Abject Horror and the Renaissance Imagination: Plotting the Intersection of Human and Monster in Book I of Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene

Melissa Joy Rack, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Date of Award
8-2008

Degree Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Arts

Major
English

Major Professor
Robert E. Stillman

Committee Members
Heather A. Hirschfeld, Elizabeth J. Bellamy

Abstract
The 16th century marked an explosion of interest in "true" accounts of monsters and monstrous births in early modern England. The fascination with grotesqueries and objects of wonder was a curious preoccupation of the learned elite of the Elizabethan court. The influence of early modern medical texts that anatomized such creatures, and historical chronicles that attempted to explain the "unnatural" aspects of the natural world, can be traced in Book I of Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene. This thesis is concerned with the way Spenser revises the characteristic tropes of these early modern texts to present monstrosity in his own distinct way. When these portraits are thrown into relief with Spenser's monsters, we see the poet's unique manipulation of the cultural notions presented in these texts. The following chapters plot moments in Book I when the tropes of these texts are revised with the intention of portraying an essential state of horror within the subject. This horror is a psychological phenomenon that occurs at the intersection of human and monster, as the subject is overcome or "infected" by monstrous vice and the boundaries between self and object, interior and exterior, seem to collapse. Julia Kristeva terms this state of horror abjection. She writes that the abjection of self "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within" (5). This moment is critical to the journey of the heroic subject in The Faerie Queene and essential to the fashioning of virtue, the poet's professed intention, as the representation of the moment of virtue's collapse allows the poet to reinvent and redefine a true virtue that resists the deceit of the fallen world.

Recommended Citation

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/3671
Edmund Spenser (c. 1552 – January 13, 1599) was an English poet of the early Renaissance who, along with his close contemporary William Shakespeare, brought about what would be a revolution in English literature. Spenser, like Shakespeare, represents a bridge between the medieval and early modern periods in English literary history. Unfortunately, there are enough divergences even between this letter and the 1590 Faerie Queene (the first three books), that there is some question as to its trustworthiness regarding the portions Spenser did not live to complete. According to the Letter to Raleigh, there were to have been twelve books, each of which was to focus on one of the twelve private virtues.