

**At Ianus' Gate: Petrarchan Convention and Innovation in Edmund Spenser's
Amoretti, "Sonnet III"¹**

Ianus, Roman god of the doorway, rules a transitional space between old and new.² Stationed at the terminus for one year and the commencement of another, Ianus' two faces look both back to the past and forward to the future. Represented as January, temporally positioned at the annual threshold, Edmund Spenser exploits the power of both metaphorical time and the potential to pastorally grow love in "Sonnet III" of *Amoretti*. This single sonnet, written within the context of a sequence dedicated to the wooing of his intended bride Elizabeth Boyle, can be read as a logical proposition imparted through use of a delayed metaphor, including a kaleidoscopic refraction and merger of personified characters, all converging their myriad traits to offer the possibility of the growth of their love. Starting at that eponymous gate, in peering through this liminal positionality that separates old from new, Spenser both preserves and innovates Petrarchan conventions to represent, personify, and appeal for love.

On the surface level, a technical overview of "Sonnet III" reveals both adherences to and shifts from Petrarchan poetic traditions. While the composition of a 14-line set of iambic pentameters is familiar, Spenser adapts his lines to a particular scheme. Instead of mimicking the "Italian" custom of octave and sestet distinguished in the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA / CDECDE (or another slight variation), Spenser adjusts this sonnet to three quatrains that finish with a rhyming couplet (ABAB /

¹ Edmund Spenser, 1552?-1599. 1595. *Amoretti and Epithalamion. Written Not Long since by Edmund Spenser*. London: <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/books/amoretti-epithalamion-written-not-long-since/docview/2240906462/se-2..>

² "Jānus." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

BCBC / CDCD / EE). The interweaving of the rhyme scheme, with the B from the first quatrain plaited with the C in the second, and C weaving again into the third, hints at a technical poetic pun within the context of this specific poem. As the B rhyme filters through into the second quatrain, and so on, like Janus, so does the poem look forward and back. While it works as a reflective metaphor in “Sonnet III,” the interlace of rhyme is typical of Spenser’s sonnets. Residual evidence of the Petrarchan tradition is corroborated in the volta after the initial octet. However, the rhyming couplet with which he finishes “Sonnet III” paired with the peculiarity in how the point-of-view switches, suggests a Spenserian innovation. The deviation from third person after the twelve lines to addressing the reader in the second person in the final two is particular to Spenser’s novelty, and echoes his themes of pastorally growing love through time and seasonal change, especially when read within the context of the *Amoretti*: a sonnet sequence conceived in courtship to his intended second wife, Elizabeth Boyle, a woman at least two decades his junior.³

The first quatrain sets a tone of resolution, arguably, an appropriate situation while stationed at “Janus gate” (1). This resolve is particularly poignant given Spenser’s personal stake in the composition. However, there remains an ambiguity in this Spenserian determination, as it is less clear who populates his poem. Who might Spenser be speaking through to the audience that is his intended? Who is the subject? Is it the indistinct “New year,” as it looks forth, or an unidentified person, ostensibly himself, stationed at the gate in preparation to embark upon this new phase – a second marriage with a younger woman – in metaphorical tandem with the commencement of a new year (1)? In her chapter on lyric forms, Heather Dubrow emphasizes a tradition of ambiguity between

³ According to *ODNB*, Edmund Spenser’s likely year of birth is 1552, making him approximately 42 years old on his June 11, 1594 marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. Though it is difficult to know her exact age, this genealogical website reckons her birthyear at 1576, making her about 18 years old at their wedding. See Andrew Hadfield. “Spenser, Edmund (1552?–1599), poet and administrator in Ireland.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 12 Nov. 2022. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26145>, and <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Boyle-564>.

speaker and audience, one in which Spenser participates here.⁴ Furthermore, while scholars debate whether the “lyric speaker is overheard,” or is reflected as a mirror to the reader, through this sonnet’s murkiness between speaker and subject, Spenser allows flexibility in the interpretation of his subject’s and speaker’s identities, up to and including an embodiment of time itself, another trope particular to lyric forms.⁵ In becoming Time, Spenser’s subject can remain intentionally indistinct and importantly, is also able to fluidly move between time and seasonal change, a consequence of linear time, to offer various points of narration through the sonnet, just as time moves cyclically through seasonal change in the calendar year.

Initially, however, just as the “New yeare” looks out of Ianus’ gate, so the subject Time embarks on a personified journey where it “Doth seeme to promise hope of new delight” (1, 2). Rendered conditional, both “seeme” and “promise” continue to layer uncertainty. Perhaps again an echo of the nature of time itself, the state of “seeme” and “promise” favor positive outcomes whilst the “hope of new delight,” (2) ostensibly confirms it. Moving on “and bidding th’old Adieu, his passed date / bids all old thoughts to die in dumpish spright” (3-4), the speaker resolves to change through time, thus honing his initial tone of resolution into a keener point. Just as one resolves to change with the opportunity offered at the commencement of a new year, so too does Spenser demonstrate the possibility that the embodiments of T/time offer – both linear in the form of his personified self, and cyclical through the mode of seasonal change. Reiterating this reading is the gendered reference to “his passed date” (3), suggesting a reference to masculine time. In drawing from the classical Roman tradition Spenser begins with, this demonstrates that despite the absence of subject so the subject emerges: the classical personification of Time, classically rendered as an older

⁴ Heather Dubrow, “Lyric Forms” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1500-1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 179.

⁵ Dubrow, “Lyric Forms,” p. 179.

male: Saturn.⁶ The first quatrain finishes by further demonstrating Spenser's speaker as allegorical Time, seeking an emotional renewal with the advent of the new year as he "bids all old thoughts to die in dumpish spright" (4). Because of Spenser's superficial ambiguity in this first quatrain, my reading hinges on the context in which it was composed: a vehicle of courtship whereby an older man (Time/Saturn) turns over a metaphorical new leaf of love in "hope of new delight" (2).

The second quatrain practically corroborates both Spenser's clandestine reference to the unions of pastoral/temporal possibility, and his fashioning of the speaker as personified Time seeking renewal through love. "And calling forth out of sad Winters night, / fresh love, that long hath slept in cheerlesse bower: / wils him awake, and soon about him dight / his wanton wings and darts of deadly power" (5-8). Like this sixteenth century quadragenarian and widower Spenser, Saturn/Time is in the winter of his life, and in the era of this poem's publication he is generally linked with Melancholia.⁷ While melancholies as understood in the Early Modern period are too diverse and expansive to delineate in the space of this essay, its hallmarks include cold, darkness, and sadness: melancholy can be a condition both temporary and/or permanent, as well as physical and/or emotional. This quatrain shows how the "sad Winters night," which the subject Time is inhabiting, gives way to this "fresh loue" now emerging having "long hath slept in cheerlesse bower" (5-6). Winter, both cold and sad may be further seen as indicative of a fallow period and the union of a cyclical, seasonal time/Time/Saturn; despite the vagaries of British/Irish seasonal variance, nothing much grows in the wintertime, the hard, cold ground too obdurate to allow germination for fresh growth. Considering Saturn is both Time and god of agriculture, the pastoral focus of the second half of the poem is brought to sharper focus: Spenser sinuously continues Petrarchan conventions while also subtly emphasizing the subject/self as personified Time.

⁶ Jenny March, and Neil Barrett. "S." In *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 433–52. Oxbow Books, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1djk.21>. For "Cronus," see esp. *ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

⁷ ODNB – widow, average age, melancholia

The poetic conduit through which Time shifts seasons is allegorical. Continuing his ambiguity, Spenser only hints at Time as a personified form through pronoun use, yet this still allows him to boundlessly convey the metamorphosis of seasons and Time via “fresh loue” (6).⁸ In this guise, Spenser again evades directly identifying a character. However, as Love emerges into the poem, Spenser’s pronoun use cues the reader to see this personification as another masculine character, one who “long hath slept in cheerlesse bower: / wils him awake, and soon about him dight / his wanton wings and darts of deadly power” (6-8). Though this cupid-like character calls the sad Time to action, he also has been entombed in the melancholic winter of his own “cheerlesse bower” (6), underscoring this other facet of his personality to emerge as equally despondent. From there, the “promise[d] hope” (2) is proving the impetus for movement and change. Here, Love’s action is to “dight,” and a closer reading of this word is pivotal to my interpretation of the refraction and eventual union of personified Time and Love (7).

As evidenced in the many definitions of “dight” (6) in the *OED*, Spenser used this now archaic word in its verb form extensively.⁹ In the sense of readying oneself through the act of dight (v.10.b.), Spenser may suggest that Time then becomes Love with the seasonal change out of “sad Winters night” (5).¹⁰ That “promise” brings forth the dormant “fresh loue” in the same manner that seasons allow the possibility new growth as springtime warms the Earth is a necessary parallel in this reading. Another possibility on offer is in the reflexive sense of dight whereby Time then becomes Love and then allows him to don the “wanton wings” and “darts” (8), investing the ability to nurse “fresh loue” through the amatory vestments that accompany Cupid—the classical deity that is Love (6).¹¹ Love’s “darts of deadly power” (8) can be seen to then to pierce and subsume the melancholic

⁸ For clarity, hereafter I will refer to “fresh loue” (5) as simply, Love.

⁹ See esp. “dight, v.1”. *OED Online*. September 2022. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125> (accessed September 20, 2022).

¹⁰ “dight, v.10.b”. *OED Online*.

¹¹ CUPID _ DEITY THAT IS LOVE

winter of Time, the better to refashion with the new season, analogous to how new growth in the ground permeates a theretofore impermeable, frozen layer.¹² Therefore, not only does Love draw both himself and Time forth from hibernation and melancholic condition in “cheerlesse bower” (6) and “sad Winters night” (5), Love also rejuvenates Time with the darting amatory fodder of himself. The clichéd notion that Spring is coming resounds here and allows Spenser to surreptitiously merge two personifications into one, without explicitly naming either.

The turn at the octave is subtle and bolsters my reading: “For lusty spring now in his timely howre, / is ready to come forth him to receiue: / and warnes the Earth with diuers colord flower, / to deck hir selfe, and her faire mantle weaue” (9-12). Nameless Time has blended with Love through the dighting action of seasonal change, moving beyond “Winter” and bringing “lusty spring” into the subject’s purview (5, 9). Here, Spenser’s union of classical and pastoral personifications reinforce my reading, yet to stress this I will also draw on two separate definitions of lusty in the *OED*. In lusty (“lusty, adj.” 2a, 2b, and especially 2c) Spenser further demonstrates Time’s transformation from “sad” to “pleasant,” and quite possibly sexually desirous (“lusty, adj.” 3-4) or even youthful and vigorous (“lusty, adj.” 5a); just as Spring is more pleasant than winter, and allows for sexual congress of the Earth itself through germination, pollination, propagation, and growth of flora and hibernating fauna.¹³

Seen in this perspective, the sexually desirous or rejuvenated, youthful subject that is evolved Time/Love (and contextually Spenser himself), “warnes the Earth with diuers colord flower, / to decke hir selfe, and her faire mantle weaue” (11-12). Thus, Spenser reiterates the Petrarchan conventions of classical and pastoral personification. The Earth, a female, (and notionally the youthful, dewy Elizabeth Boyle) is warned by “lusty spring” to adorn herself with flowers (“deck, v.”

¹² E.g. “dight, v.4”. *OED Online*.

¹³ “lusty, *adj.*2.a.-c.”. *OED Online*.

I. 2a).¹⁴ Stemming from classical belief, the Earth is indeed traditionally feminine,¹⁵ moreover, Spenser can be seen to pun on Earth's "mantle weave," as they were customarily worn by women and oftentimes also decorated with flowers. Springtime itself brings forth flowers, thus Spenser demonstrates that just as seasonal change allows for the beautification of the personified Earth, so too it can allow for the blossoming of their love.

In the final heroic couplet, Spenser jarringly changes point-of-view to second person, again refracting the transition of characters and bringing the reader, Elizabeth Boyle, back to the context and goal of this poem. "Then you faire flower, in who fresh youth doth raine, / prepare your selfe new loue to entertaine" (13-14). Though disjointed in its change to direct address, like the metaphorical Janus at his gate, the poet reflects back to the first line and looks both ways again, straightforwardly speaking to the reader in "you" (13) having maintained the subject's ambiguity throughout the previous twelve lines. Through "Janus gate" (1), with one face the Spenser shows the subject gazing back to "th'old" (3), allowing the continuity of a Petrarchan past through classical and pastoral themes in "Sonnet III." With the other face, Spenser metaphorically demonstrates how notionally as Time, imbued and developing with Love, looks beyond and is impelled to change and action, just as Earth lies dormant until impregnated with seasonal transformation into Spring. Mirroring from the initial position at "Janus gate" (1), personified Time allows for the speaker to move fluidly between characters and renew himself to better meet the equally "fresh" (13) needs of his love, the reader, Elizabeth Boyle. Thus, the poem's logical proposition, like the seasons, is brought full circle. In Spenser's maintenance of convention and innovation he is able to convey the multifaceted possibilities of time, love, and creation, and furthermore allow these many refractions to sing in unison through his verse.

¹⁴ "deck, v. I.2.a." *OED* Online.

¹⁵ March and Barrett, "G." In *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, p. 200.