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“The Wilds, the Irish, and Hermaphrodites in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*”

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“THE WILDS, THE IRISH, AND HERMAPHRODITES IN SPENSER'S

***THE FAERIE QUEEN*”**

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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Stephen Greenblatt states that not only can one read Ireland in Book V of *The Faerie Queen*, but that, “it pervades the poem” (186). It is my belief that Spenser's beliefs and emotional stress concerning Ireland can be seen within the desolate wildernesses ,within which, he sets much of the poem and within the myth of the hermaphrodite, specifically with Book I. While the main theme of Book I of *The Faerie Queene* is not wilderness, Hermaphrodites, nor the Irish, these three do act as interesting subtexts, and they intersect both the main text and each other in intriguing ways. At times they act as the “others” to Spenser's civilized monolith; England. At other times, they are associated with one another to construct a frightening portrait of an uncivilized world. Spenser's treatment of Ireland has led some to label *The Faerie Queene*, a “poem of imperial celebration” (Jardine 69). While I would call such a label myopic, there is an undercurrent to the larger story that is significant. Spenser's life as an Englishman living in Ireland does in fact inform the poem.

The world view of a colonist comes; surfacing here and there throughout the whole of the work. It is sometimes simply a minor reference, at other times it is completely grafted into the emotional and psychological truth of the poem. Book I is such a moment. What may seem unremarkable at first is, indeed, important to remember: Spenser is deliberately writing an English poem in Ireland. This may at first appear to be circumstantial, but given that St. George and King Arthur are significant British legends operating in a landscape that is Irish, and are martial in their intent and actions; as were many of the New English in Ireland, one may assume that to think of a delineated and aggressive country one also needs an “other”. As Spenser writes about the formation of England or what Spenser states and Greenblatt qualifies as, “the fashioning of an English gentleman”, he offers a view into the beginning of colonist enterprise and culture. Within the tropes of wilderness and hermaphrodites there is a certain commentary about the Irish that is informed by Spenser's position as a colonist. The setting of Book I is a moralized landscape where the colonist world-view between civilized and un-civilized, between

productive and un-productive, between noble and savage is evident. It is not just in the physical traits, like deforestation, but more importantly, the psychological traits that are pertinent to this argument. Because ultimately the small references, such as the fact that in 1579 English soldiers in Ireland were instructed to wear red crosses, similar to St. George (Maley 313), begin to build into such a crescendo that although Book I addresses religion in an individual's life it does so in terms of that individual's life within the relationship between England and Ireland. The story of the Red Cross Knight is at once about the way in which salvation may enter a person and it is also about how a nation may believe in its elected glory and *perform* as such.

Spenser's topography for Book I is almost strictly the wilderness. While the book begins with knights riding on a plain, the plain is quickly set aside for a more suitable environment. Wilderness plays on the fears of Spenser's readers, an audience that has been instructed on the dangers of the wilds. "It is customary for Scripture to call the wilds of human life a wood, where the various kinds of perturbations of soul flourish, and where destructive beasts dwell..." (Nohrnberg 158-59). It affords confusion, fear, and doubt to those susceptible to such feelings. There are a few appearances, slight glimpses of the traditional battlefield; where strength of arms was most valued, where the enemy was visible. On such a field; clarity, pride, and strength inhabit its horizon, as well as sexual fruition. The plains are topography for moral certitude and uprightness, the woods for error, rape, and creatures of mixing. On the plain there is law, and, significantly, in the forest there is no law. The forest implies a lack of civilization, laziness; it implies a lack of a humanist education.

There is no explicit statement that the wilds of *The Faerie Queen* are the wastes of Ireland, but this can be seen in the very different environments of England and Ireland: "Although the English countryside known to Spenser was already suffering extensive deforestation, the Irish landscape was forested to a degree that corresponds remarkably well with the imaginative geography of *The Faerie Queene*..." (Piehler 733). Moreover, it can be seen in the implied morality between forest and plain.

The forest inherently implies a lack of productivity, with its soil, its fertile moisture; encumbered by thick roots. The lack of people implies that it is in need of civilization. Spenser elevates productive nature over that of the untouched wilds. The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are described by Spenser as, “Saue in that soile, where all good things did grow, / And freely sprong out of the fruitful grownd, / As incorrupted Nature did them sow” (I xi 47.2-4). Important to note is the fact that the Tree of Life spreads its balm across a “fertile plaine” (I xi 48.4). That a tree is productive is important to whether it is moralized as a threat or a benefit. Both “fertile” and “plaine” are positive connotations to the Tree of Life.

It is also not insignificant that St. George signifies the plow and cultivation of the earth. The last stanzas to Books I and III have metaphors for a roadstead on a sea-voyage and the plowing of a furrow, respectively. While Spenser is addressing the toil of writing and reading, both images are climaxes within the life of a colonist, that of braving the seas and arriving safely to a port and that of breaking the ground. With Spenser's emphasis on fertility and marriage for the sake of reproduction, an environment that is wild and unproductive holds an inferior caste.

The desolate wilderness with its shadows and narrow glens provides the inaccessibility needed for the evils the Red Cross Knight must make his way through. Errour's Den is “Amid the thickest woods” (I i 11.7). Archimago resides, “Downe in a dale, hard by a forests side, / Far from resort of people...” (I i 34.2-3). Despair resides in a cave surrounded by a moralized landscape of stubby trees and owls. Deception and religious evils reside within woods and forests, far from the humanizing affects of culture and civilization. Susanne L. Wofford is correct in noting a psychological landscape, “...many of its places and commonplaces represent spiritual or emotional aspects of the characters themselves” (Wofford 116). The wilderness especially is a place of threat and punishment. After Duessa's defeat she is sent into the wilderness; a repeated Biblical punishment: “Shee flying fast from heuens hated face / And from the world that her discovered wide, / Fled to the wastfull wildernesse

apace” (I viii 50:1-3). In Spenser's *View* he similarly describes the Irish fleeing into the wild after their defeat to avoid English rule (56). Being given over to the woods means that one is disfavored by society and so by extension, God. The Red Cross Knight's wanderings through the forests is a punishment for his sin of pride. Just as the wilderness is allowed to represent “spiritual aspects” and be signified by the lack of liberality, it can then be used by a particular faith and a cumulative world view. This particular use of the wilderness, as a place of violence and fear, would have sounded most true to a colonist on the border with such a woods.

Besides its use as a tool, Spenser's use of the landscape is also informed by his position as a planter. The beliefs that favor civilized cultivation over unruly wilderness are equally applied to the inhabitants of those wildernesses. Una having been taken from Archimago by Sansloy, is almost raped by the Sarazin in a wilderness. Una is saved by ignorant innocents, the Fauns and Satyrs. Their appearance is, “rude, mishapen, monstrous rablement” (I vi 8.7). They are famously full of lust and obey animal instinct as much as human reason. Nohnberg astutely describes the worship of Sylvanus by the satyrs as a flaw within their understanding. They are fickle in their worship, but for a time they worship Una until they go back to Sylvanus. Their half beastly appearance, “mishapen”, may be a result of their lack of this ability to see the true church, while Duessa's “monstruous” appearance is a result of deliberate misuse of the true church. Lisa Jardine argues that the satyrs in this episode represent the wild Irish, because they are labeled, the “saluage nation”; a Spenserian epithet for the Irish. While Una represents the efforts by England to civilize them (69). The “wyld woodgods” important deities within the forests are also the “saluage nation” a moniker of a certain people, the Irish. Spenser's view toward Ireland is in keeping with the greater part of migrating and colonizing populations, including the fear of miscegenation.

Fradubio's arborization is a dramatic example of the punishments a civilized man may be vulnerable to within the setting of a deceptive forest. Spenser's own role, as a civilized man in an

uncivilized country, may give the Fradubio episode another layer of meaning besides that of the religious. An upright knight may be tempted by the seeming attractiveness of the wild folk through the weaknesses of the flesh. What can be seen in Fradubio's betrayal of his true love and his submission to the false Duessa is the condemnation of assimilation in Ireland, and the drastic need for a unified identity; unified and pure. Spenser in his solutions for the troubles in Ireland within his essay *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, expresses a radical burnt earth policy. The Irish culture should not be permitted or admired. The Irish tongue should not be spoken, especially by Englishmen. The English identity should be the only *one* in Ireland. Fradubio's cursed existence represents the mistakes of the knight who has come before the Red Cross knight; as he realized his mistake it was too late and he was taken into the wilderness, his identity lost.

The Red Cross Knight is in similar danger of falling prey to a loss of identity. Una can represent the one true church, but she can also in the same movement be representative of the one true identity; that of the unadulterated English. The Red Cross Knight's seduction by Duessa is symptomatic of a dispersal of religious moral values as well as the degenerated national identity. Orgoglio finds the Red Cross Knight besides a fountain, "Poured out in loosnesse on the grassy grownd" (I vii 7.2),. The Red Cross Knight attempts to fight but is, "Disarmd, disgraste, and inwardly dismayde" (I vii 11.6). The affect of the fountain has been to cast the Red Cross Knight into a crisis, as he is disarmed he lacks the armour brought to him by Una, which bears the red cross; the same cross worn by English soldiers in Ireland. The valences of the fall include, also, the loss of grace, and the crisis of inward identity. Within a simple statement, which is repeated with a difference by Una at the end of the canto, "disarmed, dissolute, dismaid" (I vii 51.3), is the existential coupling of nation, religion, and individuality.

Within Orgoglio's dungeon, the Red Cross Knight's spiritual degradation is related in the same terms Spenser uses for the Irish state of religion as they, "...lye weltringe in suche spirituall darkenes

harde by hell mouthe even readye to fall in yf god happelie helpe not” (*View* 137). The Red Cross Knight lies in a dungeon, “in balefull darkenesse” and where Arthur, “...could find no flore, / But all a deepe descent, as darke as hell” (I viii 39.7-8). How such an imprisonment can be overcome is not well described by Spenser except that Arthur with:

“constant zele, and corage bold,
 After long paines and labors manifold,
 He found the meanes that Prisoner vp to reare;”

(I viii 40.4-6)

The supremacy of Arthur aside, it is obvious that divine intervention played some part. Such similtudes between the descriptions of the state of Ireland and the trials within Book I occur with such frequency, and the emotional consequence of such a reading is such that Book I must be an allegory of the everyman's journey toward salvation as well as a nation's embrace of imperialism.

What the Red Cross Knight experiences as he loses direction, and strength, is the gradual loss of his identity, as Una must remind him in the cave of Despair, “Why shouldst thou then despeire, that chosen art? / Where iustice growes, there grows eke greter grace” (I ix 53.5-6). What brought the Red Cross to such a state is the sin of pride, similarly, in an instance of parallelism Spenser mentions that the Old English leaders of Ireland failed to civilize Ireland because of, “pride and insolencie” (*View* 114). Spenser sees a similar solution to their degenerated states.

The Red Cross Knight's salvation provides some parallels to what Spenser proscribed for the reformation of the Irish. As the Red Cross Knight is saved from the dungeon and led away from Despair, he will need the mollifying effects of education and religion in order to regain his strength. Spenser believed in education, especially a liberal education: “ffor Learning hathe that wonderfull power in it selfe that it cane soften and attemper the moste sterne and salvage nature” (*View* 218). The Red Cross Knight is taken into the House of Holiness and Una requests, “To haue her knight into her

schoolehous plaste / That of her heavenly learning he might taste” (I x 18.4-5). The effort to convert must be done as a “plantinge of religion thus muche is nedefull to be obserued that it be not soughte forcibleie to be impressed into them with terrour and sharpe penalties as now is the mannour, but rather deliuered and intaymated with mildenes and gentlenes....” (*View* 221). As the lapsed Englishman is guided, so too is the Red Cross Knight also guided by Charissa, Mercy, Speranza, and Patience. Importantly, it is through Spenser's path to salvation that a person finally, reclaims one's role as an Englishman. Religion is a means toward Nation.

Fradubio is cursed when he sees Duessa in her real form with, “Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous, / Were hidd in water, that I could not see, / But they did seeme more foule and hideous, / Then womans shape man would beleeeue to bee” (I ii 41.1-4). The revealing of her sexual parts coming while she is bathing in water, invokes the forming of the first hermaphrodite; Hermaphroditus being drowned in the fountain of Salmacis by a scorned nymph. This is, I believe, a reference toward a degeneration, and a labeling of Duessa as a hermaphrodite. The fear and danger expressed in writing Duessa as a hermaphrodite is an expression, of miscegenation and loss of identity as a result. Her dual nature is not only shown in her false lies and appearances but also in her sex. Within the main theme, Duessa is inherently evil because of her association with the Catholic church, such a one will always wear the guise of *faithful* unto the crown of England, but because she would then have two masters she can never be true, as Una.

Duessa's plea at the end, is a plea by a false subject to a court that is supposed to be civilized, and a refusal by a subject to recognize the legitimacy of conquest. Her messenger, Archimago, feigns loyalty much like the Irish feign loyalty to Henry the VIII in the *View*, only to resort to their old customs. Just as Duessa's evil has been revealed to all; so too are the Irish claims viewed with mistrust and knowing. Spenser reserves a particular distaste for the Anglo-Irish or the Old English, a sentiment that is related to the feelings that an orthodox has to a lapsed believer as opposed to one who has never

heard of the doctrine; there is the added gall of betrayal. Spenser had several conflicts with the Old English in regards to property. The messenger's accusation that the Red Cross Knight has already vowed faith to her, and, "to another land" (I xii 26.9), is related to Lord Roche's claim on Spenser's land. Lord Roche, as well as Duessa, are pleading that the English law has already recognized them as rightful ruler. Roche's land was within the English law system as having belonged to him (Coughlan 334). His accusation against Spenser was eventually partially successful, gaining some land back. Duessa ends her accusation "Thy neither friend, nor foe" (I xii 28.9). This specifies her role not just as Irish but as Anglo-Irish. Spenser's portrayal of the Old English within *Faerie Queene* can be further enlightened, by Nicholas Canny's analysis of the *View*: "...Spenser was clearly attempting the denigration of that element of the population of Ireland which had most influence with the queen and her government in England" (2).

Duessa's attempts to betray the Red Cross Knight by seeking shelter within the arms of Sansjoy and then of Orgoglio. This is an echo of the legitimate English fears of a Spanish invasion by way of Ireland. Spenser describes a discontent population within the *View*, either hateful of English religion, law, or government, "[fleeing] beyonde the Seas wheare they live vnder princes that are her maiestes professed enemyes and Converse and are Confederate with other Traytours and fugitives which are theare abidinge...." (*View* 72). Spenser is alluding to the confederacies between the Irish with Spain and Rome. The Red Cross Knight's retort to the accusation of duplicity at the end of Book I, is that Duessa fooled him, "And to my foe betrayd, when least I feared ill" (I xii 32. 9). Duessa's threat than is the Irish gaining supremacy through the might of foreign powers and religion, Spain and Catholicism, at the expense of England.

It is noted by A.C. Hamilton that the sixty stanzas encompassing Duessa's coronation to her overthrow may be representative of Queen Mary's six year reign ("Gloss" of I vii 16). An alternative reading is the roughly sixty years; beginning with the Kildare revolt in the early 1530's, up to the

writing of *The Faerie Queene*. After the defeat of the revolt's leaders, Henry VIII in 1541 raised the title of Ireland from a lordship to a kingship, symbolized by Duessa's own coronation. Also the amalgamated Duessa revealed at the end of Canto viii is symbolic of the threat of the Anglo-Irish with Spain and Catholicism. The bear paw representative of the Fitzursulas, who were an Anglo-Irish family and according to Spenser degenerated to the MacMahons (*View* 115, see also "Commentary" 347). Meanwhile, the eagle talon is iconography of the Holy Roman Empire coat of arms, and the fox tail symbolizing the duplicity between the two. Duessa's evil, the trait she is most cursed for, is primarily shown in her attempts to conceal; to act as a part of the normative chivalric and religious codes, when in reality she is not. The Old English were similarly viewed by Spenser. They had some claim to legitimacy through race; to Spenser they were simply Irish. Their duality in that they are English men in race but Catholic in religion makes them particularly dangerous.

The danger of the duplicitous Anglo-Irish is brought to a climax where Canto VII begins by a fountain. The Red Cross Knight has put aside his armour. The fountain is encircled by a woods ominously shielding the Red Cross Knight as he reunites with Duessa. Yet this is a troubled fountain: "The cause Spenser gives for the fountain's enfeebling properties, the curse placed on it in retribution for the laziness of its attendant nymph, echoes the mythographic interpretations of the Hermaphrodite in which Salmacis is an emblem of moral laziness" (Silberman 358). There is a sense of the dissolution as he mingles with the water and with Duessa, evoking the myth of Hermaphrodite.

The connotation within *The Faerie Queene*, of a degeneration of the ethnic identity with the degendering effect of the Hermaphrodite myth is echoed in the *View*:

Other great howses theare be of the olde Englishe in Irelande which thorough
lecentious Conuersinge with the Irishe or marrynge and fosteringe with them or lacke of
mete nourture or other suche vnhappye occacions haue *degendered* from their antient

dignities are now growne as Irishe as Ohanlans breeche....

(117 emphasis mine).

The word “degendered” is most likely a spelling of “degenerated” and not “degendered”, (tempting as it is to read it as such) but there is further connotations in Spenser's work between the Hermphrodite and dengeneration of ethnicity. Spenser's use of the Salmacis fountain in *The Faerie Queene* is echoed when Spenser uses the image of a bad water in the *View*, when he describing why the Irish have been lost in terms of religion: “Therefore what other Coulede they learne then suche trashe as was taughte them And drinke of that Cupp of fornicacion with which the purple Harlott had then made all nacions drunken” (*View* 137). This same image Spenser uses with Duessa seducing the Red Cross Knight by the fountain, while within the *View* it is used to describe a nation and to explain the reason for that nation becoming lapse in their religious practices. Spenser, himself, is using similar imagery in both *The Faerie Queene*, and the *View* to create a prejudice of those who adopt Irish customs by slandering them as sexually ambiguous. The placing of the Salmacis fountain within the work of holiness is, therefore, explained by the references to the fountain in the work of imperialism. There is further similarity between the two passages: “But neuerthelesse since they drunke not from the pure springe of life but onelye tasted of suche trobled waters....” (137). This resonates similarly to the “bad” waters that the Red Cross Knight drinks from as he lies next to Duessa. Not only is the textual evidence convincing of a parallel but the emotional effect of the two echoing each other in the references to the hermaphrodite myth evokes fear; of degeneration, of a loss of grace, and of the threat against the nation of England.

Allen Romano gives an interesting account of the origin of Hermaphrodite. According to an inscription from second century B.C.E., the well of Salmacis is the sight of the well where a nymph took Hermaphroditus to raise him. Contrary to the Ovidian myth the inscription describes the nymph Salmacis as “[taming] the savage mind of men”(Romano 544), not turning them effeminate. The

inscription includes many legends regarding the city of Halicarnassus. In an interesting intersection the theme of the inscription has topical importance, that of colonization.

As Spenser was a colonizer of Ireland the theme of the inscription was remarkable, because, in the interpretation given by C. Sourvinou-Inwood, it “reflects concerns about ethnicity...through the mingling of colonizing Greeks and native Carians” (Romano 544). Romano quotes Vitruvius, who comments on an incorrect assumption that the waters of Salmacis are effeminizing, “...this water acquired its reputation, not through the damage of the shameless affliction, but because the barbarians' minds were softened by the sweetness of civilization” (555). Greeks being the civilizing force and Carians being the indigenous colonized. It is an interesting parallel with this inscription not only bearing within it Hermaphrodite, the invention of marriage, but also the tensions of two cultures meeting. As the Hermaphrodite may be symbolic of passionate love, or enfeebling manhood, it can also remark on the relationship between two cultures. Spenser uses the image of the hermaphrodite in various ways, in the positive interpretation of marriage, such as, at the end to Book III. Within *The Faerie Queene* there is the negative interpretation of the hermaphrodite; imbedded in the threat of miscegenation.

Where the myth of the hermaphrodite, in regards to a colonialist reading, intersects with Spenser's use of the hermaphrodite within *The Faerie Queene* is in the fear of intermingling. In the *View*, Spenser blames the acquisition of the Irish language by the Old English on two causes, that of nursing the children by the Irish nurses and marrying into the Irish race: “The which are two moste daungerous infeccions....” (119). Spenser was involved in the effort to find a stable identity for Englishmen in terms of religion and ethnicity. His solution involved implanting an English identity in the country thereby destroying the ungovernable Irish identity.

The borders were clearly visible: the plowed hills; our land, the forest forming a shaggy line on the horizon; their land. The borders would provide the framing of racial and moral institutions. Fear

would nag them anytime they entered the canopy as the sun was blotted out. And they would warn the women of certain rape if they tested the borders. Arm in arm with these ideas of progress and productivity are the religious beliefs that divided the country; they are housed in the same body and, therefore, inseparable; adding to the dramatic righteousness that any person must have if they are to commit themselves to the hard and dangerous task of colonization. Spenser's moral views of the landscape, as well as the fear, the myths about the natives, and the admonitions, would be shared with any migrating peoples. His views would be shared with any in the effort to acquire more land: where progress was expanding into the endless wilderness; one culture meeting another: "In Ireland, England's law, culture and religion had been exposed as the most delicate of organisms, difficult to plant and more difficult to maintain. Ireland confronted England's over-confident humanists as a harsh reminder of the resilience of barbarism and the vulnerability of civility....." (Brady 42). Spenser is able to articulate the threats that England faces, and the punishment of any diversion from the path of English fruition.

Spenser uses the inferior castes of wilderness, hermaphrodite, and Irish to allow the performances of a gentlemanly individuality and of an elected nation hood. What stands antagonistic to these performances of identity is duplicity, and the uncivilized plots to divide a unified interior: "But subtill *Archimago* when his guests / He saw diuided into double parts" (I ii 9.1-2). Throughout this I have hoped to show, to use Greenblatt's phrasing, how Ireland prevaded Book I. Ireland and its relation to England, I think, is deeply entrenched, grafted, even, into the religious, agricultural, and existential beliefs of Spenser.

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Research Paper

“The Wilds, the Irish, and Hermaphrodites in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*”

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