

NATIONHOOD AND EPIC ROMANCE:
SIDNEY, SPENSER, ARIOSTO

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND RELATED
LITERATURE

2001

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Jacques Berthoud, for his guidance, patience and generous support in the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Astrid Berthoud.

At the University of York, I would like to thank Graham Parry, John Roe and Jason Scott-Warren. I must also thank the University Libraries of York and Edinburgh and the National Library of Scotland.

Finally, I need to thank Leo Anderson, Mady Böcker, Richard Danson Brown, Clare Jackson, Claire Lindsay, Andrea Lyons, Alastair Macaulay, Malina Mamigonian, Helen Sargeant and Graham Pollitt, Jon Tummons and Jo Yeates, and most of all, my parents.

Introduction: national romance

The three texts of this study are all chivalric romances, and all national poems. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* were hailed in their own time as proof of their nation's poetic vitality, and held up as sources of patriotic pride. That pride was expressed in references to crowns of bays, and in comparisons with the epics of Virgil and Homer.

There is, as some of Ariosto's compatriots pointed out, a contradiction between this epic authority and the chivalric romance form of the poems in which it was discovered. The classical epics – specifically the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad* – were poems of war and conquest, addressing the history and identity of their nation. The medieval chivalric tradition had begun in such tales: the death of Roland in Charlemagne's wars against pagan armies, the death of Arthur and his earlier conquests in Britain and Europe. From these clearly patriotic beginnings, they had expanded and digressed. More and more episodes were attached to the central thread of Arthurian and Carolingian narrative: more knights, more paladins, more adventures. These stories were no longer driven by the initial motives of conquest and defence, but by an enthusiasm for adventure. Where the early Roland or Arthur died defending their nations, the later stories take place in a world of magic, forests and wastelands without national boundaries. The medieval romance does not show public actions but private

deeds, a world in which individual knights wander aimlessly until adventure befalls them.

This kind of narrative was enormously popular, and popular across Europe. Chivalry itself was like the international Gothic style of painting, understood throughout Christendom. In its romance form, the Arthurian cycle was largely the creation of French poets; Roland was a hero of Italy and Spain. The patriotic elements of the stories faded with their political motivation, leaving a shared culture of courtliness and chivalric idealism.

With the humanist renaissance, however, romances became patriotic again. They did not return to the clearly national tales of conquest: Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was the poem of Italy, but his Orlando is still the French paladin of Charlemagne's court. Nor did they return to the earlier, linear narratives. They kept up the digressions, the interlaced narratives, the world of magic; although political motivations crept in, the heroes remained knights, aristocratic men-at-arms who fought for glory and love. With these chivalric elements intact, they nevertheless became national.

The implicit contradiction between romance and nationhood is the subject of this thesis. Why did knights errant become the heroes of national literary monuments? Why were nations celebrated through narratives, and narrative forms, that were not about conquest, not about the public actions of war and the

founding of empires? How did the digressions and public emotions of romance become patriotic? How could chivalry become national? Moreover, how did chivalry become the poetry of nationhood at just the point when the humanist renaissance made another poetry of nationhood, classical epic, available and intensely admired? Why should poets, sitting down to write their country's *Aeneid*, instead write chivalric romances? This thesis argues that romance, with its fluid digressions, its private motives and its ability to evade political reality, became a way of writing epic in times of trouble.

1 Humanism and poetic form

In writing their national works as chivalric romances, all three poets made a conscious choice of genre. Sidney, indeed, did not choose chivalry until late in the writing of the *Arcadia*. The poem's first text is a pastoral romance: it was only when he chose to revise it into a more serious, more martial text that he cast it in chivalric form, adding interlaced episodes and knightly duels. Such a conscious decision was not available to the writers of medieval romances, who automatically treated heroic action in terms of knighthood – as in one twelfth-century romance of Julius Caesar, in which Cleopatra explains that she first loved him for his knightly prowess.¹ The humanist renaissance, with its rediscovery of a classical past, brought an awareness of anachronism, an understanding that the cultures of the past were different from those of the present. It was no longer necessary to imagine Aeneas or Alexander as heroes of romance, with motives.

structures of government and methods of warfare shaped by those of the writer's own day. Nor was it necessary to present heroism in the literary forms associated with knighthood. Indeed, the rediscovery of Greek and Latin texts encouraged the imitation of classical, not medieval models. In England, humanists like Roger Ascham argued that poets should abandon the "barbarous rhyming" in favour of classical verse based on quantitative metre.² A whole generation of poets, including Sidney and Spenser, made experiments in classical verse forms, trying to adopt an alien culture for the improvement of their own. The quantitative verse experiment failed, but it testifies to the impact of newly-discovered classical methods, and the way vernacular poetry was seen differently for the understanding of classical practice.

In Italy, a similar process affected the narrative forms of poetry. Humanist readings of classical epic encouraged critics and poets to make qualitative distinctions between different kinds of long poem, to consider the differences between the medieval romance and another, suddenly different, tradition of classical epic. The re-publication of Aristotle's *Poetics* in 1536 heightened concern for unity of action and style, and drew attention to the fact that the digressive, interlaced narratives of romance departed radically from classical precedent. Through careful reading of the *Poetics*, and of the *Orlando Furioso*, cinquecento critics developed an opposition of epic and romance narratives. Lines were carefully drawn between poems with single, unified plots and the

¹ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 110.

multiple, wandering narratives associated with romance. The distinction between the two became ever more rigid as the century went on, and has lingered through centuries of literary criticism: but it can in fact be seen in the *Furioso* itself. Ariosto often conjures up epic models before turning away from them: he opens his poem with a grand siege and Homeric echoes, then abandons this public, martial action to follow the flight of Angelica through a tangled romance forest. The distinction can also be seen in the *Aeneid* itself, where the achievement of the imperial goal depends on avoiding digression: Aeneas must leave Dido if he is to found Rome. David Quint has read Virgil's battle of Actium, depicted on the shield of Aeneas, as an opposition of the forces of epic and romance. The unified authority of the Roman world is set against the disparate forces of the east, whose commander Antony is inspired not by civic duty but by love, the very emotion that Aeneas puts aside to found the city. Moreover, Quint has shown that this opposition is, within the *Aeneid*, politicised:

Virgil's poem attached political meaning to narrative form itself. To the victors belongs epic, with its linear teleology; to the losers belongs romance, with its random or circular wandering. Put another way, the victors experience epic as a coherent, end-directed story told by their own power; the losers experience a contingency that they are powerless to shape to their own ends.³

Epic can of course be less rigid, and romance less fluid, than the neo-classical critics of the cinquecento were prepared to admit. As Quint observes, the *Aeneid*

² *The Schoolmaster*, in *The Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. the Rev. Dr. Giles, 4 vols (London: John Russell Smith, 1864) IV, 150.

³ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 9.

is prepared to devote “a considerable part of its energy to criticizing and complicating what it holds up as the official party line”;⁴ conquest does resurface as an idea in later medieval romances, notably in Malory. Nevertheless, humanist-trained poets inherited a tradition in which epic was attached to public narratives, to national stories of war and conquest, while romance concerned the distraction of heroes from duty, the experience of private emotions and the loss of moral control.

That tradition would seem to urge poets of national ambition to write epics. Instead, they wrote chivalric romances. Poetry which is itself a form of patriotic endeavour, the effort of measuring up to the classical past, somehow avoids the depiction of national events. The nationhood of these vernacular poets was expressed through private feats of arms, not through great public actions.

2 Ariosto: Romance as the epic of troubled times

The political oppositions of epic and romance provide one answer for Ariosto’s choice of romance. The *Orlando Furioso*, the first of the three texts I study, imitates and responds to the *Aeneid*, but was written for a nation with none of Rome’s pre-eminence. Worse still, it was written for two nations. Ariosto’s sixteenth-century reputation was as the poet of Italy, a nation fragmented, subject to foreign invasion and without real political existence; yet, whatever his loyalties to the idea of Italy, he wrote in the employment of the Este dukes of

⁴ Quint, 23.

Ferrara, whose politicking kept their state intact but who hardly qualified as Augustan conquerors. The clash of patriotic loyalties was made worse by the fact that the Estensi, through their alliances with France and with the Holy Roman Empire, were involved in the sack of both Ravenna and Rome, the two greatest atrocities of the Italian wars. Neither Italy nor Ferrara could provide spacious imperial subject matter. When Ariosto looks forward to the present from within his Carolingian narrative, he finds not the decisive triumph of Actium but the endless, bloody process of the Italian wars.

Ariosto's account of Italy's wars is recorded in a prophetic image like Virgil's depiction of Actium. The murals of the Rocca di Tristano are admired by Bradamante, the *Furioso's* dynastic heroine, in a moment which suggests why Ariosto, who returns to epic often and sometimes with seriousness, could not maintain a linear narrative: there was no Italian or Ferrarese empire to dominate and drive the poem onwards. The Ferrarese dynasty is indeed celebrated by the *Furioso*, but as one strand among many, as Ferrara was one of many Italian states. In Quint's terms, romance is the poetry of the defeated, and Italy could not claim the authority of epic.⁵ Quint's study, however, focuses on romance within the epic tradition, defined as the "other" of linear narrative. Romance can, however, also be seen as a positive tradition. If the Virgilian epic pushes the defeated into pointless, aimless wanderings, the *Furioso* – returning to chivalric romance, and playing with the *Aeneid* as a model – can find nationhood in

⁵ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 9.

digression. Ariosto's poem can abandon its public actions for the forests of chivalric endeavour.

Where epic drives single-mindedly towards political conquest, the multiplicity of romance allows Ariosto to acknowledge the horrors of Italy's fate without being crushed by them. The Rocca di Tristano episode is framed by an account of Italy's astonishing cultural flowering, an account of the Italian present that does not soften the reality of the wars but does make it possible to see the nation in terms other than those of despair and defeat. This is characteristic of the *Furioso* as a romance: its evasions are matched by acknowledgements of disaster, building a composed picture of political collapse and artistic strength. Those elements are opposed explicitly in some of the poem's larger battles, which take on the character not of Carolingian warfare but of the mercenary actions of Ariosto's own time. Chivalry – the ardent generosity of the poem and its knights – is repeatedly distinguished from the forces that were destroying Italy.

2 Protestant doubts

Sidney and Spenser, like Ariosto, used romance to express nationhood, and to address the difficulties and limitations inherent in heroic action. Those difficulties were not, for the English, concerned with national fragmentation. By the end of the sixteenth century, England was one of the most clearly-defined

nation states in Europe, protected from invasion by the sea and escaping civil war for the duration of the century. With Elizabeth's accession, the establishment of Protestantism left the nation in self-conscious opposition to a largely Catholic Europe. The identification of patriotism and the reformed religion was urgently encouraged by Protestants from the beginning of the reign. It became inescapable in 1570, when the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* excommunicated Elizabeth, and was driven to enthusiasm in the 1580s by the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

The reformed religion gave a compelling clarity to English definitions of nationhood. For the poets of the vernacular project – most of whom were Protestant – it also transformed the ways in which national identity could be expressed. English poets were much less conscious of formal distinctions – distinctions between epic and romance are much less evident in Spenser than in Ariosto, and are barely perceivable in Sidney – but they were still troubled by a form of fiction that, two generations later, made Milton abandon Arthurian romance for political epic. They were also troubled by fiction itself: poetry was questioned in England, as it had not been in Italy. Where Pietro Bembo had discussed the best way of improving the vernacular, and du Bellay had defended the French language, Sidney apologised for poetry against the charge that it was an incitement to sin, “the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a *Sirens* sweetnesse, drawing the minde to the Serpents taile of sinful

fancies”.⁶ Richard Helgerson has pointed out how many poets of this generation, including Sidney, cast themselves in the role of prodigals, wastefully spending their youthful energies on poetry.⁷

Beyond these Protestant attacks on poetry, there were further denunciations of chivalric romance. These were in fact part of a much longer tradition of humanist complaints which concerned not only the specific failings of romances like the *Morte D'Arthur* but the dangers of the honour code that lay behind them. The knight of romance is an independent, indeed autonomous figure, based on the feudal man-at-arms who lived by fighting, whose code of honour required aggressive self-assertion, and who was willing to justify himself by violence. Such a code left “little room for the concepts of sovereignty, or of unconditional obedience”.⁸ This concept of honour gradually changed, affected by increasingly centralised state power and by humanist concepts of civic duty, of virtue achieved through learning and service rather than military might and lineage. Honour came to rest not in the militant independence of the man-at-arms, but in the gift of the monarch, who would reward loyal service. This was a shift from the recognition that rebellion against the prince was sometimes necessary to a belief that such rebellion was dishonourable treason. That process was slow and uneven, with ambitious aristocrats ever ready to hark back to the autonomy they had enjoyed in feudal times.

⁶ *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (1912; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), III, 28.

⁷ Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

Chivalric romance, however, perpetuated that feudal independence. When the knights of the *Furioso* wander, it should be remembered, they leave duty to their liege behind them. The idealised feudalism of romance, and of chivalric festivity, did not find favour with Christian humanists. The attacks of men like More, Erasmus, Vives and, in a later generation, Ascham reflect the new learning's distrust of the older honour system. None of these men were aristocratic; they had no reason to sympathise with feudal values. For the generation of Sidney and Spenser, matters were quite different. The success of humanist and Protestant education extended to the upper classes. A generation of classically-trained poets and scholars were themselves of the nobility and gentry, or wished to associated themselves with them. Spenser promised that *The Faerie Queene* would "fashion a gentleman or noble person";⁹ Sidney was defensive about his own lineage, though unmistakably the heir apparent to two earldoms. Moreover, both were or had tried to be attached to the court, which was traditionally the fount of chivalry and was ready to respond to chivalric revival.

At Elizabeth's court, chivalry was enthusiastically embraced by a Protestant humanist nobility, who used knighthood both to express homage to the queen and to make its own claims to political authority. The different elements of independence and obedience, of religion and feudal self-assertion, could be kept

⁸ Mervyn James, *Society, Politics, Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 327.

⁹ "A Letter of the Authors", in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977) 737.

in balance, but there were inevitable tensions. The strongest of these were in religion. A theology of original sin, insisting on humanity's frail and corrupted state, utterly contradicted an aggressively self-reliant honour code. The strain was all the greater because chivalric independence was most eagerly claimed by the forward Protestant faction, who chafed under Elizabeth's caution in foreign policy.

These tensions also affected Elizabethan writers of romances. Ariosto had no centralised state bearing down on his romance; his knights are uninhibitedly unruly, without the restraints of political structures to enforce their obedience. Later in the century, the Italian peninsula was dominated by the Holy Roman Empire and by the papacy, and the pressures of obedience are much more marked. In England, writers attached to Leicester's forward Protestant faction produced chivalric romances which, as new Historicist critics have shown, did support and encourage aristocratic autonomy. Through comparisons with Tasso and Ariosto, Richard Helgerson has linked the romance form of *The Faerie Queene* to the resistance of monarchical authority, while Richard McCoy has emphasised the displacement of Elizabeth from the poem.¹⁰ McCoy and David Norbrook both examine the rebellions and political unruliness in Sidney's chivalric fiction, although with less attention to chivalric romance.¹¹

¹⁰ Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 40-59. Richard McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood: The literature and politics of Elizabethan chivalry* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989) 146-150

These studies do not, however, address the often corrosive effects of Protestantism on honour codes, or the reflection of religion in chivalric texts. The new ideals of obedience were accepted and internalised, as Mervyn James has shown, through a new moralised sense of politics backed up by Protestantism.¹² It became increasingly difficult to imagine rebellion: even Essex, whose chivalric unruliness ended in outright revolt, rejected honour culture after his trial and died a Protestant death. There are similar tensions in the chivalric texts of both Sidney and Spenser: the revised *Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* are romances, but they are also Protestant texts, showing considerable awareness of original sin. An aggressively self-assertive form of heroism appears in the hands of poets trained to think in terms of human frailty.

For Sidney, those contradictions run through the *Arcadia*. The chivalric revisions to the first pastoral text give his heroes extensive opportunities for knightly display. Although they wander into interlaced adventures, the political structures of the poem restrict them as much in the romance forest as they do out of it. Pyrocles and Musidorus plunge into adventure or pastoral retreat, only to find that they cannot leave their duties behind. Their exploits, begun in hubris and the self-aggrandisement of chivalry, tend to disaster. This is heightened by an English absence of an epic/romance opposition. For Sidney's heroes there is no alternative to romance action, no epic duty to which they can return. Their knightly deeds fit neither the pattern of chivalric autonomy nor that of

¹¹ Norbrook, David. *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). 91-108.

honourable public service. The form of the *Arcadia*, a romance drawn from the *Amadis de Gaule*, should encourage and support heroic action, but Sidney repeatedly slides away from depicting it. Where *The Faerie Queene* leaves Gloriana just beyond the limits of the poem, allowing Spenser's knights the freedom of chivalric action, Sidney pushes romance action itself out of sight. Successful heroism in the *Arcadia* is almost always off-stage; as soon it presents itself for examination, its limitations become painfully obvious. Pyrocles and Musidorus can be relied upon to win duels, but that success does not necessarily resolve political conflict, which requires the authority of a prince to settle it.

Sidney seems to want to give his heroes political autonomy, but they remain constricted by obedience, limited and incapable of resolving their exploits. The problem is left open in the unfinished second *Arcadia*, but there are signs of possible answers. The good prince Euarchus, almost alone among the *Arcadia*'s characters, does not get into trouble: all his actions take place within the political structure of obedience. This is surely the Protestant humanist solution – action justified by the sanction of the monarch. The second answer lies in the figure of Pamela, who demonstrates a wholly convincing virtue in Cecropia's prison. This is, however, a passive rather than an active solution. Pamela has the honour of bearing witness to God, echoing a strong tradition of English martyrology, but her example does not solve the central problem of English heroic romance: how to present heroic action in the face of original sin?

¹² James, 364.

I will argue that the problem of original sin becomes central to *The Faerie Queene*, and to its chivalry. The poem's romance landscape, with its tangled forests and wandering, unmarked paths becomes emblematic of the fallen world itself. Romance digression and loss of control here suggest, not a failure of political power, but humanity's dependence upon divine providence. Knighthood, a frail, aggressive and glamorous form of heroism, embodies the limited capabilities of human action. It suggests at once the need for heroic action and – given the morally dubious associations of knightly independence, and the political limits put on nostalgic feudalism – its vulnerability to corruption. The greatest danger, both in the political terms of the centralised state and the theological terms of predestination, is over-confidence in human power, too great a degree of self-reliance. Spenser does also allow his heroes the freedom of the chivalric knight-errant, their quests sanctioned by a Faerie Queene whose appearance in the poem is always postponed. Those continuous deferrals displace Elizabeth from the poem, but they are also part of a larger pattern of digression and postponement. The poem's action is drastically contingent. The knights, famously, never quite finish their quests; there are betrothals but – among the human characters – no marriages; Arthur never finds Gloriana; the poem itself, having changed over time, necessarily remains unfinished. The world of Spenser's romance is radically temporal, its deferrals underlining the impossibility of resolution without grace.

Given the identification of Protestantism with English national selfhood, these theological elements serve to make *The Faerie Queene* an intensely national poem. Spenser, in fact, draws on a wide range of English nation-writing in the course of *The Faerie Queene* – from chronicle history to descriptions of the land – and these too are shaped by the largest narrative of all, that of grace.

4 Methodological remarks

The thesis is in three parts, each addressing a single text over several sections, with similar concerns in each section.

The three poems are unmistakably written as part of the vernacular project. The *Furioso*, the *Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* all aim, in different ways, to improve and extend the local language. Spenser and Ariosto explicitly measure their poems against Virgil's, against a classical epic tradition; Sidney's, with its range of inset lyric forms, offers rather a *défense et illustration* of poetic English. In matching themselves against the ancients, the vernacular authors aimed at poetic reputation as well as poetic achievement. All three authors were acclaimed as poets laureate, the authors of canonical texts. That acclamation was grounded in poetic craft, but it also required a literary community eager to bestow poetic garlands. These three poems were hastily welcomed into the national canons of Italy and England: both countries, for different reasons,

needed national poets. The praise conferred on Ariosto, Sidney and Spenser expresses a perceived lack or inadequacy in the national vernacular, and acknowledges their achievement in raising the to the level of the language of Virgil and Homer.

In a thesis about nationhood, it is necessary to understand the state of the two nations involved. I therefore explore the historical context of all three poems, both as background to the patriotism of the vernacular project, but also because all three poets confront and incorporate the events of their own time. Thus I pursue poetry in history, and history in poetry. Spenser and Ariosto both include grand inset histories, moments of Virgilian prophesy which present the nation in a particular perspective, and which profoundly affect how nationhood is addressed elsewhere in their poems. Sidney's use of historical material is rather different. There are no direct references to England, although there are numerous political parallels between events in Arcadia and in Britain. These historical allegories have been examined in other studies – notably in Blair Worden's book-length analysis of politics in the *Arcadia* – and are, perforce, less my concern.¹³ I will, however, consider Sidney's own death, which had a significant impact on the definition of nationhood and of poetry in Elizabethan England, becoming an important element in Protestant propaganda. I hope to show in all three cases that responses to history are shaped by the literary and political concerns of the poets of nationhood. Ariosto balances Este and Italian loyalties

¹³ Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

as he retells the wars of Italy; Spenser casts his chronicles of England in a form that is shaped both by contemporary writings about the nation and the shaping narratives the of Protestant English providentialism. My own examination of history and poetic history has been nourished by the historians I have consulted and by “new” and “old” historicist literary critics. As my concern for the canonical status of these poems suggests, I have been influenced by New Historicism, and especially by Richard Helgerson, whose studies of the Elizabethan poetic career and of English nationhood have shaped some of the questions this thesis addresses. I am, however, more an “old” than a “new” Historicist: my readings are dominated by the poets and their compositions, and I have made more use of traditional history than of anthropology.

Finally, I examine all three texts through close readings. Helgerson has suggested that the pressures of academic institutions make “every literary academic... an obsessive close reader”.¹⁴ However – apart from the fact that all poetry, from the epigram to the epic, is by definition nothing if not an exhibition of the art of language – in a discussion of poetry self-consciously written in the vernacular, attention to language is inescapable, and I have no wish to escape it. Concern both for historical context and for the traditions of interpretation – how their contemporaries and followers read Ariosto, Sidney, Spenser – should, I hope, protect me from the stigma of the well-wrought urn. Cultural contexts necessarily inhabit texts; but when those texts make language itself the creative

¹⁴ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 311.

mode of nationhood, it becomes necessary to show how poetic language – including formal techniques from the form of a stanza to the shape of a narrative – was used to express and consolidate the idea of the nation.

“una nazione intiera... conuiene in vno”: The *Orlando Furioso* as a national poem.

The rise of the vernacular as a respected literary language was, throughout Europe, linked to developing ideas of nationhood. Literary monuments, written in a country’s own language, could express and create collective pride, proving the cultural strength of a nation. Heroic poetry was particularly important to this endeavour: the writing of a new *Aeneid* would be the most convincing proof of a nation’s ability to measure up to classical Greece and Rome. Joachim du Bellay, calling on French poets to write a “long Poëme Francoys”, a French epic, used the *Furioso* as his example:

... ò toy, qui doué d’vne excellente felicité de nature, instruit de tous bons Ars, & Sciences, principalement Naturelles & Mathematiques, versé en tous genres de bons aucteurs Grecz, & Latins... ò toy (dy-je) orné de tant de graces, & perfections, si tu as quelquefois pitié de ton pauvre Langaige, si tu daigne l’enrichir de tes Thesors, ce sera toy veritablement qui luy feras hausser la Teste, & d’vn brave Sourcil s’egaler aux superbes Langues Greque & Latine, comme a faict de nostre Tens en son vulgaire un Arioste Italien, que j’oseroy’ (n’estoit la sainteté des vieulx Poëmes) comparer à un Homere & Virgile.¹

This example, in this argument, gives some sense of the *Furioso*’s reputation across Europe. Not only has Ariosto, by implication, all the “graces & perfections” of du Bellay’s ideal poet, he has, by writing the *Furioso*, made modern Italy the equal of the classical past. Du Bellay’s pretended reluctance

¹ Joachim du Bellay, *La Deffence et illustration de la Langue Francoyse* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1972), Book II, Chapter V.

to ignore “la sainteté des vieux Poèmes” underlines how recently Italy has achieved this splendour; the final version of the *Furioso* was published only seventeen years before Du Bellay published his *Deffence*. Ariosto’s reputation as a poet whose eminence matched Homer and Virgil was even stronger in Italy itself. Contemporaries claimed that Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, had crowned the *Furioso*’s author poet laureate in recognition of the *Furioso*’s greatness. Ariosto’s son denied this report, but it is significant that it was widely repeated and readily believed.² Ariosto was, in effect, Italy’s laureate, and a story which gave him official status as such was satisfying and credible. Even the poem’s detractors were obliged to take it seriously as a work with claims to national status, and it became a focus for the critical debate on epic and the establishment of Italian poetry. The *Furioso* proved the cultural vitality of the peninsula; it expressed and created a vision of Italy, a confident ideal of national greatness.

This ideal had no political reality. Italy was not only divided but, as the poem was being written, divided against itself. From 1494 until well after Ariosto’s death the different Italian states fought against each other, supported or led by the intervention of foreign armies. If Charles V had crowned the poet with bays, his authority to do so would have rested on his power over much of the peninsula. Ariosto would have been crowned for celebrating the Empire, not for Italy. Moreover, the poem was written in circumstances that did not

² Gardner, Edmund G. *The King of Court Poets: A Study of the Life and Times of Lodovico Ariosto* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), 257.

encourage a patriotic view of the nation. Ariosto wrote at the court of Ferrara, in the service of the dukes of Este. The *Furioso*'s Virgilian strand, a much-admired element which was cited to prove the poem's epic status, presented the founding not of Italy but of one city state, and the collective pride expressed by the poem is apparently centred on the much narrower project of glorifying the Estensi. This absence of explicit national celebration affected the poem's reception in the nineteenth century. After the unification of Italy it was considered to be important in the canon of great Italian works, but given a lower place in the national curriculum than other, more obviously "patriotic" texts. The nineteenth-century critic Francesco De Sanctis categorised the poem (as he had categorised the renaissance) as dreamily apolitical, turning its back on reality and on nationhood:

Siamo nel regno della pura arte: assistiamo a' miracoi dell'immaginazione. Il poeta volge le spalle all'Italia, al secolo, al reale e al presente...³

This poet of pure art, creator of a world "dove non è... patria" was also recognised in his own century as the laureate of Italy.⁴ The *Furioso* did not seem explicitly Italian to the generation of the Risorgimento, yet it achieved, in its own day, the status of a national poem. More than that, it became a model for other national poetry, the successful modern epic that du Bellay praised and

³ "We are in the realm of pure art, we witness the miracles of the imagination. The poet turns his shoulders on Italy, on his century, on the real, on the present." [trans. mine] Francesco De Sanctis, "Ariosto", in M.T. Lanza, ed., *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1964) vol 2, 468.

⁴ De Sanctis, 2, 477.

Spenser tried to overgo. How, then, did Ariosto achieve such an expression of Italian identity?

1 Reception of the poem

The *Furioso*'s success as a national poem was, in the first instance, based on its extraordinary popularity. Its fame throughout Europe started with the fact that it was a best-seller. The evidence of this success is overwhelming, and has been well documented by, among others, Giuseppina Fumagalli, Marina Beer and Daniel Javitch. They have shown, with reference to the poem's printing history, to its influence on subsequent romance and to the critical debates of the later cinquecento, how famous and how widely read the *Furioso* was in sixteenth-century Italy. This enormous readership, made it, in practice, a national poem: its popularity made it a cultural fact, an unmistakable achievement of Italian literature.

i The vernacular

As du Bellay's reference to Ariosto suggests, the *Furioso*'s most important national element was that it was written in the vernacular. This was not a simple or an obvious choice. Much of Ariosto's early poetry, written while he studied with the humanist Gregorio da Spoleto, was in Latin. According to the contemporary critic Giovan Battista Pigna, Ariosto's friend Pietro Bembo

encouraged him to write in Latin rather than Italian. Both writers became champions of the vernacular, Ariosto through the *Furioso* and Bembo through his prose writings, his edition and promotion of Petrarch as a canonical writer, and through his *Prose della volgar lingua*, a defence of Italian which influenced du Bellay's *Deffence* and Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. In Italy, as later in France and England, the vernacular was promoted by a group of writers, who shared the need for a language through which the nation could be defined and expressed.

Use of the Italian vernacular was complicated by the peninsula's range of dialects. Polishing the *volgar lingua* was both a practical and a poetic concern: if Italians were to write great poetry, it should be comprehensible across Italy. By the sixteenth century the contact between the country's courts and regions through diplomacy, trade and travel meant that the vernacular was moving towards a unified language.⁵ Even so, the regional identity of late quattrocento and early cinquecento Italian prose can usually be identified.⁶ A Florentine would be able to read a Ferrarese text, but not without noticing differences and local peculiarities. The need for a common language became even more apparent with the influence of printing: publishers were reluctant to print works written in less the accessible dialects. The form that basic Italian should take was passionately disputed. Bembo argued that trecento Tuscan, the language of

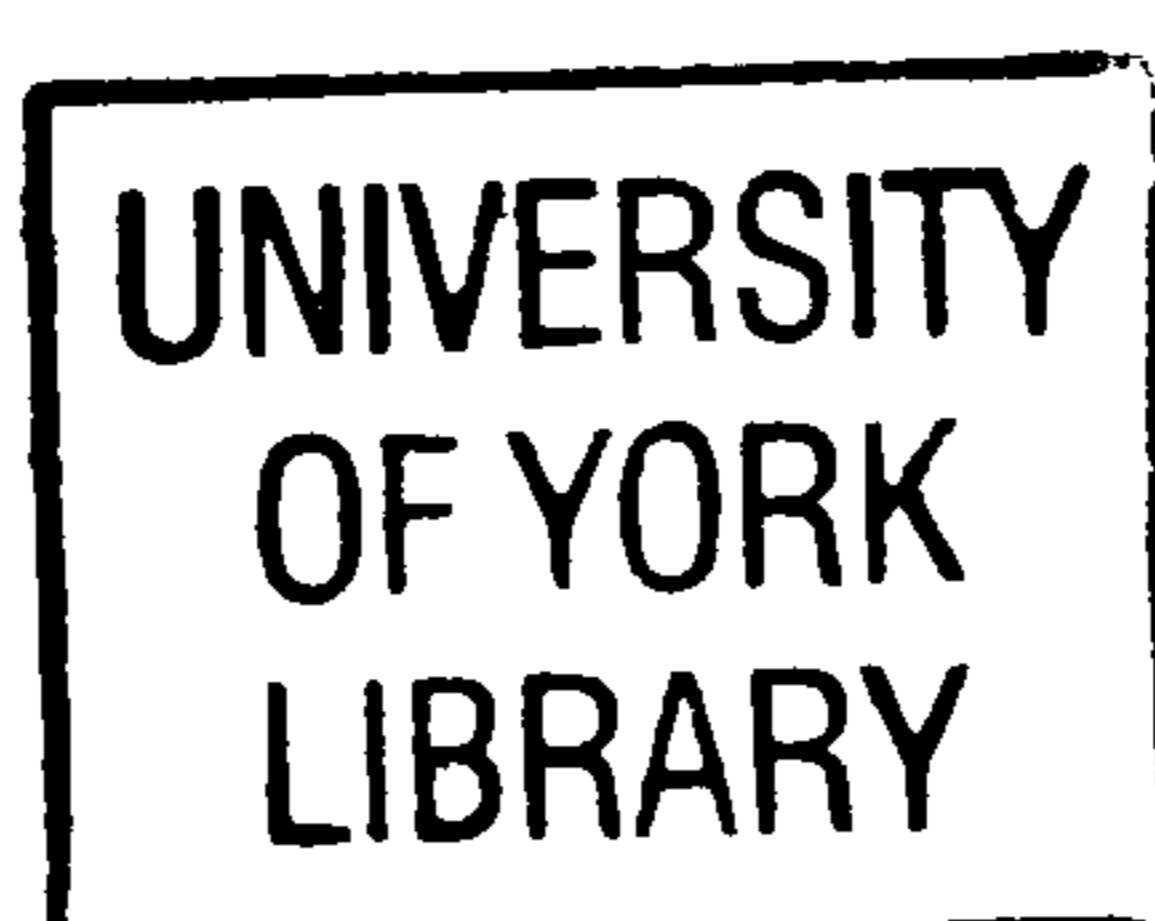
⁵ C. P. Brand, *Ludovico Ariosto: A Preface to the "Orlando Furioso"* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), 166.

Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch, should be taken as a model. Another faction championed the language of the courts – itself an ambiguous option, since there were variations from Ferrara to Mantua, from Urbino to Rome.

This debate had nationalist overtones; the need for a unified Italian language was related to a sense of the peninsula as a nation in thought if not in fact. Bembo's praise for trecento authors gave Italians an established (although admittedly Florentine) canon, a shared cultural heritage. In practice, Tuscan was becoming accepted. The common features of the *lingua cortegiana* owed much to the imitation of the three trecento writers, and even authors who claimed to write in their local dialects rarely departed much from Tuscan.⁷ The *Furioso's* success was possible because Ariosto adopted this language; Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, to which the *Furioso* is a sequel, fell out of fashion because it was written in the increasingly neglected Reggian Emilian dialect. Adopting the right language was vital to the poem's success; for the last edition of the *Furioso*, Ariosto made substantial linguistic revisions, bringing his poem more into line with Bembo's prescriptions. As Lanfranco Caretti has argued, this revision – besides making the *Furioso* a more polished work – was the adoption of a "national" language in reaction to the increasing fragmentation of Italy.⁸

⁶ Bruno Migliorini and T. Gwynfor Griffith, *The Italian Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 210. Regional dialects remain strong in Italy today.

⁷ Migliorini and Griffith, 212.



ii Readership

Ariosto evidently aimed at a much wider audience than that of the Ferrarese court; the early records of the poem show that he sold it across Italy. The first edition was printed, probably at Ariosto's own expense, by Giovanni Mazocco in Ferrara in 1516. Conor Fahy has calculated that the first printing was of 1,500 copies: this was, by cinquecento standards, an edition of substantial size.⁹ From his poem's first appearance Ariosto aimed for large sales beyond the audience of his patrons in Ferrara: within a fortnight of the first printing, he turned up in Mantua with a case full of books, presenting copies of his poem to the Marquis and his family and preparing to sell the rest. He also obtained privileges for the poem from the Pope and the Doge of Venice.¹⁰

These hopes of sales across the peninsula were quickly justified. By 1520, Ariosto wrote to Mario Equicola, expressing his astonishment that copies of the *Furioso* remained unsold in Verona:

non posso creder che quel libraio no li abbia espediti tutti, perché in nessun altro luogo di Italia non so dove ne restino più da vendere: e se fin qui non

⁸ Caretti, *Antichi e Moderni* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976) 107.

⁹ Conor Fahy, "Some Observations on the 1532 Edition of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*" (*Studies in Bibliography* 40 (1987)), 74

¹⁰ Fahy, 74. The letter to the Doge, dated 25 October 1515, survives; see Ludovico Ariosto, *Satire e Lettere* (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954), 96.

gli ha venduti, non credo che più li venda. Per questo seria meglio che il libraro li rimettesse qui, perché me ne son dimandati ogni dì.¹¹

Ariosto seems prepared to believe that the market for copies in Verona may be exhausted, but demand evidently remained strong elsewhere. This success justified the second, revised edition of 1521; other, apparently unauthorised editions soon followed. In 1524 the poem was reprinted by in Milan, and two further editions appeared in Venice.¹² A further Milanese edition appeared in 1526, and two Venetian printings came out the following year. This text was issued five more times in Venice, and once in Florence, before being superseded by Ariosto's final version of 1532. The text was entirely reworked, with several new episodes – this version is six cantos longer than its predecessors – and considerable changes to language and style. An order for paper suggests that the 1532 edition was of 3,000 copies.¹³ In 1533, the year of the poet's death, the 1532 text was reprinted twice in Venice and once in Rome. Twelve more Venetian editions had been printed by 1540, besides editions in Turin and Milan. Another fifty appeared between 1541 and 1560. Again, most of these editions were published in Venice – the Venetian printer Gabriel Giolito issued the poem twenty-seven times in eighteen years – but still more

¹¹ “I cannot believe that that bookseller has not disposed of all of them, because I know of no other place in Italy where any remain to be sold: and if he has not sold them by now, I do not believe that he will sell any more. For this reason it would be better for the bookseller to send them back here, because I am asked for more copies every day.” Letter to Mario Equicola dated 8 November 1520. [Translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.]

¹² Giuseppe Agnelli and Giuseppe Ravegnani, *Annali delle Edizioni Ariostee* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1933) 20-23.

¹³ Fahy, 75. Fahy suggests that the “eternal optimism of the author-publisher” would explain so huge a print run; the poem's sales to date would justify it.

were printed in Rome, Florence and Lyons. The *Furioso* was, beyond question, the most successful Italian poem of its time.

Sixteenth-century commentators pointed out that the *Furioso* was read by every kind of Italian. Giuseppe Malatesta claimed in 1589 that

Se voi praticate per le Corti, se andate per le strade, se passeggiate per le piazze, se vi ritrovate ne' ridotti, se penetrate ne' Musei, mai non sentite altro, che, o leggere, o recitar l'Ariosto. Anzi, che dico Corti, che dico Musei? Se nelle case private, nelle ville, ne' Tugurij stessi, & nelle capanne ancora si trova, & si canta continuamente il Furioso. Lascio stare, che non sia scuola, nè studio, nè Academia, dove non si faccia conserva di questo mirabil poema, ma diciam pure delle inculte villanelle, & delle rozze pastorelle.¹⁴

Malatesta's broad claims suit his critical purposes: he was writing to defend the *Furioso* from the attacks of neo-Aristotelian critics, who objected to the work on formal grounds. His account is, however, substantiated by other commentators. By the 1580s, references to the *Furioso*'s popularity were a critical commonplace, and the breadth of the poem's audience was frequently observed in the debate about its merits and epic qualities. The most extravagant elements of Malatesta's account – his rough shepherdesses, who presumably could not read – are corroborated by other accounts. Malatesta himself explains that the illiterate had the poem read to them, then set it to music and sang it, badly.¹⁵ Giovanni de' Bardi de Vernio, another critic, agreed: the poem was sung in taverns, in barber shops, and by noblemen and men of great learning.¹⁶ Travellers's tales describe working-class Italians chanting poetry to each other, most famously the gondoliers of Venice.¹⁷

¹⁴ "If you frequent the courts, if you walk along the streets, or through the squares, if you find yourself in salons, if you enter academies, you never hear anything but Ariosto being read and recited. Indeed, why do I say courts and academies when in private homes, in country houses, even in hovels and huts one also finds the *Furioso* continually recited. Leaving aside that there is not a school, a study, or an academy where this wonderful poem is not held dear, I am speaking as well of uneducated country lasses and crude shepherdesses." Malatesta, *Della nuova poesia* (1589), quoted and translated in Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of Orlando Furioso* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁵ Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*, 169n.

¹⁶ Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) II, 985.

¹⁷ Goethe describes the survival of such songs in a letter from Venice dated 6 October 1786: "This evening I bespoke the celebrated song of the mariners, who chaunt Tasso and Ariosto to melodies

The commentators of the cinquecento saw the *Furioso*'s popularity as a source of praise or blame – Nicolò degli Oddi argued that Ariosto, quoted in shops and brothels, was evidently plebeian¹⁸ – but they were agreed on the main point: the *Furioso* was an unprecedented success, and that success was with a uniquely broad public. We do not know how many boundaries of geography and education it failed to cross; we do know that it crossed more, with more conspicuous success, than any other Italian work of the sixteenth century. The publishing history confirms this image of the *Furioso* as the best-seller of its age. The many Venetian editions were evidently aimed at different audiences. The *Furioso* was printed in the greatest possible range of formats: all sizes and qualities, in several kinds of type, with and without illustrations and commentaries. All these variations were aimed at different kinds of readers. Javitch points out that:

what was extraordinary about Ariosto's poem – and this confirms its universal appeal – is that between 1521 and 1584 it seems to have embodied virtually every one of the particular typographical physiognomies that Venetian publishers had devised for the different kinds of readers who made up their market.¹⁹

The Sisto Libbraro al Libro edition of 1526, for example, was issued in a small octavo format, the text printed in two columns and in gothic type (both usually associated with the cheaper end of the market.) This edition was presumably

of their own. This must actually be ordered, as it is not to be heard as a thing of course, but rather belongs to the half-forgotten traditions of former times. I entered a gondola by moonlight with one singer before and the other behind me. They sing their song, taking up the verses alternately." *Travels in Italy* (Boehm, 1883), 73. Byron later commented that the gondoliers no longer sang (*Childe Harold*, IV,iii).

¹⁸ Weinberg, II, 1035.

aimed at a popular romance audience: on the title page “Orlando” – who was a standard romance hero and thus a popular selling-point – is printed in larger red type.²⁰ At the other extreme, the first of Giolito’s many editions, a quarto published in 1542, was lavishly printed in *corsivo* (roman) characters, with a decorated initial at the start of each canto. This edition came equipped with verses in praise of the poet, allegories and illustrations for each canto, an explanation of difficult words and passages, an index and a commentary by Lodovico Dolce which pointed out the poem’s classical imitations and epic features. The title page is elaborately decorated with ionic columns, muses and putti around the device *semper eadem*, “always the same”. This was an edition for the rich and classically-educated reader.²¹

These extremes might suggest that the poem had a popular romance audience and a more educated readership which admired its classical qualities. This is a simplification of the facts. The Bindoni e Pasini edition of 1542, printed just before Giolito’s luxurious quarto, also had allegories, a vocabulary, illustrations and an index of the poem’s subjects; it too was printed in quarto, in roman type. Unlike the Giolito quarto, and most of the subsequent expensive editions, it made no attempt to present the poem as a latter-day classical epic. Instead, it emphasised the poem’s romance qualities. The title page mentions Boiardo, and promises an account of the life and customs of Charlemagne.

¹⁹ Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*, 13-14

²⁰ Agnelli and Ravegnani, 26-27 and tavolo x.

Instead of pointing out classical allusions, its commentary listed sources of Ariosto's (and Boiardo's) borrowings from romance, and emphasised the influence of Spanish poems like the *Amadís de Gaule*.²² This edition was evidently less successful than Giolito's, but it underlines the fact that rich audiences did not enjoy the *Furioso* for its classical qualities alone.

In fact, romance had two audiences in cinquecento Italy, one courtly and one popular; the *Furioso* was unusual – in fact unprecedented – in appealing to both. Marina Beer has observed that

Il *Furioso* riesce miracolosamente a unificare proprio il pubblico differenziato dall'universo tipografico, innestando sul corpo di un genere largamente popolare tutte le conquiste dell'alta cultura della letteratura volgare della svolta del secolo...²³

This new breadth of audience can, in part, be ascribed to developments in publishing. In the thirty years before the *Furioso* appeared, the organisation of printers and booksellers had greatly improved. The average size of editions increased, and booksellers were finding bigger markets for their books.²⁴ As courtly texts began to be produced more cheaply, it was perhaps not surprising that printers should seek to combine their different publics. These considerations do not, however, account for the *Furioso*'s startlingly broad appeal. The poem

²¹ Agnelli and Ravegnani, 60-63 and tavolo xxxvii. Javitch cites this edition, and Dolce's commentary in particular, as an attempt to claim the status of classical epic for the poem.

²² Agnelli and Ravegnani, 58-60 and tavolo xxxv.i

²³ "The *Furioso* succeeded miraculously in uniting as its readership the different audiences of printing, grafting all those won by the high vernacular culture of the turn of the century onto the core audience of a largely popular genre." Beer, 210

even pleased readers who normally had no interest in romance. Surviving inventories of books suggest that the *Furioso* was popular among Florentine merchants who were otherwise uninterested in chivalric texts; the poem transcended the usual divisions of the book trade.²⁵

iii Neo-classical resistance, and national implications of the debate

The only serious resistance to the poem came from Aristotelian critics. By describing Ariosto's readers, Malatesta (and other commentators such as Bardi or Bernardo Tasso) were defending the romance form, and Ariosto, from neo-classicist accusations. The readership of the *Furioso* was cited so frequently because the poem became the subject of one of the cinquecento's greatest critical debates. When Aristotle's *Poetics* were reprinted in 1536, three years after Ariosto's death, they helped to focus critical attention on the subject of poetic form. The discrepancies between Ariosto's poem and Aristotle's prescriptions became an increasingly worrying issue. The *Furioso* was praised as a latter-day classical epic (a view which was increasingly difficult to sustain without careful reinterpretation of the poem and of Aristotle) or championed as a new kind of poem, the heroic romance. It was also denounced as vulgar failure which ignored Aristotelian rules. Ariosto's supporters answered objections to the

²⁴ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The impact of printing 1450-1800*. Trans. David Gerard. (1976; London: Verso, 1997) 216-218.

²⁵ Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*, 14

poem's multiple plot by pointing to its vast audience, while the Aristotelian camp started to use the breadth of Ariosto's readership to suggest that his unclassical poem appealed only to the lowest and least fastidious.

This debate has been studied in detail by Bernard Weinberg and, more recently, by Daniel Javitch. Their studies chart the progress of the argument, the development of different critical factions and – in Javitch's case – their effect on the *Furioso's* brisk achievement of canonical status. I am not immediately concerned with these issues, although I am profoundly indebted to both studies. My interest is in the fact that the debate itself, like most contributions to vernacular projects in the renaissance, had nationalist overtones. Contributors to the quarrel about the proper direction of poetry may have advocated the new poetry of romance, or insisted that only poetry which followed Aristotelian precepts was valid, but both sides wanted Italian poetry to equal that of the classical age. The question spilled into a matter of cultural pride: what was the best way of matching Greek and Roman achievements? The question was pressing for all genres, but was naturally crucial for epic, the poetry of nationhood. The attitude to Ariosto's vast popularity bears this out: for supporters of Ariosto and of romance, the vast audience proved that the *Furioso* had caught the spirit of his age and nation as clearly as Virgil or Homer had theirs, where Aristotelians fretted that such status could only be achieved by appealing to the most learned, whom they believed to be best qualified to judge. Filippo Sassetti, one of the ancients, argued that

mancate non sono mai, ne mancano adesso le eroiche attioni. delle quali comporre si possano epiche e tragiche Poesie... Il secolo presente molte bene è capace del Poema epico senza che introdurre si habbia in luogo suo una imperfetta poesia.²⁶

The failure to cast modern actions in the correct form is, for Sasseti, to deny them heroic authority. If vernacular poetry fails to take the right direction, the achievements of present age will not be suitably recorded, and the present will be judged inferior to the past. This point of view assumed that only the classical unities could produce true art, and that falling into romance, the “imperfetta poesia”, would not help Italian poetry to achieve greatness. The modern faction’s praise of the *Furioso*, on the other hand, insists that the poem is the modern equivalent of epic, that Italy has already produced a new Virgil for new times. Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio, one of the earliest to praise the *Furioso* as a classic, argued that romance was the native form of Italy, just as epic was the native form of Greece: it was necessary for

gli scrittori de i Romanzi che nella nostra lingua hanno scritto, seguire quella forma, & quella maniera di poema, ch’era già accettata dall’vso de i migliori scrittori di questa lingua quantunque ella fusse lontana da quella di Vergilio, & di Homero, i quali ad altri tempi, & in altre lingue scrissero, le quali haueano altri costumi, & altri modi di poeteggiare.²⁷

²⁶ “heroic actions have never been lacking, nor are they lacking now, from which epic and tragic poems might be written... The present century is completely capable of producing an epic poem, without there being any necessity of introducing in its place an imperfect form of poetry” .II, 974.

²⁷ “ the writers of romances who wrote in our language to follow that form and that manner of poem which was already accepted by the usage of the best writers of this language, even though it might be distant from that of Vergil and of Homer, who wrote for other times and in other languages which had other customs and other ways of poetizing.” Quoted and translated in Weinberg, II, 961.

Both factions wished to improve the standing of native poetry, but the modern position was more explicitly Italian. It aimed at the achievement of a native ideal, rather than seeking a poetry which matched neo-classical criteria of timeless perfection. This nationalist edge is confirmed by the fact that the *Furioso*'s popularity, so often cited by as proof of its excellence, was also proof of its status as a poem of the nation. Giraldi continues:

quando si vede che vna natione intiera per lo spatio di varie età (leuantine alcuni superstitiosi) conuiene in vno ad accettare per pregiata e per lodeuole vna cosa, si dee credere che non meriti di esser ripreso questo commune consentimento.²⁸

Like Ariosto, Giraldi was Ferrarese; his later *Discorsi* were, like the *Furioso*, dedicated to a member of the Este family, the rulers of Ferrara. It is therefore possible that his “natione” is the duchy of Ferrara. His other observations, however – on the romance as a native Italian form, on the effect of French and Spanish influence in Italy – suggest that he means the Italian rather than the Ferrarese nation, particularly since the debate raged across the whole peninsula.²⁹ To call the readership a “natione” in this context, then, is to identify the *Furioso* as the poem of Italy. This implication is strengthened by an emphasis on the unity of that audience, rather than the diversity described by Malatesta. It agrees “in vno”, and the fact that it has done so for generations, “per lo spatio di varie età”, gives it an enviable stability. Its near-universal appeal unites Giraldi's

²⁸ “when we see that an entire nation, over a space of several generations (except for some who are too fastidious) agrees as one in accepting a thing as valued and laudable, we must believe that this common consent does not merit being blamed.” Weinberg, II, 962.

²⁹ Weinberg observes that the quarrel had local loyalties: Florentines, for example, adopted Ariosto (a Tuscan speaker) as one of their own. Weinberg, II, 999.

natione as a cultural whole: the poem becomes the national text of a country which did not exist and would not exist for centuries. The fragmented peninsula, with its many states and bitter divisions, becomes in his description a “*natione intiera*”, whole and entire, united by its praise of Ariosto’s poem. Giraldi writes as if the readership of the *Furioso* were itself an ideal Italia.

2 Romance and epic

The most obvious and immediate reason for the poem’s success was its romance form. Aristotelian critics attacked the *Furioso*’s loves, marvels and unclassical disunity, but these elements were necessary to its success. Audiences preferred the varied form and content of romance to all neo-classical attempts to revive epic. The Aristotelian unity of Trissino’s *Italia liberata dai Goti*, published in 1547, did not persuade anyone to read it; Giraldi complained, in a letter to Bernardo Tasso, that “*così scrivere, come egli ha fatto, era uno scrivere a’ morti*”.³⁰ Torquato Tasso, Bernardo’s son, explained that his father’s *Amadigi* was written as an interlaced romance because of the response to the first version of his poem, which had cast the story as a single unified narrative. His courtly audience, which had urged him to write a poem on the *Amadís* subject, dwindled as he read it to them.³¹ When Torquato recast his own heroic romance, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, as the very unromantic, neo-classical epic *Gerusalemme Conquistata*, it too remained unread.

³⁰ “writing as he did, was writing for the dead.” Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*, 168 n.8.

³¹ Weinberg, II, 1010

Why should this have been so? The immediate answer is that romance was an indigenous form of poetry. It was an established, well-known and well-liked genre. Neo-classicists may have despised it, but they were a small, if very vocal, minority. Epic, on the other hand, was unfamiliar to all but the classically educated, and even they were not used to reading or hearing it in the vernacular. Other audiences (as Giraldi might have put it, living audiences) needed to be persuaded of its merits. From this point of view, the reaction of Bernardo Tasso's audience is not surprising. The original *Amadis* is a romance; the courtiers who asked Bernardo for his version must have been surprised, as they were obviously displeased, when he gave them a unified epic.

This initial prejudice made it harder for epics to appeal beyond the educated classes, but they might still have been read by an elite audience, as their classical models were. In practice, however, they failed absolutely. Even Aristotelian critics could not advocate Trissino, and ended by championing the first *Gerusalemme* – a poem full of romance digressions which are caught and firmly returned to the main narrative, chivalric wandering contained – not without difficulty – within an epic structure. The heroic poetry of the cinquecento succeeded only if it incorporated the multiplicity of romance: the linear form of epic, with its confident depiction of public action, failed as an expression of sixteenth-century Italy.

i Romance against epic

The opposition of romance to epic is itself a critical tradition developed over the course of the cinquecento. The rigid distinction between the two forms – insistently on the grounds of narrative unity but also on such points as the narrative voice, historical basis of the plot or the number of heroes – was worked out in part through quarrels over the *Furioso* itself. Much critical and theoretical spadework was done by sixteenth-century academics reading Ariosto in the light of Aristotle, and Aristotle in the light of Ariosto. The *Furioso* does lend itself to such readings: Aristotelian criticism started to debate the differences of romance and epic in the 1550s, but Ariosto's own practice suggests a similar generic understanding. The vernacular ambition of sixteenth-century heroic poetry was an attempt to equal what du Bellay called the “superbes Langues Greque & Latine”. It grew from a sense of the distance between local traditions – in this instance chivalric narratives – and those of the ancients. That understanding was developed through the humanist rediscovery of the classical past. Later medieval poets could still cast Julius Caesar or Aeneas as knights; by the later cinquecento Torquato Tasso was to complain about poets who, in writing about ancient subjects, gave them anachronistically modern manners.³² With such a sense of the difference of the past, the earliest humanist-trained writers of romances could cut between ancient and modern, and between different romance traditions. Boiardo first has his Carolingian hero smitten with the passions normally

associated with Arthurian romance, then puts him through a range of classical dilemmas. This Orlando blocks out the Sirens' song by filling his helmet with roses, and throws the Sphinx down a mountain when he can't answer its riddles.³³

Besides this new distance between classical and vernacular texts, fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanists developed an opposition between epic and romance genres. That distinction became hard and fast through readings of the *Poetics*, but it could be found in the *Aeneid* itself. David Quint has shown that Aeneas's progress towards his imperial destiny is achieved by refusing the digressions that characterise romance:

Epic views all such romance alternatives as dead ends... stories that, unlike epic's own narratives of missions accomplished, have no place to go.³⁴

Colin Burrow has added:

it is only by turning alternative or subsidiary stories into dead ends – literally dead ends – that the main plot can assert its dominance. In order to pursue his Roman goal Aeneas has to make major incidents seem like mere digressions, by killing off whatever does not lead to Rome. Alternative possible plots... have to be abruptly terminated in order to achieve the overall goal of the poem.³⁵

Understood in these terms, Virgil could no longer be happily assimilated to a tradition of knight errantry. Earlier European romances had been so far from

³² Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 40.

³³ *Orlando Innamorato*, 2. 18,1-2; 1.5.69-76; 2.4.34-39.

sympathy with such imperial ambition that they could present an Aeneas whose efforts in the combat with Turnus are inspired by his love for Lavinia.³⁶ This kind of motivation, in which personal desire leads to individual deeds, is directly opposed to the drive towards the collective good of empire. As Erich Auerbach showed, love “functions as a substitute for other possibilities of motivation which... are lacking” in chivalric romance. Its knights have “no political or historical task”, only an urge to demonstrate their prowess:

The world of knightly proving is a world of adventure. It not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures; more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure. Nothing is found in it which is not either accessory or preparatory to an adventure. It is a world specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself.³⁷

Seen against the linear progress of Virgilian epic, medieval romance is all digression: riding out to prove themselves, the knights are permanently ready to wander from the path into adventure. Such demonstrations of prowess justify the individual and an idealised feudal ethos, but they have little or no sense of national definition; there is no nation to define. The medieval knight is an international figure, a hero of Christendom rather than of France or England. The definition of nationhood is associated with ends, with conquest, foundation, or even with heroic defeat. Even in the Homeric poems, often credited with the first generic division of epic and romance, it is the wars of the *Iliad*, not the wanderings of the *Odyssey*, that seem most concerned with the projection of a

³⁴ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 34.

³⁵ Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 47.

³⁶ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 110.

Greek identity. In spite of this, the *Furioso*, with its digressive form, became the poem of Italy. How did this happen?

The opposition of epic and romance provides one answer. Quint has argued that Virgilian epic defined romance, with its meandering narrative, as the poetry of the defeated, those who lack the power to force events into the driving linear shape of epic.³⁸ The linear form of epic required the hope of conquest, and Italy, a divided and defeated nation, had no such hopes. Aristotelian critics like Minturno or Sasseti argued that Ariosto should have arranged his material round a single hero, a single conflict, instead of leaping triumphantly from plot to plot. It is difficult to see how such an epic arrangement could have made, in cinquecento Italy, a confident national poem. The tremendous assurance of the *Furioso* lies in the great deeds of individuals. An epic which tried simply to celebrate national destiny during the endless crisis of the Italian wars would not easily avoid escapism. The *Italia liberata dai Goti* is an unrealistic call for rescue: foreign invaders had become, and would remain, a basic and unchanging fact of Italian politics, and a story in which they were swept away would be optimistic but unconvincing. The wars of Italy provided no defining struggle, no foundation myth, but a source of disintegration and humiliation. The *Aeneid's* model of the founding of a state is hardly more helpful. Virgil could make the creation of Rome his exclusive subject because Rome was, beyond question, the most powerful nation in the known world. No other state, no other subject, could

³⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature* trans. Willard R. Trask (1946; rpt., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) 141, 134, 136.

match it in importance; the glorious future of Aeneas's city has no competition. The same could not be said for Ariosto's Ferrara. The Virgilian celebrations of the Este dynasty are only one strand of the *Furioso*; Ariosto was writing a foundation myth for a state whose existence was precarious, an empire which failed to dominate the world. By presenting the myth as one strand of a larger narrative, Ariosto denies Ferrara the central importance of Virgil's Rome, a precedent it could not convincingly rival. He also avoids championing his local nation at the expense of the "natione intiera": the multiple plot can reflect the multiple, divided Italy. Ariosto can use the complex variety of romance to present a world of mutability and confusion in which resolution is endlessly deferred; a world, in fact, which reflected the basic characteristics not just of human life but of the condition of Italy. A national poem of the cinquecento needed to make some acknowledgement of contemporary events, and that it would be supremely difficult for a neo-classical epic to do that without simply conjuring an image of despair. The *Furioso* could be the poem of Italy because it was a romance. It presents nationhood through its very lack of unity: Italian patriotism was threatened by the drive towards endings.

ii Romance digression and the *Furioso*

The *Furioso* is shaped by classical epic, with the war between Christians and Saracens as a centralising narrative. It is also rooted in the medieval romances

³⁸ Quint, *Epic and Empire*, 9.

whose intertwined narratives gave free rein to the kind of digressions closed off by the *Aeneid*. Ariosto's initial response to a Virgilian poetry in which imperial ambition is achieved through renunciation, is to rush into multiplicity and overflowing emotion. In the very early stages of the debate, before the terms of the *Poetics* got a stranglehold on the argument, Ariosto's supporters could present the *Furioso* itself as a classical epic, a poem begun in imitation of Virgil and Homer. Certainly; but those imitations draw attention to the gap between epic and romance. The *Furioso*'s opening is celebrated:

Le donne, i cavallier, l'arme, gli amori,
le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto...³⁹

This is Virgil's "arma virumque cano" not so much overgone as exploded. Ariosto converts his singular model into plurals (arms and the *men*, or rather knights) and crams it to bursting point with extra material, spilling over into a second line. Ariosto's *arma virumque*, "i cavallier, l'arme", is encircled and overwhelmed by "le donne" and "gli amori". Those new subjects – love and multiplicity – are exactly what the united epic excludes.⁴⁰ The distance between the beginning of the *Furioso* and its model in the *Aeneid* is the distance, soon to be mapped by academics, between two forms of heroic poetry.

³⁹ "I sing of knights and ladies, of love and arms, of courtly chivalry, of courageous deeds..." Quotations from the *Furioso* from Cesare Segre, ed. (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1976). Translations by Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴⁰ Ariosto's expansion of Virgil was itself reversed in Ercilla's *Araucana*, which begins "No las damas, amor, no gentilezas / de caballeros, canto enamorados" – "I sing neither women, love, nor the noble acts of knights in love". Michael Murrin, *History and Warfare in Renaissance Epic* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994) 118.

Ariosto insists on the distinction by repeating it, on a larger scale, in the development of his first canto. He opens, as Homer had opened the *Iliad*, with a quarrel between warriors over the possession of a woman:

Nata pochi dì inanzi era una gara
 tra il conte Orlando e il suo cugin Rinaldo;
 che ambi avean per la bellezza rara
 d'amoroso disio l'animo caldo.⁴¹

If the *Furioso* isn't going to be the *Aeneid*, it won't be the *Iliad* either. The Homeric squabble over Chriseis is dominated by questions of prestige, of kingly and priestly authority: however determined Agamemnon may be, he is certainly not amoroso. Having paid this attention to romantic love, the basic material of romance, the *Furioso* goes on turning away from public action. The battle goes badly for the Christians, who abandon the tent containing the waiting Angelica – who is plainly no Chriseis:

Dove, poi che rimase la donzella
 Ch'esser dovea del vincitor mercede,
 inanzi al caso era salita in sella,
 e quando bisognò le spalle diede, 4
 presaga che quel giorno esser rubella
 dovea Fortuna alla cristiana fede:
 entrò in un bosco, e ne la stretta via
 rincontrò un cavallier ch'a piè venìa.⁴² 8

⁴¹ “A quarrel had arisen a few days earlier between Count Orlando and his cousin Rinaldo, for both of them were aflame with love for the ravishing beauty”. (1,8)

⁴² “Here the damsel was left who was to have been the victor's prize: she had mounted her horse before the crucial moment and, when that came, forseeing that Fortune was that day to turn traitor to those of the Christian faith, she turned and fled. Entering a wood and following a narrow path she came upon a knight who was approaching on foot.” (1,10)

Over the course of a stanza we have gone from a war between Christians and Saracens deep into the forests of romance, with its narrow paths and unexpected encounters. As so many knights are to do in the course of Ariosto's narrative, the *Furioso* plunges into a dark wood in pursuit of Angelica. This first canto enacts the movement of romance, following the nearest and most immediate events rather than the progress of a central action, stirred by love rather than by duty or the demands of authority. Patricia Parker has observed that

Renaissance critics often excused Ariosto's irregularity on the basis of his ignorance of epic norms, but a careful study of the echoes of one poetic authority – the *Aeneid* – suggests that the "Ferrarese Virgil" was not failing in his imitation of the model but rather quite consciously marking his own departure from it.⁴³

The *Furioso* proclaims itself as a romance, in opposition to an epic tradition imagined by Ariosto (as it was to be imagined by his Aristotelian critics) as single, martial and public.

There is, in the *Furioso*'s opening, a choice between a long-term goal and immediate gratification; and romance goes for the latter. In chasing after Angelica, the *Furioso* loses sight, often for cantos at a time, of the war between Christians and Saracens, of Ruggiero's heroic destiny, even of Orlando's madness. Most of Ariosto's poem takes place in a world of romance wandering, sidetracked from the wars of Charlemagne and Agramante. The reader is alternately lost in the forests and bowers of that world, and reminded that it is an

opposition, an escape from a different world of duty. St. John the Evangelist tells Astolfo, on his visit to the moon, that Orlando's madness is a divine punishment for deserting Charlemagne's war against the pagans. A hermit reproves Ruggiero for his delay in seeking baptism.⁴⁴ Alcina's seduction of Ruggiero, one of Ariosto's lushest episodes, ends with the reminder that while Ruggiero enjoys "in tanta gioia e festa" his king toils in battle and his fiancée Bradamante wails for the loss of him.⁴⁵

Digression and the duty that opposes it are explicitly related to epic in Ruggiero, the *Furioso's* dynastic hero, its Aeneas. Like Achilles, Ruggiero is doomed by his valour, and will die by treachery after his marriage and conversion. His former tutor, the magician Atlante, tries to protect him from that future through the seductions of Alcina or through confinement in beautiful palaces; Bradamante and the sorceress Melissa repeatedly rescue him from that protected idleness. Albert Russell Ascoli, reading the *Furioso* in terms of the divided self, suggests that

Both, in a sense, are attempts to *protect* a part of his identity with the sacrifice of another: the first, a vain effort to forestall all death and the loss of physical being; the second, an attempt to promote displaced survival in name and family at the cost of a premature demise on the literal level.⁴⁶

⁴³ Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979) 40.

⁴⁴ *Furioso*, 34,62-65 and 41,55.

⁴⁵ "every sort of pleasure", *Furioso*, 7,33.

⁴⁶ Albert Russell Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony: Crisis and Evasion in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 34.

For the poem too, engagement with the real world of history is dangerous: when Ariosto turns to comment on contemporary Italian affairs, as he often does, he ends by describing horrors. When Ariosto's knights return to their duty within the poem, to reality, they often seem diminished by it. Orlando, his wits restored, returns to Charlemagne's service he becomes an officer leading a charge rather than an extravagant hero. The taking of Biserta, "la ricca e trionfal città... che fu di tutta l'Africa regina" is hardly a triumph of romance:

I vincitori uscir de le funeste
 porte vedeansi di gran preda onusti,
 chi con bei vasi e chi con ricche veste,
 chi con rapiti argenti a' dèi vetusti:
 chi traea i figli, e chi le madri meste:
 fur fatti stupri e mille altri atti ingiusti,
 dei quali Orlando un gran parte intese,
 né lo poté vietar, né 'l duca inglese.⁴⁷

This is the Orlando who, elsewhere in the *Furioso*, could single-handedly defeat armies, swim from Malaga to Africa, kill monsters, rescue damsels. As Charlemagne's general, he cannot control his troops, cannot prevent rape, pillage and blasphemy. The world of duty is, here, a brutal negation of heroism, not a triumph. At Biserta, the drive towards victory and conclusion are associated with horror and loss of control.

⁴⁷ "the rich, triumphant city which had been queen of all Africa"; "The victors could be seen emerging from the doorways of the ill-fated homes laden with rich spoils: some carried fine vases, others costly garments, others silverware stolen from the ancient household gods. Some men dragged out the children, others the grieving mothers; rape and a thousand other crimes were

3 The divisions of Italy

The *Furioso* was the national poem of a nation that did not exist. The peninsula's many states were insecure, mistrustful and under the protection, or the threat, of foreign powers. Italy was the battleground of Europe, in a state of permanent crisis. These catastrophes are one explanation for the *Furioso*'s success, and a reason why that success was so significant. Daniel Javitch has argued that the *Orlando Furioso* achieved its status as a classic because:

it was perceived to fill the need for a modern equivalent of the canonical epics of antiquity at a time when such a need was felt with particular intensity... Bembo could establish stylistic norms for "high" Italian lyric and prose, but the absence of a similar model in narrative poetry left a gap in that generic field.⁴⁸

Ariosto was pushed into the role of Italy's laureate because such a poet was needed and wanted; he and the *Furioso* filled a vacuum. Javitch reaches this conclusion by an examination of cinquecento literary politics, and the pressure to succeed in the vernacular was certainly important to the poem's "canonization". The vernacular issue itself, however, had nationalistic overtones, and so did the success of the *Furioso*. A letter by Giraldo Cintio, published in 1554, confirms Javitch's thesis that the finding of a new epic was important, but suggests a further reason why Italians needed a pre-eminent text:

committed, which Orlando and Astolfo in great part knew of but were unable to prevent." *Furioso*, 40, 32, 34

⁴⁸ Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*, 15

...il nostro Ariosto, ha solo quelle cose trattate, che gli hanno parse atte à riceuver lume, et splendore, e che non portauano con loro ne brutezza, ne sconueneuolezza... le quali egli ha tutte lasciate come indegne della maestà della nostra fauella, et della nostra natione, *laquale tiene hora tra le barbare quella grandezza, che la latina gia tenne, quantunque la maestà dello impero si ritrovi in altrui mano.*⁴⁹ [italics mine]

Giraldi is clearly concerned with achieving greatness in the vernacular. but his reasons are as much cultural and political as artistic. His description is suffused with a sense of unity, found in the shared Latin past, the shared delight in “*nostro Ariosto*”. The *Furioso* offered a dazzling image of nationhood at a time when Italy was in fact divided and subjugated. If Giraldi’s *natione intiera* existed at all, it existed in the readership of the *Furioso*, in a sense of shared cultural identity. The poem not only give Italians a challenge to the supremacy of Greek and Latin, it gave them a means of rising above the crises – the invading barbarians – of their own time.

i The Italian wars

Giraldi’s sense of Italy’s oppression was the result of the wars fought almost continuously from the end of the fifteenth century until the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559. These were the wars categorised by the sixteenth-century historian Francesco Guicciardini as

⁴⁹ “our Ariosto treated only those things which seemed to him capable of receiving light and splendour and which brought with them neither ugliness nor impropriety.... all of which he left aside as unworthy of the majesty of our language and of our nation. *which now occupies among the barbarian nations that greatness which the Latin nation once held, even though the majesty of empire is found in other hands.*” Weinberg, II, 962

...full of the most terrible happenings; since for so many years Italy suffered all those calamities with which miserable mortals are usually afflicted, sometimes because of the just anger of God, and sometimes because of the impiety and wickedness of other men.⁵⁰

Guicciardini's sense of this cataclysm led him to describe the years before the invasion as a golden age; before the French invaded in 1494, there had been forty years of comparative stability in the peninsula, kept in balance by the arrangements of the peace of Lodi (1454). That stability, which depended on keeping the ambitious states of the peninsula in check, was only ever comparative. As Machiavelli was to observe, the Italian powers "necessarily had two main preoccupations: the one, that no armed foreign power should invade Italy; the other, that no one power among themselves should enlarge its dominions".⁵¹ Italy was not even free from foreign intervention; the French house of Anjou had already claimed a right to Naples, while the Ottoman Empire fought Venice from 1463 to 1479.⁵² The next year Turkish forces landed in southern Italy, and were not expelled for two years.⁵³ Guicciardini's claim that modern Italy had "never enjoyed such prosperity, or known so favourable a situation"⁵⁴ reflected the shattering effects of cinquecento wars, not the reality of the years after Lodi. The French invasion of 1494 was a catastrophe, not because it disturbed the peace of an already war-torn peninsula, but because it was the

⁵⁰ Francesco Guicciardini *The History of Italy*, translated by Sidney Alexander (London: Macmillan, 1969) 4, anglicised from Alexander's translation.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated into English by George Bull. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 74.

⁵² Michael Mallett, "Personalities and Pressures: Italian involvement in the French invasion of 1494", in David Abulafia, ed. *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy, 1494-1495* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995), 152.

⁵³ Richard Mackenney, *Sixteenth Century Europe: Expansion and conflict* (London: Macmillan, 1993) 251

start of a long series of major foreign interventions. and because the Italian states collapsed so humiliatingly before it.

Worse still, Italians felt that their own rulers, as well as the failures of their own armies, brought about the disaster. Lodovico Sforza “il Moro”, the regent of Milan, had pressed Charles VIII of France to intervene in Italian affairs, and other Italian princes – including Ercole d’Este, Lodovico’s father-in-law and Boiardo’s patron – were ready to welcome a French invasion for their own political ends. That invasion, which set a pattern for further intervention, was brought about by the internal divisions of the peninsula itself. Relations between Milan and Naples, two of the great powers of Italy, were breaking down by 1494. Lodovico – expecting attack from Alfonso, the new king of Naples – invited Charles VIII to pursue his inherited Anjou claim to Naples by invading Italy. Ariosto, commenting on Lodovico in the *Furioso*, observed that “che sol per travagliar l’emulo antico / chiamato ve l’avea, non per cacciarlo”.⁵⁴ Guicciardini, describing Lodovico’s response, underlines Italian responsibility for the disaster:

...as if entering into greater dangers was the only remedy for present perils...[Lodovico] decided to seek protection from foreign armies, since he placed no faith in his own forces and in Italian friendships.⁵⁵

Macmillan, 1969) 4, anglicised from Alexander’s translation

⁵⁴ “had called him in to harass his traditional rival, in Naples, not to drive him out.” *Orlando Furioso*, 33,31. R.J. Knecht has argued that Lodovico probably wished only “to shelter beneath the threat of a French invasion.” *The Rise and Fall of Renaissance France* (London: Fontana, 1996) 42

⁵⁵ Guicciardini, 21

ii Responses to the invasion

Hindsight permitted Guicciardini, Machiavelli and others to see the French invasion as the undoing of Italy. The threat was not so widely recognised at the time. Ferrante of Naples – who had, after all, particular reason for fearing the invasion – warned that the French never intervened in Italian affairs without “working her utter ruin, and this coming is of such a kind that it can clearly be seen to involve universal ruin.”⁵⁷ Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* crashes to an end with the French invasion:

Mentre che io canto, O Dio Redentore,	
Vedo l’Italia tutta a fiamma e foco,	
Per questi Galli, che con gran valore	
Vengon, per disertar non so che loco.	4
Però vi lascio in questo vano amore	
Di Fiordespina ardente a poco a poco	
Un’ altra fiata, se mi fia concesso,	
Racconterovvi il tutto per espresso. ⁵⁸	8

Boiardo, who died in 1494, never returned to Fiordespina’s “vano amore”, and his silence could be read as a lament for events which were as fatal to romance as to Italy. Charles Stanley Ross, the *Innamorato*’s only modern translator, has argued that this tradition, in which Boiardo and his “frail muse” die of heartbreak over the invasion, is an unduly romantic interpretation. Boiardo, having “purposely designed a poem that could be continued indefinitely”, might simply

⁵⁷ Edmund G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, (London: Archibald Constable, 1904) 247.

⁵⁸ “But while I sing, redeemer God, / I see all Italy on fire, / Because these French - so valiant! - / come to lay waste who knows what land, / So I will leave this hopeless love / Of simmering Fiordespina. / Some other time, if God permits, / I’ll tell you all there is to this.” Quotations and translations from the *Innamorato* from Charles Ross, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

have died while “occasionally working” on its third book.⁵⁸ The events of the despairing final stanza were not the first to suspend the action of the *Innamorato*: the poem had been interrupted for similar reasons during the war of Ferrara, when “Sentendo Italia di lamenti piena / Non che ora canti, ma sospiro appena.”⁵⁹

That war, however, lasted only two years. The wars of Italy stretched on for decades. Boiardo may not have intended his *Innamorato* to end with this catastrophe, but he certainly wrote nothing after it. The tradition surrounding Boiardo’s death may be romantic, but it is not sentimental to interpret this stanza as a passionate outcry against Italy’s appalling fate. The war literally disrupts Boiardo’s narrative: the account of the descending French is written in the present tense, and it is happening “mentre che io canto”. His cry to God is strengthened by its position at the end of the line, and the adjective is significant. The presentation of God as Redeemer was of course common in many prayers, but here it implies a plea for rescue from temporal as well as spiritual horror. By referring to the French as Gauls, Boiardo casts them as barbarians, recalling the destruction of classical Rome by foreign hordes. Civilisation, including Boiardo’s poem, is being destroyed. The French appear to be bent on indiscriminate violence, since no one knows what they intend to attack. In this context, the reference to their valour is intensely ironic. This has been a chivalric romance, full of just (and sometimes unjust) quarrels, but the French seem to

⁵⁸ Ross’s introduction to his World’s Classics edition, xii.

⁵⁹ “Hearing Italy full of lamentation, I scarcely sigh, much less sing.”

have no cause, only random viciousness. The abbreviation of “Vengon”. from vengono, brings the full weight of the beat down on the second syllable: the Gauls descend on Italy with a crash. Boiardo’s last reference to the “ardente” Fiordesina is poignant; the literary flames of her passion are interrupted by the literal “fiamma e foco” of war. In the seventh line, the verb “fia”, strengthened by the echo of “fiata”, underlines the process of concession. This is a standard *cantastorie* topos; Boiardo, and later Ariosto, frequently end canti by asking permission of their supposed listeners. In this stanza it is not the putative audience but contemporary events which have power over Boiardo’s story; the romantic reading of the poem’s conclusion is implied by the text. “Concesso” chimes with the first line’s “Redentore”: if the poet is spared, if Italy is spared, he will continue.

As it was printed, with this stanza as its conclusion, the *Innamorato* suggested that its world of romance could not function under the disaster of Italy’s present fate. By choosing to continue Boiardo’s story, Ariosto took on the task of writing romance at a time of despair: the *Orlando Furioso* had to contain or ignore the disasters of its time if it was not to give way before them.

The French invasion was not universally seen as the beginning of the end. Charles’s advent was actually welcomed in some quarters; in France and in Italy, the Neapolitan campaign was invested with a degree of idealism. Knecht suggests that Charles was actively influenced by several legends. A prophecy of

the 1490s promised that a French prince named Charles would destroy Florence and purge Rome of bad priests, before defeating the Turks and becoming king of Jerusalem. Charlemagne, who had fought crusades and defended Christendom on Italian soil, was a further model.⁶⁰ The Ottoman Empire was a pressing danger in the European imagination – though in fact the holy war had abated under the rule of Bajazed II and did not become a real threat again until 1520 – and Charles’s campaign was seen as the first step of a new Crusade.⁶¹ Guicciardini gives Charles an oration persuading his nobles to the war, in which he stresses the strategic importance of Naples as a place from which to attack the Turk.⁶² As late as 1495, a Venetian envoy could write that Charles’s intention was certainly a crusade: “He has made the vow to God and would already have launched his enterprise if so many troubles had not befallen him. I, who have spoken to His Majesty, know this to be true.”⁶³ A medal cast around 1494-5 unites these crusading and Carolingian ambitions by proclaiming Charles, shown wearing the chain of the chivalric order of St. Michael, “KAROLVS OCTAVVS FRANCORVM IERVSALEM ET CICILIE REX”.⁶⁴

Not satisfied with presenting Charles as an idealistic saviour, some Italians were also ready to see him as a second Charlemagne. Carolingian stories were both popular and influential. The vocabulary of romance was so universally recognised that the Venetians could insult the Estensi by suggesting that they

⁶⁰ Knecht, 44

⁶¹ Mackenney, 251-2

⁶² Guicciardini, 22

were descended from the despised house of Maganza, from the Ganelon who betrayed Roland at Roncesvalles.⁶⁵ France was pre-eminently the land of chivalry, and its monarch was easily associated with chivalric history and virtues. Such perceptions affected Charles's reception in specific cities. The coming of a Second Charlemagne was prophesied, when "the Empire would come under the leadership of a French king, a new Charles, who would cleanse the Church, cross the seas to the East and, conquering the Infidel, unite the world in one flock under a single shepherd."⁶⁶ French alliances were almost part of the city's civic tradition, and Florentines were inclined to welcome Charles as Charlemagne's descendant.⁶⁷ Savonarola hailed him as an (admittedly apocalyptic) force of God.⁶⁸

There were of course many practical, less glamorous and certainly more realistic reasons for the campaign. These are not my concern; what matters is that Charles set off, and was received, in an atmosphere of idealism hung about with references to Charlemagne. The French monarchy claimed the title of Most Christian Kings; as such, Charles VIII was welcomed into Italy. Inevitably the motives for that welcome, like the motives for the campaign, were mixed. Italians hoped that Charles would be full of Christian and chivalric virtues; they

⁶³ Knecht, 44

⁶⁴ Illustrated in Guicciardini, 23

⁶⁵ Edmund G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, 281: "the street rabble of Venice assailed Duke Ercole with cat-calls and yells of Manganzese."

⁶⁶ Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) 38-40

⁶⁷ Knecht, 47. One of the rooms of the Florentine Palazzo Vecchio is decorated with *fleurs-de-lys*.

⁶⁸ Weinstein, 166

knew he had an army bigger than any seen in Europe for more than a century. and opposition melted before it. Streets were decorated to welcome the French. and triumphal arches were put up in their honour.⁶⁹ Despite the horrified lament with which Boiardo ended the *Innamorato*, Ferrara was quick to support Charles. The author of the *Diario Ferrarese* called him “this Holy Man”. and observed that the weather had improved as soon as he arrived in Italy – surely a sign of divine approval.⁷⁰ The popolo were firmly behind a French alliance, not least because of their justified fear of Venetian expansion. The city’s ruling family, the Estensi, claimed chivalric French ancestry, and were traditionally linked to France.⁷¹ Ercole d’Este, who was much influenced by Savonarola, was equally ready to welcome a Most Christian King.

Inevitably, Charles disappointed these expectations. By the time he reached Naples, his army had acquired a reputation for savagery. The occupation of the city led to an epidemic of syphilis – variously known as the French or the Neapolitan disease – which tarnished his Carolingian lustre. The political hopes stirred up by the French invasion proved equally fragile. The promised crusade never materialised, and the upheavals which followed the invasion undermined attempts to fight the Turk. Guicciardini, a supremely pragmatic historian, was not inclined to invest anyone with the qualities of romance, but his account of

⁶⁹ Knecht, 48

⁷⁰ Gardner, 298. The weather broke, literally and metaphorically, immediately afterwards.

⁷¹ Werner L.Gundersheimer. *Ferrara: the style of a renaissance despotism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973) 19, 225. Gundersheimer adds that, despite their claims of Carolingian and indeed Trojan descent, as celebrated in the *Furioso*, the Estensi were almost certainly of Germanic origin.

Charles suggests how appalling the disappointment must have been. Far from conferring blessings, the arrival of the French in Italy gave rise to

changes of dominions, subversion of kingdoms, desolation of countries, destruction of cities and the cruellest massacres, but also new fashions, new customs, new and bloody ways of waging warfare, and diseases which had been unknown up to that time. Furthermore, his incursion introduced so much disorder into Italian ways of governing and maintaining harmony, that we have never since been able to re-establish order, thus opening the possibility to other foreign nations and barbarous armies to trample upon our institutions and miserably oppress us. And what is all the more disgraceful, we cannot mitigate our shame because of the valour of the victor, since he whose coming caused so many misfortunes was... almost completely devoid of any natural or mental gifts.⁷²

It is significant that Guicciardini, who is usually careful to speak of the countries and peoples of Italy in the plural, nevertheless describes the invasion as a calamity visited on a collective Italian *nation*: foreigners trample “*our* institutions”, “oppress *us*”. The calamity of the French invasion was so appalling that it produced a sense of national misery.

In practical terms, this common feeling came to nothing. The Italian powers who had hoped to gain something from the invasion had no wish to see France fully established on the peninsula, but their reaction did not lead to a unity of purpose. The countries of the peninsula remained divided and conquered, despite immediate efforts against the French. No sooner had Naples fallen to (or rather, welcomed in) the triumphant Charles than Lodovico Sforza and the pope decided that his continued presence in Italy was a danger, and formed a league with

⁷² Guicciardini, 40

Venice for his expulsion. This alliance was anti-French but never got as far as being actually Italian. Ferrara and Florence refused to join, mainly because they distrusted Venice, but the league included the Emperor Maximilian and Ferdinand of Spain. Like its successors, the first attempt to expel foreign invaders paradoxically called in other non-Italian powers. A united Italy had become impossible.

iii National consciousness

The Carolingian idealism stirred up by the prospect of French intervention could not survive the actual experience of the French. The conflicts which followed made it clear that self-interest, fear and foreign interventions controlled the government of Italian states. The fifteenth-century balance of power had worked on the assumption that the different Italian nations had enough in common to work together. After the invasion of 1494 such an assumption was no longer valid. Lodovico Sforza explicitly rejected the idea of common Italian interest as an argument against the French invasion, writing “You are always talking to me of this Italy, and for my part I never saw her in the face.”⁷³

In practice, then, foreign intervention made closer Italian unity impossible. Nevertheless, the horrors of invasion created an intense desire for a united Italy. The idealism which had focused on Charles VIII was transformed into a yearning

⁷³ Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, 247

for Italian freedom. Such hopes could not overcome the realities of the cinquecento, but they did create a form of national consciousness. When the armies of Italian states marched together they were in no sense a national army, but when they fought against Northern Europeans they would adopt *Italia* as a battle cry.⁷⁴ Julius II exclaimed that “Non voglio che questi barbari usurpa Italia”,⁷⁵ even though he joined the emperor Maximilian and the kings of France and Aragon in a league against Venice. The parallel with classical Rome as a centre of civilisation under siege by barbarians was very widely used. As we have seen, Boiardo characterised the invading French as “questi Galli”; Machiavelli concluded *The Prince* by quoting Petrarch’s claim that “l’antico valore / Nell’italici cor non è ancor morto”.⁷⁶ The political and cultural supremacy of the Roman world was intensely appealing to its oppressed and divided descendants. The memory of Rome offered the glory of empire, but it was also the last convincing image of a unified Italy. Guicciardini could refer to the golden age of Lodi, but had to admit that it was undermined by war, and by its ending: the princes who invited in disaster are not products of an age of gold.

This insistence on a shared past suggests that there was a desire for a national identity, all the more intense for being unattainable. To call the invaders barbarians was to give Italians, by implication, a common cultural heritage, an ideal of nationhood. J.R. Hale has suggested that comparisons of the fall of

⁷⁴ J.R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe*, 43

⁷⁵ Vincent Cronin, *The Flowering of the Renaissance* (London: Collins, 1969) 307n.

⁷⁶ Machiavelli, 138

modern Italy to the glory of ancient Rome were unsoftened by consideration of Italy's flourishing arts; art "gilded the links binding New Rome to Old Rome, but the links themselves were independence and reputation".⁷⁷ In practical terms this is certainly true; historians and political theorists like Guicciardini or Machiavelli did not see the artistic achievements of the Renaissance as proof of Italian vitality. They were not, however, immune to the sense of national identity which the arts could create. Machiavelli uses a trecento rather than a classical author for his exhortation; the choice of Petrarch, a Florentine and an Italian, to conclude *Il Principe* is an expression of patriotism through poetry. As Giraldi's reference to "the majesty of our language and of our nation" suggests, if art could not alter the horrible realities of the wars, it could restore some sense of national pride. Vasari's praise of sculptural qualities in painting tended to elevate the Florentine school above all others, but by celebrating so many Italian artists, and insisting that their achievements were as great as those of classical times, he established a sense of the pre-eminence of Italian art. To a considerable extent, Italians could take collective pride in cultural victories. This must not be understood as nationalism or patriotism in the modern sense: Italian loyalty was to the individual state rather than to the peninsula, and Vasari and Machiavelli tended to see Florence, rather than Italy, as their nation. Nevertheless, Machiavelli's description of Italy, "more enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, more widely scattered than the Athenians:

⁷⁷ J.R. Hale, *War and Public Opinion in Renaissance Italy*, reprinted in *Renaissance War Studies*, 359-60.

leaderless, lawless, crushed, despoiled, torn, overrun...”⁷⁸ appeals to more than Florentines, even as he qualifies his exhortation by observing that the Medici would be unusually well-qualified deliverers.

4 **The *Orlando Furioso* as the poem of Italy**

The creation of a national poem for such a nation as cinquecento Italy was an astonishing and complicated achievement. Italians plainly wanted and needed an expression of national culture and confidence, but simple patriotism would have been almost meaningless in such a context. Ariosto’s poem answered those needs in a number of ways. Its classical qualities – the epic elements of the story, Ariosto’s humanist learning and classical imitations – made it possible to measure the *Furioso* against the *Aeneid* as a poem of epic stature, justifying Italian claims to a Roman heritage. These were the grounds on which publishers like Giolito, and some literary critics, presented the poem as an epic. As a romance, it was also capable of reflecting the divided nation and of uniting it in one readership.

The *Furioso*’s romance qualities are particularly important to its national success. All attempts at unified epic had failed to produce a national poem; on a patriotic and national level, the behaviour of Italians could inspire nothing but despair. An image of Italian greatness and unity, represented in a single heroic

⁷⁸ Machiavelli, 134

action, could only have been created by ignoring reality: in the real Italy, unified action on a national scale was precisely what was lacking. Chivalric romance, on the other hand, tends to defer resolution, and to allow different endeavours to coexist: Orlando can perform great deeds while the Charlemagne's army is being defeated, Bradamante can watch visions of her glorious descendants while her future husband is being seduced by enchantresses, Ariosto can praise Italian achievement while acknowledging the fundamental disaster of the wars. The poem does not try to avoid the horrors of its own time, but it does not halt under their pressures. The *Furioso's* expression of romance is complicated not only by classical influences but by the acknowledgement of the historical forces which were destructive of romance values: Ariosto continues Boiardo's story without flinching from his last stanza. The wars of Italy are present throughout the *Furioso*, as they were present at the end of the *Innamorato*.

i Italy in the *Furioso*

The number of references to Italian division increases with later editions; recent events were incorporated into each new version of the text. Carolingian and modern skirmishes are casually compared, and prophetic visions of the Este dynasty include their feats of arms. Inevitably, Ariosto's comments on contemporary affairs reflect a Ferrarese point of view; any Italian would have comparable local loyalties. For the writer of a national poem, however, the

celebration of the Este dynasty had particular complications. Ferrara survived the wars remarkably well; as Ariosto observes of Ercole d'Este:

...quando la gallica face
per tutto avrà la bella Italia accesa,
si starà sola col suo stato in pace,
e dal timore e dai tributi illesa...⁷⁹

Ercole, and his successor Alfonso d'Este, owed this security to prudent alliances with the French, and later with the Emperor Charles V, keeping Ferrara secure under Este control at a time when most states changed hands with alarming frequency. With foreign protection, Ferrara survived the machinations of Venice and various popes. In the circumstances, this survival was a remarkable achievement (and one which allowed Ariosto to work in reasonable physical security). It also left Ferrara open to accusations of treachery from the rest of Italy.⁸⁰ Guicciardini attacked the Estensi for their role in the first French invasion and in the Sack of Rome of 1527. Alfonso d'Este did not join the expedition against Rome, on the plea of defending his own territory, but he did provide the Imperial troops with safe passage, money, provisions and ammunition. These were deciding factors in the imperial campaign. Without Este help, the most deeply-felt atrocity of the Italian wars would not have been possible.⁸¹

In these circumstances, the *Furioso's* status as a national poem which also celebrates the Estensi is, at the very least, problematic. If Ariosto's poem was to

⁷⁹ "when the French torch sets fair Italy entirely alight, he alone shall remain in peace in his dominions, immune from threats or tribute..."(3,49)

⁸⁰ Gundersheimer, 227

contain the wars rather than giving way before them, it had to negotiate the horrors of the conflict and the demands of patronage. This is clear even in early editions: praise for Alfonso's achievements at the battle of Ravenna is tempered by an acknowledgement of heavy losses and of the appalling behaviour of the French troops (9,1-10). Later conflicts were even harder to resolve.

Ariosto's necessarily divided loyalties are most evident in the 1532 edition. By this stage, the Este had changed allegiances from the French to the Emperor, and Ariosto had been granted a pension by the Marquis d'Avalos, a commander in the army of Charles V. Nevertheless, Ferrarese accounts of the wars still needed to acknowledge early French-Este allegiances. These conflicting interests are represented in the Rocca di Tristano episode, one of the poem's longest accounts of contemporary events. Bradamante is shown a series of prophetic murals depicting the Italian wars. This is another moment of Virgilian imitation; the *Furioso's* dynastic thread of praise for the Este is its most obviously epic element, and this foretelling of Italian warfare follows the battle of Actium shown on the shield of Aeneas. The Virgilian Actium is a prediction of triumph, the resolution of the Roman wars into a single line of Augustan authority. Ariosto's prophecy depicts a different kind of future, a process rather than a resolution. The murals have been magically painted to warn French kings that:

⁸¹ Gardner, *The King of Court Poets: A study of the Life and Times of Ludovico Ariosto* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), 187

o di ferro gli eserciti distrutti.
 o di fame o di peste si vedranno; 4
 e che brevi allegrezze e lunghi lutti,
 poco guadagno e infinito danno
 riporteran d'Italia; che non lice
 che 'l Giglio in quel terreno abbia radice.⁸² 8

Italy – which is imagined as a whole – is united and inviolable, protected and avenged; the warning against invasion is comprehensive. Each possible fate begins “o di...”, drawing attention to what follows as a list of catastrophes. The danger and injustice of invasion are strongly marked.

Nevertheless, Ariosto is careful not to offend Este allies or sensibilities. He continues:

Acciò chi poi succederà, comprenda
 che, come ha d'acquistar vittoria e onore, 2
 qualor d'Italia la difesa prenda
 incontra ogn'altro barbaro furore;
 così, s'avvien ch'a danneggiarla scenda,
 per porle il giogo e farsene signore, 6
 comprenda, dico, e randasi ben certo
 ch'oltre a quei monti avrà il sepulcro aperto.⁸³

The stanza tries simultaneously to justify Italian inviolability and the justice of certain French interventions, and ties itself in knots in the process. The enjambment of the first line is slightly awkward. The comma and the last, stressed syllable of “succederà” enforce a caesura before “comprenda”, and there

⁸² “would see his armies destroyed by the sword, or by famine or plague: they would bring back from Italy fleeting happiness and prolonged misery, little profit and endless harm - for there was no warrant for the French Lilies taking root in Italian soil. (33,10)”

⁸³ “to impress upon his successors that by taking up the defence of Italy against all foreign aggression they could win victory and honour, whereas whoever descended upon Italy to injure her.

is another after “che”; however smoothly the speaker runs over the line break, the sentence stops and starts, full of careful hedging and parenthetical observation. Foreign aggressors are again presented as barbarians, but there is another precarious distinction in the phrase “ogn’*altro* barbaro furore”. The French themselves are still barbarians, even on those occasions when they protect Italy. Confidence returns in the second half of the stanza. The “comprenda, dico” of line seven is heavily and naturally stressed, unlike the tentative “comprenda” of the first line. Ariosto’s use of the Latin form “sepulcro” – rather than the Tuscan “sepolcro” – avoids an echo of “oltre” and “monti”; the grave is emphasised by the breaking down of assonance, rather than by assonance itself.

This stanza contains a fundamental contradiction: Ariosto’s Italia cannot be reconciled with the idea of “good” and “bad” invasions. The last four lines ring with the conviction that Italy should be free of foreign intervention of all kinds; they are not consistent with the opening distinction between protective and tyrannical invasions. Ariosto’s efforts to maintain that distinction profoundly affect his account of the Italian wars. At first, the contradiction can be resolved; the opening conflicts are those of distant and legendary history, events which neatly confirm the intended pattern of the paintings. The intervention of Charlemagne was an important foundation myth for many Italian cities; the friendly nature of his campaign could be taken for granted and – since he is also a hero of the *Furioso* – praised as glorious. It is with recent events that the

to place the yoke upon her and tyrannise her was to be under no illusion but that beyond the

distinction between oppressive and helpful intervention. a distinction Ariosto supports on behalf of his patrons, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

The recent horrors are introduced with a celebration of Ariosto's last patron, Alfonso d'Avalos. The marquis had taken an active part in Charles V's most recent campaigns, though not – luckily for Ariosto – in the sack of Rome. Ariosto devotes six stanzas to the praise of this knight, “a cui sarà secondo / ogn'altro che sin qui sia stata al mondo”.⁸⁴ His birth was deferred by providence until

...più il romano Imperio saria oppresso,
acciò per lui tornasse in libertade.⁸⁵

This celebration of the marquis is carefully placed at the point of his birth, not at the time of his deeds. This puts him in the company of Pepin and Charlemagne, rather than of Lodovico Sforza, who makes his appearance immediately afterwards. D'Avalos is praised as a defender of the empire, but it is praise without context: we aren't told what exactly he achieved. He becomes a hero of romance, not of the real world; had this extravagance been put off until the account of the 1520s, it would have clashed horribly with Ariosto's descriptions of reality. The account of the marquis's exploits is fulsome enough, but it does not go so far as comparing him to Achilles, Apollo, Caesar and Hercules, as this early description does (33.28-9). Ariosto does not bend history, then, but he does

mountains he would find his grave yawning.” (33,12)

⁸⁴ “beside whom every man born hitherto would come second” (33,27)

organise it for the benefit of his patrons. Charles VIII is protected by similar tactful omissions. His intervention was a disaster, but the Estensi had supported it. Ariosto points out, with perfect accuracy, that Charles conquered Naples effortlessly, without even fighting, and concludes with a very vague reference to this success as “incline prove”, shining deeds (33,24 and 30).

Thus far, Ariosto’s account of the wars is notably tactful. As he proceeds, however, describing each of the many French interventions in Italian affairs, the cumulative effect of invasion after invasion starts to outweigh the careful distinction between friendly and tyrannical. The same territory is repeatedly fought over, and with each fresh disaster the conflicts start to seem viciously pointless. Kings lose, win and lose again, gaining nothing but bloodshed. As with most accounts of these wars, the final impression is a confusion of disastrous battles, a list of corpse-strewn fields, plagues and gore. In the space of three stanzas Louis XII ejects and then restores the Bentivoglio family, and Ariosto does not tell us which, if either, of these actions was reasonable (33,37-39). The king’s motives are lost in a list of battles and their outcomes:

E come qui turbato, così bello,
mostra Fortuna al re Luigi il volto...⁸⁶

The explicit message of this passage, of the magical paintings themselves, has collapsed. The ordered world in which virtue – in the form of friendly

⁸⁵“the Holy Roman Empire was most oppressed, so that it could be set free by him.” (33,30)

⁸⁶“Fortune shows Louis now a frowning, now a smiling face...” (33,35)

intervention – was rewarded, and vice punished, has been replaced by Fortune’s triumph over endless conflict. The initial capital of “Fortuna” underlines this loss of balance, of justice: this is a pagan goddess, and one who served as virtue’s opposite, as an emblem of a fallen world. With her appearance, all hope of distinction is lost; disaster is matched by disaster. The atrocities become overwhelming at the sack of Rome:

Vedete gli omicidii e le rapine
 in ogni parte far Roma dolente;
 e con incendi e stupri le divine
 e le profane cose ire ugualmente. 4
 Il campo de la lega le ruine
 mira d’appresso, e ’l pianto e ’l grido sente;
 e dove ir dovia inanzi, torna indietro,
 e prender lascia il successor di Pietro.⁸⁷ 8

The violence becomes more shocking as “le divine” are set next to rape and arson. Throughout this passage, Ariosto links or begins phrases with “e”, turning each fresh horror or lamentation – “e ’l pianto e ’l grido” – into one of many. The opening “vedete” demands that we *see* the destruction of Rome, the atrocities committed in “ogni parte” of the city. This view of the devastation, as from a distance, is that of the army of the League, which waited outside the city without moving to protect it. That failure is concisely stated in the structure of the fifth line, which sets “il campo de la lega” next to “le ruine”: since they did nothing to prevent it, they deserve to be associated with it. The passive voice of

⁸⁷ “See the carnage and plunder which, throughout Rome, cause lamentation, as the sacred and the profane suffer equally from arson and rape. The forces of the League witness the devastation from close at hand, and hear the cries and laments, but instead of pressing forward they retreat, leaving the successor of Peter to be captured.” (33.55)

“prender lascia” implies that the Pope was not so much captured as abandoned to his enemies, and their neglected duty is underlined by “dove ir dovia”. a near-perfect repetition of “dovria”: they should, they should. Ariosto’s account of the wars had, until this stanza, featured the papacy as an exclusively temporal power; the phrase “il successor di Pietro” restores its theological authority and underlines the violation of Christianity inherent in these events.

The help sent to the papacy was delayed, and is delayed in the action of the next stanza:

Manda Lotrecco il re con nuove squadre, non più per fare in Lombardia l’impresa, ma per levar de le mani empie e ladre il capo e l’altre membra de la Chiesa;	4
che tarda sì, che trova al Santo Padre non esser più la libertà contesa. Assedia la cittade ove sepolta è la sirena, e tutto il regno volta. ⁸⁸	8

Ariosto’s explanation that French troops will not, this time, act in Lombardy is not strictly necessary: Rome is and was the subject, and anything else is a digression. The explanation suggests that the French might be following their own affairs; we are not told of their wish to help the Pope until the fourth line. That lethargy is underlined by the heavily-stressed phrase “che tarda sì”, and by the sentence structure: the construction “non più contesa” tells us not that the Pope was free when they got there, but that they arrived too late to have any

⁸⁸ “The king sends his general Lautrec with fresh troops, not this time to do anything more in Lombardy but to rescue the Head and other members of the Church from thieving, sacrilegious

influence over events. The reference to “il capo e l’altre membra de la Chiesa” suggests literal dismemberment; the French are too late to do anything but pick up the pieces. The Pope’s liberty, the fate of Rome itself, are not important enough to close the stanza: the French set off to further campaigns in the final couplet. The rescue of the Pope, their ostensible aim, is no longer necessary, but there is obviously no shortage of reasons for future conflict. Even the sack of Rome is not the climax of these wars. The account of the murals ends, ominously, with the line “queste e altre istorie molte”, all this history, *and much more*.⁸⁹ Italy has no Augustan triumph to aim for; the *Furioso*’s digressions leave and return to acknowledgement of Italian military and national failure.

The expression of Italian national feeling was not easy: Ariosto could not escape the contradictions between larger and smaller loyalties, or those of courtly service. These are the divisions which prevented Italian unity, and they are reflected in the *Furioso*. Ariosto does manage, throughout this lament, to be scrupulously polite about his employers: the role of the Este in the sack of Rome is not, of course, mentioned. Even with such tactful omissions, however, there is clearly a fundamental difference between Este history and Italian history, and there is no doubt which the *Furioso* finally records. The tactful acknowledgement of Ferrarese, French and Imperial interests is swamped by the sheer horror of the wars; the promised distinction between friendly and unfriendly invasions becomes meaningless. The poet’s duty to his employers is

hands; he is so late that he find the Holy Father’s liberty is no longer contested. So he lays siege to the city where the Siren was buried, and harries the whole kingdom.” (33.56)

finally less important than his duty to Italy, a duty that involves painful acknowledgement rather than celebration. That acknowledgement, here and elsewhere in the *Furioso*, explains why unified epic could not work as the poetry of cinquecento Italy. There was no “maestà dello impero” for Italian heroes to work towards; Italy’s only shared experience was fragmentation.

ii response to crisis within the *Furioso*

This lament for Italy’s fate is the *Furioso*’s most explicit comment on contemporary wars. Its length and its passionate despair are unusual: the tone is not far from that of Boiardo’s final stanza. In the *Innamorato*, acknowledgement of the invasion led to at least a temporary breakdown of the romance world – even if Boiardo had written more, his final stanza is an interruption which demands a pause before the story could continue. Ariosto’s account of French intervention appears at the beginning of a canto, and leads straight into the Carolingian narrative – back, in fact, to romance, since it continues with Bradamante sighing for love and a group of knights planning to do penance for losing their joust. The history passage does not force a break in the poem: the desperate state of Italy is not to be separated from the rest of the *Furioso*. Like the wanderings through romance forests, the loves and heroism which Ariosto celebrates, the wars are an integral part of his poem. Bradamante, who sees the murals depicting Italy’s fate, has already been shown visions of her glorious

⁸⁹ *Orlando Furioso*, 33,58.

progeny, and the images of contemporary events are a recurrent element. Earlier visions have also mentioned cinquecento atrocities, though not in this much detail. This suggests that Ariosto repeatedly makes the disastrous present a part of a glorious chivalric past. This integration does not undermine the glamour and confidence of his poem, qualities which made it a celebration as well as a lament over Italy. The framing of threatening contemporary material makes confidence possible even in the cinquecento.

The murals of the Rocca di Tristano are introduced by a proem on the subject of painting, on great artists of ancient times and on their modern equivalents:

Timagora, Parrasio, Polignoto, Protogene, Timante, Apollodoro, Apelle, più di tutti questi noto, e Zeusi, e gli altri ch'a quei tempi fôro;	4
di quai la fama (mal grado di Cloto, che spinse i corpi e dipoi l'opre loro) sempre starà, fin che si legga e scriva, mercé degli scrittori, al mondo viva:	8
 e quei che furo a' nostri dì, o sono ora, Leonardo, Andrea Mantegna, Gian Bellino, duo Dossi, e quel ch'a par sculpe e colora, Michel, più che mortale, Angelo divino;	4
Bastiano, Rafael, Tizian, ch'onora non men Cador, che quei Venezia e Urbino; e gli altri di cui tal l'opra si vede, qual de la prisca età se lege e crede... ⁹⁰	8

⁹⁰“In days of old there were painters like Timagoras, Parrhasius, Polignotus, Protogenes, Timantes, Apollodorus, Apelles (the renowned of all theses) and Zeuxis, artists whose fame (even though their bodies and their works are extinct at Clotho's hands) will endure for ever, so long as there are writers, and therefore reading and writing. / And in our own day artists have lived and still survive such as Leonardo, Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, the two Dossis, and Michelangelo (who equally as sculptor and painter is more divine than human), Sebastiano del Piombo, Raphael, and Titian (the boast respectively of Venice, Urbino and Cadore), and others whose work is visibly of the same eminence as is ascribed to the painters of old.” (33,1-2)

The greatest achievements of the classical age are easily matched by those of the sixteenth-century present. There are as many celebrated moderns as there are ancients (one more, in fact: there are eight names in each stanza, but two Dossi). Ariosto's contemporaries outweigh their classical predecessors in more than numbers. The reputation of the ancients, moreover, must be taken on trust. Ariosto twice points out that their fame depends on writers – casually reinforcing the traditional claims of poets as preservers of reputation, which Saint John the Evangelist proclaims to the knight Astolfo at 35,22-28. We can see the greatness of renaissance artists (and this stanza is quite as impressive to the modern reader, awed by a list which starts with Leonardo and ends with Titian, as it could have been in the sixteenth century) but must “lege e crede” in that of their predecessors.

The painters of ancient times are barely differentiated, but Ariosto's contemporaries are made real to us by details: by a joke on Michelangelo's name, and praise of his versatility, by the birthplaces of three other artists. The fact that Titian sheds lustre on Cadore suggests the extent to which artistic greatness bestows honour on a place, and all of Ariosto's artists are Italian. He does distinguish between birthplaces, but the context of these stanzas is of Italian rather than local history. The list includes artists from Florence, Ferrara, Piombo, Urbino and Venice, but the cumulative effect is to glorify Italy, not each individual city. Ariosto starts his account of Italian misery by reminding his

audience of national achievement. The viciousness of the wars is not understated, but it is matched by an image of the peninsula as a cultural whole of astonishing, abundant virtuosity. Such assertion of cultural achievement was immensely important at such a time, and the *Furioso* itself was an example of it. The acknowledged greatness of a Titian or an Ariosto gave Italians an image of their nation which was not rooted in butchery or despair.

This combination of triumph and harsh acknowledgement are characteristic of the *Furioso*. Michelangelo and Mantegna are not an escape from reality, but another aspect of it; in the poem's Carolingian world, madness and death are as common as love and enchantment. These elements are, nevertheless, contained within a poem famous for its harmony and even for apparent escapism. The nineteenth-century critic Francesco De Sanctis presented the poem as an aesthetic masterpiece, a tranquil dream of knights and ladies which lacked moral and especially political seriousness; later Benedetto Croce declared, in a famous study, that the poem's only end was harmony, a mellifluous unity which transcended all pain or worry. These views have, of course, been substantially revised by later critics, notably by Albert Russell Ascoli, who has presented the poem as a text full of violent crisis – of individual identity, of political and religious upheavals – which poetic harmony can only attempt to evade.⁹¹ Cultural contexts inevitably affect critical interpretation, and other works in the western

⁹¹ Francesco De Sanctis, "Ariosto". in M.T. Lanza, ed., *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (Milano: Feltrini, 1964), Benedetto Croce, *Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille*, translated by Douglas Ainslie (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921), Albert Russell Ascoli, *Ariosto's*

canon have gone through drastic reinterpretation. By any standards, however, these later readings of the *Furioso* are startlingly opposed. Such contradictions are, however, an important element of a poem which can present, at the same time, the real disasters of Italy and a succession of comic marvels and sensuous idylls. Ariosto's juxtaposition of wars and paintings suggests that Italy can exist in spirit even as the nation disintegrates; art is not only an alternative to the horrors of reality but a means of expressing and transcending them.

5 Chivalry and nationhood

The poem's marvels are possible because Ariosto's heroes can leave their sterner tasks. The *Furioso* does present its meandering narrative as a conscious opposition to tightly-structured epic: if digressions are dead ends in epic, they are a source of vitality in romance. For the knights errant of medieval chivalry, wandering was a positive tradition, a form of heroic action in its own right long before humanist rediscovery presented it as an alternative to united endeavour. The *Furioso* was, after all, popular far beyond the educated humanist audience. It was read in the tradition of Virgil, but it was also read in the traditions of the market-place cantastorie who still retold stories of Roland and Oliver, of Ferrara's magnificent library of chivalric romances.

The digressions of the knight-errant are built into chivalric narrative, with its concern for the individual warrior rather than the common end of conquest or empire-building. There is a sense in which medieval romance was itself a digression. The great cycles of Arthur and Charlemagne changed radically in the retelling; from linear (and patriotic) tales of the deaths of Arthur and Roland, they were spun into collections of stories loosely attached to the original thread. The new digressions moved into tales of individual prowess, of adventure and love, and there were so many of them that the original narrative could be swamped or even forgotten amid this new abundance. Roland's death at Roncesvalles lies behind the *Orlando Furioso*, such a long way behind that it barely registers in the poem: Orlando is diminished by service, but it is Ruggiero for whom duty is associated with betrayal and death. The "priority of love as motive" which Burrow defines as "the most obvious and important fact about *Orlando Furioso*" brings Ariosto close to Auerbach's account of medieval romance, in which love supplies the want of other motives for valour. The feudal ethos of medieval fiction "serves no political function; it serves no practical reality at all; it has become absolute".⁹³ That detachment from reality carried the knightly tradition away from its beginnings in the linear narratives of Roland or Arthur. In their earliest form, these were national heroes whose goals were the protection of their countries: there could be no digression from the conflict of Christians and Saracens at Roncesvalles, or from the heroic defeat recorded in the earliest of the Arthur stories. As those stories were retold their concern for

⁹³ Burrow, 57; Auerbach, 134.

political ends, and for national identity, faded as the self-realising ethos of medieval chivalry began to dominate. As Arthur Ferguson has pointed out, Arthur's "effectiveness as a model of knighthood varies in inverse proportion to the emphasis placed in Arthurian literature on the theme of conquest".⁹³ The more attention paid to the knights of the Round Table – and by the time of Chretien de Troyes Lancelot had become more important than his king – the less was paid to Arthur as conqueror. The chivalric cycles went from national beginnings – the heroic success of the Franks in a French poem, the great final battle of a British Arthur – to become a kind of international gothic. By the twelfth century, French poets were celebrating Arthur, and Roland was a hero from Germany to Spain. That internationalism lingers in the newly patriotic romances of the renaissance: Ariosto's Orlando may be a hero of Italy, but he's still French.

In its medieval forms, chivalric idealism is not bound by national borders. Lancelot can leave France for Britain because, as an autonomous man-at-arms, he can choose his lord. Knights defend Christendom, or their immediate lords; loyalty springs from a voluntary bond, not from patriotic feeling. The internationalism and the individual autonomies of romance reflected an absence of centralised governments. Medieval Europe was fragmented into smaller states, and fragmented again by the power of feudal magnates; national definition was often overlaid by the allegiance owed to the Holy Roman Empire and to the

⁹³ Arthur Ferguson, *The Chivalric Tradition in Renaissance England* (New Jersey: Associated

papacy. The fictional independence of romance knights was part of a world in which barons had genuine political autonomy. Geoffroi de Charny – a chivalric author who died bearing his king's standard in the battle of Poitiers – praises prowess in war above all other deeds of arms but is careful not to make the prowess shown in local wars seem less admirable than that demonstrated in national conflicts.⁹⁴ Even kings could forget the claims of nationhood: John the Good gave Burgundy semi-independent status, an appalling political mistake, because he wished to reward his son's valour at Poitiers with *largesse* on a truly princely scale.⁹⁵ This is the reverse of the Virgilian epic's elevation of imperial destiny above all other considerations.

The knightly autonomy of romances, and the feudal ethos behind it, were both under threat by the later middle ages. Monarchies became more centralised, while the authority of the knightly class became less absolute with the rise of mercantile power. As the power of feudal magnates was reined in the image of the independent knight was increasingly anachronistic. The shift was hastened by military change. By the fourteenth century the mounted knight was no longer the basic unit of warfare. Cavalry charges could be broken up by archers, and later by artillery, or impaled on the bristling spear-hedges formed by well-disciplined, and often mercenary, pikemen. Discipline was vital in these changes: new techniques, especially in artillery, made organisation essential to the conduct of

University Presses, 1986) 100.

⁹⁴ Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, eds., *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) 88-89.

war, and with it came submission to authority. Increased use of mercenaries, and finally the development of standing armies made war increasingly national: only the monarch could afford it. These developments were matched by new doubts as to the legitimacy of private wars. The early medieval lawyers Bartolus and John of Legnano had defined knighthood as the means of protecting the state, a use of power and violence which was justified and legitimated only in the service of the prince.⁹⁶ Over the course of the fifteenth century these ideas became more widely accepted. The reprinting and translation of classical military texts emphasised discipline, obedience, and civic duty. Vernacular texts adapted codes of honour accordingly: the author of the anonymous *Enseignement de Vraie Noblesse* (1440) stressed that military honour and renown could only be won in just wars, which had become those of the sovereign.⁹⁷ The sovereign had become the source of honour, and of the only justifiable military career.

Such changes – in warfare, in noble independence, in ideas of nationhood – all helped to centralise authority, and were furthered by the humanist rediscovery of classical and imperial ideas of the state. Burgundy was famous for its chivalric idealism, its celebration of the individual knight, but its standing army, created in 1471, replaced the banners of lords with new standards which identified the unit rather than its commander. Its soldiers wore surcoats in the

⁹⁵ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 91-92.

⁹⁶ Mervyn James, *Society, Politics, Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 318.

⁹⁷ Malcolm Vale, *War and Chivalry: Warfare and Aristocratic Culture in England, France and Burgundy at the End of the Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1981) 27.

duke's colours, rather than their own, and from 1473 they wore insignia which identified their squadron and their place in it. Malcolm Vale has observed that this was the first system of military differentiation to ignore social rank since the fall of the Roman Empire: and the parallel is significant.⁹⁸ The opposition of classical discipline to medieval randomness can be seen in political and military as well as literary form.

These shifts encouraged new attention to national identity, and helped to create the newly patriotic writing of the renaissance. They also underline how strange it is that chivalric romance should have become associated with the expression of nationhood. Chivalry was of course a popular form of heroic action, one adaptable enough to take on changing ideas of honour. The prose romances of Spain, well-established in the fifteenth century and reaching a peak of popularity with the *Amadis* and *Palmerin* cycles, are just as digressive, but evidently fitted a national mood of expansionist confidence.⁹⁹ Malory's Arthur is a romance hero, but he is also patriotic. Caxton's preface calls him

the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian and worthy, King Arthur, which ought most to be remembered among us English men tofore all other Christian kings.¹⁰⁰

The Arthur of Malory and Caxton still appealed on international grounds.

Malory's text is a translation from the French; Arthur is one of the nine worthies:

⁹⁸ Vale, 148.

⁹⁹ John J. O'Connor, *Amadis de Gaule and its influence on Elizabethan Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 7-8.

Caxton had, as he points out, already printed accounts of some of the others. The preface, and Malory's attention to Arthur's early career of conquest as well as to the Grail and Lancelot stories, do also underline his patriotic claim. Romance changed under the influence of greater national definition. That change, with its greater patriotism and its acknowledgement of civic duty, was blurred by the humanist renaissance. Once an opposition had been developed between chivalric and epic genres, between feudalism and the centralised state, it became harder to see the new political and patriotic elements in romance. In comparison with Roman ideas of the state, the most authoritarian romance king seemed dreamily chivalric, part of a fairy-tale world. Romance instead became associated, not with disciplined warfare or honour achieved through public service, but with the autonomy and self-realisation of older romances. Malory moved Arthur back towards his conquering roots; by the time the renaissance reached England, not long afterwards, humanists were condemning romance, and specifically Arthurian romance, for its unruly violence.

The *Furioso*'s digressions reflect that opposition of romance and classicism. Its chivalry is self-conscious. Medieval military heroes could only be knights: there is no other form available for their heroism, as the chivalric images of Julius Caesar and Alexander suggest. In the *Furioso* the glorious past is set against visions of a non-chivalric present. Auerbach saw Ariosto in the tradition of fairy-tale romance, the *Furioso* depicting "a world of serene illusion" where

¹⁰⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cohen, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

heroes do “feats of arms... rather than ‘war’, for they are feats accomplished at random, in one place as well as another, which do not fit into any politically purposive pattern”.¹⁰¹ As we have seen, the *Furioso* is full of war as well as feats of arms, but the two are as opposed in Ariosto’s poem as they are in Auerbach’s definition. Knightly values – and particularly the ardent and digressive readiness for adventure – are celebrated in the knowledge that they are threatened or, worse, are no longer held outside the world of the poem. Chivalry is not the assumed framework of the secular world, but a set of ideas that have been consciously chosen. Ariosto’s heroes are knights in opposition to other kinds of warfare, to the mercenary armies of the cinquecento. The *Furioso*’s attack on artillery, the cowardly devices that undermine true chivalry, is famous. The chivalry of the *Furioso* turns, almost invariably, against kinds of discipline – formal and military – that could not bring unity to Italy.

In consequence, the *Furioso*’s ardour, and the narrative structure that generates so many stories, are based on private rather than public action. Even in the central war, the knights fight not through duty, or for a goal of empire, but through emotion: service itself is a personal rather than a public virtue. For most of the *Furioso*, characters are spurred on by the motives of romance, moved by love and pity into passionate digression. The central conflict is repeatedly abandoned as knights rescue and pursue women, answer calls for help, get caught up in the adventure of the moment. Ariosto draws attention to that abandonment.

1969) 1,3.

as his opening canto drew attention to its digressions from epic example. There are repeated scenes, especially in the first half of the poem, where knights are forced to choose between duty and the immediate appeal of desire. They consistently choose desire: the digressive narrative is based on the fact that no knight can turn away from adventure, refuse a call for help or ignore the beauties of the various heroines. As in the first canto, the poem and its knights go on chasing Angelica. One early exception is illuminating. The female knight Bradamante receives an appeal for help from the people of Marseille, who are fearful of the invading Saracens:

e che Marsilia, non v'essesndo quella
che la dovea guardar, mal si conforta,
e consiglio e soccorso le domanda
per questo messo, e se la raccomanda.¹⁰²

Throughout the *Furioso*, appeals for help make knights turn away from their present tasks, but Bradamante – after a moment of indecision – sticks to her present course. This rare instance of non-digression is made by the poem's dynastic heroine, who is perhaps closer to linear narrative than other characters in the poem. Her decision is, however, another instance of emotion taking precedence over duty: she turns down the people of Marseilles in order to rescue her lover Ruggiero. In refusing digression she comes closer to epic teleology – she and Ruggiero are the ancestors of the Estensi, and she is rescuing her

¹⁰¹ Auerbach, 140.

¹⁰² “Those of Marseilles were in distress for lack of her, she being the one appointed to protect them; their citizens had sent this courier to commend themselves to her and to entreat her aid and counsel.” (2,63)

dynastic future – but she also comes close to another romance archetype, the damsel seeking her knightly lover, much as Fiordiligi does throughout the *Innamorato*. Moreover, Bradamante does not turn away from the townspeople in danger, only from their messenger. A few stanzas earlier, Rinaldo abandoned his search for Angelica in order to carry out a mission for Charlemagne. This is not quite a return to duty in spite of love: as Colin Burrow has observed, he turns away from the hope of Angelica, not the woman herself.¹⁰³ Long-distance appeals are resistible, as present calls for help are not. Although the call from Marseilles fails, it too works on the assumption that action is the result of emotional engagement. Bradamante has been appointed to protect the city by the Emperor, who is impressed with her military prowess. The townspeople could insist on her assistance, or reproach her for leaving them. Instead, they beg her to return because they are scared. Their claim on Bradamante is their vulnerability, not her existing duty to them. In making her decision, however, “quinci l’onore e il debito le pesa, / quindi l’incalza l’amoroso foco”.¹⁰⁴ In the context of the early *Furioso*, her decision is a foregone conclusion.

6 Chivalry and the forces destroying Italy

The opening canto of the *Furioso* sets up a formal opposition of romance and epic. In the course of the poem, that opposition is carried on through

¹⁰³ *Furioso* 2, 26-27; Burrow, 57.

¹⁰⁴ “she was pulled one way by her sense of honour and duty, and the other by the promptings of love’s passion.” (2,65)

chivalric action, with its emotional engagement, and the central campaign of Charlemagne and Agramante. There is a further opposition between chivalric heroism and the warfare of Ariosto's own time. That warfare is not only seen in the battles of Ariosto's inset histories. The great hosts of Charlemagne and Agramante are imagined sometimes as feudal armies, sometimes as modern forces. Michael Murrin has suggested that the realism of some of Ariosto's battles "affected, perhaps even generated, a new approach to heroic poetry in the later sixteenth century".¹⁰⁵ At the siege of Biserta, that realism includes an uncontrollable soldiery and outbreaks of rape and pillage; elsewhere Rodomonte battles on an extravagant scale, leaping thirty-foot trenches and single-handedly causing more devastation than cannon.¹⁰⁶ That comparison suggests the extent to which modern and romance warfare are intermingled in the *Furioso*. Rodomonte's exploits include slaughtering civilians on a scale familiar from Ravenna or Rome; he merely does "more spectacularly what soldiers in the sixteenth century did as a matter of course".¹⁰⁷ At such moments Ariosto cuts between romance and realism; elsewhere, he sets up a head-on collision between such military brutality and the individualist warfare of romance.

By the twenty-seventh canto, the Christians have surrounded the Saracen camp, and the pagan king Agramante can barely hold out. His champions have all left the field to wander through France in pursuit of adventure and their own

¹⁰⁵ Murrin, 79.

¹⁰⁶ *Furioso* 14,130 and 16,27.

¹⁰⁷ Murrin, 83.

ends. Messengers eventually find the missing knights – most of whom have been duelling and squabbling over the possession of such quintessentially romantic objects as armour, horses, and women – and persuade them to put aside their quarrels for the sake of their king. The whole episode emphasises the importance of inspiring heroes. Without Ruggiero, Mandricardo and the others, the main army fights badly. When they return, they readily defeat a Christian army that has, for the moment, been deprived of its paladins. The wars of romance are decided by individuals.

The Christian and Saracen forces are opposed in an odd variety of ways. Quint points out that, from Homer onwards, epic battles set a unified West against the diverse forces of the East. The main sweep of Ariosto's central war certainly bears this out: in the course of the poem his Carolingian knights "vanquish an Islamic army collected from Spain, North Africa, Samarkand, India and Cathay".¹⁰⁸ At this moment, however, multiplicity and unity are to be found on both sides. The champions, romance heroes, are digressive and individual, single warriors against a united force. But for once the national diversity of the Christians is more evident than that of the Saracens. As the champions break through to their king, they become exemplars of knightly warfare, opposed to a strangely modern Christian army:

L'esercito cristian mosso a tumulto
 Sozzopra va senza sapere il fatto.
 Estima alcun che sia un usato insulto

¹⁰⁸ Quint, 24.

Che Svizzari o Guasconi abbino fatto.
 Ma perch'alla più parte è il caso occulto,
 S'aduna insieme ogni nazione di fatto,
 Altri a suon di tamburo, altri di tromba:
 Grande è 'l rumore, e fin al ciel rimbomba.¹⁰⁹

“Svizzari o Guasconi” were, as everyone knew, famous as mercenary soldiers, famous also for the fact that their employers found them unmanageable. Their great strength as infantry was in forming pike barriers strong enough to withstand a cavalry charge. A Swiss force is, simply through its nationality, implicitly modern, disciplined, unchivalric and mercenary. By making their only appearance in the romance wars of the *Furioso*, they suggest that, at this moment, the Christian army is more cinquecento than Carolingian. Murrin points out that romance writers generally “discreetly updated” the warfare of their fictions; here Ariosto sets the contemporary against the heroic past.¹¹⁰ The soldiers’ hurried regrouping may suggest other professional elements; the fact that the Christians gather to their nation is also unusual in romance. Just as the Christian army becomes like that of the sixteenth century, it also becomes reminiscent of the vast mixed hordes that epic puts to the east. Its disarray under surprise attack reinforces that sense of multiple confusion. When, a few stanzas later, the whole Saracen force sets out for battle, its heroism recalls the assembled ranks of epic. Ariosto sets classical as well as chivalric heroism in opposition to modern war. Murrin points out that the *Furioso*’s battle scenes are

¹⁰⁹ “The Christian army was set by the ears, not knowing what was happening – some thought it was those Swiss or Gascons having another riot. But as most of them were in ignorance of the facts, each nation at once gathered to its standards, some to the sound of drums, others to clarion calls: great was the noise which echoed to the very heavens.” (27,19.)

¹¹⁰ Murrin, 83.

a patchwork of references, “the Latin poets and Boiardo as models... he made a mosaic imitation of Virgil and Statius, line by line, image by image” in the depiction of battles. His heroes are both classical and knightly. Nevertheless, the form and tone of his poem make heroism predominantly digressive and chivalric, and the major opposition is between champions and mercenaries.

Modernity returns as the emperor follows the route of Rodomonte and Mandricardo:

Giunge più inanzi, e ne ritrova molti
giacere in terra, anzi in vermiglio lago
nel proprio sangue orribilmente involti,
né giovar lor può medico né mago;
e vede dagli busti i capi sciolti
e braccia e gambe con crudele imago;
e ritrova dai primi alloggiamenti
agli ultimi per tutto uomini spenti.¹¹¹

This devastation is gradually revealed; it unfolds before the reader as it unfolds before Charlemagne. His troops must be dead, but the explicit statement of their deaths is withheld until the last line. It is only as the emperor reaches the end of his camp that the scale of the destruction can be understood. We hear that “molti” have fallen; that they lie in a lake of their own blood and are, euphemistically, beyond help. The escalation of horrors is luridly visualised: as Charlemagne, and the reader, moves closer, we see the devastation in more

¹¹¹ “He went further and came upon many lying on the ground, or rather in a scarlet pool of their own blood - a ghastly sight - and beyond the help of doctor or magician. He saw heads parted from trunks, and severed arms and heads, cruel to behold. From first to the last line of tents he saw dead men on all sides.” (27.21)

detail, finding scattered limbs and heads sliced from bodies. This violence, like Rodomonte's assault on Paris, recalls Ariosto's descriptions of real battles. Outside Paris, Christian bodies lie in a "vermiglio lago", where at Ravenna

... i destrier fin alla pancia
 nel sangue uman per tutta la campagna;
 ch'a sepelire il popul verrà manco
 tedesco, ispano, greco, italo e franco.¹¹²

Both battles have ended in a confused mess of bodies and gore.

This devastation, like the implicitly mercenary troops and the gathering to national standards, is an element of contemporary warfare. These acts are, however, committed by figures of romance. Ariosto's next stanza returns the poem, abruptly, to a world of prowess and glory:

Dove passato era il piccol drappello,
 di chiara fama eternamente degno,
 per lunga riga era rimasto quello
 al mondo sempre memorabil segno.¹¹³

By calling the two knights a "piccol drappello", Ariosto leaves realistic accounts of battles behind. These acts have been committed by warriors who were heroically outnumbered. It is, nevertheless, a shock to see the earlier account of severed heads and limbs paraphrased as deeds "eternamente degno" of fame and respect. It is true that romance, by focusing on the actions of knights, inevitably

¹¹² "horses wallow up to their bellies in human blood, and not all the Germans, Spaniards, Greeks, Italians and French shall be sufficient to bury the dead." (3,55) Ariosto visited Ravenna the day after the battle, and described the aftermath in his tenth Elegy: so many bodies that the earth was not visible for miles.

celebrates violent action, as sixteenth-century moralists were to complain. Earlier texts, from the *Chanson de Roland* through to the later cycles, are full of hacked limbs and ripped bodies. One of the combats depicted in the thirteenth-century Manasseh Codex shows elegant spectators, brightly-dressed knights, and squirting blood.¹¹⁴ Even tournaments, in which fighting is an entertainment, could result in serious damage. At one of Malory's jousts, we are shown a knight who "almoste broke his necke, for the blood braste out of the nose, mouthe and earys".¹¹⁵ Deaths were common in early tournaments, and even later, more careful combats were beset by accidents. Piero della Francesca's portrait in profile of Federigo da Montefeltro, duke of Urbino, shows the distorted nose, though not the missing eye, that were the result of a tournament. Most famously, Henri II of France died in a jousting accident in 1559.¹¹⁶ It should not, therefore, be assumed that gore is more characteristic of the Italian wars than it is of chivalric prowess. Nevertheless, there is a contradiction between the Saracen champions' "chiara fama" and the "vermiglio lago" they leave behind them, a contradiction which is not permitted to cloud our view of more sympathetic knights. When Ruggiero and Marfisa, who appear on the Este family's imaginary tree, cut through to Agramante their assault is handled rather differently. The violence of their assault is softened by comedy and by an absence of precise detail; they chop heads and shoulders (27,25), but the result is not described in terms of numberless dead:

¹¹³ "Where the little group had passed they had left a long gash as a mark of their passage that world would never forget: truly they merited eternal splendour and renown." (27,22)

¹¹⁴ Keen, plate 17.

Molti che dal furor di Rodomonte
 e di quegli altri primi eran fuggiti
 Dio ringraziavan ch'avea lor sì pronte
 gambe concesse, e piedi sì espediti;
 e poi, dando del petto e de la fronte
 in Marfisa e in Ruggier, vedean scheniti,
 come l'uom né per star né per fuggire
 al su fisso destin può contraddire.¹¹⁸

The Christians who fly from the frying pan to the fire are comic victims, not evidence of atrocity. The combination of fleeing (and therefore cowardly) troops with the sententious final couplet make it impossible to associate these equally doomed soldiers with the horrors inflicted by Rodomonte. The heroic, romantic aspects of this new assault are confirmed when Ruggiero and Marfisa reach the pagan camp. With their arrival, the Saracen army is confirmed as a chivalric force:

Negli ripari entrò de' Saracini	
Marfisa con Ruggiero a salvamento.	
Quivi tutti con gli occhi al ciel supini	
Dio ringraziâr del buono avvenimento.	4
Or non v'è più timor de' paladini:	
Il più tristo pagan ne sfida cento;	
Et è concluso che senza riposo	
Si torni a fare il campo sanguinoso. ¹¹⁹	8

¹¹⁶ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: University Press, 1954) 490.

¹¹⁷ Barber, 184.

¹¹⁸ "Many who had escaped from the wrath of Rodomonte and the first assailants thanked God for giving them such limber legs, such nimble feet; but when they were balked by running headlong into Marfisa and Ruggiero, they saw that a man, whether he stands or flees, cannot argue with his allotted fate." (27.26).

¹¹⁹ "Marfisa and Ruggiero safely reached the Saracen camp, where everyone raised their eyes to heaven and thanked God for this stroke of fortune. Now nobody feared the paladins any more – the most abject pagan would have challenged a hundred of them – and it was decided to issue forth without respite to make the field bloody." (27.28)

The exemplary qualities of knighthood have traditionally been important: chivalric treatises as well as romances hoped to inspire their audiences to greater things by presenting them with ideal images. Marfisa and Ruggiero act as such an image within the poem itself; the Saracens, confronted by their hero and heroine, themselves become brave. We can forget, for the moment, that these are pagans; they are knights and comrades. When the Saracens then take to the field, they are very obviously heroic:

Corni, bussoni, timpani, moreschi
 Empieno il ciel di formidabil suoni:
 Ne l'aria tremolare ai venti freschi
 Si veggon le bandiere e i gonfaloni. 4
 Da l'altra parte i capitani carleschi
 Stringon con Alamanni e con Britoni
 Quei di Francia, d'Italia e d'Inghilterra;
 E si mesce aspra e sanguinosa guerra.¹¹⁹ 8

I have suggested that the drums of 27,19 might represent modern or romance warfare. The banners and clangour of the Saracens has no such ambiguity. Their trumpets and drums spread over a whole line, an abundance of instruments. The colon at the end of line 2 suggests that the “formidabil suoni” itself causes the “aria tremolare” of the next line. Banners flutter, and the breeze is “freschi”: everything about the Saracen muster is active, noisy, and heroic.

¹¹⁹ “Saracen trumpets, clarions, drums filled the air with formidable clangour; in the fresh breeze the banners and ensigns could be seen fluttering. On the other side, Charlemagne’s captains assembled the troops of France, Italy and England along with the Germans and Bretons, and fell to in a savage, bloody battle.”

With the second quatrain, we turn to the Christians, who on this occasion are much less exciting. We have been warned earlier that most of the paladins are absent from Paris (27,8); without them, the army is uninspired and realistic. It has no drums and no flags; it is organised by captains instead of being led by champions. Its forces can be distinguished only by nation, most of which – Germany, Brittany, England – were known for exporting mercenary soldiers. The presence of Italy in this company comes as a shock. Ariosto's own nation has, at this point, barely featured in the Carolingian action of the poem; the only references to Italian armies have been in reflections on contemporary events. For Italian forces to make their first Carolingian appearance as part of an apparently modern army is to deny them any chivalric flourish. Individual Italians, such as the knight Ariodante or even Ariosto's patrons, may be heroic, but no Italian army is permitted, at any point in the *Furioso*, to present a glamorous appearance. The Italian involvement with the grim Christian forces of this stanza is not reassuring; it stresses the uninspiring aspect of Charlemagne's functional army, and reinforces the general image of Italian armies in the *Furioso*. It also confirms the sense that, at this moment, Ariosto's readers find themselves supporting the wrong side: in an Italian Christian poem, we want the implicitly Italian, certainly Christian side to lose. The last line of both stanzas ends with a promise of "sanguinoso(a)" battle, but on very different terms. The Saracens set out, without waiting to be mustered, for a field, a site of arms and bravery, while the Christians promise a fight which is "aspra", bitter.

Of course, in this battle the champions win:

La forza del terribil Rodomonte,
 quella di Mandricardo furibondo,
 quella del buon Ruggier, di virtù fonte,
 del re Gradasso, sì famoso al mondo,
 e di Marfisa l'intrepida fronte,
 col re circasso a nessun mai secondo,
 feron chiamar san Gianni e san Dionigi
 al re di Francia, e ritrovar Parigi.¹²⁰

Charlemagne's army is beaten back by a catalogue of names: the grim mercenaries seem to be overcome as much by the reputation of the Saracens as by their actions. This is an evasion: we do not see the two sides actually close in combat. Ariosto moves in to describe the aftermath of the fighting – fugitives falling from the bridge in their hurry to escape, drowning in the Seine – but not the battle itself. There is a gap between the spirited endeavours of chivalry and the realistic military force that they are expected to overcome. That gap is characteristic of the *Furioso*. In an earlier episode, Orlando defeats Cimosco, the wicked king who has invented gunpowder. In an extravagant battle, Orlando overcomes the squadron sent to capture him, impaling six knights on one spear and dealing death with every blow of his sword. But his burlesque triumph is undercut by the last couplet:

¹²⁰ “What with the force of Rodomonte the Terrible, of rabid Mandricardo and of Ruggiero, fountain of strength, of King Gradasso the world-renowned, of dauntless-browed Marfisa, and of Sacripante, the Circassian king, second to none, the King of France had perforce to invoke Saints John and Denis and retire into Paris”. (27,30)

Duolsi Cimosco che la canne el il fuoco

Seco or non ha, quand v'avrian più loco.¹²¹

8

Cimosco had not brought his artillery to this battle. Orlando triumphs over traditional forces; he never has to face up to gunpowder. As so often in Ariosto's depiction of warfare, vicious reality is overcome and acknowledged in the same instant.

Conclusion

The *Furioso* conjures a form of national heroism in opposition to painful reality. The digressions of the poem, the adventures in forests which draw champions away from their initial duty, are a kind of heroism that has not been tainted by contemporary politics. As a self-conscious renaissance romance, the *Furioso* returns to the "serene illusion" of chivalric prowess inspired by love rather than politics. It cannot present a central, end-directed action driven by political motives: even the war of Christians and Saracens, although it presents epic and chivalric battles, is vulnerable to the shadows of Italian disaster. It is the duty to which the knights must return, and which so often diminishes them.

¹²¹ "Cimosco bitterly regretted not having his tube and the flame to ignite it, just when he had most need of it." 9,70.

Duty does produce a different response later in the poem. Ruggiero, the Este dynastic hero, finally converts to Christianity. His marriage to Bradamante, which has been postponed while he digresses into romance adventure, is postponed again – but this time for the sake of the duty he owes Agramante. Instead of forgetting his obligations for the seductions of Alcina or the beauty of Angelica, Ruggiero and Bradamante put aside passion in deference to the claims of honour. As Burrow has shown, “consciousness of honour and praise has been promoted up the scale of motives to a place above amorous appetency.”¹²² The tone of the *Furioso* darkens as it proceeds, and in Ariosto’s revisions a dutiful epic dimension becomes stronger. C.P. Brand has suggested that a fourth rewrite, which Ariosto seems to have planned, would have gone further down this route, probably to the sorrow of his poem’s modern admirers.¹²³ By the time of these last revisions, the Holy Roman Empire was gaining ever more power in Italy. The final edition of the *Furioso* even includes praise of Charles V as emperor of “ogni terra e quinci e quindi estrema... sotto a questo imperatore / solo un ovile sia, solo un pastore”.¹²⁴ Italy was being largely united, not as a nation, but as separate territories under the same foreign dominion. The image of a new Christendom was heightened by the increased pressure of the Reformation. In 1517, the year after the first publication of the *Furioso*, Martin Luther had nailed his theses up in Wittenberg; by 1520 a papal bull was issued condemning him, and the Reformation was under way. Religious conflict is not much in

¹²² Burrow, 68.

¹²³ C.P. Brand, *Ludovico Ariosto: A preface to the 'Orlando Furioso'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974) 183.

evidence in Ariosto's poem, but by the 1530s the Reformation and counter-Reformation had started to bite. Brand points out that passages from the later *Furioso* "seem to anticipate trends characteristic of the later Cinquecento, certainly of Tasso... [Ruggiero's lament] might well have strayed from the lips of Olindo or Tandredi".¹²⁵ The move towards obedience – religious and political – was matched by a move towards a more dutiful, and more united, poetic form. Epic starts to gain the upper hand, as it was to dominate Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in a unity that was imperial rather than national. Even here, however, the *Furioso* is still digressive. Bradamante and Ruggiero may accept duty over desire, but it is a duty which – again – leads to a postponement of their marriage, of dynastic fate, of the poem's ending. Epic became more possible for Italians as the cinquecento proceeded, but the *Furioso* remained a romance.

When, later in the century, Tasso's attempted to rewrite the *Furioso* as well as the *Aeneid* in the *Gerusalemme*, correcting the romance unruliness of the first and the mistaken religion of the second, he demonstrated how much Ariosto had made romance a matter of Italian nationhood. Rinaldo, the rebellious knight who must be brought back to the crusade, is a successor to Ruggiero in his digression and as another heroic romance ancestor of the Estensi. As David Quint has shown, this second Ruggiero's unruly chivalric qualities are firmly associated with Italian nationhood:

¹²⁴ "every land East and West... under this emperor there shall be but one fold, one shepherd."
(15,26)

¹²⁵ Brand, 182.

...Tasso can sympathise with his Este hero and with the local Italian political interests he represents when he shows Rinaldo upholding Italian independence and nationalistic honor against the arrogant foreigner Gernando. But by suggesting that behind Rinaldo lurks Argillano, the specter of lawlessness and Protestant heresy, Tasso argues for the subordination of those local interests to papal rule.¹²⁶

As the *Gerusalemme*'s principal romance hero, the knight whose obedience is most needed and hardest-won, Rinaldo is Tasso's most obvious link with the *Furioso*. Romance, and its insubordinate departures from public duty, had become bound up with to Italian national identity. Ariosto's example had made the *Furioso*'s digressive form and impassioned knights patriotic: its wanderings and multiplicity embodied both the division and the cultural strength of Italy.

¹²⁶ Quint, 229-30.

National Poetry: Sidney and the *Arcadia*

Considered as a national romance, the *Arcadia* is in many ways the exception in this thesis. Generalisations that would fit Ariosto or Spenser break down when it comes to Sidney. The *Arcadia* is less obviously patriotic than the *Furioso* or *The Faerie Queene*. It may reflect England, but the nation is never once mentioned. And although it is unquestionably ambitious in its use and amplification of the vernacular, the *Arcadia* is also modest in claiming status as a literary monument. Sidney's letter to his sister, printed with the 1590 edition, is too self-deprecating in calling the text "a trifle, and that triflinglie handled", but the text itself makes no obvious attempt to "overgo" the classics, or even the modern heroic poetry of the Italians.¹ Its parallels with Homer are not emphasised. Nevertheless, the *Arcadia* is supremely a work of the vernacular project. Its author was claimed as England's greatest poet. It tested and extended the technical resources of English. Finally, like the *Furioso* and *The Faerie Queene*, it is a romance in which heroism is beset with difficulty, a work that reflects troubling failures in a nation it also celebrates.

Sidney also demonstrates the English vernacular project at a transitional moment. As a writer of the 1570s and early 1580s, he was faced with the great contradictions of a humanist renaissance that was also a reformation of religion.

As in France and Italy, the rediscovery of the classical past pushed local poets towards new ambitions for national poetry. At the same time, the Reformation cast of northern humanism encouraged doubt, not only about newly-despised vernacular forms but about the moral dangers of fiction. Where Italians had been moved to find a form of epic that could withstand national disintegration, the English were trying to celebrate a new sense of national identity through forms – poetry and chivalry – that they could not altogether trust.

Richard Helgerson has suggested that this suspicion of fiction could only be overcome by a new understanding of the poet's career. Writers of Sidney's class and generation tended to accept an image of poetry as the idle pastime of often lovesick young men who would end by repenting the time they had wasted in pleasure and frivolity.² In the *Defense* Sidney insisted on the authority of the divinely inspired poets of classical and biblical times, but in practice even he fitted this pattern, describing the *Arcadia* as a "toyfull book" and apparently leaving orders from his deathbed that it should be burned.³ It was not until Spenser, who rethought the poetic career as a grandly Virgilian vocation, that Elizabethan poets had an image of poetry as a worthy end in itself.⁴ Spenser manipulated his own poetic image to achieve that seriousness, but Sidney was invested with similar authority after his death. In Helgerson's term, there was a

¹ Letter to the Countess of Pembroke, in *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (1912; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), I, 3.

² Helgerson, Richard, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³ Letter to Robert Sidney, prose works III, 132, Sir Fulke Greville *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Nowell Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) 16-17.

need for an English “laureate”. As Spenser groomed himself for the role, his contemporaries were eager to bestow its garlands on Sidney. That process is reminiscent of the rush to promote Ariosto. Both poets were praised for qualities they did not necessarily possess, but neither was canonised at random. Just as the *Furioso* was truly a national poem, Sidney’s work and reputation did provide England with an exemplary poet. This chapter concerns the *Arcadia*’s real attention to English vernacular and identity, and the context that made such attention needed and welcomed.

It is also concerned with the limitations of heroic action in Sidney’s text. The national romances of the sixteenth century can be seen as epics in trouble: national poetry written under literary and political circumstances that ruled out the linear certainties of epic. The looser structures of romance allowed Ariosto to show “audaci imprese” as well as the sack of Rome. Romance offered a different kind of heroism, less focused on ends but of ardently generous means. In the absence of a united government, such chivalric individualism was inspiring without being particularly rebellious. Under the increasingly centralised rule of the English state, knightly autonomy was much more threatening. Quite apart from its dangers as a source of political unrest, such unruly self-confidence clashed badly with a Calvinist sense of human frailty. Italian poets had struggled with the academic implications of a heroic genre; the

⁴ Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser Jonson Milton and the literary system* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 21-50.

English, less rigorously schooled and with fewer formal worries, had doubts about heroism itself.

Sidney inherited all these difficulties, and went some way towards reconciling them. The *Arcadia* demonstrated the rhetorical possibilities of English within an intensely heroic narrative. It did not, however, find a solution for the dangers of that heroism. Katherine Duncan-Jones has suggested that both versions of the *Arcadia* should be seen as unfinished, “the second one radically so”.⁵ In this second *Arcadia* the struggle between the glamour of chivalry and the limitations of corrupt humanity is especially strained. It is possible that, had Sidney completed his text, these dilemmas might have been resolved. The tension that surrounds the *Arcadia*’s heroics would not be readily dispelled, but the new material of the revised third Book’s shows Sidney experimenting with new directions and different kinds of heroism. As it stands, the later *Arcadia*’s pervasive darkness of tone helps to show how painful the process of national definition could be.

1 Sidney as canonical figure

Sidney was, like Ariosto in Italy, carefully presented as the modern canonical author. The *Arcadia*, *Astrophil and Stella* and the *Defense of Poesie* were enormously influential, regularly quoted, praised and imitated. The

⁵ Sir Philip Sidney *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), vii.

posthumous printing of his works, by various agencies. was done with an eye to celebrating his reputation. Greville's decision to leave the old *Arcadia* unprinted in favour of the revised version, "whereof there is no more copies, & fitter to be printed then that first w^{ch} is so cōmon." This might simply be a matter of availability – Greville had the only text of the new *Arcadia* in his possession, and the first, already "so cōmon", was circulating widely in manuscript. It is tempting, however, to read his decision as a preference for a more obviously serious work: Greville's first wish had been to print a collection of Sidney's religious writings "that sr philip might have all thos religious honor w^{ch} ar worthelj dew to his lyfe & deathe".⁶ In these terms the revised *Arcadia* was certainly fitter to be printed. The Countess of Pembroke's 1593 printing is explicitly a monument to her brother, although on rather different terms. Its address "To the Reader" justifies the editorial decision to conflate the old and new texts, promising "the conclusion, not the perfection of Arcadia", while admitting that "Sir Philip Sidney's writings can no more be perfected without Sir Philip Sidney than Apelles' pictures without Apelles".⁷ Such a parallel with the pre-eminent painter of ancient times gives Sidney the authority of a classic. The repetition of his full name, with title, insists on the respect due to him. At the same time, however, the printing of his works shifted attention from Sidney as a man of action and religion, implied in Greville's "religious honor... lyfe & death" to an essentially literary fame. As Victor Skretkowitz has shown, the Countess of Pembroke aimed at a different kind of monument for her brother:

⁶ Victor Skretkowitz, 'Texts and Editions of the Arcadia', in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the creation of a Legend*, ed. Jan van Dorsten et al, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1986) 116, 113.

this underlying concept of preserving all her brother's works of a literary nature almost directly opposed Greville's intention to establish Sidney's reputation on the basis of his epic and religious writings alone.⁸

Commemoration of Sidney was shaped by the needs of the celebrants, and although they were agreed on Sidney's pre-eminence they disagreed on its basis. Greville was unusual in finding doubtful elements in Sidney's poetry. Where Harvey describe "the two brave knights, Musidorus and Pyrocles, combined in one excellent knight, Sir Philip Sidney",⁹ Greville points out that the princes are "accused and condemned of rape, paricide, adulteries, or treasons, by their own Lawes".¹⁰ Both edited Sidney, Harvey to create an ideal poet and Greville to create an ideal statesman. The latter was closer to Sidney's own ambitions, but it was less useful to other poets, who stuck to Harvey's perfect knight.

The Countess's promotion of Sidney came to a triumphant conclusion with publication, in 1598, of his collected works. No English writer had had such a collection since Chaucer, the only poet to win Sidney's complete approval in the *Defense*. The English book trade was smaller and more limited than that of Venice, but their strategies for Sidney and Ariosto were similar: both marketed their poets as classics. Such advertisement made Sidney and his works vitally important to the development of the English vernacular project. Just as, in Italy, it had become almost impossible not to acknowledge the *Furioso* in discussions

⁷ Maurice Evans, ed., *Arcadia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 59.

⁸ Skretkowicz, 120.

⁹ G. Gregory. Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904) II, 263.

of both epic and of vernacular achievement, Sidney became a central point of reference in Elizabethan poetics. In the 1580s and 1590s. English writers produced a wide range of texts discussing and defending poetry. Much of this debate can be read as a response to Sidney's own *Defense*, which articulated the main points of argument. Some texts drew directly on Sidney's, most were influenced by it and he was cited in nearly all of them.

Unlike so many of the responses to Ariosto, references to Sidney are entirely deferential. This is not characteristic of English poetic debate. English poets disagreed regularly, in tones ranging from formal argument – as when Samuel Daniel subtitled his *Defence of Rime* “Against a Pamphlet entituled ‘Observations in the Art of English Poesie’”, which Campion had recently published – to the personal and abusive feuds of Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe.¹¹ In all these contexts, however, Sidney is mentioned with great respect. Greville points out that even “our soure-eyed Criticks”, cannot resist Sidney's gifts: “where nature placeth excellencie above envy, there (it seemeth) she subjecteth these carping eyes to wonder”.¹² When poets do disagree with his theory or practice, they tend to do it subtly. Sir John Harington's introduction to his translation of the *Furioso* reworks Sidney's *Defense* with significant variations. He is much readier to defend love poetry, for example, where Sidney gives ground. That difference is not, however, expressed explicitly. Harington is

¹⁰ Greville, 13.

¹¹ The ludicrous tournaments of Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller* do, however, satirise Elizabethan literary chivalry, certainly including the extravagantly costumed jousts of the *Arcadia*.

¹² Greville, 11.

ready to explain his views on other texts of the vernacular debate, praising Puttenham's "whole receipt of Poetrie... saue for one observation".¹³ but avoids any quarrel with the *Defense*. Instead, Harington makes Sidney the absolute justification of a given poetic practice:

in a word to answer this, & to make them for euer hold their peaces of this point, Sir *Philip Sidney*, not only vseth them [feminine rhymes] but affecteth them...¹⁴

The glee with which Harington shuts up his supposed opponents underlines Sidney's eminence: he is someone who *cannot* be disagreed with. That unquestioned and unquestionable authority is confirmed in W.I.'s commendatory verses on *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's beginning in pastoral is compared to the disguise of "stout Achilles" as a woman, "Thinking by sleight the fatall warres to scape". Sidney is as the Ulysses who "heard him sing, and knew his voice", sending the poet off to the glories of epic. W.I. concludes, "What though his taske exceed a humane witt? / He is excus'd, sith *Sidney* thought it fitt." The arrogance of Spenser's poetic ambition is softened and justified: Sidney's judgement is final and unanswerable.

In the English vernacular debate, then, Sidney appears as a touchstone, a canonical English poet. Other writers referred (and deferred) to him, more than to any other English poet. W. A. Ringler's study of printed allusions to Sidney before 1625 found one hundred and thirty references to Spenser, but more than

¹³ Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 1904), II, 196.

¹⁴ Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, II, 221

four hundred for Sidney, quite apart from the many references in manuscript.¹⁵ Such reverent citation of Sidney shows how useful a local eminence was to English poets. Again like Ariosto, Sidney's authority was enhanced by comparisons with established poets, flattering both to the author and to his admiring nation. Sir Walter Raleigh called him the "Petrarch of our time", Harington "our English Petrarke".¹⁶ The *Arcadia*, like the *Furioso*, was compared to classical epic. Harvey promised that

if Homer be not at hand (whome I haue often tearmed the Prince of Poets and the Poet of Princes), you may read his furious Iliads & cunning Odyssees in the braue adventures of Pyrocles and Musidorus...¹⁷

Homeric comparisons were repeated in Abraham Fraunce's *Arcadian Rhetorike*. This manual of literary style promised the "Praecepts of Rhetorike made plaine by examples" in six languages, and drew most of its quotations, as well as its title, from Sidney's *Arcadia*. Fraunce's title-page lists his sources:

Homers Ilias, and Odyssea
Virgils Aeglogs, Georgics, and AENEIS
Sir Philip Sydneis Arcadia, Songs and Sonets
Torquato Tasso's Goffredo, Aminta, Torrifmondo
Sylvest his Iudith, and both his Semaines
Boscan and Garcillassees Sonnets and Aeglogs¹⁸

Sidney's inclusion, and position as the first of Fraunce's modern authors, gives him tremendous authority. Sidney's "Arcadia, Songs and Sonets", placed right

¹⁵ W.A. Ringler, 'The Myth and the Man', in van Dorsten et al., ed. 13 and 14 n.34.

¹⁶ Lisa Klein, *The Exemplary Sidney and the Elizabethan Sonneteer* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998) 26, 24.

¹⁷ Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, II, 264.

¹⁸ *The Arcadian Rhetorike*.

after Virgil's "Aeglogs, Georgics, and AENEIS" implies some parallel between the three works of each poet: the *Arcadia* acquires implied epic status. Within the text, Sidney is continually cited next after Homer and Virgil. This is not the only implication of Fraunce's impressive list. Measuring up to the classics was the essential ambition of renaissance vernacular projects, but these "examples" are from ancient and from modern literature. Fraunce asserts the importance of recent achievement not just in England, but in other countries. The *Arcadian Rhetorike* shows remarkable confidence in the present: contemporary poetry is a worthy companion to that of the ancients. That confidence is particularly important to England. Far from being a backward and provincial island, clutching at the renaissance long after the rest of Europe, Britain takes an honourable place in the continental tradition. Sidney's poetry – a range of work from the implied epic of the *Arcadia* to the lyrics – can be placed at the heart of a modern European literature whose traditions stretch back to Homer.

i Sidney as English laureate

The praise of canonical authors gives a good idea of what their contemporaries valued or needed. Ariosto's reputation rested on the *Furioso*, which had provided Italy with a national epic at a moment of national division. Sidney's was much more broadly-based. The *Arcadia* was widely praised, but the *Defense* and *Astrophil and Stella* were probably more influential. That range was especially attractive to English writers, whose vernacular seemed so short of

eminent writers. Sidney's own praise of Chaucer "of whome trulie I knowe not whether to mervaile more, either that hee in that mistie time could see so clearly. or that wee in this cleare age, goe so stumblingly after him." Having praised *Troilus and Criseyde*, Sidney can cite very little to follow it – Surrey, the *Mirror for Magistrates*, with only the *Shepherds Calendar* to represent Sidney's own generation. It is noticeable too how ancient Chaucer appears to Sidney. For the poets of cinquecento Italy, the fourteenth century was modern: it was the start of their new tradition. For Sidney, the dearth of good poetry after Chaucer made him a "reverent... Antiquitie", while Spenser's Chaucerian vocabulary becomes "an olde rusticke language".¹⁹

On these terms, Sidney's insistence that English was a good language for poetry had worryingly little corroboration. The state of national poetry was especially problematic when compared with the developing canons of other European languages. The humanist renaissance and its literary influences had reached England so late that English poets were obliged to measure themselves not only against the ancients but against a formidable modern European tradition. Sidney's career provided England with canonical texts in prose fiction, lyric and poetic theory. As we have seen, Abraham Fraunce's triumphant title page used Sidney to put English poetry in the European, as well as the classical tradition. It would be difficult to find earlier English poets who could be used as such a justification.

¹⁹ *Prose works* III, 37.

ii **Death and authority**

Sidney's own poetic authority was not acquired only, or even chiefly, through his writing. His unshakeable position rested rather on the circumstances of his life and death. His title and family made him a figure of importance and respect, and the shock of his death put a gloss on his career.

Praise of Sidney comes from educated Elizabethans. The elegies written for him – there were enough to make the Sidney lament almost a genre in itself – were by court and university poets.²⁰ The writers of the vernacular project, the authors of poetic treatises and poetic controversy, shared a similar background. They were university-educated, and often strongly Protestant; they hoped for court preferment, in poetry or in statecraft; they hoped for patronage from the nobility. As a group, therefore, they had a high value for birth and political influence. Such respect was certainly extended to the poetry of aristocrats. In the *Defense*, Sidney praises the Earl of Surrey's lyrics for "manie thinges tasting of a Noble birth, and worthie of a Noble minde": the poetry's great merit is in reflecting Surrey's social position.²¹ Admiration of Sidney reflects a similar kind of respect, quite apart from his poetic achievements.

²⁰ The universities responded handsomely to Sidney's death: four collections of Latin poetry were published, all associated with universities. See Dominic Baker-Smith, "Great Expectation: Sidney's death and the poets", in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the creation of a legend* ed. Jan van Dorsten et al. (Leiden: E.J.Brill/Leiden University Press, 1986) 82-103.

²¹ *Prose Works*, 37.

Sidney's birth and influence in fact seemed more secure after his death than they had during his lifetime. He was heir apparent to two earldoms, but both from his mother's side: the Sidneys, "so yongeli a fortun'd famili", were respected gentry rather than nobility.²² He was notably touchy about his birth, quarrelling with the Earl of Oxford over precedent. The Queen's intervention in that quarrel, averting a duel after Sidney's challenge to Oxford, cannot have helped Sidney's pride: in Fulke Greville's account, she pointed out "the difference in degree between Earls, and Gentlemen; the respect inferiors ought to their superiors..."²³ Sidney's inheritance was a matter of "Great expectation" (the phrase, Sidney's own, is from *Astrophil and Stella* 21 but also appears in the *Arcadia*) but he had little real power or status. He was a leading hope of the forward Protestant faction, the probable heir of Leicester's politics as much as of his title. On these grounds, he was addressed and welcomed by continental Protestants, humanists and indeed princes. Marriage proposals for Sidney included a German princess and the daughter of William of Orange. In spite of all this, his career was a disappointment:

He found it was possible to be godson to the most powerful monarch in Christendom [Philip II of Spain], nephew and heir to two Earls, one of them the Queen's longest-standing favourite, son of a Knight of the Garter who 'governed' both Ireland and Wales on the Queen's behalf, and to add manifest personal talent to all these unearned connexions – and yet receive no personal title.²⁴

²² Letter from Sidney to Sir Francis Walsingham, Prose works 139.

²³ Greville, 68.

²⁴ Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney Courtier Poet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991) 134-35.

These setbacks are not really reflected in the quickly-developed Sidney legend. The Sidney of the elegies is a man of birth and a man of action: his involvement in the Netherlands campaign casts a military glow backwards over the rest of his life. Some accounts do acknowledge the frustration of his lack of employment, but that too is cast as part of the Sidney myth. Greville regretfully acknowledges that Sidney “never was Magistrate, nor possessed of any fit stage for eminence to act upon”, suggesting that “his industry, judgement and affections, perchance seemed too great for the cautious wisdoms of little Monarchies to be safe in.”²⁵ Greville, though partial, was more prepared than other elegists to admit the failures of Sidney’s career, though he tends to convert them into praise. Elsewhere, hindsight and carefully crafted legend turned Sidney’s “Great expectation” into solid status and achievement. It worked similar wonders on his role in the Protestant cause, and on his poetic reputation.

Sidney died of a leg wound received at the battle of Zutphen in 1586. England had been actively involved in the Netherlands since 1585, when the treaty of Nonesuch committed Elizabeth to helping the Protestant Dutch in their revolt against Catholic Spanish rule. She had avoided such commitment for years, trying to stick to indirect assistance – blockades and – rather than land wars. Her reluctance was partly on financial grounds: sea fighting required less outlay and had hopes of profit. It also reflected her dislike of rebellion. Philip II was a Catholic and an enemy to England, but revolt was a precedent the English queen was reluctant to encourage. Calvinist theorists wrote to justify limited

²⁵ Greville, 38-40.

rebellion, led by the aristocracy against unjust and tyrannical rulers, but although texts like the *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos* were widely admired in the strong Protestant faction, they were unlikely to please Elizabeth. Such tensions between obedience and the need to improve existing government become highly visible in the revised *Arcadia*, where Amphialus's justification of his rebellion draws heavily on the *Vindiciae*. His use of it there is both persuasive and corrupt. Basilius has indeed "givē over al care of government", his daughters have been kept "in so unfit & il-guarded a place, as it was not only dāgerous for their persons but ...to the whole common-wealth pernicious". The country is demonstrably ill-governed, and there is need for reform. Such arguments are, however, "glosses of probabilitie" for privately motivated actions.²⁶ The abduction of the princesses owes nothing to a reforming political agenda. Amphialus kidnaps them because he is in love with Philoclea, and uses arguments like those of the *Vindiciae* to win military support against their rescuers. Elizabethan responses to the idea of revolt, in the Netherlands and in fiction, were fascinated but tense.

In spite of such qualms, forward Protestants, including the Leicester faction, saw the Dutch as brothers in the true religion, in desperate need of English help. This was an opportunity for a Protestant crusade, a fight that Elizabeth was consistently and frustratingly unwilling to pursue. As Sidney wrote to Walsingham,

²⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 372, 371.

If her Majesty wear the fountain I would fear considering what I daily fynd that we should wax dry, but she is but a means whom God useth...I am faithfully persuaded that if she should withdraw her self other springes would ryse to help this action. For me thinkes I see the great work indeed in hand, against the abusers of the world, wherein it is no greater fault to have confidence in mans power, than it is to hastily to despair of Gods work...²⁷

Sidney's hopes are an expression of religious faith, not of any confidence in Elizabeth. Walsingham made use of Sidney's death for their shared cause, helping to present him as the hero of the nation and of Protestantism in Europe. This was immediately noticeable in the stage-management of his funeral. Sidney was mourned on a scale beyond his nominal status. The huge procession – baron-sized, when Sidney was only a knight – included both Dutch ambassadors and ranks of pikemen. The funeral, “in its grandeur, would seem to have been raised from a private to a national affair... The attendance of the Dutch officials, too, adds to the aura of importance surrounding the funeral, while simultaneously calling to mind the special tie between Sidney and the Dutch Provinces.”²⁸ The image, both warlike and statesmanly, was preserved in Thomas Lant's ten-metre-long “Roll” depicting the procession. The effect is of a state funeral – even though Walsingham was to beggar himself paying for it – and by emphasising that Sidney died in the public service it makes his cause English. The resolution of his death allowed him to seem successful in actions and for causes that seemed to fail during his lifetime. Greville's emphasis on the Protestant Sidney, it should

²⁷ *Prose Works*, III, 166.

²⁸ Sander Bos, Marianne Lange, Jeanine Six, “Sidney's Funeral Portrayed” in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586*, 51.

be remembered, claimed religious honours “dew to his lyfe & deathe”: dying in battle was in some respects his greatest achievement.

That death, and what it came to represent, were significant in the development of English Protestant national identity. Just as the excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570 made England a country in which patriotism could only be Protestant, the events of the 1580s strengthened that identification. Sidney became valuable propaganda, evidence that England had gone to war for Protestantism. There are variations in the Sidney legend – some of his elegists are more confident about poetry than others, and like Greville and the Countess of Pembroke they have different axes to grind – but they are consistent in seeing his death as national and godly. This patriotic hero was a Protestant martyr, and vice versa.

That image was carried over into Sidney’s poetic reputation. It quickly became a commonplace of the Sidney elegy to describe the deceased as a soldier and a poet, the “perfect Myrror for the followers both of *Mars* and *Mercury*”.²⁹ This was a happy reconciliation of opposites, of poetry, apparently frivolous, with a serious public career. Richard Helgerson suggests that Sidney was a model for his contemporaries because he “managed to still the clash. His work showed them a way past the moral critics and moral qualms that lay in wait for

²⁹ The title page to George Whetstone’s “Sir Phillip Sidney, his honoroable life, his valiant death, and true vertues”, quoted Klein, 39.

young gentlemen attracted by poetry.”³⁰ As Helgerson shows, the claims Sidney made for his own poetry were much less confident than those made by his later admirers. In the *Defense* Sidney gives the poet tremendous moral authority as a theoretical figure: “Therefore compare we the *Poet* with the *Historian* & with the morall *Philospher*: and if he goe beyond them both, no other humaine skill can match him.”³¹ It is one thing to make such an assertion in the abstract, quite another to make it for one’s own works. Spenser, with his Virgilian imitations, did make such a claim; Sidney did not. Nevertheless, he refers to other exemplary poets with the kind of respect that later Elizabethans were to give him. This is perhaps most evident as he turns to scriptural poetry:

And may not I presume a little farther... and say that the holy *Davids* Psalms are a divine *Poeme*? If I do, I shal not do it without the testimony of great learned mẽ, both auncient and moderne. But even the name of Psalmes wil speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but Songs...³²

This is, in fact, the kind of authority that Sidney’s contemporaries found in him after his exemplary death. David is useful to Sidney because a poet so plainly favoured and inspired by God sanctified his medium. Sidney, similarly, made poetry respectable for those who followed. He was not only a successful blend of the private and the public, the active and the contemplative, he was a hero of his nation and his religion. He had died

of manly wounds received in service of his prince, in defense of persons oppressed, in maintenance of the only true, catholic and Christian religion, among the noble, valiant and wise, in the open field, in martial manner, the

³⁰ Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals*, 125.

³¹ *Prose Works*, III,13.

³² *Prose Works*, III,6.

honorablest death that could be desired and best beseeming a Christian knight, whereby he hath worthily won to himself immortal fame among the godly and left example worthy of imitation to others of his calling.³³

A life that had ended so virtuously could only be exemplary, and it was made to seem exemplary in all its aspects. This is why Sidney could be used to justify poetic techniques, or poetry itself, simply because he had practised it. For the Elizabethans, the principal danger of poetry was its assumed immorality. Whatever his own doubts had been, Sidney and his posthumous reputation put a Protestant martyr on poetry's side of the argument.

Idealised images – the canonical poet, the shepherd-knight, the Protestant hero – were certainly read into Sidney's life and into his works. That process, like the praise of the *Furioso* in terms of classical epic, reflected both the needs of the literary community and qualities in the work itself. Sidney, just as much his admiring followers, was working to defend and improve the English vernacular: many of their concerns were inherited directly from his *Defense*. The *Arcadia* is not a Virgilian or Homeric epic, and it doesn't project an image of the nation with anything like the force of Ariosto's or Spenser's poetry. Nevertheless, it is a work of heroic fiction on a grand and ambitious scale; it is part of the English vernacular project; and it does reflect and re-imagine religious and political elements of English national identity.

³³ Arthur Golding's introduction to *The Trewnesse of the English Religion*, Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals*, 124.

2 *The Arcadia as deffense et illustration de la langue anglaise*

As we have seen, Sidney's works provided English literature with a broad-based canon which included heroic romance, prose and lyric, "all in all for prose and verse".³⁴ He had written in a variety of forms, proving the range of English and – in the romance of the *Arcadia* and the sonnets of *Astrophil* – translating major European forms into English usage. In the *Defense* he had provided an argument, a blueprint that shaped Elizabethan poetics. That range is reflected not just in his complete works but in the *Arcadia* itself.

The pastoral tradition of Montemayor and Sannazaro, with its verse eclogues and prose narrative, allowed him not only the freedom of different kinds of episode, but the freedom to include very different forms. The *Furioso* is full of inset laments and exclamations – Bradamante's was anthologised by Gascoigne, Sacripante's set by Byrd³⁵ – but they are necessarily all in ottava rima. Sidney's mixture of verse and prose gave him enormous freedom to experiment. Sidney's prose is intensely ornate, overflowing with figures and tropes. It is appropriate that John Hoskyns, in his 1599 *Directions for speech and style*, should have taken all his examples from Sidney's romance: there is a sense in which the *Arcadia* is itself an illustration of rhetoric. Within what Maurice Evans has

³⁴ Richard Carew, "The Excellecie of the English tongue" (1614), quoted in W.A. Ringler, "Sir Philip Sidney: The myth and the man". in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586*, 12.

³⁵ George Gascoigne, *A hundreth sundrie flowres* (London: Etchells and Macdonald, 1926); Nicholas Yonge, *Musica transalpina. Madrigals translated of foure five and sixe parts, chosen out of diuers excelient authors, with the first and second part of La Verginella made by maister Byrd, upon two stanz's of Ariosto and brought to speake English with the rest* (Amsterdam: Theatris Orbis Terrum; Da Capo Press, 1972).

called a “gladiatorial display of oratory”,³⁶ Sidney’s romance offers further demonstration of the English language through a range of verse forms. All this experimentation is then framed by a narrative of heroic action. The *Arcadia* may not make any claims to Virgilian grandeur, but it is notably ambitious on its own terms.

If Sidney’s prose became a stylistic model, his display of verse forms seems designed to be read as a manual of poetic craft. The old *Arcadia*’s first Eclogue opens with a careful description of a singing contest:

Then woulde they cast away theyre pypes and, holding hand in hand, daunce as yt were in a Brawle, by the only Cadence of theyre voyces. W^{ch} they woulde use in singing some shorte Couplettes whereto the one half beginning, the other half answered; As, the one half saying: *Wee love, and have oure Loves rewarded*; the others woulde answer, *Wee love, and are no whitt regarded*. The first ageane, *Wee fynde moste sweete affections snaire*: with like tyme, yt shoulde bee (as in a Quiere) sent back ageane, *That sweete, but sowre dispayrefull care*.³⁷

Sidney describes his festivities with a care that seems to encourage imitation. We are told how the poetry should be performed, what danced or instrumental accompaniment is required at what point. (This concern for performance is characteristic. Seth Weiner and Frank J. Fabry have shown how much of Sidney’s verse – including many of his most experimental poetry – was

³⁶ Evans, ed., *Arcadia*, 15.

³⁷ *Prose Works*, 53-54. In discussing the Eclogues I quote the first *Arcadia* because its poems were (almost certainly) chosen and ordered by Sidney. As a note to the 1590 edition explains, the Eclogues for the revised text had been “left till the worke had bene finished, that then choise should have bene made. which should have bene taken, and in what manner brought in. At this time they have been chosen and disposed as the over-seer thought best” (*Prose Works*, I. 4). In the 1593 reprinting they were chosen by the Countess of Pembroke. In all texts, however, the poems show great technical range, and great care in the definition of terms.

influenced by musical ideas and forms.³⁸) The interleaving of dance and song is set down in technical terms emphasised by capital initials. Sidney (or his copyist) do not capitalise all nouns, only those that define the performance: cadence, brawl, couplet, choir. The insistence on “like tyme” for the second answer suggests not only the correct delivery of these lines, but the principle underlying this song.

There is a how-to element running throughout the eclogues, which brim over with technical terms. Some of the poems do go without introduction. In their contest Dorus and Lalus shift from form to form, with a wide technical range within the same song, too quick for immediate definition. Other devices, like the echo verse, are obvious enough not to need naming. Elsewhere, however, we are told that Dorus sang “wth a sorowyng voyce, these *Elygian* verses”, or that Cleophila “sange these Sapphistes”.³⁹ Sidney goes on to introduce, and name, hexameters, “*Anacrions* kynde of verses”, phaleuciacs, asclepiadics, octaves, sonnets, sestines (including “rhyming” and “double” sestines), dizaines and “that kynde of verse wh^{ch} ys called y^e Crowne”.⁴⁰ There is also the first use of the

³⁸ Seth Weiner, “The quantitative poems and the psalm translations: the place of Sidney’s experimental verse in the legend”, in *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the creation of a legend*, 193-220; Frank J. Fabry, “Sidney’s Poetry and Italian Song-Form” in *Sidney in Retrospect: Selections from English Literary Renaissance*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney et al, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 83-99.

³⁹ *Prose Works*, IV 75, 76.

⁴⁰ *Prose Works*, IV, 152, 157, 170, 171 and 218, 265, 307, 309. Most of these descriptions are in the Eclogues; poems in the main text are generally introduced as “these verses” or “this song”. Sidney seems to have invented the term “Phaleuciacs” for “Phaleucian hendecasyllabics”; this is the first English use of the crown form. See *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford Univeristy Press, 1985) 376 n. and 382 n.

term “stanza” in English.⁴¹ The poetry of the *Arcadia*, and especially of the Eclogues, acts as a kind of guided tour of verse forms in English; Sidney seems to be demonstrating the range and flexibility of the language, while making sure that his readers will know how to name his poetic experiments.

They are also taught how to do likewise. In the *Defense* Sidney suggested that the poet might “bestow a *Cyrus* on the world to make many *Cyrusses*”:⁴² whether or not the *Arcadia* bestowed Musidoruses or Pamelas on the world, it seems determined to encourage the creation of more poetry. In some manuscript copies of the old *Arcadia*, the First Eclogues include a debate on versification between the shepherds Dicus and Lalus which covers the arguments in favour of rhymed and of metrical verse.⁴³ Another copy includes a treatise of rules for writing metrical verse.⁴⁴ With many of the poems there is a plan marking out the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, so that we see first an abstract and then an example of each verse form. The eclogues are not only lyrical interludes; they are lists of instructions. Throughout the *Arcadia*, Sidney is concerned to prove the vitality of the vernacular. The English language, which had seemed almost bereft of poetic example, is given a full range of lyric forms to play with.

⁴¹ *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Duncan-Jones, 148 and 376n. Some manuscripts – including those used by Feuillerat – use “stave”, the term commonly used by earlier English poets.

⁴² *Prose Works*, III, 8.

⁴³ Peter Lindenbaum, “Sidney and the Active Life”, 179.

3 **The *Arcadia* as heroic narrative**

This compendium of English verse is set inside an equally ambitious narrative. Although Elizabethan admirers claimed the *Arcadia* as England's Homeric poem, some at least felt that it was rather more mixed in its genres. Francis Meres had argued that

Sir Philip Sidney write his immortal poem, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* in Prose; and yet our rarest Poet.⁴⁵

If that summary is slightly defensive, it does suggest the extent to which the *Arcadia* resists simple definition: its generic status has remained a vexed question. Kenneth Myrick has argued that the revised text follows Minturno's rules for the heroic poem, but he also admits that the *Arcadia* is “superficially in glaring contrast” with that epic ideal, not least because Sidney did not write in heroic verse.⁴⁶ For modern critics the matter is complicated by the existence of two *Arcadias*, but even the first, completed text has been subjected to a range of definitions. Stephen Greenblatt has referred to the poem's “mixed mode”, its shifts from one form and genre to another according to the needs of Sidney's narrative.⁴⁷ Robert W. Parker usefully points out that

A concept of the heroic which can include not only the *Aetheopica* and the *Amadis*, but such diverse works as the *Cyropaedia*, the *Semaines* of

⁴⁴ *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Duncan-Jones, 71-72.

⁴⁵ Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, in Smith 315-16.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Myrick, *Sir Philip Sidney as a literary craftsman* (1935; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 113-114.

⁴⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, “Sidney's *Arcadia* and the Mixed Mode”, *Studies in Philology*, 70:3 (1973), 269-78, rpt. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1986) 347-56.

DuBartas, and Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, is a concept in which a beginning *in media res* is not very important.⁴⁸

True; but although English poets used "heroic" more inclusively than their Italian counterparts, they did not necessarily put that diversity into a single work. Sidney's heroic poem is looser, and more generically mixed, than most. Even the first *Arcadia*, with its tightly organised five-act structure, moves the *Aetheopica* and the *Amadis*; the new *Arcadia* – the revisions of which do include a beginning *in media res* – shows a determination to include more military action and a stronger chivalric atmosphere. Both generic diversity and knightly heroism were important to the *Arcadia* as a work of the vernacular project.

The epic comparisons made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are in part justified by his use, in the revised text, of a Homeric siege and a duel echoing that of Aeneas and Turnus. Sidney certainly used the classical past – Heliodorus's *Aethiopian History* is one of the *Arcadia*'s main sources, and there are many references and minor borrowings in the course of the text – but he makes no attempt to frame his story with Virgilian imitation. The first *Arcadia* starts with a brief account of the country and its shepherds, the second with a pastoral scene. This revised opening, in which two lovesick shepherds lament the departure of their beloved Urania, imitates Montemayor's *Diana* and the opening eclogue of Sannazaro's *Arcadia*. The narrative does then take a more heroic turn, thrusting "into the midst" of the adventures of Pyrocles and

⁴⁸ Robert W. Parker, "Terentian Structure and Sidney's Original *Arcadia*" *Sidney in Retrospect: Selections from English Literary Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press,

Musidorus, but the tone of this newly chivalric poem is set with an imitation of two recent European pastorals.

That opening imitation, like those of the *Furioso* or of the *Faerie Queene*, can be seen as a claim to the authority of the original text. We have already seen the need of vernacular renaissance poets to measure their language and culture against the achievements of Greek and Latin. For Sidney's generation, it was also important to measure up to the achievements of contemporary Europe: France, Spain and Italy could already do better than *Gorboduc* and the *Mirror for Magistrates*. In this context, it is worth returning to the *Arcadian Rhetorike* and its list of exemplary texts and authors. Sidney is Fraunce's first modern poet, and the source of most of his quotations, but both his *Arcadia* and his lyrics are set in a context of modern and classical works. The "Praecepts of Rhetorike" are a humanist art, shared with the classically-educated moderns and with the ancients themselves. Fraunce's list suggests a common European culture in which English can, through Sidney's example, take a prominent place. The heroic and the pastoral elements of the *Arcadia*, and Sidney's imitations of European renaissance poetry – the *Furioso*, Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, *Diana* and the *Amadis* – reflect this sense of a common European tradition. As A.C. Hamilton has argued, the *Arcadia* is "European in its origins: truly a work of comparative literature, the first in English prose."⁴⁹

1988), 152.

Sidney's principal heroic model in the *Arcadia* was the *Amadís de Gaule*. This was the most famous, the most read, the most influential of the many Spanish romances of the sixteenth century. Length is, as John J. O'Connor has shown, a sign of success in this genre: popularity encouraged the writing of further sequels, often by different writers.⁵⁰ The fourteen Spanish books – written over decades by five different authors – made up the longest of the Iberian romances. In translation, it became even longer – a further six books written in Italian, a further seven in French. German translators worked through the twenty one French volumes before adding another three, which were then translated into French. *Amadís* was even translated into Hebrew.⁵¹ Across Europe, interest in chivalry was reflected in the popularity of the *Amadís*, of the *Furioso*, of native romances and of tournaments. All these elements influenced each other. Ariosto borrowed the plot of his Ginevra narrative (*Furioso* 4-6) from the Spanish romance *Tirant lo Blanc*; the Ginevra story later turned up in the French *Amadís*. In one sense, Ariosto and the *Amadís* can be seen as separate romance traditions, the two most influential in Europe; in another, their influences mingled in a thriving chivalric climate.

In all cases, that current of literature was patriotic. The romance boom coincided with, and was buoyed up by, the imperial expansions of Ferdinand and Isabella. Grenada was conquered, and the New World discovered, in 1492:

⁴⁹ A.C. Hamilton, 'Sidney's *Arcadia* as Prose Fiction: Its Relation to Its Sources', in *Sidney in Retrospect* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 121.

⁵⁰ John J. O'Connor, *Amadís de Gaule and its influence on Elizabethan Literature* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 4.

the earliest surviving edition of the *Amadís* was printed in 1508. The French text made patriotic overtones even more explicit, adding prophetic visions of history. Where the *Furioso*'s visions depict the woes of Italy as much as the glories of the Este, the French cycle cheerfully forecasts an entirely victorious national destiny.⁵² The *Amadís* is, in all its manifestations, a heroic text, a romance of resolute and determined optimism. Where the *Furioso* acknowledged loss and disaster, this other tradition resisted them. Even the passage of time cannot impair the strength of its knights or the beauty of its ladies: Amadís and his Oriane are still pre-eminent in the seventh book of the cycle, by which point they are great-grandparents.⁵³ The eighth book did kill Amadís off, but this concession to naturalism was so unpopular that it was declared invalid in a ninth volume, which continued the hero's adventures. Sidney's own reference to the *Amadís* – as a poem that moved its readers “to the exercise of courtesie, liberalitie and especially courage” – suggests both its essentially chivalric character and its optimism.⁵⁴ A work which, like Sidney's *Arcadia*, adopts leading characteristics of the *Amadís* is making heroic (and implicitly patriotic) claims.

This “Englishing” of a patriotic romance of course reflected Elizabethan courtly as well as European chivalric fashion. Roy Strong suggests that the

⁵¹ O'Connor, 10-18.

⁵² O'Connor, 11-12.

⁵³ O'Connor, 7..

⁵⁴ *Prose Works*, III,20.

Accession Day tilts began in the early 1570s;⁵⁵ by the time Sidney began the first *Arcadia*, probably in 1577-78, they were a grand and firmly-established celebration, and one at which Sidney performed with distinction. Sidney was in at the start of the Elizabethan chivalric revival: he was present at Sir Henry Lee's Woodstock entertainment, which Frances Yates credits with starting the fashion for chivalric festivities.⁵⁶ Indeed, Sidney and the *Arcadia* became bound up with the Accession Day Tilts; at the 1590 tilt, Sir Henry Lee's last as Elizabeth's champion, he gave his successor a copy of poems from the first *Arcadia* "representing, as it were, the true Bible or inspiration of the Tilt, the scriptures of the perfect knight of Protestant chivalry".⁵⁷ The Tilts were an intensely patriotic occasion, and one with which Leicester's strong Protestant faction was intimately associated. Strong's dating of their beginnings to the early 1570s is suggestive. After Elizabeth's excommunication in 1570, English patriotism became explicitly Protestant. The new festivity might easily be dominated by the Protestant faction, especially when that faction was led by the queen's favourite. Sidney's legend – the chivalric poet, the Protestant knight – fitted the Accession Day festivities perfectly because both had been adopted by the same faction for the same ends.

The fact remains, however, that although this chivalry had become patriotic and English, it was still modelled after European examples. Michael Leslie does

⁵⁵ Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (1977; rpt. London: Pimlico, 1999) 133.

⁵⁶ Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the sixteenth century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 103 .

suggest that the Order of the Garter had strongly Arthurian overtones, but Arthurian imagery is mostly absent from surviving accounts of Accession Day, as it is from the *Arcadia*.⁵⁸ Elizabethan chivalry was, to a surprising extent, a continental import, and Sidney's choice of models for his narrative are almost entirely European. Katherine Duncan-Jones has suggested that the five-act structure of the first *Arcadia* is based on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as on Terentian comedy, but shows that most of Sidney's material comes from other languages.⁵⁹ The *Arcadia* has a wide range of sources – the *Furioso*, Sannazaro, Montemayor, Heliodorus and other Greek and Latin authors as well as the *Amadis* – but it makes very little use of the northern chivalry of Malory and Caxton. Older English forms of chivalry still had limited appeal and dubious associations. It was not until the *Faerie Queene* that the fashion for literary chivalry was reworked to include the “matter of Britain” or the idea of a fellowship of knights – and even then, as C.S. Lewis points out, Spenser took Arthur far from his usual context.⁶⁰ It is startling to read Ben Jonson's claim that Sidney had “ane intention to have transform'd all his Arcadia to the stories of King Arthure.”⁶¹ Such a transformation would have required substantial revision, and not only in terms of changes to the text. The Elizabethan image of

⁵⁷ Yates, 103.

⁵⁸ Michael Leslie, *Spenser's 'Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves': Martial and Chivalric Symbolism in The Faerie Queene*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983) 102ff. The Order of the Garter seems to have had a much stronger medieval flavour than other Elizabethan chivalries. Although Edward VI made some Protestant reforms to the Order's statutes, and planned others, these were reversed by Mary I. Under Elizabeth there were no major reforms to the Order: with minor adjustments (such as the substitution of “divine service” for “Mass”) “the Catholic statutes and along with them St George, so detested by the reformers, survived into a Protestant England”. Strong, 166-168.

⁵⁹ Duncan-Jones, ed. *The Old Arcadia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) x-xiii.

⁶⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936; New York: Galaxy, 1958) 309-10.

King Arthur was still medieval, and intensely local; for the *Arcadia* to accommodate him, he or it would need radical change. Jonson was speaking in 1618, thirty-two years after Sidney's death. In those decades, there had been a revival of interest in native as well as imported forms of romance. In particular, Spenser had made Arthurian romance respectable. The Drummond/Jonson suggestion reflects seventeenth-century ideas of chivalry; it may not reflect Sidney's. It does, however, underline how European, how cosmopolitan and how unmedieval Sidney's romance is. Where Ariosto and indeed the Iberian romances drew on King Arthur and Charlemagne as well as stories of Amazons and Mediterranean kingdoms, Sidney ignored them. Indeed, medieval narrative is mocked when the stupid shepherdess Mopsa tells the story of a knight and a princess. Her narrative drones on in long sentences, linked together by a repeated "*And so*". Sidney draws teasing attention to alliterative romance phrasing in the knight's "Dayly Diligence and Grisly Grones", or to its repetitions when Mopsa's heroine visits a succession of aunts, each of whom gives her a magic nut.⁶² Apart from the limited tales foolish shepherds, Sidney stuck to Greek subject-matter and European models.

For most of Sidney's generation, Malory and the older English romances were an awkward local tradition, one which retained some (rather worrying) power but which could have little to do with the vernacular project. The

⁶¹ *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden in The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. W. Gifford, 9 vols. (London: Bickers and Son, Henry Sotheran and Co., 1875) XI, 377.

⁶² *Prose Works*, II, 241.

narratives of later medieval chivalry could not prove the vitality of modern English, or express the new ideas of the humanist renaissance and the literature which followed from it. Sidney's *Amadis*-influenced chivalry did show that the English vernacular, and English poetry, could carry and respond to those ideas. In translating and reinventing the foreign currents of chivalry and literature, the *Arcadia* nationalises them.

4 Heroic and political romance

What kind of heroism does Sidney's romance project, and what idea of national identity? The *Arcadia* is less explicitly patriotic than other sixteenth-century chivalric epics. England is not mentioned in any version. There are no visions of the nation's future, as there are in the French and the Spanish *Amadis*, let alone any parallel to Ariosto's laments for modern Italy. The relation between Spenser's Faerie land and his England is complex and ambiguous, but still unmistakable. Sidney's *Arcadia* (or his Iberia, his Macedonia or his Corinth) is not England, whatever the different countries may have in common. The famous description of Queen Helen of Corinth, who "made her people by peace, warlike; her courtiers, by sports, learned" plainly refers to Elizabeth and to the Accession Day Tilts, but it is an interpolated compliment rather than a sustained image of England.

This is not to say, however, that the *Arcadia* makes no comment on contemporary events. The Arcadians' riot, caused by fear of Zelmane and of foreign influence over their prince, presents issues made alarmingly topical by Elizabeth's proposed marriage to Alençon. That uprising, and the longer and more serious rebellion by Amphialus in the revised *Arcadia*, have been examined in the light of the Protestant theories of resistance to tyranny (and to Catholicism) that so inspired Protestants, and alarmed Elizabeth, in the Netherlands campaign. The revised *Arcadia*, especially, shows both an admiration for a younger generation who "cried with lowde voice, Libertie" in the fight against a tyrant king, and a fear of popular uprisings.⁶³ Edward Greenlaw suggested in 1913 that Basilius, with his "foolish fear of fate, this wasting of time in amorous toying while factions were multiplying and plots against the throne grew ripe", could be read as an image of Elizabeth.⁶⁴ Subsequent interpretations have explored allusions to the Anjou marriage proposals, to Catholic plots and to the Protestant cause in Europe.⁶⁵ Beyond such specific parallels, the poem's chivalric fabric has its own national implications. In the revised, chivalric *Arcadia* the *Amadis* form becomes patriotic, as it had in French and Spanish. The compliment to Queen Helen underlines the political and national ends of knightly festivities, and

⁶³ *Prose Works*, I, 200. See David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 91-108; Stephen Greenblatt, *Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre and The Representation of Rebellion* in Greenblatt, ed. *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 1-30.

⁶⁴ Edwin A. Greenlaw, "Sidney's *Arcadia* as an Example of Elizabethan Allegory" in Arthur F. Kinney ed., *Essential Articles for the Study of Sir Philip Sidney* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1986) 281.

⁶⁵ Gordon W. Zeeveld, "The Uprising of the Commons in Sidney's *Arcadia*." *Modern Language Notes*, 48 (1933), 209-217; Renee Pigeon, 'An Odious Marriage with a Stranger: Sidney's *Arcadias* and the French Match.' *English Language Notes* 31 (1993) 28-40; and, especially, Blair Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney's Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

in doing so casts light on the Elizabethan chivalric revival and on the *Arcadia* itself.

The politics of Elizabethan knighthood have been examined and re-examined. Yates's depiction of a Garter cult of Elizabeth, in which romance imagery compelled and expressed loyalty to the crown, has been qualified by increased emphasis on the nobility's exploitation of chivalry for its own ends. The elaborate tiltyard costumes and devices were often precisely motivated political statements. Among the most vivid, and best-documented, was the Earl of Essex's appearance at the tilt of 1590, all in black, very obviously in mourning for Sidney (whose best sword he had inherited, and whose widow he had married). The 1586 tilt included "A remembrance of Sir Philip Sidney Knight", and in one sense Essex's appearance was its sequel.⁶⁶ It is, however, a much more aggressive and self-aggrandising performance. His tournament costume was, in itself, a claim to be taken as Sidney's heir in the Protestant cause. This language of display is common to the tiltyard, to Sidney's funeral and to the many jousts of the *Arcadia*; unsurprisingly so, since all three were shaped by the needs of the same Protestant faction. There is even a parallel for Essex's mourning knight in Sidney's Knight of the Tomb, whose attendants are "all appareled in mourning weedes; ech of them servants of ech side, with like liveries of sorrow".⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Yates, 102.

Recent interpretations of chivalric festivity have drawn attention to these aristocratic self-assertions, and to the politicking that went with them. They were taken extremely seriously, as opportunities not only for magnificence but for advancing personal ambitions or factional (and especially Protestant) claims. Sidney's own difficult relationship between his sovereign has been traced through courtly performances, from his tilt pageant *The Four Foster Children of Desire* to his New Year gift to the queen of a jewelled whip. Displays could be a powerful way of expressing discontent or stirring up support – when Essex was out of favour he was banned from the tiltyard, perhaps for fear of the use he might make of public appearance – but could also become ends in themselves, with courtiers “relinquishing the goals and exulting in the display”.⁶⁸ The author of the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* was scathing about knightly performance on just these grounds:

Let electors, palatine, peers, and the other notables not assume that they were created and ordained merely to appear at coronations and dress up in splendid uniforms of olden times, as though they were actors in an ancient masque playing the parts of a Roland, Oliver, Renaldo or any other great hero for a day, or as though they were staging a scene from King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table... and that when the crowd has gone and Calliope has said farewell, they have played their parts in full.⁶⁹

This objection, that the energies of “notables” were expended on frivolities rather than put to serious use, has been directed by modern critics at the revised *Arcadia* itself. David Norbrook complains that Sidney “oscillates between sophisticated

⁶⁷ *Prose Works*, I, 445. The Knight of the Tomb – Parthenia in mourning disguise for her husband Amphialus – is in fact moved by personal, not political motives.

⁶⁸ *Prose Works*, 99,54.

⁶⁹ Norbrook 107.

humanist political discourse and the clichés of chivalric romance”.⁷⁰ After noting Sidney’s depiction of Amphialus’s careful strategy, and the “harsh and ugly violence” of the revolt, Richard McCoy sighs that

the *New Arcadia* remains bound by the conventions of chivalric romance... Oblivious to the requirements of supply, fortification and military command, Amphialus concentrates instead on the decorations of his horse and armor in his efforts to impress his beloved. The war itself shrinks to a series of single combats, most involving Amphialus, and it regains the chivalric glamor lost in the first battle.⁷¹

McCoy’s and Norbrook’s comments capture the *Arcadia*’s slide between a realistic sense of the duties of command and a vivid interest in knightly glamour. It is, however, too glib to dismiss the poem’s chivalry as a cliché. Enthusiasm for tournaments may seem less sophisticated than concern for government, but it should not be rejected as merely conventional. The glamour and heroism of romance was surely central to Sidney’s decision to make the *Arcadia* a much more chivalric text. His principal model was the *Amadis*, a poem that might move its readers “to the exercise of courtesie, liberalitie, and especially courage”, not the sober counsel of the *Vindiciae*. The tinselly decorations of horse and armour were intensely interesting to Sidney, and to his generation of courtiers. Far from being incidental or irrelevant, they were one of the great attractions of an inspiring genre. Chivalry was both an enticing fiction to sugar the pill of education – as in the *Defense*’s view of poetry itself – and itself an example of a particular kind of courage. Moreover, as McCoy’s own study

⁷⁰ Norbrook, 105.

shows, that tiltyard glitter was itself a political discourse. Amphialus, a character introduced in that revision, is the focus of much of the book's new political material, but he is also "so worthy a Knight, whom the fame of the world seemed to set in balance with any Knight living".⁷² In the *Arcadia*'s revisions romance heroism and political thought become closely associated. When Sidney is at his most chivalric, he is often also tensely aware of the implications not only of knighthood but of government.

The conflict between political realism and a possibly frivolous chivalry is characteristic of the revised *Arcadia*. When the third book's battles decline into single combats, they echo the basic movement of Sidney's narrative, which repeatedly turns from public service to private interest. The images of romance knighthood are used to explore the pressures of rule, but they also express the abandonment of political duty. The obviously uninspiring Basilius is first to turn away from his obligations, but the two knightly princes turn out to be just as irresponsible, leaving their life of virtuous action for one of disguise and dalliance. That movement from public to selfish motives is repeated throughout Sidney's narrative. In the first *Arcadia*'s tightly organised five-act structure, these abandonments are redressed and corrected, the final trial scene forcing recognition of the princes' mistakes before the recovery of Basilius allows forgiveness and reconciliation. That plot remains in the New *Arcadia*, but with

⁷¹ Richard McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood: The literature and politics of Elizabethan chivalry*. The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics series. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989) 71.

⁷² *Prose Works*, I, 64.

enlarged heroic actions that repeatedly show public duty neglected. Moreover, the newly chivalric character of the revision weakens the retributive shape of Sidney's narrative. The form of the new interlaced narratives encourages wandering from the point, much as Ariosto's knights left sieges to pursue Angelica. His concern with political pressures, however, keeps exposing the irresponsibility of romance action. The "conventions of chivalric romance" do not just bind Sidney's narrative: they set up a conflict between one of his main subjects and the form he has chosen to express it.

i Politicised romance

Sidney's insistence on the obligations of rule is not a common characteristic of romance. Monarchs of all kinds abound in *Amadís* or the *Furioso*, but royalty usually gives them the glamour of high birth, not the duties of government. In the *Furioso* there are moments in which duty is evoked, but its call is usually overturned. Bradamante, the appointed protector of Marseille, acknowledges an appeal from the frightened townspeople, but chooses to rescue her lover rather than return to their assistance. Ruggiero may remember Bradamante or his duty to his lord, but the memory is not enough to counteract the seductions of Alcina. Much of Ariosto's narrative depends on knights leaving their responsibilities – primarily the siege of Paris – and their returns to duty are often entirely coincidental. Moreover, that duty is for the most part simply presented as the feudal bond between knight and lord. It is hard to imagine Ariosto's knights

addressing the grievances of a rebellious peasantry, as Sidney's do at the start of the revised *Arcadia*.⁷³ There are bad kings in the *Furioso* – Cimosco with his arquebus, the misogynist Marganor – but their failings and even their bad governments are a kind of unknighthliness. Cimosco is hated “perché morto gli avea il signore antico, ma più perch'era ingiusto, empio e rapace.”⁷⁴ These are individual failings; replacing a wicked king does not affect the system of government. There is little sense of a process of rule; the political theories of a Machiavelli or a Guicciardini are part of a cruel world that the *Furioso* resists. Similarly, the wars and love affairs of the *Amadis* have few political repercussions; kingdoms are won in battle, but the narrative does not cover their government afterwards. In Sidney's romance, a form commonly used to resist political reality is instead used to examine it, and that awareness is often at its sharpest when the story is at its most chivalric. Sidney's knights and ladies are rulers and lovers, errant and obliged to accept responsibility for their kingdoms.

These apparently contradictory elements are exemplified in Queen Helen of Corinth. Her first appearance is a chance meeting with Musidorus, who has just embarked on his search for the missing Pyrocles. He and his companion stop in a

⁷³ Prose Works, I, 39 and 46-47. This first civil war is unusual in that Sidney presents the rebellious peasants (who are, however, conquered “freemen and possessioners”) sympathetically. For the *Arcadia*'s generally brutal class relations, see Greenblatt, “Murdering Peasants”. Peter Lindenbaum points out that Sidney also had doubts about the poetic capacities of *Arcadia*'s shepherds, trying “to explain away the relatively sophisticated nature of the poems...by noting that these are not typical modern-day, lower-class shepherds”. Lindenbaum, “Sidney and the Active Life”, in *Sir Philip Sidney's Achievements*, ed. M.J.B. Allen, et al. (New York: AMS Press, 1990)178.

⁷⁴ “because he had killed their own lord, but more especially because he was unjust, wicked and rapacious.” *Furioso*, 9, 83.

shady forest, where they find the armour of Amphialus. and fear that harm has come to him. The two knights ride on:

...they travailed but a little way, when in opening of the mouth of the valley into a faire field, they met with a coach drawne with foure milke-white horses furnished all in blacke, with a black a more boy upō every horse, they al apparelled in white, the coach it self very richly furnished in black & white. But before they could come so neere as to discerne what was within, there came running upō them above a dozen horsmen who cried to thē to yield thēselves prisoners or els they should die...⁷⁵

Queen Helen's elaborate train sounds like the trappings of romance at their most fantastic, though she is also an echo of Elizabeth, who made much symbolic use of black and white and was often depicted in those colours. After the defeat of the presumptuous attendants, Helen explains that she is in search of her beloved Amphialus. This completes a sequence of chivalric motifs: the start of a quest, the armour and its alarming implications, the encounter on the road, the unfair challenge, the errant damsel in search of her lover. Sidney's prose makes the events unfurl breathlessly, full of a sense of interruption. The "travailed but a little way when" promises a new incident, but we are held waiting for it as Sidney describes just where in the valley the meeting took place. The "But..." at the beginning of the last sentence promises another event, and we are held up again over "before they could come so neere" – echoing the experience of interruption, because there is time to get knights and reader nearly to the coach, but not quite. This immediacy involves the reader in a gallop of incidents

⁷⁵ *Prose Works*, I, 64.

reminiscent of old romances. In introducing herself, however, Helen becomes a queen of something other than chivalric romance:

... my name is *Helen*, Queene by birth: and hetherto possession of the faire Citie and territorie of *Corinth*. I can say no more of my selfe, but beloved of my people: and may justly say, beloved, since they are content to beare with my absence, and folly.⁷⁶

When Helen explains that she “hetherto” possessed Corinth, the well-read romance enthusiast might expect her to be another dispossessed damsel in need of assistance. Instead, “hetherto” relates to the queen’s own dereliction of duty, her absence in (selfish and possibly fruitless) search for Amphialus. For Bradamante, absence has no consequences; the people of Marseille wait patiently for her, rather than choosing another protector. Queen Helen is aware that her behaviour is politically dangerous: a less loving people might not put up with such treatment.

This focus on the relationship between monarch and subjects also introduces a sense of different nations within the romance. Helen has

to governe a people, in nature mutinously prowde, and alwaies before so used to hard governours, as they knew not how to obey without the sworde were drawne...⁷⁷

At the beginning of the *Arcadia*, one of first things the shepherds explain to the rescued Musidorus is the distinction between Laconia and Arcadia:

⁷⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 66.

⁷⁷ *Prose Works*, I, 283.

The country (answered *Claius*) where you were cast a shore and now are past through, is Laconia, not so poore by the barrennes of the soyle (though in it selfe not passing fertill) as by a civill warre, which being these two yeares within the bowels of that estate, betweene the gentlemen & the peasants (by them named *Helots*) hath in this sorte as it were disfigured the face of nature...⁷⁸

This is not an undifferentiated romance forest, but a world with national borders, in which different countries have individual political organisations (peasants are not called *Helots* in *Arcadia*) and events, in this case civil war, which result from them. The national element of the *Arcadia* is not just in the grandeur of romance ambition, but in a growing sense of the distinctiveness of different societies.

ii Private and public heroism

Those distinctions mean that the structures of government are everywhere apparent in the new *Arcadia*. Their demands cannot be excluded from pastoral retreat, or from chivalric *avanture*. In revising the *Arcadia*, Sidney greatly expanded the heroic elements of his story. The princes' earlier exploits were moved from the eclogues into the body of the text, with the addition of many new adventures. The rearrangement emphasises the chivalric content of the new material by casting it as an intertwined narrative, a characteristic romance form – drawn, Sir John Harington suggested, from the example of Ariosto.⁷⁹ Under the closer scrutiny of the revised text, however, the princes' earlier exploits seem much less successful. In the first *Arcadia*, Musidorus can tell the smitten

⁷⁸ Ibid, 14.

Pyrocles that his selfish pursuit of love will “overthrowe all the excellent thinges yow have done, w^{ch} have filled y^e worlde with your fame”.⁸⁰ Every reference to their former adventures acts as a reproach to their present love-struck idleness. They are retold in the first Ecolgues as part of an appeal on behalf of Erona, the queen of Lycia, whom they have helped in the past and who again needs their assistance. The disguised princes, caught up in their pursuit of love, decide that Erona’s problems can be left a little while:

...considering, they had yet, allmoste a yeare, of tyme to succor her. they resolved, assoone, as this theyre present action (whiche had taken full possession of all theyre desyers) were wrought to any good poynte, they woulde forthewith take in hande that Journey. Neither shoulde they neede, in the meane tyme anything reveyle them selves...⁸¹

In this straightforward contrast between the active and the passive, the heroes’ past deeds are given unshadowed and unstinting praise. In his revisions, however, Sidney examines those “excellent thinges”, and they too turn out to fit the pattern of responsibility abandoned.

The pressure of those responsibilities is more readily maintained because Sidney’s use of interlace is not purely chivalric. We hear about the exploits from the princes themselves, allowing Sidney to recall the storytelling heroes of epic, and something of epic decorum. The alternation of narrative is created in the retelling – stories are broken off by the importunities of Miso or Mopsa, or by questions and comments from one of the princesses. They are not interrupted by

⁷⁹ Smith, II, 217.

⁸⁰ *Prose Works*, IV, 16.

events within the narrative, but by factors outside it: interlace is prompted by the tale's listeners, not by its actors. The interruptions are not designed to switch breathlessly from one pressing event to another in continuous and simultaneous adventure. Instead of jumping from one exploit to another, the *Arcadia* backtracks over the princes' heroic past. The material is chivalric, but there is often an unromantic distance to its retelling.

Moreover, the earliest of these stories are prompted by motives that are themselves unromantic. In Ariosto, most new narratives start with an appeal to the knight's emotions. More adventures are constantly generated, as each encounter by the wayside can become a call for assistance. I have suggested that this emotive basis for adventure is one source of the *Furioso's* confidence and generosity. The earliest and most successful of the princes' exploits are prompted by misrule, not emotion. After their exemplary education, the princes seek adventure as rulers in training, not as knights-errant. Nancy Lindheim points out these early stories are told by Musidorus to persuade Pamela that he is a disguised prince, rather than a shepherd; his narrative therefore illustrates "the art of good government, the nature of a princely education, acts of public chivalry, and the noble virtues of friendship, magnanimity, and justice".⁸² The idea of "public chivalry", heroic action shaped by considerations of rule, remains an ideal throughout the princes' adventures. Richard McCoy emphasises the

⁸¹ *Prose Works*, IV, 67.

⁸² Nancy Lindheim, *The structures of Sidney's Arcadia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 88.

crucial difference between the *New Arcadia* and such chivalric sources as *Amadis de Gaule*... The earlier chivalric romance is unified by its magical setting and an ethos of idealized egotism; the extended series of adventures provides an occasion for almost random self-assertion. The adventures of Pyrocles and Musidorus, on the other hand, constitute a more systematic test of political wit.⁸³

When they set out to assist Euarchus (the father of Pyrocles and uncle of Musidorus) at the siege of Byzantium, they are helping with the government of kingdoms that will, one day, belong to them. Their adventures begin with an involuntary diversion: they are shipwrecked on the coast of Phrygia, where the “wickedly sad” king fears their growing reputation and power:

the prophecie of *Musidorus* destinie came to his eares (delivered unto him, and received of him with the hardest interpretation, as though his subjects did delight in the hearing thereof.) Then gave he himselfe indeede to the full currant of his disposition, esppecially after the warre of *Thessalia*, wherein (though in trueth wrongly) he deemed, his unsuccessings proceeded of their unwillingnes to have him prosper...⁸⁴

There is a sense of the shifting diplomatic relations between countries as warfare has an impact beyond the immediate causes of battle. The princes’ adventure, in which Pyrocles – who, as a friend of Musidorus, has been imprisoned by the wicked king – is rescued and the tyrant overthrown, allows Sidney to present misrule, a negative exemplar to follow the second books’ opening account of Euarchus and of the princes’ training. It also shows political virtue in action. Having won the kingdom, the prince restores them to the native royal line:

⁸³ McCoy, *Sir Philip Sidney: Rebellion in Arcadia* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), 140-141.

⁸⁴ *Prose Works*, I, 196.

...the whole estates of the country with one consent, gave the crowne and all other markes of soveraigntie to *Musidorus*; desiring nothing more. then to live under such a government, as they promised thēselves of him.

But he thinking it a greater greatnes to give a kingdome. then get a kingdome; understanding that there was left of the bloud Roiall. & next to the successiō, an aged Gentleman of approved goodnes (who had gotten nothing by his cousins power, but danger frō him and odiousnes for him) having past his time in modest secrecy, & asmuch from entermedling in matters of government, as the greatnes of his bloud would suffer him, did (after having received the full power to his owne hands) resigne all to the noble-mã: but with such conditions, & cautions of the conditions, as might assure the people (with as much assurãce as worldly matters beare) that not onely that governour, of whom indeed they looked for al good, but the nature of the government, should be no way apt to decline to Tyrãny.⁸⁵

This is a standard romance ending: settling down to rule would end the princes' adventures, and limit their achievement of renown. Sidney is, however, insistent on the statecraft of his romance. Musidorus is offered the throne by "the whole estates" of Phrygia, a unity that underlines the country's social and political structures. The crown is not simply a prize for virtue, but comes with "markes of soveraigntie", signs of rule. The new king may be "of approved goodnes", but Sidney devotes a long parenthesis to his earlier career, and the reference to the "greatnes of his bloud" shows why: the nobility are so bound up with the process of government that they need to be explicitly disassociated from its recent evils. Sidney's princes cannot just pass a kingdom to a virtuous heir; they have to ensure, through "conditions, & cautions of the conditions", that its political structures are protected against tyranny. In the romance world of the *Arcadia*, action involves government, and wickedness is politically defined.

The adventure of the king of Phrygia, and the following war with the tyrant of Pontus, involve the princes only in very active self-defence. Their exploits are still those of trainee rulers. In the next sequence of stories, Pyrocles and Musidorus decide that they will

goe privately to seeke exercises of their vertue; thinking it not so worthy. to be brought to heroycall effects by fortune, or necessitie (like *Ulysses* and *Aeneas*) as by ones owne choice, and working.⁸⁶

This is a departure not only from the earlier, inescapable adventures but from the account Musidorus has given of their upbringing. They have abandoned public service to act as individuals, becoming knights errant and not princes. This is a shift into chivalric romance: from withstanding and finding solutions to trouble, the princes have decided to go looking for it. The references to Ulysses and Aeneas underline that change in attitude: as with Angelica's plunge into the forest at the start of the *Furioso*, the *Arcadia* is turning away from the public action, associated with epic and imposed by "fortune, or necessitie", to the private wilfulness of romance. Lindheim sees this story as a "transition to the concerns of the next set", the tales of love told by Pyrocles to Philoclea – although the distinction is not absolute, since rule and emotion appear in the stories of both princes.⁸⁷ This transition also reinforces the impression of their earlier behaviour: Pyrocles, the first to fall in love, is reproached by the public-spirited Musidorus, who then himself succumbs. Moreover, although the stories

⁸⁵ *Prose Works*, 201-2.

⁸⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 206

⁸⁷ Lindheim, 96.

are shaped by their narrators, they also form a cumulative tale involving both princes in increasingly private actions.

The chivalric character of this new attitude to heroic action is confirmed when the first of their private adventures is inspired by compassion. They overhear the king of Paphlagonia and his virtuous son Leonatus (the source for Gloucester and Edgar in *Lear*) describing their misery:

These dolefull speeches, and some others to like purpose (well shewing they had not bene borne to the fortune they were in,) moved the Princes to goe out unto them...⁸⁸

Musidorus) introduces this story as one “not so notable for any great effect they perfourmed, yet worthy to be remembred for the un-used examples therein”.⁸⁹ Their intervention helps Leonatus to reclaim the throne from his bastard brother Plexirtus, and to that extent ends happily. But this is only a temporary solution. In their private capacity the princes have no authority to set up safeguards against tyranny, and there is no punishment of wrong-doing. The brothers are reconciled, and Plexirtus is free to cause more trouble in later episodes. That partial solution is characteristic of these adventures of “ones own choice, and working”. Musidorus proves to be embarrassingly accurate: he and Pyrocles did fail to perform “any great effect”. This is only the first of many half-concluded and increasingly messy episodes. Whatever the princes’ virtue and judgement,

⁸⁸ *Prose Works*, I, 207.

⁸⁹ *Prose Works*, I, 207.

their individual heroism is politically inadequate. This is knight-errantry in a world whose realities leave no room for romance.

The princes do achieve renown in their pursuit of “exercises of their virtue”, but they are teetering between public virtue and private self-indulgence. The next major episode returns to the first *Arcadia*’s Erona story, and changes it completely. Even Musidorus now presents their actions as chivalric adventures, inspired by romance feeling:

they privately went thence... dooing actes more daungerous, though lesse famous, because they were but privat chivalries: till hearing of the faire and vertuous Queene *Erona* of *Lycia*, besieged by the puissant king of *Armenia*, they bent themselves to her succour, both because the weaker (& weaker as being a Ladie) & partly because they heard the king of *Armenia* had in his company three of the most famous men living, for matters of arms, that were knowne to be in the worlde...⁹⁰

Musidorus is interrupted, and we finally hear the story from Philoclea:

These 2. princes (said *Philoclea*) aswel to help the weaker (especially being a Ladie) as to save a Greeke people from being ruined by such, whom we call and count Barbarous...⁹¹

These are precisely chivalric motives, following the same pattern in both descriptions. Helping the weaker party is an essential romance motif, as is the protection of women. Sidney even structures Musidorus’s and Philoclea’s sentences the same way: Erona’s sex is mentioned in parenthesis on both occasions. Their final reasons, however, are significantly different. When

⁹⁰ *Prose Works*, I, 213-14.

⁹¹ *Prose Works*, I, 233.

Musidorus introduces the Erona episode, he first implies that it was a departure from the “privat chivalries” that precede it, but the princes’ interest in the Armenian king’s men-at-arms confirms this as another knightly tale. Musidorus’s romance motivation is balanced by Philoclea’s assumption of their national and political motives. In her description, the princes are returned to their initial status as rulers in training. The barbarian threat affects all Greeks, and resistance to it is politically astute. It is, however, evident from the tale that follows that the princes ignored this element of their adventure, acting as knights errant without regard to national considerations.

As in the first *Arcadia*, Erona’s misfortunes are the result of letting her private inclinations into public life. She has fallen in love with the lowborn Antiphilus, and is determined to marry him against the wishes of her father and her country. After her father’s death from grief, Lycia is besieged by the king of Armenia, another of Erona’s suitors. At this point it is worth remembering why Musidorus needed to convince Pamela of his real birth and virtue: he found that “a shepherds service was but considered of as from a shepheard, and the acceptance limited to no further proportion, then of a good servant”. Sidney and indeed Musidorus are entirely in favour of Pamela’s majesty and “just disdain”.⁹² An insistence on class distinctions is a sign of respect to herself and to her position as Arcadia’s heir, where Erona has behaved with selfish abandon.

⁹² *Prose Works*, I, 153.

In an attempt to conclude the siege of Lycia, a single combat is set up between the princes and Antiphilus on one side, and those “most famous men living, for matters of arms” on the other. It fails in its aim. Pyrocles and Musidorus kill their opponents, but Antiphilus is captured; when, at Erona’s request, they go to rescue him, the king of Armenia is killed in the struggle. Their short-term success in the tournament has appalling repercussions: the surviving relatives of the champions and of the king of Armenia swear revenge on the princes. By the end of the episode, Erona is still in love with Antiphilus, and most of Asia Minor is at war.

This outline covers events in both *Arcadias*, but there are significant variations. In the second text, Erona agrees to marry the Armenian king in exchange for the life of the captured Antiphilus. Then, repenting her decision, she begs the princes “to try some way for her deliverance” and they, “that knew not what she had done in private, prepared that night accordingly” to rescue Antiphilus. In both versions the Armenian king is killed in the rescue attempt, but in the second his death has the appearance of treachery. That alteration is characteristic of the revisions: even though the princes themselves behave honourably, they are increasingly caught in the machinations and deceptions of others. They are compromised in their heroic adventures, not merely in their pursuit of love. Sidney seems to imagine successful heroic action only at a distance; as soon as his heroes’ exploits are brought into focus, they crumble.

iii **The limitations of romance**

The princes' career of adventure does invite the suspicion that, had Pyrocles and Musidorus gone to Erona's aid for the sake of Greece, for public rather than chivalric motives, Sidney would have permitted their exploit to end more happily, or indeed to end at all. As the princes insist on greater control over their actions they become subject to ever greater restrictions (precisely subject, since they are acting as private citizens who must submit to government and cannot change it). In setting such limits on the princes' power of action, Sidney echoes advice he had himself received. In 1578 Languet – a fair representative of sober Protestant thought – had rebuked Sidney for his wish to fight in the Netherlands:

...although the Belgians have just cause to defend their liberty by arms against the Spanish, this is nothing to you. If indeed your Queen had been bound by her treaty to send them troops, and had commanded you to go with these troops, then the obligation to obey her who is your ruler would have made those your enemies who are attacking the Belgian states. But you, out of mere love of fame and honour, and to have an opportunity of displaying your courage, determined to regard as your enemies those who appeared to be doing the wrong in this war. It is not your business, nor any private person's, to pass a judgement on a question of this kind; it belongs to the magistrate, I mean by magistrate the prince...⁹³

Languet, who has been credited with authorship of the *Vindiciae*, does not rule out all rebellion, but such action is carefully restricted by an assumption of obedience in most circumstances.⁹⁴ Given the frustrations of his forward

⁹³ *The Correspondence of Sir Philip Sidney and Hubert Languet*, trans. Steuart A. Pears (London: William Pickering, 1845)154.

⁹⁴ Worden, 54.

Protestant faction, the restraints imposed by that obedience were pressing considerations for Sidney's own career. These are the kinds of restrictions usually left out of chivalric narratives, but the *Arcadia's* adventures are governed by them.

This new conflict between private and public action is not explicitly stated. The turn to chivalry matches the princes' later decision to abandon action for love, but – unlike that later choice – it is never rebuked within the text. Musidorus reminds Pyrocles of the weakness of love and retreat, but there is no Languet to rebuke them for passing judgement, as private citizens, on questions “of this kind”. Instead, the episodes pile up examples of unwise interventions and their disastrous results; so much so that the princes' few successes are easily overlooked.

When Pyrocles and Musidorus bring peace to Bythinia, for example, Sidney concludes the story in a single paragraph. That intervention is unusual for three reasons: it is short, it is successful, and it does not involve military action. Pyrocles and Musidorus reconcile the warring parties by diplomacy, finding “meanes... to get such credite with them, as we brought them to as great peace between thēselves, as love towards us, for having made the peace.”⁹⁵ Such a settlement would surely win Languet's approval, but in the unfolding, intertwined narrative it barely registers. Sidney seems much less interested in his

⁹⁵ *Prose Works*, I, 292.

heroes' successes than in the ongoing troubles that compromise them. Not all the episodes end in disaster, but the failures are given much more attention. In these circumstances, the princes' real heroism is constantly diminished: thwarted by circumstance, misrepresented or hurried over with little interest. The episodes of the revised *Arcadia* seem planned to "set Pyrocles and Musidorus off to advantage",⁹⁶ but in practice they build up an image of heroism frustrated.

Sidney's own heroic death came at the end of a life of thwarted ambition, in which his hopes of joining military and diplomatic expeditions were continually overruled. In one case he was ordered back from a sea expedition when the fleet was actually ready in port. Greville's account of this episode, like Languet's letter, is illuminating: Sidney "would gladly have demurred; yet the confluence of reason, transcendence of Power, fear of Staying the whole Fleet, made him instantly sacrifice all these selfnesses to the duty of obedience."⁹⁷ The newly-centralised Tudor state demanded obedience but, as Mervyn James has shown, it could not have imposed its authority

without the collaboration of the majority of the governing class, who controlled the principal order-keeping forces available. Tudor order needed therefor to be freely accepted, assimilated, and given compelling moral force.⁹⁸

That moral force included the regulation of "selfnesses" by the acknowledgement that, in Languet's terms, certain questions belonged to the magistrate and not to

⁹⁶ Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals*, 148.

⁹⁷ Greville, 75-76.

the private individual. James sees the *Arcadia* itself as a “synthesis of honour, humanism and religion” in which the aggressive self-assertion of the nobleman was subordinated to royal authority. I agree, but find that synthesis less secure than in James’s reading: Sidney may promote a Protestant humanist concept of obedience, but it is a very ambivalent promotion. In their choice of private action, Sidney’s heroes reverse that trend, overturning not only their own royal training but the shifts in monarchical and aristocratic relations of the two centuries before the *Arcadia* was written. Even the language with which the princes abandon their public careers is characteristic of the earlier image of honour. James has suggested that in the medieval form of honour, with its insistence on the fighting man’s autonomy, the hero was subject to “fortune and necessity” but could defy them:

although the quality of the assertive will was displayed in the encounter with Fate, honour was not authenticated at the bar of success, or diminished by failure... Honour was established, not primarily by the skill with which events and situations were manipulated... but by the determined “steadfastness” with which they were confronted. Consistency in standing by a position once taken up was basic to the honour code.⁹⁹

Sidney’s princes are similarly oblivious to the actual outcomes of their interventions. From the moment they choose private over public heroism, their adventures lead to disaster, but they do not consider abandoning their knight-errantry. On these terms, in fact, they are successful. Within the poem and indeed outside it, the princes win renown; Sidney’s contemporaries, encouraged

⁹⁸ Mervyn James, *Society, Politics, Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 309.

⁹⁹ James, 315-16.

to read Pyrocles and Musidorus as Elizabethan versions of pious Aeneas (or of Sidney himself), ignore the unhappy outcomes of most of their exploits. This “steadfastness” in an unwise and unlucky course is most noticeable in the highly chivalric episodes of the revised Book II, but is characteristic of the princes even in the first *Arcadia*. Imprisoned for the murder of Basilius, they “did so endure, as they did rather appeare Governoures of necessity then Servaunts to fortune”, reminding each other that even their captivity is only an “overthrow” so far as “Humane chaunces can bee coumpted an overthrowe to hym that standes upon vertue.”¹⁰⁰ Such stoicism may be admirable, but it is embodied by heroes who will be condemned to death, and condemned justly according to the laws of *Arcadia*. There is a basic tension between two different sets of values in Sidney’s text: when the princes are, according to older ideas of honour, at their most heroic, they are also at their most unsuccessful, caught in actions that must be condemned and that end badly. Pyrocles and Musidorus conspicuously achieve renown, but they just as conspicuously cause disaster and earn punishment. They claim freedoms associated with an earlier conception of honour, and with chivalric romance, but find themselves restricted by law and by the pressures of government.

Why do the princes persist in their disastrous pursuit of chivalry? Why do they fail to realise that this new course offers less freedom than their public service? Such questions are more pressing because, within the politicised context of the *Arcadia*, the shift to chivalric action seems so unnecessary. The princes’

¹⁰⁰ *Prose Works*, IV, 344. James sees this as “religious patience” (390).

choice of adventure is actually redundant: their travels to Byzantium have already led them into several exploits, and their initial plan of assisting Euarchus offers further opportunity to demonstrate their prowess. The wish for “exercises of their vertue”, with its rejection of Aeneas and Ulysses as models, is redundant, especially since the military character of their adventures is unaffected by the change. The *Furioso*’s turn from epic to romance has an immediate effect on the quality of the action: we move at once from war to single combat, from a battle between nations to the passion-led struggles of romance. But for Pyrocles and Musidorus there is little difference between episodes. There is, in military terms, little to choose between the siege they try to lift for Erona and the neglected siege laid by Euarchus on Byzantium. The shift itself is not without emphasis – the princes’ disdain for Aeneas and Ulysses suggests hubris, and as the episodes progress their increasing loss of power becomes alarming – but there is no clear-cut distinction between one form of action and another. Ariosto’s knights abandoned a siege for an Ovidian pursuit; Sidney’s put off one siege for the sake of another. The difference is in motive and outcome, not – as later in the *Arcadia* – in the fighting itself. Sidney might have left his princes en route to Byzantium, and interrupted that journey with as many diversions as he pleased. Instead, the princes turn their backs on their duty, and fall into ever more erroneous adventures.

There is also no formal distinction to back up the opposition of different kinds of action. The Italian tradition, with its academic battles over genre,

helped to enforce a division between the unified, public action of epic and the multiple romance action. The opposition is at its clearest in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, where the epic crusade and the romance adventure are formally as well as morally distinguished. In the *Gerusalemme*, the seductive diversions of romance are set against the virtuous, linear progress of Goffredo's crusade: we are never allowed to forget what Tasso's knights are digressing *from*. Sidney has no such secure image of correct behaviour. The princes start their adventures with the intention of assisting Euarchus, but there is never any suggestion that his siege of Byzantium is suffering from their absence. There is a distinction between the continuation of their princely training and the private adventures that follow, but it is easily missed. The actions which lead to disaster in the later episodes are very little different from those which led to success at the beginning. They are distinguished only by the spirit in which the princes undertake them, not by the form or content of the adventures. The *Arcadia* shifts between pastoral and chivalric romance, mixing the Terentian comic structure of the first text with the interlaced additions of the revision, but there is nothing like the direct competition between Tasso's epic and romance elements, let alone the moral hierarchy that, in the *Gerusalemme*, governs those forms. Heroic action changes according to the selfishness of its motives, but it remains the heroism of knighthood; the same forms of combat represent the autonomy of the romance hero and the efficient obedience of the officer. Sidney does not present romance as a freer alternative to the restrictions of service: his heroes seek greater freedom and autonomy within existing forms of government, and they do not find it.

One reason for this failure is simply that it echoes the limits put on Sidney himself. This was the situation of the would-be chivalric aristocrat at Elizabeth's court: heroic action, such as involvement in the Protestant cause, could only be undertaken against the Queen's command. Elizabeth was, finally, Sidney's magistrate, and if he was tempted to run off to the wars of Belgium or the explorations of the new world he was also conscious of a duty of obedience. David Norbrook has argued that the *Arcadia's* "claustrophobic atmosphere", and its association of courtly ceremonial with violence, reflects Sidney's own "frustration at enforced inactivity".¹⁰¹ Richard McCoy suggests that Sidney's characters typically come close to rebellion, but fail to carry out their disobediences:

His major poetry and prose all present some conflict with authority, a clash between individual impulse and social order, between freedom and submission. Yet in nearly every instance, these struggles culminate in an impasse, their implications and consequences never fully clarified.¹⁰²

Richard Helgerson – who sees the heroic episodes in a much more positive light – finds a similar lack of resolution in Sidney's poetic ambitions. Here the difficulty is less in finding an acceptable form of heroic action, than of developing a poetry serious enough to "placate... the voice of Sidney's own conscience."¹⁰³ That difficulty is reflected in the princes' moral difficulties: poetry is, like the life of retreat and contemplation, like love and the pursuit of

¹⁰¹ Norbrook, 106.

¹⁰² McCoy, *Rebellion in Arcadia*, 26.

¹⁰³ Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals*, 154.

beauty, frivolous at best, sinful at worst. Like other poets of his generation, Sidney could not justify poetry as a worthwhile practice, but was unable to pursue any other career.

All these limitations – the frustration of factional hopes, the impossibility of rebellion against royal authority, the dangerous frivolity of poetry – inform the *Arcadia* and Sidney's confinement of his heroes. I would argue that a Protestant sense of original sin heightens all these elements, and is itself a pressing reason for the princes' failure. The “compelling moral force” of religion internalised the new obedience, making political and literary dangers vivid and morally threatening. The theology of Sidney's forward Protestant faction argued that humanity, in its depraved and fallen state, can only sin; what Sidney called the “infected will” would necessarily turn to wrongdoing, unless redeemed and upheld by the grace of God. It is, as Sidney had written to Walsingham, “no greater fault to have confidence in mans power, than it is to hastily to despair of Gods work”. The fictional world of the *Arcadia* is filled with this basic pessimism concerning human nature. Considering the episodes of the second book, John Carey argues that

The point of this vast extension and diversification of the narrative is that it gives the workings of fate and the struggles of passion and reason that Sidney portrays a seemingly endless validity and complication. His moral landscape stretches now as far as the eye can see, restless, tormented, full of pain and unlooked for catastrophe. The inset stories parade an anthology of mishaps.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ John Carey, “Structure and Rhetoric in Sidney's *Arcadia*” from *Poetica* 18 (1984) 68-81, reprinted in Dennis Kay, ed. *Sir Philip Sidney: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 251.

The *Arcadia* consistently shows humanity sliding away from duty, into desire and misfortune; when the princes or Amphialus claim some degree of autonomy, it only leads them to further error and further suffering.

A Calvinist sense of original sin does not, however, prevent action in the world. On the contrary: it insists on the pursuit of the active life, with its constant straining towards virtue. As Peter Lindenbaum suggests in a discussion of princes' heroic endeavours,

The fact that properly motivated heroic action *can* achieve positive good, but does not *necessarily* do so, attests to the need to hold actively to that virtue at all times. One cannot afford to assume that one's duties in the heroic world are ever finished. Thus, in the *New Arcadia*, not only do Philanax, Euarchus and the pre-smitten Musidorus insist on the need for constant moral activity and preparedness: the very nature of the world the princes find themselves in demands it as well.¹⁰⁵

That "constant moral activity" is a vivid part of Protestant humanism. As the first version of the *Arcadia* was being written, Sidney's correspondence with Languet was much concerned with the importance of public service.¹⁰⁶ The poets of the English vernacular project – most of whom were educated as Protestant humanists – faced this dilemma: the very training that had prepared them for an active career had made them too eagerly active to suit the wishes of a cautious monarch. The only virtuous career – obedient public service – could not be taken up without the queen's favour, and other options were unacceptable. It

¹⁰⁵ Lindenbaum, 186.

was as hard for Sidney to picture virtuous public action as it was for Ariosto to present united national endeavour, and for much the same reasons: it did not reflect the circumstances in which he wrote.

The structures of civic obedience offered one way of making action virtuous, with the public good as both a spur and a justification. Without that defence, how could heroic action be imagined in the context of a fallen world? Within the *Arcadia* that question is never resolved, although Sidney's different texts do suggest possible answers. One is in the providential structure of the original plot. In the first *Arcadia*, the decline of the heroes into an evidently sinful condition is resolved in the trial scene and its aftermath. The princes are first sentenced to death and then reprieved by the miraculous recovery of Basilius. These events – by which they are condemned according to the law, but forgiven through the inscrutable workings of providence – echo the process of divine mercy, in which a justly doomed humanity may be redeemed through grace.¹⁰⁷ This conclusion lets the princes off the hook, but it does not achieve any sense of uncompromised heroism. Nor does the first *Arcadia* as a whole. The closest we come to successful human virtue in that text is Euarchus, the just magistrate, who demonstrates the “Reward of vertue beeing in yt self”,

on w^{ch} his Inward love was so fixed, that never was yt dissolved into other desyers, but keeping his thoughtes true to them selves, was neither beguyled

¹⁰⁶ Neil L. Rudenstine, *Sidney's Poetic Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967) 3-15.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Lindheim 160-62. Helgerson, on the contrary, argues that the trial verdict's “suggestion of a merciful providence can hardly drown out the insistent claims of ‘the never changing Justice’” (*Elizabethan Prodigals*, 140).

with the paynted glasse of plasure, nor dazeled with y^e false lighte of Ambition.¹⁰⁸

This exemplary ruler is a rebuke to the other characters of the Old *Arcadia* even before he condemns them in the trial scene. He is, however, an image of virtue already achieved. In the *Defense* Sidney suggests that poetry can show virtuous characters in which “each thing” is exemplary; in the old *Arcadia*, only Euarchus fits this demand (a fact which in itself led Andrew Weiner to define the *Arcadia* as a comedy rather than a heroic poem).¹⁰⁹ But those extremities of virtue and vice are rare in Sidney’s fiction, which is in fact full of characters struggling towards virtue. John Carey has shown that one of the key elements of the *Arcadia* is “the principle of conflict, of divided loyalties, of tension and struggle within the soul”.¹¹⁰ In this context Euarchus seems, to borrow a different term from the *Defense*, a precept rather than an example, “setting downe with thornie arguments, the bare rule” rather than showing a process of development.¹¹¹ He comes in at the end, a bleak *deus ex machina*, to impose order on a chaotic state, but this does not resolve the other characters’ problems. Their disastrous careers are cut short by his judgements, but the desires and ambitions that prompted them have not been addressed. Moreover, and despite his moral and legal authority, Euarchus is not a central figure; his virtues (like the exploits of the princes in the first *Arcadia*’s Eclogues) are secure but distant. He is the only character who does not collapse under further scrutiny, but he spends most of the

¹⁰⁸ *Prose Works*, IV, 331.

¹⁰⁹ *Prose Works*, III, 16; Andrew D. Weiner, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978) 52.

¹¹⁰ Carey, 250.

Arcadia offstage. His role as a distant if conclusive authority is summed up in the revised text when Pyrocles, disguised as Zelmane, decides he can let Euarchus deal with matters:

Zelmane (sighting for *Eronaes* sake, yet inwardly comforted in that she assured her selfe, *Euarchus* would not spare to take in hande the just delivering of her...) ¹¹²

Euarchus is another pressure towards virtue, rather than a model for achieving and feeling it.

In the younger generation, virtue is most plainly achieved by the Pamela of the revised text. Sidney's account of the imprisoned princess – arranged as a “speaking picture” in prayer, or refuting Cecropia's persuasions to atheism – was one of Sidney's great successes in the *Arcadia*, having more impact on the poem's afterlife than almost anything else. Charles I was alleged to have quoted a prayer of Pamela's in his own captivity. It is not surprising that Milton – who in the *Reason of Church Government* praised the *Arcadia* as “exemplary to a Nation” – should in *Eikonoklastes* have damned it as a “vain amatorious Poem”. ¹¹³ In fact, with the imprisonment of Pamela the *Arcadia*'s Protestantism becomes most explicit. Even the first *Arcadia* is full of references to the limitation and “owliness” of human judgement, the “wormish” darkness in which humanity languishes, unable to choose virtue. ¹¹⁴ With Pamela's prayers,

¹¹¹ *Prose Works*, III. 13.

¹¹² *Prose Works*, I, 338.

¹¹³ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-82) I. 815 and III. 362.

¹¹⁴ *Prose Works*, IV. .

not to mention her attack on atheism, those theological assumptions are plainly stated:

...how soever they wrōg me, they cannot over-master God. No darknes blinds his eyes, no Jayle barres him out. To whome then else should I flie. but to him for succoure? And therewith kneeling down, euē in the same place where she stood, she thus said. Let not injurie, ô Lord, triumphe over me, and let my faultes by thy handes be corrected, and make not mine unjuste enemye the minister of thy Justice. But yet, my God, if in thy wisdom, this be the aptest chastizement for my inexcusable follie; if this low bondage be fittest for my overhie desires; if the pride of my not-inough humble harte, be thus to be broken, O Lord, I yeeld unto thy will, and joyfully embrace what sorrow Thou wilt have me suffer. Onely thus much let me crave of thee, (let my craving, ô Lord, be accepted of Thee since even that proceedes from Thee) let me crave even by the noblest title, which in my greatest affliction I may give my selfe, that I am thy creature, & by thy goodnes (which is thy self) suffer some beame of thy Majestie so to shine into my mind, that it may still depende confidently upon Thee.¹¹⁵

Pamela's prayer insists, as in his correspondence Sidney insisted, on human unworthiness and the absolute justice of God's will. Expressions of humility and patience are of course not exclusively Protestant, but in both its vocabulary and its perspective the prayer fits into an Elizabethan Protestant tradition. In particular, Pamela presents faith, "some beame of thy Majestie", as a divine gift, in which confident dependence on God is controlled by the deity and not the believer. Her account of belief taps into Calvinist arguments of predestination: humanity can be saved by faith alone, but God has predetermined who can maintain such faith. In this defence of her faith – as the chapter heading of the 1590 edition puts it, Cecropia's "Atheisme" is "refuted by the Neces Divinitie"¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Book 3, 464.

¹¹⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 402.

– Pamela provides the revised, incomplete *Arcadia*'s only uncompromised image of heroism.

That is not an example of active heroism. Pamela resists nobly, but she does not – cannot – act. This is the heroism of bearing witness, not of the active life. Pamela cannot change her circumstances, and has no expectation of influencing “so rotten a harte” as Cecropia’s. Her heroism lies in the fact that “my eares shall not be willingly guiltie of my Creators blasphemie.”¹¹⁷ As such, it fits into a different and much more confident heroic tradition, that of the Protestant martyr. The rhetoric and the persecution of Pamela recall the stirring stories, recorded by Foxe and widely repeated, of the Marian martyrs who submitted obediently to their fate without giving way before it. It is significant that – when the captives include Pyrocles – such strength should be given to a woman. As Richard Helgerson has shown, the most firmly articulate of Foxe’s martyrs are often the most humble, women and the ill-educated, who insistently make their weakness their strength: “God hath chosen the foolish and weak things of this world to confound the wise and mighty”.¹¹⁸ It is also worth remembering that the young Elizabeth’s confinement during her sister’s reign had made her a Protestant heroine. As a princess imprisoned, Pamela recalls Elizabeth, and her blend of defiance and submission is close to the accounts Holinshed and Foxe gave of their queen’s sufferings. When Pamela calls on her captivity as witness to her hatred of blasphemy, there being “no bodie else here to judge of my

¹¹⁷ *Prose Works*, I, 407.

¹¹⁸ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, quoted in Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 265.

speeches”, the tone is not far from that of Holinshed’s Elizabeth insisting “Here landeth as true a subject being a prisoner, as euer landed at these staires: and before thee O God I speake it, hauing none other freends but thee alone.”¹¹⁹

The complex of ideas and associations raised around Pamela are one reason why the second *Arcadia* is a more national, as well as a more heroic text. When it came to describing his captive princess, a written tradition of virtuous suffering was available to Sidney. This kind of virtue through suffering had become an important part of the Protestant identity. In the *Arcadia* obedience, bearing witness and passive resistance can all be recorded without doubt or contradiction. There was, however, no such secure tradition for active virtue. In describing his princely education, Musidorus insists on the importance of “both of doing and suffring”; Pamela illustrates endurance and patience, but not “doing”.¹²⁰ She cannot fill the gap between a need for heroic action – imposed on the *Arcadia* twice over, by its romance form and by Protestant urging of the active life – and the impossibility of “confidence in mans power”. While this clash of heroism and original sin remains unresolved, the generosity of chivalric romance is contradicted by knowledge of human frailty. Ascham had complained that in Malory “those be counted the noblest knights that do kill most men without any quarrel and commit foulest adulteries by subtlest shifts”;¹²¹ Languet continues the letter quoted above by rebuking Sidney and his contemporaries for believing

¹¹⁹ *Prose Works*, I, 407; Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1578, rpt. London: F. Johnson et al, 1808) IV, 125.

¹²⁰ *Prose Works*, I, 190.

“that nothing brings you more honour than wholesale slaughter”.¹²² The Calvinist dilemma of original sin and the need for active virtue is exactly reflected in Protestant Elizabethan attitudes to chivalry. A glamorised knighthood had become the obvious image of action, of heroism and martial strength; it was also aggressively self-reliant, undisciplined, and sinful. A reformed Protestant chivalry might be possible – Sidney comes close to acknowledging a need for grace in Pamela and in his providential plot – but although we see the princes forgiven, we never see them upheld by grace. Languet’s letter suggests a reconciliation of chivalry and Protestantism through the ideal of public service: Sidney may justly fight in the Netherlands if his sovereign orders him to do so. That ideal is reflected in the politicised romance world of the *Arcadia*, with its inescapable structures of government and its pressing responsibilities. In practice, however, this balance is almost impossible to maintain. Its obedience, its discipline, its submission to the divine will go against the grain of chivalric romances.

5 Romance against itself

In revising his text, Sidney made the *Arcadia* a more obviously serious poem. The princes are shown much more in the world of politics and war, in action and not in retreat. The prose describing those exploits is much more highly decorated; the scenes of martial heroism are brought close to patriotic

¹²¹ *The Schoolmaster*, in *The Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. the Rev. Dr. Giles, 4 vols (London: John Russell Smith, 1864) IV. 159.

court ceremonial. This new, and newly chivalric, material brings the *Arcadia* closer to the successful heroic texts of the continental renaissance. Those additions, and his changes to the form of his text, raise the *Arcadia*'s poetic ambitions, but they also undermine the compromise of Protestantism and chivalry. That strain shows clearly in individual episodes, as the princes turn to hubris or emotion leads to self-indulgence. It also infects the structure and fabric of the poem: both the interlaced narrative and its chivalric temper creak under the pressure of acknowledging original sin.

The chivalric revisions of *Arcadia* give the heroes more scope for action, for independence, but their sinful frailty makes it impossible for them to take these opportunities: the dubious nature of human heroism brings them to disaster. That tendency is at odds with the basic assumptions of chivalric romance. When Ariosto opposed Saracen champions to a modern Christian army, he expressed a faith in individual human possibility, in the generosity and courage of knighthood. Chivalry, for all its variants over different times and countries, implies self-assertion and self-reliance. In the *Arcadia*, those claims cannot be made. Although Sidney turns to romance, leaving Aeneas and Ulysses behind, he will not give his heroes the full freedom of chivalric independence. When Orlando returned to royal service he was, as we have seen, diminished by it: as a knight errant he defeats whole armies, but at the siege of Bizerta he cannot entirely control his own forces. The diminishing force of military and political reality affects Pyrocles and Musidorus even within the interlaced romance

¹²² *Correspondence of Sir Philip Sidney and Hubert Languet*, 154.

landscapes of Book II. This is a process in which the strengths of romance are increasingly constricted by moral and political doubt. As characters drift into romance, they lose authority and gain nothing in return.

Quite apart from the restraints imposed by public order, Sidney seems inclined to punish his princes for their chivalric wish to prove themselves. Pyrocles, for example, welcomes a chance for adventure “without the company of the incomparable Prince *Musidorus*, because in my hart I acknowledge that I owed more to his presence, then to any thing in my self, whatsoever before I had done.”¹²³ This ambition draws Pyrocles into trouble, and ends with Musidorus rescuing him. The narration – by Pyrocles himself – does not draw attention to the point, but it exemplifies the princes’ heroic career: each move towards independence results in a loss of autonomy.

That process of diminishment is repeated, almost compulsively, throughout the revised text. The limited hero is a central point of interest in the *Arcadia*, to the point where Sidney will turn away from a hero doing well to a subsidiary character doing badly. With the end of the episodes, and the abduction of the princesses, the heroes are returned almost involuntarily to something like their initial state. Pyrocles, in his Amazonian disguise, has been kidnapped with Pamela and Philoclea; as in their first adventure with the king of Phrygia, when Musidorus went to the aid of the imprisoned Pyrocles, self-defence and friendship justify the princes’ actions. Moreover, they are involved in a war to

defend a rightful governor against a rebel. Even Euarchus, considering the stability of Greece as a whole, thinks it worth trying to keep order in Arcadia; the defeat of Amphialus, and the end of a civil war, are plainly virtuous ends. After the private excursions of the second book, then, the wars of the third give Sidney's heroes another chance for public action. But these newly propitious circumstances do not interest Sidney. In the interlaced episodes, the princes' successful exploits were briskly dispatched; in the third book, attention drifts away from the heroes towards the rebel Amphialus.

This "courteous, noble, liberall...heroicall" knight is, like Pyrocles and Musidorus, a virtuous man sliding into drastic errors.¹²⁴ Sidney is careful to blame the kidnapping on Cecropia; Amphialus "was utterly ignorant of all his mothers wicked devises...being (like a rose out of a brier) an excellent sonne of an evill mother."¹²⁵ Nevertheless, he goes along with Cecropia's schemes because he is in love with Philoclea: "Since she is here, I would not for my life constraine presence, but rather would I die then cōsent to absence".¹²⁶ As with the princes, his slide into disobedience and disaster is prompted by emotion. He also echoes the princes' progress away from public action. Over the course of the third book, Amphialus follows this course not once but many times: his rebellion becomes more private, more selfish, more hopeless. After the abduction, he is quick to drum up political and military support, seeking out allies and publishing

¹²³ *Prose Works*, I, 263.

¹²⁴ *Prose Works*, I, 67.

¹²⁵ *Prose Works*, I, 363.

¹²⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 366.

a plausible justification of his actions. His preparations for the siege itself are extensive and intensely practical, taking in natural and prepared fortifications, “fitting instrumēts of mischiefe to places, whence the mischiefe might be most liberally bestowed”, the preservation, storage and distribution of provisions and the selection, organisation and deployment of his own men.¹²⁷ He sinks from this peak of organisation almost as soon as the fighting begins. In the thick of battle Musidorus, in disguise as the unnamed Black Knight, confronts Amphialus:

Then began there a combatte betweene them, worthy to have had more large listes, and more quiet beholders: for with the spurre of Courage, and the bitte of Respect, each so guided himselfe, that one might well see, the desire to overcome, made them not forget how to overcome: in such time & proportion they did employ their blowes, that none of *Ceres* servaunts coulde more cunningly place his flaile... when in comes an olde Governour of *Amphialus*, alwayes a good Knight, and carefull of his charge; who giving a sore wounde to the blacke Knights thigh, while he thought not of him, with another blowe slewe his horse under him. *Amphialus* cried to him, that he dishonoured him: You say well (answered the olde Knight) to stand now like a private souldier, setting your credite upon particular fighting, while you may see *Basilus* with all his hoste, is getting betweene you and your towne.¹²⁸

This first slip into selfishness turns a general battle into the “listes” of the tournament. Like the princes’ desire to outdo Aeneas, Amphialus’s wish for glory is immediately rebuked by events. This passage, much quoted, is an unusually blunt contrast between different kinds of fighting. As in the *Furioso*’s opposition of Saracen champions and Christian army, the contrast is between an older form of heroism and new ideas of military practicality. The *Arcadia*’s emphasis on duty does, as Norbrook and McCoy suggest, make Amphialus’s

¹²⁷ *Prose Works*, I, 371-74.

chivalry seem frivolous. Even here, however, there are arguments on both sides. The “olde Governour” is in the right, but the blow-by-blow account of the battle (which I have abbreviated) is plainly dear to Sidney’s heart. There is time for a very polished battle, set out for the reader’s admiration and deserving “more quiet beholders”, before grim practicalities set in. Sidney’s account did win the admiration of his contemporaries: the use of “*Ceres* servant” for thresher was singled out by Hoskyns for praise and imitation.¹²⁹ Sidney also seems to feel that the counsellor’s advice is not attractive enough to stand by itself. The aged governor’s concern for Amphialus is evident, but Sidney underlines that care, and explains that this man was “alwayes a good Knight”. His rebuke of “particular fighting” is immediately justified by the action of “Basilus with all his hoste”.

Like Pyrocles and Musidorus, Amphialus is inclined to stick to his self-indulgent course. The effect of this warning quickly evaporates: Amphialus accepts a challenge to single combat, again concerned for his personal honour and private credit. The “olde Governour” reappears to express his “reprehensions (that he would rather affect the glorie of a private fighter, then of a wise Generall)”, unanswerably but unsuccessfully. Then, as McCoy puts it, he “disappears from the narrative, and Amphialus can blithely ignore his admonitions.”¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Prose Works*, I, 393.

¹²⁹ Quoted Evans, ed. *Arcadia*, 14.

Certainly, Amphialus abandons his early efficiency for a series of single combats, held in sight of his castle walls and in an atmosphere that recalls the tournament rather than the battlefield – so much so that Frances Yates included them in her study of the Accession Day Tilts.¹³¹ But although he is no longer rebuked by his counsellor, this turn towards ceremonial jousting is far from blithe. It is true that the opening challenge is innocuous. Phalantus sends a challenge for “The liking of martiall matters without anie mislike of your person”, vapidly insisting that he has come “rather to the companie, then to the minde of your besiegers”.¹³² Both jousts are extravagantly costumed and equipped, Amphialus decking his horse with “cloath of gold” equipment “made into the fashiõ of the branches of a tree, from which the leaves were falling”.¹³³ This is combat as entertainment, even in the middle of a siege. Yates has linked Phalantus with Sir Henry Lee, an uncontroversial and successful courtier who started up the chivalric fashion with his entertainment at Kenilworth, and acted as the Queen’s champion at the Accession Day Tilts. A compliment to Lee may be one reason for the cheerful tone of this combat.¹³⁴ After that, however, the succession of tournaments becomes increasingly dark. Amphialus then fights Argalus, the exemplary hero of a love story from the first book. Sidney carefully reminds us of the virtuous love of Argalus and Parthenia, describing “The conjugall happines of him and his wife” and Parthenia’s fear and distress when

¹³⁰ McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood*, 71.

¹³¹ “...the wars of Amphialus in Book III, though in part real and bloody wars, are also in part ceremonial jousts at which knights appear in highly elaborate and unpractical attire.” *Astraea*, 92-93.

¹³² *Prose Works*, I, 413.

¹³³ *Prose Works*, I, 415.

¹³⁴ Yates, *Astraea*, 93.

her husband is called to the wars.¹³⁵ After such an introduction, and Parthenia's helpless laments, it is no surprise that Argalus dies in the fight.

Argalus and Parthenia give Sidney the opportunity of writing pitiful scenes, as they had earlier offered images of devoted love. It is significant, however, that the deaths of both should be so bound up with codes of chivalry. Argalus is not summoned to fight Amphialus in terms of public service, but because Basilius, angered by the sight of his victories over Phalantus and other knights, is "thirsting for revenge". Argalus accepts the challenge because "it imparted his honour", and Parthenia tries to dissuade him by pointing out that "Your valour is already sufficiently knowne".¹³⁶ The combat unfolds with courtly politeness, from challenge to the appearance of the knights to the fight itself, in which Amphialus tries to spare Argalus for his wife's sake, and Argalus goes on fighting for the sake of his honour. Romances are full of courteous knights respectfully killing each other; respect for the opponent and regret at his death is a standard figure. The death of Argalus, a doomed but noble knight bound by the codes of honour, is entirely traditional. Parthenia's death, however, brings a change of atmosphere. She disguises herself as a knight so that she too can die at Amphialus's hands, wearing "armour, all painted over with such a cunning of shadow, that it represented a gaping sepulchre, the furniture of his horse was all of Cypresse branches..." The armour is as fanciful as that of Amphailus or Phalantus, but it is also alarming:

¹³⁵ *Prose Works*, I, 418.

His Bases (which he ware so long, as they came almost to his ankle) were imbroidered onely with blacke wormes, which seemed to crawle up and downe, as readie alreadie to devoure him. In his shielde for *Impresa*. he had a beautifull childe, but having two heades; whereof the one shewed, that it was alreadie dead: the other alive, but in that case, necessarily looking for death.¹³⁷

Parthenia's tomb imagery darkens the chivalric spectacle, presenting death not as a noble end for a hero but in terms of physical corruption and deformity. Even beauty, in this case of the two-headed child, makes the image more gruesome. The dressing-up of tournament festivity is extended into the grotesque.

As in the episodes of the second book, greater chivalric emphasis is matched by increasing disaster. The last of this series of duels is another intensely knightly combat between Musidorus and Amphialus. At first this seems a return to the earlier courtly register. Amphialus is dressed with care:

his decking both for him selfe, and horse, being cut out into the fashion of very ragges: yet all so dainty, joyned together with pretious stones, as it was a brave raggednesse, and a riche povertie: and so cunningly had a workeman followed his humour in his armour, that he had given it a rustie shewe, and yet so, as any man might perceive was by arte, and not negligence; carying at one instant a disgraced handsomnesse, and a new oldnes.¹³⁸

In less than a hundred pages, Amphialus has gone from the provisioning of a siege to employing cunningly humorous workmen on armour that will reflect his immediate psychological state. The *Arcadia* has passed into a different, and

¹³⁶ *Prose Works*, I, 420-21. Parthenia does also argue that Argalus has "already done [enough] for your country", but the emphasis is on honour rather than duty.

¹³⁷ *Prose Works*, I, 445.

¹³⁸ *Prose Works*, I, 454.

more obviously chivalric, form of storytelling. It has also moved closer to the real tilts of the Elizabethan court. Amphialus's bejewelled rags recall Philisides, the shepherd knight, who appeared "drest over with wooll, so enriched with Jewels artificially placed, that one would have thought it a marriage betweene the lowest and the highest".¹³⁹ Philisides invites identification with Sidney, and Yates has speculated that Sidney himself may have made such an appearance at the Accession Day Tilt of 1581.¹⁴⁰ Sidney clearly felt at home with this courtly extravagance, but it is a long way from naturalistic warfare. This new atmosphere may, as Norbrook and McCoy complain, be a step away from reality to chivalric cliché, but it is a fiction suffused with martial brutality. Elizabethan tournaments were carefully non-violent; the jousts of Sidney's generation were far from the bloody spectacles described in medieval romance, where serious damage is frequently inflicted. Even Malory's gushing wounds are not so horrible as the drawn-out ferocity of Amphialus and Musidorus.

Over the course of this long fight – more than ten pages in Feuillerat's edition – the combat is insistently characterised as chivalric. It opens with correct challenges, and proceeds with knightly courtesy. Amphialus apologises for killing Musidorus's horse, and himself dismounts; he also reproaches himself for his failure to win "in the presence of *Philoclea*, and fighting for *Philoclea*".¹⁴¹ The opening image is of the two knights, evenly matched, hammering blows like Vulcan "whē he wrought at his nowe more curteous wives request, *Aeneas* an

¹³⁹ *Prose Works*, I, 285.

armour” while both “Sunne and wind (if the astonished eies of the beholders were not by the astonishment deceived) did both stand still to be beholders of this rare match”.¹⁴² After this heroic figure, the energy drains from the fight as it proceeds, becoming bloodier and more exhausted. After seven pages of blow-by-blow fighting,

But paine rather seemed to increase life, then to weaken life in those champions. For, the forsaken Knight coming in with his right leg, and making it guide the force of the blow, strake *Amphialus* upon the bellie. so horrible a woūd, that his guts came out withall. Which *Amphialus* perceaving (fearing death, onely because it should come with overthrow) he seemed to conjure all his strength for one moments service; and so, lifting up his sword with both hands, hit the forsaken knight upō the head, a blow, wherewith his sword brake. But (as if it would do a notable service before it died) it prevayled so, even in the instant of breaking, that the forsaken Knight fell to the ground...with a life conquering death, he tooke *Amphialus* by the thigh, & together rose himselfe, and overturned him. But *Amphialus* scrambled up againe, both now so weake indeede, as their motions rather seemed the afterdrops to a storme, then any matter of great furie...

The knights slog on for a few more paragraphs before collapsing. This is no longer a festive battle, although – given how much space he devotes to it – it clearly fascinated Sidney. By the end, martial vigour and enthusiasm have been reduced to a tottering mess. In one sense, this is another example of Sidney’s naturalism, as his realistic assessment of war forces itself into the private tournaments. An earlier battle scene has already left bodies whose “fowler deaths had ouglily displayed their trayling guttes.”¹⁴³ The revised *Arcadia* is full of grisly scenes; the rebellious lower orders are frequently finished off with cruel

¹⁴⁰ Yates, 92.

¹⁴¹ *Prose Works*, I, 459.

¹⁴² *Prose Works*, I, 456.

¹⁴³ *Prose Works*, I, 388.

humour. That violence is part of the *Arcadia*'s increasingly dark tone. In the case of the murdered peasants it is another example of Sidney's political consciousness, as a threatening underclass is deprived of dignity in the manner of its death. But if the mutilated tailors and butchers are, as Greenblatt has argued, "returned to earth, while the noble victors soar above it",¹⁴⁴ what are we to make of a disembowelled Amphialus? Heroism is leached out of the combat as it drags to a close, but we should not forget that this "horrible" extreme has been reached through intensely chivalric means: even as Amphialus's "guts came out withall" he struggles for victory. The logical end of a violently self-assertive knighthood is "wholesale slaughter": these broken swords and bodies are the natural consequence of earlier chivalric posturing. In the *Arcadia*, as in the *Furioso*, there is a range and variety of violence. The Amphialus-Musidorus duel is surprising not for its gore, but for its ugliness, and because it makes that ugliness characteristic of a knighthood that had seemed glamorous.

Amphialus and Musidorus are expending their energies in selfish action, rather than in civic duty, and their messy battle underlines that wastefulness. When Musidorus pulls himself up by Amphialus, who is himself overturned before he "scrambled up againe", the progress of the battle becomes circular: they repeatedly exchange blows, becoming weaker and more ineffectual but failing to reach any conclusion. That pattern is characteristic of Sidney's prose. John Carey has shown that

¹⁴⁴ Greenblatt, "Murdering Peasants", 17.

The massive rhetorical display of the *New Arcadia* is not... decorative but functional. The kind of figures Sidney chooses, constantly doubling back on themselves, enact a world view which is dominated by reversal of intention, tragic peripeteia.¹⁴⁵

The *Arcadia* is full of very active immobility, which Carey identifies both in Sidney's rhetoric and in the fate of his characters. Amphialus, for example, begins his misfortunes with an attempt to avoid Queen Helen; he progresses through increasingly horrible adventures to this single combat, after which he is taken to be cured by Helen: "fate has wound itself in a circle, and Amphialus, though he has tried everything, even suicide, is back where he least wants to be, with Helen."¹⁴⁶ This constricting process is visible not only in rhetorical figures and in the "tragic peripeteia"; it also infects Sidney's use of the interlaced narrative.

This structure, introduced with the other heroic revisions to the *Arcadia*, is one of its most obviously romantic elements. The interlace of Sidney's romance sources encourages the independence and boldness of chivalric action. The *Furioso*'s divergent narrative shows both confusion and freedom. Romance multiplicity demonstrated the failure of collective action, but it also allowed individual strength, a kind of heroism that could flourish outside the regulation of the state. For Sidney that freedom is impossible. As with the soured chivalric festivities of the third book, Sidney's use of interlace turns knightly confidence against itself. He sends his heroes into romance action without allowing them

¹⁴⁵ Carey, 263.

¹⁴⁶ Carey, 254.

the real authority of romance, and his diverging narrative enacts that process in trapped digressions that are never permitted to leave mistakes or responsibilities behind. The generative qualities of romance are poisoned at source by the questionable nature of chivalric heroism.

We have already seen how the princes, having lost sight of their initial concern for political outcomes, are unable to conclude their adventures. The wicked characters left alive in earlier stories start returning in new plots; the casual deaths of so many monarchs start new processes of revenge. Moreover, Sidney gallops through this web of disorder and deceit, interrupting it with other material and cramming it with expressions of woe. The general effect is a horrifying confusion, in which villains not only survive and continue to plot, but force the heroes to support their machinations. In a sequel to the first private adventure, the daughter of the wicked Plexirtus falls in love with Pyrocles, disguises herself as his page, and pines away for him. On her death, she makes Pyrocles promise to forgive and even to help her wicked father. Plexirtus, meanwhile, has fallen into the hands of a justly-incensed old knight, who will feed him to a monster unless a champion comes to rescue him. Pyrocles, mindful of his promise, is thus forced to fight to save the life of his former enemy. This is a repetition, made worse, of Plexirtus's earlier escape; we are drawn back into the first of the unfinished narratives, and kept there. The lack of resolution becomes chronic. Where the *Furioso's* web of stories spread wider and wider with each new adventure, Sidney's narrative winds itself ever tighter, finding

new connections between dangerously unfinished stories. After his release, the ungrateful Plexirtus tries to woo Artaxia, the sister of the king of Armenia, who has inherited the throne at her brother's death and who is still swearing revenge on Pyrocles and Musidorus. Plexirtus betrays the princes in the hope of pleasing her; his attempts to dispose of them at sea lead to the shipwreck which washes them up at the beginning of the *Arcadia*. At the same time, Antiphilus, not content with the love and kingdom of Erona, has declared polygamy legal and is also trying to court Artaxia. Artaxia takes advantage of this development to take both Erona and Antiphilus prisoner in revenge for her brother's death; Antiphilus is finally killed and Erona will be burned at the stake if Pyrocles and Musidorus do not come to her aid.

Sidney's narrative has slipped from an interlaced sequence of stories into the endlessly unresolved process of romance. In their private capacity, the princes can happily join in quarrels, but they do not have the authority to resolve them, or even to set them aside. The narrative does not, cannot cut lightly from one story to another: each new adventure springs from and returns to existing disasters. The different tales are not so much interlaced as mixed together, an effect heightened by the decorum of their retelling. As we jump from one narrator to another, from Musidorus to Philoclea, from reminiscence to reported action, we have time to consider the stories, and time to be confused. Sidney's princes are not living in the moment, as Ariosto's do; they are not sidetracked, or suddenly set upon by events. We cannot, as we can in the *Furioso* or the *Amadis*, follow

the immediate story and leave the connections to take care of themselves. The retelling has a distancing effect: these are not direct appeals to the princes' compassion, immediate calls for rescue or self-defence, but unfolded and interrupted narratives, with connections explained and political contexts insisted upon. If the reader cannot forget the consequences of action, it is hard to excuse the princes' own forgetfulness.

The episodes of Book Two do not, in the end, produce an effect of heroic ardour, but of a strangling immobility where even the finest knights cannot prevent or even attack people whom they know to be villains. The actions of the princes have not changed – they are still all-conquering – but there is an increasing sense that this physical prowess provides short-term solutions to long-term problems. They can defeat any knight or monster, but they cannot rescue Erona from her love for Antiphilus. Nor can they persuade Artaxia that their killing of her brother, without knowledge of Erona's acceptance of his peace deal, was not treacherous. Pyrocles and Musidorus can introduce more well-meaning violence, but they cannot address the causes of disruption and misery.

In Ariosto, romance contingency becomes a kind of freedom: unhappy endings can be evaded. For Sidney the conflicts of power and sin cannot be avoided; if political realities are postponed, they will invade the digressions of the narrative. The result is a panorama of confusion and death, in which the grandest knightly action can provide only temporary resolution. It is also, as we

have seen, a world which becomes significantly worse with the addition of knight-errantry, the search for glory and for wrongs to right. Instead of generous feeling leading to great deeds, action becomes immobility. In the episodes of book two, and in the bitter tournaments of book three, Sidney has written a heroic romance in which heroic action is of no avail.

Conclusion

The *Arcadia* shows just how hard it was for Elizabethan poets to write heroic poetry. The difficulty was not one of national fragmentation, or even of conflicting ideas of heroic virtue or poetic form. The Protestant humanist education of so many vernacular authors gave them a very strong shared ideal of rectitude. Unfortunately that same education made them very difficult to carry out, either in life or in fiction. Forward Protestants found few opportunities for public service, and their ideas of obedience and civic duty did not readily fit into a poetry that was, as Richard Helgerson has shown, commonly defined in terms of youthful self-indulgence and unruly private emotion. The romance form of the revised *Arcadia* only intensified the problem. Sidney's alterations make the work more obviously serious: it acquired the form of successful modern epics along with a chivalric atmosphere associated with patriotic festivity and with the claims of forward Protestantism. The difficulty was that romance, as it developed in the sixteenth century, is more suited to the youthful freedoms of prodigal literature than to the political ideas of Calvinist humanism. As Sidney's

princes wander through Asia Minor they can leave their identities behind, but they remain within the frameworks of international diplomacy, the new ideals of civic responsibility and loyal submission. With those in place, the free and random exercise of knight-errantry becomes glaringly inappropriate, while original sin makes its heroism questionable.

In other Elizabethan chivalric texts, that division between knightly independence and political structure is differently addressed. Richard McCoy has pointed out that Samuel Daniel's prose and verse histories claim to look forward to a Tudor golden age of peace and prosperity, but in fact dwell on an unstable past in which disobedient barons had the means as well as the wish to act independently:

Daniel's failure to complete his major works is partially attributable to his own confusion and ambivalence. He may have regretted the diminished "virilitie" of his own age, when "more came to be effected by wit then by the sword", but his praise of aristocratic belligerence could not go too far. Yet while he could not oppose the "greater improuement of the Soueraigntie" of his own time, he could forestall its eventual triumph by resisting narrative closure.¹⁴⁷

Daniel's incomplete histories, as in Quint's anti-teleological definition of romance, put off the evil hour in which they must acknowledge submission and defeat. Similarly, Helgerson has read *The Faerie Queene's* romance form as an implied resistance to the authority that so limited Sidney's heroes.¹⁴⁸ Such dissatisfactions with an inactive but repressive sovereign can be seen in the

¹⁴⁷ McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood*, 106.

Arcadia. If Sidney chafed, however, he also accepted the new ideal of obedience: the possibilities of rebellion were strangled by political understanding, by civic humanism, and by Protestant ideas of virtue. The *Arcadia*'s romance form does not express the wilful independence of rebellious aristocrats. In the Italian chivalric tradition, the wanderings of romance could be an escape from epic, offering greater personal freedom, though at the cost of long-term aims and self-control. Sidney, however, does not seem to feel romance as freedom. The opposition of private and public suffuses his text, but it has no formal expression: the choice between different kinds of action is vital but unclear. Wandering knights cannot forget their responsibilities, or take up the freedoms that their form seems to offer them; chivalric self-assertion is stained with hubris.

There are possible resolutions for this contradiction, through the *Arcadia*'s few images of successful virtue, and in the implied grace of its providential narrative. There was, outside the text, a further resolution in Sidney's own example. If chivalry, patriotism and active Protestant virtue were reconciled in the martyred Sidney, they remained awkwardly divided in the text of his romance. The *Arcadia* defended and illustrated English as a poetic language, and offered English poets a canonical text, but it did not finally resolve the contradictions of heroism in a fallen world.

¹⁴⁸ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 40-59, and see chapter 5 below.

The Faerie Queene: national romance

It is a paradox that romance, a genre despised for its popular character and attacked for its looseness of form and morals, should in the sixteenth century have become so successful as an expression of national aspiration and identity. Across Europe, the most read and even the most respected heroic poetry was chivalric in character. Romance, with its image of heroism achieved on a grand but personal scale, could become the epic of uncertain times and nations, offering an idea of national identity based on something other than conquest. It allowed Ariosto to write national poetry obliquely, lamenting the fate of Italy in asides from a poem which claims to concern itself with the destiny of Ferrara and the Estensi. The *Furioso* celebrated an Italy whose cultural vitality, boiling over in narratives of love and combat, could survive the current horrors of division and mercenary warfare. Similarly, Sidney's *Arcadia* could be exemplary to a nation (especially, as events turned out, to the seventeenth-century nation of Milton and Charles I) without ever mentioning it by name. Ideas of political duty, original sin and the limitations of human heroism could all be articulated within a form which – despite Sidney's increasingly martial revisions – could still claim to be an elegant trifle.

The *Furioso* and the *Arcadia* are, if not quite nation-writing by stealth, at least able to make their claims for Italy and England indirectly. In this respect,

the *Faerie Queene* is unlike the other texts of this study. Spenser's determination to address and to speak for the nation is too insistent to be ignored. That open concern with national destiny and identity are explicit in Spenser's shaping of romance material. His poem is an epic romance text, laying down claims to Virgilian and Homeric ancestry in its twelve books, in its beginning thrust "into the midst, euen where it most concerneth" the poet.¹ The poem's romance developments are caught up with nationhood too: it keeps accumulating national heroes. Spenser opens with praise of Elizabeth and the promise of Arthur's exploits, presents Saint George as the poem's first featured knight, Britomart and Artegall as Elizabeth's ancestors, and then involves Artegall and other knights in markedly British struggles. These are obvious points: they concern large and emphatically-presented elements of the poem. They also suggest the range of ways in which Spenser articulates ideas of nationhood. Romance heroes are cast in specifically national roles; a continuity is established between the events of a fictional chivalric past and those of contemporary Europe. The *Faerie Queene* is suffused with national identity, with national ambition.

It is not surprising that the nation should be evoked throughout the poem – just as Ariosto's sense of national identity was evident in much more than his laments for Italy. Spenser, however, was writing for a united nation with real political existence; *The Faerie Queene* is much more explicit than the *Furioso* could be. Throughout the sixteenth century, politics and warfare had helped to

¹ "A Letter of the Authors", in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977) 738. References to *The Faerie Queene* are from this edition, and will be cited in the text.

force definitions of English nation. Where Ariosto's Italy was defined by absence, Spenser wrote at the end of a century of disruptions that made it possible, even imperative, to see England whole and in isolation. In that perspective, the nation of *The Faerie Queene* can be seen as an increasingly centralised monarchy, as a growing empire, as the foe of Spain, as a Protestant country in Catholic Europe.

These qualities should not suggest that England was serenely undivided. The terms of all those definitions – monarchy, expansionism, religion and diplomatic relations with Europe – had been fought for, not readily achieved. The newly centralised government needed the support of the governing classes and – as the Earl of Essex's failed rebellion was to show, five years after the publication of the six-book *The Faerie Queene* – aristocratic individualism could still threaten that consensus. The success of Protestantism had been far from inevitable; its radical and sometimes violent changes had been imposed from above, and threatened readily enough by Mary Tudor's regime. Even as it was achieved in Elizabeth's reign, the new religion was the subject of much further dispute: how far the settlement had gone, how much further reformation might go. Spenser was associated with the forward Protestant party. All his patrons, including Sidney, were attached to that faction; his surviving poetry, from the very early and anti-papal *Theatre for Worldlings* onwards can be read in Calvinist terms.² The world of *The Faerie Queene*, like that of the *Arcadia*, is

² As Richard Schell points out, other interpretations are possible. *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 462.

fallen and maimed by original sin; however the poem's theology is interpreted, the insistence that "If any good we have, it is to ill" is decidedly Calvinist (I,x,1). Spenser did not have Ariosto's difficult task of accommodating both the shifting battles of his employers and the ideal of Italian identity, but he did have to deal with issues of patronage and faction. His patrons were sometimes in favour, but the same could rarely be said for their policies; forward Protestant hopes were often thwarted by the queen's reluctance to commit herself to their cause.

All these issues have been much discussed in recent Spenser studies. New Historicist concern with the negotiation of power has drawn attention both to strains in the poem's celebration of Elizabeth, and to its negative versions and representations of her in *Lucifera*, *Philotime* and even *Mercilla*.³ The poem's great confidence seems to crumble in its second instalment. In the fifth Book, Artegall's natural justice is both rough – horrifyingly so to modern eyes – and incomplete. Like Lord Grey, another thwarted Spenserian patron, the Knight of Justice is recalled before he can finish his quest. The Blatant Beast is caught, but soon returns to the rampage. Those failures at home are matched by a collapse in the cause of international Protestantism: Burbon casts away the shield of his faith. The later *Faerie Queene* is full of retreats: the tournaments of the Order of Maydenhead end by celebrating false beauty and faked valour; Amoret and Scudamour are no longer united. In Book VI, disillusionment with the court, after ticking away in the rest of the poem, becomes clearer as Calidore finds

³ Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 55-56.

courtesy among shepherds, and satisfaction in retreat rather than action. Spenser's own focus on the private vision turns away from the epic confidence of the earlier poem. Those retreats are, moreover, on many different levels. We are shown justice compromised by the struggles of the fallen world, a collapse of chivalry, resolution abandoned, the poet apparently displacing his vocation from the public to a private sphere. And, as recent work has focused on these crises, the general reputation of poem has gone from a triumphant literary monument to something much more anxious. In 1936, C.S. Lewis argued that:

Spenser must have intended a final book on Arthur and Gloriana which would have stood to the whole poem as such central or focal cantos stand to their several books. If we had it... we should be much less troubled than we now are by the recollection of Queen Elizabeth throughout the poem.⁴

By the 1980s, such worry had become a central concern of Spenser criticism; the successful conclusion of Arthur's quest seemed not a lost ending but an impossible resolution. The shift from the confidence of the early Books to the distresses of the later poem has been read in terms of Spenser's own career, and of the progress of his faction.

In this chapter, however, I want to return to *The Faerie Queene* as literary monument. Spenser's vision of heroic action does indeed show signs of strain – as in the *Furioso* and the *Arcadia*, epic confidence is hard to maintain – but it also overcomes them to be a convincing national poem. It is startling, not that the difficulties of such an endeavour should become evident, but that Spenser

⁴ C.S.Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936; New York: Galaxy, 1958) 336-37.

(much more than any of his contemporaries) should have achieved a form of Protestant epic romance. This chapter is concerned with *The Faerie Queene* as a national text, with its reconciliation of patriotic Englishness and chivalric romance in a poem that proclaimed itself as a modern epic.

1 Spenser, Sidney and the 1580s

The setbacks to Spenser's career, and to the policies supported by his patrons, have been traced in the more disillusioned 1596 text. Similarly, earlier and more positive developments in national feeling can be read in the confidence of the poem's first instalment. I have already suggested that the *Faerie Queene* is much more explicit in its national and poetic ambitions than the *Arcadia*. Such a difference should of course be seen as one of many distinctions between the two works: between a romance which, even in its revised form, could be presented as a coterie work written for the poet's female friends, and an epic poem intended for print and addressed to an audience of governors and to the monarch. I would, however, argue that these different poetic perspectives also reflect a change in English ideas of nationhood. I have said that the sixteenth century was full of pressures towards national definition. In the years between Sidney's abandonment of the *Arcadia* and the first publication of the *Faerie Queene*, that process took several very significant steps.

Composition of the *Arcadia* and of *The Faerie Queene* started at much the same time. The Countess of Pembroke asked Sidney to write her a romance in the winter of 1577-8; in 1580 he promised his brother a copy by the following spring.⁵ The *Shepherd's Calendar*, published in 1579 and dedicated to Sidney, promises heroic poetry from its author, and Gabriel Harvey was chiding Spenser over the composition of such poetry in 1580. Even the evidence used to date both poems suggests a different scale of ambition; the Sidney family letters promise a “toyful” book, where *The Shepherd's Calendar* and the Harvey correspondence already suggest full-fledged epic ambition. All the same, the two romances shared a background, and had much in common: a concern with improving the English vernacular, fiction written with the educational aim of fashioning the reader. Moreover, both poets came from the tradition of Protestant humanist education, and both were associated – Sidney as Leicester's heir, Spenser in his choice of patrons – with a faction that eagerly imagined Protestant England in opposition to Catholic Europe. The two poems were first printed in 1590, four years after Sidney's death, perhaps six after the revision of the *Arcadia* was abandoned.⁶ In those six years, English identity and the English Protestant cause were profoundly changed by shifts in Elizabethan foreign policy and by events in Europe. I have suggested that English national identity became more clearly defined over the course of the sixteenth century; in the 1580s, several important shifts in definition happened all together.

⁵ Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991) 143, 200.

The association of patriotism and the reformed religion became inevitable in 1570 with the publication of *Regnans in Excelsis*, the papal bull excommunicating and deposing Elizabeth. The following year Parliament confirmed the Thirty-nine Articles and made it high treason to deny the Royal Supremacy or to bring papal bulls into England.⁷ Throughout the following decade, further shocks – the wars of religion in Europe, and especially the St. Bartholomew massacre of 1572 – helped to confirm the image of England as a Protestant nation. By the end of that decade, the Protestant regime was well established; the conversion of the English to the new religion was slow, but by this point reasonably secure.⁸

Nevertheless, in the 1570s forward Protestants were still frustrated by their lack of progress. Catholic Europe, always a menace to the English Protestant imagination, still loomed. At home, the church seemed only half-reformed, the population half-converted, and the queen alarmingly lukewarm in the cause. The Calvinist Archbishop Grindal – praised in the May and July eclogues of the *Shepherd's Calendar* – lost favour through his insistent support of Protestant “prophesyings”. Elizabeth had avoided committing herself to the Protestant cause abroad and, worst of all for the reforming faction, was considering the marriage proposals of the Duke of Alençon. This disquieting context has been read into both texts of the *Arcadia*; the passivity of Basilius recalls Protestant complaints

⁶ Duncan-Jones *Sir Philip Sidney* 256.

⁷ Smith, Alan G.R. *The Emergence of a Nation State: The commonwealth of England 1529-1660* (London: Longman, 1984) 103.

of Elizabeth's unwarlike attitudes, while fears for the succession of the country, and the dangers of “an odious marriage with a stranger” echo through Sidney's plot.⁹

From that perspective, the events of the 1580s brought vital change: Elizabeth was finally obliged to take the Protestant side in European politics. In 1583 the Throckmorton plot for the deposition of Elizabeth was uncovered; the Babington plot followed in 1586. Both confirmed the threat of the papal bull. In 1585 the queen gave grudging but active support to the Protestant cause in mainland Europe, assisting the Estates General of the Netherlands in their fight against Spain. Her assistance remained parsimonious and unenthusiastic – she refused the crown of Holland, and the responsibilities that went with it – but England was finally committed to some degree of action.¹⁰ There was commitment for Sidney, too, given political employment at last; his own death, and the legend promoted around it, were part of the national feeling stirred up by war. Making a patriotic hero of Sidney was also a means of nationalising his cause. I have suggested that the presentation of Sidney as a Protestant martyr did much to legitimise his poetry; it also helped increasing acceptance of the Protestant vision of England.

⁸ Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 593

⁹ See Chapter 4 above.

¹⁰ Charles Wilson, *Queen Elizabeth and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 82-86, 35-36

The now open conflict with Spain brought other national heroes. Privateering expeditions had become legitimate acts of war, and when Drake returned from his voyage of circumnavigation in 1581 there was a wave of new enthusiasm for colonial and seafaring expansion. (Sidney attempted to join Drake's New World expedition of 1585, and added a passage in praise of sailing to the revised *Arcadia*.)¹¹ Maritime confidence, defiance of Spain and England's place as God's chosen nation were all triumphantly confirmed with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. This was celebrated as more than a naval victory: England's miraculous preservation was seen as divine intervention. The medal struck to commemorate the victory proclaimed "flavit deus et dissipati sunt".¹² National success was evidence of God's special favour. As Thomas Deloney put it in a flag-waving ballad:

O Noble England
 fall down upon thy knee!
 And praise thy God with thankful heart
 which still maintaineth thee!

The foreign foes
 that seek thy utter spoil
 Shall then through his especial grace
 be brought to shameful foil.¹³

The 1580s, then, were the decade in which the idea of Protestant nationhood really took hold. The concept of an English reformed religion, essential to national identity in face of foreign oppression and usurpation, had been stated

¹¹ Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 273

¹² David Loades, ed. *John Foxe and the English Reformation*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History series. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997) 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

from the beginning of the reign. But with the slow conversion rate, it was an image which much of England would not recognise. The consolidation of regime and religion was finally achieved over the 1570s and 80s; it was at this point that Accession Day became the focus of national celebrations. Protestantism and national identity, long associated in reforming polemic, had become inescapably linked; the Catholic threat and the idea of Protestant England had become concrete realities.

Such a shift of political reality is not, of course, an explanation of the differences in the work of two poets. It does, however, underline the fact that national ideas implicit in Sidney are clearly stated in Spenser. Historical pressures forced a greater degree of clarity in the idea of English nationhood. Richard Helgerson's concept of a "concerted generational project"¹⁴ expresses the outburst of national writing in the wake of these events. Attempts to improve English poetry, to find the local Virgil, were matched by new attempts to map and describe the country of England, to record its laws, its voyages and – perhaps most strikingly – its history. *The Faerie Queene*, like the *Furioso*, uses passages of inset history both for dynastic praise and national definition; in writing his closely antiquarian chronicles, Spenser was able to draw a very wide range of new and reprinted material. Carrie Harper has identified eleven texts, written or republished over the course of Elizabeth's reign, that made substantial use of Geoffrey of Monmouth's history. Many of these – especially Stow's *Summarie*

¹⁴ Richard Helgerson. *Forms of Nationhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 1.

of Englyshe Chronicles and the Cooper/Lanquet *Epitome of Chronicles* – were frequently reprinted.¹⁵ National history, national identity, were urgent concerns.

2 History: chronicle, myth, nation

Awareness of these other works is important, not only because they show other contemporary writers, in other genres, working to define the nation, but because they so strongly influenced *The Faerie Queene* itself. Spenser carefully presents his poem as the nation's epic, the grand poetic expression of this newly-established sense of England. His clear imitations of Virgil, and of modern models like Ariosto and Tasso, underline his ambitions and his own claims to the role of the inspired poet. Even as he defines his poem as the English epic, however, he draws on these other developing forms of national writing. Chronicles, histories, patterns of religious interpretation all appear within *The Faerie Queene*; even the maps and descriptions of the land are echoed at moments in the poem. National identity is, in *The Faerie Queene*, a synthesis. Spenser represents and defines England in many different ways: land and people, religion and culture, history and myth, romance and epic.

The formative history, or founding myth, of a nation is a vital element of epic tradition. In Spenser's immediate models, the epic romances of Tasso and especially Ariosto, history becomes inescapable. For Ariosto, as I have suggested, history addresses both local praise and larger disaster. Inset accounts

¹⁵ Variorum II, 451-453.

of past and contemporary horrors are reflected in the madness and losses of the romance narrative, while Italy is magnified and celebrated in the heroic identity that underpins the poem as a whole. For Tasso, writing after the wars were settled, the historic subject was a necessary part of correct epic practice. The “argument of the epic poem should be drawn, then, from true history and a religion that is not false”, following the precepts of Aristotle and the academies; the resulting poetry could, in its support of Aristotle and of church and state, be justified on artistic, moral and political grounds.¹⁶ The historical focus, and correct religion, help to guarantee of the poem’s seriousness.

If Tasso, with some relief, praised historical subject matter for its truth, the English were still alarmed by the dubious morality of fiction itself. Even Sidney’s newly-sanctified example could not quite clear poetry of the charges of falseness and frivolity. Samuel Daniel, Spenser’s contemporary, opened his poem *The Civil Wars* with a promise to “versifie the troth; not Poetize”, and sneered at poets who, like Spenser, sang “of Knights and Palladines”, painting “shadowes in imaginary lines”.¹⁷ Spenser’s own historical subject is defiantly fictional. As described in the “Letter of the Authors” to Raleigh, Arthur has been “made famous by many mens former workes”.¹⁸ But Spenser’s Arthur owes little to the chronicles, or to most Arthurian romances. As Daniel’s “feigned paladines” emphasise, *The Faerie Queene* is a romance, and its history slides in

¹⁶ Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 39.

¹⁷ Richard McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood: The literature and politics of Elizabethan Chivalry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 106.

through allegory and, as Ariosto's does, through inset chronicle narratives. As with the *Furioso*, there is a surprising amount of inset history, appearing in praise of the patron's lineage, in accounts of the nation. In all of these, Spenser keeps drawing on contemporary writing; the kinds of national writing within the poem are layered.

That richness of allusion is signalled from the Proem onwards:

Helpe then, O holy Virgin chiefe of nine,
 Thy weaker Nouice to performe thy will,
 Lay forth out of thine euerlasting scryne
 The antique rolles, which there lye hidden still,
 Of Faerie knights and fairest *Tanaquill*,
 Whome that most noble Briton Prince so long
 Sought through the world, and suffered so much ill,
 That I must rue his vnderdeserued wrong :
 O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong. (Proem 2)

As Spenser defines the kind of poem he is writing, he invokes but does not identify a chief Muse. "The antique rolls" suggest Clio, muse of history, but also Calliope, of epic poetry. Cases have been made for both muses, and for a composite figure. Thomas H. Cain, in support of Calliope, has argued that this is a confusion arising from Spenser's use of the term "historicall" for epic poetry.¹⁹ It is, however, significant for a poet to choose such an adjective at a time when fiction was still subject to criticism. The Muse's blurred identity is usefully ambiguous, and more so when we remember that poets like Daniel were taking refuge in versified history. Spenser is of course confident in the power of poetry,

¹⁸ "A letter of the Authors", 737.

proudly distinguishing between “the Methode of a Poet historicall” and “of an Historiographer”.²⁰ As in Sidney’s *Apology*, though not in his fiction, the poetry of history is more powerful than mere records. Nevertheless, the blankness of his “chiefe of nine” gives his poem both kinds of authority as it blurs between national story and Spenser’s own Faerie.

As the stanza continues, it goes on invoking both qualities. Tanaquill is plainly the queen, but which Elizabeth? Tanaquill is explicitly identified with Gloriana the Faerie Queene at II,x,76, so the official inspiration of the poem appears here in her royal public image, not her private character as “a most vertuous and beautifull Lady”.²¹ That is imagined as a mythic identity, both as an ancient type of chastity and the heroine sought within the narrative by king Arthur. Tanaquill is yet another flattering image of Elizabeth, and that flattery had been going on for a long while. Images of the queen’s chastity and power were so often repeated, their allusions so mingled, that much of the poetry written in her praise could build up to this kind of complexity. Elizabeth’s imagery has such a complex hinterland of context and meaning that this depth and layering is not surprising. It is, however, significant that such layering is characteristic of the poem, and not only in its references to Spenser’s monarch.

¹⁹ Thomas H. Cain, *Praise in the Faerie Queene* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978) 45.

²⁰ “A Letter of the Authors”, 738.

²¹ “A Letter of the Authors”, 737.

That flattery is given further support, and further complication, with the appearance of Arthur, who is both a foundation myth of Tudor claims to the throne and, in his search for Gloriana, a romanticising element, a knightly champion. Moreover, like Virgil's Aeneas, he is unnamed, defined by his actions rather than his identity. This is a chivalric story and a myth, arranged around the real figure of the monarch. Elizabeth, and with her Spenser's poem, is surrounded by the authority of foundation myth, of romance and of epic poetry. At the very start of the poem, Spenser has introduced Faerie knights, a real (if idealised and nearly mythical) monarch, and another British monarch whose mythic or historical status was the subject of still-raging argument. All these elements are introduced within a structure that identifies Spenser, our "weaker Nouice", as an inspired poet aiming at epic achievement.

In this patchwork of ideas, the different elements of the poem work in support of each other. The different kinds of authority invoked – history, myth, epic – are layered in Spenser's claim to greatness, as the poem itself goes on to layer its sources and influences. As an epic romance, *The Faerie Queene* automatically includes more than one genre; as it draws on other forms, it creates variations on them. When Spenser writes history into his epic, that too is written in composite form.

Those issues – the mingling of Clio and Calliope, and the kinds of Englishness that Spenser can make of them – are raised again in the catalogue of

monarchs in Book II. The “auncient booke, hight Briton *moniments*” read by Arthur, together with the “rolles of Elfin Emperours” read by Guyon in the same canto,²² make up one of the poem’s longest historical passages. The vocabulary that introduces them – “auncient”, “rolles” – echoes that of the proem; this is another mingling of different kinds of myth. That is immediately clear from the fact that we are shown two kinds of history, ostensibly of different lands but both plainly attached England.

Both histories are ambitious. The “*moniments*” show Britain founded by the Trojan Brutus, Britain’s Aeneas. They continue through dynastic wars, usurpations and the Roman invasion up to Arthur’s father Uther Pendragon. Spenser’s history is drawn from a range of chronicle sources: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Holinshed, Stow, Hardyng. These are the foundation myths of the Tudor state: not only Arthur, the Welsh Tudor ancestor, but Lucius, “That first receiued Christianitie, / The sacred pledge of Christes Euangely” (II.x,53) and established the British church independently of Rome. It is, importantly, a British church, and “Briton *moniments*”. Like the poem’s dedication, which addresses Elizabeth as “QVEENE OF ENGLAND FRAVNCE AND IRELAND”, this canto presents an expansionist England, a nation that includes the whole of the British mainland and its Irish conquests.²³ Although Spenser rearranges and adds to this material, he follows his sources closely – closely enough, in fact, to make the chronicle alarmingly messy and violent. The

²² II, ix, 59 and proem to II, x.

²³ Dedications to both 1590 and 1596 editions. 1596 text adds “AND OF VIRGINIA”.

dynasty of Brutus is constantly disrupted by usurpation and civil war, and finally collapses with the murder of the last heir by “his mother mercilesse” (II,x,35). The rest of the chronicle charts further invasions, further strife caused by ambition and by failures in the royal succession – a worrying moral, in fact, to put before a childless queen. That story told – it breaks off just as the chronicle reaches Arthur – we turn to Guyon’s Elf history, with its untroubled succession of reforming emperors. The unbroken Elfin lineage goes through “seuen hundred Princes” (II,x,74) without a single crisis, and concludes with what is plainly the Tudor dynasty: Oberon, like Henry VIII, inherits crown and wife from his brother, and leaves it, “by his last will” to his daughter, the Faerie Queene who is also the Tanaquill of the proem (II,x,76). England’s claims to imperial status were first made by the Tudors; Spenser, in allegorising his queen and her immediate family, gave that claim an idealised ancient past.

Such a slide – from the bloodshed and messiness of the chronicles to the triumph of the Elfin Tudors – recalls Sidney’s complaint of the limitations of history in providing exemplars:

...where the *Historian* bound to tell things as things were, cannot be liberall, without hee will be Poeticall of a perfect patterne, but, as in *Alexander* or *Scipio* himselfe, shew doings, some to be liked, some to be misliked...²⁴

The Faerie history is both liberal and poetical: its serenity is achieved by the vigorous editing of anything that might be “misliked”. The Elfin Henry VII, as

²⁴ Sidney’s *Defense of Poesie*, in *The Prose Works*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (1912: rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), III, 16.

the heir of seven hundred princes, does not have to fight the wars of the roses to gain his crown. There is no Mary I. This is not simply a matter of removing controversies: there are no obstacles, not even thwarted threats. Oberon-Henry VIII never defied the Pope, and the Spanish Armada vanishes from the record. The Tudors, in their perfect Elfin form, rise above the squalor of their British ancestors to become heroic myth, but it is a myth without struggle. Recent history becomes glowingly fictional: to borrow Sidney's words again, the world of history "is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden".²⁵

The contrast between the two histories is not, however, absolute. The Briton monuments have their own fictional element. Their foundation myths were already subject to question; Polydore Vergil and Camden had already expressed doubts about Geoffrey's presentation of Arthur, though patriotic English historians insisted on his reality. Greenlaw, discussing Spenser's chronicle, argues that it is

not only evidence of his antiquarian interest and careful study, but is itself a document in the great quarrel. It is a defense of the historicity of Arthur... Like Camden, Spenser subscribes to a belief in the value of this antiquarianism to the development of national spirit.²⁶

In fact, the prince who reads about his own ancestors is not the Arthur of chronicle, any more than he is the hero of Malory's romance. By making his "Briton *moniments*" a story read by Arthur, Spenser puts them into the category of epic praise: this is at once a retelling of the chronicles and a founding story

²⁵ *Prose Works*, III, 100.

like those of the *Aeneid* or indeed the *Furioso*. The monuments, in telling the past within a larger narrative, are like the tales told at feasts by the heroes of Virgil and Homer. Like Ariosto's Bradamante, like Spenser's own Britomart, this Arthur is told a dynastic story in which he has a part. Such a framing device reminds us that this is a poetic history, linked to other literary traditions of praise, praise of the monarch and of the nation. Even the bloodshed of the chronicle matches that tradition; the prophetic visions summoned for both Britomart and her Italian source are full of treachery and loss as well as glory.

The dynastic women of romance are given visions of their future. Arthur, ignorant of his destiny, cannot recognise his own dynastic past. The chronicle story breaks off just before naming Arthur:

After him *Vther*, which *Pendragon* hight,
 Succeding There abruptly it did end,
 Without full point, or other Cesure right,
 As if the rest some wicked hand did rend,
 Or th' Authour selfe could not at least attend
 To finish it: that so vntimely breach
 The Prince him selfe halfe seemeth to offend... (II,x,68,1-7)

Spenser's own stanza enacts that break, failing to punctuate the shift from the chronicle to the narrator's voice. The interruption itself is intensely literary; our narrator knows and uses the technical terms for stops. There is another interruption in the enjambement of line 5 – the sentence referring to the "Authour selfe" is broken by the line ending, its lost conclusion left stranded in the next line. This is also an archetypal romance moment; as happened so often in the

²⁶ Greenlaw, from *Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory*, quoted Variorum II 407.

Furioso, the story shifts, and the narrator steps in to describe why. The interruption is quite as practical as many of Ariosto's: the strands of entwined narratives often have to break off because they are about to rejoin a plot that is not yet ready for them. Arthur is not yet ready for his destiny – Spenser's Arthur, in fact, never achieves readiness – and if this interruption halts the narrative, it also half-promises further adventure. Daniel Javitch, in an essay identifying Ariosto's derailed narratives as “canto interruptus”, argues that such shifts are, as here, deliberately exasperating, a device to train the reader in a kind of literary stoicism.²⁷ Arthur, half-offended but greatly admiring by the end of the chronicle, appears as a reader of history and of romance, and is himself a figure of both genres.

This canto, with its Ariostan narrative devices, is introduced by another Ariostan reference. The opening stanzas in praise of Elizabeth imitate an address to the Estensi from the *Furioso*. Since England is united, Spenser avoids the *Furioso*'s crunch between the history of the ruler and that of the nation; there is no struggle, here, between Este and Italy. Nevertheless, for Spenser too history spreads beyond dynastic praise. The Briton monuments are an account of Elizabeth's “fathers and Great Grandfathers of old” (II,x,4,6), but they are more than the story of Tudor line. Arthur's chronicle expands into a broader image of nationhood than the royal dynasty could provide.

²⁷ Daniel Javitch, ‘Canto Interruptus in the *Orlando Furioso*’ in *MLN* 95 (1980) 66-81.

That is evident from Spenser's use, and transformation, of his Ariostan model. The opening invocation of muses comes from *Furioso* 3, where it introduced what truly was a dynastic procession. This is not one of the *Furioso*'s reflections on the state of Italy, and history is not its main priority. Bradamante, watching her progeny, sees them mostly in chronological order – beginning with her son and grandson and moving down to the poet's patrons – but the main point of that story is not chronology but abundance. We are shown a very great number of heroic Estensi, stanzas turning into lists of “altri Azzi, altri Ughi, ambi gli Enrichi...”²⁸ Ariosto, much more than Spenser, is aware of the importance of heaping glory – in the details of lands, battles and accomplishments – on the family of his employers. He is also sensitive to the dangers of that family's black sheep. Bradamante's question about two of her descendants, who seemed to be shunned by the rest of the procession, is turned away by the prophetic sorceress, who advises her to “Statti col dolcie in bocca, e non ti doglia / ch'amareggiare al fin non te la voglia”.²⁹ The Elfin narrative is comparably squeamish, but the British history shows no sense that crediting Elizabeth with a gallery of ancestral murderers, usurpers and failures might be a dubious compliment. The chronicles start with *Furioso* 3, but are closer in spirit to Ariosto's other inset histories, in which the idea of Italy has greater impact than the idea of the Estensi. The Briton monuments are exactly that: a history of Britain, shaped into a chronology by consideration of government and therefore of monarchs, but not by any means restricted to the dynastic story. In both poems, the inset history is a direct

²⁸ “more Azzos, more Hugos, both Henrys...” (OF,3,32).

representation of the nation whose identity is reflected and refracted throughout the text.

That much is clear from the early introduction. The first four stanzas of canto X insist on “Thy name, O soueraine Queene”, but attention then turns away from Elizabeth to the physical realm of Britain:

The land, which warlike Britons now possesse,
 And therein haue their mightie empire raysd,
 In antique times was saluage wildernesse,
 Vnpeopled, vnmanurd, vnprou'd, vnpraysed,
 Ne was it Island then, ne was it paysd
 Amid the *Ocean* waues, ne was it sought
 Of marchants farre, for profits therein praysed,
 But was all desolate, and of some thought
 By sea to haue bene from the Celticke mayn-land brought. (II,x,5).

The shift of interest away from Elizabeth registers immediately. This Britain does not belong to its “soueraine Queene”, but is possessed by the people. The adjective “warlike” may even imply an opposition between the Britons and a queen famous – as forward Protestants, including Spenser’s patrons, kept complaining – for keeping peace and avoiding action. But the central image is of the land itself, in an account that underlines the difference between mere territory and a nation. Britain is not simply a place, not simply a monarchy: its identity and strength are composite, and this catalogue of absences defines the elements of nationhood.

²⁹ “leave with a sweet taste in your mouth, and do not complain if I refuse to turn it to bitterness” (OF.3,62).

Without people, without the effects of human civilization, Britain barely exists. The “saluage wilderness” is not an image of a virgin isle, but a negation. The nation’s wants are emphasised by repetition both of the prefix “un-” and of “ne was it”. Even the island’s physical existence, before development, is shaky. Drawing on chronicle speculation that the British isles were once attached to continental Europe, Spenser conjures up an image in which the nation cannot be distinguished from other territories, from the “mayn-land”. These are the differences between “saluage wilderness” and an empire; Britain is created through the process of civilization. “Paysed” suggests not only physical placing but balance and control: island independence becomes something achieved by cultivation. (The implication that cultivation is something consciously maintained is, as we shall see, developed in the canto’s account of British history.) The syntax of 5-7 comes close to suggesting that the interest “Of marchants farre” has an active part in turning the country into an island, as if the nation itself were an exotic import brought “by sea... from the Celticke mayn-land”. This introduction to the chronicle history presents the kings of Britain as part of that larger process through which the country grows from desolation to a state capable of empire. The fourth line’s alliterative description of wilderness suggests what that state needs to build on: inhabitants, the development of natural resources, shared and testing experience (this sense of “vnprou’d” is confirmed in stanza 65’s reference to two captains “well-approu’d in war”). The last word of this list, the final element in national identity, is praise; as the chronicle will

make clear, nationhood must be not only achieved but understood and recognised.

As the monuments describe the first stages of that process, they go on mingling different elements of national identity. At the ninth stanza, Spenser signals the founding of Britain in Virgilian terms. The canto's promise of epic ancestry comes from Virgil as well as Ariosto, and the line of kings starts with "*Brutus* anciently deriu'd / From royall stocke of old *Assaracs* line" as the true founder of Britain. Ambitious chroniclers had long asserted England's Trojan past. In proceeding from Brutus and Arthur, Spenser gives Elizabeth a succession of heroic ancestors that draws on Homer and Malory as well as Geoffrey of Monmouth. Brutus does not, however, dominate the tale of Britain's foundation. The glory of discovery has been taken three stanzas earlier, England established not by this later Trojan hero but by the "venturous Mariner":

Learning his ship from those white rocks to saue
Which all along the Southerne sea-coast lay,
Threatning vnheedie wrecke and rash decay,
For safeties sake that same his sea-marke made,
And namd it *Albion*. But later day
Finding it fit ports for fishers trade,
Gan more the same frequent, and further to inuade. (II,x,63-9)

This is an England founded not only on the actions of fated heroes but on seafaring, trade, exploration. Brutus, the British Aeneas, is pre-empted not only in the discovery of Britain, but in heroic peril. Spenser's echo of Virgil's epic voyage and storm-tossed dangers is given to these ordinary seamen, not to his queen's alleged ancestor. Albion is founded through skill as much as destiny,

developed by commerce and colonisation. These processes are lightly suggested – the trade advantages of an Atlantic island, the gradual invasion of the countryside – but they foreshadow the later, expansive expeditions of a nation with increasing maritime ambitions. The creation of Britain has, in this version of events, much to inspire the Elizabethan colonist; the promised dynasty, with its classical foundation myth, develops alongside a more general story of England's growth through trade and conquest.

Developing the nation involves taming its “saluage wilderness”, creating identity from raw material. The first step towards nationhood is the conquest of Britain itself. The island may be “vnpeopled”, but it still has a native population: a “saluage nation... Of hideous Giants, and halfe beastly men”. Those giants, who give Brutus the opportunity of a career of heroic conquest, make the development of Britain itself a colonial project, putting such endeavours early and central to English nationhood. These natural children of the isle do not, in this story, have any right to it: the invading Brutus overthrows “their vniust possession”.

Such an example of manifest destiny picks up themes echoing through *The Faerie Queene* as a whole. In the rest of the poem, as in the history of Britain, Spenser presents civilization as something painfully achieved and maintained with care. That much is suggested even in the poem's explicit structure: each Book presents its characteristic virtue as the object of an arduous knightly quest.

The cumulative tests and frequent backslidings of the knights emphasise the difficulty not only of reaching but of keeping those virtues, a process as painful as Britain's growth towards national civilization. This structure, and the distribution of virtues and knights, crumbles as *The Faerie Queene* continues. The letter to Raleigh, with its promise of "xii other knights [as] the patrones" of the twelve virtues, should not be taken as a complete or wholly reliable guide to the poem.³⁰ Nevertheless, its often-quoted aim to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" underlines the sense that civility is both created and – through discipline – upheld.

Since the 1980s, Spenser studies have paid particular attention to those ideas of vigilance and control. Stephen Greenblatt argued, very influentially, that the discipline of civility requires "the constant exercise of power", and linked it to colonial policy in Ireland as well as to Protestant iconoclasm and to European responses to the new world.³¹ Particular attention has been paid to the poem's Irish context, to Spenser's own involvement in the English settlement of Munster. The idea of achieved civility appears again in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*; "the English themselves, before they had acquired culture, labored under the same vices as the Irish, so much so that it is impossible to say whether the Anglo-Irish who were Spenser's contemporaries were the victims of retrogression

³⁰ "Letter of the Authors", 737

³¹ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 181.

or of mere stagnation”.³² Because the idea of civility is so important to the poem, the Irish context and perspective can be read throughout Spenser’s text, most bluntly in Greenblatt’s argument that “Ireland is not only in Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*; it pervades the poem.”³³ Nevertheless, the poem should surely not be read exclusively through Ireland, not only in New Historicist terms of power negotiation. Colonial expansion and control certainly form one element of Spenserian national identity, and one that has profound and powerful implications. But one reason for that resonance is simply that, in a poem so long and so ambitious, concepts are re-examined and reinvented in a complex network of ideas; Ireland and power can, like grace, nature, virtue or nationhood, be traced throughout that network. My concern here is not with the interpretation of Spenser in Ireland and Ireland in Spenser, but with the scope and variety of nationhood in *The Faerie Queene*, and the expression of that national identity in a literary monument that is also a chivalric romance.

In writing his literary monument, Spenser draws on many different kinds of national writing. The chronicles are one; their concern with expansion and shipping suggest links with voyaging and colonial narratives. The events, and the narrative of those events, in the “Briton *moniments*” put not only the facts but the interpretative tendencies of Tudor historiography into *The Faerie Queene*; not only information drawn from Geoffrey, but patterns of history drawn from Foxe. The taming of the British wilderness is understood in Christian as well as

³² Walter J. Ong, “Spenser’s View and the tradition of the ‘wild’ Irish”, *Modern Language Quarterly* 3, 4 (1942) 569.

national terms. The “halfe beastly men”, Britain’s first inhabitants, are born in “lust unclene” (II,x,8,7):

...and with their filthinesse
Polluted this same gentle soyle long time:
That their owne mother loathd their beastlinesse,
And gan abhorre her broods vnkindly crime,
All were they borne of her owne natiue slime... (II,x,9,1-5)

The process of civilization includes the restraint and regulation of the body. The placing of the monuments in the Library of Alma’s castle makes explicit the link between individual virtue and the virtue of a nation: Alma’s castle represents the human body as a commonwealth, with national history in the place of individual memory. The need to restrain nature – Greenblatt’s control – applies to the individual and to the commonwealth; the conquest (and destruction) of the giants is one example of the regulated nation. The early Britons, like other Spenserian giants, are peculiarly fleshly; even their physical “slime”, which echoes the “monstrous masse of earthly slime” of Book I’s giant Orgoglio (I,vii,9) is characteristic. That flesh, the wilderness tamed by Brutus and by culture, has its theological dimension. The giants are characterised by the language of pollution, and Spenser’s insistent references to filthiness recall Calvin’s image of the concupiscent flesh teeming with corruption. The giants’ condition slides back and forth between natural and unnatural, “natiue” and “vnkindly”. This is a fallen state in which nature is maimed and the earth hates her own children; an important and explicit part of the giants’ horror is that they “neuer tasted grace” (II,x,7,3).

³³ Greenblatt, 186.

This language of original sin is not only a basic vocabulary of Protestantism, but sets up a pattern for the rest of the chronicle. At the birth of Christ, centuries later, Spenser describes the Incarnation by stating “th’eternall Lord in fleshly slime / Enwombed was” (II,x,50,2-3). That slime is the quintessence of original sin, of corrupted physical matter. We are reminded that this conquest – of sinful flesh by temperance, of the native British by colonial invasion – must, to be successful, be confirmed by religion. This is the other story of this history canto.

My consideration of Spenser’s chronicle, and of the need for grace it demonstrates, is necessarily indebted to two major studies of this canto. Carrie Harper’s pioneering work traced and identified Spenser’s use of chronicle sources, and pointed out that the succession of British monarchs is three times broken by interregna.³⁴ Harry Berger, drawing on this discovery of patterns within the chronicles, has suggested that these can be read as divisions of British history into stages of development and improvement. The first stage, the dynasty of Brutus, is an age of violence and confusion:

The “auncients”, it is suggested, had an inadequate notion of glory: they saw it merely as power, a power based on nature rather than on society or law. Dominion was either obtained by inheritance, or seized by physically upsetting the natural succession.³⁵

³⁴ Carrie Harper, *The Sources of the British Chronicle History in Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (Philadelphia: J.C. Winston, 1910).

³⁵ Harry Berger, *The Allegorical Temper: Vision and Reality in Book II of Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (Archon Books, 1967), 95

When Brutus's direct line collapses in the first interregnum, the nation is reunited by Donwallo, who introduces a new age of law, holding his power by consent when the "Princes of the people loose... him streight did choose / Their king, and swore him fealty" (II,x,37). The final change, and the last interregnum, comes with the British reception of Christianity. As this last change suggests, there is another division in the chronicles, between the world before and after the incarnation of Christ. These patterns "are never explicitly mentioned by the poet"; the divisions by interregna are easily missed, and though there are improvements, they are contingent and vulnerable.³⁶ God's punishment does not necessarily follow wicked actions: Spenser's good and bad kings flourish or fail independently of their moral qualities. Lucius, a good king "That first received Christianitie" (II,x,53) dies without heirs, and plunges his realm into further strife: "The history dramatizes not an allegorical meaning, but the intransigence of real facts to meaning."³⁷ The wilderness can be controlled by physical force, and helped by the further discipline of human law, which works through a degree of consensus. But even these institutions can collapse; the succession cannot be guaranteed. Human law, then, is dependent on providence:

Canto x presents corruption in the soul of a government, through weakness in will or reason. The political anatomy discloses that the weakness of flesh - the contingencies of *krasis* - may affect kings... Neither history as a process nor any man in history possesses the power to redeem, once and for all, the fleshly slime; only Christ can do this. Arthur as a minister of grace, an imitation of Christ, can redeem Britain from subjugation to the Earthly City, but Arthur is mortal and Britain will fall again.³⁸

³⁶ Berger, 92.

³⁷ Berger, 103.

³⁸ Berger, 102.

In this respect, the chronicle history is like romance: it is not directed towards ends, since no human agency has the power to shape events into the linear narrative associated with epic. Humanity is dependent upon divine providence for the organisation of the narrative, and that organisation may be beyond human understanding.

Berger is right to comment on the “muddiness” and intransigence of Spenser’s history. The chronicle is not a cause-and-effect narrative, and in that it differs from more explicitly moralising histories like *The Mirror for Magistrates*. The sense of underlying patterns, however, owes much to another kind of Tudor historiography. The glimpses of a divine plan governing human events are reminiscent of the cycles of history in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, in which England is not named as a chosen nation but nevertheless appears at the centre of the history of the true and universal church. By 1590, the providential history had become a specifically patriotic English tradition. With the account of the Incarnation, Berger argues:

...the symbolic focus tends to widen the area of association from nationalistic and political to universal and moral-theological themes. ‘Ambitious Rome’ easily becomes the Earthly City, and Caesar’s sword a symbol of the ‘hideous hunger of dominion’. The forty-ninth stanza presents Britain as in a period of bondage, and this is paralleled in the next stanza by Christ enwombed in fleshly slime.³⁹

That widening is, I would argue, itself nationalistic and political. As England became more firmly Protestant, Protestantism became a matter of patriotic

identity and pride. If condemnation of the Earthly City is universal, it is also fervently English, just as Bale's *Image of Two Churches*, with its opposition between the physical church of Rome and the universal church of faith, came to be used as a defence not only of reformation but, paradoxically, of the specific institutions of English Protestantism.

The muddiness and confusion of history's patterns has a further implication. Both in the chronicle and far beyond it, Spenser's world is radically contingent. *The Faerie Queene* both invites and turns away interpretation; its narratives are suffused with meaning, but meaning whose precise application is not clear. In the chronicles, in the poem itself, reason and narrative shape are sought by a confused humanity, but are left ambiguous. History blurs; there are morals to be drawn – at the end of the chronicle passage Arthur draws them – but such interpretations must be sought and considered. This is the image of a fallen world in which the signs of divine plans must be looked for but are not certain to be found. Spenser's Faerie land is a radically confusing, and distinctly Protestant, place. The Englishness of Spenser's chronicle, then, is in its subject matter, but also in his manner of telling it. These are British kings, but the patterns of interpretation they invite are peculiarly characteristic of English Protestant national identity.

There is another kind of Englishness running through the chronicle. Spenser begins the monuments by shifting attention from the monarch to the land itself.

³⁹ Berger, 100.

Even when the focus returns to the dynasties of British kings, that concern for the physical realm of Britain remains. As he tells his chronicle story, with its battles, invasions, heirs and changes of government, Spenser keeps a sense of place that binds the events to the land. Richard Helgerson has shown how many English topographical writings were designed to be read as the introductions to chronicle history:

Harrison's *Description* has precisely this relationship to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, as Speed's *Theater* does to his *History*. Each is the topographical introduction to a chronological book. A striking number of other chorographers, including Leland, John Hooker, Stow, Drayton, and Camden, coupled the kinds in their careers... they understood the two as forming a necessary union.⁴⁰

Telling Britain's history requires a description of the land. In the Briton monuments, chronicle and topography are not only linked but intertwined, as places are named for battles and conquerors, as Spenser describes physical monuments that have been left by or have come to be associated with events, and as the advancing cultivation of the land is recorded. The device again recalls Ariosto, whose inset histories insist on the locations of disaster and triumph, and who, in praising Italian painters, is careful to name their home towns. Berger has suggested that, with the chronicle's focus on kingship, on continuity and succession rather than individual monarchs, "no one ruler is seen to be the hero. The hero is Britain itself insofar as it triumphs through divine assistance over the

⁴⁰ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 132. John Hollander has called Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* a "devotedly Spenserian" work in its concern for myth and topography as well as in its poetry. Hollander, *Melodious Guile: fictive pattern in poetic language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 171.

evils of physical and moral nature...”⁴¹ The insistence on Britain’s physical as well as its political development increases that emphasis.

The link between land and history is stressed from Brutus’s invasion onwards:

But ere he had established his throne,
 And spred his empire to the vtmost shore,
 He fought great battels with his saluage fone;
 In which he them defeated euermore,
 And many Giants left on groning flore;
 That well can witenesse yet vnto this day
 The westerne Hogh, besprincled with the gore
 Of mightie *Goëmot*... (II,x,10,1-8)

The naming of battle places links this earliest past to Spenser’s present day. Plymouth Hoe becomes a commemorating presence: much as Malory would justify a story by explaining that a hero’s sword was kept and may still be seen, the landscape becomes a proof of the events that took place in it. There is no giant’s blood to be seen on the “westerne Hogh”, but the hill’s own existence – and the local tradition that Spenser drew on in writing this stanza – underline a continuity between England’s ancient past and its Tudor present. Moreover, this list of battles reminds us that Britain is a “mightie empire”. Brutus, aiming for “the vtmost shore”, starts an unlimited conquest of the whole island. Plymouth, on the south coast and the west country, is both an early conquest and an utmost shore. Those battles won – there are more “witnesses” to them recorded in the next stanza – the country is divided, and named after its conquerors. Corineus

⁴¹ Berger. 103-4.

had “that Province vtmost west... Which of his name and memorable gest / He called Cornewaile...”, Debon names Devon and Canute takes “Cantium, which Kent we comenly inquire” (II,x,12). All these battles, and others told in the process of the monuments, emphasise a common history through these still-surviving names and marks. We are told at stanza 36 that civil wars “left no monument / Of Brutus, nor of Britons glory auncient”, but by then we have seen that their history is part of the land itself.

Place names, their sources and etymologies, run through the British history, an insistent reminder that the nation endures and survives these vicissitudes of war, invasion and interregnum. When crises and collapses are recorded, they are linked to the larger story of Britain’s survival. As the chronicle unfolds, as the English nation develops, new kinds of etymologies start to appear. The river Humber is named, through another battle, when an invading chieftain is drowned in it. This story is followed by another drowning narrative, in which Sabrina, a “sad virgin innocent of all” is killed in the river “Which of her name now Seuerne men do call” (II,x,19). The two stories, and other river tales in the chronicle, foreshadow Book IV’s marriage of Thames and Medway, another celebration of “the English soile” (IV,xi,30). But with the death of Sabrina, Spenser introduces a new local legend, one invented for the poem rather than drawn from antiquarian accounts. A.C. Hamilton has pointed out that this is a British river with virtue poured into it.⁴² As we shift from a story of conquest to one of continuity, of the kingdom’s defence rather than its creation, we begin to

see the qualities of the nation being developed. Britain becomes a much more detailed landscape, with different sources of strength, of trade, of pride. Those qualities are both local and national; specific examples show the variety of Britain and express, in local terms, the gradual improvement of the nation. Both elements are exemplified in the story of Bladud, who:

in arts,
 Exceld at *Athens* all the learned preace,
 From whence he brought them to these saluage parts
 And with sweet science mollifide their stubborne harts.

Ensample of his wondrous faculty,
 Behold the boyling Bathes at *Cairbadon*,
 Which seeth with secret fire eternally,
 And in their entrails, full of quicke Brimston,
 Nourish the flames, which they are warm'd vpon,
 That to their people wealth they forth do well,
 And health to euey forreine nation...

(II.x.25-6)

The Athens-educated Bladud is, like Brutus, another classical source for British culture. Civility – in this case “sweet science” – is once again imported and once again brought as the flower of foreign culture: Bladud is the finest Athens can offer. The effects of history are put in local terms; the transformation is exemplified by Bladud’s creation of the hot springs at Bath. In describing this native wonder, Spenser cuts between natural metaphor – of entrails and nourishment, the heat of the baths as “quicke” and living – and a sense of magic in their production. That warmth can be “eternal” because the image of heating water at 4-5 is a circular process, emphasised by repeated “their” and “they”: the baths are “warm’d vpon” something produced in their own “entrails”. That

⁴² Note to II.x.19, Hamilton ed., *The Faerie Queene*, 262.

wonder is now a local industry. As the assonance of well-wealth underlines, the springs are a source of money as well as water; the abundance of the land becomes an abundance of trade with “euery forreine nation”. Like the island of Britain, brought from the mainland, the landscape is created by human agency, producing commerce as well as culture. The land is no longer “vnmanurd”.

Spenser’s history, like the literature of maritime expansion, shows the roots of Protestant capitalism, a commercial rather than aristocratic culture. Such consideration of trade is unusual in romance. Auerbach points out that even the “strikingly realistic” workroom described in *Yvain* “was not established because of concrete economic conditions” but as the ransom of a king from “two evil gnomelike brothers... The fairy-tale atmosphere is the true element of the courtly romance”.⁴³ *The Faerie Queene* insists on its own courtliness, on the opposition of “cowheard” timidity with the strength of noble blood, and this recognition of local industry is atypical. The commerce of this canto is on a grand scale, miraculous springs or the grandest of seafaring, but it is still trade. Its inclusion is another patriotic element and – especially in the context of maritime expansion – it taps into other Protestant English traditions. The voyages of the English nation, as recorded by Hakluyt and others, showed English colonial development, but they also implied an opposition between the trade-based proceedings of Protestant England and the cruelties of Spanish imperialism.⁴⁴ It may also

⁴³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1946; rpt., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) 133.

⁴⁴ Those were notorious in Protestant thought: Greville refers to “such terrible inhumanities, as gave those that lived under nature manifest occasion to abhor the devily characters of so

suggest the Protestant (and patriotic) courage of Foxe's tailors and shoemakers, simple people with the strength of martyrs. Within the romance world of Faerie, there is no room for such middle-class and mercantile heroism; in this direct consideration of the English nation, it does appear, however briefly.

Spenser introduced his chronicle with the promise of a dynasty, of "the famous auncestries / Of my most dreaded Soueraigne" (II,x,1). In the course of that story, Spenser also tells us England, and brings in as many kinds of nationhood as possible. That breadth is signalled early in the chronicle, which suggests the development of England from a land that was, until the Britons get there, "Vnpeopled, vnmanurd, vnprou'd, vnpraysed"(II,x,5). This is a complex idea of a nation. There is the dynasty under discussion, the people – and the race of Britons is complicated by the many invasions noted in the history – but also cultivation, the discovery of springs and hills and sources of income. Finally, there is testing and praise. A nation is land that has been, not only inhabited, but lived in and imagined: its nationhood comes not only from race and ruler but from place, and place that is developed literally and emotionally.

The importance of praise is evident in Arthur's ecstatic response:

At last quite ravishd with delight, to heare
 The royall Ofspring of his natiue land,
 Cryde out, Deare countrey, O how dearely deare
 Ought thy remembraunce, and perpetuall band
 Be to thy foster Childe, that from thy hand

tyrannical a deity". *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Nowell Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) 117.

Did commun breath and nouriture receaue?
 How brutish is it not to vnderstand,
 How much to her we owe, that all vs gaue,
 That gaue vnto vs all, what euer good we haue. (II,x,69)

Spenser's syntax is characteristically ambiguous. What, here, is the "royall Ofspring"? Is it subject or object, Arthur himself or the dynasty he has read about? Is the "natiue land" the subject-matter he has been delighted "to heare" about, or only a qualifying description for the royal offspring? That blurring is a final binding together of land and monarchy: Arthur is identified with the story of his ancestors, the land becomes both the mother of kings and a subject of delight. All these kings, like Arthur, owe this much to their country. That leads to a startling pun on the brutishness of ingratitude. Brutus provided a standard, if dubious, etymology for Britain: to be brutish is to be British. It is a surprising joke to make at such a moment. But it recalls Brutus, whose dynasty left "no moniment / Of *Brutus*, nor of Britons glory auncient" (II,x,36). Failure of understanding is to imitate Brutus's line, to be the forgetful and forgotten, and that recalls the sense, throughout the chronicle, of civility achieved and held by vigilance. Brutishness is where Britain started; to fail to appreciate one's country is to return to such a state. Proper gratitude, on the other hand, has a Protestant echo, because Arthur's "what euer good we haue" echoes "whatever strength we haue, it is to ill", that most clangorous line from Book I,x,i. This is a parallel instance of virtue received from nationhood, as it was earlier achieved through grace. England is made up of land and monarchs, and monarchs depend on the land. Finally, Arthur's "remembraunce, and perpetuall band" remind us that

identity is memory: the Briton monuments record shared experience. To be a nation, at last, is “to vnderstand”.

That understanding suggests how Arthur can be “ravisht with delight” at such a catalogue of disaster. This has always been a difficult point; as Thomas H. Cain complained, this “patriotic outburst when the chronicle breaks off... seems unwarranted by its dispiriting nature unless we understand the exclamation as an intuition of Elizabeth”.⁴⁵ For Cain, the “dreaded Soueraigne” justifies her disreputable ancestors. Berger, on the other hand, sees the exclamation as “a perspective, born of humility, which reads deep into the essential goodness of man’s life in history”.⁴⁶ The “essential goodness” is the larger pattern of providence, of Britain’s destiny. The fifth stanza of this canto, defining Britain by its deficiencies, called the island “Vnpeopled, vnmanurd, vnprou’d, vnpraysed”; the following chronicle showed it inhabited, tested and developed. With Arthur’s address to his “Deare countrey”, we finally see Britain praised.

Arthur’s “ravisht” exclamation links praise to understanding: it is not an obvious response, but one that requires generosity and thought. The bare facts of history need interpretation to become a source of national pride. Within this canto, those facts are framed by the means of interpretation: the panegyric of the opening stanzas, the romance and epic framework, the readers within the text, the insistent references to a continuity of British identity in land and people. Praise

⁴⁵ Thomas H. Cain. *Praise in The Faerie Queene* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 119.

and understanding are what Spenser's narrative makes of his still explicitly intractable material: praise, the means of national identity, is poetry.

That is illustrated by the fact that the canto itself then moves from history to acclamation. After Arthur's cry of delight, Spenser turns away from the realistic horrors of the British chronicles to the shining smooth narrative of a fictionalised Tudor dynasty. If the nation is to be understood, it needs to be praised, and the unshadowed image of Faerie splendour offers an alternative and idealised Britain. To achieve that alternative Spenser moves much further into fiction, leaving the "intransigence of real facts" behind. In doing so, he becomes much more dynastic, much more concerned with the patron's interests, than in the British history. The Elfin story actually fulfils, as the chronicle does not, the promise that Spenser's "fraile pen" will "Conceiue such soueraine glory, and great bountihed" (II,x,2). The poet's queen, if not his country, is most conspicuously glorified when she is turned into fiction. This is partly because, as Sidney suggested, the poet can leave out anything that might be "misliked", as the historian cannot. The exclusion is, as we have seen, remarkably thorough, avoiding even defeated dangers.

In the Faerie history, with its strange absence of struggle, the Tudors seem to escape not only from the messiness of the chronicles from the fallen world itself. The tale of the Elfin dynasty starts with Elfe and Fay, descended not from Adam and Eve but created by Prometheus. This new creation myth has its own fall –

⁴⁶ Berger, *The Allegorical Temper*, 90.

and Eve but created by Prometheus. This new creation myth has its own fall – Prometheus “was by *Ioue* depriued / Of life him selfe, and hart-strings of an *Ægle* riued” (II,x,70) – but one that leaves Elfe and Fay apparently free from the consequences of that “fleshly slime” that so dominated the British chronicle, and are insistently present throughout *The Faerie Queene*. This is not the first time that Spenser has let Elizabeth off the hook of human frailty. We have already learned, on the Mount of Contemplation in Book I, that the Faerie Queene “is heauenly borne, and heauen may iustly vaunt” (I,x,59). This is a compliment to Elizabeth, but one that puts her beyond the real world.⁴⁷ Gloriana, the ever-receding object of Arthur’s quest, is another of the poem’s long-deferred endings. In this history, the narrative stops for once to show greatness achieved, and it registers as a step away from the usual world of the poem, a step into a non-lapsarian universe. The Elfin triumphs – continuous rule, the founding of Cleopolis – are painlessly accomplished, so much so that their history seems static. The “rolles of Elfin Emperours” tell a story without urgency, and without heroism. Such security, and such a lack of drama, is possible because the Faerie history follows the British chronicle. The confidence of Spenser’s Tudors has most impact in contrast to the horrors of disrupted British governments. The two histories are intimately linked: both are images of England, but different ways of writing the nation. Extremes of bloodshed and of triumph finally make sense as a composite image, a compound of celebration and acknowledgement. Spenser’s

⁴⁷ Berger, in a reading that finds a distinction between Elf and human throughout the poem, has suggested that “The Original Excellence, harmony and power of Elfin man is a much more satisfactory state of nature than that of postlapsarian Adam; yet it contains a much more limited possibility of perfection and life.” *Ibid*, 108.

own poetry of praise includes the dynastic and the national, from the rough facts of history to the glories of a created myth.

The history canto piles up different ways of describing and defining England: polished dynastic praise, the mess of history, changes in government, landscape, colonial ambition, Protestant identity and patterns of events. Spenser's layered chronicle, with its different images of England, is finally a declaration of poetic as well as national confidence. The chronicle, the land and its myths are all framed by an assertion of epic and of romance authority. The canto's first two stanzas are Spenser's closest imitation of the *Furioso*; the third, insisting that his subject is "worthy of Mæonian quill", draws in Homer. Guyon and Arthur, reading stories within the text, are like the audiences of Dido's or Alcinous's courts; when, in the canto's last couplet, Alma finally drags them "halfe unwilling from their bookes... / And fairely feasted, as so noble knights she ought" (II,x,77), it recalls the storytelling of the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey* as well as the chivalric feasts of romance.

The strongest echo in this framework, however, is of the *Furioso*. Allowing for differences between the poets' patrons, *The Faerie Queene* II,x,1 is an exact translation of *Furioso* 3,1. Such a close imitation, and its use to introduce and shape this canto, helps to suggest what Spenser found in Ariosto, why his poem – which draws on so many sources – is finally closer to the romance epic strain of the *Furioso* than to any of its other models. This is a moment both of epic

authority and of romance digression; its national identity is both a celebration of the patron and the creation of a national image that goes beyond the needs of immediate political masters. The inset history passage fills some of the same needs in *The Faerie Queene* as in the *Orlando Furioso*, both dynastic praise and larger poetic ambition. Praise, finally, is epic in scale, and epic romance in its inclusiveness.

In taking Ariosto as a principal model, Spenser chose not only romance but a specific version of that genre. This is not a native, medieval form of romance, but – like so much of the culture of Britain, as described in the monuments – a continental import. Like the *Arcadia*, *The Faerie Queene* uses one of the romance forms of the European renaissance: the literary texts of the Elizabethan chivalric revival tended to ignore native images of knighthood. Both the *Furioso* and the *Amadís* were enormously popular across the continent throughout the sixteenth century, and both came to carry the ideas and aspirations of nationhood. Nevertheless, the poetic and national ambitions of the *Furioso* strain of romance are much more evident. Both are very greatly concerned with love, but the *Amadís* is much more domestic, much more feminine, much further from the masculine world of epic. Ariosto's knights are sidetracked into bowers and forests, into active and idle loves, but they do not, as *Amadís* characters do, linger among the ladies-in-waiting, disguised as Amazons. I have argued that the *Furioso* presents national identity based on something other than conquest, but the grand actions of war are never very far away.

Moreover, Ariosto made a much more ambitious poetic model. Even in the sixteenth century, the *Amadis* cycle was known by the name of its hero, not for any of the poets or translators who had produced it. It may have expressed the expansionist confidence of Spain and then France, but it did so without Virgilian fanfares. As a prose romance, its claims to poetic authority were much more modest than those of verse epic, and much less concerned with the polishing of national style.⁴⁸ After half a century of unprecedented success and determined promotion, the *Furioso* was a classic, the pre-eminent example of a successful modern epic. To imitate it was to make a very explicit claim to poetic greatness.

3 Poetic ambition: epic and chivalric romance

Spenser's image of nationhood may have gained urgency from the events of the 1580s. But is noticeable that, even in the late 1570s, he was seeking some such clarity in the grand scale of national poetry. The story of national romance in the sixteenth century has also been that of national poets. The creation and development of vernacular literatures required the discovery not only of a local *Aeneid*, but of a local Virgil to write it. The classical past shaped the ambition of vernacular poets; it also shaped praise of their work, and its presentation to the public. As we have seen, Ariosto and Sidney were profoundly concerned with the development of poetry in the vernacular: Ariosto's Tuscan polish, Sidney's

⁴⁸ Vernacular ambition did touch *Amadis*, however. Gabriel Chappuys, one of the cycle's French translators, promised "l'ornement de nostre langue Francoise". The cycle's success in French led to the publication of *Le Thresor des livres d'Amadis*, a collection of exemplary letters and speeches which was also translated into English. See John O'Connor *Amadis de Gaule and its*

formal experiments, in both cases the writing of romance on a grand scale. Those aspects of their work were taken up and magnified after their deaths as both writers were presented as proof of the vitality of the national vernacular and culture. Both were claimed, soon after their deaths, as laureate figures; Ariosto was crowned with apocryphal bays, Sidney dressed in “The garland laureate”.⁴⁹ The patriotic elements of the poetry became a starting-point for the more extensive patriotism of literary reputation. Both poets were genuinely concerned with national writing, but it is significant that that element of their work was so magnified in the posthumous reputations that were made according to local need.

In Spenser’s case, this Virgilian role was more explicitly and more deliberately assumed. As Daniel Javitch has shown, ambitious and scholarly editions presented the *Furioso* as a classic, helping Ariosto to achieve canonical status soon after his death.⁵⁰ Posthumous editions both of Sidney’s works and of poems in his praise fulfilled a similar function. The publication of *The Shepherds Calender*, with its introduction, illustrations and glosses, put Spenser through the same process right at the start of his career. E.K.’s commentary promises both the imitation of “the best and most auncient Poetes” and, in his insistence that the new poet has begun well, a future career which seems likely to include work on a grander, possibly epic scale.⁵¹ The proem to *The Faerie*

influence on Elizabethan Literature (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970) 62, 76.

⁴⁹ Edmund G Gardner, *The King of Court Poets*, 257; Thomas Churchyard’s *Praise of Poetrie*, quoted Klein 239 n63.

⁵⁰ Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic*; and see chapter one above.

⁵¹ *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 18.

Queene, with its reminiscences of “lowly Shepherds weeds” confirms that Virgilian progression from pastoral to epic, and Spenser’s contemporaries were ready to accept his self-definition. The writers of commendatory poems published with *The Faerie Queene* compared Spenser, the “Bryttane Orpheus” to Homer and Virgil.⁵² In *Self-Crowned Laureates*, his study of Spenser’s career in these terms, Richard Helgerson shows that, by insisting on a “laureate” role – that of a public poet, with a Virgil’s authority to write for the nation or a Juvenal’s authority to rebuke it – Spenser could make poetry a serious career, the kind of civic duty for which a humanist education had trained him.

A career image of this sort elevates poetry from frivolity to public service. From the point of view of this study, the most important element of Spenser’s claim to the grandest poetic authority is the national aspect of such a role. To borrow Milton’s comment on Sidney, such laureate ambition could make poetry “exemplary to a Nation”; the humanist ideal of civic duty could be cast in poetic terms through texts that expressed and magnified the nation.⁵³ *The Faerie Queene* is Spenser’s literary monument, an epic written in deliberate patriotic seriousness, and in which seriousness takes romance form.

Was that a strange choice of genre for a poet of public ambition? Gabriel Harvey suggested as much to Spenser in his complaint that working on *The Faerie Queene* rather than the nine comedies was to let hobgoblin run away with

⁵² R.S. “Faire *Themis* streame”, H.B. “Graue Muses march in triumph and with prayes”, Hobynoll “A Vision vpon this conceipt of the *Faery Queene*”, W.I. “When stout *Achilles*”.

Apollo's garland. In its surviving, published forms, *The Faerie Queene* seems evidently and eminently serious, so much a work of Apollo that Josephine Waters Bennett has argued that Harvey must have been referring to an earlier, looser romance, more closely based on Ariosto.⁵⁴ I believe that the *Furioso*, with its grand confidence and its ability to encompass anguish, is a more serious, and seriously national, poem than Bennett's argument would suggest. Ariosto's admirers and imitators found nationhood and poetic authority in the *Furioso*, as well as the abundance and liberty of romance. Spenser's third and fourth Books are, as Bennett suggests, closest to the *Furioso* in structure and even in tone, but *The Faerie Queene* is indebted to Ariosto for much more than the freer romance structures of those books, for more than images, plot details or elements of its stanza. Even in the first two books, the most tightly structured and closest to the scheme described in the letter to Raleigh, are unmistakably chivalric, and unmistakably Italianate. As C.S. Lewis wrote, six years before Bennett's study, "To fight in another man's armour is something more than to be influenced by his style of fighting."⁵⁵

Richard Helgerson has suggested that Harvey's famous complaint has less to do with romance than with metre: a debate on quantitative verse runs through his correspondence with Spenser.⁵⁶ Like the Italian concern with Aristotelian epic, this was an attempt to write poetry according to a sixteenth-century

⁵³ Milton, *Reason of Church Government* in Yale Prose works, I, 815.

⁵⁴ Josephine Waters Bennet, *The Evolution of The Faerie Queene*. (1942; rpt. New York: Burt Franklyn, 1960) 16-23.

understanding of classical rules, and it was similarly unsuccessful. Metre aside, there were still shadows on chivalric romance as a form for serious poetry, as a limited vernacular form and as a source of what Ascham condemned as “open manslaughter and bold bawdry”.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the English chivalric tradition had moved on considerably since the humanist attacks of the mid-century. Chivalry, as it was used to advance the claims of ambitious aristocrats like Essex, certainly had its dangers. Honour culture was still unruly, and could still lead to insubordinate exploits: Elizabeth was furious when Essex knighted so many of his followers, reversing the trend to put honours as well as honour in the keeping of the crown.⁵⁸ But chivalry was also used, as it is used in *The Faerie Queene*, to express devotion to the monarch. For the English, romance was associated with the private actions of chivalric individualism, as it was in continental Europe. But at Elizabeth’s court it was also associated with public service, with the Protestant crusade and the loyal celebrations of court celebrations. When Sidney turned to chivalry, he intended to make the *Arcadia* more serious, not to turn away from public duty. Recent research may have found cracks in the image of Elizabeth as Gloriana, the lady of romance inspiring her court, but the image was plainly potent and important. Chivalric romance was fashionable, made much more reputable with the cultural changes of the 1580s. The influence of Ascham and his generation receded; much of the most virulent anti-romance writing was aimed not at the poets of the 1580s and 1590s, but at their parents.

⁵⁵ C.S.Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; rpt. New York: Galaxy, 1958) 304

⁵⁶ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 25-40.

Languet, writing reproving letters to Sidney in the late 1570s, shows that disapproval was still strong, and it should be remembered that Spenser was influenced by Ascham's arguments on quantitative verse. Nevertheless, humanist reproof was diluted by court fashions. Sidney and Spenser were, or wished to be, associated with the court and the aristocracy, and were sympathetic to chivalric revivals as middle-class humanists like Asham were not. If the queen, Ascham's most famous pupil, was prepared to enjoy flattering romances, the poets seeking her favour were ready to supply them. Court festivity offered disgruntled aristocrats a means of expressing their discontent, but it remained essentially patriotic and loyal. The forward Protestant faction, although it contained the most unruly of Elizabeth's knightly courtiers, also improved the reputation of romance. Sidney's death made him an unshakeable exemplar, both as a public servant and as the shepherd knight. *The Faerie Queene* can be seen as one of a group of newly national texts, of another group of Elizabethan Ariosto texts, and also as part of the Elizabethan chivalric revival.

In practice, the form was more problematic. Sidney's posthumous example helped to bind chivalry to virtuous image of Protestant martyrdom and public service. As we have seen, his poetic practice was much less resolved. The *Arcadia* turns to chivalry as to a serious poetic form, a means of showing heroic action, but the qualities of knighthood are also those which undermine virtue in the book. When heroism collapses, as in the *Arcadia* it so often does, its failings

⁵⁷ *The Schoolmaster*, in *The Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. the Rev. Dr. Giles . 4 vols (London: John Russell Smith, 1864) IV, 159.

seem rooted in the confidence and dazzle that ought to be its strengths: violence and despair become the usual conclusion of chivalric festivity. Spenser is unlikely to have read the *Arcadia* until late in the composition of *The Faerie Queene* – there is little suggestion of influence until the pastoral retreat of Spenser’s sixth and last completed book – but he did not need to read Sidney to see that collapsed chivalric compromise. Coming from a similar Protestant humanist education, and sharing many of the same poetic concerns, he would have understood the doubts cast on romance. The dangers of original sin, and the unruly elements of knighthood, are evident in *The Faerie Queene* itself. If Spenser’s chivalry was not to be crippled by that knowledge, those problems had to be resolved.

i the unruliness of romance

As its title suggests, *The Faerie Queene* shares the dreamlike, fairy-tale atmosphere of medieval chivalric tales, Auerbach’s world without political or historical motivation. This is not to say that it is an apolitical poem – it is anything but – only that, like medieval romances, it takes place entirely in a world of adventure. William Gladstone noted, on first reading the *Faerie Queene*, “N.B. No locality”.⁵⁹ We are not confronted with the distinct kingdoms of the *Arcadia*: it is all deeds and forests, and its heroes do not directly confront issues of government. Political reality pursued Pyrocles and Musidorus through

⁵⁸ Richard McCoy. *The Rites of Knighthood*, 87.

romance battles and pastoral retreat, but Spenser's knights are permitted a much greater degree of chivalric freedom. Richard Helgerson and Richard McCoy have suggested that the undisciplined nature of romance allowed Spenser to give his knights remarkable authority outside the structures of monarchical power.⁶⁰ The whole of *The Faerie Queene* takes place away from Gloriana's court. Just as Daniel kept failing to write the final triumph of Tudor authority, Spenser never quite shows us Gloriana enthroned; the Faerie Queene herself goes on receding throughout the poem. The meandering narratives of romance permit the kind of aristocratic freedom that Sidney kept restricting. In resisting endings the romance avoids, not defeat by foreign power, but the overbearing authority of a newly centralised state.

Analysing the political implications of romance form, Helgerson turns to Tasso and to the Italian quarrel between epic and romance. In the *Gerusalemme* the formal purity of epic is matched to the united authority of an imperial state. As the *Discorsi* state, "the most excellent poem belongs exclusively to the most excellent form of government",⁶¹ and that for Tasso was not only monarchy but an authoritative Christian monarchy, religion and politics linked by counter-Reformation insistence on obedience to church and empire. The connection between state and form is underlined in Tasso's own allegory of the plot, in which Jerusalem is the goal of civic virtue and Rinaldo, the rebellious and highly

⁵⁹ Willy Maley, *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture and Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1997) 80.

⁶⁰ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 48-49; McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood*, 135-36.

romantic knight whose presence is essential to the crusade, is a passion that must be restrained and directed to worthy ends. (It is no accident that Tasso should be vital to Spenser's second book, the Legend "of Temperaunce" and self-restraint, just as the influence of Ariosto is most obvious in the third and fourth books. those most concerned with love.) That process of correction, suggests Helgerson, made the political implications of romance and epic genres explicit even in England, where the Italian generic debate was not well known. By writing in the freer, Ariostan form of heroic romance, Spenser presents a kind of aristocratic independence:

...Spenser's image of chivalric multiplicity also represents a form of political organization in which the private initiative and private *virtù* ...of individual aristocratic champions plays an exceptionally large part. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Spenser makes his poem the implicit advocate of a partially refeudalized English polity... Setting Tasso's poem next to Spenser's, anyone could see, as I think Spenser himself saw, how powerful and how powerfully significant his variance from the epic and its statist ideology really was.⁶²

Romance is inherently unruly, and Spenser's chivalric form gives his knightly heroes plenty of scope for an autonomy they did not enjoy at Elizabeth's court. It is significant, however, that the knights of *The Faerie Queene* are able sustain that independence. The revised *Arcadia* should have given Pyrocles and Musidorus similar opportunities, but ended by linking chivalry to catastrophe. That final collapse is characteristic of Elizabethan attempts to return to honour culture. It was hard for Elizabethans to overcome an ideal of obedience that had

⁶¹ Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 34, 37.

⁶² Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 54.

been accepted and internalised. When they tried, the idea of duty readily reasserted itself. Even the Earl of Essex, who pushed aristocratic freedoms to their limits before taking to open revolt, could not sustain his own claims to authority. As Mervyn James has shown, the sense that honour was derived from the crown made it impossible to consider rebellion, even for honour motives, without “divided mind and uncertain purpose”. The aggressive cult of honour around Essex was “both dissident and conformist”.⁶³ The condemned Essex abandoned honour for providentialist religion, declaring that “God of his mercy hath opened my eyes, and made me see my sin, my offence, and so touched my heart as I hate it, both in myself and others”.⁶⁴ The circumstances of their imprisonment are utterly different, but Essex’s Protestant diction, with its reference to the touched heart, has echoes of Pamela’s.

The pressures of obedience, of state authority, of Protestant humanism made it hard to maintain the romance freedom that Ariosto had achieved. Chivalric independence could present and justify “a partially refeudalized English polity”, but even those who advocated greater autonomy found it hard to do so consistently. In literary terms, rather than those of political action, Elizabethan poets suffered a similar loss of confidence.

The romance structure of *The Faerie Queene* goes some way to resolving the problem of knightly autonomy. As it is described in the letter to Raleigh,

⁶³ James, 442.

⁶⁴ James, 455.

Gloriana's feast provides the action with a standard romance framing device, familiar from *Gawain and the Green Knight* to the *Orlando Innamorato* (though not, it should be noted, from the *Furioso*). Knights leave the court for individual adventure, alone and independent, but sanctioned by the monarch. Gloriana is a supportive presence who justifies aristocratic autonomy. Or rather, a supportive absence: where Arthurian quests began and ended at court, Gloriana's feast, like the Faerie Queene herself, goes on receding. By starting in media res, Spenser avoids an opening scene, and his poem never reaches the promised account of the "Annuall feaste [lasting] xii. dayes, vppon which xii. seuerall dayes, the occasions of the xii. seuerall adventures hapned". As the poem stands, the errant knights have the blessing of authority, but are subject to none of its restrictions.⁶⁵

That means that Spenser's knights are not in fact digressive: their wanderings have official approval. As Helgerson points out, this is "only the loosest and most intermittent control over the action", giving Spenser's knights the kind of freedom that Elizabeth's disgruntled courtiers dreamed of. It is important, however, that *The Faerie Queene* finds a means of achieving that freedom without the dereliction of duty, and the guilt, that so undermined Sidney's romance. There are many wrong turnings in *The Faerie Queene*, and some dangerously seductive bowers, but there is nothing like Ariosto's, or Tasso's, opposition of duty and desire. There is no siege of Paris waiting for the Redcrosse Knight, and although he is duped into leaving Una it is not for the

⁶⁵ 738. That balance is strained in the course of the later books: the Faerie Queene's orders become restrictive, as in the recall of Artegall.

sake of some more immediate adventure. Spenser's romance, in fact, is further into the romance forest than those of his Italian predecessors: he does not adopt the form, implicit in the *Furioso* and much developed in the *Gerusalemme*, of an epic central action with romance digressions.

ii Romance as epic

In Spenser the split between epic and chivalric romance is much less radical than in cinquecento poetry: the articulation of the two genres does not necessarily lead to an either/or choice between them. On the contrary, romance itself becomes epic: public service is carried out in the private adventures of knights. The two forms may have been imagined as opposites in the Harvey correspondence, as they are in the *Gerusalemme*, but in *The Faerie Queene* they can be reconciled. Colin Burrow has shown that Spenser tries "to contain the digressive force of love by allegorically redirecting it towards images of virtuous nobility... Such a fusion of love and honour into the composite motive 'love of honour' seems to be the serenely idealistic unifying purpose of *The Faerie Queene*."⁶⁶ This is a very English variation on the chivalric theme of love as motivation. It runs through court festivities, which presented Elizabeth as a lady of romance or Petrarchan love. Many male aristocrats found it hard to be subject to a female monarch; courtly fantasy softened the duty of submission and, as in Arthur's search for Gloriana in Spenser's poem, cast public service as a private and emotion-led quest. As Burrow and Paul Alpers have pointed out, the same

atmosphere affected Harington's *Furioso* translation. In Italian allegories, Angelica's love for Medoro was read as the humiliation of a proud woman; Harington sees her as "honor, which braue men hunt after, by blood, and battells, and many hardie feats, and miss it, but a good servant with faith and gratefulnessse to his Lord gets it".⁶⁷ Elizabethan honour culture led to the Accession Day Tilts as well as to Essex's rebellion: English attempts to moralise honour as public service meant that the private actions of romance could become the inspiration for public service. The romance and epic strands of Spenser's Italian models could be reconciled.

Spenser's proem, indeed, insists on the reconciliation, carefully elevating romance itself to the status of a Virgilian genre:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
 As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,
 Am now enforst a far vnfitter tasked,
 For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
 And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds:
 Whose prayses hauing slept in silence long,
 Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds
 To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:
 Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.

This is Spenser's proclamation of Virgilian ambition. His imitation takes in not only "arma virumque cano" but the preliminary lines describing the poet's career, "Ille ego, qui quondam...", which were believed to be by Virgil and were

⁶⁶ Burrow, *Epic Romance*, 103.

⁶⁷ Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso translated into English Heroical Verse by Sir John Harington* (1591), ed. Robert McNulty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 218. Burrow, *Epic Romance*, 155-56; Paul Alpers, *The Poetry of the Faerie Queene* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 187 and n.

printed at the start of sixteenth-century editions of the *Aeneid*. The image of the poetic career, so important in Helgerson's reading of Spenser's "laureate" ambitions, is the first of a series of classical imitations, announcing *The Faerie Queene* as a public poem. The poet's Virgilian transition from pastoral to epic takes up the first four lines; Spenser breaks away from the *Aeneid* in the fifth, as he introduces the "Knights and Ladies" of Ariostan romance, itself a modification of "arma virumque". That shift from one model to another is a moment of imitation and independence. As Spenser turns from Virgil to Ariosto, the form of his stanza breaks away from Ariosto's ottava rima into Spenser's own stanza. As Thomas H. Cain has suggested, Spenser "conspicuously begins to imitate Ariosto's matter at the exact point where he begins to overgo Ariosto's form".⁶⁸

Such a layering of influence slides between genres with disconcerting freedom. The shift from pastoral to heroic leads not to classical epic, but into romance; Spenser's promise of Virgilian trumpets ends in chivalry. That slide is accomplished smoothly; the change in the rhyme scheme emphasises the subject matter, but it is an emphasis rather than a break. There is no sense of tension between the "fierce warres and faithfull loues", and both can "moralize" the poet's song. The *Faerie Queene* can, in its proem at least, include softer emotions, and indeed women, without undermining the martial strength of epic.

Epic Romance, 155-56; Paul Alpers, *The Poetry of the Faerie Queene* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 187 and n.

⁶⁸ Thomas H. Cain, *Praise in The Faerie Queene* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 39.

In the next stanza Spenser calls his muse to “sharpen my dull tong” to describe Arthur’s search for Gloriana. This is at once a love story and a quest for magnificence, and for Spenser it qualifies as a grand public subject, a theme worth framing with the invocation to the muses traditional in heroic poetry. This is romance as heroic genre, unshadowed by worries about its formal or moral shortcomings.

The expansion of Ariosto’s ottava rima demonstrates that newly epic claim. The final alexandrine gives each stanza a heroic dimension. There is a resounding authority in “Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song”, as there is in Arthur’s “That gaue vnto vs all, what euer good we haue”. John Hollander has shown that, even in other verse forms, Spenser tends to use the alexandrine to close or to act as a refrain, and traces the persistent influence of that “cadential” effect through Dryden, who argued that the long line gave “a certain majesty to the verse... and stops the sense from overflowing into another line” and onwards.⁶⁹ What William Empson called the “final solemnity of the alexandrine” gives a certain gravity to what is still a romance stanza; Spenser literally overgoes Ariosto, and his addition is a different kind of heroic confidence. It was precisely the consideration of Spenser’s stanza that prompted Empson’s description of the *Faerie Queene*’s mingled content:

...he can pour into the even dreamwork of his fairyland Christian, classical and chivalrous materials with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of

⁶⁹ Hollander, *Melodious Guile*, 171-73. As Hollander points out, the cadential alexandrine was a convention finally mocked by Pope in his *Essay on Criticism*: “Then, at the last and only couplet fraught / With some unmeaning thing they call a thought, / A needless Alexandrine ends the Song / That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.”

holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with each other, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind.⁷⁰

There is a parallel to this adaptation of Ariosto's stanza in Spenser's use of romance form. *The Faerie Queene* is a drifting chivalric romance, with its knights wandering from Gloriana's court, its deferred endings and its interlaced narratives. Around and through that loose chivalric structure there is a clearly defined framework of separate books, with the letter to Raleigh promising a new hero for each of the twelve Aristotelian virtues. The division into books gives the poem a sharpness, an epic definition not to be found in the *Furioso*; a twelve-part structure is a Homeric as well as an Aristotelian plan. However, each book comes to a conclusion that is not a conclusion, a formal ending that in fact emphasises a romance endlessness and contingency. The marriage of Redcrosse and Una is the end of the first book, but it will not be achieved for another six years. If the poem were not divided into books, those major deferrals would be much less obvious; in an episodic, interlaced romance, every story is subject to interruption. Spenser's structure, on the contrary, imposes endings but makes them inconclusive.

In *The Faerie Queene*, then, romance and epic are closely interwoven. Spenser's form mingles genres, on the large and the small scale, providing both conclusion and incompleteness throughout the poem. Synthesis is a Spenserian characteristic; we have already seen how many of the nation-writing forms of the

⁷⁰ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1934, rpt. with revisions, London: New

1580s and 1590s turn up in the course of *The Faerie Queene*. Quite apart from epic and romance, it includes chronicle history, myth, Protestant providentialism, the literature of maritime expansion and colonialism, the understanding of the land, chorographies and maps. A mixture of Virgil and Ariosto is part of a larger Spenserian inclusiveness. Given the reinventions of Virgil by Ariosto, Tasso and their predecessors, it is also part of the Italian romance tradition.

The romances of the renaissance often mingled classical and chivalric material – Boiardo and Pulci drew on their classical educations before Ariosto did – but genre boundaries remained clear. As we have seen, the members of the Italian academies spent much of the sixteenth century underlining the differences as they fought over the application of Aristotelian rules. Even before the controversies of the *dotti*, the romancers showed an exact awareness of classical and romance traditions, and of the differences between them. Ariosto's opening stanza, like Spenser's, moves between genres, but in the *Furioso* imitation of Virgil marks a conscious break with classical epic, *arma virumque* overwhelmed by romance multiplicity.

This playfulness did not survive the later cinquecento's drawing of critical battle lines. For Tasso, to slip into romance is to abandon the path of virtue. The first stanza of the *Gerusalemme*, setting out Tasso's stall in romance epic, can be seen as a correction of the *Furioso*'s opening extravaganza, and of Virgil too:

Canto l'arme pietose e 'l capitano
 che 'l gran sepolcro liberò di Cristo:
 molto egli oprò co 'l senno e con la mano,
 molto soffrì nel glorioso acquisto:
 e in van l'Inferno vi s'oppose, e in vano
 s'armò d'Asia e di Libia il popol misto;
 il Ciel gli diè favore, e sotto a i santi
 segni ridusse i suoi compagni erranti.⁷¹

Tasso's version insists on a chastened and newly Christian variety of epic romance. This is *arma virumque* and *Le donne, i cavallier* corrected, with pious arms and an orderly "capitano", with the regulated authority of an officer, as hero. The whole movement of Tasso's stanza keeps us on the straight and narrow of a single subject, even if his (first) text wanders rather wider than that. Nothing is left open-ended; where Ariosto listed actions without mentioning their conclusions, the *Gerusalemme*, like the *Aeneid*, promises its hero's success. Suspense is not a question: this is a known story. We read to find out how and why Goffredo succeeds, what lessons his triumph can teach us, not how it all turned out in the end. Tasso not only returns to the classical model, but swipes at his romance predecessor. The melange associated with romance is, here, left to the hellish variety of the Asian hordes. The knights "erranti" need, and get, cutting down to size; as Patricia Parker has pointed out, they are literally reduced.⁷² That unity is maintained in the following stanzas, which correctly

⁷¹ Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, ed. Riccardo Rugani (Florence: G.C. Sansoni Editore, 1968) I, 1. "The sacred armies and the godly knight / That the great sepulchre of Christ did free / I sing; much wrought his valour and foresight, / And in that glorious war much suffer'd he: / In vain `gainst him did hell oppose her might / In vain the Turks and Morians armed be; / His soldiers wild, to brawls and mutines prest, / Reduced he to peace; so heaven him blessed." Edward Fairfax translation, ed. Roberto Weiss (London: Centaur Press, 1962).

⁷² Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979) 61.

invoke the muse, praise his patrons and urge readers to imitate the piety of Goffredo (though not, of course, the messiness of the other knights.) The *Gerusalemme* does respond to romance, but it contains the chivalric and the marvellous, with difficulty, within its epic structure.

The Faerie Queene does follow Ariosto's model, with its unfinished romance freedoms. In doing so, it draws on a tradition that was very clear about the difference between epic and romance. For the Italians, and especially for Italians writing after the Reformation and the rediscovery of Aristotle, romance could be characterised as a kind of anti-epic. It might be embraced or rejected on those grounds, but it certainly could not be mistaken for Virgilian classicism. For Spenser romance and epic, both heroic genres, are capable of being reconciled. Tasso may set up a conflict between epic and romance, an ideological struggle that epic must win, but Spenser does not. In the proem, at least, the two forms are reconciled so smoothly that there is no break. "Fierce warres and faithfull loues do not contradict each other"; on the contrary, both moralise the poet's song. Love and war, romance and epic, are presented on equal terms. In his use of both genres, Spenser fits into an established tradition, but the calm assurance with which he leads the trumpets of epic into Ariosto's audaci imprese is entirely new.

iii **English romance epic: difficulties**

In one sense, that readiness to blend epic and romance is characteristically English. We have seen that English poetic theorists were largely untroubled by Aristotelian precepts. Spenser's own "Letter of the authors" lists Homer, Virgil, Ariosto and Tasso as his models. Sidney's *Defense* puts Greek and Italian romances, Heliodorus and Ariosto, on the same level as Virgil in the category of heroic poetry, a category based on scale rather than on the Aristotelian principles used in Italian academies. England, as a country that had its renaissance late, was ready to accept European imitations of Virgil as a further canon to beside that of the ancients; generic distinctions were much less important than they were to Italian critics. Italy, after all, had already produced successful examples of so many forms. There was no question that the Italians could write poetry, only whether they could do so within Aristotelian rules. The English, more concerned to prove that English poetry was not a contradiction in terms, were much readier to accept successful poems as worthy models. The ferocious Italian arguments of generic distinction did not reach sixteenth-century England.

That is not to say that distinctions – between genres, between ancients and moderns – were entirely ignored. Poets were vividly aware of the differences between vernacular and classical art. English struggles with quantitative verse failed as badly as Italian attempts to write regulated epic. Though English poets were untroubled by Aristotelian definitions of genre, they still found local traditions awkward. Spenser and Sidney did not turn back to medieval romance, but to Ariosto and to the *Amadis*. Even these foreign models, however highly

praised, are not quite on the level of the ancients. Spenser could cite Tasso with Homer, the *Furioso* with the *Aeneid*, but it is Ariosto whom he tried to overgo – a decision that reflects both his closeness to the model of the *Furioso* and the fact that Virgil is too eminent an authority to be bettered.

English poets were too vividly aware that their vernacular had a long way to go before it could surpass the Italians. As Sidney's *Defense* showed, there was an alarming history of native poetic inadequacy – and Sidney made the native canon look worse by excluding local romance writers: he will consider *Gorboduc* but not Malory. Hobgoblin dangers still clung to romance, and not least to its concern for love as motive. Sidney had admitted that “wanton sinfulness, and lustfull love” was “the principall if not onely abuse” of poetry, and that “even to the *Heroical*, *Cupid* hath ambitiously climed”.⁷³ His own poetic practice showed the heroic derailed by love – when it was not derailed by original sin. Romance was problematic because it was so concerned with private motivations – although those could be turned to public service – and simply because it was fiction. Where Italians had discussed the best way of writing poetry in Italian, and du Bellay had defended French as a poetic language, Sidney felt obliged to defend poetry itself.

Those doubts are contained within an essentially Protestant world view: the poets most concerned with the vernacular had all had Protestant humanist educations. Even before the reformation, northern humanists were expressing

vigorous doubts about the morality of romance. Erasmus complained that “‘Arthurs and Lancelots’...smack of tyranny and are moreover rude... [and] foolish”; Protestants vehemently added complaints about Papist romances.⁷⁴ In *The Anatomie of Absurditie* Thomas Nashe echoed Ascham by condemning

The fantasticall dreames of those exiled Abbie-lubbers, from whose idle pens proceeded those worne out impressions of the feyned no where acts, of Arthur of the rounde table, Arthur of litle Brittain, sir Tristram, Hewon of Burdeaux, the Squire of low degree, the foure sons of Amon, with infinite others. It is not of my yeeres nor studie to censure these mens foolerie more theologicallie, but to shew how they to no Common-wealth commoditie, tosse ouer their troubled imaginations to haue the praise of the learning which they lack.⁷⁵

Nashe’s familiarity with so many romance heroes does suggest that he had read them. He also suggests, however, the drawbacks of romance from a Protestant perspective. Court festivity might make chivalry fashionable, Sidney’s example might lend it respectability, but it could still be attacked for Catholic links and – a serious difficulty still for English poets – as profitless frivolities, the product of idleness. Spenser’s serious conception of the poetic career helped to overcome the idea that poetry was “idle” and useless, no good to the “Common-wealth”, but Nashe’s complaints – published a year before the 1590 instalment of *The Faerie Queene* – suggest how much had to be overcome. The association with Catholicism lurked long in English Protestant thinking: Spenser’s light reference

⁷³ *Prose Works*, III, 30.

⁷⁴ Robert P. Adams, “Bold Bawdry and Open Manslaughter: The English New Humanist Attack on Medieval Romance”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* XXIII (1959-60) 33-49, 34.

⁷⁵ *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, 5 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966) 11.

to the Grail in his history canto prompted Thomas Wharton to observe in 1754 that “our author has taken notice of a superstitious tradition”.⁷⁶

Quite apart from the lingering doubts of fiction and Catholicism, chivalry was morally doubtful from a Protestant point of view. The romance world of adventure assumes an independent, confident and self-reliant knight, a figure wholly at odds with Calvinist ideas of original sin. The forward Protestant faction was especially associated with the Elizabethan chivalric revival, in both its festive and literary forms, but that involvement had always been contradictory. Chivalry was used to justify an active Protestant position. Its aggression implied readiness for martial action, ideally in a policy of anti-Catholic land wars, and its individualism offered hopes of independent action while Elizabeth refused to commit herself and England to the cause.

In practice, then, the very people who embraced chivalric romance, with its unruliness and insubordination, were those with most reason to distrust those qualities. Chivalry was both associated with reformed religion and cast down by it. Individualism seemed to serve the Protestant cause better than obedience; but obedience, especially in this English context, was a godly as well as a civic virtue. However much events in Europe called to action, Protestant understanding of original sin reprovved on any reliance on human capability.

⁷⁶ *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Greenlaw et al, 11 vols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932-49) II, 326.

Elizabeth's reluctance to employ these would-be knightly courtiers in a Protestant crusade did not make the presentation of honourable service easier.

As Sidney found in writing the *Arcadia*, the aspirations of heroic action collapsed in the polluted realities of a fallen world. A generation of English poets was caught in this bind, and in a specifically literary version of it. The men best-prepared by education for a humanist vernacular project were most aware of the dangers of fiction; they had spent that education being warned against them. In heroic forms, poetry that set out to celebrate human action, that moral doubt applied most bitterly. Interpretation of Elizabethan knighthood has tended, in its concentration on the claims of aristocrats (and of poets) to chivalric autonomy, to ignore the pressures of original sin on romance. Those pressures are, however, vividly present in these texts. In Sidney's case, the problem drives to failure: the only successful heroism is offstage or carried out in the form of passive resistance. Those difficulties suggest that, while honour as service should justify heroic action, that solution is both hard to imagine and less inspiring than the rogue glamour of the knight errant.

Those pressures are there in *The Faerie Queene*. Approval from the distant Gloriana and the transformation of love into a motive for honour both create space for virtuous chivalric adventure. By the later books, however, the balance becomes strained. When Artegall is recalled, the chivalric quest is subjected to the strains of political reality, with restrictive orders pursuing him into the

romance world. In the restriction of Artegall Spenser does suggest that achievement of the first books has slipped, that Faerie government is not up to the job. But it also suggests that heroism – however hedged around by the inadequacies of government policy – has been made possible. An Artegall, even compromised and recalled, is in a much stronger position than an Amphialus or even a Musidorus: his achievements may be limited, but they have not been made impossible. *The Faerie Queene* does present successful heroic action.

To achieve this much, Spenser needed to come to terms not only with the dangers of fiction, not only with the question of obedience, but with original sin. Like Ariosto, like Sidney, Spenser needed to deal with the failure of human action, to write an epic about something other than conquest. A Protestant English poet did not have to deal with a fragmented nation to deal, but he did have to deal with the limitations of human virtue.

4 England, romance and the fallen world

How does Spenser reconcile heroic action with the knowledge of human sinfulness? In *The Faerie Queene* that conflict is acknowledged. The tensions between human heroism and its limits are central to the poem. The forests of *The Faerie Queene* are as wayward, entrancing and dangerous as disapproving moralists could have painted them: the unruliness and confusion of romance become emblematic of the world's corruption. Violence, bold bawdry and

unravelling plots are still a source of romance wonders, but they also create a terrifying awareness of humanity's fallen state.

Spenser was not the only sixteenth-century poet to make romance represent human sinfulness. In the *Gerusalemme Liberata* romance digressions are a departure from a central crusade which Tasso himself allegorised as civic virtue. Both are plainly post-Reformation poems, but their use of romance is actually opposed. Tasso's purified romance corrects the moral content and the formal organisation of the *Furioso* model. In both cases, the aim is obedience: to the strictures of neo-Aristotelian criticism, to the authority of church and state. On these terms, romance digression is rebellious, and must be contained within the dignified, regular structure of the poem as a whole. That process of regulation is not easy – from very early in the *Gerusalemme*'s history, readers have wondered if Tasso really was on the side of the epic – but it is clear. The road to Jerusalem is hard, but it is plainly marked. Armida's bower, and the other temptations of lust, anger and insubordination, may be hard to resist; but we always know them for what they are. Romance temptation is defined by the surrounding epic framework.

For Spenser, on the contrary, romance is a temptation with no obvious alternative. The right path is not only hard to follow, it is hard to find. Even in the Legend of Temperance, the book most influenced by the *Gerusalemme* and the closest to offering systematic rules of behaviour, temptation and right behaviour are often strangely difficult to define. Spenser's Bower of Blisse is

closely modelled on Armida's garden, and in both cases knights set out to bring a hero back from the dangers of idle dalliance. The gate of Armida's bower is decorated with images:

Mirasi qui fra le meonie ancelle
 Favoleggiar con la conocchia Alcide.
 Se l'inferno espugnò, resse le stelle,
 Or torce il fuso; Amor sel guarda, e ride...⁷⁷

Besides Hercules, the gate shows Antony at the battle of Actium, ready to die in Cleopatra's lap; Tasso might have added another classical parallel. Aeneas with Dido. These are straightforward depictions of men abandoning power and duty for the sake of women and love: *arma virumque* left for *le donne, gli amori*. In Tasso's account, Hercules is worse than feminised by Iole's demands. In giving in to her he has abandoned the active life, which is imagined not only as virtuous but as implicitly Christian. The reference to hell casts Tasso's Alcide as another of the warriors fighting against the infernal forces – as Rinaldo, who is languishing in the garden, should be fighting. The (much longer) account of Antony and Cleopatra descends from the battle of Actium on the shield of Virgil's Aeneas, in which the diverse and feminised forces of the east opposed the united martial strength of Augustus.⁷⁸ The gate of Armida's bower proclaims the power she has over Rinaldo, and its implications for Goffredo's crusade. The Bower of Blisse has a gate, too, and it too is illustrated with classical images.

⁷⁷ "Alcides there sat telling tales, and spun / Among the feeble troops of damsels mild; / (He that the fiery gates of hell had won, / And heav'n upheld); false love stood by and smiled..." *Gerusalemme Liberata*, 16,3.

⁷⁸ *Aeneid*, 8, 675-728. David Quint discusses the oppositions – East and West, unity and diversity, male and female – set up at Virgil's Actium, *Epic and Empire*, 24-29.

But the story it tells, confusingly, is that of Jason and Medea. A.C. Hamilton has glossed this image with reference to the seventeenth-century mythographer Natale Comes, who argued that Jason succumbed to voluptuous desire.⁷⁹ This is certainly what happens to Acrasia's lovers, but it does not make a clearly-pointed moral. Medea represents a dangerous power and sensuality, in which Jason is implicated but from which he has little power to save himself. If Jason and Medea demonstrate the dangers of lust, they make a complicated example, one that does not suggest any alternative to its temptations. There is no virtuous alternative, like Augustus or the earlier career of Hercules, to oppose them. The absence of obvious moral appears even more clearly in Verdant, the young man Guyon wrests from Acrasia's clutches. He has been wasting "His dayes, his goods, his bodie" in idle lust but, once released, he doesn't have a quest to go to (II,xii,80). Acrasia's seductions are not designed to thwart a particular endeavour; they are a danger inherent in the world.

Tasso's sharply-focused moral universe is shaped by the counter-Reformation. In the *Gerusalemme*, epic and romance embody a clear-cut distinction between a virtuous and explicitly obedient form of behaviour, and the temptations of resisting it. Spenser's romance world has no such oppositions; it is a blurred, fallen Faerie land in which the false Duessa cannot be distinguished from the true Una. The difference is in fact between definitions of Christianity, between the Catholic church's post-Council of Trent concern for orthodoxy and regulated behaviour, and a Calvinist theology of predestination which explicitly

⁷⁹ Note to II,xii, 44. Hamilton ed., *The Faerie Queene*, 262.

rejected salvation through works. In a Protestant fallen world, human reason is too corrupt to recognise Truth; only faith can free humanity from its corrupt nature. Confusions of vision run through *The Faerie Queene*. Duessa – who is very often described as a “goodly” lady – and Archimago reappear in different guises. The Redcrosse knight is confused first by a false spirit disguised as Una and then by another disguised as her supposed lover. Duessa obscures the sight not just of Redcrosse but of Fradubio, casting a cloud over the real beauty of his lady Fraelissa. *The Faerie Queene* is, famously, an intensely visual poem. It is also a poem in which failing human sight cannot be trusted. Patricia Parker describes a similar process in the *Furioso*:

Ariosto, like Spenser after him, often introduces the characters of his poem by the way in which they first appear to other characters, and the deceptive nature of appearance, and the errors it leads to, become part of the labyrinthine “selva oscura”.⁸⁰

For Spenser that failure suggests the blindness of sin, but it is articulated in romance terms. Those examples are from Book I, the Legend of Holinesse, in which questions of faith are closest to the surface, but the confusions are characteristic of the poem as a whole. Redcrosse is impersonated by Archimago at the start of the second book; the knights of the third seem incapable of telling the true from the false Florimell. Spenser also shows a Calvinist distrust of works; the actions of his knights are sometimes only externally virtuous. After losing Una, the Redcrosse knight begins his slide into sin. His fight with the Saracen Sans Joy is, on the face of it, a virtuous action. Spenser’s pagans have

⁸⁰ Parker, *Inescapable Romance*, 22.

no redeeming features: in terms of works, the defeat of this Saracen might be a triumph for Redcrosse. Since it happens at the House of Pride, and is followed by Redcrosse paying court to Lucifera, it is part of his slide into sin. There are no clear rules, no formula to follow. If Redcrosse is one of the elect, justified by faith, his battle with the Saracen will be just. If not, his actions will inevitably be sinful, however virtuous they appear to be.

The moral confusion of fallen humanity is embodied in Spenser's romance world. All the events described above, presenting human lack of vision and the failure of works without faith, are intensely romantic moments: combats, enchantments, digressions, bowers. Redcrosse's descent into pride is shown through his behaviour in single combat. Spenser's knights set out, as chivalric heroes had always set out, through tangled forests and unmarked paths. They have strange encounters on the way, which may or may not be explained as the narrative continues. This digressive, fluid landscape is familiar from the *Furioso*, but it has become allegorical. The forest is still a place for adventure and testing, still at a remove from literal political existence, but it has become spiritual proving. The action of *The Faerie Queene*, indeed, is markedly less literal than that of the *Furioso* or the *Arcadia*. Ariosto's battles, pieced together from contemporary warfare and classical texts, are exact campaigns; in his single combats blow logically follows blow. Sidney, a gifted performer in tournaments, lingers over his literary duels, lavishing attention on details of horsemanship and swordplay. Spenser is notoriously cavalier about such matters: at one point

Calidore with “no weapon, but his shepherds hooke”, manages to decapitate a monster (VI,x,36).⁸¹ Spenserian fights are more psychological than physical. When the poem does linger over a combat, as in Redcrosse’s fight with the dragon, individual blows usually have allegorical significance, with every ache related to the knight’s spiritual condition.⁸² Spenser’s battles are not about fighting. This is a reinvention of romance’s fairy-tale atmosphere, with its distance from political and now from physical reality: even combat, one of the more precisely realistic elements of medieval romance, has become metaphorical.

Finally, the poem’s repeated deferrals have a Christian dimension. Helgerson and McCoy are right to see the receding figure of the Faerie Queene in political terms; an absent Gloriana allows knightly independence as a present Elizabeth did not. The triumph of the centralised state is not, however, the only thing deferred in *The Faerie Queene*. All the work’s major endings – many of them much desired – are left unwritten. This is a poem of betrothals, not of weddings. The process of deferral is a romance characteristic, but here those postponements are not necessarily evasive. Spenser’s poem looks forward repeatedly to salvation; until the apocalypse – another anticipated event – resolution is not possible on earth. We don’t reach Gloriana for political reasons, but when Redcrosse can’t marry Una it’s a matter of theology. The

⁸¹ Michael West, ‘Spenser and the Renaissance Ideal of Christian Heroism’. *PMLA* 88 (1973) 1013-32, 1018-1020.

⁸² Carol V. Kaske, ‘The Dragon’s Spark and Sting and the Structure of Red-Cross’s Dragon-fight: *The Faerie Queene*, I, xi-xii.’ In A.C. Hamilton, ed., *Essential Articles for the study of Edmund Spenser*, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1972) 425-446.

contingency of romance, the anti-teleological process, is fallen humanity's view of a confused and confusing universe; its ever deferred goals are the promise of salvation. The betrothal ceremony of Una and Redcrosse echoes the marriage of Christ to the church in Revelation: conclusion must wait until the Last Days. In fact, this wedding is layered with postponements: it anticipates the apocalypse, but on an immediate level it must be deferred until Redcrosse has fulfilled his promise to fight in the Faerie Queene's wars against the pagan king. Those wars are an ideal for a Protestant faction kept kicking their heels while Elizabeth refused to commit herself. They are also the public service that never breaks into the private action of *The Faerie Queene*, another example of the political insubordination that Helgerson finds in the poem.⁸³ Finally, also deferred until after the wars and therefore linked to the postponed marriage there is Redcrosse's vision of

The new *Hierusalem*, that God has built
 For those to dwell in, that are chosen his,
 His chosen people purg'd from sinfull guilt... (I,x,57)

The contingency of romance becomes the anticipation of the divine.

For a poet raised in a Protestant English tradition, this is an intensely national issue. God's "chosen people" recalls the view of some English Protestants that theirs was a chosen nation, a new Israel. Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, an essential text of Elizabethan Protestantism, first focused attention on England's martyrs and then, in its revised reprintings, fitted their sufferings

⁸³ Helgerson. *Forms of Nationhood*, 49.

into an apocalyptic scheme of history that gave England a remarkably prominent role. Claims to chosen nationhood should not be taken absolutely or exclusively: the Protestants who implied or stated England's special destiny tended to be those advocating intervention for the Protestant cause abroad. Nevertheless, the identification of patriotism and the reformed religion did encourage the feeling that England had a special place in the divine plan. At the start of Elizabeth's reign, John Aylmer urged Englishmen to protect their new queen against Catholic invasion:

For you fight not only in the quarel of your country: but also and chieflye in the defence of hys true religion, and of hys deare sonne Christe, not against men of the same religcion, which might make theuent doubtful, but againste his ennemies...

In such a quarrel "God, and al his army of angels" will help the English cause; a marginal note to this passage proclaims that "God is English".⁸⁴ In its embodiment of Calvinist ideas, of a fallen world in which salvation comes not through obedience or works but through grace, Spenser's romance is Protestant nation-writing. Calvinist theology makes the poem's forests tense with moral as well as physical danger; it also makes this an intensely English poem.

5 Knighthood and humanity

The identification of religion, romance and Englishness is most explicit in the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, which builds a history of the English church

into the legend “of Holinesse” and binds both to the story of a dragon-killing knight who was also the patron saint of England. Book I is still the most-read, most discussed section of the poem. Spenser’s afterlife as a patriotic author – an afterlife which lasted well into the twentieth century – was entirely dominated by it. It is Book I, and not the complete (incomplete) poem, that was retold as improving, romantic reading for the children of the British Empire; only Book I was, or could have been, put on stage as a patriotic ballet during the second world war.⁸⁵ In this first book Spenser most plainly addresses the questions of heroism and original sin, the problem that had undermined Sidney’s heroes in the *Arcadia*. It is no coincidence that his response to the problem should be explicitly patriotic. Like most of the writers of England’s vernacular project, Spenser was writing from within a Protestant tradition that associated the reformed religion with English patriotism. English reports of godly heroism were very ready to shade into patriotism, as in the case of Sidney’s Pamela. A heroism that could express the English nation had to be godly.

That is evident in Spenser’s choice of hero: Saint George is both as English and as chivalric as possible. St. George, the patron of the Order of the Garter as

⁸⁴ John Aylmer, *An harborovve for faithfvll and trevve subiectes*. The English experience series. (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrum, 1972).

⁸⁵ The stories of Una and the Lion and of St. George and the Dragon are retold in Andrew Lang, *Red Book of Romance* (London: Longman’s, Green & co, 1905). In 1943 the choreographer Frederick Ashton was given leave from the R.A.F. to create *The Quest*, with Margot Fonteyn as Una and Robert Helpmann as the Red Cross Knight. The music was by William Walton, who subsequently scored Olivier’s morale-boosting film of *Henry V*. Ashton and his collaborators did not even consider other books of *The Faerie Queene*, although – in response to the wartime shortage of male dancers – Ashton gave Lucifera (Moira Shearer) a court of hermaphrodites apparently imported from Book III. David Vaughan, *Frederick Ashton and his ballets*. (1977; rpt. London: Dance Books, revised 1999) 196-200.

well as of England, was part of the atmosphere of Elizabethan courtly chivalry, of the patriotic romance of Accession Day. There were a few shadows on his chivalric reputation; Edward VI had had the saint removed from the Garter statutes, and although he was reinstated by Mary and maintained by Elizabeth, he remained anomalous: one of the very few saints to survive the English Reformation. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, St. George and his dragon were being allegorised as the Garter knights and "the dreaded Antichrist of Rome".⁸⁶ Spenser's dragon fight, which was certainly part of that allegorical rethink, is not however against a papal dragon. The anti-Catholic imagery running through Book I is attached to figures like Duessa, who rides a seven-headed Beast like that of Revelation while wearing the triple crown of the papacy (I,vii,16-17). By the time the Redcrosse knight has recovered at the House of Holinesse, he faces "that old dragon" Satan of original sin. Spenser does define his Protestant England against a Catholic menace, but the major story of the Redcrosse knight is less these machinations of papal forces than his own fall and recovery through grace.

That insistently Calvinist psychomachia is enacted in the person of the patron saint of England: Spenser could not tie patriotic and religious identity more closely together. This is an identification of the nation with a very Protestant concept of salvation, underlined by the fact that Una, the true church, is also the English church: the historical allegories link her sufferings with those

⁸⁶ Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (1977; rpt. London: Pimlico, 1999) 182.

of the English faith. As the hero and heroine go through various vicissitudes, attacked by sin and by various forces of disbelief, religion and nationhood become intertwined.

Romance is Spenser's means of demonstrating that psychomachia. St. George is, unmistakably, a romance knight: a killer of dragons, a rescuer of ladies, a patron of orders of chivalry. His personal salvation, and through him the salvation of the English nation, is expressed in a chivalric metaphor. This is Spenser's solution to the tension between heroic action and original sin. Knighthood, itself a frail and dubious form of heroism, comes to stand for the frailty of human action, just as the poem's romance qualities are the characteristics of a fallen world. The weaknesses that immobilised Sidney's knights become conscious: chivalry, with its unruliness, its arrogant confidence and its idealism expresses the limited possibilities of earthly heroism. The glamour that still clung to knighthood, even through a sense of original sin, underlies the fact that Spenser, like Sidney before him, was still committed to public action. The corruption of the Fall means that human action is compromised unless upheld by grace, but humanity must still strive for virtue.

The Error episode underlines the extent to which Spenser can use the language and values of romance as a vehicle for these Protestant concerns. Redcrosse and Una are caught in a sudden storm:

Enforst to seek some couert nigh at hand,

A shadie groue not far away they spide,
 That promist ayde the tempest to withstand:
 Whose loftie trees, yclad with sommers pride,
 Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide,
 Not perceable with power of any starre:
 And all within were pathes and alleies wide,
 With footing worne, and leading inward farre:
 Faire harbour that them seemes; so in they entred arre. (I,i,7).

To turn in the forest, and to encounter some adventure there, is an archetypal romance action. Wandering from the main road, Redcrosse and Una might be more leisurely Angelicas, except that their digression has alarming implications beyond the usual promise of a new story. The stanza offers a double vision: this is both a standard narrative beginning and a slip into more than physical danger. The description of the wood is full of hinted warnings. The trees are “loftie”, their implied haughtiness amplified by the reference to “sommers pride”. The forest has already glanced at one of the seven deadly sins. The promised shelter hides “heauens light”, another cause for caution. The many “pathes and alleies” have settled down to a well-worn road that will reappear as the “broad high way that led / All bare through peoples feet” to the House of Pride (I,iv,2). The traditional aspects of the romance forest have become deeply frightening.

Patricia Parker argues that, as they enter the wandering wood, Redcrosse and Una meet with “the romance experience of not knowing where lines are until they have been violated or crossed. Except for the random hint to the wary reader, the famous catalogue of trees does not suggest anything but the ‘delight’ with which ‘they thus beguile the way’ (10,1), until its meaning is perceived too

late and something seemingly innocent suddenly entraps.”⁸⁷ The fluidity and threat of chivalric narrative has become suffused with moral dangers. These romance tensions are maintained throughout the episode. Una warns the knight against a too-confident attack on error:

...therefore your stroke
 Sir knight with-hold, till further triall made.
 Ah Ladie (said he) shame were to reuoke
 The forward footing for an hidden shade:
 Vertue giues herself light, through darkenesse for to wade.

Yea but (quoth she) the peril of this place
 I better wot then you, though now too late
 To wish you backe returne with foule disgrace,
 Yet wisdomes warnes, whilst foot is in the gate,
 This is the wandring wood, this *Errours den*,
 A monster vile, whom God and man does hate:
 Therefore I read beware. (I,i,12-13).

How much this is the language of honour! Spenser sets up a careful balance between the strengths and dangers of self-confidence. Redcrosse’s reliance on his virtue is profoundly unwise in the context of Protestant theology: no Calvinist would accept that “Vertue” can be self-sufficient, and Redcrosse will end by accepting that “His be the praise, that this atchieu’ment wrought / Who made my hand the organ of his might; / More then goodwill to me attribute nought: / For all I did, I did but as I ought.” (II,I,33) This is not to dismiss knightly prowess, or even chivalric honour. Una accepts at least some of Redcrosse’s terms when she admits that turning back would bring him “foule disgrace”. Her advice is not to avoid confrontation, but to prepare for it, to “with-hold” his action until he is ready for it. Of course the knightly Redcrosse, eager to plunge into the

⁸⁷ Parker, Patricia. *Inescapable Romance*, 64-66.

immediate adventure, disagrees: this is exactly the self-assertion that is so important to knighthood. The very questions of heroism – of independence, of accepting human frailty and the need for grace – are cast in terms of honour. This is chivalry as it clearly appeared to Spenser and his generation: something both entrancing and dangerous.

Theological doubts were not new in chivalric texts. The Grail story is a wholesale attempt to reform romance by substituting the virginal Galahad and his Christian values for the violence and bold bawdry of the round table. In one adventure, the great Lancelot fails by being chivalrous: coming suddenly upon a battle, he helps “the wayker party in incresying of his shevalry” and is reproved for helping sinners against the virtuous.⁸⁸ We are repeatedly shown that the values of Arthurian romance contradict those of Christianity. As an attempt to reform knighthood, however, the grail story has its drawbacks. Achieving success in the grail quest tends to involve leaving knighthood or (better still) to leave life altogether. Galahad’s miracle is his death, and Percival, the next most virtuous knight, ends his quest by becoming a hermit before dying

For Spenser such an opposition will not do. Redcrosse is in need of spiritual regeneration, but that is not expressed in terms of abandoning sinful knighthood for a better form of behaviour. There is no epic or contemplative alternative for Spenser’s knights. He and they must remain committed to the active life, which

⁸⁸ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) 676-78.

is expressed through their knighthood: according to the letter to Raleigh, the armour that makes the “clownish” Redcrosse a knight “is the armour of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul v. Ephes”.⁸⁹ Redcrosse may not stay on the Mount of Contemplation: he has a dragon to kill and wars to fight. This is public poetry, even if, as Helgerson points out, it starts with private virtues and never gets around to the public qualities.⁹⁰ The *Gerusalemme* and the *Arcadia* present private action as a selfish alternative to civic duty, but there is no such choice in *The Faerie Queene*. Knighthood is inescapable: it is the form in which human life is examined. Its pride and self-aggrandisement are spiritual dangers in Spenser as they were a political threat in Tasso.

At the Cave of Despair it becomes clear that knighthood is the form in which Spenser represents human life. Despair appears at an intensely chivalric moment. The canto opens by praising Arthur’s rescue of Redcrosse as a “cheualrous emprize” (I,ix,1), and continues with Arthur’s own story of his vision of the Faerie Queene. When Redcrosse and Una meet Sir Trevisan, they are wandering along “diuersely discoursing of their loues”, exchanging gifts – very Protestant gifts in fact – and ready to be sidetracked into a romance narrative (I,ix,18). They are confronted with Sir Trevisan, galloping along, bareheaded:

Nigh as he drew, they might perceiue his head
To be vnarmd, and curld vncombed heares
Vpstaring stiffe, dismayd with vncouth dread;

⁸⁹ Hamilton, ed., 738.

⁹⁰ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 49.

Nor drop of bloud in all his face appeares,
 Nor life in limbe: and to increase his feares,
 In fowle reproch of knighthood's faire degree,
 About his neck an hempen rope he weares,
 That with his glistring arms does ill agree;
 But he of rope or armes has now no memoree. (I,ix.22)

There is a strange mixture of Christian and chivalric imagery in Trevisan's appearance, and especially in his "hempen rope". Hanging is, through Judas, associated with despair; it is an image Spenser uses throughout *The Faerie Queene*. When Spenser's Cordelia dies in despair she hangs herself (II,x.32), and Despair himself tries to die by hanging at the end of the episode. The shock of the hempen rope is not only horror at suicide, however. It is also an aristocratic and chivalric response to forms of execution: the nobility and gentry do not die by hanging. The rope is a "fowle reproch of *knighthood's faire degree*", something that contradicts his "glistring arms". The clash is between Despair and St. Paul's armour of the Christian, between knighthood and the rules of social class. Those committed to virtue are imagined as knights. This is a moment in which the different senses of knighthood within *The Faerie Queene* – the individualism and the symbolic, the gentleman and the everyman – are brought together. Knighthood is both a social class, the nostalgic feudalism of the Elizabethan gentleman, and the miles christiani.

Despair's own attack underlines the fact that knighthood is life in the world. Meeting Trevisan and Terwin, he "Inquireth of our states, and of our knightly deedes."(28) Those deeds become a foothold for despair:

The lenger life, I wote the greater sin,
 The greater sin, the greater punishment:
 All those great battels, which thou boasts to win,
 Through strife, and bloud-shed, and auengement,
 Now praysd, hereafter dear thou shalt repent... (I,ix,43)

Despair bases his argument on the law of the Old Testament, ignoring the promise of the new: humanity justly condemned through sin, but forgiven and redeemed through Christ. Without that grace, which Despair denies, all human works are sinful: in the words of the Book of Homilies, the doctrine of justification by faith “take[s] away clearly all merit of our works, as being unable to deserve our justification at God’s hands, and thereby most plainly to express the weakness of man...”⁹¹ In Spenser’s allegory of despair, the sinful works of an unredeemed humanity are imagined in chivalric terms. Despair’s language of “great battels” which are “praysd” but sinful is startlingly close to Languet’s complaint to Sidney about chivalric aggression: “You and your fellows, I mean men of noble birth, consider that nothing brings you more honour than wholesale slaughter”, and insists that chivalric battle should be seen as murder.⁹² Sidney, the recipient of that advice, was caught by it: the *Arcadia*’s duels start in glamour and end in blood and dust. By making the sinfulness and pride of knighthood an expression of fallen humanity, Spenser also makes knighthood capable of redemption through grace – something implied in Pamela, but never actively achieved by Sidney.

⁹¹ *Certain Sermons or Homilies appointed to be read in Churches* III, “On the Salvation of Mankind” (Oxford: 1822) 30.

Conclusion

The Faerie Queene is an unmistakably patriotic work, a poem designed to be exemplary to the nation. In writing it, Spenser was claiming his position as a poet of public heroism, a poet of “laureate” ambition. Those claims are imagined in terms of Virgil’s career, with the new poet abandoning his rustic pipe for the trumpets of epic. That public role was then carried out in a form associated with private virtue – an association heightened by Spenser’s decision to present private before public virtues. *The Faerie Queene* is romance, taking place so deep in forests that the shaping structures of government barely affect it. Its patriotism does not require the linear drive of Virgilian epic, even though England was in a much stronger position than Italy for the projection of a united nation through conquest; the confidence of the united plot is altogether too certain for *The Faerie Queene*’s fallen world. Spenser, in fact, explicitly postpones that kind of narrative, calling on his muse *not* to visit him “with that mighty rage, / Wherewith the martiall troupes thou doest infest, / And harts of great Heroës does enrage”, but to leave such poetic fury until the poem, like Redcrosse, makes it to the pagan wars (I,xi,6). Since the wars are endlessly deferred, that suggests that the “second tenor” of Spenser’s Muse dominates his poem, the celebration of “this man of God his godly armes”. That easy slide between the first and second tenors, between warfare and chivalric combat, confirms Spenser’s earlier readiness to blend epic and romance, as he also

⁹² *The Correspondence of Sir Philip Sidney and Hubert Languet*, trans. Steuart A. Pears (London: William Pickering, 1845) 154.

incorporates the outpouring of nation-writing of the 1580s and 1590s. It also confirms the fact that *The Faerie Queene* is predominantly a digressive romance poem, and suggests a link between the “second tenor” of chivalric combat and the poem’s “godly armes”. Spenser’s heroic poetry is both Protestant and chivalric.

Forward Protestantism was strongly associated with the Elizabethan chivalric revival, but the contradictions between a sense of original sin and an ardent wish for heroic action often led to immobility or collapse. The digressions of romance go some way to accommodating these opposites, by giving knights a sanctioned space for heroic adventure. The major conflict between sin and the need for heroism is not so readily negotiated, and becomes a central subject of Spenser’s poem. Knighthood becomes itself a Protestant image of human heroism, reaching for virtue but inherently dubious unless justified by faith. In that image, in *The Faerie Queene*, romance and Protestantism start to reinforce each other in an idea of the nation. The frailty of human heroism is given a glamour which already had patriotic associations. The chivalric romance – and the history, and the other forms of nationhood incorporated by Spenser – are transformed by an understanding of the need for grace and of England as a Protestant, and perhaps chosen, nation. This is a form of heroic action that has become bound up with reformed religion, with poetic ambition, with English identity.

Conclusion

Romance was so important to the national poetry of the sixteenth century because it could express heroic and patriotic values under severe strain. The very things for which it was attacked – its unruliness and lack of unity, its multiplicity, its failures of obedience and of decorum – made it useful for poets who were trying to write heroic poetry in circumstances which precluded or threatened empire. It was almost impossible for poets to compete with the united strengths of Virgil when their nations could not offer them the might and support of imperial Rome. The *Aeneid* in fact registers the pains of empire, driving its way towards conquest by rooting out digression and creating an image of united Rome from a background of civil war. That process was so successful as to be literally inimitable: no sixteenth-century state had the pre-eminence of Rome. Tasso, writing for a different kind of empire, tried to recreate epic unity, but his poem's romance digressions acknowledged the unruly personal and political factors that resisted the counter-Reformation demand for orthodoxy. Romance in the *Gerusalemme Liberata* stands for all the threats to imperial ambition.

Those threats could be felt so strongly because they had been confidently expressed two generations earlier, in the *Orlando Furioso*. Ariosto's poem is plainly a text of the vernacular project, concerned with expressing and celebrating Italy and demonstrating its poetic vitality. Ariosto chose to do that by turning away from epic into romance, wandering from the crusade to the

tangled forest, and sometimes back again. It owed its success to its romance qualities, to its expression of the nation through private rather than public actions. Its multiplicity, its loves and marvels, its many heroes and digressive plot made it enormously popular. Those qualities appealed through variety and excitement, but they also made the confident expression of Italy possible in the face of division and war. Romance does threaten epic by its wanderings, by its refusal to drive firmly towards a chosen goal. Its digressions are powerful, but they are often the result of a loss of power. Virgil, with Rome behind him, could drive Aeneas onwards. Ariosto, facing a fragmented Italy, could not write a poem that expressed his nation as a whole. In the *Furioso* that powerlessness is both accepted and evaded; slipping away from endings, Ariosto admits that there is no glorious future for Italy but, as he meanders, demonstrates his nation's extraordinary vitality. There could be no united crusade to rescue Italy, no *Italia liberata dai Goti*. Romance allows the poem to skirt around Italy's crushing military defeats, escaping and acknowledging political division and subjection, while showing other sources of cultural strength and insisting on an Italian identity based on something other than shared defeat. The heroic action of such a poem was itself opposed to the linear epic; it almost always chooses desire over duty, the immediate pleasure over the long-term goal. In the loves and marvels of the *Furioso*, the ardent battles of champions, Ariosto could celebrate a nation that had no political reality.

For the English, the turn to romance is more surprising. They wrote for a united nation, and one that was consolidating a patriotic identity. As they began their vernacular project, as the renaissance settled into England, the nation was beginning a process of maritime expansion, of conquest and of national definition. Hakluyt's voyages and the apocalyptic histories of Foxe are not epic texts, but they do describe an England of confident identity, defined through maritime endeavour or through its vicissitudes as a Protestant nation. Colonial expansion and providentialist history are both part of *The Faerie Queene*, whose definitions of the nation are shaped and understood through Protestant ideas of the need for grace. But Spenser presents them in the form a digressive romance: England's poets adopted the form of epic in trouble.

The Elizabethan chivalric revival offered a peculiarly English patriotism, the fashion of court festivity, and the freedom of independent knightly action. Through chivalry, the aristocrats of Elizabeth's court could celebrate their queen and, through her, the nation. Knightly displays, held in her honour, supported the new ideal of honour achieved through obedient service of the crown. At the same time, the nobility could use knighthood to claim a degree of autonomy like that of the feudal man-at-arms. Elizabethan chivalry held a balance between civic duty and aggressive self-assertion. Writing within that chivalric tradition, Sidney's revised *Arcadia* achieves an opposition of duty and desire that is almost a reversal of the *Gerusalemme*: it aims for an ideal of public service, but is contained within a chivalric form that gives no support to those ambitions.

Chivalric digression, one of Ariosto's greatest sources of strength, doubles back on Sidney, who will not take advantage of romance freedoms but could not reconcile honour and public service while his monarch retreated from action. Without the sanction of civic duty, the *Arcadia's* knights are unsupported and unjustified, trying to carry out romance actions in a poem that refuses to give them the space and freedom needed for chivalric endeavour. The clash is more than political. Actions which cannot be justified in terms of the public good cannot be justified by private motives either: the "infected will" of a fallen humanity can only produce corrupted motivation. Unusually for a romance, love cannot justify heroic action, and the restrictions of political reality mean that the state will not justify it. Sidney, and his heroes, are left with a form that urges them to action, and a context that restricts or condemns it.

The *Arcadia* seems to have had little direct influence on *The Faerie Queene*: Spenser may not have read it until it was published in 1590, the same year as the first instalment of Spenser's own romance. Only Book VI, the last completed book of *The Faerie Queene*, shows a debt to the *Arcadia*, and the fashion it started for literary pastoral. Reading *The Faerie Queene* after the *Arcadia*, though, it is striking how often Spenser addresses the problems that confounded Sidney, difficulties that sprang from their shared Protestant humanist background. The most pressing of these, the question of heroism in the face of original sin, becomes a central issue in *The Faerie Queene*. The poem's digressive form, with an offstage monarch justifying but not – until the later

stages of the poem – restricting the knights permits free chivalric action, resolving or at least finding a partial solution to the problem of the political limits on knightly freedom. Knighthood as Spenser develops it, however, is less a celebration of a feudal nostalgia than an image of human action, virtuous only when supported by grace, otherwise both glamorous and vulnerable to corruption. The painful contradiction of the self-assertive Elizabethan aristocrat, both unruly and conscious of the need for obedience, becomes an image of fallen humanity, set within a romance landscape whose labyrinthine paths and confusing visions underline the need for grace in understanding and moving safely through the world. The contingencies of romance become those of a dangerously corrupted universe.

The depiction of such a world is both Protestant and patriotic. From the start of Elizabeth's reign, Protestants had tried to associate the reformed religion with the nation, defining it against the might of Catholic Spain or calling on British history to create an idea of national identity that was insistently Protestant. Spenser draws on both these traditions, but binds nation and religion even more closely together in his use of chivalry as a metaphor. The patriotic associations of knighthood are heightened by the number of British heroes – most obviously St. George and Arthur, but also the dynastic couple Artegall and Britomart – to be found among Spenser's knights. In the case of St. George, the Protestant psychomachia of election through faith is enacted by England's patron saint, within an allegorical framework that – through Una's adventures – associates his

election with the progress towards reform of the English church. An already patriotic knighthood becomes the metaphor through which the drama of election is depicted; that drama becomes the story of the Protestant English nationhood.

I have tried to suggest throughout this thesis that Ariosto, Sidney and Spenser used chivalric romance, with its combination of stirring action and the possibility of political or moral defeat, to express the crises of the nation and, since heroic poetry relies on the courage of individuals, of human strength. Chivalry – a still-glamorous ethos that had come to be understood in opposition to other values, in literary form and in content – had a fragmented authority which could be made to embody the contradictions and pressures of English and Italian nationhood.

Response to chivalry was not confined to Italy and England. Across Europe, this was a century of romances and of developing nationhood. The enormous popularity of the *Amadis* cycle spread across the continent. Spanish and Portuguese poetry of nationhood – the *Araucana*, the *Lusiadas* – drew on Ariosto and on romance. Both these Iberian developments, however, are much less concerned with romance as a poetry of crisis. The courtly world of the *Amadis* was not cracked by the thought of defeat; Ercilla and Camões, telling tales of conquest and national expansion, had less need of the divisions of romance, although the chivalry of Cervantes, casting his literary shadow back to the

sixteenth century, should remind us that the contradictions of chivalry were present in Spain too. The chivalric romance tradition, having begun as an international gothic, was subjected to similar pressures – the changes of increasingly centralised state power, of warfare, of humanist thought – throughout Europe. What Frances Yates called “an imaginative re-feudalization of culture” in the sixteenth century was in many ways a last gasp of chivalry.¹ In salon of the *Précieuses*, so soon to be ridiculed by Molière, Ariosto and Tasso were used as a source of quotations, of ideas of love, of pet names, but not to encourage martial glory or aristocratic independence.² Ariosto’s irony, his sense of chivalry as something opposed to the present times, is still some way from the chasm between knighthood and present-day reality found in *Don Quixote*. Milton abandoned the idea Arthurian romance in favour of political epic. By the end of the seventeenth century, political and intellectual change had deprived the aristocracy of its automatic association with martial power, and chivalry, with its feudal roots and digressive romance form, became less a vivid means of expressing political and moral crisis than a dreamily romantic ideal of heroism. The archaising language of, say, William Rose’s 1831 translation of the *Furioso* is a world away from the political engagement of Spenser’s Chaucerian language, and his century’s use of chivalry is similarly romantic. This is not to say that those later evocations of knighthood were without any political force; as we have seen, chivalric heroism was used to express English patriotism well into

¹ Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the sixteenth century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 108.

² C. P. Brand, *Ludovico Ariosto: A Preface to the “Orlando Furioso”* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), 188.

the twentieth century. It was, however, knighthood as metaphor. That translation of the chivalric hero from a figure of real political strength, rooted in feudal authority, to an ideal set loose from history, was a long process that began with the renaissance understanding of chivalry as an ethos that was undermined by the centralised state, the modern army or by moral and civic duty. Ariosto opposed Carolingian knighthood to the forces dividing modern Italy; Sidney could not detach chivalric heroism from the new demands of the centralised state; Spenserian chivalry both encouraged a degree of aristocratic autonomy and imagined the knight as an allegorical representation of humanity. In the sixteenth century knighthood, the action of independent aristocrats, could still express literal action in the world of politics and nationhood. It was also, and increasingly, an ideal confronted with reality. The epic romance, with its turns to and from duty and desire, obedience and freedom, caught that contradiction and made it an expressive vehicle for the divisions and crises of sixteenth-century nationhood.

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