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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Reid, Lindsay Ann</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Date</strong></td>
<td>2020-09-07</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>De Gruyter</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Link to publisher's version</strong></td>
<td><a href="https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110699593-017">https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110699593-017</a></td>
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Imitative Series and Clusters from Classical to Early Modern Literature

Edited by
Colin Burrow, Stephen J. Harrison,
Martin McLaughlin, and Elisabetta Tarantino

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**What’s in a Blush? Constellating *Aeneid* 12.64–9 and *Amores* 2.5.33–40 in Spenser’s Legend of Chastity**

Act 4, scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* is centrally concerned with the ambiguity of the blush.¹ As he aborts his own wedding ceremony and publicly humiliates his intended bride, Claudio demands that onlookers read Hero’s face as a chromatic index of her moral character: ‘Behold how like a maid she blushes here!’ (4.1.32), ‘Would you not swear’, Claudio rants, ‘that she were a maid, | By these exterior shows?’ (4.1.36–8). Yet Hero’s ‘blush is guiltiness’, he declares, ‘not modesty’ and a sure sign that his fiancée has already ‘known[n] the heat of a luxurious bed’ (4.1.39–40). Not everyone on stage agrees, however. As the loyal Friar makes clear later in this troubling scene, the self-same ‘maiden truth’ questioned by Claudio is, in fact, precisely what he believes the subtleties of Hero’s complexion to signify (4.1.163). ‘By noting of the lady’, the Friar suggests, he has observed ‘A thousand blushing apparitions | To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames | In angel whiteness beat away those blushes’ (4.1.157–60). At the heart of Claudio and the Friar’s disagreement lies a hermeneutic quandary: how are spectators to decode the message of Hero’s colour with any accuracy when blushing can just as readily connote shame as shamefastness, anger as admission, guilt as naiveté?

While this scene from *Much Ado About Nothing* provides a particularly poignant exemplar, the semantic ambivalence of the female blush is, of course, not the exclusive purview of Shakespearean comedy. Long before the early modern English literary landscape came to be peopled by flushed harlots and bashful virgins, the poetry of Greek and Roman antiquity had evinced a similar fascination with the chiasmic interplay of crimson and white. In this essay, I turn to the *Mona Lisa* of classical literary blushes, one that has been variously characterised as ‘mysterious’, ‘enigmatic’, ‘inscrutable’, ‘emotive’, ‘tantalising’, and ‘unforgettable’: the reddening of Lavinia’s cheeks in the twelfth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid.*² Hailed as ‘the most famous blush of all in Roman poetry’, it is also one that enjoyed a notable afterlife, beginning with a provocative Ovidian imitation in *Amores* 2.5. In

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¹ Recent discussions of blushing in this Shakespearean scene include Fleck (2006) and Dunne (2016, p. 238).

what follows, I trace one strand of this image’s intertextual heritage, examining how both Lavinia’s Virgilian blush and Ovid’s near-contemporary reappropriation of its comparanda were later hybridised by Edmund Spenser in The Faerie Queene’s Legend of Chastity.3

**Lavinia’s Virgilian Blush**

Though illusoriely destined to provide the lifeblood and genetic material for Aeneas’ Roman dynasty, Lavinia (who has been dubbed ‘a wife of destiny and fate, of prophecy and oracle—not of love’) does not merit a speaking part in the epic drama of the Aeneid.4 Unavoidable comparisons with the articulate, passionate, and seductive Dido have done her no favours. Routinely, critics describe Lavinia’s mute character as ‘blank’ or ‘colorless’—a peculiar choice of vocabulary given that, besides portentously having her golden tresses burst into flame in book 7, her most significant action in the Aeneid is to visibly redden.5 The immediate Virgilian context for Lavinia’s luminous blush is what Ellen Oliensis calls a ‘strangely triangulated scene’, in which Amata (her mother) and Turnus (her soon-to-be-displaced suitor) conspire over the head of Aeneas’ future consort. Lavinia, who is pointedly ‘matura vixi’ (‘ripe for a husband’) and ‘plenius nubilibis annis’ (‘of full age to be a bride’), participates in this conversation only via involuntary physiological response (Aeneid 7.53).6 Apparently reacting to Amata’s heated, suicidal declaration that she would refuse to accept Aeneas as a son-in-law, the young woman’s colour visibly rises:

<quote>
accept vorem lacrimis Lavinia matris
flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimum ignem
subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora curcurit.
Indum sanguineo velut violaverit ostro
si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa
alba rosa: talis virgo debat ore colores.
</quote>

(Virgil, Aeneid 12.64–9)

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4 Lavinia is thus characterised by Fratantuono (2007, p. 206).

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Lavinia heard her mother’s words, her burning cheeks steeped in tears, while a deep blush kindled its fire, and mantled o’er her glowing face. As one stains Indian ivory with crimson dye, or as when white lilies blush with many a blended rose—such hues her maiden features showed.

Virgil’s epic simile is here comprised of two comparanda, with the maiden’s blooming complexion likened: (1) to dyed ivory; (2) to an interplay of lilies and roses. The first of these comparanda is, in turn, often identified by classicists as a Virgilian revision of an earlier Homeric simile, Iliad 4’s comparison of Menelaus’ wounded thigh to stained ivory. It is sometimes also suggested that the second comparandum in these Virgilian lines might be more loosely modelled on Apollonius Rhodius’ description of Medea’s blush in Argonautica 3. Just what this intertextually resonant passage might mean for our interpretation of Lavinia’s character, however, is far from clear.

Sounding for all the world like Claudio and the Friar quibbling over Hero’s facial tincture in Much Ado About Nothing, commentators from Servius onwards have debated the implications of Lavinia’s wordless affectual display.7 Whereas Francis Cairns argues that ‘Lavinia blushes out of shame when she hears her marriage being spoken of in her presence by someone else’, Ruth W. Todd suggests that she reacts, more particularly to ‘the thought of Aeneas as a husband’.8 A host of scholars including R. O. A. M. Lyne have alternatively attributed this blush to Lavinia’s love for Turnus.9 Still others, including W. R. Johnson, have dismissed such diagnostic attempts altogether, calling this sort of ‘speculation ... as fruitless as it is boring’.10

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**Corinna’s Lavinian Blush**

Ovid’s interest in rewriting the events of the Aeneid is well known, as famously attested by his revision of Dido’s abandonment in Heroïdes 7 and his miniaturised recap of the Trojan War and its aftermath in the final books of the Metamorpho-

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7 Servius posits that Lavinia blushes because ‘movebatur ... intellectus se esse tantorurn causa malorum’ (ad loc. Aeneid 12.66; she is moved, understanding herself to be the cause of such misfortunes).
8 Cairns (2005, p. 197); Todd (1980, p. 27).
10 Johnson (1976, p. 57). This word ‘fruitless’ is similarly used by Thomas (1998, p. 294). On the wider semantics of blushing in ancient Roman contexts, see Barton (1999).
ses. That he also took a particular interest in reanimating—and potentially deflating—Virgil’s primly silent Lavinia is evident in Fasti 3, which operates as something of an ‘Annand’.11 In this pithy sequel to the Aeneid, Ovid relays how Anna appeared in Italy following her sister Dido’s death, thereby sending Aeneas’ new wife into an unflattering fit of seething (and potentially murderous) rage. In defiance of her husband’s plea that she greet Anna warmly,

omnia promittit falsunque Lavinia volnus
mente premit tacita dissimulatique metus;

furiatiter odit
et parat insidias et cupit ulta mori.

(Ovid, Fasti 3.633–8)

Lavinia promised everything, but in the silence of her heart she hid her fancied wrong and dissembled her fears. She hated like a fury, and hatched a plot, and longed to die avenged.

As Alessandro Barchiesi drily notes, audiences who ‘remember Lavinia as a virginal and rather reserved character, given to unexplained blushes’ in the Aeneid are presented with ‘something quite different’ in the Fasti.12

The explicit associations between Lavinia and sexual jealousy that Ovid develops in Fasti 3 resonate strongly with his earlier invocation of her epic blush in the Amores—a collection that, (in)appropriately enough, begins with a verbal echo of the Aeneid.13 In Amores 2.5, the two-timing Corinna, who has been apprehended stealthily kissing the poet’s romantic rival, responds with downcast eyes and rising colour:

at illi
conscia purpureus venit in ora pudor.
quae coloratum Tithoni contigne caelum
subrubet, aut sponso visa puella novo;
quae rosea fulgent inter sua illa mistae,
aet ubi cantat Luna laborat equis,
aet quod, ne longis flavescere possit ab annis,
Maeons Assyrium femina tinxit ebur.

(Ovid, Amores 2.5.33–40)

But she—her conscious face mantled with ruddy shame, like the sky grown red with the tint of Tithonus’ bride, or a maid gazed on by her newly betrothed; like roses gleaming among the lilies where they mingle, or the moon in labour with enchanted steeds, or Assyrian ivory that the woman of Maeonia tinctures to keep long years from yellowing it.

In a detailed appraisal of this passage, Barbara Welden Boyd delineates the five comparanda of Corinna’s Ovidian blush as: (1) the reddening of the sky when Aurora rises (coloratum ... caelum); (2) a girl seen by her betrothed (sponso visa puella novo); (3) roses mixed with lilies (rosae ... inter sua illa mixtæ); (4) the moon in eclipse; (5) ivory that has been dyed (Assyrium ... ebur).14 Of these, Boyd notes that the third and the fifth replicate closely—though in inverse order—the descriptions of Lavinia’s earlier literary blush being like dyed ivory or lilies and roses, making our ‘recognition of Virgil’s presence here ... gradual’ and retroactively inviting audiences of Amores 2.5 to read back into the second comparandum ‘a movement from the general to the particular, from all betrothed girls to the most innocent of all virgines in the Aeneid, Lavinia’.15

Often, contemporary readings of Corinna’s intertextually rich blush have focused on Amores 2.5’s ‘comic diminishment’ of Virgilian epic or how it ‘travesties the heroic with the erotic absurd’.16 Boyd, for example, suggests that, ‘drawing abundantly on poetic memory’, this blush is designed to capitalise on the implicit contrast between Corinna (who ‘is, after all, not an innocent maiden but all too experienced in the arts of love’) and Virgil’s ‘Lavinia ... in the flush of first love’.17 Pauline Kiernan makes the correlative argument that Ovid ‘takes the epic formula’ of Lavinia’s blush and ‘lowers its tone by turning the virginal blush into the knowing blush of a sexually experienced ... woman’.18 And Joan Booth even goes so far as to posit that this simile’s obvious Virgilian reverberations render it ‘quite inapplicable’, though she allows that Ovid no doubt found ‘the humour of [the] incongruity irresistible’.19 Such interpretations of Amores 2.5’s relationship with

11 I borrow this characterisation of Fasti 3 from Chiu (2016, p. 72).
13 As is well-known, Amores 1.1.1 opens by replicating the famous first word of the Aeneid, arma.
Aeneid 12 seem to exhibit what Richard F. Thomas identifies as a tendency of recent critics ... to stabilize the Virgilian source text and see simply subversion, correction or destruction in [an] alluding text'. 20 I would argue that Corinna’s blush not only evinces parodic engagement with the Aeneid, but also exemplifies what Thomas might describe as a moment ‘where a problematic aspect of a Virgilian passage is activated in [a] later text’ with ‘the hermeneutics in the alluding text amounting to an affirmation of the problematic aspect’. 21 Indeed, Ovid’s imitation of Lavinia’s blush brings to the fore the erotic overtones that are latent present in its model. In so doing, Amores 2.5 accentuates and exploits the ‘problematic’, potentially uncomfortable depiction of Aeneas’ bride-to-be in Virgil’s text as a desiring subject and as a sexually aware—if still technically inexperienced—character at this crucial moment in the Aeneid. 22

Amores 2.5 seems to offer something in the way of poetic commentary on the semantic perplexities of Lavinia’s anterior blush. The frustrating illegibility of body language is arguably the central concern of this Ovidian elegy. Its emoterated narrator, pretending to sleep, furtively observes not just the exchange of ‘inproba ... oscula’ (2.5.23; ‘shameful kisses’) through his slitted eyes, but other alleged crimes, as well: ‘multa supercilii vidi vibrante loquentes; | nutibus in vestris pars bona vocis erat. | non occuli tacuere tui’ (15–17; ‘I saw you both say many things with quiverings of the brow; in your nod was much of speech. Your eyes, too, girl, were not dumb’). What is more, the mystique of Corinna’s pseudo-Lavinian countenance is only further heightened by the representative instability of the blush elsewhere in the Amores. When, for instance, Ovid’s narrator in elegy 1.3 represents himself as being suffused in the same ‘purpurae pudor’ that overcomes Corinna, this purple shame is glossed as a sign of his own sincerity and modesty (1.3.14), yet the complementary image of Aurora’s blush with which Amores 1.13 ends is alternatively linked to the goddess’s embarrassment upon being reminded of her many inmodest extramarital dalliances (1.13.35–48). 23 Moreover, in Amores 1.8, Dipas’ infamous advice to Ovid’s mistress raises the distinct possibility that blushing can be voluntary as well as involuntary. At times, women may tactically and deliberately redder: ‘decet alba quidem pudor ora, sed

iste, | si simules, prodest; verus obesse solet’ (1.8.35–6; ‘Blushes, to be sure, become a pale face, but the blush one feigns is the one that profits; real blushing is wont to be lost’). The question of whether Corinna’s non-verbal, externalised bodily displays in Amores 2.5 can be read as reliable, definitive indicators of her inner desires or romantic inclinations is thus explicitly raised in this poem yet remains utterly unresolved—as do the meanings of the final smile and voluptuous kiss that she bestows upon Ovid’s jealous persona in the elegy’s closing lines.

Britomart’s Hybridised Blush

At this stage in my argument, I want to shift forward in history by a millennium and a half or so to early modern England. There is little doubt that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English interpreters of the Aeneid were attuned to the opacity of Lavinia’s Virgilian blush. They were also inclined to capitalise on its ambiguities, citing Aeneid 12.64–9 to support a variety of arguments about female conduct and the procuivities of women. An early Tudor translation of Juan Luis Vives’s Education of a Christian Woman, for instance, contains a brief discussion of the scene in which the ‘wise poet Virgil ... doth bryne in kyng Latinus, and his wyfe Amata, talkynge to gether with Turmus, whiche shulde be their doyghters husba[n]de, thy daughter also prese[n]te’. Virgil is commended for ‘mak[ing] the mayde to do no more but wepe and blushe, without speakeynge of wordes: wherby he signifieth, that it becometh nat a mayde to talke, where her father and mother be in col[m]unicatio[n], about her marryage’. 24 And a century-and-a-half later, in his ‘Notes and Observations’ on the Aeneid, John Dryden ventured that there might be ‘a secret satire ... lurking under this description of Virgil, who seldom speaks well of women’. Dryden himself proposed that the ‘secret moral’ of Lavinia’s blush might be ‘that women, in their choice of husbands, prefer the younger of their suitors to the elder; are insensible of merit, fond of handsome-ness, and, generally speaking, rather hurried away by their appetite, than gov-erned by their reason’. 25 It is my contention that, for early modern English poets such as Spenser, the potential meanings of Lavinia’s blush were further complicated by the fact that they sometimes seem to have read this Virgilian passage

22 Another ‘problematic aspect’ that may perturb Lavinia’s blush (and which may have helped fuel Ovid’s reworking of this passage in Amores 2.5) is its subtle intratextual echoes of Aeneid 4. For the argument that hints of a possible Dido-Lavinia connection may be detected in the language of Aeneid 12’s blush, see Lyne (1983, p. 56–9).
23 To this list, one might also add Corinna’s blush or anger—or perhaps sorrow—with which Amores 1.14 ends.
through the lens of its Ovidian reworking in *Amores* 2.5. And it is both the mechanics and semantic implications of such multi-tiered readings that form my primary concern in the remainder of this essay.

In *The Faerie Queene* of 1590, Spenser’s plucky, cross-dressed Knight of Chastity is prone to reddening. When Britomart first appears at the start of book 3, she is, as Philip Hardie has put it, ‘as confused with blushes as Lavinia’. Upon encountering the Redcrosse Knight, she is quizzed as to ‘what vncoth wind | Brought her into those parts, and what inquest | Made her dissemble her disguised kind’, and Britomart’s physical reaction to this personally intrusive line of questioning is instantaneous: ‘euer and anone the rosy red, | Flash[es] through her face, as it had been a flake | Of lightening’ (3.2.4–5). A second and more explicitly allusive blush occurs when the love-struck heroine visits the cave of Merlin in the following canto:

The doublefull Mayday...
Was all abash'd, and her pure yuory
Into a cleare Carnation sundeine dyde;
As faire Aurora rising hastily,
Doth by her blushing tell, that she did lye
All night in old Triton's frozen bed.
Whereof she seems ashamed inwardly.

(Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 3.3.20)

Occasionally, contemporary readers of *The Faerie Queene* have looked back into literary history to identify *Aeneid* 12 as the ultimate model for book 3, canto 3’s bipartite simile—perhaps a logical leap, given the tendency of current scholarship to emphasise Spenser’s Virgilian heritage. Arguing that the ‘language’ here employed by Spenser ‘echoes Virgil’s description of Lavinia’s famous blush quite closely’, for example, Marlon A. Wells has read into this moment ‘an indication of Britomart’s unwitting association with the dynastic figures of epic’. There is, as Wells highlights, a tidy and satisfying parallel to be drawn between Lavinia’s legendary status as Roman progenitor and Britomart’s eminent future as the foremother of Troyounwarr. Similarly, Hardie interprets the nuances of Britomart’s complexion through a Virgilian lens: the blushing Knight of Chastity is lated ‘like Lavinia ... to marry someone whom she has not [yet] met’, and the ‘famous Progene’ that will result from her dynastic union with Artheagall are the direct ‘Spenserian equivalent of the Julian gens’ in the *Aeneid* (3.3.22). After all, as Spenser’s Merlin saliently prophesies, Britomart’s glorious reproductive future will enable the transmutation of ‘auncient Trojan blood’ into ‘Briton blood’ (3.3.22, 48).

Spenser has been described as a poet ‘almost indiscriminately hospitable to all literary influences’, and, as the work of M. L. Stapleton has helped to establish, Ovid’s amatory poetry featured prominently in his library of such influences. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that a closer examination of the descriptors associated with Britomart’s facial hue in book 3, canto 3 reveals a semantic complexity that straightforward Virgilian analyses do not fully capture. The relevant Spenserian passage reads more like a miniaturisation of Corinna’s derivative blush in the *Amores* than a reprise of Lavinia’s in *Aeneid* 12. Only the first of this simile’s two comparanda (where Britomart’s ‘pure yuory’ is ‘sudeine dyde’) is

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26 Hardie (2010, p. 176).
27 Nearly a century ago, it was alternatively suggested that Spenser’s most direct model for the Aurora imagery in this passage may have been a blush found in canto 4 of Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*: cf. Blanchard (1925, p. 210). In a less-than-flattering portrait of Armida’s wiles, the passage in question likewise mingles comparanda from *Aeneid* 12 and *Amores* 2.5:

O pur le luci vergognose e chine
tenendo, d’onestia s’orna e colora,
si che viene a celar le fresche brine
sotto le rose onde il bel viso infiora,
qual ne l’ore più fresche e matutine
del primo nascer suo veggiam l’aurora;

29 Hardie (2010, p. 176). Although he does not specifically discuss Britomart’s blush in this context, ‘Wilson-Okamura (2010, p. 237) posits Aeneas’ wife (particularly as mediated through the thirteenth-century romance of *Eneas* and Matteo Vegio’s popular fifteenth-century continuation of the *Aeneid* as a model for ‘married heroines like Britomart’ in early modern epic.

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e 'l rissor de lo stegno insieme n’esco
con la vergogna, e si confonde e mesce.

(Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata* 4.94)

Or holding her eyes downcast and modest she adorns and colors herself with chastity so that she succeeds in concealing the chill fair frost under the roses with which her lovely face is wreathed, even as we see the dawn in the cool morning hours of its first birth: and the blush of disdain arises together with modesty and is mingled and mixed with it.

It is entirely possible that Spenser has this postclassical model in mind, as well—and perhaps other vernacular imitations of the blushes in *Aeneid* 12 and/or *Amores* 2.5.
found in this passage's assumed Virgilian model, whereas both terms of comparison appear together in Ovid's depiction of Corinna's reddening face. What is more, although the reference to 'Tithonus' in book 3, canto 3 seems to verbally echo Amores 2.5's 'quaie coloratum Tithoni coniuge caelum | subrubet' (2.5.35–6; 'like the sky grown red with the tint of Tithonus' bride'), there appears to be a small dash of Amores 1.13 flavouring this Spenserian concoction, as well. To wit, Spenser's depiction of 'Aurora rising hastily' from 'old Tithonus frozen bed' where 'she did lye | All night' reworks the imagery of Ovid's dawn-song, wherein the narrator implies that the blushing goddess's daily flight stems from her desire to evade the sexual advances of an aged spouse:

Tithono vellem de te narrare liceret;  
fabula non caelo turpior uilla foret.  
illum dum refugis, longo quia grandior aevon,  
surgis ad invasis a sene mane rotas.

(Amores 1.13.35–8)

I would Tithonus were free to tell of thee; no more shameful scandal would be known in heaven. Flying from him because long ages older, thou risest early from the ancient man to go to the chariot-wheels he hates.

My observations about Spenser's constellation of Virgilian and Ovidian imagery in The Legend of Chastity chime with what Colin Burrow has elsewhere identified as the poet's 'tendency to allude to multiple sources at once, and to make what appear to be deliberately incongruous juxtapositions between earlier and later treatments of a classical topos'. 31 That the English author was intentionally complicating Britomart's book 3, canto 3 flush by vesting it with a dual Virgilian-Ovidian provenance seems evident—especially when we consider this moment alongside the many other allusions to Aeneid 12's blush found throughout his poetic canon. In the Epithalamion, for instance, Spenser unequivocally invokes Lavinia's blush (minus the lilies), and he does soironically in a pasan to 'sweet love and constant chastity, | Unspotted fayth and comely womanhood' as figured in the person of his own bride Elizabeth Boyle:

Behold whites she before the altar stands  
...  
How the red roses flush up in her cheekes,  
And the pure snow with goodly vermilly stayne,  
Like crimisin dye in grayne

(Spenser, Epithalamion 223, 226–8)

Moreover, in book 5 of The Faerie Queene, we find what appears to be a similarly forthright (and complimentary) equation of Florimell's roses-and-lilies complexion with, presumably, the anterior blush of Lavinia: 'her bashfull shamefastnesse ywrouget | A great increase in her faire blushing face; | As roses did with lillies interlace' (FQ 5.3.23). And elsewhere in the same work Spenser activates the second of Virgil's comparanda from Aeneid 12 in describing the 'modest' allegorical hue of Shamefastnesse:

with rosie red  
The bashfull bloud her snowy cheekes did dye,  
That her became, as polisht yellow  
Which cunning Caifesmans hand hath ouerlayd  
With faire vermilion or pure Castory.

(FQ 2.9.41)

Spenser's various depictions of Elizabeth Boyle's, Florimell's, and Shamefastnesse's neo-Virgilian blushes, then, stand in contrast to Britomart's in that they remain apparently uncontaminated by the mediating presence of additional, non-Lavinian comparanda derived from Amores 2.5.

Sujata Iyengar has proposed that 'an Elizabethan blush can mark not a moment of personal truth but a moment of social, sexual, and subjective chaos', or 'a point where clarity, morality, and truth collapse'. 32 Blushing, she submits, connotes 'not a fundamental bodily truth but its literary or hermeneutic breakdown'. 33 The 'hermeneutic breakdown' that Iyengar associates with the early modern blush more generally is rendered all the more potent in book 3, canto 3 of The Faerie Queene by the tangible—and tangibly convoluted—genetics of the erotically charged and ethically ambivalent blush represented therein. Taken in its broader narrative context, this window reference's palimpsestic invitation to read the memory of Ovid's Corinna as well as Virgil's Lavinia in Britomart's visage

feels apt. After all, Spenser’s Knight of Chastity is a direct inversion of *Amores* 2.5’s ‘sponso visa puella novo’ (2.5.36; ‘maid gazed on by her newly betrothed’): she has pursued Merlin’s assistance after becoming hopelessly inflamed by a glimpse of her future husband, the ‘comely knight’ Arthegall (3.2.24). The seemingly paradoxical capacity for pre-marital marital lust exhibited by this ‘bold Britoness’ is an often remarked feature of *The Faerie Queene* (3.12.2), and Spenser’s overlay of Lavinia’s Virgilian blush with the subsequent literary commentary of Ovid’s *Amores* heightens not only our sense of this flush’s potential (and potentially disruptive) eroticism, but also the semantic ambiguities involved in any attempt to read Britomart’s florid countenance as an ethical barometer.

**Contextualising Spenser’s Window Reference**

If we pan out to consider the wider European milieu within which Spenser was operating, it is worth reflecting upon just how self-conscious he must have been (and must have expected many of his readers to be) about the precise heritage of his literary allusions. ‘Trained to write by imitating classical writers’, as Maggie Kilgour has put it, ‘Renaissance authors had learned also how classical writers had imitated each other’; the dominant, pan-European pedagogical practices of the era made them attentive to ‘the ways in which one ancient author transformed his source—adding new materials, eliminating old, changing order and emphasis’. Such concerns demonstrably spilled over into early modern readings of classically allusive vernacular literature, as well. When, for instance, earlier in the century, Ludovico Ariosto had described the naked blush of Angelica in one of Spenser’s primary postclassical models for *The Faerie Queene*, the *Orlando furioso*, the Italian author had relied on and deliberately affiliated his own work with ancient models:

*Creduto aviva che fosse statua finta
o d’alabastro o d’altri marmi illusi
Ruggiero, e su lo scoglio così avinta
per artificio di scultori industri;
se non vedea la lacrima distinta
tra fresche rose e candidi ligustri.*

(*Ariosto, Orlando furioso* 10.96)

34 Kilgour (2015, p. 521).

Ruggiero would have taken her for a statue fashioned in alabaster or some lamenbous marble, and tethered thus to the rock by some diligent sculptor’s artifice, were it not that he distinctly saw tears coursing down her rose-fresh, lilly-white cheeks.

As Spenser must have been acutely aware, the various sixteenth-century commentaries that served to canonise Ariosto’s work, including those of Lodovico Dolce and Alberto Lavezuola, had taken pains to draw out the ancient origins of this imagery; whereas Dolce, as Daniel Javitch has previously observed, associated Angelica’s hue with Lavinia’s. Lavezuola postulated genetic links between Ariosto’s vernacular lines and passages found in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Statius’ *Achilleid*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.35

Spenser’s more immediate English context, too, is one in which the quintessentially humanist habit of commonplacering—that is, taxonomically organising quotations according to linguistic and thematic correlations to expedite their later retrieval and redeployment—dovetailed with (and, no doubt, encouraged) the literary construction of window allusions. Spenser and his similarly educated English contemporaries were the products of a curriculum that not only demanded pupils’ internalisation and bilingual manipulation of classical exemplars, but also cultivated in these students an attendant awareness of how diverse sources could be dissected and productively recombined to generate a suggestive array of new meanings. We might consider, for example, that an Elizabethan reader thumbing through Thomas Cooper’s *Thesaurus*, one of the most widely consulted reference works of the era, would have encountered the following topically cohesive yet nonsynchronous assortment of classical lines under the entry for *rubor* (a word with a spectrum of meanings related to redness, blushing, and shame):

Rubor, rubóris, m. g. Plin. *Rednesses.*
Dilutus rubor. Plin. A pale redde, that is no deepe colour.
Igneus rubor. Lucan. *A bright redde.*
Roseo lenis in ore rubor. Ouid.
Mistus candore rubor, Vide *MISCEO.*
Acuere ruborem, Vide *ACVO.*
Confessus secreta rubor. Claud.
Incenduit ore rubor. Claud. He blushed as redde as fire.

Manat tristi conscius ore rubor. Catull.
Subitus rubor notavit ora. Ouid. Shee blushed sodainly.
Pulchra vere cundo suffundens ora rubore. Ouid.
Pectora traxerunt tenuem percussa ruborem: Ouid.

(Cooper, Thesaurus, 1578, TttttT)

In Cooper’s Thesaurus, a range of Ovidian blushes are thus identified and comparatively juxtaposed with those of Pliny, Catullus, Lucan, Virgil, and others. And this dynamic is hardly unique to rubor; rather, one finds striking similar lists of classical quotations in the entries for conceptually related words such as erubesce.

Spenser’s own interest in probing and activating the sorts of intertextual comparisons facilitated by a work like Cooper’s is evident in his earliest publication, The Shepheardes Calender. This work of 1579 deftly interweaves a great variety of classical and postclassical literary models, and Spenser’s own poetry is conspicuously nested within an elaborate paratextual apparatus. Attributed to the (likely fictitious) glossator ‘E.K.’, this riddling, Servian auto-commentary calls audiences’ attention to the text’s various and competing formal, conceptual, generic, etymological, and philological debts, offering readers a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the work’s genetics and fostering our sense of Spenserian poetics as fundamentally grounded in hermeneutic multiplicity.¹⁰ To detect the intermediary influence of Ovid’s Amores 2.5 in Spenser’s Legend of Chastity, then, is merely to read the author’s ostensibly Virgilian reference to the blush of Lavinia in this later text with the same attention to literary heredity that The Shepheardes Calender more explicitly demands of its readership.

Conclusion

The above interpretation of Spenser’s multi-tiered classical allusion in book 3, canto 3 of The Faerie Queene speaks to the rhetorical self-consciousness and heightened genealogical sensitivity with which Spenser and his humanist contemporaries were primed to approach ancient poetry. Perhaps it is only to be expected, then, that this rich and intertextually evocative Spenserian

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³⁷ Krier (1986, p. 142).