2017

Race and Colonization

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Edmund Spenser's writing affords a rich archive for exploring the complexity of early modern concepts of race, and of ethnicity, which, as scholars have demonstrated, betray both continuities with and divergences from early modern ideologies of race. Spenser (1552?–1599), who moved to Ireland in the 1580s first as an administrator in Dublin and then as a settler on the Munster plantation (Judson 1945; Spenser [1633] 1934, 223–234), was writing in an era that might be described as post-colonial (Maley 2003, 74). That is, he and a wider community of settlers in the Elizabethan period – who referred to themselves as the New English – were following in the footsteps of an earlier set of colonizers who hailed from England as part of the Norman conquest 400 years prior. Many of those earlier settlers, who came to be called the Old English by Spenser and others, continued to live in Ireland after the conquest, motivated by the twin mandates of subduing and civilizing the native Irish. By Spenser's moment this group of settlers embodied, in rather alarmingly visible ways to their New English successors, how a settler community could slip away from its "origin," becoming indistinguishable from the group it sought to civilize. As Eudoxus, one of the two interlocutors in Spenser's political tract, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* ([1633] 1934), puts it: "That seemeth verie strange which yow saye that men should so much degenerate from theire first natures as to growe wilde" (82). *Degeneration,* the term that Spenser and his peers used for racial slideback, encodes the unique ways early moderns understood the relation between nature and culture, crystallizing many truths about their view of human identity, including what kind of difference a writer like Spenser named in and through the category of race.

It has been customary among historians to view racial ideology as a modern construct, born of modern science with its historically contingent ways of

understanding biology and its tendency to view the human body as pre-programmed by genes that are transmitted from parent to offspring. In this view racialism is predicated upon a rather inflexible idea of biology, one that underscores the role of inherited traits to denote an individual's racial identity at birth (Hannaford 1996; Appiah 1990). In such theories, a person's racial identity – delivered biologically – is an aspect of his/her nature that cannot be changed. Such understandings of difference are conditioned by a rather rigid divide – even an opposition – between the concepts of nature and culture. Although cultural differences might serve to express one's racial or ethnic identity, modern ideologies do not afford culture the power to alter or shape racial identity. In this view culture is "superficial" or "skin deep," while race, bound to nature, is a permanent marker of difference that pervades the body at a deep level.

Attentive to this modern ideology of difference, despite its dubious claim to scientific rigor (Venter 2007; Gould 1996; Fields and Fields 2012), historians have argued that pre-Enlightenment societies have not been bearers of "racial ideologies" in this modern sense (Bartlett 1993; Kidd 2006; Banton 2000). Rather, as they have compellingly argued, earlier eras – Medieval or early modern – have leaned more heavily on accounts of cultural practice to theorize human difference, suggesting that the lines dividing one population from another are more flexible in earlier eras and therefore fundamentally at a remove from modern ideologies. Speaking of the Medieval period, for instance, Robert Bartlett has argued: "To a point, therefore, medieval ethnicity was a social construct rather than a biological datum … When we study race relations in medieval Europe we are analyzing the contact between various linguistic and cultural groups, not between breeding stocks" (1993, 197). Still more compellingly, Bartlett, quoting Isidore of Seville, a famous schoolmaster of the Middle Ages, observes: "Races arose from different languages, not languages from different races, or, as another Latin author argues, 'language makes race' (*gentem lingua facit*)" (1993, 198). Implicit in this observation is the premise that culture precedes and instates nature in the earlier periods in ways that cease to be possible for modernity.

And yet, the view of these historians has been called into question by critics who observe resemblances, connections, and relations between modern and pre-modern forms of race thinking, in large part due to a growing suspicion that "the bifurcation of 'culture' and 'nature' in many analyses of race needs to be questioned" and that we need to "query the very boundaries between these categories" (Loomba and Burton 2007, 8, 25.) (For the Medieval period see Heng 2011 and Nirenberg 2007). If that is true of all periods – since nature and culture always "develop in relation to one another" (Loomba and Burton 2007, 8) – it is absolutely crucial for analyzing pre-modern cultures. For the noun "culture" that appears in modern vocabularies to describe the endeavors of distinct human populations was never used in the same way in the earlier period, a point whose significance to the study of early modern race cannot be overstated. As Raymond Williams long ago argued, culture was not a thing so much as "a noun of process" in the early modern period, an activity that exerted a shaping force on any aspect of nature – human or otherwise – whether a

field, a plant, an animal, or a person (Williams [1976] 2015, 49). The shift in this word's meaning between then and now is a crucial indicator of a fundamentally different way of understanding the operations of nature, including human nature, and needs to inform our understanding of early modern racial formations.

For early moderns like Spenser, insofar as they understood earthly life to exist in a mortal and therefore fallen condition, all natural life forms required studied acts of intervention in order to maintain anything like an "ordered" existence, which came in the form of acts of tillage, harnessing, domesticating, educating and so on. Without the application of culture to guide it, nature could slip into depravity – into wild and unproductive patterns of growth that might be expressed in fields that fall fallow, plants that cease to be fruit-bearing, horses that run wild, and people that swerve into ignorance and barbarism (Feerick 2011). The character Burgundy of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599) articulates precisely this situation in the final act of the play when he laments France's destruction by war. He observes that

> All our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
> Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,
> Even so our houses and ourselves and children
> Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
> The sciences…[/] But grow like savages. (5.2.54–59)

Nature in the form of fields and meadows is not ontologically "wild" but becomes so in the absence of culture. The same is true for humans, who "grow" wild in the absence of the culture of learning. Burgundy's lament articulates the early modern truism that all living forms exist on a sliding scale of difference, with acts of "culture" the only stay against a "fall" into a wilderness imagined as a self-destructing state of unconstrained and unproductive growth. In such a view tillage is to the earth, what education is to people – an acculturating act that guides nature to an ideal, because ordered and productive, form. In its absence, people slip into savagery, becoming altered in race and kind.

What this brief excursus into the etymology of *culture* reveals is that nature, as understood by early moderns, is shot through with cultural interventions that reconfigure its physical properties at every point. The early moderns were extremely aware of the entangled agencies of culture and nature, in contrast to modern societies which, as Bruno Latour has argued, lean on the myth of a Great Divide between the human and the nonhuman, society and world, the humanities and sciences. This myth begets the "tragedy of modern man considering himself as absolutely and irremediably different from all other humanities and all other naturalities" (Latour [1991] 1993, 123). As part of this conceptual partitioning of the world, "moderns have set themselves apart from the premoderns" (99), who readily blended "social needs and natural reality" (35) into the hybrids that Latour refers to as "nature-cultures" (41). And yet, even as moderns insist on a clean separation between the material world and the social realm – rendering crossovers between the two realms "invisible, unthinkable, and unrepresentable" (34) – Latour's argument in *We Have*

Never Been Modern is that they, like their premodern counterparts, actually constantly engage in such exchanges.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) expresses this premodern tendency to openly acknowledge exchanges between nature and culture in discussing how much plants can change when subject to different patterns of cultivation. He asserts, "The rule is certain, that plants for want of culture degenerate to be baser in the same kind; and sometimes so far as to change into another kind" ([1627] 1826, 246). His words express a belief that culture – including the *withholding* of culture – can fundamentally re-nature plants, even allow them to transform "kind," a term that early modern writers used interchangeably with race. The same was true for people in the estimation of the political theorist Jean Bodin (1530–1596) who, in contemplating the origin of nations, would argue that "we see men as well as plants degenerate little by little when the soil has been changed" ([1566] 1945, 87). In thinking of people's identity as resembling that of plantlife, Bodin anticipates Spenser's language, in which colonial activity, following its Latin etymology ("colonia" has the sense of "farm"), is first and foremost an act of "planting" people in a new soil, and where whole populations of colonists or "planters" exhibit an ability to grow, decline, decay, or degenerate. His organic vocabulary expresses a premodern tendency to conjoin human and nonhuman realms, seeing them as governed by identical life processes. Where today we understand nature and culture to be discrete concepts existing in separate spheres – which Latour describes as an effect of "the modern constitution" ([1991] 1993, 13) – early modern writers saw them as constantly and beneficially intersecting. In the ideal state, culture and nature were engaged in an ongoing reciprocal dance that animated the world's living forms. It does not, therefore, exactly follow that in valuing "cultural features" as a defining measure of a population – whether the emphasis is placed on language, religion, or law, as Bartlett (1993) has argued – that pre-moderns were not also therefore speaking in some sense of that population's "physical nature," or what today we would call biology. (For discussion of the imprinting of religious difference on the body, see Loomba and Burton, 2007, 12–13; Degenhardt 2010; Britton 2014.) Rather, when they spoke of culture they were always already understanding it as connected to and interacting with a person's physical nature. (For the humoral body and the environment, see Paster 2005; Floyd-Wilson 2003; Pender 2010.) And yet it also evident that for early modern writers both aspects of human identity – cultural and natural – were understood as malleable and adaptable in ways that break with modern paradigms of race, which build upon a more rigid conception of physical nature and a rupture between these two realms.

The French post-structuralist Michel Foucault echoes the conclusions of Raymond Williams's etymological overview when he identifies a pre-modern "episteme" for the Renaissance that is governed by a tendency to see the world as organized by resemblances among living things ([1966] 1970, 17–45). His genealogical method of writing history – which describes the unique arrangement of a given period's "epistemological space" (xi), and emphasizes historical rupture as against continuity – helpfully captures the alien "ordering codes" that governed how early moderns understood the operations of the universe (xxi). He points to the centrality

of resemblance as an organizing principle of early modern knowledge, observing a cultural tendency to perceive the world as rippling with connections, analogies, and relations linking the human form to other natural bodies – whether animal, botanical, elemental, or cosmological. In Foucault's words, "The point is man: he stands in proportion to the heavens, just as he does to animals and plants, and as he does also to the earth, to metals, to stalactites or storms" (22). The pre-modern episteme Foucault identifies understands all life forms as homologies of one another, as "concentric circles" (21) defined by similar rules and patterns. If modern ways of thinking tend to separate the human from the natural world – to see people as positioned outside of nature and working on it – early modern writers tended to see people as part of the organic "mesh" and as embedded in the same laws, patterns, and dynamics as all of nature. (For the ecological "mesh," see Morton 2010. For eco-critical readings of early modern materials, see Borlik 2011, Nardizzi 2013, Boehrer 2013, and Feerick and Nardizzi, 2012.) Just as humans could act as agents in applying culture to other life forms, they also understood themselves as the necessary recipients of acts of culture. Without such acts, they, like their earthly counterparts, would slip into barbarous oblivion.

I

If thus far I have suggested that a notion of race that biologically fixes a population was not operable in the early modern period, since physical nature was so tied to cultural practice as to be constantly re-formed by it, I now need to qualify that point with reference to a key aspect of early modern English identity that bears powerful connections to modern race thinking: the principle of bloodline. If early modern England did not have the language of genetics to explain the precise mechanism for the heritable transmission of traits, it did have a principle that was of Biblical provenance, which perceived in some bloodlines a means not only of inter-generational continuity but a vehicle for the infusion of transcendent qualities. A privileged few – the nobility – were perceived to bear metaphysical properties in their bloodline carrying a charge of divinity and justifying their status as earthly sovereigns and lords. It was this concept of "high blood" that early moderns most frequently associated with the word *race*, which afforded a language for distinguishing rulers from subjects on the basis of invisible distinctions of blood. William Harrison (1535–1593) gestured at this ideology in his *Description of England* ([1577] 1976), when he defined gentlemen as "those whom their race and blood, or at the least their virtues, do make noble and known" (113). So, too, John Florio's Italian-English dictionary (1598) would define *race* as "a kind, a broode, a blood, a stocke, a pedigree" (313), indicating its association with the privileged ranks of English society. Lowborn men were not typically described by early modern writers as having a race, since early modern English usage implied it was a designation proper to nobility alone. Hence, the early modern lexicon of race tended to name distinctions rooted in a lineal bloodline that were possessed by a privileged few (Feerick 2010).

The context of Ireland in the Elizabethan period became a crucible in which this ancient concept of race was being pressed to the breaking point, with Spenser voicing in increasingly subversive ways (McCoy 1989; Shuger 1997; Ivic 1999) the extent to which lineal properties of blood could not serve as a safeguard against the ravages of decline and alteration that were the predicament of all earthly things. Those invested with the conquest of Ireland in the period of the Norman conquest under Henry II had been of royal race. Their Old English descendants seized upon the rights that their lineal bloodlines conferred on them in order to resist encroachment on their power by both the Queen and her contingent of administrators – the New English – who were charged with implementing her policies in Ireland (Canny 1983). Sir Nicholas White (1532–1592), a member of the Irish Parliament, for instance, reminded the Queen that he and other Old English planters in Ireland were not only the "seed of English blood" but were derived from "ancient nobility," likening New English attempts to limit and coopt their privileges in Ireland to "artisans that persuade owners of ancient houses to pull them down" (Canny 1983, 14). But Spenser – who was one of these New English administrators – argued otherwise, suggesting that the high blood of the Old English settlers had declined in the quagmire of Ireland and that their condition might be beyond repair precisely because these men believed themselves to be above the need for culture. Moreover, he argues at length in his political tract that they had shirked their responsibilities as overlords in Ireland in failing to apply culture to the mere Irish, whose "wild" and unconstrained behavior they had not only permitted but actively encouraged.

II

Spenser's engagement with the necessary imbrication of nature and culture for all men – not least those privileged by race and blood – pervades his entire corpus. But I focus here on two texts that he wrote toward the end of his career, which foreground this distinctively early modern way of seeing nature as alterable and as requiring ongoing acts of cultivation to maintain its ordered course: the incomplete book known as the Mutability Cantos, which concludes the Folio edition (1609) of his epic poem *The Faerie Queene,* and the posthumously published political tract *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1633). (For the dating of the *View*'s composition, see Hadfield 2014.) Julia Lupton has compellingly positioned these texts in relation to one another, understanding the Mutability Cantos as "a mythopoetic analogue of the *View*'s narrative of waste" that gives an "account of Irish desolation" (Lupton 1993, 102). I would like to build upon this reading by suggesting that the Mutability Cantos portray, in the oppositional figures of Nature and Mutability, an allegorical representation of the outcomes available to all peoples and all living forms, and shows Ireland as the testing ground for these claims, since the trial that Mutability demands is staged atop Arlo-hill, Spenser's name for the peak of the Galtee mountains in Ireland. This allegorical figure Mutability therefore resonates with and obliquely encodes the history of the Old English. In the *View*, Spenser tracks a

similar set of dynamics in the context of discussing what has allowed the mere Irish and Old English, two populations with presumably quite distinct origins, to be indistinguishable, exposing the pitfall of mutability as that into which the Old English settlers have willfully heaved themselves. Both texts express a view of human nature as provisional, suggesting that a population's most basic identity – what we think of as its race – is made and shaped through the application of culture, rather than something that is conferred with any degree of finality at the moment of birth.

Insofar as both texts dramatize the relationship between acculturating acts and nature, they shed light on Spenser's conception of the principles defining different human populations. Although he is often accused of being racist toward the Irish – and his ideas are nothing if not violent and coercive in the theory of reform they propound (Loomba and Burton 2007, 24–25) – Spenser's position is precisely the opposite of what today we describe as "racist." Working from the idea of a radically shapeable human nature, Spenser defends the view that blending the Irish landscape with English culture in the form of husbandry, as well as "sowing" (see *View*, 197) English settlers among Old English and Irish alike, will set these wayward populations on the path to growing into civil (English) subjects (see Moroney 1999). Although his interlocutors, Irenius and Eudoxus, often seem to suggest that there is an "Irish" nature that resists this form of "cultivation," in ways that evoke the essentializing notion of a biological identity such as underpins modern race, Spenser's position, which is carefully adumbrated in the tract, is that cultural practice is to blame for this situation and could, in theory, be remedied. As Irenius declares when asked if he is advocating the extermination of the Irish and Old English: "I doe not meane the Cuttinge of all that nacion with the sword … for evill people by good ordynance and gouerment, maye bee *made* good" (123–24, emphasis added). Indeed, through the more experienced voice of the planter Irenius, Spenser seems to argue that the Irish had once been a reasonably acculturated people – having had "the vse of lettres verie auncyentlie and longe before England" (53) – but that they grew into savagery in precisely the same way that Burgundy's French people have: through their espousal of ill customs following the "impeoplinge of that Iland" (62) by various invaders. As such, from the Scythians they adopted the practices of herding cattle known as bollies and of wearing mantles and glibs (65–70); from the Spaniards they adapted the practice of wearing saffron clothes (79); and from the Gauls they learned to confer power and prestige on bardic poets (80–81).

The same pattern of decline is visible among the Old English, who are condemned in harsher terms by Irenius as compared with their Irish counterparts (Maley 2003, 63–91). Where the Irish have declined, it would appear, from the operations of time across many centuries and by means of many foreign invasions, the Old English in Ireland are described as having willfully rejected their connections to England in acts of rebellion and defiance. As such, they are singled out as the primary target of the text, the more intransigent population of the two. Irenius deplores them for the fact that they once had the markings of culture, by virtue both of their high birth and their upbringing, which they actively sought to erase or "raze," a pun on "race" that Spenser uses elsewhere in his writing to indicate the obliteration over time of the

marks of noble lineage (see *Faerie Queene* [1590] 2001, 2.12.80.4 and *The Ruines of Time* [1591] 1989, l.177.)

Compellingly, the description of the Old English I have just provided might well describe the figure of Mutability. Initially, she stakes her appeal to rule over the gods on the grounds of her "antique race and linage ancient" (7.6.2.2), emphasizing her lineal ties to the "old *Titans*" (7.6.2.6), the leader of whom is described as having abdicated his throne to his younger brother, Saturn, on the condition that Titan's issue, not Saturn's, would succeed him (see 27n). Because this plan ultimately unravels when Saturn's son, Jove, survives without his knowledge and dispossesses the Titans, Mutability has risen up against the gods to reclaim the powers she views as her birthright. She defends her action by reference to her patronym: "I greater am in bloud (whereon I build)/Then all the Gods, though wrongfully from heauen exil'd" (7.6.26.8–9). Later, when she comes before Jove, she is reviled in and through the language of degeneracy, described as the "bad seed" (7.6.21.1) and the "off-scum of that cursed fry" (7.6.30.1). Here she is figured as the dross – the impure metal – that remains of the hitherto godly bloodline. In an overwrought bovine metaphor, she is described as resembling "some beast of strange and forraine race" which has strayed "from his peeres," evoking a "ghastly gaze" and an "astonied" response from the herd of "Steeres" upon whom she has stumbled (7.6.28.6–9). If she appears disordered – not least for her "vncouth habit" (7.6.13.9) and "haughty" (7.6.17.4) comportment – she has wreaked similar havoc on the realms over which she has ruled. A force hostile to ordered Nature, she has "the face of earthly things so changed,/That all which Nature had establisht first/In good estate, and in meet order ranged,/She did pervert" (7.6.5.1–4). Although she is an "off-spring" of the gods' "bloud" (7.6.20.8), Mutability exemplifies Spenser's view that all races – even those of the highest bloodlines – are subject to decline.

Critics have seen an emblem of early modern Ireland embedded in Spenser's portrait of Mutability. As I have argued, a more specific allegory may be read concerning the Old English, who, in similar fashion to Mutability, rose up against a sovereign power when they felt their bloodlines reproved. But Mutability's contestation of Nature's patterns might also be seen to evoke the broader principle that human nature, like all natural forms, needs to be constantly supported by culture to maintain its orderly form. Notably, Mutability's own neglectful actions have appeared to un-race her, that is, to turn her noble bloodline into dross. Positioned in opposition to the ordered form of nature represented by the allegorical figure of Nature who oversees the trial, Mutability emerges as her antithesis – a version of nature grown wild and uncultured. If Nature is supplemented by the figure of Order when she appears atop Arlo-hill to hear Mutability's case against the gods, Mutability stands against such principles, having burst the "statutes" that Nature ordained for the world (7.6.5.4). Nature, by contrast, bestows ordered growth on the Irish locale where she hosts the trial: "dainty trees" (7.7.8.7) bow in homage to her, forming the shape of a throne, and flowers grow at her feet to forge a tapestry richer than that of "Princes bowres" (7.7.10.9). By positioning natural life forms – trees and flowers – alongside artful constructs – thrones and tapestries – this account expresses Nature's identity as a well-hewn composite of culture and nature.

And yet if Spenser overtly suggests that Nature rules over Mutability, enjoying a kind of mastery – having Nature reject Mutability's claim that all creation is patterned after her since they "doe their states maintaine" (7.7.58.9) – critics have detected a weakness in Nature's judgment. First, her ruling is delivered in "speeches few" (7.7.57.9), making it appear flimsy and arbitrary, and, second, she provides no justification for her support of the usurping Jove. By contrast, Mutability's digressive appeal, which marshals a pageant of calendrical and astrological figures, retains a vitality and aesthetic power that calls into question the strength and durability of Nature's order. Indeed, as Andrew Hadfield (2014) has argued, since the Book opens with news that Mutability has broken "the lawes of Nature" (7.6.6.1), Nature's appeal to an unchanging "first estate" (7.7.58.4) that effects its own perfection through acts of "[working]" and "turning" rings hollow (7.7.58.6–7). The *implied* message aligns instead with the poet's view as expressed in the brief eighth canto, where he concedes that Mutability bears "the greatest sway" (7.8.1.5) over earthly things and that Nature's ideal awaits earthly creatures only in the hereafter.

This view certainly rang true in the context of Ireland, where Mutability – in the form of the degenerate Old English – ruled the roost when Spenser wrote his *View*. Addressing another sovereign perceived to be too tepid in her response to the problem of mutability in the colony, Spenser took the occasion to map the troubles in Ireland as a systematic failure of cultivation at the hands of the earliest colonizing group. Like Mutability, the Old English stand against law and order both in the way they comport themselves and in the way they have allowed the Irish under their rule to live. They have thereby allowed nature in her raw, unbridled, and mutable form to override both the people and the landscape, evoking a refracted version of Burgundy's blighted garden of France. Riddling his tract with descriptions of human populations figured in organic terms (Grennan 1982) – as people planted, growing, decaying, and degenerating – Spenser signals that the problems in Ireland begin and end with the absence of a cultivating hand to arrest unchecked growth. The Old English have caused this situation in Irenius's estimation, since "the chefest abuses which are now in that realme, are growne from the Englishe" who "are now much more lawlesse and lycencious, then the verie wilde Irishe" (82). Viewing their English heritage as a would-be bridle that should potentially check their physical nature, Irenius describes the Old English as having "quite shaken of theire Englishe names, and putt on Irishe," like "wanton Coltes [that] kicke at theire mothers" (84). If here the Old English are figured as livestock, elsewhere they emerge as subverted husbands who rather than domesticating the livestock entrusted to them, have tossed aside their tools and joined up with the herd. In contrast to the Irish, whose barbarism is born of a complex history of mingling with other peoples, these actions are portrayed as willful and active, making them particularly pernicious in Irenius's eyes. The Old English "cast of theire Englishe names and alleigeance" (85) and stoked rebellions in the land in response to their "pride or wilfull obstynacie" (190). He figures them as subjects who have grown too mighty – too unchecked – such that they have overtaken the garden of Ireland, whose beauties once evoked colonial reveries of being "Lordes of all the seas, and … of all the worlde" (25).

If the Old English should have applied themselves as the "culture" to the "nature" of the wild Irish, theirs was a culture of omission. For, as Irenius relates, the attempts to acculturate the Irish have occurred only in fits and starts, such that the guiding hand of culture has never been fully absorbed by the native population, the stubborn nation never really "[menaged]" (16). As Irenius puts it in the lexicon of animal husbandry on which he so often leans, "what bootes yt to breake a Colte and to lett him streight rvn Loose at randome?" (9). Indeed, in a perverse reversal of the relations of the proper roles, Irenius describes how the Old English have been more likely to allow themselves to be governed by the lawless Irish, as evidenced by their tendency to foster their children to Irish Lordes, who bring them up "lewdlie and Irishe lyke" and without the "husbandry" of English culture (38). In Irenius's seasoned and expert view, the whole process of acculturating the Irish must begin anew – presumably under the guidance of New English settlers: first the "field" must be cleared of all weeds or rebels before the seeds of English culture – in the form of Common Law, townships, grammar schools, and English planters themselves – can be sown. (For the *View*'s Georgic emphasis – a poetic mode derived from Virgil (70–19 BCE) valuing acts of tillage as morally preferable to the otium celebrated in pastoral – see Shuger 1997.) Having identified a failure of husbandry in the injunction given to the Norman invaders to avoid sustained contact with the native population, Irenius urges a studied form of "entermingelinge" (197) between English and Irish. Only by "scattringe [the Irish] in small nombers, amongst the English" (197) and by "[sowing] and [sprinckling]" them among the "English planted" will a harvest of civil Irish at long last emerge. Once "those yonge plantes [have] growen vpp," Irenius notes, it will be the role of the English assembly – positioned as proper English husbandmen – to "[ouerlook] and [veiw]" (199) the crops generated by their labored acts of culture. In the stunningly consistent lexicon that Irenius uses, his argument lays out the idea that peoples such as the Irish and the degenerate Old English can be made anew into a good race of English subjects through studied acts of husbandry. Through the careful application of culture, the natural substrate of this population can grow in a benign and productive manner – that is, into a good race.

III

As I have argued, Spenser's "view" of the Irish and the Old English is not premised on the idea that the nature of a people is fixed and inalterable, in ways that are more typical of modern racial ideologies. Instead, he works with the idea that human nature – like natural forms at large – is pliable, reformable, and responsive to the application of culture, if properly executed. In his view, the first round of English settlers in Ireland was constituted by men who failed in their role as "planters," that is, as "husbands" who were equipped with the duty of "tilling" the soil of the colony, as well as its people. Spenser's hope, as expressed in his political tract, is that the second round of English settlers – men who were not accustomed to receiving

benefits by virtue of their lineal identity but who understood the value of husbandry, embodying a strong Georgic ethos – would do better. The irony is that within just a few years of writing a tract urging such practices, the Munster plantation upon which the poet settled was overrun by rebels – both Irish and Old English – and the New English were sent packing along with their tools and their theories of racial cultivation.

Although these theories of human identity that I have connected to prevailing views about the role of culture in shaping nature in early modern England differ in crucial ways from ideologies of modern race, it should nevertheless be clear from the account I have provided that these early modern theories could be equally pernicious and equally violent and that by identifying race as a malleable concept for this period, I am not envisioning anything like a racially "innocent" zone for the early modern period. Spenser's project – of "[fitting]" a people to a foreign law (183), of launching a burnt-earth campaign of starvation (134–135), and of using a meta-phorical scythe to clear the land of rebels construed as brambles (13) – is stark, cruel, and violent. For, as Irenius ruthlessly states in construing people through a lexicon of nature submitting to agri*culture*: "all those evills must first bee cutt away with a stronge hand, before any good can bee planted, lyke as the corrupt branches and the vnwholsome bowes are firste to bee pruned, and the fowle mosse clensed or scraped aaye, before the tree can bring forth any good fruite" (123). Culture here is imag-ined as a force that can and should aggressively reshape human nature, as it does every other aspect of the natural world. But Spenser's theory of colonial reform, unlike modern racial paradigms, begins with the assumption that human identity is extremely malleable and that "good" races can sprout from the "soil" of any native population that receives proper husbandry. His writing thereby affords a glimpse into a crucial and dissonant aspect of early modern race thinking.

What to Read Next

Baker and Maley (2002); Canny (2003); Coughlan (1989); Highley (1997); McCabe (2002).

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