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Fairy in *The Faerie Queene*: Making Elizabeth Irish

Queen Elizabeth I defied the societal and political expectations of her time by remaining an unmarried, female monarch for the entirety of her rule. Despite this, she was glorified by many, including Edmund Spenser, who dedicated his epic poem *The Faerie Queene* to her. Yet tensions surrounding Queen Elizabeth's unmarried, powerful status infiltrate Spenser's work. Various female figures serve as shadows of Queen Elizabeth, including Gloriana, the ruler of fairyland; Radigund, an Amazon warrior; and Britomart, the Knight of Chastity, and all transfer their authority to men. While these characters may not directly represent Queen Elizabeth, the allegorical nature of the epic still suggests a blatant undermining of female power that offers an interesting conflict: in a work dedicated to a female with immense authority, Spenser puts forth a narrative that seems to argue against this power.

While some scholars have considered this conflict, very few have examined Queen Elizabeth in the context of her most blatant title: that of the "Faerie Queene." By choosing such a title, Spenser explicitly calls to mind fairylore and specifically, due to Spenser's knowledge of the Irish culture and literary tradition, the idea of *Irish* fairylore. At the root of this conflict are Irish sovereignty goddesses, female figures who have sovereignty over the land. While these goddesses do have power over the landscape, their role is to transfer this power to men through marriage. As a result, they serve as a way to not only establish a link between the Irish landscape and femininity but also as a symbol that can be easily manipulated to suggest a transfer of power to masculine control.

This Irish-feminine link and sovereignty goddesses in general can thus be used to interpret Book Five of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in a new light. First, the "Letter to Raleigh" and the proem to Book Five can be seen as outlining a vision of justice that excludes female rule. The Knight of Justice named Artegall, Radigund, Britomart, and the representation of Ireland named Irena combine to complete this vision of justice by favoring the power of male, non-Irish figures. Ultimately, these analyses integrate to suggest a protest against Queen Elizabeth's own power. Hence, I argue that Spenser *purposefully* invokes the presence of Irish sovereignty goddesses to imply that because of her connection to Irishness, as well as her femininity, Queen Elizabeth is not truly fit for rule. While putting forth a surface-level positive image, Spenser really offers an implicit protest against Queen Elizabeth: she is too feminine and too associated with the Irish - leaving her unfit for rule, as she cannot truly colonize the Irish as Spenser desires.

It is important to understand that in his "Letter to Raleigh," an introduction to *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser offers glory as an explanation for his use of "faerie" that does not fully acknowledge the complexity of his own political views toward Queen Elizabeth. When explaining his choice to represent Queen Elizabeth as the Faerie Queene Gloriana, Spenser states that "I meane glory in my generall intention ... I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our soveraine the Queene, and her kingdom in Faery land" (179). In this, we see that Spenser outwardly classifies his title of "Faerie Queene" as positive and complimentary, going so far as to identify Queen Elizabeth as the most important person in England. Yet there is a problem with this implication: Spenser himself admits that he holds critical views of Queen Elizabeth's governance. As Walter S. H. Lim details, this is shown most explicitly through Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland*, a dialogue that outlines detailed plans for Irish colonization and defends

Lord Grey, a deputy whom Queen Elizabeth called back from Ireland. For example, Lim notes that Irenius, a character often considered to be representative of Spenser's own voice, "offers a passionate defense for the right of the Lord Deputy [Lord Grey]" (Lim 49) to have "more ample and absolute authority" (qtd. in Lim 49), which indicates that "Spenser's portrayal of Elizabeth's mercy ... suggests the Queen does not fully appreciate the hard reality of controlling a rebellious and intransigent people like the Irish" (Lim 49). It is clear, then, that Spenser has critiques of Elizabeth; he fundamentally disagrees with her choice to recall Lord Grey, who he identifies as having "absolute" authority (Lim 49). Simple glory fails to convey the complex viewpoint that Spenser likely has toward Queen Elizabeth, as he disapproves of some of her most significant political actions.

The meaning of Spenser's title for Queen Elizabeth becomes more complex when considering the possible Irish contexts for a fairy-related title, especially given the fact that Spenser consistently adapts Irish literature, language, and fairylore to serve his own agenda. For example, Clare Carroll notes that Spenser's knowledge and manipulation of Irish literature appears in *A View of the State of Ireland* when Irenius states "I do herein rely upon those Bards or Irish Chronicles" (qtd. in "Spenser," 285). As Irenius is often considered to be a parallel to Spenser's own knowledge and views, this particular quote suggests that Spenser does not just know Irish works, but also actively depends on them. However, Spenser's knowledge goes beyond reliance on Irish texts; Carroll points out that many Gaelic words enter Spenser's correspondences with Lord Grey, and even in *A View*, he consistently uses Gaelic words such as *bawne* ("a fortified enclosure"), *rath* ("earthen rampart, or round trench"), and *galloglas* ("a foreign younger warrior") ("Construction" 284). Even further, Carroll demonstrates that Spenser's inclusion of the story of the Sons of Milesio in Book Five mimics the traditional Irish

work *Leabhar Gabhála* with changes that allow Spenser to make a justification for Irish colonization (“Construction” 288). In other words, Spenser, in addition to being aware of the Irish literary tradition, actively *manipulates* it for his own use.

Irish fairylore, as a subset of the Irish literary tradition, is also actively employed in Spenser’s works. In fact, despite what Matthew Woodcock notes as “a lack of direct source attribution” that makes the origin of Spenser’s fairylore unclear (35), scholars have made a compelling case for Spenser’s use of Irish fairylore in *The Faerie Queene*. For example, Edwin Greenlaw examines Book Two, noting that Spenser utilized common fairylore tropes such as leprechaun guards and vengeful fairies in the adventures of his knights. Even Woodcock admits that because Spenser was well-acquainted with Irish literature and culture and because he lived in Ireland for years before beginning *The Faerie Queene*, he likely came “in contact with the Gaelic tradition of fairy” (34). Given this evidence, the connection to Irish fairylore in Spenser’s work is not something to merely glance over, even if origins of Spenser’s knowledge are not entirely clear.

Due to Spenser’s reliance on Irish fairylore, Spenser’s “faerie” title can be seen as containing an implicit Irish link. David Macritchie reflects on Irish associations with the term “fairy,” stating that “whatever may be the myths and superstitions that cluster around the word ‘fairy,’ it is clear that the Gaelic word so Englished originally meant mound-dweller” (193). By the term “mound-weller,” Macritchie is referring to the *sidhe*: an ancient fairy race that lived in literal mounds in the ground. The importance of the *sidhe* is emphasized in the *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, as the *sidhe* - otherwise spelled as *síd* - are continuously referenced in casual instances such as naming individuals like “Lir of the *síd* of Finnachad” (15). This casual use of the *sidhe* across the text indicates their importance to the Irish people. In fact, Macritchie states

that St. Patrick concluded that “the people of Ireland worshiped the *sidhe*” (185). The *sidhe*, then, are at the core of the early Irish culture. As a result, Spenser connects to this rich Irish fairylore culture through the use of the term “faerie” that really comes from the ancient Irish tradition of mound-dwellers.

Even further, the Irish *sidhe* also carry a direct link to the Irish landscape itself. Because the term *sidhe* translates directly to mound-dweller, Irish fairies are defined by the fact that they are associated with the land. This link is widely accepted throughout Irish culture; for example, in *The Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, the *sidhe* are commonly associated with the landscape through the word *sidhe*'s dual meaning as a place-name and a race. For instance, individuals “remained in the *síd* [*sidhe*] for three days and three nights,” illustrating how the term *síd* is tied to a concept of place (*Tales* 15). Thus, while Spenser claims that his title merely invokes a sense of glory, it does much more - in addition to a link to Irish fairylore being created, Spenser also directly conjures the Irish landscape because the *sidhe* are so strongly tied to the land itself.

Drawing on this *sidhe*-landscape connection, Spenser's desire to control the Irish land and culture is expressed in the proem of Book Five. Spenser's speaker begins by expressing a need to right Justice in the world, stating,

The golden age, that first was named,
It's now at earst become a stonie one;
And men themselves, the which at first were framed
Of earthly mould, and form'd of flesh and bone,
Are now transformed into hardest stone. (V.proem.2.1-5)

Here, the deterioration of the world is specifically associated with the “earthly mould,” or more simply, the landscape (V.proem.2.4). However, this transformation is more than a change in

landscape; because the *sidhe* literally live in the “earthly mould,” a change in the landscape implies a change in the Irish culture as well (V.proem.2.4). As a result, this transformation indicates a more political concern: because the Irish are so inherently connected to the non-stone *earth*, a transformation to stone suggests a loss of power over the Irish themselves. Hence, Spenser reveals that his need for justice is rooted in returning to this golden age, where individuals such as himself remain in control over both the land and the culture of Ireland.

Even further, the tie to the Irish landscape in the proem also introduces a feminine link, asserting a need for a *masculine* control over of the Irish. For example, it is stated that “*men* themselves” who were formed “of earthy mould” have transformed into stone, suggesting a gendered deterioration because men, specifically, are pointed out - not women (V.i.2.3-4, emphasis added). In fact, in the last line of this stanza, Spenser’s speaker even states the men “into that ere long will be *degendered*,” indicating a deterioration specifically associated with gender (V.i.2.9, emphasis added). As a result, the fact that men have lost control of the “earthly mould” implies that females now have this control instead, or that men have become too feminine to control the land themselves. Because Spenser emphasizes a need for rectifying this, he implies a need for fully masculine *men* - not just the non-Irish - to regain control of the Irish landscape. In other words, Spenser’s vision of justice ultimately insinuates either a loss of female power or a removal of femininity from any male figure.

Because of these two interpretations of the same quote, we can see that Spenser is concerned with both Irishness *and* femininity. Even further, *A View* demonstrates that these themes are not isolated, but rather, are intentionally associated with one another. For example, in her work “Monstrous Regiment: Spenser's Ireland and Spenser's Queen,” Joan Craig points out that Spenser’s concerns with the Irish - such as the mantle worn by both men and women (4), the

woman-ish glib (5), and the fostering of children (9) - are all rooted in femininity. Similarly, Irenius states that the Irish were clothed in “longe garmentes like weomen ... and became moste tender and effeminate” (qtd. in Craig 5). As Craig concludes, the negative connotation of “tender and effeminate” demonstrates that Spenser critiques the Irish, in part, because of their supposed femininity (qtd. in Craig 5). In Spenser’s eyes, Irishness carries an implicit feminine connotation. Thus, the use of the term “degender” in the proem of Book Five offers a much more concrete meaning. Because Irishness is rooted in femininity, Spenser asserts that restoring true justice - regaining control of the Irish land - *requires* that this justice be executed by a male.

Continuing through the proem, Spenser’s preference for male power can be used to offer an implicit criticism of Queen Elizabeth through fairylore, primarily using the concept of Irish sovereignty goddesses. Spenser’s speaker references Queen Elizabeth’s sovereignty through the figure of Gloriana, stating that she has “soveraine powre” (V.proem.10.3). This offers a political connotation, with sovereignty referring to the “the position, rank, or power of a supreme ruler or monarch” (“sovereignty, n.”). However, Queen Elizabeth’s sovereignty is shown to be more than merely political when Spenser’s speaker refers to Gloriana directly as a “Dread Soverayne Goddess,” invoking Irish fairylore (V.proem.11.1). Specifically, the very first of the *sidhe* were known as Irish sovereignty goddesses: females who have power or control over a specific Irish land or territory (Olsen 58). By referring to her as a sovereignty goddess, Spenser’s speaker acknowledges Gloriana’s - and thus Queen Elizabeth’s - power over the Irish landscape. However, this power is also simultaneously removed through the term sovereignty goddess as well. As Karen Olsen explains, “since the Irish saw their land and sovereignty as feminine, the marriage of the king to the sovereignty/territorial goddess...was a prerequisite for the latter’s successful rule” (58). Sovereignty goddesses do not merely have power over their land; they

also, through marriage, are meant to transfer this power. As a result, we see that Spenser's speaker - by referring to Queen Elizabeth with such a term - establishes that her power is not absolute; it can be transferred to a male figure.

In Spenser's allegory, this transfer of power is executed through the Knight of Justice, Artegall, primarily because he is separated from Irishness via both his maleness and his non-fairy identity. Shortly after Spenser refers to Queen Elizabeth as a sovereignty goddess, he states "thy great justice prayed overall: / The instrument whereof loe here thy *Artegall*" (V.proem.11.8-9). Despite the fact that Queen Elizabeth has sovereign power, introducing Artegall as an instrument suggests that she is not able to execute justice herself. In fact, we see Spenser doing exactly what the concept of sovereignty goddesses implies: a bestowing of power onto a male.

What defines this exchange of power, however, is the fact that Artegall is human, in contrast to Queen Elizabeth's representation as fairy. This is shown when Astrea, the goddess of Justice, captures Artegall to train him. Specifically, she "did allure [Artegall] with gifts and speaches milde, / To wend with her. So thence him farre she brought / Into a cave from companie exilde" (V.1.6.5-7). Here, we see Spenser drawing on Irish changeling lore, which traditionally outlines how a human child is stolen and replaced with a fairy. While Artegall is not replaced by a fairy and Astrea is not necessarily a fairy herself, the fact that Astrea "allure[d]" Artegall until he went with her signifies a kidnapping of sorts, which strongly echoes how human children were stolen by fairies (V.i.6.5). Spenser therefore manipulates changeling lore to make a clear distinction: despite the fact that he is in fairyland, Artegall is *not* fairy. This differentiation is reaffirmed as Woodcock also notes that in Book Three of *The Faerie Queene*, Artegall is introduced as "no *fary* borne," but he was "by false *Faries* stolen away" (qtd. in Woodcock 86). By defining Artegall as non-fairy, he is in sharp contrast to Queen Elizabeth, who is referred to

as “the Faerie Queene.” Given the fact that the idea of fairy connects so clearly to Irish tradition, this division makes sense: Artegall, as a non-fairy, lacks an association with the Irish. As part of Artegall’s quest for justice includes regaining control of the Irish landscape, he cannot have this Irish association. Conversely, Queen Elizabeth is *not* able to restore justice: she is too associated with the Irish through her female-fairy dynamic. Accordingly, Spenser fulfills his claim that a male, non-fairy is needed to restore justice by introducing Artegall as the mechanism to do so.

The condemnation of female-instilled justice is repeated through a variety of female figures. Among these is Radigund, a powerful Amazon warrior who is used to allegorically display the relationship between the Irish and Old English. In this context, the Old English are primarily Catholic descendants of the Anglo-Normans who invaded Ireland in the 12th century; they eventually intermingled with the native Irish, an assimilation that Spenser found highly problematic. As Carroll notes, Radigund’s association with the Irish and Old English begins when Spenser’s speaker refers to her as a “Puttocke” (V.v.15.1), a term only used in *A View* to describe the Old English who were “Grownen to be as very puttockes as the wild Irish.” (qtd. in Carroll, “Spenser” 82). This link is given more clarity when Radigund

made him [Artgall] to be dight
 In woman weedes, that is to manhood shame,
 And put before his lap a napron white,
 In stead of Curiets and bases fit for fight. (V.v.20.6-9)

Here, we see that the ultimate punishment for Artegall is to be put into “woman weedes” - essentially, to be feminized (V.v.20.6-9). This negative feminization is very similar to the rhetoric used in *A View* to criticize the Old English. For example, Clare Carroll observes that “Irenius speaks of the law against the wearing of Irish apparel, which is not observed by the Old

English” (“Spenser” 182). Thus, Carroll argues, Artegall - in his feminized state - and the Old English are similar, as they both adopt Irish customs linked through feminine clothing. Drawing on this similarity, Carroll concludes that “Radigund is associated with the influence of the Irish upon the Old English, as Artegall is associated with the ‘degendering’ of the Old English” (“Spenser” 182). Hence, Radigund functions as the Irish who assimilate the Old English, whereas Artegall functions as the feminized Old English in this episode. Because Spenser was highly critical of such English-Irish assimilation, this allegorical relationship suggests a particularly negative portrayal of Radigund.

Given the fact that Radigund may function as a shadow of Queen Elizabeth simply by being a female monarch, this allegory offers an implicit criticism of Queen Elizabeth. Radigund’s association with Queen Elizabeth is strengthened when Spenser refers to Radigund as a “soverayne Lord,” (V.v.27.8). linking Radigund to the political power that Queen Elizabeth also has. Curiously, as Mary Villeponteaux notes, Radigund’s name is derived from Saint Radegund, who “remained a virgin despite her marriage to Clotaire; this aspect of her story highlights Radigund’s representation of Queen Elizabeth - like Radigund a virgin queen” (218). Thus, the character Radigund embodies two elements that were often characterized as negative in Spenser’s time: the allowance of English-Irish assimilation, and the Queen’s unwillingness to be married. Given the fact that Spenser so clearly links Irishness and femininity, it is no surprise that Spenser links these two concepts in one negatively portrayed figure. As a result, Radigund’s role in allowing English-Irish assimilation, as a non-married, sovereign figure, can be visualized as a criticism of Queen Elizabeth. While clearly, Queen Elizabeth was not the *cause* of the influence of the Irish upon the Old English - as it began before her rule - Spenser suggests her and her unmarried status as being integral to the English-Irish assimilation that is still ongoing.

This criticism of Queen Elizabeth is reinforced through Radigund's defeat by Britomart, the Knight of Chastity and another representation of Queen Elizabeth. When Britomart finally rescues Artegall, she "caused him [Artegall] those uncomely weedes undight," reversing the feminization that Radigund has inflicted (V.vii.41.2). As a result, she allegorically overcomes the English-Irish assimilation and unmarried status that Radigund represents, reinforcing criticism of the assimilation that Queen Elizabeth, as an unmarried ruler, has allowed. In other words, Spenser has showed which version of Queen Elizabeth he prefers: the one who is destined to marry and is less associated with the Irish.

Yet even Britomart loses power through the sovereignty-goddess trope, further enforcing this condemnation of Queen Elizabeth. When Britomart is first introduced in Book 3 of the *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser's speaker identifies her as a sovereignty goddess because of her destiny to marry "the prowest knight [Artegall], that euer was" and "Therefore submit thy [Britomart's] wayes vnto his will / And do by all dew means thy destiny fulfill. (III.iii.24.7-9). Here, we can see that Britomart's destiny is to marry Artegall and submit to his will; hence, she is as an unnamed sovereignty goddess - someone with only transient power meant for someone else. This is fulfilled when Britomart defeats Radigund and "the liberty of women did repeal ... them restoring / To mens subjection, did true Justice deal," where *both* Britomart's and Radigund's power is returned to men (V.vii.42.6-8). Despite the fact that Britomart is destined to be married and is not representative of English-Irish assimilation, it is not enough. Britomart is inherently tied to the Irish people and landscape through her status as a sovereignty goddess and as a woman - and thus, her power, no matter what, is meant to be transferred to men. Queen Elizabeth's representations through Britomart and Radigund thus strengthen her links to the Irish

and the Irish landscape, offering an implicit condemnation: she, too, is intended to be restored to “mens subjection” (V.vii.42.8).

Spenser’s criticism of female authority becomes more specific to the political context of his time when his speaker discusses the restoration of Irena, an allegorical representation of Ireland. For example, when Artegall kills Grantorto to save Irena, the freed people went “To faire *Irena*, at her feet did fall” (V.xii.24.6). Yet despite this, the focus is not on Irena; instead, it is on Artegall, as “her [Irena’s] champions glorie sounded over all” (V.xii.24.9). In other words, Ireland and its people are ignored; instead, the focus is on the champions, on the English. After this claim, we see Irena,

Who streight her leading with meete majestie
Unto the pallace, where their kings did rayne,
Did her therein establish peaceable,
And to her kingdomes seat restore agayne;
...
That Tyrants part, with close or open ayde,
He [Artegall] sorely punished with heavie payne. (V.xii.25.1-6)

In the restoration of Ireland, Queen Elizabeth or representations of her are entirely absent: there are “kings” in the palace, and the peace is restored, yet no form of female power is mentioned (V.xii.25.2). Consequently, the masculine “kings” overwhelm this passage, implicitly suggesting a form of male restoration of Ireland (V.xii.25.2). Even more, however, it is noted that “*He* sorely punished with heavie payne” (V.xii.25.6, emphasis added). Here, we see that the one re-instilling justice by punishing the tyrants is a completely masculine figure. Because Spenser’s speaker defines the reconstruction of Ireland being done by “He,” we see that female authority is

removed from Spenser's rectification of justice. Spenser, quite simply, has no interest in feminine power being a part of his instilment of justice.

The discussion of the restoration of Irena is informed by the context of Lord Grey's actions in Ireland, further supporting Spenser's vision of male authority and a direct, although implicit, condemnation of Queen Elizabeth. Lord Grey served as the Lord Deputy of Ireland, and Spenser worked as his secretary for some time. However, as noted above, Queen Elizabeth ultimately re-called Lord Grey from his post, which Spenser's speaker discusses in canto seven of Book Five. For example, Spenser's speaker aligns Artegall with Lord Grey, stating that

He [Artegall] was that Realme for to redresse.

But evenies cloud still dimmeth vertues ray.

So having freed *Irena* from distresse,

He tooke his leave of her, there left in heavinesse. (V.xii.27.6-9)

Here, Spenser's narrator references how Lord Grey was recalled from his work in Ireland by Queen Elizabeth "amid complaints that his rule had been too violent," as Stoll notes (172n5). However, this recall is painted in a positive manner: Grey "freed" Ireland, and "took his leave," implying that it was on his own accord (V.xii.27.8-9). Thus, Spenser's narrator showcases Grey as a positive figure, someone successful at restoring justice, when in reality, his Queen was not necessarily in agreement. In the moment when Ireland is finally restored - when Spenser's ultimate vision reaches fulfillment - his Queen is absent in favor of the male figure she called back. The message is clear: Queen Elizabeth's power is only transient - just like the sovereignty goddesses, her power, ultimately, belongs to men like Lord Grey.

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Book Five, despite being dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, contains a large amount of implicit criticism through the lens of Irish fairylore. Specifically, by

referring to Queen Elizabeth as the “Faerie Queene” and allowing various representations of her to function as Irish sovereignty goddesses, Spenser creates an Irish-feminine link that serves as the groundwork for his unraveling of female power. In the proem, he establishes his vision for a non-feminine authority; through Artegall, Britomart, and Radigund, we see this vision put into practice; and through Irena, Queen Elizabeth’s power - as an unmarried monarch - is condemned. Ultimately, Spenser’s viewpoint is clear: Elizabeth, because she is implicitly associated with the Irish and femininity, is unable to truly restore justice. Instead, a male authority is needed to allow Spenser’s version of justice to reign over the colonized Irish. Spenser may have been particularly obsessed with this vision given the fact that Elizabeth, after all, was unmarried. Queen Elizabeth’s power was therefore not transient, meaning that she remained everything that Spenser argues against most: a woman with irrepressible sovereign power.

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