

## “Her cruell hands”: Love as Predation in *Amoretti*

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Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence *Amoretti* has long been considered a personal love song, addressed to his second wife to be, Elizabeth Boyle, whom the poet got married later. And perhaps that is why the work has not received as much attention from the critics as *Shepheardes Calender* or *The Faerie Queene* did, for if the work were dealing only with Spenser's private love affair within the convention of sonnet writing, the sequence would hardly be more than a small work of sonnets, which Louis Martz meticulously defines as "intimate little tokens of love made out of ancient materials deriving, primarily, from Italy" (128). Careful examination of the sonnets, however, reveals that the work shows more facets and complexities than critics comfortably put a single label on. Spenser's sonnet sequence has, like Shakespeare's sonnets, many different faces that demand our careful attention.

H. S. V. Jones is among the earlier critics who suggest that the work may have no direct relationship with *Epithalamion*, the marriage celebration published together with *Amoretti* in 1595, and therefore the lady in the sonnets may not necessarily be Elizabeth Boyle. He contends that Spenser did not initially mean to publish the two works together, because "the sequence, concluding with the separation of the lovers, does not lead up easily to the marriage hymn" (336). Except for the fact that the lady's name in the sequence is Elizabeth, he concludes, we do not know for sure who this lady is (337). J. W. Lever also points out that in *Amoretti* the presentation of the lady is not coherent and insists that the work is a blend of two different collections of sonnet: "There are at least some eighteen sonnets best considered apart from the main group. All these relate to the experience of the scorned lover" (120).

Martz admits the existence of Lever's eighteen odd sonnets where the lady is portrayed as a cruel warrior and explains that "these are done with such extravagant exaggeration of the conventional poses that they strike me as close to mock-heroic" (128). However, since we do not know for certain the date and circumstances of each sonnet of the sequence, except for the fact that Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle (Kellogg 139), it is quite difficult to accept that she is the only lady in *Amoretti*. Especially, when we consider the fact that Spenser actually has in mind three women who bear the name Elizabeth as he declares in Sonnet 74, it becomes more probable that there are more than one lady presented in the sequence:

The first my being to me gave by kind,  
 from mothers womb deriv'd by dew descent,  
 the second is my sovereigne Queene most kind,  
 that honour and large riches to me lent.

The third my love, my lives last ornament,  
by whom my spirit out of dust was raysed.<sup>1)</sup>

The third Elizabeth may be Elizabeth Boyle, and most of the sonnets in the sequence seem to be addressed to her.<sup>2)</sup> But the other two Elizabeths also appear as objects of admiration and of unrequited love in the work. We can say that Queen Elizabeth I plays particularly an important role in the sequence when we consider Spenser's relationship with the queen and the publication date of the poem. And it is my contention that a significant part of the work deals with the poet's struggle to acquire her love or her favour. This issue will be discussed later in this paper.

The first Elizabeth is the poet's mother, of whom we practically know nothing but her name.<sup>3)</sup> The poet, however, includes her name as an inspiration to his composition of the sequence, and thus she must be a significant figure to whom he addresses at least some love songs. Sonnet 78, for example, can be understood most properly when we regard the lady in the poem as the poet's mother. The sonnet is full of child-mother images. The narrator portrays himself as "a young fawne" who is seeking for his mother: "Lackyng my love I go from place to place, / lyke a young fawne that late hath lost the hynd: / and seeke each where, where last I sawe her face, / whose ymage yet I carry fresh in mynd" (78). After realizing that he cannot find her in this world, the poet decides to see her image in himself: "let my thoughts behold her selfe in

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1) The primary text is the Yale edition of the *Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* edited by William A. Oram et al., and further citation from the text will simply be identified with sonnet numbers.

2) However, while scholars like Helena Shire believe that the lady is surely Elizabeth Boyle (31), Jones insists that the lady in the sonnet is Elizabeth Carey (336-38).

3) James Russell Lowell states that "nothing is known of [Spenser's] parents, except that the name of his mother was Elizabeth" (29).

mee" (78). It is not impossible that here the narrator presents the beloved lady as a motherly figure and that the sonnet is dealing with his struggle after she has left him. Nevertheless, the image of motherless young fawn adopted here clearly points back to "mothers womb" in Sonnet 74, and it makes a better sense that the poet has his mother in mind even when he is seeking for erotic love.

The second Elizabeth, the queen, is undeniably the most important object of admiration and praise for the poet throughout his adult life. It is well-known that Spenser was from the middle class and struggled to become a member of the queen's court. He has published a pastoral, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and an epic, *The Faerie Queene*, in order to praise the monarch on the one hand and to criticize her court and its members on the other, so as to exercise his influence somehow upon the queen. As Kenneth Gross explains, however, it was not easy for the poet to attain what he had hoped for:

An English Protestant writer in war-ravaged Catholic Ireland, Spenser became the unofficial, unpatronized, and often disapproved of prophet of Elizabeth's *imperium* while helping to administer one of her government's most unstable and often ill-conceived colonial policies. The ironies of such a situation might help account for his apparent ambivalence toward the activity of poetic (as well as political) representation, his wariness of idealizations, the combination of alienation and devotion with which he renders his subjects, the willfulness and reticence of his tropes. (79)

The annual fifty pound he received from the queen after the publication of *The Faerie Queene* was "surely the largest reward she was ever to give for a poem" (Oram 514). Yet Spenser obviously wanted more than the pension. Jonathan Goldberg's comment upon *Epithalamion* may sum up the poet's attitudes towards the queen's court:

Throughout his career, Spenser acted as if he were a failure, as if he never got what he wanted. The world without was hostile. This poet filled a wedding song with lamentations about the lack of generosity of those in power; he wrote bitterly satiric allegories about corrupt courts. (173)

Indeed, it is not difficult to find in *Amoretti* the elements that can be interpreted as an expression of the poet's bitterness for not having been received in the queen's court as he thought he deserved. He cannot put a blame on the monarch, so he accuses her counsel.

In Sonnet 85, the poet severely attacks those people in the world who criticize him because they are jealous of his talent:

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.

So he retires "Deepe in the closet" and "her worth is written with a golden quill." He is expecting that sooner or later his effort would be recognized by the lady. When the time comes, the poet concludes, those that chose to envy rather than wonder would regret: "Which when as fame in her shrill trump shal thunder / let the world chose to envy or to wonder."

What is the most interesting, however, is that the queen is presented mostly as a scornful fighter, cruel warrior, and often greedy predator, while the poet is an ineffectual wooer, peace-seeking hostage, and helpless prey. The pain of unrequited love or of a scorned lover lies at the heart of the sequence. To the poet, love is a game that is extremely lopsided and unfair. But he has to play this game because he cannot survive without his lady's love, which is seen as

essential nourishment to him. Thus, predation becomes an important metaphor that illustrates the peculiar relationship between the poet and the lady he loves. Closely related to the dramatic development of the sequence, the poet's struggle to deal with the lady's cruelty constitutes a central part of our experience of the poem.

The poet's love for the lady is embodied not only in his admiration of her physical nature but also in his adoration of her power.<sup>4)</sup> He calls the lady his "soules long lacked foode" in Sonnet 1, and in Sonnet 35 he compares his yearning for her love to hunger: "My hungry eyes through greedy covetize, / still to behold the object of their paine." This particular food, however, never provides contentment, and the poet's dilemma lies in the paradox that he cannot live without this food of love, but at the same time he will starve for more if he tastes it. He acknowledges that he is in no-win situation:

For lacking it they cannot lyfe sustayne,  
and having it they gaze on it the more:  
in their amazement lyke Narcissus vaine  
whose eyes him starv'd: so plenty makes me poore. (35)

The same idea is repeated towards the end of the sequence when Sonnet 83

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4) As we have seen that Spenser ardently admired the sovereign beauty of the queen both in *The Shepherdes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene*, the lady in the sonnets, especially when she is portrayed with utmost power, may as well be the queen. Theresa M. Krier maintains that the queen often becomes St. Mary figure in Spenser: "Spenser himself was foremost among English Protestant writers who adapted the Virgin's Cantic-derived, vernal imagery to representations of Belpheobe and Amoret in *The Faerie Queene* and of Eliza in the "Aprill" eclogue of *the Shepherdes Calender*, then to the poetic praise of Queen Elizabeth—a delicate transposition of Mary's maternity from Catholic to Protestant forms of thought" (297).

duplicates Sonnet 35 except for a single word.<sup>5)</sup> The duplication not only emphasizes the poet's dilemma, but suggests that he ultimately fails to solve it until the end of the sequence.

Since the lady does not respond to the poet's desire, as he suggests in Sonnet 2, his "Unquiet thought" of love is fed only with "sighes and sorrowes." It is noteworthy here that he compares his love for her to brooding "vipers," who eventually break forth from inside to "sustayne thy selfe with food." When we consider that the vipers are said to devour their mother as they grow up, the self-destructive nature of unrequited love becomes apparent.

Ironically, however, whereas the poet considers her love as nourishment of his soul and longs for it, he himself becomes a prey for the lady. Unlike conventional mistresses who are usually passive and reluctant, the lady of *Amoretti* is aggressive and manipulative in responding to the poet's love. In Sonnet 11, for example, the poet describes her as a "cruell warriour," who "the weary war renew'th" and "greedily" pursues him to take his "poor life," while everyday he does "seeke and sew for peace, And hostages doe offer." He tries to deal with the lady's anger, begging her to show mercy and to "graunt small respite to [his] restless toile." But his endeavor turns out to be useless as she keeps tormenting him, and his pain becomes endless:

Yet my poore life, all sorrowes to assoyle,  
I would her yield, her wrath to pacify:  
but then she seekes with torment and turmoyle,  
to force me live and will not let me dy.  
All paine hath end and every war hath peace,

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5) The duplication may be considered as Spenser's negligence or mistake, but it may well be a part of the poet's intention. Martz calls it "a designed reminiscence and recurrence of an earlier mood of pining and complaint" (124).

but mine no price nor prayer may surcease.

She is sometimes presented as an unscrupulous beast that does not hesitate to taste the blood of "a yielded pray" as we can see in Sonnet 20. The poet seeks "for grace" and offers his "humbled hart before her," but "the whiles her foot she in my necke doth place, / and tread my life downe in the lowly floure." She is no lion, the poet complains, for "the Lyon that is Lord of power" would "disdeigneth to devoure / the silly lambe that to his might doth yield." The lady is compared to the imperial predator, and the poet is to an innocent prey "with guiltlesse blood." Joan Curbet points out that "In the medieval bestiaries—for instance, the English bestiaries compiled in 1346 and 1372, presently held in the Bodleian library in Oxford—the lion's life is seen as an extended allegory of the life of Christ" (3). Then, the lady portrayed here is someone who should be a lion but acts the opposite of it. The poet's complaint continues.

In Sonnet 31, the lady becomes not only cruel but a cunning beast that attracts preys to devour them. Most of the predators, the poet acknowledges, have a "dreadfull countenance" so that other animals may run away "to shun the daunger of theyr wrath,"

But my proud one doth worke the greater scath,  
 through sweet allurement of her lovely hew:  
 that she the better may in bloody bath,  
 of such poore thralls her cruell hands embrew.

Her cruelty in torturing him is further depicted through the images of panther in Sonnet 53. The way she uses her physical beauty to capture him is compared to the way "Panther" displays "his spotted hyde" to let other animals "gaze whylest he on them may pray." According to a Latin bestiary, Pliny the Elder's



*Naturalis Historia*, panthers are cunning animals: "It is said that all four-footed animals are wonderfully attracted by their smell, but frightened by the savage appearance of their head; for which reason they catch them by hiding their head, enticing them to approach by their other attractions" (qtd. Curbet 7). The Old English physiology, however, presents the panther as "Christ Himself, and the fragrance that issues from his mouth is the good tidings of the Resurrection that attracts men" (Crossley-Holland 281). It seems that Spenser follows the Latin portrayal of panther in the poem, but he is surely aware of the imperial nature of the animal when he states:

Great shame it is, thing so divine in view,  
made for to be the worlds most ornament:  
to make the bayte her gazers to embrew,  
good shames to be so ill an instrument.

Here, appearance betrays reality. She looks divine, yet she behaves like a cruel temptress.

In Sonnet 56, the poet goes one step further and presents the lady as a "Tygre" that preys upon a weak animal that happens to fall in its grasp:

Fayre ye be sure, but cruell and unkind,  
As is a Tygre that with greedinesse  
hunts after bloud, when he by chance doth find  
a feeble beast, doth felly him oppresse.

She is merciless in her treatment of the poet, whom she "do wreck, doe ruine, and destroy." Curbet explains the sonnet: "the beloved is now fully characterised as a predator, and at this point, the cumulative force of the various

metaphors through which she has been represented is enough to prevent the reader from taking this one as a mere commonplace" (8). Indeed, the various presentations of the lady as predators—the viper, lion, panther, and tyger—suggest that the poet's love for the lady cannot be obtained and he is in no-win situation.

Harry Berger Jr. suggests that the "instances of one-sided development in early phases" is for the lovers to have "more appropriate phase of relationship" later (10). Kathleen Williams also contends that "the growth of concord between lovers who are warriors, tyrants, hunters, traitors, is the theme of *Amoretti* and many a sonnet sequence" (109). It is true that there are many instances that show the poet's happiness as the lady responds favorably to his love. As we can see in Sonnet 39, her "Sweet smile" becomes nourishment to the poet: "More sweet than Nectar or Ambrosiall meat, / Seemd every bit, which thenceforth I did eat." In the same way, the poet seems to present himself as a winner of the game when he praises her beauty in Sonnet 77: her body is compared to a dinner table with "juncats" or to "a silver dish" with "two golden apples" on it. The poet's happiness, however, does not last. Behind her smile and bodily beauty lie her cruelty and brutality, and to the poet the realization of the difference between appearance and reality again comes with bitterness. Then, the idea that Spenser's sonnet sequence maintains a continual development towards a union of the two lovers is rather difficult to accept.

The lady's sweet smile turns out to be a bait to capture him. In Sonnet 47, he painfully acknowledges his own naivety in trusting her smile:

Trust not the treason of those smyling lookes,  
until ye have theyr guylefull traynes well tryde:

for they are lyke but unto golden hookes,  
that from the foolish fish theyr bayts doe hyde.

The image of fishing clearly illustrates the poet's ironical situation, in which he becomes an easy prey for her because of his own hunger for her love. The poet says that she kills her victim "with cruell pryde, / and feeds at pleasure on the wretched pray."

It is interesting to see that the lady in the sequence is mostly described as a meat-eater, which contrasts to the poet's image as a plant-eater. Indeed, the lady is an efficient hunter: she is skillful in catching her game and resolute in killing it. The poet, on the contrary, is a very poor huntsman. Although he is eager, he never succeeds in catching his prey. In Sonnet 23, for example, the poet's labor to get her attention is compared to "the Spyder web," which is easily broken "with least wind."

Sonnet 67 also shows how ineffectual the poet is as a huntsman:

Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace,  
Seeing the game from him escapt away:  
sits downe to rest him in some shady place,  
with panting hounds beguiled of their pray.  
So after long pursuit and vaine assay,  
when I all weary had the chace forsooke,  
the gentle deare returnd the selfe-same way,  
thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.

Curbert calls this "the key sonnet," pointing out that the role of the poet and the lady is reversed (10). The speaker, who has been cast as a victim or prey, becomes now the hunter, and according to Curbert,

Such a reversal coincides with the sudden anthropomorphic bent of the tropes: the speaker is now representing himself as a human hunter. Certainly, such a humanisation is essential to the whole content of the poem: what is being narrated here is, in fact, the re-situation of the speaker himself within his vital environment, and the recovery of his full human dignity as a sign of his new understanding of that environment. (8)

However, considering his incompetence as a hunter, who "all weary had the chace forsooke," it is quite hard to accept that he recovers "his full human dignity." Instead, we should say that the poet remains naive while his lady is dynamically changing her roles from that of predator to that of prey. When he confesses that "Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld, / so goodly wonne with her owne will beguyld," what we can clearly see here is the poet's feelings of bewilderment and anxiety. He often fails to see what lies behind the appearance of things and is disappointed or becomes an object of mockery. And when he thinks he gets what he pursues, it turns out to be a bait, and he becomes the captive.

Thus, not long after we see that the poet finally catches his game in Sonnet 67, we find him again in captivity within the lady's artistry. In Sonnet 71, he enjoys watching the lady's drawing for embroidery. In the drawing, she compares herself to "the Bee" and him "unto the Spyder that doth lurk, / in close awayt to catch her unaware." Although the poet seems to be convinced that she is "caught in cunning snare / of a deare foe, and thralld to his love," it is in reality the poet himself who is captived within the lady's drawing. He is simply assuming that the bee caught in the spider's web in the drawing would be the lady. Considering, however, that the spider conventionally represents the female and the bee the male and that they have predator-prey relationship, we can easily see that the poet's understanding of the situation is mistaken and

therefore the "eternal peace" between "the Spyder and the gentle Bee" is only his wishful thinking and will never be realized.

This becomes obvious when we examine Sonnet 73, where the poet presents himself as a captived bird "that in ones hand doth spy / desired food, to it doth make his flight." This image of a bird flying to the captor's hand for seeds, together with the image of fish biting a bait and the image of an innocent animal attracted to the panther's colorful hide, effectively and consistently portrays the poet's role as a victim or an ineffectual lover.

In a sense, however, the poet is happy in captivity. As Leigh A. Deneff maintains, the poet's captivity here is "neither destructive nor delimiting; it is instead a guarantee of safety and productivity if correctly viewed" (70). The point, then, lies in whose captivity the poet would feel secure and productive. Patrick Cheney states:

Throughout *Amoretti*, Spenser provides evidence for defining the sonnet sequence as a careeric gesture—as a series of Petrarchan poems in which a poet fictionalizes his attempt to unite with a beloved in order to advance, ritualistically, a nationally significant literary career. (166)

Even if we accept Ted Brown's suggestion that the speaker in the sequence may be "just one of many poetic tools artfully employed by Spenser" (407), we cannot indeed eliminate the possibility that the lady in *Amoretti* is, at least in part, the queen.

As we can see in Sonnet 77, the poet is content to be near her, admiring her beauty, feeding his mind with imagination. Even when he becomes furious because of her betrayal of his love, he cannot really conceal his love for long. Therefore, when the poet concludes the sonnet sequence with a confession that,

no matter how cruel and manipulative she may be, he simply cannot live without her, we see a man who completely gives himself up to love. In Sonnet 88 the poet states:

Of which beholding th'Idaea playne,  
 through contemplation of my purest part:  
 with light thereof I doe my selfe sustayne,  
 and thereon feed my love-affamisht hart.  
 But with such brightnesse whylest I fill my mind,  
 I starve my body and mine eyes doe blynd.

The poet now seems to experience a certain satisfaction in his soul while his body is starved to death. Does his love become completely spiritual so that he is satisfied only with the thought of love? Or is he desperately trying to get over the pain of being separated from his love? We probably cannot answer these questions with any certainty.

However, later in *Epithalamion* when we see "greedy pikes" feeding upon other fish and "the wyld wolves" seeking for their preys, the imagery reminds us of the poet's situation in *Amoretti*. The bridegroom's use of predatory images in describing his bride also suggests that the narrator of *Epithalamion* looks back *Amoretti* as he celebrates his final victory—the marriage. The poet may be successful in obtaining his love with the beloved lady after all; nevertheless, to Spenser his longing for the monarch's favor remains unrequited. As Brown points out "Spenser's effort to achieve social legitimacy through letters led him to conceive of and produce the *Amoretti* as a public document, an utterance and artifact demonstrating his bona fides as a writer of one of the most popular and competitive poetic forms of the time" (404). And it is probably the poet's attempt to present himself as a scorned lover to the queen and/or to those that

hold power in Elizabeth's court that makes the sonnet sequence such an extravagant complaint, rather than a personal love song. Spenser wanted to display his talent in letters, and *Amoretti* would certainly provide him with pride and dignity, if not the queen's love.

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Abstract

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Although Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* has long been considered the poet's personal love song for his second wife to be, Elizabeth Boyle, it is quite difficult to accept that she is the only lady in the poem. Especially, when we accept the fact that Spenser actually has in mind three women who bear the name Elizabeth as he declares in Sonnet 74, it becomes more probable that there are more than one lady presented in the sequence. Among the three ladies that the poet mentions, Queen Elizabeth I plays particularly an important role in the sequence when we consider Spenser's relationship with the queen and the publication date of the poem. And it is my contention that a significant part of the work deals with the poet's struggle to acquire her love or her favour. It is not difficult to find in *Amoretti* the elements that can be interpreted as a manifestation of the poet's bitterness for not having been received in the queen's court as he thought he deserved.

The most interesting thing is that the queen is presented mostly as a scornful fighter, cruel warrior, and often greedy predator, while the poet is an ineffectual wooer, peace-seeking hostage, and helpless prey. The pain of unrequited love or of a scorned lover lies at the heart of the sequence. To the poet, love is a game that is extremely lopsided and unfair. But he has to play this game because he cannot survive without his lady's love, which is seen as essential nourishment to him. Thus, predation becomes an important metaphor that illustrates the peculiar relationship between the poet and the lady he loves. Closely related to the dramatic development of the sequence, the poet's struggle

to deal with the lady's cruelty constitutes a central part of our experience of the poem.

Spenser's longing for royal favour is reflected in the relationship between the poet and the lady in *Amoretti*, and it is probably the poet's attempt to present himself as a scorned lover to the queen and/or to those that hold power in Elizabeth's court that makes the sonnet sequence such an extravagant complaint, rather than a personal love song.

Key Words

Spenser, *Amoretti*, sonnet sequence, Queen Elizabeth, predator