

The Lovesick Womb's Monstrous Births in Edmund Spenser's Poetry

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In 'Sonnet II' of Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence the *Amoretti* (1595), the male Lover afflicted with sexual desire for his Lady burdens himself with a metaphoric womb that gives birth to a 'vipers brood' (II.6). Similarly, in *Book I* of Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene* (1591), Redcrosse knight battles with the half woman/half serpent Errour and causes her self-replicating womb to expel her offspring. This paper argues that both these examples construct a politicized space I am terming the asexual 'lovesick womb', which evokes the Elizabethan colonisation of Ireland. In order to consider the lovesick womb as a politicized space, John Gillies' concept of 'poetic geography' will be applied to it as a mapped space *Amoretti's* Lover and Redcrosse knight desire to penetrate and control. Gillies uses the term 'poetic geography' to describe how Medieval and Renaissance mapmakers perceive the 'other'. In this sense, the 'other' represents civilizations or cultures that are not part of the dominant civilization constructing the map. Gillies argues that the Elizabethan 'other' is perceived as being exotic, wondrous, strange and barbarous (Gillies 25). These adjectives serve to set the 'other' apart from the Elizabethan notion of being 'civilised'. Similarly, the lovesick womb is evoked in Spenser's poetry as the barbaric 'other'.

My notion of the lovesick womb is related to the Renaissance notion of 'burning lust' ascribed to love-melancholy (Burton 52). Burning lust causes a violent passion in the subject because it overheats black bile until it becomes thick and acrid with impurities. In the Renaissance, combusted black bile is known by the metonym adust. It excites a carnal passion within noble men and women that causes irrational behaviour. In contrast, the asexual lovesick womb causes noble men and women to behave in a grotesque manner, which is indicative of Spenser's evocation of the Renaissance womb. He maps a psycho-sexual landscape that is a site replicating the Elizabethan's problematic conquest of Ireland.

The lovesick womb redefines Marion A. Wells' notion of love-melancholy published in her 2007 book, *The Secret Wound: Love-Melancholy and Early Modern Romance*. Wells argues that the feminising of the primarily masculine disease of medieval lovesickness results in the more ennobled condition love-melancholy, which afflicts the Elizabethan courtier. This paper proposes that Wells has overlooked the importance of the Renaissance womb,

which is demonised and considered a 'monster' itself in Early Modern medical and philosophical thought.

This concept of the womb is emphasized by the Renaissance physician Jacques Ferrand. He gives the womb bestial connotations when he writes that 'the spermatic vessels...[join] the horns of the uterus' (Ferrand 312). The 'horns' signify the womb's aggressive nature that recall a bull's horns, which masculinises the most womanly of organs. This links to the desire for patriarchal control of the womb, as it is perceived as a beast that needs taming and controlling. The womb's violent and brutal nature contrasts with the passionate heart whose 'well-meaning' desires cause erotic melancholy. The heart's melancholy also affects the brain that 'through sympathy, joins in the suffering' (Ferrand 257). The heart and the brain are, therefore, closely linked by an erstwhile passion. This passion causes a melancholy through the accumulation of adust bile or burnt black bile in the brain and heart.

The womb and its early modern associations become an allegory of lovesickness in Sonnet II of the *Amoretti*:

Unquiet thought, whom at the first I bred
Of th'inward bale of my love pined hart:
and sithens have with sighes and sorrowes fed,
till greater then my wombe thou woxen art:
Breake forth at length out of the inner part,
in which thou lurkest lyke to vipers brood:
and seeke some succour both to ease my smart
and also to sustayne thy selfe with food (II.1-8).

The phrase 'unquiet thought' indicates the Lover's melancholy as indicated by 'th'inward bale of my love pined hart'. Initially, the Lover's brain signified by 'unquiet' is sympathetic to the pain of the melancholic heart. It signifies the courtly lover's Noble suffering as the combination of heart and brain rationalise the illness. This is relayed by the physical symptom of the Lover's lack of appetite, as he is fed only 'with sighes and sorrowes'. This suffering associated with the signifier 'unquiet thought' is exacerbated through the synecdoche of being 'bred' in 'my wombe', enhanced by the alliterating rhyme of 'whom' with 'wombe'. The Lover recognises he has impregnated himself with sickness, which intensifies like a baby growing inside the womb.

Even though the 'unquiet thought' frees itself in order 'to sustayne thy selfe with food', it enables the Lover to recover from the illness. The simile comparing the 'unquiet thought' to a 'vipers brood' indicates the Lover's

recognition of his sense of spiritual morality conflicting with his sexual infatuation. His lovesick desires represented by the signifier 'unquiet thought' begin a process of sublimation of the Lover's passion for the Lady. The implication is that old passions (indicated by the simile 'vipers brood') must not gestate but should be displaced in order to reemphasize the Lady's importance. In other words, the Lady's sexed being is moved outside her body into the space of perverse sexual pleasure inscribed by language. This is similar to the Medieval saints who suffered for an affinity with Jesus that represents God's approval. The saints' self-inflicted fleshly pain articulates a sexual pleasure through the joy of being God's subject. Their spiritual body is the divine 'other' to their corporeal sinful flesh. The saints move their faith outside their earthly bodies through pain. In comparison, the Lover's lovesickness that craves an appetite for more sorrow is in order to please the Neo-Platonic idealised Lady. This in effect removes the Lady's sexuality from the Lover's 'unquiet thought' as he transfers his passion from sexual desire to spiritual fulfilment.

The metaphoric association of the Lover's 'unquiet thought' with the bestial appetite of the womb denotes sexual union. These sickening desires that 'breake forth' from the womb indicate a pleasurable release or birth of the Lover's erotic impulses through the approval of the idealised Lady. Although Alexander Dunlop argues that the simile of the Viper's brood that causes the death of the mother Viper when born signifies 'the death of the lover', the breaking out of the 'vipers brood' actually accentuates the death of the Lover's violent *passions* (Dunlop 601). The revealing of the Lover's asexual womb symbolises his control over this discursive space, as well as enjoying the organ's lovesick excess. The Lover cures his lovesickness by destroying the space that is harbouring and gestating his 'unquiet thought'. It is similar to Ferrand's unveiling of the womb through 'autopsy and anatomical dissection' (Ferrand 312). Understanding the womb also entails its violent destruction. The pleasure of knowledge is derived from the perverse pleasure of dissecting the organ. In other words, the womb's 'autopsy and anatomical dissection' entails sexual joy for the Renaissance practitioners of medicine.

Sonnet II of the *Amoretti* depicts the womb as an uncontrollable hellish space impregnated with a 'vipers brood'. Even this evocation is exacerbated in *Book I of The Faerie Queen*, which metaphorically maps a womb within a womb. Sheltering from a storm, Redcrosse knight, Una and the Dwarf enter 'a hollowe caue./Amid the thickest woods (I.I.11.7-8). The cave is a hidden space because it is located within a forest of 'So many pathes' (I.I.10.8). As the phrase 'Amid the thickest woods' implies, the cave is at the centre of the maze-like forest. This accentuates its importance not only as a hidden space,

but as a potential mappable location through its being exposed, pacified and colonised.

Rather than expanding boundaries through mapping new locations in terms of their distance from their civilised home, Redcrosse knight, Una and the Dwarf embark on an allegorical journey that questions the notion of a civilised identity through its origins. Within this concept of mapping identity, the Renaissance anxiety about the uncontrollable womb is appropriate. It is blamed for all social and cultural ills through being hidden from Patriarchal control as it creates new subjects who are potentially dangerous.

In this context the 'hollowe caue' represents the lovesick womb, a negative connotation that is evoked in the following lines: 'The danger hid, the place vnknowne and wilde,/Breedes dreadfull doubts' (I.I.12.3-4). The negativity of the cave being a 'vnknowne and wilde' place results with it breeding more anxieties. The imagery of a hidden 'vnknowne and wilde' space coupled with breeding evokes the Platonic lovesick womb described in *Timaeus* as 'wandering everywhere throughout the body' (Plato 129). The implication of the childless 'wandering' womb has associations with licentiousness. The woman will be restless or inflicted with disease until her womb's childbearing desire is sated. This analogy between Plato's wandering womb that becomes restless and wild through not conceiving is mapped directly in stanza 13: 'This is the wandring wood, this *Errours den*,/A monster vile, whom God and man does hate' (I.I.13.6-7). The naming of the forest and cave posits these locations in a signifying chain Gillies terms 'poetic geography'. They evoke the exotic and barbarous 'other'. The juxtaposition between 'wandring wood' and '*Errours den*' implies a metaphoric link where 'wandring wood' is condensed into '*Errours den*'. As the monstrous 'other', '*Errours den*' links to the negative associations of 'wandring' by being 'vnknowne and wilde'. Like Plato's wandering womb that needs to be impregnated to be sated, *Errour's den* needs to be discovered in order to have signification. Redcrosse knight, Una and the Dwarf literally impregnate *Errour's den* with meaning. The implication is that they have created the monster Error through their own 'error' of entering the cave.

The caesura that mirrors both locations also represents an allegorical code. This code registers the lovesick womb not as the metaphoric signified, but as part of the signifying chain that constitutes metonymic desire. Redcrosse knight, Una and the Dwarf map internal spaces that decrease in size. This allegoric journey through a succession of womb-like spaces leads to Error, the maternal body constituting the endpoint of their quest's desire. Yet, as her name implies, Error cannot be the goal of this desire. As a result, the desire to unify with the maternal body is replaced by the need to destroy it.

However, the lovesick womb still becomes the temporary goal of the quest's desire, as its destruction mirrors the desire to unify with it.

This desire is illustrated by Redcrosse who, despite being warned by the Dwarf to leave the place, continues to map it further:

But full of fire and greedy hardiment,
The youthfull knight could not for ought be staide,
But forth vnto the darksome hole he went, (I.I.14.1-3).

Redcrosse's desire is evoked through a passion that is 'full of fire' and an excessive appetite signified by 'greedy hardiment'. The combination of his inflamed passion and excessive appetite with his youth indicates that Redcrosse is afflicted with overheated black bile resulting in lustful desire. Through this sexual desire, Redcrosse imagines an erotic landscape. By entering 'the darksome hole', Redcrosse is not *discovering* an unmapped space but is *penetrating* it. When he confronts Error, Redcrosse discovers a hybrid monster who is 'Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,/But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine' (I.I.14.7-8). Although Gillies argues hybrid monsters represent the uncivilised territories at the edge of Renaissance maps, the womb-like space Error inhabits indicates an internalised terrain. In other words, Redcrosse enters a psycho-sexual landscape that literally symbolises bestial desire. Error's serpentine upper half and 'womans shape' recalls the original sin in the Garden of Eden. This conjoining of sin with female sexuality also represents Redcrosse's anticipated sexual excesses. However, as a mythical source of a sexual trauma associated with the maternal body, these excesses are denied. This leads to Error's destruction as Redcrosse strangles her through an enactment of his own castration phantasy, which exposes the contents of the monster's womb. The dual emptying of Error's womb and the cave as a metaphoric womb is the double-trigger of metonymic desire, which is realised by Redcrosse's symbolic castration. In other words, Redcrosse's anticipation of sexual plenitude is denied by the perverse phantasy of castration. Redcrosse's symbolic castration resolves a conflict of spiritual aberration (through *Error's den* that breeds doubt) and moral 'error' (through the incestuous self-replicating monster), as Redcrosse, Una and the Dwarf take shelter in the wrong place. However, once emptied and free from sexual excess, the womb-like space provokes a desire to be occupied.

Error represents the pacification and colonisation of a political space. As Joan Fitzpatrick argues the 'depiction of Error and her young seems to be indicative of negative English attitudes toward Ireland and Irish' (Fitzpatrick 24). The lovesick womb lends itself to Ireland's colonial context as a hostile

space requiring a 'cure'. Writing in 1620, Luke Gernon describes Ireland as a nymph 'that hath the greene sicknes for want of occupying' (Gernon 349). This is because 'she was drawne out of the wombe of rebellion' that refers to the Nine Years War 1594-1603 (350). As a lovesick womb, Ireland oscillates between aggressive promiscuity and appealing sexuality. In both cases, Ireland is desirous through the pleasure of taming then occupying her. However, Gernon's figurative language suspends Ireland in a negative discourse of an abused space. Having once been mapped as rebellious, there appears to be an uncertainty over occupying (both sexually and materially) this green sick nymph. The implication being the green sick nymph will destroy anyone who occupies her.

To conclude, Renaissance fears of miscegenation are duplicated in Redcrosse's defeat of Error. This implies an endless chain of bestial conceptions, which suggests that sexual plenitude leads to a shattering of the self through destructive desires. The metaphoric emptying of the womb through Error's death and Redcrosse's perverse joy through being metaphorically castrated leads to a space that is constantly denied positive reproductive value. The womb is never free from its lovesick associations.

This explains more fully why the Lover, in Sonnet II of the *Amoretti*, seeks forgiveness for his lovesick phantasies from his Lady in the closing rhyming couplet of Sonnet II: 'Which if she graunt, then live and my love cherish,/if not, die soone, and I with thee will perish' (II.13-14). In the masculine end-rhymes 'cherish/perish', the consonance of the stressed 'sh' sound implies the Lover has no choice. The foreboding oscillating sound of the spondees 'cherish/perish' enhances the grimness of the Lover's predicament. If the Lady forgives him, the Lover will start again with a pure spiritual love. This signifies death for the Lover as his pure love is separated from his bestial body symbolised by the 'vipers brood'. In other words, it reverses the grotesque imagery of his lovesick imagination, as fleshly lust is replaced by divine passion. This is different from the death the Lover anticipates if the Lady does not forgive him. They will both 'perish' in a womb-like landscape trapped in their corporeal bodies, as the Lover's divine love dies. Similarly, the Elizabethan colonisation of Ireland signifies failure because, as the lovesick womb, Ireland is an uncontrollable and untameable space.

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