Spenser’s Gardens: Poetry, Fantasy, and Allegory

This project examines the ways Spenser’s garden imagery interrogates the ambiguities, contradictions, and complications of *The Faerie Queene* and its allegory. While Spenser’s gardens and his self-reflexiveness have been subject to much criticism over the years, there has been little emphasis on the ways this self-critical impulse works itself through with particular urgency and complexity in the garden. Spenser’s Gardens considers both what these places tell us about the nature and function of allegorical fictions and why Spenser chooses this topos, in particular, to do this work. I argue that these gardens, the responses they elicit, and the mythographies they construct represent art in process, working actively within the world while being worked on, in turn, by that world and its creatures. The garden thus doubles not only the act of poesis itself, but also Spenser’s own vision of an active, engaged, and instrumental poetic that moves through the world shaping its readers while being subject to those same readers’ interpretive shaping. The garden thus not only represents the act of poesis itself, but also Spenser’s own vision of an active, engaged, and instrumental poetic that moves through the world shaping its readers while being subject to those same readers’ interpretive shaping. By examining their complications of the relation between art, nature, and the mind’s ideals, I argue that Spenser’s gardens re-imagine allegorical poetry’s restorative and apocalyptic dreams as creations of the desiring mind rather than idealizing them as material evocations of metaphysically pre-existent forms. Reading these gardens as the vehicles with which Spenser interrogates his poetry’s contradictory involvement in both truth-seeking and wish-fulfillment, I show that they reveal an ambivalence that is, for Spenser, the central dilemma in allegorical poesis— the poem’s search for objective truth within the deeply subjective processes of aesthetic response and interpretation. I argue for a poet who develops a radically unorthodox understanding of allegorical poetry, one whose focus is not on the ontological status of the poem’s representations but, rather, is concerned with the poem’s epistemological work. In Spenser’s revisionary approach to moral fiction-making, the garden tests not only the possibility of moral interpretation but, more fundamentally, the very premise that fiction-making can perform the ethical work ascribed to it in contemporary literary theory.
Spenser’s epic poem The Faerie Queene (1590–96), an allegorical romance designed to glorify Queen Elizabeth I of England, is celebrated as one of the greatest and most important works of English verse. Spenser’s aim in writing The Faerie Queene was to create a great national literature for England, equal to the classic epic poems of Homer and Virgil. The Faerie Queene is divided into Books I through VI, each focusing on the adventures of a different hero or heroine and a different virtue, including Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. To suit his litera