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Edward C. Jacobs
Louisiana Tech University

Karen R. Jacobs
Louisiana Tech University

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NOTES

AMORETTI 79 AND I PETER 3:1-4

EDWARD C. AND KAREN R. JACOBS

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

In sonnet 79 Spenser, as he has several times done previously, praises the beauty of his love, conventionally acknowledging the superiority of her inner beauty over her outer beauty. Her physical beauty is real enough to the senses. All, including the lady herself, observe it “dayly.” Such beauty is finite, however, subject to “frayle corruption.” Like all other beauty of its kind, it must “lyke flowers vntymely fade.”¹ Only his love’s inner beauty is “the trew fayre,” the “true beautie” enduring “permanent and free / from frayle corruption,” for it comes from God—“that fayre Spirit, from whom al true / and perfect beauty did at first proceed.” Of what qualities this “trew fayre” consists, we have no doubt. The poet tells us plainly that his love’s “trew fayre” is her “gentle wit, / and vertuous mind.” But what has gone unnoted is the similarity between Spenser’s definition of true beauty and that of I Peter 3:1-4. This passage, quite familiar to Elizabethans, is clearly a Christian *locus* for the view expressed in sonnet 79.²

Spenser’s “trew fayre”—“the gentle wit, / and vertuous mind”—resembles the description of the virtuous wife in I Peter 3:1-4 who is urged to cultivate not physical beauty, but a “pure” or “chaste conversation coupled with feare,” and “a meeke and quiet spirit.”³ Verses 1-2 instruct wives to so order their lives in “subjection to [their] husbands” that even if husbands “obey not the word” of Christ, they “may without the word be woon, by the conversation of the wives: After that they have beholden your chaste conversation coupled with feare.”⁴ Such emphasis upon woman’s chaste speech modulated by the biblical quality of “feare”—commonly understood in contexts such as this one to mean “reverence”—calls to mind Spenser’s “gentle wit, / and vertuous mind.”⁵

We need not, however, restrict our reading of a “gentle wit, and vertuous mind” to only that of gentle conversation expressing the inner beauty of a virtuous mind. Certainly both Spenserian qualities can be understood as parallel expressions of that ideal beauty defined in the sonnet and spoken of similarly in verses 3-4 as the putting on of

“a meeke and quiet spirit.” Just as Spenser tells his love that her perfect beauty is inner and not simply her outer appearance, so also does the speaker in these verses advise wives to put on not the “apparell” of outer but inner beauty:

Whose apparell, let it not be that which is outward, with braided haire, and hanging on of gold, either in putting on of gorgeous apparell: But let the hid man, which is in the heart, be without all corruption, of a meeke and quiet spirit, which spirit is before God a thing much set by. (vv. 3-4)

God prizes highly inner beauty, “the hid man,” “the heart...without all corruption,” “a meeke and quiet spirit.” Such is Spenser’s argument to his lady—his future wife: it is your inner beauty of “gentle wit, / and vertuous mind...free from frayle corruption...that doth argue you to be” highly prized by God, “to be diuine and borne of heauenly seed.”

Spenser’s argument is one that, in all likelihood, was quite familiar to Elizabethans, even to the illiterate. For the text of I Peter 3:1-4 was preached to churchgoers throughout Elizabeth’s reign. It serves as the concluding part of the matrimony ceremony in *The Book of Common Prayer, 1559*, and it is part of a sermon entitled “An Homily Against Excesse of Apparell” that appears in *Certaine Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I*. The rubrics for matrimony in the Prayer Book state that “after the Gospel shall be said a sermon, wherein ordinarily...the office of a man and wife shall be declared, according to Holy Scripture; or if there be no sermon, the minister shall read this that followeth.”⁶ Here follow selections from Ephesians, Colossians, and I Peter. Concluding the service are the verses from I Peter 3:

Let wives be subject to their husbands, so that if any obey not the Word, they may be won without the Word, by the conversation of the wives, while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear, whose apparel let it not be outward, with broided hair and trimming about with gold, either in putting on of gorgeous apparel, but let the hid man which is in the heart, be without all corruption, so that the spirit be mild and quiet, which is a precious thing in the sight of God.⁷

And from the book of Homilies we again read verses 3-4 in the sermon against excessive dress:

Heare, heare, what Christes holy Apostles doe write, Let not the outward apparell of women (saith Saint Peter) bee decked with the braying of haire, with wrapping on of golde, or goodly clothing: but let the minde, and the conscience, which is not seene with the eyes, be pure and cleane, that is...an acceptable and an excellent thing before God.⁵

Given, then, Spenser's familiarity with these verses,⁴ their repetition in the sermon and matrimonial literature, and Spenser's phrasing which echoes these verses, I Peter 3:1-4 clearly serves as a Christian *locus* for the definition of beauty—"gentle wit, / and vertuous mind"—in sonnet 79.

NOTES

¹ *The Works of Edmund Spenser, A Variorum Edition: The Minor Poems*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al. (Baltimore, 1947), 2:228. Subsequent references to the poem are from this edition.

² This is not to disallow Platonic influences in Spenser's concept of beauty, only to emphasize an unnoted Christian source quite close to Spenser's idea.

³ The text of I Peter 3:1-4 is cited from the Bishops' Bible (1568) 1602 edition found in *The New Testament Octapla: Eight English Versions of the New Testament in the Tyndale-King James Tradition*, ed. Luther A. Weigle (New York, n. d.), p. 1323. We have compared the Bishops' Bible text with other Tudor translations that Spenser certainly knew. These verses remain much the same from Tyndale through the Rheims translation. Even the subsequent King James, the RV and the RSV verse readings change very little from the earlier versions.

⁴ The Tyndale and the Geneva translations read "pure" rather than "chaste."

⁵ *OED*, col. 114, sb., 3d., "Holde fast his feare, and growe therin." (1535 Coverdale Bible, *Ecclus*, 2:6); "A perpetuall feare...of thy holy name" (1548-49 *Bk. Com. Prayer*, p. 75).

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⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer, 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book*, ed. John C. Booty (Charlottesville, 1976), p. 297.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 298.

⁸ *Certaine Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571): A Facsimile Reproduction of the Edition of 1623...Two Volumes in One*, eds. Mary E. Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, 1988), 2:107.

⁹ Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in The Faerie Queene* (Memphis, 1976), p. 214, notes Spenser's use of I Peter 3:1, 5, 6 in *FQ*, 5.v. 25. (4-8). James C. Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton, 1976), p. 160, n. 159, calls attention to Spenser's knowledge of I Peter 3:7. See also John E. Hankins, *Source and Meaning in Spenser's Allegory* (Oxford, 1971), p. 166, n 1.