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THE WELL OF LIFE AND THE TREE OF LIFE¹

(*The Faery Queen*, Bk. I, c. xi.)

The general significance of the combat between the Redcross Knight and the Dragon has never needed discussion, because it is unmistakable. After his various minor spiritual contests, now successes and now failures, in company first with Heavenly Truth and then with Falsehood, and after the spiritual regimen of the House of Holiness, the champion of Holiness, the human soul in quest of salvation, must fight the crowning fight with the enemy of mankind, the Devil. Various commentators will express the idea in various ways, but concerning the general sense of the spiritual, as distinguished from the historical, allegory, there can be no dispute. The details, on the other hand, are not altogether so evident, and it is with the most important of these that the present paper has to do.

The combat, naturally enough, is much the longest and most doubtful in the book. At the end of a day of fighting, in which the knight has been unable to hurt his enemy seriously, the monster breathes out a "flake of fire" which so sorely scorches him that he would fain cast off his armor. He is then easily beaten to the ground.

It fortun'd (as fayre it then befell,
Behynd his backe, unweeting, where he stood,
Of auncient time there was a springing well,
From which fast trickled forth a silver flood,
Full of great vertues, and for med'cine good.
Whylome, before that cursed dragon got
That happy land, and all with innocent blood
Defyld those sacred waves, it rightly hot
The Well of Life, ne yet his vertues had forgot.

¹ After this paper had been finished and submitted for publication the writer discovered that, as far back as 1871, in *Notes and Queries*, 4th ser., Vol. VII, p. 2, the interpretation here urged had been suggested by Thomas Keightley. Since Keightley did not argue the point, but contented himself with a two-line suggestion, and since his view has been ignored by all subsequent commentators, the paper seemed still to have enough *raison d'être* to warrant its publication.

For unto life the dead it could restore,
 And guilt of sinfull crimes cleane wash away;
 Those that with sicknesse were infected sore
 It could recure, and aged long decay
 Renew, as one were borne that very day.
 Both Silo this, and Jordan, did excell,
 And th' English Bath, and eke the German Spau,
 Ne can Cephise, nor Hebrus match this well:
 Into the same the knight back overthrown fell.

There he lies over night. In the morning, refreshed and strengthened, he renews the combat with better success. He manages to hew off one paw and the better part of the tail of the beast. Again, however, he is overcome by the deadly fire, and again falls, this time at the foot of a tree.

There grew a goodly tree him faire beside,
 Loaden with fruit and apples rosy redd,
 As they in pure vermilion had bene dide,
 Whereof great vertues over all were redd:
 For happy life to all which thereon fedd,
 And life eke everlasting did befall:
 Great God it planted in that blessed stedd
 With his Almighty hand, and did it call
 The Tree of Life, the crime of our first fathers fall.

In all the world like was not to be fownd,
 Save in that soile, where all good things did grow,
 And freely sprong out of the fruitfull grownd,
 As incorrupted Nature did them sow,
 Till that dredd dragon all did overthrow.
 Another like faire tree eke grew thereby,
 Whereof who so did eat, eftsoones did know
 Both good and ill: O mournfull memory!
 That tree through one mans fault hath doen us all to dy.

From that first tree forth flowd, as from a well,
 A trickling streame of balme, most souveraine
 And dainty deare, which on the ground still fell,
 And overflowed all the fertile plaine,
 As it had deawed bene with timely raine:
 Life and long health that gracious ointment gave,
 And deadly wounds could heale, and reare againe
 The sencelesse corse appointed for the grave.
 Into that same he fell: which did from death him save.

Another night passes; then a second time he rises in the morning with increased vigor, which now enables him to end the enterprise. The beast makes toward him with open mouth, he thrusts his sword down into its maw, and the long fight is over.

Some commentators on the allegory of this three-day battle between the Knight of Holiness and the old Dragon have seen in it a reference to Christ's harrowing of Hell and his resurrection on the third day, and of course, among various meanings more or less definitely in the poet's mind that may very well have been one. The fact that the battle lasts three days, however, might seem to be more naturally explainable by the poet's desire to throw emphasis, narrative or allegorical or both, upon the Well of Life and the Tree of Life. Each of these marks a definite stage in the battle, which he could best indicate by the interval of night. What, then, do this well and this tree, so emphasized, stand for?

Most of those critics who deal with the allegory of the poem, including Ruskin, Henry Morley, J. E. Whitney, Max Hoffmann, and others, have nothing to say upon this point at all, nothing definite. For them the battle has meaning only as a whole. A few treat it more or less specifically. Upton points out the relation of this well and this tree to the river and tree of Rev. 22: 1, 2:

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. And in the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

As for any particular allegorical sense which the poet may have intended them to bear, however, Upton has only one hint to offer. In comment upon the line (stanza 34) "So new this new-borne knight to battell new did rise," he remarks "New-born, i. e., being as it were regenerated by baptism in the well of life"—which leaves us uncertain whether or no he takes the well to represent definitely the sacrament of baptism. For the tree he has no explanation. Dean Kitchin is more comprehensive, but also very "general":

The well, the trees of life, and of the knowledge of good and ill, are intended to indicate the allegorical meaning of the struggle, as between

Holiness and the Devil; and to shew that (in accordance with the Anglican views on grace) man by himself cannot prevail against evil. . . . This "holy water" from the well of life is . . . simply allegorical of spiritual comfort and help in the struggle.

With this somewhat vague interpretation Professor Percival (editor, like Dean Kitchin, of Book I separately) is not content. He feels, apparently, that the Well of Life and the Tree of Life must stand for definite facts or ideas, and, casting about for such, lights upon the gospel and Christ. "In the allegory," he writes, "the well stands for the doctrines and ordinances of the Gospel." As for the tree: "In the *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, 95 ff., is an elaborate allegory on the tree of life, 'that is Jesu Crist'"—and Spenser, he declares, also means Christ. Mr. W. H. Hill (a third editor of Book I separately) accepts these interpretations of Professor Percival and adds a comment inspired apparently by Upton. Of the knight issuing from the well "new-borne" he says: "an allusion is intended to the doctrine of Regeneration. The Knight cannot conquer evil in his own strength: he must be born again of water and the spirit."

Of these four commentators, then, Upton and Mr. Hill associate the Well of Life more or less closely with the sacrament of Baptism, and so does Professor Percival in a note not transcribed here; yet the two latter assert that it stands for the gospel, and even Upton does not say unmistakably that it represents Baptism; his "as it were" leaves him uncommitted. The meaning of the poet, however, is spoken in words that would seem to be decisive. After telling how the knight, rising refreshed from the well, is enabled to wound his enemy in the head, he remarks (stanza 36):

I wote not whether the revenging steele
Were hardned with that holy water dew,
Wherein he fell, or sharper edge did feele,
Or his baptized hands now greater grew,
Or other secret vertue did ensew

"Holy water" and "baptized" surely make the reference to the sacrament as clear as may be, and enable us even to go farther; for if by the well Spenser means Baptism, it seems most likely that by the tree he means, not Christ, but the other sacrament,

the Lord's Supper. In fact, the best commentary upon this long battle with the Dragon is to be found in the Anglican Catechism:

Question. How many sacraments hath Christ ordained in his Church?

Answer. Two only, as generally necessary to salvation, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.

This part concerning the sacraments, to be sure, was not added to the Catechism till the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, five years after Spenser's death. It did no more, however, than express what was already contained or implied in Article 25 of the church: the idea that Baptism and the Holy Communion were "generally necessary to salvation" was the idea of Spenser's own day. In any case, that he should construct an allegory on Holiness in which these two fundamental institutions of Christianity should merely be glanced at, or ignored altogether, is surely unthinkable.

To consider their appropriateness to this particular passage of the book: Hitherto the knight has been engaged with individual sins. He has overcome Error (specifically, the sins of "private judgment"), he has succumbed to the wiles of Falsehood (specifically, Romanism), he has defeated Spiritual Joylessness, he has been enthralled to Carnal Pride, he has barely escaped Despair. To none of these conflicts could the two sacraments be especially appropriate. But now he is engaged with the spiritual enemy of mankind, the Devil (or, as Hoffmann puts it, the power of original sin): it is the conflict that sums up all the others, the conflict that concerns his final salvation. At this point, the more one considers the matter, the more inevitable it seems that his victory should come by the spiritual aid of the sacraments "generally necessary to salvation."

The conviction is strengthened when one considers the previous canto, that devoted to the House of Holiness. There we find mention of Penance, of the seven good works established by Catholic theology, and of other such institutions. That Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not mentioned or figured there would indicate that the poet must have reserved them for another place.

That there has been so much uncertainty in the interpretation of well and tree is probably due to vagueness in the allegorical

description of them. The abundant details rather cloud than declare the hidden sense: they are heaped up with too little regard for doctrine. And this is altogether characteristic of the poet, for though he could at times render the very life of an embodied idea with unmistakable vividness, he was also prone to be drawn aside by his fancy into overelaboration of merely picturesque or allusive detail. If one reads the stanzas in question, however, it will be clear that they express Baptism and the Lord's Supper at least as well as they do the gospel and Christ, and, in the end, though matters of allegorical interpretation can hardly be argued with absolute conclusiveness, the meaning here suggested seems to me to have in its favor the weight of superior probability.

R. E. NEIL DODGE

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN