

# Teaching Resource for the VR Module “Spenser’s Love Poetry in an Irish Context” by Thomas Herron

## Introduction, Analysis, and Further Context

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### *Introduction*

This module places excerpts from the poetic work *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (London 1595) by the English poet Edmund Spenser (1552?-1599) in the context of a Virtual Reality reconstruction of Kilcolman Castle. The work includes the *Amoretti*, a sonnet sequence that consists of 93 poems (89 of which are sonnets) followed by the poem “Epithalamion”, a 433-line *canzone*. Spenser is the speaker of both. The sonnet sequence narrates Spenser’s courtship of his English bride-to-be, Elizabeth Boyle, whom the poet woos in the hope that she will come live with him and be his second wife, presumably at Kilcolman. “Epithalamion” then describes and celebrates the wedding day and night of June 14, 1594, when Elizabeth and Edmund were married in a nearby town and returned to Kilcolman that evening.

### *Progress of the VR Module*

The VR module situates some of these poems within the domestic sphere of Kilcolman. Reading the sonnets and epithalamion “inside” the castle grounds helps to highlight the Irish context of the poems. The module is focused on the Garden and Tower House portions of the castle complex in particular; the Great Hall and attached Ground-Floor Parlor portions of the digital model are not used, but they can be explored in the other VR Modules associated with this one. (All of the castle reconstructions are based on the model found on the companion website, *Centering Spenser: a Digital Resource for Kilcolman Castle*).

This module features eight locations containing fourteen stations in total arranged in numerical order. Each station is keyed to an object in the castle complex and each station describes facets of Spenser's life and/or writing in Ireland, as they relate to sections of *Amoretti and Epithalamion* and, in one case, Spenser’s political prose tract, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. The selected sonnets are presented mostly (with a few exceptions) in the same numerical order as they appear in the published sequence.

The progress of the module follows an earth-to-heaven trajectory. The viewer therefore discovers how the sonnets themselves become increasingly idealistic and spiritually focused as they proceed in the volume. This thematic trajectory culminates in one of the great events of Spenser's life, his second wedding, which he portrays in "Epithalamion".

To better group them according to this scheme, the various stations in the module are divided into three key Zones, each corresponding with the following themes and places (see the “Outline” on the Teaching Resources homepage associated with this module):

Zone 1) poetry focused on earthly concerns; here the viewer begins in the Garden and Cellar (Stations 1-4)

Zone 2) poetry as a mediator between earthly and heavenly concerns; here the viewer explores the middle floors of Tower House (Stations 5-9)

Zone 3) poetry focused mainly on heavenly concerns; these poems also focus on time and mutability, which are themes found throughout the *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. Here the viewer explores the top part of the Tower House, where the Study and the Bedroom are (Stations 11-14).

The visitor following the tour path starts in the Garden, which is emphasized for its earthly fertility. From there, the visitor can travel up through the Tower House portion of the castle complex.

An Index for making short-cuts between the stations is also provided in the Module.

### ***Subject and Themes***

#### *Petrarchan desire, idolization and marriage*

In the sonnets found here, which are all excerpted from *Amoretti*, Spenser celebrates various aspects of his beloved Elizabeth Boyle while also criticizing her occasional cruelty and pride. In this way, he imitates the stereotypical lovelorn “Petrarchan” poet of the renaissance who spills his heart out in his verse. When Elizabeth’s personality is described, she is both highly thoughtful (see for example Sonnet 75 in Station 14) and a fallible and fickle woman, akin to the stereotypical “Petrarchan mistress” in renaissance poetry who tortures her suitors emotionally and physically.

Spenser in turn loves Elizabeth erotically and is tormented by his frustrated desire for her. He is attracted to far more than her looks, however. His ultimate goal in wooing her —beyond writing these poems that he will proudly publish in 1595— is marriage. In *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, he praises Elizabeth’s great beauty, her virtues, and also her intelligence. All of these inspire him and his poetry. Ultimately, he worships Elizabeth’s “saintly” characteristics and admires her soul as a fellow Protestant (presumably) who will be joined forevermore to him in holy matrimony. By the end of the *Amoretti* sequence, she agrees to marry him.

Spenser connects his personal life to larger issues than just his courtship of Elizabeth, however. The poems are about more than the spiritual fulfillment and happiness of two people. When reading the sonnets, one comes to understand that the sonnets tell a story greater than the conventional romantic drama of “boy meets girl, girl rejects boy, boy is hurt; girl eventually accepts boy, boy is overjoyed”. For example, Spenser’s beloved is not just beautiful but she represents the greater *idea* of beauty to the poet, in a religious and “Neo-Platonic” way. She is a

saintly “idol” that the speaker worships through his poetry (see for example Sonnet 61 in Station 10) in ways that blur Protestant and Catholic forms of devotion. This side of her adds drama to the sequence: Elizabeth is both an ideal love and an imperfect object of desire. She represents spiritual fulfillment through worship of the unobtainable as well as a material prize to be wooed and won through marriage. Neither Edmund nor Elizabeth are perfect in real life, and among their faults are the dangers that come with love and desire. Both poet and beloved are sinners, after all: as a sexualized, mortal woman, Elizabeth is a potential trap for the poet that his own sinful lust and ambition lead him towards. Spenser’s hope is that the pleasures and holy union of marriage will counteract and overcome that sin between them.

The holy conclusion that will be their marriage, which is an idealized spiritual and physical union between two people, is the promise that outweighs the difficulties and dangers of courtship for Spenser and his bride. This marriage and the wedding night that follows are described in “Epithalamion”, Spenser’s long, beautiful, and sometimes disturbing sequel to *Amoretti*. An “epithalamion” is an ancient Greek wedding poem (which Spenser adapts to English), and Spenser was highly unusual for the time by writing one for his own wedding. By doing so, he gives his sonnet sequence and volume of poems a happy ending, which is also unusual: most writers of sonnet sequences, including their Italian originator, Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) and his later imitator, the English courtier-soldier Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), end up disappointed, ditched, and/or frustrated by their efforts to win over their ideal love, as related in their own poems. Spenser’s courtship, on the other hand, was difficult but a success. The happy ending and hope expressed by the speaker throughout the sequence counteract the perilous anxieties of desire that come from falling in love with a beautiful and intelligent woman. The couple’s marriage consummates their physical desires and concludes their ambitious (or “proud”) striving for and against one another. Their marriage is, ultimately, a holy union that promises fertility, worldly success and the continuation of the couple’s own lineage. In the long run, their children will help cement the family’s hold on Kilcolman Castle, Spenser’s colonial domain on the Munster Plantation.

### *Reading with Irish Politics in Mind*

In this sense, *Amoretti and Epithalamion* has clear political significance, in that it is written by a Protestant English colonial settler transplanted to Ireland in the late-sixteenth century who is willing to fight for his land and who wants his descendants to stay there permanently (for further background on Spenser’s Irish situation and that of his colonial cohort, including Sir Walter Raleigh, see the website *Centering Spenser*, including the introductory essay on the so-called “New English”: <http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/community.html>). Spenser first arrived in Ireland in 1580, during the time of the Second Desmond Rebellion (1579-83), as a secretary to the English Lord Deputy of Ireland, Arthur, Lord Grey. As a result of the failed Desmond rebellion that Spenser (and Raleigh) took a part in suppressing, Spenser and his New English cohorts were able to possess and occupy thousands of acres of forfeited lands, including Kilcolman, County Cork, located in one of the most fertile parts of Munster. Spenser moved into Kilcolman sometime in the late 1580s. His connections and experience in the government helped him acquire the property. While there, Spenser was surrounded by mostly Catholic, potentially rebellious, mostly Irish-speaking people who worked for him and who probably resented his presence there.

The province of Munster was not yet completely conquered nor reformed in favor of the English crown government. Its official religion was Protestantism but the majority of the population were Catholic. More storm-clouds were brewing after the Desmond rebellions, and in the mid-1590s Spenser wrote an aggressive political tract, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (c. 1596; published 1633), wherein he condemns Irish customs and rebellion and promotes further English conquest and reform of the country (see the excerpt from the *View* describing the treacherous Irish mantle, in Station 4). This tract offers important contextual background for Spenser's poetry of the period.

Spenser had constant legal problems with his powerful neighbors among the Irish and was eventually burnt out of Kilcolman in 1597/98 in another rebellion. He died, a refugee in London, in 1599, and is buried in Westminster Cathedral. His descendants, however, re-occupied Kilcolman and his wife, Elizabeth, remarried and lived in Youghal, County Cork.

In sum, threats to the colonial couple, the Spensers, lingered around Kilcolman during their occupation there, and in Sonnet 65 (in Station 11), Spenser describes the "brasen" or *brassy* and *bold* "tower" in which he hopes to build a "sacred bower" of loving pleasure with his bride-to-be: it is hard not to imagine Spenser picturing in these lines the towering fortifications of Kilcolman, which are recreated here in this VR module, as a bulwark against native rebel threats all around him.

Another way to find a political "meaning" in the *Amoretti* as it relates to Kilcolman is to find a symbolic connection between Spenser's erotic wooing of Elizabeth Boyle and Spenser's struggle, as a New English colonial administrator and settler, to conquer and plant Ireland as part of the Munster Plantation. A marriage in the Tudor period was a legal contract whereby all property of the woman was forfeited to the man (the woman could nonetheless inherit and control all property at the husband's death). What if Elizabeth Boyle, in body and mind, is a symbol in the poems for all worldly property that Spenser (the speaker) wants to "conquer", not just in and of herself but more generally? We can see such a context informing Sonnets 52 and 69 (in Stations 8 and 9). What if Spenser's desire includes possessing the castle and fertile lands to be won in the hostile Irish environment of Kilcolman (an apt context for Sonnet 15, explored in Station 3)?

In this sense, one main goal of Edmund and Elizabeth's marriage was political: the security and inheritance of Kilcolman and surrounding plantation for themselves and their family. Edmund and Elizabeth joined forces in marriage in order to create children who would eventually own and occupy Kilcolman as English Protestant colonizers, and (despite repeated rebellions and Spenser's own death) they succeeded in this goal. In this sense, Spenser's wooing of the difficult-to-please-and-conquer Elizabeth Boyle has a symbolic meaning: winning *her* means solidifying *his* and *their* hold over their newly occupied Irish home.

When we read the sonnets and wedding poem excerpt in this module with this symbolic connection between bride and colonized territory in mind, the poems take on darker political undertones. These undertones further reverberate with the complicated aspects of gender dynamics in the poems. To what extent, in his love-laments, does the poet's difficulty winning over his beloved reflect the kind of difficulties caused to them both by the resistance of their angry and/or displaced neighbors, the Irish themselves, who would have resented Protestant newcomers on "their" lands?

Coincidentally, Boyle had the same first name as the contemporary monarch of England, Queen Elizabeth I, as well as of Spenser's mother. (Spenser makes the name-connection between his bride, mother, and queen explicit in another sonnet, *Amoretti* #74, not included

here). Since the queen held direct and distant power over Spenser's life and (in terms of political loyalty) his love, what if Elizabeth Boyle's cruelty, seen in the sonnets, is meant to reflect Queen Elizabeth's cruelty in sending her poet, like others, to colonize Ireland in her name? Is Spenser projecting his own love for and discomfort with the queen onto his wife-to-be in his sonnet sequence? Simultaneously, Spenser may be projecting his ongoing desire to capture and keep Irish land onto both Boyle and his queen as well.

### *Conclusion: Victory over Time*

This larger political struggle in Ireland relates to other, more conventional difficulties of a Petrarchan poet-in-love. The struggles are a challenge that fire the poet's soul and creative spirit and lead him in and out of despair. To quote Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595), "The course of true love never did run smooth": as we see from Spenser's *Amoretti*, life and love are hard, and it can take time and effort to win over a person who is worthy of your love. Simultaneously, you must keep in check your own emotionally unsettled and even dangerous passions.

Add to this classic dilemma the difficulty of wooing a distinguished, intelligent, and skeptical woman, and then inviting her to come live with you in a relatively remote, fortified, semi-foreign and dangerous place. In this difficult situation, the poet adopts two key strategies in gaining Elizabeth's hand. First and foremost, the poet believes in (and sometimes praises) the conquering power of his love, which he hopes that Elizabeth Boyle will admire and reciprocate by first favoring and then by marrying him.

The poet also believes in the power of his own poetry to make his case for him while also attesting (to all his readers) of his genius as a poet. Spenser's desire and love for Elizabeth Boyle is a principal goal of his worldly ambition, while his loving celebration of the *idea* of "Elizabeth" as an ideal, capable, and beautiful woman drives the creation of his poetry, which will make him more famous. His love for Elizabeth and her eventual reciprocation of that love will give him a tremendous reward: the spiritual satisfaction of a wife and family *in situ* at Kilcolman, as well as a powerful sequence of poems that he can publish. Doing so will help him defeat time and "live" forever in the minds and hands of readers (see Sonnet 1 in Station 13 and Sonnet 75 in Station 14).

All told, Spenser is a deeply spiritual poet who believes in the power of his art and soul to transcend time. Conflict and violence, both physical and mental, are emphasized in the poems, but these disturbances eventually come to a resolution, however temporarily, in a spiritual and worldly victory by the poet and his bride. This victory is expressed, disturbingly, in militaristic terms (see Sonnet 69 in Station 9) but is achieved—ultimately—through love and with the blessing of the gods (*i.e.*, the Christian God). Spenser's joy is eventually reciprocated by Elizabeth Boyle (see the passage from "Epithalamion" in Station 12). Nonetheless, while the joyous love between the poet and his beloved is reciprocal, many unloving threats still loom outside the walls and windows of Kilcolman on their wedding night.

Spenser's efforts are further rewarded in his own mind by his Queen (who in "Epithalamion" is invoked in the form of the moon-goddess Cynthia, who peers in at the window of their marriage chamber to bless and protect the couple). Spenser thus tells a happy but problematic story in his sequence. The poet emphasizes how Elizabeth Boyle, like Kilcolman itself, is a site of fertile creativity and punishing struggle that can result in a rewarding physical and spiritual achievement, *i.e.*, their marriage. Their marriage, in turn, points towards a spiritual

union with a Christian God in a specific place, Kilcolman, that rewards them with its opportunities. There, like the descendants of Adam in the Bible, they will be fruitful and multiply. Their fertile achievement is blessed by the Queen of England, who is the head of the Protestant Church in England and who condones the Munster Plantation as part of her expanding domestic and overseas empire.

Ultimately, the sonnet selections in this module, like the volume overall (including “Epithalamion”), demonstrate how physical struggle, love and poetry combine to enrich the poet-planter physically, materially, and spiritually in his (and her) colonial settlement, marriage, and writing. In writing this poetry based at Kilcolman, Spenser transcends earthly cares without ignoring them. Spenser’s poetry is the medium, or gospel, that preaches a supposed truth that he dearly wants to believe and is haunted by: that he and Elizabeth —both his bride and his Queen— belong in ownership at Kilcolman.

*For further analysis of Amoretti and Epithalamion, see the “Bibliography” linked from this Teaching Resources page.*

To learn more about Spenser’s colonial situation in Ireland, see the companion website to this teaching module: *Centering Spenser: a digital resource for Kilcolman Castle* (<http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/index.html>). The website contains a link to a separate Timeline and Biography of Spenser (<http://core.ecu.edu/umc/Munster/biography.html>) as well as additional teaching resources related to *Amoretti and Epithalamion* and other works by Spenser, including *A View of the Present State of Ireland*.