



Influence of Edmund Spenser in English Poetry through the Ages

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Abstract- The true poetic genius of Spenser has influenced the poets of all time and ages. It won't be an exaggeration to say that he has made more poets than any other poet in English. Though he founded no school, there are many who followed his greatness as a poet and raised English poetry to the heights of romantic epic and lyric excellence. The readers come across a beautiful blend of Renaissance spirit coupled with the ethical temper of the Reformation in his poetry.

The satires of Hall and Marston and the poetry of Donne and Ben Jonson towards the closing years of Spenser's era show that there was a distinct reaction against the diffuse and flamboyant poetry of Spenser, Sidney and Lodge. Though different groups of poets were formed towards the early seventeenth century, Spenser's influence remained dominant. If serious young poets like Giles and Phineas Fletcher profess to be disciples of Spenser, Drayton follows Spenser in pastoral poetry. Browne, Wither and Basse are younger Spensarians who composed pastoral poetry. Towards the middle of the seventeenth century poets like Henry More and Joseph Beaumont owe to Spenser in their allegory, stanza and to some extent in their diction.

The greatest poet of the seventeenth century, John Milton's poetry also exhibits allegiance to the rich poetic style of Spenser and the Elizabethans. John Milton has acknowledged to John Dryden that Spenser was his master. The graceful verses of his early poems like on The Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough show how successful he was even at the age of seventeen in catching the elegiac note of Spenser's lines. In both metre and style Milton shows the influence of Spenser. Milton must have had Spenser in his mind when he wrote the following lines:

**And though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The sun himself withheld his wonted speed.
And hid his head for shame,
As his interior lame
The new enlightened world no more should need;
He saw a greater sun appear
Than his bright throne or burning axletree could fear.**

The next phase period in Milton's development as a poet was the Horton period which saw its culmination in Lycidas. When Milton says "where more is meant than meets the ear" he refers to the allegory of the Faerie Queene. When in Aeropagitica Milton speaks of Spenser as 'our sage and serious Spenser' and a 'better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas' he shows respect to Spenser for giving expression to spiritual and philosophical truths. There is striking similarity between Spenser's description of the adventures of Amoret in the palace of Busyrane in Faerie Queene, Book III, Cantos xi-xii and Milton's Comus as both the books celebrate the triumph of chastity. The magical palaces are the homes of dread enchanters who wage incessant warfare against Virtue. Scudamour finds the fire that burns before the door, though Britomart enters it on due to the strength of her virginity. In Comus the brothers could enter only after receiving the charm from the attendant spirit. Liberation was sought in both the cases only through magic. The nymph Sabrina did it in

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Comus while Busyrane muttered the charm and set Amoret free. Like Spenser in the bower of Acrasia, Milton also lavishes great wealth upon his sinner. Scholars have found a striking similarity between the moral issues involved in Adam's fall in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and the representation of virtue under trial in the person of Sir Guyon in *Faerie Queene*, Book ii. In both the books the basic teaching is that of temperance interpreted according to the Platonic ethics as the supremacy of the rational over the passionate principle in the soul. Professor Greenlaw believes that the poetic thought of both Spenser and Milton was influenced by Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance philosophy¹. Spenser's garden of Adonis provided Milton with material on Garden of Eden. *Paradise Lost*, Book iii echoes the ideas about chaos being the womb and grave of nature and Demagorgon and Night as personifications of the abyss. If Spenser links *Faerie Queene* with *Sheepardes Calendar*, Milton links up *Paradise Regained* with *Paradise Lost*.

As far as diction is concerned, if diffuseness is one of the chief characteristics of Spenser's style, Milton's strength lies in conciseness and terseness. Professor Grierson believes that "Milton is one of the same caste as Spenser and Dante, and Virgil and the Greek tragedians, the poets who are not content to confine themselves too rigidly to a language such as men do use, but claim for the poet the liberty to build for himself a statelier speech, to move in brocaded garments, to levy tribute on all the possible resources of a nation's speech, from archaic words to words of his own coinage²."

By the middle of the seventeenth century English poetry had undergone a complete change. The poets of this period retained the allegory and romance of Spenser but could not reproduce his melody, grace and picturesque pageants. The new age advocated clarity, plainness and neatly-balanced heroic couplets. The trend which started with Waller and Denham found refinement in the couplets of Dryden who made it a suitable medium for invective, argument and narrative. Though Alexander Pope modeled his work on that of Dryden but discarded every superfluity in his couplets-even triplets, Alexandrines and enjambments which were sometimes used by Dryden. Certainly there was not much scope for Spenser's grace, spontaneity and enthusiasm. But it does not mean that Spenser has not influenced the writings of this era.

In the eighteenth century the most imitated feature of Spenser's poetry was the Spensarian stanza. Poets also took delight in using antique words from Spenser's poetry. As far as diction is concerned Spenser has influenced both Dryden and Pope through his metaphorical expressions and epithets like "sea shouldering" whales. John Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence* is regarded as the best imitation of Spenser in its form, romantic spirit and melody. Samuel Croxall is another important figure in the Spensarian movement of the eighteenth century. He imitated Spensarian stanza with much of the charm and romanticism of his poetry. Shenstone's *The Schoolmistress* is another important imitation of Spenser in the century. Not much importance can be attached to Akenside though he composed the poem *The Virtuoso* in the regular Spensarian stanza. Then comes Gilbert West who imitates Spenser in two of his poems *On The Abuse of Travelling* and *On Education*. The other poets who tried to follow Spenser in form and spirit were George Cambridge, Gloster Ridley, Robert Bedingfield, Christopher Pitt, William Melmoth, Moses Mendez, William Wilkie, William Julius Mickle and Andrew Macdonald.

Even among the pioneers of pastoral poetry we come across poets who owe to Spenser. The pastorals of Ambrose Philips seek inspiration from Spenser. The pastorals of Alexander Pope are remarkable for the peculiar softness of versification. Another poet Gay was also indebted to the pastorals of Spenser. Another worth mentioning pastoral in this period is Allen Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd*.

As we proceed from the age of reason to the age of imagination, we come across James Beattie's poem *The Minstrel* composed in the Spensarian stanza for its unusual powers. After Beattie, comes Chatterton who boldly departed from the literary principles of the age of prose. He realised that poetry should touch not



only music but also painting and thus came close to Spenser more than any of his predecessors. Hence he is regarded as the father of the romantic school who has paved the way for the great romanticists like Scott and Coleridge; Byron and Keats. His acquaintance with Spenser becomes evident especially in the Rowley poems. Chatterton composed English Metamorphosis in the revised Spensarian metre. The echoes of his master Spenser can be easily discerned in some of his best poems like *The Battle of Hastings*, *The Balade of Charitie* and *Tragedy of Aella*. The following stanza from *The Balade of Charitie* has echoes of a Spensarian stanza:

**Oh Truth! Immortal daughter of the skies,
To little known writers of these days
Teach me, fair saint! Thy passing worth to prize
To blame a friend and give a foeman praise,
To fickle moon, bedeck'd with silver rays,
Leading a train of stars of feeble light,
With noble look the world below surveys,
The world that wotted not it could be might;
With armour donned, with human gore dyed,
She seeks King Harold stand, fair England's curse and pride.**

The poetical works of Campbell and Leigh Hunt also display a considerable amount of inspiration drawn from Spenser. With the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge mark the beginning of the Romantic era in English poetry. Coleridge, with his ability to lend the force of reality to the imaginary, could transmute even the scantiest material into a glorious work of art. With the versatility of an original artist his poetry becomes a glorious gift of song. In his love poem *Manner of Spenser*, addressed to Sara, Coleridge shows his indebtedness to the great master of poetry by using the regular Spensarian stanza and a few archaic words. Spenser's influence may well be traced again in the imagery and allegory of *Christabel*. Spenser's influence is evident in the romantic machinery- wood at night, moonlight silence, a young damsel pining for her love, an ancient castle and the vivid picture of Geraldine when *Christabel* sees her in the wood. Wordsworth experimented with the Spensarian stanza in *Guilt and Sorrow*. In *Resolution and Independence* he employs a seven line stanza ending in an alexandrine and attains perfection of form when he describes the huge stone like sea-beast. We find reminiscences of Spenser in *The Prelude* when Wordsworth wanders by the Loire among the ruins of historic chateaux in France.

Though John had studied Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser with equal respect, the most sustained influence was that of Spenser on his poetry. The inspiration of Spenser is clearly writ in his early poems like *Endymion* and *St. Agnes' Eve*. In *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem*, Keats pays a tribute to Spenser:

**Spenser! Thy brows are arched, open, kind,
And come like a clear sun-rise to my mind;
And always does my heart with pleasure dance,
When I think on my noble countenance: Where never yet was ought more earthly seen
Than the pure freshness of thy laurels green.**

The sensuous and the romantic appealed to both Spenser and Keats; both were gifted with an instinct for fine words and expressions; both of them chose subjects of medieval origin and both of them could employ the Spensarian stanza with utmost ease and success.

Both Spenser and Shelley harboured lofty and intellectual aspirations. But their idealisms are different. Spenser's ideal of a noble courtier was more practical as it was the wish of every courtier to gain the favour of



the queen whereas the idealism of Shelley had no basis beyond his own chivalrous and enthusiastic temper. Shelley has also employed the Spenserian stanza in *The Revolt of Islam* and *Adonais* as an excellent medium to give expression to his different moods.

If Spenser sang of the court and the knights along with their adventures with beautiful women, giants, magicians and dragons without caring much for the world, Byron's nature and poetic themes were different as the world meant everything to him without caring for poetic felicity and the rich melody of Spenser. But he also used the Spenserian stanza and archaic words in *Childe Harold*.

In the Victorian era Tennyson gives importance to economy of detail, an exactness of outline unlike Spenser who cared more for the wealth of description than for any other exactness in details. But he has used the Spenserian stanza with its wonderful charm of verse and exquisite harmony of sound and sense in *Lotos Eaters*. Tennyson's greatest contribution to romantic poetry lies in giving a worthy form to the great Arthurian saga. Tennyson has made Arthur an allegorical figure like Spenser. Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* shows a love of sensuousness and beauty which reminds us of Spenser. Again the pictorial sense of Rossetti has a resemblance with Spenser.

To sum up we can say that Spenser was not ignored in any age. If the early Spenserians retained his allegory and pastoral tendencies Milton sought inspiration from his poetic imagination; if the Augustans admired his moral earnestness and allegory, the eighteenth century also derived inspiration from this great master of English poetry and diction. If the romantics like Keats have been able to follow the true spirit of Spenser's poetry, Tennyson was also enchanted by his genius. It is true that Spenser has received less attention in the twentieth century but even today Spenser is part of syllabus in many universities. It was Spenser who gave Renaissance poetry to England and established it in the continent.

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