



What a Heavenly Beauty: The Female Image in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*

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Abstract

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was one of the prominent poets in Renaissance English literature, and was honored as “the poets’ poet”. Without any doubt, the *Faerie Queene* is his masterpiece, but *Amoretti* is his another great achievement. His sonnet sequence, and Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* and Shakespeare’s Sonnets, are known as the most three famous sonnet sequences in Renaissance English literature. *Amoretti* is composed of 89 sonnets, and notes down the author’s courtly love for his second wife Elizabeth Boyle. The beauty in the sonnet sequence is endowed with sweet appearance and noble virtues which foreground each other, revealing her nobility and chastity. In addition, the sonnet sequence presents the beauty from the stand of the pursuer so that her figure is in consistent change owing to the successes and setbacks in the process of the lover’s pursuing. The two prominent figures of the lady are earthly beauty and heavenly beauty, and therefore, the courting of the lover changes from earthly love to heavenly love. Furthermore, in the courting, the ruthlessness and pride of the lady in the eyes of the lover, owing to the setbacks, actually implies his own pride. The lady’s proud image is repeatedly presented in the first half part of the sonnet sequence, and this image is in disappearing owing to the success of courting. Under the vanishment of the lady’s proud image, the pursuer is on the way to be virtuous. Therefore, the lady can be regarded as a redeemer to assist the pursuer to change from imperfection to perfection. Furthermore, the beauty acts as the representative of God saving the man from sin to virtue, and her divinity indicates she represents the glory of God.

Under the help of the God-bearer, the man changes from enjoying earthly love to heavenly love.

Key words: *Amoretti*; Female image; Divine; Salvation

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INTRODUCTION

Edmund Spenser is honored as one of the founding fathers of modern English. His *The Shepheardes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene* had won great reputation for him. Besides the two works, his *Amoretti*, receiving rather less attention, is his great sonnet sequence. “*Amoretti* means ‘little loves’ or ‘little love poems’, or the diminutive form implying a relationship of intimate affection might be interpreted as: Intimate little tokens of love made out of ancient material deriving, primarily, from Italy.” (Maclean & Prescott, 1993, p.807) Under the Petrarch’s example, Spenser renders the various difficulties in front of love. Actually *Amoretti* is a detailed record of Spenser’s experience of courting for his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle.

In the sonnet sequence, the attractive beauty is endowed with wonderful appearance and noble virtues. Therefore the lady enjoys both physical beauty and spiritual beauty. The man in the poem is a firm pursuer of the gentle lady. However, the courting process is going slowing. At the very beginning, the pursuer’s love for the beauty is too strong and extreme, with a great desire to possess the lady, treating her as a property. Therefore, his love for the lady is totally rejected. After some setbacks, his love becomes more generous and virtuous, it is the lady’s virtues, instead of her appearance, that attracts

the pursuer. In this contrary changing process, the lady, although in the poem negatively presented through the eyes of the pursuer, definitely plays an important role. This paper gives a general discussion about the female image in the Spenser's sonnet sequence focusing on her physical appearance as well as noble virtues. These two advantages guarantee her as the unchangeable beloved of the pursuer. In addition, the lady acts as a redeemer. She assists the lover in self-realization of his pride, and brings him into a virtuous man in the courtship. Furthermore, the lady also works as God-bearer. She is no mere an earthly beauty, but a heavenly lady with divinity, and she brings her lover from an earthly love to a heavenly love.

1. THE LADY AS THE BELOVED

In the sonnet, the lady is the lover's firm goddess of courting. The first sonnet directly discloses that the lover wants to use poem to win the lady's heart. The attraction of the lady not just comes from the amazing appearance, but more from noble virtue. The lady is a heavenly beauty with noble virtues. However, Spenser puts the lady on the earth, the secular world. Therefore, it can be noticed that an ordinary lady with divinity.

From the sonnets, the most pleasant thing for the lover is enjoying the beauty of the lady. It is reasonable that the physical beauty gives a more direct impression on the pursuer. Therefore, there are many descriptions on the amazing appearance. Before expressing his love for the lady, the lover gives the lady great praise which is from his astonishment of the attractive appearance. In *Am.* 3, the lover presents his extreme admiration. He thinks that "the light whereof hath kindled heavenly fyre, in my fraile spirit by her from basenesse rayesd" and "base things I can no more endure to view; but looking still on her I stand amazed." His praise for the lady is from his sudden shock at the lady's beauty. Although the man is astonished by her heavenly origination, he does not really understand her divinity. And in the later sonnets, the lover gives a more detailed description about the beloved's appearance, focusing on her eyes and smiles. In the *Am.* 15, the lover draws a vivid and colorful picture of lady's physical appearance to highlight her extraordinary beauty:

If Saphyres, loe her eies be Saphyres plaine,
 If Rubies, loe hir lips Rubies sound;
 If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round;
 If Yuorie, her forehead yuory weene;
 If Gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
 If siluer, her faire hands siluer sheene. (*Am.* 15)

The lover compares different parts of lady's body with the most precious and beautiful things in the world, but all these finest things cannot exceed her physical appearance. *Saphyres*, rubies, *pearles*, *yuorie*, gold and silver emphasize the perfection of the lady. However, this perfection is concluded by the lover from his sensual experience. All this comparison shows the lover is more

attracted by his beloved's visual beauty. Other sonnets can also witness this kind of attraction. There is a concentration on lady's eyes and smile. As for her eyes, "in which all powers conspire", "naught els (in the world can) be counted dear" (*Am.* 8). In the next sonnet, in order to reveal the beauty of her eyes, the lover once again tries to clarify it with some comparisons. Unfortunately, he fails to find out the right thing to express the brightness of her eyes.

Not to the sun: For they do shine by night;
 nor to the Moone: For they are changed neuer;
 nor to the Starres: For they haue purer sight;
 nor to the fire: For they consume not euer;
 Nor to the lightning: For they still perseuer;
 nor to the Diamond: For they are more tender;
 nor vnto Christall: For nought may them seuer;
 nor vnto glasse: Such basenesse mought offend her;
 (*Am.* 9)

These comparisons foreground the eternal and stable brightness of the lady's eyes. All these comparisons show the perfection of the lady, especially, her beautiful appearance. Nevertheless, the lady's perfection in the lover's eyes is still based on his visual experience. He connects the natural objects with the lady's eyes showing he is indulged himself in the attraction of the lady's physical appearance.

Furthermore, there is a changing process about the lover's appreciation of lady's physical beauty in the different phases of the courting. At the very beginning, the lover is greatly amazed by the physical beauty so that he tries to show the lady's perfection with poems, and this astonishment also result that he is in the cultish pursuit. As a result of the first rejection of the lady, the lover puts devilish thoughts on the lady's astonishing appearance. There are many evidences in the sonnet sequence to prove this point. In *Am.* 37, the lover complains about the lady's physical attraction as guile. "What *guyle* is this, that those her golden tresses. She doth *attyre vnder* a net of gold: And with sly skill so cunningly them dresses, that which is gold or *heare*, may *scarse* be told?" In other sonnets, the lover even treats the lady as a tiger, revealing the pursuer's feeling is going to the extreme. Therefore, before the success of his courting, his appreciation of lady's physical beauty changes from being surprised by the sweet beauty to debasing and condemning her beauty. Later, after his success of his courting, his appreciation returns to the original state. But differently, this time the lover finds out the heavenly beauty in lady's appearance. Therefore, he thinks she is "*diuinely* wrought, and of the brood of Angels *heuenly* born; and with the crew of blessed Saynts *vpbrought*". (*Am.* 61)

The lady's noble virtues can be regarded as spiritual beauty. Spenser's pursuing the spiritual beauty is under the influence of Platonic ideas. Plato insists on the importance of soul boldly. He thinks "only what is said for the sake of understanding and learning, what is truly

written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention" (Nienkamp, 1999, p.206). Under the inspiration of Plato's thoughts, the lady is put on a heavenly dress under the pen of Spenser. The lover is not only astonished by lady's physical appearance, but also by her spiritual beauty. In the sonnets, the lover "repeatedly praises the 'maker' of his mistress for fashioning so perfect an example of human beauty." (Bates, 1991, p.85) In *Am.* 3, the lover thinks "the light whereof hath kindled *heavenly fyre*, in my *fraile* spirit by her from *basenesse raysed*". The beam in the lady's eyes is the heavenly fire, and she is just like an angel from heaven.

The noble virtues reveal the perfection of the lady, indicating her heavenly origin. The lady is full of lofty pride and portliness, and in her eyes there is "that *boldened* innocence" so that she "scorns the base things, and seditious of foul dishonor". (*Am.* 5) In addition, harmony can be noticed in her noble virtues. In *Am.* 21, the lover praises the grace of the lady's face. However, under her sweet face, the lover finds that "pride and meekness mixed by equal part" (*Am.* 21). All these virtues make the lady as a heavenly beauty. In *Am.* 55, discussing about what makes this beauty, Spenser gives a specific presentation about the virtues of the lady.

Not earth; for her high thoughts more heauenly are,
not water; for her loue doth burne like fyre:
not ayre; for she is not so light or rare,
not fyre; for she doth friese with faint desire.
Then needs another Element inquire
whereof she mote be made, that is the skye. (*Am.* 55)

All these comparisons reflect the harmony embodied in the lady. Both the lady's physical appearance and virtues are in a moderate state. She is divine, and in eternal beauty. However, how to keep this eternal beauty alive? There is no doubt that physical beauty is in diminishing as time goes by. But for the spiritual beauty, it is "true beautie: That doth argue you to be diuine and borne of heauenly seed" (*Am.* 79). From the standpoint of the pursuer, the lady's spiritual beauty is more lasting than the physical beauty, and the way to keep the spiritual beauty alive is to keep her alive in the lover's poem. Therefore, in *Am.* 75, the poet says "my verse your vertues rare shall eternize, and in the *heuens wryte* your glorious name."

Both physical amazement and spiritual beauty reveal great attraction of the lady. Her sweet appearance makes the lover as a surrender in cultish love. From her physical beauty, the spiritual beauty of the lady can be noticed. Her spiritual beauty is Platonic. The lady is a heavenly beauty, full of divinity. She gives inspiration to that man. And on his poem, her figure lives forever.

2. THE LADY AS A REDEEMER

The lover, in *Amoretti*, is the narrator, who presents the beauty as well as the pride of the lady. It seems that her

firm rejection of him at the first period of courting renders herself as one to be scolded. However, her consistence and unchangeableness imply her perfection, rendering that the pursuer at the first stage is not qualified to possess the lady. Her final acceptance of the pursuer is not merely the result of his perseverance, but more importantly, the outcome of his self-change and this kind of self-change is indebted to the fair beauty. Therefore, from the point, the lady can be regarded as a redeemer of the man.

As for Spenser, "throughout his writing life the poet continued to reveal in his work both an enthusiasm for the humanist inheritance and a zealous, even militant Protestantism." (Hume, 1984, p.1) He was known as a protestant poet. Therefore, it is reasonable that the idea about sin and salvation can be noticed in the sonnet sequence.

Under the assistance of the lady, the lover's admiration for the lady changes from lust and a desire for possession to charity, purity. The pursuer's love for the lady at first is a kind of cultish love, and also an erotic desire, and "such desire, aside from risking idolatry, conflicts with the love of God." (Hadfield, 2001, p.153) The first sonnet indicates the beginning of his courting. When he fails in getting a content reply, he becomes impatient and restless, and complains the lady's "rebellious pride". However, the lover's complaint indicates that the real obstacle in their love is not the cruelty and hardness of the lady, but his pride. The fault does not reside on the lady, but on the lover himself. His love is a kind of selfish love with a strong desire of possessing the lady, revealing the speaker wants to "control the lady by trying to turn her into a commodity—or rather, a series of commodities." (Warley, 2002, p.579) The clue of pride is more clarified in *Am.* 3 and *Am.* 4. The lover compares the lady as fair flower "in whom fresh youth doth raine, prepare your selfe new loue to *entertaine*." (*Am.* 4). In this metaphor, the lover treats himself as the center in the love. In his thought, the lady should be more compliant, instead of rejecting his proposal. He regards himself as spring. However, all the forces of generation, all the energies of life and love can be found in the "lusty spring", while the hint of his surrender can not be found at this stage. In *Am.* 56, the lover's attitudes towards the lady and love are more direct. He compares his beauty to a tiger. "Fair ye be sure, but *cruell* and *vnkind*, as isa Tygre that with *greedinesse* hunts after bloud" (*Am.* 56). Here the lady is more than presented as a pride figure, but also as a fierce and cruel and greedy tiger. His love becomes more cultish and turns into unacceptable.

Pride reveals the lover incapable of reaching the perfect love, and his pride is in growth so that he treats his beloved lady evilly. The presentation of the lover's pride is emphasized repeatedly in the early poem. In the *Am.* 11, the lover complains the greed of the lady who cannot be "moou'd with reason or with *rewth*". In the later sonnets, the lover successively presents an evil lady with

guile, cruelty, stubborn, and cunningness. All of these evil thoughts about the lady reflect his weakness. In the courtship, the cruelty of the lady reveals imperfection of the lover, instead of imperfection of the lady herself, and “all the sonnets which emphasize her apparent cruelty are in fact fitting expressions of the appropriate and necessary reaction of perfection to imperfection.” (Benson, 1972, p.186)

What the lady wants is a kind of selfless and pure love, instead of a cultish one. Therefore, the cruelty of the lady assists in the lover’s self-realization of his imperfection and weakness. From this perspective, the lady is a discoverer with her rejection of the lover’s imperfection. Although the lover is full of pride and gives too much complains, the beauty still opens the door of love for the lover. But her tenderness and care in the man’s eyes is nothing but guile or cunning skills before his full understanding.

Faced with such an imperfect man, the lady does not give up the chance of assisting his self-change. The pursuer’s “beloved becomes a new Pandora: Her task is to cleanse the natural ‘fault’ which afflict the poet.” (Larsen, 1997, p.33) Her disapproval of the man’s proposal aims at helping him realize his imperfection and limitation in his virtues. Her rejection is beneficial for the man’s improvement. Then, in the process of man’s revelation of his flaw, the lady imparts courage and power to prevent the man from discouragement and abandoning self-change. In the sonnets, each time when the man is under bitter suffering owing to the indifference and hardness of the lady, he will, then, enjoys momentarily the beauty of the lady, which can bring new energy for him to continue his courting. The lover’s temporary enjoyment is the result of the lady’s encouragement. In *Am.* 12 and *Am.* 13, the lover says that the lady has a greedy heart and makes him in “restless toil”, and complains her “guilefull eye”. However, in *Am.* 14, he suddenly praises the lady’s fair beauty. This shock change is not randomly. His praise of the lady reveals his love for the lady on the one hand. It also possibly indicates that the lady gives her lover comfort when he feels unpleasant. From this perspective, the lady is not a static figure any more, for she can give corresponding reaction based on her lover’s performance and emotional state. The cruelty and hardness are the obstacle for the lover to get the true visage of the lady. Actually she carefully guides her lover to fulfill his self-change all the time. Furthermore, in the lover’s self-change, the former erotic desire and the final spiritual admiration is reconciled, for *hese* two kinds of love are combined acceptably and harmoniously. And the two are “not merely reconciled but serve as reciprocal instruments of reconciliation.” (Es, 2006, p.183)

After his self-realization about his flaws and sins, especially his erotic desire, the lover recognizes the lady’s perfection, and the lady’s rejection aims to his refinement and the growth of perfection. Therefore, the lover “affirms

that the chaste purgation of his lust accords with Lenten devotion and self-denial.” (King, 1990, p.163) He gradually gets to know that the lady’s assistance and love for him, and the beauty now renders a new impression:

You frame my thoughts and fashion me within,
You stop my tounge, and teach my hart to speake,
You calme the storme that passion did begin,
Strong through your cause, but by your vertue weak.
Dark is the world, where your light shined neuer;
Well is he borne, that may behold you euer. (*Am.* 8)

The lover praises the perfection of the lady without any hesitance. She is a heavenly beauty full of divinity, the light of the world. The right understanding about the lady’s action quickens the process of his self-change. When he once again faces the “harness” of the lady, he even can take some pleasures in his suffering. He can feel freedom in complete surrender. All these kinds of changes attribute to his right understanding about the lady’s intention. The beauty he loves tries to assist him in her way. Under the assistance of the lady, the man gradually undergoes his self-change. He realizes the lady’s perfection, and that what the lady wants is selfless and pure love and what she longs for is the correspondingly perfection in him. The pride he finds in the lady is not evil, but is charity that requires him to sacrifice everything for love. Her agreement on their uniting indicates the success of the man’s self-change. From this perspective, the lady is a redeemer of man’s sins.

In the courting process, the beauty is not a static figure. The lover shows his strong admiration. In turn, she gives corresponding reaction. The lady assists the man in the self-realization of his imperfection by rejection successfully, and later she continues to give consistent care and encouragement in man’s self-change. The lady’s pride actually is the pride of the pursuer himself, and the lady’s assistance in his self-change makes the lover realize that “all humans must struggle against their own propensity to place too much faith in their mortal selves, whether they pride themselves on wealth or wisdom, strength or beauty.” (Kaplan, 2014, p.284) Therefore, the lady can be regarded as a redeemer of the lover, and brings him from imperfection to perfection.

3. THE LADY AS A GOD-BEARER

The lady not only has extraordinary appearance, but also is embodied with noble virtues, which identify his perfection. Her perfection comes from heaven, and is full of divinity. Her divinity is well proved by her guidance of ascending the soul of the man from earth to heaven.

The lady in the *Amoretti* is just like Beatrice in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, Dorothy Sayers (qtd. in Benson, 1972, p.184), the translator of Dante’s great work, says that Beatrice “represents for every man that person - or, more generally, that experience of the Not-self - which, by arousing his adoring love, has become from him the God-

bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God." The beauty in the sonnet sequence is this kind of God-bearing image. In the man's praise in the early sonnets, it can be noticed that the divinity of the lady. For example, he praises his lady as "my soules long lacked foode, my heauens blis" (*Am.* 1), and she "hath kindled heauenly fyre" (*Am.* 3). His beauty is embodied with "portly pride" and "lofty" (*Am.* 5). All these descriptions indicate the lover experiences a kind of Platonic worship of the beauty. He admires her spiritual goodness and thinks that she comes from heaven. One of the most powerful evidences to prove the lady as a God-bearing image with divinity is *Am.* 22:

Her temple fayre is built within my mind,
in which her glorious ymage placed is,
on which my thoughts doo day and night attend
lyke sacred priests that neuer thinke amisse.
There I to her as th'author of my blisse,
will builde an altar to appease her yre:
and on the same my hart will sacrifice,
burning in flames of pure and chast desyre. (*Am.* 22)

It is apparently to be noticed that the lover give a religious worship to the beauty. Her image is glorious. The reason why the lover wants to build a "temple fayre" and is delighted to "sacrifise his hart" is not the attraction of the lady's beauty, but her heavenly beauty. For what she renders to the lover is more related to spiritual enjoyment, instead of physical pleasure. While this heavenly beauty attributes to the lady's divinity. In *Am.* 61, the lover gives more information about the lady's divinity. She "is diuinely wrought, and of the brood of Angels heuently borne; and with the crew of blessed Saynts vpbrought." (*Am.* 61). Since the lady is heavenly born, there is no doubt that she is embodied with divinity.

The lady can be looked as a God-Bearer not only for she is full of divinity, but also for her works as a redeemer who sublimates the man's earthly soul. She acts properly according to the man's performance. Therefore, there is the possibility that the lover can be uplifted from natural baseness by the inspiration of the lady's divinity (Cummings, 1970, p.166), and experiences from the love of physical beauty to the love of heaven.

There is no doubt that the man is attracted by the lady's beautiful appearance. But he later finds an absolute beauty on the lady, and thinks her "living fire" is aspired by God. This also indicates her image of God-bearer. She is closely related to heavenly beauty, while the lover is an earthly man with his soul imprisoned by the sublunary world. In the sublunary world, man is incapable of comprehending the idea of God owing to his imperfection. Therefore, an intermediary is needed to collect God and man. The lady in the *Amoretti* works as an intermediary. Her mission is to enlighten the ordinary man to help them realize the glory of God under the veil of love. Through the consistent courting, the man succeeds in catching a sight of God's glory. "Dark is the world, where your light

shined neuer; well is he borne, that may behold you euer." (*Am.* 8) The man is no longer entrapped by his goodness' physical beauty, and he can catch the light behind the lady, which comes from the glory of God. From the ceaseless edifying of God's glory, the man raises from baseness to pureness. In *Am.* 88, this kind of idea is well clarified.

Ne ought I see, though in the clearest day,
when others gaze vpon theyr shadowes vayne:
but th'onely image of that heauenly ray,
whereof some glance doth in mine eie remayne. (*Am.* 88)

The man finds the heavenly ray on the lady, indicating that he gets rid of the earthly bind, and he gets the absolute beauty of the lady. Actually, the lady's "guiding light was, so to speak, duplex, emanating both from the body and soul, and feeding both body and soul in him." (Fletcher, 1903, p.113) His realization of the heavenly ray is the result of both the assistance of the lady and his strong desire to enter the heavenly world. Therefore it can be proved that the lover is on the way of ascending to heaven spiritually. Although the man's body cannot transcend the earthly world, there is a chance for the ascending of his soul, and his former flaws are overcome. His "erotic love is consecrated to the earthly life and spiritual destiny of the lovers." (Hamilton, 1990, p.91) Therefore, the lover's ceaseless wooing the lady is a process of ascending from earth to heaven. The lady works as a revelator of the glory of God and assists in the ascending an earthly soul. Their final uniting indicates the success of the man in catching the absolute beauty.

The lady is the representative of God so that she is in perfection and is full of divinity. Furthermore, as the God-bearer, she tries to assist the ascending of the man's earthly soul. It is she who enlightens the man to catch the glory of God, and guides him to climb to heaven through their pure love.

CONCLUSION

Amoretti is a record of the poet's courting experience, in which his happiness and frustration are detailed and lively expressed. The lady is embodied with physical beauty and noble virtues which bring great attraction for the lover. Her perfection makes herself the unchangeable beloved of the lover.

Although the courting process is presented from the perspective of the lover, it does not imply that the lady is a static figure. On the contrary, she acts positively and vigorously in the courtship based on the performance of the lover. The extreme reflection is that she works as a redeemer in the lover's salvation. In the lover's wooing process, the lady at first shows her coldness and hardness. Her cruelty is not to reject the lover's love, but to help the man in self-realization of his imperfection and sins. And she succeeds in discovering the lover's pride and his strong desire of possession, signifying the

man's love is an earthly love, a kind of cultish love. In the next process, the lady plays an important role in the man's self-improvement. Along with her coldness, she discontinuously, but ceaselessly gives cares and encouragement to her lover. Under her help, the man finally achieves his self-change, and acquires noble virtues. Therefore, from the process of the lover's salvation, an image of God-bearer can be found on the lady. She is full of heavenly divinity and represents the glory of God. As the God-bearer, her mission is to enlighten the man to realize the glory of God. Through the courting process, the lady succeeds in ascending the man's earthly soul to heaven. With the help of the lady, the man catches the heavenly light, realizes the existence of God.

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