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Spenser's sporting muse : The playful use of imagery in relation to the metamorphsis of the lover in Spenser's Amoretti.

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Chapter 5:

FROM THE SOLIPSISTIC TO THE INTERPERSONAL

According to A. Leigh DeNeef, the *Amoretti* "is essentially a dramatic poem in which an initially literal-minded lover learns to speak metaphorically" (77). The importance of metaphor as "a means of moving towards a more comprehensive understanding" of love is emphasized by Rufus Wood who states that metaphors provide the poet with

> the means of exploring his world in order to ascertain certain profound truths. The love-poet's duty is to understand *eros* fully and to do so he must utilize the conventional postures and conceits available to him, until love's multiple secrets have been divulged. …Metaphoric variety enables the poet to encompass the diversity of love, presenting composite perspectives in an effort to construct a kaleidoscopic vision with the versatility to shift and change like love itself. (13–15)

Both Wood and DeNeef comment on Spenser's use of metaphoric variety in the *Amoretti*. Wood, who views the development of the poet/lover's suit as "a process of metaphoric comprehension" rather than "a narrative event", maintains that any discernible progress in the relationship "takes place through the extension or transfer of metaphoric understanding" (19–20). His view is supported by DeNeef who asserts that "it is exactly [the poet/lover's] growing ability to perceive metaphorically that charts his progress within the sequence" (69).

Spenser begins the *Amoretti* by "firmly—even heavily-handedly" situating his poems in the Petrarchan tradition with the poet/lover and the lady in relative isolation from one another. As he "turns that tradition inside out, transforming it in a consistent direction and subjecting it to a searching critique" (Dasenbrock 46), there is a gradual movement towards a sharing of hopes and aspirations, before the poet/lover and the lady finally promise themselves to each other. The sense of their commitment to each other underlies the remainder of the sequence, which, according to Dasenbrock, "should be seen as a turn away from the restlessness of Petrachan love and toward the peace and rest Spenser finds in the sacred world of marriage" ("Petrarchan Context 46).

In the first twenty-one sonnets, the poet/lover actively assumes the stances of conventional courtship. However, his actions prove to be ineffective and he becomes increasingly desperate as the lady, presented as the cruel/fair, steadfastly refuses to show him favour. Throughout this section, the lady remains static, but we know from Am. 5, 8 and 21 that through her, the poet/lover is being trained and taught. Whilst his heart is thrilled and his tongue and thought stopped, he is learning to transcend the conventional dichotomies of favour and disfavour and is in the early stage of teaching his heart to speak.

The middle section, the Lenten sequence, is dominated by sonnets of blame and complaint as the poet/lover bemoans his suffering and protests against the lady's seemingly unjustified cruelty. This is, however, all part of the process by which the poet/lover purges both his heart and his art of those elements that render his love unacceptable to the lady and by means of which his heart finds its voice. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact turning point in the sequence, most critics discern a decisive change in the direction in which the relationship is heading after Am. 57. In the sonnets leading up to the betrothal in Am. 67 and the fulfilment that occurs in Am. 68, the emphasis on cruelty and suffering gives way to a mood of expectation and the poet/lover displays increasing confidence and assurance that the "long languishment" of the past year will soon be replaced by happier times in the "yeare ensuing" (Am. 60).

In the final section of the *Amoretti,* which depicts the poet/lover and the lady in a variety of situations as they anticipate their forthcoming wedding day, the true effects of transformation are seen and the poet/lover and his lady now become part of a truly interactive world. Beginning with the proud and triumphant celebration of the winning of the lady in Am. 69, these sonnets revive many of the images and motifs found in the earlier sonnets. However, as they appear in a new context, they also acquire new meaning.

In this study I have attempted to show how Spenser's playful use of the imagery linked to weaving, captivity and the eyes reflects the metamorphosis of the poet/lover in the *Amoretti.* As the preceding chapters focused largely on the use of imagery found in the first two sections of the sequence (Am. 1–21 and Am. 22–68), my intention in this concluding chapter is to look more closely at a selection of the poems found towards the end of the final section (Am. 69–89), paying particular

attention to the changes that have taken place and how the poet/lover's progression from the solipsistic to the interpersonal is registered in the imagery.

Throughout the sequence the lady has been praised for her fairness and in Am. 79, the poet/lover reconsiders this idea and comes to the conclusion that "trew fayre" is no longer to be found in the physical beauty of the lady, but rather in her "gentle wit" and "vertuous mind". While this notion has previously been suggested in Am. 15, there, "Her mind adornd with virtues manifold" was merely the "fairest" of her beauties, whereas in Am. 79, it excludes all others:

> Men call you fayre, and you doe credit it,
> For that your selfe ye dayly such doe see:
> but the trew fayre, that is the gentle wit,
> and vertuous mind, is much more praysd of me.

In Am. 33 the poet/lover attributed his inability to complete *The Faerie Queene* to the "troublous fit / of a proud love" that spoiled his spirits. By Am. 80 it appears that this conflict between love and creativity has been resolved, and the epic task, referred to in Am. 33 as "tædous toyle", has now become a source of strength and inspiration to the poet/lover, who asks leave to "sport [his] muse and sing [his] loves sweet praise".

Appropriately, in Am. 82, the poet/lover sings sweet praises to the lady. In the earlier part of the sequence, the poet/lover focused his attention almost entirely on his own circumstances, but in Am. 82, he considers his situation in relation to the lady and many familiar images reappear as he weaves himself into her praises:

> Joy of my life, full oft for loving you
> I blesse my lot, that was so lucky placed:
> but then the more your owne mishap I rew,
> that are so much by so meane love embased.
> For had the equall hevens so much you graced
> in this as in the rest, ye mote invent
> som hevenly wit, whose verse could have enchased
> your glorious name in golden moniment.
> But since you deignd so goodly to relent

to me your thrall, in whom is little worth, 10
that little that I am, shall all be spent
in setting your immortall prayses forth.
Whose lofty argument uplifting me,
shall lift you up unto an high degree.

[Am. 82]

The sonnet begins on a very positive note as the poet/lover remarks on his own good fortune, suggested by the references to “blesse”, “lot” and “lucky”, in being “placed” so that he could love the lady. This contrasts strongly with the lady’s “mishap” in being “by so meane love embased”. As the “Joy of [his] life”, the lady inspires the poet/lover, her willing “thrall”, who declares that he will compensate for his unworthiness, suggested by his repetition of “little” in lines 10 and 11, by giving himself completely to her praises (“all be spent”).

Mixed with his own sense of unworthiness is the poet/lover’s playful boasting about the power of his poetry to immortalize and uplift the lady. His use of the pronoun “your” in line 11 is important as it signifies a movement away from self-enclosed complaint to a recognition of her true worth and engagement with the real person.

In the couplet, the “lofty argument” not only lifts the lady “up unto an high degree”, but also uplifts the poet/lover, both in the sense of raising his spirits to the joyful state described in the opening lines, as well as elevating him in fame as a poet.

Am. 85, in which the poet/lover addresses the outside world about the lady’s worth calls to mind his earlier defence of her pride in Am. 5 and demonstrates just how far he has come from being pained with “unquiet thoughts” breeding “of th’inward bale of [his] love pined hart” (Am. 2). Previously, his tongue was stopped “with thoughts astonishment” (Am. 3), but now, inspired with “heavenly fury”, he looks into his heart and his “glad mouth” is filled with “her sweet praises”.

In the first two quatrains, the poet/lover counterattacks, rather than simply defends, against the world’s criticism of his poetry:

The world that cannot deeme of worthy things,
when I doe praise her, say I doe but flatter:
so does the Cuckow, when the Mavis sings,

begin his witlesse note apace to clatter.
But they that skill not of so heavenly matter,
all that they know not, envy or admyre,
rather then envy let them wonder at her,
but not to deeme of her desert aspyre.

The third quatrain, with its reference to his "parts entyre", recalls Am. 6 where the poet/lovers "parts intire" were said to contain a "deepe" wound. In Am. 85, however, his "parts entyre" serve as a "closet" wherein the lady's "worth is written with a golden quill." In Am. 82 the poet/lover spoke of the lady's "glorious name" being "embased" by "hevenly wit" in "golden moniment", but in this sonnet, the "golden moniment" is the poet/lover's heart and it is his "golden quill" that will write her name. Whether the world chooses to envy the lady or to be in wonder of her, his poetry and his praise of her will triumph:

Deepe in the closet of my parts entyre,
her worth is written with a golden quill:
that me with hevenly fury doth inspire,
and my glad mouth with her sweet prayses fill.
Which when as fame in her shrill trump shal thunder,
let the world chose to envy or to wonder.
[Am. 85]

Traditionally, Elizabethan sonnet sequences end with the lady's rejection of her lover and the subsequent separation of the two. While the poet/lover and his lady are placed in the conventional position of being apart in the three concluding sonnets of the *Amoretti*, there is no evidence of rejection in these poems, and the poet/lover and his lady remain betrothed.

In Am. 87, the poet/lover laments the absence of his beloved. Without her, the temporal world is unsatisfying and his languor and sadness are conveyed both by the references to the "weary dayes" that he has "outworne" and the distortion of time that occurs:

Since I did leave the presence of my love,
Many long weary dayes I have outworne:
and many nights, that slowly seemd to move
theyr sad protract from evening until morne.
For when as day the heaven doth adorne,
I wish that night the noyous day would end:
and when as night us hath of light forlorne,
I wish that day would shortly reascend.
Thus I the time with expectation spend,
and faine my griefe with chaunges to beguile,
that further seemes his termes still to extend,
and maketh every minute seeme a myle.
So sorrow still doth seeme too long to last,
but joyous houres doo fly away too fast.

[Am. 87]

He continues the theme in Am. 88, where the reference to "light" in the opening quatrain echoes the earlier suggestion in Am. 34 that the lady transforms the poet/lover's world:

Since I have lackt the comfort of that light,
The which was wont to lead my thoughts astray:
I wander as in darknesse of the night,
affrayd of every dangers least dismay.

In the second quatrain, the metaphoric associations of light with comfort, and darkness with dismay, become literal as he contrasts the "shadowes vayne" seen by others with "th'onely image of that heavenly ray" which he holds in his mind's eye. In Am. 83 the poet/lover observed that "All this worlds glory seemeth vayne to me, / And all theyr shewes but shadowes saving she", and in this sonnet, where even on the clearest day he cannot see, his situation appears to be very similar to what it was in Am. 83, when his eyes, "so filled with the store / Of that fayre sight, that nothing else they [could] brooke":

Ne ought I see, though in the clearest day,
when others gaze upon theyr shadowes vayne:
but th'onely image of that heavenly ray,
whereof some glance doth in mine eie remayne.

He finds solace in her absence by contemplating the "Idæa playne" in his "purest part". While this does not fully satisfy him in the same way as her presence does, the image sustains him:

Of which beholding th' Idæa playne,
through contemplation of my purest part:
with light thereof I doe myselfe sustayne,
and thereon feed my love-affamisht hart.

'Sustaining' not only has etymological links with 'holding', thus connecting it to the imagery of captivity, but also points to the nourishment motif that has been associated with the lady since the very beginning of the sequence. In Am. 1 the poet/lover referred to the lady as his "long lacked foode" and now, in the penultimate sonnet, the very thought of her feeds his "love-affamisht hart". Although the lady's "light" provides some relief and the poet/lover's "plenty" does not make him "pore" as it did to Narcissus in Am. 83, it does little to feed his body. Consequently, the final line of the poem finds him in darkness, just as he was at the beginning:

But with such brightnesse whylest I fill my mind,
I starve my body and mine eyes doe blynd.
[Am. 88]

In Am. 89, the closing sonnet, the poet/lover confirms that nothing but "her owne joyous sight" will bring him comfort. His sadness and loneliness as he waits for her return are reflected in the desolate scene and the winter images that abound in the poem:

Lyke as the Culver on the bared bough
Sits mourning for the absence of her mate:

and in her songs sends many a wishfull vow,
for his returne that seemes to linger late.
So I alone now left disconsolate,
mourne to my selfe the absence of my love:
and wandring here and there all desolate,
seek with my playnts to match that mournful dove.
Ne joy of ought that under heaven doth hove
Can comfort me, but her owne joyous sight:
whose sweet aspect both God and man can move,
in her unspotted pleasauns to delight.

The comparison of the poet/lover to a mourning dove is significant. Not only does the dove have associations with gentleness, but it also symbolizes the Holy Spirit, which, as part of the Holy Trinity, is "with you always, until the end of the world". This reinforces the idea that the poet/lover is mourning a temporary absence and that the late lingering of line 4 will lead ultimately to the lady's "returne".

While the poet/lover in these final sonnets appears to be suffering almost as much as in many of the earlier sonnets, his pain and protest is directed at the outside world, and not, as before, at the lady, whose return he eagerly awaits. In the opening sonnet, sight of the lady, "that Angels blessed looke" was referred to as his "heavens blis". Now, the word "blis" appears for the final time in the very last word of the *Amoretti*:

Dark is my day, whyles her fayre light I mis,
and dead my life that wants such lively blis.
[Am. 89]

Although the sequence culminates in absence and darkness, it is, in a sense, not the end. The "starry light" of Am. 1 will return, and the poet/lover and his lady will be united in the marriage that is celebrated in the *Epithalamion.*