

**Amoretti, Sonnet XXX:
Ice and Fire, a Lady's Reply**

by Katryne Blak, January 2004

The word "sonnet" comes to us from Italian, meaning "little sound" or "little song". It is a 14-line poem in iambic pentameter (wherein each unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one), with a patterned rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes varied from poet to poet, from 14th Century Italy to 16th Century England.

Sonnets reached the peak of their popularity in England near the close of the 16th Century. Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), a sonnet writer from this period, may be best known for penning *The Faerie Queene* (Queen) in 1596. For his poems he invented the Spenserian Stanza, adopted at times by later poets, such as Shelley, Keats, and Byron.

Spenser's sonnets of the Amoretti were written in 1595, as part of his courtship to his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle. His Amoretti Sonnet XXX -- which I think of more mundanely as the Sonnet of Ice and Fire -- likens the emotions of one's nature to the elements of nature. Two of its qualities are often seen in Elizabethan sonnets: a theme of unrequited love, and a subtle revelation in the last two lines.

What follows are this sonnet in period language, and then again with modern spelling. In the spirit of experimentation, I have added my mean attempt at a sonnet reply from the lady he desires. To help illustrate the social distance between Spenser and his lady, I have not adopted the Spenserian rhyme scheme (abab bc bc cdc d ee, where matching letters indicate rhymes at the end of the line), but used instead the Shakespearean (sometimes called Elizabethan) scheme (abab cdcd efef gg).

Amoretti, Sonnet XXX

My loue is lyke to yse, and I to fyre;
how comes it then that this her cold so great
is not dissolu'd through my so hot desyre,
but harder growes the more I her intreat?
Or how comes it that my exceeding heat
is not delayd by her hart frosen cold:
but that I burne much more in boyling sweat,
and feel my flames augmented manifold?
What more miraculous thing may be told
that fire which all things melts, should harden yse:
and yse which is congeald with sencelesse cold,
should kindle fyre by wonderfull deuyse.
Such is the powre of loue in gentle mind,
that it can alter all the course of kynd.

Amoretti, Sonnet XXX, more modernly:

My love is like to ice, and I to fire:
How comes it then that this her cold so great
Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,
But harder grows the more I her entreat?

Or how comes it that my exceeding heat
Is not allayed by her heart-frozen cold,
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,
And feel my flames augmented manifold?

What more miraculous thing may be told,
That fire, which all things melts, should harden ice,
And ice, which is congeal'd with senseless cold,
Should kindle fire by wonderful device?

Such is the power of love in gentle mind
That it can alter all the course of kind.

(Note: "kind" is used here to mean "nature").

Response From the Lady

His love is like to fire, and I to ice:
How comes it then that we, thus weathered and
In many ways remote, should sacrifice
Our offices and kind on love's demand?

And how comes it that his exceeding heat
Should kindle warm response within these walls?
My haven is an ice-assembled keep
That others built of cautions and snowfalls.

This warmth dismayed will turn upon itself,
Abating my last refuges of cold,
And layer over layer of ice shelf
Will melt away the weight of winters old.

Who knew the gentle ease with which that press
Expels some, while the others convalesce?