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Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Bandello's *Novelle* as Sources for the Munera Episode in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* Book 5 canto 2

In Book 5 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* the character Munera is subjected to what is arguably the most violent death in the poem. It seems that Spenser was influenced by Shakespeare's depiction of Lavinia and Tamora in his ultra-violent Roman play *Titus Andronicus* and by material from a novella related to Shakespeare's play. Munera is a fusion of Shakespeare's women for she is both victim and perpetrator, and the reader is directed to feel sympathy for her suffering and yet satisfaction at her demise. The dates allow for such direct influence: the editors of the Oxford edition of *The Complete Works* date composition of *Titus Andronicus* well before the first known performance in 1594 and the play's combination of "sensational incident with high-flown rhetoric" was in fashion around 1590 (Shakespeare 1988, 125). Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* was published in 1596 and in Sonnet 80 (probably written in 1594) Spenser writes that he has completed the six books of *The Faerie Queene*.

The relationships between the several sources and analogues of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* are complex, and the chronological sequences remain disputed (Bullough 1973, 34-79; Shakespeare 1984, 27-38; Shakespeare 1995, 83-92). One story which appears to be related to Shakespeare's play is that printed in Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554) and Geoffrey Bullough argued that this influenced Shakespeare indirectly by being a source for a prose history of *Titus Andronicus* that was in print before the play but which is now represented only by a mid-eighteenth century reprinting entitled *The History of Titus Andronicus, the Renowned Roman General* made by Cluer Dicey some time between 1736 and 1764 (Bullough 1973, 14-15). The prose narrative, Bullough claimed, was a source of Shakespeare's play. However, Jonathan Bate has convincingly argued that the prose narrative followed, and hence was not a source for, the play, in which case Bandello's story was not (even indirectly) a source for Shakespeare's play (Shakespeare 1995, 83-85). An unexamined feature of Bandello's story is its similarity to events in Spenser's story of Munera that share common features with Shakespeare's story of Lavinia, Tamora and Titus, but the traffic here is from, not to, Shakespeare. Spenser appears to have synthesized material from Shakespeare's play with material from Bandello, the latter being available in a number of European languages and also via an English ballad from around 1570, as evidenced by one of the *Roxburghe Ballads* printed in late nineteenth century. A different ballad specifically about *Titus Andronicus* was entered into the Stationers Register in 1594 but Richard Levin has supported Bate's position by showing that this was written to capitalize on the success of Shakespeare's play (Levin 2000) and hence was not a source.

Bandello's novella tells the story of a wicked Moorish servant who, having been censured by his master, waits until the master has gone hunting in order to exact revenge. Left alone with his master's wife and her three sons and in a tower which is accessible only by a bridge, the Moor ties the wife by the hands and rapes her. When the master returns, he hears his wife's cries but cannot help her because the Moor has broken the bridge. The Moor kills the eldest of the three sons and tricks his master into cutting off his nose by pretending he will spare the other boys. He then kills the children and throws their bodies out of the window. Before killing himself he

cuts the throat of his master's wife and throws her body from the tower (Bullough 1973, 14-15).

In Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* Munera is the daughter of the villain Pollente who robs and kills anyone who wishes to pass over his bridge. Munera accepts the stolen riches from her father, a corruption symbolized by her golden hands and silver feet. Spenser's story of Munera bears remarkable resemblance to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* but he seems to take elements from Shakespeare's two main female protagonists in order to create his villainous victim Munera. In *Titus Andronicus* the most obvious female victim of violence is of course Lavinia, the chaste daughter of Titus and victim of Demetrius and Chiron, but Tamora, the whorish mother, is also a victim of Titus. The figure of Munera represents central characteristics of both women: she is the daughter of Pollente but, because morally corrupt, she cannot be considered chaste. Like Tamora she is the victim of a man who shows no pity: she is brutally killed by Talus (the 'Iron man') who, like Titus, will not hear pleas for leniency and, as with Shakespeare's villain, her punishment is morally defensible.

The hero of Book 5, Artegall, battles with Pollente on his bridge which is described as being "narrow, but exceeding long" (5.2.7.7) with many trap-doors through which Pollente's victims can fall, with the river beneath being "both swift and dangerous deepe withall" (5.2.8.2). The trap doors carry the same kind of signification as the pit in *Titus Andronicus* (2.3). David Willbern offers a full psychoanalytic reading of the significance of Shakespeare's pit: "Here is Freud's plenty. The passage expresses highly sadistic fantasies of sexual attack ... 'The Abhorred pit' will soon assume its central and over-determined symbolic significance as vagina, womb, tomb, and mouth." (Willbern 1978, 168). The sexual potency of the passage leading to the pit may have suggested to Spenser the bridge which leads to trap-doors and deep waters beneath and may also have been suggested by the bridge which plays so crucial a part in the death of the lady in Bandello's novella.

In Shakespeare's play, as in the source story by Ovid, the rape victim is dragged by her hair and mutilated by her aggressors. Munera is not raped but has her hands and feet chopped off. In the manner of her death Munera most closely resembles the fate of the lady in the novella. Just as the lady is dropped from the tower by the evil Moor so Munera is thrown to her death from her own castle by Talus: "Her selfe then tooke he by the sclender wast, / In vaine loud crying, and into the flood / Ouer the Castle wall adowne her cast, / And there her drowned in the durty mud" (5.2.27.1-4). In Shakespeare's play and Spenser's poem the natural world carries enormous symbolic signification. Willbern's reading of the pit and the passage that leads to it can be extended and developed by applying it to Pollente's bridge with its trap-doors and by considering Munera's fate: her drowning in that combination of earth and water, the "durty mud".

Moors in Bandello's tale and in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* appear to have influenced Spenser's story of Munera. They are responsible for murder and rape or incitement to rape and encourage a male protagonist to chop off his own body part. Details that occur in the tale but are not present in *Titus Andronicus* are paralleled in Spenser's Munera episode: the bridge over water, the fortified building as a site of violence, and the dropping of a lady's body from that building. *Titus Andronicus* is a

likely source for *The Faerie Queene* and the sixteenth-century tale which has come down to us in the form of a ballad is also a source for *The Faerie Queene*.

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