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"Corrupt with goodly meede": Munera and Medusa in Book 5 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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1. In Book 5 canto 2 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* lawless corruption is gendered and sexualized in the figure of Munera. She is the daughter of the villain Pollente who, with his groom Guizor, robs and kills anyone who wishes to pass over his bridge. Munera receives the stolen goods from her father and this corruption is symbolized by her golden hands and silver feet which "sought vnrighteousnesse, and justice sold" (5.2.26.8).[1] When she realises that she is to be punished for her actions Munera attempts to bribe Talus, the iron man who serves Artegall, with gold. Before killing her, Talus cuts off Munera's hands and feet, destroys the stolen gold she has received from her father and sets fire to their castle. Considering Spenser's interest in classical mythology, outlined in Henry Gibbons Lotspeich's *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, it is probable that Munera has a classical antecedent: Medusa, the once beautiful woman turned monster of Greek mythology who suffered decapitation at the hands of Perseus.

2. Given her deeds, Munera's name appears to come from the Latin plural noun *munera* (gifts) and because of thematic links many critics have identified Munera with Langland's corrupt Lady Meed.[2] The full extent of the meed/Munera connection has not, however, been hitherto explored. The OED records the use of *meed* as early as the tenth century to denote "That which is bestowed in requital of labour or service, or in consideration of (good or ill) desert; wages, hire; recompense, reward" (OED meed sb. 1). It also carries a more specifically negative meaning of "Reward dishonestly offered or accepted; corrupt gain; bribery," which was in use from the fourteenth century (OED meed sb. 2). Spenser used the word *meed*, spelt *meede*, throughout *The Faerie Queene* to denote reward in general but in the Munera episode *meede* and its plural *meedes* is used in the more specific sense of corrupt reward. The OED records yet another variant spelling, *mede*, in use from the twelfth to the seventeenth century. This last form is a homograph of a completely different word, Mede, recorded in the OED as denoting a native or inhabitant of Media (OED Mede sb. 1). There are good reasons to believe that the polysemous associations evoked by *mede* were exploited by Spenser in the Munera episode.

3. The Medians established an empire in Media in Persia in the seventh century BC. The word *Mede*, denoting one of these people, derives
from the Latin word *Medus* which was the name of the eponymous hero of the Medes, son of Aegeus and Medea (Oxford Latin Dictionary Medus²), and which also meant "Of or belonging to the Medes, Median" (Oxford Latin Dictionary Medus¹).

4. In *The Faerie Queene* the epithet 'Persian' is used by Spenser to describe the great wealth and luxury associated with the enemies of Christian knights. For example Duessa wears what looks like "a Persian mitre on her hed" (1.2.13.4); Lucifera's court is so sumptuous that "In liuing Princes court none euer knew / Such endlesse richesse, and so sumptuous shew; / Ne Persia selfe, the nourse of pompous pride / Like euer saw" (1.4.7.4-7); Malecasta sits on "a sumptuous bed, / That glistred all with gold and glorious shew, / As the proud Persian Queenes accustomed" (3.1.41.2-4). Spenser's Persian figures are antithetical to Christianity and their affluence denotes dishonest reward. When Spenser evoked Persians it was invariably in the context of excess and corruption. His Persian protagonists use their wealth and luxury to attempt the seduction of good Christian knights throughout the poem. Munera and her father Pollente are corrupt in just such a Persian way: Munera receives stolen riches from her father and attempts to use her wealth in order to seduce Talus, a just figure.

5. The classical figure who provides the bridge between Spenser's general anti-Persian characterizations and the concrete person of Munera is Medusa, the Gorgon in Greek mythology. Although it is not clear how much of his classical learning was acquired via ancient languages and how much via English, Spenser's knowledge of the classics is undisputed (Steadman 587). There are strong thematic links between Munera and Medusa. Both women are beautiful; Munera is "full faire" (5.2.10), she has "faire lockes," a "goodly hew" (5.2.25), and a "sclender wast" (5.2.27). Similarly Medusa, before she is transformed by Minerva, is described as a great beauty in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful" (Ovid 4.793-95). Both women are beauties; Munera is "full faire" (5.2.10), she has "faire lockes," a "goodly hew" (5.2.25), and a "sclender wast" (5.2.27). Similarly Medusa, before she is transformed by Minerva, is described as a great beauty in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful" (Ovid 4.793-95). Both women are seducers. The attractive Munera attempts to seduce using wealth ("She ment him to corrupt with goodly meede" [5.2.23]), and Medusa has been punished by Minerva for her lack of chastity: "'Tis said that in Minerva's temple Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her" (Ovid 4.797-98). Both women have unnatural, prodigious body parts: Munera's hands and feet are made of metal and Medusa's hair consists of snakes. Both are associated with cold, hard, natural but inorganic materials: Munera with gold and silver, Medusa with the stone into which she transforms any man who looks upon her. But perhaps the most striking link between the two figures is that found in Apollodorus's version of the Medusa story where the Gorgons are said to have "heads twined about with the scales of dragons, and great tusks like swine's, and *brazen hands*, and golden wings, by which they flew; and they turned to stone such as beheld them" (Apollodorus 2.4.2; my emphasis).
6. Available to Spenser was yet another meaning for Mede: "a precious stone described by ancient writers, said to be found in Media" (sb. 2). Duessa and Lucifera, associated by Spenser with Persian excess, are surrounded by precious stones and metals. Both Munera and Medusa have precious extremities yet whilst the latter changes others into stone Munera is apparently a victim, not an agent, of petrifaction. The visceral power of their stories depends on revulsion of the substitution of hard inorganic matter for flesh.

7. The construction of both figures reveals an anxiety towards female beauty and its perceived capacity for inflicting harm which appears to be focused on the metamorphosis of flesh. Typical of his eclecticism, it seems that Spenser used details from the legend of Medusa in his construction of Munera. She is a Medusa figure, a beautiful woman with the power to corrupt and destroy men. Both Munera and Medusa can be linked with mede (reward) and the place Media, in Persia, which symbolizes the East and the non-Christian, the infidel.

Notes

1. Quotations of the poem are from Spenser (Hamilton, ed.).

2. For example see Spenser ([Gough, ed.], 176); Hough (194); Spenser ([Hamilton, ed.] 526) and Heale (481).

Works Cited