

## Love in Spenser's *Amoretti*

Jiancheng Wang<sup>1</sup>, Zhengshuan Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Foreign Language Department, Baoding University, Baoding, China

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Hebei Normal University, Shijiazhuang, China

Email: [jjianchengwang@163.com](mailto:jjianchengwang@163.com)

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Being a sonnet cycle of love with a detailed description of the lady's physical beauty and the lover's happy feelings, *Amoretti* is a story of love between earthlings which is aimed at marriage. Meanwhile, Spenser sanctifies the love by Platonizing and Christianizing the lady. Thus it is clear that the love in the mind of Spenser is not just an earthly one or a heavenly one separately, but both, and, a combination of both earthly love and sacred love.

**Keywords:** Love; Earthly Love; Sacred Love; *Amoretti*; Edmund Spenser

### Introduction

Sonnet sequences were a great vogue during the English Renaissance. *Amoretti*, a sonnet sequence published in 1595 together with *Epithalamion*, "part private and autobiographical, part mythological" (Hollander & Kermode, 1973: p. 320), is usually understood as a record of the poet's courtship to his second wife Elizabethan Boyle whom he married in June 1594, and it is the first sonnet sequence "to have been written by a poet to his bride" (Lerner, 1990: p. 455).

Spenser names his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*, which means "little loves" (Maclean & Prescott, 1993: p. 587), or "little loves poem" (Magill, 1992: p. 3158) or "little cupids" (Hollander & Kermode, 1973: p. 320), or in detail, "intimate little tokens of love made out of ancient materials deriving, primarily, from Italy" (Martz, 1991: p. 107). No matter what words are used to interpret the title, one thing seems clear: what Spenser probes into in *Amoretti* is love.

But Spenser's love is quite different from his contemporary sonneteers. He stands alone as a poet of marriage. Through seeking a real love of the flesh and the spirit, Spenser interprets the nature of true love.

### An Earthly Love

*Amoretti* is not about passion but about love between earthlings. To celebrate his love, Spenser employs the traditional image of love, Cupid:

I mote perceiue how in her glauncing sight,  
legions of loues with little wings did fly:  
darting their deadly arrowes fyry bright,  
at euery rash beholder passing by; (XVI, 5-8)

In this sonnet "legions of loues with little wings" brings forth an image of Cupid, the representation of god of love: the lady's eyebeams contain "amoretti"—Cupid, who shoots the deadly

arrows at rash beholders.

The winged god of love, Cupid, appears many times in *Amoretti*: "him" in Sonnet IV, the "blinded guest" in Sonnet VIII, "vnrighteous Lord of love" in Sonnet X, "king" in Sonnet XIX and "the winged God" and "Cupid" in Sonnet LX.

The image of Cupid is a symbol of corporeal love (Hu, 2001: p. 132). It is obvious that the love Spenser pursues is quite different from the mediaeval one which is too spiritualized, and also different from Petrarchan one which "is rather a theatre of the lover's desire alone" (Waller, 1994: p. 76). On the one hand, Spenser's love is an earthly love of real human beings with erotic desire waiting to be fulfilled in the way of marriage, and on the other hand, it is a mutual love without which no true love exists at all.

Spenser puts the lady on the earth, the secular and sublunary world. One can see an ordinary woman who wears a net of gold (Sonnet XXXVII), dresses and makes up before her mirror (Sonnet XLV) and does "drawen work" (Sonnet LXXI). She lives in her bower, and she has a fear of losing liberty when falling in love with a man (Sonnet LXV).

To praise the earthy lady Spenser uses more ink on her physical beauty. She is the sovereign beauty (Sonnet III) whom he admires with "rare perfection of each good part" (Sonnet XXIII); she is a fair flower in whom fresh youth contains (Sonnet IIII); she has attractive eyes (Sonnet VII) which are hart-thrilling (Sonnet XII).

And the most powerful and attractive part of her body is her eyes: her eyes are so charming and powerful that even her glances will become arrows or lighting. When being looked at mildly "with louely hew", the lover's soul is "with life and loue inspired" (Sonnet VII). So the speaker tries his best to describe her eyes but finally he realizes that he can't find anything on the earth which glitters to compare to the brightness of her eyes:

Not to the Sun: for they doo shine by night;  
nor to the Moone: for they are changed neuer;

nor to the Starres: for they haue purer sight;  
 nor to the fire: for they consume not euer;  
 Nor to the lightning: for they still perseuer;  
 nor to the Diamond: for they are more tender;  
 nor vnto Christall: for nought may them seuer;  
 nor vnto glasse: such basenesse mought offend her; (IX,  
 5-12)

The smile on the lady's graceful face is also attractive and sweet. "Indeed, throughout the sequence she is certainly one of the most smiling and 'chearefull' ladies to appear in any English sequences" (Martz, 1991: p. 106). The sweet smile is "the daughter of the 'Queene of loue', expressing 'all thy mothers powrefull art' to make the lover's soul 'rauished in a trance'" (Sonnet XXXIX). For this smile with "amiable cheare", Spenser compares it to the sunlight in the summer which is pleasant and lovely (Sonnet XL).

But for the lover, love is not always so sweet and so pleasant. In opposition to the lover's enjoyment of the physical beauty is his suffering from the lady. For Spenser, love is a war and battle, for which the lover must be brave, bright and patient to fight again and again with his "sweet" and "cruell" warrior (Sonnets XI, XII, XIII, and LVII).

All these sufferings seem to be a kind of test. In Sonnet LXIII, after unendurable trial and testing, the lover does see the happy shore in front of him. And Sonnet LXVIII celebrates their joyful kiss, in which he tastes the odour of his lady that smells more fragrant than any flower. And in Sonnet LXVII, unlike other sonneteers such as *Rime* 190 of Petrarch and "whoso list" of Wyatt, the lover finally catches his "deer" after a long pursuit and attempt:

There she beholding me with mylder looke,  
 sought not to fly, but fearelesse still did bide:  
 till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,  
 and with her owne goodwill hir fymely tyde; (LXVII,  
 6-12)

The tying of a half-trembling deer suggests the betrothal to the lady who is still nervous about her new life (Maclean & Prescott, 1993: p. 614). And the lady's "paradoxical submission must be attributed not to the successful suit of the amorous male, but to her own change of heart and willing participation in a delicate act of self-conquest" (King, 1990: p. 168). Although sonnet LXVII seems an announcement of the lover's fulfilment of desire, actually the love is a mutual one indeed for both the young man and the lady.

Such is the love story that *Amoretti* tells in the secular world. In the story Spenser interprets his idea of love between real human beings. It expresses the un-expectable fate and the long painful process of the lover's wooing, and also the pleasant feelings of true love between a couple of earthlings who can marry each other finally.

### A Sacred Love

Spenser's love does not only belong to the secular world between earthlings, but it identifies itself with sacred nature with characters of Platonism and Christian ideas as well.

Spenser's attitude toward love in *Amoretti* agrees with that of Platonism. According to Plato, man in motion drives, desires and struggles to achieve the culminating objects of his desire, and man's desiring always implies a desire to what is good. For

this supreme object of man's desiring, Plato calls it *the good* or *absolute beauty*. All man's driving is motivated by a search for beauty and goodness (Singer, 1984: pp. 53-54).

Rivers (1979: p. 35) explains that the central theory of Plato and his followers is that of the two worlds—the Ideas or Forms theory. The first is the world of Ideas or Forms, which is the world of Being, stable, eternal, immutable and perfect. The second world is that of a copy of the first one, which is the world of Becoming and change. The human being belongs to the second world, and his soul which comes from the first has a longing for a return or ascent to the first.

In *Symposium*, love is a staircase between the two worlds, and man can get the absolute beauty or the ideal love in the other world by passing five steps: from love of physical beauty to love of God (Plato, 1993: pp. 47-48).

The bearing of Platonism can be seen easily in *Amoretti*. Sonnet VIII is, first of all, a praise of "absolute beauty" and virtuous love in Platonic idea. Spenser says that the lady is more beautiful than any pretty girl and her "living fire" shines and burns up and up to "the maker"—the God, so that the blinded Cupid cannot shoot the darts while the "Angels" lead the frail minds to rest on her "heavenly beauty bound" with chaste desires.

Lewis (1998: p. 144) sums up that the essential attitude of Platonism is aspiration or longing: the human soul, imprisoned in the shadowy, unreal world of Nature, stretches out its hands and struggles towards the beauty and reality of that which lies (as Plato says) "on the other sides of existence". Thus the lady in sonnet VIII, with an image of ascending up to the real world, is the avatar of Platonic world of Idea, a world of the original, real and clear:

More then most faire, full of the liuing fire,  
 Kindled about vnto the maker neere; (VIII, 1-2)

The holy conceptions of Platonic love is implied rather than stated also in many other sonnets, such as Sonnets III, VII, IX, XLV, LXI, LXXII, LXXIX and sonnet LXXXVIII. In Sonnet III, the lady is "the soverayne beauty", with her heavenly fire kindled in the frail spirit of the lover raising him from baseness to pureness. The lover is at loss for her "celestial hew" and he can only speak and write the ideal love in his heart that his wit cannot dictate. In Sonnet XLV, Spenser regards the lady as the image of "Idea". Because the world of "forms" is only visible to intellect, no earthly eyes can enjoy the immortal beauty:

Within my hart, though hardly it can shew  
 thing so diuine to vew of earthly eye,  
 the fayre Idea of your celestially hew,  
 and euery part remaines immortally; (XLV, 5-8)

In Sonnet LXI, the lady is a saint of the first world and "the Idoll" of the lover's thought. She is divinely worked, born of the brood of heavenly Angels and is brought up "with the crew of blessed Saynts". Sonnet LXXIX presents the real nature of the Platonic ideal beauty:

That is true beautie: that doth argue you  
 to be diuine and borne of heauenly seed:  
 deriu'd from that fayre Spirit, from whom all true  
 and perfect beauty did at first proceed; (LXXIX, 9-12)

Spenser also endows the love between the couple with Christian idea. *Amoretti* compares the lover's wooing for love to the

worship for God with the desire for salvation from the fallen world to the heavenly. A case in point is Sonnet XXII. On the first day of the holy Lent, a holiday for fasting and penitence with devotion, the lover is willing to do some service for the lady, his “sweet Saynt”. The lover wants to build a fair temple for the lady in his mind, in which he puts her bright and noble image. He, like a sacred priest who is devotional and pious enough for God, will sit before the godly image, praying, contemplating and expecting day and night without any distracting thoughts:

There I to her as th’ author of my blisse,  
will builde an altar to appease her yre:  
and on the same my hart will sacrifice,  
burning in flames of pure and chast desyre:  
The which vouchsafe O goddesse to accept,  
amongst thy deereest relicks to be kept; (XXII, 9-14)

It is clear that the lady in this sonnet is the lover’s goddess, the source of his bliss. Therefore the lover, being a sinful man originated from the first Adam, is ready to sacrifice his heart as a dearest relic to her on the altar to calm her ire, and at the same time, the lover himself can get election from the fleshly to the holy world. Such comparison of the lover’s wooing to the worship for God’s grace emphasizes Spenser’s praise for spiritualized love which is saintly because of God’s love of mankind.

### A Combined Love

Spenser is an exceptional genius with a diversified idea about love. But actually earthly love and sacred love accord with and interact with each other. *Amoretti* distinguishes Spenser from the Renaissance sonneteers of his age by combining earthly love and sacred love together with marriage as the holy aim, as Nelson (1965) puts it:

Spenser neither declares the earthly incompatible with the heavenly, as Sidney does, nor does he envision an unbroken ascent which spurs earth in its aspiration for heaven. He would have both loves, the one infinitely good, the other good too because, though finite, it imitates the infinite (p. 114).

To explore such mixed qualities of the love in *Amoretti*, Spenser demonstrates his artful skill at using the token of carnal love—the image of Cupid. Traditionally there are two Cupids in mythological history. Hyde (1990: p. 201) states that the false Cupid is blindfolded, plays cruel spots with his bow and arrow, and kindles lustful fires in the hearts of random victims, while the true Cupid, who is an unarmed one, benevolent and gentle, goes in places apart from the world of man. It is not unusual for the winged god bearing darts to appear so many a time in *Amoretti*. What makes Spenser specific is his use of this old-traditional token of love: he gets Cupid under the control of reason so that the blinded god cannot shoot his arrows freely to arouse lustful desire to make the random victims die of burning with filthy “love”.

In *Amoretti*, there is a happy king of lovers with “girland crowned” (Sonnet XIX), a winged God whom the lover asks to shorten his journey so that the lover and the beloved can be conjoined (Sonnet LX). In contrast, there is also a cruel and torturing Cupid darting arrows. The unique art to handle the image of the gods of love, especially the cruel one, makes the earthly love and the sacred love united.

*Amoretti* gives a figurative description of Cupid darting through the lady’s eyes which are pretty and powerful enough like the fatal arrows, and even a glance from these eyes can make a frail heart burn flame of desire. The lover says to his lady:

Through your bright beams doth not the blinded guest,  
shoot out his darts to base affections wound:  
but Angels come to lead fraile mindes to rest  
in chast desires on heauenly beauty bound; (VIII, 5-8)

Since the inspiring beams of the beloved derives from the heavenly light, Spenser does not let Cupid’s darts to harm the base affections of the lover, but on the contrary, Angels come to guide the lover to rise up and up until to the chaste desire (not erotic burning fire) in the saintly world. This is a suitable experiment of Spenser trying to combine sublunary love with saintly love.

And in Sonnet XVI, Spenser exemplifies his skilful ability to master Cupid. One day the lover’s heart is in amazement for the “immortal light” of those lovely eyes, in whose glancing “legions of loues” shoot their “frye bright” darts at those who is so rash to gaze at the beauty. Then

One of those archers closely I did spy,  
ayming his arrow at my very hart:  
when suddenly with twinkle of her eye,  
the Damzell broke his misintended dart; (XVI, 9-12)

This time the lover avoids Cupid’s destructive arrows not by angels’ help but by the twinkle of the lady’s eyes. This “twinkle” of the beauty who is “diuine and borne of heauenly seed” (Sonnet LXXIX) stops the “misintended dart” but it does not stop love: it makes the earthly love more sweet and holy in a deliberately playful and smiling way. The “twinkle”, therefore, embodies the lady’s reason to control fleshly desire, and at the same time, it serves the function of directing the earthly love to a unification with heavenly love.

Earthly love and sacred love is tied to each other inextricably in *Amoretti*: they are interactional and interdependent. The lady, who symbolizes the divine beauty, “deriu’d from that fayre Spirit” and made of “the skye”, another “Element” besides the four elements earth, water, fire and air (Sonnet LV), works as the lifting agent to the lover because the lover recognizes that the love is “my soules long lacked foode, my heauens blis” (Sonnet I), and in return, the lover, a wooer among “men of meane degree” (Sonnet LXI), will also help the lady to be more virtuous and more holy.

So when the lady looks at him mildly with lovely appearance, the lover’s “soule” is inspired with life and love (Sonnet VII), and this love is his “liues last ornament” by whom his “spirit out of dust was rayseed” (Sonnet LXXVIII) “to an higher pitch” when thinking of “whose heauenly hew” (Sonnet LXXX).

It is also true that the lover, although being lowly, produces a stimulating effect on his beloved. Even the lady herself takes on contradictory aspects: she is an absolute beauty of divine virtue with saintly nature and she is also an earthly woman in the temporal world with her feet being on the earth. So for the lady there exists a problem of salvation, for which the lover plays an active role in the matter of the lady’s leaving earth for heaven. The lady

...thinke how she to heauen may clime:  
treading downe earth as lothsome and forlorne,  
that hinders heauenly thoughts with droffy slime; (XIII,

10-12)

In such a case, the lover's courtship becomes essential. Therefore the lover asks the lady's grace "to vouchsafe to look on me" because "such lowliness shall make you lofty be" (Sonnet XIII). He promises to praise her "up to a high degree" (Sonnet LXXXII) "since your light hath once enlumined me, with my reflex yours shall encreased be" (Sonnet LXVI).

This interdependent nature of the union of earthly and sacred love agrees with Plato's idea of love. Quitslund (1990: p. 547) points out, quoted from *Phaedrus* 255D, that when love is exchanged mutually the lover and the beloved are mirrors to each other. And Rivers (1979: p. 38) gives a further explanation that in Ficino's system each order in the universal hierarchy—body, soul, angelic mind and god—aspire to that above, and man always struggle to reach god. But because of the intermediate position of human's soul, man can both look upwards or downwards which shows that he has free choice whether to reach the truth or not. Spenser applies his mirror metaphor in Sonnet XLV. In this sonnet the lover persuades the lady not to look at herself in the crystal mirror because her goodly image and beautiful face appears clearer in his mind than in the mirror:

Leaue lady in your glasse of christall clene,  
Your goodly selfe for euermore to vew:  
and in my selfe, my inward selfe I meane,  
most liuely lyke behold your semblant trew; (XLV, 1-4)

That the saintly image of the lady is contained in the heart of the lover clearly illustrates that the saintly nature of the beloved helps the lover to be holy and at the same time the lover works as a stimulus to make the beloved more lofty.

Such is the love Spenser strives for in *Amoretti*, love both being earthly and sacred, for the character of which Nelson (1965) sums up:

Spenser's system of love, as even so cursory a study shows, reaches upward from this world but keeps foothold within it... He saw a likeness between the love that draws the sexes together, producing noble deeds and perpetuating the race, and the love that draws man to God and fills the world with beauty (p. 115).

And therefore the thematic meaning of Spenser's *Amoretti* is justified itself. Firstly, quite different from lust or simple erotic desire which Spenser calls "base things", what Spenser needs is

pure and true love which is full of true emotions with pleasant feelings between real human beings on the sublunary world. Secondly, Spenser's love in *Amoretti* is a complexity being both earthly and sacred, aiming at marriage, which possesses a holy nature of longing for the soul and virtue to ascend to the heavenly world of God.

## Notes

All the lines of sonnets are quoted from *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser* edited with critical notes by J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

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