

## Unit - I

### 1. The Clerk's Tale – A Scholar from Oxford

The Clerk's Tale follows the Summoner's Tale as a group of travelers make their way to Canterbury from London. After gathering for the journey at the Tabard Inn in London, the host of the inn presents a contest to those making the pilgrimage to visit the shrine of St. Becket. The winner of the contest will receive a free meal upon his or her return. The Clerk, who is a student of philosophy, offers his tale of **Griselda**, a poor peasant girl who marries a nobleman intent on disproving her loyalty. Today, you might hear about college fraternities going overboard with hazing, but what happened with Griselda goes beyond a few brutal pranks.

The Tale of Griselda is an **allusion**, which is an indirect reference, to the **book of Job**. In the book of Job, Satan presents a series of tormenting trials to Job in an effort to prove that his loyalty to God is limited. The tale of Griselda is similar to Job's because the tests to prove their loyalty go beyond anything that could be considered humane. Like Job, Griselda remains loyal and unquestioning.

The Clerk claims to have first heard the tale of Griselda from Francis Petrarch, whom the Clerk met during his philosophy studies in Italy. Part of the significance of the Clerk's tale is its opposing nature to the **Wife of Bath's Tale**, which presented the theory that a happy marriage is the result of matriarchal domination.

### 2. Summary - Epithalamion

Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* (published in 1595) is a poem in 24 stanzas about the poet's wedding to one Elizabeth Boyle. In the first stanza, he recites a conventional invocation of the muses: "Ye learned sisters." He asks them to bless his marriage and also not let others envy his marriage. In the second stanza, he asks his love to awake by saying, "Bid her awake; for Hymen is awake," where Hymen is the deity of marriage. In the third stanza, he asks the Muses to summon other nymphs. In the fourth, he invokes the "Nymphs of Mulla" (a river in Ireland). In the fifth stanza, he invokes the goddess of the dawn, "Rosy Morne," and alludes to her love of Tithonus, the goddess's mortal love. In stanza 6, the poet compares his bride to an evening star. In stanza 7, the poet invites young boys and girls to attend the wedding and also asks the sun not to be too hot on the bride's wedding day: "And let thy lifull heat not fervent be."

Stanzas 8 and 9 discuss the musicians attending the wedding and the beauty of the bride, respectively. Stanza 10 continues to praise her beauty: "Tell me, ye merchants daughters, did ye see / So fayre a creature in your towne before" Stanza 11 compares the bride to Medusa in her capacity to captivate, similar to the way Medusa turns people to stone. Stanzas 13 and 14 are extended physical descriptions of the bride. In stanza 15, the poet asks, and laments, why Barnaby's Day (the longest day of the year) was chosen for a wedding. Stanza 16 continues this theme, asking the wedding to come quickly.

Stanzas 17 through 19 are rife with classical allusions, including to Maia, the mother of Atlas. Stanza 19 asks that no one cry on the wedding day. Stanzas 20 through 22 continue to invoke Cynthia (goddess of the Moon) and Juno (also a patroness of weddings). Juno is queen of the gods, and hers is the last blessing for which Spenser asks. The poet addresses all the gods jointly in stanza 23, asking them to "Poure out your blessing on us plentiously." In the final stanza, stanza 24, he asks that his song be a lasting monument for his bride in place of other gifts: "Be unto her a goodly ornament."

### Summary

*Amoretti* 1595), a sonnet sequence printed with the *Epithalamion*, differs from most Petrarchan sequences because instead of depicting the suffering of an unfulfilled lover, *Amoretti* moves from courtship to the lovers' fulfillment in marriage. The *Amoretti*, a sequence of eighty-nine sonnets, and *Epithalamion*, a verse celebration of a wedding day, were printed together by William Ponsonby in 1595, but they were entered in the Stationers' Register on November 19, 1594. Ponsonby's title page describes them as "written not long since," and they have been interpreted as documents in Spenser's biography.

Since the *Amoretti* contains references to wooing, it has been assumed that the woman addressed is Elizabeth Boyle, Spenser's second wife. If Edmund Spenser is the Spenser who married Machabyas Chylde in 1579, Machabyas had presumably died by 1591. According to numerological and astronomical analyses deriving from the sonnet sequence and wedding poem, Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle sometime between 1591 and 1594.

Internal references indicate that his *Epthalamion* was probably written for his own wedding, which according to astronomical and numerological images seems to have taken place on June 11, St. Barnabas Day, possibly in 1594. The dedication to the published texts, however, does not specify a biographical link between Spenser's life and these poems. Ponsoby dedicates the poems to Sir Robart Needham, whom he thanks for having brought the poems from Ireland to England.

The term "epithalamium" derives from Greek and means literally "before the bridal chamber," but it has come to stand for many different kinds of works, including lyrics praising marriage and actual descriptions of marriage. Conventionally, the spokesman of the wedding poem is a social figure in charge of the festivities or a guest at the wedding, but Spenser varies these conventions because in his poem the bridegroom himself is the poet. His poem intermixes the conventions of the sonnet sequence and the wedding poem.

The poem has a mythological frame; both human beings and gods are wedding guests, but in stanza 10, the bride is given a *blazon*, a head-to-toe description of her beauty borrowed from the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet. Spenser's bride is first a "mayden Queene," then her neck is like a "marble towre" and her body a "pallace fayre," but Spenser never lets the reader forget the sensuousness of the occasion. The lips of his bride are "lyke cherryes charming men to byte," her breast like a "bowle of creame uncrudded." This magnificent celebration of wedded love concludes with Spenser's prayer that his poem, "in lieu of many ornaments," will be to his wife a "goodly ornament," and that his consecration of their marriage in song will be "for short time an endlesse moniment."