The Problem of Spenser's Sonnets

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THE PROBLEM OF SPENSER'S SONNETS.

THE received accounts of Spenser's life tell us that he was born in 1552; that, in consequence perhaps of an unrequited passion for the 'Rosalind' of his *Shepherd's Calendar*, he remained a bachelor till he was over forty; that shortly after his return to Ireland in 1591 he fell in love with a lady there, by name Elizabeth and now identified as Elizabeth Boyle, married her on 11 June, 1594, after a courtship of some eighteen months, and celebrated his wooing in the *Amoretti* and his wedding in the *Epithalamion*.

In a recent number of the *Modern Language Review* this little idyll has been criticised with great acuteness and learning by Mr Percy Long. He has shown conclusively on how slight a basis of objective fact the whole neat edifice rests. That the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, after being entered together on the Stationers' Register in November, 1594, were published together in 1595—this is the sole objective fact: the rest is inference and assumption.

The construction of the idyll proceeds thus. When Ponsonby published the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* in 1595, he described them as 'written not long since by Edmund Spenser.' It is inferred that the wedding which the *Epithalamion* celebrates took place in the preceding year. And the allusion in the *Epithalamion* itself to 'Barnaby the bright' gives 11 June, 1594, as the actual wedding-day. It is next assumed that the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* are addressed to the same person; and since the *Amoretti* begin just before a New Year and last well into the next year but one, it is inferred that Spenser's courtship covered the years 1592-3-4. Finally since in Sonnet lx, written just before the New Year of 1594, the poet uses language which implies that he was then forty-one years old, we arrive by subtraction at 1552 as the year of his birth.

Mr Long attacks the received view at its weakest point, the link namely between the *Amoretti* and the *Epithalamion*. If he can sever

that link, the *Amoretti* are, so to speak, at his mercy. And a closer scrutiny seems to show that no such link exists. Nay, the epilogue to the *Epithalamion*—

Song! made in lieu of many ornaments,
With which my love should duly have been deckt—

seems to prove that the *Amoretti* and the *Epithalamion* cannot be addressed to the same lady. For how could Spenser speak of the latter poem as 'made in lieu of many ornaments' if he had already adorned his bride with such a string of poetic jewels as the *Amoretti*?

The *Amoretti*, Mr Long concludes, were not addressed to Spenser's wife. To whom then were they addressed? Mr Long replies that they were addressed to Lady Elizabeth Carey; that they are not a genuine record of Spenser's wooing at all, but merely one of those complimentary sonnet-sequences, conventional pieces of knight-service, which were in vogue at the time.

Mr Long's theory grows more and more upon us as he reviews the relations of Spenser to Lady Carey. She was one of the daughters of Sir John Spenser of Althorpe. She was the eldest of three sisters—the two others being Lady Strange and Lady Compton and Mountegle—with whom Spenser claimed kindred, and (like Goldsmith's spendthrift) 'had his claim allowed'; to all of whom he dedicated poems in the *Complaints* volume of 1591; and all of whom he celebrated in *Colin Clout* under the names of Phyllis, Charillis and Amaryllis. But while Spenser thus paid court to all three sisters, he singled out Lady Carey for special devotion. Charillis is praised at much greater length and with much greater ardour than either of her sisters; and the name Charillis, says Mr Long, is an anagram for Eliz. Carey. Again, the dedication of *Muiopotmos* to Lady Carey is couched in warmer terms than either the dedication of the *Tears of the Muses* to Lady Strange or of *Prosopopoia* to Lady Compton. Finally, Spenser paid Lady Carey a compliment which he paid neither to her sisters nor to any other lady 'in especial' save only the Countess of Pembroke (Sidney's sister)—he inscribed to her one of the Dedicatory Sonnets appended to the first instalment of the *Faerie Queene*. This inscription marked him out, in the language of the day, as her 'servant.'

Now in this Dedicatory Sonnet the poet promises, when time permits, to display his good will 'in ampler wise.' How did he make good this promise? Not in *Muiopotmos*, which is but an airy trifle, and in any case contains no praise of any lady. He made it good, says Mr Long, in the *Amoretti* and in the *Faerie Queene*, VI, x.

There is nothing improbable in all this so far. It is not at all unlikely that Spenser, while still heart-whole, might pay a conventional courtship to Lady Carey; nor even that he might do so when he had been some years married. But it is not so easy to believe that he could have conducted an imaginary courtship with one lady at the very time when he was really courting another, and then have published the poetic records of both affairs in one volume. Yet this is what we must believe, if Spenser was married in 1594. For the *Amoretti*, as published, cannot be shifted off the years 1592–3–4, by reason of the reference in Sonnet lxxx to the completion of *six* books of the *Fuerie Queene*. For *F. Q.*, v, xi contains an allusion to Henri IV which must be later than 25 July, 1593; and though I do not press that argument (for I suspect the latter portion of *F. Q.*, v, xi to be an afterthought) it is certain (from the change that he made in the Scudamour-Amoret story) that Spenser did not begin Book IV until after the publication of Books I–III; and he cannot have finished Book VI before 1594, even if he wrote the second three books twice as fast as he had written the first three. Mr Long does not indeed use these arguments, but he would probably admit their force; he evidently feels the difficulty of allowing the real and the imaginary wooing to synchronize, and he seeks to avoid it by disputing the received date of the former. There are two reasons, he holds, for believing that Spenser was married before 1594: (1) one account says that he had five children, not four; (2) in 1603 his eldest son Sylvanus appears in a petition, and there is nothing to show that he did not act in person.

Such is Mr Long's main argument. Now it is vain to try to rehabilitate the traditional view while the epilogue to the *Epithalamion* blocks the way. I therefore give it in full:

Song! made in lieu of many ornaments,
 With which my love should duly have been dect,
 Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
 Ye would not stay your dew time to expect,
 But promist both to recompens;
 Be unto her a goodly ornament,
 And for short time an endlesse monument.

We have seen how Mr Long takes this. But I submit that to interpret 'ornaments' metaphorically deprives the sixth line of its point. A plainer, if a more prosaic, interpretation lies to hand. The Epilogue means—or might mean—simply that (for reasons unknown) the wedding had been hurried forward before the bridegroom's presents arrived from England; that he had promised to make amends to his bride both for

the lack of these presents and for the hasty wedding; and has fulfilled both promises in this poem, which is at once an ornament above rubies and (in compensation for the shortness of time allowed for the wedding preparations) a monument to all time.

If the Epilogue means—or might mean¹—no more than this, we have turned Mr Long's most formidable position, and can now lay siege to his weakest—the identification of Lady Carey with Charillis. 'Phyllis the faire is eldest of the three' (*Colin Clout*, 541): Lady Carey was the eldest of the three Spenser sisters; therefore, it should seem, Lady Carey is Phyllis. Mr Long is of course aware of this fact; he sees clearly how dangerous it is to his argument; and he tries hard to turn its point. Spenser, he thinks, may really have been mistaken as to the ages of the sisters; or he may have aimed a compliment at Lady Carey. Neither of these explanations commands one's assent. Would Spenser pay Lady Carey a rather vulgar compliment at her sister's expense? Or advertise his want of intimacy with a family that he was so proud to claim kinship with?

But if Lady Carey is *not* Charillis, the argument based on the comparative ardour of the dedication to *Muiopotmos*, and even of the dedicatory sonnet to the *Faerie Queene*, is seriously weakened.

There remains the *fact* of this dedicatory sonnet. The significance of that I admit. But no argument can be drawn from the *promise* which it contains; for precisely the same promise is made to Lady Strange in the dedication to the *Tears of the Muses*, and to Lady Compton in the dedication to *Prosopopoia*. (I may add that no such promise is made in the dedication to *Muiopotmos*; but this, as we shall see, admits of another explanation.)

I proceed to consider the two arguments by which Mr Long tries to push back the date of Spenser's marriage. The view that he had five children rests, so far as I know, upon no evidence more reliable than Ben Jonson's gossip about an infant that perished in the sack of Kilcolman, which is of a piece with the legend that Spenser died of starvation. If there be any evidence more substantial, we are still free to believe that Peregrine and Lawrence were twins. But this discussion threatens to lose seriousness.

Mr Long's second argument proves too much. For if Sylvanus was not a minor in 1603, his father must have been married by 1581. And

¹ 'Or might mean,' I say, for my argument requires no more. About the rhythm and the syntax of this Epilogue there hangs what Meredith would call 'a strong smell of something left out.'

this is impossible. For (1) the scene of the *Epithalamion* is laid at Kilcolman ('Ye Nymphes of Mulla,' St. 3), and Spenser did not reside there before 1588, probably not before 1589; (2) in *Colin Clout* (1591) Spenser is still faithful to his love for Rosalind; and (3)—which is quite conclusive—the opening of the *Epithalamion* proves it to be subsequent at least to the first instalment of the *Faerie Queene*, to *Daphnaida*, and to the *Ruines of Time*. Nor can we, after all, ignore (4) the 'written not long since' of Ponsonby. By these two sets of arguments the date of the wedding—or at least of the wedding-song—is pushed and pulled back towards 1594, and the synchronism of the real and the imaginary courtship is again on our hands.

Is there, besides this synchronism, any positive evidence that would lead us to identify the mistress of the *Amoretti* with the bride of the *Epithalamion*? There is some.

There are, first, some general correspondences, or echoes from the one poem to the other. *Epith.*, l. 14 'Helpe me mine owne loves prayes to resound' seems to echo Sonnet lxxx, 'Till then give leave to me, in pleasant mew To sport my muse, and sing my loves sweet praise'; while Sonnet xix, 7, 'That all the woods theyr ecchoes back rebounded' recalls the famous refrain of the *Epithalamion*.

These correspondences grow more numerous and striking as Spenser proceeds to descant on the appearance of his mistress. He notes the proud humility of her mien: compare *Amoretti*, xiii,

In that proud port which her so goodly graceth,
Whiles her faire face she reares up to the skie,
And to the ground her eie-lids low embaseth,
Most goodly temperature ye may descry;
Myld humblesse, mixt with awfull majesty.
For looking on the earth whence she was borne,
Her minde remembreth her mortalitie,
Whatso is fayrest shall to earth returne.
But that same lofty countenance seemes to scorne
Base thing, and thinke how she to heaven may clime;

with *Epithal.*, Stanza 1x,

Loe, where she comes along with portly pace,
Lyke Phœbe from her chamber of the East,
Arysing forth to run her mighty race,
Clad all in white, that seemes a virgin best.

Her modest eyes, abashed to behold
So many gazers as on her do stare,
Upon the lowly ground affixed are;
Ne dare lift up her countenance too bold,
But blush to heare her prayes sung so loud,
So farre from being proud.

He dwells upon the charms of her person : compare *Amoretti*, xv,

Ye tradefull Merchants, that with weary toyle,
Do seeke most pretious things to make your gain, etc.

with *Epith.*, St. x,

Tell me, ye merchants daughters, etc.

and upon the inward beauty of her character : compare the last two lines of the above-mentioned sonnet,

But that which fairest is, but few behold,
Her mind adornd with vertues manifold.

with the beginning of *Epith.*, xi,

But if ye saw that which no eyes can see,
The inward beauty of her lively spright, etc.

and the latter part of the same stanza,

There dwels sweet love, and constant chastity,
Unspotted fayth, and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour, and mild modesty ;
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And giveth lawes alone,
The which the base affections doe obey,
And yeeld theyr services unto her will ;
Ne thought of thing uncomely ever may
Thereto approach to tempt her mind to ill.

with *Amoretti*, lxxxiii,

Let not one sparke of filthy lustfull fyre
Breake out, that may her sacred peace molest ;
Ne one light glance of sensuall desyre
Attempt to work her gentle mindes unrest :
But pure affections bred in spotlesse brest,
And modest thoughts breathd from wel-tempredd sprites,
Goe visit her in her chaste bowre of rest,
Accompanyde with angelick delightes.

These parallels are too numerous, too close, too individual, to be easily ignored ; and to these may be added a comparison of *Amoretti*, lxiv with *Epith.*, St. x.

Some of the sonnets are very lover-like. It would be hard, I think, to parallel such sonnets as xv, lxiv, and lxxvi from any purely ideal sequence. And some of the later sonnets have a matter-of-fact note which is curiously convincing. After the third year has begun (Sonnet lxii) the course of true love begins to run smooth ; the poet begins to descry the happy shore (lxiii) ; he kisses his lady's lips (lxiv)—she has yielded ; in Sonnet lxv she fears to lose her liberty ; and with the advent of Spring, in Sonnet lxx, he bids her ' her selfe soone ready make To

wayt on Love amongst his lovely crew'—to be getting ready, one would take it, for the wedding.

These arguments all point us back to the traditional view. Yet I am sensible of the weight of some, at least, of Mr Long's contentions. There is the dedicatory sonnet to the *Faerie Queene*; there is the ardent dedication to *Muiopotmos*; and if Charillis is not Lady Carey, the anagram on her name is an odd coincidence. And if, for reasons already shown, I cannot accept Mr Long's view as it stands, I find difficulties scarcely less serious in accepting the traditional view as it stands. (1) The lady of the *Amoretti* seems to be above the poet in station (see especially Sonnet lxxv); of this there is no hint in the *Epithalamion*. True, the language of the *Amoretti* may on this point be merely conventional; in any case we cannot dogmatize until we know more about Elizabeth Boyle. (2) An attentive reader of the sonnets cannot but feel that they are in two different keys. Some, as I have said, are very lover-like; they sound like the natural expression of unaffected passion. And it is significant that it is precisely these sonnets that find verbal echoes in the *Epithalamion*. But between these outbursts there are stretches of comparatively tame country—occasional poems, one might call them, suggested by such unstaled incidents as the lady's smiling, or tearing up his verses, or sitting at her drawn-work, or watching him write her name upon the sand—poems in fact which might well find a place in a conventional sonnet-sequence. (3) The dates, too, present a difficulty. There are eighty-eight sonnets in all, spread over eighteen months. There are, in fact, fifty-eight to the unbroken year. Yet of the whole series no fewer than twenty fall after the second Easter. If the wedding took place on 11 June, this seems a disproportionate allowance. And (4) there is the singular ending, on which Mr Long so justly dwells. In Sonnet lxx, as we have seen, Spring has come, and is told to go to the bride and bid her make ready. Yet in Sonnet lxxxv, by which time, on the most lenient allowance, we must be hard upon the wedding, in Sonnet lxxxv we discover that some one has been slandering the poet to his mistress: in Sonnet lxxxvi he has been parted from her 'Many wearie dayes'; Sonnets lxxxvii and lxxxviii still bemoan this severance; and so the series ends. A strange ending, surely, to the record of a happy wooing; a strange prelude to the raptures of the *Epithalamion*.

Is the key to this riddle given in Sonnet lxxi? In that sonnet the poet tells how his lady in her drawn-work compares herself to the Bee, and him to 'the Spyder, that doth lurke In close awayt, to catch her

unaware.' What is this, in effect, but the theme of *Muiopotmos*? Is it fanciful to infer that the sight of Lady Carey at just such a piece of 'drawn-work' may in fact have inspired that poem? For *Muiopotmos*, unlike most of the pieces in the 1591 volume, was not an early poem. It is not so described in its dedication, as are *Virgil's Gnat* and *Prosopopoia*. It has a separate title-page, bearing date 1590. And—what has not, I think, been previously observed—it abounds in echoes from the *Faerie Queene*: ll. 28, 33 and 34, 86, 134, 165–6, 217, 356 all echo familiar lines of the *Faerie Queene*. I make no doubt that it was written in 1590.

Consider next the 'ideal time' covered by the *Amoretti*. The series begins just before a New Year, lasts through the whole year following and well into the year after that. Does not this tally closely with the actual duration of Spenser's stay in England from 1589 to 1591? He probably came to England late in November, for the *Faerie Queene* was licensed on 1 Dec. 1589. He left it, I believe in spite of the ambiguous date of *Daphnaida*, in the spring or summer of 1591.

It seems to me possible that during this stay Spenser *did* indite a series of complimentary sonnets to Lady Carey; that some misunderstanding arose between them just before his departure for Ireland, and that they afterwards had, or feigned, a quarrel¹; or, more simply, that absence soon wore out his conventional devotion; that, in either case, he presently fell genuinely in love, and used up parts of this complimentary series in addresses to her whom Prior would have called his 'real flame.'

This hypothesis, I believe, explains all that is really difficult in the ordinary view of the sonnets—the difference of station, the difference of key, the length of the series after the second Easter, and above all the singular close. For the parting which Spenser bewails would thus belong to the original series, and would, in fact, be nothing more or less than his return to Ireland. And it conserves all that is really sound in Mr Long's argumentation². It even permits us to believe that when Spenser wrote *Colin Clout* in 1591 he meant Charillis for Lady Carey, though when he published it in 1596 he juggled with the names and ages so as to transfer her praises to her sister.

¹ In two of the three copies known to me of the second (1596) edition of *F. Q.*, 1—111 this sonnet to Lady Carey was not reprinted. I mention the fact; but the huddled state of the appendicial matter in the 1596 edition forbids one to base any inference upon it.

² Mr Long himself glances, in one sentence, at the possibility of just such a *contaminatio*, but in the opposite sense; i.e., he thinks that sonnets originally written to Spenser's wife may have been incorporated in the complimentary set. But the dates seem to make this impossible.

Nor will all this seem incredible to those who know what men and poets are¹.

If I do not at present follow Mr Long into his discussion of *Faerie Queene*, vi, x, I have an excellent excuse. In a footnote to his admirable article Mr Long dangles before us an alluring promise of fuller discussion on the Sixth Book of the *Faerie Queene*. If he should do me the honour to read this paper, I would appeal to him to make good that promise forthwith. Few scholars in Britain or in America are so well qualified for a task, the neglect of which begins to be a discredit to English scholarship—the historical exegesis of the *Faerie Queene*.

J. C. SMITH.

NEWPORT, FIFE.

¹ Professor Grierson tells me that Lamartine similarly sent to his Elvire poems that had already done other duty, and that the Dutch poet Hooft in his wooing of Eleonora Hellermans made use (with a few changes) of poems which had been written for Susanna van Baerle.