**Edmund Spenser Introductory Lecture**

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Here is my lecture on Edmund Spenser. In the course of my lectures, we are going to travel to the 16th century and immerse ourselves in some poetry. Some old-fashioned British poetry, which is somewhat patriarchal, but very beautiful, nevertheless. I say so because Spenser uses words in the most beautiful ways in his poetry. One might find Spenser old-fashioned and archaic, but one can’t help but enjoy the musicality and beauty of his poetry. We will be reading two sonnets from his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*, which was published in 1595.

As usual, before we jump straight into *Amoretti*, it will be helpful to know some details about Spenser’s life and historical context. Since we have already studied Thomas Wyatt’s sonnets, we can approach Spenser’s *Amoretti* as another stage in the development of the sonnet. As I had mentioned in my previous classes, we could also look at it as one of the different expressions of love and desire in English poetry. We will also try to draw a historical trajectory of love and desire in English lyric poetry from Thomas Wyatt to John Donne.

**Introducing Edmund Spenser**

Like with any writer, it is important know about Spenser’s subject position to understand from where his poetry is coming. His relation to the English court was very different from that of Thomas Wyatt and could have been an influence on the way he wrote poetry. So let me draw a brief sketch of Spenser’s life from his birth till the time he writes *Amoretti*.

There are many gaps in available knowledge about Spenser’s early life, for instance, we are not sure who were his parents. He was born in London sometime between 1551 and 1554. Traditionally, it has been assumed that he was born in 1552, during the reign of Edward VI (Mohl 1751). His mother’s name was Elizabeth and his father’s name may have been John Spenser. John Spenser was associated with the Merchant Taylor’s Company. It’s not clear what position John Spenser held in the company, but I think it is safe to assume that Spenser’s father was involved in an occupation related to the trade of cloth weaving. Thus, according to Ruth Mohl, “Spenser was not born a gentleman (an important distinction at the time), but became one, without arms, by virtue of having studied at the university; later, by acquiring property in Ireland, he gained the status of a landed gentleman.”

As a child, Edmund Spenser studied in the Merchant Taylor’s School, and in went on to study in Pembroke Hall, Cambridge “as a sizar (a poor but not necessarily penniless scholar given servants’ duties in exchange for room and board) (Mohl 1753). He continued to pursue his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Pembroke Hall. After completing his education, Spenser took up employment in government offices, first as secretary to various notable officials such as Sir Henry Sidney and Dr. John Young (Bishop of Rochester). By 1579, Spenser he moved into the world of the court, when entered the service of the Earl of Leicester. He also gained an entry into the literary circles of the court, associating with the likes of Sir Philip Sidney and Edward Dyer (Mohl 1754). In 1579, Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar* had been published, which probably earned him a place among the poets of the court.

Thus, Spenser was a common man who had risen to occupy a prominent position in the English Court, unlike Thomas Wyatt, who was born into nobility. He made his way up the social ladder and managed to make a place for himself in the literary circles of the court. You might find that this subject position of Spenser affects the way he writes poetry.

In 1579, Spenser married Machabyas Chylde. The next year, he became the private secretary to Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton, the new lord deputy of Ireland. Spenser moved to Ireland with Lord Grey, and thereafter, he lived in Ireland for the rest of his life. He moved up the ranks and became an important administrator, acquired property there, and went to England only occasionally. According to Ruth Mohl, Spenser was one among several literary figures who went to Ireland to seek a fortune.

In Ireland, Spenser continued writing. One of his most significant works is *The Faerie Queene*, which was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. The Queen is said to have been very pleased with the work, as she granted him a pension much higher than any other poet of his time. So you can see, Spenser was an important administrator, as well as a well-known poet highly favoured by the Queen.

So now let me cut things short and come to *Amoretti.* This sequence of sonnets was written by Spenser for his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle. (In sonnet 74 of *Amoretti*, Spenser says that there are three Elizabeths in his life, who bestowed their graces onto him: his mother, the queen, and his wife). His first wife Machabyas dies in around 1591, and around 1593, Spenser met Elizabeth Boyle, who was a kinswoman of Sir Richard Boyle, 1st Earl of Cork, Lord Treasurer of the Kingdom of Ireland.

***Amoretti***

*Amoretti* is a sonnet sequence Spenser wrote to memorialize his courtship of Elizabeth Boyle and to celebrate their wedding on 11th June 1594. ‘Amoretti’means ‘little love-offerings.’ So the sonnets in the *Amoretti* are little love offerings for Elizabeth Boyle. It is a convention among scholars of Spenser to call these sonnets ‘Amoretti’ instead of ‘sonnets.’ So even in this lecture I will refer to them as ‘Amoretti,’ and so can you in your answers. So, in our syllabus, we have “Amoretti 57” and “Amoretti 75.”

As you know, in writing the sonnet sequence *Amoretti,* Spenser was following a Renaissance convention which had become very popular in the 1580s. In these sonnets, Spenser imitates “the traditions of Petrarch’s courtship, and its associated Neo-Platonic conceits” (Larsen 2). However, there is a difference between the content of Spenser’s *Amoretti* and the sonnets of Petrarch and Wyatt. Spenser’s Amoretti are enmeshed in the discourse of marriage, while Petrarch and Wyatt’s sonnets were meditations on unrequited love, unfulfilled desires. Spenser’s *Amoretti* begins with the yearning of the lover, a tension between the physical and spiritual aspects of love, but gradually goes on a journey of reciprocated love, to culminate in marriage.

To emphasise on marriage as the necessary culmination of love, Spenser wrote the marriage song, *Epithalamion*, which celebrates his marriage with Elizabeth Boyle. It is impossible to look at *Amoretti* in isolation from *Epithalamion*. Love in Spenser’s Amoretti must be legitimized and celebrated in marriage. Thus, *Amoretti and Epithalamion* are twin pieces to be studied together. After you have studied the two sonnets in our syllabus, do go ahead to read all of *Amoretti* and put the icing on the cake with *Epithalamion*. There is a celebratory and ritualistic aspect to Spenser’s poetry. You might not be able to relate to his archaic worldview, but it’s quite interesting to behold. Do read the poems aloud. Especially *Epithalamion.* It’s like a song.

In *Epithalamion*, Spenser proposes that “resolution to the sonneteer's conventional preoccupations with love may be found within the bounds of Christian marriage” (Larsen 2). According to Kenneth J. Larsen, this gives the work a Protestant character, as Spenser’s contemporaries were developing a doctrine that “the covenant of marriage, itself of the spiritual realm, was sealed and made manifest by physical consummation.” Thus, the tension between the physical and spiritual is reconciled by giving the physical consummation of marriage a spiritual meaning. You must have noticed a tension between the physical and the spiritual in Thomas Wyatt’s sonnets as well. It is this uneasiness with the physical aspect of love that partly accounts for the misogyny, the extreme idealization contrasted by the extreme misogyny in Wyatt’s poetry. This is reconciled in Spenser through the covenant of marriage. The physical, in the right context is also a way towards spiritual salvation. It is similar to the way sexuality is controlled and legitimised through religion and marriage rituals even in our cultures.

There is a ritualistic aspect to *Amoretti and* Epithalamion. In his introduction to *Edmund Spenser's Amoretti and Epithalamion: A Critical Edition*, Larsen elaborates on the ritualistic nature of the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*. Each of the 89 sonnets or amoretti were written to correspond to consecutive dates in 1594 leading up to the wedding day:

…beginning on Wednesday 23 January 1594 and running, with one interval, through to Friday 17 May 1594: they correspond with the daily and sequential order of scriptural readings that are prescribed for those dates by the liturgical calendar of the Church of England. Their conceits, themes, ideas, imagery, words, and sometimes their rhetorical structure consistently and successively match like particulars in these daily readings. Consequently the final structure of Amoretti and Epithalamion has been shaped by Spenser as a liturgico-poetic artifact.

Larsen 3

Thus, the *Amoretti* is linked with the church’s annual liturgical seasons. I would say, they are also linked with the passing of the seasons of nature as well. Thus, drawing a link between the natural physical experiences with the religious, and reconciling the tension between the physical and the spiritual in love. Each of the sonnets till *Amoretti* 75 correspond to the liturgical proceedings prescribed for that particular day. According to Larsen, Spenser probably intended to end the sonnet sequence with *Amoretti* 75, the sonnet in your syllabus, which corresponds to the proceedings of Low Sunday.

The *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* also blend Christian and classical tropes. While the themes of the sonnets correspond to the Christian liturgical proceedings, they are also “punctuated with references and allusions” from classical writers such as Pliny, Horace and Ovid.

The influence of Pertrach is also pervasive. However, Larsen says, the continental precedents, i.e., the classical references, the influence of Petrarch paradoxically emphasise the native English nature of *Amoretti*. Although Spenser borrows heavily from Petrarch’s *topoi* (themes/conventions) conceits and mannered structures, it is very difficult to pinpoint any specific Petrarchan sources. The references are too brief. Moreover, as I have mentioned already, the theme of unrequited love is replaced by the legitimisation of love through the covenant of marriage, which is characteristically Protestant and English.

**Structure***Amoretti* consists of 89 sonnets. Scholars have observed that *Amoretti and Epithalamion* have a tripartite structure (three sections). Our syllabus interestingly includes the last sonnets of the first two sections.

The first section comprises *Amoretti* 1 to 57—the sonnets written to correspond with Hilary Term and Lent, leading up to the Holy Week (Hilary Term begins on 11th January and Holy Week is the week preceding Easter sometime in the beginning of April). These early sonnets are “straightforward poems of praise” with “good-humoured intimacies” and “private nuances.” So, you will be privy to the delicate moments between a suitor and his beloved, the suitor paying polite compliments to his beloved. The scriptural allusions extend the parameters of the compliment and lend it a spiritual, connotation, thus raising the relationship between man and woman above the profane.

The influence of Petrarch is most evident in the first section, as the suitor is wooing the beloved. However, apart from borrowing from Petrarch, the first section also parodies Petrarch’s poetic tropes. As the sonnet sequence progresses, it becomes evident that Spenser finds Petrarchan conventions inadequate to convey mutuality in love. Since the Petrarchan sonnet mostly explored unrequited love, mutuality didn’t fit into that scheme. Even white reading Petrarch and Wyatt, one is aware that there is an anxiety about mutuality and physicality. A reciprocal relationship between the lover and beloved is inconceivable. As we have observed in the poem “They Flee from Me” by Wyatt, that a moment of physical intimacy is marked by misogyny and objectification of the woman. Spenser is in search of a new language which can reconcile the tensions created by the Petrarchan conventions of love and make space for mutuality and physicality. He finds this language in religion. That is why, as the sonnet sequence progresses, Spenser’s voice becomes more and more serious and spiritual.

The second section comprises *Amoretti* 58 to 75—the sonnets written to correspond with Holy Week and Easter season till Low Sunday. Low Sunday is the Sunday following the Resurrection of Christ. These sonnets are seen as the turning point in *Amoretti*. The move ahead of the parodic tone of the first section towards a more thoughtful and devotional tone, thus paving the way for an English Protestant resolution of the sonnet sequence. They make love and mutuality a part of the divine scheme of things. In our syllabus, we have the last sonnet of this section, *Amoretti* 75, which dwells on immortality and, and the definition of his relationship to Elizabeth Boyle in terms of the covenant of marriage.

The third section comprises the sonnets Spenser had not initially intended to write, and which don’t correspond to any specific dates in the calendar. They have been described as the sonnets of expectation. These are like the bridge between the tensions of the earlier sections, leading to the jubilant “public celebrations and resolutions” of *Epithalamion*.

So, to sum up, the trajectory of *Amoretti* begins with the conventional courting of the beloved, which is initially couched in Petrarchan conventions. Gradually, Spenser finds these conventions inadequate for expressing emotions of mutuality in love. Thus, this leads to a parodying of Petrarch. As the sequence progresses, Spenser finds a language and framework within which to place his relationship with his beloved, and that language and framework is English Protestant Christianity and the covenant of marriage.

**Works Cited**

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