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Eng. 316

10/22/92

A Contextual Analysis of Selected Works by Edmund Spenser¹

Amoretti

Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,
Which hold my life in their dead doing might,
Shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,
Lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.

On the “idiot level,” we see here the author looking forward with joy to the day when his love shall hold the *Amoretti* in her own hands, hoping that the contents will be met with love.

With these opening lines of the *Amoretti*, Spenser presents us with an amalgamation of many aspects of the entire cycle: the natural element; the suggestion of the antithetical nature of the female persona; the physical and mental conformity of the female persona to the dictates of the Petrarchan convention; and also the application of decorative devices which add depth of meaning.

To begin, the pages of the work are referred to as “leaves”, thereby suggesting also that the work is a work of nature, and, in the best Platonic sense, therefore holding true not to the appearance of reality, but to the *essence* of reality. Also, the natural element is intensified by the metaphor “lilly hands”, which ren-

¹Less abridged than the previous offering.

ders the female persona an embodiment of nature, who is accordingly beautified and magnified.

And yet, with perfect conceit, there is something terrible about those dainty hands, for they hold the life of the lover in “dead doing might”. In this paradox then we see expressed the dichotomy of the Petrarchan female, who is both angelic and yet, by her haughtiness: shunning the affections of her lover, almost despicable. The disdain we typically find in the Petrarchan female is, though not overtly expressed, clearly implied by the power she possesses; and it is only by welcoming love, we see in line three, that her gentleness can take precedence.

To further reiterate this divine devil, imagery of battle, typical to the Petrarchan convention, is evoked. The leaves, which are, in this implicit and complex metaphor, also the lover, become captives, and the female persona the “victor”. The sentiment of reverential wonder here expressed contains, at its heart, an understanding of the terrible power of that cruel goddess, who could—though we know she will not—at any moment close her fist and crush those leaves to dust. Her power then—and we are of course speaking in the figurative sense—is nothing less than the power of life and death.

The paradox of “lilly hands” and “dead doing might” should also be noted, for here again we see an indication of the intrinsic paradox of the Petrarchan female.

Amongst the decorative devices, we see the use of polyptoton in “hands” and “handle”. Certainly there is here a utilitarian urging in the use of this particular device, for it allows for repetition—important to the musical quality of poetry—without being

actually repetitious, for we already find “hold” on line two and line three, and it is indeed a fine line that separates the rhythm of repetition from the boredom of repetition.

Epithalamion

Ah my deere love why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
T’awayt the comming of your joyous make,
And hearken to the birds lovelearned song,
The deawy leaves among.
For they of joy and pleasance to you sing,
That all the woods them answer & theyr eccho ring.

The narrative persona calls to his sleeping bride to awaken and partake in the joys of morning.

Here we see again the reference to nature, but now on a more concrete level than before, for now the narrative persona seeks not simply to connect nature with the text, but to actively *involve* nature. The birds then exist not symbolically, as do the leaves in the first sonnet of *Amoretti*, but they exist in their own right, and actively participate in the ceremony of the wedding. But of course, these birds embody a poetic truth as well, for they sing a “lovelearned song”. It might be suggested from this that the birds—an emblem of nature—are the teachers of poetry, the composers and singers from which the *Epithalamion* was scored. And their purpose in singing—though perhaps derived from natural inclination—is threefold: firstly to please, that the still sleeping lady awaken to their sound; secondly, they are themselves calling to their mates, implying a wooing and an eventual union; and thirdly, and more importantly, it is a **suppli-**

cation to all nature, as expressed in “all the woods”: that nature herself might join in and sing praise of the lady.

This stanza though has a more subtle purpose, for it makes a direct connection between the text and the reality it portrays, suggesting that they are inextricably bound. This is produced by the twofold meaning of “meeter”, which, concerning this correlative, is the “meeter” of the poem. The literal connection then is chronological, the poem itself ticking² away time, which actually passes in the reality it depicts; though there is by the very intimacy of that connection a suggestion that the scope is far more encompassing. It might even be suggested that Epithalamion and reality are essentially coupled in much the same way as the two lovers.

Much More than would ye wonder at that sight,
And stand astonisht lyke to those which red
Meduseas mazefull hed.

If we turn our attention firstly to the level of diction, we find that “red”, for the sake of rhyme, is being used as the past tense of “read,” though the actual meaning must needs be “saw.” Also, there is a good deal of word play: “Astonishedt” almost completely contains “a stone”—the state into which the unfortunates were transformed by the sight the beheld. “Madusaes mazefull hed” provides us not simply with the decorative effect of alliter-

²In the light of this obvious analysis, the numerological discovery so much discussed, namely that of Hieatt, might be likened to the finding of the proverbial needle lost in a haystack which was long since eaten by three hungry horses.

ation, but also suggests “amazing,” as well as suggesting a labyrinth like quality which might serve to misdirect those who try to understand, and thus overcome, the head’s power.

Before we can begin to understand the depth of meaning in this passage though, we must refer to the proceeding and succeeding lines. We are requested to see that which cannot be seen: “the inward beauty of her lively spright.” This spirit though is not complete in itself, but is, if we might cast a not entirely comfortable image, the castle—“There dwells”—of “sweet love and constant chastity”; where “virtue raynes as Queen”. Such a castle is undoubtedly in need of a protectress, and here we see the role of “Madusaes mazefull head.”

Medusa was, of course, one of the three monstrous sisters of myth, who lived beside the infernal regions. Her head, even after it’s ignominious removal, turned anyone who saw it into stone. After the amputation, it was fastened to Athena’s shield, where it served as protection.

Here Spenser makes similar use of it, for now it protects the Queen virtue and her courtly entourage of “sweet love”, “constant chastity” and “unspotted fayth”.³

Lay her in lillies and in violets,
 And silken courteins over her display,
 And odour sheetes, and Arras coverlets.
 Behold how goodly my faire love does ly

³It must be admitted that this reading ventures beyond the bounds of strict literal and even connotive meaning, and plods over the unsound grounds of associative sense.

In proud humility;

Like unto Maia, when as Jove her tooke,

Here we see an example of *contaminatio*: According to Greek mythology, Maia, daughter of Atlas, bore the god Hermes to *Zeus*. The god “Jove”, or Jupiter, was the *Roman* parallel of the Greek Zeus. Also “in Temp” refers to The Vale of Tempe, which was the scene where Apollo’s sought after Daphne, and has no connection either with Jove nor Maia. Likewise, the “Acidalian brooke”, mentioned later, was a fountain frequented by Aphrodite and the Graces.

To continue on the dreary path of research and “dictionary paging,” we might now turn our attention to the “lillies and violets”. It is only fitting that these flowers should form a symbolic bed for the female persona. Lillies, representing someone of great purity and whiteness, as they do; and violets, flowers of the genus *viola*, proffering a hint—or rather a note—of music; but also being *zygomorphic*: *zygo* meaning a union or presence of two different things.⁴ Further, violets, in the Catholic tradition, are sacred to the Virgin Mary and are symbolic of her humility. This then, in the Petrarchan tradition, is transformed, and we see our bride as a wife of humility and married chastity.

To turn, happily, from investigation to contemplation, we first notice the numerous instances of alliteration “Lay her in lillies”; “love does ly”; etc. In a sense, she is bedecked in these verbal ornaments as she is in flowers. Also, note the oxymoron of

⁴We shall pay no account to the similarity of violet and violate.

“proud humility”, which, like all good ornaments, suggests something regarding the nature of the object to which it is attached. If we see the *Epithalamion* as the happy conclusion of *Amoretti*, we might suggest that the damsel has retained some of her former Petrarchan pride; but now, having agreed upon the marriage, demonstrates the humility necessary in a wife. Also, the oxymoron succinctly announces that humility, like the marriage vow to “obey,” should not be equated with degradation, but that it brings with it a certain pride.⁵

⁵Please note: there are 42 paragraphs in this paper, each one representing one hour of reading, re-reading, re-re-reading and quiet pensiveness. The five pages correspond to the days of the work week, during which this paper was written. There are also several hundred dots and full stops, but they mean nothing.