

**FROM FIRE TO WATER:
A SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS
OF THE “ELEMENTS”
IN THE ELIZABETHAN EROTIC DISCOURSE**

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Much has been written about the Petrarchan influence on the love poems of the Elizabethan age. In this sense, there has been an endless number of studies which have attempted to give an overall view of the correlations between the Petrarchan conception of the sonnet and the innovations introduced by the English sonneteers, not to speak of the purely stylistic analyses of the most frequent tropes and figures used in this erotic code. However, an interpretation of the four elements and the role played by each in the game of love could well serve as a basis for an analysis of the logic which underlies the erotic discourse of the love sonnets, though this has never been undertaken in a systematic way. The aim of this paper is, then, to investigate the presence of three of these elements -Fire, Air and Water- in this erotic discourse and to elicit the symbolic connotations which can rather easily be derived from their pervasive appearance in the poetic structure of three typically Elizabethan sonnet-sequences like “Astrophel and Stella”, “Tears of Fancie” and “Parthenophil and Parthenophe”.¹ For clarity’s sake, I will by examining two spaces attempt to analyse the love poems in question not as isolated units but as discourses nurtured by the same erotic logic:

¹ All the sonnets by Sir Philip Sidney, Thomas Watson and Barnabe Barnes have been taken from *An English Garner. Elizabethan Sonnets*, ed. Sidney Lee, Vol. 1 (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964).

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(i) The space of Presence: The vision of the beloved object or the Dialectic of Fire.

(ii) The space of Absence: The solitude of the lover or the Dialectic of Air and Water.

Needless to say, these spaces are not separate entities and very often interact with each other.

THE SPACE OF PRESENCE: THE VISION OF THE BELOVED OBJECT OR THE DIALECTIC OF FIRE

“Thy beauty is the Sun which guides my life”

B. Barnes

It is obvious that to speak of any erotic discourse whatsoever implies to recognise the existence of a person “X” who loves and a “Y” who is loved, “X” being the subject or the “I’s” of the poems and Y the object of the discourse, usually a third and more rarely a second person.¹ It goes without saying that in most of the love sonnets of the period, this X, the subject who loves, is a man. This truism is important insofar as it shows that the erotic game which is going to be put into play is a male-centred one, which unavoidably implies a vision of the beloved object -the mistress- from a specific perspective. In fact, it is precisely the woman who is going to become the object of love “par excellence”. Not surprisingly, her figure is bound to occupy the central position in the moral, aesthetic and artistic debates of the age from different -if not opposing- standpoints. Woman can be either the epitome of the most praiseworthy virtue or the byword for moral corruption, an example of purity and chastity or the object which arouses lust and other base instincts. This is indeed the controversy which takes place in Book Four of *The Courtier* by Castiglione.

¹ For a philosophical account of the thematic structure of the erotic discourse, see Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York. Hill and Wang, 1975).

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Whereas Peter Bamboo, the defender of the Neoplatonic conception of love, argues for the doctrine that “Beauty is always good” and accordingly beautiful women can only be viewed as examples of virtue, Mr. Morello supports the traditional negative opinion of women in the following terms:

“...beauty is not always good, for the beauty of women is many times cause of infinite evils in the world (...); and beautiful women for the most part be either proud and cruel, as is said, or unchaste.”¹

But this is also a debate which is present in Elizabethan poetry, particularly in the poetry that Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* defines as “the meanest sort” which can be “used for recreation only”,² i.e., in the love sonnets and lyrics of the age. Stella, Parthenophe, Delia, Myra ..., to give but a few examples from the endless list of woman’s names which appear in this kind of poetic production, would doubtless fit into the vision of women put forward by Mr. Bamboo, since they are seen as reflections of beauty and virtue. Yet it is no less true that there is a good deal of poems which underline the other side of woman’s nature: I am here referring to all the satirical pictures which do not precisely convey a laudatory vision of the mistress and which in fact constitute an overt attack on the benefits of love.

Thus, between these two extreme poles -love as a “brain-sick foolery” and love as an eternal sacred reality does move the love poetry of the age. I do not intend, of course, to enter here into a discussion on the ideological conflict between the misogynist position, which is a clear remnant of the medieval vision of women and passion as emblematic objects of fleshly sin, and the Neoplatonic doctrine which enhances the moral virtues which can be derived from the courtly practice of love. Instead, I will focus my attention upon what seems to be the freshest and most typically Renaissance attitude towards the erotic code, which breaks through the old poetic patterns and thematic forces of the poetry of the age. This new erotic code starts from two important Neoplatonic premises which can be summarized as follows:

¹ Taken from Sir Thomas Hobby’s translation (1561). Rptd. (New York: Dutton and London: Dent, 1928).

² Cfr. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 24.

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(i) Love is defined not as a gratification of the senses but as a spiritual yearning for beauty.

(ii) Physical beauty can only be understood as an external sign of virtue. Ficino does not hesitate to recognise the spiritual nature of beauty in his influential treatise on the topic:

“And by this it is revealed that the source of beauty itself cannot be the body for if beauty were a physical phenomenon it would not correspond to the virtues of the spirit which are immaterial.”¹

For this reason, physical beauty is often viewed as a mirror of the divine order of the universe, i.e., as a balanced mixture of the four elemental spheres that make up the sublunary world. This might also account for the fact that the poetic representation of the beloved object, far from being a unique experience of the individual who loves, can be decodified into a number of elements which are always present under one form or another in most of the love poems of the age. Thus, the mistress is beautiful and can be set up as a model of physical perfection inasmuch as she becomes a microcosmic reflection of the arrangement of the four elements, not in an arbitrary fashion but precisely in the way in which these are assumed to be ordered in the macrocosm.

The Elizabethan conception of the world, as far as the theory of the elements is concerned, is hierarchical: the four elements are arranged following a vertical line in which Fire takes up the top of the hierarchy whereas Earth is located at the bottom. Air and Water occupy the intermediate positions.² Right now, we may ask ourselves how this

¹ Marsilio Ficino, “De Amore. Commentarium in Convivium Platonis” (1594). Rptd. *De Amore. Comentario a “El Banquete” de Platón*, transl. and ed. Rocío de la Villa Ardura (Madrid: Tecnos, 1986), p. 91. The translation into English is mine.

² For a detailed discussion on this topic, see the classic study by E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943) which still deserves to be read notwithstanding the fact that to the contemporary critic it may appear somewhat simplistic and perhaps even outdated. Much more interesting is a recent article by Edward Grant “Medieval and Renaissance scholastic conceptions of the influence of the celestial region on the terrestrial” in *JMRS*, Vol. 17 (1987), pp. 1-23.

particular arrangement might be translated into physical beauty, i.e., into the image of a mistress. The difficulty for a twentieth-century reader to grasp questions like this lies in the fact that our habits of thought and knowledge of the world have been formed from a positivist and rationalist standpoint which prevents us from understanding the construction of sixteenth century knowledge. In this sense, Michel Foucault makes a magnificent analysis of the Renaissance epistemology and his theory will suffice to explain this point.¹ It is impossible, he argues, to apprehend the logic of the prescientific ages if we do not take into account the category of “analogy” or “similitude”, this being one of the most powerful tools of knowledge up to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Only by starting from the concept of “analogy” will we be able to understand how the sublunary world is basically seen as a reflection of heaven in the Renaissance and how the same elements can be found in one and the other regions, the differences being only a natural consequence of the matter of which they were made. It is not surprising, then, if we follow this train of thought, to find allegedly objective sentences like the following in countless treatises of the age:

[Every flower and plant] “is an earthly star which glances at the heavens just as every star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which is only different from the earthly counterpart in its material composition.”²

¹ For a deeper investigation into the Renaissance epistemology and the category of Analogy in any of its forms, a prime text is Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archeology des sciences humaines* (1966). I am quoting from the Spanish edition: *Las palabras y las cosas*, transl. Elsa Cecilia Frost (México D.F.: Siglo XXI, 1984). All the quotations in English included hereafter have been translated by the present author. See also Joseph A. Mazzeo’s excellent article “A Critique of some Modern Theories of Metaphysical Poetry” in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry*, ed. William R. Keast (New York, 1962), pp. 63-74. His theory is based upon the premise that metaphysical poets “possessed a view of the world founded on universal analogy and derived habits of thought which prepared them for finding and easily accepting the most heterogeneous analogies.” For a wider reference to these “habits of thought”, Gaston Bachelard’s suggestive work *La formation de l’esprit scientifique* should be consulted. The Spanish edition can be found in G. Bachelard *La formación del espíritu científico*, transl. José Banini, (México D.F.: Siglo XXI, 1948).

² Quoted by Foucault, p. 29.

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It is this category of “analogy” that also explains the game of resemblances between the universe as the macrocosm and man as the microcosmic unit. Indeed, we can easily find all the elements of the former arranged in a similar way in the latter, everything being reduced to a question of reflection in varying degrees. Finally, it is this analogical view of the world that seems to justify the fact that in a microcosmic experience like love, which is supposed to partake of divine properties, the figure of the mistress mirrors the order prescribed in the constitution of the universe: Fire, Air, Water and Earth.

This is, at least, the idea presented by Sir Walter Raleigh in a poem called “Nature that washt her hands in milk”. The subject-matter is simple: the allegorical reincarnation of Love asks Nature to compose a mistress and the result can only be the image of a woman in which the first three elements -Fire, Air and Water- appear vertically arranged on her face: Fire is immediately identified with the brightness of the eyes (“Her eyes he would should be of light”); Air is transformed into “a violet of breath” and finally Water appears in “her lips of jelly”. Naturally, the difficulty arises with the problem of how to represent Earth, the most ignoble and meanest of the elements. Since love is by definition a godlike phenomenon, it is difficult to see how Earth can take part in the idyllic vision of the mistress. Raleigh unravels the problem by introducing this impure element in the following way:

“At Loves entreaty, such a one
Nature made, but with her beauty
She hath framed a heart of stone” [emphasis added]

Only when the four elements have been ordered in the only way possible, the iconic representation of the beloved object appears to be perfected.

But there is no doubt that the Neoplatonic definition of love put forward by the different “trattatisti d’amore” prescribes that out of the four elements it is Fire, the noblest and purest of them, which, above all others, takes up the most prominent position in the depiction of the beloved. An important question arises here: which of the bodily parts of the mistress can be a reflection of this first element? The answer to this question is not too difficult to find if we again think of the logic of analogy as the only possible means to grapple with seemingly unsolvable problems like this. If Fire is represented by the Sun in the universe and the Sun is the celestial body which illuminates the earth, it is no coincidence, then, that the eye,

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the organ which serves to see light, analogically comes to incarnate the properties we typically assign to this element. Discussing the “Aemulatio”, one of the methods of knowledge of the age, Foucault remarks:

“The eyes are the stars since they illuminate the face just as the celestial bodies shed light in the darkness, and because the blind are in this world like a man of normal vision who is trying to see in the darkest night.”¹

Thus, if the eyes become the embodiment of Fire, it is hardly surprising that they are constantly equated with the Sun, the stars or any other celestial or earthly body which gives or reflects light.^o Astrophil devotes a complete sonnet to his mistress’ eyes (VII), and he goes as far as to attribute his success in the tournaments to the almost divine inspiration which can come from a single glance from his beloved:

“the true cause is
Stella lookt on, and from her heavenly face
Sent forth the beams which made so fair my race”
(XLI)

To give a list of the examples in which the properties of Fire are associated with the eyes of the beloved would be an endless task and is beyond the scope of this paper. Most notable are, perhaps, Spenser’s line “Her goodly eyes like Saphyres shining bright”, Robert Greene’s simile “Thine eyes like flames of holy fire” and Parthenophil’s extended comparison “the torchlight of two suns” (Sonnet XXII). There is, nevertheless, an important idea which underlies all these poetic images: from an animist point of view, the eyes were held to be the window through which the twin souls -those of the lover and the beloved imprisoned in the body- could look out and recognise each other. Thus, Ficino regarded sight as the noblest sense through which the spiritual joy of love could be achieved:

“Beauty is a *blaze* which the human spirit draws towards itself. The beauty of the body is no other than the *blaze* itself resulting from the harmony of lines and colours (...). But this *light* of the body is not

¹ Foucault, p. 36.

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perceived either by the ear or the smell or the taste or the tact but by the eye. *If only the eye knows it, only the eye can enjoy it.*"¹

[emphasis added]

What we have here is undoubtedly a Neoplatonic vision of love as a heavenly flame sent forth by God and perceived by the body through the visual sense, the only gate which can keep the soul in contact with the external world. But what is noteworthy is that the images used to illustrate the purifying force of Love and Beauty can be no other than those related to Fire, the noblest of the elements, the least polluted of them. It is in this sense that we should understand this kind of poetic obsession with the mistress' eyes. In fact, they are going to become the definite proof -the external mark, we could say- that the beloved object is not only beautiful but also spiritually illuminated with the grace of love. In other words, if only the beautiful souls can be endowed with the illuminating power of love and this can only be reflected through the light of the eyes, it is logical that the lover focuses his attention upon no other bodily part of his mistress but her eyes. Astrophil does not hesitate to recognise this fact: "Mine eyes (shall I say curst or blest) beheld / STELLA. now she is named, need more be said?" (XVI).

This dialectic of Fire, present in the vision of the beloved object, is going to produce a whole image-repertoire which spreads from the "boiling sprites" and "restless flames" of the lover to the no less recurrent motif of the mistress' look turned into a "ray" or "beam" which inspires either the lover courtier to win his races in the tournaments as in Sonnet XLI mentioned above or the lover-poet to write his poetry as in Sonnet XV. But the symbolism of Fire in the passionate game of love is not restricted to the depiction of the mistress' eyes, however fundamental this may be. Moreover, there are some other poetic devices connected with this element which also remain invariably associated with the vision of the beloved. I am here alluding to the massive use of words like "gold" or "red", words which hint in one way or the other at this dialectic of Fire to we have been continually referring.

That "gold" seems to be analogically coupled with Fire in the Renaissance can be perfectly seen in the alchemists' appreciation of this precious metal:

¹ Ficino, p. 47.

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The Sun and gold have a special correspondence and some strength for the Sun has worked on the gold as a powerful mediator (...). Hence gold has its origin in the golden and celestial Loadstone.¹

It is this correspondence that explains the belief in gold as being the purest, the most spiritual and temperate of all the earthly substances, a belief which is reinforced by the fact that most alchemists also thought the metal to be composed of a balanced mixture of the four elements and hence its curative value and use in medicine.

“Gold fortifies the heart, reanimates the spirit and cheers up the soul (...) it is useful for melancholy and for heart pangs and throbs.”²

Seen from this perspective, gold cannot be absent in the idealised picture of the beloved: Stella’s face is compared to a palace whose “covering” is “gold” (Sonnet VII) and gold also seems to be one of the obligatory colours for Parthenophil to compose his mistress’ portrait, as we can see in the iconic representation he makes of his beloved in Madrigal 4.

The same can be said in relation to the symbolism of red in the love poetry of the age. It is perfectly obvious that an identical analogical correspondence with Fire can be found in all the metaphors whose only common element is the colour red, the one which most clearly represents the symbolic force of Fire and therefore also of concomitant experiences such as love and passion. I am not going to enter here into a discussion of the bipartite symbolic status of a colour like red and its long tradition in literature. What I would like to emphasize instead is the fact that red, as far as the logic of the erotic discourse is concerned, is a colour which definitely must be present in the depiction of the mistress’ complexion. It is only in this light that we should interpret all the flower and fruit motifs which are almost invariably used to refer to the features of the beloved’s face: thus, archetypal images like “roses” or “apples which the Sun hath rudded” (Spenser’s “Epithalamion”) can easily be understood as metaphorical expressions constructed around the axis of the fire element and used to refer to the lady’s cheeks, whereas metaphors or similes like “cherries”, “red

¹ Quoted by Bachelard, p. 166.

² Bachelard, p. 161.

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porphyry” and “vermillion” are the commonest poetic devices utilised to enact the lips of the beloved.

Thus far we have seen how the logic of the love poems included within the space of the mistress’ presence depends on a series of images of light which can only be grasped if we interpret them according to this dialectic of Fire, a dialectic which spreads from the eyes of the beloved -the epitome of the Sun- to the flower, fruit and metal motifs by which she is depicted. But the problem arises when the mistress is out of sight, i.e., when she departs from her lover. This forces us to move on to the second space into which a large number of sonnets can easily be placed. This space is obviously no other than that of absence.

THE SPACE OF ABSENCE: THE SOLITUDE OF THE LOVER OR THE DIALECTIC OF AIR AND WATER

“Whatever dies was not mixt equally”

John Donne

Let us see how the dialectic of Fire which operated in the discourse of presence is now substituted by a new dialectic of two elements -Air and Water- in a set of poems which clearly revolve around the thematic axis of the mistress’ absence and which accordingly can be analysed from a totally different standpoint. First of all, we should remark that if the beloved being was seen as a perfect whole, i.e., as a balanced macrocosmic-like combination of the four elements, of which Fire took up the most prominent position, now the solitary lover, overwhelmed by the burden of the beloved’s departure, is bound to undergo a disorder -frequently verging on a chaotic state- of the elements. Hereafter Air and Water are going to play the most important role. This is the idea expressed by Parthenophil in Sonnet LXXVII. Note how instead of the macrocosmic vertical order, we now find a complete inversion of the elements:

“How can I live in mind or body’s health,
When all four Elements, my griefs conspire?
The Fire, with heat’s extremes mine heart enraging.
Water, in tears, from Despair’s fountain flowing.
My soul in sighs, Air to Love’s soul engaging.

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My Fancy's coals, Earth's melancholy blowing."

This explains that the lover's chaotic state easily finds analogical correspondences with natural phenomena in which the elemental agents are seen as confronting each other in a violent struggle: storms, tempests, earthquakes... Thus, the mechanism which nurtures a microcosmic experience like love, in which the wild action of Air and Water seems to be the defining feature, is represented by the collision of elements as they are assumed to act in the universe, the essential game of analogical relations being once again accomplished. A good instance of this is Sonnet XXXVI of "Tears of Fancie" in which the distressed state of the lover is compared to the "raging wind" and to the "surging seas" or Parthenophil's description of his anguish as a strange concurrence of "seas, volumes, earthquakes and hell" (Sonnet XX).

The importance of Air and Water within the space of absence can also be interpreted from a symbolic perspective: since the departure of the beloved means the lover's privation of light, i.e., the disappearance of Fire in a phenomenon like love which can only subsist through the action of this element, it is perfectly understandable that now Air and Water take the stage in an erotic discourse which is about to disintegrate. This is why the images of light are now changed into images of darkness and hence the entire game of dichotomies (summer/winter, day/night, sun/moon) which plays such a fundamental role in the Elizabethan erotic discourse.

On a primary level, this new dialectic of Air and Water is most often realized by the ever-recurrent appearance of sighs and tears. Thus, Astrophil's complaint about Stella's absence is typically expressed in lines like the following: "Oft with true sighs, oft with uncall'd tears/ Now with slow words, now with dumb eloquence" (LXI). And no less revealing in this sense proves the lover's language in a sonnet-sequence like "Tears of Fancie": "Teares, plaints, and sighes, all cause of ioyes declining" (XXXIX). In fact, the logic which underlies this bulk of examples in which tears and sighs take up the central position is no other than the struggle of Air and Water, two elements which often blend and clash in the lover's soliloquies, since they seem to convey contrary effects. Obviously, the functions of Air and Water are not only different but also opposed: Water in the form of tears aims either to relieve the repressed force of desire or to extinguish the flames of burning passion. In both cases the presence of Fire, the driving element of love, is counteracted, when not annihilated:

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“Hart said that loue did enter at the eies,
And from the eies descended to the hart:
Eies said that in the hart did sparkles arise,
Which kindled flame that wrought the inward smart,
Hart said eies tears might soone quencht that flame”

(XX)

This dialectic of Water checking the burning action of Fire is going to create a series of contradictory images which reflect the two halves of the lover's tormented nature. In this sense, it is worth noting that Parthenophil defines himself as a mixture of Water and Fire in Sonnet XLII (“Thus am I Water-Man, and Fire-Man”).

On the other hand, Air, an element purer than Water since it is situated closer to Fire, brings about the reverse effect: sighs do not serve but to kindle the lover's incandescent heart which after the purifying action of tears has become reduced to a heap of embers. This is at least the conceitful thought expressed by Astrophil in Sonnet XCV (“Yet sighs! dear sighs! Indeed true friend you are”) or by Parthenophil in Sonnet LXXXVII:

“Burn on, sweet Fire! For I live by that fuel,
Whose smoke is as an incense to my soul!
Each sigh prolongs my smart...”

However, Water is the element which is going to play a most important role in the space of absence. Its function is not only restricted to the simple use of this pervasive language of tears, of which we can enumerate a host of examples.⁹ Water is also present in the form of three important motifs:

(i) Very often the lover who has been deprived of light and who cannot support the oppressive burden of his beloved's loss seeks refuge in the monotonous rhythm of the fountain. Thus, the lover of “Tears of Fancie” does not need long to see a parallel of his grief in the water springing from it:

“Taking a truce with teares
I thus began hard by the fountain side
O deare copartner of my wretched woe”

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(ii) Similarly, the lover during his mistress absence can also express his thoughts more easily by the side of a river or stream. Here we may recall Astrophil's sonnet to the river Thames (CIII), or Sonnet XXVII of "Tears of Fancie" ("The banke whereon I leand my restles head"). No less interesting in this sense proves one poem clearly articulated around the theme of the beloved's absence: Spenser's "Prothalamion", in which the line "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" is anaphorically repeated at the end of each stanza.

(iii) Finally, the Sea also seems to be a minor symbolic space within the discourse of absence. The opening lines of Sonnet LXXV of *Amoretti* can be given as a good example of this:

"One day I wrote her name upon the strand
But came the waves and wash'd it away:"

What is at issue here is the use of Water as the poetic element which most explicitly symbolizes an abstract category like Time and a parallel concept like Death. Gaston Bachelard claims apropos of this:

"Water is really the transient element. It is the essential ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. The self consecrated to Water is a self living on the verge of giddiness. It dies every single minute, something of its substance ceaselessly crumbles down. (...) The everyday death is the death of Water. Water always flows, always falls down, always ends up with its horizontal death. (...) The pity of Water is boundless."¹

Thus, the three images mentioned above can definitely be interpreted as symbols of Time operating in different forms:

¹ Cfr. Bachelard's illuminating work *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (1942). I am quoting from the Spanish edition published in Mexico D. F. with the title *El Agua y los Sueños* by Fondo de Cultura Económica (p. 15). Again the translation is mine.

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(i) First, the fountain functions as a clear image of melancholy: it is simply the vision of the water condemned to flow continuously in a cyclical way, and whose music can only convey an overwhelming feeling of sadness. It is therefore the the clearest analogical reflection of the lover's sorrow.

(ii) The river or the stream is obviously the symbolic motif of the passage of time: it is the image of the water whose flow -like that of Chronos- cannot come to a halt.

(iii) The Sea is eventually used as an emblem of Death.

Obviously enough, Time, as one of the most important thematic forces, does not seem to be absent in the erotic discourse of the age from Shakespeare's sonnets to Marvell's poetry, as it has often been pointed out. In fact, if the love union has proved impossible and the solitary lover is compelled to confront the problem of his fragile identity, it is logical that Water -the most changeable of the elements- emerges as the driving force of a discourse which can no longer be constructed around its natural thematic axis -Fire- and which accordingly is on the verge of its own disintegration. Only the vision of Water in any of its possible forms -either fountain, river or sea- can then operate as a crystalline reflection of the lover's fragmented identity. Thus, if Fire represented the spiritual force of love in an erotic game in which the vision of the beloved made the lover take part in a phenomenon which was supposed to be immutable, Water can only bring about the reverse effect: its discursive function is no other than to be a reminder of the lover's brittle, Time-bound nature, and simultaneously to emphasize the futility of his amorous discourse.

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