

LITERATURE AND
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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLAND

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CHAPTER I

The church heroic: Charles, Laud, and Little Gidding

Of the circumstances of English Protestantism explored in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, the reckoning of heroism requires from authors the greatest engagement with the past, with the circumstance of time. Overshadowed by their sense of an Elizabethan heyday for the honor of Protestant aggression, these writers struggle against the suspicion of their own belatedness, decadence, and paralysis. Far from collapsing under the pressure of the Elizabethan ethos, however, Caroline Protestants respond to the past of their own faith with an acute skepticism toward its myths and with richly inventive revisions of the heroic pomp and circumstance of faith. For heroic circumstance, they understand, comprises the various means – practical, ceremonial, or imaginative – through which the advocates of a church secure its singular elevation and, therefore, its warrant as the best of all possible churches.

Insofar as heroism comprises the means of ecclesiastical elevation, the warrant of tradition, and the claims of superiority, it dovetails with all the other circumstances of Protestant faith. Most clearly, the constructions of heroism contribute to, and depend on, the inner and outer conditions of worship – the circumstances of thought and place to be discussed in the third chapter. But as Guibbory has shown, presuppositions about ceremony are entangled with rival notions of how the social domain should be ordered and framed. So it is that the lofty authority of heroic religion makes an impact on the much more mundane ways in which human beings interact with one another in English Protestant society, in short, on the circumstance of persons.¹ As they are presented by enthusiasts for the Caroline court and the Laudian church, moreover, the assumptions behind religious heroism, worship, and social organization are corroborated by an image of the natural world according to which the ceremonies of the temple and the harmony of the social order find their counterpart in a magical, holistic cosmos whose forces are so often invoked in Stuart masques. With the Civil War and the collapse

of orthodox religious heroism, the circumstance of nature substitutes for heroism as the enveloping non-divine condition of religious faith. But as later chapters will show, natural philosophy is even more unsettled by dispute than heroic religion.

In keeping with contemporary notions that heroic virtue is in some measure a ligament binding religious communities, the most extraordinary revisions of epic religion in these decades are produced among coteries of men and women – at the court of Charles I, at the Little Gidding estate of the Ferrar family, and at the Oxfordshire home of Lucius Cary. In their symbols, ceremonies, and masques, the cultural brokers for Charles I pursue the king's own obsession with redressing recent failures in Protestant aggression against the Catholic forces of the Antichrist. Somehow the vehicle of redress must indirectly criticize Elizabethan military Protestantism, yet also distill its moral and spiritual vigor. Hailed even by its critics as more morally and aesthetically elevated than its Jacobean predecessor, the Caroline court promulgates a comprehensive heroic synthesis centered on a godly prince but including the heightened ceremony and beautification of the church. In response, critics both within and outside the court detect and accentuate the fault lines and contradictions in this idealized synthesis. In no small measure, the Ferrar family members living at their Little Gidding estate operate in response to major alterations in the Caroline/Laudian church, both in imitation and in opposition. They deliver scathing criticisms of a Stuart, especially courtly, culture in love with the wrong (romantic) traditions of heroism, but in their staged dialogues the Ferrars epitomize the arduous and multifaceted Caroline search for the elusive marks of the genuine church heroic. In turn, the chief brokers of the Caroline/Laudian church are curious about the heroic codes and patterns being established at Little Gidding too. Both communities fear the loss of Protestant heroism; both are prepared to criticize the agents of this loss; and both strive to rebuild epic religion through discourse, ceremony, and action.

Yet a third Caroline community, that brilliant coterie gathered around Lucius Cary, second Viscount Falkland, in the 1630s, responds to the many versions of Christian heroism past and present. Principally housed at Falkland's Great Tew some twenty miles from Oxford, this coterie proves as vibrantly exploratory regarding the problem of a lapsing Protestant heroism as the manor at Little Gidding. Their chief contribution – that skepticism itself might serve as the most godly form of Protestant heroism – is worked out in the context of yet another heroic synthesis, the active constituents of which do combat with one another.

In the Caroline search for the genuine church heroic, then, there are many strong contenders – old and new, courtly and anti-courtly, Laudian and Foxeian – fracturing the perceived Elizabethan and Jacobean consensus that Protestant heroism demands violent and colonial opposition to the papal Antichrist. This consensus had been unsettled by Jacobean pacifism and James's opposition to the Virginia Company late in his reign. But it is under Charles I that the loss of a consensus on Protestant heroism is deeply felt and that strenuous, elaborate efforts are made to reassemble synthetic archetypes for this heroism or to justify a heroism committed to abdication from and critique of the old myths. Moreover, far from negating ecclesiastical heroism, the competition over and dispersion of its constituents contribute to the apologetic formation of a skeptical and fallible heroism, with an earnest but mistake-ridden endeavor after true religion becoming the diacritical honor of the Church of England. In this version of religious heroism, however, the circumstances of thought come very close to supplanting the specific dispensations of worship in a church – come very close, that is, to something like the tolerant and reasonable faith that some philosophers were seeking in the minimal common notions of all religions.

In their attempts to reclaim heroic Protestantism, the three extraordinary Caroline communities – the royal court, Little Gidding, and Great Tew – capture a much wider cultural search for the basis, scope, and strength of England's covenant with God. This search is worked out in action, in policy, and in literature. From the crisis over the Palatinate to the Order of the Garter; from the Laudian beautification of the church to the controversy over Neoplatonic demigods; from Virginia to Little Gidding to the battlefield at Newbury where Falkland was killed; from Agamemnon to Scylla and Charybdis to the Ovidian translation of epic combat into metamorphoses – the Caroline church is distinguished by its transmission, transformation, and urgent, creative analysis of interconnected but also hostile versions of religious heroism. The mediation between these heroisms results in impressive courtly spectacle but also in disenchanting bathos; in opulence but also austerity; in skepticism about the possibility of a justifiable Christian heroism but also skepticism as the very essence of that heroism; and in renunciation of the world but also renewed justifications of aggressive intervention throughout the world. In the three extraordinary communities in particular, the conviction that the contemporary English church is failing the conventions of Protestant heroism intertwines with the suspicion and the defense that those conventions have failed their church and must be recast.

As much as Charles cared about stabilizing the Christian creed of his people in their catechisms, he longed just as fervently for symbols and ceremonies that would bestow honor on that creed. For Charles, then, the heroism of the English church was a principal concern. Much more than his father, indeed in part because of his father, Charles came to power under the shadow of Elizabeth, who was hailed by such Stuart critics as Thomas Scot as more masculine in her aggression against the Antichrist than James with his accommodation of Catholic Europe. In 1624–25, after the return of Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham from Spain upon the collapse of the “match,” Scot and others found reason enough to hope for the revival of the spirit of Francis Drake as a remedy for “this Dull or Effeminate Age.”² Drake’s was the spirit of the “righteous ‘little David’ setting off to beat down the abominable Iberian ‘Goliath’” as Christopher Hodgkins puts it, and his legacy spoke to an Elizabethan conviction “that territorial expansion and fabulous wealth dovetailed neatly with chivalric virtue and apostolic zeal.”³ What made this legend all the more compelling, as Hodgkins reminds us, was “Spain’s so-called Black Legend” as it was purveyed in “the graphic accounts by Bartolomé de Las Casas” of the Spanish atrocities in the New World (434). Set side by side with the martyrs memorialized by Foxe, the bloodletting dehumanization inflicted on the native peoples of “America” by the adventurers claiming authority from Charles V was starkly contrasted with “Drake’s religious scruples.” And even though Drake’s reputation was controversial in the decades before the reign of Charles, “retellings of Drake’s life and deeds constitute a minor publishing phenomenon” beginning with the death of James (Hodgkins, 436, 447).

Just before that death, an anticipated return to the militant Protestantism of an Elizabeth or a Sidney was briefly heralded in the post-Match figure of Prince Charles. As Mervyn James argues, this strategy would require a several-pronged attack: “a European Protestant league, a larger investment of resources in the war with Spain, wider military commitments abroad, westward oceanic expansion, and an extended naval assault on the Spanish empire.”⁴ According to John Reynolds – whose works zealously support the causes of the Elector Frederick and his wife Elizabeth, of New World colonization, and of the national honor to be derived from immediate and full-scale warfare against Spain – a heavenly congregation of monarchs from Henry VIII to Queen Anne would together indict James for seducing England away

from religious warfare into the decadence of an impious peace, made palatable for the idle by the pastimes of “Stage-playes, Maskes, Reuels & Carousing.”⁵ But not Charles whose mettle, according to one Spaniard in a Thomas Scot work, “is of another temper, and not so flexible as some take it.”⁶

Just so, in the early years of his reign Charles’s war with Spain and Buckingham’s naval operations on behalf of the rebel Huguenots led to the report in foreign lands “that the days of Queen Elizabeth are revived.”⁷ At the start, as R. Malcolm Smuts puts it, Charles enlisted the Elizabethan cult of heroic monarchy, its capacity for ushering in a second golden age or the New Jerusalem, and its climactic role in the “great eschatological struggle between the forces of Christ and Antichrist.”⁸ Thereafter the king was shaken by his England’s failure to revive the Protestant valor of his brother Henry, in whose honor a masque had celebrated the restoration of the “Fallen House of Chivalry” at a time when King James had reneged on heroic “austerity, military preparedness, and Protestant alliances” (29). Smuts has argued that the failure to secure a place “at the head of an international coalition” for the defense of Protestantism embarrassed Charles into “a decisive break with the religious and patriotic traditions that had grown up around Elizabeth” (7). A break was made, true, but it was not a decisive one: as Sharpe has shown, Charles continued to consider war a vital option, to blame parliament for the failures of the religious warfare under his watch, and to express the shame that he felt in their wake.⁹ Other scholars, notably J. S. A. Adamson and Marlin E. Blaine, extend our understanding of this crisis in the royal leadership of religious heroism to a wide range of texts and practices in Caroline England, from “mock orders of chivalry” to poems such as Davenant’s “Madagascar.”¹⁰ In many ways, Caroline culture proceeds as if the epic-romantic dimensions of Elizabethan court culture and its satellites were simply dreams of the past: “there was no ‘epic poetry’ of the Caroline court,” Adamson concludes, “and the already moribund Spenserian tradition of the chivalric epic was abandoned.” What is more, tournaments were jettisoned while “the image of the godly knight as the champion of the ‘Protestant Cause’” was featured in mockeries of the stereotypical “Puritan” (161, 166).

But in the years of Charles I, Adamson explains, the ridicule of chivalric conventions and pretensions is only half of a story whose other half is the “retrospective recasting” of Protestant valor; for “while Caroline courtly chivalry worked within the inherited language of the past, it simultaneously imposed new priorities on, and new standards for the

reassessment of, that tradition's divergent elements and forms" (164). As a vital part of Charles's "major change in the cultural forms by which monarchy was presented," writers affiliated with the court found inventive ways in which to transform the representations of religious heroism in knighthood, "to reappraise and redefine the chivalric tradition," and to convert the military disasters of the 1620s into "a new, purified, chivalric ethos" so that the warfaring Christian is rendered preposterous and irreligious next to the holy chivalry of the Caroline court (161, 170-71). But Caroline court culture could not simply dispense with militarism, which had to be subsumed into a synthesis that abdicated from the atrocities of imperialism while attempting to disarm the charge that abdication permitted those atrocities. In the 1630s, Charles devoted himself to recasting a brave new ideal of religious heroism set forth in a ceremonial synthesis of power, virtue, and style – a holism from which no irksome component could wrest itself free and embarrass the lapsing prowess of the monarch. That is, he sought to create in symbol the honor that was languishing in military action and foreign policy.

The masques of the 1630s testify to Charles's commitment to a religious heroism, but also to his partial deflection of Protestant heroism away from the military cults of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Henry in two related directions. At the level of court ideology, the Carlo-Marian emanations of virtue, love, and piety are celebrated for revitalizing English morality and spirituality at large. This reformatory influence, commonly hailed as "heroic," manifests itself in such exclusive circles as the newly spiritualized Order of the Garter, but it is also aimed at British subjects wherever they worship, at home or abroad. At a more material level, the Laudian restitution of the resources, ceremonies, and fabric of the church is linked by apologists and critics alike to the high cultural style of ancient epic so that the Caroline church heroic is as much a matter of beauty as it is of virtue. The beauty of holiness, the Laudians aver, will give the church a power to discipline and elevate souls that no hurly-burly violence or expensive, quixotic plantation could ever manage. The elevation of religion, that is, ought to have a wide and profound impact on the much more mundane regions of every Christian's thoughts and social interactions. But the Laudians themselves must have recourse to discursive, legal, even corporal force when beauty is underwhelming. Similarly, into the composite heroism of the court, poets and apologists inject transmuted forms of godly militarism, from the knightly and romantic to the nautical and colonial. The problem with the court's synthesis is that its elements are just as likely to conflict as they are to converge, and at

any rate each element on its own is vulnerable to a criticism that the mysterious *pneuma* of holism is unable to silence.

In Davenant and Jones's *Britannia Triumphans* (1638), there is a prominent convergence between images of the king's "heroic virtue" and signs of the church's restored magnificence. The very first scene centers on the repaired and newly classical St. Paul's, "the symbol . . . of High Church Laudian reform."¹¹ Modeled on the temple of Antoninus and Faustina, its portico was held largely responsible for restoring St. Paul's to its proper status as the "principall ornament" of the English church.¹² However, in Stuart debates over the beautification of the church, while such a pagan genealogy and the epic analogues of English temples may be taken for granted, their spiritual benefits are not. Advocates argue that Christians have always borrowed architecture and prayers from the pagans who borrowed them from the Jews, that this is a perfectly acceptable practice and easily distinguishable from papist excesses and superstitions, and that the lineage of church ceremony will incite Christians to worship their true God more carefully and orderly than the heathens did their false deities.¹³ Peter Heylyn traces the practice of setting aside sacred places – but also most sacred areas within those places – to classical culture, finding prime examples in the *Aeneid* and declaring that "there's no question to be made but many *Temples* of the *Gentiles* were, without any alteration of the *Fabrick*, converted into *Christian Churches*."¹⁴

Whereas Heylyn and John Cosin approve these grand resources for "replenishing" the church with "ornaments, utensills, and beautie" in "this last declyning age," the so-called "Puritans" whom they accuse of debasing the style of the church – and with it all uniformity, decency, and spirituality – argue against such conversions. In 1628, Peter Smart complains that Cosin would offer his flock the rites of Cybele or Bacchus, and transplant them into the high ritual "which the poett describeth in the 4th of his *Aeneidos*."¹⁵ The stances of other participants in the debate over the beautification of the church are sometimes hard to pin down. For instance, John Williams's love of rails does not prevent him from criticizing the paganism of Caroline altar policy.¹⁶ Indeed, in the final chapter of *The Holy Table*, he concludes his attack on altars by deriving the church use of diptyches for the commemoration of noteworthy Christians from the *Iliad*.¹⁷ Thus, for good or ill, Caroline efforts to dignify and decorate the church are measured according to epic proportions.

In *Britannia Triumphans*, then, the prominence of St. Paul's defines the church heroic in terms of the material enrichment, ceremonial elevation, and ancient catholicity of worship. This vein of heroism amounts to a

rearguard defense against papist attacks by shoring up the beauty of the church from neglect and decay. As part of the synthesis between the physical reconstitution of the church and the heroic virtue of the king, the Banqueting House, as the political equivalent of St. Paul's, is mentioned at the outset of the masque, which (the reader is told) took place in a "new temporary room of timber" in order to prevent damage to Rubens's recently imported ceiling and "other enrichments" in Whitehall. The ceiling, moreover, features the apotheosis of Religion among the other royal virtues named "heroic" in this and other Caroline masques.¹⁸

In court entertainments, Graham Parry has noted, "Charles is generally presented as the embodiment of Heroic Virtue" – a virtue combining contemplative depth and spiritual purity together with a military activism *in potentia*.¹⁹ In *Britannia Triumphans*, the figure of Action, whose motto is *medio tutissima* ("safest in the middle"), is advanced in congruence with a church balanced between the potential for military Protestantism and the domestic rebuilding of the temple. What this balancing act means is that Charles's synthetic ideal of heroic religion attempts to subsume its more controversial elements in a larger, inestimable mythology. Nonetheless, the controversial element in Davenant's masque – the promotion of Britain's naval strength – is notorious for its estimable cost, not just because of the naval failures of the early reign but also because of the tax on which that strength relied.²⁰

In *Britannia Triumphans*, when Britanocles, the embodiment of royal "wisdom, valour, and piety," gives way to Bellerophon or "Heroic Virtue," the latter is associated with the reclamation of both reason and chivalry from their debasement in the Socinian and magical impieties into which the king's church, so critics argue, has a tendency to slide.²¹ The refined heroics of the court must be carefully separated from certain problematic forms of heroism to which the king and his church apologists nonetheless have debts. All in all, the court's religious heroism is said to combine the best of all other heroic codes, from chivalry (including love and valor) to virtuous rationality, from wisdom and piety to a St. Paul's evocative of ceremony and ornament in the grand style, and from naval prowess in the vein of Elizabeth to the aura of Henrietta Maria whose beauty, we are told, might serve as the inspiration for epic poets such as Homer. "In this isle," Bellerophon concludes, the heroes "old with modern virtues reconcile" in a catholicity of honorable traditions congruent with Laud's own commitment to the catholicity of English ecclesiology.

The Caroline synthesis of traditions in reconstituting the church heroic is featured in other masques as well, and as often as not, its maker must find ways to subsume volatile ingredients in the amalgam. The very occasion of Davenant's *Triumphs of the Prince D'Amour* (1635) is challenging to a courtly formation of religious heroism. As they had done in 1613 at the wedding of Elizabeth and Prince Frederick, Palatine of the Rhine, the members of the Middle Temple staged a masque for the visit of the couple's son, Charles, who together with his brother Rupert, had made the journey in order to garner support for Charles's return to the Palatinate. Rather than monetary or military aid, the masque offers the beleaguered prince a chemical transformation of his otherwise limited valor into a holistic, numinous force that might somehow, magically, transmit English charity and valor over a distance.

In *The Temple of Love*, the Caroline court again is celebrated for its resourceful and sublime heroic synthesis; in this case, the Greek epic tradition, chaste love, and the conversion of Indians into "all soul within" are part and parcel of the king's depiction as "the last and living hero."²² Similar is *Tempe Restored*, in which the king is featured as that heroic virtue combining "religion, justice, and all the other virtues joined together," with the masque assembling allegories from Homer – souls reclaimed from the wiles of Circe – and from the colonial enterprise of saving the impious Indians who appear in Circe's train. There is a contemporary logic to this conflation: authors such as Hugo Grotius envision the Indians and ancient Greeks in the same category of a paganism possessed with some basic religious values but in dire need of an enterprising Christianity. According to Thomas Morton, the Indians are offshoots from the demise and dispersion of the Trojans, at one time out there on those same seas over which Odysseus ranged and so not unreasonably imagined as encountering Circe.²³ As with naval prowess or the Palatinate, the epic venture of saving the heathens is a controversial vestige of the past – one thought by some to have been tragically jettisoned by the Stuarts when James disenfranchised the Virginia Company and Charles failed to revive its mission. The consequence of this betrayal was, it was complained, that the colonies were now fully given over to Spanish imperialism or to separatist errors. As usual, Charles made matters only worse, in the eyes of his critics, by his weak and misguided attempts to restore a colonial policy to the activism of the church, with Laud overseeing the (short-lived) committee responsible for ensuring conformity to the Church of England wherever British people worshiped.²⁴

In *Coelum Britannicum*, magnificence figures centrally in the court's vision of heroic virtue. The reformation of heroism is at odds with poverty, the virtues of which are lazy, dull, and cheap. Approximating the ecclesiological position that God deserves in our services of worship the best and most that we can give, the idea of a plentiful and restorative heroic virtue suits the basic premise of the masque that Caroline England has inherited and must enrich a culture in ruins. Thus, a cautious "prudence" seems something of a misfit in the masque. But riches, we learn, are just as dangerous as poverty is undesirable: more often than not, the love of riches has induced the desecration of temples, vicious bloodshed, and erroneous colonialism. If this be so, the enrichment of the temple is in direct opposition to an interest in New England, which is disparaged in Carew's masque as a land to which some English Argo should transport the scum, humors, and vices rejected in the court-influenced reformation of Britain. But this divide between heroic goals is problematic for the court precisely because Charles putatively oversees the conformation of worship wherever there are British subjects. The immediate context of the masque drives home its colonial dilemma: three days after its performance the Privy Council discussed New England's descent into a separatist chaos.²⁵

Whether or not domestic magnificence and a colonial mission can be reconciled – and writers such as Purchas argue that they can be – the court's heroic virtue is more securely triumphant in the mythology that unites conjugal love with wisdom and industry. But in Carew's masque the diachronic dimension of the synthesis – whereby modern heroes recreate the ancients in the same fashion that Laud would resituate the English church in a catholic tradition – remains in question. In the interest of reconciliation, Momus points out that some of the old constellations are worthy of retention, not least the dragon commemorating the legend of "a divine Saint George for this nation".²⁶ He comments further on the admirable recent habit of memorializing, in "embellished" form, the military heroism of the past. Whatever his penchant for criticism, Momus introduces the Order of the Garter as the most impressive Caroline synthesis of heroic traditions, uniting old and new but also Elizabethan – with its military, chivalric, and apocalyptic tendencies – and Caroline.

As Sharpe explains, Charles sought to endow the Order of the Garter with a religious significance at once deeply spiritual and grandly ceremonial.²⁷ But even the Armada is commemorated in the masque, suitably transformed into ornamentation in "the particular Christmas hangings of the guard chamber of this court, wherein the naval victory

of eighty-eight is to the eternal glory of this nation exactly delineated” (Orgel and Strong, 574). Once again militarism and beautification converge, with the court’s sponsorship of ecclesiastical reformation aimed as much at the body and ceremony of the church as it is at the refinement of its spirit.

Whatever Charles’s love of St. George or the ongoing possibility of an English war in the 1630s, the military element fits uneasily in the context of virtually two decades of English abdication from any leadership in the Thirty Years War, seen by many Protestant commentators as the latest (if protracted and convoluted) installment in the apocalyptic battle against the Antichrist (Orgel and Strong, 574). In form and content, the ceremony of the Caroline masque epitomizes the court’s reckoning with the problem that the spirit of its religious heroism is disturbed by the multitude of attractive but volatile competitors. But the masque also illustrates just how inventively the court’s cultural brokers can work in redefining, expanding, and even humbling its own Christian heroism.

Mervyn James has argued that the Elizabethans and especially Sidney accomplished a “synthesis of honour, humanism and religion,” whose legacy in the Caroline period was fractured between the court, which promulgated a version of that synthesis, and its critics, whose allegiance to a Foxeian vision of history was posed in opposition to those Laudians who had little patience for Foxe. To the Laudians, the “Puritan” devotion to Foxe was likely to result in ecclesiastical and social disjunction; it reinforced, that is, the Puritan mindset severing a community into the godly and the reprobate.²⁸

From the beginning, it should be noted, the Foxe legacy itself was hardly univocal, as it supported the national church and even bishops on the one hand and stood critical of the persecutions sponsored by the state and its prelates on the other. But the rifts in the Foxeian heroic were not deeply felt until the reign of Charles, not least because this heroic stood in prominent opposition to the principles of the Laudian church. In the 1630s, Prynne was all the more irksome to Laud in claiming both sides of the Foxe legacy, supporting the monarch against an evil clergy and continuing a long line of heroic patience in the face of persecution. Critics indebted to Foxe also took aim at the assumption that the newly celebrated prelate would be responsible for elevating the church to epic status; whereas Francis Markham could underscore the grand style of the Caroline temple by insisting on the “first Ranke in Honour” of its bishops, Lord Brooke subverted such a claim by enlisting his own

aristocratic heritage against the modest origins and upstart mobility of prelates such as Laud.²⁹

In turn, Laud's own preference for one aspect of the Caroline synthesis – ceremonial decency – over the others also demonstrates how multiple the church heroic had become. In a letter to William Kingsley, Archdeacon of Canterbury, he illustrates just how contentious the various constituents of the court's heroism might prove. Dated 29 April 1636, the letter instructs the archdeacon to hire a painter for the purposes of removing from a church monument "all that concerns the Fleet in '88, because that belongs to a foreign nation."³⁰ In his other letters, Laud vacillates between encouraging the Queen of Bohemia and expressing his opposition to any English involvement in wars that would work at cross purposes with his pursuit of the "honour of the Church" in terms of its beauty, catholicity, ritual, and wealth. Little interested in international Protestant coalitions, Laud shows an equally slight commitment to the business of regulating religion in the colonies: as early as 1626, he records a meeting with a Dutchman whose proposal to free the West Indies from the Spaniard involves religion "in a great measure" (3.184–85). But Laud is unconvinced that the man, John Overtrout, has a viable plan. In the notebooks kept by John Finet between 1628 and 1641, the master of ceremonies is compelled to divide his attention between the rituals of the court and the intricate diplomacy with European powers. But for Laud the latter concern, with its potential for warfare, is best avoided as a "labyrinth" – no matter that Charles's sister and her children are the Protestants captured within. Laud is not interested in the court's synthetic (and costly) myths; for him the "labour" of churchmanship should be centered on "an orderly settlement of the external worship of God," or the protective "hedge" of the church, as he calls it elsewhere. With Humphrey Sydenham, Laud believes that ecclesiastical authority has awakened under Charles, since "canons, constitutions, decrees which were formerly without soul or motion . . . have recover'd a new life and vegetation" and "Ceremonies, harmless ceremonies . . . have gotten their former lustre and state again."³¹ For these reasons and no other, Laud believes, the English church has attained heroic stature.

With the rise of the Laudians, then, no one constituent of religious heroism is a matter of widespread consensus, and none exists without its damaging or limiting components. In Peter Heylyn's defense of that "most excellent and heroicke institution" of the Garter, even St. George himself is scarcely beyond reproach. Among others, Calvin has denied his existence altogether. More intricately, some critics have challenged

the historicity of the stories so that Heylyn is compelled to be scrupulous regarding the sources through which he must recover St. George. All the same, Heylyn insists on the uses of heroic fictions: in the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, and Arthurian romances, poets embellish so that readers “might more constantly bee prompted to Heroicke undertakings.”³² He repeats the point later, when St. George is said to inspire Christians to emulation in much the same fashion that Homer’s Achilles inspired Alexander. St. George has been identified, however, with a cruel and heretical bishop so that Heylyn must purge his saint of “unwarrantable” elements. Without St. George the New Jerusalem is “poorer” but a persecutory Arian hardly enriches it. In the 1630s, a consensus over religious heroism seems impossible when in 1636, the Foxeian Henry Burton can appropriate the church heroic from the Laudians in arguing that those godly saints with “a greater and more extraordinary measure of Christian zeale and courage for Christ” will always be persecuted by the merely ceremonial and largely papist prelates, and that such Christians of “heroick grace” – ironically like St. George – will find themselves condemned as dangerous heretics.³³

For a number of reasons, then, Caroline court culture complicates heroic religion insofar as a brilliant and powerful synthesis of ideals encounters equally compelling critiques of and deep-seated fractures in that synthesis. Graham Parry has remarked of the differences between Jacobean and Caroline court cultures that the former iconography was more static, the latter more dynamic, and that Charles tended “to project himself in roles, either directly (as upon the Whitehall stage in masques where he appeared variously as a British Emperor, Heroic Virtue, or a heroic lover) or indirectly (by having artists – especially Van Dyck – depict him in dramatic circumstances, as St. George or as a triumphant Emperor).”³⁴ That is, Charles’s heroism was set forth contextually, and it was dramatic in two senses: the king sought to play heroic parts to find those that best suited him; and this fashioning of a religious hero stressed the valor of the representational labors themselves. In liturgical contexts, the Caroline church heroic could approach a triumphant stasis, but given Laud’s programmatic commitment to the notion that the ceremony and decency of the church must constantly be remade, even that aspect of the Caroline church heroic was always in the process of being established, lost, and reconstituted.

Between 1625 and 1640, this heroic process is widely acknowledged to be perilous and fallible as well as mediatory and reformative. Among those epic images to which Richard Montagu, William Laud, and other

embattled apologists return, the English church is often imagined as a ship sailing in the treacherous waters between Scylla and Charybdis, assaulted contradictorily as true religion struggles to navigate between extremes. With Hercules the writers claim to be facing the unpleasant task of cleaning the Augean stables. Montagu in particular thinks of himself as a beleaguered epic hero, alone “in the gapp” between Puritan and papist. Comparing himself to those “old heroes” of the church, he often cites the words of Agamemnon from book one of the *Iliad*, according to which God and a good cause are said to justify the hero in the face of wretched betrayal and wild insubordination.³⁵

Indeed the heroism of the Church of England is often characterized in this period by its fallible execution of a nonetheless sufficiently secure authority in assessing matters of faith and worship. Whatever the impressive mythologies of the court, then, other Caroline communities devoted to rethinking and remaking the church heroic must reckon not just with the bathetic failures of Stuart heroism but with heroism as failure in the processes of reformation. Even the stalwart Montagu draws his other “favorite tag” (as Trevor-Roper calls it) from Ovid’s transformation of epic heroism into a series of metamorphoses.³⁶ And this is the very epic translated by the man (George Sandys) whose American adventures and friendship with Viscount Falkland connect those two Caroline communities producing the most complex and searching meditations on the church heroic, Little Gidding and Great Tew. These communities are dissatisfied with the official heroic postures of a masquerading court culture, but find it difficult to reinvent – and not just criticize – epic Protestantism.

II

In 1625, the family of Nicholas Ferrar pulled itself out of the political and financial wreckage of the Virginia Company and embarked on what its modern biographer has aptly called a “great adventure.” Around thirty in number, their resolve was no less than to create their own religious community apart from, yet in keeping with, the Church of England as they construed it, so that they might concentrate on “complete self-dedication to God.”³⁷ Finding neither their London nor Hertford domiciles appropriate for this design, the family found and secured in “Little Gidding, a tiny hamlet on the borders of Huntingdonshire . . . a large manor house in a shocking state of disrepair and, thirty or forty paces from it, a little church which had been converted into a hay barn.”³⁸ In

repairing the ruins of this one estate, the Ferrar family strove to rebuild English parish religion as they saw fit, without all the external depravity and political factionalism that had dismantled their involvement in that more obvious epic adventure, the plantation of true religion among the Indians in the New World. Theirs was not just a retirement from business; it was a kind of abdication from Stuart society itself, a society that nonetheless they hoped Little Gidding might come in some small measure to reconstitute.

Having spent their first few years at Gidding refurbishing the buildings and grounds themselves, the inhabitants of the community turned their attention to the establishment and development of a round of daily religious offices. Whereas these offices were the central feature of their lives, the family members kept themselves active, some with the ongoing affairs of Virginia, others with the crafting of the famous and beautiful Biblical concordances. They intervened with many charitable acts in the parish around their manor; at dinner, some worthy book was read aloud for the benefit of the diners; and for select audiences, they staged symposia on topics of Christian history that they left behind as dialogues in manuscripts, the so-called “story books.” Each participant was assigned an allegorical name for her or his part in the dialogues of the “Little Academy,” for example, the Guardian (John Ferrar), the Visitor (his brother Nicholas), the Chief (their niece Mary Collett), the Patient (her sister Anna), and the Moderator (their mother, Nicholas’s sister, Susanna).³⁹

At Little Gidding, then, “even the walls [were] not idle,” as their dear associate George Herbert wrote of the parson’s house in *A Priest to the Temple*.⁴⁰ But in everything they discussed or practiced, the Little Gidding community was concerned with the implications of their two main adventures: the spread of religion to the world, and the intensification of spirituality at home. And as Maycock understood, they cherished both endeavors as versions of Protestant heroism. Indeed, the preoccupation of their symposia was the problem of defining the very nature of epic religion in a Stuart society that seemed at once drastically unheroic in comparison to the Elizabethans and uncommonly inventive, even multiplicative in its revisions of Protestant greatness.

Like other Caroline communities invested in the reconstitution of Protestant heroism, the Gidding interlocutors cherish certain conventions of the past. For example, Nicholas Ferrar prizes Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and the Little Academy’s dialogues are filled with Foxeian narratives of “heroic suffering.”⁴¹ Beyond Foxe, the symposia concern

themselves chiefly with the wonderful accounts of that heroic virtue, mortification, and faith manifested by exemplary Christians from the beginning of the church right up to the seventeenth century.

But in the Gidding story books Protestant heroism is as complex as it is pervasive. For one thing, the Little Gidding interlocutors are convinced that most of their contemporaries have no appreciation for the true heroism of the church, “hissing out as Folly & Fables all those Heroical Actions & Events of former Times, wch exceed that measure of goodnes, wch wee haue stinted out our selues by” (Blackstone, 191). For another, the story books mediate competing notions of Christian heroism and criticize even those heroic ideals dear to the interlocutors themselves – not least the epic odyssey of the Virginia Company.

In his *Acts and Monuments*, John Foxe divides the martyrdom of Dr. Robert Ferrar, Bishop of St. David’s, into two phases. In the first and longer part, Ferrar is depicted in King Edward’s time as the victim of slander – which includes allegations that the bishop has usurped the king’s authority, fostered superstition against the king’s injunctions, and proved himself a covetous, negligent, and popish prelate. Then, with the ascension of Queen Mary, Ferrar is burned for refusing to advocate the Mass and transubstantiation and to renounce justification by faith alone; for supporting clerical marriage; and for resisting papal authority.

In their story books, it is obvious that the participants at Little Gidding in the so-called “Little Academy” are deeply influenced by Foxe. Like Foxe, they celebrate “memorable example[s] of constancy” in the name of the faith in opposition to the flimsy world, and they read ecclesiastical history for signs of providence and for moral instruction. Replacing military heroism with martyrdom, Foxe bequeaths to Nicholas Ferrar and his family the simple idea that church histories make us “better in our livings,” “better prepared unto like conflicts,” and secure in the knowledge of “what true christian fortitude is, and what is the right way to conquer; which standeth not in the power of man, but in hope of the resurrection to come, and is now, I trust, at hand.”⁴² The legacy of Foxe is integral, then, to the heroic mortification so zealously acclaimed by the interlocutors at Little Gidding.

But as the case of Bishop Ferrar suggests, the legacy of Foxe is not altogether simple for the admiring inhabitants of Little Gidding. For one thing, Foxe supports both establishmentarians and nonconformists in the English church – and Little Gidding is at once conformable and irreducible to the Caroline version of the same. For another, the tale of Bishop Ferrar anticipates the martyrdom of slander despised and

endured by the Little Gidding community itself, caricatured by some of their more biased contemporaries as papists and separatists alike. According to Barnabas Oley, Nicholas Ferrar once remarked “that to fry on a faggot was not more martyrdom than continual obloquy. He was torn asunder as with mad horses or crushed betwixt the upper and under millstone of contrary reports; that he was a Papist and that he was a Puritan.”⁴³ As Elizabeth Clarke concludes, Little Gidding was committed not just to mediating between polarities but to achieving “a third position independent of them both.” For the Ferrars, heroism at its simplest level amounted to the labors required to excavate, imagine, or attain this other ground.⁴⁴

Even among the more careful and sympathetic spectators, Little Gidding provokes considerable bemusement on the part of English Christians, from the king and queen (who until the 1640s send messengers) to those many visitors – some official, some informal – who struggle to read the composite iconography and practices of the community against the backdrop of the Stuart religious landscape.⁴⁵ Some even defend the community against slander by insisting that Little Gidding itself is normative and not singular, “Orthodox, Regular, Puritan Protestants” as one gentleman categorizes it.⁴⁶ But the story books confirm what this interpretive quandary can only suggest, namely, that heroism at Little Gidding involves the adventure of reinventing the dignity of the Church of England itself, and that this adventure is characterized not by some confident, even magical technology of synthesis promulgated by the Caroline court, but by trial and error, dismay and hope, in the enrichment of worship and the reformation of spirituality.

In the story books at Little Gidding, then, Christian heroism is only in part straightforward, a matter of saintly patience and mortified opposition to the world. But it is also elusive because there are competing, sometimes failing, notions of heroism and each – including romance, colonization, and crusade but also peace and *contemptus mundi* – is subjected to criticism. As it is explored in the Gidding dialogues, heroism is offered as an epitome of what the Church of England ought to be or has failed to be – witness the collapse of the Virginia Company – and as a synopsis of what the church is: a critical and fallible negotiation between rival notions of the church and, as such, equivocal and mediating. As the interlocutors trade stories, religious heroism is not just undercut by a disenchantment over its illusory norms; it is also reconstituted in terms of the fallen world’s inevitable recourse to incessant critique and to sometimes extraordinary, if also makeshift, reconstructions of its spiritual endeavors.

In their staged dialogues, the interlocutors concern themselves with correcting “misapprehension[s]” that inhibit the pursuit and perfection of virtue and devotion.⁴⁷ In contrast to the world’s “opinions and practices,” they long to approximate the saints and their own allegorical titles in Christian faith, knowledge, and action. Keenly alert to their own shortcomings, and with an emphasis on the heroic execution of virtue and piety, the speakers tell noteworthy and illustrative stories from ancient to modern times. Some stories involve lapses from virtue: for example, as an emblem of the loss of charity to anger and revenge, the exceptional piety of a priest from Antioch is undermined by his envy for a protégé. Just as often in the stories, modern heroes endure the tumult of post-Reformation Christendom: Henry IV of France teaches a would-be assassin the difference between a church that harms the innocent and a church that forgives the guilty, while Katherine of Aragon suffers nobly in the rift between the pope and the king, her husband.⁴⁸

For the most part, the applications are kept simple: enmity is bad, charity good, and Christian bliss is at odds with the world’s false rewards. But problems small and large arise along the way. In the case of Henry IV, for instance, it is pointed out by one of the interlocutors that mercy is inferior to the “Conjunction of two so different Vertues,” a compound of mercy and justice (Sharland, 34). Then there is the question of warfare and military heroism: at Little Gidding, romance in particular is condemned for its unholy marriage between Christian piety and violence, but the interlocutors also credit the idea that a king’s charity now ensures his military victories later.

Throughout the story books, this problem of whether Christians can justify violence is linked to the larger question of just how Protestant heroism pertains to, or exists in, the political and even the natural world. At Little Gidding, the question of heroism centers on the problem of deciding just what holy enterprises can and should be accomplished in this world – on the battlefield, in the colonial search for a new Eden or New Jerusalem, in political and judicial actions, in acts of charity and worship, and in the perfectibility of virtue among the saints. It might even be said that heroism at Little Gidding comprises the laborious condition of striving to answer in life as in discourse the very questions that plague the straightforward validation of the resources of militant Christianity.

The interlocutors’ most searching meditations on heroism involve enigmas as to whether utopias exist in the world, whether the miracles and wonders of saints’ lives are either true or useful, and whether abdication from the world and its offices is desirable or even possible. Each

of these problems impinges on the evolving enterprise of Little Gidding itself – on its involvement in colonialism, on its quasi-asceticism, on its relationship to the English world beyond its boundaries, from the parish to the court, and on its views of a Europe torn by over fifteen years of putatively religious warfare.

Many of these questions infiltrate what appears to be a straightforward (if long) celebration of Charles V's retirement from empire and the world. The abdication itself was a widely celebrated emblem in the seventeenth century of contempt for the world; in "Content," for example, George Herbert lauds "the pliant mind, whose gentle measure / Complies and suits with all estates; / Which can let loose to a crown, and yet with pleasure / Take up within a cloister's gate."⁴⁹ But as an important icon for Elizabeth I and Charles I, "this heroycall Emperour" (as he is applauded at Gidding) epitomized all the complexities of religious heroism that Caroline students of the emperor were coming to appreciate. As Karl Brandt explains, Charles V's Burgundian affiliations lent his imperial persona an air of chivalry, yet as emperor Charles wove his knightly values into a new heroic tapestry "with the conscientious piety of the Netherlands, with Spanish self-restraint and the universal traditions of the Romano-German Empire."⁵⁰ But the universalist scope of his conception of the Christian emperor made Charles vulnerable to the staggering vicissitudes of Euro-Christian politics; to complicity with those New World atrocities that were carried out in his name and denounced by Bartolomé de las Casas; and to contradictions between his Catholic convictions and his political alliance with Protestant rulers.

The abdication itself – to a villa near the monastery at Yuste – was a resolution that caused as much controversy for contemporaries in deciphering it as it did for Charles himself. Was it a repudiation of the profanities of the world in which he had been so intricately involved? Or was it a cowardly permission for those wars and atrocities to persist that he himself did much to unleash and could do much to restrain? Did the abdication make Charles a pious hero at last, or did it diminish whatever heroic stature he had ever claimed? As a ruler who had done so much to bridge past codes to the new heroism of the Renaissance, was Charles trying to cloister a valor that he had done so much to secularize as the prince under whom all God's children might be united? More than even the pope, was not he God's agent for unifying the church against heresy and political dissimulation, for planting religion among the heathens, and for combating the spread of Islam? Was not he the prince to whom Erasmus had looked for a way out of the impasse of

religious conflict? Once the goals to “eradicate the Lutheran heresy and reform the Church” (Brandt, 258) were thwarted time and time again, was it righteous for Charles to commit himself to the solitary worship of God?

Biographers have disagreed about whether Charles’s retirement was motivated by a series of disappointments late in his reign or by a medieval asceticism that he never abandoned. What the Little Gidding community emphasizes in its day-long dialogue on Charles’s retreat from empire is how vexed and fitful the retirement was for Charles himself – indeed, this struggle over whether and why to retire, and over how to live once one has retired, is the most imitable and legible aspect of Charles’s heroism for the Gidding interlocutors. On the day set aside for the story of Charles’s retirement, the narrator (the Chief or Mary Collett) lays a trap for her audience. Charles V, she begins, ranks among the happiest of men because he combined noble blood, empire, and great actions with “the right Composure of an Inward Disposition to inioy them.”⁵¹ From his royal visage and equestrian skills to the excellence of his extended dynasty, Charles V is a perfect example, she concludes, of how external happiness complements internal virtues as the very essence of the “Heroical Prince.”

But then the Chief springs the trap. Describing her discourse as a journey over seas, into creeks and channels in search of a haven, she undermines her own assertion that Charles V represents a perfect composite of internal and external blessings and, with it, her claim that such a composite defines happiness after all. Simply put, Charles becomes the true Christian hero when he renounces the world and all its politics and pomp, for only then does he acknowledge that “There’s no happines at all in this World” (51). Even prior to his retirement, the Chief suggests, Charles himself has doubts about his place in the world, since in his “continual Exercize of Heroical Industry in most Noble & weighty Affaires,” the emperor understands the political value of pomp and pleasures but he himself has little desire for these things. Yet Charles himself is fallible: for instance, his illegitimate children make him “a greater Example by his fall then perhaps he could haue been by his Integritie” (35, 56). This last statement is significant not just because it concurs with the point made so often in the dialogues – that stories about perfectly saintly virtue are less helpful than stories of the moderately virtuous and struggling wayfarer – but also because it broaches what proves to be an ongoing meditation on fallenness as a condition of religious heroism, with epic spirituality following the loss of – and preceding the recovery of – a pastoral Eden.