

# *A New Kind of Love*

By Elizabeth H

Humans have been with fascinated with the concept of love for centuries. While the connotations of the word and the modes of its expression have changed over the years, there is a universal interest in associations between people—especially between men and women. Edmund Spenser, a self-proclaimed poet of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had an especially intriguing relationship with a woman named Elizabeth Boyle. This relationship prompted him to write eighty-nine sonnets collectively called Amoretti, meaning “little love poems” (Daniel 218). Unlike other authors of the time, Spenser was not writing only to amuse his colleagues. In “Sonnet 75,” he showed Europe a contrasting view of romantic relationships and a whole new level of purpose in the composition of poetry.

The model of courtly love was created and popularized by the upper classes during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Women were placed on pedestals and worshiped from afar by knights in [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] shining armor who wasted away for want of their love. By the time Spenser had died and new writers were coming onto the scene, the status of women had faded; female inhibition and belittlement would continue until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither of these pictures encourages a romantic relationship based on honesty, similarity, and communication, but that is what it appears Spenser had. Right in the middle of all the distance and artificiality, “several of Spenser's most significant female characters play important and somewhat extraordinary roles in the dissemination of spiritual knowledge.... The significance of his allocation of important educative roles to women merits further attention” (Plant). In “Sonnet 75” the narrator of the poem speaks to the woman he is in love with, and in line 5 she speaks back to him—with valid and intelligent things to say (Spenser 219). They are speaking as equals, perfectly reflecting a

passage in the Bible that Spenser may well have been familiar with: “The same goes for you husbands: Be good husbands to your wives. Honor them, delight in them. As women they lack some of your advantages. But in the new life of God's grace, you're equals. Treat your wives, then, as equals so your prayers don't run aground” (“1 Peter”). This type of relationship requires a much closer and dearer nature than the norm of his time: “What distinguishes Spenser's poem from earlier poetry is the personal note it strikes” (Moll). Also unlike so much of the poetry written during the Renaissance, Amoretti is not directed toward an imaginary girl with a bogus Greek name, and it is not ended in sadness or pretense. At the end of [written at eastern alamance hs in 05]the sonnets, Spenser has won the heart of the girl he loves, and they talk and reason together freely. “In the process [Spenser] confronts and overcomes the traditional, perverted perceptions of the Petrarchan lover: idolization and over-valuation of the beloved, oppressive rejection and stigmatization, self-regarding pain, the masochistic enjoyment of absence, the possessive, and voyeuristic categorization of the beloved’s physical attractions...” (Griffiths).

Edmund Spenser reacts against these problems by employing new relationships between his characters, and a new approach to writing poetry. Spenser typically wrote within the context of Italian sonnets, which had recently been brought into use by Sir Thomas Wyatt (Daniel 217). He altered and complicated the basic structure, but he “borrowed the themes, expressive desires and preoccupations of Italian poetry with real human lives and loves” (Griffiths). Those real human lives and loves are easily seen in “Sonnet 75.” “In this sonnet, addressed to his wife, Spenser claims to give her immortality in his verse. He does so by starting from a very ordinary, very charming incident that may occur any day in summer by the seaside. The situation is therefore a general one, but Spenser handles it in such a way as to make it intimately personal” (Moll). Poetry about ordinary

things did not become common until the 19<sup>th</sup> century—even the pastorals of the Renaissance dripped with such idealism that common people could not relate. The technical greatness of “Sonnet 75” is a little harder to detect, but it is definitely there. Part of the worth of the poem is in its simplicity, but “Spenser's perfect handling of vowels and the wavelike rhythm of his poem can only be appreciated when the sonnet is read aloud so as to bring out its melody. His frequent use of alliteration binds the poem together” (Moll). Alliterated phrases like “waves and washed,” “pains his prey,” and “die in dust” are carried throughout the poem to written at eastern alamance hs in 05] the very last line: “Our love shall live, and later life renew” (Spenser 219). When Spenser wrote The Faerie Queen, he used language that would hearken back to Chaucer’s time (Daniel 221); he may well have intended these lines of “Sonnet 75” to be reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry like Beowulf.

Edmund Spenser was indeed a great writer. Though much of his work is relatively forgotten by today’s readers, Spenser advanced and influenced the course poetry would take for England and later America. Spenser loved his wife and showed through his writing a more cherished and balanced relationship than is typically seen in literature. Also unlike many of his peers, his “work was not simply a reflection of the response of the court and its propagandists to Reformation and Counter Reformation threats, but part of the active creation of a national literary, moral and religious identity in a way that would buttress state, Queen and church” (Griffiths).

## Works Cited

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