

3-30-2019

## Writing Early Ireland: A Panel Discussion

Laura Steblay

*University of Minnesota - Morris*, [steb1011@morris.umn.edu](mailto:steb1011@morris.umn.edu)

Caroline Vodacek

*University of Minnesota - Morris*, [vodac002@morris.umn.edu](mailto:vodac002@morris.umn.edu)

Rachel Larsen

*University of Minnesota - Morris*, [larse731@morris.umn.edu](mailto:larse731@morris.umn.edu)

Corinne McCumber

*University of Minnesota - Morris*, [mccum021@morris.umn.edu](mailto:mccum021@morris.umn.edu)

Bailey Kemp

*University of Minnesota, Morris*, [kempx192@morris.umn.edu](mailto:kempx192@morris.umn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urs\\_2019](https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urs_2019)

Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stebly, Laura; Vodacek, Caroline; Larsen, Rachel; McCumber, Corinne; and Kemp, Bailey, "Writing Early Ireland: A Panel Discussion" (2019). *Undergraduate Research Symposium 2019*. 3.  
[https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urs\\_2019/3](https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urs_2019/3)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research Symposium at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Symposium 2019 by an authorized administrator of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact [skulann@morris.umn.edu](mailto:skulann@morris.umn.edu).

# **Writing Early Ireland: A Panel Discussion**

Laura Steblay, Caroline Vodacek, Rachel Larsen,  
Corinne McCumber, and Bailey Kemp

# Outline

---

- **Background**
  - *The Táin*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*
- **Individual presentations**
  - **Caroline:** Medb and Sheela-na-gigs in *The Táin*
  - **Laura:** Poets and gender in *The Táin*
  - **Rachel:** Feminine power in *The Faerie Queene*
  - **Corinne:** Giants and colonialism in *The Faerie Queene*
  - **Bailey:** Ecology and colonialism in *The Faerie Queene* and *A View*
- **Questions from you!**

# Literature Backgrounds

# *The Táin Bó Cúailnge*

- The Great Cattle Raid of Cuailnge
- 7th Century
- Characters
  - Medb
  - Cuchulainn



# *A View of the Present State of Ireland*

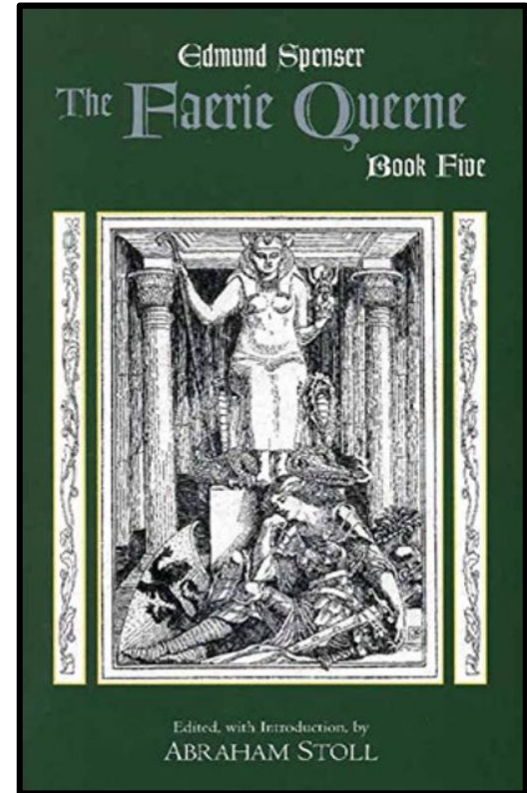
- Published in 1596 by Edmund Spenser
- Colonial treatise; dialogue between Eudoxus and Irenius
- Outlines a detailed plan to exterminate the Irish and make Ireland English



*Kilkenny*, by Francis Place, National Gallery of Ireland

# Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*

- Epic poem published in 1596
- Cyclical
- Allegory: a literary work whose characters represent abstract ideas
  - Religious
  - Political



**“What Lies Between Friendly Thighs:  
Medb, Sheela-na-Gigs, and Fluid in *The Táin*”**

Caroline Vodacek

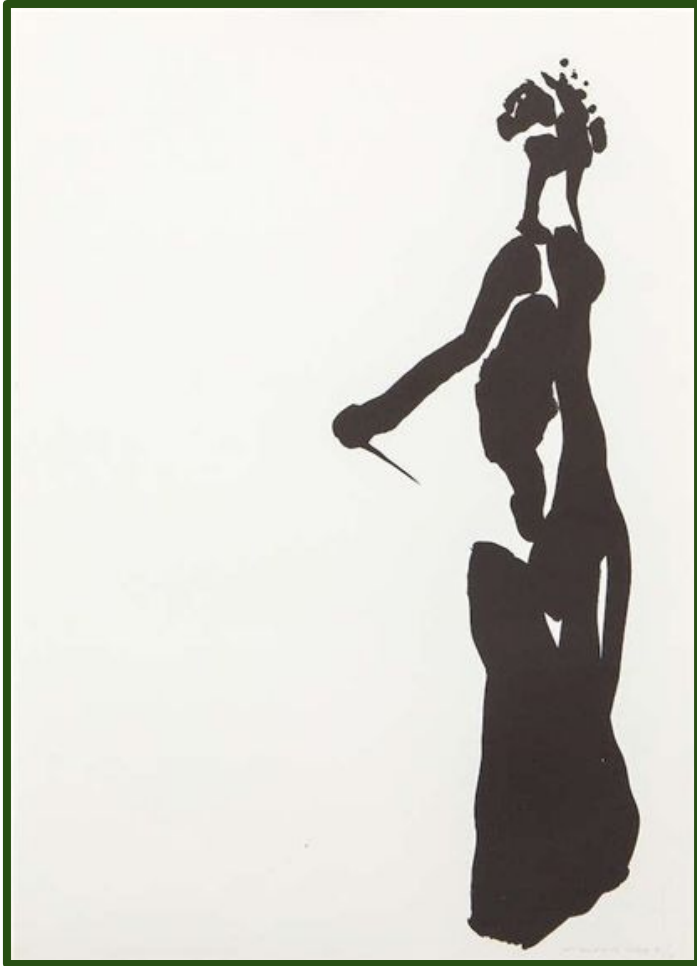




Main doorway of Kilnaboy Church, County Clare.

**“What Lies Between Friendly Thighs:  
Medb, Sheela-na-Gigs, and Fluid in *The Táin*”**

Caroline Vodacek



What We Know:

Medb

---

le Brocquy, Louis. *Medb*. Lithograph, 1969.



# What We Know: Sheela-na- Gigs

---

Sheela-na-gig. Clonmel, County Tipperary, c. 12th century.



Le Brocqy, Louis. *Medb relieving herself*.  
1969, lithograph on Swiftbrook paper, 54 x 38  
cm.



Sheela-na-gig. Ballinderry Castle, Co. Galway,  
c. 12th Century.

Medb had set up a shelter of shields to guard the rear of the men of Ireland. ...

Then Medb got **her gush of blood**.

“Fergus,” she said, “take over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland until I relieve myself.”

...

So Fergus took over ... and **Medb relieved herself**. It dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household. The place is called Fual Medba...

*-The Táin (250)*



Le Brocqy, Louis. *Medb relieving herself*.  
1969, lithograph on Swiftbrook paper, 54 x 38  
cm.



Sheela-na-gig. Ballinderry Castle, Co. Galway,  
c. 12th Century.

# Kinship Rituals

- Requirements:
  - Shared Drink
  - Bull Bath

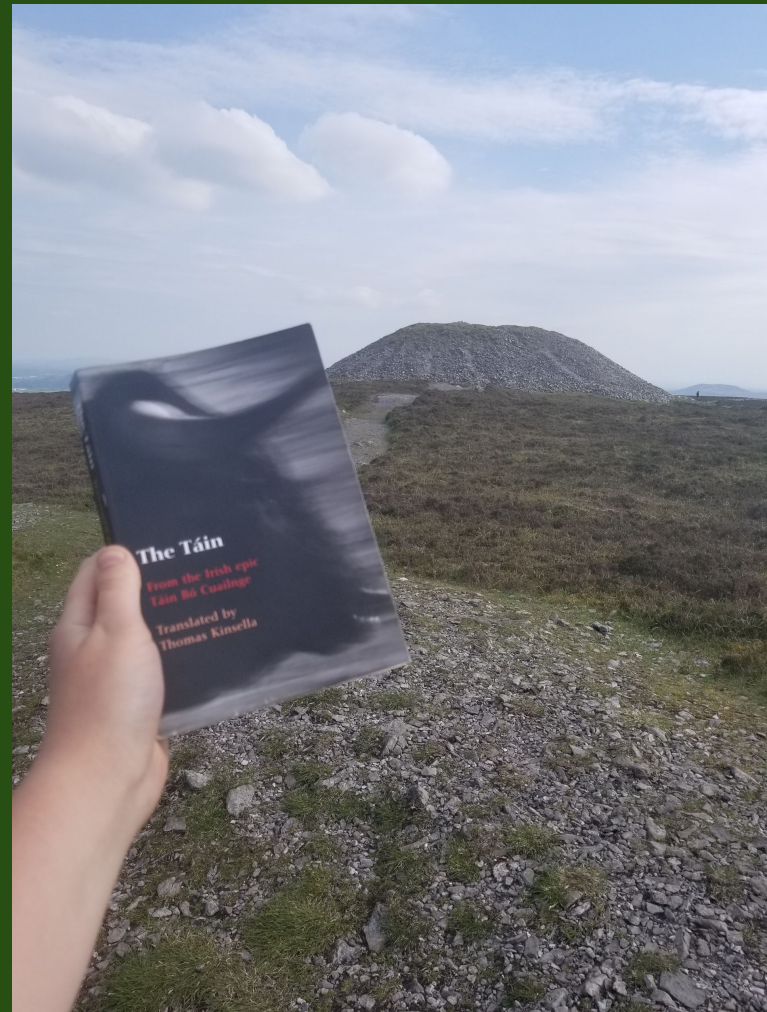


Hill of Tara, County Meath.



# Conclusion

Caroline's arm and Medb's cairn. Knocknarea, County Sligo.



**“A Woman Wielding Words: The Role of the  
Woman-Poet and Woman-Prophet Fedelm in the  
*Táin Bó Cúailnge*”**

Laura Steblay

“Medb said, ‘Fedelm, prophetess;  
how seest thou the host?’

Fedelm said in reply:

‘I see it crimson, I see it red.’”

p. 61 *The Táin*, trans. Kinsella, 1969



*The Táin. Fedelm*  
Louis Le Brocquy, 1969

# Fedelm and Words

---

## *Banfili* - woman poet

- *Fili* passed along oral tales; highly respected
- Power and credibility

## *Imbas forosnai* - The Light of Foresight

- One of the skills of the *fili*
- The ability to prophesy the future
- What Fedelm uses



# Fedelm and Imagery

---

## Connection to Cúchulainn

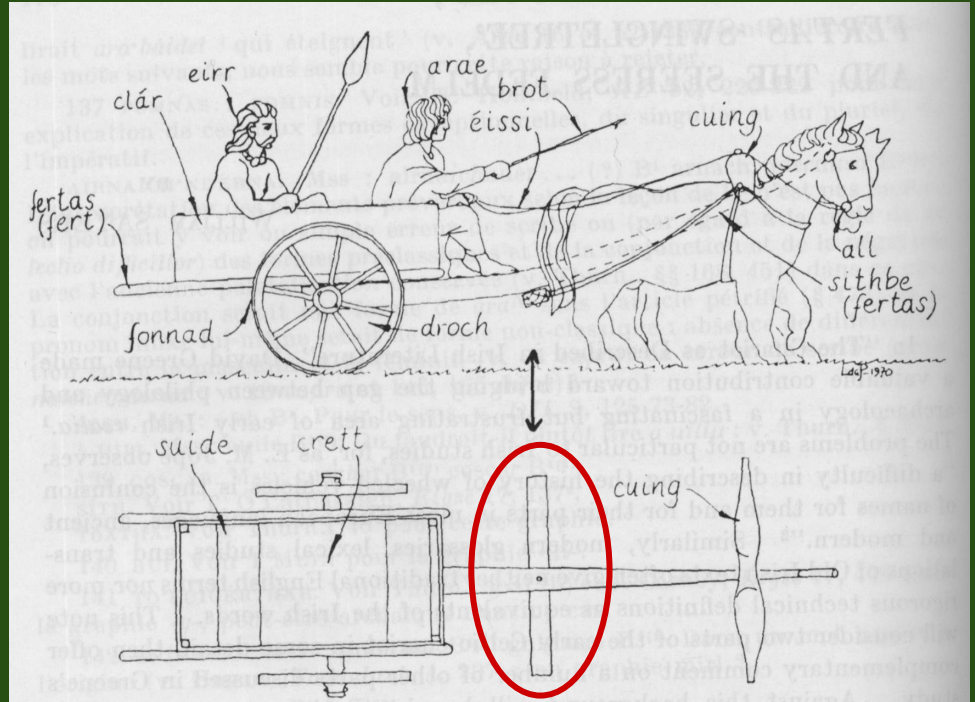
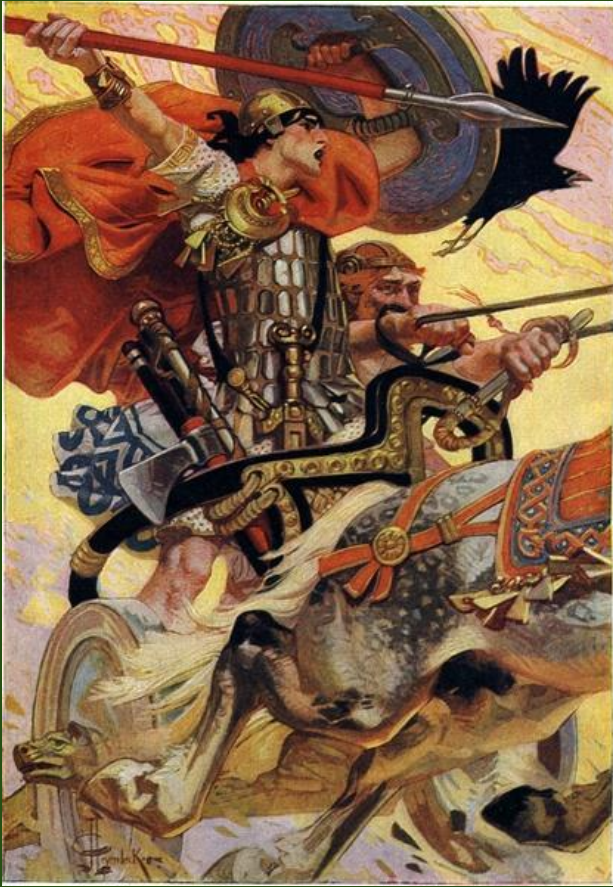
- Visual foretelling of the hero

## Outside the Gender Binary

- Fili status giving Fedelm a voice outside traditional womanhood
- Youth status placing Cúchulainn outside of manhood

Illustration of  
Cúchulainn by  
Stephen Reid,  
1904





## The Swingletree

Drawing by Liam de Paor, taken from William Sayer's essay

*Cúchulainn Riding his Chariot into Battle*  
J.C. Leyendecker, 1911

# Wielding Multiple Meanings

---

## Weaving tool or strange sword?

- Textile-creation associated with foretelling destiny
- Sword with weighted cords hearkens to Cúchulainn's *gae bolga*

**Simultaneously a literary and visual foretelling of the events of *The Táin***

# **“Cloaked Authority: The Minimization of Feminine Power in The Faerie Queene”**

Rachel Larsen



# Britomart

Knight of Chastity

-“Spenser depicts Britomart ambivalently or even negatively at the moments in the poem when she adopts an authority characterized as masculine” (Villeponteaux 64)

-“double perspective [to describe] Britomart as. . .a warrior [first], then as woman. . .then as warrior again, until the apparent contradiction of warrior/woman seems entirely natural” (Woods 151)

---

# Radigund

Amazon Queen

- “A princess of great powre and greater pride” (Spenser 5.4.33.5)
  - “doth them of warlike armes despoile, / And cloth in womens weedes[clothing]; And then with threat / Doth them compel to worke, to earn their meat” (Spenser 5.4.31.1-3)
  - “shamefull life, unworthy of a Knight” (Spenser 5.4.32.9)
  - “bear” with “cruellclawes” (Spenser 5.4.40.6)
-

# Gloriana

The Faerie Queene

“Soverayne Goddesses,  
that doest highest sit /  
In seate of judgment,  
in th’Almighties place, /  
And with magnificke  
might and wondrous  
wit” (Spenser  
5.proem.11.1-3)

---

**“A Giant Problem in  
Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*”**

Corinne McCumber

# Giant foes in Book Five

---

Egalitarian “Gyant” (V.ii.30.1)

Geryoneo (V.xi.9.5)

Grantorto (V.xii.15.2)

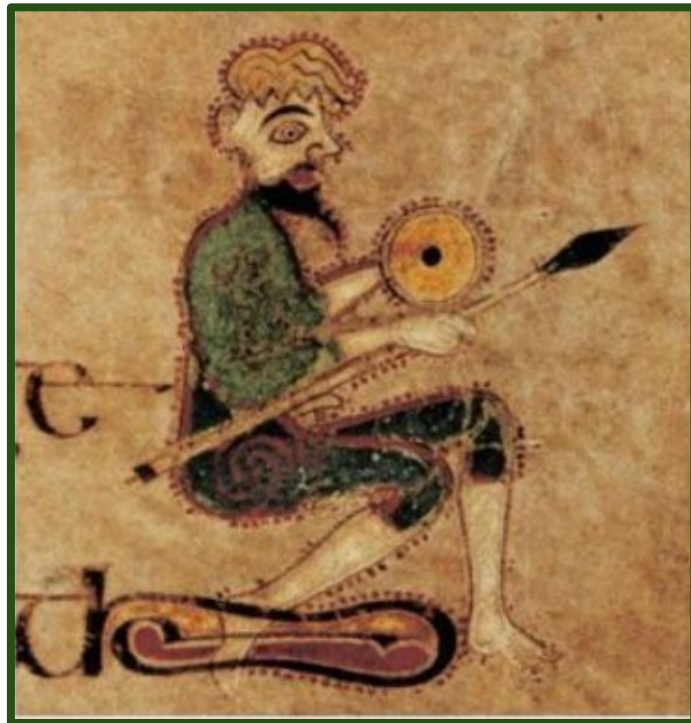
# The mythic ancestral Irish

---

“the tallest of the clerics came only to the waist or the shoulder-top of these great men, who were already sitting down.”

~ *Tales of the Elders of Ireland 5*

Detail from folio 200 recto of  
*The Book of Kells*, used as the cover of  
*Tales of the Elders of Ireland* as edited by  
Ann Dooley and Harry Roe



# Giants and the Irish land

---



Aerial view of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland,  
photo taken by Chris Hill



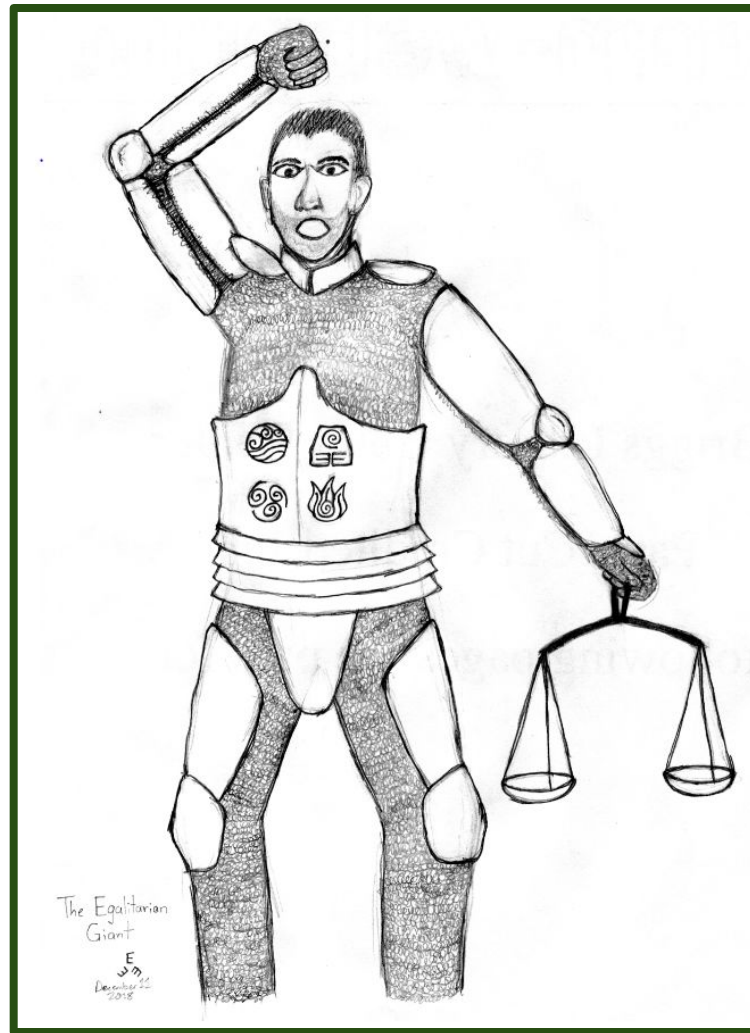
The island of Inishtooskert in Northern Ireland, photo  
taken by Sharon Loxton



*Detail of Zeus battling the  
giant Porphyryon,  
signed by Aristophanes  
(410-400 BCE)*

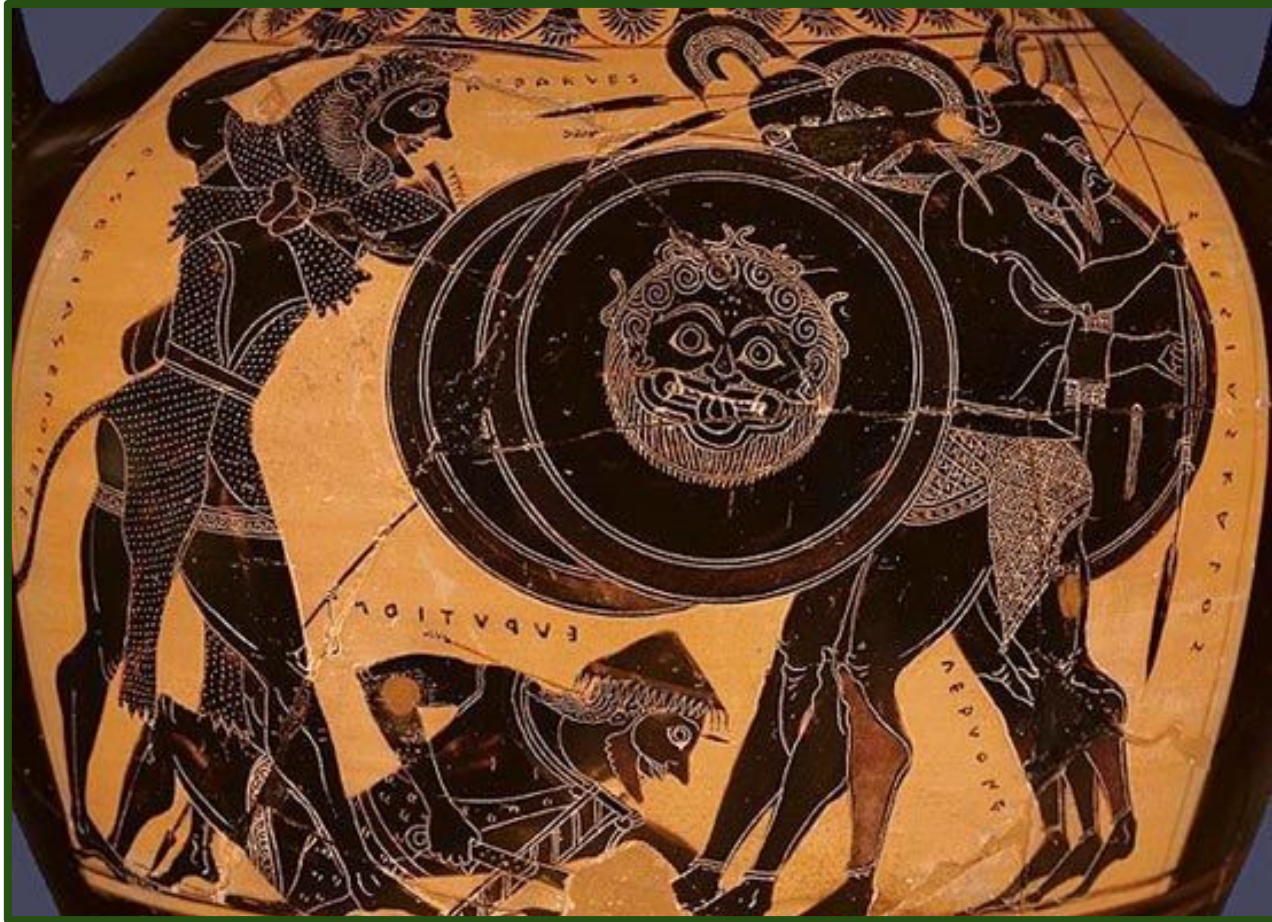


*The Egalitarian Giant,*  
by Erin Wilaby  
(2018)



*Jove casts his  
Thunderbolts at the  
Rebellious Giants,*  
by Johann Michael  
Rottmayr (1690)





*Heracles fighting  
Geryon,  
amphora by E Group  
potter (c. 540 BCE)*



Illustration of Geryoneo by Walter Crane (1890)

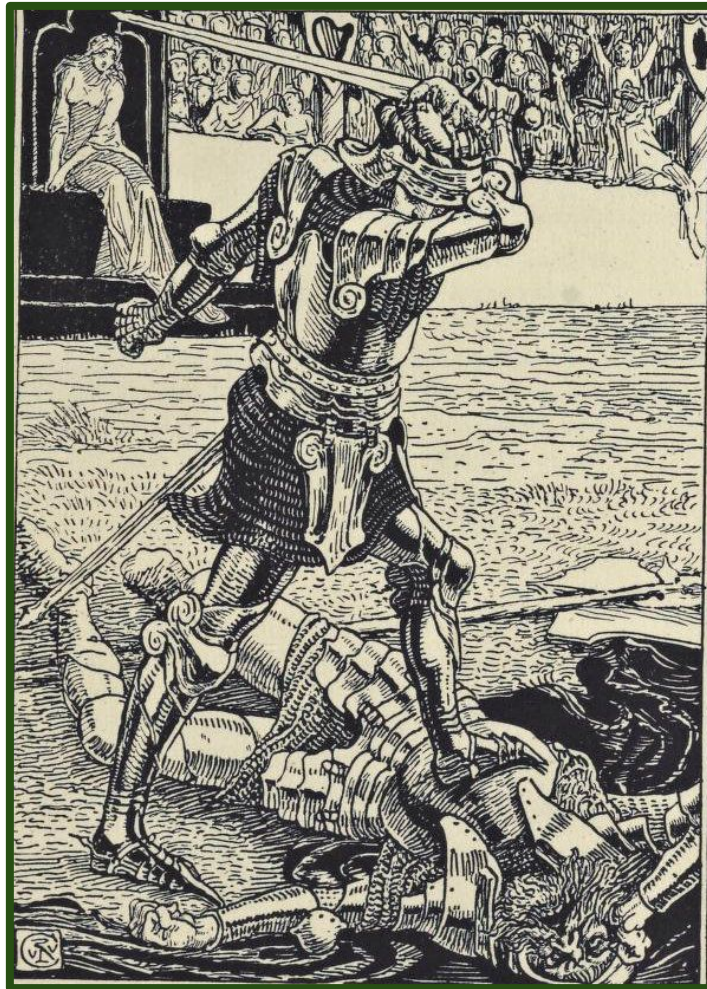


Illustration of Artegall  
killing Grantorto,  
by Walter Crane  
(1890)

**“Bodies, Blood, and Manure:  
The Rhetoric of Nutrient Cycling in  
Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*  
and *A View of the State of Ireland*”**

Bailey Kemp

# Reading Spenser through an Ecological Lens

---

Eudoxus: How then doe you think is the reformation therof to be begunne?

Irenius: Even by the sword; for all these evils must first be cut away by a strong hand, before any good can bee planted, like as the corrupt braunches and unwholesome boughs are first to bee pruned, and the foule mosse cleansed and scraped away, before the tree can bring forth any good fruite.

~ Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland* (93)

# Endless Cycling

---

How ever gay their blossome or their blade

Doe flourish now, they into dust shall vade.

What wrong then is it, if that when they die,

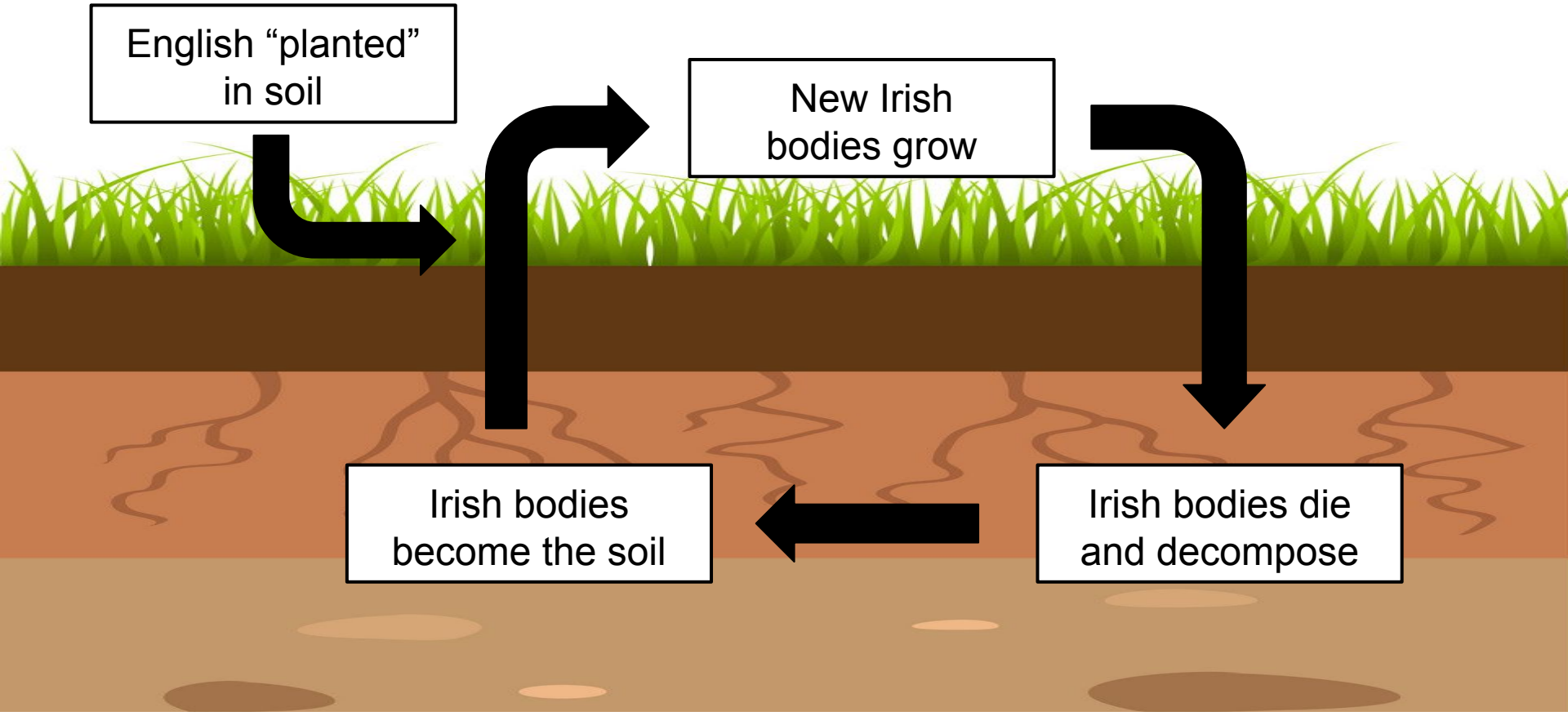
They turne to that, whereof they first were made?

~ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (V.ii.40.4-7)



# The Nutrient Cycle

---



# The Body Problem

---



The fertile Irish soil is full of what  
Spenser wants to get rid of: Irish bodies

# A Zombie Villain

---

Full dreadful wight he was, as ever went  
Upon the earth, with hollow eyes deepe pent,  
And long curld locks, that downe his shoulders shagged,  
And on his backe an uncouth vestiment  
Made of straunge stuffe, but all to worne and ragged,  
And underneath his breech was all to torne and jagged

~ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (V.ix.10.4-9)



Illustration of Malengin  
by Walter Crane (1890)

# Is Spenser Writing About Bog Bodies?

- Peat Bogs
  - High acidity and low oxygen
    - Preserves organic matter
- Bog bodies
  - Preserved corpses



Old Croghan Man  
~2,200 years old  
(National Museum of  
Ireland)



Tollund Man ~2,400 years old  
(Christian Kober/Robert Harding)

# Summary

---

- Spenser understood that bodies cycle back into the earth
- *A View* focuses on excising the Irish and “planting” the English
- *The Faerie Queene* exposes Spenser’s anxieties about Irish bodies literally embedded in the landscape
- It is impossible to grow an English society out of Irish soil

# Synthesis

---

- Gender
- Literary intersections with archaeology
- Colonialism
- Landscape
- Portrayals of Irish people throughout history

**Thank You!**

# Questions?