Spenser and land: political conflict resolved in physical topography

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This article was published in the The Ben Jonson Journal [© Edinburgh University Press] and the definitive version is available from: http://www.euppublishing.com/journal/bjj

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/6222

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Edinburgh University Press

Please cite the published version.
This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
In Book 4 of *The Faerie Queene* Irish rivers come together "in order seemly good" to attend the wedding of the Thames and the Medway, "To doe their duefull seruice, as to them befell" (4.11.44.9). Although they come from "saluage cuntreis" the rivers are respectful, subservient even, in fulfilling what the narrator regards to be their duty. The Irish rivers have been extracted from their usual environment, and have thus left behind their savage context in order to celebrate this English union. We might wonder whether Spenser wants us to think of the rivers leaving their Irish beds and flowing in English beds, or whether they take with them their native soil which gives them their identity. I have considered the Irish rivers in detail elsewhere, here I want to turn my attention toward features of the landscape in *The Faerie Queene* which switch allegiance in the colonial project without ever leaving home.

In Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* a villainous mob, captained by Maleger, lays siege to Alma's House of Temperance. There are so many of them that they obliterate all signs of the landscape: "So huge and infinite their numbers were, / That all the land they vnder them did hide" (2.11.5.7). Earlier in the episode Maleger and his men, rather than concealing the landscape, used the landscape as a hiding place from which they can launch their attack:

A thousand villeins round about them swarmd  
Out of the rockes and caues adjoyning nye,  
Vile caytiue wretches, ragged, rude, deformd,  
All threatning death, all in straunge manner armd,  
(2.9.13.2-5)

The landscape of Fairyland--its rocks and caves, as well as its woodland--harbours those who wish to attack the virtuous. Maleger, the captain of the mob that attacks the home of temperance, is a corpse-like figure:

As pale and wan as ashes was his looke,  
His bodie leane and meagre as a rake,  
And skin all withered like a dryed rooke,  
Thereto as cold and drery as a Snake,  
That seem'd to tremble euermore, and quake:  
All in a canuas thin he was bedight,  
And girded with a belt of twisted brake,  
Vpon his head he wore an Helmet light,  
Made of a dead mans skull, that seem'd a ghastly sight.  
(2.11.22)

Critics tend to agree that Maleger represents sickness, the most likely etymological explanation of his name being "male `badly' + aeger `diseased, sick'. His sickness is both physical and spiritual and perhaps even mental and psychic." The battle between Maleger and Arthur closely resembles the battle between Hercules and Antaeus in Greek myth. Like Antaeus, Maleger is revived by contact with the earth and, just as Hercules strangled Antaeus by holding him aloft, so Arthur defeats
Maleger by lifting him above the ground and squeezing him to death in a violent embrace. Spenser's story, however, takes the myth a step further. In order to ensure Maleger's demise Arthur

Vpon his shoulders carried him perforse
Aboue three furlongs, taking his full course,
Vntill he came vnto a standing lake;
Him thereinto he threw without remorse,
Ne stird, till hope of life did him forsake;
So end of that Carles dayes, and his owne paines did make
(2.11.46.4-9)

What is most striking about this action is that the landscape which has just previously revived Maleger now contributes to his decay. In effect Maleger, for whom the landscape was a source of strength—both a reviver and a place to hide—is hoisted on his own petard because the very environment he used to oppress others validates his death and consumes him.

While Arthur's battle with Maleger is undoubtedly influenced by the myth of Hercules and Antaeus it is difficult to read Spenser's description of Maleger without thinking of the by now famous description in A View of the Present State of Ireland of the starving Irish as "Anatomies of death" (Spenser 1949, 158). In an important early paper tracing the influence of Spenser's Irish experience on The Faerie Queene M. M. Gray claims that in the depiction of the siege of Alma's castle Spenser was alluding to the Munster rebellion and the figure of Maleger is "perhaps in some particulars like the starving rebel leaders" (Gray 1930, 416). Maleger's resilience, suggests Gray, is a comment upon the resilience of the Irish rebels because "Just the same disconcerting vitality characterised rebellion in Ireland" (Gray 1930, 416). Suppose we allow that Maleger has an Irish dimension, what might the manner of his death tell us about Spenser's feelings toward the Irish landscape, and what are the wider implications of those feelings? If we return to the episode in Book 4 featuring the Irish rivers we begin to see a pattern emerging: in the description of the Irish rivers and the death of Maleger the landscape has been transformed from a source of danger and uncertainty to an instrument of benevolence. In the river-marriage canto the Irish rivers are separated from their savage history and in the Maleger episode the landscape shifts from being a supporter of violence to an agent of virtue which is finally responsible for the destruction of an arch villain.

Like Maleger, the figure of Malengin, also named Guile, who appears in Book 5 of The Faerie Queene initially gains strength from his environment. The virtuous Samient tells Artegall that Malegin's "wylie wit . . . / And eke the fastnesse of his dwelling place, / Both vnassaylabe, gaue him great ayde" (5.9.5.1-3). As Andrew Hadfield notes, various critics have recognised that the description of Malengin echoes Spenser's depictions of the rebel Irish in the View (Hadfield 1997, 161). When pursued by Artegall, Malengin flees into the landscape "Vp to the rocke he ran, and thereon flew / Like a wyld Gote, leaping from hill to hill, / and dauncing on the craggy cliffe at will" (5.9.15.3-5). Malengin is a shape-shifter who changes from a fox to a bush, from a bush to a bird, from a bird to a stone, from a stone to a hedgehog. As his metamorphoses into a bush and a stone demonstrate, Malengin can not only become an animal of the kind that inhabits the landscape but can also
become part of the landscape itself. Malengin's crossing of the division between the animate and the inanimate world prefigures his fate at the hands of Talus:

But when as he would to a snake againe  
Haue turn'd himselfe, he with his yron flayle  
Gan driue at him, with so huge might and maine,  
That all his bones, as small as sandy grayle  
He broke, and did his bowels disentrayle;  
Crying in vaine for helpe, when helpe was past.  
So did deceipt the selfe deceiuer fayle,  
There they him left a carrion outcast;  
For beasts and foules to feede vpon for their repast.  
(5.9.19)

Hadfield claims that Malengin's absorption into the landscape makes his presence more frightening:

. . . the implication is that Malengin, like Error, has been destroyed only for his legacy to become even more ghostly and terrifying as it becomes part of the very landscape and, hence, virtually invisible and even more protean than the `human' figure.  
(Hadfield 1997, 163)

But there is little to suggest that Malengin has ever been or ever becomes "ghostly".5 When fleeing from Artegall he transforms himself into substantial, solid forms and there is no reason to believe that Malengin's spirit remains when his bones are ground into tiny pieces by Talus. Hadfield's earlier comment that "Talus can neither contain Malengin nor keep him at bay, and his only recourse is absolute destruction . . ." (Hadfield 1997, 163) is closer to the mark. In a sense the landscape colludes with Talus, absorbing the dust of Malengin's malevolent body in order to leave little trace of him behind. That the remains of Malengin are left to become food for scavengers need not imply that he continues to be a threat. In Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, first printed in 1594 but certainly performed earlier (Wells et al. 1987, 113), the "barbarous Tamora" suffers a similar fate on the order of Lucius:

As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,  
No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,  
No mournful bell shall ring her burial;  
But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.  
Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,  
And being dead, let birds on her take pity.  
(5.3.194-199)

This speech concludes the play and apparently constitutes closure. Certainly Tamora is incorporated into the natural world via the birds that will inevitably consume her, what James L. Calderwood calls an "anti-Ovidian metamorphosis" (Calderwood 1971, 23), but it seems unlikely that Shakespeare expected his audience to consider the defeated queen to remain a threatening presence.

Abandoning the bodies of wrongdoers in the open air without any burial rites (or indeed rights) is a traditional occurrence and a common feature of The Faerie
Queene. Having defeated their foes the knights of Fairyland usually move on to another adventure leaving the bodies of their enemies where they fell. Presumably these corpses become food for the animal occupants of Fairyland and are thus absorbed into the natural world but there is little doubt that the villains concerned have been successfully eliminated. Figures do continue to be a threat after they have been defeated, but only if they survive in a bodily form. Hadfield is right to suggest that Adicia continues to be a threat but this is because, like Duessa in Book 1, she has been allowed to escape (Hadfield 1997, 160-61). Unlike Malengin, Adicia is not crushed. When Spenser wants to suggest that malevolent figures remain a threat he allows them to remain bodily intact: at the end of Book 1 Duessa flees into the wilderness but she has not been eradicated and so we expect her to return. Similarly Grille remains a troubling presence because the source of his degeneration, Acrasia, is captured but not destroyed and he himself is not annihilated: "Let Grille be Grille, and haue his hoggish mind" (2.12.87.8). The figures who are destroyed bodily represent, for that moment at least, a small victory against the influence of vice in Fairyland.

Malengin is clearly a representative of Irish Catholic rebellion and although Ireland is a central part of the allegory of Book 5 Catholic Spain and the threat it represents also figures. Malengin's fate is not unique, the bodies of other recognisably Catholic wrong-doers are similarly smashed into tiny pieces. The Souldan, a pagan tyrant, is generally recognised as alluding to Philip 2 of Spain and his death to the defeat of the Spanish Armada. In his confrontation with Arthur, the Souldan is tossed from his own runaway chariot and killed by it: "the pagan hound / Amongst the yron hookes and grapes keene, / [was] Tome all to rags, and rent with many a wound, / That no whole peece of him was to be seene, / But scattred all about, and storw'd vpon the greene" (5.8.42.5-9). In order to emphasise that the Souldan presents no further danger the narrator announces that the tyrant has been "rapt and all to rent, / That of his shape appear'd no litle moniment" (5.8.43.8-9). Only his battered shield and armour remain and, just as Pollente's head was stuck on a pole, so they are hung on a tree by Arthur to warn against evil. Although the Souldan is recognisably Spanish he is associated with all Catholics, including the Irish, when he is referred to as a pagan who "neither hath religion nor Fay, / But makes his God of his ungodly pelf, / And Idols serues" (5.8.19.7-9). In the View Irenius denounces the Irish as "all Papistes by theire profession but in the same so blindelye and brutishly enformed for the moste parte as that ye woulde rather thinke them Atheists or infidles" (Spenser 1949, 136). For Spenser non-Protestants, be they Muslims or Catholics, merge together to form an undifferentiated religious enemy. As Richard McCabe puts it "The Christian/Paynim dichotomy provides Spenser with a means of organising his political allegory. The 'pagans' of romance fiction are the Catholics of reformed politics" (McCabe 1989, 112).

The Souldan's improper veneration of idols is echoed in Geryoneo's idol, another symbol of Catholic power in Book 5. The utter destruction of Geryoneo which constitutes the liberation of Belge (the Netherlands) from Geryoneo's grip (that is, the grip of Catholic Spain) is reinforced when Arthur smashes Geryoneo's idol in front of Belge:

Then in he brought her, and her shewed there
The present of his paines, that Monsters spoyle,
And eke that Idol deem'd so costly dere;
Whom he did all to peeces breake and foyle
In filthy durt, and left so in the loathely soyle
(5.11.33.5-9)

The idol is trodden into the soil by Arthur and there is no indication that its influence remains. The biblical allusion is to Exodus which is certainly unequivocal about the finality of the idols' destruction: "Thou shalt not bowe downe to their gods . . . but utterly overthrowe them, and breake in pieces their images".8

The bodily disintegration suffered by Malengin and the Souldan is not unique to Book 5. In the first book of the poem Kirkrapine is torn to pieces by Una's lion, a symbol of royal power (Aptekar 1969, 58-69). Una represents the one true religion of Protestantism, the figure of Elizabeth, and, as I have argued elsewhere, also an idealised Ireland (Fitzpatrick 1998, 13-16). Given that Una's lion defends the truth of Protestantism, it might constitute a specific reference to Henry 8, as noted by James Nohrnberg (1976, 218). Kirkrapine is a robber of the church and although, as Mary Robert Falls has pointed out, he might be an allusion to Protestant ecclesiastical abuses (Falls 1953) the context of the episode suggests that Kirkrapine is a symbol of the cupidity of the Roman Catholic church in England. Although Hamilton allows that the reference extends to any religious greed, including the corruption of post-Reformation English bishops, he acknowledges that "The primary reference [is] to the greed of Rome, by which the English Church was pillaged . . ." (Spenser 1977, 59). Kirkrapine is not only torn into pieces but, like Maleger, is also consumed by the landscape:

Him booteth not resist, nor succour call,
His bleeding hart is in the vengers hand,
Who streight him rent in thousand peeces small,
And quite dismembred hath: the thirstie land
Drunke vp his life; his corse left on the strand.
(1.3.20.1-5)

Again it seems that the land has actively cooperated with a villain's demise and the disintegration of his body has rendered him harmless.

Malengin is killed in Book 5 of The Faerie Queene, the one that we generally agree contains the most obvious allusions to Ireland.9 If Malengin is symbolic of one of the numerous Irish rebels who threaten the colonising project then Grantorto is a leader of such men, although he does resemble an Irish Kern in his confrontation with Artegall (Spenser 1977, 615). Whether he represents Philip of Spain or the Pope is less important than his role in the overall thrust of the allegory as a Catholic miscreant with an interest in Ireland. When Artegall kills Grantorto the villain is said to eat the earth: "He did him smite with all his might and maine, / That falling on his mother earth he fed" (5.12.7), which is an inversion of what has happened to Maleger, Malengin, and Kirkrapine. The action of gnawing the earth is either the involuntary effect of a heavy fall or a final act of defiance, an unnatural attack upon the source of life itself. It also recalls the biblical curse upon the serpent, that it shall eat dust (Spenser 1977, 537). Significantly the land, Irena or Ireland, takes the side
of Artegall, or Lord Grey, against Grantorto. She and her people, presumably the Irish, rejoice at this defeat of the representative of Catholic power:

Which when the people round about him saw,
They shouted all for joy of his successse,
Glad to be quit from that proud Tyrants awe,
Which with strong powre did them long time oppresse;
And running all with greedie ioyfulnesse
To faire Irena, at her feet did fall,
And her adored with due humblenesse,
As their true Liege and Princesse naturall;
And eke her champions glorie sounded ouer all.
(5.12.24)

Spenser's fantasy that English protestant strength is welcome and appreciated in the colony is obviously a denial of the political reality all around him.

Another malevolent figure in Book 5 who literally 'bites the dust' is Pollente. He has been recognised by Pauline Henley as a representative both of Spanish might and Sir John of Desmond, who was beheaded during Grey's campaign of 1581. Henley claims that "Pollente begins as the power of Spain, and ends as Sir John of Desmond" (Henley 1928, 139-40). Andrew Hadfield makes the plausible suggestion that Spenser might have been thinking of another rebel because what happens to Pollente's head "resembles the description given of the fate of Rory Oge O'More in John Derrick's The Image of Ireland (1581), a work which Spenser may well have known" (Hadfield 1997, 159). The fight between Artegall and Pollente takes place in the river which flows beneath Pollente's toll-bridge. When Pollente attempts to leave the river he is decapitated:

But Artegall purswed him still so neare,
With bright Chrysaor in his cruel hand,
That as his head he gan a little reare
Aboue the brinke, to tread vpon the land,
He smote it off, that tumbling on the strand
It bit the earth for very fell despight,
And gnashed with his teeth, as if he band
High God, whose goodnesse he despaired quight,
Or curst the hand, which did that vengeance on him dight.
(5.2.18)

Pollente not only consumes the earth but is also consumed by its waters when "His corps was carried downe along the Lee, / Whose waters with his filthy bloud it stayned" (5.2.19.1-2). The Lee, a river in Cork, actively transports Pollente's body away from the site of his sins and his resistance, in effect colluding with Artegall in his punishment. If, as Henley believes, Pollente represents Desmond or if, as Hadfield suggests, he represents Oge O'More then the spillage of his blood into Irish water is a fitting redress for the English blood previously spilled into the Irish river Oure detailed in the river-marriage canto (4.11.44.5). John Erskine Hankins claims that Spenser's source for Pollente's river and bridge is Rodomonte's river in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and that the battle between Artegailla and Pollente is based on the
first two of Rodomonte’s battles of the bridge. Hankins also notes that Spenser departs from his source when, unlike the villain Rodomonte, Pollente is killed in his own river (Hankins 1971, 91-92). Spenser’s decision to deviate from his source suggests a desire to implicate Pollente’s river in his punishment. Pollente used the landscape to make attacks upon his victims more effective but ultimately the landscape colludes in his destruction and the disposal of his bloody corpse.

In the View Irenius comments on the natural beauty and economic potential of the Irish landscape:

And sure it is, a moste bewtifull and swete Countrie as/ anye is vnder heaven, seamed thoroughe out with manye goodlye rivers replenished with all sortes of fishe moste abundantlye sprinckled with manye swete llandes and goodlye lakes like little Inlande seas, that will carye even shipps vpon their waters, adorned with goodly woodes fitte for buildinge of howsses and shipps so comodiously as that if some princes in the worlde had them they woulde sone hope to be Lordes of all the seas and ere long of all the worlde (Spenser 1949, 62)

Richard McCabe’s response to the above passage from the View acknowledges its covert resentment toward the Catholic inhabitants of Ireland who do not make good use of the raw materials surrounding them:

This is an extraordinary passage. Aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty gradually modulates, through plans for its commercial exploitation, into fantasies of world empire as beauty, money and power coalesce. Ideally the countryside should serve the court. As matters stand, however, Ireland’s ‘commodious’ landscape is wasted upon ‘idle’ pastoral inhabitants who choose to leave it, contrary to the English practice, unenclosed and therefore ‘wyld’ and ‘desart’ (McCabe 1993, 83).

However, particular episodes in The Faerie Queene enact a kind of imaginative enclosure whereby a landscape that has been wild is finally brought to order. Initially the landscape has acted to sustain its villainous inhabitants but when they are defeated the landscape colludes with the virtuous to enact revenge upon them. The role of the landscape in suppressing those inhabitants who resist law and order is evident throughout The Faerie Queene but is particularly marked in Book 5 which is appropriate given its references to Ireland. Just as the Irish rivers attending the marriage of the Thames and the Medway have abandoned their savage context in order to celebrate an English union so the Irish landscape appears to bow to the will of the colonist and join with him in ridding its woods, caves, and waterways of rebels.

The episodes I have discussed constitute moments of resolution in The Faerie Queene where we can identify clear winners and losers in the fight between vice and virtue. There is a provisional finality when a particular enemy has been bodily annihilated, victories which tend to be signalled by the bodily disintegration of the enemy. The repeated destruction of recognisably Catholic villains suggests an almost neurotic desire to cleanse the landscape of their influence. That the landscape cooperates in this process makes the result all the more satisfying for the frustrated colonist.
My phrase `provisional finality' has, of course, a latent contradiction, a sense of unfinished business. I fully intend both sides of this contradiction: it's over, for now. Postcolonial thinking about *The Faerie Queene* and Ireland tends to privilege the non-closure of colonial projects, the failure to resolve tensions, and especially the disruption of identity which colonialism entails. Evidenced in the Irish rivers leaving their home and coming to England in the river-marriage canto and in the ambivalent landscape I have discussed here, we have reason to suppose that Spenser wanted us to consider the degree to which soil itself gives or effaces identity. These ambivalences should not blind us to the historical victories of the colonisers. Willy Maley has referred to "the genocidal actions of English forces" in Munster between 1580 and 1583. During these years approximately thirty thousand people living in the Munster area were eradicated in order to make way for around four thousand New English settlers. Maley comments: "The English euphemism for the settlement which followed in the wake of this act of genocide, `repeopling', hardly begins to tell the story of that horrific depopulation" (Maley 1997, 61). Like the English forces in Munster the heroes in Fairyland clear the landscape of their enemies and thus open the way for its reclamation by the virtuous. The participation of the landscape in this destruction constitutes a New English fantasy but perhaps also represents the worst imaginings of those people who could find no escape from massacre in Munster.

Notes

1I am grateful to The British Academy for supporting this research with the award of an Overseas Conference Grant.

2All quotations from Spenser's poem come from Spenser 1977.


4Osgood 1931, 504-06; Hankins 1971, 84-86; Rollinson 1990.

5Malengin is described as having "hollow eyes deepe pent" (5.9.10.5) and although this might suggest the spectral it could just as easily suggest hunger which, given his resemblance to the Irish, seems more likely.


7Ironically the Souldan's fate, presumably becoming food for scavengers, is prefigured in his habit of feeding men's flesh to his horses (5.8.28.6-9).

8Anon. 1560, Exodus 23:24. The allusion to Exodus has been noted by A. C. Hamilton in Spenser 1977, 608.

9For example see Spenser 1898, vii, xiv; Lewis 1936, 349; Jones 1930, 263; Hough 1962, 191-200; McCabe 1989; Hadfield 1997, 146-70.

Works Cited


