

## A Short Analysis of Edmund Spenser's Amoretti LXXV

Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* is one of the greatest of the Elizabethan sonnet sequences; after [Sir Philip Sidney's \*Astrophil and Stella\*](#) (which was the first great sonnet sequence in English), it is perhaps the greatest of all. Sonnet LXXV from *Amoretti*, beginning 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand', is probably the most famous poem in the cycle, and deserves closer analysis for its innovative use of a popular conceit.

'One day I wrote her name upon the strand' addresses one of the key themes of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence: the struggle of the poet to immortalise his beloved, the woman his sonnets are written in praise of. In summary, Spenser tells us that he wrote his beloved's name on the beach one day, but the waves came in and washed the name away. He wrote his beloved's name out a second time, but again the tide came in and obliterated it, as if deliberately targeting the poet's efforts ('pains') with its destructive waves.

Spenser's beloved chastises him for his hubris and arrogance in seeking to immortalise her in this way, when she is but a woman, and only mortal. Her body will itself decay one day, much as her name has disappeared from the sand; her 'name', as in all memory of her, will be wiped out, just as her (literal) name has been erased from the shore.

But then there comes the *volta* or 'turn' which often comes at this point (the beginning of the ninth line) in a sonnet: Spenser responds to his beloved, arguing that whilst it is truer that less beautiful and fine things are mortal and will perish, someone as beautiful as she is deserves to live forever – not literally, but through lasting fame. Her name will live on thanks to his writing. My poetry, he concludes in the final four lines, will immortalise your rare qualities, and write your name in the heavens; so that in the afterlife together we will have a richer life, because I have praised your name so.

Edmund Spenser packs a great deal into the fourteen lines of the sonnet here. (The rhyme scheme, by the way, is *ababbcbccdcdee*, making this a Spenserian sonnet, a sort of halfway house between the **original Italian or Petrarchan sonnet**, with its octave and sestet, and the English or Shakespearean sonnet, which also ends with a rhyming couplet, as Spenser's does.) For as well as offering the usual conceit we find in Elizabethan sonnets – the idea of immortalising the woman's name through writing – Spenser goes on to offer what is, effectively, a sort of Early Modern answer to skywriting, whereby through writing about his beloved's virtues in verse (note how 'verse' and 'vertues' chime with each other in line 11, their sound and their sense chiming with each other), Spenser will *immortalise* her not simply by making her name survive on earth, but by imbuing her immortal soul with added value for when she is in the 'heavens'. When he and she are together in the afterlife together, their existence will be all the richer because he has praised her in his poems, making her almost divine through his verse.

There is an important biographical piece of the puzzle which helps us to make sense of Spenser's argument here. Many such courtly love poems are about a poet praising a woman he will never be with; but Spenser was writing *Amoretti*, and 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand', for Elizabeth Boyle, whom he had courted and married (*Amoretti* charts this courtship). So unlike many other sonneteers, such as Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophil with his beloved Stella, Spenser can be pretty sure that he and Elizabeth will be together in heaven.

There is something slightly odd, of course, about the fact that all these Elizabethan sonneteers talk about immortalising their beloved's name, but then fail to mention that name anywhere in their poems. It's something we raised in our analysis of **Shakespeare's sonnets**. But we know what they mean, even if such poems, in the last analysis, immortalised the poet, rather than their subject.