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"The Faerie Queene" As A Moral and Spiritual Allegory

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Abstract

An allegory is a fable or story in which under imaginary persons or things is shadowed some real action or instructive moral or it may be defined as a narrative in prose or verse in which the characters, events and settings represent abstract qualities; or, as I think it is somewhere very shortly defined by Plutarch, it is that 'in which one thing is related and another thing is understood'. The writer intends a second meaning to be read beneath the surface story. The underlying meaning may be moral, religious, political, social or satiric. The characters are often personifications of such abstractions as greed envy, hope, charity or fortitude. "The Faerie Queene" is a historical, political and moral and spiritual allegory. The moral and spiritual allegory underlying the first book of "The Faerie Queene".

Keywords Allegorical, infidelity, hieroglyphic, peculiar, legendary adventures, supernatural forces.

Introduction

This will be more clearly apprehended by considering that as a simile is but a more extended metaphor, so an allegory is a kind of continued simile or an assemblage of similitudes drawn out at full length. Thus when it is said that 'Death is the offspring of Sin', this is a metaphor to signify that the former is produced by the latter as a child is brought into the world by its parent. Again, to compare death to a meagre and ghastly apparition starting out of the ground, moving towards the spectator with a menacing air and shaking in his hand a bloody dart is a representation of the terrors which attend that great enemy to human nature. But let the reader observe in Milton's Paradise Lost with what exquisite fancy and skill this common metaphor and simile, and the moral contained in them, are extended

and wrought up into one of the most beautiful allegories in our language.

The resemblance which has been so often observed in general between poetry and painting is yet more particular in allegory, which, as I said before, is a kind of picture in poetry. Horace has in one of his odes pathetically described the ruinous condition of his country after the civil war and the hazard of its being involved in new dissensions, by the emblem of the ship shattered with storms and driven into port with broken masts, torn sails and disabled rigging and in danger of being forced by new storms out to sea again. There is nothing said in the whole ode but what is literally applicable as to a ship, but it is generally agreed that the thing signified is the Roman State. Thus Rubens, who had a good allegorical genius in painting, has in his famous work of the Luxembourg Gallery figured the government of France, on Louis the Thirteenth's arriving at age, by a galley. The king stands at the helm; Mary of Medicis, the queen mother and regent, puts the rudder in his hand; Justice, Fortitude, Religion and Public Faith are seated at the oars: and other Virtues have their proper employments in managing the sails and tackle.

By this general description of allegory it may easily be conceived that in works of this kind there is a large field open to invention, which among the ancients was universally looked upon to be the principal part of poetry. The power of raising images or resemblances of things, giving them life and action and presenting them as it were before the eyes was thought to have something in it like creation. And it was probably for this fabling part that the first authors of such works were called 'poets', or 'makers' as the word signifies and as it is literally translated

and used by Spenser… However, by this art of fiction or allegory more than by the structure of their numbers, or what we now call 'versification', the poets were distinguished from historians and philosopher, though the latter sometimes invaded the province of the poet and delivered their doctrines likewise in allegories or parables. And this, when they did not purposely make them obscure in order to conceal them from the common people, was a plain indication that they thought there was an advantage in such methods of conveying instruction to the mind and that they served for the more effectual engaging the attention of the hearers and for leaving deeper impressions on their memories.

The critics of the nineteenth century did not worry much about unity and design, nor about the other preoccupation of earlier or later critics, the allegory and the meaning. Hazlitt (1818) did not intend readers to ignore the allegory when he advised them that, if they didn't meddle with it, it wouldn't meddle with them. He meant that it was not usually obtrusive, or recondite, and that they should not be frightened of it: 'It might as well be pretended that we cannot see Poussin's pictures for the allegory, as that the allegory prevents us understanding Spenser'. James Russell Lowell (1875) found fault with the historical allegory and the method whereby 'all his characters double their parts, and appear in his allegory as the impersonations of abstract moral qualities' (not that this is strictly true) and decided: 'We may fairly leave the allegory on one side, for perhaps, after all, he adopted it only for the reason that it was in fashion, and put it on as he did his ruff, not because it was becoming, but because it was the only wear'. He failed to see that what he admired to Homer is largely true of

Spenser: **"The true type of the allegory is the Odyssey, which we read without suspicion as pure poem, and then find a new pleasure in divining its double meaning.**' Yet one sees that he means, and he frankly admits to being bored by the allegory, which 'is too often forced upon us against our will.' No one would deny that there are flat and dull patches of elementary personification and allegory in The Faerie Queene but Lowell went further, and found himself disliking the moral purpose: 'whenever… you come suddenly o the moral, it gives you a shock of unpleasant surprise, a kind of girt, as when one's teeth close on a bit of graved in a dish of strawberries and cream'. What he wanted was escapism, and it was Lowell more than anyone else, more even than Leigh Hunt (1844) – **'Spenser's great characteristic is poetic luxury'** – who was responsible for a sickly-sweet view of Spenser's 'endless grace and dreaming pleasure' which has prescribed until today.

"The Faerie Queene" is a historical, political and moral and spiritual allegory. Underlying the fairy tale of the first book, there is a deep underlying moral and spiritual allegory. For example, the Red Cross Knight stands for Holiness or piety or true religion. Una stands for Truth. The Dragon stands for atheism and heresy. True religion and truth always remain united. But Holiness cannot remain pure. The Red Cross Knight has to encounter and overpower the serpent monster of Error in its den. Truth and Holiness will always overpower Error. This is the first truth of moral and spiritual life.

In speaking of the structure of The Faerie Queene we have compared its organization to that of a dream; we

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must now continue this argument into the allegory. It we believe that dreams have meaning at all (as by now we surely must), there is an obvious paralled between dream and allegory. The dream-content, as Freud calls it (the manifest content0, is used to represent in a disguised form the dream-thoughts (latent content). Thus the dream-content corresponds to what in allegory we have called image, the dream-thoughts to what we have called theme. In much allegory, however, the relation between the two elements is quite unlike that found in dreams. In native allegory, and even in developed religious allegory like Everyman or The Pilgrim's Progress, the image is a simple translation of the theme, by a series of one-to-one correspondences: one element in the theme corresponds to one in the image. (The Pilgrim's Progress escapes from naïve allegory not because of any complex relation of theme to image, but because the image-sequence has so much vitality and coherence of its own.) This is not the relation in dreams. One of the principal dream-mechanisms recorded by Freud is condensation: one single element in the dream-content corresponds to more than one in the dream-thoughts. To transfer this to our terms for allegory one element in the image refers to more than one element in the theme. Even from the limited observations we have made already it will be apparent that Spenser often proceeds in this way. I will now try to illustrate this in more details.

The most obvious illustration is that in so many places there is a double reference – to the moral and psychic life in general, and to particular historical events. The attempt to read Book as a transcript of Tudor history is strained and uncertain; but clearly a strong strain of allusion to the English

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reformation runs through it. The Red Cross Knight is Holiness, fighting against the temptations and errors that must universally beset such a virtue. But he is also, more intermittently and imprecisely, English religion (why else should he bear St. George's cross?) struggling against the conspiracies and misdirections of the time, as Spenser saw them. But he is not always Holiness as an achieved state: he is often the universal miles Christianus, the militant Christian who must struggle and learn and seek to perfect himself in his journey through the world. Similarly, three themes (not unrelated but certainly distinct) stand behind the figure of Arthur – Magnificence, the historic might and glory of Britain, and the Earl of Leicester. Artegall's adventures are sometimes those of an abstract and generally justice, sometimes those of Lord Grey in Ireland.

We have already spoken of the ambiguity of Britomart in another context – of her way of stepping beyond her allegorical role. But what is her allegorical role? She represents Chastity, in Spenser's special sense of the word, but not exclusively that. She represents also a quite complex Renaissance ideal of female virtu (virtu meaning strength and energy, not virtue) which Spenser was familiar with through the virago heroines of the Italian epic, and which has nothing to do with chastity at all.

We are of course meant to admire both equally; but there are times when this kind of dual or multiple significance can introduce a moral ambiguity as well. Duessa in Book is the embodiment of falsehood, outwardly fair but in reality hideous and deformed. When she reappears in Book v a whole cluster of notions connected with Mary Queen of Scots

has become attached to her. She is still falsehood, and still to be rejected, but she is also misguided beauty, and a decided element of sympathy for the unhappy queen as a woman has crept into the signification. I do not wish to enter into the vexed question of the Bower of Bliss at this point, except to remark that it cannot represent a simple concept. The idea sometimes put forward that Spenser was secretly on Acrasia's side is obviously wrong; but it could hardly have arisen if the allegory of the bower were a totally unambiguous affair. There is an element of indulged and happy voluptuousness in the description of Acrasia's abode, that takes as back to Tasso's Armida, Spenser's principal sources. And Armida at the end of the Gerusalemme Liberata is not rejected but forgiven.

Frequently, then, more than one theme lies behind the same image, and this is one of the features of The Faerie Queene that assimilates it most closely to the dream. "The construction of collective and composite personages is one of the principal methods of dream-condensation, as Freud puts it. I do not believe that we should avert our eyes from this, or try to explain away any ambiguities to which it may given rise. Spenser's moral attitude as a man may have been unambiguous though, but an element of ambiguity is an essential part of his imaginative procedure. This meant in fact that there is a far greater quantity of psychic material behind Spenser's romance-figures than a simple translation of them into the obvious moral terms would suggest.

It is worth nothing that Spenser's multiple significance is quite unlike the medieval four levels of meaning as applied to the interpretation of Scripture, and Spenser shows no sign of being aware of this tradition.

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Littera gesta docet,
Quid credas allegories,
Moralis quid agas,
Quo tendas anagogia.

The literal sense, that is, is concerned with historical facts, the allegorical with belief, the moral with right action, and the anagogical with man's last end. Now Spenser's literal sense is not historical; his historical allusions are always concealed. He is concerned with quid credas only in Book 1; and even there it is have we should believe, and how act on our belief, rather than what we should believe, and how act on our belief, rather than what we should believe that is his main subject. The whole book is based on the necessity of cleaving to truth, and what happens when we depart from kit; but truth is never given any doctrinal content. The moral sense, quid agas, is of course omnipresent; the right conduct of life in this world is Spenser's real field. But anagogia, quo tender, man's last end, only appears directly in the vision of the heavenly city in 1, 10, and in the two lovely closing stanzas at the end of the Mutability cantos. The grades of reference for Spenser's allegory are not the medieval ones, they are the romantic, the historical, and moral and the psychological. And in the simpler and less developed parts, that is in the minor characters who are mere narrative or thematic conveniences – Sansfoy, Sansjoy and Sansloy, Furor Occasio, etc. – the underlying sense is always the moral one.

A second feature of the dream-process mentioned by Freud is the converse of condensation – it is that an individual dream – thought may be represented by several different elements in the dream-content. Or again to translate this into terms of allegory, a single theme can issue in several images. Freud is not

particularly clear about this in The Interpretation of Dreams; but he illustrate an aspect of it more fully in the easy 'Character Types in Analytic Work in Vol. iv of the Collected Papers: and any student of recorded dreams will be familiar with the way that a single idea appears in the dream under various guises. This happens in Spenser too, and it has sometimes disquieted his commentators. Legouis remarks that Red Cross, who is Holiness, goes to the House of Holiness; that Guiyon who is 'Temperance goes to the Castle of Temperance. Pride appears twice over in Book 1, as Lucifera and Orgoglio. True we can explain this if we will; Red Cross and Guyon, besides standing for their respective virtues, are also their yet imperfect human embodiments; Lucifera and Orgoglio are two different kinds of pride. But the resemblance to the dream-mechanism can hardly be missed.

Often in the dream a single character is split up into its several components, who are exhibited in the dream-content as separate figures. There are places where Spenser seems to be working on the same lines. It is often remarked that it is not easy to give any simple allegorical interpretation of the principal woman-figures in Books III and IV. This is probably because they are dissociated parts of the total image of woman. The most obvious dissociated character of this kind is Amoret-Belphoebe. Twin sisters given totally opposite educations, one brought up by Venus, the other by Diana, they stand for two opposed aspects of womanhood-woman as the over-flowing fountain of love, and woman as the virgin, the solitary, the untouchable. Their sisterly relationship makes this particularly clear; but I should be inclined to go farther and include Florimell in this

group-figure – Florimell who stands for woman as the object of desire, and who herself splits into two; the true Florimell, the right object of love; and the false Florimell, its factitious and deceiving semblance. We could include Britomart too – the active virtue of womanhood; and perhaps we should; all that forbids it is that she is a so much more developed figure in her own right.

Amoret, Belphoebe and Florimell are all aspects of the idea of woman. They do not represent virtues; they cannot be translated into clear-cut moral qualities at all. They are both more and less than that; more because they represent the unconscious, unformulated psychic background, out of which morals and virtue are yet to be developed; less because they are severally incomplete. They are a composite portrait of the anima, and they have their curious, unseizable charm not because they are romance-heroines, or not mainly for that reason, but because each is a glimpse and only a glimpse of the total image of womanhood that dominated Spenser's imagination.

Lastly (for I wish to make these dream-analogies suggestive rather than exhaustive) Freud Inquires how logical relations can be represented in dreams. 'What representation', he asks, 'do "if", "because", "as though", "although", "either-or" and all the other conjunctions without which we cannot construct either a phrase or a sentence, receive in our dreams?" And he finds that the dream has no direct means of exhibiting these. Causal relations are expressed in dreams by mere succession: alternatives by taking both members of the alternative into the same context. In fact the ample array of logical relations is reduced to a simple parataxis; apparently discrete events simply occur one after another.

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This is of course characteristic of romance-literature in general. Malory's typical conjunction is 'and'. But Malory's 'and' rarely means anything more; Spenser's temporal sequences often do imply more – or to put it in a fuller form, what appears as temporal sequence in the image conceals another relation, usually causality, in the theme. Immediately after the Red Cross Knight is separated from Una or Truth (1, 1) he meets with Duessa or Falsehood. This appears as mere temporal sequence in the story, but thematically it is a matter of cause and effect. It is because he has been separated from Truth that the knight falls into the company of Falsehood. We take the meaning without noticing the mechanism because the narrative sequence is so much the expected one; having lost one lady the romance-hero naturally meets another one. Sometimes however the sequence of images conceals a thematic meaning that is less obvious. It is on her wedding-day 'before the bride was bedded' (IV, I, 3) that Amoret was stolen away from Scudamour by Busirane. Busirane has never cherished any designs on Amoret before; in the image-sequence this appears as an uncaused, inconsequential calamity. Thematically it means that because of the wedding she was stolen away; it is because their consummation is so much desired and is so close that the lady is tortured and her lover frustrated by the perverse cruelty of amour-passion.

Other relations similarly find expression in dream-fashion. Although Guyon is attracted by the loveliness of the Bower of Bliss he knows it must be destroyed and destroys it. The 'although' hardly finds expression in the narrative; there is simply an abrupt temporal transition, astonishing to most

readers, from the manifest seduction of the bower (11, 12, 70-8) to its sudden hastily described overthrow (83). Alternatives likewise: woman's beauty as the objects of desire can be either true beauty (the outward expression of gentleness, innocence and chastity), or its false simulacrum (the outward covering of flightiness, greed and untruth); and this is expressed by the two Florimells, absolutely indistinguishable in appearance. What appears then in The Faerie Queene as the simple alogical sequaciousness of naïve romance conceals a wealth of more complex thematic relations; and meaning must be sought almost as often in these relations as in the isolated signification of individual figures.

Most of these points must be taken up and illustrated more fully later on. To make an end of this general discussion we should try to sum up the special distinguishing characters of Spenser's allegory. In the first place, it is allegory, not symbolism in either a Blakean or a Mallarmean sense; nor fully incarnate literature like Shakespeare. It is of very varying degrees of explicitness, ranging from naïve allegory to romance with only the vaguest thematic significance. It is discontinuous – the general directing allegory announced in the Letter is only faintly developed, and the greatest allegorical intensity is reached in certain of the local stories. And as we have seen there were models of this kind near to Spenser's hand in the allegorizing of Ariosto. The allegory is in the most important places multivalent; it is on the whole only the minor characters who have a single simple allegorical significance. And last, in some ways most important, and to some readers most difficult to accept, it proceeds by loosely associative, half-

unconscious methods like those of the dream, rather than by the rigorous translation of clearly formulated conceptual ideas. All the thematic content of The Pilgrim's Progress could have been as easily formulated in a sermon. This is true of parts of The Faerie Queene, but in all the best parts the thematic content finds its only possible embodiment in the actual image-sequence that the poem presents. And the poem is both-image-sequence that the poem presents. And the poem is both – theme and image in perpetually shifting relations, variously interwoven sometimes perceived separately, often talked of separately as a matter of expository convenience; but ultimately indissoluble.

Conclusion

Thus moral and spiritual allegory mingles with the religious allegory of the book. The different characters also stand for various religious events and dignitaries of age. The reformation was the most important religious movement of the time and in this epic. Spenser has represented it allegorically. Is all for the reformed church of England which is the only true church for him and against papacy and catholic church. The Red Cross Knight, for example represents the manhood England or the reformed Church fighting against the corruption.

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