

4-27-2014

A Neglected Source for the Mortdant and Amavia Episode in *The Faerie Queene*

David Lee Miller
University of South Carolina - Columbia, dmill1951@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl_facpub



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Publication Info

Postprint version. Published in *Notes and Queries*, Volume 61, Issue 2, 2014, pages 229-231.
© The Author, [Notes and Queries](#) 2014, Oxford University Press.

This Article is brought to you by the English Language and Literatures, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

David Lee Miller
Department of English
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208

**A NEGLECTED SOURCE FOR THE MORTDANT AND AMAVIA EPISODE
IN THE FAERIE QUEENE**

Scholars from A. C. Hamilton and A. D. S. Fowler to Carol Kaske have identified biblical and patristic resonances in the Mortdant and Amavia episode of The Faerie Queene (II.i-ii) that suggest a Pauline allegory of Mosaic law: ‘For sinne toke occasion by the commandement, and deceived me, and thereby slewe me’ (Romans 7:11).¹ What seems to have gone unnoticed is that Spenser develops the allegory of this episode directly from Beza’s Geneva glosses to Romans chapters 5-7. Recognizing this source enables us to clarify certain points in the allegory.

No interpretation of this episode has explained why an allegory of the flesh and Mosaic Law should be personified as a dying husband and wife. But if we look at the opening to Romans chapter 7 in the Geneva text, we read:

2. For the woman which is in subiECTION to a man, is bounde by
the lawe to the man, while he liueth: but if the man be dead, she is deliuered
from the law of the man.

¹ Hamilton, ‘A Theological Reading of The Faerie Queene, Book II’, ELH 25 (1958), 155-62; Fowler, ‘Emblems of Temperance in The Faerie Queene, Book II’, RES 11 (1960), 143-9; Kaske, ‘The Bacchus Who Wouldn’t Wash: Faerie Queene II.i-ii’, RenQ 29 (1976), 195-209; “‘Religious Reverence Doth Burial Teene’: Christian and Pagan in The Faerie Queene, II. i-ii’, RES 30 (1979), 129-43; and Spenser and Biblical Poetics (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 158-79. Biblical citations are taken from the 1576 Geneva Bible, translated Laurence Tomson (STC 2117, copy from the British Library accessed via EEBO on 21 July 2013).

3. So then, if while the man liveth, she take another man, she shalbe called an adulteresse: but if the man be dead, she is free from the Law, so that she is not an adulteresse, though she take another man.

4. So ye, my brethren, are dead also to the Law by the body of Christ, that ye should be vnto another, *euen* vnto him that is raised vp from the deade, that we should bring forth fruite vnto God.

The marginal gloss explains the analogy:

Both in this first marriage & in the second, the husband and the wife must be considered within our selues: the first husband was Sinne, and our fleshe was the wife: their children were the fruits of the flesh Gal.

5.19. In the second marriage the Spirit is the husbände, the newe creature is the wife, & their children are the fruits of the Spirit, Gal. 5.2.1

Mat. 5.32

The gloss already treats the husband and wife as allegorical figures. Spenser brings them to life, investing them with a fully human presence and pathos. Amavia's husband has died, but she refuses to be delivered from 'the law of the man', remaining bound to Mortdant ('he who gives death') even after he has died. In clinging so passionately to this bond, she fails to recognize her release from the Law, her freedom to become the bride of Christ. In effect, she confounds Paul's anguished cry, 'O wretched man that I am, who shal deliuer me from the bodie of this death?' (Rom 7:24). The answer to Paul's desire is Christ; the answer to Amavia's is suicide.

The image of the infant Ruddymane playing in his mother's blood has been glossed with a passage from Ezekiel in which the personified 'word of the Lord'

instructs the prophet to tell Jerusalem what the Lord says: 'And when I passed by thee, I sawe thee polluted in thine owne blood, and I said unto thee, when thou wast in thy blood, Thou shalt live: even when ye wast in thy blood, I said unto the, Thou shalt live' (16:1-2, 6).² The Geneva gloss to this passage tells us it means 'that before God wash his Church, and give life, there is nothing, but filthines and death'. If we accept this gloss, it locates Ruddymane in the moment prior to baptism--the moment, in Pauline theology, when the commandment brings death by causing the knowledge of sin. But it makes little sense to associate Ruddymane with the knowledge of sin: his innocent dabbling in his mother's blood vividly expresses the opposite.

A better interpretation can be found in the Geneva gloss to Romans 5:14. The verse reads, 'But death reigned from Adam to Moses, euen ouer them also that sinned not after the like manner of the transgression of Adam, which was the figure of him that was to come'. The gloss, anchored to the phrase 'them also that sinned not', explains, 'He meaneth yong babes, whiche neyther had the knowledge of the law of nature, nor any motion of concupiscence, much lesse committed any actual sinne: and this may also comprehend the gentiles'. Paul elaborates on this state in the verses of Romans 7 that stand directly behind the allegory of Mortdant and Amavia:

7 . . . Nay, I knewe not sinne, but by the Law: for I had not knowen lust,
except the Lawe had sayd, Thou shalt not lust.

² C. Kaske, 'The Bacchus Who Wouldn't Wash', 204-8.

8 But sinne tooke an occasion by the commandement, and wrought in me
all maner of concupiscence: for without the Lawe sinne is dead.

9 For I once was aliue, with out the Law: but when the commandement
came, sinne reuiued,

10 But I died: and the same commandement which was ordeined vnto life,
was found to be vnto me vnto death.

The infant Ruddymane, smiling at Guyon and the Palmer 'As careless of his woe, or
innocent, / Of that was doen' (FQ ii.1.7-8), offers an appalling image of life without
the Law, blissful in its ignorance of death and oblivious to the stain on its hands.

This allegory paradoxically locates the bloody babe earlier in the Pauline
sequence than the dead husband and his dying wife, since Ruddymane represents
the moment before the commandment has given rise to sin. His parents embody a
more complex overlaying of two subsequent moments, the death that follows from
the commandment and that which follows from baptism (Romans 6:3). For
although Kaske has dismissed the idea that the washing of Ruddymane's hands in
canto ii represents baptism,³ this does not mean that baptism has no bearing on the
allegory: in Paul's account, the struggle between sin and the Law follows
immediately *upon* baptism. This is another sense in which Guyon begins where
Redcrosse has ended: the well that signifies baptism is not the cold Ovidian spring of
II.ii but the '*well of life*' that restores Redcrosse in his battle with the dragon of sin
(FQ I.xi.29-34).

³ C. Kaske, Spenser and Biblical Poetics 167; she had endorsed this reading in 'The
Bacchus Who Would Not Wash', 206.

The allegorical tableau that astonishes Guyon and his Palmer constitutes 'the ymage of mortalitie' (FQ ii.57.2) because it condenses all three phases of mortal life as described by Paul: life without the Law, embodied in Ruddymane; the 'death' that the Law brings by creating sin, embodied in Mortdant; and the 'death' of Christ, into which believers are baptized so that they may 'live also with him' (Romans 6:8), refused by Amavia. It represents those phases, however, as both gruesome and mysterious when beheld from a perspective unable to grasp the promised immortality that concludes the Pauline sequence. Guyon is a virtuous pagan, a hero from the world of classical epic, called to witness the scene of baptism and responding with shocked incomprehension.⁴

University of South Carolina

DAVID LEE MILLER

⁴ The overlapping of Mosaic law with classical philosophy is based on the assumption that God's law is inscribed in the human conscience, and that reason unaided by revelation is therefore able to know it. See the 1576 Geneva gloss to Romans 1:31: 'Which Lawe God writ in their consciences, and the Philosophers called it the Law of nations whereof Moses Lawe is a plaine exposition'.