Persona and Process in Spenser's 'Amoretti'

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Love, as it is usually presented in Elizabethan poetry, is a state. Courtship, on the other hand, could better be called a process. That distinction in part explains why Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* is unique among Elizabethan sonnet sequences, most of which are about love. It also goes a great way toward explaining the structure of the work as a whole, for in making the process of courtship rather than the state of love his central theme Spenser wrote a sequence which reads very much like a narrative (and he also prepared the way for a great deal of biographical speculation, much of which has limited value).

If we look first at the general structural features of *Amoretti*, we see that the sequence suggests, by means of what are largely non-narrative techniques, the course of a successful courtship.[1] This impression of a story taking place is created in a number of ways. Tonal modulation, for instance, is very important in tracing the course of events. The tone of the first sixty or so sonnets — the first two-thirds of the sequence — is negative: the lover-poet is rejected; his lady seems proud and cruel, and love for him is a cause of pain and suffering. In the final, positive third, however, the lady having been won over, he finds both she and love have become sources of pleasure and enlightenment.

Additionally, a simple motif, recapitulated in over a dozen sonnets, contributes to this general impression of narrative progression. Here is that motif, as it is expressed in the couplet of Sonnet LI:

[1] For a fuller discussion of the general structural features of the sequence see the present author's, 'Convention and Structure in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*', *Proceedings of the Utah Academy*, 2, 44, 1968, 438–50.

> Onely my paines wil be the more to get her,
> but hauing her, my ioy wil be the greater.[1]

The repeated occurrences of this motif suggest that the lover's suffering is neither pointless nor interminable; the lady eventually will be won over, and she will be worth the effort. In other words, the implicit assumption that there will be a successful conclusion to the lover's suit helps sustain the impression of progress and futurity in the sequence.

The image patterns in *Amoretti* also reflect its narrative nature. The shift from a negative to a positive tone is accompanied by, or rather, reinforced by, complementary changes in imagery. Images of war and defeat, for example, are replaced by images of victory and peace. Similes equating the lady with predatory animals give way to those equating her with the deer and the honey bee. The well-known Petrarchan ship, battered by emotional storms in three of the earlier sonnets (XXXIIII, XL, and LVI), literally approaches the port in LXIII. Similarly, the early sonnets focus upon the lady's eyes, those equivocators which cause the lover so much confusion, while the later sonnets focus upon her breast, with all its suggestion of tenderness and warmth.[2]

Finally, the narrative implicit in *Amoretti* takes place within the well-known time scheme. According to a few scattered sonnets which indicate times of the year and changes of the season, the negative portion of the sequence covers a full twelve months, from new year to new year, and the positive portion carries on into the second spring, ending at some unspecified time after Easter.[3]

Essentially, then, a process takes place in *Amoretti*: that series of events to which we give the general name courtship, and by means of which a man and a woman grow into a special kind of mutual relevance, is what occurs between Sonnet I and Sonnet

[1] This and all subsequent quotations from *Amoretti* are taken from *The Minor Poems*: Volume Two, 1947, ed. Charles Grosvenor Osgood and Henry Gibbons Lotspeich, in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin, Greenlaw, *et al.*, Baltimore, 1932–47.

[2] In their introduction to *Amoretti*, Robert Kellogg and Oliver Steele point out that in addition, 'the source of the conceits changes from a parody of social institutions to a parody of nature' (Edmund Spenser, *Books I and II of The Faerie Queene, The Mutability Cantos, and Selections from the Minor Poetry*, New York, 1965, p. 454).

[3] See Sonnets IIII, XIX, XXII, LXII, LXVIII, and LXX.

LXXXIX. Thus is raised the question of Spenser's technique, for the depiction of such a process requires the presentation of progressive character interaction and, therefore, an extensive adaptation of Petrarchan conventions.

One explanation of Spenser's technique is to be found in his special use of the conventional point of view, that point of view which determines to a large extent the natures both of the persona of the Petrarchan lover-poet and of the idealized and conventionalized woman to whom he addresses himself. The Elizabethan sonneteers pretended to be writing to and about a given lady. In fact, however, each was writing about himself; or perhaps more accurately, each was writing about his attitude to love. It is true that the imagery of most of the sequences, like that of *Amoretti*, turns our attention to the lady: we are invited to admire her attributes of mind and body. Similarly, the persuasive rhetoric of the sequence is aimed at winning her. However, the emotional and tonal structure of the sequences focuses our attention upon the psyche of the lover-poet. His internal state — that is, his reaction to the lady and to the emotions, frustrations, and contradictions he feels because of his love for her — is what each sequence is actually about. Michael Drayton, it will be remembered, introduces *Idea* as 'the true image of my mind', and in the introductory sonnet of *Delia* Samuel Daniel promises to 'unclasp the book of my charg'd soul'.

When the Petrarchan sequences are examined in this light the respective parts played by the lady and the lover-poet are clear. What first becomes obvious is that the lady is not a 'person', she is a function. In the fictive relationship created as a result of the authorial pretence, she serves as the thing which makes the poet experience the emotions about which he writes. Thus generally speaking she has nothing that could be called a 'personality' (just as many critics have objected as they dismissed this or that sequence as being 'cold' or 'merely conventional'). Moreover she is, as Shakespeare's parodies of Petrarchanism imply, both faceless and bodiless. Her physical identity in the poems is a product of the conventional similes: that is, she exists only as the sum total of her resemblances to other things. In fact, she serves but as an excuse for similes, and the resultant similes are meaningful not because they tell us what some particular lady, actual or idealized,

looked like, but because their tone communicates to us some of the various emotions a lover may experience as he apprehends the beauty of his beloved.

The lady, then, serves the lover-poet's psyche in a number of ways, not the least being her function as the attraction which is denied him. Just as her presence and beauty move him to lyric expressiveness, her inaccessibility charges his poetry with the tension of frustration. This point is of special importance regarding the particular lady in *Amoretti*. She, unlike ladies of other sequences, becomes available to the lover; that is precisely what makes the theme of Spenser's sequence courtship rather than love alone. The crucial question concerning *Amoretti* is, therefore, why does the lady, at about Sonnet LX, relent? Why does she, after having persisted for over a year in raising intense passions and disappointments in her lover, suddenly become a demure and compliant betrothed? It has been almost habitual to assume that Spenser's biography provides the answer: the lady could not by any means have continued to refuse, since she was actually Elizabeth Boyle and was needed to serve as the bride in *Epithalamion*.

However, it is important to recognize that the lady in *Amoretti* neither rejects her suitor in the earlier poems nor changes her mind in the later ones. She simply waits, in Platonic serenity, for her lover to become worthy of her. As 'The glorious image of the makers beautie' (LXI) her role is passive; hers is that 'particular beauty of one body' (to quote Peter Bembo) which 'guideth [the soul] to the universal beauty of all bodies', and hence to 'universal understanding'.

In other words, it is to the lover, not to the mistress, that we should look to find the reason for the transition from the negative to the positive portion of the sequence. The courtship reaches its fruition not because the lady finally accepts, but because the lover finally becomes acceptable.

Turning then to the lover-poet, we find that the point of view of Petrarchanism also determines his nature to a considerable extent. Even more than the lady's, his conventional identity exists almost entirely as function. In *Amoretti*, for example, he has no physical presence at all, except as a second figure in a few poems which are implicitly dramatic and in a few where he

appears in similes that contrast with those describing the lady (warrior *v.* victim, beast *v.* prey, etc.).

Further, the conventional persona of the lover who is also the poet constitutes a dual and complementary functional identity. He is both sufferer and pleader; what he feels as a lover is what he expresses as a poet. And, apparently, the act of expression itself is a means to emotional relief (whether that relief comes, as Spenser suggests, through the expurgation of 'unquiet thoughts', or, as Sidney more practically suggests, when 'pity grace obtains'). His overt purpose is amatory persuasion: he appears to be trying to win, by means of a combination of flattery, pleading, and persuasion, some sort of romantic response from the lady. In fact, however, the role played by this conventional lover-poet, as well as that played by the lady to whom he addresses himself, provides the fictive context by means of which Spenser and his fellow sonneteers communicated about love and its associated feelings. The 'I' of each sequence, the individual poet's adaptation of the conventional persona, serves as the projector of the emotions which are the subject matter, so to speak, of the sonnets.

Thus the figures used by the lover-poet are the windows into his psyche: he would seem to invite us to consider the lady; in fact, however, we come to understand him because of the kinds of statements he makes about her. When the lover in *Amoretti* asks 'Fayre cruell, why are ye so fierce and cruell?' (XLIX), or when he says 'she is no woman, but a sencelesse stone' (LIIII), he is revealing his own emotional state, not her personality and character. Similarly, the hyperbolic 'her foot she in my necke doth place' (XX) takes the measure of his own excesses, not hers. Consequently, the maturational process by which the lover becomes worthy of his mistress can be traced in the tonal patterns of the sequence and in the changes that occur in the kinds of things he says about her. Simply put, Spenser's lover, as the result of exposure to the ameliorating effects of a 'particular beauty', grows from an impatient, slightly sensual and over-confident mouther of Neo-platonic platitudes into a serene and mature man whose mind and soul respond in ways consistent with Christian-Platonic values.

The lover's growth can best be traced in his painful personal resolution of the paradox of the 'cruel fair'. In the negative

sonnets he cannot understand the serenity of the lady's soul, the self-confidence and control she displays in keeping him at a distance. His first two sonnets in the courtship itself (they follow the four introductory poems) answer criticism — apparently his own — of 'her too portly pride', 'her rebellious pride'. But the very terms of his defense reveal his own lack of understanding: her 'self-pleasing pride', he argues, is a valid accompaniment to her great worth, an expression of her own recognition of her personal excellence.

Needless to say, such an interpretation of her character gives him little comfort in the subsequent year-long trial by frustration, and as the sequence progresses his tone takes on a note of frenzy and his vision becomes increasingly faulty.[1] In LIIII he equates himself with a player vainly acting out both comic and tragic parts before his lady, the mis-responding 'Spectator':

> when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry
> she laughes, and hardens euermore her hart.

In LIII he charges that the lady, just as 'the Panther' does to smaller animals, uses her beauty to lure him to his destruction; and in LVII, like a cruel warrior she shoots him 'sharpely still' despite a thousand wounds her eyes have already inflicted upon his heart. Over and over he demands to know when the lady will relent and his suffering will end. Unable to understand what he sees as the discrepancy between her beauty and her supposed cruelty, he indulges in repeated outbursts of puzzled frustration. He thinks she rejects him wilfully for convention's sake. Being unenlightened, he cannot understand that she rejects him because he is unenlightened; that she rejects him, in other words, because he loves her for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way.

As the courtship moves towards its climax the tone of some of the poems is so bitter, and the imagery picturing the lady is so violent, that one recent critic felt called upon to excise eighteen sonnets from the sequence. He dismissed them as belonging to a hypothetical earlier and more allegorical sequence differing from

[1] In fact, there is a minor motif played all through the sonnets about the 'frayle eyes' of men generally, and about the lover's own 'wandering in darknesse and dismay' until he is eventually 'elumind' by his mistress. See, for examples, V, XXXIIII, XXXVII, and LXVI.

Amoretti in 'subject-matter, characterization, and general conception'.[1] But the irrational excesses of those sonnets are symptomatic of the distorted viewpoint of the unenlightened lover-poet, and his emotionalism and frustration build to a kind of crescendo in the last few negative sonnets. Here, for example, is Sonnet LVI:

> Fayre ye be sure, but cruell and vnkind,
> As is a Tygre that with greedinesse
> hunts after bloud, when he by chance doth find
> a feeble beast, doth felly him oppresse.
> Fayre be ye sure, but proud and pittilesse,
> as is a storme, that all things doth prostrate:
> finding a tree alone all comfortlesse,
> beats on it strongly it to ruinate.
> Fayre be ye sure, but hard and obstinate,
> as is a rocke amidst the raging floods:
> gaynst which a ship of succour desolate,
> doth suffer wreck both of her selfe and goods.
> That ship, that tree, and that same beast am I,
> whom ye doe wreck, doe ruine, and destroy.

Now the stage is set for Spenser to alter the point-of-view and thereby communicate the fact that the lover has taken the first step up the Platonic ladder. That first step consists of course in the rational suppression of physical desire; the lover's reason must displace his emotions as his guiding force. That displacement is precisely what Spenser shows us is happening as the lover's vision is corrected by understanding. For abruptly, at the height of the emotional crescendo, the lover shifts to the most basic of rational methods: the pro and con discourse. The structural importance of the two sonnets involved, LVIII and LIX, is underscored by the fact that the first has the only individual title in the sequence: *By* [i.e., *to*] *her that is most assured to her selfe*. The first of these two sonnets presents the negative argument and concludes with this question:

> Why then doe ye proud fayre, misdeeme so farre,
> that to your self ye most assured are?

The subsequent, and affirmative, sonnet offers these answers: such a self-assured woman is settled and faithful in her love, is steady and dependable even in troubled times, and, finally, she

[1] J. W. Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, 1956, pp. 99–103.

neither fears 'the spight of grudging foes' nor currys the 'fauour' of friends. Therefore, the sonnet concludes,

> Most happy she that most assured doth rest
> but he most happy who such one loues best.

The lover-poet has finally come to understand and to appreciate the lady's supposed pride. It is not pride at all, or at least not the cold pride of the Petrarchan mistress; it is the laudable self-assurance of the superior woman whose physical beauty outwardly manifests a beautiful soul.

His point of view thus corrected, the lover has taken that first important step up the ladder from Petrarchan sensuality to Platonic spirituality. He has thus become worthy of the lady's love, and the negative portion of *Amoretti* gives way to the positive. The explicit Platonism and happy, rational tone of Sonnet LXI mark the completed turn:

> The glorious image of the makers beautie,
> My souerayne saynt, the Idoll of my thought,
> dare not henceforth aboue the bounds of dewtie,
> t'accuse of pride, or rashly blame for ought.
> For being as she is diuinely wrought,
> and of the brood of Angels heuenly borne:
> and with the crew of blessed Saynts vpbrought,
> each of which did her with theyr guifts adorne;
> The bud of ioy, the blossome of the morne,
> the beame of light, whom mortal eyes admyre:
> what reason is it then but she should scorne
> base things that to her loue too bold aspire?
> Such heauenly formes ought rather worshipt be,
> then dare be lou'd by men of meane degree.

Just as we can detect, in the misplaced emphasis and hyperbolic figures of the earlier sonnets, the symptoms of the unenlightened lover's emotional excesses, we can discover in the sweet reasonableness of the later sonnets the signs of his beauty-inspired maturation. The couplet of LXXII is very representative of the tone of these poems:

> Hart need not wish none other happinesse,
> but here on earth to haue such heuens blisse.

Evidence of his new state can be found in his recurrent references to his former turmoils: 'the weary yeare his race now hauing run'

(LXII), 'After long stormes and tempests sad assay' (LXIII), or 'How was I rauisht with your louely sight / and my frayle thoughts too rashly led astray?' (LXXVI). Intensity gives way to banter and playfulness, frustration and self-concern to contemplation and a lover's sensitivity for the feelings of the beloved. Christian-Platonic idealism blends easily with a comfortable sensuousness, a quiet anticipation of an almost Donnean merging of bodies and souls. (As Kellog and Steele point out (p. 454), the sequel of *Amoretti* is *Epithalamion* in which 'the penultimate image is the fruitful marriage bed'.) An interlude between the earlier sonnets of rejection and the concluding sonnets of separation, these poems reflect the psyche of a man at peace with himself and enjoying the pleasures of the new relationship he and his beloved are sorting out for themselves.[1] They represent, in other words, the final stage of the courtship, that last period of pre-nuptial adjustment.

Now, to return to one of the basic assumptions of this paper — that the impression of progressive change, of character development and of the movement toward interpersonal harmony in *Amoretti*, is the result of certain technical adaptations Spenser made in the essentially static sonnet sequence — and offer some general observations. First, those who see *Amoretti* as a kind of Neo-Platonic ladder by means of which Spenser's lover-poet rises above the sensual and the Petrarchan to some sort of spiritual communion with the Idea of Beauty seriously oversimplify the complex structure of the sequence.[2] The lover-poet neither abandons Petrarchan norms nor discovers Platonic values as the sequence progresses. Platonic metaphors appear in some of the very first sonnets, and Petrarchan figures persist to the very last sonnets. What happens in the interim is that both of these modes of externalizing and structuring personal experience become

[1] The concluding sonnets of separation bring the sequence to a quite unsatisfactory end and may indeed represent a biographical intrusion into the work. However, their tone is not necessarily as bitter as it may at first seem. Only if the 'Venemous toung tipt with vile adders sting' of LXXXVI is interpreted as the *cause* of the separation announced in the following sonnet ('Since I did leaue the presence of my loue') need we read these poems as representing anything more than a brief premarital absence of one or the other of the lovers.

[2] See, for example, Edward Casady, 'The Neo-Platonic Ladder in Spenser's *Amoretti*', *PQ*, XX, 1941, 284–95.

relevant to the lover's own emotional state and to his own experience. The early occurrences of Platonism, contradicted as they are by their context of frustration and emotional torment, reveal the lover as one who knows the words but does not grasp their significance. Conversely, the Petrarchan figures, which in the earlier poems are so expressive of the lover's failure to come to grips with his own emotional predicament, become in his enlightenment a means by which he can speak of his new relationship with his intended. In LXIX, for example, he adapts thelove-equals-war simile to the expression of his newly assumed attitude of dominance in the relationship by comparing himself to 'the famous warriors of the anticke world' and asking,

> What trophee then shall I most fit deuize,
> in which I may record the memory
> of my loues conquest . . .

And in LXXI he is the successful predator, the 'Spyder' who has captured 'the gentle Bee'.

Additionally, Spenser's structural manipulation of the poet-lover's point of view succeeds in part because a certain transference takes place. That is, a transference of norms occurs within Spenser's synthesis of Petrarchanism and Platonism. We have already looked at one illustration in some detail: the proud and disdainful woman expected of Petrarchan conventionality who turns out to be the self-assured woman of Platonic idealism. Several other examples can be cited. The lady's apparently conventional and pointless rejection of the lover, for instance, is in fact part of a positive (if passive) effort to lead him upward to enlightenment. Similarly, the lover's suffering, although expressed in the terminology of Petrarchanism, is not caused by love-longing alone; it also proves to be attributable to the growing pains which accompany spiritual maturation. Another notable illustration of this transference can be found in the use made of the lady's eyes throughout the sequence. The light from her beautiful eyes, which traditionally would have served but to incite the lover to passion, in *Amoretti* becomes the divine light of ideal beauty and rationality radiating from her soul — another fact misunderstood by the unenlightened lover. In other words, Spenser was able to achieve structurally meaningful alterations in

the lover's point of view because he managed to adapt the stock Petrarchan norms to the expression of Platonic values.

Similarly, Spenser makes Platonism serve Petrarchanism. When the poet speaks of his 'fraile spirit by her from basenesse raysed' (III), or when he says 'you calme the storme that passion did begin' (VIII), and then continues to speak and act in base and passionate ways, we recognize that he is pirating Platonic terminology in search of persuasive figures.

Finally, the progression in *Amoretti* is reinforced by other interior patterns which, even though they are scattered, fragmented, and largely irrelevant to both the narrative and the tone of their context, contribute to the structural coherence of the sequence simply by existing, as patterns, within the fabric of the whole. Sometimes these patterns involve imagery, as when the lady's eyes serve as a recurrent focal point from Sonnet VII through Sonnet XVI. In other cases a rhetorical pattern may be repeated, as in Sonnets XXV through XXXII where the figure of paradox shapes several of the poems. A situation likewise may recur, as in scattered instances of the lady's reacting to the lover as, specifically, a presenter of love poems (presumably the sonnets themselves, the 'Happy leaves' of Sonnet I). The cumulative presence of these various kinds of motifs contributes to the overall unity of the whole sequence.

Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, then, is almost certainly autobiographical, if only in its original motivation; but to call it a wedding gift, or the 'story of' Spenser's courtship, or the prelude to *Epithalamion*, does not adequately explain it. Likewise, its conspicuous dependence upon the poetic conventions of the French and Italian Petrarchanists, in combination with its typically Spenserian infusion of Neo-Platonic terminology and values, accounts for almost everything in the sonnet sequence except its final meaning. For *Amoretti*, like many Renaissance works, is defined neither by its constituent materials nor by its circumstances of composition. Rather, it is defined by the total impression left by its structure. Thus, it is a sonnet sequence which has been adapted to the narrating of a growth process. In it a man, exposed to the mellowing effects of love and beauty, matures into personal (and, probably for Spenser, philosophical) worthiness.