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Elf-Fashioning Revisited: A Response to Maik Goth*

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Taking a cue from Sir Philip Sidney's famous formulation of the poet as a "maker" possessed of the ability to bring forth "forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like" (Sidney, *Major Works* 216), Maik Goth has explored the important role that the monstrous has in early modern literary theory in exemplifying a poet's creative powers. Goth argues that the poet's capacity to fashion an "other nature" through his writing, and to take on a god-like role in creating a "second nature" that is superior to that of the real world, is epitomised by Sidney as the distinct ability to represent fantastic monstrous creatures. For Sidney, the one-eyed Cyclops and theriomorphic Chimera offer a taste of what a poet can offer when he is limited only by the bounds and constraints of his imagination, and freed from any form of external strictures imposed by a need to accurately present the world as it really is, rather than as it *could* be. The god-like ability of the poet to make monsters is compared by Goth to that of Prometheus, the figure found widely in classical mythology and its medieval and early modern reworkings who created mankind from clay, which is then animated (depending on which source we read) either by divine spirit or stolen heavenly fire. Goth characterises poetic creation as an essentially Promethean act, though exactly how we are conceiving the different facets of what constitutes a Promethean act is an issue to which we will return below. Indeed, one of the things that will be called for in

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this response essay is a more nuanced conception of how we define and understand Promethean poetic creation in relation to Sidney and Spenser.

The Promethean connotations of Sidney's description of poetic creation are of great significance to Spenser in book two of *The Faerie Queene* during the extended building-as-body conceit used throughout the House of Alma episode. In II.ix-x, he presents the three mental faculties of imagination, reason, and memory as three linked chambers in the castle's turret or "head."[1] Spenser certainly appears to have had Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* in mind when describing the occupants of the chambers. The depiction of Eumnestes (memory) at work surrounded by "worm-eaten" books and scrolls (II.ix.57) echoes the similarly corrupt "mouse-eaten records" mentioned in Sidney's description of the hypothetical historian in the *Defence* (*Major Works* 220). It is in Eumnestes's chamber that Guyon first learns of the creation of the fairy race from the "Antiquitee of Faery lond," and reads 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* depryu'd
> Of life him self, and hart-strings of an Aegle ryu'd. (II.x.70.5-9)

The fairies of Spenser's fairyland are thus brought forth through the seminal act of elf-fashioning by Prometheus, the transgressive artificer. Goth has outlined some of the classical and early modern sources that Spenser may have drawn on here, though we might also look to the studies by Olga Raggio and Ernst Cassirer for an even wider appreciation of the rich mythological and intellectual traditions with which Spenser could have been working with in this passage.[2] For Cassirer, during the early modern period Prometheus fuses with the figure of Adam:

> The first man becomes an expression of the spiritual man, the *homo spiritualis*, and thus, all the spiritual tendencies of the epoch that are directed towards a renewal, rebirth, and regeneration of man come to be concentrated in his form. (Cassirer 93)

Although medieval thinkers seized primarily upon the negative aspects of the Prometheus figure, early modern writers came to celebrate him as a man-making artist, a "human hero of culture, the bringer of wisdom and of political and moral culture" (Cassirer 95). Prometheus, in such a view, thus embodies the spirit of the "renaissance" itself. The implications of such an interpretation of the myth both for Spenser and for early modern thought and literature as a whole is obviously matter for a much larger, more wide-ranging analysis than is offered here. My present focus is restricted primarily to Spenser's use of Prometheus in the fairy chronicle "Antiquitee of Faery lond." I have already examined the different stages of the fairy chronicle elsewhere when discussing how Spenser combines his dominant mythological conceit for Queen Elizabeth I with the panegyric topos of mythical genealogy to produce the "Antiquitee of Faery lond." Goth notes that my earlier study did not fully elaborate upon the Promethean aspect of the fairy creation myth, and I welcome the opportunity to try and address this particular point here.

Perhaps the most obvious place to begin is the description of how Spenser's Prometheus first fashions the fairy race. As Goth himself observes, we are presented with a creation story that is analogous or parallel to that of human creation; Prometheus makes *a* man rather than "Man" or mankind as a whole (cf. Goth 187). Prometheus works by forming together man "of many parts from beasts deryu'd" and assembles Elfe from already extant elements. Adam may have been formed by God from "dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7), but his fairy analogue seems to have been made in a far more piecemeal and workmanlike fashion, with Prometheus operating in a manner more akin to his latter-day imitator, Victor Frankenstein. Elfe is not created *ex nihilo*. Spenser presents several different creation myths during the course of *The Faerie Queene*. There is the spontaneous generation of the river Nilus (I.i.21), and that of the Garden of Adonis (wherein Elfe also encounters his mate Fay, "th'author of all woman kynd"; II.x.71). The Edenic creation story looms large in book one, and it is implied that Una's parents are in fact Adam and Eve (cf. I.vii.43; I.xii.26). But it

is the Promethean model of constructing a new creature from existing parts or elements that appears to be the closest to Spenser's own method of composition in *The Faerie Queene*.[3] Indeed, the creation myth of Spenser's fairies as expounded in the "Antiquitee of Faery lond" is actually a microcosm of the self-conscious elf-fashioning process that is modelled with increasing anxiety throughout *The Faerie Queene*.[4]

David Williams argues that the fundamental process involved in making or inventing a monster is one of deformation: a construction made in an aberrant, unnatural pattern or from a mixture of incongruous parts. Look at nearly all of the monsters found in classical mythology or medieval representations of the wondrous East and one repeatedly finds that they are formed by bringing together bodily features or characteristics from two or more different creatures (including humans).[5] Thus the griffin combines parts of a lion and eagle; the cynocephali has the body of a man and the head of a dog; the dragon conjoins traits of the serpent, bird and fish, and its fire-breathing variants bring together all four elements of earth, air, water and fire.[6] One could easily go on citing monsters and their varied bestial components, and indeed part of Williams's study takes the form of an extended taxonomy of different monsters and their constituent parts.[7] In some of the medieval romance sources for Spenser's fairies one finds this kind of piecemeal construction of the monstrous taking place in different ways. Spenser's Duessa, for example, shares many characteristics with the figure of Melusine, the half-woman, half-serpent who features in several fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French romances and whose story became woven into the mythical foundation narratives of the Angevin dynasty and, later, the Lusignan family of Poitou.[8] The monstrous nature of Melusine's lower parts is made all the more shocking by the preceding description of her upper body's great beauty:

> Unto hir nauell shewing ther full white,
> Like as is the snow A faire branche vppon,
> The body welle made, frike in ioly plite,

> The visage pure, fresh, clenly hir person,
> To properly speke off hir faccion,
> Neuer non fairer ne more reuerent;
> But A taill had beneth of serpent!
>
> Gret And orrible was it verily;
> With siluer And Asure the tail burlid was,
> Strongly the water ther bete, it flasshed hy. (*Romans of Partenay* 100)

A slightly different mode of composite construction is found in *Huon of Burdeux*, a fifteenth-century French prose romance translated into English in 1533 by John Bourchier, Lord Berners. In *Huon* the fairy king Oberon is presented as a hybrid formed from multiple historical and mythological traditions: his father is Julius Caesar; his mother is a fay, the Lady of the Privy Isle; his half-brother is Alexander the Great (*Huon* 72-73). *Huon* itself is something of a generic monster, a hybrid text that brings together the feudal, homosocial world of Charlemagne and the *chanson de geste* with the fantastic commonplaces and amorous interactions of chivalric romance. In doing so, *Huon* anticipates the fifteenth-century Italian interlaced romance-epics of Luigi Pulci, Matteo Boiardo and Ludovico Ariosto, which are also important sources for Spenser's poem.[9]

Turning to *The Faerie Queene* itself, we can identify (as Goth has begun to) how Spenser creates monstrous characters that are formed—or de-formed—from a brutal admixture of human and animal parts, as with Duessa (I.viii.48), or the mismatched features of more than one animal, as seen in Geryoneo's dragon (V.xi.24).[10] To these we might add the very first monster encountered in *The Faerie Queene*, Errour, who is formed from another unholy combination of the human and ophidian (I.i.14). She too is a creator (as well as a creature) and spews forth books and papers and a swarm of "deformed monsters" during her struggle with the Redcrosse knight. Nobody said that bringing forth monsters was going to be a pleasant sight. Towards the end of book five, and during the course of book six, we encounter yet another monstrous creature, the Blatant beast, whose gruesome maw contains a thousand tongues and iron teeth (VI.xii.26-7). *Mutabilitie*

Cantos aside, *The Faerie Queene* begins and ends with Gloriana's knights involved in combat with monstrous figures representing debased or deformed discourse, and the abuse of the power to create things through words. Monstrous, conjoined bodies do not always have to be repulsive and treated as negative, and one finds an exceptional example at the end of book three in the 1590 *Faerie Queene* when Spenser compares the embrace of the reunited Amoret and Scudamour to "that faire *Hermaphrodite*, [...] [s]o seemd those two, as growne together quite" (III.xii.46; emphasis in the original).[11]

Just as Spenser's poem presents a number of monstrous creatures formed from different parts, *The Faerie Queene* itself is assembled in a similarly composite manner from a host of varied, seemingly incongruous and ill-fitting materials, as many source studies have already demonstrated.[12] Goth's characterisation of Spenser as a Promethean poet who labours to construct their work from already extant materials comes close to sounding like Roland Barthes's description of how an author or "scriptor" works:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. [...] The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. (Barthes 315)

Spenser's mode of composition comes closest to that outlined by Barthes in the British chronicle that Arthur reads in Eumnestes's library whilst Guyon simultaneously enjoys his fairy history book. It is somewhat ironic that II.x opens with the lines "Who now shall giue me words and sound, / Equall vnto this haughty enterprise?," a literal translation from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (20) and the first strand of a complex weave of intertextual materials in the canto. As Carrie Harper demonstrated long ago, Spenser assembles the British chronicle by bringing together images, ideas and phrases from many different

medieval and early modern historical sources in a masterpiece of syncretic storytelling.[13] Throughout *The Faerie Queene* Spenser's narrator expresses a certain anxiety that his imagined readers may believe that he has simply made up his story of fairyland and the fairy queen. He therefore deliberately downplays the agency of any sort of imaginative or creative faculty as the poem proceeds. For this reason Spenser's working model of poetic creation differs from that proposed by Sidney. Whereas Sidney fully embraces the powers of the poet's imagination, Spenser's narrator characterises the manner in which *The Faerie Queene* is composed—clearly with defensive intentions—as a process of reading and setting forth an already extant body of materials. The narrator seeks to compare his text with "old records from auncient times deriud" (II.ix.57) produced through the faculty of memory, rather than drawn from Phantastes's chamber, seemingly a props cupboard for the romance genre as a whole:

> His chamber was dispainted all with in,
> With sondry colours, in the which were writ
> Infinite shapes of thinges dispersed thin;
> Some such as in the world were neuer yit,
> Ne can deuized be of mortall wit;
> Some daily seene, and knowen by their names,
> Such as in idle fantasies doe flit:
> Infernall Hags, *Centaurs*, feendes, *Hippodames*,
> Apes, Lyons, Aegles, Owles, fooles, louers, children, Dames. (II.ix.50)

Nevertheless, the "history" that the narrator assembles and sets forth *is* full of all such things: only outside the House of Alma the "monstrous rablement" of Maleger's forces that lay in siege includes many creatures found within the list above. And several of these are such creatures "as never were in nature." It would appear that Spenser conceived the Promethean act of bringing forth monsters—or indeed elf-fashioning itself—to be a far more fraught and potentially perilous business than Sidney ever imagined.[14] One only has to look at Prometheus's fate to realise that Spenser's sense of caution and anxiety was well-founded.

By way of conclusion, I would like to propose two areas where Goth's argument concerning Promethean creation and the monstrous could be expanded further in order to prompt additional lines of questioning. Firstly, we could discuss Spenser's construction of monsters and the monstrous in relation to ideas found in modern "monster" theory concerning their semiotic value. Working from the etymology of the word "monster," from Latin *monstrum* "that which reveals" and the verb *monstrare* "to show," critics such as Williams (mentioned above), John Block Friedman, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and others have explored how the monstrous in medieval art and thought can be read in Neoplatonic terms as a negation of the visual and material.[15] Monsters thus function as symbols or signifiers that lead a reader to apprehend a more transcendent reality. As Cohen proposes, "a monster exists only to be read" ("Monster Culture" 4). Modern monster theory draws much from psychoanalytic and postcolonial approaches and offers a sophisticated critical framework and vocabulary for reading the monstrous in the works of Spenser and his contemporaries. At heart, however, it is still working from the same essential starting point as J. R. R. Tolkien's famous 1936 lecture-turned-essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." Tolkien argued that the dragon in *Beowulf* functions as a means of alienating a reader from a purely literal reading of the poem and thus serves to signal the text's polysemous nature. Just as we can read through the dominant fairy allegory of Spenser's poem, and are invited to do so on many occasions by the poet himself, perhaps we need to deconstruct the monsters of *The Faerie Queene* and to view them as another facet of the poem's heuristic engagement of the reader.

Secondly, it is surely essential to say far more about the potentially transgressive nature of Prometheus's actions. In all of the sources for the myth that Goth cites, Prometheus's creativity is clearly cast as an affront to the gods, and he duly receives censure. In fact, without stressing the distinctly transgressive aspect of the Prometheus myth that Spenser uses in *The Faerie Queene*, what Goth conceives and defines as Promethean poetic creation really only looks to be identical to

Sidney's model of creativity. Goth would appear to be proposing more than this more limited definition of what constitutes a "Promethean" act. But if we are to go as far as to see Spenser as Prometheus, we need to take this particular part of the myth into account. How, therefore, do we make sense of identifications between Prometheus's elf-fashioning and that of Spenser? It is maybe naive to assume that Prometheus's actions can be viewed as politically neutral since they involve a fundamental violation against the gods. One encounters several artificer figures in *The Faerie Queene*, such as Archimago, Merlin and Busirane, but the character that probably comes closest to Prometheus, in that he receives punishment for his art, is the disgraced public poet Bonfont found at Mercilla's court. For producing "rayling rymes" he is nailed to a post by his tongue for all to see and his previous good name has been erased so that he is now known as Malfont (V.ix.25-26). Perhaps the anxieties implicitly revealed by this small, but disturbing vignette help us to explain why there is a tailing off of Spenserian elf-fashioning in the final two books of the poem. If the progenitor of the fairy race stands as a surrogate for Spenser himself then the spectre of censure is always going to be an intrinsic part of his conception of authorship in *The Faerie Queene*.

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NOTES

[1]All quotations and citations from *The Faerie Queene* are from the edition by A. C. Hamilton.

[2]See Goth 186-88.

[3]In a rare moment where Sidney refers to his own writing process, any suggestion of Promethean "making" is eschewed in favour of the more natural image of birthing; see Sidney, *Old Arcadia* 3.

[4]This is discussed in my study of Spenser's use of fairy mythology; see Woodcock 57-75.

[5]See Williams 14. See also Cohen, "Monster Culture" 11.

[6]Cf. Williams 195-97, 202-07. Cohen, *Of Giants* 131-35 discusses cynocephali.

[7]See Williams 107-215.

[8]See Woodcock 35-36, 117; and Le Goff 205-22.

[9]Goodman (13-14) discusses the hybrid romances of the fifteenth century and their legacy.

[10]Goth's passing suggestion that the description of Duessa in I.viii.48 reads like an inverted or debased form of the Petrarchan blazon, can be extrapolated far further (Goth 190). Can we indeed compare the construction of an idealised model of female beauty to a Promethean creation, female forms "such as never were in nature?" Spenser clearly recognised the potentially monstrous nature of what might be created by the Petrarchan poet in action when he depicts the chambers of Busirane's castle in III.xi.51: "A thousand monstrous formes therein were made, / Such as false loue doth oft vpon him weare, / For loue in thousand monstrous formes doth ofte appeare." Idealisation of female forms "such as never were in nature" also anticipates the airbrushed images in modern magazines and advertisements, and an attendant conception of beauty dominated by figures whose faces or bodies are heavily "made up" by means of both cosmetics and editorial artistry.

[11]As Williams notes (168-76), Plato viewed the hermaphrodite as the ideal, perfected realisation of eros, and the positive associations of the androgyne became firmly established in Judaeo-Christian theology.

[12]See, for example, Hankins; Nohrnberg; Hamilton.

[13]See also Woodcock 126-27.

[14]Sidney does mention the negative associations of the imagination at one point in the *Defence of Poesy*, though he does so in the context of defending imaginative literature, and the uses to which it may be put, when questioning "shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious?" (236). This is the fundamental principle of his reply to the third of the objections traditionally raised against poesy.

[15]See Williams; Friedman; Cohen, "Monster Culture"; Cohen, *Of Giants*; Jones and Sprunger.

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