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Writing Early Ireland: A Panel Discussion

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Writing Early Ireland: A Panel Discussion

Laura Steblay, Caroline Vodacek, Rachel Larsen, Corinne McCumber, and Bailey Kemp
Outline

● Background
  ○ The Táin, Spenser’s The Faerie Queene, and Spenser’s A View of the Present State of Ireland

● Individual presentations
  ○ Caroline: Medb and Sheela-na-gigs in The Táin
  ○ Laura: Poets and gender in The Táin
  ○ Rachel: Feminine power in The Faerie Queene
  ○ Corinne: Giants and colonialism in The Faerie Queene
  ○ Bailey: Ecology and colonialism in The Faerie Queene and A View

● Questions from you!
Literature Backgrounds
The Táin Bó Cúailnge

- The Great Cattle Raid of Cuailnge
- 7th Century
- Characters
  - Medb
  - Cuchulainn
**A View of the Present State of Ireland**

- Published in 1596 by Edmund Spenser
- Colonial treatise; dialogue between Eudoxus and Irenius
- Outlines a detailed plan to exterminate the Irish and make Ireland English

*Kilkenny, by Francis Place, National Gallery of Ireland*
Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*

- Epic poem published in 1596

- Cyclical

- Allegory: a literary work whose characters represent abstract ideas
  - Religious
  - Political
“What Lies Between Friendly Thighs: Medb, Sheela-na-Gigs, and Fluid in *The Táin*”

Caroline Vodacek
Main doorway of Kilnaboy Church, County Clare.
“What Lies Between Friendly Thighs: Medb, Sheela-na-Gigs, and Fluid in *The Táin*”

Caroline Vodacek
What We Know:

Medb

What We Know:

Sheela-na-Gigs

Sheela-na-gig. Clonmel, County Tipperary, c. 12th century.
Le Brocquy, Louis. *Medb relieving herself.* 1969, lithograph on Swiftbrook paper, 54 x 38 cm.

Medb had set up a shelter of shields to guard the rear of the men of Ireland. ...

Then Medb got her gush of blood.

“Fergus,” she said, “take over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland until I relieve myself.”

...

So Fergus took over ... and Medb relieved herself. It dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household. The place is called Fual Medba...

-The Táin (250)
Le Brocquy, Louis. *Medb relieving herself.* 1969, lithograph on Swiftbrook paper, 54 x 38 cm.

Kinship Rituals

- Requirements:
  - Shared Drink
  - Bull Bath

Hill of Tara, County Meath.
Conclusion

Caroline’s arm and Medb’s cairn. Knocknarea, County Sligo.
“A Woman Wielding Words: The Role of the Woman-Poet and Woman-Prophet Fedelm in the Táin Bó Cúailnge”
“Medb said, ‘Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou the host?’
Fedelm said in reply:
‘I see it crimson, I see it red.””

Fedelm and Words

**Banfili - woman poet**
- *Fili* passed along oral tales; highly respected
- Power and credibility

**Imbas forosnai - The Light of Foresight**
- One of the skills of the fili
- The ability to prophesy the future
- What Fedelm uses
Fedelm and Imagery

Connection to Cúchulainn

- Visual foretelling of the hero

Outside the Gender Binary

- Fili status giving Fedelm a voice outside traditional womanhood
- Youth status placing Cúchulainn outside of manhood
Cúchulainn Riding his Chariot into Battle
J.C. Leyendecker, 1911

The Swingletree
Drawing by Liam de Paor, taken from William Sayer’s essay
Wielding Multiple Meanings

Weaving tool or strange sword?

- Textile-creation associated with fortelling destiny
- Sword with weighted cords hearkens to Cúchulainn’s *gae bolga*

Simultaneously a literary and visual foretelling of the events of *The Táin*
“Cloaked Authority: The Minimization of Feminine Power in The Faerie Queene”

Rachel Larsen
-“Spenser depicts Britomart ambivalently or even negatively at the moments in the poem when she adopts an authority characterized as masculine” (Villeponteaux 64)

-“double perspective [to describe] Britomart as. . .a warrior [first], then as woman. . .then as warrior again, until the apparent contradiction of warrior/woman seems entirely natural” (Woods 151)
Radigund
Amazon Queen

-“A princess of great powre and greater pride” (Spenser 5.4.33.5)
-“doth them of warlike armes despoile, / And cloth in womens weedes[clothing]; And then with threat / Doth them compel to worke, to earn their meat” (Spenser 5.4.31.1-3)
-“shamefull life, unworthy of a Knight” (Spenser 5.4.32.9)
-“bear” with “cruellclawes” (Spenser 5.4.40.6)
_____
Gloriana

The Faerie Queene

“Soverayne Goddesse, that doest highest sit / In seate of judgment, in th’Almightyes place, / And with magnificke might and wondrous wit” (Spenser 5.proem.11.1-3)
“A Giant Problem in Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*”

Corinne McCumber
Giant foes in Book Five

Egalitarian “Gyant” (V.ii.30.1)

Geryoneo (V.xi.9.5)

Grantorto (V.xii.15.2)
The mythic ancestral Irish

“the tallest of the clerics came only to the waist or the shoulder-top of these great men, who were already sitting down.”

~ Tales of the Elders of Ireland 5
Giants and the Irish land

Aerial view of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, photo taken by Chris Hill

The island of Inishtooskert in Northern Ireland, photo taken by Sharon Loxton
Detail of Zeus battling the giant Porphyrion, signed by Aristophanes (410-400 BCE)
The Egalitarian Giant, by Erin Wilaby (2018)
Jove casts his Thunderbolts at the Rebellious Giants, by Johann Michael Rottmayr (1690)
Heracles fighting Geryon, amphora by E Group potter (c. 540 BCE)
Illustration of Geryoneo by Walter Crane (1890)
Illustration of Arregall killing Grantorto, by Walter Crane (1890)
“Bodies, Blood, and Manure: The Rhetoric of Nutrient Cycling in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and *A View of the State of Ireland*”
Eudoxus: How then doe you think is the reformation therof to be begunne?

Irenius: Even by the sword; for all these evills must first be cut away by a strong hand, before any good can bee planted, like as the corrupt braunches and unwholesome boughs are first to bee pruned, and the foule mosse cleansed and scraped away, before the tree can bring forth any good fruite.

~ Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland* (93)
Endless Cycling

How ever gay their blossome or their blade

Doe flourish now, they into dust shall vade.

What wrong then is it, if that when they die,

They turne to that, whereof they first were made?

~ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (V.ii.40.4-7)
The Nutrient Cycle

English “planted” in soil

Irish bodies die and decompose

Irish bodies become the soil

New Irish bodies grow
The Body Problem

The fertile Irish soil is full of what
Spenser wants to get rid of: Irish bodies
A Zombie Villain

---

Full dreadful wight he was, as ever went
Upon the earth, with hollow eyes deepe pent,
And long curld locks, that downe his shoulders shagged,
And on his backe an uncouth vestiment
Made of straunge stuffe, but all to worn and ragged,
And underneath his breech was all to torne and jagged

~ Spenser, The Faerie Queene (V.ix.10.4-9)
Is Spenser Writing About Bog Bodies?

- **Peat Bogs**
  - High acidity and low oxygen
    - Preserves organic matter
- **Bog bodies**
  - Preserved corpses

- Old Croghan Man
  ~2,200 years old
  (National Museum of Ireland)

- Tollund Man
  ~2,400 years old
  (Christian Kober/Robert Harding)
Summary

- Spenser understood that bodies cycle back into the earth
- *A View* focuses on excising the Irish and “planting” the English
- *The Faerie Queene* exposes Spenser’s anxieties about Irish bodies literally embedded in the landscape
- It is impossible to grow an English society out of Irish soil
Synthesis

- Gender
- Literary intersections with archaeology
- Colonialism
- Landscape
- Portrayals of Irish people throughout history
Thank You!
Questions?