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Darci N. Hill

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Abstract

Discusses the third movement of George Herbert's *The Temple*, "The Church Militant." Reviews critical reception of the poem, and analyzes how it adapts "Christian myth to the classical epic formulas."

Additional Keywords

Christianity; Herbert, George. "The Church Militant"—Explication; Heroism

"The Church Militant" Resurrected

MYTHIC ELEMENTS IN GEORGE HERBERT'S *The Temple*

DARCI N. HILL

Numerous poets writing in the seventeenth century have been revalued and elevated in the twentieth century. None, however has received as many accolades for his work as has George Herbert. Although eighteenth-century literary figures like Addison charged Herbert with using "false wit," and although nineteenth-century scholars considered his work "quaint," this university-orator-turned-country-parson is now generally hailed as one of the most significant poets in his century. Indeed, the received opinion among literary critics today is that Herbert stands as the most significant devotional poets in the English language.

Almost all of Herbert's poetry is contained in *The Temple*, much of which was probably composed during the last years of his life when he was parson for three years of the country parish of Bemerton. Just before his death Herbert sent the manuscript to his friend Nicholas Ferrar with the following request: "if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies." (*Works*) Ferrar had it published shortly after the death of his friend in 1633.

Herbert arranges his work *The Temple* in three movements: "The Church Porch," which centers on a presentation of moral and biblical precepts; "The Church," which presents a continual cycle of conflict, doubt, and reassurance; and "The Church Militant," which demonstrates the simultaneous progress of Christianity and sin. The third movement, "The Church Militant," will be the focus of this discussion.

We will begin by looking at the poem's reception in the scholarly community. From there we will move to an analysis of the poem itself, particularly as it recalls and encompasses the heroic tradition. Finally, we will examine the lyric "L'Envoy" as an "answer" to structural and thematic problems raised by Herbert scholars.

Now even though Herbert has received his share of accolades for "The Church," Part II of the work, scholars have long been puzzled by *The Temple's* third movement, "The Church Militant." In the nineteenth century, for example, Alexander Grosart, a compiler of Herbert's poems, purposefully moves "The Church Militant" to a separate volume to avoid its "contaminating" *The Temple* with its close proximity to the other poems in the work (Miller 149). And F. E. Hutchinson, whose *Works of George Herbert* is considered by Herbert scholars as the "definitive" edition for serious study of the poet, suggests that "Herbert perhaps came to recognize that his lyrical gift was not well

fitted for [the] ambitious attempts" necessary to write "The Church Militant" ("Commentary" 543). A more recent critic, Stanley Fish, claims that "even if it were proved that Herbert intended to integrate 'The Church Militant' into *The Temple*, we would still be free to decide that he had failed" (143). However, the most commonly held view among scholars and critics is that "The Church Militant" is so simplistic and so unlike Herbert's other poetry that it would be prudent to ignore it.

This proliferation of negative comments alone from the critical community regarding "The Church Militant" should compel Herbert scholars to examine this final movement more closely. For if "The Church Militant" is so simplistic, if it really is only a five-part history lesson (Johnson 200), then why is its presence in *The Temple* so disturbing? If it is so simplistic, and if it does, in fact, reveal the "early Herbert," then why does scholar after scholar scissor it off, in effect, from the rest of *The Temple*? If so simplistic, why would a critic be so bold as to declare that Herbert fails in this third movement? And if so simplistic, why would a compiler remove "The Church Militant" from the remainder of *The Temple* for fear that the first two movements would be contaminated?

Contrary to two hundred years of critical opinion, we find upon close analysis that "The Church Militant" is a rich, many-faceted jewel which uncovers new meanings in the entire structure and arrangement of *The Temple*. We find as well that Herbert, steeped as he was in the heroic tradition and versed as he was in the rhetorical tradition, draws deeply from those reservoirs, adapting Christian myth to the classical epic formulas.

Divided into five distinct parts through the use of a refrain, "The Church Militant" is a 279-line narrative poem written in heroic couplets. The poem itself traces the history of the church universal through a narration of events from the lives of Old Testament patriarchs, proceeds into a discussion of Christ's ministry, and from there demonstrates how sin has influenced Christianity throughout history. The poem closes with "L'Envoy," a short lyric which portrays Christ as hero in his final victory over sin and death. One approach to "The Church Militant" — and the poem generally has not been 'approached' at all — is to read it as a call to the valiant to become spiritual warriors and then to march with the army of the church universal. To activate and motivate the Christian hero in this action, Herbert uses several rhetorical strategies in writing "The Church Militant" which are normally associated with the epic genre: an invocation to the muse or deity, a

hero of national or universal significance, a contest between good and evil, and a grand and elevated verse form. The poet's use of these conventions in "The Church Militant" melds Christian subject matter and classical tradition, a blend that has existed at least since Dante's use of Vergil as a guide in *The Inferno*. Further, Herbert's elaborated use of each of these epic conventions evokes a heroic genre and suggests to the reader of "The Church Militant" that the Old Testament patriarchs function in this final movement of *The Temple* as epic heroes do in classical formulas.

The grand, elevated verse of "The Church Militant" proves Herbert to be in control of an epic style. Unlike the plain, direct proverbs of "The Church Porch" or the highly personal devotional lyrics of "The Church," Herbert selects a style for "The Church Militant" normally reserved for public orations, indeed, for great ceremonies. Commenting in general on his style throughout *The Temple*, Carnes claims that Herbert in "The Church Militant" reaches a level of poetic sophistication which he does not approach in the two earlier movements (521). His predominant verse form for the final movement is the heroic couplet; he uses almost no *enjambment*, or run-on lines, which lend a casual, unhurried mood to a literary piece. Rather, his use of the heroic couplet, or the end-stopped line, produces a masculine, if not military tone to the entire poem — as in the ordered — marching cadence of the passage beginning with line 62:

The Warrior his deere skarres no more resounds
But seems to yeeld Christ hath the greater wounds.
Wounds willingly endur'd to work his blisse,
Who by an ambush lost his Paradise. (62-65)

Herbert's use of this grand style for "The Church Militant" supports a strong correlation between style and subject matter, for the poem celebrates not contemporary deeds of heroism but deeds of heroism in Christian history which are remote but ever new, glorified by a Judeo-Christian tradition already centuries old. The restoration of this tradition, invested with significance through Herbert's grand style, functions to awaken in the contemporary reader-hero a renewed appreciation of that tradition.

Another epic convention which bears study is the invocation. To introduce an epic a poet typically invokes a muse or a deity to assist him in writing the poem. Then he announces his subject matter. In this poem Herbert directs his invocation to the Christian God; his subject matter is the Church. He opens the poem, "Almighty Lord, who from thy glorious throne / Seest and rulest all things ev'n as one" (CM 1-2). This opening demonstrates God's suitability as a muse; He rules the universe yet cares for "small things" such as the *ant*, *atome* or *minute* (3-4). He also regards "great things" such as *commonweals* (5). Herbert's bold statement that "[c]ommon-weals acknowledge thee / And wrap their policies in thy decree" in lines 5-6 implies that without the ultimate rulership of God, there is neither justice nor negotiation; rather, governments remain under His authority.

The speaker now introduces his myth's subject matter — the Church. Affairs of state, important as they are, cannot compare in significance to the affairs of the church: "But above all, thy Church and Spouse doth prove / Not the decrees of power, but bands of love" (9-10). Synonymous in the invocation are the words *Church* and *Spouse* Herbert here draws on biblical metaphor, metaphor which represents the relationship between the church and Christ as bride and bridegroom, respectively (See Isa. 62:5, Rev. 19:7). Christ's Spouse, the Church, is now invested by Herbert with heroic qualities such as innocence, purity, and alertness. Now in possession of these qualities, she is "[p]repared and fitted to receive [the Bridegroom's] love," as we read in line 16.

In this same passage we also observe that Christ's "Spouse" (the Church) is described in line 13-15 as "[t]rimme as the light, sweet as the . . . vine, chaste as the dove." The lamp image recalls Jesus's parable of the ten virgins who must trim their wicks to prepare for a wedding. Jesus himself is the bridegroom in this parable, which revolves around the principle of spiritual readiness (See Matthew 25:1-10). The second simile, "sweet as the . . . vine," suggests the taste of wine in its unadulterated, natural state before fermentation. "Laden boughs" suggest fruit in abundance and in readiness for harvest. The third simile used to describe Christ's Spouse (who will collectively become Christ's army) is "chaste as the dove," suggesting the purity of the Bride or the Church. The poet uses the present tense to reiterate the Bride's eternal nature, a characteristic she possesses because of her identification with the eternal Church.

By reawakening an appreciation of the Christian heroic legacy, Herbert restores to his reader and Christian hero a former age of glory. He borrows rhetorical technique not only from classical formulas but also from the New Testament book of Hebrews. In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, often referred to by theologians as the "chapter of faith," the writer uses a variation of the heroic motif by offering an extensive *enumeration* of Christian heroes and heroines. Chapter 12, which immediately follows this heroic *enumeration* opens with an exhortation addressed to the contemporary Christian reader-hero to be encouraged because so many others of like mind and strength (referred to in the passage as a "great cloud of witnesses") have already preceded him (Heb. 12:1). The writer of Hebrews concludes his discourse on faith with an exhortation to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (12:1).

Following "The Church Militant's" invocation, a description of Old Testament patriarchs melds together two different epic features, the use of cosmic heroes and the use of catalogs. When he pens the name "Abraham" or "Moses" Herbert imagines a readership able to recall the specific narratives amalgamated to compose the continuing saga of Old Testament history. Each one of the patri-

archal figures anticipates traits of the coming Messiah of "L'Envoy" and plays a prominent role in the history of the church. Noah, mentioned in an earlier connection with the description of the church, is an archetype of the faithful; Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation; Moses is the deliverer of his people; and King Solomon is the wise ruler.

This catalog of patriarchs, though abbreviated, adds credence to the poet's argument. We readily see here the heroic motif at work as it operates in "The Church" in poems such as "Decay" and "Sion." The poet issues a call to his reader to emulate the characteristics of these patriarchs and in doing so, to identify with some of the great heroes of the Christian faith. Each hero mentioned does his part in waging spiritual battle. Herbert makes it quite clear that no one person can fight alone; rather, it requires the corporate body of the church militant marching as one to overcome evil. Herbert's inclusion of this catalog of Old Testament heroes serves to elevate the entire "Church Militant" in theme and structure. It also serves to prefigure Christ as the quintessence of heroism in "L'Envoy." One particularly significant patriarch figuring in "The Church Militant" is Moses. Allusions to Moses abound and are elaborated in this final movement. Archetypally, Moses functions as a Savior figure in his act of leading the Hebrew people out of slavery. Moses repeatedly proves God's anger when he releases one plague after another upon the Egyptians. Conversely, he acts as divine vehicle for demonstrating God's mercy with His people in the midst of judgment: "The ten Commandments there [in Egypt] did flourish more / Then the ten bitter plagues had done before" (39-40). In the midst of their bondage God blesses the Israelites with children, of whom Moses is one: "Nilus for monsters brought forth Israelites" (CM 44). Moses as type prefigures Christ, Who delivers His people out of spiritual slavery.

Another typical convention associated with the heroic myth is the contest between good and evil. If there is a hero, then this hero must "prove" himself such by overcoming an adversary. In the tradition within which Herbert is working this adversary is recognizably evil, just as the hero is recognizably virtuous. In this context *Sinne* is the adversary. Among other strategies, Herbert's treatment of sin in "The Church Militant" significantly enhances the poem's heroic tone. Whereas sin in "The Church Porch" is treated as though its presence were an external bother that man overcomes for his own self-interest and whereas sin in "The Church" represents the struggle man overcomes by recognizing sin and fleeing to Christ, *Sinne* in "The Church Militant" assumes exaggerated negative *ethos* as an allegorical enemy who "dogs" and "traces" the church in order to destroy her effectiveness. The passage beginning on line 101 is notable:

Much about one and the same time and place,
Both where and when the Church began her race,
Sinne did set out of Eastern Babylon,
And travell'd westward also: journeying on

He chid the Church away, where e're he came,
Breaking her peace, and tainting her good name.

(101-06)

Much as an evil being can change its shape at will in an epic—i.e.: Archimago in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* — *Sinne* beguiles the church herself by taking on various forms, reaching its pinnacle of deception, ironically, as a priest. Beginning with line 161 we read,

Sinne being not able to extirpate quite
The Churches here, bravely resolved one night
To be a Church-man too, and wear a Mitre:
The old debauched ruffian would turn writer.

(161-64)

Sinne's power in "The Church Militant" obliterates Truth's influence: "Truth sat by, counting his [*Sinne's*] victories" (190). *Sinne's* attempts to destroy Christianity are countered only with helplessness. *The Temple* opens with sin in "The Church Porch" and closes with sin in "The Church Militant." Herbert's unrelenting inclusion of this subject in each of the three movements demonstrates his concern with this problem in the life of his Christian hero. The reader-hero should remain aware that *Sinne* in its role as enemy of Religion is bent on destroying the universal church's hope, reputation, and effectiveness.

But a disturbing fact remains. In "The Church Militant" Herbert definitely and deliberately insists that the Church has failed, that *Sinne* has defeated her throughout history. Indeed, only 12 lines before the end of the poem the poet quite clearly warns, "The Church shall come, & *Sinne* the Church shall smother." And if this prophecy is not despairing enough, the final crushing decree of the poem in line 277 is that "judgement shall appear." From all appearances, then, the great adversary, *Sinne*, emerges victor of the ensuing battle, and the church is defeated or "smothered." The only recourse is for a hero greater than the reader-hero to rescue the Church from her inevitable defeat. "L'Envoy," the poetic finale of "The Church Militant," announces the real hero, the ultimate hero, Christ himself. In "L'Envoy" Herbert exults in Christ's final victory over *Sinne*:

King of Glorie, King of Peace,
With the one make warre to cease;
With the other blesses thy sheep,
Thee to love, in thee to sleep,
Let not *Sinne* devour thy fold,
Bragging that thy bloud is cold,
That thy death is also dead,
While his conquests daily spread;
That thy flesh hath lost his food,
And thy Crosse is common wood.
Choke him, let him say no more,
But reserve his breath in store
Till thy conquests and his fall
Make his sighs to use it all,
And then bargain with the winde
To discharge what is behind.

Blessed be God alone,
Thrice blessed Three in One.
("L'Envoy")

Saluting Christ as "King of Glory, King of Peace," the poet's first two requests of the Christ are immediately linked to Christ's two functions in the salutation of "L'Envoy": "With the one [peace] make warre to cease, / With the other [glory] blesse thy sheep" (2-3). Sinne is portrayed as a braggart soldier, taunting the Church with four illogical arguments. Through these four arguments, Sinne renders Christ's death powerless and insignificant. "[B]lood" (wine) and "flesh" (bread), the elements of the Eucharist, act as vehicles through which one partakes of the body of the Lord. "[D]eath" and "Cross" provide the backdrop to the Christian hero's desire and privilege to participate in the communion service as a liturgy but also to participate in personal communion with God.

The third portion of "L'Envoy," beginning with line 11, demonstrates the poet's and the Church's inability to combat sin, for the poet asks his boon of the King in much the same tone as a son would implore his father: "Choke him, let him say no more" (11). When Christ grants the speaker's request, Sinne's taunts cease. Sinne's inability to "say no more" obliterates his effectiveness for he no longer possesses the power of speech. The poet beseeches his King to "reserve [his enemy's] breath in store," an action which enables Sinne to sigh and moan when he is defeated by the conquering Christ. To make him use his breath for sighs instead of the accustomed accusations constitutes a type of torture. Demeaning Sinne even further, the poet suggests that Christ "bargain with the winde / To discharge what is behinde" (15-16). The poem closes with a praise to the triune God, a final dedicatory to Herbert's hero and patron. "L'Envoy" functions as the poem's climax by restating, expanding, and strengthening the poem's predominant theme. The coda closes the poem on a triumphant note, answering the critics' charges of inconclusiveness. Christ, "The King of Glory, King of Peace," combats and conquers sin in history with his death and resurrection; He combats and conquers sin in the future with his return for his Bride, the Church.

Resurrecting "The Church Militant" for serious analysis should clarify some misconceptions commonly held among the scholarly community about this final movement of *The Temple*. When viewed in light of the heroic tradition within which Herbert is working, "The Church Militant" becomes an extremely significant movement of *The Temple*. Epic characteristics amalgamate to define and elucidate the predominant theme of Christian heroism. In one of his eloquent sermons Herbert's friend and contemporary John Donne alludes to the ceaseless spiritual war Herbert describes in "The Church Militant." He alludes as well to the continuing need for the Christian hero's participation in that war. Donne inquires, "have the Saints of God no vacation? doe they never cease?" In answer to his own query, he contends that "God himselfe rested not, till

the seventh day." Donne then implores, "be thou content to stay for thy sabbath, till thou maist have an eternall one. . . be not thou weary of bearing thy part in his Quire, here in the Militant Church" (*Sermons* 8.52-53). With this final movement Herbert depicts a never-ending war, a war which will not cease until Christ, the universal hero, the "King of Glory, King of Peace" descends to reclaim His Bride, the Church.

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MUCHMORE CORE READING LIST

MUCHMORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954; *The Two Towers* 1954; *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977.

C.S. LEWIS

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadow of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Tales from Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).