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978-0-521-12946-6 - Spenser's Anatomy of Heroism: A Commentary on
The Faerie Queene

Maurice Evans

Excerpt

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PART I

Introduction to the poem

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The Heroic Poem

[1]

Spenser's letter to Raleigh, published with the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* in 1590, is a humanist manifesto designed to place the poem in the great heroic tradition, just as E.K.'s Preface to *The Shepheardes Calender* a decade before advertised the fact that here was the genuine English Pastoral. As an ardent humanist Spenser worked his way through the traditional poetic genres, acclimatising them to the English language and usually drawing attention to the fact. In his desire to be recognised as the champion of the new literary movement, he perhaps laid claim to a purer humanism in his prefatory letter than is manifested in the poem itself, and his account of the author's intention stresses the epic qualities of the work but does less than justice to those which are mediaeval and native. We are reminded, for example, of the tradition of writing the poem in twelve books, the central hero, and the initial plunge *in medias res* which distinguishes the epic poet from the more orderly historiographer; but nothing is said about the romance techniques of the poem by which story melts into story and many actions are kept simultaneously afoot. Spenser makes no mention of the great Renaissance controversy over unity of action in the long poem, although his intention to unite the twelve separate stories under a common hero, Arthur, shows that he was well aware of the issue. Instead, he insists on the heroism which is the feature of both epic and romance, and presents himself as the latest practitioner in the great heroic line which embraces both genres: 'In which I have followed all the antique Poets historicall; first Homere . . . then Virgil . . . after him Ariosto . . . and lately Tasso . . .'

His identification of himself with the line of 'Poets historicall' reflects normal Renaissance literary theory: Puttenham, too,

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defines heroic poetry in similar terms:¹

Such therefore as gave them selves to write long histories of the noble gests of kings and great Princes entermedling the dealings of the gods, halfe gods or Heroes of the gentiles, and the great and waighty consequences of peace and warre, they called Poets *Heroick*, whereof *Homer* was chief and most auncient among the Greeks, *Virgill* among the Latines. (I. xi)

Spenser describes his poem as 'coloured with an historical fiction', and the phrase offered less of a paradox to the Elizabethan reader than to us with our stricter ideas of what constitutes history. Puttenham, for example, divides histories into three kinds: wholly true, wholly false, and a third which he calls 'mixt', exemplified in Homer's 'fabulous or mixt report of the seige of Troy' (I. xix). The term 'historical' is the label of the type of poetic subject rather than a guarantee of veracity, and the historical poet is free 'to devise many historical matters of no veritie at all, but with purpose to do good and no hurt. . . .' [ibid.]. In this respect the heroic poem is the direct ancestor of the historical novel and insists as strongly as the latter on its fictional quality. This follows inevitably from the usual Renaissance interpretation of Aristotle's term *mimesis* as 'feigning'; for Sidney,² the essence of poetry lies in fiction—'it is not riming and versing that maketh a Poet, . . . But it is that fayning notable images of vertues, vices, or what els, with that delightfull teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a Poet by. . . .' (p. 160). The distinctive quality of poetry lies in its ability to exceed the 'narrow warrant' of nature, and it is this which gives the poet his special status as a 'maker' and is the source of the specific delight which poetry affords.

The main object of the heroic poem, however, is not to please but to instruct through pleasing, and for this, fiction alone is not enough. A poem must create belief if it is to achieve its proper moral or cathartic effect; it must have the 'verisimilitude'

¹ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, 1936).

² *An Apologie for Poetry*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. Gregory 'Smith' (Oxford, 1964), vol. 1.

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upon which neo-classic criticism insisted so strongly, especially if it belongs to a literary 'kind' such as the heroic which has so much of the marvellous in its constitution. The solution was to attach the fiction to historical settings and characters since, as Aristotle had pointed out when discussing this problem of belief, what is thought to have happened is clearly possible and hence credible.¹ Modern or familiar history will not do because the truth is too well known to be tampered with, and the poet's task, therefore, is to find a historical figure sufficiently venerated to carry belief and authority but sufficiently remote and imprecise in detail to allow the poet free play; in the words of Tasso:²

In some ways the history of an age or a nation very distant from us appears a subject well-suited for a heroic poem, because, since those things are so buried in antiquity that there scarcely remains a weak and obscure memory of them, the poet is able to change them and change them again and tell of them as he pleases.

(*Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, II. 15)

The highest aim of poetry is to make men virtuous, and the heroic is the highest 'kind' of poetry because its blend of history and fiction performs this function best. The history gives it the authority of a great and credible example, while the fiction emancipates the poet from the limitations of a foolish world and enables him to improve on even the best of history. It is this combination which, in Sidney's judgement, made Xenophon a heroic poet: 'For Xenophon, who did imitate so excellently as to give us . . . the portraiture of a just Empire under the name of *Cyrus* (as *Cicero* saith to him), made therein an absolute heroicall Poem' (p. 160). By means of this idealised portrait of a historical figure Xenophon was able 'not onely to make a *Cyrus*, which had been but a particuler excellencie, as Nature might have done, but to bestow a *Cyrus* upon the worlde to make many *Cyrus's*' (p. 157). The feigned *Cyrus* of Xenophon, the feigned *Aeneas* of Virgil, are more 'doctrinable', to use Sidney's word, than their historical

¹ For a fuller treatment, see Graham Hough, *A Preface to The Faerie Queene* (London, 1962).

² In *Literary Criticism, Plato to Dryden*, ed. Alan H. Gilbert (Wayne Books), p. 482.

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originals in Justin or Dares Phrygius. This exalted conception of the moral impact of literature must stem, in part, from the effect of the new medium of the printed book; and it only differs from our own conception of the influence of the newest medium, television, in that it springs from a deeper idealism. Renaissance theory stressed the benign influence of the heroic figure in literature, whereas we are more conscious of the dangerous effects of the film or television gunman.

For the Renaissance reader and writer alike the most important thing about the heroic poem was, as its name implies, the hero and Spenser seems to have been conscious of this quality of the heroic genre to a quite unusual degree. *The Faerie Queene* is very specifically a heroic poem and peculiarly rich in allusions to 'the olde heroes' who provide the touchstone for virtue throughout. The word 'Heroick' is Spenser's highest term of praise and one which he uses with precise and literal meaning: Merlin, showing Britomart her descendants in his magic glass, holds up Malgo for her admiration:

'How like a Gyaunt in each manly part
Beares he himselfe with portly maiestee,
That one of th'old *Heroes* seemes to bee.' [III. iii. 32]

Belpheobe is praised for her 'Heroick mind' [III. v. 55], Britomart for her 'huge heroicke magnanimity' [III. xi. 19]; and Calidore, seeing the virtue of the young Tristram, at once assumes that he must be 'surely borne of some Heroicke sead' [VI. ii. 25]. There are many descriptions of this kind throughout the poem, as well as innumerable casual references to the 'old Heroes' which keep the concept of heroism to the fore and play an important part in the total meaning of the poem:

Phorcys, the father of that fatall brood
By whom those old Heroes wonne such fame;
[IV. xi. 13]

The old heroes to whom Spenser so constantly alludes form a very curious collection: there are British kings such as Brutus and Malgo; 'famous founders' of 'puissant nations', of whom Inachus and Albion are examples; literary and mythical heroes like Orpheus, Odysseus, Hercules, Aeneas; and finally what

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Puttenham calls the gods of the gentiles, a category which includes Bacchus, Isis and Osiris. This mixture of the semi-historic and the purely mythical resulted from the traditional euhemeristic explanation of pagan mythology as something based ultimately on historical fact:¹ the pagan gods and heroes of mythology were in their origin historical heroes, law-givers, civilisers who for their benefactions to mankind were first adored and eventually worshipped by posterity. Spenser's collection of 'old heroes' ranked as a historical list, and it is this fact which allows him to invoke Clio so frequently in *The Faerie Queene*. There was plenty of disagreement about the precise date and nature of the historical figures around whom the myths were woven, and Miss Rathbone² has shown that there were several candidates for the original Hercules and the original Jove—a fact to which Mutability alludes when she taunts Jove in the *Mutability Cantos*:

Then, let me aske you this withouten blame,
Where were ye borne? Some say in *Crete* by name,
Others in *Thebes*, and others other-where;
But, wheresoever they comment the same,
They all consent that ye begotten were
And borne here in this world, ne other can appeare.

[VII. vii. 53]

The precise origin of Jove does not matter to Mutability since in any case he is 'mortall borne, and thrall to me'. The historicity of such figures was not in doubt, and Professor Sez nec has drawn attention to the vast body of mediaeval and Renaissance literature concerned with tracing the genealogies of Saturn, Jove, Hercules or the Trojan line back to their fountain-head in Noah, or forward to their descendants among the reigning dynasties of the Renaissance. It was no uncommon thing in Renaissance courts to claim Hercules or Aeneas among one's great ancestors.

Spenser's familiarity with this time-honoured conception of myth is obvious throughout *The Faerie Queene*. His description

¹ Jean Sez nec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (Harper Torchbooks), book 1, part 1, section 1, 'The Historical tradition'.

² Isabel Rathbone, *The Meaning of Spenser's Fairyland* (New York, 1937).

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of the heroes of justice, for example, implies their eventual ascent to the level of mythology:

Whilome those great Heroes got thereby
 Their greatest glory for their rightfull deedes,
 And place deserved with the Gods on hy. [v. ii. 1]

His account of Isis and Osyris, deified for their exercise of justice and equity while they reigned on earth, is an explicitly euhemeristic one:

Well therefore did the antique world invent
 That Justice was a God of souveraine grace,
 And altars unto him and temples lent,
 And heavenly honours in the highest place;
 Calling him great *Osyris*, of the race
 Of th'old Aegyptian Kings, that whylome were;
 With fayned colours shading a true case:
 For that *Osyris*, whilest he lived here,
 The justest man alive, and truest did appeare.

His wife was *Isis*, whom they likewise made
 A Goddess of great powre and soverainty,
 And in her person cunningly did shade
 That part of Justice, which is Equity, . . . [v. vii. 2–3]

Their predominant virtues on earth caused them to be identified with the absolute virtues as they exist in heaven, and Spenser's terminology—'With fayned colours shading a true case'—suggests how this elevation came about. It is the poets who turn heroes into gods and 'feign' the myths by which men attempt to govern their lives; and it is of special relevance to *The Faerie Queene* that poetry, particularly heroic poetry, was credited with this power and this responsibility of myth-making. Puttenham once more makes the point in his chapter on the form of Poesie by which 'the great Princes and dominators of the world were honored'. The Poets, he begins,

being in deede the trumpeters of all praise . . . were in conscience and credit bound next after the divine praises of the immortall gods, to yeeld a like ratable honour to all such amongst men, as most resembled the gods by excellencie of function, and had a certaine

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affinitie with them, by more than humane and ordinarie vertues
shewed in their actions here upon earth. (Book I, chap. xvi)

The whole pantheon of Greek mythology thus arose out of the ministrations of Homer, Hesiod and the Greek poets:

Such personages among the Gentiles were *Bacchus*, *Ceres*, *Perseus*, *Hercules*, *Theseus* and many other, who thereby came to be accounted gods and halfe gods or goddesses [Heroes] and had their comedations given by Hymne accordingly or by such other poems as their memorie was therby made famous to the posteritie for ever after, . . .

It is this power which gave poetry its almost divine status in the Renaissance and enabled Puttenham or Sidney alike to claim that the poets were 'the first priests, the first prophets, the first Legislators and polititians in the world'. Orpheus could tame the savage beasts with his lyre because he was the son of the Muse, Calliope.

Nor is this simply the critic's view of poetry; the poets themselves make this claim for their own art. Ben Jonson, for example, makes the point in his *Epistle to Elizabeth Countesse of Rutland*,¹ though not without some touch of irony, perhaps to excuse the arrogance of a belief which his plays suggest that he took very seriously:

It is the Muse, alone, can raise to heaven,
And, at her strong armes end, hold up, and even,
The soules, shee loves . . . There were brave men, before
Ajax, or Idomen, or all the store,
That Homer brought to Troy; yet none so live:
Because they lack'd the sacred pen, could give
Like life unto 'hem. Who heav'd Hercules
Unto the starres? or the Tyndarides?
Who placed Jasons Argo in the skie?
Or set bright Ariadnes crowne so high?
Who made a lampe of Berenices hayre?
Or lifted Cassiopea in her chayre?
But only Poets, rapt with rage divine? (41–63)

Spenser seems to have accepted this high responsibility of

¹ Poems of Ben Jonson, ed. George Burke Johnston (London, 1954).

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poetry without self-consciousness or hesitation, and his early poems make repeated profession of this poetic faith. In *The Ruines of Time*, for example, the personification of the ruined city Verulam asserts that poetry alone can give immortality, and whoever wishes to mount to heaven by his virtuous deeds 'on *Pegasus* must ride,/And with sweete Poets verse be glorifide' (426–). In *The Teares of the Muses*, Calliope, the Muse of Epic, boasts of the powers which she once exercised but which she now abrogates since men are no longer worthy of them:

Therefore the nurse of vertue I am hight.
And golden Trompet of eternitie,
That lowly thoughts lift up to heavens hight,
And mortall men have powre to deifie:
Bacchus and *Hercules* I raisd to heaven,
And *Charlemaine* amongst the Starris seaven.

But now I will my golden Clarion rend,
And will henceforth immortalize no more; (457–65)

The Faerie Queene is Spenser's attempt to wipe away her tears and restore her broken trumpet.

[2]

These common aspects of Renaissance heroic theory form the background to *The Faerie Queene* and influenced Spenser's attempt at the heroic genre in a very fundamental manner. Following the best authorities, he chose a hero and a period at once very remote yet carrying historical authenticity for his own times: he chose Arthur, we are told in the letter to Raleigh, as being 'most plausible'. He set the historical period very precisely—Britomart starts out on her quest just after King Uther has beaten the pagans, Octa and Oza [III. iii. 52]—yet in showing Arthur as a prince before he came to the throne, he found a period of his hero's life not so documented by the chroniclers as to inhibit fiction. That Arthur was a historical figure was scarcely questioned in Spenser's day; and the large body of modern research into the Tudor myth has brought to

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light the good political reasons for which the Tudors were anxious to trace their descent from the original British kings of whom Arthur was the most illustrious. The British line, of course, goes back beyond Arthur through Brute to Aeneas, and so by way of his mother, Venus, to Jove himself, with Hercules, Helen and a host of others all in the family. Spenser outlines the genealogy from Aeneas downwards, starting in the middle as a poet should, instead of at the beginning in the manner of a historian. Book II, canto x, gives us the chronicle of Briton kings to the accession of Uther Pendragon, where it stops abruptly since that, for Arthur, was the present, and to go further would be to leave the chamber of memory for that of prophecy. This is what happens in III. iii, when Britomart goes to Merlin's cave and is shown in his magic glass the 'famous progenie' which shall spring from herself and Artegall and culminate in the Tudor dynasty. The first comes last of all, in III. ix, when Paridel traces the line from the birth of Aeneas through the fall of Troy to the founding of Rome, and so on to the conquest of Albion by the Trojan Brute, which is the point where Arthur's chronicle of Briton kings begins.

As a celebrated figure and the most famous of Elizabeth's ancestors, Arthur was obviously a very suitable epic hero and one who enabled Spenser to pay the compliment to his great patron which Virgil and Ariosto had paid to theirs: but there were pressing literary as well as political reasons for his choice. In his role of a prince of the Trojan line, Arthur was descended from heroes already celebrated in poetic myth and identified with the great tradition of heroic poetry: Homer had begun the epic tale, Virgil had carried it on as far as Rome, and now it was the time for the British heroic poet to deal with the British sequence. The epic of the third Troy follows those of the other two; and in continuing the heroic account of the same illustrious line, Spenser was very conscious that he was treading in the footsteps of Homer and Virgil and that his argument was very literally 'worthy of Maeonian quill' [II. x. 3]. A heroic poem about British Arthur is as much a piece of humanist myth-making as any Renaissance epic on a classical subject; and it is entirely natural that the actions of Arthur and the separate heroes should be modelled on those of Hercules and Aeneas,