Poetical History

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When Spenser in the "Letter to Raleigh" characterized his project as in line with "*all the antique Poets historicall*," far from clarifying his intent with *The Faerie Queene*, he threw it into even further confusion. From what he proceeds to discuss, comparing his way of exemplifying virtue to those of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso, and echoing Sir Philip Sidney on how "*much more profitable and gratious is doctrine by ensample, then by rule*," Spenser gave himself an opportunity to simplify his meaning: the poem might be "historical" only in the sense of being cast in narrative – "history" as equivalent to our term "story," and opposed not to the fictive or fanciful but to pastoral, lyric, or drama. The story works as an example by letting us see virtue come alive in praxis, and in this working an idea of the past may contribute, but is not necessary, and when applied is necessarily vague. A famous, celebrated name could enhance a story's power to instill admiration, and an atmosphere of bygone human superiority could help stir the gentleman or noble person to fashion himself better in virtuous and gentle discipline. Arthur is "*fitte*" for Spenser because of "*the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes*." Arthur's name recognition can be parlayed into a legend: matter meet-to-be-read, tracing the excellent actions of an excellent hero, who lived way-back-then, when there were heroes. Indeed, for Spenser the story of each discrete virtue-knight is framed in this manner, each comprising a legend. Any further historical specificity would interrupt the excellency, as Sidney warned. Since history deals with real-life particulars, poetry with idealized universals, history's exemplarity is crippled, and poetry binding itself to history is self-defeating, short-circuited by history's intransigent moral ambiguity – "captived to the truth of a foolish world," as Sidney put it.[1] And yet, Spenser does not free his poem from history. He maintains ties to history as the interpreting of what actually happened in human time. Such moorings make his self-identification as a poet historical unusually

perplexing, and especially so as we consider how he eschews many stand-
ard methods of incorporating history.

In *The Faerie Queene*, three prominent versions of the reconstructive
mode of historical poetry are notably absent or marginalized. The first
is historical *ethopoeia*, the envisioning of how a certain historical person-
age might speak. Authorities like Erasmus, Thomas Wilson, and George
Puttenham discussed the decorum necessary for such verbal portraiture,
with obvious implications for historical drama of this period; but this
decorum, imagining the speech appropriate to a particular historical fig-
ure, was pertinent to narrative historical poetry as well. George Chapman
proved as much in his notes to his translation of Homer, praising "*our
most inimitable Imitator of nature*" for his characterization.[2] But, while
many Spenserian creations talk, none does so as a portrait of a real per-
son, and neither does Spenserian narrative present itself as a partial recon-
struction of vaguely understood far-distant events. For, secondly, Homer
was often named as chief among poets crucial for inquiry into the most
ancient past. Since, as Sidney, Tasso, and Puttenham had affirmed, "the
Poet was also the first historiographer," a heroic account like Homer's
might contain valuable historical evidence; "very little" outside of Homer
is known of the Trojan War, explained Sir Walter Raleigh, and so "such as
can either interpret their fables, or separate them from the naked truth,
shall find matter in poems not unworthy to be regarded of historians."
And yet, though Spenser elsewhere attributed a similar usefulness even
to Celtic bards – "there appears among them some reliques of the true
antiquitie, though disguised" – he did not design his epic for it. *The Faerie
Queene*'s fictional narrative disguises no antiquarian suggestiveness, and
at times calls attention to this lack. With Spenser's Merlin's two magical
inventions, Prince Arthur's diamond shield and Britomart's Venus glass,
each a symbol of the poem's meaning-making power, a joke is made about
their earthly existence: the shield "yet … may be seene, if sought," and
the glass would have spared the realm much anguish, "had it remaynd."
The shield and the glass do reveal truth, reflecting our world – but not
by affording us clues to the long-ago. In fact, the notion of either's ability
tangibly to survive figures the silliness of expecting the poem to function
as artifact and leave traces of historical reality. That Spenser should with-
hold from his epic both historical *ethopoeia* and bardic antiquarianism is
all the more striking considering the "The Ruines of Time," wherein the
ancient city of Verlame is given a voice, and made to combine lamentation
that the past has been forgotten with validation of the effort to recover it.
In a minor poem, a real city can relate her particular experience, and in

a manner which complements the antiquarian findings of a scholar such as William Camden, that "nourice of antiquitie,/ And lanterne unto late succeeding age,/ To see the light of simple veritie"; but in the major poem, no characters, actions, or details lend themselves to any such historical examination.[3]

Thirdly, the reconstructive mode of poetical history could appear in an abbreviated recounting of a chronology's highlights, in either epitome or epic-catalogue; of this device Spenser did avail himself in *The Faerie Queene*, but with relegation perhaps understandable given his material. That material would be the list of ancient Celtic British monarchs, extending from the Troy-descended, eponymous founder Brutus through the world-conquering Arthur, to the final overwhelming of Britain by the Saxon invaders. Derived ultimately from the ingenuity of the twelfth-century Welsh monk Geoffrey of Monmouth (Galfridus), the British History had always been scrutinized and had recently, thanks especially to the researches of Camden, been largely discredited. Arthur and many other Galfridian stories were captivating individually, and as a unified story-arc, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* proved irresistible. The English versifying of it began early on with Layamon, and in the Renaissance the Galfridian verse epitome became a tradition, with John Hardyng and William Warner preceding Spenser and Thomas Heywood, Michael Drayton, William Slatyer, and John Taylor the Water Poet following after. And yet, despite this fascination, and despite some medieval precedents like the Alliterative Morte Arthure, from this tradition a historical narrative poetry did not arise – a Renaissance epic that would focus on some signature Galfridian episode and glorify it through amplification. This might be because, as the accuracy of Geoffrey's account was so dubious and its details sparse, it could easily seem completely poeticized already: though, in prose it was much like Homer, possibly preserving within bardic exaggeration some nuggets of passed-down truth, and historiographically relevant only for this possibility, and for a dearth of competing sources. How could a poet embroider on what was embroidering to begin with? Other writers bypassed this question by not venturing beyond verse paraphrase of Galfridian chronology, but Spenser had a much bigger, multidimensional story to tell, and so it is significant how he made that chronology ancillary. His British History is parenthetical, both bracketed off as epic-catalogue, and removed from and made secondary to the narrative, being limited to digression within Arthur's adventure and to preparation for Britomart's. Unlike the *Iliad*'s catalogue of ships, or the epitomized history in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Petrarch's *Africa*, or

Camoens's *Lusiads*, *The Faerie Queene*'s summary of Galfridian chronology is not integrated with the main action. Dissociated from Faerieland's plane and continuum, the Galfridian kings of Briton Moniments in II.x and Merlin's prophecy in III.iii broach history but do not centralize it – hinting at the poet's suspicion toward their reconstructing any truthful history at all.

Perhaps Spenser seems closer to the Virgilian method, wherein the reconstructive mode of history is put together with but is made subservient to the topical and the vatic modes; when Thomas Greene remarked that, for Renaissance aspirants to epic, "really to count, the new work would have to look like the *Aeneid*," this nexus seems close to what he meant. The perfect Renaissance epic would adapt for Christendom what Virgil gave to Augustan Rome: it would synthesize, through a Christian lens, a magnification of the past with a commentary on the present and a vision for the future. For Virgil, Aeneas's personal and political virtues, his governance of his fellow exiled Trojans and his own emotions and impulses, issued in his fulfillment of his divinely ordained destiny to found the civilization that would become Rome; his struggles and triumphs allow for and symbolize those of the Roman people through the centuries up until the poet's own day, culminating in the peaceful rule of Augustus, which marks the confinement of Fury, both in the world and (nodding to the emperor's program of moral reformation) in the human soul. Thus, insofar as Virgil and his contemporaries were invested in their historical descent from Troy, the *Aeneid* transforms Rome's most ancient past into a narrative both grand and orderly, so that it can provide a grand and orderly understanding of Rome's more recent past and its present – including that present's significance in shaping the world for posterity. Aeneas's having been a real person, one who really did carry with him a Trojan legacy and pass it down through Rome's ancestry, was important in arguing a teleology for Rome, its place within a cosmic design, even though this argument, the poet's insight into his people's ethos and foresight into their world-historical role, was the priority, not a historically accurate Aeneas. Hence for the theorist probably most emphatic about the integration of truth-of-story into the heroic poem, Tasso, "the argument of the best epic should be based on history," for falsity diminishes a poem's capacity to move us. Virgil's marvelous elements were built on a historical matrix, "since it was a belief of the Romans that they were descended from Aeneas," and so while Virgil's fantastic inventions were various and conspicuous, he obeyed the rule of verisimilitude: a poet must not "stretch his license so far that he dares to change the outcome of the enterprises he undertakes to treat, or to narrate

contrary to actuality any of the main and best-known events which are accepted as true." This core of historicity was essential, but it served higher directives: "we must take into account above everything else nobility and excellence … the noblest action of all is the coming of Aeneas to Italy: the subject in itself is great and illustrious, indeed the greatest and most illustrious, since it gave rise to the Roman empire."[4]

Other theorists stressed exemplarity over teleology, but still acknowledged the role a historical core can play in a heroic poem. For Giovanni Pontano, the *Aeneid* was comparable to the histories of Sallust and Livy, similarly dealing with majestic matter, explicating the causes of events, describing them vividly, allocating praise and blame, and, most of all, imitating nature; the difference lay in the poet's higher capacity to instill admiration, as he could add marvelous and monstrous elements to the plain truth. Julius Caesar Scaliger, who also noted blurriness between history and poetry, held the heroic to be the foundation of all other poetry, which borrowed from its majesty, and in "heroic" he included story untethered from fact, like the *Aethiopithica*. Nevertheless, he assumed like Pontano a basic view of epic as embellished *res gestae*: the epic poets all used illustrated and colored-in history for their argument; "Nam quid aliud Homerus?" Puttenham's chapter on "*historicall Poesie*" established even more clearly that history meant story, joining Sidney in rating "fained matter or altogether fabulous" as equal to or better than the truth; the three kinds of historical poesie, "wholly true and wholly false, and a third holding part of either," were the same in what counted, "edification." But Puttenham does classify Homeric epic as a "fabulous or mixt report of the siege of Troy," confirming its historical backbone, and opens the chapter stating that historical poetry owes its exalted status to its memorializing what is "autentike," lifting us up with thoughts of "our deare forefathers." Meanwhile, Sidney himself extols heroic poetry as "the best and most accomplished kind," using it and its "champions" to clinch his overall thesis that poetry "inflameth the mind" to virtue, with Aeneas's run of valor, perseverance, and temperance making for irrefutable proof: "Only let Aeneas be worn in the tablet of your memory," and invariably you'll want to be better. It seems our memory of Aeneas should be of the character, not the person, for Sidney earlier uses Aeneas as a prime case of history's inferiority: we should prefer as much more "doctrinable" the "feigned Aeneas in Virgil than the right Aeneas in Dares Phrygius." And yet, this is to suggest that Aeneas, Sidney's *coup de grâce* against the "poet-whippers," is indeed historically based – Virgil had imaginatively improved upon a "right Aeneas." Even Ariosto's translator

Sir John Harrington, who, eager to defend his flamboyantly fanciful and often outrageous author, contested the old accusation of poetical lying by referencing allegory, not truthfulness, factored in historicity. Deeming Ariosto's best excuse to be likeness to Virgil, Harrington parallels the two epics in being built off a core of truth and capturing the essence of an event that occurred, in a slice of time: "the heroicall Poem, should ground on some historie, and take some short time in the same to bewtifie with his Poetrie: so doth mine Author take the storie of k. *Charls* the great, and doth not exceed a yeare or therabout in his whole work."[5]

Like the poem it advertises, Spenser's "Letter" seems an inversion of these other theorists' Virgilianism: even while enhancing the topical and vatic strains of historical poetry, Spenser gives *The Faerie Queene*'s narrative no "ground on some historie." The ground instead is Faerieland, which he explains is predicated not on history but on direct topical metaphor. Rather than Aeneas's mission figuring Augustus's Rome, Gloriana *is* Elizabeth, and many additional personae "*otherwise shadow her*" and the various aspects of her England on which the poet wants to comment. The purely fictional Belphoebe takes us straight to Elizabeth as "*a most vertuous and beautifull Lady*," and accordingly, in the poem Belphoebe's encounters with Braggadochio and Timias refer us to goings-on in Elizabeth's court, without doing so via parallel from a distant past. Discussing epic structure, the "Letter" proceeds to touch on the vatic mode, and in a way that continues to subordinate the reconstructive:

> For the Methode of a Poet historical is not such, as of an Historiographer. For an Historiographer discourseth of affayres orderly as they were donne, accounting as well the times as the actions, but a Poet thrusteth into the middest … and there recoursing to the thinges forepaste, and diuining of thinges to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all.

This statement of compliance to the epic convention of opening *in medias res* alerts us to how far Spenser's poetic license extends beyond mere arranging; in fact, affairs as they were done have scant place, the poem pleasingly analyzing all else *but* historiography, an analysis including, evidently, the future instrumentality of England in God's providential plan.

This sense, that this poem lends unusual gravity to the topical and vatic modes, even while unfastening them from a grounding in reconstruction, seems corroborated in the opening Proem, which enjoins the muse to "Lay forth out of thine euerlasting scryne/ The antique rolles, which there lye hidden still,/ Of Faerie knights and fayrest *Tanaquill*." The poet assumes a sacred duty to sing out the glory of his queen, her servants, and

their stand against evil, demonstrating this glory's unmatched height but also its complete reality. Such demonstration calls for the most serious dedication, comparable to that of a historian uncovering some long-lost chronicle, and committing it to narrative more accessible for the present and for posterity – but only *comparable* to this. Though the antique rolls, containing the stories of Gloriana and her knights, *do* proceed from what is indeed everlasting, there are no such antique rolls. This approach to history appears directly to answer that of Ariosto, who notoriously proclaimed the glory of heroes the product of mere poetic whim: the "contrary" would be known, had Homer "listed,/ That Troy preuaild, that Greeks were conquerd cleane,/ And that *Penelope*, was but a queane." The poem might "ground on some historie," some slice of historical time within which the action was set, but its generation of glory was just a game. Whom the poet wanted – or got paid – to celebrate, was celebrated in heroic poetry. Contrariwise, Spenser, with no such ground, sounds in earnest about that "Great Ladie of the greatest Isle, whose light/ Like *Phoebus* lampe throughout the world doth shine."[6]

   And yet, this earnestness about asserting glory would seem in vain if conveyed in an entirely ahistorical historical poem; and so, perhaps because of the nigh-religious import he gave to the topical and vatic modes, Spenser found his own ways, apart from narrative, to give *The Faerie Queene* some reconstructive component. The perspective Merlin affords Britomart, that with Elizabeth "eternall vnion shall be made/ Betweene the nations different afore," posits her reign, its opposition to Catholic powers ("the great Castle"), and its near-future total victory – "But yet the end is not" – as the culmination of a God-guided unfolding of events; and though Spenser does not make Virgil-like heroic poetry from these events, which are those of the suspect Galfridian chronology, he preserves his ability prospectively to do so. Invading Faerieland with human virtue-knights, Arthur, Britomart, Redcrosse, and Artegall, Spenser injects his poem not with historicity but with characters subject to and situated in historical time. As Britomart readies to depart her native Wales for Faerieland, we learn that she lives in a specific context: King Uther's reign, when he was battling the Saxons at Verlame. This brings a time continuum into the poem's universe, even though not into its action, a subtlety peculiarly the case with Arthur. Prince Arthur's story, his youthful adventuring among Faerie creatures, is pure fabrication. But, as the "Letter" stipulates – displaying moral virtue now, "*before he was king*," he will illustrate politic virtue later, "*after that hee came to be king*" – this Arthur is the King Arthur we know, and he is historically located; hence Briton Moniments, the Galfridian

epitome he reads, breaks off at the appropriate time, the current time of his unknown father King Uther, thereby signaling unmistakably that the story we know will go on. The "vntimely breach" truncating Briton Moniments and frustrating its reader is timely indeed: at the opportune moment the book confirms that in its continuance he will become its crescendo, and thus implicitly that he exists in a time-stream; he will be the Arthur who "defrayd" the Roman conquest of Britain by defying and overcoming Rome, along with the better part of Europe. Spenser, while telling a different, non-Virgilian story, has opened a space for an eventual Arthuriad. This deferred, implied historical Arthur epic argues the reality of the poet's analogy between the nation's ancient and its present glory, without arguing it historiographically or narratively. Moreover, Spenser shows that his argument, the reality of his nation's etiological and tele-ological glory, is his to make; he appropriates for himself historiographical control. From Redcrosse's story we understand how properly to read the religious development of the English-Saxon people through the Middle Ages, as a wayward journey toward Reformed holiness; and from Artegall's we understand how to read Elizabethan foreign affairs, as an exercise in justice. In neither does Spenser tell us what happened, but in both he insists we learn how to view what happened. Without exactly endorsing the Galfridian Brutus origin-myth, Spenser through Britomart insists on the historical, real-world truth of its meaning: "That in all glory and great enterprise," his nation "Both first and second *Troy* shall dare to equalise." Wherever we come from, our ancestry's greatness rivals that of any people on earth, and it represents a linear movement through time toward glory. Without needing it expounded for us in a heroic narrative, we should, like Arthur, come away "quite rauisht with delight" at the idea of our country's past.[7]

Arthur's ravishment is followed by Guyon's Faerie Chronicle, which boils the national experience down to pure idealism, an entirely, and incredibly, untroubled linearity; this might indicate a qualification or even a reservation on Spenser's part with regard to his capacity to include historical truth in his pleasing analysis. Perhaps *The Faerie Queene*'s his-torical dimension illuminates nothing more about the past than the Faerie Chronicle. And yet, we cannot be secure in this relinquishing of history, as is clear by this strange doubling up in II.x of historical epitomes, and thus, by that strange demarcation epitomized in them, that between the Faerie and human realms. We must at least entertain the possibility that, compared with Faerie time's origin in the fantastical Gardens of Adonis,

the time-stream of the poem's legendary, ancient, Arthurian Britain is much closer to, and may even be a parcel of, our own.

NOTES

1 Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 37–38. For all references to Spenser's poem, see *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

2 Erasmus, *Copia*, trans. Betty Knott, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 24, ed. Craig R. Thompson (University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 584–85; Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 357–58; George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 151–52; George Chapman, *Chapman's Homer*, vol. 1, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 71 (see also p. 42).

3 Sidney, *Defence*, pp. 18–19; Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), p. 25; Puttenham, *Arte*, p. 9 (quote); Sir Walter Raleigh, *History of the World*, in *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, vol. 4 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1964), p. 448; Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 46–47; *FQ* I.vii.36, III.ii.21. See "The Ruines of Time," in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William Oram et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 232–40, ll. 169–71.

4 Thomas Greene, *The Descent from Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 3; Tasso, *Discourses*, pp. 34, 26, 39, 58–60, 49.

5 Giovanni Pontano, *Dialogus de Historia*, in *Artis Historicae Penus* Tom. 1, ed. Johannes Wolfe (Basil, 1579), pp. 545–52, 582, 590–91; Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices Libri Septem* (Lyons, 1561), pp. 144, 5; Puttenham, *Arte*, pp. 39–41; Sidney, *Defence*, pp. 47–48, 35; Sir John Harrington, *An Apologie of Poetrie*, in *Orlando Fvrioso in English Heroical Verse* (1591), sig. viii.

6 FQ I.Pr.4; *Orlando Fvrioso*, xxxv.26, p. 292. Hamilton's note on the Proem speculates that the muse invoked might be Clio, muse of history, which would coincide with the "antique rolles," but he also observes the ambiguity here. Spenser leaves uncertain the name of his muse, much as he makes mysterious his poem's relation to history.

7 III.iii.49–50, III.iii.52, II.x.68, II.x.49, III.ix.44, II.x.68. That Spenser construed Uther's siege of Verlame to be a historical event is clear from "The Ruines of Time," ll. 104–05. For King Arthur's Roman war as alluded to proleptically in Briton Moniments, and its suitedness to a hypothetical climax for the poem, see A. Kent Hieatt, "The Projected Continuation of *The Faerie Queene*: Rome Delivered?" *Spenser Studies*, 8 (1987), 335–47.