

Spenser was pale. He said, with some effort: "We can cast some bait. I am finishing a poem. An allegory about the queen of the fairies. What if I put in a knight of the Red Cross? The real Templars will recognize themselves..." (Eco 408)

The relationship between the realm of belief and the practical concerns of European politics demonstrated within the poetry of the great English renaissance epic poets Spenser and Milton, is evidence of the flux in the prevailing thought world of the time. With Spenser and Milton the subservience of reason to the Church is loosed but the confidence of the enlightenment is yet to be. The ultimately unsuccessful glue they apply to the deepening schism is the search for universal truth within hermetic studies and the particular local strand of Christian Cabbalism which privileges a messianic view of England's destiny. I will examine the interrelatedness of their religious and political worldview, and the extent to which these views are informed by their appreciation of history and science as refracted through the hermetic prism.

Spenser's real job was as a senior public servant with various positions of administration in Ireland (Fowler 10). He is familiar with the court and its diplomatic and domestic machinations and amongst the many layers of allegory found in *The Faerie Queene* are references to local and European politics. These views reflect the milieu of the Sidney circle which was monarchist but not always in agreement with Queen Elizabeth, and Protestant but not against all Catholic thought. They were influenced by such moderate Catholics as Giordano Bruno whose brand of Italian neoplatonism found a sympathetic

hearing (Yates, "The Religious Policy of Giordano Bruno," 195). Within this range the puritan in Spenser could use Duessa as the symbol for Roman Catholicism and blast away like a rabble rousing preacher, likening her to some creature from the apocalypse:

And after him the proud Duessa came,
High mounted on her many headed beast,
And every head with fyrie tongue did flame. (I.vii.6)

Politically, however, this is not incompatible with support for Catholic countries if it fits Spenser's ideas of England's destiny. The French get support in the episode of Sir Burbon (V.xi.49) which has been linked to the Earl of Essex and his campaign to encourage Elizabeth to support Henry IV (Norbrook 128). At a more general level this episode reveals a desire for France, like England, to throw off the shackles of false religion and particularly the influence of Catholic Spain. Burbon is knighted by Redcross, the knight of true religion, but is shamed by his giving up of the shield of Protestantism.

True is, that I was dubbed knight
By a good knight, the knight of the Redcrosse;
Who when he gave me armes, in field to fight,
Gave me a shield, in which he did endosse
His deare Redeemers badge upon the bosse...

But for that many did that shield envie'
And cruell enemies increased more;
To stint all strife and troublesome enmite,
That bloudie scutchin being battered sore,

I layd aside, and have of late forbore. (V.xi.53-4)

Burbon gets the sharp end of Artegall's tongue for laying aside his shield in the vain hope of winning back Flourdelis from the tyrant Grandtorto. Spenser hints that when the time is right Burbon may again take up his shield, but Burbon's dissembling tests the patience of the warlike Artegall, who obviously does not think Paris is worth a Mass. This irritation, however, does not prevent Artegall assisting Burbon, his brother knight, in his immediate problems with the peasants.

Yates notes that the prophesy of Ariosto in Orlando Furiosa, that Charles V will be a universal emperor, is transferred by Spenser to Queen Elizabeth in Merlin's prophesy to Britomart (III.iii.23; "Queen Elizabeth as Astrea." 51). Spenser sees history as culminating in Elizabeth and while he admits that there is much still to achieve, sees in her and England a glorious future. Arthur having received the history of his forebears:

Cryde oute, Deare countrey, ⇔ how dearely deare
 Ought thy remembraunce, and perpetuall band
 Be to thy foster Childe, that from thy hand
 Did common breath and nouriture receive?
 How brutish is it not to understand,
 How much to her we owe, that all us gave,
 That gave to us all, what ever good we have. (II.x.69)

With a neat pun on “brutish” Spenser conveys both Arthur’s awe at his inheritance and the contention that the poet’s contemporaries do not appreciate their destiny. The history continues in prophetic mode from Merlin culminating in the reign of the “royal virgin” who, having reclaimed the throne for “Briton blood”, presides over peace and union between the nations (III.iii.48-9). The specific example of Belgium is given as an indication of the start of this process and Merlin’s fit which ends the prophecy conveniently leaves Spenser with no need for real prophecy. While the two histories are full of setbacks and evil there remains this optimism in the destiny of Elizabeth and England, which, for Spenser, has yet to be disappointed.

Armstrong contends that the fourteenth century mystics of England had no successors, because the hostility of the Protestant reformers to monasticism destroyed their natural home (13). The sort of Christianity which allowed speculation became more thinkable but less acceptable to Catholic and Protestant authorities after the Reformation. Bruno’s eventual burning is rather instructive as he saw that “in the present wretched state of the world it is upon the poet that the chief responsibility for carrying on the heroic enthusiasms of former days must rest” (Yates, “The Religious Policy of Giordano Bruno” 206-7). Mysticism is dangerous to authoritarian religion and so can only be expressed with some safety in poetry and if the poetry is densely allegorical so much the better. As an obscurantist poet in a climate of religious intolerance Spenser can get away with suggesting a religion which has heterodox features. The Faerie Queene is full of Roman Catholic symbolism (Ricks 331), is dualistic to the point of gnosticism, suggests the end times are

upon the Elizabethans by frequent allusion to Revelation in Book I (Kermode 263) and incorporates the beliefs “which the Neo-platonic syncretists of the Renaissance regarded as the universal truths found in all of the then-known religious traditions” (Phillips 115). In short there is something to offend everyone, if they looked hard enough.

At this distance in time it is easy to forget that science of the renaissance was essentially hermetic, with alchemical, mystical, mathematical and religious conceptions little removed from what would simply be labeled superstition today. All science, even that of such a bulwark of the beginning of the modern age as Newton, operated in just such a framework (Westfall 217). The major influence on the Sidney circle of hermetic ideas was John Dee, a giant of mathematics, navigation and philosophy who enjoyed, for a time, a degree of royal patronage. He appears to have been involved in a loose college with Sidney, Spenser and other notable Elizabethans like Greville and Dyer which discussed matters of great import (French 134). It is likely that Dee was Spenser’s model for Merlin and his crystal ball (Brookes-Davies 44).

The great Magitian Merlin had deviz’d,
By his deepe science, and hell-dreaded might,
A looking glasse, right wondrously aguiz’d,
Whose vertues through the wyde worlde soone were
solemniz’d. (III.ii.18)

The design of the Temple of Alma evinces the idea of universal harmony as expressed in architecture. The planets, angelic hierarchies, Man and God are all brought together in a figure difficult to imagine except as a

musical chord (II.ix.22; Yates, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age 97-8). Such concerns for a sacred geometry had been the province of the master masons involved in Cathedral building and had spawned myths and secret lore concerning the Great Architect and Solomon's Temple which flowed into the esoteric corpus and later became grist to the masonic mill (Baigent and Leigh 188-9).

Hermetic influences are seen in the versions of Mercury's caduceus belonging to the Palmer and Cambina (Brooks-Davies 14). The staffs are peacemakers: "Th'infernall feends with it he can asswage," (II.xii.41) and "In her right hand a rod of peace she bore," (IV.iii.42) but also have overlapping regal, magical and religious overtones. Cambina's rod with the entwined serpents is like the rod of Moses and Asclepius and so carries with it ideas of deliverance from oppression and disease. Britomart gets a regal wand and uses it to subdue masculinity represented as a crocodile when she becomes Isis in a dream, prefiguring her descendant's destiny (V.vii.15 ; Fletcher 273). Rods also have connections with genealogies and the Virgin Mary, with medieval depictions of the Rod of Jesse showing "Mary and her child as the apex of God's historical purpose" (Warner 47). According to medieval legend, Joseph was chosen as Mary's husband by a dove resting on his staff, which then flowers and is therefore fruitful (Horton 47-8). The new virgin, Elizabeth, therefore becomes the awaited magical monarch of true descent in the Hermetic tradition of Adam, Moses and Solomon, and worthy to, at coronation:

Receive the Scepter, the sign of Kingly Power, the Rod of the Kingdomes...Receive the Rod of vertue and equity. Learn to make much of the Godly and to terrify the wicked (Coronation Service qtd in Fletcher 277-8).

Spenser's choice of the romance genre has political connotations. The revival of chivalry in such ceremonial arenas as the Accession day tilts provide at least part of the direct inspiration for The Faerie Queene being the source of the Fairy Queen character herself. There are similarities between these celebrations and the annual feast outlined in Spenser's letter to Raleigh with its simple person petitioning the Queen (Yates, "Elizabethan Chivalry" 14-6). These events became quasi-religious as they replaced the holy days of popery and also political as they "all helped to advertise and celebrate the centralization and expansion of political power in the hands of the royal household" (Mueller 752). In addition at these tilts and those associated with the Knights of the Garter the knights could demonstrate their service to the crown in a way which covered the demeaning nature of subjection to a female monarch (Norbrook 110). This discomfort at serving Elizabeth is hinted at in the suffering of Amoret in Busirane's castle, which feminist readings have restored as an episode of real torture and likely rape of one facet of Elizabeth in an attempt to maintain male control (Frye 50).

The Red Cross knight is identified with St. George, the patron saint of the Order of the Garter, a particularly resilient organisation (I.ii.12). It was a neotemplar association formed in 1348 by Edward III within a generation of the dissolution of the original Templars (Baigent and Leigh 133). The Order and its patron survived the reformation surprisingly intact and although it of

necessity became a Protestant order it could maintain links with similar French orders as exemplified by a joint Church service with the Order of the Holy Spirit in Paris in 1585 (Yates, "Elizabethan Chivalry" 23). The Templar knights were reputedly the holders of dark secrets; certainly they were destroyed by the church for heresy, and they wore the red cross. Spenser's use of such symbols fits with hints of unorthodox Christianity, a hermetic undercurrent and a link with another romance theme, that of the grail quest.

The Red Cross knight has parallels in the grail romances. Smith finds a commonality with Perlesvaus's shield (671) and Galahad is destined to wear "a shield bearing a red cross on a white background," originally from Joseph of Arimathea's son's nose bleed (The Quest of the Holy Grail 55). Malory uses the same story with few emendations (254-6). In Parzival the company of the grail is described as Templars and so are brethren to the Red Cross knight (426).

Another grail parallel is found in the story of Timeus and Belphoebe. Timeus's thigh wound is of a type with that of the Fisher King's javelin wound through the thighs (Chretien de Troyes 420). While she heals him of the literal thigh wound she does not restore wholeness because his wound is now of the heart (III.v.42). As he cannot tell her of his love, his wound is a form of impotence. This wound is made near mortal when Timeus is unable to finish off the salvage man with his javelin, denoting further potency problems. Belphoebe has to deliver the coup de gras to the salvage man, so setting up the denouement in which Timeus is discovered with Amoret (IV.vii.26-35). While

Percival's failure causes a land to be laid waste, Belphoebe's rejection and Timeus's failure causes a personal wasteland. There is a reconciliation and healing of sorts but Belphoebe remains unattainable (IV.vii.18).

The grail stories themselves are a repository of hermetic thought within a tradition familiar to the English. The Parvizal has been noted to contain such influence particularly with the identification of the krater with the grail (Kahane 5). These elements mingled with the Celtic and the Christian sources to give the grail its mystic quality. The grail story then flowed into the mainstream of romance tradition generally and into the matter of Britain particularly. The grail forms part of the history of England as detailed to Arthur:

Yet true it is, that long before that day
Hither came Joseph of Arimathy,
Who brought with him the holy grayle, (they say)
And preacht the truth, but since it greatly did decay. (II.x.53)

Spenser has used questing in ways typical of grail romances, yet subverts the genre to redefine the target. There is subversion in that female knights take over traditionally male roles, Britomart replacing Galahad, for example, as the knight of Chastity. A woman also initiates the quests, as instead of Arthur's table it is Gloriana's from which they are sent. In Malory's romances physical prowess is the key until the Grail quest, in which the knights who triumph in tests of virtue are successful. The quests Gloriana sends Spenser's knights on involve them fighting their own weaknesses and learning virtues. In The Faerie Queene then, the knights act as if they are questing for

the grail, but the male ones are actually after persons who are types for Queen Elizabeth. Arthur who is the sum of the other knights is questing after Gloriana, the sum of the figures of Elizabeth. But Mueller has noted that for Arthur, Gloriana is always unattainable (748).

Now hath the Sunne with his lamp-burning light,
Walkt round about the world, and I no lesse,
Sith of that Goddess I have sought the sight,
Yet no where can her finde: such happinesse
Heaven doth to me deny, and fortune favourlesse. (II.ix.7)

Arthur's cursing of the night which prevents him finding Florimell whom he can only wish was his Faery Queene leaves a pathetic situation where he is doubly removed from his true quest (III.iv.54). It appears Spenser has replaced the grail with Elizabeth so that Arthur cannot possibly find Gloriana, for what he is really searching for is the glorious future empire of the British under Elizabeth.

Those who took neither side when Lucifer and the Trinity fought — these angels, noble and worthy, were compelled to descend to earth, to this same stone... Since then the stone has always been in the care of those God called to his task and to whom He sent His angel. Sir, such is the nature of the Grail (Parzival 253).

Milton took sides. Politically, his grail was the revolution and it too was elusive in the end. By the time of writing Paradise Lost, he has despaired of the English people, he knows his side has lost and more particularly his early political views on the great destiny of England have come to naught.

Milton hoped in the 1640's that poetic and political expectations would converge, that he would be able to produce a great celebration of the nation's apocalyptic renewal (Norbrook 237).

Milton's delayed production of his epic means that in the end he is involved with explaining the failure of God's chosen race rather than celebrating its hoped for success. The Fall as a subject was a hot topic by the second half of the century in a country where "those who had proclaimed God's cause had won power, and had failed, failed utterly" (Hill, C. 347). A religious poem about how Adam could fall is also political because it tries to explain how the corruption in Man has allowed the chance of a new paradise to fail. For Milton, it is not God's fault anymore than he blames God for Adam's fall (Hill, C. 349). Milton's communal hopes for England must shift after the failure of the revolution to hopes for the individual; it is after all, all he has left (Hill, J.S. 117).

Milton includes history in the form of prophecy just as Spenser did, but takes things back as far as you can go and devotes most of two books to it. There is no sense here that there is any triumphant end within reach however, short of the return of Christ. Michael's education of Adam is a history of one catastrophe after another with post-lapsarian man capable at best of heroically prefiguring the coming of the messiah before the evil in man repeatedly sinks him into death and defeat. The Christian era is dismissed in just forty lines between Pentecost and Armageddon.

Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves,

Who all the sacred mysteries of heav'n
 to their own vile advantages shall turn
 Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
 With superstitions and traditions taint...

Whence heavy persecution shall arise
 On all who in the worship persevere
 Of Spirit and Truth... (XII.508-12, 531-3)

This reflects the religious situation of a disappointed Protestant. On the one hand he remains rabidly anti-Catholic, suspicious of popery leaking back into English religion. He condemns the Catholic religious orders to a new Limbo in the "Paradise of Fools" (III.496). A palimpsest of a Catholic priest is visible in the description of the temptation, administering a false sacrament to Eve (Gardiner 219). On the other, he has abandoned Calvinism for Arminianism, the trinity for a near mechanistic monotheism and his total theology as portrayed in De Doctrina Christiana was so heretical it could not be published anywhere even under a pseudonym (Hill, C. 335, 355). Milton's aloof God the Father is one who needs a creative demi-urge, a concept which comes from a mystic gnostic source, yet also suggests a mechanistic, materialist view of the world as emerging from science and philosophy (Rogers 285). Milton is leaning towards a God who has wound up the world and left it to us, albeit in our fallen state, emphasising Man's free will and responsibility for his own evil in the choices he makes.

Milton's world of angels and demons inevitably draws on an eclectic array of sources. Away from canonical sources and classical references he uses

the Jewish midrashes and pseudepigrapha on the Eden story (Baldwin 366). He uses science to have Raphael warn Adam about excess of curiosity, by having him lampoon the astronomers' difficulty in working in what is the Angel's turf.

This to attain, whether heav'n move or earth,
Imports not, if thou reckon right; the rest
From man or angel the great Architect
Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge
His secrets to be scanned by them who ought
Rather admire...
 ...how gird the sphere
With centric and eccentric scribbled o'er,
Cycle and epicycle, orb in orb. (VIII.70-5,82-5)

Kepler the astronomical magus had made redundant the epicycles used to calculate planetary motion with his discovery of the elliptical orbits which completed the Copernican system (Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition" 249). Milton does not commit himself but gently suggests the Ptolemaic explanation involving "the prime orb / Incredible how swift," (IV.592-3) and "the sedentary earth, / That better might with far less compass move," (VIII.32-3) is less believable than that of the new sciences. Kee notes that the tension between the two world views is between qualitatively different kinds of knowledge and that pursuit of the new learning risks losing the important moral and spiritual truths of the old, hence the Angel's admonition of Adam (163).

Milton, like Spenser, is working within the tradition of the Christian Cabbala, albeit as it had limped into the seventeenth century. Brookes-Davies points out that Milton's earlier work Il Pensero has Hermes Trismegistus as its central character and suggests the connection between hermetic thought and the urge for reform (124). There are suggestions that for Milton, the Rosicrucian Robert Fludd played a like if lesser version of Dee's role in Spenser's thought, in providing a background of speculative thought that could be mined by the poet. Such ideas as creation through a demi-urge, sexual connections between God and Wisdom and the fortunate aspects of the Fall are seen as having Cabalistic pedigrees (Werblowsky 98,110). Indeed Spenser's Faerie Queene, once seen as an expression of the Christian Cabbala, is another source for hermetic ideas in Paradise Lost (Yates, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age 180).

Alchemy is present in Paradise Lost in the description of the workings of the sun (III.591-612). While Milton laments the failure of the alchemists to discover the philosopher's stone he admits their ability to "bind / Volatile Hermes," (602-3) a reference both to mercurial chemistry and harnessing hermetic thought. The rod of the Mercurial monarch appears with Satan's rod (I. 294) which becomes problematic once he is changed to a serpent, and the scepter of Christ (V.816) which is only needed until all is fulfilled after the end of the world (III.340). Concepts of a universal order are seen in the harmonics of the dance of the Angels (V.625) and the picture of the universe suspended from heaven on a golden chain (II.1051).

Both poets had their messianic hopes for England dashed, Milton before and Spenser after writing their great epics. At the beginning of the modern age they are breaking out of the closed universe of scholastic religion, embracing the first inklings of scientific materialism and, most modern of all, being profoundly disappointed and disillusioned. The promise of secret knowledge, a stone, a grail which would restore the prelapsarian or even the premodern world and give a new certainty to replace the old was, in the end, no more real for them than for the post modern hero of Foucault's Pendulum.

Now I know what the Law of the Kingdom is, of poor, desperate, tattered Malkhut, where Wisdom has gone into exile, groping to recover its former lucidity. The truth of Malkhut, the only truth that shines in the night of the Sefirot, is that Wisdom is revealed naked in Malkhut, and its mystery lies not in existence but in the leaving of existence... I have understood. And the certainty that there is nothing to understand should be my peace, my triumph... If you can't figure it out for yourself, tough shit. (Eco 640-1)

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