Edmund Spenser’s “Epithalamion” and Strategic Spatiality

Abstract: Three types of deixis are especially important in Spenser’s poem: his use of “heere” in line 71, his repeated references to “this day,” and his deployment of the deictic motion verb “come.” Studying them demonstrates the many ways his deictics can be seen as strategic and provides new perspectives on the poem’s relationship to the English presence in Ireland while also supplementing, complicating, and evaluating that political reading.

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I Mapping strategic spatiality

Lavishing wedding invitations on an extraordinarily varied crew of potential guests, Edmund Spenser’s “Epithalamion” also invites its readers to develop new perspectives on lyric deixis, notably on its interactions with spatiality. Not surprisingly, the temporalities of this poem have attracted the critical attention encouraged if not commandeered by Spenser’s overt references to the hours of the day. Yet the role of space has been neglected by some critics and misread by others; in particular, Louis Montrose’s binary contrast of a public sphere versus a domestic domain slights the communal areas so central to the poem.1

Might the subtle and shifting generic modalities of the “Epithalamion” compromise its presence in this study? In the poem often cited as a prototype of the subgenre widely termed the lyric epithalamium, characteristics typically associated with the lyric mode do in fact abound. Witness, for example, the meditative intensity with which that speaker calls up the events of the wedding in his own mind. Considered the signature of lyric by Jonathan Culler, apostrophe occurs less frequently in many early modern texts than the later writings he considers; but it is alive and well throughout Spenser’s poem.2 To deny or even downplay the coexistence of significant narrative elements in a text structured around consecutive hours would merely be tendentious. But such hybridity, inflecting rather than erasing either the narrative or the lyric elements, is common in the poetry of the period, and in any event lyric characteristics predominate in the principal passages I analyze below.

The most significant deictics in the “Epithalamion” participate in the practice that I will term strategic spatiality. Strategic in many senses, these deictics invite that label above all by ordering space, one of the main patterns traced in the preceding chapter; in this instance deixis gathers together the elect while Othering those excluded from the wedding. In so doing, these usages exemplify the power plays often associated with my categories of converger and expeller – but the deictics in question exemplify as well the risks of a reductive reading of the political and cultural complexities enacted in this process of gathering and separating.

Whereas early modern readers may well have discerned an echo of the retributive wedding invitations in Matthew 22, Spenser’s interplay of drawing together and casting out also echoes patterns central to space theory.3 Associating space with the praxis of gathering, a leading figure in that field, Edward S. Casey, identifies “a peculiar hold... a holding in