected character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, let alone his oeuvre: Sycorax. Known only as a “witch” from times past and the mother of Caliban, as well as a character who does not physically speak or appear, Sycorax would appear to figure sparingly into the construct of the play. However, in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter’s classic essay “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings” and Édouard Glissant’s theory of opacity, this paper argues that far from an absence in or even a spectre of *The Tempest*, Sycorax is an active participant in it. I intend to establish Sycorax’s power to command space as a non-European female creative, a position which threatens the protected space of protagonist Prospero on the island he now occupies. I propose that the failure of *The Tempest* to make Sycorax visible in the dramatis personae and in body within the play, creates an opportunity to encounter Sycorax where she indeed is. Reading this aperture in her physicality as opacity, the paper proposes that the play’s attempt at Sycorax’s exclusion only affirms her ability to positively stake demonic ground. Though her name comes up only a handful of times in the text, this analysis will challenge what it means for Sycorax to “make an appearance” in the play space and beyond when we account for the “demonic” and opacity as complementary forces of her power. Given that both political and psychological control within the play is bound up in language and magic, Prospero is able to “demonize” Sycorax according to the traditional etymology of the word. However, this paper recognizes that opacity can turn *The Tempest* against its will as a possessive text and toward Sycorax’s self-possession as “demonic.”

“Hunger and the Technologies of the Flesh in Shakespeare and Spenser”

Ashley Sarpong, California State University-Stanislaus

In *Habeas Viscus*, theorist Alexander Weheliye examines how hegemonies of racialized difference rely upon the exclusion of non-white people from the label of “human” and in turn how the notion of “human” can be understood not simply through notions of “bare life” or in relation to the non or post-human but through the persistent practices of oppression and violence through which racialization is predicated. Within this examination, Weheliye scrutinizes the role of hunger as a mode through which human beings—like political prisoners, enslaved peoples, and the Musselman of Nazi occupation camps—transform into fleshly matter that occupy new relational domains to food and flavor in a “potentiality in every and all things, not just in states or spaces of exception” (87). That is to say that the specter of extreme, politically sanctioned hunger reminds us of the capacity in more mundane ways that we encounter food on a spectrum of racializing technologies. Following Weheliye’s lead, in this paper I seek to consider how hunger functions as a tool of political domination that produces hierarchies of humanity and the construction of difference for early modern authors like Shakespeare and Spenser.

In this paper I consider the role of hunger in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* as a means of imprinting the flesh with socioeconomic domination through the patricians’ hoarding of grain. After demonstrating how hunger operates as a fulcrum of political control in Shakespeare’s play, I turn

to Spenser's grotesque reference of the native Irish in *A View* as "anatomies of death" brought to devour clovers and the bodies of the dead as a result of the manufactured famine and larger tools of colonial oppression wielded by Elizabethan settlers—and in turn this figure of hunger becomes a racialized marker in itself. In weaving together these major examples, this essay explores how we can understand hunger and its inscription on the body as a hierarchical categorization and designator of racialized, colonizing, and capitalistic violence and the technologies of difference in early modern texts.

"Welcoming the Stranger: Troy in Spenser and Shakespeare"

Pattie Wareh, Union College

This paper considers Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and the Paridell-Hellenore episode of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, showing how both works adapt the material of the Trojan War as a critique of British codes of civility. As these texts point to the importance and the limits of hospitality, pity, and mercy, they explore from a variety of angles the problem of how to come to terms with the stranger, or even the enemy. Both emphasize the humanizing ability to identify with others at the same time that they reveal the precarity of the communities of courtesy they establish. Adapting *The Aeneid*, *Faerie Queene* 3.9 places Malbecco's reluctant hospitality in the larger legendary context of the conquest of the "fittest soyle" (49) of England by Trojan refugees. Connecting its characters to the "race" (38) and "stocke" (47) of Troy, this canto offers several instances in which hospitality and courtesy are linked, while also demonstrating the limits of gentle behavior as Paridell and Hellenore reprise the roles of Paris and Helen. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, I suggest, offers an even more demystifying exploration of Trojan civility. In this play male combatants are able to form ad hoc communities of welcome, treating one another with respect and humanity, even as they accept the ostensibly more permanent staining effect of women's infidelity. In both Spenser and Shakespeare, the mobility of "fair" women coexists in uneasy tension with the desire to pin down a national identity of civilized, empathetic humanity.