

Amoretti LXXV: One Day I Wrote her Name

BY EDMUND SPENSER

Introduction to One day I wrote her name

One day I wrote her name is the 75th sonnet of Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence and epithalamion which was published in 1595 by William Ponsonby in London under the title, "Amoretti and Epithalamion. Written not long since by Edmund Spenser." The title Amoretti itself means "little notes" or "little cupids". The poem is said to have been written on Spenser's love affair and eventual marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. There are 89 sonnets in the sequence and in writing this sonnet sequence Spenser was observing a Renaissance convention which had grown popular in England during the prior decade. Thomas Watson's Hecatompithia had appeared in 1582 and had been followed by among others John Southern's Pandora (1584), Samuel Daniel's Delia (1592), Barnabe Barnes's Parthenophil and Parthenophe (1593), Thomas Lodge's Phillis (1593), Giles Fletcher the Elder's Ucia (1593), Michael Drayton's Ideas Mirrour (1594), Henry Constable's Diana (1594), and William Percy's Coelia (1594), while the anonymous Zepheria had also appeared in 1594 and Spenser, in Amoretti 8, shows some knowledge of Fulke Greville's Caelica, even though Caelica was published later.

Petrarch's *Rime* had established the mode in which poems employ a number of what were to become conventional topoi, all of which in their discrete way explain the poet's difficulties in the face of various facets of love. In Amoretti Spenser often uses the established topoi, for his sequence imitates in its own way the traditions of Petrarchan courtship and its associated Neo-Platonic conceits. His debt to Petrarchist exempla and to the unifying tendencies of continental philosophies is always clear. Yet suggestions of his continental predecessors, Tasso, Ariosto, du Bellay, Desportes, Marot, Caza, and Serafino, would have been more evident in Amoretti to his contemporaries than they are to the modern reader. Spenser seldom imbues a sonnet with a clear Neo-Platonic cast (Amoretti 45 and 88 are possible exceptions) and generally accepts Neo-Platonic doctrines as conceits to be exploited. His essentially syncretic cast of mind shapes these conceits as non-specific rather than explicit imitations.

Introduction of the sonnet form in English Literature:

The sonnet is unique among poetic forms in Western literature in that it has retained its appeal for major poets for five centuries. The form seems to have originated in the 13th century among the Sicilian school of court poets, who were influenced by the love poetry of Provençal troubadours. From there it spread to Tuscany, where it reached its highest expression in the 14th century in the poems of Petrarch. His Canzoniere—a sequence of poems including 317 sonnets, addressed to his idealized beloved, Laura—established and perfected the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet, which remains one of the two principal sonnet forms, as well as the one most widely used. The other major form is the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet.

The Petrarchan sonnet characteristically treats its theme in two parts. The first eight lines, the octave, state a problem, ask a question, or express an emotional tension. The last six lines, the sestet, resolve the problem, answer the question, or relieve the tension. The octave is rhymed abbaabba. The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies; it may be cdecde, cdccdc, or cdedce. The Petrarchan sonnet became a major influence on European poetry. It soon became naturalized in Spain, Portugal, and France and was introduced to Poland, whence it spread to other Slavic literatures. In most cases the form was adapted to the staple metre of the language—e.g., the alexandrine (12-syllable iambic line) in France and iambic pentameter in English.

The sonnet was introduced to England, along with other Italian verse forms, by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, in the 16th century. The new forms precipitated the great Elizabethan flowering of lyric poetry, and the period marks the peak of the sonnet's English popularity. In the course of adapting the Italian form to a language less rich in rhymes, the Elizabethans gradually arrived at the distinctive English sonnet, which is composed of three quatrains, each having an independent rhyme scheme, and is ended with a rhymed couplet.

A note on Elizabethan Sonnets:

The typical Elizabethan use of the sonnet was in a sequence of love poems in the manner of Petrarch. Although each sonnet was an independent poem, partly conventional in content and partly self-revelatory, the sequence had the added interest of providing something of a narrative development. Among the notable Elizabethan sequences are Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirrour* (1594), and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1591). The last-named work uses a common variant of the sonnet (known as Spenserian) that follows the English quatrain and couplet pattern but resembles the Italian in using a linked rhyme scheme: ababbcbccdcdee. Perhaps the greatest of all sonnet sequences is Shakespeare's, addressed to a young man and a "dark lady." In these sonnets the supposed love story is of less interest than the underlying reflections on time and art, growth and decay, and fame and fortune.

Like Dante, Petrarch idealises love, but he brings love down from Dante's celestial plane to earthly plane. Though love is unrequited in Petrarch, his lover manifests the idealized courtly love attitude towards his beloved. He conceives the lover to be the humble servant of the often cruel, fair lady, wounded by a glance of her eyes, tempest tossed in the sea of despair when his love is not reciprocated.

In the Middle Ages men had to repress their passion because it was considered a sin. So men mortified their flesh. With the Renaissance came in humanism which inculcated in men's mind an intense love of beauty celestial and earthly, pure and sensuous. Everything connected with man and his physical and spiritual enjoyment was in consonance with the Renaissance spirit. As Petrarch was nurtured with Renaissance humanism, his sonnets sing of the glory of human love and exploit the whole gamut of human passions. At times, the lover is perched on the height of rapture and at times plunged into the sea of deep distress. Though love in Petrarch is human, it is never grossly physical. Love in Petrarchan sonnets begins at the physical plane, soon rises aloft from the physical to celestial plane.

In its subsequent development the sonnet was to depart even further from themes of love. By the time John Donne wrote his religious sonnets (c. 1610) and Milton wrote sonnets on political and religious subjects or on personal themes such as his blindness (i.e., "When I consider how my light is spent"), the sonnet had been extended to embrace nearly all the subjects of poetry.

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The sonnet's opening combines a possible occasion of writing in the sand only to be washed away with further references to water, washing, naming and eternal life which fit well with the liturgical topoi of the First Sunday after Easter, Sunday 7 April, known as Low Sunday or Dominica, which acknowledges the neophytes who, having been washed in the waters of Baptism and received their names, are required no longer to wear their white vestments. As Ovid brings the *Metamorphoses* to a conclusion with the conceit of poetic immortality, so Amoretti 75 seemingly was intended temporarily to bring the sequence to a close.

Text

One day I wrote her name¹ upon the strand²,
But came the waves and washed³ it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay⁴,
A mortal thing so to immortalize;
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eke my name be wiped out likewise."
"Not so," (quod I) "let baser things devise
To die in dust⁶, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your vertues rare shall eternize⁵,
And in the heavens write your glorious name⁷:
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue⁸,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

Commentary

1. I wrote her name: this has a ref to the day's Epistle, 1 John 5.13, "These things haue I written vnto you, that beleue in the Name of the Sonne of God," (*These things have I written to you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God.*)

2. strand: sandy sea beach; strictly, the stretch of shore that lies between the tide-mark.
3. washed: assonates with references to water in Epistle 1 John 5.6 & 8, including the sidenote to verse 6, "Ttie water . . . declare that we haue our sinnes washed by him".
4. Vayne man ... in vaine assay: reflecting the imaginings of Acts 4.25, "Why did . . . the people imagine vaine things?" [essay- attempt](#)
5. live by fame: I . . . eternize: The court of Elizabeth I is full of "knights of noble name, / Thatcouet in th'immortallbooke of fame / To be eternized" {FQ l.x.59.4-6).

Fame is a topic of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Met.15.878, we find "perqueomniaeaculafama" ("and time without all end / ... My life shall euerlastingly bee lengthened still by fame"). Spenser used the same conceit of poetic immortality in this poem.

6. die in dust: Compare morning prayer Ps. 35.5, "Let them be as the dust before the wynde."

7. My verse your vertues rare shall eternize, / And in the heavens write your glorious name: this is quite suggestive of the purpose of John's writing, 1 John 5.13, "These things haue I written vnto you, that beleue in the Name of the Sonne of God, that ye may knowe that ye haue eternal life." Likewise Acts 4.12, "for among men there is giuen none other name vnderheauen." And Ovid writes in Met. 15.876, "nomenqueeritindelibilenomen" (Golding, 15.990-91, "And all the world shall neuer / Be able for too quench my name").

rare: 1. uncommon; 2. excellent.

8. shall all the world subdue: An exact rendering of Ovid, Met. 15.877, "domitisterris" (= the subdued world), and in contrast to 1 John 5.4 (and passim), "all that is borne of God, ouercometh the worlde."

9. later life renew: probably the "heauenlie" life which the betrothed will finally enjoy.

Summary of the poem

One Day I Wrote Her Name upon the Strand is a Spenserian sonnet. The Spenserian sonnet is broken up into four parts, with a couplet acting as an answer to the poem with the rhyming pattern of ababccdefefgg. The poet speaks of his endeavour to immortalize the woman he loves, by writing her name in the sand.

This sonnet seems to be about the author's attempts to immortalize his wife or the love of his life. Spenser starts the poem with a quatrain recalling an incident that could have happened any summer day at the seaside. He writes his love's name in the sand at the beach, but the ocean's waves wipe it away, just as time will destroy all manmade things. The next quatrain describes the woman's reaction to the man's charming attempt to immortalize her. She claims that the man's attempts were in vain and that no mortal being can be immortalized due to the cruelty of time. The next quatrain represents a turning point in the poem and the author reveals that his wife will be eternally remembered in his poems and his verse. The final couplet at the end, "Where whenas Death shall all the world subdue, Out love shall live, and later life renew," summarizes the theme of the poem by comparing the eternal quality of love and death to the brevity of life and humanity.

During the Elizabethan age, love sonnets traditionally told the story of men in love with unattainable women. However, Spenser's sonnets from his sonnet sequence "Amoretti" disobey the general pessimism and give an optimistic look at love. In fact, his "Sonnet 75" shows such optimism that his persona, after a realization in the poem, claims that his love will be immortal through verse. "Sonnet 75" stands as a successful sonnet because it presents an optimistic view on love through graphic imagery and a realistic story. Spenser takes the success of the work a step further because he uses form, rhyme, personification, and alliteration to mirror the imagery and story of his sonnet.

Spenser uses a very harmonious rhythm and an iambic pentameter to compose a pleasing poetry so as to immortalize his beloved. This sonnet discusses about the transitory world and the ways to make the love undying. Spenser is successful at bringing two contradictory forms of poetry in a same place with a magnificent harmony. The poem is lyrical and dramatic at the same time. A beautiful lyric is maintained in the poem and the dramatic situation is created by the dialogue between the speaker and his beloved.