

## An Answer to Matthew A. Fike\*

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Let me begin by thanking Matthew A. Fike for taking me seriously enough to engage with my article. I also want to acknowledge my debt to his excellent book *Spenser's Underworld*. Given the limitations of a reply like this, I shall cut to the quick by engaging with what I take to be Fike's major gripe, namely that "blasphemy overstates Spenser's technique to the extent that the *Aeneid* is the fundamental antecedent [for Duessa's descent]," which in turn means that "Spenser's technique, [...] to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic, not blasphemous" (4).

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I have of course never questioned the importance of the *Aeneid* as a crucial intertext for this passage, or indeed for book one as a whole. However, I do object to the adjective "fundamental" in the sense Fike seems to give it, i.e., that Spenser's use of Virgil would somehow obliterate other important intertexts such as the New Testament. The thought that Spenser's allegory in all its richness could be reduced to one, and only one interpretative grid seems to me ill advised.

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\*Reference: Åke Bergvall, "Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's 'The Legend of Holiness,'" *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 1-10; Matthew A. Fike, "A Response to Åke Bergvall's 'Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's «The Legend of Holiness,»'" *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 1-5.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergvall01613.htm>>.

In a paper soon to be published in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Lars-Håkan Svensson demonstrates in learned detail how throughout Redcrosse's fights with the Sans brothers, including the one discussed in my paper, Spenser actively engages with the *Aeneid*, in particular its ending, but that these classical allusions also have to be fitted into a larger interpretative picture: "the episodes making use of the ending of the *Aeneid* in book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* involve three evil brothers, clearly intended as participants in a theological allegory based on Galatians 5.22-23."<sup>1</sup> In the same way, I would argue, Duessa's descent, not *despite* but through the *transformation* of its classical antecedents, is fitted into a larger Scriptural picture. Consequently, I have no problem with Fike's proposition that the descent, "to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic" (4; my emphasis). However, to the extent that it invokes the *Christian*, the descent is also blasphemous. What I am trying to show in my paper is that, within the overarching religious allegory of book one, Duessa's descent functions in ways analogous to how she herself as the allegorical figure "Fidessa," complete with her iconic cup, blasphemously and ultimately fruitlessly prefigures her true counterpart within the House of Holiness, Fidelia (and as virtually all the other characters within its walls have been prefigured by their antithetical counterparts). Fike is of course correct in pointing out the "greater truth" that the harrowing of Hell occurs in canto 11, where the brazen tower and Redcrosse's dragon battle "echo Christ's harrowing of hell" (whether, as Fike claims, this "is not the central object of the allegory in canto 11" [4] had better be left for another time, especially since he seems to be fighting scholarly ghosts not found in my paper). However, it is perfectly in line with the allegorical methodology of Spenser's poem that Duessa's (ineffectual) attempt in canto 5 to "saue" and "cure" Sansjoy by descending into hell prefigures that later event in canto 11 by staging its very antithesis: where Redcrosse "harrows" hell she returns empty-handed, and where Redcrosse is resurrected Sansjoy remains in the land of the dead (the active/passive construction is deliberate: Redcrosse is both

the savior and the saved in canto 11, and thus prefigured by both Duessa and Sansjoy).

It is precisely these instances of antithetical prefiguring—of the House of Holiness of canto 10 by the various anti-figures populating the early parts of the book, and of the Easter drama of canto 11 by Duessa's descent—that together constitute the semantic and existential confusion enveloping the first nine books, a confusion, as I showed in my paper, structurally centered on Duessa meeting her mother (with its Messianic, and thus blasphemous overtones) as well as her descent into the underworld. In the same way that the House of Pride, within which the descent occurs, is the antithesis to the House of Holiness, so the descent itself, in its very parody of classical heroics, forms a blasphemous counterpart to the allegorical depiction of Christ's death and resurrection in canto 11.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lars-Håkan Svensson, "Remembering the Death of Turnus: Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and the Ending of the *Aeneid*," forthcoming in *Renaissance Quarterly*. The reference to Galatians is based on an interpretation of the names of the three Sans brothers: "The three brothers are negative embodiments of some of the fruits of the spirit mentioned in Galatians 5.22-23: 'ioye [...] faith [...] against such there is no Law'" (note 91).