

Spenser's Concept of Love in Amoretti

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Spenser's *Amoretti*, published together with *Epithalamion* in 1595, is an Elizabethan love-sonnet sequence in which he expressed his personal feeling to an unmarried woman, Elizabeth Boyle, whom he later married and celebrated his marriage in *Epithalamion*. Like other Renaissance sonneteers, Spenser imitated the pioneer love-sonnet sequence poet, Petrarch. Yet Spenser's *Amoretti* seems to have some features that are not to be found in other love poems of his both predecessors and successors. The aim of this paper is to consider Spenser's concept and values of love as expressed in these love sonnets, *Amoretti*, and how they differ from those expressed in other Renaissance love-sonnet sequences and from those of Petrarch.

The *Amoretti* has been subject to some controversial views. Critics differ as to the subject matter, lady's character, concept, thought, feeling and mood revealed in these love poems.

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C. S. Lewis emphasises the idea of marriage by saying that Spenser is the "greatest among the founders of that romantic conception of marriage which is the basis of all our love literature from Shakespeare to Meredith"⁽¹⁾. Edwin Casady reads the sonnet sequence in terms of the neo-platonic ladder. "The love," he says, "moves from physical, earthly and mortal love to spiritual, heavenly and immortal love"⁽²⁾. Hallet Smith draws our attention to Spenser's description of the lady's physical beauty and her spiritual qualities. Ha adds that though marriage is not really mentioned in the *Amoretti*, yet "the absence of conflict (pangs and restlessness) of conscience as in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* and the similarity in tone between the sonnets of the *Epithalamion* make the *Amoretti* seem to be a celebration of a love affair which leads up to and implies marriage."⁽³⁾ J. W. Lever finds faults with and inconsistencies in this sequence. He argues that Spenser's lady is portrayed in two quite different ways. On the one hand, she is characterised by being angelic, divine, humble and virtuous. On the other hand, she is presented as crude, savage, deadly, tyrannical and proud. Lever attributes this discrepancy in the second type of poems to an earlier time in Spenser's life⁽⁴⁾. Louis L. Martz gives a different reading of the sequence from that of Lever. He says that the lady's controversial attitude is one of the important conventions of courtly and Petrarchan love. Courtly love relies on contraries, such as joy

and fear, melancholy and happiness, smile and cry, separation and union, cruelty and kindness, etc. Martz argues that the "sequence does not end abruptly and no sonnet is irrelevant".⁽⁵⁾ W.C. Johnson notes that the sonnets emphasise beauty rather than woman. Hence, he adds, love rather than the woman is the real theme expressed by the sequence. The lady's name, he adds too, is mentioned but once; she is identified as one of those women called Elizabeth in sonnet 74.⁽⁶⁾ R. W. Dasenbrock believes that Spenser's deviation from the Elizabethan love sonnet form is deliberate. The lady, he adds, is "Heaven itself, on Earth Unlike the Petrarchan lover, Spenser's lover does not climb the Platonic ladder up to Heaven where he finds rest and peace. Rest and peace are found in the "sacred bond of marriage", not in death as it is true of Petrarch. In *Amoratti*, he concludes, there is "no rise from physical to spiritual love: the proper kind of physical love is spiritual."⁽⁷⁾

As far as Spenser's concept of love is concerned, the *Amoretti* has some features that distinguish it from other sequences. In the first place, most of Spenser's sonnets, like Petrarch's, show a strong element of idealism: his lady's ideal and heavenly features are celebrated, whereas earthly and mortal things are ignored. Second, Spenser, as Reed W. Dasenbrock notes, was the first poet who introduced the new and sacred concept of marriage into the traditional and established concept of love.⁽⁸⁾ Instead of

transcending his lady by turning to heaven as Petrarch did, Spenser turned to marriage which is for him a sacred refuge of stability, rest and peace which reconcile the real to the ideal. Adulterous or infidel love is criticised. Besides, Spenser's deliberate and conscious choice of a form-abab bcbc cdcd ee-different from that adopted by other Elizabethan sonnet sequences falls in with the new concept or type of values he tries to reveal in the sequence. Form and content are harmoniously fused. Finally, Spenser rejected the traditional fashion of naming a sonnet sequence after or addressing it to the lady. Yet, her personality, unlike, for example, that of Sidney's Stella, is more portrayed and presented than the lover's.

Love, not the lady, is the actual theme in Spenser's *Amoretti*. Also, the absence of the lady's name in the title of Spenser's sonnet sequence suggests that the sequence is not meant to be about the lover's lady. What enhances this suggestion is that we know nothing about the lady of the *Amoretti* until we come to sonnet 74 in which three women named Elizabeth are mentioned.^(*) "The word 'love' as a noun and a verb," as W. C. Johnson has calculated, "appears forty-eight times in the *Amoretti*, in addition to once as 'loved', once as 'love-affamished', ten times as 'lovely', nine times as 'love's

(*) Sonnet 74 refers to Queen Elizabeth, his mother's namesake and that of his mistress Elizabeth

Boyle.

and four times as 'loves'."⁽⁹⁾ Spenser's sonnets are heavily influenced by Plato and Petrarch. Unlike other sonnet sequences, the *Amoretti* does not tell the details or events of a story. It deals with the purity and the inspiration of the poet's love. Love enlightens his soul. His beloved is endowed with divine power; her beauty is heavenly and it represses or calms the stormy physical and base desires. She is the image of the Maker's beauty; her beauty is likened to heaven's light and it relieves the lover's soul. She is not a mistress whose suitor is a servant dying for a smile or a kiss from her. Love in Spenser is not erotic or lustful. He thought of love as aspiration to the perfect beauty which was God. This principle is neo-platonic. Pure and transcendent love seems dominant in the *Amoretti*. Chastity and spirituality replace carnal love. Spenser is not concerned with the pleasures of sensuality. He disapproves of sensual indulgence which can reduce a man to a beast and lead him up to a state of degradation. Man for Spenser should have virtues that raise him above his animal nature. Though sex makes the sequence pleasant to read, yet Spenser's purpose is not the praise of sensual love. The type of love Spenser expresses, R. D. Trivedi notes, was "real and not pretended." He adds that it was also pure because it was expressed to an unmarried woman, not as was the case with Sidney's love which was expressed to a married woman".⁽¹⁰⁾

Below are some examples from the sonnets of Spenser's sequence about the type of love he seeks. The lover "defends (his lady's pride) as the shield of innocence" in sonnet 6. In sonnet 5, lines 13-14, the lover says that it " Was neuer in this world ought worthy tride, / without some spark of such self-pleasing pride"^(*). Pride provokes in the lover spiritual passion for it is spiritual beauty. In sonnet 7, lines 5-8, her eyes influence his soul:

For when ye mildly looke with louely hew,
 then is my soule with life ana loue inspired
 but when ye lower, or looke on me askew,
 then do I die, as one with lightning fyred.

In sonnet 8 her eyes repress and calm down the stormy passion in the lover. This divine element in the lady is "manifest in her physical beauties as wall as in the qualities of her mind".⁽¹¹⁾ The lady's looks are angelic, spiritual and Christian; they are not sensual as Cupid's darts. Lever notes that "mental esteem, not physical desire, is the primary impulse which unites virtuous lovers. love leads to sacramental marriage".⁽¹²⁾ Lines 5-11 of sonnet 8 read:

Thruh your bright beames doth not the blinded guest,
 shoot out his darts to base affections wound:
 but the Angels come tolead fraile windes to rest

(*) These and other subsequent lines are from *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (OUP, 1966).

in chaste desires on heavenly beauty bound.

You frame my thoughts and fashion me within,
 you stop my tongue, and teach my heart to speak,
 you calm the storm that passion did begin.

In sonnet 13, lines 4-5, she is "most goodly temperature.../ Myld humblesse mixt with awfull maiesty." Her character is made up of both majesty and humility. Smith says that she "looks upon the earth and remembers that she is mortal".⁽¹³⁾ In sonnet 15, line 14, "her mind adorned with virtues manifold". In sonnet 17 we note her "sweet eye-glances" (line 9) and her "charming smiles" (line 10) and "Angels face" (line 11). Though the poet's emphasis is on the physical beauties of the lady, yet he avoids licentiousness. Spiritual qualities are fully presented. In sonnet 21 her beauty awakens reverence and represses all base desires:

she to her love doth lookers eyes allure:
 and with stern countenance back again doth chace.
 their looser looks that stir up lusts impure.

(Lines 6-8)

The qualities of "pride and weakness mixt by equall part" are the source of chasening the desires aroused by others' looks. She is so able to attract the eyes of others. Sonnet 22 endows the lady with semi-divine qualities. The services of love are likened to religious rites. Love is "not a physical passion but a

mental state".⁽¹⁴⁾ His heart must be clean so as she might accept him, "in flames of pure and chaste desires". In sonnet 34 Spenser's ship, unlike Petrarch's, reaches the harbour safely, as the lines quoted by Lever show:⁽¹⁵⁾

Yet hope I well, that when this storme is past
my *Helice* the lodestar of my lyfe
will shine again, and looke on me at last,
with louely light to cleare my cloudy grief.

(Lines 9-12)

In other words, the harbour of Spenser's ship signifies consummated marriage and stability, whereas that of Petrarch's ship signifies restlessness. Sonnet 43 celebrates her "deep wit". Sonnet 49 mentions that both lover and beloved are like ships that reach the end (harbour, unity, marriage). In sonnet 61 she is the image of the Maker's beauty. The lover adores her divine essence; the beauty he loves is divine. She is the embodiment of spiritual qualities. Sonnet 62 shows the two lovers exchanging love directly and without any pretence. In sonnet 64 his estimate of the lady's beauty, Dasenbrock notes, is as pure and chaste as his appreciation of the beauty of flowers⁽¹⁶⁾. Sonnet 66 says that his beloved's beauty is a "heavenly beam". Her presence delights his soul. In sonnet 67 "rational love is happier than sensual".⁽¹⁷⁾ Sonnet 68 is the "Easter sonnet". The lover-poet, Dasenbrock says, appreciates the divine origin of love,

as represented by "Christ's sacrifice for man and prays that he and his beloved should be able to heed the lesson Christ taught and love spiritually".⁽¹⁸⁾ Sonnet 69 says that his verse shall immortalise his love which is adorned with honour and chastity. Accordingly, the beauty of his beloved shall be immortalised, and so shall their spiritual love. In sonnet 72, her beauty is similar to heaven's light and restores his soul to its pure, chaste place:

Oft when my spirit do spread her bolder winges,
 In mind to mount up to the purest sky:
 it down is weighed with thought of earthly things
 and clogd with burden of mortality,
 Where when that souerayne beauty it doth spy,
 resembling heuens glory in her light:
 drawne with sweet pleasures bayt, it back doth fly,
 and unto heauen forgets her former flight.

(Lines 1-8)

In sonnet 75 appears "the idea of sacred marriage which Spenser introduces into love poetry. Both love and the lady are made sacred in marriage. In sonnet 76, Dasenbrock says, Spenser is less concerned with the subject of the lady's breasts than with his thoughts about them. Her breasts, he continues, are "fraught with vertues richest treasure" (line 1). They are "the bowre of blisse, the paradice of pleasure,/ the sacred harbour of that heuenly spright"

(lines 3-4).⁽¹⁹⁾ In sonnet 88 he sees the image of the heavenly ray in her. When he thinks of her, his soul is consolidated:

Ne ought I see, though in the clearest day,
 when others gaze upon theyr shadowes vayne:
 but th'onely image of that heauenly ray,
 whereof some glances doth in mine eie remayne
 Of which beholding the Idea playne,
 through contemplation of my purest part:
 with light thereof I doe my selfe sustayne,
 and thereon feed my loue-affamisht hart.

(lines 5-12)

The sonnets in Spenser's *Amoretti* are more concerned with the state of mind of both the poet and the lady than with the details of the lover's love affair.⁽²⁰⁾ Don M. Ricks argues that the poet wins her favour and finds both her and love as “sources of pleasure and enlightenment”. Spenser's lady, he adds, differs from other ladies in that she is won over and obtainable to her lover. It is not because she accepts his wooing at the end but because the lover becomes worthy of her love and acceptable.⁽²¹⁾ This is why she does not repulse him nor change her mind throughout the sequence. She waits for the opportunity when he becomes worthy of her love.

The change in the poet's own condition or tone ties in with the change in the use of the devices. Metaphors of war and defeat, for example, are used earlier in the sequence and are later replaced by those of peace and victory. This can be evidenced in sonnet 14, line 1, where the siege metaphor, "Retourne agayne my forces late dismayd,/ Unto the siege by you abandon'd quite", is replaced in sonnet 62, lines 1-4, by the huntsman metaphor, who captures his deer, which signifies the lover's success in his love or in winning his lady's favour:

The weary yeare his race now hauing run,
The new begins his compast course anew:
with shew of morning mylde he hath begun,
betokening peace and plenty to ensew.

The lover-poet's lady is likened to wild animals on the one hand. She is "more more cruell and more saluage wylde,/ then either Lyon or the Lyonesse (Sonnet 20, lines 1-2). The poet is the lamb that gives in to the lion's power. On the other hand, she is likened to the deer and the honey bee, "Your selfe unto the Bee ye doe compare" (sonnet 71, line 2). This serves the lover's state of mind when he is first rejected and disappointed and later when he is happy.

In the sonnets of the *Amoretti*, Spenser rejects physical, earthly and mortal things in favour of spiritual, heavenly and

immortal ones. Like Petrarch, he desires to transcend love. Petrarch achieves peace by joining his mistress in heaven, after her death. Whereas Spenser realises union by joining her not in death but in marriage. Marriage in Spenser's sequence replaces Petrarch's restless, unconsummated love. The union of marriage is a sacred refuge leading to peace and stability and condemning adulterous love.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love; A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; rpt. Oxford: OUP, 1953), P-360.
2. Edwin Casady, "The Neo-Platonic Ladder in Spenser's *Amoretti*," *Philological Quarterly*, 20 (1941), p.295.
3. Hallet Smith, *Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952),pp. 169-70.
4. J. W. Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1956), pp. 97-102.
5. Louis L. Martz. "*The Amoretti*; 'Most Goodly Temperature'," in *Form and Convention in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, ed., William Nelson (1961; rpt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p.150.

6. W. C. Johnson, "Amor and Spenser's *Amoretti*," *English Studies*, Vol.54, No.3 (June 1973), p.217.
7. R. W. Dasenbrock, "The Petrarchan Context of Spenser's *Amoretti*." PMLA, Vol.100, No.1 (Jan. 1985) p.38, note 14, p. 48
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Amor and Spenser's *Amoretti*", p.213
10. R. D. Trivedi, *A Compendious History of English Literature*, 1985 edn. (Delhi: Roopak Pinters, 1976),p.69
11. Hallett Smith, *Elizabethan Poetry*, p. 168
12. *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, p.98
13. *Elizabethan Poetry*, p.166
14. Lever, *The Elizabethan love Sonnet*, p.107.
15. *Ibid.*, p.121
16. "The Petrarchan Context of Spenser's *Amoretti*", p.38
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p.44.
20. *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, p.96
21. "Persona and Process in Spenser's 'Amoretti'", *ARIEL*, 3:4 (Oct. 1972), p. 5.

ملخص

مفهوم سبنسر عن الحب في أمورتي

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يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مفهوم وقيم الحب لدى الشاعر ادموند سبنسر في متواليه قصائد الحب المسماة 'امورتي'، وكيف يختلف هذا المفهوم وهذه القيم عن تلك التي تعبر عنها متواليات قصائد الحب الأخرى في عصر النهضة وعن تلك لدى الشاعر بترارك.

(*) قسم الترجمة _ كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل.