The Successor of St. George: Chivalric Ideal and Its Failure in *The Faerie Queene*

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Introduction

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (*FQ*)[1] has been often revised for children.[2] It may be because its delightful narrative as a chivalric romance is considered safely pleasant and even useful in an educational standpoint. The author explains in his "Letter to Ralegh" that his intention "is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" by the fine portraits of virtuous knights. His intention has been basically favoured, though some may feel it too didactic.

Chivalric appearance or guise may be one of the elements that have helped *FQ* retain its evaluation for over four hundred years. It gives *FQ* the advantage of delightfulness and morally safe outlook through which children and even adults may learn to be "gentlemen or noble persons." "Gentlemen or noble persons" suggest that *FQ* expects aristocratic readership. However, as Arthur F. Ferguson surveys, English upheaval of knightly virtues lasted long after the actual knights in shining armour disappeared, and the word "chivalric" seems to be reworded as "gentlemanly" in modern sense. Thus the author's words well make sense in present reading. It seems to me that *FQ* will survive as long as this agreeable attitude toward chivalry maintains.

FQ may appear thoroughly in praise of chivalric tradition. In fact, the narrator presents many exemplary knights who are preeminent in chivalric virtues, and the knights themselves

often extol or expound knightly honour. Guyon and Artegall are the elected members of Gloriana's "Order of Maydenhead." Calidore is the most courteous of Gloriana's court that is famous for its surpassing courtesy. Prince Arthur is perfect in every virtue required for a worthy knight. Above all, the narrator chooses the Redcrosse Knight, or St. George, for the titular knight of the very first Book, who is the patron saint of England and of Christian chivalry as well. This brilliant line-up adorns *FQ* with their glorious achievements and excellent knighthood.

In this essay, first I would like to survey the reason why *FQ* adopts so elaborate an outlook of chivalry, and then examine its validity. It seems to me that the narrator's attitude toward chivalric tradition oscillates in the face of changing circumstances of the time.

Chapter I The Elizabethan Revival of Chivalry

Chivalry itself was already considered rather archaic in Spenser's days, but it retained continued vitality and its customary influence as a guide to honourable life even after the society that gave birth to it had passed away. Ferguson examines the revival of chivalric tradition in Renaissance that took place more than once. In his study on its Elizabethan revival, he counts Ralegh, Essex, the Sidneys, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and of course, Spenser, as belonging to the generation that urged and supported the revival. Unlike the older generation including the queen herself, Burghley and Walshingam that survived turbulent decades, the younger ones were "receptive to the romanticism of a revived chivalry" and also found in it most satisfying symbols of their "high aspiration" in their life in the shadow of the court (Ferguson 69). Traditionally, chivalry highly esteemed "radical individualism" or "essentially

private values" of the knight-errantry that attains virtue and honour by his own prowess (17). Essentially private as their personal ambition was, their chivalric ideal was in perpetual collision and reconciliation with the sense of loyal obedience and public service, which was strongly required by the elder, administrating generation. The queen made the most of her courtiers' chivalric inclination by presenting herself as the unattainable virtuous mistress of Petrarchan kind of love, "the object of purest devotion and the inspiration for knightly deeds" (76), so that she was able to assure their respective service in the name of love in their personal efforts to gain her favour. At the same time, she installed her favourites as Knights of the Garter. As Ferguson says, the knightly orders such as the Burgundian Order of Golden Fleece or the English Order of the Garter, "were calculated to bring the higher aristocracy together in a common brotherhood of chivalry, united in allegiance to the ruler" (Ibid.). Hence the queen was able to attain their public service as well. By multiple self-presentation as the source and the distributor of honour, she was able to attain her subjects' service in both private and public senses.

Chivalric appearance of *FQ* may safely conform not only to the contemporary taste, but also to the queen's political demand for loyalty. The knights of Gloriana's Order of Maydenhead try to attain her grace by achieving their official adventures to which they are appointed by her. They also make much of personal adventures, and are frequently engaged to them, but these private engagements are often criticized as neglect of public missions. For example, reproached by Belge's subject, Artegall feels ashamed of his "default" (V. xi. 41. 5), and the narrator blames Calidore of being "Vnmyndfull of his vow and high beheast, / Which by the Faery Queene was on him layd,

/That he should neuer leaue, nor be delayd /... till he had it attchieued" (VI. x. 1. 3-6). For them the queen's grace and public evaluation seem to be of higher value than personal honour. In this sense, chivalry in *FQ* may attach greater importance to achievement of public missions than private adventures which the traditional knight-errantly used to think great deal of. By this, the narrator may expect favourable reading by his audience, royal and noble, that may promise him preferment either in poetic career or in public service. Chivalric outlook, as well as allegorical devices, may be the safeguard for his discourse.

After collating several authoritative books and studies on the chivalric commandments that have been rather obscurely presented, Philippe du Puy de Clinchamps concludes that the commandments are summarized in three aspects, religious, social, and private. In addition to being a brave warrior, a knight should be a good Christian who holds Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. He should be loyal to his sovereign, male or female, and affectionate to his subjects both in peace and war. He should definitely uphold his knightly honour anytime in his private or public life. The narrator presents Prince Arthur as such an ideal knight, "the prowest knight aliue, /... flowre of grace and nobilesse" (II. viii. 18. 3-4). He is excellent in all the three aspects above. He is of "wondrous worth and warlike feat" (II. ix. 6. 3). His words to Una, "Despaire breedes not ... where faith is staid" (I. vii. 41. 7) suggest his firm faith and hope, and also his "entire affection [that] hateth nicer hands" (I. viii. 40. 3) for the weak and the distressed suggests his magnanimous love for neighbors. He is also a paragon of knightly love, who dedicates devoted love for Gloriana and earnestly wishes to be her loyal servant "to dye at her desire" (II. ix. 5. 9). He is an affectionate master of

Timias. At the same time, in the current belief of "Tudor myth" that Spenser shared (Tillyard 288), claiming Arthur as its ancestor, he is the safest figure to avoid "the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time" (Letter).

Putting him in his younger days before accession to the Briton king is quite skillful, for by this setting the narrator is able to present his Arthur without reference to his unfavourable aspect, namely his helplessness to check Guinevere's repeated fornication, which is commonly regarded as the primal cause for the decline and collapse of the corpus of his honourable knights of the Round Table.[3] King Arthur himself is revered as the most worthy Christian king like Charlemagne, and Cameron shares the honour of Christendom with Charlemagne's France. However, for all his personal glory as the lord of a Christendom, King Arthur failed to preserve his Briton Christendom. The narrator seems to overlook his failure, for the last page of Briton Chronology that Prince Arthur read in Alma's Castle is abruptly torn away (II. x. 68. 4), so that the narrator is exempted from mentioning his failure. Although Prince Arthur seems to fulfill all the chivalric commandments, it seems less persuasive to allot him the public role of the defender of a Christendom because of his biographical background that was considered factual rather than fictitious then.

II St. George, the Defender of Christendom

The decades around 1600 were the time of many crucial transitions in European culture. William Zunder and Suzanne Trill enumerate several momentous elements that threatened the English government: the shift from feudalism to capitalism, the Reformation, the rise of science, political disruption brought by Puritans, and disturbances in Ireland (2-3). All of these may undermine the Elizabethan reign, but Spanish threat

(1588) was the most serious one. Ideologically, the reaction of English governments to these threats was "to reformulate and enforce the hierarchical assumptions about reality and society inherited from the preceding feudal period" (3).

This reaction explains Frances Yates' "an imaginative refeudalization" (108), but in more political sense. In order to repel the pressing threat of Spanish Armada, the queen needed to invoke the people's patriotic service. As Louis Adrian Montrose points out, the queen identified her actual female body with the nation itself, and "the threat of invasion is ... presented in the most intimate and violent of metaphors, as the attempted rape of the queen by a foreign prince" (315). The national crisis is translated to the particular threat on her personal body, and the honourable independence of the nation is reworded as her chastity. This metaphor of deflowerment may effectively evoke the people's chivalrous enthusiasm to save "the maiden in danger." Thus the basically private sense of chivalric duty is effectively used to win their public service at the time of the national crisis.

It is well known that the collision of England and Spain was also an opposition of Protestantism and Catholicism, but not a wholly religious one, for religion was firmly combined with politics then, both domestic and international. However, the political opposition was often discoursed in the words of religion or theology. Queen Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Roman Church, whereas the Anglican Church regarded itself as the only True Church and impeached the Catholics of fornication. Fornication is an inclusive term signifying at once idolatry and adultery, and hence it may suggest impure love, desire diverging from God to His creatures, which St. Augustan reproaches.[4] Such impure love is adultery, a serious sin in the light of the Christian idea of the mystical marriage of Christ

and the church, or human soul (Eph. 5. 32). Such performers of adultery are considered servants of the Anti-Christ and for this reason Protestants often compared the Catholic Church, or the Pope himself, to the Dragon of the Revelation. In this formula, the Spanish threat was interpreted as the oppression of the True Church by the Anti-Christ. Chivalric patriotism may take on a sense of a sacred war against the enemy of the faith. At the time of great emergency, the idea of public service to defend Christendom seems to be foregrounded in the English revival of chivalry.

Spenser chooses St. George as the titular knight of the first Book. The saint's famous story of defeating a dragon and extricating a royal princess from death is associated with the apocalyptic but similar achievement in the heaven by Archangel Michael (Rev. 12. 7-9), who is called "the principal fighter of the heavenly battle against the devil (or dragon) (*Oxford Dictionary of Saints* 348). Partly because of this association, St. George is called "the personification of the ideals of Christian chivalry" (Ibid. 202). The legend that a vision of St. George preceded the defeat of the Saracens and the fall of Antioch on the first Crusade may fix him in the role of the defender of Christendom. He is considered most appropriate for that public role.

That Cleopolis is juxtaposed with the New Hierusalem as its earthly type strongly suggests that Gloriana's kingdom is a Christendom. Gloriana herself is often praised of her heavenly birth (I. x. 59. 9), and her kingdom is said to be defended by "all knights of noble name, / That couet in th'immortall booke of fame / To be eternized" (Ibid. 4-6). Here "th'immortall booke of fame" may be read as "the Book of Life" that contains the names of the victors over the Anti-Christ, holding steadfast faith in Christ (Rev. 3. 5). As the Palmer says, Redcrosse

Knight's name has already been "enrolled ... / In heauenly Registers" (II. i. 32. 3-4), while Guyon has to begin the "race to runne" (Ibid. 7) to participate in the same glory. This indicates that the Redcrosse Knight enjoys a special position in Gloriana's knights.

It may be because of this specialty that only the Redcrosse Knight is clearly nominated to serve her "in warlike wize, / Gainst that proud Paynim king, that workes her teene" (I. xii. 18. 7-8). Historically Saracens were Christians' enemy, and St. George is closely related to the Christian victory over them as mentioned above. This Paynim king who oppresses Gloriana and her kingdom, or "Briton fields" (I. xi. 7. 3) is England's national foe, and is at once the persecutor of the true Christendom. By the severe dichotomy of Christian theology that makes clear discrimination between God's people and His enemy, this Saracen king may be translated simultaneously as Devil, and is easily associated with the Catholicism, and the Spanish king. That St. George is the only knight whose future engagement in the war against this king is distinctly mentioned in the text suggests that the narrator intentionally emphasizes on his status as the principal defender of Gloriana's Christendom, which allegorically represents England, Elizabeth's Christendom itself, as the narrator addresses to Elizabeth to behold her "owne realmes in lond of Faery" (II. Proem 4. 8). For this reason, the narrator may mention clearly that he is the national patron saint of England. He is called his "owne nations frend / And Patrone ... / Saint *George* of mery England, the signe of victoree" (I. x. 61. 7-9).

At the same time, because of the legendary extrication of the virgin princess from the Dragon, St. George has been considered the protector of virgins. In *FQ*, Gloriana is highly praised for her unblemished virginity. For example, Guyon

calls her "great and most glorious virgin Queene aliue" (II. ii. 40. 3), or "the flowre of grace and chastitie" (II. ix. 4. 3). Chastity may be the epithet that identifies her most characteristically. Here again the threat of the Paynim king's intrusion to the Faerylond may be interpreted as the threat of violation of Gloriana's chastity. The English particular circumstances of having a virgin monarch may be the determinant that may encourage the narrator to reaffirm St. George's patronage over England in *FQ*.

The Redcrosse Knight's preceding defeat of the Dragon that tortured Una's kingdom may be understood in multiple levels. In narrative or literal level, it is certainly read as the knight's actual, though fictitious, slaughter of the evil dragon. It may be read allegorically: the personification of holiness defeats the embodiment of the evil and relieves truth or true faith. Many critics generally seem to take this interpretation for granted. It may be possible to read it in the apocalyptic sense as the dramatization of Michael's victory over the Anti-Christ dragon, and further reading of anagogical kind as the defeat of Devil by Christ Himself is also assumed by some critics. However, taking into consideration the argument above, it may be rather likely that his overthrowing of the dragon may be the foretelling event of the knight's future victory over the Paynim king, or the Spanish assault. As Ferguson puts it, St. George is the national hero of the depapalized England, the patron saint of England's "Protestant chivalry" (70), who "became duly converted to Protestantism" (76).[5] He may symbolize the militant Protestants shaped and presented in the political or patriotic context of defending the virgin mistress of English Christendom.

III The Failure of St. George's Successor

Following the traditional attribute of St. George, the narrator provides the Redcrosse Knight with a shield which bears "a bloudie Crosse" on it (I. i. 2. 1). This shield is one of the equipments that the author's "Letter" explains that he is given by Una. The "Letter" further expounds that the armour is "the armour of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul," hence the shield is interpreted as the Biblical shield of faith (Eph. 6. 16). In chivalric tradition, a shield is particularly important because it is the symbol of the knight's honour, and at the same time it indicates the bearer's identity, as Guyon immediately recognizes the Redcrosse Knight and takes deference to him by the red cross on his shield at the beginning of Book II. By this shield, the Redcrosse Knight is recognized and honoured as the defender of faith and Christendom.

For this reason, the shield is often attacked by the enemies of faith. For example, Errour, the serpentine representation of error that leads a Christian to diverge from the right way to God and wonder in heresy, "lept fierce vpon his shield" (I. i. 18. 6). Una's cry at this critical moment, "Add faith vnto your force" (Ibid. 19. 3) may suggestively associate the shield with faith. Sansfoy says, "Curse on that Crosse ... / That keepes thy body from the bitter fit" (I. ii. 18. 1-2). It is quite natural that the faithless Saracen knight, the supposed incorrigible enemy of Christians, focuses his curse on the shield of faith. The Dragon also attacks it repeatedly (I. xi. 38, 40).

According to the old man Contemplation, the Redcrosse Knight is to be called "the signe of victoree" (I. x. 61. 9), when the shield is hung high as the token of his victorious achievement (Ibid. 60). The shield is to be immortalized. Victory may be both against the dragon and any principals of the evil, including the enemy of Gloriana's, namely the national foe of

Elizabeth's Christendom. In this sense, it is astonishing that he leaves this shield in other man's hand. It is hardly conceivable a figure of St. George that lacks his synecdochic shield with a red cross.

Reproached by Artegall of throwing away his shield in his battle, Sir Burbon tells him how he acquired that shield. That was given to him by the Redcrosse Knight when he was dubbed a knight by him. It seems that Burbon well understands the significance of the red cross inscribed on the shield, for he recognizes it as "deare Redeemers badge" (V. xi. 53. 5), and the phrase immediately recalls the first description of this shield in the hand of its original possessor: "The deare remembrance of his dying Lord, / For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore / And dead as liuing euer him ador'd" (I. i. 2. 2-4). As the original possessor did, Sir Burbon also has won many fields and defeated his enemies by that same shield, and the shield "most safety to him gaue, / And much did magnifie his noble name" (V. xi. 46. 5-6).

His lady Flourdelis has been "left all succourlesse" under siege by "a rude rout" (Ibid. 44. 7, 3), and is "crying, and holding vp her wretched hands / To him for aide" (Ibid. 8-9). Sir Burbon strives bravely "like a Lion" (V. xi. 45. 3) to banish the mob in order to rescue her, but despite his desperate struggle, he is helpless in the face of the mob whose "numbers are so great" and who "turne afresh, and oft renew their former threat" (Ibid. 6, 9). Like the enemies of the Redcrosse Knight, many "did that shield enuie" (Ibid. 54. 1), and the rioters also attack his shield to force him "to throw it quite away" (Ibid. 46. 3), but unlike the original possessor, Sir Burbon "did it leaue" and "blotted was with blame, / And counted but a recreant Knight, with endles shame" (Ibid. 7-9).

Artegall reproaches him that since the shield is "the badge,

that should his deedes display," it is "the greatest shame and foulest scorne" to give it up in the face of danger (52. 5, 3), for it containes Burbon's "honours stile" (55. 6). Burbon makes an excuse that he laid it aside "to stint all strife and troublous enmitie" that the glorious shield caused and adds, "hoping thereby to haue my loue obtayned" (54. 3, 6). He tries to justify his deed, saying, "To temporize is not from truth to swerue, /... / When as necessitie doth it constraine" (56. 3, 5), against which Artegall sharply rebukes that such feigned opportunism is not knightly, for "knights ought be true, and truth is one in all" (Ibid. 8).

Artegall's words exactly suggest what the Redcrosse Knight learned and attained through his failure and hardship: steadfast faith to truth. Truth is personified in the figure of Una, and his faith to truth is represented as his faithful love to her, but at the same time, in that particularly ecclesiastical context of the Book, his love to Una signifies his faith in the True Church that his queen's Christendom upholds. The word "faith" works quite inclusively, meaning both love for his beloved lady and creed to the national Church. Sir Burbon may be considered the successor of St. George, both of his shield and of his role as the defender of faith and Christendom. His argument that necessity allows temporary abandon of faith betrays his status as the successor of St. George.

The name "Burbon" may associate him with the House of Burbon of which Henry VI was the head, and he was blamed by the English for converting from the Protestant faith to the Catholicism in order to appease his people. The name of his lady, "Flourdelis," intensifies this political association by its connotation of a lily, the national emblem of France. Burbon's opportunistic renouncement of the shield and failure to rescue his love may be read as the narrator's criticism on Henry VI's

vacillation in English view. This episode appears to praise English steadfast faith in contrast to French infidelity, presenting St. George's superiority to Burbon, his supposed successor. Thus, even after transferring his attributive shield, St. George, the public hero, plays his role to extol the national superiority of England.

However, the preceding episode of the giant with his balance surrounded by the praising crowd is quite suggestive in reading the story of Burbon's failure. The giant insists that he is able to rearrange everything on the earth and allot goods and rights equally to everyone. The narrator lets Artegall rebuke the giant's theory, and maintain the heavenly justice that allot supreme rights to the monarchs and duty of subjection to the subjects: "He maketh Kings to sit in souerainty; / He maketh subiects to their powre obay" (V. ii. 41. 5-6). As the narrator calls him the "instrument" of Elizabeth's justice (V. Proem 11. 9), his words are certainly uttered in defense of the existing governmental idea of national order. In Artegall's argument, the giant is against God's order, and hence, he is the enemy of Elizabeth's Christendom. This idea of God-given order was supported by Protestant leaders such as Martin Luther.[6]

The crowd, listening to the giant's words, seem to be persuaded and fascinated, and fervently support him. The narrator calls them "the vulgar," "the simple peoples" (V. ii. 33. 1, 7), consisting of "fooles, women, and boys" (Ibid. 30. 9). When Artegall defeats the giant, the people turn to be the mob and rush to attack him. Here the point is not in the narrator's prejudiced reference to women and children, but in Artegall's inability to disperse them, which is ascribed to his self-restraint as an honourable knight. In the face of the tumultuous crowd, he is quite helpless, "ne wist what to doo. / For loth he was his noble hands t'embrew / In the base blood of such

a rascall crew" (V. ii. 52. 3-5). After all it was Talus, his iron servant, who banished them. In the story of Burbon, the knights may seem to try to scatter them, but almost in vain. Again it was Talus who slaughtered them "chiefly ... with his yron flayle" (xi. 59. 4). In this case, that he drives them into the sea (xi. 65. 4) may suggest the devilish nature of the mob, for it may recall Christ's miracle that drives a great host of demons similarly into the lake (Luke 8. 30-3).

In both episodes, the mob is compared to a host of flies: "a swarme of flyes" (V. ii. 53. 6), and "a swarme / of flyes" (V. xi. 58. 1-2). These flies are immediately associated with the Errour's brood, "loathly frogs and toades, which eyes did lacke" (I. i. 20. 7) creeping in her vomit full of erroneous "bookes and papers" (Ibid. 6), which are compared to "a cloud of combrous gnattes" (Ibid. 23. 5) that annoys a "gentle Shepheard" (Ibid. 1). Errour is often read as the Roman Church or the Pope, and in this clearly ecclesiastical context, the gnats suggest the Protestant view on the people so wrapped in Catholic "endlesse traine" (I. i. 18. 9) who are unable to discern the right from the wrong because of their blindness, and easily instigated to attack the True Church serving Christ, the good "Shepheard". Here again the mob is regarded as the national enemy of Christendom that upholds the True Church.

The Redcrosse Knight was able to defeat the brood as well as Errour. In similar circumstances, both Artegall and Burbon defeat or appall their respective enemies, the giant or Grandorto, but neither could cope with the mob consist of anonymous multitude but for Talus' iron weapon. The helplessness of Artegall and Burbon suggests the basically individualistic aspect of chivalry, which is at the same time vulnerable in the face of the blind mob. The chivalry worked basically for the honour of respective knights, so that the

knights carefully choose their opponents of respectable degree and fame. In fact, as seen in *Chanson de Roland*, the knights' single combats are narrated strictly one by one. As the rise of firearms subsequent to the invention of gun powder diminishes the importance of knightly arms such as swords and lances, and the corpus of individual knightly warriors of fame and names is replaced by a more official legion of anonymous soldiers in the fields, the chivalry rapidly loses its effectiveness in the actual battles. Consequently, the popularity of St. George gradually faded.[7]

Conclusion

The failure of St. George's successor thus discloses the vulnerability of chivalry, in the shift of the fighting style. In spite of the seemingly enthusiastic revival of chivalry and skillful royal propaganda making the best of it, chivalry did not serve well in actual battlefield like in the tumult in Ireland. Sir Burbon seems to recognize the limitation of chivalry in the face of the raging multitude, while he well appreciates the knightly steadfastness, for he apologizes himself "blushing halfe for shame" (V. xi. 52. 6). The controversial dialogue of Burbon and Artegall may suggest the narrator's oscillating attitude toward the chivalry between evaluation of its spiritual and emblematical role to defend the nation and doubt on its actual validity caused by its basically individualistic nature. Burbon's episode seems to be less mentioned in Spenserian study at present, but it may be significant in examing the narrator's wavering attitude toward chivalry. St. George's successor may undermine the chivalric outlook of *FQ*, which has been so consistently taken for granted and fairly welcomed.

NOTES

1. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Longman, 1977). All references in the text are to this edition. Hereafter, the title *FQ* will be omitted when quotations are from the same.
2. See Hamilton's general introduction for *FQ*, p. 4.
3. Malory's Guinevere clearly mentions her responsibility.
4. See St. Augustan, *The City of God*, XIV. 28.
5. Frank Kermode also points out that "the English have sturdily ignored" that the saint is celebrated in the Roman Church. See his *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne: Renaissance Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 151.
6. See his Dedication to *Das Magnificat Verdeutscht und Ausgelegt* (1521).
7. See *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 202.

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