

A Response to Åke Bergvall's "Resurrection as Blasphemy in Canto 5 of Edmund Spenser's 'The Legend of Holiness'"*

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Åke Bergvall clearly sets out his purpose in two statements early in his article. First, "I shall argue that Duessa's act of salvation is blasphemous and (consequently) ineffectual" (1-2). Second, "[t]he contention of this paper is that Duessa and her 'mother' Night, even as they bring linguistic confusion and stage a blasphemous mock-imitation of Christ's harrowing of hell, may be suffering the same fate" (2). The final phrase may mean "willing evil but working good" (2), but this may not be entirely clear.

The key concept, then, is blasphemy, which Bergvall, following Andreea-Tereza Nitisor, claims to be "'textual' and 'linguistic.'" "That linguistic profanation," writes Bergvall, "can be felt in the semantic confusion of canto 5," and so forth (2). The nexus of blasphemy, linguistic profanation, and semantic confusion is a bit shaky, but Bergvall offers a capable and sensitive close reading of canto 5, with an emphasis on the multiple readings that arise from ambiguous statements such as Duessa's "Thine the shield, and I, and all" (I.5.11). Bergvall writes: "In fact, there is no conclusive evidence which of the two knights Duessa is actually addressing, or indeed, *if* she is rather hedging her bets" (5; emphasis added). But the uncertainty here is the key point—the lack of evidence *is* evidence. As stated in my book, *Spenser's Underworld in the 1590 Faerie Queene*, "the remark may be

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addressed to either Redcrosse or Sans Joy (she *is* covering her bases)" (42; emphasis added). The ambiguity is purposeful, as the author later seems to agree: "indeed, she seems more than happy to exchange lovers depending on their luck in the jousts" (5).

Duessa's falseness is another nicely developed feature of Bergvall's article, but he is at his best in delivering insights on blasphemy, narrowly defined. His point about "Messianic delight at seeing the newborn Savior in chapter 3 of the Gospel of Luke" in connection with Night's mention of the "child, whom I haue longd to see" (L.5.27) is a very good reading (8). So is the insight, borrowed from A. C. Hamilton's note, that "some" in stanza 26 may refer to Christ as well as others. At these two points, the article delivers on the notion of blasphemy in its first statement of purpose. But there is a disconnection between the author's stated goal and what he actually achieves insofar as the true interest here—namely, confusion, developed often as falseness—is rarely blasphemous.

The article's second statement of purpose, which concerns the harrowing of hell, is somewhat at odds with Bergvall's assertion in paragraph 2 that his "contribution" is not source study. Demonstrating that canto 5 includes blasphemy requires reference to sources, as with the passage from Luke and the traditional understanding of Christ's harrowing of hell, which the Bible originates, the Fathers confirm, and texts like Langland's *Piers Plowman* dramatize. Or, as Bergvall admits later on, Duessa is "performing a false harrowing of hell, a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources" (6). Blasphemy subverts previous statements that connect in some way to a religious, theological, or Christ-related context; and such subversions do not necessarily have to involve confusion. Duessa's descent with Sans Joy clearly deviates from Christ's model in the harrowing, but does this constitute "a blasphemous inversion of the literary sources," or is the inversion merely parodic?

There are additional weak links in the argument at this point. First, to say that "Duessa [is] described as a Christ- or Theseus-figure" (6) incorrectly equates Christ and Theseus: one is a successful harrower

of hell, but the other must be rescued from the underworld by Hercules and cannot save his friend Pirithous. As well, Christ descends to liberate the righteous, whereas Duessa descends to seek healing for an evil man: the contrast constitutes parody, not blasphemy. Nor does Bergvall seem to know what “harrowing of hell” actually means. According to the *OED*, “harrow” means “to harry, rob, spoil” and is “[u]sed especially in the phrase *to harrow hell*, said of Christ” (“harrow,” 2.a.). Since Duessa’s descent is clearly not a harrowing in the traditional sense, it is precarious to expand the word “harrowed” so that it encompasses the action of both Duessa and Prince Arthur: the word is more specialized. Second, as I suggest in *Spenser’s Underworld*, Judith Anderson is probably not correct to state that Duessa’s descent is Redcrosse’s dream: if it were, how could he leave the House of Pride before she returns in stanza 45? Bergvall ought to realize the disconnection because he quotes the key lines: “‘The false *Duessa* leauing noyous Night, / Returnd to stately pallace of Dame *Pryde*,’ if only to find Redcrosse gone” (3). And third, blasphemy overstates Spenser’s technique to the extent that the *Aeneid* is the fundamental antecedent, and on the Virgilian connection much more needs to be said.

Throughout the article, Bergvall makes fruitful reference to Hamilton’s notes in the authoritative edition. It is somewhat ironic, then, that the author overlooks what is perhaps the most helpful statement ever written about Duessa’s descent in canto 5, namely, Hamilton’s analysis of it in *The Structure of Allegory in The Faerie Queene*:

In Virgil Aeneas’s descent climaxes the first half of his adventures. He hears the prophecy of his woes to be fulfilled in the second half of his journey, and he learns his full destiny. In Spenser Duessa’s descent climaxes the Red Cross Knight’s wanderings—he leaves the house of Pride only to fall before Orgoglio. Night prophesies his fall, and reveals that his adversaries are Night’s children. Duessa, like Aeneas, invokes the powers of Night; and Night’s account of the macrocosmic conflict between the children of Night and the sons of Day expands Anchises’[s] account of the fiery life-seeds shut up in the dark dungeon of the body. Clearly Spenser means to parody Virgil. In his poem the adversary, not the aged priestess of Phoebus, makes the

prophecy of woe; and the great mother of the hero's adversaries, not the hero's sire, reveals the hero's destiny. (70)

This passage makes perfect sense of Spenser's technique, which, to the extent that it invokes the classical, is parodic, not blasphemous. Imposing blasphemy on an episode whose main antecedent is classical is too heavy-handed; and nowhere does Bergvall explain how Duessa and Night "may in fact be willing evil but working good," if that is even what the author means by "suffering the same fate."

Ultimately, the article simply does not justify the title's claim that resurrection is treated blasphemously in canto 5. In fact, this is hardly an article about resurrection at all. The word appears only in the first paragraph's claim that the dragon fight—not canto 5 but canto 11—reenacts Christ's death and resurrection. The only other reference to something possibly related to resurrection is Bergvall's statement that "Sansjoy is brought down to hell and left there in the limbo of materialist medicine," a point he borrows from Douglas Trevor (9). Aesculapius is not even mentioned by name, and the author overlooks the idea that Duessa's descent is an image of what Redcrosse is still trying to do: namely, addressing spiritual problems with purely physical resources.

Regarding the dragon fight, the greater truth is that the three-day battle and the brazen tower echo Christ's harrowing of hell. As J. A. MacCulloch points out, in Patristic tradition the gates of hell are made of brass (219). In addition, the spiritual healing that Redcrosse receives from the tree and the well (versus the purely physical healing of Aesculapius) suggests the revivifying role of the sacraments in the life of the Protestant Christian: the harrowing of hell, though clearly present in the background, is not the central object of the allegory in canto 11. Thus "The Legend of Holiness," despite the inclusion of Catholic elements at the House of Holiness, culminates in a distinctly doctrinaire vision of what it takes for Protestants to make their way in the world.

In conclusion, Bergvall's article, though it contributes a useful close reading of canto 5 to the body of scholarship on *The Faerie Queene*, is

more about confusion as infernal parody than about resurrection as blasphemy. Bergvall is on the right track when he sees “Duessa’s rescue operation to save Sansjoy [...] as a confused parody of the main themes of the Legend of Holiness” (8). Exactly right. The article would have been more successful if the author’s stated purposes and the strong insights in this statement and throughout the body had been more properly in sync.

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