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A Giant Problem in Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*

In Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser has no qualms about killing giants, who appear at multiple points in the text. Spenser has his narrator explicitly call three foes giants: the Egalitarian “Gyant,” whom the protagonists Artegall and Talus fight over the redistribution of resources (V.ii.30.1); Geryoneo, whom the other protagonist, Arthur, fights to free the character Belge (V.xi.9.5); and Grantorto, who is said to be “Like to a Giant for his monstrous hight” during his fight with Artegall (V.xii.15.2). Other giants weave through the text, and all perish--though their deaths signal more than simple defeat in combat. Generally speaking, in scholarly examinations giants have been linked to classical and biblical usurpers of both God and the State. Yet giants are also, as I will show, uniquely connected to Ireland. Because of this connection, I argue that the giants of Book Five are representatives of Irish land and lore. Thus, their continual defeat throughout Book Five, building up to Artegall’s final battle with Grantorto, symbolizes the defeat of key aspects of Irish power. The giants’ defeat encompasses not just military loss and death but also the destruction of a historic national identity *and* the subjugation of distinctly Irish land--though that subjugation is not fully achieved in the end. To make this argument, I will provide an overview of how giants are associated with classical, biblical, and political usurpers--an association that makes them a particularly apt symbol of Ireland given the Irish rebellion against British rule during Spenser’s lifetime. Then, I will solidify the connections between giants and the mythic ancestral Irish as well as between giants and Irish land. Finally, I will return to Book Five, examining in particular Artegall’s fight with Grantorto, to illuminate the colonial undertones present whenever anyone in this poem fights a giant.

When Spenser uses giants in Book Five, he relies in many ways on classical mythology. Spenser's classical inclinations concerning giants are readily visible, for instance, when he notes that priests in the temple of Isis cannot drink alcohol because "wine they say is blood, / Even the bloud of Gyants, which were slaine, / By thundring Jove in the Phlegrean plaine" (V.vii.10.3-5). Here, it is generally accepted that Spenser references multiple sources concerning the demise of the giants, most notably Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plutarch's *Moralia*. In *Moralia*, Plutarch argues that "the blood of those who had once battled against the gods ... had become commingled with the earth," causing vines to sprout which eventually became wine (17). This is why those drinking wine lose their senses and become crazed; they become like the giants whose transformed gore they are consuming (Plutarch 17). Spenser's reference to wine thus reminds readers--through wine's relation to drunkenness and giant blood--that giants are violent, crazed usurpers of the gods. But for the specifics of how that usurpation happened, Spenser draws particular parallels to Ovid. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid details both the slaying of the giants in front of their mother, the Earth, and the gory aftermath:

Giants, it's said, to win the gods' domain,
Mountain on mountain reared and reached the stars.
Then the Almighty Father [Jove] hurled his bolt
...
Grim broken bodies crushed in huge collapse,
And Earth, drenched in her children's weltering blood,
Gave life to that warm gore; and to preserve
Memorial of her sons refashioned it
In human form. (1.151-60)

Similar to Ovid, Spenser attributes the destruction of the giants primarily to Jove's actions and emphasizes the gore that came from the giants, either creating spiteful humans (in Ovid's version) or wine (in Plutarch's and Spenser's). Thus, in Spenser's work, readers are strongly reminded of giants' classical associations with violence and usurpation.

Yet there is another layer of complexity to the archetypal giant character, one that is not readily apparent in the text of Book Five. This association is biblical: giants were also linked to corruption (as the Nephilim) and to the Tower of Babel in Spenser's day, cementing their opposition to a different kind of godly authority. The first mention of biblical giants comes before God floods the world because of human depravity. The scripture reads, "In those days as well as later, when the sons of the gods had intercourse with the daughters of mortals and children were born to them, the Nephilim were on the earth, they were heroes of old, people of renown" (*Oxford*, Genesis 6:4). While the Nephilim¹ are described as "people of renown" and "heroes," they are not viewed positively. As a footnote in the *Oxford Study Bible* explains, this line is "an ancient fragment, a folk explanation for a race of giants ... used here to illustrate the growing wickedness of humankind ... and to set the stage for the deluge" of the flood (Genesis 6:1-4n1). These giants are representatives of wickedness, destined to be killed by God. And giants are likewise painted in a negative light when the Tower of Babel is discussed. This story appears in Genesis 11, where it is said that all the world spoke a single language and attempted to build a tower with its top in the heavens (*Oxford*, Genesis 11:1-5). When God saw their progress, though, he confused their language and dispersed them over the world (*Oxford*, Genesis 11:5-8). This narrative was widely interpreted in the 1500s as parallel to the story of the giants fighting Jove. For example, Roger Iredale shows that John Calvin strongly linked giants to

¹ The exact meaning of the word *Nephilim* is subject to scholarly debate; however, scholars often interpret these beings as "fallen ones" (Hendel 22). In the Latin Vulgate Bible, this term is translated from Hebrew to the Latin *gigantes*, meaning giants, which further emphasizes the Nephilim-giant association (*Biblica*, Genesis 6:4).

the Tower (376). Calvin says when discussing Genesis 11 that “hereof sprang up the fable of the Giants, that they shoulde set mountains upon mountains, to pull Iupiter out of his heavenly throne” (qtd. in Iredale 376). Thus, giants in general can be read in a distinctly religious light; they are wicked and arrogant usurpers of a Christian God. While Spenser does not comment directly upon this connection in Book Five, the links nonetheless remain--perhaps echoing in the minds of readers thanks to Spenser’s earlier classical references.

Interconnected with this religious interpretation is the idea that giants are also enemies of the government. Iredale provides examples of this by showing how commentators such as George Sabinus, who was working with Ovid in 1584, equate “the battle of the giants against Jove ... with the conspiracy of powerful men against the State,” using the well-known rebels Sulla and Catiline as examples (378). In evoking the classical history of giants, Spenser could have additionally reminded readers of classical *human* usurpers of the state. And if the state is divinely appointed, as was the dominant belief in 16th-century England, then resisting it is equivalent to resisting God. Spenser himself describes the relationship between God and the state when he writes in the proem of Book Five:

That powre he [God] also doth to Princes lend,
And makes them like himselfe in glorious sight,
To sit in his owne seate, his cause to end,
And rule his people right, as he doth recommend. (V.proem.10.6-9)

Princes, sitting in God’s “own seate,” are not to be trifled with, for they are acting as the divine. Going against them and their ruling government is going against God. Thus, the complex web of interpretations seems to be complete--giants are classical, religious, and political usurpers, and invoking one aspect of the figures may bring to mind the others.

Giants' close ties to usurpation make them invaluable to Spenser when allegorically discussing Ireland because the Irish have a history of rebellion. Before, during, and after Spenser's lifetime, the Irish were fighting English colonial rule, making them usurpers in the eyes of the English. This is evident in Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland*, for instance, during a dialogue where the character Eudoxus asks, "But doe they [the Irish] not still acknowledge that submission [to the English]?" (16). To this the character Irenius--the knowledgeable expert of Ireland in *A View*--responds, "No, they doe not: for now the heires ... of them which yeelded the same, are (as they say) either ignorant thereof, or do willfully deny, or steadfastly disavow it" (16). As Spenser describes, this lack of acknowledgement of English dominance allows for the Irish to support Edward le Bruce (*View* 25), Thomas Fitz Garret (*View* 28), and others in various rebellions against England. The Irish are not submitting to English rule, so they are attempting to usurp English authority. Through their ties to rebellion and usurpation, then, giants and the Irish go hand-in-hand.

Spenser's discussion of the Irish is complicated, however, when one takes into account his familiarity with Irish culture. Clare Carroll has argued that Spenser had access to numerous forms of Irish knowledge. For example, drawing from Spenser's state papers, Carroll shows how he was familiar with Irish words such as "glenne" (valley), "kerne" (horseboy), and "galloglas" (foreign young warrior), among others from his work as a secretary in Ireland under Lord Arthur Grey (284). Furthermore, Carroll uses Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* to demonstrate that Spenser's interest in Irish culture went beyond his work as an administrator. Carroll references the character Irenius, who states, "I do herein rely upon those bards or Irish chronicles, though the Irish themselves, through their ignorance in matters of learning, and deep judgement, do most constantly believe and avouch them, but unto them besides I add my own

reading” (qtd. in Carroll 285). Taking this character to be an analogue for Spenser as far as knowledge is concerned, this scene shows that Spenser had numerous Irish sources from which to work. And Spenser went to great lengths to obtain his knowledge, for he also writes (through Irenius) that he had “caused diverse of them [Bardic poems] to be translated unto me” (qtd. in Carroll 286). This means Spenser probably went so far as to get translations to learn about Irish poetry. It is clear, then, that Spenser knew about and valued, in some way, Irish culture and lore.

This familiarity with Irish culture provides context for Spenser’s beliefs about Irish history and Irish relations to giants. For instance, when detailing Ireland’s history in his *View of the State of Ireland*, Spenser primarily references Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, both of which note that giants settled the Hiberno-English Islands in earlier times (Harper 38; Harper 43-44; Harper 48). Likewise, Spenser himself makes an explicit link between giants and Ireland, stating through the character Irenius that there were “Giants dwelling then in Ireland” around the time that he alleges the Scythians, a race of barbarians, came to the island (*View* 49). Thus, it is strikingly clear that Spenser was aware of how giants could have existed specifically in an Irish historical context.

Given his familiarity with Irish culture and historically based giants, Spenser was likely aware that giants are common symbols of the mythic ancestral Irish. Mixing history and myth is a particular aspect of Irish culture, and according to J. P. Mallory, “the Irish possess a written account of their Dreamtime,” a time in which “both the natural world and human culture and traditions originated” (9). This “Dreamtime” represents a liminal state in which Irish history and myth are culturally combined, meaning that the two genres of writing are not entirely separable. As such, the historic Irish and the mythic Irish people are one and the same--and they are huge.

The gigantic nature of the ancestral Irish is referenced in many different works. In *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, for instance, the hero Caílte and his fellow men of the Fíán warrior band are described as “enormous,” so large that “the tallest of the clerics came only to the waist or the shoulder-tops of these great men, who were already sitting down” (5). These figures, quite literally walking out of antiquity to accompany Saint Patrick as he christianizes Ireland, are gigantic. And Finn mac Cumail, the mythic-historic leader of the Fíán who appears in many other texts, is a giant as well. As Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp states, “According to Irish onomastic lore, a gigantic Finn is responsible for many features of the landscape, such as lakes and huge rocks, which he often created when throwing handfuls of earth and boulders at aggressive Scottish giants” (47). To be large enough to carve out a lake is to be a giant. Clearly, Ireland’s history and related myths are solidly situated on the shoulders of giants.

Giants also have special control over Irish land, thoroughly shaping their surroundings. Relating to Forste-Grupp’s comment on Finn’s size, for instance, the Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland derives its name from a scuffle between Finn and the Scottish giant Benandonner. The legend states that Finn “constructed a causeway from Antrim to the Scottish island of Staffa” to fight Benandonner (Crawford and Black 116). Following Finn’s victory, Benandonner “escaped back to Scotland [while] ripping up the causeway behind him ... leaving only remnants in Ireland and at Finn’s Cave on Staffa” (Crawford and Black 116). These fantastic stories explain how the earth was topographically formed. And in Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*, giants’ topographical control is referenced through the character of the Egalitarian Giant. Before his death, this giant

said that he would all the earth uptake,

And all the sea, devided each from either:

...

And looke what surplus did of each remaine,

He would to his [its] owne part restore the same againe. (V.ii.31.1-9)

Here, the Egalitarian Giant is suggesting the radical movement of the earth and sea to restore balance to the world, clearly confident in his ability to drastically change the landscape.

This control over the land is complicated by the fact that giants return to the earth after death, transforming them into the Irish landscape--an idea that is common in folklore. For instance, megalithic monuments throughout Ireland and western Europe were and are popularly termed "giants' graves" because of their massive size (Evans 8). This naming practice suggests that giants have been buried in the ground under enormous stone markers, becoming a part of the landscape. And this giant-and-earth connection is acknowledged today. For example, the island Inishtooskert (or, in Irish, *Inis Tuaisceart*) is popularly termed "the Sleeping Giant" because it looks like an enormous person laying down when viewed from the east (Carney and Hayes 7). In long-standing place-name onomastics, then, Irish giants *made* the land, and they *are* the land.²

Drawing on these Irish-giant associations, Spenser places symbolically resonant giants in more than just Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*. As Forste-Grupp argues, Spenser bases the giant Coulin in Books Two and Three of *The Faerie Queene* on the Irish heroes Finn mac Cumail and CuChulainn. Coulin is one of "Britain's native population of giants," and he dies when he is forced "to leap across a large pit into which [he] falls on the return leap" (Forste-Grupp 42). Laying out Coulin's similarity to Irish heroes, Forste-Grupp first addresses the phonetic similarities between "Coulin," "CuChulainn," and "mac Cumail" (44-5). She then

² It is worth briefly noting that Spenser was skeptical of such giant-based naming claims. Possibly commenting on these traditions, Spenser mentions in *A View* (through the character Eudoxus) that great stones were sometimes "vainly terme[d] the ould Giants Trevetts," showing that he knows of these popular practices, though he appears dismissive of them (80). Given this context, Spenser likely doesn't believe that giants *are* the Irish landscape, though he is surrounded by stories which say just that.

outlines some tales in which CuChulainn and Finn literally leap around Ireland, while also discussing Finn's gigantic size in numerous poetic and historical sources (45-8). Additionally, she pieces together from various manuscripts one account of Finn's death from an ill-considered jump over a chasm that is reminiscent of Spenser's description of Coulin's demise. Through similarities in sound, size, and demise, Forste-Grupp solidifies the link between the giant Coulin and the two Irish heroes; Spenser probably drew from Irish myth to create this giant. But this giant's death is likely more than a simple mythic retelling. Forste-Grupp argues that Spenser intended Coulin's demise to be a metaphor for the English defeat of rebellious Irish lords. She bases this on the fact that Irish poets in the sixteenth century sometimes called their patrons CuChulainn as a "symbol of Irish resistance to English rule" (50). If the character who is named after and based somewhat upon CuChulainn dies, then the ideas they represent are intended to die with them. Metaphorically, then, Spenser is attempting to kill the rebellion when he kills Coulin. The colonial purpose behind the story is laid bare--far before Spenser focuses more intensely on Ireland in Book Five.

Giants' various associations--with usurpation, the mythic ancestral Irish, the Irish landscape, and the giants who came before them--can come to mind every time a giant is mentioned in Book Five. What becomes particularly pronounced is how often giants (and thus the allegorical ideas they represent) are destroyed. Creating a simple catalogue of the giants' deaths is a poignant way to prove this point. When giants are first mentioned in Book Five, it is regarding how they were "quelled" by Jove using the sword *Chrysaor* (V.i.9.8-9). Then, the Egalitarian Giant is killed by Talus, who "shouldered him from off the higher ground, / And down the rock him throwing, in the sea him dround" (V.ii.49.8-9). As previously discussed, the giants' demise at Jove's hand is again referenced when discussing wine in the temple of Isis

(V.vii.10.3-5). Later, Geryon, a mythical giant who is only briefly mentioned as the father of Geryoneo, is said to have fallen “Under *Alcides* club,” referencing his death at the hands of Hercules (V.x.11.2-3). Next, Arthur stabs the triple-bodied giant Geryoneo: “Through all three bodies he [Arthur] him [Geryoneo] strooke attonce; / That all the three attonce fell on the plaine” (V.xi.14.1-2). And, lastly, Grantorto is struck upon the head and promptly beheaded (V.xii.23.1-9). As they are quelled, drowned, clubbed, stabbed, or beheaded, it is clear that giants can’t seem to survive Book Five. Though they sometimes fight back, their bodies and the allegorical ideas they represent are practically destined for death.

These defeats are part of a precise narrative structure, and they gain greater significance as they are repeated. To prove this point, Patricia Palmer argues that Book Five moves “between violent repression and endlessly reincarnated resistance” and that Spenser is “reproducing rather than resolving the dilemma of the Hydra’s regenerating heads” (“Defaced” 85). In other words, the savagery treated upon the giants and others can only beget more savagery. This is exemplified through the repeated patterns of violence that Spenser creates, but it is also worth noting the cumulation of this cycle, how it gains greater significance each time it is repeated. Through simple repetition, each of Artegall’s and Arthur’s victories against giants results in more metaphorical wearing down of the ideas giants represent, building up to the final battle of the book.

The greatest violence against giants, then, occurs with Grantorto’s defeat. Grantorto is the nail in the coffin for Book Five’s giants, and--significantly--he is cast as a distinctly Irish figure. This is perhaps most obvious because of his battle armor. He comes to the fight

All armed in a cote of yron plate,

...

And on his head a steele cap he did weare
Of colour rustie browne, but sure and strong;
And in his hand a huge Polaxe did beare,
Whose steale [handle] was yron studded, but not long (V.xii.14.3-8)

This regalia links him firmly to the Irish soldiers called galloglasses, whom Spenser describes in *A View of the State of Ireland* as being “armed in a long shirt of mayle downe to the calfe of [their] leg[s], with a long broad axe in [their] hand[s]” (74). By giving Grantorto similar armor and a similar axe, Spenser makes the giant into a much more obvious symbol both of the native Irish people as well as the violent Irish resistance.

Grantorto’s death is described in detailed--and in distinctly classical and Irish--terms:

So well he [Artégall] him [Grantorto] pursew’d, that at the last,
He stroke him with *Chrysaor* on the hed,
...
Againe whiles he him saw so ill bested,
He did him smite with all his might and maine,
That falling on his mother earth he fed:
Whom when he saw prostrated on the plaine,
He lightly reft his head, to ease him of his paine. (V.xii.23.1-9)

Spenser’s particular mention of the sword *Chrysaor* calls to mind the exploits of Jove, whom Spenser paints earlier as using *Chrysaor* in his own fight against the giants (V.i.9.8-9). This makes the episode between Artégall and Grantorto seem to be a reenactment of myth, perhaps fated to occur in just this way. Additionally, relating to both classical and Irish source materials, Spenser emphasizes Grantorto’s connection to the earth upon his death. Grantorto is said to die

on the “plaine,” bringing to mind the “Phlegrean plaine” discussed as the giants’ death-site in Spenser’s reference to wine--again mimicking classical myth (V.vii.10.3-5). And in stating that Grantorto falls upon and feeds upon his “mother earth,” Spenser reminds readers that giants were born of the earth (classically) and that they become the earth after death (which is emphasized in Irish contexts). In particular, putting one’s face to the earth is an often-repeated form of death in Irish tales. For instance, in *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, the hero Cailte relates a battle in which the “women put their faces to the ground and died of terror,” causing their burial place to be named the “Mound of the Womenfolk” (86). This link provides another example of how Grantorto’s death is distinctly Irish. Utilizing these generally classical and Irish associations, then, Spenser appears to quell the usurpation that giants represent.

The specifics of this slaughter are important, especially since Grantorto meets his end by beheading. A severed head, as Palmer notes, is “a memento vitae. It is its resemblance to the living, while being utterly drained of life, which disturbs us” (Introduction 4).³ A beheaded giant thus brings to mind a false semblance of life, where destruction has been complete. And a head also serves as a warning. Spenser references this function earlier in Book Five when the character Pollente is beheaded by Artegall for extorting people as they attempt to cross a bridge. After the fight, Pollente’s head is “pitcht upon a pole on high ordayned; / ... / To be a mirrour to all mighty men / ... / That none of them the feeble overren” (V.ii.19.4-8). In this scene, the lifeless head is an established threat to those “mighty men” who are similar to the beheaded. While this is not the exact fate that befalls Grantorto’s head, the threat is still present. As a warning and a symbol, controlling another’s head is controlling another’s power.

³ In modern English use, a “memento mori” is a reminder of the inevitability of death--though this translation does not reflect Latin grammatical structures (“Memento mori, n.”). As Palmer uses the phrase, then, a “memento vitae” is a reminder of life.

Such actions have a larger purpose behind them, for Spenser was a staunch colonist who wanted English control of Ireland to be expanded. His material circumstances show this, and *The Faerie Queene* itself is a “product of the material conditions of colonialism” because the Kilcolman estate in Ireland, where Spenser wrote, “came into the hands of the New English settlers, and eventually into Spenser’s possession, as a result of the seizure and division of the lands of the rebel Earl of Desmond” (Stoll xiv). Furthermore, in *A View*, Spenser “recommends a cruel suppression of the Irish and Irish culture” (Stoll xv), advocating for reformation “by the sword” (*View* 93). With this in mind, it is easy to see how Spenser highlights multitudinous levels of violence and destruction in *The Faerie Queene* to further his argument about English dominance over the Irish. In Grantorto’s death scene, this dominance is portrayed both through Artegall’s military victory and through Artegall’s control over the earth-based processes that are linked to giants. Grantorto’s defeat by arms shows Artegall’s (and, allegorically, England’s) military might compared to the Irish. And because Artegall kills Grantorto “on the plaine,” he seems to control the placement of the giant’s dead body--therefore controlling the earth’s shape through and after Grantorto’s demise (V.xii.23.8). Both the people and the land are thus subdued in one fell swoop. Here, Spenser’s violent ideologies drive his artistic work: he advocates for the fictional death of giants because he advocates for real-life colonialism, and giants represent a large number of ideas that stand in the way of English colonial expansion.

There is a problem, however, with Spenser’s solution of killing giants, for they still represent the Irish land in death--and the land does not appear to be entirely changeable. Spenser acknowledges this immutability in *A View*, stating through Irenius that previous English settlers “have degendred from their auncient dignities, and are now growne as Irish” (*View* 70). Here, the land seems to have an enduring Irish quality that causes those who use it (or are “growne” in it)

to adopt Irishness.⁴ Even in death, then, figures such as giants retain their Irish nature and pass it on to others by returning to the land, meaning that killing giants does not completely eradicate what they represent. There is definitely power in being able to kill such foes--their ability to wreak havoc is lessened when they are dead--though Spenser's solution is not as comprehensive as he might like. Giants, even in death, are fundamentally a part of the Irish landscape--whether Spenser wants them there or not.

The repeated defeat of giants in Book Five encompasses the destruction of classical, biblical, and political usurpers; the dismemberment of a historic Irish national identity; *and* the subjugation of uniquely Irish land. In creating and destroying these foes, Spenser kills more than just giants--he argues for the destruction of the ideas that they represent to further a colonial agenda that requires their eradication. Yet such measures cannot fully eradicate the Irish because giants return to the land, reinforcing its Irish nature, after death. In a fantasy world controlled by the colonist, it is clear that the giants--and the ideas that they represent--could not remain completely alive. History, however, does not agree with Spenser. Despite his efforts, Ireland is not under English control, and the Irish have not been destroyed, as evidenced by the resurgence of the Irish Gaelic language and the fact that figures like CuChulainn are held up as national heroes. The giants remain, carrying monumental meaning on their shoulders and foiling Spenser in both life and death.

⁴ I would like to thank Bailey Kemp for the seed of this idea, which comes indirectly from her paper concerning nutrient cycling in *The Faerie Queene* and *A View of the State of Ireland*, cited below. At the time of publication for this paper, her work was yet unpublished.

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