

Spenser – The Poets' Poet

Introduction:

Spenser's tombstone proclaims him to be "the Prince of Poets in his Time." The truth will not be violated if we proclaim him to be "the Prince of Poets of all Times." The prince of essayists, Charles Lamb, appropriately designated the prince of poets, Edmund Spenser, "the poets' poet."

In spite of what some modern Zoiluses may say, Spenser's work strikes us as an exquisite embodiment of the ultimate in poetic excellence which has been the rather mirage-like goal of all poetical endeavour, beckoning all the generations of English poets after Spenser as an example and ideal. Whatever may be the other faults of Spenser, there is no gainsaying the fact that there is no dearth of the poetic in him. And the poetic faculty transforms, like the Philosopher's Stone or a magic wand, all the dross that it touches into the pure gold of genuine poetry. How intensely he influenced the succeeding poets and how widely he excited imitation are common knowledge for a student of English literary history.

Spenser through the Ages:

That Spenser's contemporaries hailed him as the greatest of the poets of their age, we have mentioned above. He was often enthusiastically called "the New Poet." His eclogues (in *The Shepherd's Calendar*) and his epic *The Faerie Queene* earned him the very proud title of "the English Virgil." The reputation that he gained among his contemporary poets was perpetuated over the ages after him by a very large number of poets who acknowledge him as their master and model. Spenser's poetic works provided the poets of all schools practical lessons in the writing of excellent poetry. In no age was Spenser out of vogue. Donne's reputation suffered a complete eclipse in the eighteenth century, the century of Pope, and Pope's own reputation fell in the nineteenth, but Spenser's reputation has remained constant like the lodestar which twinkles but does not fade. Of course, in the early eighteenth century, "the age of prose and reason," Spenser went somewhat out of vogue, but towards the middle of the century he became a source of inspiration for the poets like Croxhall and many others. The great Dr. Johnson looked with dismay and disapproval at the contemporary cult of imitating Spenser, but he could do nothing to stem the popular tide in spite of his being the arbiter of contemporary taste. Spenser was, indeed, as James Reeves says, "at no time out of fashion." He was, to quote the same critic, "a copious source of inspiration to other poets for three centuries."

It must be noted that, unlike Chaucer's influence on his immediate successors, Spenser's influence on his immediate successors was not so marked. Chaucer inspired a large number of "Chaucerians"-both in England and Scotland-whose cherished aim was to write like their master or, even, "father" (as Lydgate called him). Spenser, "the second father of English poetry," did not generate such a tremendously imitative tendency. The reason for it was the rise and extreme popularization of the drama in the Elizabethan age. Most of the literary geniuses up to about twenty years after the death of Spenser tried their hand at the writing of the drama-the most popular and "paying" literary genre of their age. But later on, even a poet of Milton's stature acknowledged him to be his original, and in *Penseroso* he referred to him quite reverently as a poet who sang

Of tourneys, and of trophies hung,
Of forests and enchantments drear,
Where more is meant than meets the ear.

Further, in *Areopagitica* he extolled him as "our sage and serious Spenser." Cowley tells us how by reading a copy of Spenser lying in his mother's parlour he became a poet at the age of twelve. Dryden proclaimed him as one of his two models—the other one being the "smooth Waller." Even in the eighteenth century we find the great Pope himself praising Spenser and acknowledging his debt to *The Shepherd's Calendar* in the writing of his own *Pastorals*. Addison, however, in his *Account of the Greatest English Poets* dismissed *The Faerie Queene* as a "mystic tale" which

Can charm an understanding age no more.

But it must be remembered that Addison's judgement of Spenser was as wanting in maturity as his summary dismissal of Chaucer as a rude barbarian,
Who tries to make his readers laugh in vain.

Addison wrote this critical—in fact, "uncritical"—poem when he was a callow youth, and he was sensible enough in his years of maturity to dissociate himself from his patently irresponsible judgements. Steele 'knew better when he observed in a *Spectator* that Spenser's "numbers" were "exquisite." In the later years of the eighteenth century, with the birth of a more imaginative spirit, Spenser came to be appreciated with a far keener sensitivity. Thomson and Shenstone not only caught a spark of the Spenserian flame but also used the Spenserian stanza to register a prosodic break with the heroic couplet of the Popean school—the former in his *Castle of Indolence* and the latter in his *Schoolmistress*. To discuss the influence of Spenser on the early nineteenth-century poets—Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge and Keats—will require a sizable volume. Keats in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Scott in *The Vision of Don Roderick*, Shelley in *The Revolt of Ishtar* and Byron in his *Childe Harold* prolonged the Spenserian note, though the last named was alien to the Spenserian spirit, and once remarked: "I can make nothing of him." Later, in the Victorian age we find Spenser exerting a profound influence on Tennyson, becoming the idol of Charles Doughty, and even being re-echoed in the "Spenserian" cadences of the poems of Robert Bridges. Among modern poets W. B. Yeats comes nearest to him.

Spenser's Equipment as a Poet:

Why and how Spenser inspired and influenced such a large number of poets can be explained by pointing out that he had what every poet aspires to have—a fertile, teeming imagination wedded to exquisite craftsmanship. Some poets have too powerful an imagination but a poor degree of craftsmanship to mould it into artistic patterns of poetry. Blake is a representative example of such a poet whose imagination runs away unbridled by artistic control. Some other poets have a rather unproductive imagination even though they are wonderful craftsmen. Spenser is one of the ideal poets like Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton who have a fertile imagination which is perfectly moulded into poetry by their uncanny sense of pattern and architectonics, in addition to their mastery of the poetic idiom with all its suggestiveness. Spenser was fully equipped as a poet. He was as learned as Milton. As a "child" of the Renaissance, he was well read into the classics which were in his age beginning to exercise a hold on scholars and men of letters. He was an M. A. from Cambridge University and well grounded in the traditions of Greek and Latin poetry as also the poetry of Renaissance Italy and

France. Homer, Virgil, and Ovid on the one hand, and Tasso, Ariosto, Petrarch, Ronsard, and du Bellay on the other, were at his finger-tips. In his poetic works he freely drew upon them with the result that there grew a number of similarities, stylistic as well as thematic, between his own works and the works of the above named masters before him. And that is not all. Spenser was well-versed even in the philosophers-Plato and Aristotle-out of whom the former exercised a strong hold upon his mind. In his Four Hymns and elsewhere, he effectively and unmistakably gives expression to "his Platonism which believes that we should ascend from a specific embodiment of beauty to the idea of beauty itself. This idea of beauty is divine, and its contemplation something religious in nature. Nor was Spenser ignorant of the medieval lore. Though he disapproved medieval patterns of thought yet he loved to breathe the medieval air with all its fair-land tints of chivalry, knight errantry, religious fervour plus all its superstitions and backwardness. He captured this air exquisitely in *The Faerie Queene*. Then he was greatly influenced by the Reformation, too, and in his work we are not unconscious of his puritanic temper. Thus he exhibited a rarely synthesizing temper and mind which is the hall mark of every poet who aspires for universal fame. With all his poetic equipment it was natural for him to be the envy of all poets. He wrote for the cultivated and the initiated, and not what in Europe and America are called "the common people" and in India "the masses." He was the poets' poet and not the people's poet, in any sense, Marxian or otherwise.

Spenser's Poetic Genius:

But all of Spenser's learning and scholarly equipment would have been of no avail if he did not have the all-important poetic impulse which was necessary to electrify it into poetry. Even a huge dump of fuel fails to give heat without the all-important spark. Spenser had this spark. Even captious Addison admitted that Spenser was "warm'd with poetic rage." This poetic rage, genius, or impulse is hard to define, but it unmistakably shows itself in every page and every line of Spenser's works. Spenser may be a prodigiously learned man, but what matters most is his poetic genius. "The Faerie Queene", says W. P. Ker, "is the truest sort of poetry in which the poetic genius declares--itself most truly, as distinct from other kinds of genius." Leigh Hunt likewise observes: "Take him in short for what he is, whether greater or less than his fellows, the poetic faculty is so abundantly and beautifully predominant in him above every other." W. L. Renwick appropriately remarks: "Beyond question, what moved Spenser to write was a genuine poetic impulse. He sang because he must; not only because people listened....He sang not because he was learned....or an intense votary of the Reformation-or the Renaissance, but because his imagination longed for outward embodiment, because it must give birth to its divine conceptions, because it insisted on relief and deliverance. In other words, Spenser's poetry is a true incarnation of a poetical spirit, not the elaborate effort of a partisan, literary, political, religious." As is said about Shelley, Spenser exhales verses as a flower exhales fragrance. He cannot help it.'

W. L. Renwick further points out that even when Spenser sometimes uses material which is prosaic enough he transforms it into true poetry. He refers in this connexion to the description of the House of Alma in Book II of *The Faerie Queene* and the versification of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Britons* in the following canto and observes that whatever be the difficulties in Spenser's path, "he never ceases to be a

poet." He always flies and never creeps or even walks. Nobody has ever posed the question-as was done too openly and too repeatedly in the case of Pope-whether he is a poet or not. He is not only a poet, a great poet, but the poets' poet. "Of all the poets", observes Hazlitt, "he is the most poetical." He offers in his work the quintessence of poetic lushness.

Spenser's Deft Craftsmanship:

Add to Spenser's vigorous poetic impulse his virtuosity and sureness of touch as a craftsman. He has a perfect mastery over his medium-words. He does whatever he likes with words and makes them responsive to all sorts of moods and feelings. His poetry has a rare pictorial quality which was sought to be imitated by poets like Keats, Swinburne, Tennyson, and many more. He was, as Legouis so well puts it. a painter who never held a brush. With equal justice we may remark that he was a musician who never wielded a musical instrument. The English language, tattered and jagged as it had become by the awkward handling of the fifteenth-century poets like Lydgate and Skelton, in Spenser's hands not only regained the harmony of Chaucer's numbers, but vastly added to its musical quality, in which it was previously much below Italian and French. "He seemed able," writes Legouis, "to tune English verse which had been so long rebellious, to the natural tones of his voice. For him language ceased to be refractory." It may be true that, as Ben Jonson complained, Spenser wrote no language. But whatever he wrote bespeaks a highly poetic spirit subjected to the process of exquisite craftsmanship which has always remained with the poets of all ages a thing of professional interest and emulation. It is in this sense, too, that Spenser can be called the poets' poet.

Spensers Importance:

Spenser appears as a source of inspiration for the succeeding poets because through his example he amply showed that the heights were within reach of English poetry, and he did actually make his poetry reach them. In his age-the age of the Renaissance--before he started writing, England had to show nothing to compare with the poetry of the Italian Renaissance poets such as Ariosto, Tasso, and Petrarch, and the French Renaissance poets like Ronsard and du Bellay. By his poetic effort Spenser proved that, to quote Renwick, "modern England was capable of poetry as great as that of any other age and that she had her share of poetic power, of art and learning." In his pastoralism (*The Shepherd's Calendar*) he challenges comparison with the ancient Theocritus and Virgil, in his sonneteering with Petrarch and Ronsard, in his epic-writing Tasso and Ariosto and in his imaginative fertility and craftsmanship with any poet ancient or modern. He taught his countrymen once and for all not to look for poetic gems to Italy or France but to their own country, for it had come after all to have a great poet, the poets' poet!