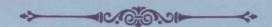
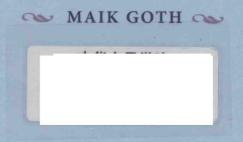
The Manchester Spenser



Monsters and the poetic imagination in *The Faerie Queene*

'Most ugly shapes, and horrible aspects'





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MAIK GOTH

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Monsters and the poetic imagination in *The Faerie Queene*





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Note on texts and language

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References to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* are to *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton; text ed. by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki, Longman Annotated English Poets (London: Longman, 2001). Upper-case roman numerals stand for books, and lower-case roman numerals for cantos; arabic numbers are used for stanzas and line references throughout. Spenser's minor poems and prose texts are quoted from the *Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. by Edwin Greenlaw, Charles Grosvenor Osgood and Frederick Morgan Padelford, 11 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1932–45), henceforth *Variorum*.

All citations from the Bible refer to the Vulgate, and all translations are taken from the Douay Rheims version. The following editions have been used: *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, 4th edition, revised by Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994; originally published 1969) and *The Holy Bible – Douay Rheims Version*, revised by Richard Challoner (1749–52) (Rockford: Tan Books, 1971).

In accordance with general Renaissance usage, and wishing to avoid 'he or she', the use of the pronoun 'he' is gender-neutral in this book, referring to both the male and female genders.

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Introduction

In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, an epic romance published in two parts in 1590 and 1596, monsters of all kinds hide in the caves, castles, mountains and woods of Faeryland and other regions. As soon as the poem starts, Redcrosse fights the monster Errour in her lair, and then overthrows the huge Dragon that terrorises the kingdom of Eden in a three-day fight; during their voyage to Acrasia's island, Sir Guyon and the Palmer encounter innumerable creatures from the bottom of the sea; a voracious monster reminiscent of a hyena is set on Florimell by a witch; and the Blatant Beast slanders its victims with a hundred tongues and bites them with teeth of rusty iron. Add to that the various giants, grotesque human–animal composites and monstrous humans that populate the stanzas of the text, and, I would argue, *The Faerie Queene* emerges as a poem in which monsters constitute a central theme that defines the world of the poem and informs its meaning.

This monograph is the first attempt at a comprehensive reading of monsters and monstrous beings in *The Faerie Queene*, and at positioning them in larger theoretical frames. It takes as its starting point Thomas Cooper's sixteenth-century definition of *monstrum* as something 'that exceedeth, lacketh, or is disordred in natural forme. Any thing done against the course of nature. A token or shewing: a thing that signifieth,' which appears in his influential *Thesaurus* (1565).¹ Cooper's dictionary entry covers the major areas of the Renaissance discourse on the monstrous: the notion of the physically deformed, the violation of the rules of nature (based on the Latin *in naturam*) and the idea of the sign that needs interpreting. These distinctions also represent the poet's use of monsters and monstrous beings in *The Faerie Queene*: Spenser fashions monsters and monstrous beings as physical deformities violating the rules of nature in

¹ Thomas Cooper, Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae (London, 1565), s.v. 'monstrum'.

order to establish them as meaningful ciphers in an 'extended Allegory' designed to 'fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline'. Following Cooper's definition and Spenser's poetic practice, the arc of the argument spans two interconnected areas, which elaborate on the poet's involvement in the monstrous discourse of the early modern period. This study first offers a taxonomic account of the monsters and monstrous beings in *The Faerie Queene*, which sets them in relation to the natural world of Faeryland and its geographical surroundings. It then analyses monsters and monstrous beings as signs interacting with the early modern discourse on the poet creating a secondary nature through the use of his transformative imagination, and as ciphers that need to be interpreted by the reader.

As teratology, i.e. the study of monsters and monstrous beings, has claimed a vast territory in critical inquiry over the last two decades, an introductory chapter acquaints the reader with the matter of the monstrous and its prevalent aspects. Part I first poses the question whether *The Faerie Queene* can be termed a poem of monsters (Chapter 1), before it traverses the terrain of the monster's cultural importance for the early modern period (Chapter 2). This discussion is then followed by a historico-cultural account of the word *monster* and the concept of the monstrous from the classical to the early modern period (Chapter 3). A survey of criticism on Spenserian monsters and an outline of the major trends in monster studies round off the first part (Chapter 4).

Parts II and III contain the actual critical analyses. Part II follows Cooper's definition of the monstrous as a physical deformity violating the rules of nature, and brings into relief the plenitude and diversity of monsters and monstrous beings in Spenser's poem by analysing them along systematic and anatomical parameters. Using Isidore's classification of monsters in *Etymologiae*, Book XI, the 'Taxonomic considerations' prefaced to this chapter (Chapter 5) focus on the monsters' bodies: as the monstrous manifests itself physically, this section proposes the concept of the 'monstrous signifier', i.e. the physical attribute that distinguishes the monstrous from the normative body. This concept is also applicable to those cases in which the monstrous reveals itself textually, i.e. when poetic language maps something 'other' on the normative body through similes and metaphors. The individual close readings which follow are embedded in a general taxonomical system that divides Spenser's monsters into 'Monstrous animals' (namely 'Dragons' and 'Four-footed

² Spenser, 'Letter to Raleigh', 8. References to the 'Letter' are to the line numbers in Hamilton's edition of *The Faerie Queene*.

beasts'), 'Human-animal composites', 'Giants', 'Monstrous humans' and, finally, 'Automata' (Chapters 6–11). The description and interpretation of monsters through a necessarily artificial conceptual grid is designed to render insight into how Spenser creates permutations of the monstrous by reconfiguring normative bodies, and into how he integrates them into the unity of his work. Drawing on a vast number of classical, scriptural, medieval and contemporaneous traditions, Spenser fashions a plethora of monsters as opponents the heroes of his epic romance have to vanquish in battle, and additionally establishes the monstrous as a corrupting force that disfigures or even annihilates the normative body through transformation and metamorphosis. An intermediary conclusion summarises the major issues raised in this part (Chapter 12).

Taking up Cooper's definition of the monstrous as a sign requiring interpretation, Part III offers a theoretical discussion of the monstrosities and deformities in *The Faerie Queene*, and the insights they provide into Spenser's role as the maker of a poetic heterocosm. The chapters focus on the heavily contested status of the monster in the early modern period and relates it both to the contemporaneous idea of the poet as a secondary maker and to the discourse of the transformative imagination. Special attention is devoted to the work of the imagination as expounded in Renaissance medical and poetical treatises. These illustrate that the creation of monstrosities is intimately connected to the controversy over the malfunctioning imagination, and to the emergence of a more autonomous poet. I will demonstrate that Spenser, following the call for poetic autonomy, positions himself against the antipoetic sentiments of his age as a secondary maker who can deliberately create a secondary world that contains monsters and monstrous beings. Chapter 13 first surveys Renaissance views on the problem of the literary monster. Drawing on Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1595) and George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), it discusses the idea of the poet as maker, especially the role the imagination plays in the poet's creative process, and sets it in relation to Spenser's poem. Chapter 14 places Spenser's poem of monsters, new realms and characters in the emerging tradition of what M. H. Abrams terms the 'heterocosm', and establishes the entire poem as just such a textual realm, which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics significantly characterised as a place where the monster runs rampant. Spenser explicitly engages with the notion of the heterocosm at the beginning of the poem, where Redcrosse and Una enter the Wandering Wood and find Errour in her den. On one level, monster and wood define the poetic text as a labyrinth in which characters and readers

have to orientate themselves through constant interpretation, and may encounter monsters and monstrous beings at any time. On another level, forest and monster also represent the notion of ὕλη, or silva, the major metaphor of primordial matter from which all things and beings were turned into form. The opening narrative of The Faerie Queene hence also allegorises the Wandering Wood and Errour as the material agencies from which the poem and its monstrosities are made. Chapter 15 examines Spenser's allegory of the imagination, Phantastes's chamber, which is situated in the brain turret of Alma's Castle, Spenser's representation of the human body and soul (FQ, II.ix). This section elaborates on Spenser's awareness of a monstrous discourse in epic romance and deals with the involvement of the imagination in the making of monstrous images. As Phantastes's chamber contains frescos that depict characters, animals, and monsters typical of romance, Spenser explicitly connects the images dwelling in the imagination to the creative work of the poet composing an epic romance. By likening the flies that buzz around Phantastes's head to honey-laden bees, Spenser consolidates the creative work of a transformative imagination that can turn confusing ideas and imaginings into the useful images of poetry. The remaining sections analyse Spenser's creation of monsters and monstrous beings in greater detail. Chapter 16 examines various kinds of malfunctions in the imagination as exemplified in Spenser's poem, namely excessive melancholy and uninhibited dream-work, the distortion and transformation of beings, as well as the spontaneous birth of monstrous images. These analyses press home that Spenser deliberately participates in the discourse of the monstrous imagination by turning the landscape of his poem into a breeding ground of the monster, and by creating characters that suffer from a hypertrophic imagination that transforms them into monstrous beings. Spenser's animating the monstrous imagination is a self-reflexive strategy indicative of a double imaginative act: it shows the source of the monstrous in the characters' overheated imaginations, and exemplifies the poet's deliberate depiction of such monstrous, or pathological situations to educate the reader. Chapter 17 more specifically draws on Spenser's version of the Prometheus myth in The Antiquitee of Faery Lond (FQ, II.x), which recounts how Prometheus created the first elf, to elaborate on the conflict inherent in the poet's creation of monsters. Spenser here contends that the poet, like Prometheus, has creative autonomy over his work. However, like the Greek god, he also has to act transgressively when creating something new and living from disparate parts, be it a new monster, or even a new poem. Chapter 18 consolidates Spenser's use of the monstrous

for his didactic programme, namely 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline, by setting his literary practice in relation to George Puttenham's modes of poetic making and Sidney's notion of useful poetry. Spenser uses his poetic imagination to fashion monsters as viable rhetorical creations representing aberrations, corruption and vices in order to advance his readers' understanding of universal truths. Created in a textual milieu that gives them apprehensible form and poetic substance, the monsters and monstrous beings work on the readers' imagination and move them to lead a life according to the good and the virtuous. Finally, Chapter 19 elaborates on the problems posed by the interpretation of monsters as polyvalent, incongruent and unstable creatures in Spenser's multi-referential allegorical poem, and brings this discussion to bear on the Blatant Beast's escape from Faeryland. By setting his readers the task to make sense of the monsters in his poem, Spenser seeks to facilitate the readers' formation of identity, and educate them as gentlemen or noble persons. When the Blatant Beast escapes into contemporary England at the end of Book VI, Spenser makes his readers aware that the monsters in his allegorical poem are permutations of the monstrous forces in the real world, which they now have to trace and face on their own.

Finally, Part IV, 'Conclusions', reiterates the major findings of this study.

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³ Spenser, 'Letter', 8.