

## **Puritanism in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*: Refashioning the Petrarchan Sonnet**

**Muna Mohamad Abd-Rabbo<sup>1\*</sup> and Layla Farouq Abdeen<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Dept. of English Language, Literature and Translation, Faculty of Arts, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, 11733 Amman, Jordan*

<sup>2</sup>*The World Islamic Science and Education University, 11947 Amman, Jordan*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence *Amoretti* and its concluding sequel *Epithalamion* within the context of Puritanism. By highlighting the Puritanical concepts in Spenser's two poetic works, the two researchers demonstrate the aspects in which Spenser parts ways with the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. Spenser offers a pure, Christian love that ends in holy matrimony as an alternative to the unsanctified, unrequited love in Petrarchan sonnets. Moreover, this research identifies the segments of Spenser's poems wherein Platonism is exceedingly manifested. Through the textual examination of the two aforementioned works, it becomes evident that nuances of the Puritan faith come to light in Spenser's depiction of a holy, Christian courtship and marriage, in his portrayal of the lady as an embodiment of heavenly light in contrast to the inferiority of earthly existence and in his parallel presentation of the lover's suffering for his angelic lady as an allegorical reflection of the agony endured by the Puritan to gain Heavenly Grace.

*Keywords:* *Amoretti*, Edmund Spenser, *Epithalamion*, holy marriage, platonism, puritanism

### **INTRODUCTION**

The *Amoretti* sonnet sequence by Edmund Spenser (1595) embodies numerous Petrarchan conventions. The lady's physical charms as well as her chastity both inspire and torture the speaker. However, Spenser (1595) departed from Petrarch by describing a pure, Christian love that led to marriage in *Epithalamion*. The Petrarchan sonnet is not only a poetic tradition, but also a structure of feeling

#### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 04 April 2017

Accepted: 13 February 2019

Published: 28 June 2019

*E-mail addresses:*

[anumra@yahoo.com](mailto:anumra@yahoo.com) (Muna Mohamad Abd-Rabbo)

[Layla\\_abdeen@yahoo.com](mailto:Layla_abdeen@yahoo.com) (Layla Farouq Abdeen)

\* Corresponding author

in which love flourishes in the absence of mutuality. What distinguishes the *Amoretti* sequence is that aggressive masculine activity is met with female passivity albeit by diverse structures of the lady's interactive response. According to Sanchez (2012) in "Modesty or Comeliness": The Predicament of Reform Theology in Spenser's *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*", Spenser's two poetic creations concur with various Christian ideals in their portrayal of a Protestant alternative to the Petrarchan convention. Therefore, these poems reveal a distinct discrepancy between a Catholic idealization of celibacy and a Protestant celebration of marriage. Spenser was an Anglican and more specifically a Protestant; furthermore, during his early years, he was deeply influenced by Puritanism. As Hume (1984) stated, "The religion to which he [Spenser] adhered throughout his life was fervent Protestantism which requires the label 'Puritan' during a specific period". According to Abrams (2000), "In his [Spenser's] early days, he was strongly influenced by Puritanism [and] remained a thoroughgoing Protestant all his life".

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Critics have extensively explored aspects of the Puritan faith as it appears in Spenser's works, focusing on the manifestation of certain Puritan beliefs in his poetic achievements on one hand, and the integration of Spenser's religious convictions with an espousal of the Renaissance spirit on the other. (e.g. Crawford, 2013; Lethbridge, 2006; Oser, 2014; Padelford, 1916; Tolman,

1918; Van Gelder, 1961). This paper follows a critical /analytical approach to highlight the Puritan concepts apparent in *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, specifically the Puritan's notion of marriage, the contrast between earth and heaven, the Puritans' interpretation of grace, and their attitude towards suffering.

## The Petrarchan Sonnet

The Petrarchan sonnet was first created by Francesco Petrarch (1304-74) in Italy in the 14th century. Petrarch's sonnets depict the plights and perils of the tortured lover whose deep, desperate love for Laura, the lady of all his sonnets, remains unrequited. The poet /lover uses hyperboles and sensual imagery in order to dramatize the excruciating agony inflicted upon him by the unattainable lady. The poems do not portray a mutual love that leads to a blissful marriage, but rather a deeply passionate one-sided love which leaves the speaker lamenting the misery of unfulfilled desire.

Petrarch's sonnet sequence comprises 366 poems, and it is considered to be "the first collection of poetry that was completely and seriously devoted to a single subject or person" (Johnson, 2009). Although Petrarch's poems were rooted in the medieval tradition of courtly love, Petrarch departed from the practices of courtly love in his omission of "the final consummation: his is a love that is endlessly frustrated" (Johnson, 2009). Spenser, on the other hand, deviates from the Petrarchan depiction of an unrequited, exasperated love and instead illustrates a pure Christian love that is eventually sanctified through holy matrimony.

### The Platonic Tradition

The Renaissance in Europe was marked by the rebirth of Classical scholarship and philosophy. Amongst the works revived was Plato's *Symposium* which explicates his concept of love as the means for the lover to transcend the material, physical world through the meditation upon the idealized beauty and virtue of the lady who is the object of this platonic love. Therefore, "the purpose of love was to draw the lover toward a higher, heavenly idea of beauty and virtue, eventually leading him to a better understanding of God" (Johnson, 2009). Love in the Platonic sense serves as a ladder that carries the lover high above earthly desires to the elevated realms of celestial eternity.

The concept of the Platonic ladder of love refers to the process in which the poet /lover may surpass the material world in pursuit of spiritual delights. In Spenser's sonnets, the speaker contemplates his beloved lady's divine beauty and ascends heavenwards away from all that is earthly and ephemeral. It is the lady's celestial spirit and beauty that enable the poet to transcend earthly materialism. Consequently, the principle of the Platonic ladder may be linked to the Puritan preference of the Hereafter as opposed to the physical world.

### The Philosophy of Marriage in Puritanism

The Puritans hold a very high opinion of marriage. In his article "Puritan Christianity: The Puritan at Home", Pronk (1997) quoted Thomas Gataker as saying "there is no society

more near, more entire, more comfortable, more constant, than the society of man and wife". Furthermore, Pronk (1997) explained that unlike the Catholics and the Protestants who thought that the purpose of marriage was procreation, the Puritans shifted the emphasis from procreation to companionability. Furthermore, the Puritans placed emphasis on physical love as part of the "joys experienced within the bonds of matrimony." The husband was the head of the household, but his rule should be "as easy and gentle as possible, and strive to be loved than feared" (Pronk, 1997).

For William Gouge, the influential Puritan writer, the mutual love between a husband and wife originates in the heavenly spheres. Johnson (2005) discussed the theological framework surrounding Gouge's portrayal of marriage stating that "love is the source of duty in Christian marriage, and the source of love is divine grace" (Johnson, 2005). The Puritans' celestial visualization of marital love is reflected in Spenser's platonic depiction of the speaker's passion towards his beloved in his *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*.

Another prominent Puritan thinker who was instrumental in shaping the Puritans' concept of marriage was Robert Cleaver. According to Johnson (2005), Cleaver modifies the priorities in the sacred Christian marriage by giving precedence to companionship over the conventional aim of procreation. In that regard, Cleaver "reversed the traditional order of the ends of marriage: mutual society, not procreation, is the most fundamental" (Johnson, 2005).

The Puritan notion of companionability in the marriage comes to light extensively in Spenser's sonnets and in his marriage poem as will be argued within the upcoming sections that present an analysis of *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*.

Lane (2000) stated in his article "Two Schools of Desire: Nature and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism" that Puritanism understood the institution of marriage as a training ground in the learning of affection, which eventually led to Christ's captivating beauty. Similarly, John Robinson argued that a man's love for his wife must be "like Christ's to His Church: holy for quality and, and great for quantity" (cited in Pronk). Pronk (1997) elaborated further by pointing out that the Puritans developed John Calvin's 'companionate marriage.' "They conceived of marriage as a deep spiritual union of spirit and mind as well as body...on the spiritual and often intellectual level, the Puritan wife thought of herself as his [her husband's] equal...The core of their union is the communion with Christ." (Pronk, 1997). Neuman (2016) in "Puritanism and Modernist Novels: From Moral Character to the Ethical Self" argues that the influence of Puritanism is evident in literature through religious allegories. Therefore, from a Puritan perspective, man and wife in holy matrimony solidify their bond in their constant journey towards the love of Christ.

According to Verma (2001) in *Amoretti (A Detailed Consideration of the Poem with Text)*, Spenser's innovation in the Petrarchan sonnet springs from the fact

that the poet dedicates his sonnets to his future wife Elizabeth. However, Johnson (1993) in "Gender Fashion and Dynamics of Mutuality in Spenser's *Amoretti*" pointed out that Spenser identified the sonnet lady in *Amoretti* within a complex of terms that depicted her in a series of metaphors identifying her as merely 'she'. Nonetheless, Spenser parted ways with previous sonneteers, who pursued an unattainable married woman. Thus, as Paul Cavill (2007) argued, Spenser did not revel in profane love; instead, his aim was towards "an Orthodox Christian ...marriage". On the other hand, Renwick (1933) in *Edmund Spenser: An Essay on Renaissance Poetry* suggested that the love described in *Amoretti* was really a "nameless and undefined aesthetic experience recognized as love". This undefined experience need not be aesthetic; it could be deeply religious.

In line with this religious angle, the whole Christian marriage between the poet and the lady can be viewed at a more allegorical level as being parallel to the relationship between a Puritan and Christ. The poet enjoys suffering for the sake of his lady in the hope of reaching an elevated love in the same manner that a Puritan suffers in his quest for Christ's grace. The lady is of divine origin and in numerous instances she is depicted as possessing the power of life and death regarding the poet. Johnson (1993) cited Spenser's extensive allusions to the church calendar in *Amoretti* as proof that the poet here described "a metaphoric presentation of the Christian's love for Christ" (cited in Wirth, 2007).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Amoretti* as an Expression of Puritan Theology

In *Amoretti*, Spenser depicts the courtship between himself and his future wife Elizabeth. This sonnet sequence displays a variety of Puritanical concepts, namely the sanctity of marriage as a mirror of mankind's sacred love of Christ, the contrast between Heaven and Earth, and the Puritan's quest for God's grace as attained through physical and spiritual anguish.

In sonnet I, the lady's life and death giving powers are depicted in the first two lines: "Happy ye leaves when as those lily hands, / which hold my life in their dead doing might" (1-2) She has an "Angels blessed look" (11) as testimony to her celestial essence. On the other hand, the Puritan idea of earthly companionability surfaces in this sonnet; for the speaker, the lady's presence is akin to food for his soul. Moreover, she embodies his "heaven's bliss" (12), a phrase that reinforces the Puritan notion that the union in a marriage brings the couple closer to God in his heaven. According to Johnson (1993), the description of the lady in this sonnet shifts from a fragmented one to a whole "voiced figure who relates mutually with the poet-lover". He says that:

Only as the lady emerges from marginality to a voiced, named, part of the sequence, do we realize it is very much she, not the poet-lover, who shapes the sequence's plots, themes, conflicts and emotive fluctuations.

Ultimately, it is she as female creator-nurturer who refigures both gender and genre, the poet and the poetry, the lover and his love. In the process, materiality is incorporated into spirituality, chastity is redefined, and the female presence becomes a force beneficial rather than inimical to men. In the complex ludic interplay of a poet fashioning poetry, and thus fashioning a self, the poet also fashions a lady; and she in turn, as the poet's projection of female other who is, nonetheless, more than an imagined 'muse', refashions the poet. (pp. 505-506)

The lady in this sequence steps out of the passive shadows confined to the traditional Petrarchan lady. She possesses an independent spirit which is angelic in its life-giving, celestial qualities. At the same time, she retains the pious morality and earthly companionability as the speaker's future wife. The lady here guides, nurtures and reshapes the essence of the speaker. Moreover, she instils within him a sense of peace and wholeness that aids him in his own quest for piety and inspiration.

By that same token, the lady's control of the poet's life comes to light anew in sonnet VII. One gentle glance from the "fayre eyes" (1) and the speaker's soul fills with life and love. In contrast if the lady eyes him "askew" (7) then the poet will die as though struck by lightning. In sonnet XI, the poet compares the lady to a "cruell warriour" (3) who constantly wages war on him. She torments him and makes his miserable life her "vnpittied spoil" [unpitted] (8). Holding

his life in her hands, she forces him to continue living, unable to die in peace. He concludes that although all pain and wars have an end, no amount of prayer can make his pain cease.

In sonnet IX Spenser explicitly draws a comparison between his beloved and the Maker. He is at a loss to find something on earth with which he can compare the "goodly light" (4) of her "powerful eies" (2). Her rays are superior to the sun, moon, stars, fire, lightning, crystal and glass. He concludes that she resembles the Maker "whose light doth lighten all that here we see" (14).

In sonnet LXXIX, the poet describes the lady's spiritual beauty which far surpasses the flesh. He declares that her true beauty lies in her "gentle wit" (3) and "vertuous mind" (4) which are not transitory like physical beauty. Here the lady is such a sublime being that she is given Christ-like dimensions. She is of "heavenly seed: / deriv'd from that fayre Spirit" (10-11). Her everlasting beauty is from God because "true beauty derives from God" (Yale; cited in Wirth, 2007). The sensitivity to feelings of ecstasy, anguish and profound longing came to characterize Puritan conversion narratives as a natural expression of such an impulse. Moreover, the capacity to comprehend the depths and heights of loss and joy became increasingly a measure of one's own nature before God.

In sonnet VIII the lady is said to be born of the life-giving fire that is kindled in heaven by the Maker. The brightness of her eyes compels Cupid to strike arrows that

may conjure up base emotions. However, because she is of celestial origin the angels stop such baseness and guide "fraile mindes" (7) towards heaven's beauty. In the third quatrain the speaker addresses his sweetheart directly and informs her of her positive influence on him. "The Puritan wife is her husband's helper, counselor and comforter" (Pronk, 1997). In this sonnet she helps the speaker formulate his thoughts and his inner being. He tells her "you stop my tounge, and teach my hart to speake" (10). By contemplating her beauty, he goes into a meditative silence and delves into his heart's deepest sensibilities and sentiments. The world is brighter because of her companionship; without her, darkness prevails.

### **The Contrast between Heaven and Earth**

The contrast between heaven and earth is explored by the poet in sonnet III. Puritans forsake the earth with all its worldly temptations and corruptions and instead incessantly strive for God's heaven. The lady here with her "souerayne beauty" (1) and "heavenly fyre" (3) refines the poet's soul and raises it from the baseness of the earth, so that he looks upward towards God in his heaven. The beloved's divine rays motivate the poet in his voyage towards heaven; he views earth as inferior to celestial light and therefore unworthy of any attachment by the poet: "That being now with her huge brightness dazed / base thing I can no more endure to view" (5-6).

This earth /heaven dichotomy is reiterated in sonnet V. The poet admires the lady's "portly pride" (2) even though others criticize her for it. She deserves to be full of pride as testimony of her heavenly origin. She has nothing but contempt and "scorn of base things" (6) in the world of mortals. Her warranted pride is also the theme of sonnet LXI wherein she exemplifies "the glorious image of the makers beautie" (1), "divinely wrought" (5) and "Angels hevenly borne" (6). The speaker concludes that a person of such heavenly magnitude should be worshipped rather than loved.

In sonnet XIII, the poet contrasts the lady's mortality with her constant climb to heaven. She looks down upon this world of which she was born as being "lothsome and forlorne" (11). Not only is the poet on a voyage heavenwards, but rather the lady as well is on a journey of "self-transcendence" (Turner cited in Wirth, 2007), heaven bound. In this sonnet Puritanism meets Platonism. A Puritan always looks up to heaven in order to embrace God's grace; in the same fashion, anyone who subscribes to the Platonic ladder of love surpasses this world in pursuit of celestial delights. In addition, Puritanism differs from previous doctrines in its view of women. According to Pavlick (1993) in her thesis *The Puritans and Women: Equality under God*, "Christian women were spoken of favourably, and were thought to be just as spiritual -- and just as capable of spirituality -- as men were. This image of the capable woman was very removed from the pre-Reformation idea of women as the ruin of humanity, and the religious image, far from

being misogynist, praised the role of women in the community". The lady here is just as capable of ascending the Platonic ladder as the male speaker is. She becomes more than a lovely face or an objectified ideal as she expresses her emotions, experiences, and interpretations apart from the stylizing poet-lover's attributes to her. She constructs a discourse of language and action in which she views herself equal, if not superior, to the lover.

Mortality versus immortality in the Afterlife is the topic of sonnet LXXV. The poet writes the lady's name on the sand near the sea, but the waves keep erasing it. His beloved tells him what he is doing is in vain because she herself will be "wyped out" (8) just like her name. The poet refuses to give up and declares that despite inevitable death, his sweetheart shall be immortalized in his lines. He will continue writing poetry in heaven and their love shall continue living in the Afterlife: "Where whenas death shall all the world subdew, / our love shall live, and later life renew" (13-14).

In sonnet LV the poet wonders what mould his lady is made of and how she can combine beauty with cruelty. Spenser's lady refuses to remain a literary projection of the lover's desire and by such a refusal, she is liberated from the patriarchal order, which would restrict to a passive observer. Consequently, he gives proof that she cannot be composed of the four elements: Earth, water, air and fire. He concludes in the end that she is made of a mould from up above because "to the heaven her haughty looks aspire" (11). Just like in sonnet XIII the lady

is seen as someone ascending the Platonic ladder to transcendence. However, it is also evident that she is capable of hesitation, anger, and pain. At one point she laughs and at another she deconstructs the poet-lover's language and actions.

Interestingly enough, the contrast between spirituality and physicality is explored once again in sonnet XXXV through the myth of Narcissus. Rogers (1976) explored this mythological angle in his article "Narcissus in Amoretti XXXV." Rogers (1976) explained that in this sonnet the poet compared the lady to Narcissus' image in the lake; however, there was reversal in the outcome of the poet's contemplation of his lady. Unlike Narcissus who loses his life because of his vanity and pursuit of worldly possessions, the poet here feels his adoration of the lady has some "genuine value". Rogers elaborates further by bringing forth the idea of the Platonic ladder of love as it appears in this sonnet. By meditating upon the lady's heavenly beauty, the poet is drawn away from any "preoccupation with transitory physical things" (Rogers, 1976). The poet declares that all things in this world are vain and worthless "shadows saving she" (14). The lady's essence rises above earthly materialism, and therefore serves as a worthy quest. Once more, the whole notion of the Platonic ladder of love bears a clear connection to the Puritan disdain of the worldly in favour of the heavenly.

### **Puritanical Suffering and Gaining Grace in *Amoretti***

Another Puritan concept in this poem is the agony that the seeker suffers in his pursuit of this elevated beauty. He cannot remove his eyes from the lady, "the object of their pain" (2); in the same fashion, a Puritan does not remove his eyes from looking up to God despite any suffering at His hands in this world.

Platonism comes to light once again in sonnet LXXII. Verma (2001) explicates how the poet is fixated on Plato's flight of the spirit (p. 74). As the speaker aspires to reach the pure sky, he feels weighed down by earthly things and his mortality. The lady's lofty beauty fills his soul with "heaven's glory" (6) and sets it on the right course upwards. He also feels that their grand love for one another is just like heaven on earth: "Hart need not with none other happinesse, / but here on earth to have such heavens bliss" (13-14).

The spirituality of their love is emphasized once again in sonnet LXVI. The lady is given such an elevated status that she cannot find a match in heaven or on earth. Nevertheless, she bestows her love upon this low-ranking poet. The speaker then declares that the love they share endows her with "greater glory gate, / then had ye sorted with a princes pere" (9-10). Their bond surpasses all earthly riches and social rankings. The light she shines on him will increase because of its reflection in his adoration of her: "Yet since your light hath once enlumind me, / with my reflex yours shall increase" (13-14). As Okerlund (1982) pointed out, the poet's



admiration of the lady “elevates their love into a spiritual phenomenon that transcends mere earthly matters” (39). In sonnet XVII he once again contrasts her “Angels face” (1) with “the world’s worthlesse glory” (3). Yet these rhetorical figures, argued Johnson (1993), were hardly agreed upon terms between the poet-lover and the lady as they depicted a male fantasy that illustrated the structures of dominance and submission.

The idea of pure love versus lust evinces itself most prominently in sonnet VI in *Amoretti*. Here the lady remains too proud to submit to the speaker’s love, but this dejection does not discourage him. He feels his love is “not lyke to lusts of baser kynd” (3) and will mature slowly as it is directed towards heaven. He compares his deep desire to an oak that takes a long time to ignite but when it does “it doth divide great heat, and makes flames to heaven aspire” (7-8). In this sonnet the Puritan idea of directing the lovers’ union towards Christ (heaven) becomes clear. In actuality, Puritanism focuses on the nature of love as well as the respective duties of both husbands and wives within a patriarchal society. To Puritans, desire becomes a significant path toward the acknowledgement of God since the desire of the heart is the most pleasing to Him. Therefore, when a husband and wife enter into matrimony, Puritans expect a greater manifestation of love to emerge from that bond. The speaker’s love for the lady grows and becomes more intense the more the flame of his desire burns towards heaven. The Puritans also embrace suffering as an integral component in their journey for

a higher purpose. In the final two lines, the speaker states that he can endure “taking little paine / to knit the knot, that shall ever remaine” (13-14). He feels that this pain he suffers at the hands of his lady strengthens and purifies his love and makes their union in marriage all the more worthy. In addition, the blazing desire in this sonnet hints at the physical aspect of love which the Puritans accept as an essential part of the marital bliss to come.

The Puritan’s positive attitude towards pain is even clearer in sonnet XLII. He speaks of “The love which me so cruelly tormenteth, / So pleasing is my extreamest paine.” He continues to say that the more he suffers the more he wants to embrace his bane. In sonnet XVII, he describes the arrows that glide from her “sweet eye glaunces” (9), and, in sonnet XVI the poet expresses his fear at almost being slain by the one of the deadly arrows that fly from the “immortall light” (2) of her eyes. At the last minute her eye twinkles and the arrow does not sink into his heart. Even so he declares that he “hardly scap’t with pain” (14). Transcending towards heavenly altitudes does not come easily. He has to suffer whenever he peers into the heavenly rays that rise from her eyes. The poet’s agony at any glance of the lady’s physical charms is of course a Petrarchan convention. However here, the fact that the arrow does not actually strike his heart shows that this love is not utterly devastating to the poet-lover. It is not love that inflicts him with pain but rather the transcending experience that accompanies it. In addition, the lady

he seeks is attainable unlike the ever out of reach Petrarchan lady, and it is the twinkle in her eye that ultimately saves the poet. In other words, and in the course of the entire sequence, the *Amoretti* lady is available to the poet-lover and she may even be eager for his love but only on her own terms.

The poet's suffering in his pursuit of the sonnet lady's "grace" (1) appears in sonnet XX. In a series of comparisons, the poet reveals how the lady here is crueller than lions and lionesses alike. Even though he yields before her and begs for mercy, she places her foot on his neck and stomps down his life. He addresses her saying that even a lion has mercy upon a lamb that yields before him; therefore, don't let your unmatched beauty be tainted with the blood of a prey supplicating before you: "Fayrer then fayrest let none other say, / that ye were blooded in a yeelded pray" (13-14). The poet's "humbled hart" (2) here can allude to the humbling experience of a Puritan as he overcomes the harshness of this world in his pursuit of heaven's salvation. The idea of suffering for a lofty cause reappears in sonnet LXIII. Here the poet feels he can endure all types of pain in order to "gaine eternall blisse" (14). Apparently, she at one point ignores his attention remaining aloof during even the rituals of courtship in a probable attempt to keep the lover's desire going.

The concept of grace resurfaces in sonnet XL but from a positive angle:

Mark when she smiles with amiable  
cheare,

And tell me whereto can ye liken it:

When on each eyelid sweetly doe  
appeare.

An hundred Graces as in shade to sit  
(1-4)

From the poet's point of view, the lady's sweet smile cannot be justly compared to any earthly object. The word "Graces" is capitalized, an indication that the speaker intends a meaning beyond that of human grace. It could have holy implications, a grace that brings peace to the mind and spirit of the poet. Just like the title of the sonnet sequence, which is pluralised meaning little loves, here grace is also in the plural form as it is granted gradually in little bits. Later on, in the sonnet the lady's smile, with its balm-like quality is compared to mild sunshine after a violent storm: "...the fayre sunshine in somers day: / that when a dreadfull storme away is flit" (6-7). She brings delight to his "storme beaten hart" (13); as he meditates upon her "Graces" his spirit is uplifted and he forgets his troubles.

In sonnet LXXXVIII the poet pushes away every "spark of filthy lustful fyre" (1) that may disturb the lady's repose. Instead the poet brings forth only the purest emotions when he visits her in her "bowre of rest" (7). According to Okerlund (1982) this sonnet represents "an argument between two aspects of the poet's soul – his spiritual being and his baser physicality. The speaker may be attempting to control passions which threaten the sacred purity of his love in a dialogue with self." (Okerlund, 1982,

p. 41) The poet does not acquiesce to his physical desire which would taint the purity of his love. Although the Puritans celebrate physical pleasure in marriage, they look down upon pre-marital relations.

In sonnet LXVIII the poet combines religion with sensuality. His images echo those of the Song of Solomon in which the language of love “was considered in Spenser’s day to be an allegory of the union between Christ and his church” (Cavill, 2007). As Cavill (2007) pointed out, Spenser did not confine himself to secular sources to find images that alluded to physical intimacy. The Song of Solomon begins with “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (cited in Cavill, 2007), while in the sonnet the poet begins by stating that he found “grace” (1) in the lady’s kiss. It is arguable that this grace the poet finds in his beloved’s lips could echo God’s grace. Even this physical act of kissing is associated with his quest to be at one with Jesus Christ. His love for this lady transcends this world and transports the poet to a realm of spirituality.

Cavill (2007) argued that the image of the deer in sonnet LXVII was also taken from a holy source. Psalm 42 reads as follows: “As the hart brayeth for rivers of water, so panteth after thee O God” (cited in Cavill, 2007). He hunts after the lady just as a believer strives for God’s salvation. Johnson (1993) discussed another angle of this sonnet. Here the poet is no longer the hunter because after he has almost given up the hunt, the deer approaches him willingly:

There she beholding me with milder  
looke

Sough not to fly, but fearlesse still did  
bide

Till I in hand her yet half trembling  
tooke

And with her owne goodwill hir fymely  
tyde (9-12)

According to Johnson (1993), “the male surrenders his will to mastery, and the female surrenders her freedom”. From a Puritan perspective this situation between the two lovers is ideal in the making of a successful marriage. The man’s rule is not so forceful; he relinquishes the role of the hunter. There also has to be willing submission on the part of the woman, “as part of her obedience to Christ” (Pronk, 1997). In the preceding sonnet or the “betrothal sonnet”, the love between the poet and the lady “is synchronized with the divine love of Christ in the final outcome of reconciliation of opposites” (Wirth, 2007).

In sonnet XXII the poet speaks of the “holy season” (1) for fasting and praying. Here the poet wants to build a temple for his “sweet Saynt” in his mind and his thoughts will perform sacred ceremonies like priests. He will sacrifice his heart on the temple’s altar where it will burn with the paradoxically “pure and chaste desire” (12). Their love is associated to a number of religious references in this sonnet to further reinforce the sacred quality of their Puritan love for one another.

Another overtly religious sonnet is LXVIII or “Easter”. From Cavill’s (2007) viewpoint this sonnet alludes to Jesus’ love and suffering for humanity. The

poet describes “the sacred love of God for those he created” (Cavill, 2007). He sanctifies their love once again by creating a link between it and Christ, as love is the lesson to learn from Christ’s sacrifice for mankind. A Puritan couple should always direct their love for each other towards their love for Christ. Johnson (1993) stated that suffering for both lady and lover becomes an opportunity rather than a sacrifice. Through acceptance of deprivation, both of them achieved a reward that proved to be of greater value than individual triumph.

As the wedding approaches, the lady begins to harbour some doubts in sonnet LXV. The two lovers have reached a degree of mutuality wherein the lady “is liberated enough to express her very human doubts about marriage” (Johnson, 1993). The speaker assures her that her fears are unnecessary because she is not really losing her freedom as much as she is gaining two liberties. The poem here expresses some Puritan ideals in marriage such as “loyal loue” (10), “simple truth” (11), and “good will” (11). The lady’s willing acquiescence to her future husband is necessary for the marriage to work; matrimony for the lady is likened to a pleasant bird cage: “the gentle birde feels no captivity / within her cage, but sings and feeds her fill” (7-8). The “spotless pleasure” (14) echoes the Puritan celebration of physical enjoyment made pure in marriage.

In the final sonnet in *Amoretti* the two lovers experience a period of separation that is unbearable to the poet. He compares himself to a Culver, or “dove” (Verma,

2001) that sits on a branch singing her songs and awaiting her absent mate. The speaker mourns the parting of his beloved, for his world is sad and dismal without her. He uses the word “mourn” to allude to his dead life in the absence of her glorious light. Nothing can bring surcease to his sorrows except “her owne ioyous sight, whose sweet aspect both God and man can move” (10). Once again, the lady is attributed with larger than life dimensions; she not only brings joy to people on earth, but she also moves God in his heaven with her divine beauty. The Puritan idea of companionability makes a strong presence in this sonnet. The lady “appears again as the absence presence; her voice is not heard but recognized as the ‘sweet aspect’ that alone can ‘move’ the lover” (Johnson, 1993). Even in her absence the speaker always carries her essence in his heart for solace.

Spenser continues the theme of cruel love in the attached Anacreontics, a series of epigrams with which the poet concludes the *Amoretti* sequence. These poems which feature Cupid and the goddess of love perpetuate the lover’s suffering in *Amoretti* and foresee the holy union in *Epithalamion*. As Silvia (1989) pointed out, the Anacreontics should be viewed “as the finale of the *Amoretti*, rather than the *Epithalamion* (which is treated more as the fulfilment of the courtship process)”. Seen in such a manner the Anacreontics revealed “the ambivalent and inconclusive nature of love” (Silvia, 1989); consequently, these epigrams “recapitulate the conflicts in the sonnet sequence and anticipate the epithalamial resolution” (Silvia, 1989).

Although these epigrams convey the painful woes of love as an experience, they also portray “love as a gift of grace” and a “benevolent, healing experience” (Silvia, 1989). The episodic narrative that unfolds in the epigrammatic sequence reinforces the never-ending paradoxical cycle of cruel / joyous love. The poet-lover draws parallels between himself and Cupid as both the victim and victimizer in the experience of love. In the first epigram it is Cupid who entices the lover to chase after the bee, grab it forcefully and get stung; in a similar fashion when the speaker tries to impose his passion on his beloved, he receives a sharp dose of suffering from his lady. Ironically, in epigram four Cupid is the victim of his own playful ways when he hastily grabs a bee in order to ‘subdue’ it and ends up inflicted with the bee’s sting. Cupid’s mother, Venus, the goddess of love takes pity on her wounded son and heals him only after she gently advises him to have mercy on the lovers whom he has inflicted with anguish in the past for his own merriment. Cupid heeds his mother’s words albeit temporarily only to resume his mischievous ways after healing from his wounds. The speaker concludes the final stanza in the fourth epigram wondering about the inconclusive nature of love until he remembers the lesson to be learned from the story of Cupid and the bee. Love is both an all-consuming and a healing experience; the poet-lover must not insist upon reciprocity from his beloved. Only when he can wholly submit to the encounter with Cupid’s arrow can he gain the mutuality of affection that he so desperately seeks.

In this epigrammatic narrative, Spenser’s combines religious and mythological imagery revealing his espousal of Christian and Renaissance values. Such a combination of Christian and Classical images come to light most prominently in the portrayal of Venus and Cupid. Miola (1980) remarked that

it is Venus’ divinity, her compatibility with the notion of a loving Christian God, that sparks the comparison between her meeting with Cupid and the sinner’s reconciliation with God. The striking similarity between this simile and the epigram’s reunion of cupid and Venus points to the latter’s allegorical significance. In both passages Venus acts as a symbol of divine power whose primary function is the healing of spiritual wounds and the reinstatement of sinners to a life of grace. (p. 63)

The image of Venus holding Cupid in her lap brings to mind “the iconography of the Madonna and child” (Silvia, 1984). Interestingly enough, the poet’s beloved is associated with Venus in epigram three when Cupid mistakes the speaker’s lady for the goddess of love. In the final line of this epigram, the poet lover is not surprised that Cupid has made such a mistake, stating that “many haue err’d in this beauty” (8). Once again, the lady’s divine beauty is emphasized; by meditating upon his lady’s unsurmountable beauty, the poet is both afflicted and healed by her powers.

Platonism comes to the fore here anew; love appears as the means for the lover to transcend the material, physical world through the meditation upon the idealized beauty and virtue of the lady who is the object of this platonic love. Likewise, the Puritan strives for God's grace through the contemplation of the beauty of divine ideals.

Spenser's use of sensual imagery and Classical allusions alongside his portrayal of Puritan suffering for heavenly light in the *Amoretti* and the *Anacreontics* reflect the poet's amalgamation of his Puritan faith with the essence of the Renaissance in his works. Spenser's Puritanism is one which is qualified by the Elizabethan spirit of humanism and the rebirth of Classicism. Padelford (1916) summed up the two disparate dimensions of Spenser's character best in the following statement: "Spenser was in the main an admirable exponent of the Renaissance, however contradictory to its spirit his theological professions may have been". Thus, Spenser embraces the Renaissance revival of Classical scholarship and philosophy in addition to the Elizabethan emphasis on humanistic values, but all within the spiritual milieu of his Christian faith.

### **Holy Puritanical Union in *Epithalamion***

After this period of separation, the two lovers are united in holy matrimony in the poem *Epithalamion*. This poem celebrates the "marriage of mind, body and spirit" (Johnson, 1993), a phrase that resonates with Puritan ideals in marriage. This exemplifies Spenser's model of the sacred relationship

between man and woman and the appropriate kind of love relationship between them. The images in this marriage ceremony display various Episcopalian components; Spenser's employment of such imagery illustrates his position, even during his strongest espousal of Puritan beliefs in his early days, as a "moderate Episcopalian Puritan" (Hume, 1984). In fact, in her analysis of Spenser's *The Sheperdes Calender*, Hume (1984) noted that "Spenser supported episcopacy as did many Puritans; but his management of the argument in the *Calender* ... indicates that he participated during those years [the 1570s] in the zealous Puritan search for reform of ecclesiastical abuses". Although it is hard for critics to ascertain whether Spenser retained his Puritan faith during the 1590s when he wrote the *Amoretti* sequence and the marriage song, most agree that he remained a devout Protestant throughout his life.

Cavill (2007) marked that Spenser utilized the Classical form in *Epithalamion* to suit his Protestant beliefs. Even though the poem contains numerous mythological references, it still focuses in the end on "a Christian marriage service before an altar attended by a 'holy priest' (224) and choirs of angels singing alleluia (240)". The poet rejoices in describing the marriage bed, but as a means to produce children: 'that may raise a large posterity' (417).

The Protestant notions of marriage as pointed out by Cavill concur with the Puritan sacredness in marriage; nevertheless, the poet's emphasis on the joys of the marital chamber express the Puritans' emphasis on the physical pleasures of matrimony.

Procreation is of course the Catholic and the Protestant purpose in marriage while physical pleasure is regarded with disapproval. The Puritans on the other hand have a healthier attitude to the joy that comes with this holy union. This positive attitude manifests itself in *Epithalamion* in the marital chamber scene. The poet welcomes the night after the marriage ceremony and says he does not want anything to disturb “The safety of our joy” (325). Lane (2000) stated that:

[T]he Puritans revealed themselves as intensely a people of desire. In fact, this evocation of passion was what made necessary the severe cautions against the danger of misdirected longing that we have come to regard as characteristically Puritan. The excesses of natural theology (the pantheistic identification of God with nature) and the peril of disordered affections were perennial concerns in the preaching of Puritan pulpits. In a spirituality where temporal beauty was recognized as an unpolished mirror of eternal Beauty, there was always the danger of lingering at the enjoyment of the one without pressing on to ecstatic union with the other... This theme of “desiring God” had appeared so often in Puritan sermons that desire itself had become a dominant way of articulating the knowledge of God, the surest test of human character, the authenticity of

spiritual experience generally, and the very nature of prayer. (pp. 374-375)

The repetition of the word “woods” in the refrain “That all the woods may answer and your Eccho ring” can also have some Puritan relevance. For Puritans all forms of worship don’t necessarily have to be performed in the church. In this poem, the marriage ceremony takes place in the church, but its joy resonates in the birdsong of the surrounding woods. Lay (2016) explained that Spenser dedicated a major part of his marriage poem, namely twelve stanzas, “to the anticipation, preparation and procession” of the wedding but only one stanza for the ceremony itself” thereby revealing a certain “hesitation surrounding the marriage service”. Due to the fact that marriage was no longer considered a sacrament in the Anglican Church, “chastity within the marriage had...surpassed the virtues of perpetual virginity”. The wedding goes beyond the confines of the church; it is no longer a religious ritual performed in church but rather a spiritual and physical union between two individuals whose love harmonises the couple both with natural beauty and God’s grace.

Many of the *Amoretti* lady’s divine attributes are praised here once again, but her pride has been converted to humility. Even the heavenly light in her eyes has been toned down to modesty; she is too humble to lift her eyes up: “Her modest eyes to behold...Ne dare to lift her countenance too bold, / But blush to heare her prayes sung

so loud" (159, 162-3). According to Klein (1992) in her article "Protestant Marriage and the Revision of Petrarchan Loving in Spenser's *Amoretti*", this poem traces the poet's success in the "fashioning of the lady from a proud mistress into a humble bride who exhibits the richly suggestive "proud humility" [306] that characterises a virtuous Christian wife". In addition to this traditional image of the humble protestant bride is her celestial independence. The lady here retains the Puritan wife's spiritual equality with her husband that the Puritans emphasize (Pavlick, 1993; Pronk, 1997). She joins the poet in their mutual flight towards heavenly light through their holy union and pure love. Spenser celebrates the beauty of her spirit and "The inward beauty of her lively spright" (186) just as he did in the preceding sonnet sequence as well as her chastity. Her love is pure and free of any "base affections" (196). Throughout the poem, in the events preceding the ceremony, within the ceremony itself and in the privacy of the "brydall bourse" (299), the poet sings the praise of his lady's angel-like physical and spiritual beauty. Selincourt (1961) in *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser* summed up this nuptial song as a celebration of the "magic union of the lover's passion with deep religious feeling, of a free and ardent joy with a deep and tender reverence". This combination of the religious and the sensual is characteristic of the whole sonnet sequence as well as the marriage poem. The merging of elements that are at once of Classical,

mythological, Anglican, Protestant and Puritan significance in varying degrees illustrates furthermore the hybridized spirit of Spenser as a man and a poet; he truly embodies the values of Christian theology and Renaissance humanism.

## CONCLUSION

In these two works Spenser succeeds in the intermingling of his religious beliefs with Petrarchan conventions on one hand, and the Platonic ladder of love on the other. By placing the lady high above upon a pedestal as is the norm in Petrarchan poetry, Spenser parallels her lofty status to the sought-after heavenly light in Platonism and the striven for salvation in God's Grace. During the sequence of *Amoretti*, Spenser gradually transforms the lady in the sonnets from a fragmented form to an angelic figure to a voiced being with an identity. Spenser, by that, shifts in his sonnets from the portrayal of the transcendent ideal to the phenomenal everyday life. All throughout the *Amoretti* sequence as well as in *Epithalamion*, the poet exhibits numerous Puritan tendencies, especially with regard to marriage, suffering, spirituality and Grace.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The two authors express their gratitude to the English departments at their two respective universities (Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan and The World Islamic Science and Education University) for all their support and encouragement.



## REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. (Ed.). (2000). *The Norton anthology of English literature* (Vol. 1, 7<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, USA: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Cavill, P., & Warder, H. (2007). *The Christian tradition in English literature*. Grand Rapids, USA: Zondervan.
- Crawforth, H. (2013). *Etymology and the invention of English in early modern literature*. New York, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, A. (1984). *Edmund Spenser: Protestant poet*. London, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, W. C. (1993). Gendering fashioning and the dynamics of mutuality in Spenser's *Amoretti*. *English Studies*, 6, 503-519.
- Johnson, J. T. (2005). Marriage as Covenant in early protestant thought: Its development and implications. In J. W. Junior & E. Ellison (Eds.), *Covenant marriage in comparative perspective* (pp. 124-152). Grand Rapids, USA: William B. Eerdmans publishing Company.
- Johnson, K. (2009). *Love, lust and literature in the late sixteenth century* (Master's thesis, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, USA). Retrieved March 12, 2017, from <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>
- Klein, L. M. (1992). Protestant marriage and the revision of Petrarchan loving in Spenser's *Amoretti*. *Spenser Studies*, 10, 109-38.
- Lane, B. C. (2000). Two schools of desire: Nature and marriage in seventeenth-century Puritanism. *Church History*, 2, 372-402.
- Lay, J. (2016). *Beyond the cloister. Catholic Englishwomen and early modern literary culture*. Philadelphia, USA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lethbridge, J. B. (2006). Introduction. In J. B. Lethbridge (Ed.). *Edmund Spenser new and renewed directions*. Massachusetts, USA: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp.
- Miola, R. S. (1980). Spenser's Anacreontics: A mythological metaphor. *Studies in Philology*, 77, 50-66.
- Neuman, J. (2016). Puritanism and Modernist novels: From moral character to the ethical self. *English Literature in Transition*, 3, 399-402.
- Okerlund, A. N. (1982). The rhetoric of love: Voice in the *Amoretti* and the *Song and Sonnets*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68, 37-46.
- Oser, L. (2014). Almost a golden world: Sidney, Spenser, and puritan conflict in Bradstreet's 'contemplations'. *The Free Library*. Retrieved July 4, 2018, from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/ALMOST+A+GOLDEN+WORLD%3a+SIDNEY%2c+SPENSER%2c+AND+PURITAN+CONFLICT+IN...-a066681247>
- Padelford, F. M. (1916). Spenser and the spirit of puritanism. *Modern Philology*, 14, 31-44.
- Pavlick, J. (1993). *The puritans and women: Equality under God* (Master's thesis), Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA.
- Pronk, C. (1997). Puritan Christianity. Retrieved March 10, 2017, from <http://www.frcna.org/Messenger/Archive.asp?Issue=199709&Article=1086013355>
- Renwick, W. L. (1933). *Edmund Spenser: An essay on renaissance poetry*. London, England: Edward Arnold & Co.
- Rogers, W. (1976). Narcissus in *Amoretti XXXV*. *American Notes and Queries*, 15, 18-20.
- Sanchez, M. E. (2012). Modesty or comeliness: The predicament of reform theology in Spenser's *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*. *Renascence*, 1, 5-24.

- Selincourt, E. D. (1961). Introduction. In J. C. Smith & E. D. Selincourt (Eds.), *The poetical works of Edmund Spenser*. London, England: Oxford University Press.
- Silvia, E. D. (1989). *Dramatic unity in Spenser's Amoretti, Anacreontics and Fowre Hymnes* (Master's thesis), McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Spenser, E. (1595). *Amoretti*. Retrieved March 9, 2017, from <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/amoretti.html>
- Spenser, E. (2000). *Epithalamion*. In M. H. Abrams (Ed.), *The Norton anthology of English literature* (Vol. 1, 7th ed.). New York, USA: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Tolman, A. H. (1918). The relation of Spenser and Harvey to puritanism. *Modern Philology*, 15, 549-564.
- Van Gelder, H. A. E. (1961). *The two reformations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: A study of the religious aspects and consequences of renaissance and humanism*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Verma, C. D. (2001). *Amoretti (A detailed consideration of the poem with text)*. New Delhi, India: Aarti Book Center.
- Wirth, A. (2007). *Spenser's sporting muse: The playful use of imagery in relation to the metamorphosis of the lover in Spenser's Amoretti* (Master's thesis), University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.