

SPENSER'S *PROTHALAMION* AND THE CATULLAN EPITHALAMIC TRADITION

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In the *Prothalamion* the discordant note struck by the complaining poet as well as Spenser's problematic treatment of the marriage *topoi* has prompted scholars to criticize the poem for disunity and hence ineffectiveness as nuptial poetry.¹ Mythic symbols, rituals, and earlier epithalamia which may have influenced Spenser's construction of the poem have been extensively explored for solutions to the artistic difficulties.² Although Catullus' Poem 61 is a well-known source for the *Epithalamion*, critics have largely ignored the relationship of the Roman poet's wedding hymn to the *Prothalamion*.³ This is particularly surprising since Catullus' Poem 61 has been considered "the single most influential poem of antiquity upon the Renaissance Epithalamists."⁴ As formal, commendatory pieces written for members of the nobility whose favor would have benefited the poets, Poem 61 and the *Prothalamion* share thematic and structural elements which clarify the seeming anomalies of Spenser's wedding hymn.

First, the structural development and movement of both poems are quite similar. In his nuptial hymn for Manlius Torquatus and Junia Aurunculeia,

¹ Editors, "Spenser's *Prothalamion*," *Explicator* 1, No. 5 (1942), item no. 36. J. Norton Smith in "Spenser's *Prothalamion*: A New Genre," *Review of English Studies* 10 (1959):173-78, tries to resolve the difficulties by maintaining that Spenser called his poem the *Prothalamion* to indicate he was creating a new genre where such "discordant notes" might find a place.

² See Michael West, "Prothalamia in Propertius and Spenser," *Comparative Literature* 26 (1974):346-53; William Elford Rogers, "The *Carmina* of Horace in the *Prothalamion*," *American Notes & Queries* 15 (1977):148-53; William Elford Rogers, "Proserpina in the *Prothalamion*," *American Notes & Queries* 15 (1977):131-35; and also Dan S. Norton "The Background of Spenser's *Prothalamion*," (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1940).

³ James A. S. McPeck in *Catullus in Strange and Distant Britain*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 15 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 176, sees only one plausible Catullan allusion in the *Prothalamion*. Thomas M. Greene in "Spenser and the Epithalamic Convention," *Comparative Literature* 9 (1957):222, has singled out the wedding prayer in Stanza 6 as the only conventional segment in the poem.

⁴ Greene, p. 215.

Catullus constructs his poetry around the actual events occurring at the couple's wedding ceremony. However, the poet selects only certain incidents for development; many of the usual wedding activities such as the initial prayers, sacrifices, and wedding feast have been omitted. Instead, Catullus focuses upon the events directly related to the *deductio*, the bride's procession to her new home. The initial section of the poem, extending from line 1 to 113,⁵ is static. The poet and the crowd of marriage revelers are positioned outside the door of the bride's house and await the commencement of the wedding march while praising the marriage god Hymen and shouting encouragements to the *nova nupta*. The appearance of the bride marks the beginning of the procession which composes the central portion of the poem in lines 114-83. During this *deductio* the poet introduces one conventional marriage *topos* after another into his narrative.⁶ The final section of the poem, lines 184-228, again returns to a stationary scene; with the revelers gathered before the door, the bride is positioned on the wedding couch in her husband's home. Thus, the structural movement of the poem parallels the physical act of transporting the bride from her father's home to her husband's. It also reflects the bride's symbolic *rite de passage* as she progresses from the celibacy of a *puellula* (l. 184) to the fecundity of her role as a *domina* (l. 31).

In the *Prothalamion* the movement of the poetry directly parallels that of Poem 61. Like Catullus, Spenser chooses a nuptial march as the structural core of his "spousall verse"⁷ in honor of the double betrothal of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset to Henry Gilford and William Peter. Whether this poetic *deductio* actually reflects a ceremonial barge procession on the Thames River of the type the Elizabethans often enjoyed is unimportant. The significant point here is that Spenser selects the marriage processional as the most appropriate means of expressing the transition from sterility to fecundity inherent in the entrance into matrimony. As in Poem 61, the opening scene in Stanzas 1 and 2 of the *Prothalamion* is static. Standing on the bank of the Thames, the poet views "a Meadow, by the Rivers side" (l. 19) peopled with a wedding crowd of nymphs. Stanza 3 opens the central *deductio* episode of the poem when the poet suddenly glimpses "two Swannes of goodly hewe,/ Come softly swimming downe along the Lee" (ll. 37-38). With nymphs and waterfowl in attendance these allegorical

⁵ Catullus, *The Poems*, edited by Kenneth Quinn (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1970). All subsequent references to Catullus' Poem 61 will be based upon this Latin edition and will be cited in the text. Translations are my own.

⁶ For a basic explanation of the conventional epithalamic *topoi*, see A. L. Wheeler, *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934).

⁷ J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt, eds. *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), title page. Subsequent references to this edition of Spenser's *Prothalamion* will be noted in the text.

brides pass along the Thames with ceremonial grace until they arrive at "mery London" (l. 123) in Stanza 8 and are ultimately received by their future husbands in the final Stanza 10. As in Catullus' wedding hymn, Spenser uses a processional to portray symbolically the brides' intended passage into a procreative state.

Moreover, comparison of the settings employed in the two epithalamia indicates that Spenser's use of the *deductio* is meaningful beyond the context of marriage itself. Catullus' poem refers specifically to the actual wedding day of Manlius and Junia and consequently describes the events as occurring only in present time. The setting, which encompasses the bride's home, the street, and the groom's home, is completely realistic. Likewise, all the characters are genuine marriage participants: the poet himself as "wedding director," the attending *virgines* (l. 37), the *pueri* bearing torches (l. 114), the rejected *concubinus* (l. 123), the *praetextatus* who accompanies the bride (l. 175), and the *bonae feminae* who position the bride in her new home (ll. 179-80). The hymn's refrain also stresses the poem's foundation in actual human events rather than in poetically created incidents. As the poem progresses, the refrain changes to suit the ceremonial actions then taking place: the invocation to Hymen (ll. 1-60) elicits *o Hymenaeae Hymen, / O Hymen Hymenaeae*; the praise of Hymen (ll. 61-75) prompts the question "who dares to be compared with this god?" (*quis huic deo / comparari ausit?*); the encouragement of the bride (ll. 76-113) moves the crowd to shout "come forth, bride" (*prodeas noua nupta*); the abuse of the "favorite slave" (ll. 119-33) stirs the poet to cry "give out the nuts, boy" (*concubine, nuces da*), while the remaining merriment evokes the cheer *io Hymen Hymenaeae io, / io Hymen Hymenaeae*. Thus, in his treatment of time and setting Catullus stresses the primary function of his poem as a realistic marriage hymn.

On the other hand, Spenser's handling of the setting in the *Prothalamion* betrays his wider purposes in his use of the *deductio*. In the traditional manner the central portion of the poem focuses upon a specific day, in this case that of the official betrothal visit of the Somerset sisters to the former Leicester House. Although the celebration is clearly not that of the actual wedding itself, the poem can justifiably be evaluated in terms of a genuine epithalamium since betrothals in that era were virtually as binding as marriage itself. However, apart from the conventional focus upon a specific ceremonial day Spenser sacrifices a realistic portrayal of the nuptial events in order to introduce a setting artistically designed to heighten and extend the import of the *deductio*. First, the temporal setting of the poem is not restricted to the present but also encompasses the past and future. Composing his epithalamium in the present, Spenser describes the betrothal procession in terms of a past event. Yet, during the poet's recollection of the *deductio* scene (throughout Stanzas 2 to 7) the first segment of the refrain, "Against the Brydale day, which was not long," consistently refers

to the future. Likewise, in the stanzas outside of the *deductio* proper (1,8,9,10) he again stresses the sense of the future as the true fulfillment of nuptial fruitfulness by replacing "was" with "is." Moreover, regardless of whether he is describing a past, present, or future event in a stanza, Spenser keeps the final segment of his refrain identical throughout the poem—"Sweete Themmes runne softly, till I end my Song." The effect is to coalesce all temporal awareness into an intense prevision of future fulfillment. Thus, Spenser's poetry moves outside the restricted temporal domain of a conventional epithalamium.

In a similar manner, the entire setting of the marriage processional soars beyond the realistic presentation found in Catullus' poem. The *Prothalamion* opens with a scene which is supposedly real to the poet but which also vividly suggests the sweet quietude of an ideal pastoral setting:

Calme was the day, and through the trembling ayre,
Sweete breathing Zephyrus did softly play
A gentle spirit, that lightly did delay
Hot Titans beames, which then did glyster fayre. (ll. 1-4)

The poet's entrance into a world whose beauty is ideal rather than realistic becomes quite apparent when, in line 11, the sonorousness of the alliteration in "the shoare of silver streaming Themmes" parallels the onset of a medieval dream vision.⁸ This effect is amplified by the scenic description which follows. The Thames itself becomes a "Christal Flood" (l. 57) whose waters are likened to the flower-strewn River Peneus flowing through the Vale of Tempe where Apollo wooed Daphne. "Sweete Themmes" is also personified, as in Stanza 3, when the river bids his "billows" gently avoid soiling the swans' snowy plumes. In Stanza 7 he continues his show of esteem:

So forth those ioyous Birdes did passe along,
Adowne the Lee, that to them murmurde low,
As he would speake, but that he lackt a tong
Yeat did by signes his glad affection show,
Making his streams run slow. (ll. 114-18)

The banks of the Thames are "paynted all with variable flowers,/ And all the meades adorned with dainte gemmes" (ll. 13-14). The inhabitants of Spenser's visionary world are just as mythical as their surroundings:

⁸ For similar views and a discussion of Spenser's indebtedness to Chaucer, see Hallett Smith, "The Use of Conventions in Spenser's Minor Poems," in *Form and Convention in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, edited by William Nelson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 122-45; and Dan S. Norton, "The Tradition of Prothalamia," in *English Studies in Honor of James Southall Wilson*, University of Virginia Studies 4 (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1951), pp. 223-41.

There, in a Meadow, by the Rivers side,
 A Flocke of Nymphes I chaunced to espy,
 All lovely Daughters of the Flood thereby. (ll. 19-21)

The *Faerie Queene* makes clear that allegory was a natural poetic mode for Spenser, but his use here of the swan allegory for the traditional *deductio* and his evocation of a mythico-pastoral world betray a purpose much deeper than the simple need for a convenient method of artistic embellishment in a formal hymeneal. If indeed Spenser was concerned primarily with the lavish detail an allegory could afford, he could have easily employed the realistic approach of Catullus and not sacrificed any artistic richness. The magnificent portrayal of Essex in Stanza 9 firmly illustrates this point. In fact, the aspect of the *Prothalamion* most troublesome to scholars is the pastoral swan allegory which appears to suffer an abrupt end in Stanzas 8 through 10.⁹ The swans suddenly vanish, and in Stanza 10 it is two human brides who are received at the bank of the river. Even though this change of method is puzzling, it must be the result of the poet's deliberate choice rather than his neglect or lack of skill.

The only apparent answer to this incongruity in the poem lies with the nature of the *deductio* itself. As previously discussed in relation to Catullus' poem and Spenser's, the nuptial procession functions both as an actual transportation of the bride to her husband's dominion and as a symbol for the transition from sterility to fecundity inherent in wedlock. In the *Prothalamion* Spenser extends this symbolism even beyond the marriage context. He associates the transition into fruitfulness with the swans' passage from a non-social world of nature into the highly developed social milieu of "mery London" (l. 127). In fact, Spenser characterizes the city as a "kyndly Nurse" and thus suggests that certain factors in London's culture and urbanity parallel the creative impulse implicit in marriage. In the midst of this symbolic fruitfulness the poet positions the tangible figure of "Great Englands glory and the Worlds wide wonder" (l. 146), the Earl of Essex, who had just returned from a most brilliant military victory in Cadiz. In Stanzas 9 and 10 the elegant description of Essex and his train as they await the arrival of the brides is no less characterized by Golden Age transcendence than the mythico-pastoral setting of the *deductio*. Spenser has not, therefore, unintentionally broken off the swan allegory and thus disjointed his poem. Rather, his purpose in discontinuing the allegory was precisely to equate the fertile beauty of the visionary world with the real splendors of prosperity attainable within the social realm as symbolized by England's capital. By making London the terminal point of the marriage procession in the *Prothalamion*, Spenser creates in the city a larger symbol

⁹ Harry Berger, "Spenser's *Prothalamion*: An Interpretation," *Essays in Criticism* 15, No. 4 (1965):363-80, attempts to resolve this problem by analyzing the swan allegory in terms of a psychologically therapeutic reordering of the poet's outlook on the disappointing realities of his life.

for the societal forms of "fruitfulness" which could be achieved within the "bridegroom household" of Essex and Elizabeth. And indeed, Spenser could hardly have chosen a better unifying thread to wed the richness of an idealized world with the realistic prosperity of England than the Thames itself, the very heart of London.

In the *Prothalamion* the thematic merger of fecundity as created in an ideal poetic world and as existing in the real world is also reinforced by Spenser's use of traditional epithalamic *topoi* analogous to those in Catullus' Poem 61 but translated into Renaissance terms. Easily recognizable is the similarity in the descriptions of the bride's beauty. In Poem 61 Catullus stresses the whiteness of the bride, although he does so in the usual Roman fashion of referring to her foot (*candido pede*, l. 108). Throughout the poem the bride's beauty is also likened to that of flowers such as the hyacinth (l. 89), daisy (l. 187), and poppy (l. 188). The degree of her loveliness is stressed by means of the poet's assurance that

... non tibi, Aurunculeia, periculum est,
ne qua femina pulchrior
clarum ab Oceano diem
uiderit uenientem. (ll. 83-86)¹⁰

In addition, Junia's fairness is described in terms of Venus' beauty during the Judgment of Paris (ll. 16-20). In the *Prothalamion* Spenser praises the beauty of the swans by noting that even Jove and Leda were "not so white as these, nor nothing neare/ So purely white they were" (ll. 45-46). Paralleling Catullus' *flos* imagery, in Stanza 5 Spenser's swans are strewn with flowers and crowned with garlands by the nymphs. The loveliness of the swans is also stressed through comparison with others of their own species and an allusion to a celestial symbol like Catullus' *clarum diem*:

And all the foule which in his flood did dwell
Gan flock about these twaine, that did excell
The rest, so far, as Cynthia doth shend
The lesser starres. (ll. 119-22)

Likewise, the Venus motif is cleverly transferred into Spenser's allegory by correlating the bride-swans with that "same payre/ Which through the Skie drew Venus silver Teeme" (ll. 62-63).¹¹

Another nuptial *topos* common to both poems is found in the bride's maiden attendants and the accompanying crowd of celebrants. In Poem 61

¹⁰ "there is no danger. Aurunculeia, that any more lovely woman will see the bright day coming forth from the ocean."

¹¹ For an emblematic approach to this description of the brides' beauty, see Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), pp. 51-52, 101-13.

the bride is personally attended by "unmarried virgins for whom a like day approaches" (*integrae/ uirgines, quibus aduenit par dies*, ll. 36-38). A joyous mixed crowd follows the procession while young boys with torches light the way for the bride (l. 117). Similarly, the bride-swans of the *Prothalamion* are accompanied by the Spenserian counterpart of the traditional *virgines*, namely a flock of nymphs who in fine Roman nuptial style have their "goodly greenish locks all loose untyde,/ As each had bene a Bryde" (ll. 22-23). Spenser even provided his brides with a merry crowd of marriage celebrants—a flock of various waterfowl who "enranged well,/ Did on those two attend,/ And their best service lend" (ll. 122-24).

However, perhaps the most striking *topos* in any epithalamium is the wedding prayer simply because it represents a verbalization of the elements most sacred in marriage. Catullus' prayer in Poem 61 is undoubtedly one of the most touching pieces ever written. The poet first asks Venus' blessing upon the couple's honest display of love and desire (ll. 195-98). The joys of the bride and groom are counted as infinite as *pulus Africi* (l. 199). In a most beautiful passage Catullus then prays for children and describes the joy that a *paruulus Torquatus* would bring (l. 209). The poem closes simply with the poet's wishes that the couple thrive upon the delights of wedded love (ll. 225-28). It is significant that Catullus' marriage prayer is sung only after the *deductio* has been completed and the bride has been officially united with her husband.

In contrast, Spenser's wedding prayer in Stanza 6 of the *Prothalamion* is sung during the *deductio* by a nymph to the bride-swans alone. All the conventional elements are included: Venus is invoked to bestow love (l. 96), "fruitful issue" is encouraged (l. 104), and prayers for peace and joy are extended. Although this prayer is quite beautiful and adequately fulfils the traditional formula, it can hardly be considered the focal point of the poem, as is Catullus' prayer, for Spenser later eclipses the significance of the nymph's prayer with one of his own. In Stanza 9, the very position traditionally allocated to the nuptial prayer, the poet himself indulges in a lengthy laudation of Essex and proceeds to wish him joy and "endlesse happinesse" (l. 153). Furthermore, Spenser then prays that by means of Essex's success England

may be freed from forraine harmes:
And great Elisaes glorious name may ring
through al the world, fil'd with thy wide Alarmes. (ll. 156-58)

Here Spenser's wish for Essex and Elizabeth creates an interesting parallel with a traditional wish in Catullus' epithalamium. In Poem 61 Hymen is invoked to bless the marriage couple by providing guardians for the country's borders (ll. 71-75). Moreover, in his closing prayer for Junia and Manlius, Catullus expresses his hopes that Junia's just praise will be reflected in her future son much as Spenser sees Essex glorifying the name of Elizabeth.

However, Spenser attributes yet another marriage *topos* to Essex. Although this motif does not occur in Catullus' Poem 61, it is nevertheless traditional for the poet to invoke Hesperus, the planet Venus' name under the guise of an evening star, as the herald of a marriage's consummation. In fact, Hesperus is often closely associated with the god Hymen himself. In the *Prothalamion* Spenser significantly likens Essex to "Radiant Hesper" (l. 164) in the final stanza which marks the reception of the brides by their husbands.

Thus, Spenser utilizes traditional wedding *topoi* within both the *deductio* and the final reception scene to help coalesce the vision of prosperity in the ideal world with that in the real world. But more importantly, conventional marriage motifs are specifically applied to Essex. The sterility-fertility transition represented by the nuptial procession reaches its conclusion not only in the capital city London but also at the doorstep of the Earl of Essex. Robert Devereux, therefore, symbolizes in a particular sense the prosperity awaiting the Somerset brides as a result of the Earl's favor for them, their husbands, and their father, Earl of Worcester. Yet, because of the nuptial motifs Spenser employs in the encomium of Essex, the Queen's favorite represents matrimonial fruitfulness in a more universal sense also. As the terminal point of the *deductio*, Essex is singled out as England's "Hymen," the beneficent bringer of prosperity whose deeds will glorify both Elizabeth and her nation.¹²

The poet himself is also an essential part of this entire generative scheme, since in his own right he is the creator of the phenomena he describes. As a result, the poet's own relationship to the procreative role of marriage is quite strong and is indicative of his larger outlook upon the beneficent forces of society and life in general. In Poem 61 Catullus depicts himself as intimately involved in the marriage rituals by casting the poem in the form of a dramatic monologue. He is not only the attendant poet but also the master of ceremonies and song leader. It is he who invokes Hymen, rounds up the accompanying maidens, encourages the bride, directs the procession, begins the songs, and speaks the final prayer. Furthermore, Catullus is the one who initiates the *Fescennina iocatio*. The poet reserves five stanzas (ll. 119-43) for this traditional ribaldry and himself harasses the *concubinus* and warns the groom that "those same liberties are not permissible for a married man" (*marito ista non eadem licent*). In essence Catullus' treatment of the Fescennine verses represents a condemnation of unproductive relationships and a commendation of the

¹² For a discussion of the Essex-Elizabeth marriage idea see Dan H. Woodward, "Some Themes in Spenser's *Prothalamium*," *Journal of English Literary History* 29 (1962):34-46; and Dan S. Norton, "Queen Elizabeth's 'Brydale Day'," *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944):149-54.

fruitfulness implicit in marriage. Thus, as a poet Catullus is a complete advocate and participant in the generative forces of which marriage partakes.

Spenser's position, however, is not so easily characterized. Unlike Catullus, he is not an active participant in the nuptial proceedings, but taking the position of a spectator he simply narrates the marriage events. Furthermore, he is hardly a suitable marriage celebrant. In direct contrast with the sense of joy and prosperity which fills nuptial ceremonies, Spenser unexpectedly opens his poem with a portrayal of his own gloom and disappointment:

Through discontent of my long fruitlesse stay
In Princes Court, and expectation wayne
Of idle hopes, which still doe fly away,
Like empty shaddowes, did afflict my brayne. (ll. 5-11)

His fit of self-pity lasts only until the fertile landscape and the betrothal procession overwhelm the sense of barrenness in his situation with the promise of future productivity. Nevertheless, once the *deductio* ends with the swan-brides' arrival in London, Spenser again emphasizes his joyless state. In Stanza 8 he first hails London as "my most kyndly Nurse,/ That to me gave this Lifes first native sourse" (ll. 128-29). He soon goes on to note how even his hometown could prove unnourishing and ruinous through his description of how the "bricky towres" of the Temple have degenerated to use as lawyers' quarters (ll. 132-36). Likewise, in the next lines of the stanza Spenser emphasizes his success in achieving "giftes and goodly grace" (l. 138) while under the patronage of Leicester only to dispel the image of prosperity with an allusion to his "freendles case" (l. 140). Thus, the poet has flanked the *deductio* with an explanation of his own failure to gain preferment¹³ and in this manner has associated his own state of unproductivity with the sterility—fertility transition symbolized in the marriage processional.

In addition to the specific fecundity theme of the Somerset sisters' betrothal, Spenser also identifies his hope of progressing from his "freendles" position to one of patronage with the image of prosperity embodied in Essex. Indeed, the poet's "nuptial" prayer for Elizabeth's favorite concludes with the wish that "some brave muse may sing/ To ages following" (ll. 159-60) the "prowesse and victorious armes" (l. 155) of "Great Englands glory" (l. 146). Obviously Spenser is suggesting his own artistic talents as those most capable of portraying Essex's greatness, and

¹³ Muriel Bradbrook's "No Room at the Top: Spenser's Pursuit of Fame," in *Elizabethan Poetry*, Stradford-Upon-Avon Studies 2, edited by J. R. Brown and B. Harris (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd., 1960), pp. 90-109 presents an excellent descriptive analysis of the social and historical background to Spenser's pursuit of advancement.

through him Elizabeth's, in a timeless monument of poetry.¹⁴ The *Faerie Queene* is sufficient justification for Spenser's confidence in himself. If in the *Prothalamion* there is any thematic parallel to the contrast of barrenness and productivity implicit in Catullus' Fescennine verses, it is Spenser's invitation to Essex and Elizabeth to end his "Olde woes" (l. 142) with the prosperity of preferment.

Thus, Spenser uses many of the traditional epithalamic features exemplified in Catullus' Poem 61 to create a unique Renaissance marriage hymn characterized by a triple theme of fruitfulness. The *Prothalamion* not only incorporates a wedding blessing for the Somerset sisters, but as a whole the poem functions as an *allocutio sponsalis* praying for the continued success of Essex and through him the prosperity of England, Elizabeth, and the poet himself. This is precisely the significance of the poem's refrain which continually stresses the idea of future fulfillment. As long as Elizabethan prosperity in the image of "Sweete Themmes" continues to "runne softly" and flourish, Spenser hopes to "sing his song" as a favored poet.

¹⁴ See John Mulryan, "The Function of Ritual in the Marriage Songs of Catullus, Spenser and Ronsard," *Illinois Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1972):54, for his discussion of the relationship of the efficacy of marriage with the efficacy of the ritual as created by the poet's artistic skill.

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