Desired Light: A Study of Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion*

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Abstract

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Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* has typically been read through the lens of number symbolism or as a poem enwrapped in the heights of joy. The former reading tends to locate the poem's climax at the alter, around the twelfth and thirteenth stanza; the latter, at the conclusion, the final two stanzas. While seemingly contradictory readings, this essay argues that both are essentially right. Proceeding stanza by stanza through the poem, this argument demonstrates a creative ascent in the first half, which is characterized by sunlight, vernal imagery, and spiritual love and which climaxes at the poem's middle point, and a creative descent in the second, which is characterized by night, autumnal or hibernal imagery and which climaxes in the final two stanzas. These double movements and double climaxes are best identified with each other, just as all the poems' other cyclical imagery is to be joined in union. To unify the poem's opposites—implicit in the poem's structure and its central theme of matrimony—is to enable an understanding of its primary concern of sex and the dissolution of binary thought, above all the subject-object dichotomy. The *Epithalamion*'s total vision erodes the stable barriers of identity and, in so doing, points to the central concern of all metaphorical thought.

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I

Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* may be, relative to the praise it's received, the least studied poem in English literature. The 1932 Variorum edition of Spenser is indicative of the admiration felt for the poem, but also the relatively small amount written on it until the mid-twentieth century. It seems until around that time, it was regarded as one of the great English poems—a masterpiece to stand alongside Milton's "Lycidas" or Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" or Keats' odes. Although one finds equal praise for these poems, one also finds far more critical writing. I can't entirely account for why that is—it may be that the praise inhibited rather than aided critical analysis, or it could be that literary critics in general are less interested in works of joy and comedy than pain and tragedy, or it could merely be that Spenser's declining literary 'stock' over the last century or so has dragged this poem with it. I have no systematic analysis of how often the poem is taught or read these days, but if the critical writing is any indication, the poem's reach has only receded in the last few decades.

In its own modest way, this essay seeks to rectify the dearth of criticism on the *Epithalamion*. My intent here is to read Spenser's poem in its entirety and outline or recreate—as well as possible—its imaginary structure. Perhaps part of this project is to justify the praise the poem has received (though I leave it to the reader to decide for themself how deserving it is). Many critics of taste and insight far more discerning than mine have found much in the poem, even if they never wrote about it. While the praise may have been nothing more than prejudice, it seems worth at least trying to account for the poem's power.

Before speaking about the *Epithalamion* specifically, it's worth considering what criticism has been written on the poem. Much twentieth century criticism sprang from a single, rather offhand, remark by John Erskine: "Strictly speaking, each stanza, with its own inspiration, is a song in itself, and the complete poem is a series rather than an organic whole" (189). Erskine wrote this comment in 1903, before there was any serious critical work on the poem. Many critics would subsequently take it upon themselves to prove the poem's unity. As far as I know, no critic has had much sympathy with Erskine's claim, but it deserves to be taken a bit more seriously. I use it as a starting point for my present essay. Taken in its strong sense—that this poem is really twenty-four different poems which have only some vague formal relationship to each other—Erskine's claim is indefensible. The mere repetition of a refrain suggests that there is some kind of unity to the *Epithalamion* beyond some convenience of publication. Taken, however, in a much weaker sense (the sense, I think, Erskine intended it)—that each stanza has some kind of self-contained matrix of imagery or thought, and that these modulate from one stanza to the next—Erskine's comment becomes much more intelligible. Each stanza builds up a central image, or mood concretized by a few images, and each of these images in succession helps create the poem's narrative movement. Spenser's verse invariably operates on this principle—in all of his poetry, he transitions only between stanzas, very rarely within one. Part of the reason the *Epithalamion* has produced much admiration but little criticism, it seems to me, is that it's difficult to quote anything but an entire stanza. Each line pulls you outward to the stanza, and each stanza pulls you out to the entire poem, making it difficult to fixate on detail. The best way to consider the entire poem, if we take Erskine seriously, is to proceed stanza by stanza, thinking always of the relationship between each stanza and the whole poem. This somewhat daunting task may have dissuaded critical analysis.

The two fullest accounts of the *Epithalamion* are A. Kent Hieatt's *Short Time's Endless Monument*, published in 1960, and Enid Welsford's 1967 book, *Spenser: Fowre Hymnes,*

Epithalamion: A Study of Edmund Spenser's Doctrine of Love, which reprints the *Epithalamion* and Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* with a lengthy introduction and commentary. These are the chief works I'll consider here, beginning with Hieatt.

In the first two chapters of his book, Hieatt makes a series of novel observations: first, that the twenty-four stanzas in the poem correspond to the hours of the day—supported by the fact that the hours attend the bride, an image which has no precedent; second, that the hours of light and darkness on the day of Spenser's wedding correspond to the divisions of stanzas (the first four stanzas being in darkness because the sun started to rise around five in the morning, with the sunset corresponding similarly); third, that there are 365 long lines, which suggests that the poem is concerned with annual time as well as daily time; and, fourth, that the poem is divided into two corresponding sets of twelve stanzas: 1-12 and 13-24 (so stanza 1 lines up with 13, 2 with 14, et cetera); linking stanzas in this way allows Hieatt to view the whole poem as a circle, with the imagined diameter drawn between any stanza and whatever is twelve stanzas away. Hieatt, focusing on the imagery, realized that the climax of positive imagery occurs around the halfway point, at the wedding altar. After that, the images turn increasingly demonic as the poem moves into night. The inverted-V movement of the imagery—moving from low to high to low, from night to day and again to night—led Hieatt to focus on the poem's cyclical and temporal dimension. The poem's central image in Hieatt's account is the circle—an important image, as we shall see—and around the circle he based his rigid numerological scheme, which justified itself by following the poem's imagery and finding correspondence between distant stanzas. Though he doesn't use the word, Hieatt's understanding of the relationship between images is generally typological: what image or mood is established in the first half of the poem is, in the corresponding stanza, revealed more fully in the second half. The description of the bride's beauty in the tenth stanza, for example, finds its antitype in the prayer for progeny and blessed conception—as Hieatt puts is, "the use to which this body is to be put" (105)—in the twenty-second. What is latent in the first half of the poem is revealed in the second half. The image, or type, created in each of the first twelve stanzas finds its realization, or anti-type, in the final twelve. While the typological relationship between images can't be dismissed entirely (and I will continue to use the language), the rigidity of Hieatt's scheme leaves many connections far from persuasive. I don't find it a compelling move, for example, to link the fifth stanza to the seventeenth on the sole evidence that while the former evokes Spring—the month of May—the latter mentions the goddess Maia, for whom the month is named. While there may be some connection between the images, it must be considered independently of the stanza number in which those images appear.

Many critics in the wake of Hieatt would take to matching stanzas together in increasingly complicated ways. Few critics would offer their scheme as a strict revision to Hieatt's, and would usually praise the poem for its capacity to have within it two—or more—stanza-matching-schemes. I don't think the cynic is wrong to point out that when one poem has enough different organizational patterns attributed to it, the patterns themselves start to look more like impositions than something inherent in the poem. Although originally an attempt to prove the poem's unity, the stanza-matching tends to have the effect of carving the poem up in a manner far more dramatically than Erskine ever did. Whatever structural unity the stanza-pairing establishes can be found only by cutting the poem in half and piecing stanzas together in a sequence very different from the one published.

Enid Welsford would reach much the same conclusion in her book, which includes an appendix that effectively suggests so many possible stanza matches as to entirely undermine any

point to the exercise. While Welsford doesn't entirely refute Hieatt's numerological scheme, she notes that it doesn't appear on the poem's surface, and that whatever meaning Hieatt's findings might have, they must be subordinated to what lies plain. Welsford is skeptical of Hieatt's emphasis on circular imagery and of his emphasis on time; the poem's point, she claims, is not cyclical time, but eternal love. Whatever relevance time or natural cycles hold in the poem, Welsford argues, it is only to subordinate them to poetry and love:

> The movement of *Epithalamion* is not that of a round dance, but of a procession that proceeds onwards and upwards until it passes beyond our range of vision. On the other hand, Spenser does suggest a means whereby temporal mutability may be defeated even in this life, but it is not by procreation or seasonal renewal, it is by poetry. Both the first and the last stanzas state explicitly that the bridegroom is thinking of himself as also a poet. Elizabethan poets never tired of reminding their patrons or their mistresses that they could confer immortality upon them and that, unlike stone or brass, words could be shaped into an 'endlesse monument.' (201)

Welsford suggests, contra Hieatt's vision of cyclical imagery, an "onward and upward" trajectory to the poem. Things only improve as the poem moves closer and closer to the wedding bed before ending in some kind of cosmic ecstasy. Although the day, and the ceremony at the altar is holy, the night is even holier, since it's there that the true union of husband and bride occurs. Welsford includes the poem in an edition of the *Fowre Hymnes*, in an attempt to articulate Spenser's doctrine of love.

While Welsford confronts Hieatt in two appendices, the real benefit of Welsford's volume is in the introduction and footnotes, where she situates the *Epithalamion* in its generic context and helps one understand the many obscure aspects of the poem. I've relied on her notes heavily in my own examination. Though individually they reveal much insight and reflection, her reading cannot be called complete, for much of the poem passes without any comment whatsoever. Welsford's strong argument against Hieatt is also too quick to dismiss the cyclical imagery of the poem. The organization of the imagery around the diurnal cycle can't entirely be subsumed into an "onward and upward" trajectory. The general movement of the poem is from darkness to light to darkness. It has therefore a cyclical movement at its center. The clearest manifestation of this cycle is the diurnal pattern—the poem tracks literally the poet's wedding day, which begins with a dark dawn and moves to daylight, to sunset, and finally to night. Hieatt is right to point out that the poem's twenty-four stanzas formally signify this order of cycle. Whatever escape the poem finds from natural cycles, it finds only from carefully moving through them.

To greatly simplify the positions, we may say that Hieatt primarily reads the poem's imagery; Welsford primarily reads the narrative. Hieatt claims the climax occurs at the altar, and that the night which follows is a descent from the angelic heights of the twelfth and thirteenth stanzas. Welsford claims that the night is holier than the day, and that the poem only moves higher and higher. These seemingly contradictory positions are, I argue, both correct. Although I speak of narrative and imagery—what Gerard Manley Hopkins would call the poem's overthought and underthought—to read the poem completely, one has to identify the narrative with the imagery.

Though perhaps a slight exaggeration, one could reasonably say that, narratively, the *only* thing that really happens in the poem is that the bride and groom get married—that is, have sex.

Everything that precedes the bedding is mere anticipation or foreshadowing. In terms of imagery, the only thing that really occurs is that all of Nature is gathered in a circle—a spatial and temporal sphere—around the altar, which joins the celestial angels and gods with the terrestrial bride and groom. That circle emerges from darkness at the poem's start, and sinks into it again at the end. The imagery, then, climaxes with the hierogamy, or the sacred cosmic union, of the earth and sky at the wedding altar, while the narrative climaxes in the more modest sexual union of bride and groom. Taking them together, the union of man and wife is to be identified with the union of earth and sky. Each one is the other, and the poem's imaginary ascents and descents are also to be identified with each other.

As I said, this essay seeks to read the poem in its imaginative entirety, with a particular focus on its mythical structure. Assuming the *Epithalamion* to be the great work so many have thought, it seems to me that its power must come from the poem's mythical or symbolic mode rather than its ideological aspect. The recent critical interest in poetry's historical or ideological dimensions seems to have touched Spenser little, and the *Epithalamion* scarcely at all.[1] Lacking the historical knowledge to rectify that dearth, I follow previous critics in focusing on the poem's mythical aspect.[2] This essay will proceed, according to Erskine's claim, stanza by stanza. Although perhaps a clumsy structure for a written analysis, it seems to me not the worst pedagogical strategy. I hope to gradually make clear that the poem's imagery and narrative operate in a dialectical pattern to unify opposites and erode the logical mind's subject-object separation.

II

The *Epithalamion* begins, as any great poetic undertaking should, with an invocation to the muses.

Ye learned sisters which haue oftentimes
Beene to me ayding, others to adorne:
Whom ye thought worthy of your gracefull rymes,
That euen the greatest did not greatly scorne
To heare theyr names sung in your simple layes,
But joyed in theyr prayse;
And when ye list your owne mishaps to mourne,
Which death, or loue, or fortunes wreck did rayse,
Your string could soone to sadder tenor turne,
And teach the woods and waters to lament
Your dolefull dreriment:
Now lay those sorrowfull complaints aside,
And hauing all your heads with girland crownd,
Helpe me mine owne loues prayses to resound,
Ne let the same of any be enuide,
So Orpheus did for his owne bride,

[1] The only sustained examination of the poem's ideological aspect I know is Christopher Warley's essay, "'So Plenty Makes Me Poore': Ireland, Capitalism, and Class in Spenser's 'Amoretti and Epithalamion.'"

[2] My analysis is heavily indebted to Northrop Frye, particularly his late work, which informs my dialectical understanding of Spenser.

So I vnto my selfe alone will sing,
The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring.[3]

The first five lines of this opening stanza are marked by caesuras which audibly split the lines in half. I find it difficult to read aloud without stopping for an instant halfway through each line:

Ye learned sisters—which haue oftentimes
Beene to me ayding,—others to adorne:
Whom ye thought worthy—of your gracefull rymes,
That euen the greatest—did not greatly scorne
To heare theyr names—sung in your simple layes,
But joyed in theyr prayse;

These half lines layer upon each other until they firm up somewhat in the second part, lines 7-11, which still avoids fluid iambic pentameter by putting conjunctions in the middle of lines—an effect to slow rather than speed the meter's pace. Only in the final part, lines 12 and on, when the poet asks the muses to turn from others' tragedy and to the poet's own joy, do the clauses conform wholly to the length of the line, with no pauses. The complete aural effect of the stanza, then, moves from fragmentation to unity, from frequent—though fairly regular—pauses to lines which are, as Yeats so aptly described Spenser's verse, "like bars of gold thrown ringing one upon another" (xli-xlii). This aural movement coincides with the movement of tone. The poem begins with an invocation to the muses, "oftentimes" collaborators with the poet in panegyric and lament. Here and now, however, their power is for the poet's own festive love. Complaints are to be replaced with 'girlands,' an ancient emblem of Hymen, the god of marriage. Shadowed in these lines is a past of pain and emptiness for the poet, a past which will be stated more clearly later. His relationship with the muses has been to adorn others or to speak in a tragic strain of death or love or "fortunes wreck." The shift is double—from others to the poet himself, from lament to celebration. The woods and waters, taught formerly to mourn, now echo and ring with Spenser's joy, who is emphatically the source and destination of the verse—"I unto myself alone."

It is worth pausing upon the woods and waters, the former of which is part of the poem's refrain and stands as one of its most pervasive images. Ears as attuned to the Bible as Spenser's contemporary audience were would no doubt connect the woods and waters to the tree and water of life, the imagery which bookends the entire biblical narrative, and pervades the Song of Songs, often thought of in the Renaissance as an epithalamium. The "fountain of gardens, a well of living waters" (Song 4.15, AV) stands as a clear formulation of the garden imagery which echoes through the Bible. The tree and water of life stand as the paradisal state from which humanity fell, and from which we continue to turn. The living garden is our proper state, but we find ourselves instead in an alienating world of death and bloodshed. That the Bible opens and ends with this image suggests that, though fallen from what we were, we may hope to eventually regain life. The Song of Songs, situated in the center of the Bible, provides a vision of the paradisal state located in physical love. The sexual love in the Song of Songs is the spiritual love which the New Testament identifies with the tree and water of life. Theologians, Christian and Jewish, have been at pains for centuries to allegorize the carnal aspect out of the Song of Songs, and they've made some compelling readings to be sure, but it's difficult for any good critic—or poet—to ignore what the poem says plainly. Spenser, in his *Fowre Hymnes* and the *Epithalamion*

[3] All *Epithalamion* quotes are from *The Shorter Poems*, edited by Richard McCabe.

seems closer to the spirit of the Song than the theologians. All of Spenser's poems share a collapse of the platonic ladder—one does not, that is, move from bodily physical love to a rarified spiritual love, rather physical love *is* spiritual love; *agape* is *eros*.

The garden imagery, particularly in this first stanza, unfurls also in the opposite direction, away from biblical toward classical mythology. The classical influence is felt particularly in the refrain, which puts the woods in proximity with Echo.

> So Orpheus did for his owne bride,
> So I vnto my selfe alone will sing,
> The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring.

The poet's emphasis on "I unto myself alone" may be—in addition to earlier observations—also a drift towards the position of Narcissus. Lurking in the stanza's last three lines then, the first permutation of the poem's echoing refrain, are two myths which stand as negative examples of marriage—the explicitly named Orpheus and the implicit Echo and Narcissus. The pair of myths evoke dual positions which the poet will attempt to ward off throughout the poem. I'll briefly consider the possible implications of these myths for Spenser's poem.

If one pole of the garden imagery is the Edenic state which the poet longs for, the other is the negative dimension figured here by the classical myths named. The garden imagery vacillates or teeters uncertainly between the Edenic paradise and the woods of Narcissus and Echo. Thinking through the Edenic pole of this continuum, marriage is a restoration of human relationships to the living waters and trees which our general parents (to use a Miltonic phrase) enjoyed, a state of amorous bliss—a physical and spiritual unity we also glimpse in the Song of Songs. Thinking of the classical pole, marriage—and indeed all human interaction—is Narcissus staring at himself while Echo watches; a state in which all love is directed toward the self, and insofar as it's directed toward alterity, it fails to reach consummation. A thinker as dialectical as Spenser demands a unification of opposites. Narcissus gives Spenser an image of onanism—in the *Epithalamion* and *The Faerie Queene*—which fails to integrate with alterity.

As Narcissus fails to love outside himself, he fails also to love above himself. The Neoplatonic reading of Narcissus, which may inform Spenser's understanding, is that he fails to transcend bodily beauty and seek heavenly beauty. He loves in himself not the reflection of a divine soul, but a reflection of a body. His desire remains only earthly, and therefore (in Ovid's version at least) he eventually melts into the ground. George Chapman in his *Hymn to Christ Upon the Cross*, loosely translating the Neoplatonist Ficino,[4] epitomizes the Neoplatonic reading of Narcissus:

> Hence came the cruel fate that Orpheus
> Sings of Narcissus, who being amorous
> Of his shade in the water (which denotes
> Beauty in bodies, that like water floats)
> Despised himself, his soul, and so let fade
> His substance for a never-purchased shade.
> Since souls of their use ignorant are still,
> With this vile body's use, men never fill. (page 146-7)

[4] Demonstrated in Edwards, "The Narcissus Myth in Spenser's Poetry." The article includes a more sustained examination of the myth, and the Neoplatonic reading of it, in Spenser's poetry than I can include here.

Chapman is kind to tell us that the waters represent bodily beauty, the shadow of "himself, his soul." Narcissus falls in love with bodily beauty and fails to desire what is within or above this beauty. There's in this failure a dual movement—he fails to know or love himself (so Chapman says he "despised himself"), and he fails to know or love anybody else. The poet will, in stanzas ten and eleven, provide a vision of just such an ascent through the body to heavenly virtue, avoiding the threat posed by Narcissus.

Orpheus also haunts the opening lines, and perhaps much of the poem thereafter. Spenser might have in mind Pythagorean texts ascribed to Orpheus, but I'm more interested in the allegorical implications of evoking the vatic poet who controlled the woods and stopped the waters—an ability Orpheus shares with the muses, who "teach" the woods and waters, in Spenser's formulation. Within this vision, poetry is not a human construction apart from Nature; it is rather the recreation of Nature itself. Through this power of recreation, the muses and Orpheus both are linked with each other and with Spenser himself. The poet calls upon the muses and Orpheus in an incantation to harness their protective power. What he needs protection from is the past menaced in this opening stanza—the pains or horrors which seep more and more into the imagery as the poem proceeds. A recreation is needed to find freedom from the ruins of the past. These horrors are also latent in the Orpheus allusion itself. Since Orpheus' marriage to Eurydice ends in the latter's death at the teeth of a snake in the grass, one must agree with Joseph Loewenstein that it seems a "curiously reckless" allusion on the day of one's wedding (289). After Eurydice's death, Orpheus attempts to retrieve her from the underworld. While he charms the gods with his song into letting him retrieve her, he fails to follow their instructions (for gods always give detailed instructions), and Eurydice remains in the underworld, while a demoralized Orpheus returns to earth. The story—however else we might take it—shadows the idea that poetry, despite whatever other powers it holds, is ultimately incapable of resurrection. Though he descends and manages to return to earth, he cannot redeem anybody with him. The poet who can control the natural world cannot prevent his wife being killed by a snake, nor can he resurrect her. Orpheus, for all his vatic powers, fails to consummate his marriage. As if to emphasize this point, some versions of the story suggest that Orpheus' botched wedding leads him to renounce women and only spend time with men. When a group of women get tired of him charming all the prospective bachelors, they tear Orpheus apart. The inability to unify with Eurydice precipitates his own separation from himself.

Orpheus signifies as much as Narcissus a demonic marriage. While Narcissus fails to rise beyond self-love, or bodily love, Orpheus fails to be, as Raphael advises Adam in *Paradise Lost*, "lowly wise" (VIII.78). For all the high flights of poetry, he cannot prevent a snake from killing his wife, nor can he successfully harrow the underworld to revive her. Resurrection or restoration first requires a fall, and the descent—and corresponding ascent—must be performed carefully. We shall see that the imagery in Spenser's poem moves both up and down—the first half is concerned with the ascent of *agape* and the second with the descent of *eros*. Narcissus and Orpheus are the demonic types of each, as both fail for different reasons to unify with another.

Both classical myths also link to the biblical garden myths we've discussed. Many commentators have noted that Narcissus is a type of Adam, as both love their shadowy reflections in a lower world. Orpheus too is a type of Christ, as both harrow Hell (though with different degrees of success). Christ also is an anti-type of Adam, one who delivers all from the fallen world. All four seem then to be complicated types of each other, and—to each a type of the *Epithalamion*'s poet. Adam (with Narcissus) drops us into a nature which only reflects or echoes the ego. Orpheus controls nature and effects his audience in a way that would make

advertisers drool, but it isn't clear that he escapes the fallen vision of call-and-echo. Christ redeems us to a nature which is within us as we are within it—one which is other than us but also our identity. A re-creation of Nature demands a dialectical identification with another who is both me and you. The *Epithalamion* presents us with a wedding in which the bride is the poet's identity, and yet not the poet. The poet is a type of Christ and Orpheus, in that he will attempt to restore the garden, a higher nature to which we rightfully belong. To do so, Spenser will succeed where Orpheus and Narcissus failed and unify with his feminine opposite. The unity of opposites enables the eroding of the subject-object division which grounds the fallen state of nature. This erosion is the aim of the whole poem.

Whatever else these classical allusions evoke, they position the garden as simultaneously a place of violence, but also a place of love and redemption. This tension between love and violence infuses the entire poem. The opening stanza, for all its beauty, begins the poem leaning towards the latter. The violence latent in all touch, all human relationships, is not unobserved in the poem—it haunts these opening lines and, as we shall see, becomes more and more urgent as the poem draws to a close. It might strike one as a nervous tick to include such thinking in a wedding song, but a fear is never cast out by failing to speak it. Not to recognize such violence would probably indicate a greater neurosis. Spenser acknowledges but enfolds this fear within a more potent vision of love.

Redemption comes already into view in the second stanza:

Early before the worlds light giuing lampe,
His golden beame vpon the hils doth spred,
Hauing disperst the nights vnchearefull dampe,
Doe ye awake and with fresh lusty hed,
Go to the bowre of my beloued loue,
My truest turtle doue,
Bid her awake; for Hymen is awake,
And long since ready forth his maske to moue,
With his bright Tead that flames with many a flake,
And many a bachelor to waite on him,
In theyr fresh garments trim.
Bid her awake therefore and soone her dight,
For lo the wished day is come at last,
That shall for al the paynes and sorrowes past,
Pay to her vsury of long delight,
And whylest she doth her dight,
Doe ye to her of ioy and solace sing,
That all the woods may answer and your eccho ring.

Still addressing the muses, the poet askes them to wake up his bride so that the ritual can begin. While the first stanza gives us no sense of place or time, we learn here that it is before dawn on the poet's wedding day. Time is described only in negative terms—it's before sunlight spreads across the earth—which nevertheless affirm the image of light breaking upon darkness, an image which enables the second stanza to reiterate the comic movement observed in the first. The "pains and sorrows" of line 32 transform into the "joy and solace" of line 35, an exchange reinforced by their parallel positions in their respective lines (one syllable from the end rhyme). The "pains" referred to are no doubt the courtship tribulations in the *Amoretti*. The central image

of the second stanza is the sun, rising yet still unrisen, which exists in juxtaposition with the bride, waking but still asleep, and Hymen, ready with his torch but not yet required. The rising sun signals a recompense for the preceding night, as the wedding day will pay "usury" for "all the pains and sorrows past." The language of debt pulls the mind forward and backward simultaneously—backwards to loss and night's dark, and forward to return and daylight. The moment of recompense is a moment of rebirth or radical change which the poet and bride are about to experience.

The sunlight becomes variously refigured as the stanza goes on. The ambiguous syntactical position of the third line makes it unclear whether the sun will have "dispersed the night's uncheerful damp," or whether the muses—the "ye" addressed in the following line—have already done so. This ambiguity allows one to identify the sun's restorative power with the muses' power of poetry. In the seventh stanza, Apollo is called the "father of the muses" (line 121), which reinforces the link between the sun and human creativity. The light-giving lamp of the sun also modulates into Hymen's flaming torch (what Spenser calls his 'tead') as the long delights linked with the impending daylight are also linked to the impending marriage itself.

The description of Hymen's masque, consisting of "many a bachelor," foreshadows the impending social celebration, and begins to move the poem beyond the isolation of the first stanza. As each stanza proceeds, more and more will be added to the wedding ritual. The first stanza's introversion and implicit image of Narcissus will recede further and further from sight as the poem integrates more and more aspects of creation into its view. Spenser moves in each stanza more or less up the chain of being, beginning in the third stanza with the floral:

Bring with you all the Nymphes that you can heare
Both of the riuers and the forrests greene:
And of the sea that neighbours to her neare,
Al with gay girlands goodly wel beseene.
And let them also with them bring in hand,
Another gay girland
For my fayre loue of lillyes and of roses,
Bound trueloue wize with a blew silke riband.
And let them make great store of bridale poses,
And let them eeke bring store of other flowers
To deck the bridale bowers.
And let the ground whereas her foot shall tread,
For feare the stones her tender foot should wrong,
Be strewed with fragrant flowers all along,
And diapred lyke the discolored mead.
Which done, doe at her chamber dore awayt,
For she will waken strayt,
The whiles doe ye this song vnto her sing,
The woods shall to you answer and your Eccho ring.

The unclear function of the second *you* in the first line of this stanza (it isn't clear whether it's the subject or the object of the relative clause) makes it hard to tell who is hearing whom. The syntactic ambiguity creates the sense that song and echo, muses and nymphs, are working as a unity; art and nature are resonating as one sound. I won't continue to labour the point, though this kind of syntactical ambiguity occurs throughout the poem. Spenser's proclivity for Latinate

syntax—bending and folding to conform to the line, rhythm, and rhyme—frequently puts subject and object next to each other, positioned to create the sense that they aren't separable forces, but rather interpenetrating ones. The poem's general interest in how two become one—in how a love object becomes wedded to a loving subject—seems enacted even on the level of syntax.

In the third stanza, the woods and waters which pervade the entire poem are personified for the first time as nymphs, implored to bring garlands and flowers, the most salient images of this stanza. The garland, a ring of flowers, has classical associations of excellence in poetic or military endeavours—neither of which can be entirely discounted in this poem. Garlands are also conventional in pastoral poetry, typically as an innocent gift for amorous pursuits. As Hieatt notes (1961; 117-121), the circular shape of the garland resonates with the final word of each stanza—*ring*, a conventional image of weddings which signifies unending balance and eternal order. The garland, bound by the nymphs, situates this marital harmony in the terrestrial order; the wedding ring, given at the altar in the thirteenth stanza, will be in the twenty-second blessed by Juno, casting the harmony into the celestial.

For now, we're still on earth, among flowers and lurking danger. As the poet exhorts preparations for his bride's safety, the lines themselves, with their parallel clause length and sounds, seem to insulate the threat. The exhortation sits atop the fear, even on the page:

> And let the ground whereas her foot shall tread,
> For feare the stones her tender foot should wrong,
> Be strewed with fragrant flowers all along

One might think that flowers would only camouflage (and so make more dangerous) a stone's edge, exacerbating its potential for injury, but the imagery suggests that flowers, in addition to their usual amatory association, operate as a charm to ward off affliction—one also observes the same principle in Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay* (and probably many other places in a culture beset by plague and a miasma theory of disease). The stone itself is a displaced type of the serpent in the grass which killed Eurydice—and Eve, in a more circuitous way. The death which haunts all human activity is, for the moment, cast away by the vernal delights of ringing Nature. The flowers purify the earth and prepare for the awakening bride, though more than vegetable life is needed.

The fourth stanza shifts from the floral to the aquatic and animal sphere:

> Ye Nymphes of Mulla which with carefull heed,
> The siluer scaly trouts doe tend full well,
> And greedy pikes which vse therein to feed,
> (Those trouts and pikes all others doo excell)
> And ye likewise which keepe the rushy lake,
> Where none doo fishes take,
> Bynd vp the locks the which hang scatterd light,
> And in his waters which your mirror make,
> Behold your faces as the christall bright,
> That when you come whereas my loue doth lie,
> No blemish she may spie.
> And eke ye lightfoot mayds which keepe the deere,
> That on the hoary mountayne vse to towre,
> And the wylde wolues which seeke them to deuoure,
> With your steele darts doo chace from comming neer,

Be also present heere,
To helpe to decke her and to help to sing,
That all the woods may answer and your eccho ring.

Both the fish and deer—with all their associated imagery of hunting and nets, hooks and eating—have amatory associations in ancient and Petrarchan love poetry. The poet is usually trapped by Cupid or the beloved, and in turn attempts (and typically fails) to hunt down the beloved, figuratively both entrapper and innocent doe. Here, the traps are held far from the overt imagery of violent capture—though the poet does include a remark on the quality of the fish, and I can't imagine what he'd mean besides their taste. The nymphs are called upon because they're a benevolent force in the violent cycle of hunting and eating—because, that is, they care for the fish and protect the deer from wolves. The snares will recur with a clear erotic charge in the twentieth stanza, a point in the poem, as we shall see, when the violent imagery cast out in the poem's early stanzas returns with fuller detail. For now, the snares are a part of the excluded initiative—violence—as the poet focuses instead on bringing more of the natural world into the ritual.

The nymphs called upon in the fourth stanza are a part of the forces meant to protect the bride and groom. They tend the natural world, protect it from predators, and seem to absorb some of the Narcissus imagery we observed earlier. When they look into the water as a mirror, it's for the sake of the bride. It is self-love directed towards alterity. We seem to be already in a higher place than Narcissus and Echo. The poet will, much later in the poem, come to the same realization that his poetry or song is not self-directed. The natural world seems already reforming to a different vision than merely an echo of the self.

This natural world is not merely a general location, however. Spenser names 'Mulla,' what we call the river Awbeg, which flows near the poet's home, Kilcolmen castle in County Cork. This gives a local sense of place to the poem, and it is worth thinking for a moment about the poem's Irish context, as it helps expand one into a fuller sense of the poem.

Spenser turns increasingly to the Irish environment around his estate in his later poetry, and he knew full well that it lacked the literary status of the Mediterranean landscape which had already been absorbed into all of Europe's poetic imagination; he knew that when he asks in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* "Who knows not *Arlo-hill*?" (VII.vi.36.6), nobody but his closest friends or neighbours would have the faintest idea. In the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, or *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, the Irish landscape stands partly as a synecdoche for a fallen world—though not without hope, Ireland and the horrors of the colonial occupation were probably as fallen as anything Spenser could imagine. The wolves mentioned in this stanza might be understood—as was common enough in Spenser's verse and the Elizabethan period[5]—as a cruel metaphor for the supposedly rapacious Irish natives. Though their presence here doesn't seem to distract much from the jubilation, violence may once again be lurking as an excluded initiative. The English presence in Ireland was growing increasingly tenuous in the 1590s, and Spenser's prose tract, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, makes clear that he was anxious about rebel violence which would threaten his home. What we may call the colonialist's anxiety, a variation on the master-slave dialectic, can't be exempt from the poet's many concerns in the *Epithalamion*. While much of the poem's worry seems to find its source in the poet himself—his own fears of poetic inadequacy, of Narcissism, even of his innate capacity for violence—there are external threats as

[5] See, for examples, *Elizabethan Ireland: A Selection of Writings by Elizabethan Writers on Ireland*, edited by James P. Meyers. Archon, 1983.; *Faerie Queene* VII.vi.55; *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* l.318.

well, not the least of which was the upon the Irish landscape. The poet will later ask for protection from, among other things, "housefyres" (l. 340), a seemingly bizarre prayer, but one with added power when remembering that, not long after the poem's composition, Spenser's home would be burned down by rebels—an event which may have led to the poet's subsequent illness and death.

Spenser's ritual may be said to draw a circle of safety in a fallen, bloody landscape. From a different point of view, though, Spenser and his colonial ilk's presence are exactly what creates that bloody landscape. The widening sphere of the wedding ritual renders violence upon what it excludes—and what it excludes may be far from evil. The greatest poetic response to Spenser's *Epithalamion* along this train of thought is the Irish poet Eavan Boland's poem, also called "Epithalamion," published in her final collection, *The Historians*. Boland's poem imagines a man and wife dead just beyond the limit of Spenser's. While the wedded couple in Spenser's *Epithalamion* are wrapped in the eighteenth stanza in Night's "sable mantle" (line 321), Boland's pair are shrouded, dead, in the dark earth—a burial or erasure Boland identifies with Spenser's poem and the empire it represents. Besides this shared image of the shawled couple, Boland's poem has little clear formal resemblance to Spenser's poem, though that lack is precisely the point: borrowing imagery or motifs from Spenser would risk repeating the same ideological exclusion his poem creates. The music and joy of Spenser's poem not only comes at the expense of the native Irish, it actively obscures the suffering caused by the English colonial project and, by extension, Spenser himself. To what degree that's a fair charge against the poem—to what extent, that is, Spenser's poem can be taken as a synecdoche for the entire Tudor colonial mission and the suffering created or rendered silent from it—I'm not certain. Any poem, however beautiful, composed against the background of imperial death begs to be employed for ideological purposes. In terms of Spenser's *Epithalamion*, the ritual aspect of the poem makes clear enough who or what is being excluded—to wit, anything that would harm the bride or bridegroom.

There is in Spenser's poem much ritual anxiety—everything has to be included in the ritual, whether through invitation or rejection, and the poet makes sure to leave nothing unaccounted for. What invitees can and cannot do is no less important, and the exhortations made by the poet simultaneously create the ritual and reveal the concerns behind it (and him). The poet's double role as master of ceremonies and bridegroom—a Spenserian innovation in the genre of epithalamia, so far as I know—demands a greater attention to fuss and detail. Ritual, at least in literary contexts, is bound up in what Northrop Frye calls secondary concern (Frye 50). Primary concerns are statements of the most bald naivete, such as "life is better than death" or "everybody deserves food." Secondary concerns are these same statements, but with caveats and exceptions (e.g. "nobody deserves to be killed, except enemies of the state"). Although rituals like weddings seek to bind a community together, it is a particular community. Rituals tend to exclude on principles of age, gender, social roles, or (in the case of weddings) catering costs. A wedding must ultimately exclude everything or everybody except the bride and groom, but in it's initial stage, it must—on the level of secondary concern—exclude anything which would strive to separate or oppose the couple. From the perspective of a bourgeois English landowner getting married around his Irish estate in the midst of Tyrone's rebellion, a good deal of the native Irish population must be suspect and repelled from the ritual lest they harm the wedded couple. This view provides, briefly, the poem's ideological or secondary concern. It also provides a counterpoint to Boland's poetic response.

While it's probably fair to say that Boland's poem is bound up in an ideological concern far more obviously than Spenser's is, the effect of both poems is the same—to bring to the imagination's center a married couple. Both focus in the here and now a pair from the margins—Spenser from the lowly position of a public poet, Boland from the silenced victims of empire. Both poems, in some sense, exclude the other—Boland's is unkind to the "migrant" who composes "in an Irish anywhere" (lines 1, 27) and the colonial project of which he is a part; Spenser repels "wolves" and those who would commit "false treason" (lines 69, 323)—many of the indigenous Irish, that is. But both poems also, in some other sense, transcend these ideological exclusions and speak, or render visible, something more to everybody who reads them.

No poem is completely separable from its historical or ideological context, but all good poetry potentially speaks even to those whom the ideological dimension repels. While the ideological concerns of a poem are, in Northrop Frye's terms, secondary or exclusionary, the mythological dimensions are rooted in primary or inclusive concerns. Frye's penultimate book, *Words With Power* (a work to which I owe a considerable debt) argues this point. Myth—the narrative, though also the metaphors and imagery, which ground all imaginative literature—is counter-historical, which is to say that it cuts across time and space, across all ascendent ideologies, which rise and fall like all empires. The mythological dimension enables a woman to find something of freedom in a desperately patriarchal text, or a black man to see something deeper than racist ideology in a nineteenth-century American novel.

My present essay emphasizes the mythological aspect of the poem—partly because I don't think it's ever been satisfactorily analyzed, and partly because my own deep ignorance of the Elizabethan period, the colonial history in Ireland, and Spenser's role in that history, vastly limits what I can say about the poem's ideological dimension. Though I won't continue to speak about it at any length, the ideological concerns of the *Epithalamion* are inseparable from it, and those concerns, however benevolent, operate on a principle of exclusion. The poem's presence in several anthologies of Irish poetry suggests, however, that even those who have been ostensibly excluded by the poem still find freedom in it. That freedom, which comes from the poem's mythological dimension, forms my principal interest here.

The fifth stanza moves up the chain of being from the aquatic world to the avian:

Wake, now my loue, awake; for it is time,
The Rosy Morne long since left Tithones bed,
All ready to her siluer coche to clyme,
And Phœbus gins to shew his glorious hed.
Hark how the cheerefull birds do chaunt theyr laies
And carroll of loues praise.
The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft,
The thrush replyes, the Mauis descant playes,
The Ouzell shrills, the Ruddock warbles soft,
So goodly all agree with sweet consent,
To this dayes merriment.
Ah my deere loue why doe ye sleepe thus long,
When meeter were that ye should now awake,
T'awayt the comming of your ioyous make,
And hearken to the birds louelearned song,
The deawy leaues among.

For they of ioy and pleasance to you sing,
That all the woods them answer and theyr eccho ring.

There's a probable pun on "meeter" in line 86. The word means "more fit," and also refers to the poetic meter. Since the sun is rising, the poem itself wills her awake. The dawn is characterized in conventional terms, with rose shades and her consort, Tithonus, who was granted by the gods eternal life but not an ageless body. Tithonus presents a demonic vision of eternity—one in which earthly pains and sorrows continue without end, without any freedom from the endless cycles of mortality. Time for Tithonus brings no renewal or resurrection, only continual decline to greater and greater infirmity. Yet "Rosy Morne" leaves the unrenewed immortal every day to eternally renew the world. The sun's climb away from Tithonus' horrifying wedding bed indicates the poem's present drift away from this tragic mutability towards fertility. We find here a celestial variation of the emotional movement away from "pains and sorrows past" towards a restored happiness.

The sun has now fully risen, and the birds join the circle of the natural world. The lark, as it conventionally does, rings in the morning. I'm not certain what particular meaning—if any—to ascribe the other birds. At any rate, the community of singing birds, full of erotic charge, anticipate with their "lovelearned song" not only the sexual union of the bride and groom, but also the human community, soon to appear and join in the wedding song. To this point, the poet has called upon the natural (and supernatural) world without much reference to the social sphere. The rising of the sun and the birdsong help create the communal space the marriage will occur in; this stanza indicates the shift from the single poet to the community. This social realm becomes clear in stanzas to follow.

With the social realm comes the bride, and the poem must account for her before anybody else:

My loue is now awake out of her dreame,
And her fayre eyes like stars that dimmed were
With darksome cloud, now shew theyr goodly beams
More bright then Hesperus his head doth rere.
Come now ye damzels, daughters of delight,
Helpe quickly her to dight,
But first come ye fayre houres which were begot
In Ioues sweet paradice, of Day and Night,
Which doe the seasons of the yeare allot,
And al that euer in this world is fayre
Doe make and still repayre.
And ye three handmayds of the Cyprian Queene,
The which doe still adorne her beauties pride,
Helpe to addorne my beautifullest bride
And as ye her array, still throw betweene
Some graces to be seene,
And as ye vse to Venus, to her sing,
The whiles the woods shal answer and your eccho ring.

The bride is now awake—awake from her dream, and from the pains and sorrows past, symbolized here by the night and the evening star (Hesperus), which she outshines. The total image of the sixth stanza is the risen bride, an axis around which turn the Hours and the Graces.

This image finds its antitype in the thirteenth stanza, the height of the ritual, where angels orbit the bride in much the same way. The Hours stand as the human-fashioned division of time, which may depend—as they do in Spenser's apparently original genealogy—on visible cycles like day and night or the seasons, but are nevertheless outside of such a natural rhythm. While, in a different context, the arbitrary division of time could reflect humanity's own alienation from the movement of the natural world, the emphasis here seems to be on the Hours as generative or restorative powers, the mutable foundation for all natural cycles. The poem itself is structured upon the diurnal cycle, and just as the hours attend the bride, the *Epithalamion*'s twenty-four stanzas praise her. Both are powers of renewal directed towards the bride's beauty. Poetry is also represented by the Graces—the "handmaids" of Venus, "the Cyprian Queen."

Graces attending the bride is a convention of epithalamia. Hesiod tells us that the Graces "live in delight" (83) near the muses, which links them to the arts, in addition to their connection to Venus, beauty and love. The mysterious commentator of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, known only as E.K., suggests also in a note to *Aprill* that they're "the Goddesses of al bountie and comeliness" (note to line 109) and links them with courtesy, a deep virtue in Spenser's circle. Their connections with beauty, love, art, and courtesy, all swirl around the bride as well. It is these virtues or aspirations which enable a separation from the demonic clock time which the Hours could shadow. For the poet, the bride unifies all of these aspects and enables him to see beyond the dull progression of history, which we live in but always feel alienated from. For the reader, the poem itself unifies all of these aspects and enables—even if for a short time—an escape from the past which only ever slips away, the present which never quite exists, and the future which never arrives. More will be said of this when we come to the final stanza.

It is worth noting that the movement of the third to sixth stanza approximates the orders of Nature established in Genesis, albeit in a different sequence. The flowers of the third stanza correspond to the third day of creation, in which God fashions all vegetable life; the fourth and fifth stanza, to the fifth day, in which God creates animal life. The sixth stanza—in which the awakened Bride is likened to Hesperus, followed by a description of the Hours—matches both the fourth and sixth days of creation, in which the celestial lights and humanity are created, respectively. Although Spenser's order presents a slightly different hierarchy—moving from plants to fish and animals, to birds, to the heavens and finally the bride—it seems that the poem is reconstituting, or recreating, creation itself. Paradise can only be restored through a second creation, and in Genesis the so-called Priestly (P) account, which establishes the seven days of creation, precedes the Jahwist (J) account[6], which provides the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. Before the poet can reside in a wedded paradise, an ordered chain of being must first be established and folded into the ritual. Since the poem has by this point established the upward orientation of the cosmos, the garden imagery, already implicit in the first stanza, will slowly begin to take center stage.

Before paradise can be restored properly, the poet devotes more attention to the heavens, which have yet to be properly integrated into the ritual:

110 Now is my loue all ready forth to come,
Let all the virgins therefore well awayt,
And ye fresh boyes that tend vpon her groome

[6] From Genesis 1:1 to 2:3, God is referred to as *Elohim*; starting at Genesis 2:4 God is referred to as *Yahweh Elohim*. The AV and every prior English translation I know uses "God" for Gen. 1:1 to 2:3 and "Lord God" starting at Gen. 2:4; the Vulgate similarly uses *Deus* and *Dominus Deus*, respectively.

Prepare your selues; for he is comming strayt.
Set all your things in seemely good aray
Fit for so ioyfull day,
The ioyfulst day that euer sunne did see.
Faire Sun, shew forth thy fauourable ray,
And let thy lifull heat not feruent be
For feare of burning her sunshyny face,
Her beauty to disgrace.
O fayrest Phoebus, father of the Muse,
If euer I did honour thee aright,
Or sing the thing, that mote thy mind delight,
Doe not thy seruants simple boone refuse,
But let this day let this one day be myne,
Let all the rest be thine.
Then I thy souerayne prayses loud wil sing,
That all the woods shal answer and theyr eccho ring.

It's no longer possible to imagine the poet merely singing unto himself; his appeals to virgins and "fresh boys" make clear that the poem is now operating in a social world. While the boys prepare for the groom, the groom himself prays to the Sun with a double ask: not to scorch the bride, and to let this day belong to him. These requests are reformulations of the same thing—the safety of the bride will enable the poet to "possess" the day in a manner different from our ordinary experience. The stanza's stately sound—for the prayer is to an august power—is counterposed by the almost sing-song rhythm and rhyme (particularly lines 121-6). The effect here is of a serious and profound feeling which, once vocalized, can only sound a bit like fussing. Line 125 may be taken as a good example:

But let this day—let this one day be myne (dash mine)

The split into two parts of four and six syllables (or two and three feet) creates a formal rhythm bolstered by the repetition.[7] The words *let* and *this* swap metrical positions, each becoming on different sides of the caesura a stressed and unstressed syllable (if we wish to maintain Spenser's vigorous iambic rhythm). That repetition, though musical and perhaps even solemn, does leave at least some impression of desperate fuss—a symptom of the ritual anxiety we already discussed, though here the poet seeks to resist something over which any ordinary person would relinquish control. We're in a different realm from ordinary experience, however: the poem is operating in something more like the world of the charm, where the right words in the right sequence will affect a desired outcome. Speaking the divine names enables the poet to tap into their power and grant him and his bride protection. Rituals themselves, enacting oaths, promises, or prayers, come close to the charm. While charms change the physical world, poems work in a different world—be it mental or emotional or spiritual, or some hazy combination of the three. The *Epithalamion*, by enacting a ritual of charm within itself, feels as if it comes close to the center—at least one center—of poetry itself. The ritual unfolds not in the real world, but in the reader or listener's imagination. Whether Spenser was in fact married on the eleventh of June, 1594 is of no real importance; whether Phoebus Apollo intervened and dimmed his sunrays, because

[7] For a fuller consideration of the four-and-six rhythm in Spenser and his contemporaries than I can provide here, see Richard Danson Brown, *The Art of the Faerie Queene*, 74-86.

Spenser asked him to, is also of no importance. Whatever happened to Spenser in history, the poem has its power through a personal, rather than historical, connection. Through the invocation of these names, the poet calls on the imaginative faculties of one's own metaphorical thought as much as on the metaphorical gods of classical myth. The poet prays both that the sun not scorch his bride, and that we imagine the sun—as Goldilocks would have it—just right. The reader's imagination is where the ritual is to be held, and where it is to affect its change or renewal. The joy so many readers find in Spenser's poem may be the charming power of its words. To recreate joy and a sense of united love seems a difficult spell to cast, though it can perhaps be cast only with a measure of fear, anxiety, and fuss.

Till now, I've neglected to mention the first six lines of the seventh stanza (110-115). Although the primary image of stanza is the sun, now completely risen, the sun is framed in a social sphere of boys and virgins. There is a remarkable link in the poem between the sun and the social. I noted earlier that the poem begins in darkness with the poet alone, and as the sun rises, the forces of nature are marshalled to help the bride and groom. As we shall see later, the community around the bride and groom also dissolves as the sun sets. At this point, however, the sun has risen and so a community of people, besides the poet or his bride, comes into view. That community and its harmonious song forms the focal image of the eighth stanza:

Harke how the Minstrels gin to shrill aloud
Their merry Musick that resounds from far,
The pipe, the tabor, and the trembling Croud,
That well agree withouten breach or iar.
But most of all the Damzels doe delite,
When they their tymbrels smyte,
And thereunto doe daunce and carrol sweet,
That all the sences they doe rauish quite,
The whyles the boyes run vp and downe the street,
Crying aloud with strong confused noyce,
As if it were one voyce.
Hymen io Hymen, Hymen they do shout,
That euen to the heauens theyr shouting shrill
Doth reach, and all the firmament doth fill,
To which the people standing all about,
As in approuance doe thereto applaud
And loud aduaunce her laud,
And euermore they Hymen Hymen sing,
That al the woods them answer and theyr eccho ring.

The "strong confused noise" is imitated by the emphatic trochees which begin lines 138 and 140, as well as the noise-voice rhyme built upon a clownish diphthong. There's a probable pun on *croud*, which means both a group of people and a Celtic viol-like instrument. The music and instruments are becoming blurred together as the community sings with a single voice that rises to fill the sky. Here we encounter the first instance of the merging of heaven and earth, a recurring image throughout the poem. Mircea Eliade suggests that all wedding rites replicate the divine union of the earth and the sky (145-6; 170). Whether that claim's true or not, what he calls the divine union, or hierogamy, does recur in classical literature. The clearest example I know of

is in Statius' epithalamium, in which Venus says that she can wed heaven and earth and bring renewal:

> … ipsum in conubia terrae
> aethera, cum pluviis rarescunt nubila, solvo.
> sic rerum series mundique revertitur aetas. (*Silvae* I.ii.185-7)
>
> [When the clouds are thinned by rains, I melt the firmament into union with the earth. Thus do things proceed, and the world's age renews.]

From this quote one can gather virtually everything needed to understand the divine union image. Statius characterizes it here by rains (an image we'll encounter later in the *Epithalamion*), but I wish rather to stress the link between renewal and the divine union.

The hierogamy of the heavens and earth is a rejuvenation of Saturn's golden age, or, in Christian terms, a return to paradise. Between Hell and God, there's the sky and the earth. The sky is characterized by unchanging cycles, with virtually no visible change between one and the next. The earth is also characterized by cycles, but each of these cycles is different than the last; spring comes every year, but it isn't quite the same spring every year. If the fallen, ever-changing cycles of earth become one with the immutable cycles of the sky, humanity's temporal being might also transform into eternal life. Were the ground where we live to join the unchanging heavens, we'd be free from death—so went the thought, at least. It's for this reason that Dante puts the garden of Eden at the top of the mountain of Purgatory—above the crucibles and catharsis of life on earth, where the earth meets the sky. Spenser draws upon this imagery in the *Epithalamion* to suggest through his marriage a return to paradise. Hieatt's numerological scheme suggests that the poem is symbolically joining the solar and sidereal years, a displaced version of the earthly and celestial cycles. Mirroring this marriage, the union of man and wife recreate the collapse of disparate natural states into one. From this hierogamy, the poem allows us to glimpse life free from the ravages of mutability. We've already seen, and we'll continue to observe, the garden imagery which suggests a return to Eden. We shall also keep finding the divine union image. For now, I'll note that in the eighth stanza, it is the earth which figuratively rises to the sky. It is humanity's voice which elevates itself—and by extension all human reality—to the heavens. The full implications of the divine union imagery—and this permutation of it—will become clearer as we proceed.

In the ninth stanza, we find the divine union concentrated within the bride. Having established the social and natural context for the wedding, the poet shifts his attention to the aim of the wedding herself:

> Loe where she comes along with portly pace,
> Lyke Phoebe from her chamber of the East,
> Arysing forth to run her mighty race,
> Clad all in white, that seemes a virgin best.
> So well it her beseemes that ye would weene
> Some angell she had beene.
> Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre,
> Sprinckled with perle, and perling flowres a tweene,
> Doe lyke a golden mantle her attyre,
> And being crowned with a girland greene,
> Seeme lyke some mayden Queene.

Her modest eyes abashed to behold
So many gazers, as on her do stare,
Vpon the lowly ground affixed are.
Ne dare lift vp her countenance too bold,
But blush to heare her prayses sung so loud,
So farre from being proud.
Nathlesse doe ye still loud her prayses sing,
That all the woods may answer and your eccho ring.

The central image is finally the bride. The stanza's movement seems to follow the poet's eyes as he sees first her white dress, then her yellow hair, then finally her face. He compares her to the rising Phoebe—a name for Diana which brings out her resemblance with (Phoebus) Apollo—and to an Angel. The metaphors in the first part of the stanza (lines 148-53) primarily involve celestial imagery of this kind. These are balanced in the second part (lines 154-8) by the earthly images of pearls, girlands, and the bride's physical form, which concentrates on her hair. The final part narrows focus further on the bride's face, which is characterized by its revelation of virtue—it demonstrates a person neither bold nor proud. This virtue might indicate what joins the stanza's terrestrial and heavenly imagery. The divine union latent in this stanza becomes clearer in the two to follow. The ninth stanza is the first of three which concentrate focus on the bride. The union of celestial and earthly imagery in this stanza separates in the next two; the tenth centers on the earthly, recreating the vertical chain or tower of being we observed in the first six stanzas, while the eleventh concentrates on the inward virtue, represented again with an image of hierarchy, but presented in heavenly terms. All three stanzas present the bride—and by extension the groom—as a cosmic union in miniature.

The tenth stanza gives us a *blazon* of the bride, which returns to the garden and natural imagery we've seen in earlier stanzas:

Tell me ye merchants daughters did ye see
So fayre a creature in your towne before?
So sweet, so louely, and so mild as she,
Adornd with beautyes grace and vertues store,
Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
Her forehead yuory white,
Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips lyke cherryes charming men to byte,
Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncrudded,
Her paps lyke lyllies budded,
Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
And all her body like a pallace fayre,
Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre,
To honors seat and chastities sweet bowre.
Why stand ye still ye virgins in amaze,
Vpon her so to gaze,
Whiles ye forget your former lay to sing,
To which the woods did answer and your eccho ring.

The mention of "merchants daughters" make clear that, despite all the literary or cosmic import given to it, the wedding is a rather bourgeois affair. More importantly, the description of the

bride reiterates the chain of being. The series of similes begins in mineral terms (sapphires and ivory), then proceeds to the vegetable (apples, cherries), the animal (cream), the floral (lilies), and then again to mineral terms, though now in a creative or human context (tower, palace). The 'bower' of line 180 is probably an inner chamber (which indicates where the poet's mind is at), though it also conveys the potential meaning of arbour, and, in that verbal instability there lies the joining of the green and human world. The virtues mentioned at the stanza's end reinforce that human world. The stanza's movement is from outside to inside, from visible to invisible, from low to high. Although it's the stanza's primary image, the bride's body is to be passed through, so to speak, to get to the virtues concealed within. The poet does this through the *blazon*, a tradition modern sensibilities take a pretty dim view of. To be fair, the many dreary examples of pat Petrarchan catalogues do little to invigorate a student. Nor is this fatigue new: Shakespeare was already parodying it. One can scarcely shake the notion that the *blazon* tradition objectifies the woman—for it usually is a woman—it describes, and with all the images of flora and rare gems, the poem is commodifying far more than elevating anybody. There's certainly some merit to this line of thinking, and one should perhaps not forget that Spenser was writing the *Epithalamion* as the Atlantic slave trade—probably the greatest mass commodification of human lives in history—was gearing up.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that, understood in the purely metaphorical terms in which it speaks, the *blazon* may do the exact opposite. A good deal of objectification can happen without need for fanciful similes, and if phrases like 'the male gaze' mean anything, then most of our ordinary perception does a rather poor job recognizing another's humanity. We're back once more in the realm of Narcissus and eyes which fail to see. The only way around this sort of thinking, at least in poetic terms, is through it. A series of metaphors which carve up a person's body and identify it with all kinds of bizarre objects is the normal impulse to objectify cranked up beyond any normalcy. Such a series can layer so many images atop one another that it overloads the mind's logical faculties so that (hopefully) the imagination can take over. One might consider as an example the seventh chapter of the Song of Songs—which Spenser surely had in mind when he wrote the *Epithalamion*'s tenth stanza.

> … the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman.
> 2 Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies.
> 3 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.
> 4 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bathrabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus.
> 5 Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple; the king is held in the galleries.
> 6 How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!
> 7 This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes. (AV)

One observes here the similarity to Spenser's imagery, which runs through—in less systematic order—the mineral, vegetable, animal, and architectural levels of being.[8] It's unclear to me how complimentary it is to hear, say, one's breasts compared to young roes, but the symbolic resonance of the whole sequence creates the identification of the bride with the earth of Israel itself. Metaphorical thoughts like this are counterlogical, and far from ordinary consciousness. From any logical view, saying "this woman is Israel's land" is utterly insane, but it makes sense on a level of human thought deeper than logic. Metaphorical thinking which 'objectifies' a person like this—in the sense that it identifies them with an object—also 'personifies' the object. The effect of such metaphors—perhaps all metaphors properly understood—is to pierce the filmy barrier that logic constructs to separate subject (or human) and object (or non-human). The subject is object, and the object is subject. At the core of the wedding image is this identification between subject and object, between two which logic seeks to oppose. To hear a barrage of metaphors which all state more or less this point is to interpenetrate the very categories which we use to dehumanize daily all that's around us. Such metaphorical thinking enables one to see a person's body as more than merely a body, and one's identity as more than one's own. Spenser suggests that such figures reveal a vision of virtue, as he finds in his bride. The act of metaphor is what enables the tenth stanza's movement from outside to in, from appearance to reality, from visual to virtuous beauty.

The following eleventh stanza outlines in further detail these inner virtues, identified with heavenly grace:

But if ye saw that which no eyes can see,
The inward beauty of her liuely spright,
Garnisht with heauenly guifts of high degree,
Much more then would ye wonder at that sight,
And stand astonisht lyke to those which red
Medusaes mazeful hed.
There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,
Vnspotted fayth and comely womanhood,
Regard of honour and mild modesty,
There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,
And giueth lawes alone.
The which the base affections doe obay,
And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will,
Ne thought of thing vncomely euer may
Thereto approch to tempt her mind to ill.
Had ye once seene these her celestial threasures,
And vnreuealed pleasures,
Then would ye wonder and her prayses sing,
That al the woods should answer and your echo ring.

The stanza's minimal use of enjambment and caesura reflects aurally the bride's orderly virtue, characterized by a hierarchal image of a Queen ruling lesser passions. This image also contextualizes the somewhat jarring mention of Medusa petrifying people—jarring because this is the only overt classical allusion in the central part of the poem (stanzas 10-13), and because to

[8] For a more detailed comparison between these catalogues, see Baroway "The Imagery of Spenser and the 'Song of Songs.'"

compare one's bride with a gorgon is beyond any straightforward praise. Given the entire stanza, Spenser probably has in mind the image of Athena brandishing the head of Medusa on her shield. The bride astonishes *like* Athena wielding Medusa—a statement which for some contains the reassuring corollary, "but she's not really like Medusa," but also says at its core: "the bride *is* Medusa." The bride's identification with a gorgon seems to reveal more anxieties which take us close to the poem's central concerns. Natalis Conti's *Mythologiae*—Spenser's favourite mythological sourcebook[9]—offers one allegorical reading of Medusa which may help our understanding. Conti glosses Medusa as representing Passion, which has the power to turn men to stone and render them powerless, but can be mastered by wisdom, i.e. Athena/Minerva (VII.11, page 634-7). He is careful to remind us that Medusa was cursed with her serpentine hair and petrifying power because she had sex with Poseidon in one of Athena's temples, so it should be clear enough what kind of passion Conti has in mind. Medusa represents a demonic or insatiable female sexual energy against which men can do nothing directly.

There's certainly a good deal of patriarchal neurosis surrounding the Medusa myth, but its kernel of sexual anxiety is genuine enough. It's natural for one to fear the base sexual passion, both within oneself and within a lover, which can never be entirely satisfied, and which—one often feels—drags one into some sort of lower state away from human identity. The poem never confronts this fear directly, but the classical allusions enable it to move, barely perceptible, below the poem's surface. We shall at the end of this essay say more about the sexual dimension of the *Epithalamion*, as the poem's second half delves into night and the cares of the marriage bed. For now, however, the sexual anxiety Medusa represents is inhibited by the bride's chaste virtue, as the unruly mob is ruled by the just monarch. One wonders if, as the poet says, there's no uncomely thought lurking, or if some fear has merely been repressed—some fear which may return before the poem's end. In any case, the virtues are reinforced by both the royal image and words like *heavenly* and *celestial*, which layer with the previous stanza's earthly metaphors to make the bride a microcosm of the divine union. The poet's earthly love is also a heavenly one, and through the bride he—and we—find a restoration of eternity. Taking together all three stanzas with the bride as the central image, one sees that she's figuratively a tower or ladder that presents a vision of ascent through the natural world to heavenly virtue. The following stanzas will show the climax of that ascent, and help us think more upon the architectural metaphors which have already emerged in the poem.

The twelfth stanza finally brings us to the altar where the formal wedding is to happen.

Open the temple gates vnto my loue,
Open them wide that she may enter in,
And all the postes adorne as doth behoue,
And all the pillours deck with girlands trim,
For to recyue this Saynt with honour dew,
That commeth in to you.
With trembling steps and humble reuerence,
She commeth in, before th'almighties vew,
Of her ye virgins learne obedience,
When so ye come into those holy places,
To humble your proud faces;

[9] Convincingly demonstrated by Lotspeich's *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, Princeton University Press, 1932.

Bring her vp to th'high altar that she may
The sacred ceremonies there partake,
The which do endlesse matrimony make,
And let the roring Organs loudly play
The praises of the Lord in liuely notes,
The whiles with hollow throates
The Choristers the ioyous Antheme sing,
That al the woods may answere and their eccho ring.

This stanza has a clear narrative movement within it. The bride moves from outside to inside the "temple," and then approaches the altar in the final part. The movement inward is related to a movement upward, as the command "bring her up" indicates. We have already seen that imaginatively the bride is high indeed, but the altar stands as the highest point in the poem. The inward and upward movement of the temple mirrors the movement already observed around the bride herself. The identification of the bride with an architectural structure may still be in place. Spenser in the tenth stanza uses the "tower of ivory" image from the Song of Songs, and we find at the halfway point of the *Epithalamion* a temple; we shall also see he also invokes a heavenly temple in the penultimate stanza. I suggested that the tower as a vertical and static order stands for the chain of being that we considered in the first six stanzas. Spenser employs a similar architectural metaphor at the end of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* when he imagines all things stayed upon the "pillars of eternity" (VII.viii.2.4); the "endless monument" which ends the *Epithalamion* may be a variation of the same figure. The stability of the tower figures the stability of life free from time and death. Once again, we come to see the hierogamy as an aspect of the tower, which stands as humanity's creative ascent to live in the sky. The airy song which rose to the sky in the eight stanza has, so to speak, concretized into a tangible monument. In the Bible, this kind of union is presented in demonic form as the tower of Babel. Rather than a genuine dwelling among both the earth and the sky, Babel becomes rather an image of the rising and falling of empires—and man's associated arrogance. Spenser's dialectical imagination also modulates his architecture into an image of decline and the destructive power of mutability. This sense finds fullest expression in his *Complaints* volume, particularly *The Ruines of Time* and *Ruines of Rome*.

In the *Epithalamion*, however, the towers and temples don't have this clear sense of decay, though it may be latent in the progression of imagery. The bride's identification with the architecture could suggest that the union of human spirit and sky might not be as stable as it looks; that the upward climb always necessitates a descent, though not necessarily a demonic one. In the thirteenth stanza, the bride appears to absorb some of the power of the temple which she is and surpasses:

Behold whiles she before the altar stands
Hearing the holy priest that to her speakes
And blesseth her with his two happy hands,
How the red roses flush vp in her cheekes,
And the pure snow with goodly vermill stayne,
Like crimsin dyde in grayne,
That euen th'Angels which continually,
About the sacred Altare doe remaine,
Forget their seruice and about her fly,

Ofte peeping in her face that seemes more fayre,
The more they on it stare.
But her sad eyes still fastened on the ground,
Are gouerned with goodly modesty,
That suffers not one looke to glaunce awry,
Which may let in a little thought vnsownd.
Why blush ye loue to giue to me your hand,
The pledge of all our band?
Sing ye sweet Angels, Alleluya sing,
That all the woods may answere and your eccho ring.

The red roses rising in the bride's cheeks are a displaced tree of life, and likewise the snow in her white skin may be the waters of life. We have reached a restoration of the garden in the bride. The angels encircling her suggest a full integration with a higher state. The image evokes paintings of the Assumption of Mary—of which, Titian's is probably the most famous. The conventional depiction of Mary's Assumption is for Angels to be swirling around her, carrying her to heaven. I'm also reminded of the ending to Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*, in which Satan puts Jesus atop the temple in Jerusalem after tempting Jesus with everything from food to the city of Rome. Citing scripture to goad him, Satan tells him to jump off. Jesus easily declines, and an astonished Satan falls while Angels carry Jesus to heaven. Satan's descent and Jesus' ascent happen simultaneously, and the rise from the temple suggests that Jesus has transcended it. Internalizing scripture enables him to resist Satan's commands and achieve a state higher than the temple can provide. He has absorbed its power, and the rest of us—by implication—should seek salvation through Jesus rather than through the temple. I can't help but think that something like this is occurring in the *Epithalamion* when the angels "forget their service" and orbit the bride rather than the altar. The bride individualizes the temple, and supersedes its power when the angels metaphorically elevate the bride to the highest point in the poem, above even the holy altar. Her "sad eyes" look down because almost everything is below her. The temple itself slips from the imagery halfway through the stanza. The poet no longer looks for paradise in the priest or the temple, but in his wife, the apex of his imagination.

The wedded couple's transcendence of the church accords with the Protestant vision of marriage which Spenser helped to establish. Divine love is not found on earth through celibacy, but through physical union. The ascendent *agape* we've been considering, symbolized by the angels surrounding the bride, achieves its height only because the couple anticipates erotic pleasure. Welsford argues that, for Spenser, "to try to separate *eros* from *agape* is about as sensible as to try and separate inhalation from exhalation in breathing" (88). At least part of the reason the bride seems to absorb the temple's power is that she represents a fuller vision of love than the temple can afford—one which includes *eros*. I said earlier that theologians for millennia have worked quite hard to circumvent all the sex in the Song of Songs. Many were writing from the Catholic cloisters, where it would hardly occur to them that the Song really could be about sex. This sort of Catholic thought upholds a version of the Platonic ladder, positing that erotic love is a diluted form of spiritual love, a higher state which celibacy—or a nice biblical gloss—helps one achieve. Protestantism's comparatively high esteem for marriage posits that erotic love is at worst a necessary rung on the ladder, but at best the only way to understand the depth of divine love. Sex isn't a force for good *per se*: Spenser is all too aware of how easily erotic love can slip into vice and sin. The *Faerie Queene* outlines many of these slips in detail. Still, the presumed end of the epic is the wedding of Gloriana and Arthur—the creation of a new

dispensation through a virtuous and erotic union. The *Epithalamion* perhaps gives us some sense of the emotional impact that conclusion might've possessed had Spenser lived to write it. It's movement, which centers *agape* and the temple before *eros* and the marriage bed, suggests that chaste sexual love is not a debasement of *agape*, it's the realization of it.

We have until this point in the poem been on a steady move upward. The dark isolation has given way to a sunny social world and the bride herself. The poem has drawn a circle of safety around the ritual—including as many aspects of creation as possible—and at its holy center stands the altar and the bride seeming to absorb its heavenly power. The waters and tree of life are in the bride's form, and when the poet takes her in hand he joins her in a recreated paradise. The poem's imagery has proceeded as high as it can go while plausibly maintaining the narrative of a bourgeois wedding. Although consecrated in religious terms, the wedding has yet to be completed in bodily terms. The poem therefore needs to modulate into another key and begin a descent into night and another level of the imagination.

III

I'm not the first critic to observe that descent characterizes the second part of the *Epithalamion*, particularly the final stanzas. Hieatt found it by considering the sun's movement in the poem, though the descent imagery is much more complex than merely the setting of the sun. As the poem moves from the sunlit ceremony's spiritual love toward the moonlit marriage bed's physical love, there's a corresponding descent, replete with sexual anxieties and demonic imagery. This descent isn't a moral descent, or purely a movement to a more hellish state, though it is fraught with dangers. I'll try to suggest that the descent in the second half is creative and stands in a dialectical relationship to the ascent in the first. The ascent to *agape* and the descent to *eros* are not absolutely opposite trajectories, but two parts of a single progression to be identified with each other.

Although the bride's downcast eyes might already be an instance of the poem's descending spirit, we begin to descend properly in the fourteenth stanza, in which we find a good deal of pouring liquids:

> Now al is done; bring home the bride againe,
> Bring home the triumph of our victory,
> Bring home with you the glory of her gaine,
> With ioyance bring her and with iollity.
> Neuer had man more ioyfull day then this,
> Whom heauen would heape with blis.
> Make feast therefore now all this liue long day,
> This day for euer to me holy is,
> Poure out the wine without restraint or stay,
> Poure not by cups, but by the belly full,
> Poure out to all that wull,
> And sprinkle all the postes and wals with wine,
> That they may sweat, and drunken be withall.
> Crowne ye God Bacchus with a coronall,
> And Hymen also crowne with wreathes of vine,
> And let the Graces daunce vnto the rest;
> For they can doo it best:

The whiles the maydens doe theyr carroll sing,
To which the woods shal answer and theyr eccho ring.

The repetition of imperatives—more even than usual—reflect the repetitive chants associated with drinking, and perhaps with the half-automatic act of drinking itself. The "triumph of our victory" which begins the stanza evokes the Roman processional celebrations of military victory. Welsford notes rightly that "[t]he use of the word 'our' suggests that the homecoming of the bridal pair is a triumph celebrating their common victory over difficulties that had stood in the way of their marriage" (182). The victory, then, is over the pains and sorrows past. Still, the Roman triumph would usually include captured generals enslaved for ridicule, and one can't entirely separate this violent image of imperial conquest from Spenser's word. We are potentially closer to Theseus and Hippolyta at the start of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the conquering king with his conquered queen, than the loving parity at the play's end. Both images operate simultaneously as the poet turns his attention to the social activity of feasting and drinking.

Bacchus, the god of wine, is hardly distinguished from Hymen, the god of marriage, as both are crowned with garlands—possibly a variation on the tree of life. The wine is also a variation on the water of life (as in the eucharist), one with a decided communal aspect. While sound and music previously constituted the social sphere—the primary image being the music rising to the heavens—here, it is characterized by revelry and food and drink. The primary image has shifted to the downward pouring of wine. One can't make too much of this observation on its own, but it does seem to indicate the poem's shift to images of descent. The Graces recur here, though they have modulated to signify their agricultural aspects.[10] The stanza in general is a clear manifestation of autumnal harvest imagery—characterized above all by feasting and drink. A sunset is the diurnal equivalent of autumn, and night is the equivalent of winter. The harvest imagery occurs with the arrival of sunset, and indicates that we are about to decline from life to death.

Stanza 15 begins clearly this descent:

Ring ye the bels, ye yong men of the towne,
And leaue your wonted labors for this day:
This day is holy; doe ye write it downe,
That ye for euer it remember may.
This day the sunne is in his chiefest hight,
With Barnaby the bright,
From whence declining daily by degrees,
He somewhat loseth of his heat and light,
When once the Crab behind his back he sees.
But for this time it ill ordained was,
To chose the longest day in all the yeare,
And shortest night, when longest fitter weare:
Yet neuer day so long, but late would passe.
Ring ye the bels, to make it weare away,
And bonefiers make all day,
And daunce about them, and about them sing:
that all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

[10] Conti in particular emphasizes the Graces' agricultural aspects. (Book IV, chapter 15)

This stanza has the distinction of being at seventeen lines the shortest, besides the last. The brevity occurs as the poet begins to check his clock and count the minutes until he and his wife can go to bed. The poet's request to Apollo in the seventh stanza to "let this one day be mine" (125) seems to have come true as the poet declares here the holiness of the day, though that might have more to do with the general holiday—St. Barnabas' Day, which in Spenser's time was celebrated on the summer solstice. This fact helps one understand the second part of the stanza, which describes the declining hours of daylight and the change from the astrological sign of Gemini to Cancer.[11] The crab mentioned here seems to indicate a devouring aspect of mutability, an association we find also in the shifting astrological signs in the proem to Book V of the *Faerie Queene*.

In any case, the poem's understanding of time and festivity have modulated to a lower level. This stanza is framed by exhortations to make music. Stanza eight has a similar emphasis on song and music, but the image there is the people's voice rising to the firmament. Here, the song is related to decline and wearing away the day. The poet is clearly discontent, if belatedly, about his choice of date, and how long he'll have to wait till sunset and the marriage bed. Music is now something to pass time, which in this stanza is imagined as decline and falling away. We have seen that earlier in the poem, the wedding's time was imagined as a rise out of the pains and sorrows past, culminating in the "endless matrimony" (217) at the altar. The poet is still in anticipation of something, but the lower state seems located less in the past than the present. Mutability rather than restoration seems the primary impulse of time.

Curiously, it's the annual rather than the diurnal cycle evoked here, which gives a sense that the larger annual cycle is also being mapped onto the wedding day. One finds when looking at the poem's imagery that there is a movement of the imagery which loosely follows the seasons. The poem begins in a declining darkness with the impending light of spring, and vernal imagery of flowers, nymphs, and a reborn Nature, following soon. The pastoral beginning modulates into a social center characterized by the bride's beauty and the sun's heat. Autumnal harvest imagery follows—replete with food and wine. Careful attention is paid to the sun's decline, and a withdrawal from the human community. Finally the wintry darkness returns along with anxieties of death; the poem returns to it's beginning, in anticipation of future fertility.[12] I wouldn't push this hazy seasonal movement too far—I don't think it a particularly productive question, for example, to ask whether the seventeenth stanza is a part of autumn or winter. But it seems that this much larger cycle is evoked—if only in outline—by the smaller diurnal cycle, and that both these cycles are in turn shadowed by an even grander order of life, death, and rebirth. The poem seems even on this level to be pointing out the cosmic implications in the relative minutiae of the wedding day.

By the sixteenth stanza, we are moving quickly towards death and a sense of time characterized by impatience and worry:

> Ah when will this long weary day haue end,
> And lende me leaue to come vnto my loue?
> How slowly do the houres theyr numbers spend?
> How slowly does sad Time his feathers moue?

[11] For a full explanation of the astrological movement, see Campbell. "'The Crab behind his back': Astrology in Spenser's *Epithalamion*." *Notes and Queries*, Vol. ns-34, no. 2, 1987, pp 200–201.

[12] This seasonal movement is suggested briefly at the end of Hieatt's book (69-74). It seems an inevitable conclusion from the 365 'long lines' that some sort of annual cycle is integrated into the poem. Hieatt draws the fascinating comparison with *Amoretti* 70, but otherwise leaves the imagery surprisingly unexplored.

Hast thee O fayrest Planet to thy home
Within the Westerne fome:
Thy tyred steedes long since haue need of rest.
Long though it be, at last I see it gloome,
And the bright euening star with golden creast
Appeare out of the East.
Fayre childe of beauty, glorious lampe of loue
That all the host of heauen in rankes doost lead,
And guydest louers through the nights dread,
How chearefully thou lookest from aboue,
And seemst to laugh atweene thy twinkling light
As ioying in the sight
Of these glad many which for ioy doe sing,
That all the woods them answer and their echo ring.

The stanza begins with some questions that reveal an impatient poet. Time is figured here as numbers and feathers and like arbitrary objectifications. The previous stanza's emphasis on cyclical time is less clear here. We find the poet waiting for a particular event: while he says he's waiting for the setting of the sun—what Spenser calls the "fairest planet"—his mind is presumably more on the sex he'll have once he's in bed. The *Epithalamion*'s total imagery suggests the cyclical movement of the wedding day, but there's also a linear progression, and the joys of a wedding are 'once in a lifetime,' as the cliché goes, which suggest that they exist outside the natural cycles of the visible world. The joys of the wedding night also happen but once—unless, like Spenser, you marry twice.[13] Nevertheless, a singular event, which can't be considered as a recurring aspect of cyclical time, points to a linear sequence. The poem's language of debt indicates much the same radical break from endless recurrence.

The *Epithalamion* has then, like all literature, two temporal impulses: one cyclical, and one moving from a decided beginning to a decided end. Some literary traditions emphasize one or the other. Japanese *waka* and haiku poetry, for example, finds it almost essential to indicate a season in every poem. Western literature in the nineteenth century seems considerably more invested in a vaguely Hegelian eschatological history, which provoked the modernist commitment to the cyclical. Spenser himself meditates upon both conceptions of time in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, where we are presented in the first canto with a regressive decline of time which by the second canto has become just one pole of all natural cycles. These cycles in turn are viewed as the mutable manifestation of Nature's reach to divine unity, or as an anticipation of an absolute end to history. This final break from violent history to the restful "pillars of eternity" (*FQ* VII.viii.2.4) occurs only in the poet's prayer, which suggests that for Spenser a complete break from history is never possible in life as we know it, but that it may still be glimpsed with a combination of human experience and divine grace. The human ritual centered in the *Epithalamion*, structured around a cycle but always pointing to something greater, provides such a vision.

The central image of the sixteenth stanza is the darkening sky and the evening star leading the "host of heaven" and lovers into night. I don't know why it appears in the east—it

[13] Not a lot is known about Spenser's first wife or their marriage. She seems to have died around five years before Spenser's second marriage, in the late 1580s or 1590 (Hadfield 288). This grim memory may help explain the vague shadows of death which haunt the *Epithalamion*.

could be a printer's error, though it could signify some kind of more general renewal/decline cycle as heavenly bodies move from east to west. In any case, the evening star is the planet Venus, a fact Spenser acknowledges in the *Faerie Queene* (IV.x.26). It's fitting that the evening star is leading lovers, and hints at where they're being led. The ancient Greek name for the evening star is Hesperus, to whom the bride is compared in the sixth stanza (line 95) as she awakes from her dreams. We're at the opposite end of the day, but there's soon to be a second awakening, so to speak, from the state of virginity into the world of erotic marriage.

The stanza seems carefully written not to include any upward movement or ascent. Hesperus doesn't rise, he "appears;" the sky "glooms," and although Hesperus is above the couple, he is still looking down. When one explores the imagery of descent in the latter part of the poem, one can never be certain that Spenser knew entirely what he was doing. Northrop Frye rightly observes that "descent themes, from New Testament times to the eighteenth century, have the difficulty that their full metaphorical exploitation in literature is hampered by the ideological derivation, the chain of being and the like, which provide little if any place for a creative descent" (200). Most descents before the Romantic period are merely journeys to death or hell. One has to wait for Blake or Shelley to find genuine creative power found through descent.[14] Perhaps one of the reasons the Romantics were generally so interested in Spenser is that he, more than any of his contemporaries, tried to explore creative descents in his limited way. In the *Epithalamion*, the erotic descent begins as the day turns to night. Nature descends into darkness as the poet descends into the dark womb, the source of human creation. While this happens, the descent imagery is sometimes confused or displaced, but I hope to demonstrate its presence and indicate that from it springs much of the poem's power.

By the seventeenth stanza, night has arrived, and as the poem descends into it, the community must be dissolved:

Now ceasse ye damsels your delights forepast;
Enough is it, that all the day was youres:
Now day is doen, and night is nighing fast:
Now bring the Bryde into the brydall boures.
Now night is come, now soone her disaray,
And in her bed her lay;
Lay her in lillies and in violets,
And silken courteins ouer her display,
And odourd sheetes, and Arras couerlets.
Behold how goodly my faire loue does ly
In proud humility;
Like vnto Maia, when as Ioue her tooke,
In Tempe, lying on the flowry gras,
Twixt sleepe and wake, after she weary was,
With bathing in the Acidalian brooke.
Now it is night, ye damsels may be gon,
And leaue my loue alone,
And leaue likewise your former lay to sing:
The woods no more shal answere, nor your echo ring.

[14] Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* are clear examples of creativity located downward, with ossified tyranny located upward.

This stanza also has a clear movement to it: the dissolving day leads to the wedding bed, which the poet compares to the union of Jove and Maia. Put this way, the stanza might seem a disparate compilation, but each part, identified with each other, forms a unity. As the community arrived earlier with the day, with the arrival of night, the community—indicated by "ye damsels"—withdraws. With the social sphere dissolved, the poet can finally do what he's waited for and lay the bride in bed. The marriage bed is characterized by flowers and fabrics. As we saw in stanza three, the flowers are probably functioning as a charm to ward off danger. With the waters of the Acadalian brook, we may have another variation of the Edenic imagery. I'm not sure if the fabrics have any particular symbolic import, but the description is rich and sensual. The delicate splendour of an arras tapestry is its own kind of "proud humility." The oxymoron describes the bride's triumph over pride, a state which Petrarch's Laura never managed to achieve. Petrarch says she is "humble in herself, haughty to love" ("humile in sé, ma 'ncontra Amor superba;" *Canzoniere* 323, line 64). The higher moral state of the bride is—at least partly—what enables the erotic consummation, which Spenser begins to describe with a series of similes, each involving Jupiter. The first is in the final part of this stanza; there are two more in the next. I'll for now set the simile aside to consider all three together in a moment. It's worth noting now that the seventeenth stanza also marks a shift in the refrain: from this point on, it's in the negative. The poet naturally wants silence so that he and his bride can sleep. But on a deeper level, the Narcissus-Echo level of Nature as merely a mirror reflecting the self has, in some sense, been resolved now that the time of consummation has come. The sexual union of opposites—male and female, husband and wife, heaven and earth—creates a nature which is not only the self or not only other, but both the self and not the self. The poet's stable ego which views everything as an echo is vanishing for silence and surrender. The ascent to a higher level of nature happens alongside a corresponding descending into night.

I turn now to the eighteenth stanza, in which we find two more Jove similes:

Now welcome night, thou night so long expected,
That long daies labour doest at last defray,
And all my cares, which cruell loue collected,
Hast sumd in one, and cancelled for aye:
Spread thy broad wing ouer my loue and me,
That no man may vs see,
And in thy sable mantle vs enwrap,
From feare of perrill and foule horror free.
Let no false treason seeke vs to entrap,
Nor any dread disquiet once annoy
The safety of our ioy:
But let the night be calme and quietsome,
Without tempestuous storms or sad afray:
Lyke as when Ioue with fayre Alcmena lay,
When he begot the great Tirynthian groome:
Or lyke as when he with thy selfe did lie,
And begot Maiesty.
And let the mayds and yongmen cease to sing:
Ne let the woods them answer, nor theyr eccho ring.

The most salient features of this stanza are its similes, which occupy the last third of it. I'll speak first about the Jove similes—the two here and the one in the previous stanza—before speaking generally about the rest of the stanza. Harold Bloom suggests in some brief comments on the poem that the Jupiter similes present a violent or stormy version of the divine union.

> Spenser takes pains both to associate his own marriage with the union of Jove and Maia, and to dissociate it from the ritual pattern attendant upon other couplings of Jove (with Alcmena, and with night). That pattern (repeated by Dido and Aeneas in *Aeneid*, VI, for instance) is one of bringing together heaven and earth by storm, so as to renew the fertility of earth even as the god takes his human bride. By rejecting the storm as the proper setting (lines 326-331) Spenser carefully removes part of the pagan background he has invoked in the reference to Jove and Maia (lines 301-310). (Bloom 19)

Bloom considers the divine union imagery here, and the fertility it generates. He thinks of Jove as a stately metaphor for lightning. The divine union image here is—unlike the earlier rising song or the bride "ascending up with many a stately stair" (line 179)—the lightning storm crashing from the heavens to meet the earth. The descent is violent and destructive, even as it brings renewed fertility. Bloom reads Jove's various unions as being a state the poet half wants and half rejects. I think Bloom is right to read ambivalence here, though I'm not certain why he privileges the Maia simile over the other two, since it isn't clear precisely what the Alcmena and Night similes are describing. Syntactically, lines 328-331 could be describing either a "calm and quietsome" night or "tempestuous storms." Thinking grammatically, one must be right and the other wrong, but thinking poetically, we can hold both in mind at once: the night is both tempestuous and calm, and the poet both desires and rejects the jovial union. What he seems to accept is the erotic descent of the heavens; what he seems to reject is the violence of the storm.

The question may be asked: why does Spenser choose these three instances specifically? The only obvious similarity between them—and perhaps the chief takeaway—is that each produces illustrious progeny. Jove with Maia begat Hermes, or Mercury; with Alcmena, he begat Hercules, whom Spenser calls the "Tirynthian groom"; with Night, Majesty. None have much in common besides favourable attributes—Mercury being the messenger of the gods and in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* figures as a peaceful arbiter (*FQ* VII.vi.14-18); Hercules being the great hero, "with kingly power endued" (*FQ* V.i.2.9); Majesty being, as the name implies, a force of reverence.

I'll be frank and say that I'm not entirely sure what Spenser has in mind when he says that Majesty springs from Night and Jupiter. As far as anybody can tell, there's no source to this. Welsford suggests in a note that Spenser was misremembering the opening of Ovid's *Fasti* V, where Majesty is said to be the daughter of Honour and Reverence (lines 1-52). At any rate, Jove might be read as a metaphor for order (however ambivalent), and Night as disorder. As in the larger scheme of the *Epithalamion*, polar opposites combine to create something new and good. The three encounters move also in a progression from brightest to darkest, so to speak. Maia's was, temporally speaking, a fairly typical jovial encounter. To bed Alcmena, Zeus both disguised himself as her husband, Amphitryon, and prolonged the night to last the length of three nights. In the last simile, Jove finally becomes one with the night. As the poem itself drifts from day to night, these similes seem to follow suit and provide the metaphorical movement, however obscure, into darkness.

While the bride is compared with Maia, and the night compared to other evenings, there's an implicit comparison between Jupiter and Spenser himself. Given Jupiter's penchant for disguise, and for bedding women like Maia, "twixt sleep and wake" (line 309)—given, that is, Jupiter's penchant for rape, this seems another reckless simile. The poet identifies himself with Jupiter, and implicitly suggests he's as capable of violence, if on a less grand scale. Like the earlier Medusa simile, there lurks a deep fear that the erotic embrace might turn violent. Although the poet seems to reject the violence of the lightning, there appears nevertheless a recognition of it within himself.

With night comes erotic delight, which occupies the first part of the eighteenth stanza, but also nightmares and fear, which swirl at its the center. The language of debt recurs in this context. As earlier in the poem, the pleasures of the wedding night cancel the debt of cares. This language suggests a new mode of temporality free from cyclical repetition. Predatory lending may be said to create a cycle of debt, but—more pertinently—Petrarchan love is nothing if not a cycle of frustrated desire. Spenser's *Amoretti*, which moves in schizophrenic patterns from joy to misery, may indicate both the *Epithalamion*'s "pains and sorrows past" and "all my cares, which cruel love collected." Pains and joys in the *Amoretti*, or most sonnet sequences, are temporary. Even within a single sonnet, joy often turns to pain and pain to pleasure. The only way out of this cycle and out of debt is a vertical reorientation to a radically different mode of being—that is, a cancellation of the debt into a state unimaginable from the position of debt or debtor. The debt here is figurative, not financial, but the same principle applies. Night's erotic pleasures redeem the past woes of Petrarchan courtship, and these expand to present anxieties in the stanza's second part. The anxieties are vague, but words like "peril" and "horror" suggest that the poet is worried about more than fussy details.

These fears will clarify themselves in the nineteenth stanza:

Let no lamenting cryes, nor dolefull teares,
Be heard all night within nor yet without:
Ne let false whispers breeding hidden feares,
Breake gentle sleepe with misconceiued dout.
Let no deluding dreames, nor dreadful sights
Make sudden sad affrights;
Ne let housefyres, nor lightnings helpelesse harmes,
Ne let the Pouke, nor other euill sprights,
Ne let mischiuous witches with theyr charmes,
Ne let hob Goblins, names whose sence we see not,
Fray vs with things that be not.
Let not the shriech Oule, nor the Storke be heard:
Nor the night Rauen that still deadly yels,
Nor damned ghosts cald vp with mighty spels,
Nor griesly vultures make vs once affeard:
Ne let th'unpleasant Quyre of Frogs still croking
Make vs to wish theyr choking.
Let none of these theyr drery accents sing;
Ne let the woods them answer, nor theyr eccho ring.

Lines 349-50 were the only specific part of the poem C.S. Lewis couldn't confidently admire, saying the lines are "either too comic or not comic enough" (372)[15]. I assume it's not comic enough in that it certainly isn't a trisyllabic burlesque rhyme as one finds in Butler or Byron; too comic because, as it is, it's the only so-called feminine rhyme in the poem. The scansion could suggest that Spenser wants "choking" and "croaking" to be one syllable each. I have trouble pronouncing it like that, and while I don't know if Spenser would have, I'm still more inclined to say that the feeble-sounding extra syllable on these lines imitate the obnoxious frogs who don't know when to quit. If one does add those extra syllables, it makes this stanza (almost by default) the most metrically irregular in the poem—a reflection of the destabilizing fear lurking in the lines.

The aural anxieties modulate into psychological fears—the "deluding dreams" mentioned in line 338 seem to be what are elaborated in the rest of the stanza. Their order appears to be fairly random—generally, sounds, ghouls, birds, and sounds again. One may have expected Spenser to go back down the chain of being in roughly the order he went up it, but the confused order seems to express the dizzying effects of fear. The sense that all these things are really "deluding dreams," that all these fears "be not," makes it difficult to say they're external to the poet or the wedding bed. It's probably more right to say that the poem externalizes them. They "be not" because they have a reality in the imagination. To expel anxiety is to integrate it into one's whole being. Most conscious life is spent repressing fear—which usually means it's the primary operating impulse. Ideologies and tyrannies of all kinds focus on this conscious thought, for what lurks beneath consciousness tends to be difficult to pinpoint or control. Descents into what the conscious ego has repressed are perhaps all that enable freedom from it.

Many of the images here are demonic parodies of earlier imagery: the "lamenting cries" and "false whispers" shadow the poet's song; the housefires parody Hymen's torch; the Puck, evil sprights, goblins, and witches are demonic versions of the Nymphs, Graces, the virgins, and "fresh boys" which the poet had earlier asked for help. The catalogue of malicious birds mirrors the amorous birdsong in stanza five. The "damned ghosts called up with mighty spells" are hellish versions of the classical gods the poet has invoked for protection. The quire of frogs croaking parodies the "merry music" (130) in the eighth stanza. These demonic parodies take us into the double, or doppelganger, an aspect of literary descent themes. Nineteenth century writers were particularly interested in doubles—Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Dostoevsky's *The Double* are ready examples, though Poe, Wilde, and Nabokov all explore the idea. At the core of the double theme is the separation of identity—often along moral terms; in its simplest cases, the story is about an evil version of a good character. The readiest example in Spenser is Duessa as a demonic double of Una; Duessa's very name indicates the fracturing of the singular identity which Una's points to. The Narcissus imagery we considered earlier is a version of the double theme—Narcissus falls in love with a lower-world copy of himself. The separation of stable identity seems a core aspect of descent themes, whether demonic or creative. We shall see that the poet's descent is creative; his identity dissolves but simultaneously reforms as he unites with his bride. Still he must pass through demonic visions of an underworld which mirrors the world of our true desire. We shall encounter the double image again in the twenty-first stanza.

The nineteenth stanza's fear, now dispelled, facilitates erotic pleasure in the twentieth:

> But let stil Silence trew night watches keepe,

[15] Lewis also dislikes the refrain passing into the negative after the sixteenth stanza. I'm not sure he recognized any significance behind it.

That sacred peace may in assurance rayne,
And tymely sleep, when it is tyme to sleepe,
May poure his limbs forth on your pleasant playne,
The whiles an hundred little winged loues,
Like diuers fethered doues,
Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,
And in the secret darke, that none reproues,
Their prety stealthes shal worke, and snares shal spread
To filch away sweet snatches of delight,
Conceald through couert night.
Ye sonnes of Venus, play your sports at will,
For greedy pleasure, carelesse of your toyes,
Thinks more vpon her paradise of ioyes,
Then what ye do, albe it good or ill.
All night therefore attend your merry play,
For it will soone be day:
Now none doth hinder you, that say or sing,
Ne will the woods now answer, nor your Eccho ring.

Noise and demonic disturbances have for the most part been banished, and so the married couple can enjoy their marriage bed with Silence on guard. There's a pun on "rayne" in line 352—it might mean *reign* or *rain*. The rain—implicit also in the pouring sleep—gives us another image of the descending sky unifying with the fertile earth. The pouring sleep is a displaced image of the divine union, closely related to the poet's own sexual union and the generative power of semen. Sex here is described only in terms of "winged loves," or Cupids, flying around the bed. This image presents an erotic type to the angels which encircle the altar and bride in the thirteenth stanza (229-233). The parallel imagery suggests that the altar and the wedding bed are to be identified with each other. The *agape* of the altar and the *eros* of the bed are not separate forms of love, but mutual aspects of a single love. The figurative link between these single images may expand into the network of light and dark, day and night, song and silence, ascent and descent imagery which surround them, and one may identify the light and dark halves of the poem with each other. While one half of the poem is characterized by daylight and ascent, and the other by night and descent, these are really mutual aspects of a single cycle. In following the natural cycle of one day, and integrating within that cycle the imagery of a larger seasonal cycle, Spenser collapses any kind of absolute separation these can hold in our mind, and collapses also any separation of sexual and spiritual love.

The middle part of this stanza (lines 360-4) repeatedly uses words of secrecy or concealment. The concealment is partly for the reader. Spenser's decision to write an epithalamium about his own wedding ensures a finer line of decorum. While classical epithalamia tend to be rather frank about sex, Spenser has no such luxury. To any careful reader, it should be fairly clear what this stanza is describing, but the imagery is very careful to avoid anything bawdy or carnal. While the poet would no doubt like to maintain this secrecy, a presence—perhaps unwanted—disturbs them:

Who is the same, which at my window peepes?
Or whose is that faire face, that shines so bright?
Is it not Cinthia, she that neuer sleepes,

But walkes about high heauen al the night?
O fayrest goddesse, do thou not enuy
My loue with me to spy:
For thou likewise didst loue, though now vnthought,
And for a fleece of woll, which priuily,
The Latmian shephard once vnto thee brought,
His pleasures with thee wrought.
Therefore to vs be fauorable now;
And sith of wemens labours thou hast charge,
And generation goodly dost enlarge,
Encline thy will t'effect our wishfull vow,
And the chast wombe informe with timely seed,
That may our comfort breed:
Till which we cease our hopefull hap to sing,
Ne let the woods vs answere, nor our Eccho ring.

Cynthia, the moon goddess identified with Diana or Artemis, disturbs the couple. Earlier the bride was compared favourably to Phoebe, but the shift in name suggests a shift in divine aspect, and the goddess here is considerably more envious and aggressive than the earlier allusion would suggest. At least, the poet seems much more afraid of her. He's worried she'll envy the wedded couple, and—as gods are wont to do—lash out and curse them. The poet briefly relates Cynthia's affair with Endymion (the "Latmian shepherd") in an effort to placate her.

Spenser's letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, which he appended to the first edition of the *Faerie Queene*, indicates that Spenser approved of allegorizing Cynthia as Queen Elizabeth. I'm not sure how much it enriches the poem, but one may do so here, quite plausibly, as Elizabeth reacted so poorly to Raleigh's own marriage, she threw Raleigh and his wife in the Tower of London. It's hard to imagine the Queen would even remotely care about Spenser enough to do the same, but a poet can't be too careful. Endymion, in this reading, would be one of Elizabeth's ultimately failed suitors—Robert Dudley, the Duke of Anjou, et cetera. While asking for the Queen's blessing seems normal enough from a man who was at court once or twice, such allegorizing doesn't present the virgin Queen in a particularly positive light. It makes her seem envious and neurotic—which she may well have been, but Spenser doesn't often say so.

Whether one reads Cynthia as Elizabeth or not, it's clear that she presents a demonic version of chastity, a virtue the bride is so often praised for. She's really a demonic parody of the bride herself—another instance of the doubling we've already explored. Book III of the *Faerie Queene* demonstrates that, for Spenser, chastity is not the same as virginity, though in many scenarios virginity is a realization of chastity. The real aim of the virtue, usually, is a conjugal union with love. For Britomart, the central knight of Book III, this means marrying the unimpressive Artegal. For Spenser, this means sexual union with his bride. In the context of marriage, virginity becomes a distortion of chastity—not merely because it contradicts the poet's own desire, but because it indicates some kind of deficiency in one's capacity for love. Cynthia may be seen as an external threat—a jealous Elizabeth—or as an aspect of the bride, something undesirable or demonic within her. Either/or formulations like this should probably be reconsidered as both/and: the neurotic envy of Cynthia-Elizabeth is an unproductive distortion of love and virtue. The poet turns at the end of the stanza to "goodly generation" and "timely seed" because fertility is the aim of love and virtue. He prays to the feminine power that blocks this fertility—both internal and external—in an effort to cast it out, and, presumably, is rewarded.

The twenty-second stanza presents another goddess:

And thou great Iuno, which with awful might
The lawes of wedlock still dost patronize,
And the religion of the faith first plight
With sacred rites hast taught to solemnize:
And eeke for comfort often called art
Of women in their smart,
Eternally bind thou this louely band,
And all thy blessings vnto vs impart.
And thou glad Genius, in whose gentle hand,
The bridale bowre and geniall bed remaine,
Without blemish or staine,
And the sweet pleasures of theyr loues delight
With secret ayde doest succour and supply,
Till they bring forth the fruitfull progeny,
Send vs the timely fruit of this same night.
And thou fayre Hebe, and thou Hymen free,
Grant that it may so be.
Til which we cease your further prayse to sing,
Ne any woods shal answer, nor your Eccho ring.

In some sense, we have returned to the poem's start, with its steady stream of divine invocations. While in the poem's early phases, the invocations were to the Muses, Nymphs, Hours, and Graces—all relatively harmless feminine forces—at this late stage, more powerful divinities are called upon. The poet invokes Juno, the goddess of marriage, the queen of the gods, and the representative goddess of all feminine power. Unlike Cynthia, a metaphor for the moon, there's no image attached to Juno, who is characterized only by her "awful might." Taken with the previous stanza, it seems clear that the poem moves into a world of feminine powers, of which the poet seems both awed and afraid. The poet himself, as he unites with his bride, dissolves his singular identity. For the masculine Spenser, this necessitates a descent into the feminine. The darkness takes the poet outside of his masculine identity into a new loving state. As the poem descends into night, and the poet into the womb, he confronts the "awful might" of abstract feminine power. Juno may have no concrete imagery attached to her because the womb itself is a 'void' of creation. As the poet enters this natural darkness with the bride, who has been identified with the garden, there may also be a displaced descent into the earth, humanity's womb and tomb. Death lurks on the horizon, which seems to be receding toward the bridal bed.

Considering the poem's total movement of feminine powers, we might find shades of Robert Graves' *White Goddess*. As the poem moves from daylight to night, the poem's feminine presences become increasingly powerful and, perhaps, hostile to the masculine. Tracking the poem's feminine powers, the virginal nymphs give way to the bride, who is followed by a crone-goddess (Cynthia), and finally the maternal goddess—virgin, bride, crone, mother. The order is significant: placing the fertile Juno after the crone Cynthia indicates a rejuvenation of the feminine principle. Although the poet seems still ambivalent in the face of Juno's "awful might"—revealing perhaps some angst about female power and the demonic forms it might take—he carefully invokes Hebe, goddess of youth and daughter of Juno and Jove. The maternal aspect of Juno must then be primary, for it represents the bride's own future role as mother. The

poet's mention of childbirth may be merely wishful thinking, but his concern for the generative power of sex is genuine enough. He invokes the "glad Genius" as the generative force of the marriage bed. The Genius is the male counterpart to Juno—in Roman religion, a man's divine spirit was called a Genius, a woman's was called her Juno. That the poem raises Hebe only after Juno and the Genius could indicate that masculine and feminine spirits must first be combined in order to produce progeny (like Hebe) or a true marriage (Hymen).

This fruitful progeny becomes the key image of the penultimate stanza:

> And ye high heauens, the temple of the gods,
> In which a thousand torches flaming bright
> Doe burne, that to vs wretched earthly clods
> In dreadful darknesse lend desired light;
> And all ye powers which in the same remayne,
> More then we men can fayne,
> Poure out your blessing on vs plentiously,
> And happy influence vpon vs raine,
> That we may raise a large posterity,
> Which from the earth, which they may long possesse,
> With lasting happinesse,
> Vp to your haughty pallaces may mount,
> And for the guerdon of theyr glorious merit
> May heauenly tabernacles there inherit,
> Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.
> So let vs rest, sweet loue, in hope of this,
> And cease till then our tymely ioyes to sing,
> The woods no more vs answer, nor our eccho ring.

This stanza moves from darkness to "desired light" and prayers for the future. The temple of the gods, characterized by the multiplication of fire, is both a displaced furnace sitting at the bottom of the imagination—a place which necessitates purgation and renewal through the flames (as, say, in Daniel 3:8-25)—and a variation of the empyrean fires of life, such as one finds surrounding God's chariot in the Book of Ezekiel (1:4-28). In the mystical Jewish Merkavah-Hekhalot literature, which explores this very image of the fiery chariot, ascents and descents to the divine *merkavah* (chariot) or *hekhalot* (palaces) aren't clearly differentiated—though, from what I gather, the palaces tend to be up and the chariot, down.[16] Most scholars are baffled by the imagery of descent in these texts—since God is usually "up" there—and while they offer sundry explanations for it, they are usually careful to use quotation marks when they mention a descent to God of any kind (ascents get no such punctuation). I won't claim to have much understanding of these difficult and heterogenous texts, but it seems clear enough that they're trying to challenge the conventional imaginative compass. The altered state associated with upward movement might well bring one to a divine presence, but it seems to identify with a divine vision, one must come at it from above as from below; there must be both a descent and a corresponding ascent—and, perhaps, the identification of these two are in fact how one ultimately alters consciousness to glimpse something beyond anxious mortality.

[16] For some texts from this tradition in English, see James Davila's *Hekhalot Literature in Translation*. Brill, Leiden, 2013.

In the twenty-third stanza of Spenser's poem, one observes just such an identification. The rain of "happy influence" which pours downward creates in turn the corresponding ascent of "blessed saints." Here again there is a figurative union of the earth and the sky: the rains of the sky fall to touch the earth while the "wretched earthly clods" rise to dwell in the sky. Finally we find a hierogamy of both ascent and descent, where the falling rains of heaven are identified with the rising human spirit. The poem achieves concord between the heavens and earth, just as the poet achieves absolute union with his bride. The collapse of heaven and earth, of ascent and descent, provide us with the "heavenly tabernacle," the presence of God. The architectural image returns here. This heavenly temple is the anti-type to the earlier wedding temple—the true edifice promised by the wedding altar and the bride. Spenser doesn't imagine he achieves this himself, but he prays that his "large progeny" does. He desires that his future children will glimpse divinity; the many admirers of the *Epithalamion* are perhaps a part of the "large progeny" the poet prays for.

The fires in the furnace or temple that generate a bountiful rain has the metaphorical seed of an icicle melting, or of spring's heat turning snow into rain. The penultimate stanza represents a vision of redemption, of light and fertility returning to a darkened earth. In some ways, we are back to the poem's start, awaiting day's warm fertility. The wedding day and night have run their course, and are to be followed by another diurnal cycle. While it's true that this cycle to come takes us beyond the scope of the poem, it's also true that the poem, through a complete integration with cyclical time, finds an escape from the cycle itself. We have not returned to the point at the start of the poem, which was introversion; the wedding of two souls exists outside of normal temporal schemes and lifts one from what Blake calls "the same dull round" (*There Is No Natural Religion* IV).

This point is demonstrated by the final stanza, the envoy, which breaks from the narrative sequence of the wedding day. Spenser addresses the poem itself, apologizing for it's apparently hurried composition.

> Song made in lieu of many ornaments,
> With which my loue should duly haue bene dect,
> Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
> Ye would not stay your dew time to expect,
> But promist both to recompens,
> Be vnto her a goodly ornament,
> And for short time an endlesse moniment.

The syntax makes this peculiar stanza difficult to decipher. Welsford points out that "cutting off" (line 429) could qualify "ornaments," which means the poem was hurried as a gift in lieu of more lavish presents; it could also be a verb performed by the song (the song cuts off, that is), which would mean that he wanted this poem or perhaps the entire volume of the *Amoretti and Epithalamion* to be longer (82). The poem is a "goodly recompense" for both its hasty composition and a lack of "ornaments," whatever those might be. Welsford concludes:

> The *Epithalamion* is intended as a personal gift to his bride, which will more than make up for any deficiencies in the actual wedding arrangements, for it is written in her honour and will 'immortalize' her and her wedding day . . . . The abrupt descent from high contemplation to the everyday world of wedding presents and upset timetables, comes not as an anticlimax, but as a final affirmation of the authenticity of the experience described in the *Epithalamion*. (83)

The envoy is a withdrawal from the narrative of the poem and points to its worldly construction. Spenser is hardly the first man to apologize to his wife on his wedding night, though he may be the first to do so for a great poem. In Welsford's eyes, this merely reaffirms his genuine love for his wife. But setting aside the biographical dimension for a moment, I'd like to consider how the envoy, despite it's detachment from the narrative—or, because of it—concludes the poem and resolves some of the concerns we've been tracking throughout this essay.

The envoy returns to the first stanza's concern of poetic composition. The invocation of Orpheus provides at the poem's outset a failed vision of redemption and an indication of the limits of poetry. We return in the last stanza to these suggestions, but see that Spenser's poem is a recompense and, whatever its limits, an endless monument. The redemptive vision may be a modest one—Orpheus failed to resurrect his bride, Spenser manages to recompense both "hasty accidents" and a lack of "ornaments"[17]—but something is redeemed, if only the bride's imagination. We find also a resolution of the Narcissus-Echo image: the envoy acknowledges explicitly that poetry—or this poem, at least—is for another. At the poem's outset, Spenser asks the muses to allow him to write for once about himself instead of others; at the poem's end, he recognizes that the poem was for his love. As we've observed throughout our analysis, however, what appears on one level to be vacillation is better understood as a dialectical identification. The poet doesn't change his mind about whom the poem is for—the opening contrast of either adorning others or singing for oneself is really one path. To adorn others *is* to sing for oneself. Over the course of the wedding day, two bodies have become one, and one body two; the poet has become other, and his bride has become him. The separation between self and other has collapsed, as has the anxiety that poetry is merely Narcissus staring at himself. The poem becomes an object of address—that is, it becomes something external to the poet, which he has half-created but isn't dependent upon. The muses, the "learned sisters" of the first line—best understood as both a convention beyond the poet and an internal manifestation of his own creative energy—are the true starting point, and the bride—understood as both another person, independent of the poet, and a body become one with him—is the poem's end point.

In the Elizabethan period, it was generally assumed that a poet must be a lover. For most of the fifteenth century, love lyric in the vein of Petrarch was the only genre developed with any zeal. The *Epithalamion* reveals many of the concerns resting at the genre's core, including time. European love poetry from at least Dante onward is preoccupied with time and love's relationship to it. In Dante and Petrarch, the mistress dies, but the poet's love triumphs over death through poetic expression. Many poets who follow Petrarch manage to keep their lovers alive, but the same principle holds: poetry enables love to withstand time and death. Spenser's *Amoretti* more or less conforms to this same pattern. We find similar conceits in Spenser that we find later in Shakespeare—that poetry will enable freedom from death. So the poet says to his beloved:

> . . . let baser things deuize
> to dy in dust, but you shall liue by fame:
> my verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
> and in the heuens wryte your glorious name.
> Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,
> our loue shall liue, and later life renew. (*Amoretti* LXXV.9-14)

[17] These strike me as the most obvious referents of the "both" in line 430, though it's by no means certain.

The *Amoretti* ends in a less than euphoric state, however. Taken with the *Epithalamion*, the complete volume appears to give the sense that only love fulfilled through matrimony can truly transcend time. The final line's paradox—"for short time an endlesse monument"—echoes the earlier "endless matrimony" (line 217), which occurs almost exactly halfway through the poem. The two—poem and altar—are identified with one another; the poem is then, no less than the divinely-sanctioned wedding, a fount of eternity. The *Epithalamion*'s concluding line may also remind one of a similar paradox in the *Faerie Queene*: we are told of Adonis, who resides in the center of a garden of erotic pleasure, that he is "eterne in mutabilitie" (III.VI.47). What might Spenser have in mind with these paradoxes? The clue may be in the architectural image he attaches to the "endless monument," which anticipates the "pillars of eternity" which end the *Mutabilitie Cantos*.

We've already explored the architectural image as it appeared in the bride's comparison with a tower. I noted earlier that Spenser, in the *Complaints* volume particularly, modulates this image into ruins. Much of what we encounter in everyday experience is ruins, in the sense that it's the decaying creative work of the past. Every creative endeavour has power for only a short time—when it's re-created in the imagination of an audience. Once the music or the poem ceases to be performed, it becomes only one more ruin, one more aspect of a decaying world. Eyes which fail to see, or ears which fail to hear, do nothing to renew such ruin. All endless monuments exist in short time, for—as far as I can tell—only in the present can the truly eternal be glimpsed. Only in the present can the spirit recreate or restore the ruins of the past. Spenser's poem creates that short time—not a present which always looks anxiously backward and forward in time, but a present around which the past and future revolve. Truly understood and properly felt, every ephemeral act of genuine creativity provides a glimpse of this present. Love and poetry—indivisible acts of the human spirit—reveal a perfect vision of time to our imperfect understanding, one in which time, like nature, is both identified with our imagination, yet still separate from it.

IV

We have now moved through the entire poem and seen, briefly, its general movement. I've been trying to suggest that the poem's core is the dissolution of the subject-object divide through the dialectical union of opposites. While I've alluded to this idea throughout the essay, I'd like to clarify how the poem's total structure creates it. It may be helpful to return to where we started by again considering Hieatt and Welsford's readings of the poem. I said at the start of this essay, echoing Welsford, that the poem has an "onward and upward" trajectory. We've also seen, however, that the imagery in the poem's second half suggests a descent. In what sense does the entire poem move "onward and upward" and yet we find so much darkness and decline in the latter part?

When I speak of 'narrative,' I mean what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls "overthought," or the answer to the question, "what is the poem about?". A summary of the *Epithalamion* in its simplest form would be something like, "a poet gets married." A fuller one would elaborate the general movement through the wedding day, from (1) the lone poet to (2) the ceremony to (3) the wedding bed. These three stages to the poem's narrative might provide us with a fuller understanding of how this "onward and upward" trajectory is presented.

The poem begins with the isolation of the poet. It moves then into a social sphere in which "fresh boys" and "virgins" are increasingly addressed. In this social sphere, we're also

first introduced to the bride. After the ceremonial union at the altar, the social unit is dispersed, and we are then left with the wedded couple and the increasing anxieties which characterize sex. Despite the care and fears, what remains is something neither individual nor social. A wedding, metaphorically, is both individual and social. Human happiness can't be conceived entirely in terms of either—no remotely sane person would want to be only alone or only with other people for their entire life. The best most of us manage is to waver back and forth between solitude and loneliness, social weariness and fulfillment. The metaphorical identification of the social with the individual (where the group *is* the one, and the one *is* the group, without any subordination of either) is in literary terms the ideal state. Most typically in literature—in the Bible, and in comedies of all kinds—this is represented as marriage, where a group of people become one, and one becomes two. The narrative movement of the poem is a simple dialectical one which moves from the single to the collective to the identification of each with the other. It is in this sense that the poem moves steadily in an upward direction. It begins in darkness, moves to light, and then turns to a darkness lighted by desire.

The imagery and metaphors, what Hopkins might call the "underthought," splits the poem roughly in half, moving first in an upward and then downward direction. Hieatt's reading suggests that the poem's climax occurs halfway through—at the wedding altar in the twelfth and thirteenth stanza. For Hieatt, the poem breaks into two halves, the first characterized by sunlight, ascent, and spiritual love; the second by darkness, decline, and erotic love. Hieatt proposes a stanza-matching scheme which has the effect of folding the two halves together, reading one half through the other. We can abandon the stanza-pairing, but still understand that each of the two halves are to be understood through each other. The night can be realized only in its relation to the day; ascent, to descent; sound, to silence, et cetera. Each of these oppositions figuratively forms one part of the diurnal cycle. The circle is, as Hieatt argued in both his book and his 1961 essay, the master image of the poem. It's suggested by the *ring* which ends each stanza, the garlands, and the natural cycles. I said earlier that much of the poem is a kind of charm to draw a circle of safety around the wedded couple. This circle expands with the rising sun, and seems to shrink or grow more tenuous as the couple move into night. The total image of the poem is of a ring of light pushing against an abyss of darkness, widening and widening before it reaches its widest possible extent, and then slowly shrinking and shrinking again till, at the point of vanishing entirely into darkness, it expands beyond limit. That downward drift halfway though the poem seems to conflict with the narrative movement. Welsford argues as much when she suggests that Hieatt's interest in the imagery leaves his interpretation vulnerable to ignoring what is plain on the poem's surface. One must ask, however, whether the apparent conflict between the overthought and underthought—between the narrative and the imagery—can possibly be reconciled.

The apparent tension between the narrative, which moves onward and upward, with the imagery, which rises and falls, can be resolved by realizing that the poem's descent is a creative one. A major aspect of descent themes is a loss of identity. This can take an ironic form, as one finds in Ovid, but can also appear in more genuine forms, as often occurs in Romantic literature. We've seen that as the poem enters night, the poet enters a space of harmful fears and female presences. The corresponding dissolution of his identity occurs through his physical union with his bride, after the echoes have ceased to sound. The imagery that evokes all this is, as I've said, rather obscure, and I've possibly overstated it to make my point. Nevertheless, descents of this kind are creative when they precipitate a rebirth.

Rebirth, by definition, can only occur after death. To live fully is to experience continual death and rebirth. A dialectical union of opposites may once again be necessary. Most life is spent living among death, among ruin, but resurrection is dying in life, so to speak. The redemption which the poet hopes for can come only through a translation to a different mode of being. In the "desired light" (line 412) of the penultimate stanza, there shines such a rebirth. The poet's identity as one subject dies, and the poet is reborn as both himself and his bride—he has become both subject and object. The poem's investment in dialectical identifications creates on many different levels this grand order of life-death-rebirth. It's implicit in the natural cycles which ground so much of the poem's imagery: day dies and turns to night, which revives again to a new day. One also finds it in the hierogamy of heaven and earth, and by proxy much of the sexual imagery laden throughout.

The poem's primary concern is love and sex. Though I've occasionally noted the amorous associations of images such as birds or snares, the entire poem is deeply sexual. Lines like "Open the temple gates unto my love" (204; spoken at the height of the holy ceremony) easily detach from their context to form sexual euphemisms.[18] Even the death which haunts the poem is probably sexual. In Spenser's time, "to die" was a euphemism for orgasm—a fact that helps colour in the poem's life-death-rebirth movement. On a deeper level, the poem shows a continual interest in the union of opposites, especially the divine union, a sexual joining of the sky and earth, cosmic masculine and feminine powers. Though the concern for love and sex, in both the *Epithalamion* and most poems, is mostly a lot of fretting about it, there is still an authentic joy to be found. Nevertheless, the sexual dimension also accounts for the violence latent in much of the imagery—from the early mention of Orpheus to Medusa, to the triumphal ceremony (243), to the "dreadful darkness" (412). The violence latent in *eros* is a major concern of the *Faerie Queene*—particularly in the third book. While Spenser may simply be some kind of sicko, even the most cursory glance at modern pornography will demonstrate that violence and power are closer to most of our sexual thoughts than we'd probably like. Spenser was all too aware that plenty of sexual desire is—like most human desire—a manic folly very far from wisdom. This demonic vision of *eros* finds a succinct explanation in Conti's gloss on Cupid:

> In a word, the ancient poets attributed so many of these emblems, powers, booty, savage companions, hideously blinded eyes, and immature age to Cupid to show the madness of human desire, and to elicit disgust for something that can't be tolerated by the well-organized man who wants to live a well-ordered life. (IV.14, page 334)

The emblems of Cupid all represent some aspect of desire's inanity. This kind of thinking might account for why Spenser in the *Epithalamion* surrounds *eros* with darkness and descent imagery.

The potential for violence in any human touch is a concern Spenser explores explicitly in the *Faerie Queene* and implicitly in the *Epithalamion*. Though it haunts the continual mention of Jove and a few other points of the poem, the violence integrates with the poem's joyous celebration. We've spoken already about a union which integrates two identities without compromising either. This seems to be the aim of love. The destruction of another's identity, or the desire to control or crush it into one's own, seems to be the aim of hatred. Defined simply like this, they would appear to be polar opposite impulses, but in the erotic moment, they become increasingly entangled. The *Epithalamion*'s brevity and tone of joy doesn't allow it to explore

[18] For an analysis of this phenomenon, specifically in the twelfth stanza, see Linda Leavell's "And Yet Another Ring of Echoes in Spenser's 'Epithalamion.'"

this dilemma at any length, but the similes and allusions to classical figures—to Jupiter and Medusa—reveal Spenser's anxiety over the violent aspects of *eros*. I'm not sure the tension can be reconciled in any clear way. Perhaps the two, though opposing forces, must integrate somehow. Love and Chastity are, in the *Faerie Queene*, militant virtues, which means they aren't invariably antithetical to violence. In a different key, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is such a haunting book because it demonstrates that love and violence aren't always opposites. While I don't wish to resolve all the tension in the *Epithalamion*, the violence and the fears may too be integrated with the joys, for love without fear seems like reckless unconcern. Fears concentrate especially in the poem's second part, so they may be more identified with *eros* than *agape*, another reason why the former is "lower."

Its being lower doesn't necessarily mean it's more primitive or more malicious. Descents are often dangerous, but they can be, as we've seen, genuinely creative. The poem's total structure wants the "lower" bodily love to be identified with the "higher" spiritual love. Spenser doesn't seem to believe in the usual Platonic ladder, which has *eros* at the bottom and *agape* at the top (with various steps in between). In the *Epithalamion*, the center of *agape* in the poem—the marriage altar—is constituted by strikingly similar imagery to the marriage bed, the center of *eros*: both have angels or cupids orbiting them. The bride's body is identified with both erotic and spiritual centers, because, for Spenser, they're really the same thing. While one is associated with light and ascent. and the other with darkness and decline, one can't push that too far, since the entire poem's point is to break through divisions like that. The day and night are a part of one natural cycle. *Eros* and *Agape* too are a part of one loving cycle. All cycles ascend and descend, and one can never escape from a mental cycle until one unifies opposite ends of it. Only then can the mind move beyond the confines of either/or thought.

I've suggested that metaphorical thinking has for its foundation a split from the either/or thinking that other modes of writing and discourse rely on. A metaphor in its simplest form says *This is That*, which affirms both the unity and difference between the subject and compliment. While one is said to *be* the other, the mere fact that there are two separate words indicates some difference. As soon as one says, "the world is a stage," the mind immediately thinks of its negative formulation—"the world is not a stage." The metaphor is counterlogical since it's both true and false at the same time. It both affirms and dissolves identity. Metaphors, then, are also marriages. All we've said of breaking from binary subject-object thought, and upholding identity in difference, applies to wedding and metaphor equally.

Spenser's bourgeois wedding becomes in the mind a moment to consider all union. Superficially, the poem is a union of classical and biblical imagery. On a deeper level, it weds ascent imagery (including day, spring, and summer) with descent imagery (night, autumn, winter). Such wedding produces the core image of the cycle, which itself seems combined with a movement that transcends cyclical time. At the start of creation in the Bible, Adam and Eve were married in the garden. At the end of time, creation will be wed with its creator. If there can be any paradise between then and now, it must lie in the metaphors which shatter the rigid constructions of logic and free us to marry everything we are and aren't. Perhaps only in the movement of figurative thought can there be any endless monument.

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