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McCulloch, Lynsey

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CHAPTER 4

Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism: The Secret History of Spenser's Iron Man

Lynsey McCulloch

> Immouable, resistlesse, without end.
> (Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene,* V.i.12)[1]

Talus (or Talos), Artegall's "yron groome" (V.iv.3) in Book V of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and the brazen automaton of Greek myth, appears in both the classical and Renaissance periods as a striking composite of man and machine, humanoid in appearance but also the product of *technē* and emergent metallurgic and mechanistic industries. In modern parlance, Talus is a cybernetic organism or cyborg. Acting as page to Sir Artegall, Spenser's Knight of Justice, the early modern iron man administers the law, his hardened frame a tireless tool of the state, his threshing flail the robotic arm of Spenser's iron and stone-age body politics. Scholarly appraisals of Spenser's Talus have focused variously on the socio-political and colonial implications of this automated servant. Does he represent the failure of military NeoStoicism, the advance of Western industrial development, or the judicial fantasy of Ireland's beleaguered English colonists?

This chapter posits an alternative reading, one that looks to uncover the sensitive side of this much-maligned figure and to situate him—not only within that familiar nexus

[1] Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1978). All further references to the text are to this edition.

of retributive justice, military arms and mechanical industry—but also within a context of ancient fable and mythic wonder, tracing his literary journey from the classical accounts of Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Apollonius of Rhodes, in which he communes with the talismanic automata so prevalent in that period, to the Renaissance appropriation of Spenser. This approach will account for the aspects of Talus' personality so often overlooked by critics focused on the iron man as a "terrible creature"[2] or "figure of horror,"[3] namely his physical grace, mediatory role, capacity for unveiling hidden knowledge, and storytelling function. With a particular focus on Talus' interaction with the analogously manufactured figures of Book V—including the armored knights, bionic women, holographic images, and living statuary of Spenser's imagination—this chapter will consider Talus' ontological perversity, his position as both subhuman and superhuman, war-machine and wondrous spectacle. How far can we synthesize these converse categories within the body of a single man/machine and what might such a synthesis portend? In acknowledging Talus' status, not simply as killing machine, but as

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[2] Jane Aptekar, *Icons of Justice: Iconography & Thematic Imagery in Book V of* The Fairie Queene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 41.

[3] Jonathan Sawday, "'Forms Such as Never Were in Nature': the Renaissance Cyborg," *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 190. Sawday usefully acknowledges in this essay the strained position of the automaton between the worlds of magic and mechanics, but sets Talus squarely within the context of the latter. For a further discussion of Renaissance technology, and Talus' place within it, see also Sawday's *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine* (London: Routledge, 2007).

animated statue, and fully considering his relations with the variety of automata represented in antique and early modern texts, this chapter looks to reinscribe the Spenserian rationale behind this most curious of creations. It will also examine Spenser's own identification with the automatous, both as colonist in the contested territory of Ireland and as poet, assessing the extent to which Talus functions as a representation of political instrumentality but also, given his narrative role, as a sign of authorial identity and ambiguity.

Mechanism

Given Spenser's allegorical mode, it is no surprise that scholars have long identified Book V of *The Fairie Queene* as a coded representation of the poet's Irish experiences. Spenser served as secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Arthur Grey, from 1580 until his employer's ignominious recall to London in 1584 by Elizabeth I, amid rumors of cruelty and bloody excess against the rebels and the indigenous population. If accepted as the companion piece to Spenser's contemporaneous account of Irish politics, his *View of the Present State of Ireland*, Book V reads both as a reflection on the singularity of a military engagement in Ireland, one that requires a strong arm and an understanding of guerrilla warfare, and a troubled apologia for Lord Grey. In this context, Artegall functions as a clear analogue of Grey and Talus becomes inevitably the military arm of the English incursion or, to quote Jonathan Sawday, "the Law as Spenser imagined it should be exercised by the Elizabethan imperium at the expense of Ireland."[4] Several of Book V's major malefactors are imaged by Spenser as Irish, the monstrous Grantorto

[4] Sawday 190.

amongst them. Grantorto is dispatched by Artegall but Talus is also regularly called upon to pursue and punish the "Irish" rebels within the text. Spenser's retributive fantasy would no doubt have found a strong supporter in Lord Grey de Wilton, but Elizabeth I, in her dealings with Ireland, was wary of appearing the tyrant even by proxy. John Milton, bemoaning another English monarch's reluctance to crush the Irish, certainly envisages Talus as a necessary brute, citing his independence from the strictures of rule and law as his most valuable quality:

> If there were a man of iron, such as *Talus*, by our Poet *Spencer*, is fain'd to be the page of Justice, who with his iron flaile could doe all this, and expeditiously, without those deceitfull formes and circumstances of Law, worse then ceremonies in Religion; I say God send it don, whether by one *Talus*, or by a thousand.[5]

Milton's position may now be politically untenable, but the burgeoning archipelagic scholarship of recent years—while rightfully acknowledging the suffering of a subject state like Ireland—has nevertheless compounded earlier critical treatments of Spenser's "transparent allegory"[6] of colonialism, and once more consigned Talus to the role of guilty imperial pleasure. Richard McCabe is not alone in discerning a deep-felt anxiety in *The*

[5] John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., vol. III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-1982) 390.

[6] M. M. Gray, "The Influence of Spenser's Irish Experiences on *The Fairie Queene*," *The Review of English Studies* 6.24 (1930): 417.

Fairie Queene with the iron man as the poem's dark centre: "Spenser's poetics interrogate his politics so profoundly as to discover the heart of darkness at the centre of the colonial enterprise."[7]

Scholars have also been alert to Talus' place in the history of Western industrial development, and specifically the application of technology to a military and judicial context. Alastair Fowler has described how "Talus' inhuman, robotic aspects seem to reflect the increasingly technological character of law enforcement and war in the modern state."[8] More recently, Jessica Wolfe has examined the political instrumentalism of the Renaissance period and the misguided courtly emulation, by the Earl of Essex and others, of a Stoical *apatheia.* Holding Talus up as the "perverse, inhuman mascot of Elizabethan military humanism and its devastating array of newfangled machines and strategies,"[9] Wolfe foregrounds Talus' function as a warning against the dehumanizing effects of Stoicism, the concomitant rages that result from such an emotional repression, and the dangers of fashioning human beings as tools.

Myth

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[7] Richard A. McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 4. For further evaluations of Spenser's colonial conscience, see Willy Maley, *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture and Identity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[8] Alastair Fowler, "Spenser and War," *War, Literature and the Arts in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, ed. J. R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 160.

[9] Wolfe 207.

The instrumentality of Spenser's Talus has, in fact, a classically sanctioned legitimacy. Several ancient Greek sources suggest that the brazen man known as Talos or Talon was built in bronze by Hephaestus, the smith-god, and gifted to King Minos of Crete. Others advance a rather different provenance. Talos' origins are certainly confused, not least in Spenser's own mythos, and Hesiod's *Work and Days* proffers another possible derivation:

> And Zeus the father made a race of bronze,
> Sprung from the ash tree, worse than the silver race,
> But strange and full of power. And they loved
> The Groans and violence of war; they ate
> No bread; their hearts were flinty-hard; they were
> Terrible men; their strength was great, their arms
> And shoulders and their limbs invincible.[10]

Spenser too, in elegiac mode, tenders a chronology in which Talus may be inserted: "For from the golden age, that first was named, / It's now at earst become a stonie one" (V.Proem.2). But while Hesiod emphasizes the invulnerability of his brazen figures—brazen in this instance by virtue of their accoutrements rather than their bodies—he also credits the siring of this warlike race to Zeus. It is this divine inception that complicates our perception of Talos and his ilk. The brazen man of Hesiod's *Work and Days* betrays

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[10] Hesiod, *Theogony, Work and Days*, trans. Dorothea Wender (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 63.

superhuman origins and yet lives a life of stultifying regularity and subhuman mechanization; he patrols Crete on behalf of King Minos, circumnavigating the island thrice daily and attacking with stones any who attempt to alight on shore. Plato's *Minos* and Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* offer similar pictures of a legal and juridical instrument. In Plato's rationalized version of the tale, a non-brazen Talos traverses Crete displaying the island's laws engraved in brass. The *Argonautica*, unlike *Minos* and Hesiod's *Work and Days*, offers an actual man of brass, the Talos who attacks Jason and the Argonauts and is ultimately destroyed by Medea.

Spenser's Talus, like his classical ancestors, is deftly situated between a sub- and superhuman status. Despite his apparently prosaic employment by the Knight of Justice, this iron man retains a noble history. Astraea, the classical personification of justice, leaving the earth for the last time, bequeaths her groom, Talus, to Artegall. Talus' servility is not in question. But his background as Astraea's personal aid and possible genesis as one of a divinely produced race hint at a magical or deified aspect to his character, one that crucially adapts his nominal status as a mechanical tool. Indeed, *The Fairie Queene* is full of instances in which technology and the supernatural cooperate. Arthur's enchanted shield, invested with magical powers by Merlin, was also manufactured in a more conventional fashion: "It framed was, one massie entire mould, / Hewen out of Adamant rocke with engines keene" (I.vii.33). Book V in particular examines the relationship between sub- and superhuman behaviors. Hercules, who "monstrous tyrants with his club subdewed" (V.i.2), is referenced more than once and the legitimation of his violent tendencies—"with kingly powre endewed" (V.i.2)—raises some interesting questions.

Historically, this laboring demi-god, fathered by Zeus and demonstrating superhuman strength, becomes, at moments of dramatic reversal, a labored subhuman, a muscle-bound fetcher and carrier. [11] More-than-human and less-than-human hereby coexist. This radical confluence is perceptible too in the work of Spenser's contemporaries and the early modern period's wider concern with the vexed interface of art and nature, mechanics and magic.

The iron man has a supporting and prosthetic responsibility: "powre is the right hand of Iustice truely hight" (V.iv.1). But although Talus serves Artegall in this respect, the Knight of Justice is also implicated in the elision of sub- and superhuman; as Astraea's deputy on earth, Artegall is an "instrument" (V.Proem.11) himself. Several accounts of the knight in action stress the mechanical nature of his martial force. In his confrontation with

[11] William Shakespeare, in his Roman plays, examines labor politics, instrumentality, and the world of the rude mechanical, his definition of "mechanical" crucially extended to include the rulers and senators as well as the plebeian populace. Shakespeare's own "Herculean Roman" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.iii.84), the soldier and triumvir Antony, encapsulates the elision of such binary opposites. In *Julius Caesar,* despite his military prowess and political importance, Antony acts primarily as Caesar's surrogate, fulfilling his physical obligations: "Antony is but a limb of Caesar" (II.i.165). In *Antony and Cleopatra,* he becomes once again the right hand of a Caesar, Octavius Caesar. While Cleopatra derides the Roman mechanicals with their "greasy aprons, rules, and hammers" (V.ii.206), her partner, with heavy irony, appropriates the workaday language of the plebeian carpenter or stonemason: "Read not my blemishes in the world's report. / I have not kept my square, but that to come / Shall all be done by the" rule" (II.iii.5-7). Antony functions as a military instrument or bionic appendage operated by others, not unlike Spenser's Talus. See William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

the Amazon Radigund, Spenser imagines him as a blacksmith, striking his foe with mundane regularity, and the description of his tool inevitably recalls Talus' own weapon, the iron flail:

> Like as a Smith that to his cunning feat
> The stubborne mettall seeketh to subdew,
> Soone as he feeles it mollifide with heat,
> With his great yron fledge doth strongly on it beat. (V.v.7)

The iron flail, Talus' signature weapon, consisting of a wooden staff at the end of which a shorter pole or club swings freely, was an instrument for threshing corn by hand and, as Spenser notes, a "strange weapon, never wont in warre" (V.iv.44). There is no question that Talus betrays the taint of the laboring classes; he is as much agricultural worker as military mechanism and his tool suggests as much. But strengthened with iron in this case, Talus' attribute becomes a rather more threatening prospect. Jane Aptekar, tracing Spenser's iconography, notes that the iron man shares his attribute with the classical god of war, Mars.[12] Once again, Talus' ontological status becomes problematic. Is he a god or a golem?

Master and Servant

[12] Aptekar, Jane. *Icons of Justice: Iconography and Thematic Imagery in Book V of* The Fairie Queene (New York: Columbia UP, 1969) 45.

Many of the scholarly arguments representing Talus as a monstrous figure, one extemporizing man's uneasy association with the machine, are predicated on his differentiation from Artegall as the Knight and true champion of Justice and the increasingly fractious relationship that is thought to develop between master and man in the light of Talus' increasing aggression. Kenneth Gross, considering again the Irish analogy, suggests that, "Spenser may choose to hold apart the image of effective violence against rebellion in the person of Talus from the idealistic justification of violence personified by Arthegall."[13] Artegall's own instrumentality confuses the issue and Spenser takes pains to elide the two figures, not, I think, in order to interrogate the mechanistic threat to Artegall's own humanity[14] but rather to foreground the pair's cooperative effort and ultimate commonality. Early descriptions in Book V of the "awfull sight" of Artegall's "wreakfull hand" (V.i.8) undermine any suggestion that the Knight of Justice keeps his hands clean while displacing guilt onto his iron page. It is true that Artegall entrusts Talus with tasks he is not prepared to undertake himself, but several of his delegations credit Talus with more quality than most critics are prepared to do.

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[13] Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 89.

[14] Germane here is Jessica Wolfe's characterization of Artegall and Talus according to the medieval philosophy of the king's two bodies, with Artegall as the organic body natural and Talus as the insensate body politic, and her argument that the pair periodically swap roles to indicate the "antithetical qualities demanded by the militaristic ethos of late Elizabethan culture." See Wolfe's *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 203-235.

James Nohrnberg, in his 1976 work *The Analogy of* The Fairie Queene, acknowledges Talus' communion with classical and medieval automata including his direct literary predecessor, Talos, the apprenticed nephew of Daedalus.[15] This version of the myth, in which Talos as inventor produces a saw copied in iron from the backbone of a fish (a fitting mixture of artificial and organic elements), appears in Apollodorus' *Library*. Nohrnberg is alert to the gift for invention shared by Spenser's Talus and his ancient Greek counterpart; unable to enter Pollente's castle in canto ii, Artegall calls on Talus to devise a method of entry; he 'bad his seruant *Talus* to inuent / Which way he enter might, without endangerment' (V.ii.20). However, Nohrnberg argues that both stories set the dangerous autonomy of the servant against the fitting authority and oppression of the master. In Apollodorus, Daedalus rewards his nephew's precocity by throwing him off a cliff.[16] In *The Fairie Queene*, Artegall on three occasions halts Talus' assaults on his enemies, citing clemency but also expediency and politic reserve as his reasons. In all three cases, and in a similar scenario with Britomart, Talus immediately complies. The iron man is under instruction from Astraea to obey Artegall's commands and does so, but his particular skill set dictates that, in certain situations and not merely military ones, Talus takes the lead: "Ne wight but onely *Talus* with him went, / The true guide of his way and vertuous gouernment" (V.viii.3). Talus does not only protect Artegall's safety; he also preserves his virtue. In canto iv of Book V, Spenser again extols "that great yron groome, his

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[15] James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of "The Fairie Queene"* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1976) 409-425.

[16] Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. J. G. Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 1: III.xv.8.

[Artegall's] gard and gouernment" (V.iv.3). In governing Artegall, Talus becomes responsible for his moral conduct. He is more here than guide or guardian and, by representing Artegall's conscience, Talus once again assumes a role discrepant with his reputation as a strong arm.

Visualizing Talus

Talus' physicality poses another conundrum for scholars keen to establish his form and function. Nohrnberg, speaking albeit figuratively, portrays the Spenserian Talus as "the helpful giant who aids the hero on his quest"[17] and it is this sense of the character's gigantism, whether real or metaphorical, that can all too easily mislead. Spenser's epic poem is full of giants, but Talus is not one of them, despite the early modern commonplace that men of the golden, silver, and bronze ages were larger in stature than their descendants. In fact, references to Talus' role as groom or page suggest a youthful attendant rather than any early modern realization of the monstrous-heroic. His speed and lightness of touch are emphasized as often as his strength:

> His yron page, who him pursew'd so light,
>
> As that it seem'd aboue the ground he went:
>
> For he was swift as swallow in her flight,
>
> And strong as Lyon in his Lordly might. (V.i.20)

[17] Nohrnberg 417.

Admittedly, Spenser may not have visualized Talus in any specific detail. The iron man's shape-shifting abilities suggest as much. Missing also from the text is any helpful description of his apparently iron frame. But these uncertainties warn against the reading of a singular Talus, one inevitably cast in cruelty and indomitability. To be sure, Talus' iron casing protects him from physical assault. It also inures him from attempted enchantment. In canto ii, Pollente's daughter Munera tries to prevent Talus from discovering her "wicked threasury" (V.ii.9) with spells but no "powr of charms, which she against him wrought, / Might otherwise preuaile, or make him cease for ought" (V.ii.22). Talus appears invulnerable to love or seduction. This does not mean, however, that Talus is insusceptible to emotion. Spenser, in fact, hints at a chink in his armor. Reporting the news of Artegall's capture and captivity at the hands of the Amazon Radigund to his master's betrothed, Britomart, Talus betrays some feeling, indeed some fear:

> The yron man, albe he wanted sence,
> And sorrowes feeling, yet with conscience
> Of his ill newes, did inly chill and quake,
> And stood still mute, as one in great suspence,
> As if by his silence he would make
> Her rather reade his meaning, then him selfe it spake. (V.vi.9)

Talus' lack of "sence," namely the capacity for feeling, appears damning. "Conscience" too may well here denote consciousness rather than any innate moral compass, but Talus is undeniably anxious and significantly aware of the pain he will cause.

Signs such as these of life and sensation in the iron man, partial though they may be, align him closely with the automata and motive statuary that pepper classical, medieval and Renaissance texts. Levels of animation vary but, for the most part, mechanical movement and even magically engendered vitality do not equal life in all its complexity. Such figures have a limited functionality, and Talus seems to be no exception. But his incomplete animation and relative lack of emotion need not suggest a cold brutality. In a poem peopled by elfin knights, giants, dwarfs, monsters and a fairy queen, humanity is actually in short supply. Of course, like other created beings, automata can pose a serious threat to human existence as well as interrogating, via their imitation of life and the hybridization of art and nature they presuppose, the stability of human identity. Posthumanist scholars have lately drawn attention to the cyborg's "destabilization of the 'ontological hygiene' by which cultures have distinguished nature from artifice, human from non-human and normal from pathological."[18] Donna Haraway's seminal text "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" famously celebrates the cyborg as a border or boundary figure, one able, through its hybrid status, to challenge taxonomy and break down the binary distinctions that incapacitate male, female, animal and machine relations.[19] Such a release

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[18] Elaine Graham, "Cyborgs or Goddesses? Becoming Divine in a Cyberfeminist Age," *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity*, ed. Eileen Green and Alison Adam (London: Routledge, 2001) 305.

[19] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Socialist Review* 15.2 (1985).

from conventional dualisms would not, however, be universally welcome. Talus' reputation as a retributive and rebellious automaton[20] and *The Fairie Queene*'s treatment of analogously manufactured creatures might suggest that Spenser took a dim view of artificial life and the ontological mobility of such border figures. The Amazons—interestingly hailed by Haraway as marginal, monstrous and thereby cybernetic—are severely chastised by Spenser in Book V after Artegall's capture and subsequent effeminization by their queen.[21] Stripping imprisoned knights of their armor and dressing them in women's weeds, the Amazons' disregard for the traditional polarity of the sexes results in harsh punishment and the restoration by Britomart of the women to "mens subjection" (V.vi.42). As a demonstration of Spenser's attitude towards hybridization and rule-breaking, not to mention women, this may be instructive; his discomfort with the performance of gender, and the artificiality it infers, suggests that Spenser was concerned by the indeterminacy of mixed identities. The complexity of Talus' ontological status, however, implies that the poet was also conscious of his own partiality and keen to interrogate it.

Animated Statuary

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[20] Michael West, complicating Nohrnberg's view that Talus 'takes direction rather than giving it' (Nohrnberg 409), emphasises the iron man's 'military ruthlessness' and 'operational autonomy', a common reading based on Talus' unilateral decision-making and apparently uncontrolled violence in the field. See Michael West, "Spenser's Art of War: Chivalric Allegory, Military Technology, and the Elizabethan Mock-Heroic Sensibility," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41.4 (Winter 1988): 667.

[21] See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991).

Spenser's representation of Talus' closer relations, the artificial and manufactured figures of *The Fairie Queene*, offers a useful insight into the poet's ethical position on the automatous. In the Bower of Blisse episode in Book II, Spenser reconstructs the world of sixteenth-century courtly artifice and automata and seems to do so with serious reservations. Apparently a natural paradise, it soon becomes clear that the Bower's beauty is built on an artistic sleight of hand. This affectation of nature by art, with its "wanton toyes" (II.xii.60), seduces but also deceives and is destroyed by Sir Guyon in a fit of iconoclastic rage. As the Bower's centerpiece, the enchantress Acrasia with her "alabaster skin" (II.xii.77) and "snowy brest" (II.xii.78) is also its icon. Acrasia is one of many animated statues in *The Fairie Queene*.[22] In canto iii of Book V, the false Florimell peddled by Braggadochio, a "glorious picture" (V.iii.25) according to the narrator, recalls the pictorial and sculptural seductions of Acrasia and stands in for the true Florimell at her wedding until exposed by Artegall. The Knight of Justice sets the authentic female, Marinell's true love, beside Braggadochio's living doll:

> Like the true saint beside the image set,
> Of both their beauties to make paragone,
> And triall, whether should the honor get.
> Streightaway so soone as both together met,
> Th'enchaunted Damzell vanisht into nought. (V.iii.24)

[22] See Nick Davis' essay in this volume for a fuller discussion of the automata in Spenser's Bower, among whom he does not, as I do, count Acrasia.

The false Florimell encapsulates several of the classically negative connotations of animated statuary. The level of verisimilitude, usually the hallmark of the great artist, is here a notable hazard, the work of a magician rather than grand master. The underlying insubstantiality or hollowness poses another threat. But the false Florimell is first and foremost a false icon, and the staunchly Protestant Spenser bridles at the image of such a painted, and Catholic, saint. Her movement provokes even greater anxiety. Following the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, rumors persisted, and were cemented by propagandists, of fraudulent sculptural mechanisms discovered in Catholic churches and abbeys. The apparent discovery of several automata in the Cistercian monastery at Boxley in Kent, including a cruciform Christ figure able to move its limbs and even alter its facial expression, perpetuated popular iconomachy and fuelled iconoclastic action.[23] Attempts by both faiths to claim these types of statues and explain their movement indicates the ideological significance of such objects. In Book V of Spenser's poem, the triple-bodied idol of the giant Geryon, allegorically representing Philip of Spain's jurisdiction over Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries, is found to harbor, beneath its golden façade, a monstrous sphinx. The sphinx, sending forth speeches and her signature riddles, animates the statue above, a debased copy of the ancient Greek oracle. This image of outer beauty and inner monster, a metaphor for the seductive quality but blasphemous

[23] See Chapter 6 of this volume for Brooke Conti's discussion of the Rood of Boxley. For sixteenth-century iconomachy and its influence on literature, see also Marion O'Connor, "'Imagine Me, Gentle Spectators': Iconomachy and *The Winter's Tale*," *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume IV: The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays,* ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 365-388.

reality of the Roman faith, is exacerbated by the spectacle of the sphinx herself: "For of a mayd she had the outward face, / To hide the horrour, which did lurke behinde" (V.xi.23). The seductive qualities of these animated statues relate not only to the proselytizing efforts of the Catholic Church but to the inherent sexuality of the sculpted or automated figure. In Book V, Munera, a figure who, with her golden hands and silver feet, is very close to Talus physiologically, mounts an unsuccessful seduction of the iron page. Sexualized artifice is here proscribed, and Talus' apparent asexuality contrasts with the hypersexuality of other, specifically female, automata. These figures each have specific functions to fulfill but it would be wrong to suggest that male and female automata are produced simply for military and sexual purposes respectively. Spenser may question the moral efficacy of several of these hybrid figures but he acknowledges their varied applicability and, in many cases, their genuine value.

What Munera and Talus have in common, besides their cybernetic frames, is their responsibility as guardian statues. The Talos of Apollodorus, Hesiod and Apollonius of Rhodes becomes the guardian of territory, the protector of the island of Crete. If manufactured by Hephaestus, he joins the smith-god's entourage of guardian statuary and metallic automata, including a bronze lion and the gold and silver dogs of Alcinous. Hephaestus typically offered these talismanic statues to rulers or gods for the purposes of protection. Their function was primarily to guard property and such figures had, of course, both real-life and static counterparts. Boundaries, entryways, and thresholds are vulnerable to various kinds of attack and incursion and apotropaic statuary placed at doors or gates were thought to guard against potential intruders or disease. In *The Fairie Queene*, Munera

serves a similar function and guards her father's castle and his wealth. Talus, in the end, breaches the castle wall and is indeed throughout Book V strongly associated with the breaking of thresholds but he also acts as guardian statue himself, securing not territory in this incarnation but personnel. He is Artegall's bodyguard. This does mean, however, that he spends much of his time as night watchman, guarding the rooms and pavilions housing his master and his associates. On one occasion, Talus and Britomart spend the night in the home of a knight they meet on the road. Talus guards the entrance to Britomart's chamber and Spenser is keen to stress the iron man's dutiful efforts rather than any automated or programmed behavior. Talus has as restless a night as his anxious mistress:

> Ne lesse did *Talus* suffer sleepe to seaze
> His eye-lids sad, but watcht continually,
> Lying without her dore in great disease;
> Like to a Spaniell wayting carefully
> Least any should betray his Lady treacherously. (V.vi.26)

His care is rewarded when Britomart is attacked and he reacts at once to protect her. In many ways, Talus is the perfect servant. Christopher Faraone, discussing guardian statuary in the classical period and the brazen man of Greek myth, sets Talos apart from other examples of the type on account of his ambulatory guardage of Crete. Other guardian statues animate in various ways, by moving limbs or speaking, but they cannot replicate the mobility of Talos. The fear that statues might free themselves from their bases and

achieve independence is reflected in several classical texts; Faraone proposes that such a "scenario might help explain why Talos . . . is so readily portrayed in an awful, nearly diabolical manner."[24] The same concern over Talus' independence, as a ghost in the machine, is perceptible in Spenserian criticism but not necessarily supported by the text itself. All Talus' actions are in the service of Artegall or Britomart.

Spenser's portrayal of animated idols and sexualized female automata is also counterbalanced in canto vii of Book V by Britomart's experiences in the Temple of Isis. With Talus barred from entering, Britomart enters the temple to pay tribute to Isis, the epitome of equity, and does so by praying to the Egyptian goddess's "idol" (V.vii.6). Daringly for a Protestant poet who has already indicted the worship of false idols and the animation thereof, Spenser brings the statue of Isis to life. This, however, is not fraud but a genuine miracle. Spenser here rehabilitates the animated statue and suggests that such appearances are not inherently deceptive:

> To which the Idoll as it were inclining,
> Her wand did moue with amiable looke,
> By outward shew her inward sence desining,
> Who well perceiuing, how her wand she shooke,
> It as a token of good fortune tooke. (V.vii.8)

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[24] Christopher Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 28.

Not only that, but Britomart, imitating the incubatory habits of the ancients, spends the night in the temple and sleeps at the statue's base. The prophetic dream she has as a result, an allegorical vision outlining the importance of equity and clemency in tempering justice and confirming her future with Artegall, also contains an image of the dreamer herself as the statue of Isis. Artegall and Britomart are clearly the earthly manifestations of Osiris, god of justice, and Isis, but Spenser in this canto, extols the animated statue on several levels. It can, in theory, serve as a conduit for divine communication. It can thereby serve a reliable oracular function, guiding worshippers and predicting the future. Britomart's obvious enjoyment of the image of herself as a statue compensates also for Spenser's prior distaste for the sculptural and sexualized female body. Her transfiguration encourages a healthy narcissism:

> That euen she her selfe much wondered
> At such a change, and ioyed to behold
> Her selfe, adorn'd with gems and iewels manifold. (V.vii.13)

Talus' exclusion from this sacred episode should not impede his own rehabilitation as an automaton or moving statue. The animation of the statue of Isis, a cult-figure after all, represents one kind of vivification process. The iron man signifies another, no less significant.

Narrative Function

One of Talus' particular skills is the acquisition of hidden knowledge or underlying truth. This has, first of all, a practical application. In his altercation with Munera, Talus not only penetrates the castle walls but sniffs out the hidden treasury and its female guardian:

> But *Talus*, that could like a limehound winde her,
> And all things secrete wisely could bewray,
> At length found out, whereas she hidden lay
> Vnder an heape of gold. (V.ii.25)

Talus' vision too is keen. When Britomart is attacked in the middle of the night in the home of Sir Dolon, the iron man pursues her assailants: "Where euer in the darke he could them spie" (V.vi.30). But Talus' abilities go further than an extraordinary sense of smell, or a piercing night vision. At the start of Book V, Spenser describes how his iron flail "thresht out falsehood, and did truth vnfould" (V.i.12). Distinguishing truth from falsehood is the one of the primary functions of the justice system and Talus no doubt assists his master in this respect. At the end of Book V, Artegall sends Talus after the defeated Grantorto's supporters:

> And that same yron man which could reueale
> All hidden crimes, through all that realme he sent,
> To search out those, that vsd to rob and steale,
> Or did rebel gainst lawfull gouernment;

On whom he did inflict most grieuous punishment. (V.xii.26)

Talus' retributive function in passages such as these can easily take on an inquisitional flavour. C. S. Lewis was unequivocal on the implications of Talus' special talents:

> And when we reflect on the judicial methods of the time, the statement that his iron page Talus "could reveale all hidden crimes" becomes abominable, for it means that Talus is the rack as well as the axe.[25]

Adding torture to Talus' list of malefactions, Lewis simply tows the critical line. But the facility for unveiling hidden truths might suggest, not the work of the torturer, but that of the writer, specifically the composer of allegories. Spenser's description of allegory as "fayned colours shading a true case" (V.vii.2) not only concedes the benefits, not to mention literary necessity, of counterfeiting, but reminds us that establishing truth is a specialist business.

Talus' narrative function has been long overlooked by scholars. As early as Book V's first canto, Talus demonstrates his verbal skills by persuading the murderous Sir Sanglier to return to the scene of his crime and accept his punishment. It is in canto vi, however, that Talus turns true storyteller. With Artegall in thrall to the Amazon Radigund, Talus has few options. He cannot rescue his master because Artegall, abiding pedantically

[25] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936) 348.

to chivalric law, has voluntarily surrendered to the Amazon queen. Talus, always respectful of Artegall's wishes, instead enlists Britomart's assistance, firstly narrating to her the circumstances that led up to Artegall's capture: "What time sad tydings of his balefull smart / In womans bondage, *Talus* to her brought" (V.vi.3). Britomart grants the iron man an audience and Spenser explicitly likens Talus' spoken version with his own poetic treatment of recent events:

> With that he gan at large to her dilate
> The whole discourse of his captiuance sad,
> In sort as ye haue heard the same of late. (V.vi.17)

Talus is no mute killing-machine but uses his story-telling faculties to protect Artegall's fate, and ultimately his reputation, as the Knight of Justice. Talus memorializes both himself and his master and, by doing so, assumes another of the animated statue's major roles, that of living monument. He becomes a living monument to justice, a cast iron statue with flail as sculptural attribute, but he also plays the monument-builder, a role allied to his narrative function. Book V is full of monuments, mostly negative exemplars, and they are often erected by Talus.[26] These too are testaments to justice and stark warnings to passers-

[26] Philip Schwyzer explores Spenser's setting of monumental imagery against figures of dissolution and obliteration in his *Archaeologies of English Renaissance Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Certainly, a significant tension exists between the desire to wipe out the memory of an event and the need to consecrate it for future generations. One of Talos's mythical features, a vulnerability at his ankle, remains unused by Spenser. In several versions of the fable, Talos is finally destroyed when a nail or stopper in his

by; Munera's golden hands and silver feet are "Chopt off, and nayld on high, that all might them behold" (V.ii.26). At the end of the Book V, Talus once again looks to protect his master's reputation. Following the emancipation of Irena, Artegall, like his real-life counterpart Lord Grey, is ignominiously recalled to court. On his journey back, he meets two hags on the road, Envy and Detraction. Grey himself was subject to slanderous attack on his return to London and, although Artegall, Grey's analogue, remains stoic, Talus reacts wrathfully to Envy and Detraction's tirade:

> But *Talus* hearing her so lewdly raile,
> And speake so ill of him, that well deserued,
> Would her haue chastiz'd with his yron flaile,
> If her Sir *Artegall* had not preserued,
> And him forbidden, who his heast obserued.
> So much the more at him still did she scold,

---

heel is removed and his life blood, or *ichor*, spills out. Ben Jonson, in his 1611 Roman tragedy *Catiline*, likens his doomed rebel to the brazen man and contrasts Catiline's forced monumentalization at the hands of Rome—"So Catiline, at the sight of *Rome* in vs, / Became his tombe" (V.678-685) —with the soldier's own hope of an apocalyptic dissolution:

> That I could reach the axel, where the pinnes are,
> Which bolt this frame; that I might pull 'hem out,
> And pluck all into *chaos,* with my selfe. (III.175-177)

See Ben Jonson, *Works, Vol. V, Volpone, or the fox; Epicoene, or The silent women; The alchemist; Catiline*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

> And stones did cast, yet he for nought would swerve
> From his right course, but still the way did hold
> To Faery Court, where what him fell shall else be told. (V.xii.42-3)

Critics keen to characterize Talus as the rogue instrument of Spenser's judicial system offer this incident as another example of the iron man's dangerous autonomy. Artegall is forced to restrain him from assaulting the defamatory pair. But Talus' intentions are admirable and the prevention of this honorific if violent action, coming as it does conclusively at the end of Book V, signals not the shutting-down of a recalcitrant mechanism but rather the opportunity for Spenser to appropriate Talus' role himself. With Artegall representing Spenser's berated employer, is it not possible that Spenser allegorized *himself* into the poem as Justice's right hand, the iron man? Spenser's text, and Book V in particular, looks to salvage Grey's reputation, leaving to posterity a living monument to the much-maligned deputy. The author was keenly aware of the power of text as monument, a popular Renaissance literary trope. Maintaining that poetry would outlive any artistic memorials, the sentiment was ubiquitous in the period. Spenser was also deeply conscious of the ability of texts to celebrate both authors and dedicatees. The frontispiece of his 1586 *The Shepheardes Calender* displayed, not Spenser's name, but that of his patron, Sir Philip Sidney. *The Fairie Queene* remains a defense of Lord Grey de Wilton but also a memorial to Spenser's own immeasurable talent. Talus' attempts to protect with arms his master's reputation mirror Spenser's own efforts to eulogize Grey.

While this reading would seem to strengthen claims for Book V as primarily a survey of Spenser's Irish experiences,[27] it also does something else. According to extant sources, the Talos of Greek myth vacillates between the roles of inventor and invented. Is he the nephew of Hephaestus and the producer of cunning contrivances, or Hephaestus' creation and the brazen instrument of war? Spenser's Talus encapsulates the same dynamic. He is both maker and made, and this positions him delicately between nature and art, between subhuman and superhuman status, and between the worlds of antique myth and early modern mechanism. Horst Bredekamp, discussing Goethe's visit to a collection of classical statuary in Mannheim and their magical animation via lights and rotation, reflects on the appeal of the ancient automaton: "Instead of creating the aura of future beings that owed their creation to man, the impression they gave of life resembled more a lofty, past form that relegated modern man to a lower order of being."[28] Such a function is suggested by Spenser's Talus, and this vacillation between autonomy and dependency points not only to the secret history of the iron man but to the secret history of Spenser himself. As a poet in a period of literary patronage, Spenser's authorial independence was partial but his literary identity never in doubt. The automaton in English Renaissance literature inevitably mirrors its maker. For Spenser, Talus offered a timely intervention, a working through of professional and poetic insecurities. For us, he remains a measure of the variety and complexity of artificial life.

[27] Indeed, if we were to accept the characterization of Talus as a holy terror, this would consolidate speculation over Spenser's guilty conscience as Grey's right-hand man.

[28] Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art and Technology,* trans. Allison Brown (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1993/1995) 6.