

Spenser as Prometheus: A Response to Maik Goth*

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I enjoyed Maik Goth's thoughtful piece on Spenser as Prometheus. Goth explored the representation of monstrous creations in *The Faerie Queene* in terms of Sir Philip Sidney's characterisation of the poet as a "maker" in his *Apology for Poetry*. He argued that for Spenser "the monstrous becomes an integral part of poetic creation" (183). In the Castle of Alma Spenser represents the mind as a chamber of three parts, the first of which is cast as Phantastes, "the personification of fantasy" (186); the second as judgment; and the third, as Eumnestes, the personification of memory. In one of the tapestries hanging in the third chamber the story of Prometheus is told, but with a characteristically Spenserian twist, as Prometheus is shown creating an elf. From this Goth concludes, reasonably enough, that Spenser, like George Chapman, thought of his own intellectual and creative labour as a poet in similar terms: "it could be argued that Prometheus's transgression is constituted by the pursuit of his own creative designs" (189). If we make this link, then we can see that Spenser's poem is full of similarly monstrous, unsettling and potentially unnatural creations, such as the often cited description of the repulsive nether parts of the disrobed Duessa, a foul combination of different animal parts, and the equally disgusting description of Geryoneo's dragon. For Goth, Spenser is a poet advertising his own ability to create what he likes, however monstrous it might be, casting himself as "an early modern Prometheus" and asserting that the poet acts as a creator who be-

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debgoth01813.htm>>.

comes “a rightful secondary god if foresight and forethought guide his steps” (198).

There is a great deal to commend in this perceptive and lucidly written essay. I am more concerned to try and push Goth’s insights further than to resist them, although I think some points do need to be contextualised and qualified. One of the dangers of reading Spenser is that he is such a slippery and elusive writer. Just when you imagine that you have reached a point where he is stating what he believes, you find that he is merely reaching an interim conclusion that will be modified later on. Moreover, one of Spenser’s favourite narrative devices is to rewrite and refigure earlier sections of the poem, citing lines or recycling images, so that we have to go back and reread and rethink earlier episodes. As Goth demonstrates, Spenser clearly does think of the imagination in terms of the myth of Prometheus and the monstrous, but is this the point where his analysis concludes? Is there more to be said?

In the first chamber of the mind we witness a new version of the myth of Prometheus, as Goth states. I need to quote these verses again because they are as crucial to my argument as they were to that of Maik Goth:

But *Guyon* all this while his booke did read,
 Ne yet has ended: for it was a great
 And ample volume, that doth far exceed
 My leasure, so long leaues here to repeat:
 It told, how first *Prometheus* did create
 A man, of many parts from beasts deryu’d,
 And then stole fire from heuen, to animate
 His worke, for which he was by *Ioue* de pryū’d
 Of life him self, and hart-strings of an *Aegle* ryū’d.

That man so made, he called *Elfe*, to weet
 Quick, the first author of all Elfin kynd:
 Who wandring through the world with wearie feet,
 Did in the gardins of *Adonis* fynd
 A goodly creature, whom he deemd in mynd
 To be no earthly wight, but either Spright,

Or Angell, th'authour of all woman kynd;
 Therefore a *Fay* he her according hight,
 Of whom all *Faryes* spring, and fetch their lignage right. (II.x.70-71)

Goth concludes that “Prometheus’s [...] pursuit of his own creative designs” (189) is a model adopted by Spenser himself. Spenser indeed suggests that there are connections between Prometheus’s creation of the elves and the creative process but I am not sure that they are represented in quite so positive a manner as Maik Goth argues. The first point I would note is that in the first half of verse 70, omitted from Goth’s essay, we learn that Guyon cannot finish the book he finds in the chamber. Such omissions are always a warning sign in Spenser, showing us that we do not have the full picture. The implication is that his contemporary readers did not know enough to understand the mind or brain and, therefore, would not be able to follow the creative process. Furthermore, the representation of Prometheus’s act of creation is ambivalent, to say the least. We learn that the elf created by Prometheus discovers a creature in the garden of Adonis, but he cannot be sure whether she is a sprite or an angel. We are immediately reminded of the Redcrosse Knight’s dreams in the first canto of the poem, one of the key reference points throughout the text. Here sprites are conjured up by Archimago, making them akin to incubi or even demons. Sprites are delusive figures who enter dreams in order to lead humans astray. In fact the word is used nine times in the first two cantos of the poem, and with great frequency thereafter, showing how important the concept of the “sprite” is in *The Faerie Queene*.

The point can be taken further: the description of the union of the elf and the faerie appears also to suggest a forbidden union, such as that between the fallen angels and women, an apocryphal tradition which expanded Genesis 6:4. The note provided in A. C. Hamilton’s edition of the poem leads the reader to equate the Garden of Adonis with Eden, but the description of elves uniting with faeries who are either sprites or angels leads the reader to a much darker interpretation (cf.

259n). In short, Spenser's characteristic use of ambiguous syntax and reference warns us not to take this account at face value.

I would suggest that we were already given pause for thought in the elaborate description of the three chambers of the mind. Early modern conceptions of the imagination were invariably guarded or even hostile. Montaigne's essay on the subject, "Of the Force of the Imagination," represents the faculty as powerful and delusive, undermining the reason of good men. Imagination was generally seen as a quality associated with women rather than men, and a key element of the significance of Spenser's representation of the divisions of the mind seems to be that in a country ruled by a queen, imagination has usurped the role of reason. The question generally asked was: did this different balance of mental capacities preclude women from being successful rulers? Were women monarchs exceptions that proved the rule or had they been unfairly excluded from government (cf. Maclean 63)? Indeed, later in the same book Spenser appears to be praising Alma as a wise ruler, like his own virgin queen:

But in a body, which doth freely yeeld
 His partes to reasons rule obedient,
 And letteth her that ought the scepter weeld,
 All happy peace and goodly gouernment
 Is setled there in sure establishment,
 There *Alma* like a virgin Queene most bright,
 Doth flourish in all beautie excellent:
 And to her gwestes doth bounteous banquet dight,
 Attempred goodly well for health and for delight. (II.xi.2)

This stanza reads like a celebration of the wisdom of Elizabeth, who appears temperate, moderate and judicious. But, as so often in Spenser, such words are a starting point rather than a conclusion, written as a deliberate allusion to the complex debates about female sovereignty, rationality and temperance, especially as we have seen Alma hurrying through the chamber of reason in her castle (see below). Alma is *like* a virgin queen, which makes her one of the many types of Elizabeth who appear in the poem.¹ But we need to remember

that figures such as Lucifera were also types and forms of the queen.² The reader is asked to think whether Alma functions like Elizabeth and, if so, how? As a straightforward allegory of her? Or as a pointed figure of what the queen might be or not be? By the end of the book, I would like to argue, we are certainly sceptical about Elizabeth's ability to act rationally and need to ask whether this is her fault or that of her sex. Either way, Spenser appears to be arguing, her subjects suffer, as she fails to live up to the ideals of queenship, a message developed later in the poem by means of other representations of Elizabeth, such as Mercilla, who has to be persuaded of her duty to execute Duessa (Mary Queen of Scots), as her death is in the interests of the people.³

The knights are particularly impressed with the second chamber where they witness the "goodly reason" (II.ix.54.7) of the sage who sits amidst frescoes "Of Magistrates, of courts, of tribunals, / Of commen wealthes, of states, of pollicy, / Of lawes, of iudgementes, and of decretals; / All artes, all science, all Philosophy" (II.ix.53.5-8), but they are hurried along, a sign that learning is not taken seriously in a castle—and by implication, a state—ruled by a woman.⁴ As Goth rightly points out, the chamber of imagination is represented as a room buzzing with flies, a description worth quoting in full:

And all the chamber filled was with flyes,
Which buzzed all about, and made such sound,
That they encombred all mens eares and eyes,
Like many swarmes of Bees assembled round,
After their hiues with honny do abound:
All those were idle thoughtes and fantasies,
Deuices, dreames, opinions vnsound,
Shewes, visions, sooth-sayes, and prophesies;
And all that fained is, as leasings, tales, and lies. (II.ix.51)

Again, we note the reference to dreams as delusive, linking this stanza to the forces that overwhelm the hapless Redcrosse Knight, and so to the account of Prometheus's creation of man as elf who mates with a sprite. The imagination, as in Montaigne's essay, is powerful and overwhelming, but not to be trusted.

The final chamber, that of memory and history, is also portrayed in problematic terms. Significantly enough, it is represented as a library of ancient books and manuscripts, one that is useful but does not function perfectly:

His chamber all was hangd about with rolls,
And old records from auncient times deriud,
Some made in books, some in long parchment scrolles,
That were all worm-eaten, and full of canker holes.

Amidst them all he in a chaire was sett,
Tossing and turning them withouten end;
But for he was vnhabable them to fett,
A litle boy did on him still attend,
To reach, when euer he for ought did send;
And oft when thinges were lost, or laid amis,
That boy them sought, and vnto him did lend.
Therefore he *Anamnestes* cleped is,
And that old man *Eumnestes*, by their propertis. (II.ix.57.6-9-58)

The function of memory is represented as an impressive collection of texts, but it cannot be relied upon to enable its owner to recall, order, process and reproduce what is contained with unfailing accuracy. Things often get lost somewhere along the way showing that one cannot place absolute confidence in the faculty. The body and mind that make up the Castle of Alma are invariably described by critics as if they form an ideal to be imitated. Walter R. Davies concludes his entry in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* with the statement that “Alma’s castle is the image of achieved temperance figured as the fitting together of parts (L[atin] *temperare* to mix equally): harmony among parts of the body, among parts of the soul, between body and soul, and between human and divine” (25). This simply is not true. The mind of the supposedly ideal body is represented as limited and unbalanced. Flies buzz uncontrolled in the chamber of imagination and the recall of valuable information is limited and faulty in the chamber of memory. What is lacking is a dominant chamber of reason and government to control, order and utilise the other two chambers.

However, Alma leads the knights on quickly to the chamber of Eumnestes, even though they are most interested in the middle chamber, the implication being that she is not interested enough in the chamber of reason:

Of those that rowme was full, and them among
 There sate a man of ripe and perfect age,
 Who did them meditate all his life long,
 That through continuall practise and vsage,
 He now was growne right wise, and wondrous sage.
 Great pleasure had those straunger knightes, to see
 His goodly reason, and graue personage,
 That his disciples both desyrd to bee;
 But *Alma* thence them led to th'hindmost rowme of three. (II.ix.54)

Alma hurries through the chamber of reason, spending more time in the chambers of fantasy and memory. This clearly suggests that she is not fully in control of the castle over which she rules, probably because she fails to understand, or neglects, the masculine offices of reason and government which should be the highest faculties. Instead imagination and memory, valuable faculties, of course, have become excessively powerful and so distort the mind that should govern the body. The Castle of Alma can be read as another negative representation of Elizabeth and her court, to go alongside such images as the House of Pride in Book I and the Court of Mercilla in Book V.⁵ After all, Elizabeth, as the virgin queen, was nothing if not temperate. Unfortunately, for critics like Spenser, this precluded her from producing an heir and so consigned her subjects to a state of perpetual uncertainty and her realm to the possibility of future civil war after her death.⁶ Alma's desire to lead the knights out of the chamber in which they show the greatest interest is a sign of the lack of masculine principles in her court, as advisers to steer her government properly, and in her life, as a husband to control the unruly and destructive passions and lapses of female rule.⁷

It is important that we try to understand the context within the poem out of which Guyon's reading the British and Elfin chronicles

has developed. As Goth rightly argues, Spenser does place great emphasis on the value of the imagination in poetic creation. However, we are reminded that imagination on its own is never enough to sustain an argument or, more importantly, the work of a “Poet [...] historicall” (“Letter to Raleigh” 715). The myth of Prometheus as represented in *The Faerie Queene* needs to be carefully analysed and decoded in terms of the poem’s larger narrative structures and thematic concerns. First, we need to note that the myth of Prometheus is not complete in itself, but part of a longer book to which we do not have complete access as it is far too long for Guyon to finish. Already we have the sense that there is more to the story here than meets the eye. Prometheus creates a fairy out of the many parts of beasts and then uses the fire he steals from heaven to animate his work. What he does bears a number of resemblances to Spenser’s description of Archimago’s construction of the false Una out of a “Spright,” as I have already indicated. While Prometheus brings down fire from heaven to manufacture his creature, Archimago calls up spirits and demons to aid him:

And forth he cald out of deepe darknes dredd
 Legions of Sprights, the which like litle flyes
 Fluttring about his euerdamned hedd,
 A waite whereto their seruice he applyes,
 To aide his friendes, or fray his enimies:
 Of those he chose out two, the falsest twoo,
 And fittest for to forge true-seeming lyes;
 The one of them he gaue a message too,
 The other by him selfe staide other worke to doo. (I.i.38)

The sprites surround Archimago like a swarm of flies, here making the demonic state of the creatures as familiars of Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies, absolutely clear. Prometheus’s act of creation is therefore bound to that of Archimago. But the connection between the two cuts both ways, which is why Goth’s article contains such a valuable insight into Spenser’s conception of poetic creation. Although Prometheus’s art can never be perceived as free from the taint of demonic

activity, this does not mean that it is *necessarily* wrong and has to be condemned by the reader.

Spenser was a poet invariably eager to push the boundaries of what was possible, experimenting “with a wider range of metres, dialects, and stanza-structures than any English poet prior to John Donne” (McCabe, “Edmund Spenser” 53). He was always eager, I think, to demonstrate that poetic creation had to take risks and try out new ideas and new forms of writing. At the most basic level this meant writing what Ben Jonson later described as “no Language,” a pseudo-archaic vocabulary and style that created an imaginary past that had never existed (qtd. in R. M. Cummings 294). At a much more profound level it meant exploring subjects that were complicated, difficult and dangerous. It is no accident that Spenser appears to have offended Elizabeth’s chief minister, Lord Burghley, as well as his son, Sir Robert Cecil, who played a similar role after his father’s death; her favourite and possible husband, the earl of Leicester; his erstwhile patron, Sir Walter Raleigh; and James VI, King of Scotland, an impressive list.⁸ As Brian Cummings has pointed out, most religious literature after the Reformation ran the risk of flirting with heresy just through citing words and phrases with theological significance. Spenser’s first work, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), contains a considerable amount of religious poetry at an especially sensitive time in the wake of the papal bull, *Regnans in Excelsis*, issued on 25 February 1570, which urged Catholics to assassinate their heretical ruler.⁹ Throughout his writing career Spenser was prepared to challenge received notions and he appears to have seen one of his chief duties as a poet to say what others feared to say and to forge new forms of writing. It is not surprising that his output is so varied and diverse, nor that he fell out so often with the good and the great.

Spenser’s representation of the creative act as Promethean in Book II is shrouded in ironies and is a subject worthy of further analysis, as Goth has recognised. Despite a considerable amount of thinking and research and some fine books, we are still not sure who the elves are or what role they play in *The Faerie Queene*: in particular, their rela-

tionship to the Britons whose dynastic genealogies they shadow in the book Guyon reads.¹⁰ The act of Promethean creation also makes it hard to distinguish between elves and fairies. However, Matthew Woodcock has made essentially the same point as Goth, in arguing that “Prometheus’s seminal act of ‘elf-fashioning’ [...] mirrors what takes place in the production of *The Faerie Queene* itself in Spenser’s own construction of his fairies from ‘many parts,’ from many different textual sources” (Woodcock 130). In reading the chronicle, Guyon, as an elf, a creature invented in a book by Spenser, is witnessing his own origins, although he shows no sign of realising his relationship to the material he eagerly consumes. The connection makes the reader aware that Guyon’s temperance is not a virtue that humans can easily imitate, or that would necessarily benefit many if they could. Accordingly, readers might conclude that the queen’s virginity was especially perverse, as her control over her body led to a lack of control over the nation and her people through her inability to produce an heir. Spenser, famous as a poet of marriage, appears to be suggesting that those on earth need to follow a different path, one about to be outlined in Britomart’s quest towards marriage in Book III.

In the opening sonnet of his sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, Sir Philip Sidney compared writing poetry to giving birth:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
 That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain.
 Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
 Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain.
 Oft turning other’s leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burnd brain.
 But words came halting forth, wanting invention’s stay,
 Invention, Nature’s child, fled step-dame Study’s blows,
 And other’s feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
 Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
 “Fool,” said my Muse to me, “looke in thy heart and write.” (1)

Spenser, I would argue, has a similar notion of poetic creation. *The Faerie Queene* shows us images of cunning, dangerous and blasphemous creation in Books I and II. We also witness Guyon reading the chronicles which he finds in Eumnestes's chamber. Each type of action, poetic creation and the recall of history, are qualified in Book III, as Britomart undertakes her quest. When Merlin reads her the chronicles in canto three we see the history that should have taken place had Elizabeth married and secured her dynasty, connecting the past to the future. And when she enviously witnesses Amoret and Scudamore entwined as a hermaphrodite, once Britomart has released Amoret from Busirane's chamber of sterile and unsatisfied desire, we realise where the real future lies and how poetic and natural creation are in harmony.¹¹ What Prometheus does leads to the creation of elves like Guyon; what Britomart does leads to a glorious future for England represented in poetry like *The Faerie Queene*. While men write, women have babies.

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NOTES

¹For analysis, see Sheila T. Cavanagh.

²See Paul Suttie's essay "Edmund Spenser's Political Pragmatism."

³Richard A. McCabe makes this point in his essay on "The Masks of Duessa."

⁴For discussion see Amanda Shephard; and Maclean.

⁵See Suttie, *Self-Interpretation in The Faerie Queene* 98; and McCabe, "The Masks of Duessa."

⁶See ch. 6 of my *Literature, Politics and National Identity*.

⁷More generally, see Anne McLaren.

⁸Fuller details will be provided in my biography of Spenser, forthcoming from Oxford University Press in 2012.

⁹See Adrian Morey, *The Catholic Subjects of Elizabeth I*, chs. 4-5.

¹⁰See, in particular, Isabel E. Rathborne, *The Meaning of Spenser's Fairyland*; Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in The Faerie Queene*.

¹¹For further analysis see Andrew Hadfield, "Spenser."

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