

posedly produced theatrical Christ figures. But when we ask for facts to support this, we are given something else—biblical typology, or allegorical masques, or sermons, and now multiple plots and a division of mankind into analogical pre-Cartesians and mathematical post-Cartesians. Yet none of this speaks to the point, which is whether any Elizabethan was likely to create or discern a Christ figure on the stage (indeed one wonders why, if these figures depended on the pre-Cartesian spirit of that age, they have only been discovered in our post-Cartesian century). Nor does it speak to the problem of “Fluellenism,” since it offers no help in distinguishing the author’s figures from the critic’s. Nor does it speak to any of the specific objections I raised to the Christ figures found in Shakespeare. So it seems fair now to turn and ask my respondents to explain which of these figures they accept, and which they reject, and on what grounds.

Bryant also presents another defense of Christ figures, based not on whether they are provable but on whether they improve the play. According to him, anyone who denies that in *The Winter’s Tale* Hermione is a figure of Christ, Paulina of St. Paul, and Perdita of the Church (I use his reading) is “reducing” the play, presumably to “impassioned propaganda and ornamented reportage.” I think anyone who affirms these figures is “reducing” the play to allegory. This is a question of different minds valuing different things in literature, and about such matters we cannot argue fruitfully. But we can argue about the probability that such figures were intended. And I think the answer is obvious.

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Note

¹ “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding et al., vi (London: Longmans, 1870), 696.

Spenser’s Poetic Strategy

Mr. Tonkin replies:

James Neil Brown takes me to task for failing to consider the work of John Erskine Hankins in my article “Spenser’s Garden of Adonis and Britomart’s Quest” (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 408–17). Hankins’ important book *Source and Meaning in Spenser’s Allegory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) did not in fact appear until 1972, two years after my article was submitted and shortly after I had completed my revisions.

Had Hankins’ study been in my hands in time, my disagreement with him would have been largely over Spenser’s poetic strategy. Hankins establishes, at least to my satisfaction, the likelihood that Spenser was

better acquainted with Ficino (either first- or second-hand) than Ellrodt implies in his study *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960). What his elaborate discussion does not do, however, is demonstrate the central importance of the Garden of Adonis to the development of Spenser’s argument in Books III, IV, and V (indeed, that is not part of his purpose). My own reading set out to show how the Garden, with Venus and Adonis in its center, is linked to the quest, at once dynastic and sexual, of Britomart for Artegall. In so doing, it suggested a thematic link, the theme of the union of form and matter, between Venus and Adonis on the one hand and Marinell and Florimell on the other, and then between Florimell and Marinell and Artegall and Britomart. In Britomart’s pursuit of Artegall the normal role of the sexes is reversed, and this reversal of roles extends ultimately to Venus and Adonis, itself a myth of such reversal.

In making this suggestion, I was not intending to imply an exclusive and total reversal. Just as Britomart, as a kind of Venus Armata, contains within herself the attributes of Mars as well as those more usually associated with her, so the Venus of the Garden of Adonis is not merely the female principle. At the same time Brown’s flat assertion that “Spenser’s Venus is androgynous” cannot hold. There is no such thing as Spenser’s Venus; there are only Spenser’s Venuses. She is different in her different manifestations, and the hermaphroditic Venus of Book IV is not the Venus of Acidale or the Venus of the Garden. The Venus of the Garden needs, indeed, seeks out, Adonis.

It is this seeking out that is the most interesting aspect of her character. As patroness of generation (and Brown is right to see a parallel here with the Aphrodite Pandemos), she plays a dominant role that may be mythologically acceptable but is certainly not what we traditionally associate with the role of the female. As such it parallels, and throws light on, Britomart’s quest for her future husband. There is nothing especially unusual in Spenser’s playing with our expectations in this fashion. He does the same, for example, with the dream in Isis Church (Bk. V), the interpretation of which seems oddly inadequate, or with the Dance of the Graces (Bk. VI) where the implications of the episode are much broader than Colin’s rather prosaic explanation.

Brown’s caution that an emphatic identification of Venus as form or Adonis as matter fails to take into account the complexity of their relationship makes excellent sense, but I am not sure that that of necessity should lead us to accept Hankins’ Neoplatonic argument in all its complexity. We simply do not need Ficino to understand the “comely rew” of creatures in the Garden, or the cycle of generation represented by the babes. And the function of Adonis as species is self-evident, without appeal to Alanus de Insulis

(Hankins, p. 247). Nevertheless, I gladly concede that it is above all the *union* of form and matter that the *union* of Venus and Adonis sets in motion, or parallels, and that the union is more important than the difference between them.

My article does not deal with connections between Venus and Diana, but that should not indicate that I regard them as nonexistent. Both Britomart and Belphoebe bear evidence of a combination of their attributes. As for Brown's possible implication that I line myself up for Christian influence against Platonic influence in Book III, I agree emphatically with Hankins that both are present, though not necessarily in the proportions that he suggests. Spenser was very much a product of Christian humanism, and as such his work is full of the signatures of holy Socrates.

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Native Son

Mr. Siegel replies:

In his comment (*PMLA*, 90, 1975, 122–23) on my article “The Conclusion of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” (*PMLA*, 89, 1974, 517–23), David S. Lank does not take issue with my two main points: (1) Max, despite the generally accepted opinion (Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, et al.) that he is a Communist spokesman who makes a “party-line oration” in his courtroom speech that is poorly related to the rest of the novel, is not a Communist, and his speech grows out of what has preceded it; (2) the views that in the final scene Bigger gives himself up to fear (Howe) or, in giving himself up to hate, suffers a defeat (Robert Bone) are wrong: Bigger finds a meaning in his life by accepting his feeling of hate. Instead, Lank takes up a peripheral point: Max’s understanding of Bigger. But what I said about critics reading into the novel their own preconceptions is also true here.

Lank finds it to be a “major weakness” of my presentation that I “ignore Max’s willingness to accept Bigger as an intellectual entity, ‘Negro,’ rather than as a human being facing death” (p. 122). Max’s “‘understanding’ of Bigger,” he says, “is limited by the lofty sociohistorical perspective that he urges the judge to accept” (p. 122). Lank’s preconception is that perceiving a person from a sociohistorical perspective must limit one’s understanding of him as an individual. But it is precisely because Max is able to enter into Bigger’s feelings that he can see him as representative of black millions, with all that this implies for American society, and it is precisely because Max understands the historical forces that have shaped Bigger that he can better understand him and feel with him.

Why did not Bigger understand Max’s speech, Lank

asks me, and he answers his own question: “Bigger does not understand Max’s speech because he does not recognize himself as a rhetorical device to be wielded as a club against racial prejudice” (p. 122). To safeguard oneself against reading one’s own preconceptions into a novel, it is always well to check the text. Bigger “recalled the speech Max had made in court,” says Wright, “and remembered with gratitude the kind, impassioned tone. But the meaning of the words escaped him. He believed that Max knew how he felt” (*Native Son*, New York: Harper, 1940, p. 350). Bigger did not follow Max’s speech because he lacked the vocabulary and the historical knowledge to do so. But, as Wright said earlier, “he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max’s voice” (p. 339), and this was enough for him to believe Max knew how he felt.

“Whether or not Max is a Communist ‘spokesman,’” says Lank, “is irrelevant to the impersonality he embodies” (p. 122). Max impersonal? It is hard to see how Wright could have depicted Max more clearly as a deeply compassionate man, most sensitively responsive to Bigger. Bigger’s first impression of Max is of his kindness: “The voice was quiet, firm, but kind.” (*Native Son*, p. 247). When Max questions him in his cell, Bigger, who had regarded all whites as hateful, is so moved by his kindness that it is Bigger who feels sorry for Max: “Bigger watched Max’s . . . deep-gray, soft, sad eyes. He felt that Max was kind, and he felt sorry for him” (p. 304). For Max’s questioning of him reveals a sympathy for him as a human being unique in Bigger’s experience: “In Max’s asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before” (p. 305).

Max promises, “I’ll tell the judge all I can of how you feel and why” (p. 304). And so he does—to those who will listen. His speech, uttered, we may remember, in a “kind, impassioned tone,” is not, as Lank would have it, a “rather impersonal American social history lesson” (p. 122). To be sure, he tries to explain to the judge how Bigger came to feel the way he does and what this means for America, but he is most certainly concerned to show how Bigger feels: “The central fact to be understood here is not who wronged this boy, but what kind of vision of the world did he have before his eyes” (*Native Son*, p. 333). He begs that Bigger’s life be spared not only that a beginning might be made toward ending the chain reaction of fear-hate-guilt which must cause America’s destruction but that Bigger in prison may “build a meaning for his life” (p. 338).

The other question that Lank would have me answer is why Max in the last scene “does not wish to talk to Bigger about the significance of his life” (p. 122). Lank’s own answer is that Max is “sadly