Curing the (Other) Self: Medical Discourse in Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland*

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**Abstract**
This paper explores the development of literary, English nationhood at the end of the sixteenth century. Through a close, critical reading of select excerpts from Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* (1596), this paper, by drawing from rhetorics of bodily disease and health in the early modern era, considers how England's national identity developed with the growth of and advances within the field of medical science. It is argued that Eudoxus, the central figure of Spenser's text, takes on the role of an English "Phisitian" to diagnose Ireland as a diseased body in need of redress. Eudoxus's prescription of a "dyet," a dose of English civility and ideology, however, seeks not only to cure Ireland's contagious impurities and infections, but treat those within England, as well.

**Keywords**
Spenser, Ireland, England, nationhood, medicine, diagnosis, early modern

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(Öteki) Benliği Tedavi Etmek: Edmund Spenser’ın A View of the State of Ireland Adlı Eserinde Tıbbi Söylem

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Özet

Anahtar Kelimeler
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Though Neill (1994), in his discussion of English and Irish nationhood, productively contends that "nationality can only be imagined as a dimension of difference" (p.3), the status of England as an imperialistic colonizer complicates the writing of the nation as relational to an (inferior) Other. In Spenser's A View of the State of Ireland (1596), the dialogical figure, Eudoxus, works to demarcate and, in turn, champion an inherently pure "New English" identity that, born from the new breed of post-Reformation settlers in Ireland (Kidd, 1999, p.146), demands unparalleled vitality and virtuousness. Defined in opposition to the discursive, medical diagnosis of Ireland as a diseased, wretched body, the "New English" identity motivates England's intolerance toward its barbarous, colonized territory during the Nine Years' War. This intolerance of difference, despite geographical distance, swells in Spenser's text,
infecting England with both fear and unease: physical ailments which grow from an encounter with the abuses of Ireland's earlier subjugators, the pre-Reformation "Old English." In this light, Eudoxus, whose prescriptive words are laden with Protestant England's hegemony, becomes a Phisitian, a metaphorical healer trying to assuage and cure the illness of the intensifying "British problem" within (Bradshaw & Roberts, 1998, p.162).

Working with selected excerpts from A View in Sauer and Wright's book, Reading the Nation in English Literature (2010), I explore how Spenser's emphasis on medical discourse as a response to advancement in the medical field during the sixteenth century literally constructs England as an elect—though continually threatened—nation. Eudoxus and Irenaeus's nuanced and arguably monologic description of Ireland (Maley, 2003) blurs the distinction between the self and Other in an effort to depict brute Irishness as a contagious, debilitating malady poised to poison the bloodstream of England's socio-cultural body. Eudoxus's prognosis, I argue, motivates his prescribed political "dyet" which calls for therapeutic redress by means of treating the Irish ills that both fester and plague the model, idyllic Englishness in Ireland. A View, in essence, functions as a self-reflexive examination, whereby the text itself performs a unique healing function which posits Spenser and his readers as both physicians and patients nursing a body politic that is suffering Ireland's decay.

On the topic of the cultural treatment of Ireland during the early modern period, Dionne and Mentz (2004) argue: "England's colonial project in Ireland attempted to define Englishness in opposition to Irish otherness. However, what the English find in Ireland is a community of 'not-quite-other-people'" (p.315). This unsettling discovery, the authors add, frames the uncannily similar "Old English" as a "tangible threat to English identity" that is, undoubtedly, "contagious" (p. 316). The danger of destabilizing, widespread contagion, for Avery (1990), draws attention to Eudoxus's fear that "the English will more readily emulate the Irish then will the Irish take up 'English' ways" (p. 276) of law, custom, and religion. It is precisely in this anxiety of infection, the effect of which would work to dilute both English virtue and national distinction from Ireland, that Spenser, in A View, integrates a necessary, interventive medical discourse to expose and allay the uneasy English's "feare of relapse."

Since Vaught (2010) argues that "[m]any early moderns believed that words have the power to expose, cause, and even cure infection"
(p.17), it is not surprising that Eudoxus, acting in the role of a practitioner, invites Irenaeus to disclose, publicly, the details of his experience in the ailing land:

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I pray you, a little devise of those evils, by which that country is held in this wretched case, that it cannot (as you say) be recured. And if it be not painefull to you, tell us what things during your late continuance there, you observed to bee most offensive, and greatest impeachment to the good rule and government thereof. (Spenser, 1596)
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The word "evils", here, in addition to identifying the Irish country's deviant and defiant customs and conduct, points to a corporeal corruption: the physical symptoms of a communicable disease subsequently catalogued by the dialogue's interlocutor and medical patient, Irenaeus. Eudoxus's unwillingness to actually name Ireland in the above passage and, instead, refer to it merely as "that country" [emphasis added] further isolates and "others" the colonized territory. This quarantining approach is reinforced by the gripping image of the country's land and populace being figuratively "held" by a crippling, unrelenting contamination. The "wretched case" connotes the state of affairs which have befallen Ireland and, more significantly, echoes the contemporary medical terminology of Spenser's time by referring to an instance of disease, and the consequential clinical condition of a person receiving or requiring medical treatment. Milburn (2004) argues that "Early modern English writers frequently used the trope of the diseased body politic" and the "symbolic relay between the health of the individual body and the health of the national body" (p.617) to solidify cultural boundaries and even demonize foreignness. Hadfield (1997) similarly notes that an authority figure acting as doctor to the wounded body of a state is "commonplace of sixteenth-century political writing" (p.58). Accordingly, Spenser situates Ireland's decay within a medical discourse to draw attention to Protestant England's superior but threatened health, while anticipating the potential physical cure of its own, conquered "Daughter island."

Spenser's use of parenthesis in Eudoxus's exchange with Irenaeus, "it cannot (as you say) be recured," implicitly reveals the Phisitian's professional obligation to treat, medically, his unwell subject. The parenthesis, which isolates content within a body of text, works to
further distinguish the boundary between practitioner and patient by suggesting, through the parenthetical word "you," that Eudoxus's sentiment differs from Irenaeus's. The physical break in text articulates a distance between the speakers: a separation strengthened by Eudoxus's interrogative tone, which inspires the word "you" to be repeated four times within the excerpted lines above. Eudoxus's linguistic inspection creates, what Milburn (2004) asserts, is a "social authority in the form of the medical practitioner" who "envisions national survival to be dependent upon the specialized knowledge of physicians and surgeons" (p. 602). This "social authority," which justifies medical intervention into the moralities and lives of the commonwealth's populace, engenders the collective identity of Protestant, "New English" healers in *A View*. Eudoxus's coaxing invitation to, in effect, have Irenaeus "tell us" [emphasis added] of Ireland's syndromes, "if it be not painefull," suggests an implied, authoritative audience which, represented by Eudoxus, both records and evaluates the source and impact of affliction that Irenaeus charts. Spenser's text, which purposely breaks the early, physician-patient privilege of confidentiality governing standard medical practice, allows Spenser's English readers to remain privy to the evils ailing Ireland. As a result, Spenser's medically imbued dialogue figuratively places readers alongside Eudoxus and, accordingly, on similar terms with medical professionals. The text itself, then, becomes a literary pill which, in the hands of Spenser's readership, begins to circulate as an antidote within the English national bloodstream.

The textual community of practitioners assembled by Eudoxus's authoritative role imagines an encounter between healer and patient in which wretched Ireland, thoroughly indoctrinated by English hegemony and growing medical knowledge, is both physically and mentally transformed. On the topic of early modern literary representations of doctors, Hadfield (1997) argues that, to save a land, its infected people must first be cured by a "reliable" and "skilful" physician who "will not resort to amputation or cauterization if he can cure the disease by compresses or a draught of medicine, and will

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1 Physicians were, even in the early modern period, expected to keep the information of the patient private under the moral and legal codes of "Medical Ethics" and "Medical Jurisprudence". For a more detailed explanation of the laws surrounding physician-patient privilege, see "Robert Baker's Code to Ethics: Some History" in *Perspectives on the Profession* 19.1 (1999).
never fall back on them unless compelled by the illness to do so" (p.58). Similar to Hadfield, Eudoxus, who asks, "which kinde of speech, is the manner rather of desperate men farre driven, to wish the utter ruine of that which they cannot redress?" (Spenser) seems to resist the temptation of immediate amputation or surgical removal of Irish tumefaction. Eudoxus's protest to "utter ruine" which, in the sixteenth century, referred to both physical decay and fatal destruction, signals a complex consciousness in Spenser's dialogue: that the colonized territory is not merely an extension or appendage of but, rather, an internal, vital organ operating within a single body. Accordingly, Irenaeus's encounter (and Eudoxus's consequential receipt of his particularly disconcerting experiences) is not necessarily with a foreign Other but, rather, an estranged, domestic self. Disturbed by the potential corporeal demise of England's own livelihood in Ireland, Eudoxus, distancing himself from "desperate men farre driven," begins to inject, into the dialogue, his medical knowledge and optimism regarding a treatable, indoctrinated Ireland. Eudoxus's refined, methodological approach contrasts the relentlessness of the seemingly inferior and incapable "they": those who deem Ireland's woes incurable and doom the land to certain ruin.

Though Hadfield (1997) suggests the possibility of excising a deviant population, "like a hopeless, incurable limb, to prevent the infection spreading to the healthy part" (p. 58), Eudoxus's eagerness to discuss "some reasonable way to settle a sound and perfect rule of government" (Spenser) reveals his desire to redress, rather than simply eradicate, Ireland's diagnosed sickness. The terms "reasonable" and "settle" reflect an interventive, reconciliatory approach rooted not in desperation but, rather, in calculated, medical reason. Eudoxus's solution to Ireland's "wretched case," Mandressi (2013) would argue, seems to demonstrate an understanding of the "doctrina de homme": medical logic which, in the early modern period, observed the human body as an intricate object of medical science and knowledge. It is perhaps Spenser's own knowledge of the medical science of the period which affords Eudoxus the opportunity to speak confidently of possible redress with medical terminology:

The which method we may learne of the wise Phisitianis, which first require that the malady be knowne thoroughly, and discovered: Afterwards to teach how to cure and redresse it: And lastly doe prescribe a dyet with straight rule and orders to be dayly observed, for feare of
relapse into the former disease, or falling into some other more dangerous then it. (Spenser, 1596)

Vaught (2010) argues that "early modern practitioners believed that they could restore health by returning their patients to a state of balance or ease" (p.158). It is not surprising, then, that Eudoxus, having distinguished himself from the erratic, driven men, chooses to continue his response to Irenaeus with the allusion to "wise Phisitians." The word "learne," coupled with the first-person, collective pronoun, suggests the communal capacity to understand and model the methodology employed by the period's aforementioned "social authority," while the Phisitians' wisdom contrasts the brutish Irish conduct and customs. The phrase "first require" introduces a systemic process of treatment, a sequential procedure which begins with the patient's assessment and diagnosis of "the malady." Eudoxus's insistence that the disease be "knowne thoroughly, and discovered" [emphasis added] implies a period of intense medical observation and investigation to determine, with specificity, an accurate infectivity of England's ailing corpus. Neill's (1994) argument that "Ireland played an equally crucial part in the determination of English identity" (p.3), however, insists a symbiotic link between England, the colonizing host, and Ireland, its politically attached, parasitic colony. This rapport, which begs for "cure and redresse," breathes life into Hadfield's (1997) claim: "the state is one body" (p.58). The proposed corporeal singularity of Protestant England and its desired target of reform posit Ireland as the Phisitian's critical patient into whom the syringe of English ideology must be administered.

Eudoxus's sustained, chronological explanation of the proposed treatment continues with the phrase, "Afterwards to teach how to cure and redresse it." The word "Afterwards" signals the stage of prognosis, wherein details of the sickness, and its remedy, are disclosed to the ill patient. The phrase "teach how to," however, suggests that the cure is not merely a simple injection with immediate effect but, rather, an instructive course of action. The prolonged rehabilitation which, once more, endows superior social authority to the textual community of English social healers by way of their ability to educate, reveals the medical power to, as Milburn (2004) contends, explore "the inside of the patient's body in the interest of national health" (p.602). This discursive dissection of the body, and of the body politic, anticipates the need for recommendation and prescription: a
last endeavour to attend to Ireland's ruin. Although, as Vaught (2010) explains, the early modern physicians commonly advised "dieting" to their patients in an effort to return them to health and ease (p.158), Spenser's use of the word "dyet" in the phrase, "doe prescribe a dyet with straight rule," suggests not the allowance or provision of particular foods but, rather, a course of life, a way of living or thinking. The prescribed, dogmatic lifestyle, the rigidity of which is accentuated by the phrase "straight rule and orders to be dayly observed," for Eudoxus, is to be implemented by the English as both a reactive and preventative measure to allay the "feare of relapse." The expression "dayly observed" indicates an intense, ceaseless rehabilitation which, for Spenser's readership, articulates the gravity of Ireland's sickness which necessitates such a potent antidote. The crippling trepidation of falling once more into the corruptive ways of Old Englishness suggests, in this passage, that Ireland's now "former" disease can—and will—be beaten.

Perhaps the most disturbing element of Eudoxus's extended medical metaphor is the space which Spenser discursively forges to present an alternate fate in which the Irish relapse not into previous disease but, rather, fall into "some other more dangerous then it." The threat of an even more infective and hazardous malady imagines the dreadful possibility that national identity is not innate but, rather, can be chosen by the individual and his or her community—a notion perhaps anticipated by the English Tudor dynasty which, in 1542, under the reign of Henry VIII, reclaimed the title, "King of Ireland." In A View, England's body is equally as vulnerable as that of Ireland and just as—if not more—dependent on the redress which Eudoxus prescribes to preserve national virtue and purity. In this light, Spenser's medical discourse operates not on a foreign Other but, rather, on the threatened, infected self. The dialogue between Irenaeus and Eudoxus forces a critical examination of the body politic to diagnose disease as increasingly internalized, thus prompting the need for self-regulation. Spenser's A View, then, creates a textual and social community of individuals who are simultaneously Phisitian and patient, wise healer and contaminated invalid in dire need of a dose of hegemonic Englishness to cure the (Other) self.
References


