English 125
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Tina Wu

<u>Love Overheard</u>

by Tina Wu

Spenser wrote his *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* under the tradition of Petrarchan lyric poetry. However, he, like other writers, adopted and adapted Petrarch's sonnet to create something unique, simultaneously noting the past and inventing new approaches. How is Spenser's *Amoretti* different from Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*? What does Spenser take from Petrarch's precedent, and how does he make the sonnet form his own? Louis Martz suggests in "Amoretti" that Spenser alters the relationship between the speaker and his lady. While Petrarch's speaker is seriously doleful about his unrequited love, Spenser's speaker is more like an older man approaching a young lady with affection and admiration. This speaker participates in the conventional Petrarchan laments, but does so with an "extravagant exaggeration of the conventional poses… [that] strike me as close to mock-heroic" (807). Martz argues that Spenser deliberately adds to his sonnets a touch of "humor, parody, or comedy… a light touch" (807). In "The Petrarchan Context of Spenser's Amoretti," Reed Way Dasenbrock goes further, suggesting that in addition to affectionate humor, Spenser's sonnet sequence turns "away from the restlessness of Petrarchan love and toward the peace and rest… [of] the sacred world of marriage" (46). In this way, Spenser reinvents the Petrarch's tradition. Instead of shunning earthly love for the holier Virgin Mary, Spenser's speaker embraces earthly love in holy marriage.

Both these arguments shed light on the way Spenser responds to Petrarch's precedent, but they are, in themselves, insufficient. Beginning with the very first sonnet of the *Amoretti*, we

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already see a question that begs addressing. Amoretti 1 begins with the speaker's envy of those "happy leaves… happy lines… [and] happy rymes" that are so lucky to have the lady's attention. "Leaves, lines, and rymes, seeke her to please alone, / Whom if ye please, I care for other none," the speaker continues. Spenser's speaker is remarkably different from Petrarch's speaker in Rime 1. Both Spenser and Petrarch's speakers seem to be looking back from having finished writing their sonnets. They acknowledged the "leaves, lines, and rymes" or "rime sparse" 'scattered rhymes' that they are about the present. However, while Spenser's speaker continues to be devoted to his lady, Petrarch's speaker has already moved on. "[D]el mio vaneggiar vergogna è 'l frutto, / e 'l pentersi": 'shame is the fruit of my vanities / and remorse,' Petrarch begins his sonnet sequence apologetically. Why is Petrarch's speaker in Rime 1 a reformed voice, while Spenser's is unapologetically unchanged?

Dasenbrock's argument that the *Amoretti* results in a praise of earthly love and of the holiness of marriage, suggests that perhaps Spenser's speaker has nothing to be apologetic about; after all, his love for his lady, unlike Petrarch's love, is acceptable. This explanation, however, necessarily leads to a further conundrum. If Spenser's speaker here is looking backwards with full knowledge of the subsequent sonnets and the changes in his relationship with the lady -- i.e. that he pursues her, wins her love, and ultimately marries her -- why is his voice unchanged? He may not be apologetic like Petrarch's speaker, but we would expect him to be altered in some way because, like Petrarch's speaker, the external circumstances of his life have changed.

To address this question, we begin by analyzing the speaker's relationship to the reader and to the lady in Spenser and Petrarch's sonnets. Amoretti 1 addresses "happy ye leaves;" the speaker is speaking not to the readers, but to the actual sonnets that he has written. Furthermore, he specifically dedicates them. "[S]eeke her to please alone," he instructs his poems. The

speaker is fully aware that the lady will read these sonnets, and that they are written for her audience only; we readers are simply eavesdroppers. Therefore Spenser specifies from the very beginning that the sonnet sequence is a message from a lover to his beloved. In contrast, Petrarch's speaker addresses "voi ch'ascoltate in rime sparse il suono": 'you who hear the sound, in scattered rhymes.' The speaker acknowledges a third party, independent of himself and his lady, and he acknowledges his own reputation as "Ma ben veggio or sí come al popol tutto / favola fui gran tempo": 'an old tale among all these people.' Instead of addressing his beloved Laura, who most likely does not even know that he exists, Petrarch's speaker introduces his sonnet sequence to a third party of readers. Furthermore, his description of his poetry as "quei sospiri ond'io nudriva 'l core":'those sighs on which I fed my heart' acknowledges only his own experience. He makes no mention of Laura, other than the fact that she is a continued inspiration.

Simply in closely observing the two first sonnets of Spenser and Petrarch's sonnet sequences, we already notice the different purposes of the *Amoretti* and *Rime Sparse*. The *Amoretti* is a message to the beloved lady of the speaker; the *Rime Sparse* is a record of the speaker's personal experience, inspired by the beloved lady. Naturally, the differences between the sonnet sequences are reflected in the individual sonnets themselves.

In Spenser's sonnets, the lady is given a voice; she participates with and engages the speaker. This is most obvious in sonnets like Amoretti 18, which actually refers to the lady's words and responses. "But when I pleade, she bids me play my part, / And when I weep, she says tears are but water: / And when I sigh, she sayes I know the art / And when I waile, she turns herself to laughter." However, the lady also engages the speaker even when she is not speaking, even when it seems that she does not notice the speaker noticing her. In Amoretti 16

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for example, the speaker admires the beauty of his lady's eyes. He describes the "deadly arrowes" that fly out of them, piercing the unaware onlooker with love. "When suddenly with twinkle of her eye, / The Damzell broke his misintended dart. / Had she not doon, sure I had bene slayne, / Yet as it was, I hardly scap't with paine," the speaker recounts. Louis Martz uses both sonnets to show how the lady and the speaker seem to interact playfully, "smiling and good-humored" (805). However, even the very fact that they interact at all is extremely important. By showing how the lady responds to the speaker, Spenser presents a second voice. Although we literally only hear the speaker's voice, the lady's voice is delivered through his representation of her. Therefore, the sonnets read not as one voice crying out to a void, but as two voices conversing with each other.

In fact, as Spenser's *Amoretti* progresses, the lady's voice becomes clearer and more distinct. At the beginning of the sequence in Amoretti 16, quoted above, the speaker only speculates on the intention and engagement of the lady. By Amoretti 18, quoted above, the speaker records her actual responses, or rejection of his advances. Then, as the sequence continues, the lady's words are actually quoted. In Amoretti 29, the speaker says, "'The bay,' quoth she, 'is of the victors borne.'" Now she is not only represented through the speaker's voice, she has her own distinct voice; she no longer speaks through the speaker, but through herself. Finally, by the end of the sequence, in Amoretti 75, for example, Spenser literally records the poet and lady's conversation. "'Vayne man,' sayd she, 'that doest in vaine assay / A mortall thing so to immortalize…' / 'Not so,' quod I, 'let baser things devize / To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame.'" By the end of the sonnet sequence, Spenser's *Amoretti* presents two distinct voices conversing with each other.

This is remarkably different from Petrarch's speaker, who never gets the opportunity to

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engage Laura, and who presents only his own voice and experience. In Rime 202, Petrarch laments that "D'un bel chiaro polito et vivo ghiaccio / move la fiamma che m'incende et strugge, / et sí le vène e 'l cor m'asciuga et sugge / che 'nvisibilmente i' mi disfaccio": 'The flame that burns and destroys me / flows from lovely clear smooth living ice / and so drains and dries the veins and heart / that I melt away almost invisibly.' The speaker recounts his personal experience of loving the lady, revealing the irony that the heat of his passion arises from someone who is clear and smooth like ice. But because this speaker has no access to the lady, the irony necessarily stops here, and the speaker moves on to use other metaphors to describe his experience.

Spenser adopts Petrarch's metaphor, but he reforms it to fit his own sonnet sequence. Whereas Petrarch can only devote one stanza, Spenser can devote an entire sonnet to this particular irony. The relationship between fire and ice that he presents is much more complicated because his speaker's relationship with the lady is more involved. Spenser's speaker says that his love who is like ice "harder growes the more I her intreat," and he wonders "what more miraculous thing may be told, / That fire which all thing melts, should harden yse: / And yse which is congealed with senselesse cold / Should kindle fyre by wonderfull devyse?" In Spenser's poem, not only is the flame responding to ice -- the irony that Petrarch writes about -- but the ice also responds unexpectedly to fire. Here, Spenser uses Petrarch's original metaphor, but he adds a dual relationship, an interaction between fire and ice, that is quite in tune with the dual nature of the entire sonnet sequence.

Spenser's revising of Petrarch's poetry is also seen in the description of the lady's hair. In Rime 59, one of the many sonnets in which Petrarch admires Laura's hair, the speaker says, "Tra le chiome de l'òr nascose il laccio, / al qual mi strinse, Amore": 'Love hid that noose he caught me with / among that golden hair.' For Petrarch, the golden hair is an inspiration, a tool that Love

uses. The speaker admires Laura's golden hair from afar and falls into Love's trap, but she is completely unaware of her hair and its effect on her admirer. There is no interaction between the poet and the lady. However, in Amoretti 37, Spenser's speaker says that his lady "doth attyre under a net of gold: / And with sly skill so cunningly them dresses." Instead of Love, *she* is the one casting the trap; "She may entangle [men's eyes] in that golden snare." Spenser, unlike Petrarch, gives his lady agency. Whether or not she is actually aware of her suitor, the speaker writes about his lady as if she were aware of him. By doing so, he gives her a distinct character, one that is quite unlike the removed Laura, who is only a tool used by another agent, Love. Spenser revises Petrarch's removed admiration of his lady's hair and makes it more engaging to fit the particular relationship between poet and lady that he creates in the *Amoretti*.

For Spenser, the entire sonnet sequence is a record of the interaction between the poet and the lady, dedicated to the lady. Christopher Miller, in his lecture on lyric poetry, quotes J.S. Mill, saying that the lyric is an "overheard prayer." [1] But if Petrarch's lyric is an overheard prayer, Spenser's lyric is decidedly different. Spenser reinvents the lyric tradition, making it more of an overheard courtship. The speaker first approaches the lady, speculates on her awareness of and engagement with him, then slowly and increasingly interacts with her, and finally develops a relationship or a continued conversation with her. In this context, it is necessary for Spenser to revise Petrarchan *topoi* like the irony of lovers like fire and ice, and the attraction of the lady's golden hair.

Furthermore, if the *Amoretti* is an overheard courtship, then it is appropriate that Amoretti 1 presents a voice that is unchanged, one that continues to express eagerness to be with the lady. Courtship implies that the speaker has not yet obtained the object of his affection, and it would be unexpected for a series of courtship poems to be introduced by a speaker who has

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[1] Miller, Christopher. "Plenary Lecture: Early Modern Lyric." *English 125*. Yale University, 10 November 2005.

already married his lady. Spenser recognizes this and thus ends his last sonnet, Amoretti 89, with the poet still longing for his lady.

By the end of the sonnet sequence, however, the relationship between the speaker and the lady has outgrown the *Amoretti*. The relationship ends in the sacredness of marriage, for which the sonnet form is no longer suitable. For marriage, Spenser must choose a new form, the *Epithalamion*. By making the *Amoretti* a series of courtship, instead of an overheard prayer, and by separating the *Amoretti* from the *Epithalamion* marriage song, Spenser shows that not only can he use the tradition created by Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* and present it in a new manner, he can even surpass it.

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