

A writer and his  
creation: double  
meanings in  
Spenser's Amoretti



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Though he is by no means a single-minded man, Edmund Spenser's Amoretti focus largely on the beauty and physical form of the woman he addresses these poems to. In seven of these sonnets, he calls this woman's beauty her "hew", or in the modern spelling, "hue"; each time 'hew' is used, it is paired with a defining adjective. Examining alternative definitions of 'hue' within the Amoretti sheds light on Spenser's meaning within these stanzas, and explores further the complicated philosophical relationship Spenser has with the act of creation and writing: a relationship central to the narration of his Faerie Queene.

In Sonnet III, the line reads: "but looking still on her I stand amazed, / at wondrous sight of so celestiall hew" (389). Sonnet seven lists it as a "louely hew", and sonnet seventy-four as a "glorious hew", with these three defining words repeated among the remaining four instances. Though in the poem it quickly becomes clear that Spenser is referring to his lady's "hue", because it is spelled like "hew" the reader may be momentarily confused. Our definition of "hew" is to "cut or hack"; indeed, it has borne this meaning as early as 993 CE according to the Oxford English Dictionary, which first lists it as "To strike, or deal blows, with a cutting weapon" ("Hew," OED). The word 'hue', as we are meant to read 'hew' in the Amoretti, has meant "form" or alternatively "colour", both since 971 CE ("Hue", OED).

In six out the seven places Spenser uses 'hew', it is meant to flatter. Her hue is lovely, celestial and glorious, and the implication is obvious. But as ever with Spenser, his words are carefully chosen; the use of the word 'hew' represents an important intention. The OED's full first definition of hue is "<https://assignbuster.com/a-writer-and-his-creation-double-meanings-in-spensers-amoretti/>

Form, shape, figure; appearance, aspect; species.” The last definition, ‘species’, is particularly interesting in this instance. An animal’s species is an inherent quality. It isn’t what an animal attains or works towards; it is a quality they are born with, and they cannot help but being said species. Spenser, in his praise of his love, is essentially claiming that she is inherently glorious and lovely, and that she couldn’t help but be so. When paired with the word “celestial”, she is elevated, and becomes inherently of the heavens and inherently godly.

The first definition of ‘hew’ is, as stated above, “To strike, or deal blows, with a cutting weapon.” (“Hew,” OED). Farther down in the entry, however, the seventh definition of hew is listed as “To make, form, or produce by hewing (with obj. expressing the product)”. To think of ‘hewing’ something as producing it, forming it into a certain shape, makes Spenser’s use of ‘hew’ much more complicated. In effect, it is the polar opposite of ‘hue’. Though the part of speech is somewhat twisted as a result, to affirm an object’s ‘hew’ as its form, its crafted shape, implies that this shape is not an inherent quality. For Spenser to, six times, say that his love has a wonderful ‘hew’, and to take it to mean ‘man-made form’, raises another question; who has hewn her? Spenser isn’t implying that she procured some sort of sixteenth century plastic surgery, or that she herself has made for her this shape; Spenser is who has hewn her. And he has done it with the craft he knows best: his words. He wrote almost one hundred sonnets about this woman. Read as a whole, these sonnets shape her in the reader’s mind. Spenser has created her ‘hew’.

Of course, this is not to say that Spenser's subject or her beauty is a fiction. It is logical to take the primary meaning of 'hew' to be 'hue', and for this to be rightly flattering to the woman. But by shaping and forming her from his words, Spenser has indeed created her 'hue'; the only hue the reader of the poem knows. Spenser often flirts with the idea of the poet forming true and living figures through his writing. In *The Faerie Queene*, he often questions the path his characters are taking and claims that he must take a break from writing about them, as their plot line is much too distressing. And yet simultaneously he acknowledges that he is the one who has put them in these situations.

This idea of Spenser himself as creator of information as well as simple narrator seems to be echoed in these sonnets. He can't help but wax poetic about her "hew": it is his job both as a lover and a narrator. And yet, he has created it in describing it. Spenser seems to acknowledge that his love's inherent hue, her celestial aspect, is the one he has hewn for her. He has created his love. Spenser projects a sense that he has agency in this story, and yet acts as if he has no control whatsoever. This, as well as the realization that Spenser often intentionally uses words with double meanings, are important acknowledgments to make: both expand and complicate Spenser's role as writer in the *Amoretti* and *The Faerie Queene*.