

English 3212
British Literature of the Sixteenth Century:
Nation, Imagination, and Gender in the English Renaissance
2015
Dr. Joshua Phillips

Description: The sixteenth century represents one of the most important moments in literary and cultural history. The English Renaissance, as the period has come to be known, not only produced writers such as Shakespeare, Spenser, and Donne, but also established a fundamental revaluation of religion, social systems, and literature. In some of the most powerful plays and poems ever written, writers of this era grappled with issues in ways that still remain central to our own self-understanding. In this class, we will trace out how men and women of the sixteenth century represented their world to themselves through a variety of literary forms and genres.

With the “discovery” of a new world, the inhabitants of sixteenth-century England had to confront the destruction and transformation of an old one, the only world they had ever known. Their attempts to interpret and represent such changes—as well as the nature of change itself—burn through their literary projects. As Protestantism replaced Catholicism in England, writers responded to the new religious and interpretive practices that implied. And while the first centralized and coherent English nation (and its attendant identity) was coming into existence, a female monarch occupied the throne, overseeing these monumental changes and implicitly posing questions about the nature of gender.

From Sir Thomas More’s utopian fantasies to Shakespeare’s clear-eyed evaluations of monarchy and legitimacy, to Queen Elizabeth’s rhetoric of gender and power, we will study the ways that people tried to make sense of their world and the amazing aesthetic works to which they gave voice.

Some of the works which we will read (at least part of) include: More’s *Utopia*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Elizabeth Carey’s *Tragedy of Mariam*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and poetry by Wyatt, Donne, Sidney, and Aemelia Lanyer.