

Critical appreciation of the poem 'One day I wrote her name...'

(Sonnet No. 75) by Edmund Spenser.

Spenser, the great poet of a great age of poetry, sings in an exquisite delightful strain the unique gift of art to confer immortality on mortal being in his sonnet no. 75 ('One day I wrote her name...') from his sonnet sequence Amoretti. Spenser in the sonnets of Amoretti has escaped altogether from the fetters of current convention and given free play to his poetic imagination. The sonnet, addressed to Elizabeth Boyle whom Spenser married afterwards, marks both the thematical idealism and technical excellence of the sonnet series.

The present sonnet deals with the concept which was particularly popular with the sonneteers of the French La Pleiades group. Poets not merely achieve immortality through their verse, but have the power to confer immortality on those whom their poetry is addressed to. This idea was cultivated by Ovid among the Greeks and Horace and Pindar among the Italians. The French sonneteers Ronsard and his disciples had developed it with a complacency that gave it new life. From France it spread to Elizabethan England where it was quickly welcome. Sir Philip Sidney in his Apologie for Poetrie wrote that it was the common habit of poets "to tell you that they will make you immortal by their verses". "Men of great calling", wrote Nashe, "take it of merit to have their names eternized by poets".

The adoption of the conceit, that is, the triumph of love through the triumphant vindication of the power of art by Spenser is simply brilliant. Leaving aside Shakespeare, no sonneteer repeated the poetic vaunt with more dramatic vein and with greater emphasis as did Spenser. The repeated onslaught of waves made the poet's attempt to engrave the name of the beloved on the strand futile. Despite the mild chastisement of the beloved, the poet-lover asserts by the depth of his love:

"Not so", quod I, "let baser things devize

To die in dust, but you shall live by fame

My verse your virtues rare shall eternize
And in the heavens write your glorious name”.

Elsewhere in the Amoretti, Spenser declares in the same vein:

This verse that never shall expire...
Fair be no longer proud of that shall perish
But that which shall you make immortal cherish.

Through all such passages Spenser speaks in the voice of Ronsard, the French poet, who wrote before him that his lute would eternize his patron’s name. Shakespeare also talks of immortality achieved with the help of verse:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
So long lives this and this gives love to thee.

The tone of the poem is free from remorse, frustration and restlessness, and full of contentment and happiness. Less intimate or sincere than Sidney, less impulsive or idealistic than Shakespeare, Spenser’s sonnets as the present one shows, are rich with the magic touch of personality, the grace of imagery and the melody of diction. Whether he addresses spring to go to his lady love and trim her for love (Sonnet no. 4) or writes her name upon the strand (Sonnet no. 75), his emotion is single – the emotion of love.

In the use of metre, Spenser follows a line of his own devising. His poetry diverges alike from the ordinary English and foreign models. His sonnets, as it is evident in the sonnet no. 75, are mostly formed of three quatrains, alternatively rhymed and a concluding stanza. Spenser follows the foreign fashion in restricting the total number of rhymes in a single sonnet to five instead of extending to seven, as we find in normal English pattern. The melodist with an ear turned to music, has made the last lines of the first and second quatrains rhymed respectively with the first lines of the second and third quatrains – ab ab bc bc cd cd – a brilliant example of the perfection of interlaced rhyme structure.