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“Goodly Woods”:
Irish Forests, Georgic Trees
in Books 1 and 4 of
Edmund Spenser’s Færie Queene

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Whilst vitall sapp did make me spring,
And leafe and bough did flourish brave,
I then was dumbe and could not sing,
No had the voice which now I have:
But when the axe my life did end,
The Muses nine this voice did send.
—Verses upon the earl of Cork’s lute,
attributed (ca. 1633) to Edmund Spenser

By one estimate, Edmund Spenser’s Irish lands would be
worth £10,000,000 today, certainly enough money to write
home about—which is precisely what Spenser did. Spenser
wrote, officiated, and farmed as the queen’s troubled poet in Ireland.
He hoped to convert one corner of the recently ravaged province of

'Calculated by John Bradley in "Anglicization and Spenser," a paper
presented at the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association’s
Goodly Worlds: Places, Topoi, and Global Riches conference in Big Sky, Montana, 3–7 June 1998. Portions of this essay were first presented as “Horrid Munster: Planting Adventure in Book 1 of The Færie Queene” at the same conference.
Munster into a fruitful, newly ordered land. Despite his reservations about the vanities and corruptions of the London and Dublin governments, "Bryttane['s] Orpheus" looked to the English crown for martial and civic support, no more so than when under increasing military threat throughout the 1590s. At least in theory, the crown provided a

Compare Willy Maley's argument that the Cambridge circle of intellects who nourished Spenser in his early career found in Ireland "a pastoral location par excellence for the projection of the radical reforming impulse of 'puritan' planters" (Willy Maley, Salvaging Spenser [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997], 18). For a general overview of the Munster plantation, see Michael MacCarthy-Morogh, The Munster Plantation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

From line four of the "Commendatory Verse" by R. S., published along with The Faerie Queene in 1590. In Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Longman, 1977), 739. All quotations from The Faerie Queene herein are taken from this edition.

Recent criticism has deeply complicated the question as to whether or not Spenser was (to quote Karl Marx) Elizabeth's "arse-kissing poet." As Andrew Hadfield points out, the theoretical underpinnings of Spenser's political tract A View of the Present State of Ireland (1596) demonstrate a tension between a Jean Bodinesque reliance on absolute monarchical authority versus a Machiavellian flirtation with commonwealth ideals, a political querying enabled by Spenser's far remove from London's central authority and occasional disdain for it (Andrew Hadfield, Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 51-84). One could, nonetheless, argue that while the thrifty "New English" (or Protestant newcomer, like Spenser) landowner tried to maximize profit on his own lands, negotiated with the (often absent) powers-that-be over policies and taxes, and dreamed of a commonwealth, he still relied on the English monarch as figurative sun-Jove, whose model of hierarchy and military strength helped ward off rebellion. Accordingly, Spenser's criticism of government policy in his A View of the Present State of Ireland alternates with a promotion of increased military spending from the crown and even a willingness to entertain less profitable forms of husbandry (such as corn instead of pasture in Munster) for the sake of social order. Spenser's concern in the 1580s and especially the '90s was
pattern for harmonious, godly government that guided Spenser's highly personal struggle to rescue the land and culture around him from its own—and his own—"degenerative" tendencies. Inspired by Elizabeth, Spenser's epic consistently demonstrates an ethos of empire-building heroic labor with its roots in the Irish soil: a "georgic spirit." From the beginning of his epic Spenser's political and moral purpose was to rescue the Irish land from industrial neglect and redeem the Christian soul through a combined utilitarian, moral, political, and poetic struggle. Like the Scottish poet Gavin Douglas, whose translation of the Aeneid (in 1513) first introduced the Georgics into English poetry,6 Spenser also found along England's "celtic fringe" opportunities to enlarge and perfect his craft. This craft, in georgic fashion, was analogous to the mercantile ordering and exploitation of the Irish countryside, a process of turning chaotic energy into labor and land into the poetic-utilitarian

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for controlling the restive polity as much as for making a quick return on his investment. In any case, this article will argue that his labor provided the foundation for an imperial ideology, a "georgic spirit," which sought to build an anglicized, hierarchical Protestant society out of the so-called "wasteland" of a chronically rebellious nation, be it kingly landlord, lord deputy, or queen at that revived nation's head.


"Goodly Woods": Georgie Trees in The Faerie Queene

landscape exemplified by the tree catalog in Book 1.1 of The Faerie Queene.7

The opening invocation to Virgil's Georgics combines the artifice of poetic learning with practical action in a complex “web of progress and cultural syncretism.”8 The invocation calls on gods, mythological characters, and the earth's various riches for inspiration and success in writing the poem, before finally appealing to Octavian, the future Caesar Augustus, to “come forward” and help “smooth [the] path.”9 An equally complex web of earthly riches and myth is found in the tree catalog which soon follows Spenser's initial invocation to Elizabeth, the Fairy Queen, whom he asks to “sharpen [his] dull tong” and shed light on his poetic enterprise (1.proem.2.9).10

Both poets, after all, had similar enterprises ahead of them. Virgil wrote from Mantua, finishing the poem in 29 B.C. in the fearful hope that the land riven by civil war could be peacefully governed again under Augustus. Spenser wrote from Munster in the hope that Elizabeth's rule might bring peace to a land recently wracked by rebellion. Both poets were fond of the analogy, found in the Georgics 2.541-42, of

I use landscape in the early modern sense noted by Simon Schama: “The word . . . entered the English language . . . as a Dutch import at the end of the sixteenth century. And landschap, like its Germanic root, Landschaft, signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction” (Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory [London: HarperCollins, 1995], 10).


This image is intriguingly complicated by an OED entry, from 1592, which notes that the term tong was applied to the head of a plough. If Spenser intends such a pun, it can claim ancestry in Georgics Book 1. There, Virgil tells us, in our imperfect world
the pen performing the plough's labor (Latin *versus* could mean "verse" or "furrow"). Both poets wrote with this metaphor in mind, as their poems helped to rebuild a recently shaken empire. In the proem to Book 3, Virgil imagines himself as master of ceremonies

\[
\text{pater ipse colendi} \\
\text{haud faciæm esse viam voluit, primusque per artem} \\
movit agros curis acuæm mortalía corda, \\
nec torpere gravi passus sua regna veterno. \\
(1.121–24)
\]

[Jove] willed that the path of tillage be not smooth,  
And first ordained that skill should cultivate  
The land, by care sharpening the wits of mortals,  
Nor let his kingdom laze in torpid sloth.  
(Wilkinson 60)

The adverse world "sharpens" (*acuæm*) the wits of man thanks in part to the will (*voluit*) of Jove himself; this image is soon echoed when ploughmen use their spare time in winter to "beat sharp [literally, "into teeth"] the blunted ploughshare point" ("arator / vomeris obtunsi dentem") (*Georgics* 1.261–62; Wilkinson 65). Once combined into one image, that of "sharpening the plough" as if it were the "wits" or "tongue" of the poet, these passages become central to an overarching idea in *The Færie Queene*: the ploughman-poet owes his sharpened "tongue" to the monarch, but with a price: the Jovian, fallen world given to him is full of adversity and itself challenges him to individually sharpen his tongue/pen/plough in opposition to it. The monarch gives the poet an initial opportunity and continuing guidance in his work; without adverse labor, however, wit cannot hone itself, nor the poet properly glorify his own effort.

Along similar lines, Andrew V. Ettin discusses in depth the influence of the ending of Virgil's poem (4.559–66) on Spenser's proem to Book 1, arguing that Spenser's invocation "deepen[s] Vergil's contrasts, emphasizing both the poet's humble preparations and the ruler's magnificence." Ettin then concentrates his analysis primarily on Book 6 of *The Færie Queene* (Andrew V. Ettin, "The Georgics in *The Færie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 3 [1982]: 59, 57–71).

11Spenser first uses it in *The Færie Queene* to conclude the 1590 edition of Book 3.
leading a procession of the muses not to Rome, but to his native Mantua, and building there a temple to Caesar. The passage not only commemorates Octavian’s triple victory at Illyricum, Actium, and Alexandria, but also the poet’s own musical art, since the temple is by analogy that of his own poetry.12 Spenser (who in his earlier Shepheardes Calender envisions a similar temple built to Elizabeth, with his alter-ego, the poet Colin Clout, ascending towards it)13 builds his “temple,” The Faerie Queene, out of poetic materials found partly near Kilcolman, Co. Cork, his Munster home by the late 1580s.14

After a Jovian storm drives our heroes into the dark wood, the poet takes pains to catalog the trees obscuring Una and Red Cross Knight’s progress through the world:

The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
   The vine-prop Elme, the Poplar neuer dry,
   The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,
The Aspine good for staues, the Cypresse funerall.

   The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours,
   And Poets sage, the Firre that weepeth still,
The Willow worne of forlorne Paramours,
The Eugh obedient to the benders will,

12For this interpretation, see Wilkinson’s “Introduction” to his translation of the Georgics, 25.
14For an analysis of the formal nature of The Faerie Queene as a “temple,” see Angus Fletcher, The Prophetic Moment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 14–23. See also his chapter “The Vergilian Matrix,” 76–90, which (unlike my conclusion here) finds Spenser’s “geopolitical questing” in Book 2 of The Faerie Queene, rather than Book 1 (Fletcher, 79).
September.

vvoeft, and through a great plenty was fallen into great pernici. This poet I knowe, to have bene much yield of the author, and to iuch a like effecte, as sylye Naucitus spake it.

October.

Ægloga decima.

ARGUMENT.

In Cuddie is set out the perfecte paterue of a Poete, wise he finding no maintenance of his Rate and Studie, complemeth of the contempe of Poetrie, and the causes thereof: Specially basing bene in all ages, and even amongst the most barbarous always of singular accounts & honor, & being indeed so worthy and commendable an arte: or rather no arte, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both: and poured into the wise by a certaine inspiration, and celestial inspiration, as the Author thereof where at large discussed, in his bookes called the English Poete, which booke being lately come to my hands, I make also by Gods grace upon further advisement to publish.

Pierce. Cuddie.

Cuddie, soe shame holde up thy heavie head,
And let vs cast with what delight to sing.

Æd.
The Birch for shaftes, the Sallow for the mill,
The Mirrhe sweete bleeding in the bitter wound,
The warlike Beech, the Ash for nothing ill,
The fruitful Oliue, and the Platane round,
The caruer Holme, the Maple seeldom inward sound.

(1.1.8-9)

Spenser carves an identifiable catalog out of the intractable, labyrinthine forest, Dante's *selva oscura* which is "an emblem of man's life within society." 15 Spenser's tree catalog demonstrates the harmonizing effect of the poet's verse in this chaotic society: it echoes the workings of an organizing principle in nature traditionally manifest in such poetic catalogs 16 and in opposition to the Lucretian mutability surrounding George and Red Cross Knight. This organizing principle in the text reflects the firm hierarchy of Gloriana's beneficent rule, as the trees are figuratively dragged one by one into imperial scrutiny and named, just as it demonstrates the poet's own ability to imperfectly figure forth new worlds.

According to Richard Helgerson, Spenser's authoritarian power of imagination creates an idealized faerieland: "Like a king, the Spenserian mythopoetic artist creates another nature, gathers the Ganges, the Tagus, and the Thames in a single imagined space as easily as he gathers their names in a single sentence." 17 Spenser's sentences display a "cultural syncretism" that intertwines mythical, ritual, and practical uses for the trees into a cosmic order hoped for on earth. To write the faerie landscape is a poetic-imperial activity that reflects past, present, and future change in that landscape. Such change can be for the worse (the duplicitous maple of the catalog, for example, foreshadows Duessa's "wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind" [1.8.47.8]), but the

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virtuoso artificiality of the poet’s imaginative effort reflects a royal, spiritualized order underlying nature and guiding the poet’s labor. In the “Laurell” especially, “meed of mightie Conquerours,” the poet magnifies his own poetic laurels. The catalog suggests, in short, a conquering expansion across the landscape by the planter-poet.

Virgil guides Dante through a similar dark forest, and Virgil’s tree catalog in the Georgics 2.343–53 guides Spenser’s art; the Georgics helps provide the utilitarian-imperial direction of Spenser’s thought. Though not as directly inspirational as the arboreal list in Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls (176–82), which—besides Spenser’s translation of the pseudo-Virgilian Culex—Marillene Allen calls the “only” direct source, it still should be considered as primary. It also describes the “fruitful Oliue,” the pine for ships, and the yew for bows; the vine-propping elm is mentioned, moreover, eighty lines previously (2.262). Compare with Chaucer’s Parliament, which is shorter than Virgil’s list but clearly dictates Spenser’s word choice in three cases (Chaucer’s “byldere ok” becomes Spenser’s “builder Oake”; “saylynge fyr,” the

Critics seem to have ignored this source. Jeffrey Knapp cites it, but only to argue (opposite my own point) that “the trees are not used, only admired; or rather, the only use to which they are put represents a devolution even from georgic poetry” (Jeffrey Knapp, “Error as a Means of Empire in The Fairie Queene 1,” ELH 54.4 [Winter 1987]: 804, 801–34). I can’t find it glossed in either Hamilton’s edition of The Fairie Queene or in Thomas P. Roche’s The Fairie Queene (New York: Penguin, 1978), 1076–77; nor does Marillene Allen mention it in her entry “trees” in The Spenser Encyclopedia, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 697–98. The Variorum cites one brief connection by John Upton, wherein he cites Georgics 2.448 (“Itureos taxi torquentur in arcus”; “yews are bent for Iturean bows,” trans. Wilkinson 91) as the source for 1.1.9.4 (Frederick Morgan Padelford, ed., The Fairie Queene: Book One. The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932], 181).

Virgil stresses the fruitfulness of the “plump” olive while also conventionally calling it the “pride of Peace”: “hoc pingueum et placitam Paci nutritor olivam” (2.425; trans. Wilkinson, 90). Compare Spenser’s Muipotmos, the mock-Virgilian epic that praises the “fruitfull Olyve tree, with berries spredd, / That all the Gods admir’d” (326–27).
"sayling Pine"; "asp for shaftes," the "Birch for shaftes"); its matching uses of trees with Spenser's catalog, however, occurs only three times (Chaucer's oak, cypress, and yew perform the same functions as do Spenser's): fewer matches than between Spenser's catalog and the Georgics (four, if one includes the "vine-prop Elme"). This count also outdoes the Culex connection, whose pine, cypress, and poplar have identical uses with those in The Faerie Queene.

Spenser also borrowed to a lesser extent from the Sibyl's grove in the Aeneid (6.176–82); here, Virgil catalogs trees among the "antiquam silvam" which compose a funeral pyre at the burial of Misenus, a quasi-sacrificial rite that helps enable Aeneas' journey to the underworld. Upon Aeneas' arrival, his father tells him of his future homeland won by war and built by industry. Aeneas' last-born son, Silvius, will be nobly raised in forests and his descendants will wear oak leaves on their rugged brows, as (before the arrival of Romulus permanently establishes Rome) they found town after town, "Pometii, Fort Inuus, Bola, Cora— / Names to be heard for places nameless now" (6.756+). Towns are founded then disappear but nonetheless prophetically point towards an ongoing civilizing project. In Spenser's tree catalog the images reminiscent of destructive warfare (the yew bow, the arrow shaft) grow side by side with the peaceful (the olive). Some (like the "builder Oake,") connote both the commercial value of domestic industry and naval warfare. If we read the trees as representative of an Irish world of fallen forests and soldiers, like Virgil's Misenus, who provide a vision of an empire to come—a Munster plantation—then we can conclude that warfare and personal sacrifice must exist side-by-side with industry, as both struggle to carve a more

20 Translated by Spenser as Virgils Gnat. For its tree catalog, see Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser, ed. Oram et al., 293–326, lines 190–224. See also Book 10.86–105 of Ovid's Metamorphoses for a catalog of trees that respond to the poet Orpheus' song.

21 Hamilton, ed., The Faerie Queene, 32n.

peaceful, more permanent civilization out of the “wilderness” of an
inferior society.²³ Virgil’s Georgics, as a companion source to the Aeneid,
demonstrates how the still-rugged Romans continued to plow towards
this end.

Virgil’s focus in the Georgics is mythologically inventive and geo­
graphically scattered, but he also describes his native Mantua in detail
(2.198–99), and the forests, fields, streams, and vines of Italy famously
gain the greatest praise in his poem (2.136–76). Spenser’s tree catalog
also integrates Irish realities into his færie vision of rugged imperial
harmony. Victor I. Scherb has noted how worldly catalogs in medieval
English dramas (such as the Castle of Perseverance) could often signify
covetousness in a ruler who proudly lords over his corner of the world.²⁴
Spenser’s tree catalog demonstrates a similar drive to control worldly
property in his own neighborhood, although with less medieval moral
opprobrium and more of a renaissance poet’s delight in “wrapping”
himself in knowledge of the natural world, a delight Sir Philip Sidney

²³ Compare Sir John Davies’s description of King James’s circuit court’s
entry into Ulster, “where the wild inhabitants wondered as much to see the
King’s Deputy as the ghosts in Virgil wondered to see Aeneas alive in hell.”
In discussing this quotation (taken from Margaret MacCurtain), Maley
stresses the ghostliness of the Lord Deputy’s authority in Ireland as symbolic
of a similar “absent centre” regarding the queen’s authority in The Færie
Queene (Maley, Salvaging Spenser, 116–17). In this particular case, at least,
I would instead stress Aeneas-Mountjoy’s very real accomplishments in pro­
mulgating the future English empire in Ireland, as cleverly foreshadowed by
this passage and the tree catalog from The Færie Queene. As MacCurtain
notes, with the entry of the circuit court into Ulster “the shift in emphasis
from settlement to colonization [i.e., in the form of the Ulster Plantation]
... took place” (Margaret MacCurtain, “The Roots of Irish Nationalism,” in
The Celtic Consciousness, ed. Robert O’Driscol] [New York: George Braziller,

²⁴ Victor I. Scherb, “All the Kingdoms of the World in a Moment of Time:
Geographical Catalogues in English Medieval Drama,” paper presented at
the RMMRA Goody Worlds conference. For an analysis of the abiding influ­
ence of medieval drama on Spenser, including the Castle of Perseverance, see
Clifford Davidson, “drama, medieval,” The Spenser Encyclopedia, 224.
identifies as one of the key pleasures of the georgic mode of writing. Spenser, nonetheless, escapes from Sidney’s censure of those who remain inertly content in this georgic mode, since he also uses the georgic spirit to figure forth new “golden” worlds in his poetry; in so doing, however, he alludes more significantly to that natural world of his adopted landscape in Book 1 than critics have heretofore seen.

When one reads *The Faerie Queene* with Irish politics in mind, it becomes increasingly difficult to disassociate Spenser’s idealized pastoral visions—to choose one type of landscape involved—from the tamed Irish landscape ideally under New English control. Plantation

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27 Critics such as Robert Stillman, Julia Lupton, and Joanne Woolway have suggestively discussed Spenser’s georgic themes in relation to Ireland and *The Faerie Queene*, but my main contention is that they underplay the importance of Virgil’s *Georgics* specifically, and the “georgic spirit” generally, especially in relation to the supposedly less-politically oriented books 1–3 of *The Faerie Queene*. See Robert Stillman, “Spenserian Autonomy and the Trial of New Historicism: Book Six of *The Faerie Queene,*” *English Literary Renaissance* 22.3 (Fall 1992): 299–314; Julia Reinhardt Lupton, “Mapping Mutability: or, Spenser’s Irish Plot,” in *Representing Ireland*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield, and Willy Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 93–115; Joanne Woolway, “Spenser and the Culture of Place” (paper presented as guest lecturer at the University of Oslo, 17 April 1996, and circulated over the internet). Critical attention is gradually turning towards Irish signifiers in Book 1. For an insightful discussion of Ireland’s significance to the “salvage nation” episode of 1.6, see Hadfield, *Spenser’s Irish Experience*, 130–34.

28 In the terminology of the day, the “New English” were the waves of predominantly Protestant settlers, including Spenser, who arrived in the latter half of the sixteenth century to take advantage of ongoing plantation
creation in Munster encouraged Spenser’s Virgilian, poetic justification of a warfaring destruction for the sake of the nationalistic, godly (i.e., Protestant) reconstruction of society. The plantation was first enabled by the highly destructive Desmond rebellion (1579–83), which left desolate much of southwest Munster. The resulting empty land and fallow growth allowed increased surveying and whet the appetite of the incoming colonists. (This process would repeat itself when Spenser’s aptly named first son, Sylvanus, would eventually inherit Kilcolman, but only after the plantation’s violent inception, destruction [in 1598], and reconstitution.)

Spenser’s poetry, accordingly, shows a fondness for idyllic Irish forests around Kilcolman, like those in the Mutability Cantos that Cynthia once ruled, hunted, and played in (7.6.38). But he also saw the wisdom of cutting them down, so as to creatively channel destruction and build a more civilized political landscape. Once Diana’s world had degenerated, thanks to Mutability, it became a place that harbored “Wolves and Thieves” (7.6.55.8), hostile “wood-kernes,” and other Irish rebels. These forests were subsequently cleared for security reasons as well as for profit. One group of prospective Munster planters, in a 1583 requisition for land there, declared that “nothing was more fitting to bridle that idle and filching people than the cutting down of their projects that favored their ethnic group. They often conflicted with the so-called “mere” or “wild” Irish, who were the native Irish-speaking descendants of those who ruled Ireland before the Anglo-Norman conquest of the country in the twelfth century. Caught between the two factions were the “Old English,” who were the descendents of the Anglo-Norman families, many of whom from the time of the conquest had married into Irish families, adopted Irish customs, and thereby “degenerated” in the minds of successive English administrations.

29 Compare Maley, “Planting a New Culture beyond the Pale,” chap. 3 of Salvaging Spenser.
"Goodly Woods": Georgic Trees in The Faerie Queene

woods, which are their chiepest source of strength."

Soon after, in 1584, the first survey of the rebellious Earl of Desmond’s confiscated lands (which formed the basis of the Munster plantation) made special note of corn production and prices and also cataloged “the minerals available, timber and stock.”

Even prior to the Munster plantation, and roughly contemporary with the initial date of composition of The Faerie Queene, Spenser briefly owned (in December 1580) well-timbered lands at Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford. A fiant from 1566 reveals that these lands provided “boards, timber,” and “laths”; and a letter from a successive owner (the powerful Sir Henry Wallop) in 1586 describes the “greate store of Shipp planks and Shipp tymer, Pipe Boards and Barrell boords, and all other kynds of cloven tymber” to be found in the area. Spenser logically would have known the value of Irish timber when he began his epic in the 1580s, a situation confirmed by his later Irish experience.

Plenty of forest remained in Ireland at the time. Unlike long-denuded England, one-eighth of Ireland was forest-covered in 1600 (as opposed to 1/50 ca. 1800), most of it in Ulster and West Munster. Much of Spenser’s grant of 3,000 acres at Kilcolman contained forest land, some of it among the hills but some in the “champaign country” and thus readily extracted. An idealization of Ireland’s timber potential

32 MacCarthy-Morogh, 23.
33 MacCarthy-Morogh, 5.
34 Philip Herbert Hore, History of the Town and County of Wexford (London, 1911), 6:370, 408, 411.
under sovereign rule is found in Spenser’s political tract *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596). Says Irenius, describing the lands around the Pale,

> And sure it is yet a most beautifull and sweet countrey as any is under heaven, being... adorned with goodly woods even fit for building of houses and ships, so commodiously, as that if some Princes in the world had them, they would soon hope to be lords of all the seas, and ere long of all the world. 37

The description not only follows contemporary convention of describing Ireland in such “commodious” terms for the delectation of prospective planters, but it also brings Spenser’s own wooded Munster to mind, as well as *The Faerie Queene* catalog. 38 Spenser’s catalog describes exotic trees, like the maple, which never took root in Ireland until the eighteenth century, 39 and the olive, which won’t grow there; not to mention the absurdity (if potential popularity) of propping up grapes in Ireland. Even the “sayling pine,” used for masts, was (by 1611) to come out of Scotland, not Ireland. 40 Nonetheless, Ireland’s “goodly woods even fit for building of houses and ships” in the *View* may help explain the catalog’s “builder Oake.” After 1600, as the Irish timber export industry grew rapidly (thanks to the seeds of industry planted earlier), many of the hulls of England’s ships were built out of Irish oak; more would have been “if the English government had been able to carry out its intentions,” which were often frustrated by political
unrest or local demands. Earlier, Irish oak was used in widespread fashion for building half-timbered Tudor houses, especially in English-held Irish towns. The presence of such houses on the Irish landscape was a potent symbol of the English civility envisioned by the *View*.

A further comparison with Spenser’s sources, moreover, reveals two usages unique to Spenser, both of which shed new light on the material reality intended by his catalog: the “Aspine good for staues” and the “Sallow for the mill.” The “Sallow for the mill” has an Irish plantation resonance. A. C. Hamilton suggests that sallow, which E. K. in *The Shepheardes Calender* glosses as “a kind of woodde like Wyllow, fit to wreath and bynde,” may have been used for making mill wheels. Virgil’s *Georgics*, which lists fences and osiers as appropriate uses for the willow (2.440+), supports this guess by stressing the wood’s pliable nature. One could, accordingly, find such a use in an Irish landscape: mills were common along the Blackwater River, which coursed south of Spenser’s estate and served as the area’s main drainage route to the sea. Youghal alone, lying at the end of the Blackwater, had four water mills in operation in its burgesses by the late thirteenth century.

Nonetheless, this explanation for “Sallow for the mill” is further complicated by Hamilton’s citation of the blacksmith Care passage in *The Faerie Queene* Book 4 (5.32–46) (ca. 1596) as supporting evidence. Hamilton notes that sallow grows by stagnant water near Care’s smithy (5.33.4–5). The poet may not, however, be imagining the sallow as material for mill wheels alone (while the water may bring mill use to mind, certainly its stagnant nature does not), but also (or instead) as fuel for an “iron” “mill,” work not unrelated to the blacksmith Care’s

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41 McCracken, 63.
42 McCracken, 73–79.
manufacture of iron wedges (5.35.8). The word *mill* in the sixteenth century could connote any industrial process, a smithy included (*OED*). The *OED* also lists examples of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century burning of sallow, which made especially good charcoal. While we know nothing of the blacksmith’s fuel of choice, the poem subtly hints at the sallow’s use as such; the sallow trees that “grew in ranke” by the blacksmith’s stream echo the clang of the hammers “beating ranke” in the same stanza (33.5–7). The repetition of “ranke” indicates a phonetic absorption of the trees by the blacksmith’s cacophonous industry; perhaps these “few” remaining sallow trees (in “ranke” as if planted for the purpose?) provide the blacksmith with the fuel to keep his hammers banging.

Spenser strengthens the Irish relevance of the episode in his physical depiction of Care, who has “hoarie shagged heare,” a “Full blacke and griesly” face, ragged clothes, and “hollow eyes and rawbone cheeke forespent, / As if he had in prison long bene pent” (4.5.34). A Willy Horton to the edgy, racist planter, Care resembles the rude, glibbed, starving, villainous Irish churl that Spenser so graphically describes in the *View* and elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*. Pauline Henley notes a possible source for Care’s forge in the early Irish Book of Munster. The Irish word *ceir* (pronounced “care”) meant a “metal-smith” (if not a blacksmith) in medieval literature; even the word *griesly* has Irish resonances: Spenser the multilingual poet may be punning on Irish *gris*, “fire,” as well as “pimple” due to heat inflammation


“Goodly Woods”: Georgic Trees in The Faerie Queen

(appropriate enough for a blacksmith's face "Besmeard with smoke" [4.5.34-7]), and/or the related verb *griosaigh* (pron. "greasy"), to "excite, stir, provoke, kindle, inflame." 48 No wonder Care's annoyance weakens our hero. Like drums in the forest or an Irish hubbub, his continual noise and red-hot prodding keep the jealous Scudamore fitfully awake and unable to rest, as Scudamour in a simile is reduced to a "heauie lumpe of lead" (4.5.45.6). In Spenser's market economy of moral virtues, Care's abuse of labor produces the basest material, lead, from the most heroic material, Scudamour (whose name, derived from French *écu* and *d'amour*, connotes a "shield of love"). 49

On the other hand, lead had a supreme value in early modern Ireland, since its import was forbidden to the Irish for fear of arms manufacture. In a famous episode, Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, the rumored grandson of a Dundalk blacksmith, 50 convinced William Cecil to let him import lead under the pretext of building an English-style country manor at Dungannon, following his elopement with Mabel Bagenal in 1591. After openly rebelling in 1594 he had his smithies melt the lead into bullets, which he used to rake his former brother-in-law Henry Bagenal's troops (killing Bagenal himself) at

48 For historical uses of the Irish words, see the *Dictionary of the Irish Language (DIL)* as well as Edward O'Reilly, *Irish–English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1817). Compare with the "griously foster" chasing Florimell (p. 71.2). His lust, correspondent with the symbolism inherent in the smithy's flames, may refer to the chaotic generative power found within his habitat, the (Irishesque) forest.


50 Hugh O'Neill's father, Feardocha, or Matthew, was widely thought to be the illegitimate son of a blacksmith's family (Ciaran Brady, *Shane O'Neill* [Dublin: Historical Association of Ireland, 1996], 22). Hugh O'Neill was hence dubbed a "base Bastard of Ulster, blowen out of a Smithes forge" in New English propaganda during the Nine Years' War (the anonymous *The Supplication of the blood of the English most lamentably murdered in Ireland, Cryeng out of the yearth for revenge* [1598], ed. Willy Maley, *Analecta Hibernica* 36 [1995], 3-77, esp. 20, 75).
the Battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598. As if mocking the principle behind Spenser’s “builder Oake,” O’Neill successfully turned an emblem of English civility in the Ulster “wilderness” into a violent means of rebellion. Similarly, Scudamour has had his identity perversely abused as he is figuratively reduced from a protective power (a hero’s shield with the strength of chivalric love behind it) into an illicit, dangerous metal thanks to the efforts of a manic blacksmith who resembles an Irishman (perhaps an allegorical echo of O’Neill, who would eventually instigate the ruin of the Munster plantation during the Nine Years’ War, ca. 1594–1603).

Scudamour must therefore have care that his own future labors aren’t reduced to fruitless, violent ends thanks to the vice of jealousy, just as the poet must be careful his own labor isn’t wasted, or even worse, perverted. Spenser’s earlier, repeated pun on “ranke” jars the senses not only in its loud sound and blatant rhyme with “stanke,” but in its plodding repetition: the poet’s belabored pun is itself “ranke” and reflects the blacksmith’s destructive labor. The poem plods because the labor it describes plods, as the blacksmith follows the poet’s advice laid out in his catalog, to bring the sallow to the mill, but in a never-ending, spiralling circle of diminished returns: he “to small purpose yron wedges made” (4.5.35.8).

One can, in fact, imagine little other use for Care’s wedges except to cut down more trees. As Spenser writes earlier in his translation of Du Bellay, lamenting the fall of the “faire Dodonian tree” associated with Rome at its “stately” height of power, “When barbarous villaines

51Richard Berleth, The Twilight Lords: An Irish Chronicle (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978), 251. Compare this episode with the fate of a Munster lead mine described by Gerard Boate. Its first use, ca. 1605, was by the Lord President of Munster, the earl of Thomond, to roof his house at Bunratty. It was subsequently destroyed by Irish rebels in the 1640s (Gerard Boate, Irelands Naturall History (1625). A Collection of Tracts and Treatises Illustrative of the Naturall History, Antiquities, and the Political and Social State of Ireland, At Various Periods Prior to the Present Century (Dublin: Alex. Thom & Sons, 1860), 1:1-148, esp. 115–17.
in disordred heape, / Outragd the honour of these noble bowes. / I hearde the tronke to grone under the wedge." Care's labor will be self-defeating once his "few" remaining sallows have been cut down by his wedges and consumed by his jealous fire. The blacksmith Care, like the Irish and O'Neill, are the later reincarnations of the "barbarous villaines" who spite themselves by uselessly chopping down the Dodonian tree of civil empire in Ulster and Munster, which Spenser must painstakingly try to rebuild . . . beginning, in Book 1, with a catalog that includes proper uses for trees.

If not by smithies, many of the trees of Ireland were devoured by iron mills, which were another significant part of the plantation economy. The first iron mill in Ireland was built in Enniscurthy in North Wexford in 1560, and as the practice grew in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Munster saw more than its fair share of them, including one at Dingle (in 1600) in Co. Kerry, and Minehead (in 1591) and Tallow (in 1588) in Co. Waterford. The most mills in any one county, twenty-two, were built in Co. Cork, most in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Iron mills tended to operate in places with sufficient timber fuel, and these were often locales with difficult access to transport routes, as in the hilly ravines of West Munster (a landscape reflected, perhaps, by Care's smithy, located "Vnder a steepe hilles side" [4.5.33.1]). Mills simply burned the timber on the


53The OED records frequent use of the term iron mill in the sixteenth century, including one from William Cecil in 1559. Gerard Boate refers to "All the Mills, Melting-houses, Refining-houses, and other necessary Work-houses" which stand near the lead and silver mine in County Tipperary, Munster (Boate, 117). On iron mills in Ireland generally and Munster particularly, see McCracken, 46, 90–96.
spot, as raw iron ore and smelted pig iron were easier to transport in and out of the ravines than the trees themselves. Otherwise,

From the [Munster] woods a continuous stream of timber flowed out—trunks from good, large trees for ships and houses, branches from these trees and smaller trees for barrel staves, and lop and top and all other woods for charcoal for iron and glass works.54

Though the best charcoal for smelting was from five-year-old coppice oak,55 in practice “all other woods” left over from other uses would be thrown into the fire, including the charcoal-rich sallow.

Like the “builder Oake,” the iron mill was also a symbol of social control used by the New English Protestant planters: “forges, like towns and bridges, were accepted as symbols of the new civil order.”56 Mills became symbols of an efficiently wasteful management of the land’s resources, an example of the bursting georgic fertility of the land which encouraged excessive and destructive use, yet only for a larger, carefully controlled gain. Sustainable woods were deliberately clear-cut to feed the mills, which often closed once the wood source was exhausted; such forest clearance in Ireland functioned as a transitional step to a fully pastoral society more profitable than the mills themselves.57 Hence Spenser’s pastoral vision of Mt. Acidale, a possible allegory for an idealized Ireland,58 shows a delightful green space with dancing nymphs


55MacCracken, 92. The *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* mentions oak and ash as primary fuel for ore-smelting furnaces, and willow for “wattle and basketry”; it doesn’t, however, exclude the latter type of tree from furnace use (F. H. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* [Cork: Cork University Press, 1997], 123, fig. 2).


57MacCracken, 95-96.

58Stillman, 311-12.
surrounded by a wood, as if cut out of the "stately" forest surrounding it (6.10.5–28). The "Maple seeldom inward sound" no longer exists in that idealized world but has already been weeded out and consigned to ashes.

Spenser's "sallow for the mill" and rich description of trees may therefore have been predicting (and encouraging) future success for smithies and/or iron mills in his own neighborhood. For we mustn't forget Spenser's audience in Ireland and among English investors; timber work, mines, and mills enabled the newcomer Richard Boyle (the eventual earl of Cork and Spenser's distant relative by his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle) to make a large portion of his great wealth in the early seventeenth century. To this day, the motto above the entrance to Boyle's sumptuous and painstakingly English castle at Lismore, Co. Waterford, reads God's Providence Is Our Inheritance. His dark, providential mills operated primarily on Cork lands sold to him by Sir Walter Raleigh, the dedicatee of The Faerie Queene's famous prefatory letter. This letter, which catalogs the gentlemanly virtues found in the poem, titles Raleigh "Lo. Wardein of the Stanneryes." These Stannaries were comprised of the tin mines and smelting works of Cornwall and Devon. Raleigh was steeped in the profits of metallurgy. As a consequence, he created some of the first iron mills in Waterford, "mills" suggested by the tree catalog in The Faerie Queene.

Raleigh was also one of the first New English settlers to develop the timber trade in Ireland. His "extreme desire to find out new and rapid paths to wealth" led to "a passion for Irish land," and when Raleigh had his newly granted Munster estates surveyed in 1587, he complained about the physical difficulty involved in clearing its secondary growth, which had sprouted in the wake of the Desmond uprising (an uprising which had depopulated much of the area of its

9Nicholas Canny, The Upstart Earl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 72.
10McCracken, 94.
He soon imported 200 timber workers from England, and in 1601 secured a monopoly for exporting pipe staves out of the country to the continent, despite a ban on such exports forced into law by English merchants in 1596. The ban, and its flouting, indicate the magnitude of the perceived threat to those factions opposed to it; pipe staves (cf. the “Pipe Boards” found at Enniscorthy, above) of oak or soft woods, such as aspen, were one of the main exports from Ireland, with southern Cork a primary source. Civility benefited from the process, since both the towns of Tallow and Killarney owed their rapid growth chiefly to timber processing. Thanks in part to Raleigh’s efforts, in the early seventeenth century, French, Spanish, and Italian wine was imported into England almost exclusively in Irish wood. Spenser’s “Aspne good for staues” was good for Raleigh, too.

Another meaning of stave, that is, “a staff-like weapon,” appears in *The Ferie Queene*. Here, too, an Irish connection surfaces. An angry crowd of stereotypically Irish-looking rabble (compared, famously, to gnats on the Irish Bog of Allen in stanza 16), led by the villain Maleger, assaults the House of Temperance. Among the many weapons the “thousand villeins” carry are “staues in fire warmd” (2.9.13-7), in order to harden them. The term stave in the tree catalog therefore has an ambiguous Irish significance. Like the iron wedges of Care, also fired for a fruitless purpose, staves can be used or abused, depending on the purpose and virtue of the user. How we read the tree catalog therefore challenges us to turn what could be a weapon in the hands of an uncivilized, Irish power—the fire-hardened stave—into a weapon in the

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62 Pope Hennessy, 56.
63 McCracken, 99.
64 Pope Hennessy, 76. A “pipe” is a size of barrel.
65 On the stave industry in Ireland, see McCracken, 59–62, 99; Aidan Clarke, “The Irish Economy, 1600–60,” in *A New History of Ireland*, 3:68–86, esp. 180–81. Canny, in *Kingdom and Colony*, states that staves were made from soft woods such as aspen (52), although McCracken states that oak was used.
66 McCracken, 100; Pope Hennessy, 76.
hands of the virtuous reader, or even better, into a product of industrial advancement on behalf of the New English—the barrel stave.

Control of the plantation came not by destroying its native element, but by reharnessing the energy latent in the land and its peoples. Raleigh became frustrated at the unwillingness of the Irish natives to labor for him, because he badly needed their labor to supplement that of his own migrant workers. To overcome the paucity of labor in Munster following the Desmond rebellion, Spenser envisions the remaining rebel Irish controlled and “driven” to power industry:

therefore are those Kearne, Stocaghes, and Horse-boyes, to bee driven and made to imploy that ablenesse of bodie, which they were wont to use to theft and villainy, henceforth to labour and industry. . . . To which end there is a Statute in Ireland already well provided . . . but it is (God wot) very slenderly executed.

Spenser employs the language of draught animals and refers to the necessity of strengthening laws (with a chilly pun on “executed”) to make such labor happen. He hopes to harness a chaotic Irish energy, freshly roiled from civil war, which will spur on his poetry as well. Accordingly, Spenser reinvokes the georgic equation of the ploughing poet at the end of the blacksmith Care canto as, exhausted, he unyokes the horses of his energetic inspiration (4.5.46.8–9). He nonetheless continues on to the next canto, just as jealous Care keeps Scudamour painfully awake with his red-hot iron tongs: the chaotic sexual desires symbolized by the tools of his trade help spur Scudamour on his quest. Wanton labor, fueled by destructive desires (such as jealousy or

Pope Hennessy, 56.
Spenser, A View of the [Present] State of Ireland, 149.
covetousness) and found reflected in the Irish landscape, its native inhabitants, and the new planters, can be productive if properly harnessed.69 Labor omnia vicit (Georgics 1.145): under proper, long-term management, Care’s iron wedges cutting down trees can clear the land for pastoral or agricultural purposes. Weapon staves can be replaced by pipe staves. When seen in this clever light, Spenser’s own Care-ful continuous labor, driven by georgic fires and desires, yet also guided by the Apollo—Elizabeth of the poem’s opening invocation, with each written word exhaustively enacts the noble purpose of controlling the Irish landscape.

Spenser’s art sought to transform the material, spiritual, and civic well-being of the planter in Ireland. It continually stressed that planter’s agricultural identity by encouraging and predicting his future success in specific industries. Perhaps, as in his portrayal of the destruction of the Bower of Bliss (2.7.69–87), Spenser’s puritanical distrust of worldly show is increasingly exacerbated by his creative side, which chooses to linger over the world’s verdant beauty. Such a scenario leads, perhaps inevitably, to Guyon gate-crashing, locking the liquor cabinet, and telling everyone to go home. But Verdant isn’t particularly industrious when Guyon intrudes, nor does Guyon cut down the Bower to make ships out of it. There may, therefore, be a third way to conceive of Spenser’s relationship to the physical world which partially excludes

69See also Anthony Esolen’s argument concerning Lucretian influences in The Færie Queene, especially Book 4: “for Spenser chaos is not the guiding principle of nature, but it has its place. Like undifferentiated sexual energy, chaos is created and restrained and used by God so that despite itself it becomes an agent of God’s plan” (Anthony Esolen, “Spenserian Chaos: Lucretius in The Færie Queene,” Spenser Studies 11 [1994]: 31–51, esp. 44). Care’s lustful cacophony certainly captures the spirit of Lucretian chaos, which must be managed by Spenser for socially harmonious effect. For a relevant, in-depth discussion of Lucretian influence on Virgil’s nationalist sentiment in the Georgics and the Aeneid, including the argument that Lucretian metaphors “of fertility and flowering will be used to bind civilization to the land in the Aeneid,” see Richard Jenkyns, Virgil’s Experience: Nature and History: Times, Names and Places (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 247 and passim.
both Guyon and Verdant: the georgic. The more we see Spenser’s material side as a reflection of Ireland’s history, the more we must stress the poet’s active force of creation physically bending the world to its plan of plantation.  

The poem is literally the “fruit of savage soil.” Robert Welch has his fictive Spenser fantasize about Irish timber pressed into the poem’s pages, “Ireland’s woody fastnesses brought to book.” In the same vein, Willy Maley speculates that “clout” could mean the rags with which a page is pressed together: “if Colin echoes Coloni and Clout resonates with ‘clowte,’ or cloth, which is also the very fabric of the text, then one rendering of ‘Colin Clout’ would be ‘colonial text.’” Such a clout-text demonstrates the riches of a worldly productivity envisioned for Ireland. Like St. George’s “booke, wherein his Saveours testament / Was writ with golden letters rich and brave,” given in return for Arthur’s “Boxe of Diamond sure” (1.9.19), Spenser’s gift to his patron Elizabeth (and to his more local Maecenas, Arthur, Lord Grey) is a spiritualized worldly good from “goodly woods.” Like a renaissance painting, The Faerie Queene is both a source of aesthetic delight and a commercial property that advertises the constructed wealth of both the skilled craftsman and his patrons, all the while pointing towards God.

C. S. Lewis describes Spenser as “‘the glad creator,’ the fashioner of flower and forest and river, of excellent trout and pike, of months and seasons, of beautiful women and ‘lovely knights,’ of love and marriage, of sun, moon, and planets, of angels, above all of light. . . . His universe dances with energy” (C. S. Lewis, “Neoplatonism in Spenser’s Poetry,” in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, ed. Walter Hooper [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966], 149–63, esp. 162).


Maley, Salvaging Spenser, 33.