

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Poem of the day:

***Epithalamion* by Edmund Spenser**

My wife and I have sometimes noticed that you can guess how long a marriage is going to last by how expensive the wedding reception has been. The more it costs, the shorter the marriage: knock off a year for every bridesmaid's gown that costs more than a thousand dollars. That's because the couple will think that the wedding is all about themselves. They may invite God to the ceremony, but only if He keeps his place in a corner of the chapel. As for the reception itself, he isn't even on the guest list.

It would strike them as strange if I said that a wedding must be about the whole of a human society, its years long past and to come, the history of God's grace toward man, the natural world all around us, the spiritual realities we cannot see – angels and archangels and all the host of heaven, and God, who said in the beginning, “Let us make man in our image,” and male and female He

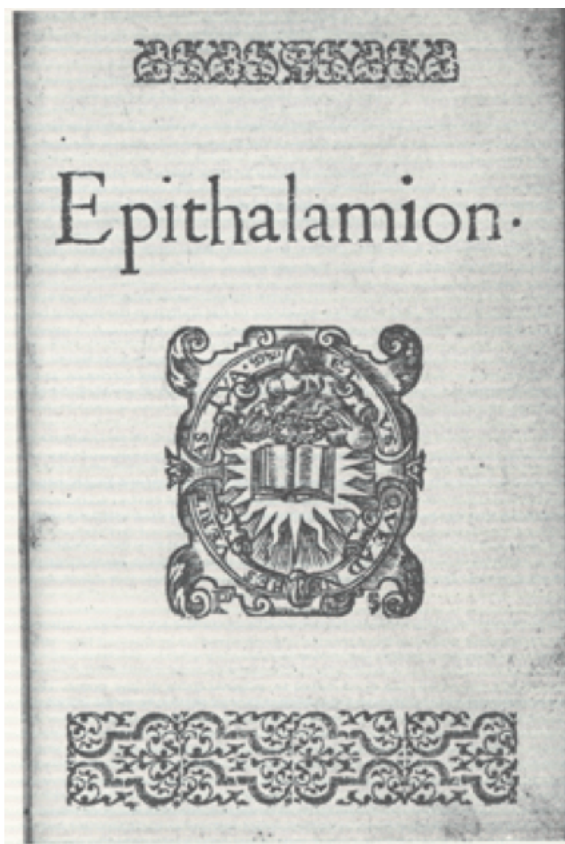
made them, and “for this reason a man shall leave his mother and father and cleave unto his wife, and the two shall be one flesh.” They might say I was being sentimental. But they are the ones who are sentimental. I am describing the reality. It is the mere fact. Our pagan

forefathers would have seen the natural part of it, even if they missed the supernatural.

So whom should you invite to your wedding feast? The poet Edmund Spenser answers that question for us in the *Epithalamion*, probably the greatest wedding hymn ever written. Spenser was a widower already when he wooed and won his second bride Elizabeth, and they married at Kilcolman in Ireland, in 1596. He gave her as a wedding present a book of his own love poetry, inspired by her, commemorating their courtship and celebrating her virtue and beauty. The

Epithalamion is the finale in that book.

Spenser is a Christian poet, so that means that his vision is going to take in the whole world, because God made that world. He invites the pleasant fish-rich Irish rivers to the



feast, the nymphs of the woodlands full of deer,
the birds singing aloft in the summertime, and
then all the people of Kilcolman. That means
girls and boys too:

*Now is my love all ready forth to come,
Let all the virgins therefore well await,
And ye fresh boys that tend upon her groom
Prepare yourselves, for he is coming straight.
Set all your things in seemly good array
Fit for so joyful day,
The joyfulest day that ever sun did see.*

The whole town comes
forth with merriment!
And at the altar?

We are apt to think
that the bride is the center
of attention there too.
Why? Spenser's bride
hears her praises sung on
all sides before she enters
the church, but she
blushes, "so far from
being proud." She stands
before the altar, to
partake of the ceremonies

"the which do endless matrimony make." Let
me show you one of the many beautiful brush
strokes in this poem. If you count up all the
lines, they make 433. Which is the line right in
the middle, then? It is line 217, with 216 lines
before it and 216 lines after. That is the line I
have just given you, *the which do endless
matrimony make*. What word is in the middle
of that line? *Endless*: eternal, in the exact
center of the poem. So it is fitting that beings
from the eternal are present too. The angels
who assist at the sacrament, they are there, and
they gaze upon the beauty of the bride, who

holds her sober gaze upon the ground, and will
not let one unsound thought come to mind or
one ungracious look to glance awry. The bond
is made forever, and the angels participate in it
too:

*Why blush ye, love, to give to me your hand,
The pledge of all our band?
Sing ye sweet Angels, alleluia sing,
That all the woods may answer and your echo
ring.*

"The angels who assist at the
sacrament, they are there,
and they gaze upon the
beauty of the bride, who
holds her sober gaze upon
the ground, and will not let
one unsound thought come
to mind or one ungracious
look to glance awry."

Of course there's a great
feast to follow, not stinting
with the refreshments and
the boisterous noise. "Pour
not by cups but by the belly
full!" cries the groom.
"Ring ye the bells, ye young
men of the town," he cries,
and urges them to make
bonfires all day long, to
dance and sing and make
the woods reecho with the
joy. But even the longest
day of the year, thank God,
has its blessed end, and

Spenser, who married on that longest day, wants
it to come to a close, so that night will fall and
he will be alone with his bride. So at *exactly* the
point in the poem that would mark the division
between day and night for the longest summer
day at Kilcolman, he says, "Now night is come,"
and after the bridesmaids help to undress the
bride and fit her for the marriage bed, he begins
to change his melody and bid the guests
farewell.

But not all the guests. Not the little Cupids
sporting about, and not the majestic goddesses
of youth, marriage, and childbirth. For God

Himself is present, and the poet prays that the stars above will shed their power upon him and his bride, so that their act of love will resound through eternity:

*Pour out your blessing on us plenteously,
And happy influence upon us rain,
That we may raise a large posterity,
Which from the earth, which they may long
possess
With lasting happiness,
Up to your haughty palaces may mount,
And for the guerdon of their glorious merit,
May heavenly tabernacles there inherit,
Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.*

(“Guerdon” means reward.)

Think of it. The husband and wife bring into existence an immortal soul, destined for holiness and the enjoyment of the presence of God for all eternity.

How many newlyweds in our time give it a passing thought? They should read Spenser.



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Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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