
UNIT 11 SPENSER'S POETRY - II

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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.

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 moniment' 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 heures' 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

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 cheryes charming men lo byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncrudded,
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.

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 sense is furthered when we recall

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 Themmes 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:

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 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

allusion is to the Roman classical myth of Jove and Leda, but it is used to suggest that the two daughters of Somerset were in fact more beautiful than Jove and Leda too.

The real significance of the poem, unlike the *Epithalamion*, lies less in its poetic achievements and more in its biographical value, as reflective of some of the pressures that Spenser the outsider to court politics must have had to face. The lines,

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 (stanza 1)

are unexpected as an opening to what is ostensibly a celebratory wedding song. Their very presence in a poem written in honour of his patron's friend suggest the anger and rejection that Spenser must have felt toward the entire system of patronage that was so important for a poet's – and in fact a courtier's – survival in the Elizabethan court. This sense of unhappiness arising out of unsatisfied career prospects is repeated again in stanza 8, as if the poet is unable to restrain himself

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:
But Ah here fits not well
Olde woes, but ioyes to tell...

The lord being referred to is of course, the late Earl of Leicester, Spenser's patron for many years. This reference suggests that it is the impersonality of the patronage system, in which one patron can and should replace another, that most bothers Spenser, and not perhaps the system itself. Whatever the truth, it is clear from these lines that the poem is as much about the poet's sense of unhappiness as it is about the wedding – in fact, the latter becoming a means and an occasion to air the former.

11.4 LET'S SUM UP

In the above unit, we studied two of Spenser's longer poems, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*. We examined not only the various poetic and cultural influences that went into the writing of these poems, but also how they come to reflect various aspects of his personal life, as much as aspects of Elizabethan England. We noted how Spenser establishes his uniqueness in blending Christian, classical and pre-Christian tribal lore in his poetry. This, as we noted, in many ways served as the training ground for the more ambitious fusions that Spenser was to attempt in his unfinished magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*. In particular, we noted the way these poems, the *Prothalamion* in particular, indexes the role of patronage and politics in the writings of the Renaissance English poets.

From our studies it is clear that the Spenserian period in English literature was a pioneering and formative one for it. Spenser's ability to fuse diverse poetic and discursive traditions brought into the corpus of English literature a set of possibilities that it was left to later poets to exploit and further – and this you will see especially in the study of John Milton's work.

11.5 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. In the *Epithalamion*, Spenser celebrates not just his wedding, but the aspirations and imagination of an entirely new class of people. Discuss.
2. Analyse, with reference to Spenser's *Epithalamion*, the fusion of classical and English mythology and legends. Do they, in your opinion, enhance the intention and effectiveness of the poem or distract the reader? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Compare and contrast the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion* as wedding songs.
4. The *Prothalamion* by Spenser is less a wedding song and more a complaint by the poet. Do you agree? Respond with specific reference to the poet's political and personal life.
5. Analyse the use of time and temporality in Spenser's *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion*.

11.6 ADDITIONAL READING

1. Ellrodt, Robert, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960).
2. Hamilton, A.C., et al, eds, *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of London Press, 1990)
3. Heatt, A. Kent, *Short Time's Endless Monument: The symbolism of the numbers in Edmund Spenser's 'Epithalamion'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960)
4. Loades, D.M., *The Tudor Court* (London: Batsford, 1986).