ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Spenser's Ambivalence: Perspectives on Ireland Within Errour's Monstrous Den

Courtney Beale

May 2024

'what is bigger, what is smaller, what denies its normality…what is neither human nor animal'

(Wilson 4)

Edmund Spenser's understandings of the relationship between England and Ireland were balanced between his poeticism and his position as a political official within the Irish conflict ongoing with Elizabethan England. As Ciaran Brady asserts in his article 'Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s,' some historians separate his artistry as a poet from his position within politics in an attempt to allow him to coexist as both the "gentle poet" and the man who recommended ruthless political policy (17); however, "…the attempt to distinguish the poet Spenser from any of his presumed personae in Ireland is […] ultimately futile" (18). While undertaking his position as a secretary for Lord Grey in Ireland, he was deep into drafting his poem *The Faerie Queene* (he arrived in Ireland in 1580, 10 years before the publication of the first three books in the poem). Thus, these experiences constituted a seminal part of Spenser's writing. To divide the poet and the politician is impossible, as both facets of Spenser work in tandem within the poem; and while Brady says that thinking of Spenser as a poet "…conditioned by the state is […] highly anachronistic" (17), I see this mode of thinking as highly informative. While Elizabeth did not condition Spenser (he certainly has criticisms towards her and her policies), he was conditioned by his experiences growing up and being shaped by his homeland, as well as by his involvement in the state's policies and actions on the ground in Ireland. Spenser is an Englishman in Ireland during a period of immense anxiety surrounding dynastic rule, ecclesiastical instability, and rapidly shifting political policies that shook the foundations *The Faerie Queene* was written on, and it is important to reconcile both the poet and the politician when thinking through the piece.

This reconciliation comes through when looking at Spenser's language, as he elects to carefully author his poems in precise detail to produce stanzas entrenched in political and

religious commentary. Though this can be seen throughout the epic, looking to Errour from book one of Spenser's work is a foundational place to start thinking about these concepts within his work. However, before venturing into Errour's den, it is essential to strictly define what I mean exactly when I say monster; for this work, I will be thinking of the monstrous in its perhaps most understood form, the monstrosity that can arise from the physical body, but also what happens when already monstrous body breaks not just the physical boundaries, but the social ones as well. Specifically, I will be thinking about what happens when the traditional human body is mixed with an animal and what this suggests about Spenser's understanding of those he is attempting to represent in this monstrosity. For this reason, Errour's position as a half-woman and half-serpent, as well as the first encountered monster, speaks to her importance to *The Faerie Queene.* Looking at the cultural and political structures that interact with both Spenser and this text affirms this importance while looking at his specific language and detail will allow us to understand how Spenser allows these real-world influences to interact with his work.

One of the reasons Errour's existence as a hybrid woman is important is that she does not conform to traditionally confined categories of what is considered normal; in fact, she is characterised as a monster because she defies those categories. As Dudley Wilson explains in *Signs and Portents*, monstrosity derives from categorical difference; hence, "what is bigger, what is smaller, what denies its normality…what is neither human nor animal" are all defiant of a particular societal category (4). Present in each of these defied norms is the notion that monstrosity works against distinct categorisation; monsters are detached from normal boundaries set in place by a social group, and this detachment "…created uneasiness and even an atmosphere of taboo" (Wilson 4). A being that harbours these differences does not conform

to the labels that a society uses to define itself and, as such, exists in a multifaceted space where meaning can be attached and misconstrued in favour of reflecting the desired social traditions and values. Accordingly, Errour exists at what Jeffery Jerome Cohen calls a "metaphoric crossroads"; it is at this crossroads, Cohen says, that monsters can embody a 'time, a feeling, or a place" (4). Monsters are frightening because they cannot be defined by the clear categories assigned by a society and occupy multiple definitions at one time (such as a hybrid) or create a category of their own. Since monsters harbour this ability to transcend multiple distinct categories, Spenser was able to use Errour as a schematic for imbuing his understanding of Ireland as a "time, feeling, or place" (Cohen 4) by representing what categories Errour defies, how she is unable to be traditionally categorised, and how she can exist externally from Gloriana's kingdom.

Still, Errour's monstrosity does not simply lie in her physicality, as it is also demonstrated in Spenser's naming of her. Jacques Derrida explains in his book *Points…Interviews, 1974-1994* that:

> Sometimes the effacement of the name is the best safeguard, sometimes it is the worst 'victimization.' [sic] This double bind to which we are always coming back renders impossible a determined or determinable decision concerning which is better: very often to inscribe the name is to efface the bearer of the name (390).

The name a character is given tells the reader much about the author's intention and thoughts towards the character. By naming a character a symbolically significant name, an author is, in some respect, burying the bearer of the name under the weight or significance that the name carries. Spenser certainly plays on this within *The Faerie Queene*, as his naming is very strategic

in designating what each character means individually, as well as concerning each other. We can see this in Errour's name, as Errour is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course, a roving, winding" (error, n.l.1). Errour's name indicates acting/living outside of the strict norms placed on society. Her name literally places her as "roaming" or "wandering" from the given path laid out by traditional societal standards. By existing outside of traditional society, Spenser uses Errour as a physical embodiment of a being's ability to live outside the restrictions of Faery Land's norms, becoming a pinnacle of difference.

Red Crosse's name is also essential to discuss, particularly considering how Spenser's language around Errour defines much of what she will be to the text. The same can be said for Red Crosse, whose name very clearly aligns him with the uniform of crusaders, a Catholic military force sent out on religious missions to reclaim holy land. This reclamation, however, was a displacement of those already residing in that space. Though one group felt they were doing their godly duty, they were ousting another group from their home. Moreover, Red Crosse's name also appears to be a reference to Sir William Pelham's order after Lord Grey's arrival in Ireland "…requiring 'every horsemane' in the service of the crown 'both Englishe and Irishe' to display 'two rede crosses….one to be fastened on the breste, the other on the backe'" (McCabe 101). This order, made by the then president of Munster, would have allowed Spenser to see these "red crosse knights" roaming around Ireland amidst his and Lord Grey's arrival. Red Crosse's name is not just an adaptation of the traditional Catholic crusaders but also an allusion to his real-life experiences on the grounds of Ireland. As indicated previously, Spenser is strategic with his naming, and Red Crosse is no exception to this. Certainly, Spenser

understood the obvious comparison of Red Crosse to the crusaders, particularly since he is the knight of supposed holiness. Moreover, Spenser had authentic experience with English knights wearing red crosses and consequently took creative liberty to adapt those characteristics to build his own version of a red crosse knight, parading through Faeryland to conquer the Catholic Irish. Spenser's Red Crosse certainly acts like a crusader in the wandring wood, subverting the traditional Catholic crusader by positioning Protestant Red Crosse as one.

It is in this effort to reclaim this holy land inhabited by Errour that we can begin to see the parallels Spenser was drawing between Red Crosse and Queen Elizabeth I. Seeking to control wayward Catholic Ireland and bring it into Protestant English rule, Elizabeth was launching her own military campaigns (similar to crusades) in order to bring Ireland into the Protestant religion and secure England from outward Catholic interference in Ireland. As Patricia Palmer reminds us, Spenser "…graft[s] the poetry of Faerielond onto the 'sient base' of historical violence" (10). Spenser's poetics are aligned with the historical violence being enacted around him, and he uses his naming to signify this connection between his literary world and the historical influences he is drawing upon. By giving his knight of holiness the name Red Crosse and having him invade Errour's unholy land, Spenser mimics Elizabeth's own desire to stake claim to erroneous Catholic Ireland and convert it into Protestant rule, the true and proper religion. Looking at Una's naming in contrast with Errour's also affirms this perspective, as her name asserts her as the one. As she is travelling with Red Crosse, she is the female embodiment of the one true church, Protestantism. Naturally, one might assume then that this suggests Una is a model for Elizabeth; however, Elizabeth famously remarked that she had the heart and stomach of a king.

Thus, whilst Una may outwardly embody Elizabeth I and her commitment to the true church,

Red Crosse is what Spenser puts forth as the internal embodiment of Elizabeth and her actions within Ireland. These perspectives show a problem with both Spenser and Red Crosse's narration of Errour, as each perspective is inherently swayed. Spenser imbues his own understanding of the religious conflict into her characterisation, and Red Crosse's narrative position as the protagonist against Errour allows Spenser to use Red Crosse against her. Yet, this does not work exactly how Spenser expects, as Red Crosse does not live up to his knightly title and is therefore unreliable when thinking about their understanding of other characters. Due to this, it is important to look at how Spenser discusses Errour, both from Red Crosse's and his own narrative perspective.

Spenser's introduction of Errour is steeped in negative language and not unintentionally so. Cynthia Nazarian asserts that the poem "[first] dissolves victims of violence into the untamed landscape through a naturalizing, dehumanizing [sic] vocabulary" (332). As part of Spenser's aim to offset the knights and the monsters, he employs language that strips away humanity that may be present within his monsters. Doing so likens them to the uncontrollable landscape, or in Errour's case, the "wandring wood." In this dehumanisation, the monsters within Spenser's poem are read by his audience as widely unsympathetic; readers are steeped in negative descriptions of Errour that layer on top of each other, making it almost impossible for readers to see beyond the muck. Joel Slotkin confirms this, explaining that "[c]areful readers wishing to pursue these intricacies fully must imaginatively wallow in [Errour's] vomit in order to do so" (54). In order to garner any sympathy and see Errour's humanity in the poem, readers are forced to dive within the filth of Spenser's language; they must wallow in the dehumanisation, which for many readers will not be a task they will undertake. As readers cease to read between the

lines, this will allow Spenser to have Red Crosse's interpretations guide readers' perceptions. This is especially problematic since, as we have previously established, Red Crosse's position as a Protestant Crusader and emblem of Queen Elizabeth I renders him unreliable, as it impedes his ability to see her without these biases; moreover, Red Crosse (and readers) are already made to perceive Errour as a threat before they even get a chance to meet her. As a result, when audiences meet her, they are already pre-disposed to Red Crosse's negative perceptions, allowing the violence he enacts upon her to be violence that readers are largely desensitised and unsympathetic to.

Before the violence, it is important to look at the specific language Spenser employs when writing *The Faerie Queene* and its importance when discussing Errour and Red Crosse. Willy Maley explains in his book *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture, and Identity* that when creating the language used within Faeryland, Spenser used a mixture of English, Irish, and neither all at once, with playwright Ben Johnson even remarking that he had "writ no language" (47). The decision to do this by Spenser might seem out of place, but Maley maintains that "[i]n *The Faerie Queene,* we have a new language for a new kingdom-standard and non-standard and the incorporation of dialect into such a medium suggests that it is felt to possess the necessary exotic quality" (47). Spenser combines the two languages whilst also deconstructing them to fit within his fantasy realm; in doing so, he exoticises his poem. This is important, and this desire to exploit the quality of exoticism whilst also disparaging it is seen throughout the poem, particularly with Red Crosse and Errour. Spenser mixes the Irish language with his familiar vernacular, English, and publishes the poem in England. Readers in England would most likely assume that the language being altered is purely English; as a result, the contributions of the

Irish language are drowned out. Spenser uses the Irish language yet ceases to acknowledge doing so and continually disparages them. He profits off of the exoticism of their language in his writing whilst also propagating their demise and dissolution into English rule. This concept is also true with Spenser's treatment of Errour and Red Crosse.

When Red Crosse follows his impulse to enter the cave, he is met with what Spenser describes as an "…vgly monster plaine, /Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, /But th'other halfe did womans shape retain/Most lothsom, filthie, foul, and full of vile disdaine" (Spenser 1.1.14). Spenser immediately declares Errour a monster, both outright and through his description of her body. He attests that she is half-serpent and half-woman and attributes her to being "lothsom,", "filthie," "foul," and "full of vile disdaine." Thinking about each of these terms is essential, as it exemplifies the aspects of Errour which Spenser depicts as making Errour monstrous. These first few words are all similar to each other and express a sentiment that can seem self-explanatory; he sees her body as disgusting and obscene, against God's nature. More importantly, these words, in rapid succession, cement Errour as an object of opposition to Red Crosse. Her position as partly human is ignored in favour of derision towards her serpent qualities. Looking back to Wilson's conceptualisation of the monstrous, Errour is one because she defies the boundaries of humans and animals in her combination of the two. She does not clearly fit within either category and does not seek to, choosing to remain in her body of pure difference; she is the outsider, the monster on the hill.

It is also important to pause in this final phrase, as it is interesting to note that Spenser indicates her "vile disdaine" as a monstrous quality. To Spenser, it is not only the manifestation of her physical body that is monstrous but also her choice to live ignorant of the norms of

Elizabethan society. Errour is guilty of breaking not only physical boundaries but also spatial and social ones. She is not only a serpent-human hybrid, but she lives within the woods and outside Gloriana's kingdom (and control). By living outside the community and in a space where she does not have to conform to their expectations and traditions, she is signalling disdain and contempt towards Faery Land. Spenser sees her monstrosity as encompassing a duality, existing in both her body and her choices. If we map this onto Elizabeth's conflict with Ireland, we see Errour as representative of Ireland's choice to exist outside of Protestant England and Spenser's derision of this choice as disdain for the true society and, more importantly, the true religion.

This contempt does not just affect Errour; her disdain for Elizabethan England bleeds into her children as well. Spenser explains that she had "A thousand yong ones, which she dayley fed, / Sucking vpon her poisonous dugs, eachone/Of sundry shapes, yet all ill fauored" (Spenser 1.1.15). Thinking about Errour as the defiant state of Catholic Ireland, these younglings then become symbolically representative of those who follow the Catholic church or support Ireland in the fight against England. They "suck" on Errour's poison or her existence outside of the norms of traditional society. Further, Spenser elaborates that it does not matter what "sundry shapes" Errour's poison comes in; this is an interesting detail since information during this period could be spread in many ways, including through pamphlets, ballads, and even sermons. Spenser here highlights that though pro-Catholic and anti-English propaganda took many different shapes, to him, they are all "ill-favored" methods of corrupting the people of Catholic Ireland against Protestant England. It is important to note here that Spenser's admonishment of Errour's younglings' acceptance of her propaganda can be mapped onto various other meanings;

Spenser's derision towards Catholic propaganda could surely apply to the other Catholic states in which England (and Elizabeth) was up against, or even beyond the realm of Catholicism. Despite this, thinking about this moment in the context of Catholic Ireland allows us to further understand how Errour can be seen as embodying it.

As Joel Slotkin reminds us, female hybrids "thematically…all suggest 'the recurrent conflation of the female and maternal with the monstrous'" (58). Errour is not only a monster through her physical body and location but also in her position as a mother. She does not have a male partner and essentially creates clones of herself as offspring. As clones, they only know her "poison", much like those in Ireland who were shaped by the church and doctrine there at the time. Like Errour's younglings, those residing in Catholic Ireland did not know the true church and way of life, at least according to Spenser. Those in Ireland were so inundated with Errour's poison that they could not see the supposed good Spenser saw within Red Crosse (or Elizabethan England). Thinking with this good that Red Crosse supposedly has in contrast to Errour's bad, it is pertinent to take a step back and understand how Spenser attempts to show Red Crosse's virtue against Errour; however, as we will see, it does not quite come across the way Spenser expects. The language Spenser uses to describe Errour is negative, and Red Crosse's is fairly positive; however, looking closer demonstrates Spenser's propensity to balance Red Crosse's positive, knightly qualities with his actions. Spenser counteracts Red Crosse's position as the chivalric hero by having him attack Errour, unprovoked, in her home. Though she is monstrous, and Spenser certainly does not condemn Red Crosse for this choice, he still includes this to balance the two. Red Crosse is not entirely good, and though Errour is monstrous, her interaction with Red Crosse was not initiated by her. Here, we start to see

Spenser's ambivalence within his writing; the characters and his perspectives of them are not black and white but instead balanced between shades of grey.

As a result, there is no chiaroscuro effect in Spenser's text, as the knight and the monster reflect off of each other and do not necessarily make each other look better (or worse). While Spenser may have placed Red Crosse next to Errour to highlight his knightly virtues, he also subtly illustrates how these virtues disappear when aligned with Errour. One could argue that Red Crosse simply acts this way because he is affected by the "wandring wood," which is causing him to devolve from his moral standards; however, it is important to remember that Spenser asserts that no "liuing" men can exist in the forest, as only those who wander and become lost in it thrive. However, this is exactly what Red Crosse does; he disregards the warnings of Una and gives in to his greed and destructive tendencies. Again, it is not he who is virtuous when he enters the cave, but the armour that envelops him. Spenser attempts to use language in a way that points readers to see Red Crosse positively compared to Errour, yet also undermines this by portraying Red Crosse himself as flawed. This double meaning reflects an ambivalence throughout Spenser's poem; while he is certainly criticising Errour, Red Crosse is not wholly out of his critical eye.

Through Faery Land, Spenser works through his perspectives surrounding the English and Irish conflict and imbues them in the development of both Red Crosse and Errour. Though this poem seems to have strong ties of loyalty and adoration for England and Queen Elizabeth I, book one of Spenser's poem shows the complications surrounding his view of the monarch, as well as her political policy within Ireland. Furthermore, book one demonstrates the complicated dynamics of not only the Irish conflict but Spenser's own insight into the dispute. Through the

Errour episode, readers can flesh out Spenser's understanding of the ongoing political and ecclesiastical conflicts that surrounded him. In this, we see that Errour and Red Crosse are more than just early modern re-interpretations of a classic knight's tale; rather, they encompass a complicated schematic for Spenser to map his Irish and English conceptions. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* operates as an early modern spyglass, looking directly into his conflict between the English perspective of the Irish conflict and his complicated relationship with both his English identity and Irish proximity.

Works Cited

Brady, Ciaran. "Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s." *Past & Present,* no. 111, 1986, pp. 17-49.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Derrida, Jaques. *Points…Interviews, 1974-1994*, edited by Elisabeth Weber, Stanford University Press, 1995.

"error, n., sense I.1." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, September 2023.

Maley, Willy. *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture, and Identity,* Macmillan Press, 1997.

McCabe, Richard A. *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

Nazarian, Cynthia. 'Sympathy Wounds, Rivers of Blood: The Politics of Fellow Feeling in Spenser's Faerie Queene and A View of the State of Ireland.' *Modern Philology*, vol. 113, no. 3, 2016, pp. 331–52.

Palmer, Patricia. *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation and Violence in Early Modern Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Slotkin, Joel Elliot. *Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature* Springer International Publishing, 1st ed., 2017.

Spenser, Edmund, and A. C. Hamilton. *The Faerie Queene*. Longman, 1980.

Wilson, Dudley Butler. 'Definitions.' *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment,* Routledge, 1993.