



THE LIMITS OF EROTICISM
IN POST-PETRARCHAN
NARRATIVE

CONDITIONAL PLEASURE
FROM SPENSER TO MARVELL

DOROTHY STEPHENS

The limits of eroticism in post-Petrarchan narrative

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Dorothy Stephens

University of Arkansas



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521630641

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First published 1998

This digitally printed first paperback version 2006

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Stephens, Dorothy.

The limits of eroticism in post-Petrarchan narrative: conditional pleasure from Spenser to Marvell/Dorothy Stephens.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Renaissance literature and culture; 29)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 63064 9 (hardback)

1. English poetry – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism.

2. Narrative poetry, English – History and criticism. 3. Erotic poetry, English – History and criticism. 4. Petrarca, Francesco, 1304–1374 – Influence.

5. Feminism and literature – England – History. 6. Spenser, Edmund, 1552?–1599 – Technique. 7. Marvell, Andrew, 1621–1678 – Technique.

8. English poetry – Italian influences. 9. Renaissance – England.

10. Sex in literature.

I. Title. II. Series.

PR539.N3S74 1998

821'.03093538–dc21 97–52750 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-63064-1 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-63064-9 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-03469-2 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-03469-8 paperback

Although theories of exploitation and subversion have radically changed our understanding of gender in Renaissance literature, to favor only those theories is to risk ignoring productive exchanges between “masculine” and “feminine” in Renaissance culture. “Appropriation” is too simple a term to describe these exchanges – as when Petrarchan lovers flirt dangerously with potentially destructive femininity. Edmund Spenser revises this Petrarchan phenomenon, constructing poetic flirtations whose participants are figures of speech, readers, or narrative voices. His plots allow such exchanges to occur only through conditional speech, but this very conditionality powerfully shapes his work. Seventeenth-century works – including a comedy by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley and “Upon Appleton House” by Andrew Marvell – suggest that the Civil War and the upsurge of female writers necessitated a reformulation of conditional erotics.

For Paul Alpers

Quae tibi, quae tali reddam pro carmine dona?

Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 29

The limits of eroticism in post-Petrarchan narrative

Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture

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Since the 1970s there has been a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political and cultural history. While the earliest New Historicist work was criticized for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytical work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and of the concept of identity itself, on theater as a political and economic phenomenon and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. *Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture* is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theater which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our own history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

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Acknowledgments

I have written this book in dialogue with, admiration for, and resistance to Paul Alpers's work, which continues to inspire my own students. Paul has for many years been a rigorous reader, generous supporter, humorous opponent in arguments, and cherished friend; and I dedicate this book to him.

My debt to my family – Wesley, Annette, Lynn, Dan, Jimmy, Ann, and Stevie – is infinite; the central joy and sure ground of my life is their love. Papa died while this book was being written and never saw a word of it, but I think I must have gotten some of my taste for Spenser from the leisurely, divagating stories he told when I was growing up.

Janet Adelman has donated more time to reading my chapters than anyone ought by all rights to have done; she is a master at asking those truly alarming questions that propel one out of complacency. She has a loyal following of people who have been thus alarmed, and I add my deep affection to the stream.

Colleagues and graduate students in my department at the University of Arkansas have given me steady encouragement, surrounding me with good will and good advice. The clerical staff deserve an award solely on the strength of their photocopier-placating abilities, not to mention their mysteriously persistent good cheer. The University of California at Berkeley and the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas have provided an embarrassing number of summer stipends, fellowships, and grants. Chapter 1 appeared in an earlier form in *ELH* and was revised and reprinted in *Queering the Renaissance*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg. Portions of the essay were incorporated into "Finding the Feminine in Book IV" in *Approaches to Teaching Spenser's "Faerie Queene,"* edited by David Lee Miller and Alexander Dunlop. A version of Chapter 2 appeared in *ELR*. Talks based on each of the six chapters have been delivered at MLA, SAA, RSA, SCS, and Medieval Congress conferences, and I owe thanks to members of those audiences who made suggestions.

My editors have prevented many embarrassments and taught me

much; I thank Stephen Orgel, Josie Dixon, Linda Bree, Virginia Catmur, Karl Howe, Rob Sawkins, and the anonymous readers who generously gave of their time and expertise.

It has been impossible to give full credit in citations to all of the friends and acquaintances who rescued me from my own stupidity by commenting on chapters or suggesting sources. I marvel at the unselfish beneficence of scholars in this profession: Elizabeth Abel, Joel Altman, Richmond Barbour, Carolyn Dinshaw, Katherine Eggert, Michelle Elkin, Teresa Faherty, Catherine Gallagher, Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Greenblatt, Robert Henke, Clark Hulse, Lindsay Kaplan, Leslie Katz, Mary Ann Koory, Leah Marcus, David Lee Miller, Greg Miller, Patricia Parker, Victoria Pond, Evelyn Tribble, Nancy Vickers, and Naomi Yavneh.

With a sense of wonder, I acknowledge my happy indebtedness to friends in Fayetteville who will probably never read this book but who have been daily companions, confidants, and sources of sanity, loving me with unreasonable pertinacity: Douglas Behrend, Maria Coleman, Fiona Davidson, Ingrid Fritsch, Karin Herrmann, Amy Herzberg, Elizabeth Lamb, Matthias McIntosh, Patricia Romanov, Sharon Wilcox, and of course Talia Behrend-Wilcox (who is now old enough to make up lovely stories about wolves drinking tea in my miniature Japanese house). Along with these friends, others who live further away have nevertheless regularly reinvigorated my chapters, borne much, trudged beside me through swamps of doubt, recalled me to laughter, and kept my intellect and spirit alive with the flourishing of their own. I think especially of Jennifer Clarvoe, Jason and Donna Eberhart-Phillips, Vicki Graham, John Jacob, Theodore Leinwand, Barbara Montero, Ann Parsons, Jo Anne Shea, Betty Silbowitz, Richard Strier, and Frank Whigham.

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Introduction

Provisional pleasures

While browsing through a card shop just before Valentine's Day a few years ago, I noticed a valentine with a photograph of a pre-Raphaelite painting on its cover. In the painting, a medieval woman with a cloud of golden hair bent fervently to kiss the hand of a knight who had clearly just slain the dragon now lying behind them. Half of a red lance protruded from the dragon's side, while the other splintered half remained in the knight's now-quiet hand. Because something about the card seemed out of kilter, I took it down to look inside. No surprises there: "You're My Knight In Shining Armour. Happy Valentine's Day." The problem was that in the painting, the knight was gazing quietly over his lady's shoulder, as though at some invisible complication or heaviness. Only when I looked at the back of the card did I learn that the 1898 painting by Mary F. Raphael (fl. 1889–1915) was titled *Britomart and Amoret*. I felt as though someone were teasing me – or perhaps (since I did not know the sex, sexual orientation, politics, or education of the card-maker who had paired Raphael's painting with that tag to form a valentine) it was my private pleasure rather than one I shared with someone else. To a card-maker who had not read *The Faerie Queene's* third book, with its bold heroine disguised as a knight in armor, the name "Britomart" would not necessarily look feminine, would it? Given that the card shop's valentine display clearly assumed heterosexuality and that the card's message did not announce itself as anything other than timeworn, I imagined an unsuspecting female customer buying the card for her guy. She would thus be sending an erotic message far more complex than she had intended – or than he would be likely to receive. This was a delightful game, yet I did not even know whose it was. Which two figures did this armored dalliance engage? Britomart and Amoret? (In the poem, after all, Amoret does not know at first that her rescuer is a woman.) Spenser and Britomart? An employee of the Marcel Schurman card company and myself? Myself and another purchaser? Mary

Raphael-the-pre-Raphaelite and her post-Raphaelite viewers? Or suppose I decided to send the valentine to a male friend whose familiarity with Spenser would allow him to enjoy the gendered layering? The card neither depicted a flirtation nor clearly enacted one; Raphael's maiden was solemnly grateful rather than blushing, the message inside was not coy, and even the red lance was hardly subtle. Yet although a valentine depicting, say, Titian's *Urbino Venus* – with her face half-turned, her smile half-formed, and her hand half-covering her pubis – might have had a more immediately erotic effect on its viewers, such a valentine could not have been any more intriguingly indirect or provisional in its sexual teasing than this one was.

Raphael's painting depicts a scene not to be found in *The Faerie Queene*; Spenser's Britomart saves Amoret from various perils but never from a dragon. Despite, and partly because of, its mismatch between illustration and written text (whether by "text" we mean the message in the card or the sixteenth-century epic from which Raphael took her title), this twentieth-century valentine with its surplus of messages can serve as an appropriate analogy for the complicated genderings in Spenser's poetry. Although all good flirtations involve a great deal of uncertainty about what is or is not going on, Spenser's narrative technique often resembles or incorporates flirtation while adding more layers of ambiguous intent than we normally recognize in a flirtation between two people. This book will use Spenser's poetry to define a flirtatious sixteenth-century literary mode that scholars have often glanced at without fully recognizing, which can best be described as a *conditional erotics*. Whereas all flirtation is conditional in the sense that the people involved cannot be sure of each other's wishes, the type of flirtation that this book addresses threads its way through wider uncertainties: because the participants may be narrative voices, readers, or even figures of speech as well as characters, the very existence of their erotic exchanges often seems a trick of lighting, an elusive shadow in our peripheral vision.¹ Many times neither the reader nor the participants know for sure who is dallying with whom or how they are gendered by the text. Yet I will argue that this dalliance is a source of great textual strength.

I want to raise questions about gender that are at once less antipathetic towards male authors and more cognizant of the unresolvable strangeness of sixteenth-century ideas about human sexuality than some recent feminist criticism has been. Briefly, the central questions of the book are these: to what sorts of feminine influence other than, or in addition to, that of the Virgin Prince does Spenser's *Faerie Queene* acknowledge or reveal a debt? In what sense can we say that this specifically Spenserian indebtedness to forms of behavior and thought that early modern

English culture labels “feminine” grows out of or participates in a wider set of sixteenth-century English attitudes toward eroticism? How do these sixteenth-century attitudes then shape the ways that people view English women who begin to publish imaginative literature in significant numbers for the first time in the seventeenth century? In answering these questions about Spenser, I make no pretense of compendiousness; for better or worse, my habit is always to work outward from small, luminous moments in a text toward the suggestion of larger possibilities. Similarly, my final two chapters will address the questions I have raised about the seventeenth century by working outward from two texts that cannot in themselves prove trends but that can show us richly what is possible. These chapters examine two seventeenth-century refigurations of Spenser’s topos, first in a comic drama by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley and then in Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House,” which differs from mid-sixteenth-century Petrarchan lyrics in ways that strongly suggest both the intervening influence of Spenser’s conditional erotics and the pressure put upon that mode by the entrance of female writers into the marketplace.

The notion of a conditional eroticism informs the whole of my study; *Conditional Erotics* was intended to be the book’s main title until practical marketing considerations stepped in. Because two-thirds of the book will be devoted to defining my key term by example and discussion, any attempt to define conditional erotics in this introduction by summarizing those examples will necessarily seem oblique or elliptical. There are, however, some general characteristics of Spenserian textual eroticism that will become more intelligible once we have set the stage by looking at the origins and contexts of this mode.

Elizabethan courting

The confederation of literary techniques that I am calling conditional eroticism has its roots in the tradition of Petrarchan love poetry, becoming especially important for Sidney’s sonnets in the sixteenth century. Two of these sonnets will generate a great deal of the centrifugal force for Chapter 2. The strongest examples of the phenomenon, however, are in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Epithalamion*, so Chapters 1 through 4 will chiefly discuss passages from the romance epic rather than short lyric poems. Spenser complicates, politically intensifies, and narrativizes a type of dalliance that Sidney, Greville, and others had already made possible in more lyrical and less complicated fashions.

A note about the term “post-Petrarchan”: I use this term somewhat differently from Roland Greene, who begins his study of the western

lyric sequence by postulating, "As soon as a European poet of the 1500's lifts pen to write as a Petrarchan, he or she inevitably becomes a post-Petrarchan, reinventing the idea of a broadly scaled, self-oriented poetry for present circumstances" (*Post-Petrarchism*, 3). True as this must be in some senses (and Greene makes good use of it), in most argumentative contexts it is counterproductive to define Petrarchism as including only that which is indistinguishable from Petrarch. All genres vary a great deal internally; otherwise, we would have to define each genre as only an original example and its most slavish, least interesting followers. For my purposes, Petrarchism includes Petrarch's *Rime sparse* and all the lyric sequences afterwards that imitate the *Rime sparse* to any significant degree.

Yet we need not insist upon a sharp distinction between Petrarchism and post-Petrarchism, either. With the latter term, I do not primarily designate what Heather Dubrow calls a "counterdiscourse" (*Echoes of Desire*, 8), nor an antagonism toward an earlier genre – though Spenser certainly had that at times. Rather, I am interested in a conversation between a non-lyric genre (the epic) and a lyric one (the Petrarchan sonnet sequence). Indeed, I am far less concerned with the move from the *Rime sparse* to English poetry than with how Petrarchism as defined in English sonnets begins to influence other English works. Rather than considering Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* as anti-Petrarchan or post-Petrarchan, then, I take Sidney to be the author who most familiarly defines the genre for England. (His anti-Petrarchan declarations are almost always humorously ironized by his imitations of Petrarch's own self-criticism.) I think of *post-Petrarchism* as a body of literature, not usually in sonnet form, which recognizes the prior fact of Petrarchan lyricism and quotes it purposely out of context.

I should be more specific about my relationship to Dubrow's work, since she must have been writing her *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* at about the same time I was working on the Spenser portions of this book, and since our theories complement each other. The category of responses to earlier Petrarchism that Dubrow addresses differs from the category engaged by this present study. Dubrow's "counterdiscourses" are by and large the conservatizing responses: those which attempt to counter the frustration and the gendered slippages characteristic of Petrarchism by fashioning a powerful male speaker who "achieves the consummation of which his counterpart in Petrarchism can, quite literally, only dream" (*Echoes*, 252). Dubrow and I agree that Petrarchism is complexly gendered, often making room for feminine agency even in sonnet sequences with male speakers, but whereas Dubrow looks at subsequent efforts to tame this complexity, I

look at subsequent efforts to heighten it, to search out its dangers – though in the context of a playfulness that can overtly deny the existence of risk.

In importing a quintessentially lyrical mode into his epic, Spenser might seem at first simply to take his cue from Sidney's use of ostentatiously and sometimes humorously Petrarchan sigla in his *Arcadia*, as when sighing lovers affix poems to trees (a topos later gleefully employed by Shakespeare in *As You Like It* and Marvell in "The Garden"). Yet even more than Sidney, I would argue, Spenser recognizes that at the heart of Petrarchism is not a set of tropes, gestures, and images (though he is quite capable of using these) but a method of enriching the representation of relationships among desiring human beings and among the conflicting desires of each individual. Explicitly neoplatonist in his *Fowre Hymnes* and in the *Faerie Queene's* Garden of Adonis (*FQ* III.vi), Spenser is nonetheless famously anti-Petrarchan in his critical portrayal of Busyrane's sadistic use of sonnet devices to torture Amoret, who literally carries her pierced heart before her in a basin, the wound in her breast giving her agony (*FQ* III.xii). It is to a great extent this very discomfort with the tradition, combined with fascination, that produces Spenser's conditional erotics. Although others among his contemporaries certainly ironize the sonnet tradition while using it, only Spenser is at once so invested, so disturbed at his own investment, and so determined to probe the wound of that disturbance. Before addressing conditionality more specifically in relation to Spenser's texts, then, we should briefly consider gender and conditionality in the Petrarchan tradition proper.

As Arthur Marotti, Louis Montrose, and others have pointed out, Petrarchism became increasingly important in court politics after Elizabeth Tudor ascended the throne; in one sort of court discourse, the ideal sovereign became the ideal beloved, and political ambition spoke the language of neoplatonic desire for both the enlightenment and the erotic fulfillment that only a beautiful woman could supply. The fantasy of marrying purely for love came to represent the equally improbable fantasy of being promoted purely for merit.² On the one hand, this sociopolitical system sometimes advanced Elizabeth's interests in frequently allowing her to offer her followers the conditional and ambiguous rewards of grace and love in place of, say, monopolies or hard cash, and it further allowed her to avoid ceding power to a husband who would only interfere in the marriage between the Virgin Queen and her country.³ Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Daniel Javitch, and Frank Whigham have usefully explored the ways that the queen's authority was veiled, ventriloquized, and disseminated,

often through amorous fictions and rhetorics that made it seem as though courtiers and subjects called all of the shots.⁴ Analogously, though in a deconstructive vein, Elizabeth Bellamy has argued that the very language Spenser uses to describe his queen only names her elusiveness. When he metaphorizes her as a mirror, she becomes “her own self-reflecting but ever-vanishing source, defying representation from the outside” (“Vocative,” 10). The fact that Spenser never received a court position and was therefore technically not a courtier only emphasizes the degree to which his unsuccessful bid for such a position, in naming England’s first national epic after Queen Elizabeth, demonstrates the success of her political appropriation of Petrarch.

On the other hand, some of these same critics have also been interested in the ways that Elizabethan writers used their *subjected* positions within Petrarchan discourse as a means of asserting their own *subjectivity*. Montrose writes that “the Petrarchan lover worships a deity of his own making and under his own control,” and Robert Mueller argues that although “the ambition of the courtier keeps producing and reproducing the absolute status of the arbitrary power,” this means (in Hegelian fashion) that the monarch depends upon the courtier.⁵ Indeed, according to Mueller, Spenser’s Gloriana (the “Faerie Queene” herself) “is the creation solely of Arthur’s quest for her. Arthur’s infinite desire is equated with Elizabeth’s endless stream of courtiers” (“Infinite Desire,” 757). Although Elizabeth differed from Gloriana in having a living presence, Montrose argues persuasively that Elizabeth Tudor had only partial authority in the production of “Queen Elizabeth”; this authority was shared by many people with competing interests, including writers like Spenser: “This is not to deny that there exists an authority ‘beyond the poem,’ but it is to *unfix* that authority, to put into question its absolute claims upon the subjects who produce the forms in which it authorizes itself” (“Elizabethan Subject,” 317, 331).

More recently, Richard Rambuss has cross-pollinated the theory that Elizabeth uses Petrarchism to frustrate her courtiers’ access to her power with the theory that her subjects use Petrarchism to claim at least a conditional, textual power. Starting with the etymological connection between “secrecy” and “secretary,” Rambuss argues that Spenser’s career as a secretary in the civil service is not as incidental as has been thought to Spenser’s fashioning himself into England’s first professional poet:

Rather than seeking to “name” Elizabeth, or to lift the “couert vele” that always obscures her, the poem’s investment, I suggest, lies precisely in maintaining that veil, in keeping her (as its) secret. And rather than occasioning the vocational crisis Bellamy describes, Spenser’s secreting of Elizabeth serves as the poetic

substantiation of his vocation as a poet who is also a secretary – who is, to recall Angel Day's formulation, "a keeper or conseruer of the secret unto him committed." (*Spenser's Secret Career*, 76; Day, *The English Secretary*, Pt. 2, 102–103).

Rambuss emphasizes the politic and professional nature of Spenser's proof that he can keep secrets, but I find Rambuss's conjecture striking in its hint of a much more intimate flirtation between poet and queen than the courtship-contests figured by Montrose *et al.* Here, Spenser styles himself as someone who shares his mistress's beauties only with her – if she will cooperate. Nevertheless, Rambuss shares with the critics who privilege Elizabeth's control over her poet and those who privilege Spenser's control over his queen the baseline assumption that Elizabeth is always at the center of Spenserian erotics.

Most Spenserian scholars interested in issues of sexuality and gender have focused their researches upon Elizabeth, and understandably so, given that Spenser's epic turns to the queen for its inspiration, title, subject matter, and reward. In view of Spenser's lifelong angling for a position at court, it would seem doubly logical to center my own study of textual flirtation upon the queen. Nor do I disagree with the historicist arguments summarized above. Yet the mythology of the Virgin Queen, which encouraged Elizabeth Tudor's courtiers to flirt with her, fully explains neither Spenser's responses to the pressures of femininity nor his explorations of the interactions between gender and narrative. Certainly *The Faerie Queene* is heavily invested in Elizabeth, but it also acknowledges, and is curious about, less glorious forms of feminine power and inscrutability. If it is true, as the last several decades of Renaissance scholarship have indicated, that Elizabeth shrewdly predicated her political control upon her difference from other women, validating her rule by claiming the "heart and stomach of a king" while paternally preventing her Maids of Honor from making even basic decisions about the directions of their own lives, then we should consider the possibility that feminine influences upon, and voices within, Spenser's epic may sometimes look very different from Elizabeth's idiosyncratic brand of feminine influence.⁶ It follows that the poem's exchanges with other forms of femininity may differ importantly from its erotic exchanges with the "haughtie courage" of the queen (*FQ* IV.pr.5).

Jonathan Goldberg has taken issue with the current tendency to believe Queen Elizabeth unique in her gendering simply because she spoke of herself in both feminine and masculine metaphors, remained adamantly unmarried, and was powerful: "To treat her as 'anomalous' is to assume that biological sex and gender are unproblematically sutured in 'ordinary' cases and that heterosexuality assigns men and women to