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Marrying waterways: Politicising and gendering the landscape in Spenser's Faerie Queene river-marriage canto by Dr Joan Fitzpatrick

In April 1580 Edmund Spenser wrote a letter to his old Cambridge friend Gabriel Harvey telling him about a literary project he intended to undertake in the near future:

I minde shortly at conuenient leysure, to sette forth a Booke . . . whyche I entitle, Epithalamion Thamesis, whyche Booke I dare vndertake wil be very profitable for the knowledge, and rare for the Inuention, and manner of handling. For in setting forth the marriage of the Thames: I shewe his first beginning, and offspring, and all the Countrey, that he passeth thorough, and also describe all the Riuers throughout Englande, whyche came to this Wedding, and their righte names, and right passage, etc. A worke beleue me, of much labour, wherein notwithstanding Master Holinshed hath muche furthered and aduantaged me, who therein hath bestowed singular paines, in searching oute their first heades, and sources: and also in tracing, and dogging oute all their Course, til they fall into the Sea. (Spenser 1949, 17)

We do not know what became of Spenser's project; he may have abandoned it--perhaps because it was too ambitious--or it may simply have been lost. The Variorum edition identified six critics who thought that the marriage of the Thames and the Medway, which occurs in Book 4 canto 11 of The Faerie Queene, completes the intention announced in Spenser's letter to Harvey concerning Epithalamion Thamesis, with just one dissenting voice (Spenser 1949, 266).

The description of the marriage of the Thames and the Medway is a celebration of English nationhood and the governance of waters. The episode serves as a model for the attempted resolution in poetry of competing territorial claims and makes explicit Spenser's perception of the importance of landscape within the political, historical, and social concerns of the poem. The celebratory tone of the episode belies its function as a fantastical, selective, and imaginative reshaping of landscape which subordinates geographical reality to an ideological ideal. That Spenser's poetry has a distinct nationalistic agenda was of interest to critics who, influenced by theoretical developments, recognised the colonial agenda running through The Faerie Queene. The polarization of Spenser's experience and his imagination is typical of binary oppositions which have dominated Spenser studies for many years: England versus Ireland, coloniser versus colonized, poetry versus political polemic; this last binary made textual in the generic distinction between The Faerie Queene and A View of the Present State of Ireland. However, in the late twentieth century there was an effort to acknowledge that boundaries between apparent binary opposites can be less than distinct. Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning prompted closer analysis of Spenser's poetry in the light of theoretical ideas, particularly those of Jacques Derrida. Greenblatt's explanation of Guyon's aggression in the Bower of Bliss focused upon colonial efforts to avoid the "threat of absorption" that colonized cultures presented to the colonizer, that is the threat of the constructed binaries of Self and Other, civilized and uncivilized, collapsing into each other (Greenblatt 1980, 172). In the collection of

essays that appeared in 1989, Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective, literary critics and historians informed by recent theoretical debate actively engaged with the binaries that have traditionally governed Spenser studies. In his introduction to the collection Nicholas Canny questioned the traditional view that there is a distinction between Spenser's polemical and creative writing by asserting the two way process between The Faerie Queene and the View (Canny 1989, 9). This is related to his challenge of the traditional notion of Spenser as humanist versus Spenser as militant protestant: Spenser could be both, claimed Canny (Canny 1989, 13-15). As critics have come to accept the influence of Spenser's Irish experience on his poetry they have recognised that traditional dichotomies such as English versus Irish or colonizer versus colonized are inadequate. David Baker has pointed out that although the people inhabiting Ireland were carefully categorized by the colonists into Old English, New English, or 'meere' Irish these categories are inherently unstable (Baker 1992, 38-40). Drawing upon the theories of Homi Bhabha, Andrew Hadfield, like Baker, claimed that nationhood cannot be considered in terms of polarities because no identity--colonizer or native--is pure but rather both groups will be altered by contact (Hadfield 1997, 1-4). In a similar vein Willy Maley rejected what he called "simplistic divisions" (Maley 1997, 52) and noted that, given the Scottish context of the View (Maley 1997, 136-62) and the fact that Spenser was particularly resentful toward the Old English (Maley 1997, 52-58), traditional dichotomising cannot adequately reflect the situation in early modern Ireland.

This essay will show that Spenser's depiction of the marriage ceremony between the Thames and the Medway is further evidence of this tendency for apparently fixed binary opposites to collapse into each other. Spenser presents us with an English landscape into which Irish rivers have been absorbed. Given Spenser's denunciation of the degeneration of the Old English in the View we might expect this cartographic miscegenation to be disturbing but there is little trace here of any malevolent Irish influence. The process of absorption has been reversed and Englishness absorbs Irishness rather than the other way round. Most importantly, there is no indication that the presence of the Irish rivers will undermine the joyful celebrations.

After a brief flurry of interest in the 1960s (Fowler 1964, 170-75; Roche 1964, 167-84; and Oruch 1967), Spenser's marriage of the Thames and the Medway has attracted little critical comment. The marriage of the rivers occurs in Book 4, the one devoted to the praise of 'friendship' which critics have increasingly referred to in terms of 'concord' or, more specifically, discordia concors: the birth of concord from discord. Concord carries the inter-personal sense of harmony and agreement but it has political and public dimensions too. Appropriately enough, this public display of concord, the marriage, occurs in one of the series of Books of The Faerie Queene (4-6) concerned with public virtues and published together in 1596. Given the emphasis on topography in canto 11 it is significant that 'concord' should also have a topographical sense for it is also recorded as a legal term pertaining to land: "An agreement made in court respecting the conveyance of a fine of lands; also, an agreement made between two or more upon a trespass committed" (OED sb. 3).

In the July eclogue of The Shepherd's Calender Spenser refers to "The salt Medway, that trickling stremis / adowne the dales of Kent: / Till with his elder brother Themis / his brackish waues be meynt" (Spenser 1989, lines 81-84). The Shepherd's Calender was published in 1579, seventeen years before the first edition of Books 4-6 of The Faerie Queene. In The Faerie Queene Spenser has changed the sex of the Medway with the effect that the rivers are transformed from brothers to betrothed. That the rivers should become lovers is hinted at in The Shepherd's Calender by reference to the Medway's "brackish waues" which are "meynt", that is 'mingled', with those of his brother. Calling the Thames the elder brother in the earlier poem appears to make the relationship hierarchical but not if Spenser was thinking of the Irish practice of gavelkind (whereby land was distributed equally among sons) rather than the English law of primogeniture. Even if we do consider the relationship in The Shepherd's Calender to be hierarchical it is so in a different way from that presented in The Faerie Queene in that the shift from brothers to lovers is primarily significant in terms of gender, not rank. It might be objected that allowing the rivers to remain an image of platonic male friendship would have been more fitting for a Book devoted to friendship but, on the other hand, changing the sex of the Medway allows Spenser to bring the rivers together in a public celebration, an event that would hardly be possible were the rivers to remain brothers or even male. That the merging of the rivers should be presented as a marriage, a legal contract which describes a relationship which is both public and private, alerts us to Spenser's preoccupation in his river poetry with the sexual act and its consequences and the way in which the private sexual union is related to public, indeed political, life.

A.M. Buchan and Alastair Fowler have detected political and national dimensions in the union of the rivers in Book 4, particularly in Spenser's choice of the Medway as a marriage partner for the Thames. Alastair Fowler has claimed that the Medway was by no means an obvious partner for the Thames and, in fact, Spenser was the first to write about the marriage of these two rivers (Fowler 1964, 171). Fowler objected to Buchan's assertion, following Upton, that the Medway was chosen by Spenser as a compliment to Philip Sidney whose home Penhurst was in Kent. According to Fowler, the Thames is representative of England as a whole and the Medway in Kent was chosen as spouse for the Thames because of its associations with Elizabeth whose royal palace was in Kent and who could be considered the most appropriate spouse for England (Fowler 1964, 172). The whole canto, is, according to Fowler, "a festival piece, celebrating a visionary England--and Ireland--united in friendly alliance, and married to a sovereign whose policy promises a strong and prosperous peace" (Fowler 1964, 174-75). Fowler summed up the relationship between England and Ireland in the canto as one of "friendly alliance", suggesting partnership and equality--the ideal humanist marriage one might say.

Fowler's easy reading of the river-marriage canto is inadequate because it makes no attempt to consider the strained effect of Ireland's presence at this celebration which takes place in England. If we are going to consider the relationship

between England and Ireland as a marriage then we must come to the conclusion that the relationship is not governed by mutuality. Fowler's notion of the relationship as a "mutual" marriage is fine in terms of Spenser's poetic reality but is naive in terms of political reality ignoring as it does the history of the relationship between the two countries. The reality of England's relation to Ireland is that of a powerful entity which dominated and exploited despite resistance; if the marriage metaphor is appropriate then surely England, the husband, has been guilty of sexual violence--as Seamus Heaney points out in his poem about the relationship between the two "Act of Union" (Heaney 1975, 49). This reality is avoided by both Fowler and Spenser in favour of an illusion of conviviality. Despite the great lengths Spenser goes to in order to conjure up an image of "friendly alliance" might he at some level be aware that the picture he paints is somewhat forced?

Certainly the Irish rivers are among the guests celebrating the wedding of the Thames and the Medway: "Ne thence the Irish Riuer absent were, / Sith no lesse famous then the rest they bee, / And ioyne in neighbourhood of kingdome nere". But the narrator is somewhat defensive about their inclusion: "Why should they not likewise in loue agree, / And ioy likewise this solemne day to see?".¹ The question anticipates criticism about the Irish presence which the narrator justifies by reference to their fame and proximity. There are many Irish rivers attending the ceremony but the narrator does not list all of them: "I them all according their degree, / Cannot recount, nor tell their hidden race, / Nor read the saluage cuntreis, thorough which they pace" (4.11.40). Whether the narrator "cannot" give us this information because he does not know it or whether he is prevented from disclosing it is unclear but in a literary work we have to treat the narrator's drawing attention to this absence in the account as itself a significant presence. The fact is that the history of the rivers named and their relation to the Irish landscape remains unstated. This is not true of the preceding English rivers whose histories are related without demur, for example we are told about the river Tyne "along whose stony bancke / That Romaine Monarch built a brasen wall, / Which mote the feeble Britons strongly flancke / Against the Picts, that swarmed ouer all" (4.11.36.1-4) and the river Dee which "Britons long ygone / Did call diuine" (4.11.39.3-4). As Andrew Hadfield has noted, the Irish rivers are guests "only on the condition that much of the history they carry with them is hidden from view" (Hadfield 1997, 144). But why include the Irish rivers at all if their history must be suppressed? Of all the histories that might be suppressed in this account the one which most urgently calls out for elision is that of England's role in Ireland's violent past. Spenser envisages a peaceful celebration which includes Ireland's waterways but from which Ireland itself--its history, and its people--are excluded. Yet they are not entirely concealed for Spenser's reference to the river's "hidden race" and "saluage cuntreis" alerts us to what he desires to keep hidden with the word 'saluage' carrying overtones of violence, thus allowing us a glimpse of the darker under-side of Ireland. Whether Spenser accidentally or deliberately allows us this glimpse is difficult to ascertain but if accidental then it seems likely to be an effort on his part to control the savage island.

The impulse to control and contain the landscape and its truths is evident in Spenser's habit of re-naming Ireland's topographical features. This poetic idiosyncrasy reflects the longstanding history of English legal attempts to control naming, an issue discussed in the *View*:

for the better breakinge of these heades and septes which I toulde youe was one of the greatest strengthes of the Irishe me thinkes it shoulde be verye well to renue that olde statute that was made in the Raigne of [Edward the fourth] in Englande, by which it was Comaunded that wheareas all men then vsed to be Called by the name of theire septes accordinge to theire seuerall nacions, and had no surnames at all, that from thenceforthe eache one shoulde take vnto him selfe a seuerall surname ether of his trade and facultye or of some qualitee of his bodie or minde, or of the place wheare he dwelte, so as euerie one should be distinguished from thother, or from the moste parte, wherby they shall not onelye not depende vppon the heade of theire septe as now they doe but allso shall in shorte time learne quite to forgett his Irishe nacion. (Spenser 1949, 214-15)

Of course legal attempts to control naming extended to the control of language itself, as evidenced by An 'Act for the English Order, Habit, and Language' (1537):

And be it enacted that every person or persons, the King's true subjects, inhabiting this land of Ireland, of what estate, condition or degree he or they be, or shall be, to the uttermost of their power, cunning and knowledge, shall use and speak commonly the English tongue and language . . . [and] shall bring up . . . his . . . children in such places, where they shall or may have occasion to learn the English tongue, language, order and condition. (Maxwell 1923, 113)

Perhaps the most significant renaming in Spenser's river-marriage canto is that of 'Mulla' for the river Awbeg: "And Mulla mine, whose waues I whilom taught to weep" (my emphasis) being a reference to Spenser's earlier use of the fictive name in Colin Clouts Come Home Again, published in 1595. In renaming the river, Spenser claims ownership, control, and authority: "Mulla mine". Claiming possession of this river in the context of a marriage ceremony is significant: the male poet has imagined the river female in its former poetic creation and in his river-marriage canto becomes a husband-figure taking possession of the female by renaming. In the same way that a woman loses her name in marriage so the Awbeg has been renamed by Spenser, the implication in both cases being that identity is negated and he who controls language controls that which he names.

If glimpses of Ireland's hidden history darken the joyful proceedings underway in Proteus's hall so too do the stories of sexual violence which frame the narrative. It is disturbing that the marriage of the Thames and the Medway should be celebrated in Proteus's hall when at the very same time Florimell is suffering at the hands of Proteus. A victim of his sexual aggression, she has been held captive in his dungeon for seven months (4.11.4). It is even more disturbing that the narrator should first remind the reader of Florimell's predicament and then leave her there during his description of the joyous event going on above her prison:

Bvt ah for pittie that I haue thus long
Left a fayre Ladie languishing in payne:
Now well away, that I haue doen such wrong,
To let faire Florimell in bands remayne,
In bands of loue, and in sad thralldomes chayne;
From which vnlesse some heauenly powre her free
By miracle, not yet appearing playne,
She lenger yet is like captiu'd to bee:
That euen to thinke thereof, it inly pitties mee.
(4.11.1)

We might well ask what other function a narrator performs if it is not one comparable to that of a "heavenly powre" that might free her. Another instance of sexual violence is evident in Spenser's account of the rape of the the nymph Rheusa by Blomius resulting in the creation of three Irish rivers (4.9.42) It is perhaps ironic that the marriage of the Thames and the Medway should be celebrated amidst such feminine reluctance: not only is Florimell imprisoned against her will by the lustful Proteus and Rheusa subjected to rape but the bride herself, the Medway, has taken much persuading:

Long had the Thames (as we in records reed)
Before that day her wooed to his bed;
But the proud Nymph would for no worldly meed,
Nor no entreatie to his loue be led;
Till now at last relenting, she to him was wed.
(4.9.8.5-9)

That Proteus's sexual violence should mar the peaceful celebration of sexual love that takes place in his house suggests a broader political reference. Florimell's prison is "wall'd with waues" (4.11.3.6), an island, and aggression towards her occurs close to a site of peace and order which may suggest Irish aggression against English peace--either the threat of Irish violence to the island of England or the threat of Irish violence against those English who dwell within the island of Ireland. If we focus on the latter suggestion then the peace threatened is contained within the island of Ireland and so the violence alluded to is against either the Pale or Ireland's principal towns. Security was a priority in Elizabethan Ireland. As R. A. Butlin has pointed out, the city of Cork was situated on an island accessible only by bridges (Butlin 1976, 159) and its walls were "ten feet thick in places and fifty feet high" with the gates "continually guarded" against Irish outlaws (Butlin 1976, 160). Spenser's desire to contain the Irish landscape by renaming and claiming ownership ("Mulla mine"), mirrors the act of marriage as a means of containing female sexuality. But his efforts at containment are not entirely successful and Ireland's violent reality can be glimpsed. The celebration of the marriage of the Thames and the Medway is framed and interrupted by stories of sexual aggression disruptive to the celebration of friendship and equality in marriage.

As well as being an attempt to control language the 'Act for the English Order, Habit, and Language' (1537) insisted that the Irish conform to English social

practices: the "rude and ignorant" Irish should have "a conformity, concordance, and familiarity in . . . manners, order and apparel, with them that be civil people, and do profess and acknowledge Christ's religion, and civil and politic orders, laws and directions . . . " (Maxwell 1923, 112-13). Aside from the demand that the Irish speak and teach their children English, the act denounced Irish fashions regarding hair and articles of clothing, and demanded that the Irish "use and keep their houses and house-holds . . . according to the English order, condition and manner. . . " (Maxwell 1923, 113-14). Spenser's preoccupation with sexual and topographical containment mirrors the desire of English commentators in this period to control what they perceived as general Irish incontinence. In A New Description of Ireland, Barnaby Rich said that the Irish "had rather stil retaine themselues in their sluttishnesse, in their vncleanlinesse, in their rudenesse, and in their inhumane loathsomnes, then they would take any example from the English, either of ciuility, humanity, or any manner of Decencie" (Rich 1610, D4v). Similarly Sir John Davies in A Discoverie of the True Causes why Ireland was never Entirely Subdued referred to "their promiscuous generation of Children; their neglect of lawfull Matrimony; their vncleannesse in Apparrell, Diet, & Lodging; and their contempt and scorne of all thinges necessary for the Ciuill life of man" (Davies 1612, Aa2r). Spenser's reference to the "saluage cuntreis" through which the Irish rivers flow suggests that Ireland is uncultivated but also that its people are barbaric. It might also, given Spenser's preoccupation with chastity, nod towards dangerous female sexuality evoking as it does the bawdy Elizabethan pun on 'countrey' (Montrose 1993, 188).

Just as the mention of Ireland's "hidden race" and "saluage cuntreis" allows us a glimpse of the darker, shameful under-side of Ireland so too does Spenser's reference to the "balefull Oure, late staine with English blood", thought by P.W. Joyce and A.C. Hamilton to allude to the defeat of Lord Grey on the banks of the Avonbeg at Glenmalur in 1580 (Spenser 1935, 271; Spenser 1977, 516). The poetic implications of the river stained with blood are numerous: it suggests that despite attempts by the narrator to hide Irish history its savagery pollutes the very land and its waters. Also evident is the sense that there has been an undesirable mixture of Irish fluids and English blood whereby English blood spilled on the Irish landscape and absorbed by Irish rivers becomes a metaphor for miscegenation. The defeat of the English cannot be forgotten because their blood has made an indelible mark on the Irish water and the inevitable ingestion of that blood-stained fluid by the Irish suggests a further stage of mingling and miscegenation. There is a significant parallel between Spenser's Oure, in which Irish fluids and English blood are mixed, and the Severn in Shakespeare's 1 Henry 4, where the blood of the Welsh Glyndwr and the English Mortimer is mingled:

Three times they breathed and three times did they drink,
Upon agreement, of swift Severn's flood,
Who, then affrighted with their bloody looks,
Ran fearfully among the trembling reeds,
And hid his crisp head in the hollow bank,
Bloodstained with these valiant combatants.
(1.3.101-106)²

Shakespeare's syntax admits ambiguity: is the Severn's water bloodstained, or just the hollow bank, or both? Unless it is just the bank, Glyndwr and Mortimer's drinking of the water is also a drinking of each other's blood, which prefigures their subsequent blood-mingling in marriage. As Philip Schwyzer has noted, Mortimer "unites his blood with Owain Glyndwr's not once but twice--first literally, and with potent symbolism, in the waters of the Severn as they do battle on its banks (1.3.102-7), and then in marriage with Glyndwr's daughter" (Schwyzer 1997, 36). Terence Hawkes claimed that Mortimer's enrapture with his Welsh wife is feminine, narcotic, sensual. The seduction is centred on her voice and

Holinshed's sparse reference to her, 'daughter of the said Owen', is expanded in the play to create a far more disturbing figure who, Circe-like, seems easily able to subvert Mortimer's English manhood" (Hawkes 1998, 123).

Some of the rivers that converge upon the marriage celebration of the Thames and the Medway in Spenser's allegory are confluent in geographical reality and the reader might easily suppose that confluence will be a metaphor for the unification enacted in marriage. But Spenser disrupts this conceit by bringing to the marriage rivers from across England and Ireland (not to mention the wider world) which have no confluence with the Thames or Medway. Although the geography of united rivers motivates Spenser's allegory, he appears to deliberately exceed his physical metaphor in order to assert that unity is ultimately a conceptual, not a physical, reality. Acknowledging that the British Isles are indeed an archipelago, Spenser offers a fantasy of unification which asserts the primacy of human achievement--economic interdependence and political integration--over geographical reality.

Spenser's desire for a psychologically united kingdom, which involves Ireland's rivers in an English celebration, is hindered by the violent reality of Irish history: rivers stained with blood, a hidden race, and savage lands impinge upon the festivities. It becomes clear to the reader that Spenser's notion of concord, what Fowler called being "united in friendly alliance", can only be achieved through selective amnesia. Spenser can only have his united kingdom by denying Ireland's political reality and it is the knowledge of this reality which explains his defensiveness when justifying the presence of the Irish rivers at the marriage of the Thames and the Medway.

I began this essay by considering Spenser's river-marriage canto in the context of Epithalamion Thamesis and remarked that we do not know what became of the project. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that Spenser's intentions to produce a work with a particularly English focus became modified by his experiences in Ireland. The letter addressed to Gabriel Harvey which mentions Epithalamion Thamesis is dated April 1580. Later that year Spenser became secretary to Lord Grey and was probably present at the siege of Smerwick in Munster in November 1580 when Grey slaughtered hundreds of Italian and Spanish troops. In the View Irenius praises Grey's actions at Smerwick and advocates for Ulster the kind of famine that successfully subdued the population in Munster

(Spenser 1949, 156-59). Spenser benefited from the consequences of such aggression in Ireland: as Andrew Hadfield has pointed out, "the land which was confiscated as a result of the Desmond Rebellion (1579-83)--of which the massacre at Smerwick was a significant incident--went to establish the Munster Plantation after 1584, where Spenser made his fortune" (Hadfield 1997, 18). Given the intense violence of everyday life in Ireland and Spenser's role in that violence it is not at all surprising that a project focussing on English rivers should evolve into a project alert to Ireland's relationship with England and Ireland's bloody history with which Spenser was directly involved. Spenser's intentions are probably less important than geography: being situated in Ireland his priorities changed and a more exciting series of ideas and connections occurred to him, encouraging a shift in focus which may explain why he never wrote Epithalamion Thamesis.

Notes

¹All quotations of The Faerie Queene are from Spenser 1977.

²Quotations of 1 Henry 4 are from Shakespeare 1988.

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