
UNIT 11 SPENSER'S POETRY – II

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 *The Epithalamion*
- 11.3 *The Prothalamion*
- 11.4 Let's Sum Up
- 11.5 Questions for Review
- 11.6 Additional Reading

11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will continue the close textual analyses of Spenser's poetry begun in the previous unit. It will aim to:

- Offer a preliminary discussion of the genre of the epithalamion and of Spenser's predecessors in this genre.
- Provide an overview of two of his longer works, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*.
- Identify the ways in which these two poems reflect diverse aspects of Spenser's life, while sharing certain formal qualities.
- Identify the crucial differences between the two poems.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we examined Spenser's shorter work as indexing a new style of poetry, particularly with respect to the tradition of courtly love. In this unit, we will continue that exploration of his poetry, but focusing instead on two of his longer works, namely Spenser's two major nuptial songs, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*. Both the wedding poems deal with the celebration of marriage, but with significant and far-reaching differences in treatment, style and intent. As with the shorter poems in the previous unit therefore, the analyses will therefore focus substantially on the formal elements of the poems.

The 'epithalamion' is a form of poetry dating back to classical Greek literature, and was probably first used as a literary form by the Greek poetess Sappho. The term literally means 'at the bridal chamber', and earlier referred to the song sung in celebration of the bride's wedding night, literally at her bridal chamber. 'Prothalamion' is a term invented by Spenser, in order to differentiate his poem by that name from his own and earlier written bridal song, but the meaning remains essentially unchanged, with the prefix 'pro-' (or prior to) standing in for 'epi-' (or outside of). Conventionally, an epithalamion described the wedding day itself and the events leading up to it, and also celebrated the sexual union of the married couple. In this sense, it was usually also an erotic poem or song. While Spenser's own epithalamion carries elements of this eroticism, the Prothalamion is a qualitatively different poem, almost completely devoid of eroticism, and in fact, actually, little more than a thinly disguised complaint poem. Let us now proceed to examine these two poems.

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11.2 THE EPITHALAMION

The *Epithalamion* is a carefully crafted yet exuberant song celebrating the poet's love for and marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. It appears to have been written as the culmination to the courtship described and embodied in the *Amoretti* sonnets. Like the *Amoretti* sonnets, it too celebrates a legitimate form of sexual desire, that between bride and groom, husband and wife. According to the envoy at the end of the poem, i.e. the brief stanza 24, it is intended to be an ornament 'in lieu of many ornaments', and an 'endlesse monument' to the beloved herself. It therefore carries multiple functions – as celebration of the wedding, as celebration of the beloved, as celebration of legitimate passion, as ornament to the beloved and as monument to her. In this it matches the multiple roles that Spenser gives himself in the poem – as poet, lover, bridegroom, master of ceremonies of the wedding and as eventual husband. Spenser envisages the poem's functions not separately but as extensions of each other, and to this extent they reinforce each other. In comparison to the *Prothalamion*, Spenser's other wedding song, the integration of the multiple functions of the poem is therefore more successful in the *Epithalamion*. Even the curtailed last stanza of the poem does not detract from this sense of an integral whole; indeed, it may be seen as specific to maintaining the sense of wholeness of the poem.

The poem is in 24 stanzas, representing the hours of the day, with a total of 365 long lines of five feet or more (in prosodic terms), representing the days of the year. In this sense, the apparent curtailment of the poem with the envoy is no coincidence or 'hasty accident' as the poet would have us believe, but a deliberate effect. It serves to simultaneously accentuate the senses of immediacy and of a longer duration, as if the one gives rise to the other. At the same time, the poem draws together the universal and the temporal, the idea of a love that is divine and transcendental with a more earthly, sensual love. Following the consistent Spenserian strategy of reconciling the Platonic and the Christian perspectives, the poem seeks to celebrate the eternal in the temporal, the divine in the mortal. In other words, Spenser's conception of love is firmly located in time, even as it is proffered as lasting and undetermined by time. The element of time or temporality is therefore central to the crafting of the poem, not just in its formal aspects but at the level of the theme of love and its treatment as well.

An essential aspect of this temporal element is the refrain of the stanzas, which are variations on the last line of the first stanza: 'The woods shall to me answer and my Echo ring.' Through the refrain and its variations, the poet manages to suggest continuity as well as change, a suggestion that is borne out in the very images that are repeated, of the woods and the echo. For, woods undergo a long-term set of changes that belie the sense of permanence that is associated with them, just as an echo bears the promise to prolong a sound, but must inevitably die too. Further, the refrain itself changes qualitatively from stanza 17 onward, when it becomes negative: 'The woods no more shal answere, nor your echo ring.' The allocation of sixteen stanzas with a positive refrain and eight with a negative one is again not coincidental, but matches the number of hours of daylight and dark, respectively. The sense of balance that is achieved is reinforced by the offsetting of the celebratory tone in the poem with passages of deep anxiety and worry in stanzas 18 and 19.

The poem begins with the traditional invocation to the muses. The muses are then invited to participate in the wedding as bridesmaids, along with the 'fayre houres' and the three Graces or the 'handmayds of the Cyprian Queene' (stanza 6). The pastoral setting of the poem is made clear in stanza 5, partly in adherence to poetic convention and partly to permit the orgiastic celebrations that take place after the wedding (stanzas 14 and 15). Further, this setting permits the dramatic dimension of the poem to be enacted more vividly, than if the poem had been a simply descriptive one. The poem itself has approximately five movements, in terms of dramatic action. The first is from stanza 1 to stanza 8, which set out the poem's purpose, its means of

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accomplishing it and the pastoral setting of the event; the second is from stanza 9 to stanza 13, which eulogise his beloved's beauty as she wakes up, is adorned and then enters the 'temple' or church for the wedding and the wedding itself; the third is from stanza 14 to stanza 17, which are about the celebrations after the wedding and the poet-bridegroom's impatience to be alone with his bride; the fifth is from stanza 18 to stanza 24, which express the poet-bridegroom's fears and anxieties and then seek the blessings of all the gods for their union. These five movements culminate in the envoy of the last stanza, and are explicated by it.

Despite the evident eulogising of the beloved in and through these movements however, what must be noted about the poem is that, like the *Amoretti* sonnets before it, the poet's conception of his beloved remains peculiarly external and voyeuristic. While she is celebrated in all her beauty, both physical and spiritual, she remains absent as a person with a degree of autonomy and agency. Stanzas 10 and 11 in particular objectify her so completely that we may picture her, but we find it difficult to apprehend her as a person. This sense of objectification is intensified by the fragmenting of the body of the bride into its 'attractive' or seductive parts:

Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
Her forehead yuory white,
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncruded,
Her paps lyke lyllics budded,
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
And all her body like a pallace fayre,
Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre,
To honors seat and chastities sweet howre.

The analogy of the palace is extended in the next stanza to eulogize his beloved's virtues:

There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,
Vnspotted fayth and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And giueth lawes alone.
The which the base affections doe obey,
And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will
Ne thought of thing vncomely euer may
Thereto approach to tempt her mind to ill.

These are praised as being superior to the physical beauty described in the previous stanza, and the analogy is a typically feudal one, employing metaphors of the virtues as a queen unto whose service the 'base affections' or sensual desires are turned. Again, as we saw with the *Amoretti* sonnets, the poet's attempt is to reconcile two opposed conceptions of love, the spiritual and the physical, the latter being offered as a path to the former, rather than as something to be either overwhelmed by or to be rejected. But in order to serve the demands of this Reformist-Protestant morality by which a legitimate desire may be inscribed into the poem, the poet has to render his own beloved almost sex-less, or lacking in desire herself. Given that the poem is a celebration of the wedding and of the nuptial union, such an erasure of feminine desire suggests that the poet does not see his beloved as a subjective individual with her own feelings and emotions that would be different from his own, or even from his perception of them, but as an object, desirable and to be acquired. It is then again, no coincidence that the *social* setting invoked in the poem is not the princes and the nobility but commerce and trade, as implied by the invocation of the 'merchants daughters' in the first line of stanza 10. This is sense is furthered when we recall

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phrases like 'usury of long delight' (stanza 2) being used in regard to the relationship, implying a contractual arrangement that is not confined to an emotional and spiritual attachment or commitment, but is underwritten by money.

Epithalamion is nevertheless a poem that is unique in the poetry of the sixteenth century, not least because it is probably the first English wedding poem to announce itself explicitly as one. In its poetic craft, it offers a rich tapestry of sensual imagery that borrows as much from classical legends and myths as from Christian ideas and beliefs and local folklore (see for instance the description of the fears of the night as haunted by goblins, spirits, etc, in stanza 19). It is this fusion that it achieves of diverse poetic traditions, and of almost oppositional religious beliefs – in terms of invoking pagan gods and yet retaining a strongly Reformist-Christian sensibility – that is in many ways unprecedented on this scale in English literature. Spenser was to go on to expand the scale many times over in *The Faerie Queene*, but somewhat unsuccessfully. This poem may then be considered his most successful fusion of these diverse poetic traditions and styles.

11.3 THE PROTHALAMION

The term 'prothalamion' as we have already noted, is a Spenserian neologism, invented to signify a preliminary nuptial song. The poem was written on the occasion of the wedding of Elizabeth and Catherine Somerset, daughters of Edward Somerset, the Earl of Worcester, on 8 November 1596. The wedding was formalised at the Strand in London, in Essex House. Spenser was once sponsored by the Earl of Essex, a relative of the Somersets, hence the writing of this poem. But this poem is vastly different from Spenser's own nuptial song. Where the *Epithalamion* is exuberantly sensual and consistent throughout its length in its themes, the *Prothalamion* is shorter, more pensive, and almost sedate in its pace.

The *Prothalamion* too uses some of the devices of the earlier poem in its structure. For instance, it too uses a pastoral setting – specifically here, the bank of the river Thames – and it too employs a couplet at the end of the first stanza that is reworked into a refrain at the end of each subsequent stanza: 'Against the Brydale day, which is not long:/ Sweete Thennes runne softly, till I end my Song.' Again, like the *Epithalamion*, the *Prothalamion* too eventually invokes pagan gods to bless the couples and guard them from all ills:

loy may you haue and gentle hearts content
Of your loues couplement:
And let faire Venus, that is Queene of loue,
With her heart-quelling Sonne vpon you smile,
Whose smile they say, hath vertue to remoue
All Loues dislike, and friendships faultie guile
For euer to assoile. (stanza 6)

But there the resemblance ends. The later poem makes no attempt to elaborate on the wedding, or the festivities that follow, or the wedding night, as did the *Epithalamion*. Even the invocation cited above is barely a few lines in one stanza, unlike in the *Epithalamion*. Instead it confines itself to describing the bridal procession down the river Thames, leading up to Essex house where the wedding will be solemnised. The refrain, such as it is, shows far less variation than in the *Epithalamion*, rendering the poem somewhat stilted and wooden. In terms of the passage of time, it is little more than a few hours of the morning that are encapsulated by the poem, and therefore the poem has none of the profound integration of temporality and theme that the *Epithalamion* weaves. What it does have is an elaborate allegorical structure, in which the two brides are likened to beautiful swans that sail down the river. The

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5. QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. How does Spenser's *Epithalamion* differ from the traditional wedding poem? How might it be interpreted as a celebration of the poet's own life? Refer to Spenser's *Epithalamion* in your study of the wedding poem. Do you think it is possible to read the poem as a celebration of the poet's own life? Why or why not?
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1.6. DEFINITION READING

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THE TEXT OF THE SONNETS

SONNET. XXXIII.

LYKE as a ship, that through the Ocean wyde,
by conduct of some star doth make her way,
whenas a storme hath dimd her trusty guyde,
out of her course doth wander far astray.
So I whose star, that wont with her bright ray, [5]
me to direct, with cloudes is ouer-cast,
doe wander now, in darknesse and dismay,
through hidden perils round about me plast.
Yet hope I well, that when this storme is past,
My Helice the lodestar of my lyfe [10]
will shine again, and looke on me at last,
with louely light to cleare my cloudy grief.
Till then I wander carefull comfortlesse,
in secret sorrow and sad pensiuenesse.

Notes:

conduct: guidance
whenas: when
guyde: guiding light
wont: used to

hidden perils: ambiguous, referring to either the troubles in his life in Ireland at this point, or to the deceptions and dangers of court life in London, or to the constant distractions and disturbances of sensual, bodily pleasures.

Helice: Playing on the sound of 'Eliza', refers to the constellation of Ursa Major or the Great Bear, but also to a city at the foot of Mount Helicon, where Apollo and the muses were said to reside.

lodestar: the polestar, which sailors used to navigate by. It is not a part of the Great Bear but of Ursa Minor, the Little Bear constellation. Spenser is dispensing with accuracy of navigational details to suggest that Helice or Elizabeth plays the same navigational role in his life.

carefull: full of cares and worries; the 'and' is implicit after 'carefull'.

SONNET. LXVII.

LYKE as a huntsman after weary chace.
Seeing the game from him escapt away:
sits downe to rest him in some shady place,
with panting hounds beguiled of their pray.
So after long pursuit and vaine assay. [5]
when I all weary had the chace forsooke,
the gentle deare returnd the selfe-same way,
thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.
There she beholding me with mylder looke,
sought not to fly, but fearelesse still did bide: [10]
till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,
and with her owne goodwill hir fyrmely tyde.
Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld,
so goodly wonne with her owne will beguyld.

Notes:

chace: chase

beguiled: cheated

assay: attempt

forsooke: given up

next: nearby

milder looke: it is not clear whose look is milder, the deer's (the beloved) or the hunter's (the poet). The idea is to suggest that neither was coerced or forced into love

hide: stay, remain

goodwill: willingness

firmely tyde: to tie the knot of marriage. The suggestion is that the beloved is nervous and apprehensive about getting married.

her owne will beguyld: suggesting that it was the beloved's sexual desire for him that eventually permitted her conquest.

SONNET. LXXVII.

WAS it a dreame, or did I see it playne,
a goodly table of pure yyory:
all spred with iuncats, fit to entertayne,
the greatest Prince with pompous roialty.
Mongst which there in a siluer dish did ly, [5]
two golden apples of vnualed price:
far passing those which Hercules came by,
or those which Atalanta did entice.
Exceeding sweet, yet voyd of sinfull vice,
That many sought yet none could euer taste, [10]
sweet fruit of pleasure brought from paradice:
By loue himselfe and in his garden plaste.
Her brest that table was so richly spredd,
my thoughts the guests, which would thereon haue fedd.

Notes:

yyory: ivory

iuncats: delicacies

vnualed: invaluable, priceless

Hercules, Atalanta: referring to a Roman legend. Atalanta was a swift-footed princess who vowed to marry only a man who could outrace her, and executed the losers. Hippomenes eventually defeated her by distracting her with three golden apples of a tree in North Africa tended by the Hesperides (daughters of the evening star, Hesperus) and guarded by a dragon. Hercules had to steal some of these apples from this tree as one of his labours.

voyd: devoid, lacking

loue: Love, Cupid

1.

Ye learned sisters which haue oftentimes
beene to me ayding, others to adorne:
Whom ye thought worthy of your gracefull rymes,
That euen the greatest did not greatly scorne
To heare theyr names sung in your simple layes,
But joyed in theyr prayse.

And when ye list your owne mishaps to moune,
Which death, or loue, or fortunes wreck did rayse,
Your string could soone to sadder tenor tune,
And teach the woods and waters to lament
Your dolefull drreriment.

Now lay those sorrowfull complaints aside,
And hauing all your heads with girland[s] crownd,
Helpe me mine owne loues prayses to resound,
Ne let the fame of any be enuide,
So Orpheus did for his owne bride,
So I vnto my selfe alone will sing,
The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring.

2.

Early before the worlds light giuing lampe,
His golden beame vpon the hills doth spred,
Hauing disperst the nights vnchearefull dampe,
Doe ye awake and with fresh lusty hed,
Go to the bowre of my beloved loue,
My truest turtle doue
Bid her awake; for Hymen is awake.
And long since ready forth his maske to moue,
With his bright Tead that flames with many a flake,
And many a bachelor to waite on him,
In theyr fresh garments trim.
Bid her awake therefore and soone her dight,
For lo the wished day is come at last,
That shall for al the paynes and sorrowes past,
Pay to her vsury of long delight,
And whylest she doth her dight,
Doe ye to her of ioy and solace sing,
That all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

3.

Bring with you all the Nymphes that you can heare
both of the riuers and the forrests greene:
And of the sea that neighbours to her neare,
Al with gay girlands goodly wel beseene.
And let them also with them bring in hand,
Another gay girland
my fayre loue of lillyes and of roses,
Bound trueloue wise with a blew silke riband.
And let them make great store of bridale poses,
And let them ecke bring store of other flowers
To deck the bridale bowers.
And let the ground whereas her foot shall tread,
For feare the stones her tender foot should wrong,

Be strewed with fragrant flowers all along,
And diapred lyke the discolored mead.
Which done, doe at her chamber dore awayt,
For she will waken strayt,
The while doe ye this song vnto her sing,
The woods shall to you answer and your Echo ring.

4.
Ye Nymphes of Mulla which with carefull heed,
The siluer scaly trouts doe tend full well,
and greedy pikes which yse therein to feed,
(Those trouts and pikes all others doo excell)
And ye likewise which keepe the russhy lake,
Where none doo fishes take.
Bynd vp the locks the which hang scatterd light,
And in his waters which your mirror make,
Behold your faces as the christall bright,
That when you come whereas my loue doth lie,
No blemish she may spie.
And eke ye lightfoot mayds which keepe the deere,
That on the hoary mountayne vie to towre,
And the wyldc wolues which seeke them to deuoure,
With your steele darts doo chace from comming neer
Be also present heere,
To helpe to decke her and to help to sing,
That all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

5.
Wake now my loue, awake; for it is time,
The Rosy Mome long since left Tithones bed,
All ready to her siluer coche to clyme,
And Phoebus gins to shew his glorious hed.
Hark how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies
And carroll of loues praise.
The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft,
The thrush replies, the Maui descant playes,
The Ouzell shrills, the Ruddock warbles soft,
So goodly all agree with sweet consent,
To this dayes meriment.
Ah my deere loue why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
Tawayt the comming of your ioyous make,
And hearken to the birds louelearned song,
The deawy leaues among.
For they of ioy and pleasance to you sing,
That all the woods them answer & theyr eccho ring.

6.
My loue is now awake out of her drearne[s],
and her fayre eyes like stars that dimmed were
With darksome cloud, now shew theyr goodly beams
More bright then Hesperus his head doth rere.
Come now ye damzels, daughters of delight,
Helpe quickly her to dight,
But first come ye fayre houres which were begot
In loues sweet paradice, of Day and Night,
Which doe the seasons of the yeare allot,
And al that euer in this world is fayre
Doe make and still repayre.

Be strewed with fragrant flowers all along,
And diapred lyke the discolored mead.
Which done, doe at her chamber dore awayt,
For she will waken strayt,
The while doe ye this song vnto her sing,
The woods shall to you answer and your Eccho ring.

4.

Ye Nymphes of Mulla which with carefull heed,
The siluer scaly trouts doe tend full well,
and greedy pikes which vse therein to feed,
(Those trouts and pikes all others doo excell)
And ye likewise which keepe the rushy lake,
Where none doo fishes take.
Bynd vp the locks the which hang scatterd light,
And in his waters which your mirror make,
Behold your faces as the christall bright,
That when you come whereas my loue doth lie,
No blemish she may spie.
And eke ye lightfoot mayds which keepe the deere,
That on the hoary mountayne vie to towre,
And the wyld wolues which seeke them to deuoure,
With your steele darts doo chace from comming neer
Be also present heere,
To helpe to decke her and to help to sing,
That all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

5.

Wake now my loue, awake; for it is time,
The Rosy Morne long since left Tithones bed,
All ready to her siluer coche to clyme,
And Phoebus gins to shew his glorious hed.
Hark how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies
And carroll of loues praise.
The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft,
The thrush replies, the Mauis descant playes,
The Ouzell shrills, the Ruddock warbles soft,
So goodly all agree with sweet consent,
To this dayes meriment.
Ah my deere loue why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
T'awayt the comming of your ioyous make,
And hearken to the birds louelearned song,
The deawy leaues among.
For they of ioy and pleasance to you sing,
That all the woods them answer & theyr eccho ring.

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With darksome cloud, now shew theyr goodly beams
More bright then Hesperus his head doth rere.
Come now ye damzels, daughters of delight,
Helpe quickly her to dight,
But first come ye fayre houres which were begot
In loues sweet paradise, of Day and Night,
Which doe the seasons of the yeare allot,
And al that euer in this world is fayre
Doe make and still repayre.

And ye three handmayds of the Cyprian Queene,
The which doe still adorne her beauties pride,
Helpe to addorne my beautifullest bride
And as ye her array, still throw betweene
Some graces to be seene,
And as ye vse to Venus, to her sing,
The whiles the woods shal answer & your eccho ring.

7.

Now is my loue all ready forth to come,
Let all the virgins therefore well awayt,
And ye fresh boyes that tend vpon her groomer
Prepare your selues; for he is comming strait.
Set all your things in seemely good aray
Fit for so ioyfull day,
The ioyfulst day that euer sunne did see.
Faire Sun, shew forth thy fauourable ray,
let thy lifull heat not feruent be
For feare of burning her sunshyny face.
Her beauty to disgrace.
O fayrest Phoebus, father of the Muse,
If euer I did honour thee aright,
Or sing the thing, that mote thy mind delight,
Doe not thy seruants simple boone refuse,
But let this day let this one day be myne,
Let all the rest be thine.
Then I thy souerayne prayses loud wil sing,
That all the woods shal answer and theyr eccho ring.

8.

Harke how the Minstrels gin to shrill aloud,
Their merry Musick that resounds from far,
The pipe, the tabor, and the trembling Croud,
That well agree withouten breach or iar.
But most of all the Damzels doe delite,
When they their tymbrels smyte.
And thereunto doe daunce and carrol sweet,
That all the sences they doe rauish quite,
The whyles the boyes run vp and downe the street,
Crying aloud with strong confused noyce,
As if it were one voyce.
Hymen to Hymen, Hymen they do shout,
That euen to the heauens theyr shouting shrill
Doth reach, and all the firmament doth fill,
To which the people standing all about,
As in approuance doe thereto applaud
And loud aduaunce her laud,
And euermore they Hymen Hymen sing,
that al the woods them answer and theyr eccho ring

9.

Loe where she comes along with portly pace,
Lyke Phoebe from her chamber of the East,
Arysing forth to run her mighty race,
Clad all in white, that seemes a virgin best.
So well it her bescemes that ye would weene
Some angell she had beene.
Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre,

Sprinkled with perle, and perling flowres a tweene,
Doe lyke a golden mantle her anyre,
And being crownd with a girland greene,
Seeme lyke some mayden Queene,
Her modest eyes abashed to behold
So many gazers, as on her do stare,
Vpon the lowly ground affixed are.

Ne dare lift vp her countenance too bold,
But blush to heare her prayses sung so loud,
So farte from being proud,
Nathlesse doe ye still loud her prayses sing,
That all the woods may answer and your echo ring.

And he likewise which keepe the rashy lake,
Where none doo fishes take,
Tell me ye merchants daughters did ye see,
So fayre a creature in your towne before,
So sweet, so louely, and so mild as she,
Adorn'd with beautyes grace and vertues store,
Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
Her forehead yuory white,
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte,
Her prest like to a bowle of creame yncruded,
Her paps lyke lillies budded,
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble tower,
And all her body like a pallasce faynt your echo ring,
Ascending vpe with many a stately stayre,
To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre,
Why stand ye still ye virgins in amaze,
Vpon her seat since left I thones bed,
Whiles ye forget your former lay to sing,
To which the woods did answer and your echo ring?

Ha k how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr rates
14
Byt if ye saw that which no eyes can see,
The inward beauty of her luely spright,
Garnish'd with brauenly guits of high degree,
Much more then would ye wonder at that sight,
And stand astonish'd lyke to those which red
Medusæes mazenful had,
There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,
Vnsotted fayth and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And gueth lawes alone,
The which the base affections doe obey,
And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will,
Ne thought of thing yncomely euer may
There to approach to tempt her mind to ill,
Had ye once seene these her bestiall treasures,
And variegall pleasures,
Then would ye wonder and her prayses sing,
That all the woods should answer and your echo ring.

12
But first come ye fayre houres which were begot
Open the temple gates vnto my loue,
Open them wide that I may passe in,
And all the pleasures shew vnto my howe,
And all the pillenly pleasures shew vnto my howe.

Sprinkled with perle, and perling flowres a tweene,
Doe lyke a golden mantle her attyre,
And being crowned with a girland greene,
Seeme lyke some mayden Queene,
Her modest eyes abashed to behold
So many gazers, as on her do stare,
Vpon the lowly ground affixed are.
Ne dare lift vp her countenance too bold,
But blush to heare her prayes sung so loud,
So farre from being proud.
Nathlesse doe ye still loud her prayes sing,
That all the woods may answer and your eccho ring.

10.

Tell me ye merchants daughters did ye see
So fayre a creature in your towne before,
So sweet, so louely, and so mild as she,
Adorn'd with beautyes grace and vertues store,
Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
Her forehead yuory white,
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips lyke cheryes charming men to byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncruded,
Her paps lyke lyllies budded,
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
And all her body like a pallace fayre,
Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre,
To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre.
Why stand ye still ye virgins in amaze,
Vpon her so to gaze,
Whiles ye forget your former lay to sing,
To which the woods did answer and your eccho ring?

11.

Bvt if ye saw that which no eyes can see,
The inward beauty of her liuely spright,
Garnisht with heauenly giufts of high degree,
Much more then would ye wonder at that sight,
And stand astonisht lyke to those which red
Medusaes mazeful hed.
There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,
Vnspotted fayth and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And giueth lawes alone.
The which the base affections doe obey,
And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will
Ne thought of thing vncomely euer may
Thereto approch to tempt her mind to ill.
Had ye once seene these her celestial treasures,
And vnreuealed pleasures,
Then would ye wonder and her prayes sing,
That al the woods should answer and your echo ring.

12.

Open the temple gates vnto my loue,
Open them wide that she may enter in,
And all the postes adorne as doth behoue,
And all the pillours deck with girlands trim,

For to recyue this Saynt with honour dew,
That commeth in to you.
With trembling steps and humble reuerence,
She commeth in, before th' almighties vew,
Of her ye Virgins learne obedience,
When so ye come into those holy places,
To humble your proud faces,
Bring her vp to th' high altar that she may,
The sacred ceremonies there partake,
The which do endlesse matrimony make,
And let the roring Organs loudly play
The praises of the Lord in liuely notes,
The whiles with hollow throates,
The Choristers the ioyous Antheme sing,
That all the woods may answere, and their eccho ring.

13.

Behold whiles she before the altar stands
Hearing the holy priest that to her speakes
And blesseth her with his two happy hands,
How the red roses flush vp in her cheekes,
And the pure snow with goodly vermill stayne,
Like crimsin dyde in grayne,
That euen th' Angels which continually,
About the sacred Altare doe remaine,
Forget their seruice and about her fly,
Ofte peeping in her face that seemes more fayre,
The more they on it stare.
But her sad eyes still fastened on the ground,
Are gouerned with goodly modesty,
That suffers not one looke to glaunce awry,
Which may let in a little thought vnsownd,
Why blush ye loue to giue to me your hand,
The pledge of all our band?
Sing ye sweet Angels Alleluya sing,
That all the woods may answere and your eccho ring.

14.

Now al is done; bring home the bride againe,
bring home the triumph of our victory,
Bring home with you the glory of her gaine,
With ioyance bring her and with iollity.
Neuer had man more ioyfull day then this,
Whom heauen would heape with blis.
Make feast therefore now all this liue long day,
This day for euer to me holy is,
Poure out the wine without restraint or stay,
Poure not by cups, but by the belly full,
Poure out to all that wull,
And sprinkle all the postes and wals with wine,
That they may sweat, and drunken be withall.
Crowne ye God Bacchus with a coronall,
And Hymen also crowne with wreathes of vine,
And let the Graces daunce vnto the rest;
For they can doo it best:
The whiles the maydens doe theyr carroll sing,
To which the woods shal answer & theyr eccho ring.

15.

Ring ye the bells, ye yong men of the towne,
And leaue your wonred labors for this day:
This day is holy; doe ye write it downe,
that ye for euer it remember may.
This day the sunne is in his chiefest hight,
With Barnaby the bright,
From whence declining daily by degrees,
He somewhat loseth of his heat and light,
When once the Crab behind his back he sees.
But for this time it ill ordained was,
To chose the longest day in all the yeare,
And shortest night, when longest fitter weare:
Yet neuer day so long, but late would passe.
Ring ye the bells, to make it weare away,
And bonafiers make all day,
And daunce about them, and about them sing:
that all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

16.

Ah when will this long weary day haue end,
and lende me leaue to come vnto my loue?
How slowly do the houres theyr numbers spend?
How slowly does sad Time his feathers moue?
Hast thee O gayrest Planet to thy home
Within the Western fome:
Thy tyred steedes long since haue need of rest.
Long though it be, at last I see it gloome,
And the bright euening star with golden creast
Appeare out of the East.
Fayre childe of beauty, glorious lampe of loue
That all the host of heauen in rankes dost lead,
And guydest louers through the nights dread,
How chearefully thou lookest from aboue,
And seemst to laugh atweene thy twinkling light
As ioying in the sight
Of these glad many which for ioy doe sing,
That all the woods them answer and their echo ring.

17.

Now ceasse ye damsels your delights forepast;
Enough is it, that all the day was youre:
Now day is doen, and night is nighing fast:
Now bring the Bryde into the brydall boures.
Now night is come, now soone her disaray,
And in her bed her lay;
Lay her in lillies and in violets,
And silken courteins ouer her display,
The odour sheetes, and Arras couerlets,
Behold how goodly my faire loue does ly
In proud humility:
Like vnto Maia, when as loue her tooke,
In Tempe, lying on the flowry gras,
Twixt sleepe and wake, after she weary was,
With bathing in the Acidalian brooke.
Now it is night, ye damsels may be gon.
And leaue my loue alone,
And leaue likewise your former lay to sing:
The woods no more shal answere, nor your echo ring.

18.

1. Now welcome night, thou night so long expected,
That long daies labour doest at last defray,
And all my cares, which cruell loue collected,
Hast sund in one, and cancelled for aye:
Whom thou thought worthy of most precious kisses,
That euen the greatest did not greatly prize,
That no man may vs see,
And in thy sable mantle vs enwrap,
From feare of perrill and foule horror free.
Let no false treason seeke vs to entrap,
Which death, or loue, or fortune wreck did raise.
Nor any dread disquiet once annoy
The safety of our ioy:
But let the night be calme and quiescense,
Without tempestuous storms or sad afray:
Lyke as when loue with layre Alcmena lay,
And calling all your heads with golden haire
When he begot the great Irvynian broome:
Help, he mine owne loyes prayses to resound,
Or lyke as when he with try selfe did he,
And begot Maieesty,
So Orpheus did for his awne brude,
So I unto my selfe alone will sing:
Ne let the woods them answer, nor theyr eccho ring.
The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring

19.

2. Let no lamenting cryes, nor dolefull teares,
Be heard all night without nor yet without:
Ne let false whispers breeding hidden feares,
Breake gentle sleepe with misconceiued doubt.
Let no defuding dreames, nor dreadful sights,
Make sudden sad affrights:
Ne let housefyes, nor lightnings helpelesse harmes,
Ne let the Pouke, nor other euill sprites,
Ne let mischeuous witches with theyr charmes,
And many a bacched wench aile on him,
Fray vs with things that be not.
Let not the shrinck Oule, nor the Storke be heard:
Nor the night Raven that still deadly yels,
That shall for all the pavies and sorrowes paye,
Nor grieuful vultures make vs once afraid:
Ne let the vnpleasant Onyre of Frogs still croking
Make vs to wish theyr Choking.
Let none of these thyr drye accents sing:
Ne let the woods them answer, and your eccho ring.

3.

20. By let still Silence trow night watches keepe,
That sacred peace may in assurance rayne,
And timely sleep, when it is tyme to sleepe,
May poure his firmes forth on your pleasant playne,
The whiles an hundred litle winged loues,
Like diuers feathered doues,
Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,
And in the secret darke, that none reproues
Their pretty stealthes shal worke, & snares shal spread
To filch away sweet snatches of delight,
Conceald through couert night.
Ye sonnes of Venus, play your sports at will,
For greedy pleasure, carelesse of your ioyes,
Thinks more vpon her paradise of ioyes,

18.

Now welcome night, thou night so long expected,
that long daies labour doest at last defray,
And all my cares, which cruell loue collected,
Hast sumd in one, and cancelled for aye:
Spread thy broad wing ouer my loue and me,
that no man may vs see,
And in thy sable mantle vs enwrap,
From feare of perrill and foule horror free.
Let no false treason seeke vs to entrap,
Nor any dread disquiet once annoy
the safety of our ioy:
But let the night be calme and quiet some,
Without tempestuous storms or sad afray:
Lyke as when loue with fayre Alcmena lay,
When he begot the great Tirynthian groome:
Or lyke as when he with thy selfe did lie,
And begot Majesty.
And let the mayds and yongmen cease to sing:
Ne let the woods them answer, nor theyr eccho ring.

19.

Let no lamenting cryes, nor dolefull teares,
Be heard all night within nor yet without:
Ne let false whispers breeding hidden feares,
Breake gentle sleepe with misconceiued dout.
Let no deluding dreames, nor dreadful sights,
Make sudden sad affrights;
Ne let housefyres, nor lightnings helpelesse harmes,
Ne let the Pouke, nor other euill sprights,
Ne let mischieuous witches with theyr charmes,
Ne let hob Goblins, names whose sence we see not,
Fray vs with things that be not.
Let not the shriech Oule, nor the Storke be heard:
Nor the night Rauen that still deadly yels,
Nor damned ghosts cald vp with mighty spells,
Nor grievely vultures make vs once affeard:
Ne let th' vnpleasant Quyre of Frogs still croking
Make vs to wish theyr choking.
Let none of these theyr dreary accents sing;
Ne let the woods them answer, nor theyr eccho ring.

20.

Bvt let stil Silence trew night watches keepe,
That sacred peace may in assurance rayne,
And tymely sleepe, when it is tyme to sleepe,
May poure his limbs forth on your pleasant playne.
The whiles an hundred little winged loues,
Like diuers fethered doues,
Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,
And in the secret darke, that none reproues
Their prety stealthes shal worke, & snares shal spread
To filch away sweet snatches of delight,
Conceald through couert night.
Ye sonnes of Venus, play your sports at will,
For greedy pleasure, carelesse of your toyes,
Thinks more vpon her paradise of ioyes.

Then what ye do, albe it good or ill,
All might therefore attend your merry play,
For it will soone be day:
Now none doth hinder you, that say or sing,
Ne will the woods now answer, nor your Eccho ring.

21.
Who is the same, which at my window peepes?
Or whose is that faire face, that shines so bright,
Is it not Cinthia, she that neuer sleepes,
But walkes about high heauen al the night?
O fayrest goddesse, do thou not enuy
My loue with me to spy:
For thou likewise didst loue, though now vnthought,
And for a fleece of woll, which priuily,
The Latmian shephard once vnto thee brought,
His pleasures with thee wrought,
Therefore to vs be fauorable now;
And sith of wemens labours thou hast charge,
And generation goodly dost enlarge,
Encline they will t'effect our wishfull vow,
And the chaste wombe informe with timely seed.
That may our comfort breed:
Till which we cease our hopefull hap to sing,
Ne let the woods vs answer, nor our Eccho ring.

22.
And thou great Iuno, which with awful might
the lawes of wedlock still dost patronize,
And the religion of the faith first plight
With sacred rites hast taught to solemnize:
And ecke for comfort often called art
Of women in their smart,
Eternally bind thou this lovely band,
And all thy blessings vnto vs impart.
Thou glad Genius, in whose gentle hand,
The bridale bowre and geniall bed remaine,
Without blemish or staine.
And the sweet pleasures of theyr loues delight
With secret ayde doest succour and supply,
Till they bring forth the fruitfull progeny,
Send vs the timely fruit of this same night.
And thou fayre Hebe, and thou Hymen free,
Grant that it may so be.
Til which we cease your further prayse to sing,
Ne any woods shal answer, nor your Eccho ring.

23.
And ye high heauens, the temple of the gods,
In which a thousand torches flaming bright
Do burne, that to vs wretched earthly clods:
In dreadful darknesse lend desired light;
And all ye powers which in the same remaine,
More then we men can fayue,
Poure out your blessing on vs plentifully,
And happy influence vpon vs raine,
That we may raise a large posterity,
Which from the earth, which they may long possesse
With lasting happinesse.

Then what ye do, albe it good or ill.
All night therefore attend your merry play,
For it will soone be day:
Now none doth hinder you, that say or sing.
Ne will the woods now answer, nor your Eccho ring.

21.

Who is the same, which at my window peepes?
Or whose is that faire face, that shines so bright,
Is it not Cinthia, she that neuer sleepes,
But walkes about high heauen al the night?
O fayrest goddesse, do thou not enuy
My loue with me to spy:
For thou likewise didst loue, though now vnthought,
And for a fleece of woll, which priuily,
The Latmian shephard once vnto thee brought,
His pleasures with thee wrought,
Therefore to vs be fauorable now;
And sith of wemens labours thou hast charge,
And generation goodly dost enlarge,
Encline they will t'effect our wishfull vow,
And the chaste wombe informe with timely seed,
That may our comfort breed:
Till which we cease our hopefull hap to sing,
Ne let the woods vs answeere, nor our Eccho ring.

22.

And thou great Iuno, which with awful might
the lawes of wedlock still dost patronize,
And the religion of the faith first plight
With sacred rites hast taught to solemnize:
And eeke for comfort often called art
Of women in their smart,
Eternally bind thou this lovely band,
And all thy blessings vnto vs impart.
Thou glad Genius, in whose gentle hand,
The bridale bowre and geniall bed remaine,
Without blemish or staine,
And the sweet pleasures of theyr loues delight
With secret ayde doest succour and supply,
Till they bring forth the fruitfull progeny,
Send vs the timely fruit of this same night.
And thou fayre Hebe, and thou Hymen free,
Grant that it may so be.
Til which we cease your further prayse to sing,
Ne any woods shal answer, nor your Eccho ring.

23.

And ye high heauens, the temple of the gods,
In which a thousand torches flaming bright
Do burne, that to vs wretched earthly clods:
In dreadful darknesse lend desired light:
And all ye powers which in the same remayne,
More then we men can fayne,
Poure out your blessing on vs plentiously,
And happy influence vpon vs raine,
That we may raise a large posterity,
Which from the earth, which they may long possesse
With lasting happinesse,

Vp to your haughty pallaces may mount,
And for the guerdon of theyr glorious merit
May heauenly tabernacles there inherit,
Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.
So let vs rest, sweet loue, in hope of this,
And cease till then our tymely ioyes to sing,
The woods no more vs answer, nor our eccho ring.

24.

Song made in lieu of many ornaments,
With which my loue should duly haue bene dect,
Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
Ye would not stay your dew time to expect,
But promist both to recompens,
Be vnto her a goodly ornament,
And for short time an endlesse moniment.

FINIS

Notes:

Epithalamion: Greek, meaning literally, 'at the bedchamber'.

1.

learned sisters: the nine muses. The poet is using the typical Homeric convention of beginning a poem with an invocation to the muse.

others: possible reference to patrons or aristocrats to whom poetic works were dedicated.

simple: guileless

And when ye list your owne mishaps to mourne: referring here to a poem called the "Teares of the Muses" in which the nine Muses rehearse their complaints over the decadence of poetry and the neglect of learning.

fortunes wreck: ruinous fortune

rayse: cause

tenor: mood

And teach the woods and waters to lament: referring to Orpheus' music as he grieved for Eurydice.

dreriment: grief

enuide: envied

Orpheus: The singer who moved Pluto the God of Death to release Eurydice whom he lost again after looking back at her as he led her home.

The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring: A Virgilian refrain which suggests the understanding of time as circular. We see here and later through several references, the importance of time in the poem.

2.

lusty hed: vitality, force

bowre: chamber

turtle doue: (dove) poet and beloved are compared to consorting birds here and later.

Hymen: God of marriage who oversees weddings.

maske to moue: (move) referring to a celebrating wedding procession of masked, disguised persons. The procession is usually led by a figure of Hymen.

Tead: torch

flake: spark

vsury: (usuary) increase

Pay to her vsury of long delight: Refers to the difficulties which the couple may have had in their courtship which the poet wishes to compensate for.

dight: dress

ioy: joy

solace: pleasure

3.

heare: that can hear you.

forrests greene: The forest as the territory of Diana, the Goddess of the hunt.

wel beseene: well-dressed

girland: garland

silke riband: the silk ribbon symbolises fidelity and true love.

poses: posies.

eeke: also

the stones her tender foot should wrong: a reference to Psalm 91:11-12 which tells us that God's protecting angels will protect "thy foot against a stone".

flowers: suggests the transition from virgin to wife

diapered...mead: adorned as brilliantly and impressively as the multicoloured meadows.

strayt: immediately

4.

Mulla: name of the river Awberg which was close to Spenser's Irish estate, Kilcolman.

trouts ...pikes: pike evokes the male predatory, and trout, female sexuality

vse: use

lake: the lake near Spenser's Irish estate, Kilcolman.

Bynd vp the locks: bind up; encouraging chastity

scattered light: hair seen through water appears as scattered light

mirror: the emblem of Venus

Behold your faces ... she may spie: an exhortation to match the perfection of his beloved.

towre: a hawking term meaning "to soar" which Spenser uses to indicate a 'frequent ascent to high places'.

deuoure: devour, consume greedily

5.

awake: invokes the Song of Solomon (2. 10-13) in which the mystical union of the Church (bride) and Christ (groom) is symbolised by marriage.

Tithones: Husband of Aurora, goddess of the dawn.

Phoebus: Sun god and God of poetry

carroll: both a joyous song, and a dance in a circle. The circularity of the dance draws attention to the poem's symbolism to be found in 'girland', 'ring'.

mattins: morning song

thrush... playes: 'the singing thrush'; employing here the medieval poetic convention of courting birds.

Ouzell: blackbird

Ruddock: robin

consent: harmony

The merry Larke ... dayes merriment: Though the birds are singing to their various mates, it appears that their singing is part of the wedding tunes. This is underscored by Spenser's use of the traditional symbolism of courting birds.

meeter were: it were better that

make: mate or equal

pleasance: delight

6.

Hesperus: Usually the evening star. Spenser associates Hesperus with Venus (see Prothalamion 164).

daughters of delight: refers to bridesmaids, the handmaids, the three Graces (see below). These "daughters of delight" usually form part of a traditional wedding procession and appear in the contemporary pageantry. As Graces, they represent the blessings of favour, charm and prosperity. Since they are connected to the Muses, they lend charm and music to the event.

fayre houres: reference here to how time controls the seasons and preserves beauty.

still: constantly
handmayds: three attendants of Venus or Aphrodite: Aglaia, Euphrosyne, Thalia.
Cyprian Queene: reference to Venus who was born from the sea near Cyprus
pride: magnificent
betweene: at intervals

7.

virgins: damsels
boyes: attendants to the bridegroom
lifull: live-giving
sunshyne: golden
disgrace: spoil, disfigure
father of the Muse: Usually Jove is acknowledged as the father of the Muses (in Hesiod's version). Here, following the poet Ennechos, Spenser names Apollo as their father indicating a willingness to adapt myth.
mote: might
simple boone: (boon: a prayer or gift). Here the poet requests Apollo to bestow upon him the powers to control the weather that only Apollo has. Note also that Apollo is father of the Muses. The word "simple" then is ironic since the poet is requesting the powers of Apollo himself. Note also the parallels between bridegroom and sun and bride and moon.
soueraigne: sovereign

8.

gin: begin
pipe... Croud: the bagpipe, drum and the six-stringed fiddle popularly used in Irish music.
tar: (jar) jarring, discordant sounds
tymbrels: tambourine
whyles the boyes ... strong confused noyce: the jocular and bawdy songs and chants of young boys in the wedding procession.
Hymen to Hymen. Hymen: the ritual exclamation at Roman weddings.
loud aduance her laud: robustly sing her praises.

9.

portly: graceful and dignified
Phoebe: the chaste Diana, goddess of the moon and virginity. Symbol of brightness.
mighty race: the original (Psalm 19, Bible) refers to the mysterious power of a woman's chastity and to the bridegroom exiting the bed chamber after love. Spenser changes the gender of the 'racer'.
white: symbolising virginity
seemes: suits
Her long loose yellow locks ... flowres a tweene: description of beauty so great that it appears like crafted artwork.
perle: pearl
perling: (purle, to twist) entwined like embroidery. A play of words here.
girland greene: (green garland) green symbolises the end of chastity and the beginning of womanhood.
mayden Queene: a possible reference to Queen Elizabeth I, who was frequently referred to as the moon-goddess.
proud: recalling the lover's typical unrequited love and his complaints about the 'pride and cruelty' of the beloved.
Nathlesse: Nevertheless

10.

merchants daughters: Spenser here refers to emergent and significantly growing merchant and trading classes. Yet, through the imitation of the Song of Solomon, the poem retains its pastoral dependence.
vertues store: wealth of virtue

still: constantly
handmayds: three attendants of Venus or Aphrodite: Aglaia, Euphrosyne, Thalia.
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merchants daughters: Spenser here refers to emergent and significantly growing merchant and trading classes. Yet, through the imitation of the Song of Solomon, the poem retains its pastoral dependence.
vertues store: wealth of virtue

rudded: reddened
vncrudded: uncurdled
paps: breasts
lyllies: lilies (a white flower)
marble towre: comparing the beloved's beauty to magnificent architecture; a mainly classical and Renaissance convention.
sweet bowre: 'the head' which was held to be the seat of reason.
stayre: (stair) used only for the late Elizabethan prodigy house and was a instance of conspicuous wealth.

11.

liuely spright: living soul.
Garnisht: adorned
red: saw
Medusaes mazelid hed: the amazing head of the Medusa with its hair of serpents turned all who gazed directly upon it into stone. The simile between the beloved and the Medusa hints both at the lover's sexual anxiety and his astonishment at the spiritual beauty of the beloved.
base affections: the lower faculty of passion
vncomey: (uncomely) repulsive

12.

enter in: a play on the invitation to God to enter the soul.
And all the postes adorne as doth behoue: suitably decorate the door posts.
Saynt: saint; probably alluding to the fact that the wedding took place on St Barnabas' Day. It offers an example of the way in which theological and biblical doctrines were joined with the classical epithalamic tradition. As a result sexual love and the lover are akin to worship and saintliness.
endlesse matrimony: lasting marriage, which shall not be broken by anyone; or immortality through the fruits (offspring) of that marriage.
make: constitute the basis for
roaring: roaring; it is a term that can be applied quite aptly to the deeper tones of a church organ.
hollow throates: yawning mouths.
Antheme: antiphonally sung song by a split chorus

13.

two happy hands: hands raised in blessing.
red roses: blushes, signifying her modesty
vermill stayne: vermilion (red) stain
crimsin dyde in grayne: permanent reddish dye made from insect bodies found in oaks and often mistaken for berries; hence the term grayne.
That euen th' Angels ... about her fly: the cupids seen in classical art to hover around the lovers, specially the bride.
sad: serious
vnsownd: unchaste
band: bond
Alleluya: Halleluyah, or Praise the Lord

14.

triumph of our victory: Roman triumphal procession being alluded to here; winning the bride is at once also their combined victory over the circumstances that separated them.
glory of her gaine: the glory of gaining her
jollity: jollity (gayness)
lue long: live-long, suggesting the weariness stepping in, but also a day that will be remembered long.
stay: restraint.

belly full: possibly referring to Bacchus' wine swollen stomach and Comus, god of revelry and the belly

wall: wall

postes and wals with wine: a Roman wedding ritual in which all doorposts and walls were sprinkled with wine.

Bacchus: god of wine

coronall: garland

wreathes of vine: Hymen was usually represented as bearing a crown of marjoram leaves.

15.

Ring ye the bells: ceremonial ringing of bells and an indication of a quieter tone that will be taken in the poem from now on.

wonted: usual

Barnaby the bright: reference to the feast of St Banabas on June 11 that marks the summer solstice. Bonfires were lit and bells were rung in celebration. It has been noted that lines 263-264 fall at the "golden section" of the poem, dividing the poetic structure proportionately and aesthetically.

by degrees: gradually

the Crab behind his back he sees: The sun leaving zodiac sign of Gemini and entering that of Cancer (the crab) which heralds the decline of day.

late: at last

bonifiers: bonfires

16.

sad: inexorable

feathers: wings

fayrest Planet: the sun which, according to the Ptolemy, circled the Earth.

fome: foam, waves of the sea

steeds: horses that pull the sun's chariot

gloome: grow dark

evening star...the East: Spenser is not quite clear here, since the evening star rises in the west, and not the east.

lampe of Ioue: associated with Venus

That all the host ... the nights dreud: it is the first star to be seen and therefore is the 'leader' of the other stars.

atweene: between, through

these glad many: the celebrating wedding group

17.

nighing: nearing

disaray: undress

courtein: curtains

odourd sheetes: perfumed sheets

Arras cowerlets: Bedspreads of the finest embroidery and tapestry work.

proud humility: typical Petrarchan oxymoron, reminding us that the bride retains her pride even as she submits to the groom

Maia when as Ioue her tooke: The most beautiful of Atlas' daughters who gave birth to Mercury by Jove.

In Tempe...the Acidalian brooke: references to Tempe and Venus' Acidalian brook may be derived from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

leave: stop

18.

defray: pay for

sad: terrible

afray: fear

love with fayre Alcmena lay: The night on which Hercules was begotten by the union between Jove and Alcmena was supposed to be thrice as long as usual.

Tirynthian groome: Hercules

Majesty: the quality and virtue

19.

Let no lamenting cryes...within nor yet without: Spenser prays that there should be no lament from either the bride inside or from the world outside.

dout: fear

Pouke: the reference to Puck, the mischievous or malicious spirit or goblin, also recalls the traditional blessing of the bed to free it from demons.

hob Goblins: demons of lust

Fray: terrify

shriech Oule: the screech Owl, usually a bird of ill-omen

Storke: Stork; considered an unclean bird.

still: constantly

Quyre: Choir

Frogs: sometimes associated with evil, sometimes wit sexuality.

20.

Silence: Following the Roman convention, silence is personified as either a male god or a female goddess with a finger to the lips. Silence watches over night perfectly since s/he can ward off evil.

peace: again a personification in which the figure appears with a cornucopia abundant with flowers.

sleep: brother to death, Sleep is personified as a winged youth bearing a cornucopia of perfumes.

rayne: reign

pleasant playne: plain is the quietness of the night, but also the scene of battle. Silence, the soldier who guards the night against enemies, permits sleep to enter and soothe the passionate lovers temporarily.

winged loues: winged loves; a reference to Cupid, but also to the sacred doves of Venus. Here Spenser creates a magical world through imagery.

diuers feathered douse: the diverse (varied) feathered doves of Venus.

toyes: love-making

ioyes: joys

21.

Cynthia: Diana, Goddess of the Moon.

enuy: envy

woll: wool

Latmian shepherd: Cynthia is reputed to have loved Endymion a shepherd whom she saw sleeping nude in a cave on Mount Latmos after Jove put him to perpetual sleep. Endymion gifted Cynthia a fleece of wool after she kissed him.

of wemens labours thou hast charge: Both Diana and Juno are invoked as the goddess who brings light (Lucina) and preside over childbirth.

enlarge: increase

hopefull hap: what we hope for

22.

Juno: (Juno). Feminine counterpart of the sky-god Jupiter. A specifically 'female' goddess concerned with and protective of the sexual maternal and childbearing functions of women. Also the goddess of legitimate and fruitful marriage.

awful: awe inspiring

patronize: presiding deity

religion: sanctity

smart: pains

louely: loving

Genius: The (masculine) God of birth and generation. Functions as a guardian angel.
gentle: tender, and also a play on the Latin word "gentilis" (meaning born into the same family) and therefore fertility
geniall bed: again a play on the god's name (*Genius*) and invokes a pleasant and a fertile bed.
timely: referring to a future pregnancy
fayre Hebe: The daughter of Juno and goddess of youth and rejuvenation.

23.

And ye high heauens...lend desired light: instead of Hymen's torch now starlight guides their way. The imagery here is Platonic.
powers: The powers of heavenly bodies refer to either the nine-fold angelic hierarchy or astrological influence.
fayne: imagine
influence: stellar influence
guerdon: reward
heauenly tabernacles: (heavenly), signs of divine presence (see Revelations 21:3).
And cease till then our tymely ioyes to sing: (timely joys); timely refers here both to the present happy moment and to its perpetuation through time, in the birth of children for instance. Observe how this draws attention to Spenser's concern with the issue of time through the structure of the poem and through references to numerology, astrology, permanence and so on.

24.

Song: it has been suggested that here the envoy addresses the poem itself. The line proposes that the poem is advised to be both a decoration and a monument ("moniment", see l. 434 and note below).
ornaments: other poems
bene dect: been adorned
dew: due
expect: await
moniment: monument or memorial

III
Prothalamion

Or

A Spousal Verse made by
Edm. Spenser.

IN HONOVR OF THE

Doyble marriage of the two Honorable & vertuous
Ladies, the Ludie Elizabeth and the Ladie Katherine
Somerset. Daughters to the Right Honourable the
Earle of *Worcester* and espoused to the two worthie
Gentlemen *M. Henry Gilford,* and
M. William Peter Esquyers.

AT LONDON.

Printed for *William Ponsonby.*

1596.

1.



Calme was the day, and through the trembling ayre,
Sweete breathing *Zephyrus* did softly play
A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
Hot *Titans* beames, which then did glyster fayre:
When I whom sullein care,
Through discontent of my long fruitlesse stay

In Princes Court, and expectation vayne
Of idle hopes, which still doe fly away,
Like empty shaddowes, did afflict my brayne,
Walkt forth to ease my payne [10]
Along the shoare of siluer streaming *Themmes,*
Whose rutty Bancke, the which his Riuer hemmes,
Was paynted all with variable flowers,
And all the meades adorn'd with daintie gemmes,
Fit to decke maydens bowres,
And crowne their Paramours,
Against the Brydale day, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* ranne softly, till I end my Song.

2.

There, in a Meadow, by the Riuers side,
A Flocke of *Nymphes* I chaunced to espy, [20]
All louely Daughters of the Flood thereby,
With goodly greenish locks all loose vntyde,
As each had bene a Bryde,
And each one had a little wicker basket,
Made of fine twigs entrayled curiously,
In which they gathered flowers to fill their flasket:
And with fine Fingers, cropt full feateously
The tender stalkes on hye.
Of euery sort, which in that Meadow grew,
They gathered some; the Violet pallid blew, [30]
The little Dazie, that at euening closes,
The virgin Lillie, and the Primrose trew,
With store of vermeil Roses,
To decke their Bridegromes posies,
Against the Brydale day, which was not long:
Sweete *Themmes* ranne softly, till I end my Song.

3.

With that I saw two Swannes of goodly hewe,
Come softly swimming downe along the Lee;
Two fairer Birds I yet did neuer see:
The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew, [40]
Did neuer whiter shew,
Nor Ioue himselfe when he a Swan would be
For loue of Leda, whiter did appeare:
Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare,
So purely white they were,
That euen the gentle streame, the which them bare,
Seem'd foule to them, and bad his billowes spare
To wet their silken feathers, least they might
Soyle their fair plumes with water not so fayre, [50]
And mar their beauties bright,
That shone as heauens light,
Against their Brydale day, which was not long:
Sweete Themmes runne softly, till I end my Song.

4.

Eitsoones the Nymphes, which now had Flowers their fill,
Ran all in haste, to see that siluer brood,
As they came floating on the Christa] Flood:
Whom when they sawe, they stood amazed still,
Their wondring eyes to fill:
Them seem'd they neuer saw a sight so fayre, [60]
Of Fowles so louely, that they sure did deeme
Them heauenly borne, or to be that same payre
Which through the Skie draw Venus siluer Teeme:
For sure they did not seeme
To be begot of any earthly Seede,
But rather Angels or of Angels breede:
Yet were they bred of Somers-heat they say,
In sweetest Season, when each Flower and weede
The earth did fresh aray:
So fresh they seem'd as day, [70]
Euen as their Brydale day, which was not long:
Sweete Themmes runne softly till I end my Song.

5.

Then forth they all out of their baskets drew,
Great store of Flowers, the honour of the field,
That to the sense did fragrant odours yeild,
All which vpon those goodly Birds they threw,
And all the Waues did strew,
That like old Peneus Waters they did seeme,
When downe along by pleasant Tempes shore
Scattered with Flowres, through Thessaly they streeme, [80]
That they appeare through Lillies plenteous store,
Like a Brydes Chamber flore:
Two of those Nymphes, meane while, two Gariands bound,
Of freshest Flowres which in that Mead they found,
The which presenting all in trim Array,
Their snowie Foreheads therewithall they crownd,
Whil'st one did sing this Lay,
Prepar'd against that Day,

Against their Brydale day, which was not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly till I end my Song. [90]

6.
Ye gentle Birdes, the worlds faire ornament,
And heauens glories, whom this happie hower
Doth leade vnto your louers blisfull bower,
Ioy may you haue and gentle hearts content
Of your loues complement:
And let faire *Venus*, that is Queene of loue,
With her heart-quelling Sonne vpon you smile,
Whose smile they say, hath vertue to remoue
All Loues dislike, and friendships faultie guile
For euer to assoule. [100]
Let endlesse Peace your steadfast hearts accord,
And blessed Plentie wait vpon you[r] hard,
And let your bed with pleasures chast abound,
That fruitfull issue may to you afford:
Which may your foes confound,
And make your ioyes redound.
Vpon your Brydale day, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softlie, till I end my Song.

7.
So ended she; and all the rest around
To her redoubled that her yndersong. [110]
Which said, their bridale daye should not be long.
And gentle Echo from the neighbour ground,
Their accents did resound.
So forth, those ioyous Birdes did passe along,
Adowne the Lee, that to them murmurde low,
As he would speake, but that he lackt a tong
Yet did by signes his glad affection show,
Making his streame run slow.
And all the foule which in his flood did dwell
Gan focke about these twaine, that did excel [120]
The rest, so far, as *Cynthia* doth shend
The lesser starres. So they enranged well,
Did on those two attend.
And their best seruice lend,
Against their wedding day, which was not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly, till I end my song.

8.
At length they all to mery *London* came,
To mery *London*, my most kindly Nurse,
That to me gaue, this Lifes first natue source:
Though from another place I take my name, [130]
An house of auncient fame.
There when they came, whereas those bricky towers,
The which on *Themmes* brode aged backe doe ryde,
Where now the studious Lawyers haue their bowers
That whylome wont the Templer Knights to byde,
Till they decayd through pride:
Next whereunto there standes a stately place,
Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace
Of that great Lord, which therein wont to dwell,
Whose want too well, now feeles my friendless case: [140]
But Ah here fits not well

Against their Brydale day, which was not long:
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Let endlesse Peace your steadfast hearts accord,
And blessed Plentie wait vpon you[r] bord,
And let your bed with pleasures chast abound,
That fruitfull issue may to you afford:
Which may your foes confound,
And make your ioyes redound,
Vpon your Brydale day, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softlie, till I end my Song.

7.

So ended she; and all the rest around
To her redoubled that her vndersong. [110]
Which said, their bridale daye should not be long.
And gentle Eccho from the neighbour ground,
Their accents did resound.
So forth, those ioyous Birdes did passe along,
Adowne the Lee, that to them murmurde low,
As he would speake, but that he lackt a tong
Yet did by signes his glad affection show,
Making his streame run slow.
And all the foule which in his flood did dwell
Gan flocke about these twaine, that did excel [120]
The rest, so far, as *Cynthia* doth shend
The lesser starres. So they enranged well,
Did on those two attend,
And their best seruice lend,
Against their wedding day, which was not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly, till I end my song.

8.

At length they all to mery *London* came,
To mery *London*, my most kindly Nurse,
That to me gaue, this Lifes first natiue source:
Though from another place I take my name. [130]
An house of auncient fame.
There when they came, whereas those bricky towers,
The which on *Themmes* brode aged backe doe ryde,
Where now the studious Lawyers haue their bowers
That whylome wont the Templer Knights to byde,
Till they decayd through pride:
Next whereunto there standes a stately place,
Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace
Of that great Lord, which therein wont to dwell,
Whose want too well, now feeles my friendless case: [140]
But Ah here fits not well

Olde woes, but ioyes to tell
Against the bridale daye, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly till I end my Song.

9.

Yet therein now doth lodge a noble Peer,
Great *Englands* glory and the Worlds wide wonder,
Whose dreadfull name, late through all *Spaine* did thunder.
And *Hercules* two pillors standing neere,
Did make to quake and feare:
Faire branch of Honor, flower of *Cheualrie*, [150]
That fillest *England* with thy triumphes fame,
Ioy haue thou of thy noble victorie,
And endlesse happinesse of thine owne name
That promiseth the same:
That through thy prowesse and victorious armes,
Thy country may be freed from forraine harnes:
And great *Elivacs* glorious name may ring
Through al the world, fil'd with thy wide *Alarmes*,
Which some braue muse may sing
To ages following, [160]
Vpon the Brydale day, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly till I end my Song.

10.

From those high Towers, this noble Lord issuing,
Like radiant *Hesper* when his golden hayre
in th'*Ocean* billowes he hath Bathed fayre,
Descended to the Riuers open vewing,
With a great traine ensuing.
About the rest were goodly to be seene
Two gentle Knights of loucly face and feature,
Beseeming well the bower of anie Queene, [170]
With gifts of wit and ornaments of nature,
Fit for so goodly stature:
That like the twins of love they seem'd in sight,
Which decke the Bauldricke of the Heauens bright:
They two forth pacing to the Riuers side,
Receued those two faire Brides, their Loues delight,
Which at th'appointed tyde,
Each one did make his Bryde,
Against their Brydale day, which is not long:
Sweete *Themmes* runne softly, till I end my Song. [180]

Notes:

1.

Dovble marriage: double marriage

delay: temper, or reduce the intensity of

glister: shining

sullein: sullen, moody

Of idle hopes...afflict my brayne: even after he had established himself in Ireland,
Spenser never ceased hoping for betterment of his prospects in the
Elizabethan court.

shoare: shore

rutty: rooty, filled with roots of water plants

variable: various

meads: meadows

gemmes: gems (the flowers)

Paramours: lovers

Against the Brydale day, which is not long: anticipating the approaching wedding day.

2.

Flood: the river (Thames)

entrayed curiously: finely entwined

flasket: basket

cropt full feateously: cut finely, plucked delicately

Dazie: daisy

vermeil: scarlet

posies: bouquets

3.

Swannes of goodly heve: swans of pleasant appearance, representing the brides.

Flocks of swans were commonly seen on the Thames in Spenser's time.

Lee: either any river or stream running into the Thames or specifically the river Lea, which enters the Thames between Poplar and Canning Town.

Pindus: the mountainous western boundary of the Thessalian plain in Greece.

Jove himselfe... whiter did appeare: the myth of the rape of Leda by Jove as a swan, recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Spenser seems to be suggesting that the beauty of the two brides is similar to that of Leda whom Jove found irresistible and therefore raped her, but yet exceeds that of Jove and Leda, in this and the following lines.

foule to them: dirty compared to them

bad his billowes: bade or ordered his waves (billows)

spare: desist, stop from

4.

Eftsoones: In due course, duly

Flowers their fill: had their fill of flowers

brood: the pair of swans of noble lineage

Christal: crystal; here used to indicate sparkling water

Them seem'd: it seemed to them

decme: judged them to be

payre: pair

draw Venus siluer Teeme: Venus' chariot is conventionally represented as drawn through the skies by a pair of swans

breede: race, origin

Somers-heat: Spenser puns here on the surname Somerset

weede: water plant

aray: arrange

5.

honour: the best (flowers of the field)

strew: scatter over

Peneus Waters: the river Peneus flows through the Tempe valley in Thessaly, between Mount Ossa and Mount Olympus. The implication is that the Peneus is a river that is laden with flowers.

through Lillies... Chamber flore: so covered with lilies as to appear to be a bride's chamber floor (similarly strewn with lilies)

Their snowie Foreheads: the foreheads of the swans

this Lay: the 'song' or lyric that is recited in and constitutes the next stanza

6.

hower: hour

loues couplement: conjugal sexual union

heart quelling Sonne: Cupid or Eros

vertue: power, capacity