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Femininity in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*

Ženskost v Amoretti Edmunda Spensera

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 8 August 2018

Prohlášení

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V Praze dne 8. srpna 2018

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ABSTRACT (ENG)

This thesis focuses on Edmund Spenser's sonnet cycle the *Amoretti* with the aim of highlighting the manner in which its treatment of the Lady of the Sonnet (in this case inspired by Spenser's second wife Elizabeth Boyle) differs from the common tendencies exhibited by other Petrarchan sonneteers – specifically, that she is allowed to play a comparatively more active role in the cycle's narrative and engage the speaker more directly, that her personality and opinions are defined with greater clarity, and overall that she displays an atypical amount of independence, considering the genre she appears in. For the purposes of proving this point, two other works were selected for comparison: *Canzoniere* (also known as *Rime sparse*) by Francesco Petrarch, the so-called “Father of the Sonnet” whose poetry established numerous defining traits of the love sonnet tradition, and *Delia* by Samuel Daniel, whose cycle excellently illustrates the conventions eventually understood as “Petrarchan” in Elizabethan England (which originated from Petrarch's successors as often as from the man himself).

Crucial claims this paper discusses are, firstly, that the Lady as Spenser portrays her does not defy her admirer primarily through her “heart of flint” and passive refusal of his advances (as was the standard approach), with her destructive “power” stemming largely from the emotional turmoil she causes in the lover and his inability to stifle *or* satisfy his own passions. Elizabeth is shown to intentionally utilise various kinds of subterfuge or – should that fail – even direct and violent actions against the *Amoretti*'s speaker. These situations are often described through the manipulation of relatively common conceits. These scenes, while not exactly flattering, result in fashioning a Lady with a decidedly more defined character than either Laura or Delia.

And secondly, the lover and the beloved do eventually manage to negotiate relationship terms which are acceptable for both of them, upon which they consummate their relationship and agree to marry. While there have been numerous attempts to reform or

transcend Renaissance Petrarchism, Spenser's solution appears to be relatively unprecedented, as he joins his characters in what is repeatedly stressed to be a companionate and harmonious relationship based on "mutual good will". Spenser's portrayal of this supposedly thoroughly reciprocal bond is not without its faults, as significant part of it still hinges on the "taming" of the Lady and enforcing the speaker's artificial superiority, yet the effort *itself* seems very much sincere. Several sonnets even concern the Lady's own worries, such as her fear that marriage will only be a prison for her, or her anxieties about her own fragility and impermanence. And while Spenser's portrayal of this is once again imperfect, it also once again, suggests that the Lady in the *Amoretti* is truly viewed as an essentially a complete person, with her own joys, anxieties and opinions.

ABSTRAKT (CZE)

Tato práce je zaměřena na cyklus sonetů *Amoretti* od Edmunda Spensera s cílem upozornit na způsoby, kterými se jeho pojetí Dámy sonetu (v tomto případě volně inspirované Spenserovou druhou manželkou Elizabeth Boylovou) liší od tendencí obvykle projevovaných ostatními petrarkovskými básníky. Konkrétněji řečeno, v porovnání s typickými Dámami hraje Elizabeth ve Spenserově sbírce aktivnější roli, na mluvčího reaguje příměji, její osobnost a názory jsou jasněji definovány a všeobecně projevuje větší samostatnost, než se v daném žánru dá obvykle předpokládat. Za účelem prokázání výše zmíněného byla vybrána k porovnání dvě další díla: *Zpěvník* (také známý pod názvem *Canzoniere* a *Rime sparse*) Francesca Petrarky, takzvaného „Otce sonetu,“ jehož poezie posloužila jako základní kámen mnoha fundamentálních aspektů tohoto žánru, a *Delia* Samuela Daniela, jehož básnická sbírka skvěle ilustruje konvence, které se později považovaly za standardní u petrarkismus alžbětinské Anglie (přestože pocházely zrovna tak často od pozdějších petrarkistů jako od Petrarky samotného).

Hlavní argumenty, kterými se tato studie zabývá, jsou zaprvé, že Dáma sonetu ve Spenserově podání nevzdoruje svým obdivovatelům primárně svým „srdcem z kamene“ a pasivním odmítáním jejich návrhů, a její ničivá „moc“ nepramení převážně z citové bouře, kterou vyvolává ve svém milovníkovi (a z jeho následné neschopnosti své vášně potlačit či uspokojit). *Amoretti* vyobrazuje Elizabeth jako schopnou a ochotnou vědomě využít všemožné lsti a úskoky, nebo – pokud by tato možnost selhala – se dokonce uchýlit i k přímé a násilné konfrontaci s mluvčím. Tyto situace někdy bývají zpodobňovány za pomoci manipulace relativně zavedenými metaforami. A ačkoliv tyto výjevy nejsou právě lichotivé, jejich výsledkem je Dáma s o poznání výraznější povahou, než jakou se mohou chlubit Laura nebo Delia.

A zadruhé, milovníkovi a milované se nakonec podaří navázat vztah, jehož pravidla jsou přijatelná pro ně pro oba, což nakonec vyústí v jeho fyzické naplnění a společnému rozhodnutí uzavřít svazek manželský. Ačkoliv se o překlenutí nebo reformu petrarkismu pokusil ne jeden básník, Spenserovo řešení sjednotit svůj pár ve vztahu, který je s opakovaným důrazem popisován jako harmonický a založený na „vzájemné dobré vůli,“ je v zásadě bezprecedentní. Spenserovo vyobrazení tohoto ideálně oboustranného pouta není zdaleka dokonalé – nezanedbatelná část vztahu stále závisí na „zkrocení“ Dámy a umělé nadřazenosti mluvčího – avšak Spenserova *snaha* o jeho vyobrazení se zdá upřímná. Několik sonetů se zabývá i starostmi Dámy samotné, například strachem, že pro ni manželství bude jen vězením, nebo obavami souvisejícími s pomíjivostí jejího smrtelného těla. A přestože Spenserův zvolený způsob vykreslení této situace opět není ideální, i přesto znovu naznačuje, že na Elizabeth z *Amoretti* by mělo být nahlíženo jako na samostatně existující osobu s vlastními radostmi, strachy i názory.

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INTRODUCTION

AFTER so long a race as I haue run
Through Faery land, which those six books compile
giue leaue to rest me, being halfe fordonne,
and gather to my selfe new breath awhile.
When as a steed refreshed after toyle,
out of my prison I will breake anew:
and stoutly will that second worke assoyle,
with strong endeuour and attention dew.
Till then giue leaue to me in pleasant mew,
to sport my muse and sing my loues sweet praise:
the contemplation of whose heauenly hew,
my spirit to an higher pitch will rayse.
But let her prayes yet be low and meane,
fit for the handmayd of the Faery Queene.¹

“Even those who admire Spenser’s sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti*, often hedge their admiration”.² Thus begins Reed Way Dasenbrock his paper detailing Edmund Spenser’s Petrarchan tendencies in the aforementioned sonnet cycle. Indeed, his collection of love sonnets was for a long time considered a very minor work and received only marginal critical attention compared to his other writing.³ Spenser himself, however, appeared quite fond of the *Amoretti*, and admitted that working on it refreshed his spirits when his more serious literary efforts drained him.⁴ His “muse” and eventual wife Elizabeth Boyle,⁵ presumed to be the

¹ Edmund Spenser, *Renascence Editions: Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1996) 80, *The University of Oregon* <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/amoretti.html>>.

All poems referenced in this thesis are for greater ease of reading denoted using their number within their respective collections instead of page number. For similar reasons, while the content of both *Delia* and the *Amoretti* is organised with the use of Roman numerals, they are marked here by Arabic digits.

² Reed Way Dasenbrock, “The Petrarchan Context of Spenser’s *Amoretti*,” *PMLA* 100.1 (1985): 38, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462199>>.

³ Joan Curbet, “EDMUND SPENSER’S BESTIARY IN THE ‘AMORETTI’ (1595),” *Atlantis* 24.2 (2002): 41, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055069>>.

Dasenbrock 38.

⁴ Spenser 80.

⁵ Zhengshuan Li and Jiancheng Wang, “Love in Spenser’s *Amoretti*,” *Advances in Literary Study / SciRes* 2.1 (Jan 2014): 27-30, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/als.2014.21006>>.

primary addressee of the sequence and its main character (less so due to any wealth of available information in favour of the idea than the absence of evidence to the contrary)⁶, does not appear to have left any indication of how she perceived her own portrayal within the collection. Her later marriage to Spenser indicates, if nothing else, that she was not gravely offended.

Spenser's treatment of the Lady of the Sonnet (and, by extension, his treatment of gender as such) is rather unusual within the world of conventional Petrarchism. The Ladies other sonneteers admire (usually while suffering in the distance) tend towards passivity and immovability, while she is often portrayed as active. The speaker within Spenser's sonnets regularly compares his beloved to various animals, utilizing the combined symbolism of the classical and mediaeval tradition to define her as both sacred and terrible at once. Spenser's Lady doesn't burn the lover with the overwhelmingly bright light of her beauty and virtue – she intentionally deceives men to sing her praises while her hands are drenched in blood. This directness was hardly usual for Spenser's contemporaries or for the Petrarchan tradition as such, but is typical for the *Amoretti*. At the same time, Spenser's Lady is allowed to act with greater agency and admitted more personhood than is usual within the tradition. Her personality is more clearly defined, her preferences acknowledged.

The *Amoretti* describes the lover's attempts at dialogue and negotiation with his beloved, failed and successful, and, eventually, the formation of a (supposedly) loving relationship between the Lady and the speaker – all with a combination of humour, unexpected touches of verisimilitude and lifelike characterisation of the Lady hardly found anywhere else⁷. While scholarly texts examining the *Amoretti* in depth used to be relatively scarce, possibly as a result of the once-common assumption that its differences from

⁶ William C. Johnson, "Gender Fashioning and the Dynamics of Mutuality in Spenser's *Amoretti*," *English Studies* 6 (1993): 503-504.

⁷ Johnson 504-505.

conventional Petrarchism were mere failures to conform or perhaps demonstrated Spenser's lack of understanding regarding the genre's specific appeal,⁸ there has eventually emerged a significant body of work arguing that the collection in fact represents Spenser's attempt to criticise or transcend the Petrarchan tradition.⁹ The sonnet cycle has been interpreted, among other things, as intentionally mirroring *Canzoniere* and showcasing this transcendence by presenting the development of a functional companionate relationship based on the values of Elizabethan Protestantism, with the Protestant ideal of mutual married love providing the ennobling spirituality Petrarch himself could begin to approach only after Laura's death.¹⁰ The *Amoretti* can also be read as representing the speaker's supposed ascent up the Neoplatonic ladder, in direct contrast to the unfulfilled passions troubling other sonneteers. Overall, it is not difficult to view the lover's and the beloved's relationship as initially turbulent yet slowly developing into a harmonious union.

But for every Petrarchan convention Spenser appears to break, there is another he upholds as thoroughly as any other Elizabethan Petrarchist (differing only in the fact that he may have arrived to his destination along a less-treaded path), or invents an entirely manner in which to undermine his own message. His innovations within the love sonnet tradition are often incomplete or ambiguous, easily called into question yet difficult to confirm or disprove: the beloved's atypically active and aggressive opposition to the lover's interest, and the lover's repeated failures to defend himself against his "fayre cruell's" onslaught can be viewed as the Lady's "liber[ation] from the fixed patriarchal order which would confine her to the role of a hardly-present passive observer,"¹¹ just as easily as they could present the

⁸ Dasenbrock 38.

⁹ Another way to view the *Amoretti* is as "a self-designed command performance" within the bounds of a popular genre with the goal of advancing Spenser's career as a poet – in which case its less typical traits become primarily an exercise in wit and skill. (Ted Brown, "Metapoetry in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*," *Philologyn Quarterly* 82.4 (Fall, 2003): 401-402, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/289610>>.) But this approach, while certainly valid and worth acknowledging, contributes very little to the subject of this essay, and therefore the attention devoted to it will be marginal.

¹⁰ Dasenbrock 39.

¹¹ Johnson 508.

speaker's "disingenuous rhetoric of masculine submission that conceals the will to dominate"¹² (criticisms of the mutuality later proclaimed to exist between the couple generally follow along similar lines of perceiving the speaker's statements as hypocritical at best).¹³ Spenser's faithfulness to Neoplatonic ideals can also be called into question, as sexuality is very much present in the speaker's and the Lady's relationship, and their physical love depicted as a joyful and desirable event, when a true Neoplatonist's perception should be solely spiritual¹⁴. And finally, the unambiguously positive but also deeply one-sided depiction of physical love within marriage appears to find only questionable support in the notions of Protestantism popular during Spenser's life.¹⁵

Yet through redefining his Lady and the speaker's relationship with her, Spenser still appears to offer a unique and genuine attempt at reforming and reshaping the Petrarchan tradition through his work. His Lady of the Sonnet is still extraordinary and her treatment very often runs quite contrary to what one can be lead to expect within the majority of other cycles. For the purposes of illustrating this, Spenser's work will be compared to the sonnet cycle *Delia* by Samuel Daniel (whose collection is immensely useful in its relative conventionality for the time period), *Canzoniere* by Francesco Petrarch himself, and marginally to the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt in an instance when Daniel fails to offer useful material for comparison.

¹² John Campana, *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability and Ethics of Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 174.

¹³ Melissa E. Sanchez, 'Modesty or comeliness': the predicament of reform theology in Spenser's Amoretti and Epithalamion," *Renaissance: Essays on Values in Literature* 65.1 (2012): 5.

¹⁴ Patrick Cheney, "'And Doubted Her to Deeme an Earthly Wight': Male Neoplatonic "Magic" and the Problem of Female Identity in Spenser's Allegory of the Two Florimells," *Studies in Philology* 86.3 (Summer, 1989): 324, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174341>>.

¹⁵ Dasenbrock 49.

CHAPTER 1: THE LADY IN CONTEXT

If one is to argue about Petrarch and his ilk, it is first necessary to define the terms and grounds on which one does so. Despite Joseph Campana's quite fitting accusation that poetic works featuring classic Petrarchan lovers "always seem to be about something other than love or the beloved",¹⁶ there was a specific and only partially flexible set of conceits that poets were expected to observe – the very fact that they chose to write about love in the form of a sonnet was a statement of an implicit agreement to adhere to its established *topos*¹⁷. This related both to the description of the narrator's inner suffering and (of course) its proclaimed source – the Lady.

It is probably a fair assumption that the term "Lady of the Sonnet" conjures up a very specific image in the minds of most readers, even those with little enthusiasm for love poetry: the Lady is an ethereal being with "tresses [like] the golden ore", hands and skin the colour of "ivory white",¹⁸ eyes filled with "light [which shows] the way that leads to Heaven"¹⁹ and possibly speaks or sings with an "angelically sweet" voice²⁰. This poetic ideal of a blond, bright-eyed, pearl-toothed woman with snow-white limbs and rose-red lips has (with a few exceptions)²¹ changed relatively little over time, with some of the conceits dating as far back as Ancient Greece,²² and later being famously utilised by Francesco Petrarch in his

¹⁶ Campana 169.

¹⁷ M. B. Ogle, "The Classical Origin and Tradition of Literary Conceits," *The American Journal of Philology* 34.2 (1913): 126, *JSTOR* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/289610?>>.

¹⁸ Samuel Daniel, *Elizabethan Sonnet-Cycles – Delia* (2006) 19, *The Project Gutenberg* <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18842/18842-h/18842-h.htm>>.

¹⁹ Francesco Petrarch, trans. A. S. Kline, *The Complete Canzoniere* (2001) 72.

²⁰ Petrarch 63.

²¹ Sidney's Stella, for example, has dark eyes. Later, of course, Shakespeare's notorious Dark Lady subverts most of these expectations altogether, but this particular case shall be excluded from analysis here, as the subject is a broad one, and has been explored many times by scholars infinitely more accomplished than myself. While dark eyes were apparently treated as similarly desirable in some periods of Italian, Spanish and French love poetry, the "reign of the blonde" blue-eyed beauty in English poems was apparently continuous and undisputed. (Ogle 126.)

²² Ogle 126-127.

Canzoniere/Rime sparse and by various European poets²³ seeking to emulate him²⁴. It bears mentioning that Renaissance poets were much more inclined to seek their inspiration within the so-called *in vita* part of the *Canzoniere*, while *in morte* (sonnets which “take place” after Laura’s untimely death) was largely overlooked²⁵ to the point of not receiving an English translation until the nineteenth century.²⁶ And even within *in vita*, the vast majority of attention was focused on approximately a dozen specific sonnets, the rest gaining only marginal recognition.²⁷ Therefore, due to the relatively stable selection of ubiquitous and easily identifiable conceits and imagery, most superficial aspects of the Petrarchan ideal are likely to need little other introduction.

Yet it would be an immense disservice to the skill of Petrarchan poets to act as if the image of the Lady is merely a sum of beautiful parts which need to be praised in specific pre-approved terms. One of the Lady’s key traits in the Petrarchan sonnet (apart from her beauty) is how deeply and utterly overwhelming it is to exist in the same reality as her, let alone in her immediate vicinity. “Take counsel from me,” Petrarch’s Laura advises and warns from her seat in the heavens,

[...] take counsel,
for I have greater powers than you know:
and create joy or sadness in a moment,
more swiftly than the wind,
and rule and watch while the world turns.²⁸

²³ Ernest H. Wilkins, “A General Survey of Renaissance Petrarchism,” *Comparative Literature* 4.2 (Autumn, 1950): 329, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1768389>>.

²⁴ Although their tradition is considered “Petrarchan”, many English sonneteers owe equal or greater debt to other Petrarchans, rather than the man himself. (Anthony Mortimer, et al., *Petrarchism in England* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 15; Wilkins 338-339.)

²⁵ Mortimer, et al. 27.

²⁶ Dasenbrock 41.

²⁷ Mortimer, et al. 18, 27.

²⁸ Petrarch 325.

In *Canzoniere*, Petrarch recalls many a time how one simple gaze upon his Lady's face utterly destroyed him and bound him to the torturous path of chasing after an unrequited love for what would presumably be the rest of his life. "Love discovered me all weaponless,"²⁹ he writes of his first meeting with Laura. "Alas for me, I saw my ills too late."³⁰ Yet as much as Petrarch's speaker bemoans the pain his Lady's immovable heart supposedly brings him, even to the point of regularly begging for the merciful release of death, he claims he cannot bring himself to entirely regret that their paths crossed: "My own thoughts struggle against me: [...] yet I do not pray for my freedom, / since all other roads to heaven are less true"³¹. In this manner he reveals another crucial aspect of the Lady's presence: her beauty, holiness and virtue are so overpowering to her admirer that he cannot separate himself from her by his own will, regardless of how much remaining close to the object of his affections hurts him, and, in fact, cannot even force himself to desire the separation in the first place. In his famous Sonnet 19, Petrarch describes his passions thus:

There are creatures in the world with such other
vision that it is protected from the full sun
[...]

and others with mad desire, that hope
perhaps to delight in fire, because it gleams,
prove the other power, that which burns:
alas, and my place is with these last.³²

Daniel utilises a different metaphor in his Sonnet 5 to convey the same inner conflict – he is refused by his "goddess chaste", yet his own thoughts continue to harry him:

²⁹ Petrarch 3.

³⁰ Petrarch 89.

³¹ Petrarch 29.

See also Sonnet 59: "despite grief or death, / I do not wish Love to loose me from this knot [of Laura's golden hair]."

³² Petrarch 19.

Which turned my sport into a hart's despair,
Which still is chased, while I have any breath,
By mine own thoughts set on me by my Fair.
My thoughts like hounds pursue me to my death;
Those that I fostered of mine own accord,
Are made by her to murder thus their lord.³³

Remaining in the proximity of the target of his devotion is just as impossible as leaving – the speaker’s mind cannot help but betray its own master, painfully and violently, supposedly as the Lady’s accomplice.

Petrarch’s Sonnet 19 highlights another highly characteristic trait of the traditional love sonnet – describing the Lady in the terms of overwhelming elemental imagery. His Laura is indirectly compared to a scorching noon sun, burning her admirer and causing his eyes to become infirm³⁴ – though not with any obvious intent on her side, but rather by consequence of his aforementioned inability to let go of her *or* peacefully exist in her unbearably affecting presence. Fire is an extremely prominent motive in Petrarchan sonnet: Kline’s translation of *Canzoniere* contains the word “fire” 77 times,³⁵ “flame” 23 times (plus 12 additional instances of the word “inflamm”), a variation of “bright” 39 times and “burn” entire 105 times – considering the whole collection consists of 366 poems, the idea becomes not only unavoidable but deeply engraved into the reader’s mind.³⁶ Daniel’s sonnets to Delia mostly follow suit, if not in the precise proportion of usage regarding the individual terms (the word “burn” appears only 4 times, for example), then in ensuring the motive is nearly omnipresent, with 42 of these terms per 64 sonnets (including the so-called “rejected sonnets”). Celestial

³³ Daniel 5.

³⁴ Petrarch 19.

³⁵ Excluding the table of contents, naturally.

³⁶ And there are undoubtedly several other combustion or light-related terms not accounted for – the terms tracked were chosen arbitrarily in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of the fire motive (or potentially lack thereof), and specific numbers are mentioned only in order to illustrate this point, not as an attempt at an exhaustive compilation of relevant phrases.

imagery is also an extremely popular choice: “sun” (which handily combines the image of fire and a heavenly body) appears in *Canzoniere* 119 times. Often, the Lady’s eyes are shown to be the locus of her incredible power, depicted as anything from sweet lanterns bright with virtue³⁷ to terrible instruments which have the power to wound or kill in a single moment³⁸. The Lady’s heart is also, depending on the poet’s preference, as cold as “unyielding ice”³⁹ (more popular with Petrarch) or as hard as stone (Daniel usually refers specifically to flint)⁴⁰.

Now enter Edmund Spenser with his sonnet sequence the *Amoretti*. It would be incorrect to say that Spenser specifically avoids established Petrarchan imagery: one needs to look no further than Sonnet 3 (“the light wherof hath kindled heauenly fyre, / in my fraile spirit by her from basenesse rayseed”), 7 (“Fayre eyes [...] the which both lyfe and death forth from you dart”), 8 (“More then most faire, full of the liuing fire”) or 30 (“My loue is lyke to yse, and I to fyre”). Several literary critics noted how “oddly”⁴¹ the overt Petrarchism of some of the poems sits with the rest of the *Amoretti*, to the point of theorising the collection actually contains two different sequences (or even three)⁴² or that several sonnets should be excluded due to their unfitting and “almost parodically Petrarchan” style.⁴³ Humorously enough, there seems to be little consensus on which precisely these hyper-Petrarchan sonnets are, with the specific lists differing drastically among the critics – eventually leading R. W. Dasenbrock’s to suggest that the “conventional Petrarchism [must be] more diffused throughout the early sonnets in the sequence than [the] critics recognise,” although even he seems to agree that most of these are, in fact, in the earlier half of the *Amoretti*.⁴⁴ All of the aforementioned approaches are later specifically called into question by Heather Dubrow, who insists that not

³⁷ Petrarch 106.

³⁸ Petrarch 95.

³⁹ Petrarch 66.

⁴⁰ Daniel 11.

⁴¹ Dasenbrock 46.

⁴² Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Cornell University Press, 1995) 81, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g5n1>>.

⁴³ Dasenbrock 45-46, 49.

⁴⁴ Dasenbrock 46.

only are strong Petrarchan tendencies present throughout the entirety of the sequence, but many of them are an almost inevitable result of any attempts at anti-Petrarchism.⁴⁵ This discord within the criticism of the *Amoretti* underlines a deeper issue that while there appears to be a general agreement on sonnet cycle being in some manner atypical when viewed through the lens of the Petrarchan tradition, the specifics of *how* still appear to be a highly contentious topic.

Spenser's treatment of the Lady is definitely one of the keys, however. Despite the fact that Spenser does utilise the typical imagery of Petrarchism, his – to draw on a previous example – relative density of fire-related comparisons is decidedly lower than can be observed in Petrarch or Daniel: in a 90-poem sequence there are mere 25 mentions of fire or flame, 5 of burning, alongside 5 instances of the word “bright” or “brightness”. The Sun, crucial as it was for Petrarch, is mentioned precisely once throughout the entire sequence, and only twice indirectly through “sunshine”.⁴⁶ This presents a marked diversion from the previously established trend: barely over a third of the poems in the *Amoretti* should in theory contain some reference to fire, which is a drastic decrease from either Daniel's (still relatively restrained) two thirds, let alone Petrarch's utter ubiquity of the motive. The remaining sonnets still feature the speaker's thoughts on the Lady and himself in relation to her, however, so the “absent” fire imagery must have been replaced by something else.

While fire is curiously underutilised in the *Amoretti*, a partially related term garners almost as much attention from Spenser – “light”⁴⁷. Upon a closer examination, a pattern emerges: fire, the Sun or light often seem to provide Petrarch and Daniel with an easy shorthand for the Lady's unique beauty and divinity and the highly destructive manner in

⁴⁵ Dubrow 78.

⁴⁶ Spenser 40.

Several alternative spellings of each term were taken into account.

⁴⁷ Appears in the *Amoretti* 18 times, 5 times in *Delia* and 93 times in *Canzoniere* (excluded were instances where the term was used to mean “easy” or “light-weighted”).

which her presence affects the speaker at the same time, but there is quite often little division between them. This is easily demonstrated on the previously mentioned Sonnet 19 (“There are creatures in the world with such other / vision that it is protected from the full sun,”) as it concerns itself almost entirely with the double-edged nature of the Lady’s blazing light, a sun so bright it both attracts and wounds – yet the pattern repeats itself throughout the entire *in vita Canzoniere*:

Wandering sparks of my life,
angelic, blessed, from which delight takes fire,
that consume me and sweetly destroy me:
as every other light
must flee and vanish before your splendour,
so with my heart,
when such great sweetness descends within,
all other things, all thought must go,
and only Love remains there with you.⁴⁸

Rime 72 presents a typical Petrarchan paradox of conflating holiness with something which nevertheless consumes and destroys. The same light which is blessed, angelic and may inspire growth wherever it falls⁴⁹ is also the light which burns all those possessed by “mad desire” who approach it too closely. Daniel, meanwhile, once uses the motive of light as a way of referring to the Lady within an extended metaphor,⁵⁰ but little of note beyond that.

Yet Spenser himself seems to have comparatively little use for such a combination of ideas. The sweet, divine yet terrible flames of his “fayre cruell”⁵¹, while not completely omitted (as should be obvious from the sonnets deemed “parodically Petrarchan”), they generally tend towards a separation of positive and negative aspects until the burning Sun is

⁴⁸ Petrarch 72.

⁴⁹ See Petrarch 125: “‘Here the wandering light fell.’ / Whatever herb or flower I cull / I think that it has its roots / in this earth, where she used to walk.”

⁵⁰ Daniel 21: “If beauty thus be clouded with a frown, / That pity shines no comfort to my bliss, / And vapours of disdain so overgrown, / That my life's light wholly indarkened is.”

⁵¹ Spenser 49.

robbed of its power over life and death to transform into the merely sweet and – even more importantly – divine light:

Through your bright beams doth not [the] blinded guest,
shoot out his darts to base affections wound;
but Angels come to lead fraile mindes to rest
in chast desires on heauenly beauty bound.⁵²

In order to properly understand this difference, it is necessary to be aware of one of the chief philosophical tendencies informing Petrarchism: Platonism and Neoplatonism.⁵³ Jon A.

Quitslund offers several relatively straightforward guidelines on recognising a lyrical poet's interest in ideas perceived as Platonic in sixteenth century England:

- 1) praise of inner, spiritual beauty, and reference to the immaterial origin of even physical beauty;
- 2) praise of the ennobling power of love of such beauty, contrasted to desire for physical satisfaction, and the suffering entailed in its frustration;
- 3) assertion that such love is an affair of the mind or soul, rather than the passions;
- 4) reference to the celestial origin and/or destiny of the beloved's soul or beauty, and perhaps to her life prior to mortal birth;
- 5) worship or use of the beloved as a means of grace, devotion to her being part of an ascent to perfection and knowledge of God.⁵⁴

All of these points can be found in *Canzoniere* – just *Rime* 72 alone can be interpreted as containing each single one of them. The aforementioned “blessed sparks” which “sweetly

⁵² Spenser 8.

⁵³ Stevie Davies, *Feminine Reclaimed: The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986) 7.

Jon A. Quitslund, “Spenser's Amoretti VIII and Platonic Commentaries on Petrarch,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 36 (1973): 270-271, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/751165>>.

⁵⁴ Quitslund 257.

Quitslund himself remarks upon the difficulty of properly defining “Platonic” tendencies due to the various overlapping meanings the term acquired throughout its history, and therefore uses it in his own text for what would be deemed Platonic among Spenser and his contemporaries. (Quitslund 257-258.) This intentionally narrowed definition, while probably not ideal for application in broader philosophical or historic study, is extremely useful for works concerned specifically with conventions of Elizabethan literature (such as this one).

destroy” are preceded by a markedly soft beginning: “[m]y gentle lady, I see / a sweet light that streams from your eyes / that shows me the way that leads to Heaven”, then followed by “[t]his is the sight that leads me to do good, / and drives me towards a glorious end,” easily satisfying the point 2), and according to individual interpretation possibly also 1) (“blessed”, “divine lights”), 4) and 5) (depending on whether the way to Heaven is meant to imply the speaker’s pleasure, the beloved’s connection to divinity or both), and maybe even 3) (“but from that day was pleasing to myself, / filling with sweet and noble thought / that heart to which lovely eyes hold the key“, alongside once again returning to 2)).⁵⁵ Should these appear insufficient, the very next *Rime* 73 reaffirms the second point (although with greater emphasis on frustrated desire, and lesser on the ennobling power of love), and praises the Lady’s God-given virtue (the first point, possibly fourth).⁵⁶ One can easily continue as long as there are sonnets left, since these ideas are essentially omnipresent in *Canzoniere*.

It is, however, true that their distribution is not quite the same *in vita* and *in morte*. As Reed Way Dasenbrock remarks, *in vita* sonnets are characterised by the “instability and discontinuity” of the speaker’s emotions.⁵⁷ The Lady herself remains unchanged and unmoved, but “her inflexibility reinforces the protean and unstable character of Petrarchan love”.⁵⁸ Petrarch’s (and conventionally Petrarchan) speaker’s emotional turmoil is largely self-inflicted: “I am not strong enough to gaze at the light / of that lady,” he despairs, but as long as he lacks the proper vision to be “protected from the full sun”⁵⁹, it will continue to burn him, and the Lady herself will continue to indifferently “watch while the world turns”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Petrarch 72.

⁵⁶ Petrarch 73: “Love, you who create my longing, / be my guide, and show me the road, / and let my verse match my desire [...] but now that God, and Love, and Nature / wish to set every gentle virtue / in those bright eyes, through which I live in joy,”.

⁵⁷ Dasenbrock 38.

⁵⁸ Dasenbrock 39.

⁵⁹ Petrarch 19.

⁶⁰ Petrarch 325.

around her. This last quote, however, is from a much later *in morte* sonnet, part of which is addressed to the lover himself:

‘Hold your eyes steady like an eagle on the sun:
while you listen to my words.
[...]
So bright is [Laura’s] face with celestial rays,
your gaze cannot stay fixed on her’

The situation would appear identical to the one presented above, but the lover’s reaction differs: he is, in his own words, “sad”, “bitter” and “hunger[s] so for death”.⁶¹ It is somewhat difficult to believe that a Petrarchan lover would keep any sort of mental anguish to himself, let alone one which defined him so thoroughly before – it appears more likely that the emotional reaction he records is the one he is experiencing. Therefore, the lover either doesn’t even attempt to look at the Lady’s light anymore, or his gaze has been altered. Dasenbrock observes that “even before Laura dies, she is increasingly identified with the stable, divine world for which Petrarch is yearning. His yearning for the divine is thus identified with his yearning for Laura. [...] Laura becomes [Petrarch’s] agent of transcendence.” Consequently, the desire for Laura and for transcendence can now be one and the same.⁶² In Sonnet 285, the speaker even views her as a manner of a guiding spirit, instead of an unaffected source of extreme pleasure and pain:

Never did mother caring for her dear son
nor lady burning for her beloved husband

⁶¹ Petrarch 325.

⁶² Dasenbrock 40.

See also *Canzoniere* 284: “I see her, the lady of the highest house, / with her calm brow driving sad thoughts / away from my dark and heavy heart. / The soul, that cannot endure such light, / sighs and says: ‘O blessed be the hour / you opened up this path with your eyes!’” The speaker *claims* his soul cannot bear the light, yet Laura’s spirit (or memory) has calm visage and momentarily drives away his grief. The entire sonnet appears to contradict itself in regards to whether the lover feels relief or not, but the negligible presence of Petrarchan paradoxes seems to give the sonnet less anguished tone than was standard *in vita*.

give such faithful counsel to an anxious mind
with such sighing, and with such concern,

as she, gazing on my heavy exile
from her eternal refuge in the sky,
offers me, with her usual affection,
her brow shining with two-fold pity:

now a mother's, now a lover's: anxious
or burning with virtuous fire: showing me
in her speech what path to flee or follow,

in all the changes of this life of ours,
begging me to ennoble my soul quickly:
and only while she speaks, do I rest.⁶³

While Petrarch's *in vita* Platonism was very obvious, it was also unproductive: the transformation of the speaker's perception was entirely "horizontal" rather than "vertical", which is to say it shifted constantly but achieved no lasting development or further closeness to the divine.⁶⁴ Yet after the Lady's death, the lover is now free to project all his wishes onto her – and in his mind she becomes caring, divine, spiritual, virtuous, celestial soul, inviting him to ascend to Heaven with her. Apart from lacking contrast with the "baser" physical desire, there is no Neoplatonic criterion on the Quitslund's list that this sonnet wouldn't satisfy. While Renaissance Petrarchism is almost entirely preoccupied with the poet's *in vita* "horizontal transformations", Petrarch himself appears to be attempting to climb the Neoplatonic ladder by fixating on Laura's heavenly spirit.⁶⁵

Yet according to Patrick Cheney, Petrarch's ascent is technically incomplete, although he comes close to achieving it.⁶⁶ By Cheney's definition, while the Neoplatonic climb is initiated by perceiving the physical body of a beautiful woman, the proper Platonic result

⁶³ Petrarch 285.

⁶⁴ Dasenbrock 38.

⁶⁵ Dasenbrock 40-41.

⁶⁶ Cheney 331.

must be to “depersonalize” the beloved “into an abstraction” – that is, to perceive the beloved not as an individual but as a dehumanised representation of the Platonic divine Idea of Beauty. While Petrarch appears to consider Laura the living incarnation or an angelic spirit individually personifying the Idea, he still perceives her as “beautiful” (beautiful woman, beautiful angel), with a semblance of humanity and identity, however stylized or imaginary it may be – he does not begin perceiving her (and loving her) as a “beauty”, a universal divine constant representing *all* beauty everywhere. Cheney argues that truly Neoplatonic perception is only that which denies the subject any manner of personhood in the eyes of the beholder in order to “elevate” the perceived woman to an ideal concept.⁶⁷

Unlike the fires, pain and pleasure of *in vita* Petrarchism, Spenser’s sonnet cycle doesn’t even need to pave its way towards Platonic ideals – it *opens* with holiness. Sonnet 8 may be the most clearly representative case,⁶⁸ but already in Sonnet 3 already praises the ennobling “souerayne beauty which I doo admyre, / [...] the light wherof hath kindled heauenly fyre, / in my fraile spirit by her from basenesse raysed.”⁶⁹ While Petrarch’s gaze is initially mutilated by Laura’s largely passive presence, Spenser seems to have significantly fewer issues in this regard – his Elizabeth inspires in the speaker’s “chast desires” and “*calme[s]* the storme that passion did begin”⁷⁰ (italics mine). Her light tends strongly towards being a perceived as peaceful and holy force instead of a destructive one. Her own active behaviour may cause the speaker anguish, but unlike in Petrarch, her existence does not.⁷¹

And so while Elizabeth’s passive presence may not have the same destructive effect on the speaker as Laura or Delia do, this should not lead one to assume her actions are always

⁶⁷ Cheney 324.

⁶⁸ Essentially satisfying all Quitslund’s criteria.

⁶⁹ Spenser 3.

⁷⁰ Spenser 8.

⁷¹ Granted, Spenser’s Neoplatonism isn’t entirely straightforward either, because he doesn’t move away from physical attraction towards spiritual perception of the Lady, but from spirituality towards physicality (Cheney 331) – this will be further examined in Chapter 3.

equally benevolent. Another popular Petrarchan image is a ship, either in the process of drowning or being lost on the waves – both Petrarch and Daniel utilise it to great effect to relay their own emotional states or their Ladies’ passive influence.⁷² Spenser employs a similar metaphor in his Sonnet 38, referencing the tale of mythical Persian merchant Arion, who was saved from drowning by a dolphin⁷³:

ARION, when through tempests cruel wracke,
He forth was thrown into the greedy seas:
through the sweet musick which his harp did make
allu'rd a Dolphin him from death to ease.
But my rude musick, which was wont to please
some dainty eares, cannot, with any skill,
the dreadfull tempest of her wrath appease,
nor moue the Dolphin from her stubborne will⁷⁴

Joan Curbet notes the storm as being Spenser’s innovation when compared to Ovid’s *Fasti*, the text Spenser was most probably drawing his inspiration from. There Arion hurls himself into the ocean to escape the sailors who would harm him, yet as Curbet notes, “[t]here is no human threat against Arion in [*Amoretti*] 38, it is the very tempest that throws him into the sea.”⁷⁵ At the same time, the stubborn dolphin is clearly identified with the Lady as well, making it not only abundantly clear the beloved is to blame for the speaker’s current

⁷² See Petrarch 189 (“My ship, full of oblivion, sails / on a bitter sea, at winter’s midnight, / between Scylla and Charybdis”) or Daniel’s “Rejected Sonnet 3” (“The grievous shipwreck of my travels dear / In bulged bark, all perished in disgrace. / [...] My sails were hope, spread with my sighs of grief”).

⁷³ Curbet 47-48.

⁷⁴ Spenser 38.

Dolphins were thought to be attracted by the sound of human voice (or even sing themselves) and occasionally willing to carry people on their backs and rescue the drowning. (T. H. White, ed. *The book of beasts: being a translation from a Latin bestiary of the twelfth century* (Madison: Parallel Press, 2002) 200-201, <<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/HistSciTech.Bestiary>>.)

⁷⁵ Curbet 48.

Curbet describes Arion as being thrown into the ocean by the ship’s crew, while she immediately after provides a translated excerpt of *Fasti* which clearly states he jumped overboard on his own hoping to save himself, but this seems to be a very minor oversight and doesn’t impact her argument in any way.

predicament while at the same time being his only salvation,⁷⁶ but essentially creating a world which has spun completely out of control simply because of the Lady's temper.

Yet several other sonnets within the remainder of the sequence cast significant doubt on the accuracy of such assessment. As Ted Brown notes, the wording of the *Amoretti* places a high degree of emphasis on self-referentiality:⁷⁷ where Daniel addresses his first sonnet to Delia ("Read it, sweet maid, though it be done but slightly; / Who can show all his love, doth love but lightly")⁷⁸, and Petrarch to his readers ("You who hear the sound, in scattered rhymes, / [...] I hope to find pity, and forgiveness, / for all the modes in which I talk and weep")⁷⁹, demonstrating the two most typical approaches, Spenser – atypically for a Petrarchist – turns to his own sonnet cycle⁸⁰ ("Happy ye leaues when as those lilly hands, / [...] shall handle you and hold in loues soft bands")⁸¹. Alongside several other obvious references to the pain and joy of creating poetry which strengthen the validity of this notion,⁸² the initial sonnet especially serves as a clear signal alerting the audience to the "self-referential nature of the sequence".⁸³ But Spenser's metatextual efforts hardly stop there. Sonnet 18 chronicles one of the speaker's attempts to woo his Lady, and, as it would appear, a woefully unsuccessful one at that:

But when I pleade, she bids me play my part,
and when I weep, she sayes teares are but water:
and when I sigh, she sayes I know the art,
and when I waile she turnes hir selfe to laughter.

⁷⁶ Curbet 48.

⁷⁷ Brown 401.

⁷⁸ Daniel 1.

⁷⁹ Petrarch 1.

⁸⁰ Brown 401, 403.

⁸¹ Spenser 1.

⁸² See *Amoretti* 33 ("doe ye not thinck th' accomplishment of it, / sufficient worke for one mans simple head") or 80 ("After so long a race as I haue run / Faery land, which those six books compile / giue leaue to rest me, being halfe fordonne"), both of which detail Spenser's exhaustion resulting from his work on *The Faerie Queene* and imply that composing the *Amoretti* refreshes his spirit (Sonnet 80: "Till then giue leaue to me in pleasant mew, / to sport my muse and sing my loues sweet praise: / the contemplation of whose heauenly hew, / my spirit to an higher pitch will rayse.")

⁸³ Brown 403.

So doe I weepe, and wayle, and pleade in vaine,
whiles she as steele and flint doth still remayne.⁸⁴

This suggests that the Petrarchan suffering the speaker claims to experience due to his beloved's refusals, his praises and his pleas are simply an elaborate mating ritual⁸⁵ with little basis in experienced emotion. Even more importantly, the Lady is *aware* of this – she is not fooled by her admirer's performance, or impressed by his execution of it. Sonnet 18 may, however, leave the audience wondering whether the *speaker* has any knowledge of this presumed dynamic: his tears, after all, could be genuine. Yet this uncertainty is laid to rest quite unambiguously in Sonnet 54, where “[in] this worlds Theatre in which we stay, / My loue lyke the Spectator ydly sits / beholding me that all the pageants play,” while the speaker “masks” himself in mirth “lyke to a Comedy” or, depending on his mood, “a Tragedy”.⁸⁶ The element of artificiality in *Amoretti* 54 is revealed as unmistakably intentional, emphasised by the presence of numerous thespian allusions and vocabulary.⁸⁷ While one may hold whichever assumptions one wishes in regards to where, for example, the man Petrarch ends and the lover Petrarch begins, there is little indication that the emotions of his speaker are to be considered anything but sincere – Spenser's speaker, on the other hand, admits to wearing the mask of Petrarchism for his “Spectator” as expectations dictate. His Lady is unmoved – but now it is necessary to ask (if difficult to determine) whether her disapproval reflects her opinions or simply her own adherence to the Petrarchan script of unsuccessful courtship. The answer, however, isn't nearly as important as the question and the manner in which it encourages the audience to maintain awareness of how illusory the situation presented to them truly is. As a

⁸⁴ Spenser 18.

⁸⁵ While it presumably could have been so in most cases (Arlene N. Okerlund, “The Rhetoric of Love: Voice in the *Amoretti* and the *Songs and Sonnets*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (February, 1982): 38;), essentially admitting so in the text can hardly be considered a standard practice.

⁸⁶ Spenser 54.

⁸⁷ Brown 405, 416.

result, the characters are humanised while simultaneously distanced from their own descriptions, so that the audience remembers that no matter how lifelike they may appear, their Petrarchan situation isn't real.

Another reminder of the lover and beloved's existence not being entirely defined by the Petrarchan reality are the various humorous sonnets strewn throughout the *Amoretti*. In Sonnet 46, the lover has apparently decided to use rain as a justification for remaining at the Lady's house (whether to remain longer in her presence or simply to avoid the unpleasant weather regretfully remains unspecified), but his "cruell fayre" apparently considers rain a rather poor excuse for loitering past one's appointed time:

WHEN my abodes prefixed time is spent,
My cruell fayre streight bids me wend my way:
but then from heauen most hideous stormes are sent
as willing me against her will to stay.
Whom then shall I or heauen or her obey,
the heauens know best what is the best for me:
but as she will, whose will my life doth sway,
my lower heauen, so it perforce must bee.
[...]
Enough it is for one man to sustaine,
the stormes, which she alone on me doth raine.⁸⁸

More famously,⁸⁹ Sonnet 48 details the aftermath of an argument during which the Lady subjected a sonnet the speaker had apparently written in her honour to a "bad end for hereticks ordayned" through "sacrifize vnto the greedy fyre".⁹⁰ There is no remotely comparable incident in either Petrarch's or Daniel's work, nothing which would define their Ladies in quite such clear, human and believable terms. Even limiting the choices to a more traditional setup for a sonnet than domestic life doesn't preclude the possibility of humour:

⁸⁸ Spenser 46.

⁸⁹ Brown 405, 407.

⁹⁰ Spenser 48.

Sonnet 16 initially launches into a fairly standard description of the beloved's eyes as releasing numerous arrows of love (their generosity in this regard being the only possibly notable factor) – yet when one arrow is predictably about to find its way towards the speaker, the events take an unexpected turn:

One of those archers closely I did spy,
 ayming his arrow at my very hart:
 when suddenly with twinkle of her eye,
 the Damzell broke his misintended dart.
Had she not so doon, sure I had bene slayne,
 yet as it was, I hardly scap't with paine.⁹¹

The speaker appears almost grateful that the Lady's powerful gaze left him comparatively unscathed, while the Lady's "twinkle" suggests her refusals of him aren't necessarily due to a lack of mercy, outright cruelty or a simple contrariness, but because she is aware of the situation the speaker and herself are in – much like in the "Theatre" Sonnets 18 and 54. In this manner, they and the more humorous sonnets serve the same purpose: they humanise the characters, especially the Lady, and create a certain disconnect between them and the Petrarchan scenarios and images they present to the audience.⁹²

The last manner in which the Lady is humanised is both the most effective and most uncertain, for the simple reason that its interpretation depends entirely on a single syntactically ambiguous phrase. *Amoretti* 58 is the first of what would seem to be a sonnet pair, appearing to contain a fairly unoriginal warning to the Lady that even her own form, however glorious, is finite and fragile, alongside the unsubtle implication that she should accept the speaker while she is still desirable (although unlike Petrarch or Daniel, Spenser

⁹¹ Spenser 16.

⁹² And considering the harshness of some of the sonnets analysed in the following chapter, it is probably fortunate that Spenser did so.

thankfully spares the reader a straightforward comparison of the Lady to Narcissus).⁹³ The second sonnet (*Amoretti* 59) then exalts the very same confidence, self-sufficiency and pride 58 seemed to condemn, but concludes with the couplet “Most happy she that most assured doth rest, / but he most happy who such one loues best”⁹⁴, creating the impression that the drastic change in the speaker’s opinion is most likely the result of the Lady responding favourably to his advances. This impression, however, may or may not hold after examining 58’s preface: “*By her that is most assured to her selfe.*”⁹⁵ The initial “by” can be understood in two ways: either as “*concerning her who...*” or as “*authored by her who...*” with the second option radically altering the meaning of the text.⁹⁶

WEAKE is th' assurance that weake flesh reposesh,
 In her owne powre and scorneth others ayde:
 that soonest fals when as she most supposeth,
 her selfe assurd, and is of nought affrayd.
 All flesh is frayle, and all her strength vnstayd
 like a vaine bubble blowen vp with ayre:
 deuouring tyme & changeful chance haue prayd,
 her glories pride that none may it repayre.
 Ne none so rich or wise, so strong or fayre,
 but fayleth trusting on his owne assurance:
 and he that standeth on the hyghest stayre
 fals lowest: for on earth nought hath enduraunce.
 Why then doe ye proud fayre, misdeeme so farre,
 that to your selfe ye most assured arre.⁹⁷

The gendering of the “weake flesh” (and potentially its owner) is indicative of very little, as it is not only a well-documented poetic and philosophical tradition to associate the body with

⁹³ See Daniel 34 and Petrarch 45.

Interestingly, Spenser compares *himself* to Narcissus in *Amoretti* 83, but his dialogue with the sonnet conventions and tendency to assign various commonly utilised personas to the “wrong” characters and situations (such as comparing both the lover and beloved to Penelope in *Amoretti* 23) deserve to be examined as their own subject and shall not be extensively elaborated upon here.

⁹⁴ Spenser 59.

⁹⁵ Spenser 58.

⁹⁶ Sanchez 12, 23.

⁹⁷ Spenser 59.

the feminine (and the mind with the masculine),⁹⁸ but the later lines 11-12 “and he that standeth on the hyghest stayre / fals lowest” echo the initial four, yet characterise the same weakness as an equally masculine attribute.⁹⁹ Should the speaker of *Amoretti* 58 be the Lady, however (as Melissa E. Sanchez and W. C. Johnson argue)¹⁰⁰, the sonnet suddenly becomes her meditation on her own mortality and imperfections – and the following one very possibly an image of the male speaker’s cluelessness regarding the Lady’s inner conflict and his blind idolisation of her or (as suggested by Johnson) words of comfort and acceptance¹⁰¹.

Spenser therefore presents his Lady as less supernaturally destructive due to his somewhat less turbulently troubled relationship with Neoplatonism. He also sketches out her character in clearer terms through his use of humour and metatextual techniques, which interestingly serve largely the same purpose: to remind the audience that the sonnet cycle and reality are two different concepts which do not always intersect. And lastly, depending on interpretation, Spenser may have used the most subversive tool of all, which was to give his Lady her own voice.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 17.

Sanchez 12.

⁹⁹ Sanchez 12.

¹⁰⁰ Sanchez 12.

Johnson 512-513.

¹⁰¹ Johnson 514.

2. THE LADY DEFIANT

One can hardly expect a love sonnet sequence to do without a tortured, eternally scorned narrator.¹⁰² It was established that the Lady's brightness wounds him, her refusals kill him, and were there anything worse than that, her disdain would doubtlessly cause the speaker to experience it too. The Lady's status as a being utterly out of reach of the speaker is one of the primary established conventions of the sonnet,¹⁰³ yet Spenser manages to play both a traditionalist and an iconoclast at the same time:¹⁰⁴ while his Lady refuses him, her resistance is presented in a somewhat different manner. She not only personally engages the speaker much more directly and frequently than can be observed in either Petrarch or Daniel, but her methods are described as more intentional and vividly brutal, creating an image resembling less an unapproachable merciless goddess and more a wild predator playing with her victims – Spenser accomplishes this through the use of various similes and allegories, and by assuring that with their help, the Lady is portrayed as an active agent whenever possible. Some of Spenser's anti-Petrarchan tendencies also reveal themselves to be rather circular or counter-productive in their defiance against the norms of his chosen genre, but this appears to be more a feature of anti-Petrarchism itself than specific failing on Spenser's part.¹⁰⁵ The Lady's pride, while it continues to be treated with a significant amount of ambivalence, is notably less consistently villainised than could be expected from either of the other two sonneteers.

Spenser's anti-Petrarchan leanings reveal themselves quite visibly through the various personas he has the Lady and his speaker assume, and their subsequent behaviour within those

¹⁰² Okerlund 44.

¹⁰³ Although marginally less so in Daniel than in Petrarch – Daniel actually suggests the possibility of Delia accepting him in his Sonnet 11 (“Flint, frost, disdain, wears, melts and yields, we see”), but he never truly expands on the idea.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel E. Hile, *Spenserian satire: A tradition of indirection* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2017) 70, 127-128.

¹⁰⁵ Dubrow 78.

roles. Among the first of these is the otherwise typical role of two warriors, an image which rather sets the tone of the lovers' interaction throughout the majority of the sonnet sequence. Petrarchan love¹⁰⁶ is portrayed (as is also quite standard within the genre) not only as a torturous condition, but as a constant power struggle – one that the speaker is clearly losing, or so Sonnet 12 argues:

ONE day I sought with her hart-thrilling eies,
to make a truce and termes to entertaïne:
all fearlesse then of so false enimies,
which sought me to entrap in treasons traine.
So as I then disarmed did remaine,
a wicked ambush which lay hidden long
in the close couert of her guilefull eyen,
thence breaking forth did thicke about me throng,
Too feeble I t'abide the brunt so strong,
was forst to yeeld my selfe into their hands:
who me captiuing streight with rigorous wrong,
haue euer since me kept in cruell bands.
So Ladie now to you I doo complaine,
against your eies that iustice I may gaine.¹⁰⁷

This particular sonnet demonstrates several Spenserian tendencies. The approach to the depiction of the Lady's lack of returned interest differs from both Petrarch and Daniel, albeit for slightly different reasons in each case – Daniel may complain of his “Injurious Delia”¹⁰⁸, yet her great sin and cruelty is simply steadfastly ignoring his advances:

Let Venus have the graces she resigned,
And thy sweet voice give back unto the spheres;
But yet restore thy fierce and cruel mind
To Hyrcan tigers and to ruthless bears;
Yield to the marble thy hard heart again;

¹⁰⁶ Here defined as the combination of desire and idolatry resulting from the attempt to redirect lust into purely intellectual or spiritual Neoplatonic perception. (Cheney 312.)

¹⁰⁷ Spenser 12.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel 29.

So shalt thou cease to plague, and I to pain.¹⁰⁹

Refusal is enough in Daniel's eyes to consider his beloved purposefully cruel and compare her to a tiger, but while Daniel responds to his Lady's lack of returned affection by simply projecting his emotions onto her and then complaining about them, Spenser elevates the Lady's assumed complicity to new heights. Elizabeth's eyes don't simply contain stone-hearted refusal – they “guilefully” ambush him during peace talks and turn him into their hostage. As Stevie Davies observes, “[o]pposites within the feminine principle (the extreme of activity, the extreme of passivity) [...] both have the power to terrify”:¹¹⁰ Delia is overall presented in a passive manner, and her power (meaning, of course, power over men)¹¹¹ lies, apart from beauty and virtue, in being an immovable object to the unstoppable force of Petrarchan passion. Yet with Elizabeth, there can be no mistake concerning the intent or its active pursuit – at least not until the sonnet's *coda*, which reveals a degree of separation between the Lady and her eyes, somewhat complicating the previously obvious synecdoche into a situation where Elizabeth's eyes could theoretically be read as a deceptive “third party” (perhaps the seat of Love) that she is simply affiliated with. This may suggest that her eyes (for want of a better term) “acted alone” and she simply happened to be their unwitting associate at the time of the crime; or it could imply her carelessness with her own power allowed such unfairness to come to pass, and that the speaker perceives her as – to use a more colloquial phrase – having “lead him on” (with all the misogyny inherent in the statement). Neither case bodes terribly well for her in terms of characterisation: if the Lady and the eyes are not one and the same, it means the Lady possesses gifts she is unable or unwilling to guard responsibly. If the two are synonymous for the poet's purposes, then she is clearly able *and willing* to use her abilities in a less than honourable manner.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel 19.

¹¹⁰ Davies 50-51.

¹¹¹ Dubrow 76.

The question of how the Lady's portrayal as a warrior in the *Amoretti* differs from that in *Canzoniere* is slightly more complex. There is, naturally, at least one then-popular *Rime* of Petrarch's that Spenser's sonnet is significantly indebted to in terms of imagery or wording. In this particular case, one's attention might be drawn to Sonnet 95, which laments that Laura's eyes similarly assaulted him unprepared and without mercy:

there's no spirit in this world so cruel
it would not be saddened out of pity.

But you, eyes of beauty, from which I felt
the blow, not wearing a helmet or a shield,
you see me naked, inside and out
though my grief is not poured out in tears.¹¹²

Yet if one is willing to forgo the more explicit aspects of the sonnet's battle imagery and the slight alteration of the beloved's face exerting the magnetic influence instead of her eyes, *Rime* 96 might actually be closer in spirit:

I'm so defeated now, in appearance,
and with the sighs of this long war,
that I've come to hate hope and desire,
and all the other nets that snare my heart.

But that sweet joyful face whose image I carry
engraved in my breast, and see wherever I gaze,
constrains me: I'm forced back against my will
into those torments that I first knew.

I erred then when the ancient path
of liberty was closed to me, removed:
what ill he follows who's led by the eye,

then free and freely runs towards his ill:
the spirit that sinned a single time

¹¹² Petrarch 95.

must march now to another's orders.¹¹³

The basic premise is very similar, although compared to *Amoretti* 12, Petrarch's telling is decidedly tinged with bitterness: the beloved's beauty had drawn the speaker into a conflict and continued to hold him there against his will (while Spenser's case is an ambush, what Petrarch's words evoke seems to be rather an image of conscription). Yet in Petrarch's case, the Lady appears distant and the only true reminder he carries of her is an image – the sole implication of the Lady's direct involvement is having to “march now to another's orders”, but those orders could come from simply gazing at the beloved's image and the “hope and desire” the sight provokes, rather than directly from her; or perhaps they are issued from his heart that the hope and desire are said to have bound. The degree of the Lady's complicity in either case is unclear, but Love always appears to be the major culprit – the Lady's existence is the cause of the speaker's misery, but her own *actions* might not be.¹¹⁴ *Canzoniere* establishes Love almost as a character in his own right, a cunning creature the speaker's suffering heart often places the blame on. Sometimes Love commits mischief alongside the Lady – other times he acts alone.¹¹⁵ Yet the Lady herself isn't accused of malicious intent and personally going out of her way to commit harmful actions nearly as often as in Spenser, who appears to hold his Lady responsible for either committing a crime by proxy, or with full intent and the use of noticeably underhanded methods. Heather Dubrow comments that “[d]eflection [is] as common a strategy in the counterdiscourses as in Petrarchism itself [...] the counterdiscourses typically transfer characteristics of both the poet and his lady to other beings,” an approach which (as showcased above) would seem to be usually true for Petrarch

¹¹³ Petrarch 96.

Another parallel can be easily found in Sonnet 21, but the negotiations described there appear to have taken place with minimal interruption, if also with minimal success.

¹¹⁴ Assuming, of course, that we define Laura's continuous unwillingness to accept the speaker in the terms of her *lack* of action where *Canzoniere* doesn't specify otherwise.

¹¹⁵ For mention of the first, see *Canzoniere* 57.

For examples of Love acting on his own, see 25, 65, 109 or 360.

himself – yet Dubrow also notes that Spenser appears to be one of the few English Petrarchans whose sonnets usually don't show his Lady the same courtesy.¹¹⁶ Emphasising the Lady's role as the warrior¹¹⁷ has the dubious result of transforming her into not only a powerful but also an actively involved character, but at the same time also lays the entirety of the blame squarely on her shoulders for whatever mixed signals the speaker then decides to hold her accountable for.

Dubrow also claims that the treatment of gender in the English sonnet “is prone to be more overt, more virulent, and more aggressive” when compared to Petrarch¹¹⁸ – and in the light of the differences in handling the Lady's agency and blame between him, Spenser and Daniel, this idea appears rather relevant and warranting further exploration. *Canzoniere* certainly doesn't shy away from outright hostility: apart from calling his beloved a “sweet enemy”¹¹⁹ – a turn of phrase so embedded in the sonnet tradition one is likely to become almost completely desensitised to it within the space of the first ten poems – there are certainly moments when the speaker's fury outweighs his adoration for the beloved by several orders of magnitude. In Sonnet 253, he accuses Laura for – supposedly – bringing nothing but suffering into his life:

O lovely face granted me by harsh fate,
that made me always sad, and never joyful:
O concealed deception, loving fraud,
to give a pleasure that only brought me pain!¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Dubrow 85.

¹¹⁷ For more straightforward depictions of the Lady as a warrior, see *Amoretti* 11 and 57.

¹¹⁸ Dubrow 86-87.

¹¹⁹ Petrarch 73, 125 and others.

¹²⁰ Petrarch 253.

And just three sonnets later, his anger seems to have transformed into a fantasy of revenge, even including a typical Petrarchan paradox to accentuate the intensity of his emotional turmoil:

If I could take my vengeance on her
whose glances and words consume me,
and who then, to increase my pain, flees,
hiding those eyes so sweet and painful to me.¹²¹

And while I noted earlier that in Petrarch's sonnets Love often acts independently of the Lady's approval or knowledge, in *Rime* 23 the Lady is revealed as an accomplice Love enlisted to gain greater influence over his quarry:

I say that many years had passed
since Love tried his first assault on me,
[...]
That savage adversary of whom I speak,
seeing at last that not a single shot
of his had even pierced my clothes,
brought a powerful lady to help him,
against whom intellect, or force,
or asking mercy never were or are of value:
and the two transformed me to what I am,
[...]
She who maddens men with her gaze,
opened my chest, and took my heart in her hand,
saying to me: 'Speak no word of this.'¹²²

The Lady is once again described as merciless, but unlike the previous examples, *Rime* 253 also presents her as deceptive, a *fraud*, a promise of pleasure which was broken only to bring

¹²¹ Petrarch 256. Sonnet 29 expresses similar sentiment as well.

Interestingly, Sonnet 64 lists a number of "signs of unease" such as "lowering your eyes, bowing your head, / or being more ready than anyone to flee, [...]" that the Lady might employ in order to "seek escape so from my heart" and judges it as "just cause" for her disdain, yet *Rime* 256 shows anger at her for hiding herself from the speaker.

¹²² Petrarch 23.

suffering instead. There doesn't appear a single time in the *in vita* sonnets where the Lady directly promises anything to the speaker or implies there are any set conditions that, fulfilled, might persuade her to consent to a relationship,¹²³ but the speaker's one-sided love for her – presumably summoned by her man-maddening gaze – is clearly enough for the promise to be brought into existence in his mind, and the breaking of this assumed contract provokes fury. But this is quite standard Petrarchan egotism and not particularly surprising, although it is true that *Rime* 23 clarifies that there can be no mistake regarding the presentation of the Lady's behaviour as intentional, and the image of a torn heart is a vivid one.

Yet where Petrarch expresses anger and pain in the light of the Lady's perceived deception, he appears almost subtle compared to Spenser:

TRUST not the treason of those smyling lookes,
vntill ye haue theyr guylefull traynes well tryde:
for they are lyke but vnto golden hookes,
that from the foolish fish theyr bayts doe hyde:
So she with flattrring smyles weake harts doth guyde,
vnto her loue, and tempte to theyr decay,
whome being caught she kills with cruell pryde,
and feeds at pleasure on the wretched pray:
Yet euen whylst her bloody hands them slay,
her eyes looke louely and vpon them smyle:
that they take pleasure in her cruell play,
and dying doe them selues of payne beguyle.
O mighty charm which makes men loue theyr bane,
and thinck they dy with pleasure, liue with payne.¹²⁴

His Lady is not only cruel, but *delights* in being so, and worse, intentionally lures men with her beauty only to devour them, her hands drenched in blood. This sonnet is absolutely not unique within the *Amoretti* in its imagery, tone or startling depiction and condemnation of the

¹²³ There are mentions *in morte* of Laura agreeing “to lighten my sad days with sight of you!” (Petrarch 282), but what Laura's spirit does or does not seem to promise is a different matter altogether and therefore not delved into here.

¹²⁴ Spenser 47.

Lady's behaviour – it is in fact very much representative of what to expect from the portion of the sonnets which deal with the Lady's continuous unwillingness to be conquered.¹²⁵

(Although, as shall be shortly made clear, as frequently reiterated as similar sentiments are, they do not encompass the entirety of the Lady's treatment in such situation.) In a similar vein, when Petrarch laments that “she roars like a lioness in my heart, / through the night when I need to sleep,”¹²⁶ this is what becomes of it in Spenser's retelling:

IN vaine I seeke and sew to her for grace,
and doe myne humbled hart before her poure:
the whiles her foot she in my necke doth place,
and tread my life downe in the lowly floure.
And yet the Lyon that is Lord of power,
and reigneth ouer euery beast in field:
in his most pride disdeigneth to deuoure
the silly lambe that to his might doth yield.
But she more cruell and more saluage wylde,
then either Lyon or the Lyonesse:
shames not to be with guiltlesse blood defylde,
but taketh glory in her crueltiesse.
Fayrer then fayrest let none euer say,
that ye were blooded in a yeelded pray.¹²⁷

Sonnet 20 once again depicts in a rather explicit manner the Lady lording her power over the speaker/lamb, while being compared to a lion (or a lioness) herself. *Amoretti* 20 may, in a sense, appear more honest than Sonnet 47: while both are deeply dehumanising to the Lady and portray her as a blood-thirsty beast out for the blood of men, Sonnet 20 at least admits to it by directly comparing her with one. Yet Spenser's dialogue with Petrarchan conventions is somewhat more complex: in her research into Spenser's similes and metaphors which include various kinds of wild fauna, Joan Curbet provides a highly useful overview of the animal

¹²⁵ For another scene that is very much alike, see also *Amoretti* 10 (“See how the Tyrannesse doth ioy to see / the huge massacres which her eyes do make”).

¹²⁶ Petrarch 256.

¹²⁷ Spenser 20.

symbolism(s) used during Spenser's time. The lion, for example, often emblematised "earthly pride", here demonstrated by the Lady standing over her "humbled foe" with a foot planted on his neck.¹²⁸ Curbet explains that "what she lacks is the pity and magnanimity that temper the lion's natural pride": lions were considered willing to spare creatures too weak or defenceless to fight back,¹²⁹ if not necessarily by Spenser's contemporaries, then definitely by several writers of classical antiquity who would be very well known to them, such as Pliny the Elder or Ovid.¹³⁰ (This might also potentially serve to heighten the contrast with the image of the lamb which may – apart from its obvious role as prototypical prey – rely on Christian reading instead.)¹³¹ "Through an exercise of textual manipulation, both the metaphor and its classical source work *against* the beloved: she appears as a predating force, but she lacks the natural qualities of that force."¹³² Therefore, the Lady cannot even be identified with an ordinary predator – the combination of her beauty, pride and savagery produces a monster which even the "Lord of power" is dwarfed by.

Similar comparisons are sown regularly throughout the first two thirds of the *Amoretti*: apart from a lion, the Lady is compared to a basilisk in Sonnet 49 (a creature that supposedly kills with its gaze, quite like the Petrarchan beloved),¹³³ while Sonnet 53 likens her to a panther, an animal which was, if one draws on the classical tradition, believed to hide its terrible aspects in order to lure its prey (an image easily translated either into another misogynist idea common to love poetry – that of a woman ensnaring men with her beauty¹³⁴);

¹²⁸ Joan Curbet, "Edmund Spenser's Bestiary in the 'Amoretti' (1595)," *Atlantis* 24.2 (2002): 45, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055069>>.

¹²⁹ Curbet 46-47.

¹³⁰ Curbet 45, 50.

¹³¹ Curbet 46. Curbet does point out that "the lion's life [could be] seen as an extended allegory for the life of Christ [as in mediaeval bestiaries]," but claims the "Christian connotations are entirely displaced onto its victim, the lamb." While the lion was indeed identified with Christ (White 8-9), I agree that it is unlikely to be the case here – when paired with the lamb, reading the lion this way appears to produce largely nonsensical results.

¹³² Curbet 47.

¹³³ Spenser 49: "and kill, with looks as Cockatrices doo".

¹³⁴ Curbet 51.

or in mediaeval tradition, an animal with a deep connection to Christ¹³⁵ (in line with the idea of corrupted divinity). While it is certainly possible that, as Curbet claims, Spenser “rewrites these [commonplace animal motifs] so as to heighten the threatening, disruptive connotations that each of them has, and thus to enhance the danger to the psyche [...] that the experience of love entails”¹³⁶ only for the experience to subsequently be transcended (the lover and beloved do, after all, eventually achieve a union), it would be unwise to overlook the manner in which this kind of imagery affects the appearance of power imbalance within the relationship.

Joseph Campana draws attention to the rather ostentatious way Petrarchan lovers dramatically expose themselves as powerless, calling it a “disingenuous rhetoric of masculine submission that conceals the will to dominate, presenting a lover at the mercy of the powerful beloved”, a paradoxical display of power typical for the *Amoretti* as well.¹³⁷ Dubrow describes the same trend as the poet’s attempt to assert his free will through

the desire to achieve mastery, whether over a literary discourse or a psychological state [...] Indeed, that striving for mastery involves the attempt to transform the role of passive sufferer into active agent, the very process Freud identifies in his main discussion of reenactment, a section of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [...].¹³⁸

While Dubrow’s commentary in fact refers to *anti*-Petrarchan poets’ efforts to differentiate themselves from the tradition’s most famous founder, it is also used to explicitly highlight how often these attempts to subvert tradition end in a place very similar to the one they were trying to abandon. Both of these accounts suggest the *Amoretti*’s insistence on presenting its speaker as helpless in the all-powerful Lady’s clutches should be treated as highly suspect.

¹³⁵ White 15-17.

¹³⁶ Curbet 42.

¹³⁷ Campana 174.

¹³⁸ Dubrow 74.

Consider, for example, Sonnet 20 claiming the Lady was “blooded in a yeelded pray”¹³⁹, with the narrator as a self-styled yielding lamb. No true surrender took place at any point: the Lady has “power” over the lover through attracting him, but no proper ability or option to actually repel him, only to cause him pain with her semi-effective rejections. (Effective in the sense that the speaker doesn’t act upon his desires, but woefully ineffective in persuading him to direct his interest elsewhere, which generally appears to be her wish.)

At the same time, even when the lover is supposed to be on his knees (so to speak), his ideas of domination still have a tendency to shine through. Compare the handling of the situation in Sonnet 12 and Sonnet 14.

Too feeble I t’abide the brunt so strong,
was forst to yeeld my selfe into their hands:
who me captiuing streight with rigorous wrong,
haue euer since me kept in cruell bands.¹⁴⁰

It was clearly wrong, unfair and “cruell” to force a being into submission like this. Yet despite that, Sonnet 14 quite clearly expresses the speaker’s desire for a similar victory:

Bring therefore all the forces that ye may,
and lay incessant battery to her heart,
playnts, prayers, vowes, ruth, sorrow, and dismay,
those engins can the proudest loue conuert.¹⁴¹

Similarly, Sonnet 10 consists of the speaker’s complaints about being “scorned”, yet his proposed solution is to “al her faults in [a] black booke enroll. / That I may laugh at her in equall sort, / as she doth laugh at me & makes my pain her sport”,¹⁴² which is to say – petty

¹³⁹ Spenser 20.

¹⁴⁰ Spenser 12.

¹⁴¹ Spenser 14.

¹⁴² Spenser 10.

revenge. Much later in the sequence in Sonnet 65 – when following the lovers’ first kiss, the Lady appears to have second thoughts – the speaker suggests that

Sweet be the bands, the which true loue doth tye,
without constraynt or dread of any ill:
the gentle birde feeles no captiuity
within her cage, but singes and feeds her fill.¹⁴³

What is being judged in the Lady as an aberration that turns her into a terrible bloodthirsty monstrosity is at the same time considered a victory scenario for the speaker as long as he is the one in control. As Dubrow remarks, “the gendered tensions in the sonnet tradition repeatedly demonstrate how often reactions against the Other repress and represent reactions against the self”¹⁴⁴.

The performance of powerlessness also furthers the goal of absolving the speaker of the blame for his voyeuristic behaviour by presenting him as the wounded party while pre-emptively assuring the audience of the Lady’s guilt, and so by implication also of the righteousness of the speaker’s effort to dominate. Laura Mulvey remarks in her paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” on the popularity of utilising a (rather thin) veneer of “ideological correctness” alongside the “established guilt of the woman” in order to justify the drive for control of the male viewpoint bearer while strengthening the audience’s identification with him¹⁴⁵ – and while her article focuses specifically on trends on the silver screen, many of her points are easily applicable to other media as well. Interestingly, the cases she lists as examples of this are subsequently linked with power, authority and narrative sadism,¹⁴⁶ a view not wholly applicable to the exaggerated vulnerability of the *Amoretti*’s

¹⁴³ Spenser 65.

¹⁴⁴ Dubrow 72.

¹⁴⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn, 1975): 813.

¹⁴⁶ Mulvey 811-812, 813-815. Mulvey’s most relevant examples include the films of Alfred Hitchcock (*Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, *Marnie*) and the genre of *film noir* as such, where the man acting as the bearer of the gaze is typically endowed with legal or social authority (as a policeman, lawyer, or simply by being rich and influential).

speaker, but requiring surprisingly little modification in order to fit him into a similar mould. The additional context reveals exactly why Campana can describe the speaker's apparent submissiveness as a "will to power that conceals its longing for domination"¹⁴⁷: for it is precisely this helpless submission which, in this context, grants the speaker's case legitimacy. *Of course* the Lady has to be all-powerful and pointlessly cruel – then the speaker's victory is not only desirable but necessary. His transgressions seem minimal in comparison and his fantasies of revenge or domination justified.

The persistent preoccupation with positioning the speaker as defenceless while painting the Lady not only as possessing nearly unlimited power over him, but also nearly unlimited brutality, seems to strongly encourage a single conclusion: that while the Lady's influence might be immense, she *cannot* be trusted to control her own power – unchecked, she will only use it for vile ends such as enslaving and torturing hapless men, not unlike strange beasts from faraway lands do with their own prey. At the same time, however, the Lady is still desired and perceived within the sonnet sequence as "adornd with vertues manifold"¹⁴⁸ and "so diuine in view"¹⁴⁹, creating an unsolvable paradox of an entity that is both greater than the best and harsher than the worst.¹⁵⁰ Pondering the cause of this clearly unacceptable state of affairs is at the heart of Sonnet 41:

IS it her nature or is it her will,
to be so cruell to an humbled foe:
if nature, then she may it mend with skill,
if will, then she at will may will forgoe.
But if her nature and her wil be so,
that she will plague the man that loues her most:

The male main character forcefully demystifies and exposes the "guilty object" (woman) (Mulvey 811) and then proceeds to enact his will by punishing her or saving her (and often consequently gaining possession of her as well).

¹⁴⁷ Campana 171.

¹⁴⁸ Spenser 15.

¹⁴⁹ Spenser 53.

¹⁵⁰ And unlike in Petrarch or Daniel, Spenser presents these traits as clearly unnatural (as was demonstrated, even the nature itself often isn't *quite* so harsh, if the *Amoretti* is to be believed).

and take delight t'increase a wretches woe,
then all her natures goodly guifts are lost.¹⁵¹

As straightforward as the central message of the sonnet seems, it is important to view it in the context of Spenser's Neoplatonic tendencies: the Lady is, through her extraordinary beauty and virtue, divine. With this information in mind, it becomes clearer that Sonnet 41 is not simply a Petrarchan speaker's lamentation about why he must endure the excruciating pain of rejection – it is also a rumination on why the Lady seems so ready to renounce all her God-given virtues, and what can possibly be done to once again reconcile her state with its appropriate holiness: “But mercy doth with beautie best agree, / as in theyr maker ye them best may see.”¹⁵² If cruelty is the Lady's natural inclination, there is hope, for she too is a being with free will, and so capable of consciously tempering her impulses; if cruelty is the Lady's *choice*, then there is hope as well, for she may simply decide against it.

And so, strangely enough, a musing on the nature of the Lady's terrible corruption results in the revelation of a possible cure by acknowledging her personhood: one way or another, the Lady must wish for the change *herself* before there is any possibility of reformation. After an entire cavalcade of sonnets featuring treacherous eyes, blood-soaked arms, and other upsetting imagery, the way is being paved for an eventual resolution. Indeed, the Lady's terrible “games” (as the speaker perceives them) are generally portrayed as those of a creature bent on causing as much havoc as possible, clearly in need of taming for the sake of everyone's safety (but especially the speaker's), yet nothing can be done as long as her *voluntas*¹⁵³ remains unaltered.

All this being said, while the Lady's pride and refusal to submit may seem to be unconditionally condemned by Spenser's portrayal, his condemnation does not apply

¹⁵¹ Spenser 41.

¹⁵² Spenser 53. See the final couplet of Sonnet 55 for a very similar message: “Then sith to heauen ye lykened are the best, / be lyke in mercy as in all the rest.”

¹⁵³ Curbet 52.

indiscriminately. The very Sonnets 5 and 6 – even before any of the beloved’s supposed brutalities take place¹⁵⁴ – warn of the difficulties likely to occur during the courtship, and in fact paint the beloved’s “scorn of base things”¹⁵⁵ as a laudable sign of her being elevated above earthly concerns:

BE nought dismayd that her vnmoued mind,
doth still persist in her rebellious pride:
such loue not lyke to lusts of baser kynd,
The harder wonne, the firmer will abide¹⁵⁶

the speaker assures himself. The presence of a measure of pride within the Lady paradoxically affirms her virtue, and the difficulties of winning her over are to be expected precisely *because* of its overabundance within the Lady’s person. Base impulses would clearly be beneath her, while love based on spirituality “to heauen aspire[s]” and remains eternally.¹⁵⁷ The image of the Lady as a warrior also appears here for the first time, and is framed in a decidedly positive light:

Such pride is praise, such portlinesse is honor,
that boldned innocence beares in her eies:
and her faire countenance like a goodly banner,
spreads in defiaunce of all enemies.¹⁵⁸

Spenser’s Neoplatonism is clearly on display here as well, with both sonnets easily satisfying Quitslund’s points 2) and 3). Pride as one of the Lady’s defining attributes reappears several times throughout the *Amoretti*, and while its depiction goes back and forth between stressing

¹⁵⁴ The first poem in the *Amoretti* depicting the Lady as vicious would be either Sonnet 10 and its “Tyrannesse” or the more traditional Sonnet 7 where the speaker ponders being “with lightning fyred”.

¹⁵⁵ Spenser 5.

¹⁵⁶ Spenser 6. See also Sonnet 26: “So euery sweet with soure is tempred still, / that maketh it be coueted the more / for easie things that may be got at will, / most sorts of men doe set but little store.”

¹⁵⁷ Spenser 6.

¹⁵⁸ Spenser 5.

its link to virtue and presenting it as a flaw of character, it obviously isn't viewed as an unquestionably negative trait.¹⁵⁹ This proves to be a notable difference in comparison to Petrarch and Daniel. For Petrarch himself, the Lady's pride is almost exclusively a negative factor and one of the causes of her cruelty ("It troubles me / when a sovereign pride / hides many virtues in a lovely lady")¹⁶⁰ – it is telling that Laura *in morte* is generally described, in the speaker's own words, as "more beautiful and less proud"¹⁶¹ (alongside becoming boundlessly nurturing and understanding of her admirer's suffering). Daniel, much like Petrarch, links pride with disdain, but considers both an issue to overcome ("Yet will I weep, vow, pray to cruel she; / Flint, frost, disdain, wears, melts and yields, we see").¹⁶² In Spenser's case, however, some "spark of such self-pleasing pride"¹⁶³ appears to be only natural, if somewhat vain or ill-conceived ("Faire be no lenger proud of that shall perish")¹⁶⁴, and when it results in true harm, it is primarily when it appears in conjunction with the Lady's other personal failings such as cruelty – this is again demonstrated in the "Lion" Sonnet 20, where the Lady's pride is emphasised through the comparison to the animal, and causes so much destruction because the Lady also utterly lacks mercy and doesn't discriminate between friend and foe.

The "sharply visual nature" of Spenser's allegories¹⁶⁵ seems to paint a rather harsh picture of the Lady and as often as not, Spenser's portrayal of her strength reveals itself upon closer inspection to be a variation on the common Petrarchan sleight of hand of displacing blame on the Lady and letting the speaker appear more innocent by comparison,¹⁶⁶ with the added twist of also making the Lady appear out of control, thus justifying and paving the way

¹⁵⁹ The conflicting presentation may perhaps be best exemplified by the sonnet pair 58 and 59 ("By her who is most assured to her selfe") mentioned in the previous chapter.

¹⁶⁰ Petrarch 105.

¹⁶¹ Petrarch 302.

¹⁶² Daniel 11.

¹⁶³ Spenser 5.

¹⁶⁴ Spenser 27.

¹⁶⁵ Mortimer, et al. 22.

¹⁶⁶ Spenser 36.

for the speaker's eventual "conquest". At the same time this possible future victory on the speaker's part is explicitly described as something the Lady herself must allow to come to pass and decide to adjust her will accordingly. There are also surprising aspects of her persona which are not nearly as vilified as might be expected – her initial adversarial stance and her pride are often portrayed as traits which, while possibly suppressing her virtue, also present a direct proof of it. When taken into account alongside the sonnets 54, ("Of this worlds Theatre in which we stay, / My loue lyke the Spectator ydly sits")¹⁶⁷ and 18 ("But when I pleade, she bids me play my part")¹⁶⁸ with their allusions to the illusory nature of the *Amoretti's* "events", and the more humorous ones such as Sonnets 48 ("Innocent paper whom too cruell hand [...] did sacrificize vnto the greedy fyre"), the result seems to be the figure of a Lady who appears more defined in terms of personality than could be considered ordinary within the genre, but whose connection to reality is also strongly implied to be somewhat unreliable. This can easily allow for the interpretation that each of the pair may simply be playing their assigned roles as demanded by Petrarchan notions of unsuccessful courtship, and the Lady's cruelty may simply be a necessary step before transcending them – as Spenser fully intends the pair to do.

¹⁶⁷ Spenser 54.

¹⁶⁸ Spenser 18.

CHAPTER 3 – THE LADY’S SURRENDER

The *Amoretti*'s exceptionality among sonnet cycles arises, of course, in significant part from the fact that the speaker does eventually “get the girl”, and the collection has amassed much of its reputation not so much due to the artistry of its individual sonnets,¹⁶⁹ as due to its supposed emphasis on the Protestant ideal of mutual married love¹⁷⁰. Apart from the union between the lovers actually occurring, however, there is little about this conception that has not at various points been deemed highly questionable or downright false¹⁷¹ – and the evidence is often substantial. For one, while mutuality is superficially presented as both the “appropriate” goal and the eventually achieved state between the couple, Spenser’s outlook and portrayal of it is rather complicated and fraught with ideas and expressions which, be they unfortunate inheritances from conventional Petrarchism or the result of his own biases, nevertheless undermine his message. The principal question then becomes less whether the *Amoretti*'s text and subtext can be at odds, but rather when – and whether the conflict is strong enough for the apparent message of mutuality to be discarded altogether. For two, the nearly-unambiguous positivity of Protestant views on marriage tends to be greatly exaggerated, much like Spenser’s own alignment with these ideals.¹⁷² Protestant notions of celibacy, marriage and married sex differed wildly even during Spenser’s lifetime,¹⁷³ and while the encouragement of unions even among the clergy may have improved the status of marriage as a relationship with spiritual significance,¹⁷⁴ celibacy was often still preferred as the holier way of “God’s chosen few” that most inhabitants of a postlapsarian reality were

¹⁶⁹ Dasenbrock 38.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson 504.

¹⁷¹ As a quick glance through almost any two sources for this very paper can easily prove. (Should an inquisitive reader wish to verify this, comparing the conclusions of Johnson and Dasenbrock with those of Dubrow and Sanchez is an excellent start.)

¹⁷² Dasenbrock 49.

Sanchez 5, 7, 10.

¹⁷³ Dasenbrock 49.

¹⁷⁴ Dasenbrock 47, 49.

simply unable to properly follow (both in their behaviour and in the lack of sexual thought).¹⁷⁵ Marriage was therefore often viewed as a necessary evil to keep impure lusts among the sin-prone populace within at least vaguely sensible bounds, rather than a universally laudable and desirable state.¹⁷⁶ Spenser, however, seems to portray sexuality within marriage positively, as crucial and even sacred component of a loving union.¹⁷⁷ His enthusiasm is in fact such that Sanchez accuses the speaker of abandoning the “modesty and comeliness” expected within marriage even in the more sex-approving versions of Protestantism, as disregard of appropriately restrained behaviour would still be akin to “adultery with [one’s own] wife”.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, Spenser does very much seem to be attempting to portray the development of his speaker and the Lady’s relationship from discord and lack of understanding towards at least mutual contentment and concord, although the path there is undeniably rocky.

It would be tempting to mark the turn in the relationship between the lover and beloved as beginning with Sonnet 67, which obviously references *Canzoniere* 190 and its “untouchable *candida cerva*”.¹⁷⁹ Yet the seeds from which the change eventually sprouts are planted much sooner – already in Sonnet 57, the speaker proclaims to his Lady “Sweet warrior when shall I haue peace with you? / High time it is, this warre now ended were”,¹⁸⁰ and notes how weary he is of his constant Petrarchan struggle. “Make peace therefore, and graunt me timely grace: / that al my wounds will heale in little space”, he pleads to his beloved. An audience without prior knowledge of the *Amoretti* would have no particular reason to suspect any change to be forthcoming, but hindsight reveals two important signs: the first being the emphasis on weariness and the time the speaker spent in a metaphorical war against the beloved and a proclamation of a desire for peace and healing; the second being the

¹⁷⁵ Sanchez 15.

¹⁷⁶ Sanchez 7.

¹⁷⁷ Dasenbrock 49.

¹⁷⁸ Sanchez 7.

¹⁷⁹ Mortimer, et al. 20.

¹⁸⁰ Spenser 57.

fact that it is then immediately followed by Sonnet 58. If one accepts the hypothesis that *Amoretti* 58 (“By her that is most assured to her selfe”) is indeed from the Lady’s point of view, then it is there where she expresses her own anxieties about her finite and fallible existence, alongside the disquieting fact that she will likely not be able to remain self-sufficient for her entire life (“soonest fals when as she most supposeth, / her selfe assur’d, and is of nought affrayd”)¹⁸¹ – a thought process which reveals her as presumably equally unable to maintain her powerful and independent persona forever and which could very conceivably result in the decision to marry. If we do not consider the idea of the Lady as a viewpoint character very likely, the argument remains applicable, except the Lady is instead being warned about the potential undesirable outcomes by a party with a vested interest in swaying her. Either case constitutes an unpleasant reminder that the time of her glory may well be running out, resulting in the sonnet becoming something of an extended prelude to the main event. In a similar vein, the following Sonnet 59 may or may not be the speaker’s acceptance of the Lady despite her admission of imperfection (“Most happy she that most assured doth rest, / but he most happy who such one loues best”).¹⁸²

Shortly after emerges the “New Year” Sonnet 62, which speaks of forgiveness of old sins and of new, better beginnings, not just for himself but for the Lady as well¹⁸³ (“So let vs, which this change of weather vew, / change eeke our mynds and former liues amend / the old yeares sinnes forepast let vs eschew”)¹⁸⁴, a more peaceful and optimistic echo of Sonnet 57. This is the earliest relatively obvious instance signalling that an alteration of the *status quo* might realistically be in sight – where *Amoretti* 57 merely suggested the possibility of such change and *Amoretti* 58 argued for the wisdom and necessity of it, *Amoretti* 62 proposes a way towards achieving it. From there on, events progress with rapid speed: in Sonnet 63, the

¹⁸¹ Spenser 58.

¹⁸² Spenser 59.

¹⁸³ Johnson 514.

¹⁸⁴ Spenser 62.

male speaker compares himself to a sailor on a stormy sea, yet expresses a clear hope that he may be, after a long and arduous journey, finally arriving at a fertile shore (“I doe at length descry the happy shore, / in which I hope ere long for to arryue, / fayre soyle it seemes from far & fraught with store”), with the somewhat prophetic conclusion that “All paines are nothing in respect of this, / all sorrowes short that gaine eternall blisse.”¹⁸⁵ And it seems only appropriate that *Amoretti* 63 should conclude with bliss, because the very first line of 64 informs us of the lovers’ first kiss (“Comming to kisse her lyps, (such grace I found”).¹⁸⁶ The sonnet then continues as a *blazon*,¹⁸⁷ listing and individually praising the Lady’s various charms, and – one assumes – mimicking the lover’s euphoria at their first physical contact. The same euphoria might also explain the immediate relapse into the highly conventional and one-sided language of love poetry: if mutuality has a place in the lovers’ relationship, it is not to be found here, and despite Elizabeth’s previously noted expressions of a remarkably pronounced individual personality for a Lady of the Sonnet, in the moment of the kiss the lover’s gaze immediately turns her into “just” one more mistress whose eyes are all alike to sun.

But while the speaker was momentarily allowed to forget his Lady’s individuality, it quickly reasserts itself in the following sonnet, which concerns her uncertainty about proceeding on with the relationship and “loos[ing her] liberty”.¹⁸⁸ The speaker, after countless sonnets detailing the adversarial relationship with his “faire cruell” and the utter failure of most attempts at communication between the two of them, finally replies with the language of mutuality:

THE doubt which ye misdeeme, fayre loue, is vaine
That fondly feare to loose your liberty,

¹⁸⁵ Spenser 63.

¹⁸⁶ Spenser 64.

¹⁸⁷ Curbet 55.

¹⁸⁸ Spenser 65.

when loosing one, two liberties ye gayne,
 and make him bond that bondage earst dyd fly.
 Sweet be the bands, the which true loue doth tye,
 without constraunt or dread of any ill:
 the gentle birde feeles no captiuity
 within her cage, but singes and feeds her fill.
 There pride dare not approch, nor discord spill
 the league twixt them, that loyal loue hath bound:
 but simple truth and mutuall good will,
 seekes with sweet peace to salue each others wound
 There fayth doth fearlesse dwell in brasen towre,
 and spotlesse pleasure builds her sacred bowre.¹⁸⁹

This very same sonnet was used in Chapter 2 to highlight the speaker's hypocrisy in regards to his need for domination while harshly condemning similar tendencies in his partner. Yet it is crucial to also acknowledge it for its other side: an apparent attempt to assuage the Lady's worries by reassuring her of the speaker's benevolent intentions and the fact that he wishes for their relationship to have its primary basis in "mutual good will" rather than a zero-sum game of who controls whom. Instead of a bloodthirsty predator, the Lady is now encouraged to be a "gentle birde": happy in her cage, because she is provided for by someone who values compassion and reciprocity. Campana comments that advising "the beloved to renounce her liberty in order to procure a new kind of liberty for the two of them" does reverse the previous scenarios of female predation and "the speaker leaves behind his weakness as the beloved abandons her cruelty. However, the speaker's freedom comes at the price of the beloved's freedom."¹⁹⁰ Johnson arrives to a different conclusion – no longer having to fear each other's power, the Lady is liberated enough to express her own doubts to the speaker, who is now free to "rewrite both the politics and poetics of bondage in order to achieve positive effects"¹⁹¹. To slightly complicate the issue, the image of a happily caged bird reappears later in Sonnet 73,

¹⁸⁹ Spenser 65.

¹⁹⁰ Campana 175-176.

¹⁹¹ Johnson 515.

shortly after the Lady consents to a relationship. Here it is the speaker who allows the Lady to imprison him.¹⁹²

BEING my selfe captuyed here in care,
My hart, whom none with seruile bands can tye:
but the fayre tresses of your golden hayre,
breaking his prison forth to you doth fly.
[...]
Doe you him take, and in your bosome bright,
gently encage, that he may be your thrall:
perhaps he there may learne with rare delight,
to sing your name and prayses ouer all.
That it hereafter may you not repent,
him lodging in your bosome to haue lent.¹⁹³

Amoretti 73 superficially appears to be a mostly unremarkable celebration of the speaker's love, and one more sonnet which displaces the power within the relationship onto the Lady (if not maliciously this time). Yet the use of "may", "[d]oe you him take", or the acknowledgement of the fact that the Lady could regret her choice (and that such situation should ideally be prevented) creates a remarkably gentle-sounding sonnet which evokes the feeling of genuine concern for the Lady's opinion and happiness – although strangely, among critics seeking to prove, disprove or problematise the validity of Spenser's supposed fondness for mutual love, it appears to have gone largely unnoticed.¹⁹⁴ In any case, while the speaker's gentleness may be genuine, it comes a little bit late – at this point in the *Amoretti*, the relationship has been sealed, consummated and celebrated,¹⁹⁵ so the Lady deciding she does not want a thrall to sing her praises after all would be very much a moot point¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹² Or rather the speaker's heart – but in this particular sonnet, the difference between the two is negligible.

¹⁹³ Spenser 73.

¹⁹⁴ Janet G. Scott's paper mentions *Amoretti* 73, but only in the context of its significant debt to Torquato Tasso. Janet G. Scott, "The Sources of Spenser's 'Amoretti'," *The Modern Language Review* 22.2 (April, 1927): 191-192, 194, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3714491>>.

¹⁹⁵ As per *Amoretti* 67-70.

¹⁹⁶ Although one assumes evicting the speaker out into the rain again (as in *Amoretti* 46) could still be an option, if not a long-term solution.

This does not mean the Lady's will or wellbeing are treated as unimportant after *Amoretti* 65. Once the speaker finishes describing to her how he imagines their relationship, he exalts the Lady as angelic in Sonnet 66, and begins wondering why she "whose high worths surpassing paragon" would her "loue lent to so meane a one",¹⁹⁷ before concluding that, firstly, his "lowly" presence causes the Lady to appear better by comparison, and secondly, that the Lady's divinity inspires him to create and by doing so, he shall preserve her virtue for eternity. While this is a very common idea in love poetry (and within the *Amoretti* reiterated more explicitly both before and after Sonnet 66),¹⁹⁸ the placement of the sonnet directly after comforting the Lady about her fears lends it a tone of credibility it would otherwise lack. Only once the lover's *and* the beloved's concerns are acknowledged, and at least partially resolved to the couple's satisfaction does the Petrarchan doe appear to yield to her hunter in Sonnet 67:

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.
 There she beholding me with mylder looke,
 sought not to fly, but fearelesse still did bide:
 till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,
 and with her owne goodwill hir fymely tyde.
 Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld,
 so goodly wonne with her owne will beguyld.

¹⁹⁷ Spenser 66.

¹⁹⁸ Brown 406-407.

See also *Amoretti* 48 ("Yet liue for euer, though against her will, / and speake her good, though she requite it ill.") or 75 ("my verse your vertues rare shall eternize, / and in the heuens wryte your glorious name").

For the use of the same conceit elsewhere, see *Canzoniere* 327 ("and if my verses have any power, / your name, sacred among noble minds, / will become an eternal memory down here"), and *Delia* 40 ("For though that Laura better limnèd be, / Suffice, thou shalt be loved as well as she!") or 42 ("That grace which doth more than inwoman thee, / Lives in my lines and must eternal be").

And thus the male “victim” completes his transformation into a hunter and the Lady into his willing prey.

Much has been said about this perhaps most famous of Spenser’s sonnets,¹⁹⁹ and in order to judge it clearly and understand why that would be the case, it is necessary to provide broader context. *Amoretti* 67 clearly references – and subverts – Petrarch’s Sonnet 190:²⁰⁰

A pure white hind appeared to me
with two gold horns, on green grass,
between two streams, in a laurel’s shade,
at sunrise, in the unripe season.

Her aspect was so sweet and proud
I left all my labour to follow her:
as a miser, in search of treasure,
makes his toil lose its bitterness in delight.

‘Touch me not,’ in diamonds and topaz,
was written round about her lovely neck:
‘it pleased my Lord to set me free.’

The sun had already mounted to mid-day,
my eyes were tired with gazing, but not sated,
when I fell into water, and she vanished.²⁰¹

And while there is no equivalent to Petrarch’s Sonnet 190 in Daniel’s cycle, a translation (albeit loose one) of *Canzoniere* 190 by Sir Thomas Wyatt – a near-contemporary of Spenser’s – provides an interesting contrast to both Petrarch’s and Spenser’s interpretation:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, helas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,

¹⁹⁹ Johnson 515.

²⁰⁰ *Amoretti* 67 is apparently indebted even more to Tasso, but his work shall not be discussed here. (Scott 195; Dasenbrock 43.)

²⁰¹ Petrarch 190.

I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
 Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
 Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
 Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore
 Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.
 Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
 As well as I may spend his time in vain.
 And graven with diamonds in letters plain
 There is written her fair neck round about:
 ‘*Noli me tangere* for Caesar’s I am,
 And wild for to hold though I seem tame.’²⁰²

Petrarch’s white doe, while she may allure with her sweet visage, is (much like his beloved) unreachable and untouchable – such is the will of her lord, God.²⁰³ Petrarch’s speaker is inevitably left “not sated”, and the moment he loses control, she disappears. It isn’t difficult to draw a direct parallel to Laura and her unavailability, or even her (possibly foreshadowed) death – in Dasenbrock’s words, “[h]er Caesar [...] has made her free to ascend to Heaven, made her free of this world.” On the other hand, Wyatt’s variant (presented here primarily for the stark contrast its difference provides to both Spenser and Petrarch), couldn’t concern itself less with transcendence of the speaker *or* the doe/Lady.²⁰⁴ An astute reader may quickly notice that Petrarch’s speaker follows the hind simply due to being enchanted by her “aspect”, but Wyatt’s speaker is a huntsman attempting to capture his quarry – and where Petrarch is primarily concerned with the doe herself, and only describes his own state of mind in the second and last stanza, Wyatt appears determined to detail his speaker’s difficulties at the expense of almost all other elements. And Wyatt’s hind herself is, significantly, *not* free: “This Lady already belongs [...] to Caesar, and everyone else must keep his distance. Petrarch’s Lady is a bride of Christ; Wyatt’s is a part of a royal harem.”²⁰⁵ Correspondingly,

²⁰² Mortimer, et al. 115.

²⁰³ Dasenbrock 43.

²⁰⁴ Dasenbrock 43.

²⁰⁵ Dasenbrock 43.

the writing around her neck is only composed of diamonds, the symbols of steadfastness – topazes (signifying chastity) have disappeared.²⁰⁶

Spenser's Sonnet 67 is, in many ways, a microcosm of the entirety of the *Amoretti*. It appears likely that its occurrence – marking almost precisely the end of the second third of the cycle – is supposed to mirror *Canzoniere*'s division between *in vita* and *in morte*.²⁰⁷ Or – in other words – Spenser's speaker renounces what is thought of as conventional Petrarchism at approximately the same time as Petrarch himself. The speaker initially assumes the role of a hunter in a manner partially reminiscent of Wyatt, and similarly, his pursuit of the deer only "wearied [him] so sore"²⁰⁸ and achieved little, resulting in his forsaking any chance of success. Yet once the hunter's energy is spent and the doe appears to have evaded him, she returns to reveal that "in truth, she also thirsts",²⁰⁹ and allows herself to be taken, "halfe trembling"²¹⁰. In this "moment of calm mutuality"²¹¹ the doe/beloved is "metaphorically assimilated":²¹² "the male surrenders his will to mastery, and the female surrenders her freedom; he possesses her by yielding the initiative, and she is bound by her own goodwill."²¹³ The Petrarchan speaker's "will to power"²¹⁴ and the beloved's "earlier fear of commitment"²¹⁵ are both supposedly resolved and abandoned in favour of "mutuall good will" proposed as the basis for their relationship just two sonnets prior²¹⁶. The speaker no longer needs to wonder whether the Lady's "nature or her will" can be "mended", as he did in Sonnet 41²¹⁷ – after the development present in *Amoretti* 57-66 facilitated greater mutual

²⁰⁶ Dasenbrock 43.

²⁰⁷ Dasenbrock 46-47.

²⁰⁸ Mortimer, et al. 115.

²⁰⁹ Mortimer, et al. 20.

²¹⁰ Spenser 67.

Johnson remarks on the syntactical ambiguity of the phrase – the audience cannot be certain which half of the couple is "doing the trembling". (Johnson 515.)

²¹¹ Curbet 55.

²¹² Curbet 53.

²¹³ Johnson 515-516.

²¹⁴ Campana 171.

²¹⁵ Johnson 516.

²¹⁶ Spenser 65.

²¹⁷ Spenser 41.

understanding, the Lady's *voluntas* has, after many trials and tribulations, finally changed. The sonnet concludes in a literary equivalent of a fade-to-black, a scene Dasenbrock describes as "impeccably discreet".²¹⁸

Having resolved the central conflict of most sonnet sequences, one that Petrarch himself could seemingly only transcend through death (both his and his beloved's), the rest of the *Amoretti* should, therefore, ideally contain a mostly equal, reciprocal and loving relationship. Yet as was pointed out before, the image of a happily caged bird was not entirely deproblematised, despite the apparent attempt to do so – it certainly isn't helped by the fact that already in Sonnet 71, shortly after the speaker finally united with his beloved, he "joys" to see her compare him to a spider "in close away to catch her vnaware", styling herself as a captured bee.²¹⁹ The speaker once again extols the delights he intends to provide the beloved with in her gilded cage (while eagerly agreeing that a cage it indeed is), and concludes that "And all thensforth eternall peace shall see / betweene the Spyder and the gentle Bee."²²⁰ Curbet calls the scene described within the final couplet "almost prelapsarian" and stresses its probable connection to Biblical descriptions of Salvation,²²¹ but in the light of the speaker's previous hypocrisy regarding the matters of mastery and control, and of his "joy" at his beloved's change of perspective, it is difficult to view the emergent reversal of roles as entirely innocent. Akin to the previously discussed image of an imprisoned bird, it appears that while the speaker attempts to strip the simile of its unpleasant implications, he does so without the necessary commitment to truly accomplish the goal, especially where the situation would otherwise suit him.

And finally, there is Spenser's portrayal of physical love and attraction. While it cannot be denied that the *Amoretti* demonstrates Neoplatonic tendencies, if Spenser intended

²¹⁸ Dasenbrock 44.

²¹⁹ Spenser 71.

²²⁰ Spenser 71.

²²¹ Curbet 56.

to “climb the Neoplatonic ladder”²²² of moving away from earthly physical attraction towards perceiving within the beloved a spiritual ideal of beauty,²²³ he failed spectacularly, as physicality and eroticism is very much present both before and after the lovers’ union in Sonnet 67. An idea with more apparent substance is that Spenser was attempting to present within the *Amoretti* an ideal of companionate Protestant marriage – a reciprocal relationship where “physical love is spiritual”²²⁴ and sexuality is viewed in a positive light. In a similar (though not interchangeable) vein, Patrick Cheney proposes that Spenser’s work portrays transcendence of the Neoplatonic ideals of exclusively spiritual love, which – in Cheney’s opinion – Spenser considered to be deeply dehumanising to the female partner and intrinsically connected to Ovidian lust.²²⁵ Yet even this train of thought, when applied to the *Amoretti*, isn’t without faults. The sonnet connecting sexuality and spirituality most overtly is the so-called “Easter Sonnet” 68, which immediately follows the white doe’s surrender:

MOST glorious Lord of lyfe that on this day,
 Didst make thy triumph ouer death and sin:
 and hauing harrowd hell didst bring away,
 captiuity thence captiue vs to win.
 This ioyous day, deare Lord, with ioy begin,
 and grant that we for whom thou didest dye
 being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
 may liue foreuer in felicity.
 And that thy loue we weighing worthily,
 may likewise loue thee for the same againe:
 and for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy,
 with loue may one another entertayne.
 So let vs loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought,
 loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught.²²⁶

²²² Dasenbrock 48.

²²³ Cheney 320.

²²⁴ Dasenbrock 48.

²²⁵ Cheney 317, 324-325.

While Cheney’s primary argument centres on the Books III-V of *The Faerie Queene*, its general ideology appears quite applicable to the *Amoretti* as well.

²²⁶ Spenser 68.

While there are indeed hints of mutuality, Melissa E. Sanchez strongly criticises the theological validity of the sonnet. “Like their Catholic forbears,” she claims, “the majority of Protestants believed that sex, even within marriage, was innately perverse and sinful—a theological affinity that can be attributed in part to a shared Augustinian heritage.”²²⁷ The *imitatio Christi* in Sonnet 68 is in her view a cynical ploy which completely disregards the importance of vulnerability central to Christ’s sacrifice and where “the crucifixion becomes a metaphor and model for erotic love, rather than erotic love an allegory of divine sacrifice.”²²⁸ Her objections extend to Sonnet 84 as well:

LET not one sparke of filthy lustfull fyre
 breake out, that may her sacred peace molest:
 ne one light glance of sensuall desyre
 Attempt to work her gentle mindes unrest.
 But pure affections bred in spotlesse brest,
 and modest thoughts breathd from wel tempred sprites,
 goe visit her in her chast bowre of rest,
 accompanyde with angelick delights.
 There fill your selfe with those most joyous sights,
 the which my selfe could never yet attayne:
 but speake no word to her of these sad plights,
 which her too constant stiffenesse doth constrayne.
 Onely behold her rare perfection,
 and bless your fortunes fayre election.²²⁹

Sanchez interprets this sonnet as a continuing struggle for dominance between the betrothed pair due to the speaker’s inability or unwillingness to reconcile the inherently sinful human sexuality in the postlapsarian world with the Lady’s own human (and therefore sinful and sexual) nature.²³⁰ She additionally comments that

²²⁷ Sanchez 5.

²²⁸ Sanchez 10.

²²⁹ Spenser 84.

²³⁰ Sanchez 14.

[a]ccordingly, this attempt to wish away female sexual feeling also has the disturbing effect of naturalizing male sexual violence. [...] In this account, the relation between poet and lady is defined by male sensuality and female innocence, not mutual need and companionship. And if the beloved's chastity can be reimagined as “too constant stiffnesse” — excessive rigidity and haughtiness — then courtship and marriage are characterized not by reciprocity, but by a contest between desire and frigidity.²³¹

What Sanchez doesn't appear to properly account for is the fact that while the speaker does complain about his beloved's lack of sexual appetite, a complaint is all the sonnet appears to be: it contains little obvious indication of an intention to trespass the Lady's sexual boundaries, with the possible exception of seeking out “those most joyous sights” – and while considerations of voyeurism are hardly praiseworthy, there is an immense divide between that and the underlying threat of sexual violence Sanchez describes. The sonnet's *coda* seems to amount to the speaker's sigh, shrug and a reminder to himself that he should “bless [his] fortunes fayre election” and be grateful for marrying a being of such “rare perfection” in the first place. The greater problem here is presented by the fact that *Amoretti* 84 contains the very same fault all of Spenser's sonnets directly concerned with this subject of sexuality appear to share (with the partial exception of Sonnet 68): not so much the possibility of violence or need for sexual “conquest”, as their deeply one-sided viewpoint and the resulting conventionality. Whenever Spenser's speaker touches upon sexuality, he relapses from any mutual acknowledgment and awareness he may have gained before into describing his own subjective impressions and current state of mind. Spenser hasn't achieved the Neoplatonic ideal of spiritual love, and he probably didn't intend to: but neither did he achieve the

²³¹ Sanchez 15-16.

Protestant ideal of marriage as a cure for lust, nor the ideal of marriage as a companionate and mutual relationship.

Spenser's Protestantism appears to be more a matter of what he considers pleasant or convenient rather than theologically sound. And while his Lady and the speaker appear to engage in something genuinely approaching a dialogue and an attempt at negotiating the terms of their relationship, their road towards mutuality and companionate marriage is complicated by Spenser's not necessarily malicious, but very definitely imperfect and self-centred treatment of sexuality. Similarly, the aim of the role reversal within the couple being the fostering of "mutual good will" might be more convincing if it weren't a *complete* reversal – as the collection stands, the lover appears suited to mastery of the beloved by the virtue of his willingness to make the Lady's captivity pleasant, something the Lady refused to even consider while she was (supposedly) in control of the relationship in the earlier half of the *Amoretti*.

CONCLUSION

Edmund Spenser's portrayal of the Lady of the Sonnet is certainly unusual, in more ways than might perhaps be expected from a mere glance. On the one hand, she is often portrayed as terrible and merciless, even more viscerally so than in Petrarch's often overtly hostile descriptions, but it would be a true disservice to pretend that is all Spenser's Elizabeth is. Through creative subversions of established conceits, Spenser paints an extremely life-like portrait of his Lady as a woman with her own mind, will and boundaries. And as the *Amoretti* continues, Spenser's speaker begins to realise this as well, and attempts to negotiate with the Lady in an effort to create a mutual and loving relationship.

Spenser's transcendence of Petrarchism and possibly Neoplatonism isn't complete or without its issues – in many areas, his speaker is still overly concerned with himself, and unwilling or unable to let go of that which he condemned in others or of the privileges the established rules of the genre and his own gender afford him at his Lady's expense. But that hardly means Spenser's effort isn't genuine or transformative – one might argue that it isn't transformative *enough*, but it is crucial to remember that the poetic space Spenser is attempting to claim and re-define spans centuries of tradition rooted in egotism and established conceits, and Spenser's particular brand of anti-Petrarchism enters an almost entirely new territory. As a pioneer of celebrating gradually-achieved companionate love through the sonnet form, while his inability to fully embrace the implications of his speaker's proclaimed goals is disappointing, he nevertheless deserves recognition for paving a path towards portraying the Lady of the Sonnet in a new light.

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