

The Faerie Queene now: remaking religious poetry for today's world



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Part of the AHRC/ESRC-funded Religion and Society Programme, this project investigates the spiritual possibilities of the present by rescuing a neglected poem, one of the great epics of English literature, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

A poem of militant Protestantism contemporary with the original establishment of the national church, *The Faerie Queene* is remote from mainstream secular society, and from its relatively quiescent and marginalised official church. Paradoxically, in present-day Spenser's poem perhaps has most in common with the insurgent religious intensity of other, 'minority' faiths. And yet, poetry itself has, since Spenser, lost much of its power to speak to and intervene in issues of fundamental social and religious concern.

'*The Faerie Queene Now*' responds by remaking religious poetry for today's world. Kicking off from April 2011, it speaks to where we have come from and where we are going by exploring Spenser's foundational poem in various present-day religious, educational and cultural contexts. But it also aims to recreate and refunction Spenser's epic as a positive contribution to contemporary life. It hopes to bring some of the energy of Spenser's art and moment into official English religion, which it also hopes to open further to energetic and diverse elements not allowed for or even foreseen by the original national church. At the same time, it aims to bring official religion into creative dialogue with other groups in English society that are entirely beyond incorporation into any established church. In short, the project seeks via poetry and the imagination the greatest possible representation of religious and secular interests in relation to our shared inheritance and to those issues of religion and society which, one way or another, matter to us all.

The project splits into two main component projects. One is the *The Faerie Queene* Liturgy Project, which has created a new liturgical text, *Redcrosse: A New Celebration of England and St George*, inspired by the quest for holiness in Book 1 of Spenser's epic. Here the Principal Investigator, **Ewan Fernie** (<http://www.bhamtest1.bham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/shakespeare/fernie-ewan.aspx>), has worked in conjunction with Co-Investigator Jo Shapcott and another major contemporary poet, Michael Symmons Roberts, as well as with the theologian Andrew Shanks, who has made a case for 'shaken poetry' as a source of religious renovation.

This team has prepared two extraordinary, inclusive events for the two very different environments of Manchester Cathedral and St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, working in each case with an impressive group of consultants including scholars, artists and theologians. The event in Windsor formed part of the Windsor Spring Festival, 2011. The event in Manchester, on 8 May, 2011, involved Catalan-style 'gegants', giant puppet figures, representing Spenserian figures. Fernie and Andrew Taylor, the Project Administrator, have won further funding and commissioned new 'Canticles' from composer Tim Garland for trio Acoustic Triangle and the Royal Holloway College Choir. Discussions are underway with the RSC about a further outing for *Redcrosse* in 2012. *Redcrosse* has had considerable press at local and national level, and also featured on Radio 4's Sunday programme. It is hoped that it might become an alternative ritual for St George's Day.

The Liturgy Project is complemented by the Fable and Drama Project, in which Co-Investigator Simon Palfrey worked with the dramaturg Elisabeth Dutton, both of Oxford University, to evolve new stories and a play through intense collaboration with heterogeneous educational communities: two ethnically diverse comprehensive secondary schools, both from socially deprived wards; and the radically different students of Oxford University.

The two projects came together in two events of reflection, dialogue and synthesis: a public arts event run by the Poet in the City charity at major London venue King's Place on the 7 March 2011 and a two-day cross-sector conference at Cumberland Lodge 26-28 January 2011. It will also culminate in a variety of high-profile publications.

'*The Faerie Queene Now*' project was graded by the AHRC/ESRC as 'world class', 'highest priority for funding'.

The total value of the project is circa. £175000. It includes further grants from, among others, the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Exchange; the PRS Foundation for New Music; the Arts Council of England; Awards for All; and the Church Urban Fun, as well as in kind support from Manchester Cathedral; Poet in the City; Windsor Castle; Windsor Festival; Cumberland Lodge; Bishop David Brown School; George Mitchell School; and Shakespeare's Globe.

- **[further details on the project \(http://www.rhul.ac.uk/English/faeriequeene/\)](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/English/faeriequeene/)**
- **'[Poets enlist for quest to pull St George from the jaws of far right \(http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/24/poets-enlist-st-george-liturgy\)](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/24/poets-enlist-st-george-liturgy)'** - Guardian article
- **[audio interview with Ewan Fernie \(mp3\) \(http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Professor_Ewan_Fernie's_podcast.mp3\)](http://www.ideaslab.bham.ac.uk/MP3s/Professor_Ewan_Fernie's_podcast.mp3)**