Check for updates

Literature Compass

WILEY

ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Matter of Consent in "Book of Chastity" of *The Faerie Queene* After #MeToo

Youngjin Chung

Department of English Language and Literature, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Korea

Correspondence: Youngjin Chung (youngjinchung@ewha.ac.kr)

Received: 6 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 18 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the pedagogical challenges and opportunities of teaching Edmund Spenser's "Book of Chastity" from *The Faerie Queene* (1590/1596) to South Korean undergraduate women in the post-#MeToo era. Set against the backdrop of student protests against campus sexual misconduct, the study explores how an early modern English poem portraying non-consensual relationships is received in a contemporary, all-female academic setting. Through a case study of an upper-level course on women and literature, the research investigates students' responses to Spenser's allegory, focusing on its treatment of female agency and consent within the prevailing rape culture. The essay highlights the complexities of bridging early modern literature with current discussions on gender and consent, examining students' critical engagement with a male-authored canon addressing chastity and consent. By exploring these pedagogical experiences, the study contributes to the ongoing dialog about teaching historically significant and yet potentially problematic texts in a modern, culturally specific context, while remaining sensitive to evolving perspectives on gender, consent, and literary interpretation in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

1 | Introduction

On March 23, 2018, a significant event in South Korean academic history unfolded at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, one of the world's largest female research institutions and one of the most prestigious domestic universities. In a bold and visually striking protest, students took a stand against sexual misconduct perpetrated by professors, transforming the hallowed halls of academia into a canvas for their outrage. The offices of accused faculty members, once symbols of authority and respect, were plastered with colorful sticky notes bearing slogans such as "#MeToo," "#WithYou," and "Out!" As allegations mounted against the professors, the Student Committee rose to the occasion as well. They took their cause beyond the campus, staging a press conference at the university's main gate —a symbolic threshold between the insular academic world and the wider public sphere. Their demands were unequivocal: swift and decisive action against the insidious threats of sexual assault and harassment that had long cast a shadow over students' lives (The Post-it Rally 2018).

This protest stands as a testament to the power of collective action and marks a national turning point in the narrative of social activism and esthetic politics within the global #MeToo movement. By speaking out against campus sexual misconduct, these students broke through the long-standing silence that had protected wrongdoers in positions of institutional power. Given the cultural and sociopolitical significance of Ewha Womans University, founded in 1886 and Korea's first female institution, the impact of the 2018 protest was unignorably strong.[1] The students' actions demonstrated how gender, power, and education are connected, and proved that ordinary people working together can challenge deep-rooted institutional practices. Moreover, the protest exemplifies the effective combination of social activism with creative expression. By turning places of authority into symbols of resistance, the students made their message stronger than words alone could.

Six years after the initial wave of academic #MeToo movements, another remarkable protest against sexual abuse, known as the "Lacquer Protest" at Seoul Women's University, reignited

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Literature Compass* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

discussions surrounding campus sexual misconduct. While sharing fundamental concerns with the 2018 Ewha protest, this movement distinguishes itself through its unique form of expression. Since early 2024, participating students have applied red lacquer to various campus structures, particularly administrative buildings. The blood-like red lacquer's permanence and visceral impact symbolically underscore the enduring nature of students' grievances and their profound indignation. Notably, the protesters have departed from using the hashtags "#MeToo" and "#With You," the characteristic slogans of the global and domestic #MeToo movements of the 2010s. Instead, the "Lacquer Protest" employs more direct messages: "Criminal OUT!" and "Stop Silence" (Students' Protest with Red Lacquer 2024).

The change from the earlier #MeToo protest at Ewha Womans University to the current "Lacquer Protest" at Seoul Women's University suggests an evolution in South Korean #MeToo activism from victim-centered narratives to more assertive and confrontational approaches. What lies behind such a change? Frustration seems to be a major reason. A female politician and feminist activist has recently lamented on Twitter that despite 6 years of protest against sexual misconduct in educational and professional settings, women's persistent resistance has failed to reduce female vulnerability to sexual abuse (Womensparty_yjh 2024). Although the #MeToo movement in South Korea has successfully raised public awareness about the pervasive nature of sexual crimes affecting women and fostered solidarity through shared experiences and empathy, its impact on effecting cultural and political change has fallen short of initial expectations. The 2023 South Korean independent documentary film *#AfterMeToo* features a poignant segment on "School #MeToo" that concludes with a stark message displayed in white text against a black screen—a visual metaphor evoking a funeral notice. The message reveals that the accused finally faced trial only after a 3-year delay from when victims first filed their lawsuits.[2] While some might consider the fact of a trial a victory, the protracted and emotionally draining legal process, coupled with its uncertain outcome, hardly constitutes a triumph. The situation is further exacerbated by cases where accused perpetrators of campus sexual misconduct have returned to their academic positions following temporary resignations, sparking renewed outrage among students (Ewha Students Responding 2022).

Furthermore, reports both online and offline indicate that victims' suffering has intensified in the years following the culmination of South Korea's #MeToo protests in 2018. Female Students' Councils at coeducational universities have suffered a surge of misogynistic attacks from within and without (Though the Female Student Council is Abolished 2019). Even an NGO faced public censure and calls for boycott merely for its support in the past of pro-feminist book clubs, despite the organization's declaration of political neutrality (Even Children's Organizations Under Attack 2024). Virtually any initiative associated with the #MeToo movement has become a target for social backlash. Most alarmingly, sexual harassment has become increasingly entrenched through systemic, economic, and legal channels. One may encounter a law firm advertisement on the subway, for example, that reads "we can help with *acquittal, non-indictment, and probation* people who face *unjust* punishments on child molestations, rapes, and other sexual misconduct" (emphasis added). B. Kim (2023, 26) offers a thoughtful analysis of law firms that specialize in defending perpetrators of sexual offenses with comprehensive "packages" of strategies aimed at sentence reduction, often recasting perpetrators as victims of defamation and false accusations.

Considering these rapidly changing sociopolitical and economic contexts, it is hardly surprising that the South Korean #MeToo movement has become diversified by continuously seeking new strategies of action and rhetoric. "School #MeToo" protest, for example, has asked how literary studies might inspire teachers and students to reflect and build on the evolving post-#MeToo consciousness. What responsibilities might educators take in catching up on the fast-changing dynamic of gendered social activism and incorporating it within traditional curricula? Within the environment of literary studies, these questions are particularly crucial for early modernists given that they deal with texts written centuries ago by people shaped by cultural, political, ethical, and literary values often radically different from those with which students are familiar or even comfortable.[3] Given the period's pervasive alterity, what texts should we teach? On what grounds and to what ends?

One approach is to incorporate into syllabi texts by early modern women, setting their voices in illuminating counterpoint against the voices of their male contemporaries. Students in recent years have shown themselves particularly appreciative of the various forms of early modern women's life-writing, such as letters, diaries, or memoirs. Less mediated by the literary conventions that students can find a challenge to navigate, early modern life-writing often addresses issues that strike students as speaking directly to their concerns: the danger of gossip and false narratives, the threat of being targeted by sexual misconduct or abuse of power, the frustrations of limited agency. But they also tell, to varying degrees, stories of survival, of uncompromising self-belief, of creative ways to hold on to virtue and agency in the face of gender bias and patriarchal authority. These kinds of texts are often an easy "sell" in the classroom, especially in an all-female institution.

But what might we do with the imaginative literature—especially canonical literature—of early modern England after #MeToo? After all, courses in early modern literature cannot dispense entirely with the literary to focus on the non-literary, and even early modern women's literary writing is written in complex dialog with the writing of male contemporaries: the canon cannot be dispensed with either. What pedagogical approaches then might help students navigate the tension between appreciating early modern literary texts, including the male-authored canon, and reading them against present-day gendered social activism? In the remainder of this essay, I discuss one of the most rewarding sessions of an undergraduate course on women and English literature I first taught in Spring 2023 at Ewha Womans University, one in which students voiced their complex responses to the matter of consent in the "Book of Chastity," the third book of *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) by Edmund Spenser. I say that the session was "rewarding" not because the session went smoothly, but because it complicated all the questions raised above.

To provide context, I begin with a brief description of the course, "Women and Literature," designed for upper-level undergraduate English majors. My 2023 class comprised 40

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

students, all female, and was structured primarily as a lecture course rather than a seminar. This format presented unique challenges, prompting me to carefully consider how to address sensitive content and foster an environment of trust. My primary goal was to create a safe space where students could express their thoughts and reactions freely, without the pressure of finding a "correct" answer. I was mindful that some students might feel hesitant to speak up in front of a large audience, a feeling I could relate to from my own student days. Additionally, I recognized the potential discomfort students might experience when sharing personal stories or interpretations in a public setting. Above all, I kept myself reminded of the wide spectrum of students' gender sensitivity and the diverse background thereof. These considerations shaped my approach to facilitating discussions and encouraging participation through either speaking or writing to respect each student's comfort level.

For the reading assignments, I curated a chronological selection of shorter fiction and non-fiction works, encompassing both verse and prose, by women writers from the 17th century onward: Anne Halkett, Agnes Beaumont, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter, and Caryl Churchill. While not all of these writers are explicitly feminist, they all, to varying degrees, grapple with issues of gendered power relations and resistance—themes that continue to resonate with 21st-century female students. To facilitate deeper exploration, I organized the readings into thematic groups. This course design serves a dual purpose: it strikes a balance between canonical and non-canonical works, offering students exposure to a diverse range of literary voices and perspectives crossing over genres and periods; additionally, it balances victim narratives with thought-provoking survivor stories. These selections illustrate the complex landscape of rape culture over time, explore female agency (or its absence) in matters of consent, and highlight the profound and yet unsettling power of sisterhood.

As a final strategic element and pedagogical experiment, I placed the "Book of Chastity" from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, one of the most canonical exemplars of the high-literary male-authored canon, at the very beginning of the course. I was keenly aware that including this text might invite controversy due both to its canonicity and to its seeming irrelevance to contemporary feminist discourse and to the experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Yet, I chose Spenser's text precisely because of its contentious nature, as it raises critical questions about the role of canonical works in modern literary studies. The debate surrounding canonicity, which was intensified by feminist criticism in the 1980s and the 1990s, remains unresolved. Should we dismiss male-authored canons to reimagine literary traditions with a sense of equity? Or should we construct female literary canons exclusively? By presenting students with Spenser's text, I aimed to engage them in this ongoing discourse and challenge them to critically examine these questions.

Moreover, I wanted to provide my students with hermeneutic challenges through which they could grapple with early modern female heroism, a concept constructed upon the oppressive political agendas of patriarchy and nationalism, and veiled in allegory, a genre that often compels the reader to adhere to authorial prescription.[4] By encountering and dismantling the interpretative constraints of allegory and its accompanying esthetic politics, I believed, students might develop critical skills to tackle contemporary issues of consent, power dynamics, and female agency. In my assessment, engaging with these literary challenges could equip Korean students of English literature with the critical tools to both inform and enrich global post-#MeToo discourse, while simultaneously contributing to the ongoing evolution of gendered social, political, and literary dialogs. Spenser's "Book of Chastity" serves these purposes well, since the poem is a highly coded esthetic and political artifact with complex subplots, allusions, and imagery. Spenserian allegory or "dark conceit," furthermore, is neither straightforward nor didactic, but fluid, ambivalent, and multiple.

During our inaugural discussion of the "Book of Chastity," students raised a thought-provoking question: to what extent was chastity—particularly female chastity—considered a virtue? This seemingly simple inquiry opened up a rich dialog about the evolving perceptions of sexual morality, revealing the stark contrast between Renaissance England and contemporary Korean society. For these 21st century female students, the concept of chastity as a virtue seemed archaic—a notion historically imposed on women by patriarchal social and political structures. Their perspective, shaped by modern ideals of gender equality and personal freedom, viewed chastity not as an inherent moral virtue, but as a personal choice intrinsically linked to individual agency and autonomy. Where Renaissance literature often portrayed female chastity as a societal expectation and a measure of a woman's worth, my students emphasized the importance of personal autonomy in sexual decisions.

This generational and cultural gap in understanding chastity opened avenues for deeper analysis of how societal norms shape individual choices and identities. Moreover, the students' perspective on Spenser's central framing idea invited us to consider how we can engage with historical texts in ways that acknowledge their cultural context while also subjecting them to contemporary ethical scrutiny. More significantly, this discussion led students to recognize that the "Book of Chastity" itself transcended a simple narrative of personal integrity. They discovered it to be an intricately coded political allegory, with the titular knight Britomart symbolically positioned as an epic progenitor of the Tudor dynasty. This realization prompted students to reconsider the poem's complex structure, particularly noting how Britomart often appeared as a cautious observer, contrasting with characters embodying unbridled desire. Students came to understand that the central question at stake was the representation of female chastity itself. They grappled with a paradox: chastity, by its nature, cannot actively express itself. Ironically, it becomes most visible when threatened, violated, or lost. This insight deepened their appreciation of the poem's nuanced treatment of virtue and its political implications.

In subsequent classes, students focused on identifying pivotal moments where female characters played crucial roles in complicating the poem's intricate allegorical design. This shift in focus—from Britomart, the seemingly invincible female hero, to more vulnerable minor female characters such as Florimell and Chrysogone—proved particularly illuminating. It enabled students to discern Spenser's multifaceted treatment of consent, or

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

more precisely, the pervasive threat of its absence. Florimell in Canto 1 enters the text desperately fleeing from a forester, a potential rapist, with her eyes looking back out of fear. Arthur and Guyon immediately chase the apparently helpless damsel to save her from the violent forester. According to the logic of allegory, many students argued, this moment illustrates the two respectable knights' valor and sense of justice. However, other students highlighted Spenser's deliberate complication of this reading. They pointed out that from Florimell's perspective, the ostensibly righteous rescue attempt by Arthur and Guyon might be indistinguishable from the forester's threatening pursuit. This realization invites a critical examination of the fine line between chivalric rescue and unwanted pursuit, challenging readers to question the nature of consent and the subjective experience of the pursued:

> Which outrage when those gentle knights did see,
>
> *Full of great enuy and fell gealosy*,
>
> They stayd not to auise, who first should bee,
>
> But all spurd after fast, as they mote fly,
>
> To reskew her from shamefull villany.
>
> The Prince and *Guyon* equally byliue
>
> *Her selfe pursewd, in hope to win thereby*
>
> *Most goodly meede*, the fairest Dame aliue:
>
> But after the foule foster *Timias* did striue.
>
> (1.18.1–9, emphasis added)[5]

Students demonstrated a keen sensitivity to Spenser's often perplexing word choices in this stanza, critically examining the knights' emotional drives. The "outrage" and "shamefull villany" suggest that the knights interpret the scene as a potential sexual assault, whereas terms such as "enuy" and "gealosy" raise questions about the knights' motivations. Additionally, line 3 carries an unsettling nuance that Arthur and Guyon act on impulse, which makes the reader pause to think whether the poem underscores their admirable urgency or problematic rashness. The trickiest part comes in lines 6 and 7. Their pursuit of Florimell "in hope to win" and their imagination of rescue as a "most goodly meede" objectify Florimell, reducing her to a prize to be won—"the fairest Dame aliue." Taken together, as students concluded, this stanza discernably alludes to the prevailing rape culture in which a vulnerable young woman is helplessly exposed to sexual violence by men, whether their intentions be good or malicious. The subsequent narrative of Florimell's ordeals extends beyond this stanza, depicting attempts at sexual assault by both an old fisherman and the sea-god Proteus. The successive threats to Florimell illustrate that female consent and autonomy are repeatedly disregarded in this world, underscoring the pervasive threat of violence they face—a threat that Spenserian allegory works to foreground.

Another ambivalent episode that warrants careful attention, as students noticed, is the pregnancy of Chrysogone, the biological mother of Amoret and Belphoebe, in Canto 6:

> It were a *goodly* storie, to declare,
>
> By what straunge accident fair *Chrysogone*
>
> Conceiu'd these infants, and how them she bore,
>
> In this wilde forrest wandring all alone,
>
> After she had nine moneths fulfild and gone:
>
> For not as other wemens commune brood,
>
> They were enwombed in the sacred throne
>
> her *chaste* bodie, nor with commune food,
>
> As other wemens babes, they sucked vitall blood.
>
> (6.5.1–9, emphasis added)

At this point, Spenser frames Chrysogone's conception as immaculate, evoking Mary's conception of Jesus. His word play of "goodly" underscores such a parallel, for "goodly" carries both moral ("good") and spiritual ("godly") valences. Spenser, however, gradually complicates this seemingly innocent and religiously elevated event as he expands it with pseudo-Greek mythology:

> It was vpon a Sommers shinie day,
>
> When *Titan* faire his beames did display,
>
> In a fresh fountaine, far from all mens vew,
>
> She bath'd her brest, the boyling heat t'ally.
>
> (6.6.4–7)

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Titan, the Sun God, impregnates the unconscious Chrysogone, who falls asleep naked. "The sunbeames bright vpon her body playd,/Being through former bathing mollifide,/And *pierst into her wombe* [...]" (6.7.5–8, emphasis added). Some students rightly pointed out that Chrysogone's pregnancy alludes to Danaë's impregnation by Jove in the form of a golden shower. Despite all rhetorical embellishments such as "so sweet sence and secret power vnspide" (6.7.9), however, the image of penetration by Titan is horrifying especially given that Chrysogone is asleep and unconscious. Many students noted the unsettling similarity between this beautified, miraculous impregnation and modern-day dating violence or drugged rape. This attention to Chrysogone's loss of chastity without her consent—and even without her consciousness—as well as her response to it ("shame and foule disgrace" [6.10.1], "dishonor" [6.10.5], "sorrow sore oppresst" [6.10.9], etc.) sparked a heated discussion. Some argued that Spenser took rape culture for granted and even mystified it in the name of divine conception, in which female passivity and surrender would serve as a god-chosen matrix; others contended with a caution that Spenser's sympathetic depiction of Chrysogone's "guiltlesse conscience" (6.10.2) and suffering should not be overlooked, as it may represent a social critique of non-consensual relationships. Both interpretations hold significant value, particularly in the context of a post-#MeToo course on "Women and Literature." Our primary goal in this field is to uncover the power structures that underpin

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

gender inequality and to engage with these issues in a nuanced manner that avoids anachronism. By examining both Spenser's portrayal of Chrysogone and the implications of her experience, we can better understand how historical texts reflect and reinforce societal attitudes towards women.

Students' examination of "Book of Chastity" culminated in their analysis of Amoret's ordeal at the hands of the villainous Busirane. Central to their exploration were, not surprisingly, themes of rape culture, challenges to female agency, and issues of consent—particularly its absence due to male sexual misconduct. Giving a take-home writing assignment, I further encouraged students to prepare themselves for the last few classes so that they could link the anecdotes of female sufferings we had discussed in class. The aim of mapping was to understand the suffering individuals collectively: despite the variations of female plights caused and intensified by different individual predatory male desires, greed, and assault, an understanding of analogies and similarities among these experiences emerged. This comparative approach allowed students to recognize patterns of oppression and to contextualize Amoret's story within a broader framework of systemic gender-based violence. By drawing these connections, students could better appreciate how Spenser's work, though centuries old, resonates with contemporary discussions on gender dynamics, power imbalances, and the ongoing struggle for female autonomy.

Furthermore, the exercise could, I hoped, indirectly convey the message that no matter how individuated, the exposure of female vulnerability and shame should be understood as part of a larger societal pattern. Such realization could empower students to view these experiences not as isolated incidents, but as manifestations of deeply ingrained cultural norms that require collective scrutiny and action, echoing the key lesson from the #MeToo movement. This pedagogical approach could further benefit students to recognize that Florimel, despite not being directly related, shares a closer affinity with Amoret in terms of affliction than does Belphoebe, Amoret's biological twin. Similarly, students could discern that Britomart's experiences more closely mirror Amoret's trials than those of Belphoebe, particularly in their shared struggles with heterosexual love and their eventual roles as emblems of married chastity—a destiny that awaits both Britomart and Amoret. In other words, this analytical assignment could help students better understand that the bonds forged through shared experiences of adversity would often prove stronger than those of mere biological kinship. Such a recognition could prompt students to contemplate how Spenser's portrayal of female relationships transcends simple or binary categorizations, offering a nuanced exploration of women's alliances in the face of societal constraints. Moreover, by drawing parallels between Spenser's fictional world and contemporary society, students could gain insights into the complex nature of female bonds, the impact of shared trauma, and the importance of mutual support.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the poem's two distinct endings, published in 1590 and 1596 respectively, elicited different responses from students, prompting thoughtful discussions about narrative closure and its sociopolitical as well as thematic implications. A significant portion of students favored the 1590 conclusion, in which Amoret and her beloved Scudamore reunite in an embrace, evoking the image of a hermaphrodite, with male and female merged in perfect union and balance. Those who preferred this ending often cited its symbolic representation of unity and the resolution of the heterosexual quest narrative. They appreciated how this conclusion seemed to fulfill the traditional expectations of romantic closure or "happy ending." A few students noted that this closure was already implicit in the names of the lovers: Scud*amore* and *Amore*t. The shared "amore" (i.e., love) between the lovers and the prefix "scudo" (i.e., shield) applied to Scudamore construct a strong image of protected, consensual love, a state that Britomart desires and envies.

Conversely, another substantial group found the 1590 ending disappointing for precisely the same reasons. They argued that despite the seemingly perfect etymological match, neither Scudamore nor Amoret had demonstrated qualities deserving of such a reward. These students contended that Scudamore, far from exhibiting valor, had primarily displayed distress throughout his quest. Moreover, they pointed out his failure to pass through the fiery gate due to insufficient chastity, suggesting that his love—and perhaps heterosexual love in general—might be tainted by lust. These students further argued that the 1590 ending reduced Amoret to a mere object of love—whether pure or perverted—passed from one man to another. They contended that all the complex nuances associated with Amoret's emotional and physical torments were summarily dismissed for the sake of a conventional romantic resolution. This interpretation suggested that a woman's struggle for chastity was deemed meaningful only as a prelude to wifehood, rather than as a journey of personal growth and empowerment. More importantly, the students argued that both Britomart and Amoret boldly took steps together towards a more empowered and self-determined future—a future that, while desired, remained fraught with challenges and uncertainties. Britomart, with her warrior spirit and quest for love, represents active agency and the pursuit of one's destiny. Amoret, having endured and survived trauma, embodies resilience and the capacity for healing. Together, their intertwined journeys illustrate the multifaceted nature of female experience and the strength found in mutual support. The appreciation of the alliance between Britomart and Amoret was widely acknowledged as meaningful, although some students astutely pointed out that the ultimate goal of their journey and mutual support was predetermined by heterosexual expectations.

As the course instructor, I found it intriguing to observe the students' preferences, while respecting the viewpoints of both debating groups. It was particularly noteworthy that a significant number of students still favored a closed narrative ending over an open one—even though Spenser himself revised that ending in his continuation of the epic, unmaking the perfect pair and sending all his lovers into further and increasingly unresolved adventures. The preference for closure might suggest that, despite the increasing independence and autonomy of young South Korean women, there remains a certain apprehension towards the uncertainty that an open future presents. This inclination towards narrative closure is unlikely to be a backlash against the #MeToo movement. Rather, it may reflect broader socioeconomic concerns that influence these students' perspectives. The preference for a definitive ending could

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

indicate a desire for stability and certainty in South Korea's rapidly evolving social and economic landscape.[6] This observation reminded me that any forward-looking approach to post-#MeToo literary studies should be mindful of the complex intersectionality between global movements and local contexts.

The preference for traditional, heteronormative narrative closure seems contradicted by the global #MeToo movement and South Korea's "4B" or "Four Nos" campaign—which advocates no dating, no sex, no marriage, and no childbirth.[7] The apparent contradiction warrants further study. The narrative preference for or inclination to the conventional romantic happy ending raises questions about the interaction between new social movements and established cultural norms. While young South Korean women are reported to have been increasingly familiar with—and even actively engaged with—feminist ideas and activism, they seem to still navigate a world where traditional expectations hold significant influence, especially regarding relationships and life choices. The gap between progressive ideals and conventional narrative preferences may illustrate the complexity of social change here and now. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multiple, often conflicting forces at work as societies adapt to new norms and values.

As demonstrated throughout this essay, teaching women's literature in the post-#MeToo era presents complex pedagogical challenges. However, this evolving landscape offers a thought-provoking, dynamic, and often unexpectedly enriching educational experience for both instructors and students. My experience teaching Spenser's "Book of Chastity" proved both challenging and rewarding, not despite but because of its potential irrelevance in a course fostering post-#MeToo consciousness. The apparent incongruity between the deeply canonical male-authored text and contemporary sensibilities served as a catalyst for deeper engagement and critical thinking.

The cultural and generational gaps between late 16th-century England and 21st-century readers are apparently daunting, but these differences provided fertile ground for rich discussions about issues relevant to women in post-#MeToo culture. These include the concept of consent, female agency (and its absence), and the representation of heterosexual relationships, which often appear normative (and even romantic) despite potentially threatening undertones. By encouraging students to approach the text with both historical context and contemporary critique in mind, we uncovered nuanced perspectives on enduring issues of sexual misconduct and rape culture. A particularly rewarding outcome was students' critical attention to mistreated women whose existential significance has long been overshadowed by the glamor of teleological female heroism serving Tudor dynastic political interests.

This experience also highlighted the enduring power of traditions in both social and literary senses. Even forward-thinking students equipped with post-#MeToo consciousness sometimes leaned towards interpreting the traditional heterosexual union of Amoret and Scudamore as an ideal consequence of mutual consent. Such seemingly conservative interpretation, however, stems from complex considerations of the social, economic, and political stances held by 21st century women (in this case, South Korean students). Thus, innovations and inspirations in literary interpretation should be understood as a compound of continuities and discontinuities of various, often conflicting, values.

This observation extends to the values of traditional literary methodology as well. While accommodating advanced gendered social activism in the development of post-#MeToo pedagogy, literary studies should not neglect the power of close reading. At the foundation of students' fresh perspectives and new hermeneutics lies careful attention to how language works and generates nuance. In this regard, a difficult allegory such as the "Book of Chastity" contributes to students' understanding of surface meaning and its semiotic subversions. Through this training, students engage with an allegorical text, eventually recognizing the ideological underpinnings of society and cultivating the potential for resistance against the ideological forces at play.[8] This dual approach—combining contemporary feminist critique with traditional close reading—allows for a more comprehensive analysis of texts like Spenser's "Book of Chastity." It enables students to navigate the complexities of historical contexts while applying modern sensibilities, fostering a nuanced understanding of how literary works both reflect and challenge societal norms across time.

Moreover, this method encourages students to develop critical thinking skills that transcend the boundaries of literary analysis. By examining how allegory and ideology intersect in Renaissance literature, students can better understand how similar mechanisms operate in contemporary media and discourse. Such heightened awareness can empower them to identify and question ideological structures in their own lives and society at large. Ultimately, the integration of post-#MeToo consciousness with traditional literary analysis creates a dynamic learning environment. It allows for the exploration of enduring themes such as power, gender, and sexuality, while also acknowledging the evolving nature of societal values and literary interpretation. This approach not only enriches and reevaluates the study of canonical texts but also equips students with valuable tools for engaging critically with both historical and contemporary issues surrounding gender and power dynamics.

Acknowledgments

I sincerely thank Prof. Julie Choi and Prof. Kate Hext, the co-editors of this special issue, for proposing this project, offering outstanding guidance, and providing invaluable editorial support. My appreciation also goes to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments.

Ethics Statement

The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Endnotes

[1] According to a newspaper report, the #MeToo protest at Ewha Womans University grew into a large-scale rally of over 2800 participants and led to coordinated protests across a coalition of eight universities (Action Brings Change 2018).

[2] Park, S. H., et al. (Directors). (2022). *#AfterMeToo* [Documentary]. See also Universities Still Unchanged (2019).

[3] Several significant academic studies on South Korean feminist curriculum reform emerged during the height of the #MeToo movement. Min-Jung Kim observes that while gender equality courses in general education have increased quantitatively, these courses remain marginalized within the curriculum (M. Kim 2020). Songhee Lee examines how female poets articulate their experiences of sexual harassment by influential male poets in South Korea's creative writing community (Lee 2019). Eunha Kim emphasizes the necessity of establishing feminist counter-canons (E. Kim 2019). Although these studies make valuable contributions to the discourse on curriculum reform, their scope is limited to contemporary South Korean literature. The broader implications for pedagogical reform in literary studies remain largely unexplored.

[4] As Murrin (2010, 173) notes, "Most poets in this period [i.e., the Renaissance] tried to control audience response."

[5] All citations from Spenser (2001).

[6] Intriguingly, the current popularity of romantic fantasy web novels and webtoons among women in their 20 and 30s in South Korea may partly explain why even progressive students favor traditional happy endings. South Korean romance fantasy frequently features medieval and early modern European settings, transformations, and magical elements.

[7] The "4B" or "Four Nos" campaign is a radical South Korean feminist movement that has gained recognition since about 2019.

[8] See Jameson (2019) for a substantial discussion of allegory and its function as a political tool of understanding the complexities of ideological struggles.

References

Action Brings Change. 2018. *Hankyoreh*, March 30. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/838483.html.

Even Children's Organizations Under Attack ... Feminist Backlash 'Spreads Indiscriminately'. 2024. *Hankyoreh*, May 24. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/women/996328.html.

Ewha Students Responding With 'Class Boycott' to Professor's Return After Four Years Since #MeToo. 2022. *Hankook Ilbo*, September 15, revised ed. https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2022091415590001514.

Jameson, F. 2019. *Allegory and Ideology*. Verso.

Kim, B. 2023. *Sexual Misconduct Gone to Market: How Sexual Perpetrators Can Buy Commutation*. Humanist Press.

Kim, E. 2019. "The Decomposition and Reorganization of Literary Anthology: Finding the Origin and Identity of Women's Writing." *Feminism and Korean Literature* 48: 60–86. https://doi.org/10.15686/fkl.2019.48.60.

Kim, M. 2020. "Exploring Topography of Gender-Related Courses in Universities After the 'Feminism Reboot'." *Korean Feminist Philosophy* 33: 143–181. https://doi.org/10.17316/kfp.2020.05.33.143.

Lee, S. 2019. "Poetic Image Through the 'Me Too' Discourse." *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 10, no. 4: 1243–1252. https://doi.org/10.22143/hss21.10.4.89.

Murrin, M. 2010. "Renaissance Allegory From Petrarch to Spenser." In *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, edited by R. Copeland and P. T. Struck, 162–176. Cambridge University Press.

Spenser, E. 2001. *The Faerie Queene*. Edited by A. C. Hamilton. Longman.

Students' Protest With Red Lacquer. 2024. *Maeil Business News Korea*, November 21. https://www.mk.co.kr/news/society/11174850.

The Post-It Rally at Sexual Perpetrator's Offices at Ewha Womans University. 2018. *Hankyoreh*, March 23. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/837467.html.

Though the Female Student Council Is Abolished, Feminists Begin Their Next Chapter. 2019. *Ilda*, September 8. http://ildaro.com/8544.

Universities Still Unchanged after #MeToo. 2019. *OhmyNews*, October 5. https://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002477157.

Womensparty_yjh (@Womensparty_yjh). 2024. "School #MeToo and Its Disappointing Aftermath." *Twitter*, June 22.

17414113, 2025, 4, Downloaded from https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lic3.70032 by Ewha Womans University Library, Wiley Online Library on [13/01/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License