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Yulia Ryzhik (Harvard U.), "Whose Blood?: A Note on Amoret and Lust"

Amoret's encounter with Lust and her rescue from his clutches has a double allegorical significance. As a moral allegory, it shows married chastity assailed by lust and rescued by honor (Timias) and absolute chastity (Belpheobe). As an historical allegory, the episode recounts the scandal of Sir Walter Ralegh's affair with and secret marriage to Elizabeth Throckmorton, which caused his banishment from Queen Elizabeth's court. Putting the historical allegory aside for the moment, I would like to parse the physical details of the episode and the moral consequences of these details. Doing so will elicit a different interpretation than the standard one, which is too severe on Amoret, and will better coincide with Spenser's treatment of Amoret throughout the Faerie Queene. Such an interpretation will also coincide with the only response Spenser was likely to have had to the Throckmorton affair.

There is no doubt that in the scuffle that ensues between Timias and Lust, before Belpheobe arrives on the scene, Timias accidentally wounds Amoret. When Timias examines her injuries after the battle, "of his owne rash hand one wound was to be seene" (IV.vii.35). But there has been some confusion among readers as to when and how Amoret receives this wound and as to what kind of wound it is. The two stanzas in question are as follows:

The villaine used craft in fight;
For ever when the Squire his javelin shooke,
He held the Lady forth before him right,
And with her body, as a buckler, broke
The puissance of his intended stroke.

And if it chaunst, (as needs it must in fight)
Whilst he on him was greedy to be wroke,
That any little blow on her did light,
Then would he laugh aloud, and gather great delight.

Which subtilly sleight did him encumber much,
And made him oft, when he would strike,
Forbeare;
For hardly could he come the carle to touch,
But that he her must hurt, or hazard neare:
Yet he his hand so carefully did beare,
That at the last he did himselfe attaine,
And therein left the pike head of his speare.

A stream of coleblacke bloud thence gusht amaine,
That all her silken garments did with bloud bestaine. (FQ IV.vii.26-7)

A. C. Hamilton locates the moment of Amoret's wounding in the second of these stanzas, which he glosses as an "implied allegory of sexual intercourse," and attributes the wounding to Amoret's being "overcome by lust" (IV.vii.27n). William Oram also sees the wound as a sexual one ("the effect of defloration"), and Martha J. Craig supports the same interpretation, citing the erotic imagery of the phallic spear and the Argument's "The Squire her loves."1 Craig argues that the "color of Amoret's blood—'cole blacke'—indicates her . . . contamination," comparing it to the pollution of Shakespeare's Lucrece by Tarquin (333-4). The "sanguine red" blood that we saw Amoret shed in Busirane's castle (III.xii.20) is now infected with foul lust and black like the blood of Error and of the Dragon in Book I.

To interpret the instance of Amoret's wounding as occurring in the second, rather than the first, of these stanzas, and consequently to
interpret the wound as a sexual one, seems to me entirely wrong. The wound inflicted by Timias in the second stanza is inflicted not on Amoret, but on Lust. When Donald Cheney suggests as much, he is unnecessarily cautious: “if one can trust any single reading of Spenser’s ambiguous pronouns” (22). It is true that the exigencies of the Spenserian stanza are not always conducive to pronominal precision. But that is not the case here. We never lose track of what each of the two combatants is doing. In the first of these stanzas, Timias is on the offensive, “greedy to be broke” on Lust, while Lust defends himself using Amoret’s body as a shield. That Lust breaks the puissance of Timias’s intended stroke with Amoret’s body cannot mean that Amoret is struck repeatedly, every time (“ever when”) Timias thrusts. It is reasonable to suppose that, for most of these thrusts, Timias stops the spear before it touches Amoret: the power of the thrust breaks before her, not against her. Only a few times (“if it chaunst”) is Timias unable fully to restrain the momentum of his stroke, and Amoret receives a “little blow.” It is here, in the first of the two stanzas, that Amoret receives her wound, with no hint of graphic violence or sexual imagery. The gore that “gusht amaine” in the second stanza comes out of the body of Lust, when Timias “his hand so carefully did beare,/ That at the last he did himselfe attaine,/ And therein left the pike head of his speare.” Timias stabs Lust, and the head of his spear is lodged in the wound (note that Timias removes no spearhead from Amoret’s wound, which would have been the first order of business, had it been lodged there). It is Lust’s monstrous, coal-black blood that gushes forth and stains Amoret’s garments, not her own. The situation is surely made clear in the next stanza when we see Lust’s enraged reaction to his wounding:

With that he threw her rudely on the flore,

And laying both his hands upon his glave,
With dreadfull strokes let drive at him
[Timias] so sore,
That forst him flie abacke, himselfe to save...
(IV.vii.28)

Had it been Amoret who was wounded, it would make no sense for Lust to drop her, since she has served him quite well for a shield. Lust drops his human buckler in a fit of rage because he is, for the first time, injured. His crafty, defensive, taunting style of combat will no longer suffice, and he needs the force of both his hands to drive Timias back. Although Timias cannot complete Amoret’s rescue, he does manage to wound Lust and to make the monster let go of his prey. The implications of this revised reading of the passage could be surprisingly far-reaching. For one, Spenser’s portrayal of Amoret in this episode is more sympathetic that the traditional, sexual interpretation would have us believe. That the black blood is not, after all, hers clears Amoret of the guilt of internal contamination by Lust. As Thomas P. Roche says, her very encounter with Lust “need not be understood as a lapse in her own behavior” (116). Lust, in Amoret’s case, is not so much an “interior quality” or a “psychological state,” but an “external quality, more specifically, rape” (Roche 136–7). Unlike Lust’s other captive, Aemylia, Amoret has no lustful intentions when she strays away from Britomart “for pleasure or for need.” Amoret is instead the victim of another’s lust. She is therefore inwardly untainted by Lust, and, with the exception of a few bruises and soiled garments, unharmed by his manhandling.

The most serious wound Amoret sustains is inflicted by honor, Timias. It is a blow to her reputation for chastity (Roche 137). Amoret has already been accused of faithlessness, by Ate, for keeping company and even sharing a bed with Britomart. After the Lust episode,
Amoret becomes more than ever vulnerable to harsh misjudgments of her virtue—to “misdeeming” by Belphoebe and later to defamation by Sclaunder (Cheney 23). She is not inwardly infected by Lust, but the stigma of Lust’s black blood sticks to her. If we imagine for a moment what Belphoebe sees when she returns from her kill, her disdainful reaction to what she finds (Timias on the ground, kissing and softly handling a “new lovely mate” who is covered head to foot in Lust’s black blood) is understandable. She finds Timias himself probably not much cleaner. Belphoebe, being absolute chastity, turns away disgusted, making no distinction between inward and outward contamination by Lust. The damage to Amoret’s reputation is so severe that not even Arthur’s all-healing balm of grace can cure it completely. Although Amoret physically recovers from her wound, she is still susceptible to Sclaunder’s venomous speech, and remains so weak that she can barely keep her saddle (IV. viii.37). Spenser shows, as he does elsewhere in the Faerie Queene, a touching empathy for Amoret, on this occasion for her plight as a guiltless victim of slander and misdeeming—an empathy extending, surely, to the disgraced Elizabeth Throckmorton. It is ironic that Spenser’s effort to portray Amoret’s innocence in her encounter with Lust has elicited from his readers a conclusion opposite to the one he intended. The unflattering interpretation of Amoret’s wounding as a sexual crime committed by Amoret and as a sign of her inward pollution by lust is yet another case of harsh misdeeming.

Endnote

1 Oram 357, Craig 333. The antecedent of “her” in the Argument of IV.vii could be either Amoret or Belphoebe: “Amoret rapt by greedie lust / Belphebe saues from dread, / The Squire her loues . . . .”

Works Cited


