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Incest and Empire in *The Faerie Queene*

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INCEST AND EMPIRE IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

BY KENT R. LEHNHOF

When King Henry VIII wished to divest himself of his first two wives, he cried incest in each instance. Henry invalidated his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (and disavowed the daughter she had given him) by alleging that Catherine's prior relationship to Henry's older brother placed her within the degrees of kinship prohibited by biblical injunctions against incest. He cast off Anne Boleyn (and disclaimed the daughter she had given him) by accusing Anne of incestuous adultery with her brother. Describing the King's twice-tested strategy, Bruce Boehrer affirms: "Henry sought to alter the social significance of his first two wives and their daughters by wrapping them in a thick gauze of incestuous narrative." Boehrer points out, however, that this incestuous narrative did not end with the execution of Anne:

The problems of Henry's first two marriages exerted practical pressure on both Mary and Elizabeth when they sought to inherit their father's throne; with both their mothers adjudged guilty of incest at different times, neither daughter could advance an absolutely unconflicted claim to the English crown; and thus the issue of incest directly informed English political behavior for several decades after Henry's demise.¹

According to Boehrer, Mary I tried to overturn the repudiation of her mother by reenacting Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon: she married Philip II and forged anew England's alliance with Spain. Elizabeth I, on the other hand, refused to marry, insisting that her right to the throne did not need to be dressed up in royal authority borrowed from abroad. As part of this program, Elizabeth tried to cut short all commentary concerning the royal line of succession or her place within it. Elizabeth's reign, Boehrer asserts, "is characterized by an intense reluctance to talk openly about the family matters of the sovereign, particularly as those matters extend to the question of incest."² Not even her own supporters were permitted to talk about the lineal status of Henry's children, an interdiction evident in the imprisonment of John Hales for writing a tract discrediting Mary

Stuart's title to the crown. As Boehrer affirms: "Elizabeth clearly regarded her control over genealogical matters, both past and future, as crucial to her tenure on the throne."³

When considered in the context of Elizabeth's effort to silence all discussion of incest, Edmund Spenser's courtly epic aiming to cultivate favor with the monarch looks like a disastrous miscalculation, for incest appears throughout *The Faerie Queene*. Indeed, incest sits at the center (both literally and figuratively) of the Book of Chastity, the very book wherein Spenser encourages Elizabeth "in mirrours more then one her selfe to see."⁴ In the present essay, I investigate the apparently illogical and impolitic prominence afforded to incest in book three of *The Faerie Queene*, ultimately arguing that the imperialist logic underpinning the epic is linked to an intense fear of miscegenation that, in turn, privileges endogamous relations as a way of warding off foreign invasion and contamination. For Spenser, incest becomes a positive practice, one that ensures national and individual purity.

To be sure, the incest of book three is often associated with the epic's evil characters and signals moral degeneracy. Thus, Spenser's Malecasta subtly shadows Ovid's Myrrha, the incestuous daughter who tricks her father into sleeping with her. As James Nohrberg remarks: "There are broad hints of Myrrha's passion in the nocturnal fraud of Malecasta." Ovid, for instance, tells the myth in conjunction with the story of Venus and Adonis; Spenser makes the same connection, setting the stage for Malecasta's seduction by describing the tapestries of Malecasta's castle, one of which gorgeously depicts "the loue of *Venus* and her *Paramoure*" (3.1.34). According to Nohrberg, "the midnight hour and the cosmic backdrop" of Malecasta's illicit seduction "suggest Ovidian originals." So does Britomart's enraged reaction, which duplicates the response of Myrrha's father: "Britomart goes for her sword, as King Cinyras, discovering the filial identity of his bedmate, goes for his."⁵ As the embodiment of chastity, Britomart violently rejects Malecasta's advances, apparently establishing incest as the antithesis of her sexual purity.

In this manner, the episode with Malecasta might be seen to be recuperating or even erasing Elizabeth's matrilineal involvement with incest. Because *The Faerie Queene* designates Britomart as Elizabeth's royal foremother, her opposition to the illicit sexuality of Malecasta-Myrrha potentially expunges the embarrassing reputation of Anne Boleyn, allowing Elizabeth a supremely virtuous mother instead of an

allegedly incestuous one. Moreover, by vilifying Malecasta on the basis of her incestuous intentions, the epic perhaps endeavors to displace and deny the specific form of sexual transgression that proved so troubling to Spenser's sovereign. Casting the crime onto villainous others, Spenser possibly aims to put distance between incest and the poetic avatars/ancestors of the Queen.

This tactic of displacement appears to explain the textual function of Argante. At once a product and practitioner of polluted sexuality, Argante is defined by incest:

Her sire *Typhoeus* was, who mad through merth,
 And drunke with bloud of men, slain by his might,
 Through incest, her of his owne mother Earth
 Whilome begot, being but halfe twin of that berth.

For at that berth another Babe she bore,
 To weet the mighty *Ollyphant*, . . .

 These twinnes, men say, (a thing far passing thought)
 Whiles in their mothers wombe enclosed they were,
 Ere they into the lightsome world were brought,
 In fleshly lust were mingled both yfere,
 And in that monstrous wise did to the world appere.

So liu'd they euer after in like sin,
 Gainst natures law, and good behaiouire.

(3.7.47–49)

The hyperbolic quality of Argante's corrupted sexuality pointedly contrasts with the hyperbolic chastity of another female twin introduced in book three, namely Belphebe, the character singled out in the proem as the textual expression of Elizabeth's virginity (3.proem.5). Whereas Argante is conceived incestuously, Belphebe is conceived asexually, "through influence of th'heauens fruitfull ray" (3.6.6). While Argante's maturation entails increasingly monstrous transgressions, Belphebe is "vpbrought in goodly womanhed" (3.6.28). As Belphebe's foil, then, Argante seems to serve as an anti-Elizabeth. In this role, the giantess is perfectly suited to assume the incestuous identity that the text would wish to divorce from the queen. Locating incest in a figure antithetical to Elizabeth, Spenser can potentially depollute his sovereign.

To the extent that Argante functions in this fashion, Spenser might be seen to be implementing a strategy common to the pro-Tudor authors bold enough to address the explosive topic of incest. As

Boehrer observes, Queen Elizabeth managed to suppress discussions of incest in official avenues, but the topic resurfaced in the imaginative literature of the period. This body of writings, Boehrer explains, “aims to ease the symbolic tensions accruing around Elizabeth’s inheritance of her father’s throne, and in the process . . . regularly performs a ritual of cleansing whereby it seeks to exorcise the genealogical problems of the Tudor dynasty by displacing them onto other historical and mythical figures.”⁶ As a “mythical figure” onto whom accusations of incest are “displaced,” Argante seems to be a case in point. Nevertheless, a number of readers have noted that Spenser’s representation of Argante appears to be at odds with a plan to cleanse the crown of incest by coding it as completely other. Indeed, Argante often looks eerily like Elizabeth herself.

By the time *The Faerie Queene* was published, Elizabeth quite obviously had passed her child-bearing years. The absence of a legitimate successor to the aging Queen provoked considerable anxiety in England. This anxiety only intensified when Elizabeth, having failed to beget an heir, obstinately refused to name one. The Queen was widely—and not always circumspectly—criticized for endangering the realm by defaulting on her royal obligation to ensure dynastic continuity. David Kinahan argues that *The Faerie Queene* mounts a critique of this kind, primarily through the character of Argante, who offers Spenser “a refracted way of considering Elizabeth’s unproductive sexuality.” Observing that Argante’s forbidden sexuality is cast as a kind of self-consumption (the desire to “deuoure / Her natue flesh” [3.7.49]), Kinahan claims that Argante’s incest is intended to resonate with Elizabeth’s refusal to reproduce. He contends that Spenser ties Elizabeth to Argante according to a propagative logic within which Elizabeth’s rejection of marriage and her procreative role “has the same social effect as endogamy—the Tudor line consumes itself.” For Kinahan, Argante is not Elizabeth’s other. Instead, she is Elizabeth’s monstrous self: “Argante becomes a (per)version of Elizabeth—of incestuous origin, unmarried, and refusing to participate in the socially (and, in her case, politically) perpetuating institution of marriage.”⁷ If Kinahan is correct, *The Faerie Queene* does not introduce Argante in order to distance Elizabeth from incest but rather to accuse her of it.

The episode with Argante, however, is not the only instance wherein incest seems to attach itself to what might be considered the wrong referent. Throughout the whole of book three incest appears to be altogether too mobile. Disrespecting the distinctions between

good and evil, it refuses to restrict itself to the ranks of the unregenerate. As a result of incest's alarmingly ambulatory nature, the characters who ostensibly emblemize virtue are often associated with illicit sexuality. Thus, the supremely chaste Florimell, fleeing from the witch's monster, is compared to Myrrha:

Not halfe so fast the wicked *Myrrha* fled
From the dread hand of her reuenging fathers hond:
.....
As *Florimell* fled from that Monster yond.

(3.7.26)⁸

Conflating Florimell with Myrrha, Spenser's simile mixes sexual purity with sexual pollution. But it is in the figure of Britomart that this continued confusion of chastity with its ostensible other is most clearly manifest. Britomart's love for Artegall, the driving force behind book three, often bears an uncanny resemblance to Myrrha's love for Cinyras.

I. BRITOMART

From the very beginning, Britomart's attraction to Artegall is haunted by the figure of her father.⁹ She falls in love while contemplating her father's glass in the intimate seclusion of her father's closet:

One day it fortun'd, faire *Britomart*
Into her fathers closet to repayre;
For nothing he from her reseru'd apart,
Being his onely daughter and his hayre.

(3.2.22)

Spying a comely knight in her father's mirror, Britomart conceives a passion so strong that her nurse immediately suspects her of harboring "filthy lust, contrarie vnto kind" (3.2.40). After hearing what has happened, Glauce invokes the incestuous examples of Myrrha and Biblis, even while assuring her charge that her affections are dissimilar:

Not so th'*Arabian Myrrhe* did set her mind;
Nor so did *Biblis* spend her pining hart,
But lou'd their natiue flesh against all kind,
And to their purpose vsed wicked art.

(3.2.41)

Britomart, however, resists Glauce's attempt to differentiate her from Myrrha and Biblis. Although the maid acknowledges that incest is wicked, she nonetheless announces an envious identification with both women:

Beldame, your words do worke me litle ease;
For though my loue be not so lewdly bent,
As those ye blame, yet may it nought appease
My raging smart, ne ought my flame relent,
But rather doth my helpelesse grieffe augment.
For they, how euer shamefull and vnkind,
Yet did possesse their horrible intent:
Short end of sorrowes they thereby did find;
So was their fortune good, though wicked were their mind.
(3.2.43)

Wishing that she could realize her desire as they were able to realize theirs, Britomart allies herself with Ovid's incestuous women.

Belying her claim that Britomart's love carries "no guilt" (3.2.40), the nurse presently proposes to cure her of it. As Nohrnberg has shown, Glauce's schedule of herbal and magical ministrations parallels the program of Myrrha's nurse.¹⁰ Moreover, the motive cited for Glauce's diligence also hints at incest: the nurse tries to extirpate Britomart's love out of concerns that it will prove troubling to Britomart's father, occasioning "foule reproofe, / And sore reproch":

Full many wayes within her troubled mind,
Old *Glauce* cast, to cure this Ladies grieffe:
.....
For thy great care she tooke, and greater feare,
Least that it should her turne to foule reproofe,
And sore reproch, when so her father deare
Should of his dearest daughters hard misfortune heare.
(3.3.5)

In an attempt to avoid a shameful situation, Glauce strives to stifle Britomart's passion.

Her inability to do so instigates a visit to Merlin, the maker of the magic mirror. In spite of the fact that Britomart disguises herself for the journey, Merlin straightaway calls her by name, causing Britomart to blush. Although such a blush conventionally signifies bashful modesty, the simile Spenser employs to describe her reaction cuts in the other direction.¹¹ Resurrecting the idea of illicit love, Spenser likens Britomart's embarrassment to that of Aurora:

The doubtfull Mayd, seeing her selfe descryde,
Was all abasht, and her pure yuory
Into a cleare Carnation suddeine dyde;
As faire *Aurora* rising hastily,
Doth by her blushing tell, that she did lye
All night in old *Tithonus* frosen bed,
Whereof she seemes ashamed inwardly.

(3.3.20)

Comparing Britomart's blush to the shame a young woman feels after lying with a man much older than herself, the text again implies that her affections are illicit.

The ensuing interview further complicates the characterization of Britomart's love by introducing what David Lee Miller calls "an odd convertibility between the images of parent and child."¹² Merlin prophesies that Britomart's eventual husband will be "cut off by practise criminall" but reconciles Britomart to this loss by telling her:

With thee yet shall he leaue for memory
Of his late puissance, his Image dead,
That liuing him in all actiuity
To thee shall represent.

(3.3.28, 29)

Adverting that Britomart's son will take the place of her husband, Merlin foretells an affective substitution not unlike those involved in acts of incest.

This confusion of lover and child can also be seen in Britomart's conversation with the Red Crosse Knight. Telling him that she is trying to track down a knight "that hath vnto me donne / Late foule dishonour and reprochfull spight," Britomart prods Red Crosse to provide news of Artegall (while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that there is something foul, dishonorable, and reproachful in her attraction to him). As Red Crosse disputes her disparaging description of Artegall and praises his virtues, Britomart "woxe inly glad, / To heare her Loue so highly magnifide":

The louing mother, that nine monethes did beare,
In the deare closet of her painefull side,
Her tender babe, it seeing safe appeare,
Doth not so much reioyce, as she reioyced there.

(3.2.8, 11)

Likening Britomart's feelings for Artegall to a mother's love for her child, the passage conflates conjugal love with filial love, merging chastity with incest. As Jonathan Goldberg writes: "Britomart gives birth to Arthegall. . . . Arthegall is at once Britomart's ideal, her child, and her future husband."¹³

To account for the incestuous quality of Britomart's love, Nohrnberg points to her symbolic status as Chastity and explains that the virtue of chastity presupposes sexual awareness: one must feel sexual desire in order to chastely govern it. Consequently, Britomart must first undergo a sexual awakening before she can then become the embodiment of chastity. This sexual awakening, starting with her vision of Artegall, appears incestuous at first because sexual desire, as Freud has shown, originally targets one's own parent. Britomart's amorous career, in other words, rehearses the psychogenesis of eros. Initially directed at her own father, Britomart's first erotic feelings are eventually transferred onto an appropriately exogamous object.¹⁴

Nohrnberg's reading provides a certain rationale for the incestuous nature of Britomart's initial attraction to Artegall. His interpretation, however, depends upon the disappearance of incest as Britomart's love matures. But it quite plainly persists. The union between Artegall and Britomart that is prophetically envisioned in book five—two full books after Britomart's sexual awakening in the closet of her father—imaginatively aligns the eventual marriage of Artegall and Britomart with the brother-sister endogamy of Isis and Osiris, the divine siblings of Egyptian myth.

Just before she rescues Artegall from Radigund, Britomart spends the night in the Temple of Isis. Falling asleep at the idol's feet, Britomart receives "a wondrous vision, which did close implie / The course of all her fortune and posteritie" (5.7.12). In the vision Britomart finds herself appareled like a priest of Isis, doing sacrifice before her altar. Britomart's "Moone-like Mitre," however, is suddenly transformed into a "Crowne of gold" as Britomart ceases to be a devotee of the goddess and becomes Isis herself (5.7.13).¹⁵ As the goddess Isis, Britomart is beset by an amorous crocodile:

he so neare her drew,
That of his game she soone enwombd grew,
And forth did bring a Lion of great might;
That shortly did all other beasts subdew.

(5.7.16)

The high priest who interprets this dream on the following day tells Britomart that this crocodile symbolizes both Osiris and Artegall:

For that same Crocodile doth represent
The righteous Knight, that is thy faithfull louer,
Like to *Osyris* in all iust endeuer.
For that same Crocodile *Osyris* is,
That vnder *Isis* feete doeth sleepe for euer.

(5.7.22)

By casting Britomart and Artegall in the respective roles of Isis and her brother Osiris, Spenser ties his heroes to incest yet again. Invalidating Nohrnberg's ideas about Britomart's psychological progression, the episode in Isis Church does not dismiss the intimations of incest evident in Britomart's early attraction to Artegall but rather intensifies them. Figuring the union of Britomart and Artegall as the union of an Isis and an Osiris, the prophetic vision of book five perpetuates the incestuous suggestions articulated earlier in the epic.

In book three Britomart wishes to consummate her desires as Myrrha and Biblis have consummated theirs. In book five Britomart does not merely envy the incestuous women of ancient myth but becomes one herself. Symbolically transfigured into the goddess Isis, Britomart is not just identified with but is identical to a classical example of incest. And this particular example has powerful implications within the Tudor incest narrative. While book three has draped the love of Britomart and Artegall in Ovidian trappings, implying a connection between Britomart and Myrrha, book five exchanges the model of father-daughter love found in the tale of Cinyras and Myrrha for the brother-sister coupling exemplified in the story of Osiris and Isis. The substitution amplifies the significance of the incestuous allusions for an Elizabethan readership because the sibling incest of the Egyptian pair precisely parallels the incestuous acts imputed to Anne Boleyn. Depicting Britomart as an incestuous sister who takes her brother for her lover, Spenser audaciously enacts in the ancestral line that he fabricates for Queen Elizabeth the very crimes for which her mother was executed and by which Elizabeth herself was rumored to have been conceived. Instead of insulating Elizabeth and her mother from the Henrician incest narrative, *The Faerie Queene* seems rather to be inserting them right into the middle of just such a narrative.

In Henry's hands, the category of incest proved highly malleable. Although Spenser's deployment of the idea differs significantly from

Henry's, incest in *The Faerie Queene* also displays considerable flexibility. At times, incest appears to mark out moral depravity (as in the case of Argante); at other times, incest wears the badge of chastity (as in the case of Britomart).¹⁶ The complexity of this situation is made strikingly apparent when one recognizes that the sexual acts in question are the same. Although their respective behaviors are read quite differently, Argante's incest is identical to that of Britomart-as-Isis: each character couples with her own brother. In fact, the details of Argante's monstrous incest appear to derive directly from the description of Isis encountered in Plutarch. When the Squire of Dames describes Argante's outrages in book three, he refers to that which is all but unthinkable—incest *in utero*:

These twinnes, men say, (a thing far passing thought)
Whiles in their mothers wombe enclosed they were,
Ere they into the lightsome world were brought,
In fleshly lust were mingled both yfere,
And in that monstrous wise did to the world appere.

(3.7.48)

Plutarch makes the very same claim concerning Isis in his treatise *Isis and Osiris*, the text on which Spenser bases his description of Isis Church: "They say that . . . Isis and Osiris, being in love with each other even before they were born, were united in the darkness of the womb."¹⁷ Turning Plutarch's reference to "the darkness of the womb" into its obverse ("the lightsome world") and duplicating the reportorial phraseology of Plutarch's accusation ("They say" and "men say"), Spenser seems to conscientiously connect Argante to Britomart-as-Isis. Once again, incest appears to disorder the moral framework of the epic, blurring the boundaries between purity and pollution and forcing the question of how one accounts for Britomart's incestuousness.

Sociological investigations into the operation of the incest prohibition point in the direction of class or status. Raymond Firth's study of Polynesian cultures, for instance, reveals a relationship between endogamy and the aristocracy. "Where interest of rank or property steps in," he instructs, "the incest prohibition is likely to melt away."¹⁸ Such an understanding might inform the incestuous depiction of Britomart's love: Britomart's high status renders permissible affective impulses that would be expressly forbidden to someone of a lower station. Thus, Britomart's incestuous desires are sanctioned while Argante's are condemned not because the nature of the desire differs

but rather because the nature of the desirer does. That which is inexcusable in the case of the one is acceptable in the case of the other because Britomart's social status licenses what Argante's cannot. As a result of Britomart's royal rank, "the incest prohibition . . . melt[s] away."¹⁹

Like Firth, Julian Pitt-Rivers sees status to be central to those situations where injunctions such as the incest taboo are dissolved or disregarded. Pitt-Rivers argues that classist ideologies cultivate within the nobility a sense of extra-legality by installing them in the role of "the arbiters" rather than "the arbitrated." Because the upper classes act as a law unto themselves, they feel themselves to be exempt from the prohibitions that bind society at large. Transgression comes to be the prerogative of the powerful. As Pitt-Rivers states: "The sacred quality of high status is demonstrated in the freedom from the sanctions which apply to ordinary mortals."²⁰

Insofar as freedom from society's sexual prohibitions is expressive of "the sacred quality of high status," involvement in incest potentially signals both position and privilege. It is along these lines that Jonathan Crewe interprets the issue in his remarkable reading of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Although critics commonly construe the character of Stella to be a screen for Lady Penelope Rich or Queen Elizabeth I, Crewe speculates that the wealthy, unobtainable woman of Sidney's sonnet sequence might really represent his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke. To elucidate why Sidney might have wanted to poetically implicate himself with his sister, Crewe points to Sidney's tendentious ties to the aristocratic class and notes the ways in which incest could shore up this shaky social position. There are, in other words, "tactical reasons" for Sidney to strike an incestuous pose:

Far more compellingly than chivalrous courtship, incest can mark a boundary between the gentry and those who are not; between those who can get away with it and those who can't; between those who dare to do it and those who don't; between those who are, by virtue of their peculiar exclusiveness, "fated" to do it and those who are not; between those who are culturally overawed and those who are not.

According to Crewe, the incestuous intimacy shadowed in *Astrophil and Stella* potentially serves as an assertion of social position, working "to confirm the aristocratic status of that marginal gentleman, Philip Sidney, a knight only by virtue of the emptiest diplomatic formality."²¹

Analogously, incest in *The Faerie Queene* seems to be a sort of shorthand for nobility. Like Sidney in *Astrophil and Stella*, Spenser appears to exploit incest's signifying potential to affirm Britomart's queen-like condition. As she pursues a relationship repeatedly portrayed as incestuous, Britomart effectively claims for herself an extra-legality that in turn attests to her regal status by placing her above the taboos that subdue the lower classes.

The courtly orientation of *The Faerie Queene*, though, puts it at odds in certain places with Crewe's theorization of incest and the Elizabethan aristocracy. In Crewe's reading, Sidney's incestuousness directly opposes the institution of "exogamous political courtship" that calls upon the courtier to abandon the familial sphere in order to practice service and submission to the monarch. When Sidney selects his sister over his sovereign, he subversively centers his social, emotional, and intellectual life at Wilton House rather than Westminster. By renouncing the court of the Queen for a counter-court comprised of his own family circle, Sidney chooses incest over England. Loyalty to that which is external (crown and country) is vanquished by a transgressive desire for that which is internal (family). In Crewe's view, incest is inimical to the state, arising from a fealty and affection for family that "surpasses any national, centralizing, or counter-dynastic interest."²²

National, centralizing, and counter-dynastic interests, however, are precisely those that Spenser embraces in his poem. Instead of displacing the Queen, Spenser repeatedly avows his intention to more fully enthrone her. Indeed, Karl Marx found Spenser's efforts to ally and ingratiate himself with the sovereign to be so ardent that he famously referred to him as "Elizabeth's arse-kissing poet."²³ Although Marx's appellation fails to appreciate the ways in which Spenser might resist or reproach Elizabeth in the course of his poem, it is, for the most part, an accurate evaluation. As Miller declares: "Spenser's portrayal of Elizabeth is sometimes obliquely critical . . . but it remains on balance a work of glorification."²⁴ As an act of explicit political courtship, *The Faerie Queene* would consequently seem to have little traffic with the antimonarchial and antinational aspects of incest that Crewe discusses in relation to Sidney. To the degree that incest is important to Spenser's "arse-kissing" epic, it must somehow signify differently than it does in *Astrophil and Stella*.

Moreover, incest possesses symbolic power in Crewe's account precisely because it is illicit, because it is a perversion. Such an explanation appears to fall short of its complexly multivalent meaning

in *The Faerie Queene*. Not always an abomination in need of authorization or excuse, incest is often associated with divinity. The incestuous figure of Isis, for instance, is enthroned in a holy temple, where a steady stream of disciples—including Britomart herself—do her devotion. These acts of adoration indicate that Isis is sanctified rather than sullied by her relations with her brother; her divine status does not seem to license her endogamy so much as her endogamy seems to endow her with divinity. But Isis Church is not the only place in the epic where incest is exalted. Indeed, when one examines the universal cosmology of *The Faerie Queene*, one discovers incest at its very core.

Canto six, located in the center of book three, contains a lengthy discussion of the Garden of Adonis. This garden, frequently used by Renaissance writers to symbolize venery or lust, assumes a quite different character in *The Faerie Queene*. In Spenser's redaction, the Garden of Adonis is the birthplace of all life:

[T]here is the first seminarie
Of all things, that are borne to liue and die,
According to their kinde.

(3.6.30)

All things from thence doe their first being fetch,
And borrow matter, whereof they are made,
Which when as forme and feature it does ketch,
Becomes a bodie, and doth then inuade
The state of life, out of the griesly shade.

(3.6.37)

Adonis himself resides in the middle of this garden, where he is said by many to enjoy immortality:

And sooth it seemes they say: for he may not
For euer die, and euer buried bee
In balefull night, where all things are forgot;
All be he subiect to mortalitie,
Yet is eterne in mutabilitie,
And by succession made perpetuall,
Transformed oft, and changed diuerslie:
For him the Father of all formes they call;
Therefore needs mote he liue, that liuing giues to all.

(3.6.47)

Structurally central to the *Book of Chastity*, Adonis is also symbolically central—the immortal origin of all life. This relatively unusual claim becomes even more remarkable when one remembers that the boy Spenser nominates “the Father of all formes” took his own form from an incestuous union: Adonis is the son of Myrrha and Cinyras. Given the importance of the Myrrha myth to the ideas and images of book three, Adonis’s incestuous conception is not an embarrassing coincidence. Instead, the incest narrative attaching itself to Adonis appears to be essential to his originary role. Spenser’s extended discussion of the Garden of Adonis points to a meaningful relationship between incest and origins.

These categories converge again in Spenser’s alternative account of creation, also found in book three. In this version, the Sun supplants Adonis as the source of life, but the incest motif does not disappear. According to Spenser’s heliocentric account of creation, the Sun is the “great father . . . of generation,” or “th’author of life and light.” Significantly, the Sun authors both life and light by conjoining with his sister, the Moon, whose “matter fit” the Sun “temp[ers]” so that it “breedes the liuing wight”:

Great father he of generation
 Is rightly cald, th’author of life and light;
 And his faire sister for creation
 Ministreth matter fit, which tempred right
 With heate and humour, breeds the liuing wight.

(3.6.9)

In the Garden of Adonis, father-daughter incest has supplied the starting place for all life. In the passages about the Sun and the Moon, brother-sister incest engenders all that exists. In both cases incest ceases to be an aberrant transgression “against all kind” and operates instead as the natural process generative of all being. Far from signifying unnaturalness or impurity, incest approximates godliness.

The sibling incest inherent in Spenser’s heliocentric model of creation is particularly suggestive in relation to the situation of Britomart and Artegall because Spenser conscientiously alludes to the example of the Sun and the Moon when describing his chivalric heroes. The very first time Britomart reveals herself to the reader (raising her visor in Malecasta’s castle), she is compared to the Moon:

But the braue Mayd would not disarmed bee,
But onely vented vp her vmbriere,
And so did let her goodly visage to appere.

As when faire *Cynthia*, in darksome night,
Is in a noyous cloud enueloped,
Where she may find the substaunce thin and light,
Breakes forth her siluer beames, and her bright hed
Discouers to the world discomfited.

(3.1.42–43)

The simile describing Artegall's first appearance is analogous. Like Britomart, Artegall enters the epic fully armed. An upraised beaver, however, offers his face to view. As was the case with Britomart, Artegall's half-seen countenance peers forth as if it were a celestial body breaking through a temporary obscuration. While Britomart was associated with *Cynthia*, Artegall enters as *Phoebus*:

Eftsoones there was presented to her eye
A comely knight, all arm'd in complet wize,
Through whose bright ventayle lifted vp on hye
His manly face, that did his foes agrize,
And friends to termes of gentle truce entize,
Lookt forth, as *Phoebus* face out of the east,
Betwixt two shadie mountaines doth arize.

(3.2.24)

Likening Artegall and Britomart to the Sun and the Moon, Spenser links the life-creating incest of the latter pair to the nation-creating incest of the former.

The episode in *Isis Church* forges similar connections. Equating Britomart to *Isis* and Artegall to *Osiris*, the text confirms their respective relationships to the Moon and the Sun while simultaneously strengthening the incestuous associations attendant upon these symbolic convergences. In the Temple of *Isis*, Spenser reports, the priests wear “riche Mitres shaped like the Moone, / To shew that *Isis* doth the Moone portend; / Like as *Osyris* signifies the Sunne” (5.7.4). These multiply layered symbolic relationships (Britomart-is-*Isis*-is-Moon and Artegall-is-*Osiris*-is-Sun) interpellate Britomart and Artegall into a number of incestuous configurations, each of which bears the stamp of divinity. Unlike the incest encountered in the stories of *Myrrha-Cinyras* and *Argante-Ollyphante*, the incest in the mythic relations of *Isis-Osiris* and the Sun-Moon is both virtuous and holy.

By enfolding the relationship of Britomart and Artegall into the natural, cosmic incest of the Sun-Moon and the divine, primordial incest of Isis-Osiris, *The Faerie Queene* indicates that Britomart's quasi-endogamous attraction is not an abnormal or aberrant desire permissible only because her social status confers upon her an extra-legal exemption from normally binding sociological prohibitions. Indeed, the sibling incest that provides the pattern for Britomart's union with Artegall is linked with purity rather than prurience. It is for this reason that Britomart is not simply "permitted" to marry Artegall—she is commanded to do so. As Merlin witnesses, Britomart's love does not arise from her own will or her own sense of class privilege. Her affective condition has been engineered by "eternall providence":

It was not, *Britomart*, thy wandring eye,
 Glauncing vnwares in charmed looking glas,
 But the streight course of heauenly destiny,
 Led with eternall providence, that has
 Guided thy glaunce, to bring his will to pas:
 Ne is thy fate, ne is thy fortune ill,
 To loue the prowest knight, that euer was.
 Therefore submit thy wayes vnto his will,
 And do by all dew meanes thy destiny fulfill.

(3.3.24)

According to Merlin, Britomart's endogamously inflected love for Artegall is not prohibited by God but rather is produced by him. For Britomart, incest is somehow imperative.²⁵ This incest imperative, I contend, is driven by an ideology of purity not unrelated to one at work in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

In John Webster's sensational Jacobean play, the widowed Duchess of Malfi scandalously contracts a second marriage with her lower class lover. Isabella's brother, enraged that she has defiled the aristocratic purity of their blood line, imprisons, tortures, and eventually kills his sister. Frank Whigham's provocative reading of the play begins with the observation that Ferdinand's impassioned response conveys a curiously erotic investment in the character of his sister. Although Ferdinand's incestuousness has not gone unnoticed, previous critics have struggled to account for it because Ferdinand does not seem interested in sexual gratification. How does one make sense of incestuous desire that doesn't aim at incestuous relations? According to Whigham, one does so by recognizing that Ferdinand's incest is not a sexual but rather a social posture.

Whigham ties Ferdinand's emotional state to the increasingly unstable class structure of Jacobean England, where political and economic changes swelled the ranks of the aristocracy with first-generation gentlemen. Whigham claims that the character of Ferdinand dramatizes the crisis of identity experienced by the aristocratic classes in the face of this lower class infiltration: "My core hypothesis," Whigham writes, "can be briefly stated. I read Ferdinand as a threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his supposedly ascriptive social rank, and obsessively preoccupied with its defense. . . . This account construes Ferdinand's incestuous inclination toward his sister as a *social posture*, of extreme and paranoid compensation—a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading contamination by inferiors."²⁶ Ferdinand's frenzied attempt to possess his sister, in other words, does not intend the achievement of sexual relations but rather their prevention. By keeping Isabella for himself, Ferdinand seeks to disallow others from taking possession of—and thereby polluting—the vessel that contains his/her aristocratic blood. "That body of hers," Ferdinand rants, "While that my blood ran pure in it, was more worth . . . [than her] soul."²⁷ Contra Freud, the horror here is not incest but exogamy, for exogamy brings about a mixing of status/rank/blood. Fueled by a fear of miscegenation, Ferdinand's incestuous desires arise from what Whigham terms "status paranoia."²⁸

In many ways, Spenser's own rise in rank epitomizes the upward mobility that Ferdinand finds so alarming. Starting out as a charity student at the Merchant Taylors' School, Spenser eventually comes to own an estate of almost 4,000 acres. His childhood title of "poor scholar" gives way in later years to that of "Gent.," as Spenser successfully enrolls himself in the upper classes.²⁹ Spenser's precipitous social ascent, of course, occurs in the Irish colonies, far distant from the courtly circles that Whigham posits as the sociopolitical context of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is precisely this distance, however, that instills within Spenser a sense of crisis comparable to that of the Jacobean aristocracy. Indeed, Whigham's reading of Ferdinand seems strikingly germane to Spenser's situation in the colonial administration of Ireland. As a member of an elite minority threatened with invasion from below, Spenser's anxiety about his identity as a New English settler serves as a real-life analog to the status paranoia of Webster's Ferdinand. Whereas Ferdinand is a threatened aristocrat, Spenser is a threatened Englishman, anxiously trying to preserve his supposedly ascriptive national identity in an environment where the

distinction between English and Irish, colonizer and colonized, is imperiled by both the shedding and the mixing of British blood.³⁰

II. IRELAND

Homi Bhabha has shown how colonial ideologies depend upon a “Manichaeian structure” which seeks to split the world into dichotomous identity categories. The attempt to differentiate between the civil and the barbaric, the “us” and the “them,” grounds itself in genealogy. As Bhabha writes: “The objective of colonialist discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”³¹ Obsessively prying into the ancestry of the Irish people, Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* aims at just such an objective. Irenius, the authoritative voice in the text, argues at great length that the Irish descend from the most uncivil races of ancient times. This ignominious lineage is fully evident in the evil customs of the contemporary Irish. Thus, Irenius simultaneously pieces together this degenerate genealogy and proves its veracity by contemplating the vicious behavior of the Irish and then tracing these behaviors back to the customs of more ancient peoples. The clothing, hairstyles, and weaponry of the Irish, for instance, all declare them to be “mere savage and Scythian.”³² Matching each Irish incivility to one of the disreputable races represented in their variegated blood, Irenius conscientiously attributes the depravity of the Irish to their racial origin. *A View of the Present State of Ireland* legitimates the English colonial presence by portraying the Irish as a mongrelized race that bears its moral inferiority in its very blood.

According to Irenius, this savage race is distressingly adept at attacking the English colonists, whose very civility hinders them from effectively defending themselves. But the greatest danger faced by the New English in Ireland is not murder but miscegenation. Whereas murder spills British blood, miscegenation spoils it, threatening to undo the racial and national categories upon which the colonial project rests. In brief, miscegenation jeopardizes Spenser’s place in Ireland as well as his identity as an Englishman. It is for this reason that *A View of the Present State of Ireland* points to the intermingling of the Old English and the Irish as the most extreme example of colonial catastrophe. Notwithstanding Irenius’s glib assertion about the evangelical outcome of intermarriage, the interracial

unions of the Irish and the English effect no divine purpose. Irishness is never ennobled, and Englishness is invariably enervated—indeed, it is almost entirely effaced.³³ As Irenius reports:

[G]reat houses there be of the old English in Ireland, which through licentious conversing with the Irish, or marrying and fostering with them, or lack of meet nurture, or other such unhappy occasions, have degenerated from their ancient dignities and are now grown as Irish as O'Hanlan's breech, (as the proverb there is).³⁴

The Old English who have joined with the Irish have surrendered “their ancient dignities” and have lost all semblance of their British selves. As Eudoxius comes to understand, they have degenerated to such a degree that they “from civility are grown to be wild and mere Irish.”³⁵

The Irish ability to overwhelm the identity of the British and reduce them to “mere Irish[ness]” prompts Spenser to prescribe an extreme insularity. As Thomas Healy remarks: “Ireland provides distinct evidence that civilisation in the hands of the few must be maintained by exclusivity.”³⁶ This exclusivity is especially important where intermarriage is concerned. Referring to interracial relations as both an “infection” and a “contagion,” Irenius warns: “These two evil customs, of fostering and marrying with the Irish [are] most carefully to be restrained.”³⁷ If the colonizers are to retain their British identity, they must keep to themselves. In short, the threat to Spenser's imperiled identity eventuates in a social withdrawal similar to the one enacted by Webster's Ferdinand. As in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the fear of invasion from below engenders an intense investment in social exclusivity. Because exogamy in Ireland dangerously confuses racial and national identities crucial to the Elizabethan colonial project, Spenser embraces an elitist insularity that finds its fullest expression in *The Faerie Queene* when one noble Briton endogamously pairs with another.

III. THE FAERIE QUEENE

Critics have frequently pointed out how Spenser's Irish experiences inform his epic. C. S. Lewis, for instance, famously suggested that “*The Faerie Queene* should perhaps be regarded as the work of one who is turning into an Irishman.”³⁸ Richard McCabe, taking into account the apprehensions evident in Spenser's writings, offers a cogent correction to Lewis's claim: “It would be more accurate to

regard it as the work of one who feared that his descendants might turn into Irishmen.³⁹ In a world thronging with savages, seductresses, and sorcerers, Spenser's valiant knights-errant occupy a precarious position not unlike the one he attributes to the New English in Ireland. As Healy explains: "The court of the Faerie Queene from where the knights are dispatched is absent from the poem. There appears no civilised pale where they can remove their armour and let down their guard for any length of time. The virtues the knights seek to develop, both in themselves and in the world, are always under assault."⁴⁰

Like the British colonists in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, the heroic protagonists in *The Faerie Queene* are repeatedly invited to corrupt themselves by embracing savagery, sensuality, or apostasy. Consequently, moral purity in Spenser's epic roots itself in self-reservation. Goodness consists of repeatedly repudiating that which is understood to be unlike the self. McCabe's summation of the first three books shows self-withholding to be the poem's principal condition of heroism: "Holinesse must distinguish itself from the 'barbarous truth' of a 'salvage nation'; Temperance must resist 'an uncouth, salvage, and uncivile wight'; and Chastity must preserve the integrity of a pure bloodline destined to 'indew / The salvage minds with skill of iust and trew.'"⁴¹ In Spenser's epic, virtue maintains itself virtuous by rejecting relations with anything other than itself. The only congress that does not contaminate is the kind that conjoins like with like.⁴²

In many ways, the epic's idealization of relationships that do not admit difference accords with theories of attraction prevalent in the period. As Laurie Shannon has shown, classical and early modern discourses of natural desire routinely depict affection as an outgrowth of resemblance or similitude. According to these conceptualizations, love properly proceeds according to kind: each thing instinctively seeks its like and shuns its contrary.⁴³ Characterizing mixed matches as unnatural or aberrant, this likeness *topos* leads to what Shannon labels a "homonormative bias" in matters of affinity and alliance.⁴⁴ This homonormative prejudice can be seen throughout *The Faerie Queene*. When Spenser's epic celebrates the merger of like with like and disfavors associations involving difference, the poem trades in early modern commonplaces concerning the naturalness of sympathetic desire and the unnaturalness of any intercourse with otherness.

Yet Spenser's position ceases to be strictly conventional to the extent that his homonormativity is supercharged by an imperialist

angst. Anxieties about mixing with alien races and a colonial concern to police “pure” identity categories raise the homonormative stakes of *The Faerie Queene* through the roof. Keeping to kind comprises more than a natural inclination: it is a moral and political imperative vital to the preservation of self. The early modern aversion to heterogeneity and hybridity escalates in Spenser’s epic into an abhorrence for difference that envisions all crossings and mixings as a kind of contamination.

Consonant with this homonormative hysteria, Spenser invents in *The Faerie Queene* an origin story for the British race that endeavors to expunge all elements of unlikeness. Spenser provides the English with an irreproachable—albeit imaginary—genealogy by aggressively insisting upon the self-sameness of Britomart and Artegall. It is this xenophobic desire to exclude otherness that drives the incestuous characterization of their coming together. Fears of adulterating interrelations push Spenser to embrace the consanguineous attractions of incest as an exemplary commitment to one’s own kind.

Spenser’s text attests to this enviable self-sameness in the case of Britomart and Artegall by refracting their relationship through a series of mirror images. The maid first feels desire for Artegall when his image substitutes itself for her own in a magical mirror. Fascinated with this reflection, Britomart outfits herself in armor and sets out in pursuit, effectively transforming herself into the mirror image of the mirror image of her lover. By the time we get to book five, Britomart has become so like Artegall that other characters commonly confuse the two. On the evidence of “many tokens plaine,” for instance, Dolon mistakes Britomart for her future mate (5.6.34).⁴⁵ These converging identities and myriad mirrorings strive toward an arresting condition of complete likeness, obscuring potentially defiling difference by multiplying sameness. Within the homonormative logic of the poem, Britomart and Artegall are the perfect pair because they are not really a pair at all. Mirroring a single heroic ideal, they cease to be separate individuals and occupy instead the same subjective space. This programmatic effacement of difference speaks to Spenser’s wish to negate all notions of hybridity or miscegenation and confer upon the British race an all-important genealogical integrity. When the savagery of the Irish is said to stem from their racial heterogeneity, the civility of the British must perforce be produced by its inverse: a lineage devoid of dirtying mixture.

Of course, the biological differences that are dictated by the situation serve as something of an embarrassment to this mythical

similitude. The pair's reproductive destiny demands a heterosexuality that strains the poem's homonormativity. This tension is partially and provisionally assuaged by Britomart's transvestism. Her male attire covers up her uncomfortable anatomical otherness and her compelling performance of masculinity puts in play a show of sameness, each deferring the problem of sexual difference.

But Artegall must ultimately see through the reassuring masquerade if the couple is to commence the business of begetting the British nation. He gets his first glimpse when, in the course of combat, he shears off part of Britomart's helmet and discovers an undeniably female face. The revelation renders him completely impotent:

And as his hand he vp againe did reare,
Thinking to worke on her his vtmost wracke,
His powrelesse arme benumbd with secret feare
From his reuengefull purpose shronke abacke,
And cruell sword out of his fingers slacke
Fell downe to ground.

(4.6.21)

Artegall's stupefaction is symptomatic of the epic's inability to conceive of an encounter with difference as anything other than a dispossession or loss of self. Artegall is overcome and unmanned by that which is alien, much as the Irish race is overwhelmed, in Irenius's history, by successive waves of invaders. To be sure, the eventual union of the female Britomart and the male Artegall brings together two disparate sexes or "kinds," and in this fashion constitutes a kind of miscegenation. The heterosexual imparity inevitable in their marriage imperils the epic's homonormative investment—and the colonialist agenda that gives it such importance—by admitting into the history of the British race an instance of heterogeneous mixing that is theoretically difficult to distinguish from other moments of miscegenation, particularly the intermarrying that produces the racial inferiority of the Irish. When Spenser's mythical account of a pure British bloodline butts up against the necessary difference of sexual kind, the divide between the pure (unmixed) English and the wild (hybrid) Irish disturbingly diminishes.

Compensating for this debilitating sexual difference is the idea of incest and the intense interplay of sameness entailed therein. By figuratively affording Artegall and Britomart the status of siblings, *The Faerie Queene* offsets sexual difference with familial resemblance. Consanguinity is called upon to cover over an original

imparity, as an unlikeness in kind is corrected by a sameness in kinship. Spenser allusively enrolls the union of Britomart and Artegall in the lists of the illicit, for incest enables the myth of a pure British bloodline.

Because Britomart and Artegall are represented as the incestuous offspring of the same father (the Trojan Brutus), the blood of the one is the same as the blood of the other. Since they bear the same blood, the race that they create lays claim to an unmixed, undiluted ancestry. Cast in the role of brother and sister, Britomart and Artegall create a race with a single—and therefore unsullied—bloodline. It is to fend off the threat of contaminating miscegenation—both in the originary past and in the colonial present—that Spenser fashions the love of Artegall and Britomart after its ideological opposite: complete consanguinity. Within the xenophobic context of *The Faerie Queene*, incest salvages a stance of racial and moral purity.

According to Bhabha, the formation and preservation of national identities depends upon a certain forgetfulness. “Being obliged to forget,” he advises, “becomes the basis for remembering the nation.”⁴⁶ The central fact that *The Faerie Queene* seeks to forget is the ancestral hybridity of the British nation. As if to deny that the British bloodline contains anything other than British blood, Spenser’s epic indulges in a fantasy of originary incest. This mythic consanguinity, subtly suggested through allusions to Myrrha, Biblis, and Isis, bespeaks the superiority of the British race by purging from the British bloodline the history of successive invasion and intermixing that characterizes the degenerate races—and legitimizes Britain’s imperial control over them. Implying the original, racial superiority of the purebred Britons, incest enables Elizabeth’s expansionary politics. To the degree that it provides the ideological justification for empire, incest becomes essential to the epic directed and dedicated—not just to a queen—but to a “MOST HIGH, MIGHTIE And MAGNIFICENT EMPRESSE.” Although Freud suggested that the object of civilization is to prevent the spread of incest, Spenser uses incest to facilitate the spread of civilization.⁴⁷ In the imperial logic of *The Faerie Queene*, the paradoxical purity produced through incest authorizes the forcible imposition of English cultural formations.

CODA

In 1533 the Parliament of Henry VIII passed an act prohibiting all appeals to the See of Rome. Parliament authorized this renunciation

of papal authority by arrogating for England the status of an “Empire.” As the first sentence of the act announces: “It is manifestly declared and expressed that this Realme of Englonde is an Empire, and so hath ben accepted in the worlde.” According to Parliament, England’s imperial status gives it the right to untrammelled self-sovereignty; consequently, the Pope’s plan to curb Henry’s imperial prerogative is tantamount to an alien invasion wherein a “foreyn Prince” endeavors to usurp control over England and its juridical processes.⁴⁸

The Pope, of course, is not the only unwanted foreigner that this act of Parliament tries to exclude. The occasion inciting England to proclaim itself an independent empire was Henry’s intention to put away Catherine of Aragon, his foreign-born first wife. In this way, the statute powerfully displays the convergence of the categories of incest and empire. The incestuous narrative that Henry leverages to divorce himself from Catherine directly produces the break with Rome that, in turn, precipitates England’s official understanding of itself as an empire. Thus, in Spenser’s fabulous history of the Britons, art imitates life. When Spenser tells a tale of mythic incest to outline the origins of the English empire, he follows a proven model. For Spenser—as for Henry VIII—a story about incest ushers in and empowers an imperial England.

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NOTES

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¹ Bruce Boehrer, *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 2–3.

² Boehrer, 14.

³ Boehrer, 46–47.

⁴ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 3.proem.5. Hereafter cited parenthetically by book, canto, and stanza.

⁵ James Nohrberg, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 447.

⁶ Boehrer, 48.

⁷ David Kinahan, “Embodying Origins: An Anatomy of a Yeoman’s Daughter, Spenser’s Argante, and Elizabeth I,” in *Contextualizing the Renaissance: Returns to History*, ed. Albert H. Tricomi (Binghamton: Brepols, 1994), 211, 212, 210.

⁸ Although his reading leaves me largely unconvinced, Nohrnberg finds in Florimell's initial appearance an additional allusion to Myrrha: "In the first canto Florimell is 'chased' by a 'griesly Foster'; other uses of the word 'foster' make it mean a parent, in which case *this* parent would be the father who chases Myrrha—the aroused Cinyras" (447).

⁹ Artegall's closeness to Britomart's father is perhaps punningly registered in the word "pere" employed throughout the text to describe Britomart's lover. Although it denotes both "a chivalric champion" and "an equal," the word "*père*" is also French—for "father."

¹⁰ Nohrnberg calls attention to a number of additional parallels between the two tales: "Particularly analogous are the speeches of Britomart's and Myrrha's nurses (3.2.30–36; *Metamorphoses* 10.395–418); the nurses both command healing charms, herbs, and magic rites. Even Britomart's seemingly idiosyncratic line, 'my crime (if crime it be),' reflects the prayer of Ovid's lovesick Myrrha: 'scelerique resistite nostro, / si tamen noc scelus est' (resist this crime in us, if indeed this is a crime)" (447).

¹¹ John Milton's usage illustrates the way in which the blush generally bespeaks virtue. In book eight of *Paradise Lost*, Adam describes Eve's demeanor on the day of their marriage: "To the Nuptial Bowre / I led her blushing like the Morn." In this context unfallen Eve's blush announces her "Innocence and Virgin Modestie" (in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy C. Flannagan [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998], 8.510–11, 501).

¹² David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies: The Poetics of the 1590 Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), 279.

¹³ Jonathan Goldberg, "The Mothers in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 17 (1975): 7. Although he recognizes that the text figures Britomart's romance with Artegall in an incestuous fashion, Goldberg insists that "no taint of incest need be attached to this love." He argues that the apparent similarity between Britomart and the other incestuous women appearing in the epic is not designed to collapse but rather to call attention to the difference between her and them. In his reading, Britomart's maternal/conjugal love "presents a marked contrast" to that of the other incestuous mothers encountered in the text (8).

¹⁴ Nohrnberg, 436.

¹⁵ The transformation of the mitre into the crown attests to her new identity as Isis, for the "Crowne of gold" that Britomart acquires in her vision matches precisely the "Crowne of gold" worn by Isis in 5.7.6.

¹⁶ Even this formulation fails to convey the complexity of the situation. In the case of Argante, for instance, incest would seem to be a straightforward sign of moral degeneracy, but it is ultimately insufficient as a sign of sinfulness. Although Argante copulates with her brother "[g]ainst natures law," these relations are not the source of her "greatest shame":

So liu'd they euer after in like sin,
Gainst natures law, and good behaioure:
But greatest shame was to that maiden twin,
Who not content so fowly to deuoure
Her natue flesh, and staine her brothers bowre,
Did wallow in all other fleshly myre,
And suffred beasts her body to deflowre:

So whot she burned in that lustfull fyre,
Yet all that might not slake her sensuall desyre.

But ouer all the countrey she did raunge,
To seeke young men, to quench her flaming thirst,
And feed her fancy with delightfull chaunge.

(3.7.49–50)

Envisioning incest as a lesser abomination than either bestiality or heterosexual promiscuity, the text gestures toward the recuperation of the category of incest. It is not the utmost evil; there are things that are far worse.

¹⁷ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, trans. J. Gwyn Griffiths (Cambridge: Univ. of Wales Press, 1970), 13.356A. In a footnote to the Yale edition of *The Faerie Queene*, Roche asserts that in writing about Britomart's visit to the Temple of Isis, "Spenser relied heavily on Plutarch's treatise *Isis and Osiris*, but he took considerable liberties with his source" (1199 n. 5). Plutarch's treatise on the sibling spouses was available in a number of sixteenth-century editions. In addition to the Greek text editions (Venice, 1509; Basle, 1542; Basle, 1572; and Frankfurt, 1599), Plutarch's work was printed in French (Paris, 1572) and Latin (Louvain, 1564; Basle, 1570; and Frankfurt, 1580).

¹⁸ Raymond Firth, *We, the Tikopia: A Sociological Study of Kinship in Primitive Polynesia*, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1957), 294.

¹⁹ Alan Bray's discussion of the Renaissance categories of "friendship" and "sodomy" posits a process of differential evaluation dependent upon the identity of the actors analogous to the one I am describing here. According to Bray, the vast ideological distance between friendship and sodomy in the early modern period is often belied by the absence of any measurable difference in the activities associated with each. The facts used to support accusations of sodomy (sharing the same bed, exerting influence on behalf of the beloved, or kissing and embracing in public) are indistinguishable from those tokens taken to be signs of true friendship. Bray believes that acts are understood to be either sodomitical or friendly in accordance with the identity of the men involved. Considerations such as rank, nationality, and religious creed cause the self-same behaviors to be read differently. Similarly, the "chaste" interpretation of Britomart's activities and the "incestuous" reading of Argante's might be produced by differences in race, status, and stature rather than by any real difference in their erotic desires or pursuits. See Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Goldberg (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994), 40–61.

²⁰ Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Value of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), 31. In using Firth and Pitt-Rivers to analyze incest in Renaissance texts, I borrow from Frank Whigham's discussion of *The Duchess of Malfi* in his *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

²¹ Jonathan Crewe, *Hidden Designs: The Critical Profession and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 84.

²² Crewe, 83.

²³ "Elizabeths Arschkissende Poet." Karl Marx, *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*, ed. and trans. Lawrence Krader, 2nd. ed. (Assen: Van Gorcum: 1974), 305.

²⁴ Miller, 6. In addition to Kinahan, other critics who argue that the portrayal of Elizabeth is not entirely laudatory include Judith H. Anderson, "In living colours and right hew': The Queen of Spenser's Central Books," in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George deForest Lord (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 47–66; David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1984), chapter 5; Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London: Routledge, 1989), chapter 6; Susan Frye, "Of Chastity and Violence: Elizabeth I and Edmund Spenser in the House of Busirane," *Signs* 20 (1994): 49–78; and Kimberly Anne Coles, "'Perfect hole': Elizabeth I, Spenser, and Chaste Productions," *ELR* 32 (2002): 31–61.

²⁵ For another discussion of Britomart and incest, see Maureen Quilligan's *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 134–63.

²⁶ Whigham, 191.

²⁷ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1964), 4.1.121–23.

²⁸ Whigham, 196.

²⁹ In light of Ferdinand's fury at the social confusion caused by his sister's choice to marry again, it is interesting to note that Spenser's entry into the upper class also involves a second marriage. By marrying into the family of Richard Boyle, Spenser infiltrates and adulterates (as Ferdinand would understand the merger) an aristocratic family of immense wealth and prestige.

³⁰ Spenser's precarious social position, both in the Irish colony and in the English court, would seem to set the stage for an interest in incest. As Crewe observes: "[Incest] becomes especially important, if only in fantasy, when other sources of distinction are threatened or appear groundless, and it is also especially important to a marginalized or self-imagined gentry" (84).

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 61, 70.

³² Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. W. L. Renwick (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 57.

³³ When Eudoxius draws up short at Irenius's disparaging depiction of the Spanish as a mongrelized race resulting from sustained, serial miscegenation, Irenius reassures him:

Neither is that which I speak anything to his derogation. For in that I said he is a mingled people it is no dispraise, for I think there is no nation now in Christendom, nor much further, but is mingled and compounded with others. For it was a singular providence of God, and a most admirable purpose of His wisdom, to draw those northern heathen nations down into these Christian parts where they might receive Christianity, and to mingle nations so remote, so miraculously, to make as it were one kindred and blood of all people, and each to have knowledge of him. (Spenser, *A View*, 44–45)

There is nothing in Irenius's numerous descriptions of miscegenation, however, to uphold the sentiments of this isolated comment. The Spanish and Irish genealogies offered in the text clearly associate mixed blood with baseness while implying that honor and nobility are a product of pure blood. Gainsaying this evangelical model, Irenius consistently characterizes the mixing of races as an invasion wherein the blood of the "inferior" or "savage" race dominates over that of the "superior." Thus,

the Old English who have embraced Irish wives and Irish habits are said to have introduced into their bloodlines an impurity “which could never since be clean wiped away, but the contagion thereof hath remained still amongst their posterities” (66). Contradicting his suggestion that intermarriage plays a part in the divine reclamation of the human race, Irenius dismisses out of hand the idea that the Irish could be reformed through intermarriage with the English. Given the depravity of the Irish, Irenius demands, “How can such matching but bring forth an evil race?” (68).

³⁴ Spenser, *A View*, 66.

³⁵ Spenser, *A View*, 151.

³⁶ Thomas Healy, *New Latitudes: Theory and English Renaissance Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 90.

³⁷ Spenser, *A View*, 67, 66, 68.

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), 126.

³⁹ Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 109.

⁴⁰ Healy, 103.

⁴¹ McCabe, 164.

⁴² The link between purity and similitude in part accounts for Britomart's ability to involve herself in erotic encounters with other women without compromising her status as the emblem of chastity. Britomart shares a bed with Glauce (3.2.34), Malecasta (3.1.61), and Amoret (4.1.15–16), but she does not seem to thereby suffer any loss of virtue. As Kathryn Schwarz perceives: “Britomart can take women to bed and remain a hero” (*Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000]), 169). Chastity can blamelessly enter into intimacies such as these, I contend, because the same-sex configuration of the encounter successfully steers clear of those colonialist anxieties that construe contact with otherness as a defilement. Britomart's honor is unimpeached because she dallies not with difference but with sameness. Insofar as female-female eroticism downplays difference between the two lovers, it sidesteps the threat of adulterating mixture and in this way allows for Britomart's continued purity.

⁴³ Spenser gives voice to this sentiment in the second of his *Fowre Hymnes* to love. “A Hymne in Honour of Beautie” counsels young ladies to select lovers that are “likest to your selves”:

But in your choice of Loves, this well advize,
That likest to your selves ye them select,
The which your forms first sourse may sympathize,
And with like beauties parts be inly dect:
For if you loosely love without respect,
It is no love, but a discordant warre,
Whose unlike parts amongst themselves do jarre.

(lines 190–96)

Proposing that affection is impossible where parts are “unlike,” the poet advises that love flourishes where sameness prevails. Spenser, “A Hymne in Honour of Beautie,” in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram and others (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989).

⁴⁴ Laurie Shannon, “Nature's Bias: Renaissance Homonormativity and Elizabethan Comic Likeness,” *Modern Philology* 98 (2000): 208, but see esp. 183–94.

⁴⁵ Besides bearing Artegall's image in her own person, Britomart bears it in her womb. As Merlin foresees, Britomart will bring forth a son that is the express image of Artegall. This child will be "his Image dead, / That liuing him in all actuity / To thee shall represent" (3.3.29).

⁴⁶ Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 311.

⁴⁷ See Sigmund Freud, "The Savage's Dread of Incest," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. A. A. Brill (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), 808.

⁴⁸ 24 Hen. 8, c. 12. See *The Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols. (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1963), 3:427.