

## Anabaptists and the Gyant in Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*\*

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Among the more interesting aspects of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is its topical allegory, and of particular interest is the allegorical treatment of Justice in Book Five. Critics usually comment that Book Five is a sublimated political pamphlet and its poetry is to be mainly in a feverish earnestness and lofty scorn; it is a defense of the paternalistic kind of government. Within Book Five, there is one specific incident, the encounter of Artegall and the Gyant, that suggests the close relationship between Spenser and the political and religious unrest of the sixteenth century.

The search for the exact historical antecedent for the Gyant has been a difficult and, to my knowledge, inconclusive task. Many critics who attempt to give a general interpretation of *The Faerie Queene* make brief mention of the Gyant, often in the vaguest of terms. Josephine Bennett doubts that any topical allusion was intended by Spenser, who was dealing with "academic

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problems of justice" (179). Other critics such as Herbert E. Cory and Pauline Parker attribute to the Gyant such adjectives as "democratic" and "communistic." Possible historical sources are given by several critics: Parker suggests that uprisings in Münster in Westphalia, Ireland, and England itself are potential sources (210); Fritz Caspari sees the influence of the German Peasants' War and the Irish uprisings (203); and H. S. V. Jones mentions the insurrection in Münster, Plato's *Republic*, and Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* as possible influences (254). Few critics, however, mention the English Anabaptist movement. Albert B. Gough and Merritt Hughes both recognize the disdain that the English monarchy held for the Anabaptists and mention an uprising in Norwich in 1549 as being of particular interest. Another source of some significance was that of Frederick M. Padelford, who discusses the possibility of the Anabaptists in England being the source for the Gyant. Irving B. Horst, Richard Heath, Buchanan Sharp, and Michael O'Connell also provided historical information relating to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

Unfortunately Spenser has left no personal document that would suggest the precise historical nature of the Gyant. However, if one juxtaposes Spenser's stated and implied beliefs in the Tudor social order with the equalitarian ideals of the leveler Anabaptists, one can note a close parallel to the juxtaposition of Artegall and his foe, the Gyant. The English and Irish political situation in the late sixteenth-century around Spenser can also make us assume the possible source for the Gyant. Thus, by indicating Spenser's political philosophy and contrasting it with that held by the Anabaptists, and by mentioning few historical information concerning the Anabaptists in England, which critics fail to pinpoint, in this paper I wish to show that the English Anabaptists, those heirs of political discord found in Münster and the Low Countries, are the most likely historical antecedent for the Gyant.

Spenser, in his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, stated that *The Faerie Queene*

had as its purpose “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.” This remark indicates that Spenser was following in the tradition established by Castiglione, Elyot, and Sidney, all of whom endorsed the established social order which revolved around the concept of hierarchy. And one of the necessary components of this social order is dealt with in the Fifth Book: the concept of Justice. Caspari states that “‘Justice’ to Spenser means mainly the right order of state and society. This order can easily be identified as an idealized version of the status quo in England, an authoritarian, hierarchically organized polity. That order will be maintained by the readers . . . if they follow the example of Artegall” (190). Not Artegall alone, but, as Bernard Davis notes, “the task of ‘elvish knights’ is to safeguard the security of the commonwealth by quelling the various forces of disorder” (71).

In Book Five, Canto ii, Artegal and Talus meet Florimell’s dwarf who tells them of a bridge hard by which is guarded by a Saracen, Pollente. Pollente assaults travelers and secures their possessions and property,

Having great Lordships got and goodly farmes,  
Through strong oppression of his powre extort;  
By which he stil them holds, & keepes with strong effort. (5.2.5.7-9)<sup>1</sup>

Artegall challenges Pollente, but Pollente cheats by opening a trap door beneath Artegall. The two continue their fight in the river below the bridge, where Artegall cuts off Pollente’s head. Artegall and Talus reach Pollente’s castle, where his daughter Munera attempts to distract them by throwing gold from the walls. Talus breaks down the door to find Munera hiding beneath a mound of gold. Talus cuts off her golden hands and silver feet,

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, eds. J. C. Smith and Ernest De Selincourt (London: Oxford UP, 1912). Subsequent citations from *The Faerie Queene* are from this edition and will be referred by book, canto, stanza, and line numbers (if necessary) parenthetically.

and throws them into the river. Talus melts all her gold and pours it into the river. Then he burns to ashes the "mucky pelfe,"

The spoile of peoples evill gotten good,  
The which her sire had scrap't by hooke and crooke, (5.2.27.7-8)

In the second half of the canto, Artegall and Talus find a large crowd on the beach listening to the speech of "a mighty Gyant" who is holding a pair of balances in his hand. In this speech, the Gyant encourages everyone to redistribute the resources of the earth, from forests and mountains to monetary wealth. Artegall opposes this idea as a disruption of God's system of distribution and raises the counter-argument that wind, light and right or wrong cannot be quantified and redistributed. Artegall cannot tolerate disorder, for he believes that the existing social order is divinely appointed by God.

Such heavenly justice doth among them raine,  
That every one doe know their certaine bound,  
In which they doe these many yeares remaine,  
And mongst them al no change hath yet beene found.  
But if thou now shouldst weigh them new in pound,  
We are not sure they would so long remaine:  
All change is perillous, and all chaunce unsound.  
Therefore leave off to weigh them all againe,  
Till we may be assur'd they shall their course retaine. (5.2.36)

To Artegall the Gyant is a hypocritical agitator and demagogue parading under the banner of justice; he attracts a rabble of malcontents by shouting communism and denouncing property right and by denying the validity of law and authority. Artegall declares that sovereignty and property are divinely-ordained institution, created and supported by the providence of God.

The hils doe not the lowly dales disdaine;  
 The dales doe not the lofty hils envy.  
 He maketh Kings to sit in sovereignty;  
 He maketh subjects to their powre obay;  
 He pulleth downe, he setteth up on hy;  
 He gives to this, from that he takes away.  
 For all we have is his: what he list doe, he may. (5.2.41.3-9)

Parker points out that Artegall's argument against the Gyant is made by asserting "the superiority of the existing order of nature as being the one ordained by God according to heavenly Justice in which all know their place and part . . . the world scheme as the Elizabethans saw it" (210). Talus<sup>2</sup> then throws the Gyant into the water. The angry crowd assail Talus, but quickly disperse when he wields his flail.

The canto ii is a definition of the correct theory of property by the elimination of the Anabaptists' doctrine, and an exposition of the office of the true nobleman in upholding economic justice. Extortion and communism are in equal violation of that divine law upon which justice is based. It is the duty of the true knight, on the one hand to defend the poor against the greed of the plutocrat, and on the other, to defend property against the revolutionary folly of the communist. The opening lines of the canto say it:

Nought is more honorable to a knight,  
 Ne better doth beseeme brave chevalry,  
 Then to defend the feeble in their right,  
 And wrong redresse in such as wend awry. (5.2.1.1-4)

Spenser had already condemned the greed for gold on the grounds of temperance, and had defined the attitude which the virtuous man should

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<sup>2</sup> For the additional analysis of Talus, refer to Elizabeth Jane Bellamy's article, p. 280.

take toward riches in Book II. Sir Guyon, in response to the temptations of Mammon, says,

But I in armes, and in atchievements brave,  
Do rather choose my flitting houres to spend,  
And to be Lord of those, that riches have,  
Then them to have my selfe, and be their servile slave. (2.7.33.6-9)  
. . . . .  
All that I need I have; what needeth mee  
To covet more, then I have cause to use? (2.7.39.3-4)

The condemnation of concupiscence in the first part of the canto, like the condemnation of communism in the second, runs parallel to the prevailing ecclesiastical thought. Thus in this canto, Spenser identifies himself with current ecclesiastical thought.

Not only does Spenser's concept of Justice come from the existing social order, but from Aristotle as well. In his letter to Raleigh, and even in the subtitle of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser tries to demonstrate the twelve virtues of Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> H. S. V. Jones points out that in Spenser's view of Aristotle, there was a continuum upon which might be placed, from left to right, the democrats (unrestrained freedom), the aristocrats (virtue), and the oligarchs (wealth). The aristocrats, therefore, fulfill the Aristotelian concept of the Golden Mean. Furthermore, in Book Five, Artegall is seen in a virtuous middle position, between the extremes of the evils of aristocratic violence as represented by Pollente and Munera, and the democratic Gyant where all things are held in common. It is in relation to Artegall that Spenser states,

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<sup>3</sup> Caspari suggests that "Spenser . . . was closer to the medieval and renaissance concepts of the four 'cardinal virtues' of wisdom, temperance, justice, and courage" (179).

But set the truth and set the right aside,  
For they with wrong or falshood will not fare;  
And put two wrongs together to be tride,  
Or else two falses, of each equall share;  
And then together doe them both compare.  
For truth is one, and right is ever one.  
So did he, and then plaine it did appeare,  
Whether of them the greater were attone.  
But right sate in the midst of the beame alone. (5.2.48)

Thus Spenser finds himself squarely in the middle, abhorring any deviation from it. Spenser's opposition to "democratic" ideals is certain, and as Cory states, one can see Spenser's "noble narrowness" (300). Jones also indicates Spenser's narrowness by stating that "The only answers made by Spenser to the advocates of democratic principles . . . is that the established order was divinely appointed and the proposed reforms are contrary to the principle of the Golden Mean" (255).

In contrast to Spenser's extremely conservative position is that of the sixteenth-century religious sect known as the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists took power in the Münster Rebellion and founded a democratic proto-socialistic state in 1534. They claimed all property, burned all books except the Bible, and called it the "New Jerusalem." The Anabaptists believed they would lead the elect from Münster to capture the entire world and purify it of evil with the sword in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ and the beginning of the Millennium. The sect, however, became infamous after the atrocities they committed in Münster under the leadership of John of Leyden. Anarchy and polygamy were the more conspicuous deviations of the German anabaptists. Helen C. White writes that "They would abolish all magistrates and authority of law, they would level all social distinctions between the different classes of man, and they would have all property in common. In other words . . . anarchy, social

revolution, communism” (118). In relation to the charges leveled against the Anabaptists, Richard Heath states that:

The Anabaptists are the parishes of history, and the prejudice against them has had little chance of being removed, owing to the fact that their foes, being all-powerful, destroyed nearly everything they wrote, so that posterity has been mainly informed of what they thought and did by histories vehemently hostile. (390)

Spenser, however, did not have to look to Germany in order to find difficulties with the Anabaptists, for they had been a source of irritation for some sixty years in England prior to the publication of *The Faerie Queene*. In the 1530s Anabaptism supplanted Lollard in name as in doctrine and became the left wing of the English Reformation. Primarily the Anabaptists came to England in two waves: the first wave came following the fall of Anabaptism in Münster in 1535-1536, and the second wave followed the effort on the part of the Duke of Alva to exterminate the Anabaptists in the years 1567-1573. So heavy was the influx that Heath states that “Interest in Anabaptist teaching England was only second to Germany and the Netherlands” (394).

The English monarchs were well aware of the problems created by the continental Anabaptists and they treated the newly arrived members of the sect with a heavy hand. Henry VIII is said to have burned more Anabaptists in a few years than had Lollards been burned in the previous century. In 1538, Henry VIII issued a proclamation prohibiting the printing, importation, and possession of Anabaptist books, and later issued a second order which stated that all rebaptized persons must leave the realm. Bishop Latimer commented on the burning of two members of the sect in 1536; “The Anabaptists that were burnt here in divers towns in England, as I heard of credible men--I saw them not myself--went to their death, even



*intrepide*, as ye will say, without any fear in the world, cheerfully; well, let them go" (Heath 395). The suppressive measures continued during the reign of Edward VI. In fact, the Anabaptists created so many problems in Kent and Essex that a royal Commission containing Cranmer, Latimer, and others, was given special powers to correct the Anabaptists. Elizabeth continued the attack, and in 1560, she ordered all Anabaptists to either conform or leave the country. The coming of so many Dutch and Flemish refugees in the 1560s culminated in a proclamation in 1568 which condemned the Anabaptists because they met in secret conventicles and had influenced the English people. The Queen had no intention "to harbour such sort of persons" and ordered, in another proclamation, "search to be made, not only of foreigners, but of homeborn subjects, who had conceived any manner of such heretical principles as the Anabaptists do hold" (Heath 393). Late in Elizabeth's reign there occurred the Hacket affair which revolved around an alleged Anabaptist plot to take Elizabeth's life. "Men talk of it resemble it to the Anabaptists, and think this fool [Hacket] plotted some such kingdom as these prophets might have assemble" (Black 166-167). J. B. Black suggests that this incident indicates that the atrocities of Münster were still fresh in the Elizabethan mind (167).

The Anabaptists were the subject of discourse by several sixteenth century writers such as John Hale, Henrie Smith, Sir Thomas Nashe, and even Shakespeare. Hale, who had served as one of the King's Highness' Commission, and was in an excellent position to access the current political climate stated that "Anabaptists and libertyness I have and do most abhorre, as sectes clean contrary to goddes words, nature and civyle pollicie" (White 121). Henrie Smith, writing in *The Poore Mans Teares* in 1592, has an account of beggars who seize horses and take other men's purses, and states that "these fellowes are of the opinion of the Anabaptists, that everie mans goods must be common to them, or else they will force them to part it" (White 126). And I. B. Horst adds that,

Thomas Nashe, in contrast to the decorous Spenser, relates . . . the story of the Anabaptists at Frankenhause and Münster in *The Unfortunate Traveler* (1594). Although he confuses the two events, he appears to follow Sleidanus faithfully enough to arrive at the traditional interpretation. Nashe is interested chiefly in telling a story, but he does betray a sympathy with the victims, the account of which no doubt reminded him and his readers of the current executions in London. (219)

Nashe clearly satirizes the Anabaptists in a savage portrayal of the Münster debacle of 1534. In the case of Shakespeare, Byung-Eun Lee mentions that Gonzalo's speech on the commonwealth in *The Tempest* is a direct criticism of the Anabaptists.

There is little doubt that Spenser was aware of the activities in England concerning the Anabaptists. He was a highly educated person in his age: Merchant Taylors' School and Pembroke College, Cambridge. And he was a man with a varied career enough to understand contemporary religious movements. Moreover, as Padelford points out, "[i]t must be evident that the allegory of Artegall and the Gyant is no mere academic handling of the subject of communism; it is a scathing denunciation of it, in which the personal feeling of the author is sufficiently evident" (336). Kate M. Warren agrees,

This story, however, plainly shows that Spenser was not beyond his age in the way he viewed the 'democratic' movement. There is here the unsympathetic, aristocratic air which the Elizabethan gentleman too often adopted towards the people, and from which Shakespeare himself was not free. (275)

The Anabaptists in Elizabethan England were more revolutionary than those of Münster and were anxious to spread their ideas through the country (Freeman 269). Although it is unlikely that underground

Anabaptists represented any threat to the political order in the 1590s, their social doctrine continued to be feared.

Especially in the mid-1590s, the period of composing Book Five, the low-class riots were widespread mainly because of food shortages. The economic situation of agricultural workers in England had been declining steadily through the century, reaching its lowest point in the 1590s. Beginning in 1594, unusual dry weather in spring and summer brought four bad harvests in a row. Unprecedented shortages caused grain prices to double in 1594 and again in 1595. Because two-thirds of the population lived at the margin of poverty, the threat of starvation immediately endangered social order. Food riots were everywhere in 1595, and there was an attempted insurrection among the artisans of Oxfordshire. Spenser's Gyant personifies the social threat this misery represented to the political order of the kingdom.

In addition, Frederick Padelford, Merritt Y. Hughes, and Alfred B. Gough suggest that specific events might be responsible for Spenser's attack. Hughes suggests that the rebellion led by Robert Kett (or Ket) in Norwich in 1549 was perhaps parallel with the Münster uprising in Spenser's mind: "John Ket, who promised a Utopian reformation . . . like the Gyant, was overthrown at the very beginning of the armed struggle, but only after a long and formal debate with the representative of authority" (Hughes 144). Gough states that "a Robert Kett had established a communist regime in East Anglia for a brief period in 1549, and was later overthrown" (175). Padelford believes that the proclamation of the queen in 1568 is the source. "I suggest that it was this harsh removal across seas of these troublesome sectarians that is figured forth in the precipitation of the giant into the sea" (340).

No doubt the Münster rebellion and other uprisings concerning the Anabaptists were known to Spenser; however, it seems that a poet who had such a strong nationalistic leaning as Spenser would use native, local

material, particularly when it was current and relevant, to frame his allegory. I suggest that the topical allegory in Book Five would have been more meaningful to the English readers of the day if interpreted in light of the Anabaptist agitations of the Tudor period. Although there appears to me to be very little evidence to trace the Gyant to a specific event, the evidence does strongly suggest that the English Anabaptists could be the source for the Gyant in Book Five.

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## ABSTRACT

**Anabaptists and the Gyant in Book Five of *The Faerie Queene***

Byung-Eun Lee

In Book Five, Canto ii of *The Faerie Queene*, there is one incident, the encounter of Artegall and the Gyant, that suggests the close relationship between Spenser and the political and religious unrest of the sixteenth century. Spenser has left no personal document that would suggest the precise historical nature of the Gyant. However, if one juxtaposes Spenser's stated and implied beliefs in the Tudor social order with the equalitarian ideals of the leveler Anabaptists, one can note a close parallel to the juxtaposition of Artegall and his foe, the Gyant. The English and Irish political situation in the late sixteenth-century around Spenser can also make us assume the possible source for the Gyant. Thus, by indicating Spenser's political philosophy and contrasting it with that held by the Anabaptists, and by mentioning few historical information concerning the Anabaptists in England, which critics fail to pinpoint, in this paper I wish to show that the English Anabaptists, those heirs of political discord found in Münster and the Low Countries, are the most likely historical antecedent for the Gyant.

**Key Words** | Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book Five, Anabaptists, Gyant, radical religious movement