

The Mummings' Play *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* and Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

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Abstract

This essay examines Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in relation to its rich, English and Irish festive and performative context. In "A Letter to the Authors" addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh, which was part of the prefatory material to his epic, Spenser envisions including twelve books that correspond to the "Faery Queene" keeping her "Annual feaste xii. dayes." This phrase most likely refers to Queen Elizabeth's annual feast of the Twelve Days of Christmas. The Mummings' Play *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* was traditionally performed during the Christmas holiday season. In one version of this popular, comic play St. George engages in a slap-stick battle with a dragon that roars, demands meat, and performs a summersault. Throughout Book I of *The Faerie Queene* featuring Redcrosse who develops into the legendary St. George, Spenser appropriates elements from English Mummings' plays about St. George, his Turkish opponent, and the Dragon in keeping with his larger Protestant agenda. His doing so contributes to the comedic dimension of Redcrosse's battle with the dragon toward the end of Book I. Spenser's surprising addition of comedy to this battle of biblical proportions further links Redcrosse with popular versions of legendary St. George well-known in comic, holiday performances and thereby distances his Protestant figure from the more serious Catholic Saint by this name.

Keywords

Christmas, comedy, dragon, Mummings, Mummings' plays, pageantry, performative, Protestant, Old Snap the Dragon, St. George, *St. George and the Fiery Dragon*

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* emerges out of a rich, English and Irish performative context related to carnival and carnivalesque festivities. He exhibits fondness for a number of elite and popular holiday motifs, including pageants centered on St. George and the Dragon and related plays performed by Mummings, celebratory folk wearing masks and costumes. Such pageantry and Mummings' plays provided entertainment during the Christmas season, further suggesting their intertextual connection to Spenser's epic that might have been a holiday gift to Queen Elizabeth for the annual feast celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas.¹ Spenser's appropriation of the legendary figures of St. George and the Dragon, well-known through pageantry and Mummings' plays as well as parades and puppet shows, contributes to the comedic dimension of Redcrosse's battle with the dragon toward the end of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*.² The poet depicts this storybook foe as incongruously cheerful and as bounding like a puppy to greet his opponent. Spenser's apocalyptic dragon thereby inspires both laughter and terror. The vanquished dragon's grotesque size and his hell-mouth, another performative aspect of this monster fit for the stage, help demonstrate victorious Redcrosse's mighty status as the

¹Wall notes that Spenser mentions "the twelve-day feast of Gloriana in a letter to Raleigh dated 23 January 1598/90" (98). Hamilton's suggestion that the poet might have given Queen Elizabeth a copy of the 1590 edition of poem since he dedicates it to her adds to Wall's hypothesis that Spenser did so for the gift-giving occasion of the feast of the Twelve Days of Christmas (*The Faerie Queene* x).

²With the few exceptions of Hardin and Lamb Spenser scholars have largely neglected the pageantry figures of St. George and the dragon. See Hardin 251-253; Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson* 186-193; and Lamb, "The Red Crosse Knight, St. George, and the Appropriation of Popular Culture" 185-208, in which she discusses Book I of *The Faerie Queene* in relation to early modern performances of St. George's battle with the dragon during festival celebrations and processions that included the Norwich hobby-horse Old Snap on St. George's Day. In this essay I aim in part to illustrate the comedic dimension of Spenser's enormous dragon, an aspect of this figure with ties to festive pageantry that even Lamb in her thoroughly engaging work, *The Popular Culture of Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson*, overlooks when she states, "as an incarnation of evil, this truly terrifying dragon evokes few reminders of the much-loved dragon accompanying St. George" (191).

Protestant, English hero of St. George. Throughout Book I Spenser appropriates these pageantry figures in a manner that emphasizes his sense of humor; his love for native, spiritually regenerative English soil; his defense of folkloric, holiday practices such as mumming among other festive rituals currently under siege by Puritan detractors; as well as his Protestantism.

Although existing historical records indicate that carnival and carnivalesque festivities were less abundant in Protestant England than they were in Catholic Europe, a great deal of evidence exists about the vitality of English seasonal practices and customs during the medieval and early modern periods. Marking the beginning and end of the holiday year, Christmas festivities traditionally included Mummers' plays as well as masques. The term "mumming" refers to the wearing of a festive mask or disguise and derives from the Greek word "mommo," meaning "mask." Mummers frequently wore animal head masks, skins, or horns, creating grotesque, hybrid figures (Laroque 48). The term "momerie" first appeared in Britain in the thirteenth century, and by the sixteenth century during the reign of Elizabeth I the folk practice of mumming had contributed to the development of the theatrical genre of the masque featuring masked performers, a genre most prominent at court and other private, elite settings that had largely aristocratic audiences (Hutton, *Stations of the Sun* 11-12). On Twelfth Night, January 6, 1559, an anti-Catholic masque featuring crows as cardinals, asses as bishops, and wolves as abbots was performed at Whitehall Palace before Queen Elizabeth (Colthorpe 317).³ Such allegorical parodies of religious and political figures, a performative mode that was common in early modern England and Europe, appear also in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in which the reigning Lucifera in the House of Pride functions as a parodic version of Queen Elizabeth.

During the Twelve Days of Christmas in early modern England, local villagers wearing masks went house-to-house to perform Mummers' plays.⁴ Central in these Mummers' plays is the

³Here Colthorpe is citing a letter describing this anti-Catholic, Elizabethan masque. It is dated January 23, 1559 from Il Schifanoia, a Mantuan, *Calendar of State Papers... Venice*, vii. 11.

⁴Marcus argues that a traditional Christmas in great country villages involved "mumming and St. George plays performed by local villagers" (77). Pettit notes that "Mummery seems to mean simply a seasonal

legendary figure and English national hero of St. George. The Mummers' play *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* also includes St. George's slap-stick battle with a Dragon. In one version of this comedic play the Dragon roars, demands meat, and performs a summersault (Helm 33). Following Christmas and Shrove Tuesday, ritual festivities such as the Feast of St. George on April 23 as well as Whitsuntide, May Day, and Midsummer rounded out the calendar year for all ranks of individuals in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The patriotic celebration of St. George's Day often included parades that featured the popular figure of Old Snap the Dragon whose wooden jaws made a snapping sound (Hutton, *Rise and Fall of Merry England* 215-216). A number of these spring and summer festivals also featured morris dancers accompanied by a wickerwork, snapping-jawed hobby-horse fastened around the waist of one of the performers. Morris dancers frequently wore painted masks and hoods and danced ceremonially around May poles, which Philip Stubbes and other Protestant reformers describe disapprovingly as "idols."⁵ Historical records indicate that morris dancing first occurred in aristocratic, courtly contexts and gradually dispersed from such elite circles in London to become part of folk practices in rural towns and villages in England (Hutton, *Stations of the Sun* 262-268).⁶ Because of the wide range

(winter) house-to-house visit by a group of local people who put on some kind of show from the households on which they intrude" (8). In "The Red Crosse Knight, St. George, and the Appropriation of Popular Culture" Lamb cites Pettit's definition of mumming (193). Twycross and Carpenter add that "in England [mumming] belonged particularly to the Twelve Days of Christmas" (84). Wall demonstrates that "fundamental aspects of *The Faerie Queene* came to Spenser through the cultural inheritance represented by the Elizabethan Christmastide festivities" such as mumming (97-98).

⁵See Hutton, *Stations of the Sun* for a useful description of this type of hobbyhorse (81-82). Hutton adds that hostility to maypoles was "first manifested in the Reformation of Edward VI, when the famous Cornhill maypole, which had been deposited in storage, was sawed up and burned after a preacher denounced it as an idol" (235).

⁶In *Stations of the Sun* Hutton states that although the work of John Forrest and Michael Heaney on the Early Morris Project "awaits full publication, preliminary reports show the morris as being based primarily in royal and noble households from 1458 to 1540, in towns from 1540 to

and expanse of such holiday practices throughout early modern England sixteenth-century readers of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* were no doubt aware of numerous performative entertainments—that took place at various private estates and on the public streets—that took place during English feast-days in the city, country, and at court.⁷

Protestants who objected vociferously to seasonal rites, many of which have pagan and Catholic origins, provide further evidence of the vitality of carnivalesque festivities in early modern England. In the *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583) Phillip Stubbes attacks not only theatrical practices like crossdressing but also a variety of native, popular and elite celebratory customs:

First, all the wilde-heds of the Parish, flocking together, chuse them a Graund Captain (of all mischeefe), whome they innoble with the title of 'my Lord of Mis-rule', and him they crowne with great solemnitie, and adopt for their king [. . .] Then, euerie one of these his men, he inuesteth with his liueries of green, yellow, or some other light wanton colour; And as though that were not (baudie) gaudie enough, I should say, they bedecke them selues with scarfs, ribbons, & laces [. . .]; this doon, they tye about either leg [. . .] bells, with rich handkerchiefs in their hands [. . .] Thus al things set in order, then haue they their

1600, and in villages from 1600 onward. It was supported first by kingly and aristocratic patronage, then by guild and parish sponsorship [. . .] It thus moved from the public to the private sphere and dispersed across England from the London area" (266). He cites Heaney, "Kingston to Kenilworth: Early Plebian Morris" and Forrest and Heaney on the history of morris dancing.

⁷In his discussion of Shakespeare and folklore Muir remarks that "anyone brought up in Stratford-upon-Avon in the middle of the sixteenth century would have come into contact with a wide variety of folk customs and superstitions. What is also clear is that any dramatist writing in the last two decades of the sixteenth century could rely on his audience being equally familiar with the same body of material" (231). Non-dramatists as well as dramatists were no doubt widely familiar with these seasonal, festive rituals. In "Pageants" Bergeron argues that Spenser's readers would have noticed the many parallels between his literary works and street or indoor pageantry in early modern England (526).

Hobby-horses, dragons & other Antiques, together with their vaudie Pipers and thundering Drummers to strike up the deuils daunce withal. then, marche these heathen company towards the Church and Church-yard [. . .] where they haue commonly their Sommer-haules, their bowers, arbors, & banqueting houses set vp, wherein they feast, banquet & daunce al that day & (peradventure) all that night too. And thus these terrestriall furies spend the Sabaoth day.

(*Anatomie of Abuses* qtd. in Cawte 45)

Here Stubbes refers to holiday figures and practices such as Lords of Misrule; morris dancers with ribbons on their brightly-colored clothes, bells tied to their legs, and handkerchiefs in their hands; hobby-horses; dragons in Mummers' plays such as *St. George and the Fiery Dragon*; and elaborate feasts and banquets on Sundays. In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) George Puttenham reports his experiences of "midsummer pageants in London, where, to make the people wonder, are set forth great and vglie Gyants marching as if they were aliuie, and armed at all points, but within they are stuffed full of browne paper and tow."⁸ At Midsummer pageants and parades he apparently witnessed the frightening and comical Wild Men known as "woodwoses," which were commonly dressed in ivy and carried an oak club (Laroque 57, 137). Spenser incorporates such Wild Men in Books I, II, IV, and VI of *The Faerie Queene*.⁹

Written accounts of riots and rebellions that accompanied holiday rituals and customs provide further evidence of the sustained presence of these annual, occasional celebrations and their violent underbelly in early modern England. During the early

⁸Puttenham, Chapter VI: "Of the High, Low, and Meane Subiect" in *The Arte of English Poesie* as cited in Smith 159 and quoted by Leahy 71.

⁹See, for instance, Orgoglio in Book I, canto vii; *Disdayne* at the House of Mammon in Book II, canto vii; the figure of Lust who attacks Amoret in Book IV, canto vi; and the cannibalistic Salvage Nation in Book VI, canto viii. Less pejorative uses of this folkloric motif include Artegall at Satyrane's tournament in Book IV, canto iv; penitential Timias in the forest in Book IV, canto vi; and the benevolent Salvage Man in Book VI, cantos iii-viii.

reign of James I, armed revelers not unlike the threatening giants that Puttenham observed "marching as if [. . .] armed at all points" in Midsummer pageants instigated riots during 24 of 25 Shrove Tuesdays, with the brunt of the violence directed against brothels and playhouses. As John Taylor reports in his account of Shrove Tuesday in 1621, "youths armed with cudgels, stones, hammers, rules, trowels and hand-saws, put play-houses to the sack, and bawdy-houses to the spoil." Young apprentices as well as higher-ranking craftsmen participated in these riots (Hutton, *Stations of the Sun* 155).¹⁰ In early modern England Shrovetide festivities were frequently expressive of violent social and economic conflicts among the lower and upper ranks as well as nationalism and xenophobia. A number of early modern literary works relevant to carnival and the carnivalesque include similar violent conflicts. Jews and others treated as outsiders or scapegoats as well as animals were often targets for abuse during such celebratory feast-days for which cruelty and violence were often cathartic for explosive tensions between individuals of different ranks, nationalities, and religions.¹¹

In early modern England civic processions and pageants for annual, occasional holidays included royal entries of sovereigns into London, a custom that featured dramatic tableaux and dated back to the thirteenth century, and Lord Mayor's Shows with idealized figures riding on the back of animals during their parade throughout the city (Bergeron, *English Civic Pageantry* 3, 125-139). These elaborate, public spectacles have a broad and extensive English and European history and are integral to early modern literature in various forms such as the procession of the Seven Deadly Sins at the House of Pride in Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Accession Day Tilts performed annually on November 17 in celebration of the accession of Queen Elizabeth to the throne

¹⁰In *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* Hutton cites Taylor's comments about Shrovetide riots that occurred mainly after 1598 (188).

¹¹Wilson notes the "suffering of the Jews and other scapegoats pelted by revelers" during Carnival (60). In *Stations of the Sun* Hutton remarks that Shrovetide sports such as cock-fighting and ball games were further expressive of the holiday propensity for cruelty and violence (153).

featured chivalric tournaments as entertainment for the monarch.¹² A parodic version of these royal entertainments performed for the reigning Queen Lucifera occurs in Spenser's House of Pride. Though chivalric tournaments central during Accession Day celebrations became less frequent after the reign of Elizabeth I and throughout the seventeenth century, the continuing festive practice of a morris dancer wearing a wickerwork hobby-horse fastened around his waist was intended to recall the chivalric rider and horse focal during such entertaining jousts at court (Cawte 208).

Spenser's procession of the Seven Deadly Sins featuring Lucifera as a mock Queen or Lady of Misrule is informed by the festive, spectacular and performative traditions of religious and civic pageantry well-known in sixteenth-century, Elizabethan England.¹³ This parade of sins serves as entertainment for Lucifera and her followers in the House of Pride and is a parody and travesty of royal processions celebrating Elizabeth I and other monarchs in both the city and country.¹⁴ Though Lucifera is associated with hell and darkness, for the duration of this episode she acts as sovereign of the daytime world, a carnivalesque role reversal. Spenser describes this false ruler in the following manner:

[She] made her selfe a Queene, and crownd to be,
Yet rightful kingdome she had none at all,
Ne heritage of natue soueraintie,
But did vsurpse with wrong and tyrannie

¹²As Laroque argues, "festivity, whether in the guise of civic pageants, tournaments or court spectacles, had a particular importance of its own. It seems to have been regarded as a specially effective means of propagating the national, religious and monarchical ideology of the period" (70).

¹³Cf. Twycross's discussion of "the rhetoric of processions" in "Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity, Especially Processions" (17). Blythe refers to Herbert Cory's note in *Edmund Spenser* (89) that "the overall effect of this procession with its mixture of grotesque and comic is that of a circus parade" (346). Blythe additionally describes the Sins as "textbook caricatures," a term that describes figures commonly included in carnivalesque processions, early modern to modern (350).

¹⁴Weimann argues that "parody and burlesque often flourished in conjunction with pageants and disguises. They also survived in the context of processions and irreverent festivals of the medieval church" (6).

Vpon the scepter, which she now did hold.
(iv.12.2-6, my italics)

As a Lady of Misrule, Lucifera is a tyrant who has usurped rather than inherited her right to wear a crown.¹⁵ She functions as a perversion of Elizabeth I in a number of ways. Spenser's detail that in her "hand she held a mirrhour bright" (iv.10.6) recalls his description of Elizabeth I as "Mirroure of grace and Maiestie diuine" in the Proem to Book I (4.2). The dragon at Lucifera's feet and the lengthy and labyrinthine, dragon-shaped procession that unravels before her provide further evidence that she is a parodic form of Queen Elizabeth, who was head of the Order of the Garter lead by the legendary St. George who heroically defeated the dragon (iv.10.4-5; Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene* 65).

Redcrosse acts as a Lenten killjoy during the carnivalesque festivities at the House of Pride by proudly refusing to take part in the apparently joyful, carnivalesque celebration there that includes his combat with Sansjoy, a Saracen or Paynim known to Elizabethans as a Muslim. As Spenser states, "But that good knight would not so nigh repaire, / Him selfe estraunging from their ioyauce vaine, / Whose fellowship seemd far vnfit for warlike swaine" (iv.37.7-9). Sansjoy, his opponent in combat, provides a mirror image of the Knight and fittingly arrives after he rejects such "ioyaunce" (38.6). The poet presents the chivalric tournament between Redcrosse and Sansjoy as festive entertainment for Lucifera that parodies occasional events such as the Accession Day tilts performed annually on November 17 before Elizabeth I (iv.15.9, v.4.1; Brooks-Davies 441). As he states,

At last forth comes that far renowned Queene,
With royall pomp and Princely maiestie;
She is ybrought vnto a paled greene,
And placed vnder stately canapee,
The warlike feates of both those knights to see.
(I.v.5.1-5)

¹⁵Here Hamilton adds that the name "Lucifera," which recalls Lucifer's name as the "son of the morning" (Isaiah 14:12), also suggests that she attempts to usurp the role of Una as "the morning starre" (see page 66 of Hamilton's edition).

During the tournament performed for Lucifera at the House of Pride, Redcrosse, the killjoy knight in a carnivalesque setting, apparently kills his opponent representing joylessness.

This tournament between Redcrosse and Sansjoy alludes to the English Mummers' Play about St. George and his combat with a Turkish knight as well as his slaying of the dragon. As I mentioned earlier, these Mummers' plays were well-known seasonal customs often performed at Christmas time at court and in the country where local people went from house-to-house to put on a show involving such masked players. Focal in this variety of a Mummers' play are St. George, his killing of his Saracen opponent, and a doctor and old woman who successfully help bring him back to life in a "cure scene." In Spenser's parallel episode Redcrosse defeats Sansjoy, Duessa attempts to revive him in the underworld, and Night carries him in her chariot to be healed by the god of medicine Aesculapius.¹⁶ Throughout Book I of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser appropriates the basic plot of English Mummers' plays about St. George, his Turkish opponent, and the Dragon in keeping with his larger Protestant agenda.¹⁷ In contrast to Sansjoy, whose body is miraculously revived by the pagan god Aesculapius, Redcrosse will find joy again after he is restored in spirit through the sacrament of grace when he falls into a fountain three times during his battle with the enormous dragon near the end of Book I.¹⁸

Spenser's literary appropriation of a version of the English Mummers' Play about St. George in combat with a non-Christian opponent in the episode of Lucifera at the House of Pride

¹⁶Hardin notes these parallels between Spenser's text and this primarily oral, folkloric tradition (251).

¹⁷For further discussion of the ways in which Spenser parodies the English Mummers' Play of St. George see Hardin 251; Lamb, "The Red Crosse Knight, St. George, and the Appropriation of Popular Culture" 200-204; and Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* 189-192.

¹⁸In "The Red Crosse Knight, St. George, and the Appropriation of Popular Culture" Lamb makes this distinction between Spenser's Aesculapius Episode and the English Mummers' Play (202).

illustrates how carnivalesque motifs in literary works can foster national pride as well as xenophobia. During the tournament between Redcrosse and Sansjoy, the future patron saint of England, who will later discover his identity as St. George, defeats this exotic, non-Christian figure as if the victor were a Protestant crusader. Sansjoy, for instance, is a "Sarazin," referring to an Arab or Muslim often perceived as a religious enemy during the Crusades or associated with any non-Christian heathen or barbarian (I.v.4.1; *OED*. "Saracen." 1.a.). Adding to the exoticism of Redcrosse's opponent during the tournament, the spectators bring them "wine of *Greece* and *Araby*, / And daintie spices fetcht from furthest *Ynd*" (4.5-6). After Redcrosse defeats and seemingly kills Sansjoy, Spenser links Duessa and her disingenuous tears for the fallen combatant with the exotic locale of Egypt and the "broad seuen-mouthed *Nile*" noted for the crocodile. Her false tears further associate her with "a cruell craftie Crocodile, / Which in false grieffe" hides "his harmefull guile" and "swallow[s]" up the man who pities him (v.18.2, 4-8). In an earlier episode of Book I Redcrosse is himself subject to her deceit after he defeats her champion, Sansfoy—brother to Sansjoy—and she, "melting in teares," entreats his sympathy (ii.21, 22.1). Duessa becomes Redcrosse's Eastern "Cleopatra," one of the many fallen victims in the hellish underworld beneath the House of Pride, and threatens to dim his religious and national glory as St. George (v.50.7). Spenser appropriately ends the episode at the House of Pride by presenting Lucifera's castle as a "dreadfull spectacle," a word suggestive of the elite court entertainment of the masque, which exhibited ties through its masked performers with folkloric mummers' plays (v.53.9).

In one of the culminating episodes of Book I of *The Faerie Queene* Redcrosse Knight battles the carnivalesque dragon laying waste to the kingdom of his beloved Una's parents, a holy conflict that underscores Spenser's Protestantism. This dragon exhibits a number of connections to the festive, pageantry figures of St. George and the Dragon—perhaps Old Snap—from English and Irish Mummings' plays. The slap-stick comedy characteristic of these popular figures infuses Redcrosse's heroic, yet comic battle with the clumsy, bounding dragon near the end of Book I shortly

after the Knight discovers his identity as St. George.¹⁹ In the introductory headnote to this episode the phrase "that old Dragon," which is reminiscent of the very name "Old Snap the dragon" as well as evocative of the apocalyptic serpent, suggests that Spenser and his readers were widely familiar with this monster from popular and biblical contexts.²⁰ In patriotic terms Una urges Redcrosse to battle the formidable, yet carnivalesque dragon by reminding him of his glorious, superlative, and legendary reputation as St. George, Patron Saint of England:

The sparke of noble courage now awake,
And strive *your excellent selfe* to excel;
That shall ye evermore renowned make,
Above all knights *on earth*, that batteill undertake.
(xi.2.5-9, my italics)

These lines further indicate that Spenser's readers, like Una, are already aware of Redcrosse's famous identity as St. George, which she describes as his "excellent selfe." Because his foolish mishaps and failed trials prior to this battle in the Legend of Holiness have obscured the full extent of his future glory Una might be referring to St. George's reputation, stellar or not, beyond Spenser's poem in other literary works and popular performances. She inspires Spenser's Redcrosse to victory by promising that this ultimate battle will "excel" such former, legendary accounts of the battle between St. George and the dragon.

Una's prophesy that Redcrosse by undertaking this battle with the formidable dragon will be "evermore renowned [. . .] / Above all knights on earth" links the hero of Book I and the English national pride she attributes to him with the rusticity of the soil.

¹⁹Hardin demonstrates how widely the St. George and the Dragon story was disseminated during Spenser's day, including avenues such as "pageants, puppet shows, or Mummings' Plays" (252). During a lecture at Indiana University in 1991, Judith H. Anderson illuminated the comedy of Spenser's depiction of the dragon that Redcrosse Knight battles by referring to the beast as an "overgrown" or "overweight gargoyle" that Spenser describes as having a "huge wast" (I.xi.8.4).

²⁰Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene* 143: cf. *Revelation* 20.2: "the dragon that old serpent, which is the devil and Satan."

Throughout *The Faerie Queene* Spenser similarly exhibits his affection for his homeland in terms of his inclusion of holiday folklore and practices of the native inhabitants of England.²¹ His literary appropriation of elements from pageantry and Mummers' plays about St. George and the dragon is another case in point. Una's prophesy about the earthly fame of the Knight of Holiness is in keeping with the hermit Contemplation's prior dialogue with Redcrosse during which he invites him to ascend "the highest Mount" in the following terms, "Then come thou man of earth" and refers to his name "George," which is based on the Greek word *georgos* meaning 'ploughman' (I.x.52.2, 53.1; see also Hamilton's gloss on page 139). Similarly, Spenser emphasizes the virtue and hallowedness of English soil during the carnivalesque episode of Redcrosse's battle with the dragon. Una, for instance, welcomes Redcrosse to her parents' kingdom by stating, "Now are we come unto *my native soyle*," a phrase highlighting the dignity of English soil through its association with this allegorical figure representing the true and perfected Protestant Church in England (xi.2.1, *my italics*).

Redcrosse's hard-fought, three day battle with the fierce dragon and his triumph through grace redeems earlier associations of the earth in *The Faerie Queene* with the original sin and fall of Adam, who was the first ploughman. Earlier in Book I the folkloric Wild Man and giant, Orgoglio, proudly defeats Redcrosse and places him in a hellish prison. Orgoglio's earthquake-like outcry "that all the earth for terrour seemd to shake" (I.vii.7.6) becomes metamorphosed into the dragon's roar that "all the ayre with terrour filled wide, / And seemd vneath to shake the stedfast ground" (xi.4.2-3; Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene* 144). These earthquakes, though similar in magnitude, function for far different ends. In the latter episode during which Redcrosse is triumphant the "earth" and "ground" become water sources for sacred fountains of grace rather than damning pride.

The surprisingly comic nuances surrounding Spenser's biblical,

²¹Holiday motifs throughout *The Faerie Queene* include clownish, rustic fools and May games; Lords of Misrule central to Twelfth Night festivities; religious and civic processions and masques; the Wild Man or Savage Man commonly featured in Midsummer pageants; and carnivalesque feasts of excess that sometimes verge on cannibalism.

enormous, and noisy dragon are in keeping with its intertextual connection to the folkloric creation of Old Snap the Dragon from popular St. George pageantry and Mummings' plays. The dragon in Book I is a legendary, storybook figure well-known to Spenser's readers from the outset. The very description of the "dreadfull Dragon [. . .] stretcht [. . .] upon the sunny side / Of a great hill, himselfe like a great hill" includes mock cheeriness in keeping with the comic incongruity of him rousing "himselfe full blith"—as if he were a cheerful domestic pet greeting his master rather than a dragon intending to destroy the intruder Redcrosse (xi.4.9). Depicting a dragon as "blithe," meaning "joyful" or "kindly," is slightly odd and out of keeping with the fear this monster with a hell-mouth no doubt evokes (Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene* 144). In keeping with the ambiguous response evoked by the folkloric Wild Man from festive, Midsummer pageants, a figure that is both comic and frightening and to which Spenser alludes in the Orgoglio episode, this dragon inspires laughter as well as terror. As the dragon nears Redcrosse and Una, it is "halfe flying, and halfe footing in his hast," a phrase that depicts him as a clumsy, winged creature for whom taking off proves difficult (8.2). Spenser's dragon even sounds like the pageantry figure of Old Snap the Dragon known for its snapping, wooden jaws. When he shakes his "brazen scales," which clatter like household pots and pans, "such noyse his roused scales did send unto the knight" (9.7, 9). As Spenser further illustrates in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, the incongruously blithe dragon is "often bounding on the brused gras, / As for great joyance of his newcome guest" (15.3-4). In preparation for his encounter with Redcrosse, the dragon once again "shoke his scales to battell readied drest," no doubt creating an awful, yet somewhat laughable din (15.7).

The vast size of the fire-breathing dragon and his hell-mouth emphasize the legendary stature, force, and grandeur of Spenser's Protestant, English hero, who promises to defeat Catholic foes beyond the pages of *The Faerie Queene*. Interestingly, the fact that the dragon's "huge long tayle" is just shy of "three furlongs" indirectly links him to Redcrosse's own origins as a foundling left in a "furrow" by a Faerie, another folkloric motif in this epic (11.7). A "furlong" derives from the Old English word *furb* (furrow) and *lang* (long) and originally refers to the length of a furrow in a ploughed field. This detail underscores the connection between the

dragon and Redcrosse's own rustic past and suggests that he is battling in part his own sinfulness when he encounters this opponent and defeats him through grace. In an analogous way *St. George and the Dragon* pageantry and Mummers' plays were an integral part of Spenser's and his readers' own rural and village life heritage in England and Ireland.²²

In addition to bolstering the heroic stature of victorious Redcrosse, the poet's description of the dragon in terms of the performative stage prop of a hell mouth further grounds his epic poem in its larger, festive context that included *St. George and the dragon* pageantry and Mummers' plays, parades, and puppet shows. As he states, "for his deepe devouring jawes / Wide gaped, like the grisly mouth of hell, / Through which into his darke abisse all ravin fell" (xi.12.7-9). When Redcrosse wounds the dragon, Spenser again focuses on the creature's mouth, which as a "greedie gulfe does gape, as he would eat / His neighbour element in his revenge" (21.1.5-6). The poet builds on the terrifying, oral dimension of this monster by describing his "wide devouring oven" (26.3), his grip that rivals "Cerberus greedie jaw" (41.4), and his "gaping wide [. . .] darksome hollow maw" with which he threatens to swallow Redcrosse (53.1, 8). Spenser pauses in the midst of his account of Redcrosse's battle with this vast, fire-breathing dragon to anticipate the Knight's later fight against "that proud Paynim king," an opponent representing Catholic Philip II of Spain (7.4). As Redcrosse reveals to Una's father at the end of the poem, the Knight has vowed to the *Faerie Queene* that he will defeat this Catholic opponent, though this struggle will occur beyond the six book form of this epic (xii.18.8).

Throughout *The Faerie Queene* Spenser includes native, holiday

²²For discussion of the mumming tradition in Ireland, which some argue was introduced there from England in the seventeenth century, see Gailey 11. Gailey adds that "many people have suggested Richard Johnson's romance, *The Famous History of the Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596) as the source from which mummers' plays were developed" (62) and that "it has even been suggested that the tangle of knightly figures, including *St. George*, in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* inspired Richard Johnson" (64). On the roots and flourishing of Irish mumming see also Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1975).

customs like pageantry performances of the Mummings' play of *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* once they are cast in a Protestant light and separated from Catholic feast days. Spenser's surprising addition of comedy to a battle of biblical proportions between Redcrosse and the dragon is possibly the result of his attempt to link his figure of St. George with popular versions of this legendary figure well-known in comic, holiday performances. By doing so the poet distances his Protestant Redcrosse and future St. George from the more serious Catholic Saint by this name. Spenser refers to an annual, Protestant feast day held at the court of Elizabeth I in "A Letter to the Authors," which is part of the prefatory material to *The Faerie Queene*. In this "Letter" addressed to Sir Walter Raleigh Spenser envisions including in his epic a total of twelve books that correspond to the "Faery Queene" keeping her "Annual feaste xii. dayes." This phrase is arguably a reference to Elizabeth I's annual feast of the Twelve Days of Christmas.²³ Linking the Faerie Queene's "annual feaste" with such Christmas celebrations makes sense in light of the fact that mummary performances of St. George and the Dragon plays often took place during this holiday season.

Befitting a poet who defends a variety of such seasonal, English pastimes from the Blatant Beast-like jaws of Puritan detractors throughout *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser presents the rustic earth commonly associated with the folk, who were some of the original Mummings in England and Ireland, in a dignified and holy light. The Tree of Life in Una's kingdom, a landscape that Redcrosse restores to a kind of paradise after he defeats the dragon, originates from her native "soile, where all good things did grow" (47.2). This rustic landscape and the folkloric customs that originate there are regenerative—in a literary and spiritual sense—for Spenser as well as the Knight of Holiness. The poet's appropriation of elements from pageantry and Mummings' plays about St. George and the Dragon reveals the extent to which *The Faerie Queene* developed out of a native, English and Irish tradition of festivity, both oral and

²³As Wall argues, "no one has recently taken seriously the suggestion made by Josephine Waters Bennett in 1942 that Gloriana's annual feast is the twelve-day-long Feast of Christmastide which was celebrated by Elizabeth and her court with great festivity from Dec. 25 to Jan. 6 every year" (93).

written.²⁴ Spenser and his Renaissance readers were no doubt widely familiar with a variety of these seasonal and performative customs—elite as well as popular—that enlivened occasional feasts and holidays at court, in the city, and in the country during the early modern period in both England and Ireland.²⁵ A number of these festive traditions still exist today in England and America. Some include Pearly Kings and Queens acting as Cockney Lords and Ladies of Misrule at Royal Ascot Races just outside London; masked and costumed beggars, who exhibit ties to traditional Mummings, during country Mardi Gras celebrations in rural Louisiana; and Mummings' plays of St. George and the Dragon still performed during the Christmas season at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London (Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4).²⁶

²⁴Mellican argues in one of the earliest studies of folk materials in relation to *The Faerie Queene* that "Arthurian legends and even much of the machinery of chivalry were kept alive as a matter of policy of the Tudors." He thereby suggests that Spenser's uses of Arthurian legend were motivated by politically conservative ends that supported the monarchy of Elizabeth I (14).

²⁵Bergeron states that "the first Lord Mayor's Show for which speeches were recorded was in 1561. Since the mayor, Sir William Harper, belonged to the Merchant Taylors' Company (with which Spenser's father may have been associated), the young Spenser may have actually witnessed this spectacle, in which mythological and biblical characters dominate" ("Pageants" 525-526).

Although several critics such as Heatt and Welsford have discussed Spenser's works in terms of their relation to time, few other than Wall have linked his epic to occasional festival events, another means of talking about how a culture conceives of and measures time.

²⁶ See <<http://www.thelionspart.co.uk/stgeorgeandthedragon/index.html>> for a slide presentation of a December 2006 performance of "The Ballad of St. George and the Dragon" at Globe Theatre in London. I am grateful to Gail and Joe Andriano for bringing this performance to my attention.



Figure 1: Pearly kings and queens, Royal Ascot Races. Author's photograph, 1985.



Figure 2: Masked beggars in Mardi Gras parade in Church Point, Louisiana. Author's photograph, 2002.



Figure 3: Masked rider for Courir de Mardi Gras in Eunice, Louisiana. Author's photograph, 2002.



Figure 4: Costumed Beggar with captured chicken for a communal meal during Mardi Gras in Eunice, Louisiana. Author's photograph, 2003.

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