
UNIT 8 THE RENAISSANCE

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is intended to equip the student with a basic knowledge of the Renaissance and its broader ramifications. To this end, the unit will

- Help the student distinguish between the different strands of the Renaissance.
- Acquaint the student with the main features and figures of this phenomenon.
- Acquaint the student with some of the significant social and cultural movements that shaped the Renaissance in England.
- To this end, it will identify the role of the Reformation movement in the Church and of English nationalism, in the shaping of the English Renaissance.
- Indicate the role of changes in the English court in the production and shaping of Renaissance English literature.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Given that the period we refer to as the Renaissance sits at different times in different countries, and that the English renaissance owes much to its Continental predecessor, the first unit will explore some of the relations between the two. It will focus on trends in learning and the arts, on the evolution of English humanism, and on religious and political movements like the Reformation and their impact on English politics and society. It will also dwell on the literary, cultural and economic developments (the inception of British imperial inclinations, for instance) of the period. These will include issues like the evolution of courtier poetry, the relation of poets and poetry to Elizabethan court politics and the role of a newly emerging English nationalism in shaping the arts of the age.

8.2 THE RENAISSANCE

8.2.1 The Continental and the English Renaissance

The social, political, religious and cultural forces that we refer to as the Renaissance was first evident in continental Europe and began to be felt in England only about the end of the fifteenth century. Perhaps the most important of these forces in the continent and in England was the spread of the new humanist learning and ideology



Courtly Love

especially among the upper classes. This leaning is first in evidence in Italy. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1493, refugees from that city had brought with them the vast learning and literature – especially of the Greeks – that had been stored in the libraries of the city. This produced the first great Italian humanists like Savonarola, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who were subsequently to influence early English humanists like Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), John Colet (1467-1519) and William Lyly (1468-1522) – visitors to Italy who took back to England the new learning. It was highly influential in the designing of the new curricula in schools and universities, especially the work of the great humanist educationist Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536), but for a long time it remained without impact on the literature and art of England. This was primarily because the English language was as yet immature, socially and politically without power. The language of the courts was still predominantly French, while that of learning remained Latin. There was no real tradition as yet of English theatre, prose or verse, despite the work of Chaucer in the last. Nor was there a major school of art that could be influenced by the new learning, as was the case with Italian artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. It is no coincidence then that the first full impact of the renaissance in English literature came with the translation of Latin and Italian verse into English by poets like Wyatt and Surrey, and the consequent enrichment of the literature in the English vernacular. This in turn was enabled substantially by the fact that the school and university system had by now produced a generation of writers literate in the ancient languages and literatures of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and brought to English writings the humanism of those works.

The invention of the printing press also played a role in the emergence of the Renaissance in the continent and in England. It made possible the sudden and immense popularization of the new learning in Italy, and in the other European countries. It also contributed substantially to the development and consolidation of national languages and consequently of national traditions of literature. The classics were translated from the Latin and Greek originals into the vernacular languages of the different countries and published widely, allowing greater access to the new, learning. This pattern was true of England too.

Where the English renaissance differed substantially from its European counterparts was, firstly, in the kind of impact that the Reformation had on the renaissance in England. We will study this in greater detail in the next section; for now, let us note that the spirit of unbounded humanism associated with the continental renaissance, with its celebration of the human form and intellect, was tempered by the moral vision of a powerful Puritan imagination, which had already established itself in England by the time the renaissance took effect there. Secondly, the renaissance in England was never as profoundly an elitist phenomenon as it was on the continent. Perhaps because of the distance from Italy, perhaps because of the entrenched popular traditions of theatre and folk music and poetry, the emergent high culture that was the renaissance in England had to deal with and assimilate local, popular and mass forms and traditions of literature and culture more than, say, the renaissance in France. Because of the spread of Protestant teachings and of literacy, the English renaissance also had a mass base very different from its continental counterparts. Thirdly, the direction of politics in the age – which led to the political distancing of England from both France and Italy – along with a native resurgence of nationalistic sentiments, and ambitions to rival the Greeks and the Romans in their cultural achievements, led to an involution of the spirit of the renaissance that was specifically English in character, and distinct from its European counterparts. The poetry of Edmund Spenser in many ways typifies this character, as we shall see shortly.

8.2.2 The Renaissance and the Reformation

As we noted above, the English renaissance was crucially influenced by another very important historical phenomenon, which differentiated it substantially from its

continental predecessor: the Reformation. In essence, the 'Reformation' refers to the various and often bloody and violent movements against the Roman Catholic church, that spread over Continental Europe through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, demanding large scale reforms in its beliefs and ecclesiastical practices. It, too, was in many ways a consequence of the spread of the new humanist learning on the continent, and of the power of the printing press, which permitted the translation and popularization of the Bible from Latin and Greek into the European vernaculars, annulling the laities' dependency on the ecclesiastical orders for the interpretation and mediation of the Bible. It was led by figures like Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64) but was preceded by reformers like St. Francis, Peter Waldo, John Huss, and John Wycliffe who repeatedly critiqued the abuses in ecclesiastical practices from the early thirteenth century onward. They were, however, not inclined to actually break from the Roman Catholic Church, an extremism that later reformers of the sixteenth century adopted, resulting in the many breakaway sects that constitute Protestantism. The conventional date for the beginning of the Reformation then is Oct. 31, 1517, the date that Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses critiquing the church on the door of the Castle Church, Wittenberg. It is falsely assumed by many that Luther had intended to break from the Catholic church, but the fact is that it was the Catholic church that expelled Luther, against his own desire. Later reformers however, picked up on Luther's principles of dissent and deliberately broke from the Catholic church, plunging much of Europe into religious and civil strife for the next few centuries.

The reformist spirit had already made its way to England by the time of Luther, primarily through the work of John Wycliffe (1330-84), who not only protested against the excessive worldly power of the Catholic church, but was instrumental in first translating the Bible into English. Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament was, however, not very accessible and his followers, the Lollards, did not have much impact on the religious imagination. Wycliffe's work was furthered by William Tyndale (1484-1536), who wrote and popularized a much more accessible translation of the Bible. When Henry VIII -- who had initially been a strong defender of Catholic orthodoxy -- broke from the Roman papacy in 1535, the impetus to the Reformation in England became politically powerful, although tempered by the King's desire to form a Church of England that would lean neither toward Catholicism nor toward the more rigid versions of Protestantism. The more radical varieties of Protestantism however, continued to flourish in England, in the form of sects like the Diggers, the Quakers, the Presbyterians, etc. and remained influential in shaping the directions of politics as well as of society and culture. Their impact is felt especially in the tempering of renaissance humanism and sensualism, through the consistent maintenance of Christian tenets over classical, especially Platonic, ideals. So even while the Italian influence on the emergent English literature of the period is strongly evident, it remains harnessed to an essentially Christian vision, revealing in that literature a tension between a strong fascination for the former and an equally strong moral condemnation of it.

8.2.3 Social and Political Circumstances of the Renaissance

We have already noted how the permeation of the currents of the renaissance into English culture was both mediated and tempered by the forces of the reformation that had already found root in England. Both forces -- of the renaissance and of the reformation -- served to substantially reorganize English society. In the 15th century, England had had primarily an agrarian and feudal socio-economic structure, with much of the population living in the rural countryside, many as tenants to country squires and noble lords. However, repeated epidemics of the plague had substantially affected the population, which as a consequence hardly grew in this period. The shortage of labor proved a blessing to many peasants, who managed to sell their labor at a premium, and eventually to rise above their class and form a new class of landed folk called 'yeomen' or small farmers. Many large landholders converted their land into sheep pasture because of the lack of labor, leading to land enclosures and the

abandonment of many villages. This in turn led to the dramatic development of the wool industry. The popularity of the pastoral as a genre and of the figure of the shepherd in renaissance English poetry then, is not entirely because of either classical influences or of Biblical ones, but derived from the English social landscape itself. But the period also saw the growth of London as a commercial and political city, with the new classes and the re-distributed populations seeking employment, commercial gains and political power gradually settling in the city. A part of the new social constituents were guilds of artisans and craftspeople whose services were becoming increasingly important in catering to the needs of the growing populace. The emergence of these mixed social sectors was an early part of the larger process of the dismantling of the feudal economy that was to culminate with the consolidation of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. As yet though, they were still constrained by the social and economic parameters of that economy. The migrants to London in this century were thus mainly seeking social and economic uplift as well as acceptability in a feudal socio-economic system that barely recognized them. They became a ready constituency for proselytizing protestant groups who not only converted their beliefs, but through promoting literacy, gave them access to educational possibilities that had remained outside their reach till now. But in doing so, it also spread the sense of tension that we noted above, between the humanist education they had access to and the conservative reformist morality of the new religious movements.

This tension was compounded by monarchical changes and the consequent changes in affiliations – from Henry VIII's Anglicanism to Edward VI's rigid Protestantism to Mary Tudor's Catholicism to Elizabeth I's return to Anglicanism and so on. But these vacillations were substantially defused in their impact on literature and culture primarily because of an emergent English nationalist spirit. This nationalist sentiment held together at the cultural level despite the political tensions that arose out of diverse and changing religious affiliations. It rejected much that was Italianate in the renaissance, promoting an Englishness of vision and ideals that was aimed at positioning English literature and arts as superior to the rest of renaissance Europe. (It is no coincidence that many of the playwrights of the period set their comedies and satires – whether it was Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* or Jonson's *Volpone* – in Italy, implying to their English audiences that the vices and venalities satirized in the plays were the illnesses of a specifically Italianate character.) This ideological rejection permitted the English writers of the period to import forms, genres, styles and themes from the continent but also to experiment with them freely, nativizing them by fusing them with the existing traditions of English literature, subjecting them to the specificities of the rapidly evolving English language, and infusing them with the moral and social vision of English Anglicanism. Nevertheless, several of the main elements of the European renaissance which did not conflict with protestant ideals – or even enhanced them – did find their way into, and become an entrenched part of, the new literature of England. The celebration of the human spirit and intellect was one such element. A related and for us, more pertinent element was a celebration of the arts, especially of skills in writing and rhetoric, the cultivation of which was now considered of signal importance especially to the governing classes, into which Spenser made his way. This was now a part of the education of these classes, and Spenser too, was to avail of it at his grammar school as well as subsequently, at Cambridge University. We will now examine briefly how this skill and knowledge in the arts was an important aspect of court life in renaissance England, and what the consequent relations were of poets to the monarch and the court.

8.2.4 Courtier Poets, Court Politics

Most of the well-known poetry of the period was written by courtiers, or by highly educated gentlemen, and was rarely published. Poetry was written more for a small circle of friends and others of similar rank, addressed to a nobleman usually, following the practice of patronage by the nobility. But it was, as we have noted,

following the practice of patronage by the nobility. But it was, as we have noted, common practice for courtiers of the period to lay claims to being poets. There is some controversy about how important their self-perception as poets was to them, and to the social meanings and implications of this perception. It is probably true that the poets of the Elizabethan period – from Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) to Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) and John Davies (1569-1626) – were first courtiers and then poets. Critics like Richard Helgerson argue that most of these poets, while projecting the craft of poetry as being of 'divine origin and advertising its civilizing effect', and the poet as teacher, afflict d, inspirer, etc., to monarchs, refused to see themselves in these terms (Helgerson: 676). Contrarily, for most of them poetry was merely an indulgence, about which they remained largely defensive. The risk of assuming the garb of Poet, as they envisioned the vocation, was too potentially threatening to their social status, with the possibility of exposing 'its wearer to ridicule and shame' (Helgerson: 676). Thus while acknowledging the importance of the figure notionally, according to Helgerson, most of these poets were unwilling to offer their own work and themselves as worthy of acknowledgement in these terms. They instead invariably offered apologies for their work, blaming it on the passions of love or a lack of suitable employment, often promising never to repeat their 'pretensions' to poetry again. Their complaints however were not against their conceptions of poetry so much as against their actual poetic work, which they felt was likely to be mocked, and in turn, they themselves as poets.

The picture is however more complicated than it appears here. We must also remember that, firstly, self-deprecation was part of the poetic conventions of the time, and need not be taken as seriously as Helgerson wishes to. Very often poets self-reflexively indicated their art as insufficient to its own ambitions, generating a particularly poetic tension that was based on the paradox of the poem achieving its aims precisely by denying itself. This may be made clearer through the following lines from Sidney's Sonnet 34, addressed to his beloved 'Stella':

What idler thing than speak and not be heard?
 What harder thing than smart and not to speak?
 Peace, foolish wit! With wit my wit is marr'd.
 Thus write I, while I doubt to write, and wreak
 My harm in ink's poor loss....

The basic point being made in the poem and specifically in these lines is that there is an overwhelming reason to write – the 'smart' or pain of love, in the 2nd line – which is however hindered by the very passion it seeks to communicate: 'With wit [of passion] my wit [of poetry] is marr'd'. And in expressing the difficulty of communicating the passion, the poem achieves its precise aim, which is to project the measure of the passion as all-consuming.

Once we acknowledge this convention, it becomes clear that the poet's deprecation of his art was often not so much a matter of placing the vocation of the courtier above that of the poet, as a matter of fulfilling a demand of the poetry itself. But in addition to this, we must also remember that such a pose – of expressing an inability to complete, of embarking on a task that is beyond one's powers, of self-deprecation, and so on – was not confined to the poet or the vocation of poetry but was considered the appropriate mode of self-presentation for the ideal courtier, and extended to all of his various roles. This pose was assumed to indicate not so much humility, as moderation and balance on the part of the courtier. It was an Italian ideal, propounded by Baldasare Castiglione in his book, *The Book of The Courtier* (1528), a very influential humanist text on courtiers of the sixteenth century, not least because it opened the question of whether a courtier is born one or anyone from outside the nobility could also become one on the basis of his abilities, accomplishments and learning. It was read by many outside the nobility, especially from the emerging merchant class, who wished to appear cultivated. This is an issue of significance for us because, as we shall see, Spenser was not born into the nobility but nevertheless

education and accomplishments. Castiglione's book suggested not only that the ideal courtier was one who was graceful and educated, but that he be accomplished and many sided in his personality, and yet remain inoderate in his presentation of his accomplishments. For the average Elizabethan courtier this was extended in its implications to indicate loyalty and subservience to the monarch; it therefore took the form of self-deprecation and was much practiced, as a means of displaying one's accomplishments even as they were belittled as a sign of inferiority before the queen. Sir Philip Sidney was to become a living ideal of such a courtier; but for an outsider like Spenser, this was to become a problem. We will discuss some of these issues in the next unit, when we discuss the life of Spenser. For now, it should be clear that the writing of poetry, and the practice of self-deprecation were both necessary dimensions to the politics of the Elizabethan court and the self-presentation of the courtier there.

8.2.5 English Nationalism and the Renaissance

While the nationalist spirit in England is fully in evidence only by around the middle of the seventeenth century, explicitly on display especially in John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, the sentiment had been on the rise for more than a century. In some sense a rudimentary nationalistic spirit is evident ever since the beginning of the battles with France in the medieval period. But with the sixteenth century, this sentiment begins to take the shape of a full fledged ideology. We have already hinted at some of the reasons for this development, like the political distancing of the English from Italy and France. This in turn was a consequence of the spread of Protestantism in England, leading to the religious separation from Rome and the establishment of the Anglican Church under Henry VIII. Thus, English nationalism from its very inception had been closely allied to religious sentiments, unlike the subsequent emergence of nationalisms in the European countries, which followed, rather than preceded, the process of secularization of society, and the separation of religion and state. Since the separatist religious agenda of Protestantism in England was intimate to the formation of a separate English national identity (or English nationalism), and since the spread of Protestantism had been primarily through and among the emergent merchant and trading classes, and in the new squirarchy, the nationalism that emerged was itself very middle class in its roots. It was not confined to this class however, and found willing takers in the nobility and aristocracy, especially those who affiliated themselves to the Anglican Church or other protestant sects.

The social origins of this nationalisin are of some significance. This was the time that England was growing as a naval and commercial power, and its merchant and trading ships had traveled all over the known world. English merchant ships were bringing back wealth from the distant comers of the globe, including from India and China. Along with the local growth in agriculture, sheep-rearing and the wool and cloth industry, England was growing into an important economic power in the European region. The main beneficiaries of this econoinic growth as we have noted were the new classes of merchants and traders, and professional artisans. The combination of a specifically English Protestantism, the burgeoning economy and the emergent economic classes led to the promotion of a nationalisin that sometimes served as a qualification for social mobility for the emergent classes and professions. It led to the consolidation of a sense of national identity (albeit as yet nascent) that was able to contain, at least in the sixteenth century, the social tensions that were unleashed by such a drastic social change, as well as offer channels for upward mobility to those who proclaimed it. This is evident in Spenser's avowed desire to be a truly English poet. It is then this English nationalisin that spurred him as well as other less able poets to attempt the first truly English epic – a task that was ironically fulfilled only when that very nationalist ideology was threatened, in the next century by John Milton. It was the later attempts of the English monarchy to return to the Catholic

8.3 LET'S SUM UP

We have examined some of the main characteristics of the Renaissance as it flowered in England, and of the impact of the Reformation on it. We identified some of the consequences of this in terms of distinguishing the English renaissance from its continental counterparts. This was seen to be as much a matter of the social bases of the English renaissance as of the political upheavals of the age. We noted how the combination of a humanist education and a protestant Christian vocation could turn advantageous to people like Spenser, who sought to use these as means of social and political advancement. We identified some of the processes by which this historical change came about in England, and how some of those processes in turn affected the shape and quality of the renaissance in England. We shall now examine specifically the impact of these issues on the life and work of Edmund Spenser, in Unit II.

8.4 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What does the term Renaissance mean? Identify some of the key factors responsible for the spread of the Renaissance in Europe.
2. What was the Reformation? What relations can you identify and trace between the Renaissance and the Reformation?
3. Identify some of the socio-cultural factors that shaped the English Renaissance.
4. What was the role of the court in the shaping of English Renaissance literature?
5. Nationalism and the nationalist spirit played an important role in the shaping of the Renaissance imagination. Do you agree?

8.5 ADDITIONAL READING

1. Cooper, Helen, *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance* (Ipswich: D.S Brewer, 1977)
2. Cullen, Patrick, *Spenser, Marvell, and Renaissance Pastoral* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1970)
3. Ellrodt, Robert, *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960).
4. Grundy, Joan, *The Spenserian Poets: A Study in Elizabethan and Jacobean Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969)
5. Helgerson, Richard, 'The New Poet Presents Himself', in Edmund Spenser's Poetry, Norton Critical Editions, Hugh MacLean and Anne Lake Prescott (eds.) (London: Norton, 1993)
6. Hume, Anthea, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
7. Loades, D.M., *The Tudor Court* (London: Batsford, 1986)
8. Rambuss, Richard, *Spenser's Secret Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

UNIT 9 EDMUND SPENSER

Structure

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- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Some Theoretical Remarks
- 9.3 Spenser's Life
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- 9.4 The Politics of Spenser's Life and Poetry
- 9.5 Let's Sum Up
- 9.6 Questions for Review
- 9.7 Additional Reading

9.0 OBJECTIVES

The intent of this unit is to:

- Acquaint the student with some of the theoretical issues involved in examining literary works through the lens of biography.
- Briefly present the life of Edmund Spenser.
- Through this, to provide a glimpse of the cultural context within which court poets like Spenser worked.
- Offer an analysis of the politics of courtier poets and poetry.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will briefly discuss the significance of biographies and biographical material in understanding and analysing literature. The unit will then cover the life of Edmund Spenser to the extent it is known. It will examine some of the literary, political and personal factors that inflected his writings, specifically the nature of patronage poetry and the ways in which it influenced his work. It will also look at some personal dimensions of his life as they bear on his work, as for instance his courtship and marriage to Elizabeth Boyle, or the impact of the conflicts between his religious training and his readings in Platonic philosophy.

9.2 SOME THEORETICAL REMARKS

Before going into the life of Spenser, it may be worth our while to dwell briefly on why we should undertake a study of the poet's life. At a certain level, the need to do so may seem self-evident; after all, what could be more intimate to a writer's work than the life of the writer itself? However, it is necessary to examine whether things are indeed so simple, and for this we shall briefly outline some of the theoretical issues involved in this question.

The form of criticism known as biographical criticism is a venerable and much practised one, dating back at least to Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. It gained in popularity and esteem through the 19th century, and remained considerably influential till the early part of the 20th century, when it was challenged first by the school of New Criticism and later by Structuralist and Post-Structuralist critics. The basic

premise of all biographical criticism is that the events and experiences of an author's life have a bearing on his/her literary work, and that therefore a study of the author's life can prove the basis of a useful explanatory or interpretative commentary on the work. Usually, this extended to maintaining that the author's intended meaning was the final horizon of meaning that the text could yield; nothing outside this could be a valid interpretation. The New Critics and the Structuralist and Post-Structuralist critics, however, challenged this premise. For the New Critics, like the American critic I. A. Richards, the fundamental object of criticism was the text, and nothing outside it – including the author – could be of relevance to it. For Structuralists like the French critic Roland Barthes, the life (especially as biography) of any author was considered as much a construct as the text – a construct that in making itself sensible, followed conventions and patterns (or structures) of meaning-making that belong to the larger field of literary enterprise. Hence, the relevance or otherwise of his or her life or intended meanings to the text could not be a matter of certainty, and certainly could not conclude the debates on the meanings of any literary text. Post-Structuralist writers like the influential French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, furthered the debate. Derrida suggested that the meanings of texts contain within them the logics of their own disintegration, because texts can be made meaningful only through the consistent suppression of alternate possible meanings in them. The relevance of the life or intent of the writer to the text was therefore only one among myriad possible meanings, and could not be the single conclusive way of interpreting the text. Foucault's contribution to the author debate was to propose that the idea of the author was itself part of a field of authoritarian and disciplinary discourses around a text aimed at controlling the production of meaning in it. To all these thinkers and critics, clearly, there was no self-evident association between author and text; the latter was to be treated as disengaged from its producer, whose role in its meanings, subsequent to its production, would be the same – and have the same validity – as that of any other reader. A useful, comprehensive introduction to many of these issues may be found in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1985).

Given such strong theoretical rejections of author-centred critical practice, the utility of studying the author's life may well be questioned. However, it must be noted that the knowledge of the author's life need not serve only as a means to read and interpret the text. Literary biographies serve us more usefully in other ways. Firstly, even as a textual construct itself, a literary biography can offer us valuable insights not so much into individual texts by that particular author as into his/her age. It can provide us with the means for understanding the circumstances within which the writer wrote: the pressures and difficulties he/she faced, the literacy levels and reading habits of his/her age, the kinds of issues that occupied his/her society, the kinds of issues that he/she chose to engage with – in short, the available literary, political, social, economic and cultural influences on him/her. In other words, it is part of the process of locating a writer's work in its context. Secondly, to the extent that any literary text must in the first instance be authored, and usually form part of a corpus of work that a writer produces, its links and relations with the rest of the oeuvre can throw light on the work itself, formally and substantially, and can usually be traced only through an examination of the author's literary life. And finally, even if the meaning intended by the author need not serve as a master-meaning to the literary text, and even if such intended meanings are rarely easily evident, it is arguably necessary to uncover and engage with them in the first instance, before deciding on whether or not they are relevant to the text. With these observations in mind, it is now possible to turn to an examination of Spenser's life, as it relates to his work.

9.3 SPENSER'S LIFE

9.3.1 The Early Years

Not much is known about Spenser's life. It is reasonably certain that he was born in London, probably in 1552. Although he himself came of poor stock, he may have

been related to the Midlands noble family of Spencer, who had been made wealthy through sheep-rearing – which as we saw from the previous unit was a growth industry in the sixteenth century. He was entered as a "poor boy" in Merchant Taylors' grammar school, where he would have studied mainly Latin, with some Hebrew, Greek, and music. The school was established in 1560 by the guild of tailors (hence the name) and was one of many founded by similar guilds across England at this time, following a modern, humanism-oriented education. Spenser matriculated from this school and joined Pembroke College in Cambridge University in 1569, as a 'sizar' or poor scholar. As such, he had to undertake various odd jobs and menial tasks around the university, in return for the education. This was also the year when his poetry was first published. These were translations from the Biblical Book of Revelations, four sonnets of the 16th-century French poet Joachim du Bellay, as well as a translation of a French version of some epigrams by the Italian poet Petrarch. They prefaced an anti-Catholic prose tract and were probably commissioned by the chief author of the tract, the Flemish expatriate Jan van der Noodt. He received his B.A. from Cambridge in 1573, left briefly because of an epidemic in 1574, then returned to take his M.A. in 1576. During his stay in Cambridge he was known to have been befriended by Gabriel Harvey, a witty, ambitious but somewhat pedantic and devious fellow of Cambridge, from a similar social background to Spenser. The latter was to later celebrate their friendship in the figure of I-Iobbinol in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579). What they shared apart from their literary pursuits was – in an atmosphere of social mobility and opening possibilities – the ambitious expectation that this education would offer them rank and status.

9.3.2 The Cambridge Years and After

At Cambridge, Spenser picked up Italian, French and past and contemporary English literature, along with a wide reading in the Greek and Latin classics. Alongside this, he read much in pagan mythology, divinities, ancient and contemporary philosophy, and pagan and English legends and folklore. It was a knowledge that provided the foundation for the kind of fusion of themes, forms and generic styles that he attempted so successfully in his later poetry. He is known to have read Homer's *Illiad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, all of which probably were formative in the writing of *The Faerie Queene*. Likewise, the influence of Virgil's *Bucolics* and other Italian and French pastoral poetry are evident in *The Shepheardes Calender*, just as are the Petrarchan sonnets and canzone form and other Italian, French and Latin marriage odes evident in the *Epithalamion* and the *Amoretti* Sonnets. Spenser weaves all of these diverse streams of reading and knowledge together in his poetry, but without losing an essentially Christian orientation. In fact, much of his reading drew from earlier humanist attempts – like Ficino's *De Amore* (1475?) – to reconcile a popular neo-Platonism of the Italian Renaissance with Christianity, with the central tension very often between the idea of spiritual love and that of sensual or earthly love. Spenser's poetry thus is haunted by this tension, and offers a rich tapestry of meanings that draw on diverse and multiple sources, in its quest for reconciliation. In Spenser's case in fact, the tensions are aggravated by his desire to establish a specifically English literary discourse, or the spirit of English nationalism that we noted in the previous unit.

While not much is known about the specificities of Spenser's religious life, it is fairly certain that religion played an important role in his thinking. Not only was it a central feature of his school and college education, it was an unavoidable element in the climate of the times, in the acrimonious debates and struggles between the various denominations and sects. These were debates that were very much in the air in Cambridge too, specifically on the question of whether England was right in abandoning Catholicism and the more radical view of adopting a more stringently Puritan Church than the Anglican. What Spenser's own position in these debates was is not clear, but the view earlier held that he was inclined to be a radical Puritan does not have much evidence to support it. There is some suggestion that Spenser was

inclined to take ecclesiastical orders at this time, when he was appointed secretary to the Bishop of Rochester in 1578. His first important publication, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579 or 1580), deals more extensively than any of his later work, with the bishops and affairs of the English church. But this was obviously not to be, for in the same year he joined the service of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and favourite of the queen. This was probably his first step toward his longer term ambition of serving at the court.

Around 1579-80, when still in service with Leicester, Spenser made the acquaintance of Sir Philip Sidney, nephew to the earl of Leicester, and joined his circle of literary friends. He was to remain a faithful and devoted friend to Sidney throughout his life, often alluding to him in his poetry and mourning his early death in an elegy. It was probably in this circle that Spenser began making his name as a poet, in fact socially presenting himself as one. It was also around this time that Spenser got married to a certain Machabyas Chylde, of whom again little is known, and also began work on *The Faerie Queene*. By 1580 he had been appointed secretary to Lord Arthur Grey, lord deputy of Ireland and a friend of the Sidney family. Already in this we can see how Spenser's literary connections worked towards the furthering of his career and social rank.

9.3.3 Ireland

Spenser's relationship with Ireland was in many senses typical of the attitude of the English toward the Irish in his time. It was treated as a colony by the English, and was resisted as such by the Irish, not least because of the imposition of the English church on a predominantly Catholic populace, and because of threats of attacks from Catholic Spain. Spenser's stay in Ireland as an administrator was therefore not without its risks. He however did not treat this stay as an exile; rather, he became deeply involved with the country and its peoples, fascinated by its landscapes as much as troubled by its lawlessness. He however followed Lord Grey in imposing stern, almost ruthless measures, in his efforts to make the Irish accept English rule.

His efforts in Ireland were to be well rewarded. The following year (1581), Spenser succeeded the poet Lodowick Biyskett as Clerk of the Chancery for Faculties, an office that channelled the dispensations of the Archbishop of Dublin, and in this sense was a key political post. He retained this post for several years, until 1588. He also gained other favours, including control over forfeited land, which he may have profited from through land speculation. On leasing the small property of New Abbey, County Kildare, he was first designated "gentleman", but went on to obtain a much larger estate in Munster. Repopulation of this province, scarred as it was by war and starvation, was a primary goal for its administrators. Consequently, Spenser awarded large "plantations" to English "undertakers", who undertook to make them self-sustaining by occupying them with Englishmen of various trades. In 1586, Spenser was assigned to Munster's Kilcolman Castle, about 25 miles to the north and west of Cork, with the task of repopulating it with English immigrants. By 1588 Spenser took over the 3,000-acre plantation of Kilcolman, and was granted full lease of property in 1590. Through this Spenser had evidently decided to rise socially and politically in Ireland, effectively a colonial land of opportunity, rather than seek power and rank in London. His family was probably with him in Kilcolman at this time, although his wife may have died by then. She was definitely dead by 1594, when he married Elizabeth Boyle, whom he was to memorialise in the *Amoretti* sonnets and the *Epithalamion*. In his new situation he, like other undertakers, faced stiff resistance from the local Anglo-Irish aristocracy and did not have much success with the repopulation scheme.

Nevertheless, it was here and in these conditions that Spenser wrote his greatest poetry. In 1589 he returned to England with Walter Raleigh, a favourite of the queen, to present the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* to the queen herself; they were warmly received and published the following year. His later poem, *Colin Clouts*

Come Home Again (completed 1595), records Spenser's sense of being a provincial innocent up against the sophistications of a centre of power in this visit, and projects his own ideal of true love as an alternative. Helgerson (1993: 677-9) notes that it is in this poem that the poet presents himself specifically as Poet, rather than courtier. He is known to have spent some of this time in 1591 – apart from a quick visit to Ireland – supervising the publication of his volume of collected poems, *Complaints*, along with another long poem, *Daphnida* – perhaps to reinforce his claims to being first and foremost a poet. He returned to Ireland that year with the grant of an annual pension of fifty pounds from the queen, a princely sum in those days.

9.3.4 The Last Years

In Ireland once more, Spenser continued writing despite the pressures of his various duties and posts, which were added to in 1594, when he was appointed Queen's Justice for Cork. This was also the year of his passionate courtship and marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. *The Amoretti* and the *Epithalamion* that celebrate this event are unique in the sonnets of the English renaissance in celebrating a successful love relationship, rather than complaining – as was the fashion then – of failed and unrequited ones. Spenser again travelled to London shortly after, perhaps in hope of greater rewards, now that (as he may have thought) he was privy to the queen herself, perhaps just to supervise the publication of a series of poems, including *Colin Clout; Astrophel: A Pastoral Elegy upon the Death of the most Noble and Valorous Knight, Sir Philip Sidney*; the *Amoretti* sonnets and the *Epithalamion*. Alongside this was the publication of Books IV, V and VI of *The Faerie Queene*, which came out in 1596, with *Fowre Hymnes* and *Prothalamion*, Spenser's second, commissioned marriage song. This was to be the last burst of publication of his poetry in his lifetime. Two years later, he did publish a prose tract on the current Irish situation, but in the same year there was an insurrection in northern and western Ireland which spread to Munster. Kilcolman was attacked and burned, forcing Spenser to take refuge in Cork. Although he was appointed to the important post of the sheriff of Cork at this point, he left Ireland for London, bearing dispatches from the Governor of Munster to the Privy Council, regarding the desperate situation there. He did not survive this visit, and died the following year in London. He lies buried in Westminster Abbey, close to the grave of Geoffrey Chaucer.

9.4 THE POLITICS OF SPENSER'S LIFE AND POETRY

From the above discussion of it, it may seem that Spenser's life was devoted less to the pursuit of poetry and more to the pursuit of rank and acceptability, despite his self-proclamations as Poet. As we noted in the previous unit, it was not common for courtier poets to establish the primacy of their roles as poets, the way Spenser did. In fact they were at pains to denigrate their poetry and themselves as poets. But to equate Spenser, either as a person or as a poet, or in his intentions and ambitions, with the other poets of the age would be misconceived. The other poets were mostly from the nobility. They were also courtiers and held political positions in the court of the monarchs. Spenser on the other hand did not have any noble antecedents. He was of humble origins and had moved up the social ladder with the help of education and socially acquired contacts. While his contemporaries (poets) could take their status and rank for granted, Spenser had no such luxury. Where other courtiers had personal fortunes to fall back on, in the event of monarchical disfavour, Spenser had none, and part of his ambition would have been to accumulate precisely that. Hence, where other courtiers could afford to present themselves as humbler, or less than able to the demands of poetry, thereby adopting a conventional even fashionable social and literary gesture, for Spenser, it was in fact important not to belittle himself.

This is not to suggest that poets like Wyatt and Surrey were merely affecting the sense of loss and/or anguish and/or humility that pervades their poetry. But while they could articulate these unreservedly, Spenser perforce had to avoid such articulations of humility and/or unhappiness, at least overtly, and instead present himself as the herald of Elizabethan England. Where a Sidney could proclaim his strong Protestant sentiments through his poetry in terms of its dissatisfaction in the Elizabethan court, and disguise it as the feelings of an anguished lover, Spenser felt it incumbent on him to celebrate Elizabeth and her reign, in grander terms than any poet before him. If we put this in terms of a social 'market', where people must offer themselves as socially necessary or desirable people, it was necessary for Spenser to carve a niche in the court – create a demand in the market, so to speak – for his social ware, which was poetry. In other words, Spenser had to present himself as desirable, rather than denigrate himself or his poetry. This is not an entirely inappropriate analogy: we must remember, this was the time when new commodities were beginning to enter England from global trading routes, opening out a mercantile capitalism that was to fundamentally realign the feudal socio-economy. So for Spenser to adopt the strategies of the market in relation to his own life and career is not, after all so surprising.

An essential aspect of this strategy was the presentation of a different kind of moderation from the one practised and articulated by his contemporaries. Spenser probably sought to distinguish himself from them, but without appearing entirely a maverick and misfit. To this end, he crafted a different tension in his poetry from the more common one between desire and its lack of fulfilment. This was a more metaphysical tension, focusing less on situations – and consequently less on his relative success or failure in love – and more on the problem of desire itself, within a Christian moral and ethical framework. Within this, sensual desire was seen as debilitating and misleading from true love, yet an inevitable part of being human. Spenser took recourse to Platonic notions of love, in which the senses were – or ought to be – governed by the spirit or the soul, and the mistress or beloved was conceived of as the embodiment of a spiritual salvation, to acquire which, the lover had to transcend sensual desire and focus only on his beloved's virtues. While it was necessary then to acknowledge the urges of sexual and sensual passion, the Spenserian lover sought to deal with them through belittling their importance in the larger dimensions of the relationship. This is especially evident in the description of Elizabeth Boyle in stanzas 10 (which deals with her physical beauty in rapturous terms) and 11 (which then denies its significance in the face of her 'greater' beauty, which is that of her virtuous spirit) of the *Epithalamion*. Through this strategy of elevating the terms of the contemporary poetic discourse of the lover's tension to a Platonic discussion, Spenser sought to remain within the larger discourse while pushing back its frontiers. It was a strategy that served well in placing him as a poet of the times, yet as superior to the times.

As such then, Spenser decided on a twofold strategy, one of which was to present himself as a poet able to the demands of the times, and the other to not compete in the central arena of power (the court in London) but to consolidate himself professionally where there was little competition to go, i.e., Ireland. Spenser's celebration of his beloved in the *Amoretti* and the *Epithalamion* is the celebration of a man who has (socially speaking) arrived. For, by the time of the writing of these poems, Spenser was already established as a poet. His *The Faerie Queene* had been well received and he was doing well professionally. On the personal front he had engaged in a passionate relationship that had eventually culminated in marriage. Even the opening passage of the *Prothalamion*,

When I whom sullein care,
Through discontent of my long fruitlesse stay
In Princes Court, and expectation vayne
Of idle hopes, which still doe fly away,
Like empty shaddowes, did afflict my brayne... (11. 5-9)

– which is often cited as evidence of Spenser's disaffection for the court – or the despairing vision of stanzas 18 and 19 of the *Epithalamion*, which seems to suggest that Spenser may have been afflicted by losses and anxieties that were of a professional nature, or the sense of being out of his depth in court that we noted earlier in *Colin* Clout... – none of these is sufficient to offset the generally optimistic, celebratory tone of the rest of Spenser's oeuvre.

It is in these tenets that we can understand the crucial difference of Spenser's poetry from his contemporaries. For Spenser, poetry was a means to an end that was not necessarily the advancement of poetry alone, but personal advancement. In fact, we may even argue that it was precisely by advancing the frontiers of English poetry that Spenser hoped to achieve a unique distinction, and thereby also personal advancement. The personal, as so often is true, came together with the political.

9.5 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed some of the key issues in biographical criticism, and the need to examine the lives of writers. We then examined the life of Spenser, such as is known to us, in the context of the literary and political climate of his times. We studied how he put to use his educational background as well as the personal and social contacts he acquired to create the image of a Poet, a social location from which he was able to meet and match the measure of others his superior in rank and status. We noted how he adapted the events of his life to his advantage, turning a relatively undesirable posting to Ireland into an opportunity to gain the status of a gentleman of means, and then subsequently presenting himself as a Poet who could and would address not individual concerns but national ones. We examined the poetic and personal strategies that were put into play in realising this ambition. In the following Unit, we will briefly study the manifestations of some of these issues in his shorter poems.

9.6 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. How important, in your opinion, is biographical material in the examination of a writer's work?
2. What do you understand to be the most influential factors shaping Spenser's career as a poet? Would you consider him an opportunist?

9.7 ADDITIONAL READING

1. Burrow, Colin, Edmund *Spenser* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996)
2. Cummings, R.M., ed., *Spenser: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) -- up to 1715
3. Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1985).
4. Judson, Alexander, *The Life of Edmund Spenser* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1945)
5. Maley, Willy, *A Spenser Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)

6. Helgerson, Richard, 'The New Poet Presents Himself', in *Edmund Spenser's Poetry, Norton Critical Editions*, Hugh MacLean and Anne Lake Prescott (eds.) (London: Norton, 1993)
7. Hume, Anthea, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
8. Loades, D.M., *The Tudor Court* (London: Batsford, 1986)
9. Rambuss, Richard, *Spenser's Secret Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

UNIT 10 SPENSER'S POETRY – I

Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 Introduction
 - 10.1.1 The Sonnet
 - 10.1.2 The Courtly Love Tradition and Poetry
- 10.2 The *Amoretti* Sonnets
 - 10.2.1 Sonnet 34
 - 10.2.2 Sonnet 67
 - 10.2.3 Sonnet 77
- 10.3 Let's Sum Up
- 10.4 Questions for Review
- 10.5 Additional Reading

10.0 OBJECTIVES

The intent of this unit is to:

- Provide the student with a brief idea about the *Amoretti* sonnets in general.
- Familiarize the student with a select few of Spenser's sonnets, specifically from the *Amoretti* sonnets.
- Indicate some ways of analysing the sonnets that the student may want to take further, through a combination of formal and substantial elements.
- Explore the relations between the formal and the substantial elements in a poem.

Read in conjunction with the poems, this unit should provide the student with some ways of opening them out analytically, and with a sense of the importance of the formal dimensions of a poem to the overall meanings it generates.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will attempt to offer an overview of Spenser's well known sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti* sonnets, focusing primarily on formal elements and literary influences. It will offer analyses of three sonnets from the *Amoretti*. The influence in particular of Italian court poets like Petrarch, and the reworking of the sonnet will be explored. The earlier mentioned conflict between the Christian and Platonic visions especially of love and eroticism will be touched upon. To begin with, in what follows immediately, we will examine some aspects of the sonnet and of the courtly love tradition, which Spenser was part of.

10.1.1 The Sonnet

An important point to remember while reading the poems and the following notes is that the sonnet is fundamentally a short lyric, a stylised fourteen line poem that developed in Italy in the Middle Ages. There are broadly three styles of sonnets: the Petrarchan, which is the most common, consisting of an octave and a sestet; the Spenserian, which has four quatrains and a couplet, rhyming abab bcbc cdcd ee; and the Shakespearian, which follows the Spenserian line scheme of four quatrains and a couplet, but differs in its rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg). The sonnet became

popular in Italian poetry primarily as a vehicle for the expression of love and sensuality, a heritage that it carried with it into its English versions. Petrarch was the Italian poet most well-known for this practice, and his *Canzoniere* – a collection of love sonnets – is a sort of literary compendium of the passions of the lover. The sonnet is in many ways the most appropriate form for the articulation and expression of the kind of sentiments that came to be characterised as courtly love. Its brevity prevents excessive sentiment from becoming sententious, and forcing such sentiment to be articulated through intense imagery and condensed rhythm. At the same time its internal organisation allows the poet a degree of flexibility and innovativeness in terms of constructing the poem as a dramatic movement or series of movements that mirrored the movements of his own passions and feelings. One of the important virtues of any courtier (as we earlier noted in Unit 8), according to the influential Italian writer Castiglione in *The Book of The Courtier* (which served as a conduct Book of sorts for many Elizabethan courtiers) was moderation (or *sprezzatura*). We can see how important the sonnet was as a form of the lyric that held in moderation – even as it hinted at – the overwhelming passions of the courtly lover. Perhaps most significantly, it allowed the poet to represent love as an intense yet elusive, almost ephemeral and trans-worldly feeling – an ideology of love that characterised the poetry of the courtly love tradition. In this sense, the sonnet was the ideal form for the articulation of this dominant conception of love in the Renaissance. Let us briefly examine this phenomenon.

10.1.2 The Courtly Love Tradition and Poetry

When Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey translated Petrarch's work into English in the 16th century, it was to prove tremendously influential. The sonnets initiated a way of thinking and writing about love in English poetry that was fundamentally chivalric, based on feudal themes and ideas, and centred on the figure of the beloved as mistress of the poet. This way of thinking about love, or ideology of love, was first formed in the troubadour poetry of Aquitaine and Provence in southern France toward the end of the 11th century, from where its influence spread to Italy and the rest of Europe. One may describe its basic tenets as the following: the celebration of adultery; the near-deification of the mistress; the lover as very often unrequited in his love; and somewhat paradoxically, the celebration of faithful service to the beloved. There were several reasons for the emergence of this particular ideology of love. Medieval Europe in the early part of the last millennium was controlled by feuding war-lords, protected and surrounded by armies of knights who owed allegiance entirely to their respective barons. One means of forming alliances amongst these lords was through marriages between their houses. These marriages of convenience meant that the lady of the castle was often not very close to the lord, and even neglected by her husband. Since the castle populations were predominantly male, with few women, the lady inevitably came to be the recipient of the amorous attention of the many knights and courtiers. The passions thus evoked were thus often torn by the opposite demands of fidelity to the lord and desire for the beloved. Equally important were the roles of the Catholic imagination of the Virgin Mary on the one hand and the pre-Christian tribal conception of women as powerful beings, on the other: they led to the beloved, because of her social inaccessibility, often being represented as quasi-divine, especially in poetry. It is from this peculiar conjunction of social and historical factors that the poetry of courtly love carries the paradoxical discourses of adultery and fidelity, intense physical passion celebrated in an idealized, almost spiritualized fashion. Poets in particular had few predecessors to turn to, to chart this new mixture of emotions, although the Latin poet Ovid, in his *Ars Amatoria* (which pictured the lover as the slave of his passion and therefore of his beloved), was to prove singularly influential. The poetry that emerged from this context spread swiftly through medieval Europe; C S Lewis' old but classic study, *The Allegory of Love*, is worth exploring for a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon. However, by the time it reached England in the 16th century, several other factors came to play a decisive role in changing its characteristic features.

Poets like Sidney and Surrey continued in the vein of the old courtly love poetry, particularly with the arrival of Elizabeth to the throne of England. She epitomised the type of the inaccessible mistress even more sharply than the figures of the beloveds in earlier poetry, and inspired the same kind of mixed and paradoxical fervour. The beloved in the courtier poetry of the time was thus frequently compared in her inaccessibility to the queen herself. The important difference was that Elizabeth, as queen, besides being truly unattainable, was also functionally both 'lord' and lady: the courtier owed allegiance as well as fidelity. This resulted in an intensification of the language of deification in the English poets. It is only in Spenser's verse that a new language is forged, fusing the amorous with the divine in a way that liberated both from the contradictory pull of the other. We have noted in the earlier units some of the reasons for the emergence of Spenser as a new kind of poet. What we need to note here is that spread of a strict Protestant moral code contributed substantially to the maturing of Spenser's poetry. This code broke with the deification of the beloved in the mould of the Virgin Mary, rendered her more this-worldly, thereby enhancing her desirability while simultaneously insisting on the importance of maintaining sexuality and desire within conjugal bounds. It must be noted here that such a language of restraint was already available in the more Platonic conception of love to be found in Petrarch; but Spenser's genius lay in aligning that language with a more Protestant stress on the importance of marriage for sexuality. In this sense, the language of love that we will see in the *Amoretti* sonnets and in the *Epithalamion* later, display the shift from the earlier codes of courtly love to a more celebratory, this-worldly, and therefore realizable love, that nevertheless emphasises the sanctity of the love itself. Let us now examine the three sonnets of the *Amoretti* chosen for study, in this light.

10.2 THE *AMORETTI* SONNETS

The *Amoretti* sonnets share many of the typical characteristics of the court poetry of sixteenth century Renaissance England. Apart from its use of the sonnet form, which was very fashionable by the time Spenser was writing, it also shares for instance the fashion of incorporating classical and Biblical allusions and mythology. Another very popular idea that these sonnets share with their contemporaries is that of the avowed intent of immortalising their subjects – in this instance, Elizabeth Boyle. While Spenser owes some of his imagery in particular to continental writers like the Italian poet Tasso and the French poet Ronsard, these sonnets are essentially variations on the Petrarchan sonnet, which Spenser was familiar with given the popularity of Petrarchan poetry in Elizabethan England, and through his own translations of Petrarch. The Petrarchan sonnet, like all sonnets, has fourteen lines and is usually divisible into two parts, the octave (eight lines) with the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*, and sestet (six lines) with the rhyme *cdecde*, or its variants like *cdccdc*. Typically the Petrarchan sonnet also employs the Petrarchan conceit of the beautiful, yet unresponding, cruel and distant mistress/beloved, the object of the sonnet's address. This figure was picked up and reworked by Elizabethan sonneteers, in translations of Petrarch and in original poems, till it became almost hackneyed. But the Petrarch of the Elizabethan imagination is the early Petrarch, obsessed by the instability of his passions, manifested in his poetry through the common device of the oxymoron. The later Petrarch, who seeks absolution from such mutability, is picked up only by Spenser among the Elizabethans.

In Spenser's versions therefore, the mistress is a much more accessible and responsive figure than the Elizabethan type or the early Petrarch. The entire sonnet sequence may be split roughly into three movements, or phases of passion. The first section (sonnets 1-36) is largely in the mode of complaint, and sees the mistress as tyrannical and his own love as oppressive. The second section (sonnets 37-69) re-figures the lover and his mistress in more exploratory, and therefore more

conciliatory terms, with the lover appearing more aware of his mistress as herself a feeling, thinking and speaking subject of passion. The last section (sonnets 70-87) is a reversal of the first phase: it sees the poet-lover as successful in his amorous enterprise, and the terms of relation change, toward the subordination of the mistress to the desire and will of the lover. It must be noted that, like a finely composed piece of music, the three movements cannot, in actuality, be so easily separated: there are overlaps and seepages in the themes identified above, between the different phases, and the scheme suggested here is arguably not watertight. However, it has the advantage of providing us with a convenient handle on the complex sentiments and attitudes expressed in this sonnet sequence. The three sonnets chosen for study in this unit may be seen as belonging respectively, one to each of the three movements identified above. Spenser also experiments with the line and rhyme schemes of the sonnet, splitting it into three linked quatrains and a couplet. We shall study the effects of this in our analyses of the poems.

10.2.1 Sonnet 34

This sonnet, as you may have noticed, is indicative of several of the preoccupations of the first movement – in its tone of complaint, its sense of confusion and despondency, its depiction of the beloved as a remote, almost inaccessible figure and in its overall sense of subjugation. It essentially follows the Petrarchan trope, first popularized by Wyatt in his translation of the Italian poet, of the lover as a storm-tossed ship, caught in the grip of his passions. However, Spenser introduces the idea of the beloved as a star that guides him through the seas of life. In storm (or the troubles of life) however, her light is hidden from him by clouds, leaving him to 'wander now in darkness and dismay' (ll. 5-7). Further, unlike the other Elizabethan versions of this trope, Spenser does not attribute the storm to his beloved, implying thereby that it is a storm of unquenched desires; contrarily, he hopes 'that when this storme is past', she will shine again as his guiding star (ll. 9-12). The sonnet, though apparently diverging from the Petrarchan form in its organization into three quatrains and a couplet, may nevertheless still be split into an octave of two quatrains, and a sestet with a quatrain and a couplet, thematically: the first eight lines present the poet's current situation of feeling lost in a sea of trouble, without guidance or solace. The first quatrain here lays out the analogy while the second applies it to the speaking subject himself. The next six lines reverse this downward mood, to anticipate release from the 'perils' and a renewed access to his beloved. The sestet in turn may be split into the quatrain and the couplet, with the latter returning to touch upon the poet's sense of grief and anxiety, with which the poem then closes.

The sonnet employs the typical Spenserian sonnet form, with the rhyme scheme abab bcbc cdcd ee. The interesting effect this achieves is the continuity between the different quatrains but a discontinuity with the couplet. In terms of reading the poem, this has one possible effect: the three quatrains reflect a total experience (of trouble and care), in which the hope and anticipation of relief from the experience becomes a part of it, rather than distinct from it; the final couplet then functions as a reflective commentary, distinct from the experience, and in fact almost objectively rendering the experience as a total and continuing one.

10.2.2 Sonnet 67

This sonnet too picks up a trope common to both Petrarchan sonnets and to other Elizabethan versions of them: the setting of the hunt, with the beloved as a deer being hunted by the poet as huntsman. Again, unlike its typical treatment in Elizabethan sonnets, in Spenser's version the huntsman catches his prey. In fact, Spenser's is a radical exception to this convention, for he not only wins the chase but presents the victory over the beloved, or the conquest of the prey, as being by her own will, i.e., as of her own desire (ll. 11-12). The ambiguity of line 9, 'There she beholding me with mylder looke', makes it unclear who makes the conquest possible by becoming milder, the hunter or the hunted, but line 11 suggests that the beloved remains nervous about the prospects of marriage, belying the last lines of the poem. It would

be very instructive for the student to compare this poem with Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem 'Whoso list to hunt...', a sonnet with similar themes and imagery, but in the traditional Petrarchan mould. In Wyatt's poem the deer, or beloved, is ultimately unattainable, and the poem ends with the line 'Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am' (the Latin phrase meaning 'do not touch me'), which are the words inscribed on the collar around the deer's neck. In contrast, there is no Caesar, or competing lord, to whom the beloved is bound in Spenser's poem. In her very availability she thus becomes the site of a transforming discourse of love and desire in Spenser's poetry – a discourse in which the beloved is not just transfigured from a remote and unrealisable object of desire, but, with a new mutuality and reciprocity that probably originates in Protestant thought, is hinted at as being herself a desiring subject.

This sonnet too uses the rhyme scheme abab bcbc cdcd ee, using the same three quatrains plus a couplet scheme, but unlike sonnet 34, it resists a thematic split into an octave and a sestet. Instead, being a poem less about a condition than an event, it lays out the movements of the event in three steps – the three quatrains – followed by a commenting couplet. The reversal typical to the Spenserian sonnet happens in the second quatrain itself, with the return of the 'deer', and her eventual willingness to be captured.

10.2.3 Sonnet 77

This sonnet borrows not from Petrarch but from another Italian poet who was also inspired by Petrarch, Torquato Tasso (1544-95), specifically his sonnet 'Non son sì belli'. Tasso describes his beloved's breasts through two analogies – autumnal fruits and the legendary golden apples – but Spenser picks on only one of these in this sonnet, devoting another sonnet entirely (sonnet 76) to the other. In both 76 and 77, Spenser's intentions are not to describe physical beauty for its own sake, or as sexually stimulating and erotic, but to forge a connection between physical beauty and spiritual virtue, linking the erotic with the spiritual and the sacred. That is, he wishes to suggest that the beloved is so full of virtue and religious and moral purity, that even the sight of her breasts can only arouse in him an appreciation of these qualities in her, rather than simple physical desire. Hence the description of her breasts as

Exceeding sweet, yet voyd of sinfull vice,
That many sought yet none could euer taste,
sweet fruit of pleasure brought from paradise:
By loue himselfe and in his garden plaste. [ll. 9-12]

The reference to 'paradise' is multi-leveled, referring to the original sin and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (of sexuality), as well as suggesting that his beloved is Paradise itself embodied, with the understanding of Paradise here as that original state of 'man' when the sensual and the spiritual were not separate but fused. In this Spenser is deliberately attempting a fusion of the Platonic ideal (of ultimate beauty as lying beyond sensual perception), and Christian myths and values (such that the Platonic ideal of beauty may be perceived in the physical world by one sufficiently spiritual to not be overwhelmed by its sensual seductions). Spenser seems to be applying Reformation celebrations of conjugal sexuality as superior to celibacy, to the less strictly marriage-oriented Petrarchan frame of sensuality. The reference in the final couplet to the thoughts as guests at the table of his beloved is intended to communicate this detachment from the vagaries of an uncontrolled sensuality.

Like the other two sonnets, this sonnet too follows the rhyme scheme abab bcbc cdcd ee. There is a false rhyme between lines 4 and 5, for 'yvory' and 'royalty' are not true rhymes for 'ly' and 'by'. This may suggest a dissonance between the quatrains, but it would not be true. Firstly, the overwhelming theme of the sonnet pre-empts any such dissonance, holding the poem together on the unlikely comparison of the beloved's breasts to a table laden with delicacies. Secondly, we must remember that such rhyme

patterns were intended to provide a totality of linked and related experiences. As such, false rhymes were a permitted poetic liberty, basing the rhyme on spelling rather than sound. We may therefore treat the rhymes as true ones and regard the three quatrains as part of a single experience, fusing the sensual and the spiritual or religious, rather than as discrete and disconnected parts of one event. Like sonnet 34, this one too describes a condition rather than an event (as in sonnet 67). However, more like sonnet 67, this sonnet too cannot therefore be split into an octave and a sestet.

10.3 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at some important aspects of the sonnet form and the traditions of courtly love poetry that influenced Spenser. We noted how the sonnet was in many ways the aptest literary vehicle for the articulation of a new conception of love that owed much to the Italian courtly love poets. Some of the important aspects of the courtly love tradition and their transforination in Spenser's poetry, along with the historical reasons for this, were also touched upon. We then examined some of Spenser's shorter poems in this light. We saw how they draw upon and yet diverge substantially from, earlier traditions of love poetry, especially the Petrarchan. We saw how they serve to illustrate not just the poet's unusual poetic skills and originality, but also the peculiar movement in the quality of passion in the sonnet sequence, from despair to comprehension to celebration. The formal analyses of the sonnets also revealed the ways in which Spenser managed to forge a new kind of English lyrical form. In the next unit we will examine two longer poems by Spenser, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*.

10.4 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. The courtly love tradition was in many ways formative of the poetry that was to follow the Renaissance poets, even if it was substantially modified by them. Do you agree?
2. In the three sonnets from the *Amoretti* by Spenser that you have read, what do you consider are the specifically Petrarchan elements? How does Spenser rework them, if at all?
3. The *Amoretti* sonnets by Spenser are replete with images of sensuality. What, in your opinion, do these communicate about (a) the poet; (b) his beloved; and (c) the age?
4. In sonnets 34, 67 and 77 of the *Amoretti*, Spenser explores a vision of love that is at odds with both the Christian and the Classical. Do you agree?

10.5 ADDITIONAL READING

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UNIT 11 SPENSER'S POETRY – II

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 The *Epithalamion*
- 11.3 The *Prothalamion*
- 11.4 Let's Sum Up
- 11.5 Questions for Review
- 11.6 Additional Reading

11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will continue the close textual analyses of Spenser's poetry begun in the previous unit. It will aim to:

- Offer a preliminary discussion of the genre of the epithalamion and of Spenser's predecessors in this genre.
- Provide an overview of two of his longer works, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*.
- Identify the ways in which these two poems reflect diverse aspects of Spenser's life, while sharing certain formal qualities.
- Identify the crucial differences between the two poems.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we examined Spenser's shorter work as indexing a new style of poetry, particularly with respect to the tradition of courtly love. In this unit, we will continue that exploration of his poetry, but focusing instead on two of his longer works, namely Spenser's two major nuptial songs, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*. Both the wedding poems deal with the celebration of marriage, but with significant and far-reaching differences in treatment, style and intent. As with the shorter poems in the previous unit therefore, the analyses will therefore focus substantially on the formal elements of the poems.

The 'epithalamion' is a form of poetry dating back to classical Greek literature, and was probably first used as a literary form by the Greek poetess Sappho. The term literally means 'at the bridal chamber', and earlier referred to the song sung in celebration of the bride's wedding night, literally at her bridal chamber. 'Prothalamion' is a term invented by Spenser, in order to differentiate his poem by that name from his own and earlier written bridal song, but the meaning remains essentially unchanged, with the prefix 'pro-' (or prior to) standing in for 'epi-' (or outside of). Conventionally, an epithalamion described the wedding day itself and the events leading up to it, and also celebrated the sexual union of the married couple. In this sense, it was usually also an erotic poem or song. While Spenser's own epithalamion carries elements of this eroticism, the Prothalamion is a qualitatively different poem, almost completely devoid of eroticism, and in fact, actually, little more than a thinly disguised complaint poem. Let us now proceed to examine these two poems.

11.2 THE EPITHALAMION

The *Epithalamion* is a carefully crafted yet exuberant song celebrating the poet's love for and marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. It appears to have been written as the culmination to the courtship described and embodied in the *Amoretti* sonnets. Like the *Amoretti* sonnets, it too celebrates a legitimate form of sexual desire, that between bride and groom, husband and wife. According to the envoy at the end of the poem, i.e. the brief stanza 24, it is intended to be an ornament 'in lieu of many ornaments', and an 'endlesse moniment' to the beloved herself. It therefore carries multiple functions – as celebration of the wedding, as celebration of the beloved, as celebration of legitimate passion, as ornament to the beloved and as monument to her. In this it matches the multiple roles that Spenser gives himself in the poem – as poet, lover, bridegroom, master of ceremonies of the wedding and as eventual husband. Spenser envisages the poem's functions not separately but as extensions of each other, and to this extent they reinforce each other. In comparison to the *Prothalamion*, Spenser's other wedding song, the integration of the multiple functions of the poem is therefore more successful in the *Epithalamion*. Even the curtailed last stanza of the poem does not detract from this sense of an integral whole; indeed, it may be seen as specific to maintaining the sense of wholeness of the poem.

The poem is in 24 stanzas, representing the hours of the day, with a total of 365 long lines of five feet or more (in prosodic terms), representing the days of the year. In this sense, the apparent curtailment of the poem with the envoy is no coincidence or 'hasty accident' as the poet would have us believe, but a deliberate effect. It serves to simultaneously accentuate the senses of immediacy and of a longer duration, as if the one gives rise to the other. At the same time, the poem draws together the universal and the temporal, the idea of a love that is divine and transcendental with a more earthly, sensual love. Following the consistent Spenserian strategy of reconciling the Platonic and the Christian perspectives, the poem seeks to celebrate the eternal in the temporal, the divine in the mortal. In other words, Spenser's conception of love is firmly located in time, even as it is proffered as lasting and undetermined by time. The element of time or temporality is therefore central to the crafting of the poem, not just in its formal aspects but at the level of the theme of love and its treatment as well.

An essential aspect of this temporal element is the refrain of the stanzas, which are variations on the last line of the first stanza: 'The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring.' Through the refrain and its variations, the poet manages to suggest continuity as well as change, a suggestion that is borne out in the very images that are repeated, of the woods and the echo. For, woods undergo a long-term set of changes that belie the sense of permanence that is associated with them, just as an echo bears the promise to prolong a sound, but must inevitably die too. Further, the refrain itself changes qualitatively from stanza 17 onward, when it becomes negative: 'The woods no more shal answere, nor your echo ring.' The allocation of sixteen stanzas with a positive refrain and eight with a negative one is again, not coincidental, but matches the number of hours of daylight and dark, respectively. The sense of balance that is achieved is reinforced by the offsetting of the celebratory tone in the poem with passages of deep anxiety and worry in stanzas 18 and 19.

The poem begins with the traditional invocation to the muses. The muses are then invited to participate in the wedding as bridesmaids, along with the 'fayre heures' and the three Graces or the 'handmayds of the Cyprian Queene' (stanza 6). The pastoral setting of the poem is made clear in stanza 5, partly in adherence to poetic convention and partly to permit the orgiastic celebrations that take place after the wedding (stanzas 14 and 15). Further, this setting permits the dramatic dimension of the poem to be enacted more vividly, than if the poem had been a simply descriptive one. The poem itself has approximately five movements, in terms of dramatic action. The first is from stanza 1 to stanza 8, which set out the poem's purpose, its means of

accomplishing it and the pastoral setting of the event; the second is from stanza 9 to stanza 13, which eulogise his beloved's beauty as she wakes up, is adorned and then enters the 'temple' or church for the wedding and the wedding itself; the third is from stanza 14 to stanza 17, which are about the celebrations after the wedding and the poet-bridegroom's impatience to be alone with his bride; the fifth is from stanza 18 to stanza 24, which express the poet-bridegroom's fears and anxieties and then seek the blessings of all the gods for their union. These five movements culminate in the envoy of the last stanza, and are explicated by it.

Despite the evident eulogising of the beloved in and through these movements however, what must be noted about the poem is that, like the *Amoretti* sonnets before it, the poet's conception of his beloved remains peculiarly external and voyeuristic. While she is celebrated in all her beauty, both physical and spiritual, she remains absent as a person with a degree of autonomy and agency. Stanzas 10 and 11 in particular objectify her so completely that we may picture her, but we find it difficult to apprehend her as a person. This sense of objectification is intensified by the fragmenting of the body of the bride into its 'attractive' or seductive parts:

Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
Her forehead yuory white,
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips lyke cherries charming men lo byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncruded,
Her paps lyke lyllyes budded,
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
And all her body like a pallace fayre,
Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre,
To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre.

The analogy of the palace is extended in the next stanza to eulogize his beloved's virtues:

There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,
Vnspotted fayth and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And giueth lawes alone.
The which the base affections doe obey,
And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will
Ne thought of thing vncomely euer may
Thereto approach to tempt her mind to ill.

These are praised as being superior to the physical beauty described in the previous stanza, and the analogy is a typically feudal one, employing metaphors of the virtues as a queen unto whose service the 'base affections' or sensual desires are turned. Again, as we saw with the *Amoretti* sonnets, the poet's attempt is to reconcile two opposed conceptions of love, the spiritual and the physical, the latter being offered as a path to the former, rather than as something to be either overwhelmed by or to be rejected. But in order to serve the demands of this Reformist-Protestant morality by which a legitimate desire may be inscribed into the poem, the poet has to render his own beloved almost sex-less, or lacking in desire herself. Given that the poem is a celebration of the wedding and of the nuptial union, such an erasure of feminine desire suggests that the poet does not see his beloved as a subjective individual with her own feelings and emotions that would be different from his own, or even from his 'perception of them, but as an object, desirable and to be acquired. It is then again, no coincidence that the *social* setting invoked in the poem is not the princes and the nobility but commerce and trade, as implied by the invocation of the 'merchants daughters' in the first line of stanza 10. This sense is furthered when we recall

phrases like 'usury of long delight' (stanza 2) being used in regard to the relationship, implying a contractual arrangement that is not confined to an emotional and spiritual attachment or commitment, but is underwritten by money.

Epithalamion is nevertheless a poem that is unique in the poetry of the sixteenth century, not least because it is probably the first English wedding poem to announce itself explicitly as one. In its poetic craft, it offers a rich tapestry of sensual imagery that borrows as much from classical legends and myths as from Christian ideas and beliefs and local folklore (see for instance the description of the fears of the night as haunted by goblins, spirits, etc, in stanza 19). It is this fusion that it achieves of diverse poetic traditions, and of almost oppositional religious beliefs – in terms of invoking pagan gods and yet retaining a strongly Reformist-Christian sensibility – that is in many ways unprecedented on this scale in English literature. Spenser was to go on to expand the scale many times over in *The Faerie Queene*, but somewhat unsuccessfully. This poem may then be considered his most successful fusion of these diverse poetic traditions and styles.

11.3 THE PROTHALAMION

The term 'prothalamion' as we have already noted, is a Spenserian neologism, invented to signify a preliminary nuptial song. The poem was written on the occasion of the wedding of Elizabeth and Catherine Somerset, daughters of Edward Somerset, the Earl of Worcester, on 8 November 1596. The wedding was formalised at the Strand in London, in Essex House. Spenser was once sponsored by the Earl of Essex, a relative of the Somersets, hence the writing of this poem. But this poem is vastly different from Spenser's own nuptial song. Where the *Epithalamion* is exuberantly sensual and consistent throughout its length in its themes, the *Prothalamion* is shorter, more pensive, and almost sedate in its pace.

The *Prothalamion* too uses some of the devices of the earlier poem in its structure. For instance, it too uses a pastoral setting – specifically here, the bank of the river Thames – and it too employs a couplet at the end of the first stanza that is reworked into a refrain at the end of each subsequent stanza: 'Against the Brydale day, which is not long:/ Sweete Themmes runne softly, till I end my Song.' Again, like the *Epithalamion*, the *Prothalamion* too eventually invokes pagan gods to bless the couples and guard them from all ills:

Ioy may you haue and gentle hearts content
Of your loues complement:
And let faire Venus, that is Queene of loue,
With her heart-quelling Sonne vpon you smile,
Whose smile they say, hath vertue to remoue
All Loues dislike, and friendships faultie guile
For euer to assoile. (stanza 6)

But there the resemblance ends. The later poem makes no attempt to elaborate on the wedding, or the festivities that follow, or the wedding night, as did the *Epithalamion*. Even the invocation cited above is barely a few lines in one stanza, unlike in the *Epithalamion*. Instead it confines itself to describing the bridal procession down the river Thames, leading up to Essex house where the wedding will be solemnised. The refrain, such as it is, shows far less variation than in the *Epithalamion*, rendering the poem somewhat stilted and wooden. In terms of the passage of time, it is little more than a few hours of the morning that are encapsulated by the poem, and therefore the poem has none of the profound integration of temporality and theme that the *Epithalamion* weaves. What it does have is an elaborate allegorical structure, in which the two brides are likened to beautiful swans that sail down the river. The

allusion is to the Roman classical myth of Jove and Leda, but it is used to suggest that the two daughters of Somerset were in fact more beautiful than Jove and Leda too.

The real significance of the poem, unlike the *Epithalamion*, lies less in its poetic achievements and more in its biographical value, as reflective of some of the pressures that Spenser the outsider to court politics must have had to face. The lines,

When I whom sullen care,
Through discontent of my long fruitlesse stay
In Princes Court, and expectation vayne
Of idle hopes, which still doe fly away,
Like empty shaddowes, did afflict my brayne,
Walkt forth to ease my payne (stanza 1)

are unexpected as an opening to what is ostensibly a celebratory wedding song. Their very presence in a poem written in honour of his patron's friend suggest the anger and rejection that Spenser must have felt toward the entire system of patronage that was so important for a poet's – and in fact a courtier's – survival in the Elizabethan court. This sense of unhappiness arising out of unsatisfied career prospects is repeated again in stanza 8, as if the poet is unable to restrain himself

Next whereunto there standes a stately place,
Where oft I gayned giftes and goodly grace
Of that great Lord, which therein wont to dwell,
Whose want too well, now feeles my friendless case:
But Ah here fits not well
Olde woes, but ioyes to tell....

The lord being referred to is of course, the late Earl of Leicester, Spenser's patron for many years. This reference suggests that it is the impersonality of the patronage system, in which one patron can and should replace another, that most bothers Spenser, and not perhaps the system itself. Whatever the truth, it is clear from these lines that the poem is as much about the poet's sense of unhappiness as it is about the wedding – in fact, the latter becoming a means and an occasion to air the former.

11.4 LET'S SUM UP

In the above unit, we studied two of Spenser's longer poems, the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion*. We examined not only the various poetic and cultural influences that went into the writing of these poems, but also how they come to reflect various aspects of his personal life, as much as aspects of Elizabethan England. We noted how Spenser establishes his uniqueness in blending Christian, classical and pre-Christian tribal lore in his poetry. This, as we noted, in many ways served as the training ground for the more ambitious fusions that Spenser was to attempt in his unfinished magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*. In particular, we noted the way these poems, the *Prothalamion* in particular, indexes the role of patronage and politics in the writings of the Renaissance English poets.

From our studies it is clear that the Spenserian period in English literature was a pioneering and formative one for it. Spenser's ability to fuse diverse poetic and discursive traditions brought into the corpus of English literature a set of possibilities that it was left to later poets to exploit and further – and this you will see especially in the study of John Milton's work.

11.5 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. In the *Epithalamion*, Spenser celebrates not just his wedding, but the aspirations and imagination of an entirely new class of people. Discuss.
2. Analyse, with reference to Spenser's *Epithalamion*, the fusion of classical and English mythology and legends. Do they, in your opinion, enhance the intention and effectiveness of the poem or distract the reader? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Compare and contrast the *Epithalamion* and the *Prothalamion* as wedding songs.
4. The *Prothalamion* by Spenser is less a wedding song and more a complaint by the poet. Do you agree? Respond with specific reference to the poet's political and personal life.
5. Analyse the use of time and temporality in Spenser's *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion*.

11.6 ADDITIONAL READING

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