

EDMUND SPENSER'S BESTIARY IN THE *AMORETTI* (1595)

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Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti* (1595), has long been considered a minor work, and has rarely been discussed in terms of its gender politics. This essay shows, through a careful reading of an interrelated group of sonnets, how Spenser examines the extreme difficulty of rewriting the traditional male perspective of Petrarchan poetry so as to advance towards a recognition of the beloved's subjectivity. The essay concentrates on Spenser's manipulation of a series of topical figures of speech, based on animal motifs, which are used in the poems to represent the female addressee, and thus to define her from a male viewpoint. Spenser's clever modification of his sources (Pliny the Elder and Petrarch, especially) always emphasises the speaker's projection of his own fears towards the figure of the beloved, until the moment of role-reversal occurring in sonnet 67, when the expression of her own will leads the speaker to overcome the shortcomings of his perspective and rhetoric. The article also presents evidence for some hitherto unidentified Latin sources used by Spenser in some of the sonnets.

Fifteen years ago, in the context of an article on sexual strategies in *The Faerie Queene*, Lauren Silberman stated that late twentieth-century men and women had "still much to learn from Edmund Spenser's willingness and ability to be genuinely revisionary" (Silberman 1987: 260). Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Silberman's comment retains its validity, yet it is ironic that the revisionist, anti-Petrarchan stance adopted by Spenser should have been examined more extensively in relation to the *Faerie Queene* than in the context of his own sequence in the Petrarchan mode, the *Amoretti* (1595). Perhaps its reputation as a minor and occasional work, celebrating the poet's second marriage in 1595, has contributed to this relative critical neglect; apart from brief commentaries by major Spenserians such as Richard Rambuss or Gary Waller (Rambuss 1993: 64-57 and 100-01, Waller 1994: 132-39), it has been left relatively untouched by the theoretical revision of Spenser's work in the last decade (see, most notably, Andrew Hadfield's critical reader, *Edmund Spenser*, 1997, which manages to ignore it completely). It is to be hoped that Professor Kenneth J. Larsen's excellent edition of *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (Larsen 1997) and Ilona Bell's detailed discussion of the sequence as a dialogue of courtship in the final pages of her *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* (Bell 1998: 152-84) will be seen in the future as having helped to

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reverse this trend, yet the critical power of the collection as a commentary on ideological constructions, and especially on the construction of the male gaze, remains largely unexplored.

My intention in the following pages is to contribute to this necessary re-evaluation by showing how, in the *Amoretti*, Spenser carries out a serious critique of the male viewpoint presupposed by Petrarchism while acknowledging the speaker's own affinity with it, and, therefore, the enormous difficulty of re-writing that gaze so as to reach a new perspective on the female addressee. This revisionary effort is carried out, as I will try to prove, on two levels: 1) the intertextual confrontation with the dominating *topoi* of the preceding tradition, and 2) the figural relocation of the image of the beloved within the domain of the natural world, within which both speaker and addressee are locked. One of the ways in which this double process takes place is through Spenser's rewriting of a series of topical figures of speech, based on animal motifs that are applied to the beloved, and thus used to define her role from a male viewpoint. As we shall see, Spenser does not reduce the conflictive patterns of Petrarchism through the use of this figural bestiary: on the contrary, he rewrites these commonplaces so as to heighten the disruptive, threatening connotations that each of them has, and thus to enhance the sense of danger to the psyche (in Aristotelian terms, the "danger to the soul") that the experience of love entails, while showing the solipsistic tendencies of the traditional poetic perspective. Having acknowledged these tendencies, it will be possible to replace them by the new model of gender roles offered by the Protestant marriage, which is celebrated in the closing group of *Amoretti* and in the subsequent *Epithalamion*. The *Epithalamion* itself shall not be discussed here: I will concentrate exclusively on key aspects of the conflictive process that leads to it through the *Amoretti*, and, by focusing on several specific sonnets, I also hope to point towards a few of their textual sources that have, to my knowledge, been unnoticed until now.

Recent critical developments have certainly acknowledged the definitive relativisation of Petrarchism that is carried out in Spenser's sonnets, their questioning of the traditional paradigm that had dominated the previous sonnet sequences, and their abandonment of that paradigm for an essentially Protestant world-view. As Kenneth Larsen puts it in the introduction to his edition of the collection, "by hurrying his lines onward to create a semblance of a Petrarchist mode, Spenser continually thwarts any conventional expectation. The sonnets' brief Petrarchan allusions allow little secure indebtedness and threaten to undercut the very tradition that Spenser overtly espouses" (Larsen 1997: 23). It is necessary, however, to complement with several specifications the general perspective on the sexual politics of the *Amoretti* that emerges from Larsen's introduction. While it is undeniable that Spenser tends to smooth out some of the most problematic or conflictive aspects of Petrarchism, it is also true that such a task is no easy feat: it necessarily involves a confrontation with a textual past that spans more than two hundred years, and thus implies a serious and difficult process of reinterpretation and rewriting. This process has occasionally been seen as involving, in contrast with the *Faerie Queene*, a late "general turning in his (Spenser's) poetry towards the self-

centered and ... a personal reserve" (Rambuss 1995: 102). Yet, as Ilona Bell has shown in detail, the result of such a process is not as "self-centered" as the very genre of the sonnet sequence might suggest, for, at the end of the collection, the solitary self of the previous Petrarchan tradition has been abandoned in favour of a public, highly ritualised union of speaker and addressee that deliberately adds itself "to the larger cultural debate between poetry and courtship" (Bell 1988: 184). What still needs to be investigated further is the extent to which the misogynistic, obsessive aspects of Petrarchism have really been superseded in the text of the sonnets, and at what cost.

It is necessary to take into account that, by the time Spenser began writing the *Amoretti*, he had already confronted and questioned the essential dynamics of that tradition; such a questioning had taken place in the third book of the *Faerie Queene*, composed between 1591 and 1592. It was evident there that the situational patterns and the language of the Petrarchan system could not simply be inherited or adapted from the continental tradition. In spite of the fact that these dynamics had proved to be quite adequate, and to have a political function, in the Elizabethan court (and even though they had already been useful to Spenser himself when addressing and representing the Queen), they proved to be far too ambiguous and problematic for the Puritan *ethos* informing the epic. This is most evidently visible in the depiction of the House of Busirane in Book III, where male adoration of a female figure (Amoret) is shown as having the immediate effect of controlling and silencing her. Amoret is not only imprisoned by Busirane: she is also imprisoned by his allegorical masques and pageants on love, by his perceptions of her and his desire to interpret her. The archetypal Petrarchan situation is recognised here as a theatre of cruelty, where male authority tries to gain control over the female beloved through the imposition of a whole system of preconceived imagery. But this is an attempt that is doomed to failure: the lover (Busirane) is trapped in the contemplation of his own passion, and does not reach towards transcendental perception, remaining locked in the world of representations and appearances. In book II of *The Faerie Queene*, the Petrarchan situational pattern is not taken as something superseded or easily deproblematized: on the contrary, it is recognised as a powerful discourse on love, one that is potentially dangerous and disabling, but which at the same time enacts some of the key moral dangers that the experience of love entails. Chief among these dangers are narcissism, self-delusion and, especially, the cancellation of epistemological or moral progress. This latter is perhaps the most important of all, for it implies the danger of constraining the *intellectus*, and hence the rational soul, to the realm of physical nature and mutability. In contrast, it is Amoret's rejection of her role as passive and distant mistress that will affirm her integrity and virtue, and, finally, it is the sacramental and institutional framing of her marriage to Scudamore in Book III that will ensure the legitimacy of her sexuality. The quintessential Petrarchan experience is thus done away with in Spenser's epic, but not before its disquieting force and the dangers it exemplifies are acknowledged and confronted.

To be sure, it was almost impossible for Spenser to approach this subject-matter otherwise: he was revising a tradition which, from its earlier continental

examples, had presented love as discourse not simply laden with, but created by, inner conflict and discomfort. His immediate English predecessors were radical Protestants like Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville, who had put a major emphasis on the moral and psychological dangers of such a discomfort: the beloved, after all, could root the speaker to material reality, preventing him from turning to metaphysical truth, and "in soul up to our country move"(Sidney 1987: 31), as Sidney phrased it in *Astrophil and Stella* 5. To be sure, this aspect had been a recurring theme of Petrarchism from its very inception. On the one hand, Laura was seen in Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* as a personification of poetry and intellectual perfection (and hence the basis of the author's own poetic fame, emblematised in the Laurel of Apollo to which her name referred), and, on the other hand, as a human being firmly rooted in the materiality of earth, just as the laurel itself, and therefore preventing the poet from rising to a higher form of contemplation. From the perspective of a late sixteenth-century Protestant poet, this central ambivalence of the female addressee could not but be maintained: the sonnet sequences written in the Puritan circles in the 1580s, while granting a relative independence to their female characters (most obviously in the case of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*) identified them as a major source of psychic unrest, making the speaker forget, in Astrophil's own words, that "on earth we are but pilgrims made", and that the human flesh "of true beauty can be but a shade" (Sidney 1987: 31): in Sidney's sequence, the speaker is not even granted the final possibility of religious conversion that often closed the continental sequences. In the late Elizabethan contexts, the central drama of the Petrarchan tradition was, if anything, enhanced and intensified by the ideological pressure of radical Protestantism.

The *Amoretti* could reframe this poetic tradition and reduce the psychological conflict it articulated, but only to the extent that they could also carry out a strenuous revision of its previously existing topics, and endow them with a new significance. The sonnets involving a direct use of *topoi* from the humanistic and Petrarchan repertoire of animal motifs furnish an excellent standpoint from which to examine this exercise of rewriting: on the one hand, these topics are relentlessly manipulated in ways that conspicuously depart from their source or their previous uses; on the other, this manipulation is constantly brought to bear on the central problem of interpreting the role of the beloved and her place in the world of nature. In spite of the lightheartedness that recurs through the *Amoretti*, and which testifies to the poet's confidence in his persuasive capacity (and hence to his prospective marital happiness) this problem is repeatedly confronted in several sonnets with a seriousness and earnestness which have to be assumed by both speaker and audience, if the cancellation of Petrarchism and its transformation into a celebration of marriage is to occur effectively. This is achieved through a dramatic revision of its central problem: the male difficulty of perceiving the female addressee as placed within nature (the physical world, here partly invoked through the animalistic references) or as embodying a transcendent spiritual virtue.

The difficulty of transcending this conflictive paradigm is signalled early on in the sequence, in sonnet A (*Amoretti*) 20:

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In vaine I seeke and sew to her for grace,
 And doe myne humbled hart before her poure:
 The whiles her foot she in my necke doth place,
 And tread my life downe in the lowly floure.
 And yet the Lyon that is Lord of power,
 And reigneth over every beast in field,
 In his most pride disdeigneth to devoure
 The silly lambe that to his might doth yield.
 But she more cruell and more salvage wylde,
 Then either Lyon or the Lyonesse:
 Shames not to be with guitlese bloud defylde,
 But taketh glory in her cruelnesse.
 Fayrer then fayrest, let none ever say
 That ye were blooded in a yeilded pray.

This image is the first simile of predation occurring in the *Amoretti*. In his edition, professor Larsen establishes Psalms 62 and 64 among this sonnet's sources (Pss. 62.10: "In vain did seek the hurt of my soul", echoed in line 8, "Powre all your hearts before him", and Ps. 63.10: "They shall go under the earth", echoed in line 4),¹ along with famous passages from Ovid, Pliny and Erasmus providing the *topos* on the magnanimity of the lion, developed here in lines 5-12 (See Spenser 1997: 150). However, the primary debt of this sonnet is, I would suggest, to Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*, 256:

Così li affitti et stanchi spirti mei
 a poco a poco consumado sugge,
 e'n sul cor quasi fiero leon rugge
 la notte, allor quand' io posar devrei.

Thus little by little she consumes and saps my afflicted, tired
 spirit, and like a fierce lion she roars over my heart at night,
 when I ought to rest (Petrarch 1976: 419).

Petrarch's image seems straightforward enough, and does not seem to require a strong interpretive effort; yet the *topos* itself might have been charged, by the 1340s, with other connotations: this sign, in the medieval repertory of *topoi*, was endowed with another, even more popular signified. In the medieval bestiaries—for instance, in the English bestiaries compiled in 1346 and 1372, presently held in the Bodleian

¹ I am not quoting directly the Bible here, but rather K. J. Larsen's reproduction of these Psalms in his notes to the poems, which I have duly referenced later in this same paragraph. It is worth noting, however, that Larsen is using the 1560 Geneva Version of the Bible; he does so here and in later cases, which I also reference below. Since my main concern in this article is Spenser's manipulation of classical sources (especially some passages from Pliny, hitherto unnoticed by the editors of the poems), and there is only one occasion when I propose a possible biblical source (Isaiah 11: 6-8 for *Amoretti* 71, at the end of the article) I have also used the Geneva Version there, in order to maintain the same biblical basis throughout.

library in Oxford—the lion's life is seen as an extended allegory of the life of Christ. Indeed, Petrarch could be using the first Canto of Dante's *Commedia*, which uses the lion as a signifier for earthly pride, as his source here. In Spenser's A20, Petrarch's image of the lion treading on the speaker's heart is not only echoed, but made more graphic, as the "Lyon or the Lyonesse" has planted her foot not on the breast, but on the speaker's neck ("her foot she in my necke doth place/And tread my life downe in the lowly floure"). To the animal motif is thus linked the connotation of victory over a humbled foe, the lion emblematising pride (and pride, as we shall shortly see, is also the defining characteristic of the woman warrior later described in A 41). In Spenser, however, the religious reading of the image has not been entirely lost: indeed there is a clear Christian reference in A 20, although it is not centered on the lion itself. The sonnet includes a distinct mention of its victim ("the sillie lamb"); while the lion is used, as in Dante and Petrarch, as an emblem of pride, its older Christian connotations are entirely displaced onto its victim, the lamb, itself a traditional emblem of Christ. Yet, in the overall structure of the poem, the lamb is to be identified with the speaker ("her foot she in my necke doth place"); in this way, all connotations of purity and meekness are whisked away from the addressee and exclusively centered on the male speaker. Let us not lose, moreover, the slight but effective suggestion of an entirely Christian, even chaste attitude on the speaker's part: indeed his whole attempt at persuasion has to be seen strictly in accordance with Christian rule, for it leads to matrimony, while the beloved's ill-advised pride is keeping her away from it, and making his rhetoric, for the moment, ineffective.

But there are more implications at work here. Even while characterising the beloved as a "lioness", the poet is working through an extended simile, not through a metaphor; and this implies that there is not a full identification between both elements (simile and real-life referent) of the figure. On the contrary, the momentary identification between them ("She, *more* cruell and *more* salvage wylde") is made to work *against* her; she is compared to the lion described in the first two quatrains only to be distinguished from it, and that distinction only operates to her disadvantage: what she lacks is the pity and magnanimity that temper the lion's natural pride. I would suggest that Spenser is playing with another source (not indicated in Larsen's edition); a passage from Pliny's *Natural History* (VIII: 48), centered on the habits of lions:

Leoni tantum ex feris clementia in supplices; prostratis parcit, et, ubi saevit, in viros potius quam in feminas fremit, in infantes non nisi magna fame. Credit Iuba pervenire intellectum ad eos precum. (*Naturalis Historia* VIII: 48)

The lion alone of wild animals shows mercy to suppliants; it spares persons prostrated in front of it, and when raging it turns its fury on men when extremely hungry. Juba believes that the meaning of entreaties gets through to them. (Pliny the Elder 1940: 36)

The commonplace or *locus classicus* that is used here acts in strict coherence with the rhetorical strategy that I have been delineating. By citing the natural magnanimity that counterbalances the lion's pride, and by then accusing the beloved of lacking that magnanimity, the poem once more stresses the *unnatural* quality of her attitude, and this places her outside of the boundaries of interpretation. She cannot be correctly read or understood, as she is situated, even through similes, outside the rules of the natural world: not human, but not fitting clearly in nature either. The classical source is used, in humanist fashion, to define further the object that is being described, but the *locus classicus* that defines the lion is also turned against the being that is compared to the lion. Through an exercise of textual manipulation, both the metaphor and its classical source work *against* the beloved: she appears as a predating force, but she lacks the natural qualities of that force. In archetypal Petrarchan fashion, she appears at once inside and outside nature, while the male speaker's inability to fit her into a clear category generates (at this point at least) his anxiety and, hence, his poetic voice.

It is in the specific situation of the female addressee within the world of nature that her unreadability, and the threat she is consequently described as posing, are more clearly defined. Another key example here, and one which continues and completes the strategy begun in A20, through a similar animalistic motif, is to be found in A 38:

Arion, when through tempests cruel wracke,
He forth was thrown into the greedy seas:
Through the sweet musick which his harp did make
Allured a Dolphin him from death to ease.
But my rude musick, which was wont to please
Some dainty eares, cannot with any skill
The dreadfull tempest of her wrath appease,
Nor move the Dolphin from her stubborne will,
But in her pride she doth persever still,
All carelesse how my life for her decayes.

The source here is a passage from the first book of Ovid's *Fasti*, in which the fate of Arion, a Persian musician, is described: the dolphin seduced by his music and who readily saves him from death, had become an emblematic animal already in the late Middle Ages, when, as the tradition of the English bestiaries proves, it had already acquired the status of a beast of good omen. Quite evidently, the musical art of Arion establishes in the sonnet a parallel between him and the speaker; the parallel which should logically follow, however, between the beloved and the dolphin, is far from being so obvious and definite. To begin with, there is a slight alteration of the source here: the reader of Ovid would immediately recognise the "tempests cruel wracke" of the Spenserian text as an innovation. There is no storm in the Latin text: in *Fasti* 2.79, Arion is presented as being attacked by some fellow sailors and thrown by them into the sea:

Gubernator dextricto constiti ense
 Ceteramque armate conscia turba manu ...
 (Arion) Protinus in medias ornatus desilit undas:
 Spargitur impulsæ caerulea puppis aqua.
 Inde, fide maius, tergo delphina recurvo
 Se memorant oneri supposuisse novo;
 Ille sedens citaramque tenet pretiumque vehendi
 Cantat et aequoras carmine mulcet aquas. (*Fasti* II, 99-100, 111-17)

The helmsman took his stand with a drawn sword, and the rest of the conspiring gang had weapons in their hands.... With all his finery on, (Arion) leaped down into the waves: the refluxing water splashed the azure poop. Thereupon they say (it sounds past credence) that a dolphin did submit its arched back to that unusual weight: seated there, Arion grasped his lyre and paid his fare in song, and with his chant he charmed the ocean waves. (Ovid 1931: 62)

There is no human aggression against Arion in A 38: in Spenser's sonnet, it is the very tempest that throws him into the sea; and the *prosopopeia* in the second line ("the greedy seas") together with the one in the first line, clearly establishes Nature itself as his antagonist. The image of the Dolphin is immediately woven into the poem in strict accordance with Ovid: it is the "sweet musick" made by the poet as his last farewell to life that attracts his saviour to him. Of course the dolphin is compared to the beloved, who cannot be allured by the speaker's own "rude musick", but it must be noticed that, in a second and more interesting turn, the beloved is also identified with the sea itself ("the dreadful tempest of her wrath appeased"). There can be no easy salvation here: the comparison with Arion is brought in so as to point out how his plight differs from the speaker's situation.

Now let us observe carefully how Spenser's rhetorical strategy is organised here, and what it is telling us about the female presence that is defined through it. While the original passage from Ovid could easily be rendered as implying communication between the human subject and nature, Spenser rewrites it as signifying a lack of communication between the subject and the female addressee: the "Dolphin" will not come to his rescue. But what is the cause, in the first place, of his distress? It is actually her: in Spenser's version of the story, it is an altered sea, not a human conspiracy, that has endangered Arion, and that sea is directly identified with the beloved. She appears, then, both as destroyer and as potential rescuer: she is the force that has thrown him into danger (like the tempest endangering Arion) and then she is represented, in the midst of this distress, as his only possible source of relief (the dolphin): a relief that is then withdrawn from him. Spenser's rendering of Ovid presents Arion, and through him, the speaker, as a victim of natural forces who is nevertheless rescued by another force of nature. By placing the female addressee both as a destructive force of nature and as a potential sympathetic element within it, the speaker is making all the figural elements of the poem (Arion excluded) converge upon her. On the one hand he is displacing the

responsibility of his situation on to her, who appears as the cause of it; on the other, she is made to appear, simultaneously, as the only possible means of escape. She is both tempest and dolphin; both destruction and possible salvation. In this way she is being doubly linked to nature; and her being metaphorically identified with the sea itself has the effect of casting darker connotations on the image of the dolphin itself, that does not perform its rescuing mission. There is in fact no strict difference between the dolphin and the sea: as metaphors, they both have the same referent; and because of this, the dolphin can be seen as no more than an aspect of the sea itself, and therefore as an extension of its destructive force. Hence the final couplet:

Chose rather to be prayd for dooing good,
Then to be blamed for spilling guiltlesse blood.

The figural bloodletting of the last line completes the representation of the female addressee, who is now being imagined as a deadly force in terms that evoke feral predation ("blamed for spilling guiltlesse blood"). And this leads us back to A20, which had likewise culminated in figural spilling of the speaker's blood; and in both cases, such a spilling is the result of a deviation from the natural rules. As long as the female figure is seen by the male voice as altering the appointed order, as enigmatically unnatural as the dolphin moved by cruelty or as the lion deprived of its proverbial piety, the speaker will remain threatened by a figural "death" within that altered world. Unable to fit his vision of her in the order of postlapsarian nature, he is threatened by a dislocation of his own self: A 20 and A 38 culminate with imagined representations of his destruction within an environment that does not correspond to its traditional representation. The effect of love, in the first part of *Amoretti*, is the impossibility of reconciling the self to nature, caused by the impossibility of perceiving the female beloved as part of it.

This serious difficulty in interpreting the nature of the female addressee becomes even more pressing in A 41:

Is it her nature or is it her will,
To be so cruell to an humbled foe?
If nature, then she may it mend with skill:
If will, then she at will may will forgoe.
But if her nature and her will be so,
That she will plague the man that loves her most:
And take delight t' encrease a wretches woe,
Then all her natures goodly gifts are lost.

These lines take up the theme of "cruelty on a humbled foe" discussed in A 20; however, instead of being likened to a lion, the female figure appears here as triumphant in the field of battle, having conquered the speaker, who now begins to question the very possibility of interpreting her correctly. The "woman warrior" or amazon is doubtless one of the images that are most threatening for the doubtful self of the poet, all too willing to encapsulate his experience within clear, compact boundaries. The very possession of *voluntas* (the will) places humanity above

nature; indeed its very use involves the modification of purely instinctive habits, which would be ruled instead by the *sensitiva*, so that education may dominate pure instinct ("If nature, she may mend it with skill"); on the other hand, there is no superior capacity than *voluntas*, and it is at its command that all the other faculties of the soul work ("If will, she at will may will forgoe"). Things are not so simple, though: for the will itself may, in the postlapsarian world, be corrupted; and in this case the addressee's very nature, including both her instinct (the *vis sensitiva*) and her corrupted *voluntas*, would imply the loss of all the gifts and qualities that *also* constitute her being for the speaker. And indeed this is the contradiction expressed in the second quatrain ("But if her nature and her will be so...Then all her natures goodly gifts are lost."). Should the image of the woman as merciless warrior, or as merciless lion, truly *correspond* to her nature; should the speaker's metaphor be an adequate expression of reality, then he would be confronting a self-negating nature; an actual, living impossibility in the person of the female addressee. The woman warrior, just like the merciless lion, is an adequate image of a nature at odds with itself, which seems to violate its own rules, leaving the speaker unable to make sense of it, and of his own place in it. Hence the supplication in the final couplet, where the desire to escape from this realm of contradictory appearances is most evident:

O fayrest fayre, let never it be named,
That so fayre beauty was so fowly shamed.

The speaker is trying to define a space in which his own selfhood might find a coherent order and, at the same time, to suggest a concept of the beloved (virtuous in soul and body) that would adequately embody such an order. The female addressee remains, however, as the central yet unreadable signifier within the masculine perspective, and the speaker remains trapped in an untrustworthy reality, where essence and appearances seem to be at odds with each other: the canonical Petrarchan situation is dramatically enacted once more with its traditional mysogynistic bent, and it is directly caused by the seeming difficulty of interpreting the figure of the beloved in the postlapsarian world of mutability.

The imagined violence that we have observed in these sonnets is far from being an occasional element in the collection: on the contrary, it is a recurring strategy throughout it, and one which, when examined closely, would seem to threaten seriously the project of harmonic integration between lover and beloved, self and society, which the sequence enacts. This sense of danger, which is conveyed by an active manipulation of re-reading of the classical sources behind the sonnets, shows that Spenser is taking pains to insist upon the conflictive nature of the interpretative effort that the speaker is carrying out. To be sure, Spenser's text does not require the active identification of all the sources behind it; but they would be easily identified by the members of the courtly audience which formed the core of his readership; and in these cases, the violence of the re-reading would doubtless have been recognised as a deliberate enhancement of the psychic conflict experienced by the speaker as he tries to understand and represent the beloved. This conflict, and this violence, are enhanced as similar images of predation recur again and again in later sonnets: the

topoi related to hunting and to the stalking of preys become more abundant as that first part of the sequence reaches its end (A 67), growing harsher before that key moment of role reversal. Shortly before that, the beloved has appeared once more as a destructive force, perceived in mythological terms, as in A 49 ("Let us feele th'utmost of your receltyes/ And kill with looks, as cockatrices do"). The death which this cockatrice, or basilisk, brings about is the same that has been mentioned in the final couplets of A 20 and A 38, and the same that threatens the speaker further, in A 53:

The Panther, knowing that his spotted hyde
Doth please all beasts, but that his looks them fray,
Within a bush his dreadfull head doth hide,
To let them gaze whylest he on them may pray.
Right so my cruell fayre with me doth play,
For with the goodly semblant of her hew
She doth allure me to mine owne decay.

Once more, I would argue that the simile displayed here may be read as being directly based on a classical commonplace, not specified in Larsen's edition: that commonplace being the story of the panther, which Spenser is transcribing, it seems to me, from another fragment of Pliny's *Natural History* (this time from VIII: 62):

Ferunt odore earum mire sollicitariquadripedes cunctas, sed capitas torvitate terri; quamobrem occultato eo, reliqua dulcedine invitatas corripunt (Naturalis Historia XXII: 62)

It is said that all four-footed animals are wonderfully attracted by their smell, but frightened by the savage appearance of their head; for which reason they catch them by hiding their head, enticing them to approach by their other attractions (Pliny the Elder 1940: 49).

Spenser's rendering of this commonplace obviously adds a moralistic reading to it, and one which is another anti-feminist commonplace in itself: the female beauty as a trap or a snare which causes man to lose his inner peace. On this occasion, a religious reading would initially seem out of the question; yet the final lines of the sonnet seem to lead us in another, surprising direction.

Great shame it is, thing so divine in view,
Made for to be the worlds most ornament
To make the bayte her gazers to embrew:
Good shames to be to ill an instrument.
But mercy doth with beautie best agree,
As in theyr maker ye them best may see.

The religious implications of the sonnet come not from its central image itself, but from what is being suggested as its opposite: not the deceptive beauty of the panther, but the transcendent beauty of God. The apparent discordance that the

speaker perceives between the internal and the external nature of the beloved, between her body and her will, is the cause of his confusion, and the rhetorical strategy of the poem is to argue in favor of a concordance between both ("Good shames to be to ill an instrument/But mercy doth with beautie agree"). If such an objective is possible, then physical beauty itself might be best regarded not as a deadly "bait", but as "divine" in itself; the biblical reference here to Psalm 76:4 ("Thou art more bright and puissant than the mountains of prey", referenced by K. J. Larsen in Spenser 1997: 182-83), in which God is identified with wild nature, confirms this very possibility. This identification of beauty with God leads to a re-reading of the beloved's physicality itself, which might be vindicated, and experienced without moral danger, only with a change in her *voluntas*. The body might be seen, in purely Neo-Platonic fashion, as the recipient of the highest good—the rational soul—and as a reality that has to be dignified as befits its role as such; we would thus be progressing from a Petrarchan, misogynistic archetype towards the Neo-Platonic ideal. But this progression is not possible yet: as long as the beloved's *voluntas* remains inaccessible to the speaker, it will prevent such a reinterpretation of the body, which in his perspective will remain entrapped in the world of mutability, endangering him once more, and bringing him again close to the figural destruction that is evoked again, in far less ambiguous terms, in A 56:

Fayre ye be sure, but cruell and unkind,
As is a Tygre that with greedinese
Hunts after bloud, when he by chance doth find
A feeble beast, doth felly him oppresse.

Such an image is far less ambiguous than those of the dolphin (A38) or the lion (A20), and even than that of the basilisk (A49): the beloved is now fully characterised as a predator, and at this point, the cumulative force of the various metaphors through which she has been represented is enough to prevent the reader from taking this one as a mere commonplace. While it obviously completes the discourse that has cast her in such a role, it can do so now without even having to modify too much its source, which in this case is, once more, Petrarch (*Rime* 152).

Of course, the definitive moment of change, and the double promise of a cancellation of anxiety and a joyful integration between subject (speaker) and object (beloved) comes in the crucial and widely commented *Amoretti* 67. If, at the moment of confronting it again, we take into account the significance of the various figures or *sedes naturae* which we have been commenting, and which have contributed to defining the addressee's role until this moment, we will be able to re-read this key sonnet so as to obtain a renewed understanding of its significance:

Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace
Seeing the game from him escapt away,
Sits downe to rest him in some shady place,
With panting hounds beguiléd of their pray:
So after long pursuit and vaine assay,
When I all weary had the chance forsoke,

The gentle deare returnd the selfe-same way,
 Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.
 There she beholding me with mylder looke,
 Sought not to fly, but fearelesse still did bide:
 Till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,
 And with her owne goodwill her fymely tyde.
 Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld,
 So goodly wonne with her owne will beguyld.

The sonnet begins as an extended simile ("*Lyke* as a huntsman..."), stressing from the beginning the figural status of the situation described, which calls our attention to the other images that have been used up to now to describe and define the experience of love. And thus the contrast with these images becomes all the more apparent: the images of predation or of hunting that we have encountered have always cast the speaker as the prey, the victim of the hunt; in this case that situation is reversed, and the speaker is now the hunter, while the beloved is cast as the prey. Such a reversal coincides with the sudden anthropomorphic bent of the tropes: the speaker is now representing himself as a *human* hunter. Certainly, such a humanisation is essential to the whole content of the poem: what is being narrated here is, in fact, the re-situation of the speaker himself within his vital environment, and the recovery of his full human dignity as a sign of his new understanding of that environment.

But even while the speaker's self-representation is acquiring a new richness and dignity, that of the beloved is undergoing significant changes, well beyond the reversal of her own position from predator to prey. The initial simile is now turning—second quatrain—into an allegorical image, with the beloved metaphorically assimilated, beyond explicit comparison, to the deer gently returning to the brook. Now this deer is, in itself, fully charged with a significative force that goes well beyond its role as a signifier for the beloved: for it was a recurring motif not only in secular poetry, but even more usually in predication, with a biblical basis, as professor Larsen points out, in Proverbs 5.18-19 ("rejoyce with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hinde and pleasant roe: let her breasts satisfie thee at all times..."), see Spenser 1997: 199) and, as Anne Lake Prescott has indicated, in the Song of Solomon 2.9 ("My wellbeloved is like a roe, or a yong hart", see Prescott 1993: 811). The Patristic tradition had interpreted these deer as figures of Christ; but in Spenser's sonnet this tradition seems to be mixed with the other, secular signification of the deer as emblem of the female figure. This other interpretation does not belong, strictly speaking, to the Christian tradition: it is, rather, a debt to the codes of courtly love, where the deer is to be identified with the female body, or acts as a metaphor for it, from the early twelfth-century texts of Chrétien de Troyes (most notably in *Erec*, but also in *Perceval*) or Marie de France (in *Lai de Guigemar*) to Petrarch himself, in the Rime 190 of the *Canzoniere*. I would suggest, moreover, the underlying presence of yet another source behind Spenser's representation of the deer's docility: the commonplace assumption of its tendency to be charmed by the shepherd's pipes and as animals prone to surprise, coming from Pliny's *Natural*

History VIII, 114 (and we shall shortly see how the notion of surprise is used to great effect in the final couplet of this crucial sonnet):

Mulcentur fistula pastorali et cantu.... Cetrero animal simplex et omnium rerum miraculo stupens in tantumut equo aut bucua accedente (*Naturalis Historia*, VIII: 114).

They can be charmed by a shepherd's pipe and song.... In other respects the deer is a simple animal, and stupefied by surprise at everything. (Pliny the Elder 1940: 83)

Surely Spenser did not expect the reader to keep all these referents in mind when confronting the sonnet; yet as the initial comparison begins to turn into an allegory, with its corresponding cluster of interrelated metaphors (speaker as hunter, beloved as deer, the brook as an image of love and fertility) it becomes clear that he intends us to integrate his vision of Christ into it. The eighth line specifies that the deer returns to the hunter "with her owne goodwill"; the love of the lady can only be obtained if her own will freely decides that she has to give it. And this is precisely the concept of God's love that pervades the whole of the Reformation tradition in its diverse forms; perhaps the only element of doctrine that is at the basis of all forms of Protestant theology: it is God who chooses the object of his love, which cannot be won by merit or "good works". The poem works, then, both as a Christian allegory and as a love sonnet expressing the change of feeling of the female figure; the allegory has to be read, simultaneously, in human and in religious terms. No doubt it had to be that way: the history of Petrarchan poetry before Spenser had endowed love itself with such a strong spiritual force, it had blurred so much the barriers between it and religious devotion, that a radical alteration in that love—here a shift in the attitude of the beloved towards the poet—also had to be expressed through an allegory of God's love.

The speaker's reaction to this change also establishes the most significant difference in relation to the previous situational pattern, and also in relation to one of the classical sources being used here. As we have seen, according to Pliny deer are especially simple, and predisposed to surprise, yet here once more there is an inversion of roles, as it is the hunter/speaker who is surprised by his prey's behaviour. His amazement quietly fills the final couplet, accepting this joyful change without questioning it:

Strange thing me seemd to see a beast so wyld,
So goodly wonne with her owne will beguyld.

How are we to interpret the sensation of "strangeness" which the speaker seems to feel now? If we look retrospectively towards the figures we have been examining, the significance of this reaction becomes clear: from a Christian perspective, it is not strange in itself that the deer should come by its own will, but it is certainly so for the speaker, who perceives it from a Petrarchan perspective. What Spenser is making evident here is the limitation of the speaker's perception, which still projects

upon the beloved the preconceptions (about her "wildness", about her absolute distance from him) that he has inherited from his poetic paradigm. The sense of "strangeness" bears witness to the radical shift away from the traditional situation and to the superseding of the psychological confusion of Petrarchism; it is created, precisely, by the figural violence and the anxieties of desire that have preceded this moment of calm mutuality. A new reciprocity between the lovers and a lighter, more convivial atmosphere are now possible, but only because the tensions and fears implied by Petrarchism have been fully rehearsed and confronted, and can finally be left behind.

The final group of sonnets (68-88) involves a much more moderate use of the imagery of nature; and it is in the repetition of some motifs that we have already encountered that we will find the most explicit evidence of the new, definitely post-Petrarchan situation. We are in the relatively unexplored domain of a love that is shared and that will be fulfilled: it is only now that the shift to an integration of vernacular poetry and a Protestant world-view is taking place, love itself being sanctioned by the religious perspective of the speaker. From the disordered universe that he had presented, we now come towards a nature that is in continual transformation, that cannot be perfect, but which at least is coherently ordered. As a consequence, the imagery does not require from the reader the interpretive efforts that were needed earlier on: it is not surprising that the minor sub-genre of the *blazon*, the separate praise of each of the parts of the woman's body, should resurface in this last part. But let us observe how, this time, the beloved is not seen as different from nature or existing outside of it: on the contrary, where earlier on in the sequence no flowers or precious minerals could seem adequate terms of comparison for the speaker's view of her (as in sonnets A 9 or A 26), she can now be, in A 81, suggestively compared to them:

Fayre is my love, when her fayre golden haeres,
With the loose wynd ye waving chance to marke:
Fayre when the rose in her red cheekes appears,
Or in her eyes the fyre of love does sparkle...

The female figure appears as part of this postlapsarian natural world, her body being fully integrated in it, and enjoyed by the speaker as part of it. But, most importantly for our purposes, the imagery of predation reappears as well, in one last occasion, in this final section: sonnet A 71 recovers the image of the spider's web, which provides an excellent example to bring our discussion to a close. For it is interesting to see how the roles of predator and prey have been reversed here:

I joy to see how in your drawn work,
Your selfe unto the Bee ye doe compare;
And me unto the Spyder that doth lurke,
In close awayt to catch her unaware.

As Professor Larsen adequately indicates, "the net's *locus classicus* was Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 4.170-ff, where Venus and her lover are imprisoned by a net or

snare-*retiaque et laqueos*—like to a spider's web" (Spenser 1997: 204). But it is especially important here to observe how this figure works in the context of those we have been discussing up to now. Most of the metaphors we have examined managed, by identifying the beloved as a dangerous predator (lion, dolphin, panther, tiger, basilisk), to enhance the connotations of anxiety that the speaker's reading of her implied. A re-interpretation of the classical source is likewise present here: but its modification is brought about through a definitely Christian viewpoint, as the final couplet makes evident:

And all thenceforth eternall peace shall bee,
Betweene the Spyder and the gentle Bee.

The image from Ovid has been rewritten into a vision of harmony which seems almost prelapsarian, but which in fact has to be read within the context of the lovers' union after A67. If we consider the Christian overtones of that union, and also the fact that this particular sonnet celebrates the future union of the prey and its predator (here a spider, but previously a lion, a tiger, a cockatrice) it is impossible not to hear, in the prophetic tone of its closing couplet ("Thenceforth eternall peace shall bee..."), an echo that is more transcendent than that of its obvious classical source. I would propose that such an echo comes from Isaiah 11.6-8: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kide....The suckling childe shall play in the hole of the asp, and the weaned childe shall put his hand in the cockatrice's den" (Geneva Version; 1969: 598). This passage is not directly woven into the couplet, but it is certainly suggested by its phrasing, and by the fact that the new situation between the lovers must indeed bring with it a reminder of the earlier images of the female addressee as predator. Here, in contrast, the Christian perspective of the speaker allows him to avoid the implications of violence and psychological unrest that his previous readings of the beloved had projected onto her. Now she is imagined, alongside himself, in an idealised natural environment, fully integrated in it and devoid of danger: deproblematised, in fact, and finally readable in terms of the Protestant concept of marriage.

It is necessary to conclude that this final sense of mutuality (opening the way for the *Epithalamion*) has come at no small cost. It has been made possible only by a rigorous confrontation with the psychological crisis entailed by Petrarchism: by the detailed re-enactment and subsequent overcoming of that crisis. Spenser, moreover, has enhanced the intensity of this process through a series of *topoi* or images of animal predation, and by manipulating his sources for these *topoi* (Pliny and Ovid, especially) so as to show how the speaker projects towards the beloved his own sense of anxiety and interpretative confusion. Part of the revolutionary strength of the collection comes from its leading the reader to acknowledge the displacement of guilt towards the female beloved, and the victimisation of the male speaker, that the Petrarchan paradigm necessarily involves. Such a victimisation, and such a displacement of guilt, have to be interrupted if any sentimental progress has to occur: the key sonnet A67, and the change of perspective taking place at the end of the collection, show that the speaker's anxiety was the result of his misguided

attempt to understand reality (and the female addressee) through the preconceptions and situational patterns of Petrarchism.

The research carried out in this article also shows that, in the composition of the *Amoretti*, Spenser made a more substantial use of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* (and especially of its Book VIII) than has been generally acknowledged; in my reading of the poems I have also tried to reference a few more of their sources that, to my knowledge, had been hitherto unnoticed (Petrarch's *Rime* 256 for A 20; Isaiah 11.6-8 for A 81). Spenser did not use this source material merely as learned quotation, but cleverly put it at the service of a strenuous critique of the ideology implicit in the sonnet sequence tradition, and of the shortcomings of the male perspective presupposed by it. To the extent that they enact that critique, the *Amoretti* retain their full power as a text that forces us to question, even today, the many ways in which the male gaze is ideologically and textually constructed.

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