

Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Blazon

Developed by classroom teachers Louisa Newlin & Gigi Bradford

Lesson Overview

Students will read and respond to a Shakespearean sonnet which is in the Petrarchan tradition but mocks its conventions. This lesson should begin to give them some ideas about why Shakespeare is revered more than other sonneteers. This module works best after our modules introducing Petrarch, Petrarchan conventions, and Shakespeare's sonnets. See these teaching modules in the "Sonnets" category.

Time: One 45-minute class period

Materials:

- Spenser's Sonnet XV
- Shakespeare Sonnets 130, 138
- A dictionary
- For the teacher, The New Folger edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets

What To Do

1. Pass out copies, or project on a screen, the text of Sonnet XV, part of Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*. Explain that it was fashionable in the late 16th-early 17th centuries to write linked sonnets addressed to a beloved. (*Amoretti* contains 88 sonnets).
2. Have the students do a "read around" of Spenser's sonnet, stop to stop (count colons and semicolons as "stops" in this case).
3. Have a student look up the term "blazon" and choose the meaning most appropriate to describe this sonnet. Paraphrase, collectively, the first four lines. Define archaic words (ween) or forms (needeth, tradeful, spoil).
4. Discuss the poet's attitude towards his beloved and the implications of the mercantile images he uses to describe her beauty.

5. Have students do a "read around" of the text of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, each person reading a line. Ask students to identify and define unfamiliar words and usage (Refer to the notes in the Folger edition of the sonnets).
6. Have students respond to the following questions in their journals: What's going on in this poem? How does the poet feel about his mistress? How can you tell? Share the responses aloud.
7. Discuss the tone of Shakespeare's sonnet. How does it compare to Spenser's? Which specific words in Sonnet 130 lend humor to the whole?
8. Compare the diction in the two sonnets. What connotations do words like "treasure," "riches," and "sapphires" have in Spenser's, and "dun," "wires," and "reeks" have in Shakespeare's?
9. In both sonnets, the last two lines oblige us to re-think what came before. How convincing are these final lines, in each case?

Assessment

- Did students gain new insights into Shakespeare's originality?
 - Did they demonstrate an understanding of how Shakespeare shows off his own familiarity with sonnet conventions and, at the same time, upends them?
 - Did they appreciate the humor and wit in Sonnet 130?
 - Were they able to compare intelligently the styles and attitudes of the two poets?
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