
UNIT 10 SPENSER'S POETRY – I

Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 Introduction
 - 10.1.1 The Sonnet
 - 10.1.2 The Courtly Love Tradition and Poetry
- 10.2 The *Amoretti* Sonnets
 - 10.2.1 Sonnet 34
 - 10.2.2 Sonnet 67
 - 10.2.3 Sonnet 77
- 10.3 Let's Sum Up
- 10.4 Questions for Review
- 10.5 Additional Reading

10.0 OBJECTIVES

The intent of this unit is to:

- Provide the student with a brief idea about the *Amoretti* sonnets in general.
- Familiarize the student with a select few of Spenser's sonnets, specifically from the *Amoretti* sonnets.
- Indicate some ways of analysing the sonnets that the student may want to take further, through a combination of formal and substantial elements.
- Explore the relations between the formal and the substantial elements in a poem.

Read in conjunction with the poems, this unit should provide the student with some ways of opening them out analytically, and with a sense of the importance of the formal dimensions of a poem to the overall meanings it generates.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will attempt to offer an overview of Spenser's well known sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti* sonnets, focusing primarily on formal elements and literary influences. It will offer analyses of three sonnets from the *Amoretti*. The influence in particular of Italian court poets like Petrarch, and the reworking of the sonnet will be explored. The earlier mentioned conflict between the Christian and Platonic visions especially of love and eroticism will be touched upon. To begin with, in what follows immediately, we will examine some aspects of the sonnet and of the courtly love tradition, which Spenser was part of.

10.1.1 The Sonnet

An important point to remember while reading the poems and the following notes is that the sonnet is fundamentally a short lyric, a stylised fourteen line poem that developed in Italy in the Middle Ages. There are broadly three styles of sonnets: the Petrarchan, which is the most common, consisting of an octave and a sestet; the Spenserian, which has four quatrains and a couplet, rhyming abab bcbe cdcd ee; and the Shakespearian, which follows the Spenserian line scheme of four quatrains and a couplet, but differs in its rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg). The sonnet became

popular in Italian poetry primarily as a vehicle for the expression of love and sensuality, a heritage that it carried with it into its English versions. Petrarch was the Italian poet most well-known for this practice, and his *Canzoniere* – a collection of love sonnets – is a sort of literary compendium of the passions of the lover. The sonnet is in many ways the most appropriate form for the articulation and expression of the kind of sentiments that came to be characterised as courtly love. Its brevity prevents excessive sentiment from becoming sententious, and forcing such sentiment to be articulated through intense imagery and condensed rhythm. At the same time its internal organisation allows the poet a degree of flexibility and innovativeness in terms of constructing the poem as a dramatic movement or series of movements that mirrored the movements of his own passions and feelings. One of the important virtues of any courtier (as we earlier noted in Unit 8), according to the influential Italian writer Castiglione in *The Book of The Courtier* (which served as a conduct book of sorts for many Elizabethan courtiers) was moderation (or *sprezzatura*). We can see how important the sonnet was as a form of the lyric that held in moderation even as it hinted at – the overwhelming passions of the courtly lover. Perhaps most significantly, it allowed the poet to represent love as an intense yet elusive, almost ephemeral and trans-worldly feeling – an ideology of love that characterised the poetry of the courtly love tradition. In this sense, the sonnet was the ideal form for the articulation of this dominant conception of love in the Renaissance. Let us briefly examine this phenomenon.

10.1.2 The Courtly Love Tradition and Poetry

When Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey translated Petrarch's work into English in the 16th century, it was to prove tremendously influential. The sonnets initiated a way of thinking and writing about love in English poetry that was fundamentally chivalric, based on feudal themes and ideas, and centred on the figure of the beloved as mistress of the poet. This way of thinking about love, or ideology of love, was first formed in the troubadour poetry of Aquitaine and Provence in southern France toward the end of the 11th century, from where its influence spread to Italy and the rest of Europe. One may describe its basic tenets as the following: the celebration of adultery; the near-deification of the mistress; the lover as very often unrequited in his love; and somewhat paradoxically, the celebration of faithful service to the beloved. There were several reasons for the emergence of this particular ideology of love. Medieval Europe in the early part of the last millennium was controlled by feuding war-lords, protected and surrounded by armies of knights who owed allegiance entirely to their respective barons. One means of forming alliances amongst these lords was through marriages between their houses. These marriages of convenience meant that the lady of the castle was often not very close to the lord, and even neglected by her husband. Since the castle populations were predominantly male, with few women, the lady inevitably came to be the recipient of the amorous attention of the many knights and courtiers. The passions thus evoked were thus often torn by the opposite demands of fidelity to the lord and desire for the beloved. Equally important were the roles of the Catholic imagination of the Virgin Mary on the one hand and the pre-Christian tribal conception of women as powerful beings, on the other: they led to the beloved, because of her social inaccessibility, often being represented as quasi-divine, especially in poetry. It is from this peculiar conjunction of social and historical factors that the poetry of courtly love carries the paradoxical discourses of adultery and fidelity, intense physical passion celebrated in an idealized, almost spiritualized fashion. Poets in particular had few predecessors to turn to, to chart this new mixture of emotions, although the Latin poet Ovid, in his *Ars Amatoria* (which pictured the lover as the slave of his passion and therefore of his beloved), was to prove singularly influential. The poetry that emerged from this context spread swiftly through medieval Europe; C. S. Lewis' old but classic study, *The Allegory of Love*, is worth exploring for a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon. However, by the time it reached England in the 16th century, several other factors came to play a decisive role in changing its characteristic features.

popular in Italian poetry primarily as a vehicle for the expression of love and sensuality, a heritage that it carried with it into its English versions. Petrarch was the Italian poet most well-known for this practice, and his *Canzoniere* – a collection of love sonnets – is a sort of literary compendium of the passions of the lover. The sonnet is in many ways the most appropriate form for the articulation and expression of the kind of sentiments that came to be characterised as courtly love. Its brevity prevents excessive sentiment from becoming sententious, and forcing such sentiment to be articulated through intense imagery and condensed rhythm. At the same time its internal organisation allows the poet a degree of flexibility and innovativeness in terms of constructing the poem as a dramatic movement or series of movements that mirrored the movements of his own passions and feelings. One of the important virtues of any courtier (as we earlier noted in Unit 8), according to the influential Italian writer Castiglione in *The Book of The Courtier* (which served as a conduct book of sorts for many Elizabethan courtiers) was moderation (or *sprezzatura*). We can see how important the sonnet was as a form of the lyric that held in moderation – even as it hinted at – the overwhelming passions of the courtly lover. Perhaps most significantly, it allowed the poet to represent love as an intense yet elusive, almost ephemeral and trans-worldly feeling – an ideology of love that characterised the poetry of the courtly love tradition. In this sense, the sonnet was the ideal form for the articulation of this dominant conception of love in the Renaissance. Let us briefly examine this phenomenon.

10.1.2 The Courtly Love Tradition and Poetry

When Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey translated Petrarch's work into English in the 16th century, it was to prove tremendously influential. The sonnets initiated a way of thinking and writing about love in English poetry that was fundamentally chivalric, based on feudal themes and ideas, and centred on the figure of the beloved as mistress of the poet. This way of thinking about love, or ideology of love, was first formed in the troubadour poetry of Aquitaine and Provence in southern France toward the end of the 11th century, from where its influence spread to Italy and the rest of Europe. One may describe its basic tenets as the following: the celebration of adultery; the near-deification of the mistress; the lover as very often unrequited in his love; and somewhat paradoxically, the celebration of faithful service to the beloved. There were several reasons for the emergence of this particular ideology of love. Medieval Europe in the early part of the last millennium was controlled by feuding war-lords, protected and surrounded by armies of knights who owed allegiance entirely to their respective barons. One means of forming alliances amongst these lords was through marriages between their houses. These marriages of convenience meant that the lady of the castle was often not very close to the lord, and even neglected by her husband. Since the castle populations were predominantly male, with few women, the lady inevitably came to be the recipient of the amorous attention of the many knights and courtiers. The passions thus evoked were thus often torn by the opposite demands of fidelity to the lord and desire for the beloved. Equally important were the roles of the Catholic imagination of the Virgin Mary on the one hand and the pre-Christian tribal conception of women as powerful beings, on the other: they led to the beloved, because of her social inaccessibility, often being represented as quasi-divine, especially in poetry. It is from this peculiar conjunction of social and historical factors that the poetry of courtly love carries the paradoxical discourses of adultery and fidelity, intense physical passion celebrated in an idealized, almost spiritualized fashion. Poets in particular had few predecessors to turn to, to chart this new mixture of emotions, although the Latin poet Ovid, in his *Ars Amatoria* (which pictured the lover as the slave of his passion and therefore of his beloved), was to prove singularly influential. The poetry that emerged from this context spread swiftly through medieval Europe; C S Lewis' old but classic study, *The Allegory of Love*, is worth exploring for a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon. However, by the time it reached England in the 16th century, several other factors came to play a decisive role in changing its characteristic features.

be very instructive for the student to compare this poem with Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem 'Whoso list to hunt...', a sonnet with similar themes and imagery, but in the traditional Petrarchan mould. In Wyatt's poem the deer, or beloved, is ultimately unattainable, and the poem ends with the line 'Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am' (the Latin phrase meaning 'do not touch me'), which are the words inscribed on the collar around the deer's neck. In contrast, there is no Caesar, or competing lord, to whom the beloved is bound in Spenser's poem. In her very availability she thus becomes the site of a transforming discourse of love and desire in Spenser's poetry – a discourse in which the beloved is not just transformed from a remote and unrealisable object of desire, but, with a new mutuality and reciprocity that probably originates in Protestant thought, is hinted at as being herself a desiring subject.

This sonnet too uses the rhyme scheme abab bcbe cded ee, using the same three quatrains plus a couplet scheme, but unlike sonnet 34, it resists a thematic split into an octave and a sestet. Instead, being a poem less about a condition than an event, it lays out the movements of the event in three steps – the three quatrains – followed by a commenting couplet. The reversal typical to the Spenserian sonnet happens in the second quatrain itself, with the return of the 'deer', and her eventual willingness to be captured.

10.2.3 Sonnet 77

This sonnet borrows not from Petrarch but from another Italian poet who was also inspired by Petrarch, Torquato Tasso (1544-95), specifically his sonnet 'Non son si belli'. Tasso describes his beloved's breasts through two analogies – autumnal fruits and the legendary golden apples – but Spenser picks on only one of these in this sonnet, devoting another sonnet entirely (sonnet 76) to the other. In both 76 and 77, Spenser's intentions are not to describe physical beauty for its own sake, or as sexually stimulating and erotic, but to forge a connection between physical beauty and spiritual virtue, linking the erotic with the spiritual and the sacred. That is, he wishes to suggest that the beloved is so full of virtue and religious and moral purity, that even the sight of her breasts can only arouse in him an appreciation of these qualities in her, rather than simple physical desire. Hence the description of her breasts as

Exceeding sweet, yet voyd of sinfull vice,
That many sought yet none could euer taste,
sweet fruit of pleasure brought from paradice:
By loue himselfe and in his garden plaste. [ll. 9-12]

The reference to 'paradice' is multi-leveled, referring to the original sin and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (of sexuality), as well as suggesting that his beloved is Paradise itself embodied, with the understanding of Paradise here as that original state of 'man' when the sensual and the spiritual were not separate but fused. In this Spenser is deliberately attempting a fusion of the Platonic ideal (of ultimate beauty as lying beyond sensual perception), and Christian myths and values (such that the Platonic ideal of beauty may be perceived in the physical world by one sufficiently spiritual to not be overwhelmed by its sensual seductions). Spenser seems to be applying Reformation celebrations of conjugal sexuality as superior to celibacy, to the less strictly marriage-oriented Petrarchan frame of sensuality. The reference in the final couplet to the thoughts as guests at the table of his beloved is intended to communicate this detachment from the vagaries of an uncontrolled sensuality.

Like the other two sonnets, this sonnet too follows the rhyme scheme abab bcbe cded ee. There is a false rhyme between lines 4 and 5, for 'yvery' and 'royalty' are not true rhymes for 'ly' and 'hy'. This may suggest a dissonance between the quatrains, but it would not be true. Firstly, the overwhelming theme of the sonnet pre-empts any such dissonance, holding the poem together on the unlikely comparison of the beloved's breasts to a table laden with delicacies. Secondly, we must remember that such rhyme

patterns were intended to provide a totality of linked and related experiences. As such, false rhymes were a permitted poetic liberty, basing the rhyme on spelling rather than sound. We may therefore treat the rhymes as true ones and regard the three quatrains as part of a single experience, fusing the sensual and the spiritual or religious, rather than as discrete and disconnected parts of one event. Like sonnet 34, this one too describes a condition rather than an event (as in sonnet 67). However, more like sonnet 67, this sonnet too cannot therefore be split into an octave and a sestet.

10.3 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at some important aspects of the sonnet form and the traditions of courtly love poetry that influenced Spenser. We noted how the sonnet was in many ways the aptest literary vehicle for the articulation of a new conception of love that owed much to the Italian courtly love poets. Some of the important aspects of the courtly love tradition and their transformation in Spenser's poetry, along with the historical reasons for this, were also touched upon. We then examined some of Spenser's shorter poems in this light. We saw how they draw upon and yet diverge substantially from, earlier traditions of love poetry, especially the Petrarchan. We saw how they serve to illustrate not just the poet's unusual poetic skills and originality, but also the peculiar movement in the quality of passion in the sonnet sequence, from despair to comprehension to celebration. The formal analyses of the sonnets also revealed the ways in which Spenser managed to forge a new kind of English lyrical form. In the next unit we will examine two longer poems by Spenser, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*.

10.4 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. The courtly love tradition was in many ways formative of the poetry that was to follow the Renaissance poets, even if it was substantially modified by them. Do you agree?
2. In the three sonnets from the *Amoretti* by Spenser that you have read, what do you consider are the specifically Petrarchan elements? How does Spenser rework them, if at all?
3. The *Amoretti* sonnets by Spenser are replete with images of sensuality. What, in your opinion, do these communicate about (a) the poet; (b) his beloved; and (c) the age?
4. In sonnets 34, 67 and 77 of the *Amoretti*, Spenser explores a vision of love that is at odds with both the Christian and the Classical. Do you agree?

10.5 ADDITIONAL READING

1. Burrow, Colin, *Edmund Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996)
2. Cooper, Helen, *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance* (Ipswich: D.S. Brewer, 1977)
3. Dasenbrock, Reed Way, 'The Petrarchan Context of Spenser's *Amoretti*', *PMLA* 100, 1 (1985)
4. Ellrodt, Robert, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960)
Lewis, C. S., *The Allegory of Love*
5. Johnson, William C., *Spenser's Amoretti: Analogies of Love* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990).

patterns were intended to provide a totality of linked and related experiences. As such, false rhymes were a permitted poetic liberty, basing the rhyme on spelling rather than sound. We may therefore treat the rhymes as true ones and regard the three quatrains as part of a single experience, fusing the sensual and the spiritual or religious, rather than as discrete and disconnected parts of one event. Like sonnet 34, this one too describes a condition rather than an event (as in sonnet 67). However, more like sonnet 67, this sonnet too cannot therefore be split into an octave and a sestet.

10.3 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at some important aspects of the sonnet form and the traditions of courtly love poetry that influenced Spenser. We noted how the sonnet was in many ways the aptest literary vehicle for the articulation of a new conception of love that owed much to the Italian courtly love poets. Some of the important aspects of the courtly love tradition and their transformation in Spenser's poetry, along with the historical reasons for this, were also touched upon. We then examined some of Spenser's shorter poems in this light. We saw how they draw upon and yet diverge substantially from, earlier traditions of love poetry, especially the Petrarchan. We saw how they serve to illustrate not just the poet's unusual poetic skills and originality, but also the peculiar movement in the quality of passion in the sonnet sequence, from despair to comprehension to celebration. The formal analyses of the sonnets also revealed the ways in which Spenser managed to forge a new kind of English lyrical form. In the next unit we will examine two longer poems by Spenser, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*.

10.4 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. The courtly love tradition was in many ways formative of the poetry that was to follow the Renaissance poets, even if it was substantially modified by them. Do you agree?
2. In the three sonnets from the *Amoretti* by Spenser that you have read, what do you consider are the specifically Petrarchan elements? How does Spenser rework them, if at all?
3. The *Amoretti* sonnets by Spenser are replete with images of sensuality. What, in your opinion, do these communicate about (a) the poet; (b) his beloved; and (c) the age?
4. In sonnets 34, 67 and 77 of the *Amoretti*, Spenser explores a vision of love that is at odds with both the Christian and the Classical. Do you agree?

10.5 ADDITIONAL READING

1. Burrow, Colin, *Edmund Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996)
2. Cooper, Helen, *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance* (Ipswich: D.S. Brewer, 1977)
3. Dasenbrock, Reed Way, 'The Petrarchan Context of Spenser's *Amoretti*'. *PMLA* 100, 1 (1985)
4. Ellrodt, Robert, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960)
Lewis, C S, *The Allegory of Love*.
5. Johnson, William C., *Spenser's Amoretti: Analogies of Love* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990).