

## **The Influence of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages On Spenser**

Introduction:

What Chaucer was to the England of the late fourteenth century, Spenser was to that of the late sixteenth century. In his work he has completely and effectively captured the spirit of the age. The late sixteenth century was a period known appropriately as that of the efflorescence of the Renaissance in England. Simultaneously, it was the age when England came under the full impact of the Reformation which had started in the early part of the sixteenth century.

In the age of Spenser the spirit of the Renaissance as also the Reformation was abroad, and nobody could keep himself untinged by it. Spenser's works are imbued with this twin spirit. But though Spenser kept pace with the changing times he sometimes also shows evidence of looking to the past—the fairyland of the Middle Ages. Consequently, we find him not only faithfully recording the impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation but also allowing a gust of the medieval wind to blow across his pages. He is at once a child of the Renaissance and the Reformation even though there are some touches of medievalism in his poetry as well as temper. Let us now try to bring out, one after the other, the elements peculiar to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages in the work of Spenser. Let us start with the Renaissance.

### **THE RENAISSANCE**

The Spirit of the Age:

The Renaissance (etymologically, re-birth) which started in Italy (and somewhat later, in France) as early as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries came to have its full impact on England only sometime in the middle of the sixteenth. Basically, the arrival of the Renaissance signalled a revival of interest in ancient Greek and Roman literature and learning, but as the Renaissance arrived in England via Italy (and to some extent, France), it came after acquiring a particular complexion associated with the Italy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Not only were the ancient Greek and Roman men of letters and philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Homer, and Virgil hailed as guides and models by the English but also the Italian poets and philosophers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, like Ariosto, Petrarch, Tasso, and Machiavelli who themselves had written under the impact of the ancient masters. By the time the dawn of the Renaissance arrived in England, it had already become a decadent, if not an altogether defunct, force in Italy. Nevertheless, the Renaissance meant in England not only the revival of interest in the Greek and Roman antiquity but also a great deal of respect for the values of Renaissance Italy which was characterised, along with an avid love of learning, by such features as a reckless spirit of adventure, a taste for pomp and splendour, a keen appreciation of beauty (generally of the physical kind), a kind of "Machiavellian" egocentricism, and a general love of luxury. Spenser's work very well captures the spirit of the Italian Renaissance which stirred the life of his age in all its aspects except the sordid Machiavellianism which held such a sinister interest for some of his contemporaries, like the University Wits and Baron as well as a vast brood of gilded courtiers. The Renaissance elements in Spenser are<sup>1</sup> tempered by the Reformation ideals.

Writers:

Spenser, an M. A. of Cambridge University, was well read in much of the ancient classical literature which had then begun to be commonly known. He borrowed a good deal from the vast treasure of that literature and came to be intimately influenced by a number of ancient poets and philosophers and the writers of Renaissance Italy who themselves had been influenced by these poets and philosophers. He modelled his most important work *The Faerie Queene* upon the epics of the Greek Homer, the Roman Virgil, and the Italian Ariosto and Tasso. Theocritus and Virgil prompted him to try his hand at the pastoral (*The Shepherd's Calendar*). The first English writer of the eclogue was Barclay (of the *Ship of Fools* fame) who flourished in the fifteenth century; but he had based his five eclogues on the work of the Italian poet Mantuanus rather than the great Virgil and Theocritus. Spenser went back to Virgil and wrote what stands in comparison with his eclogues. Then, Spenser looked to Petrarch and his French followers while composing his sonnet sequence *Amoretti*. Thus in his selection of the literary genres for his use Spenser clearly displays his debt to the ancient Greek and Roman and the modern Italian writers. Moreover, there are some specific echoes of these writers in his works. For instance, we have a number of Virgilian phrases which, like a good writer, Spenser does not allow to stand out, but submerges into the context. In *The Faerie Queene* Sir Guyon's voyage to the Bower of Bliss (where his arch enemy Acrasy is living) is suggested most probably by a similar voyage in Homer's *Odyssey*; but Spenser means by this voyage what Homer did not. Then the descent of the false Duessa to Hades is suggested by the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Tasso's Armida gave Spenser some obvious hints for his description of Acrasy and her terrible powers. Ariosto, the writer of the first romantic epic in the history of world literature (*Orlando Furioso*), set before Spenser a living example of the romantic love of adventure and unbounded activity which he was to imitate in *The Faerie Queene*.

Plato and Aristotle:

The great Greek philosophers, Plato and his disciple Aristotle, exerted a strong hold on Spenser's intellectual and moral temper. In his *Four Hymns* Spenser gives a poetic utterance to the Platonic conception of Love and Beauty. Plato taught that all material beauty (such as the beauty of the human body) is a shadow as well as a symbol of the Ideal Beauty which is divine. A specific embodiment of beauty should be used for ascending to the contemplation of the abstract Idea of Beauty. The abstract Idea is divine, and the contemplation of the Idea is a religious activity. Echoing the true Platonic spirit, Spenser observes in the *Hymn in Honour of Beauty* that "a comely corpse, with beauty fair endowed" is the house of a "beauteous soul."

Fit to receive the seed of virtue strewed:

For all that fair is, is by nature good.

Spenser well became a spokesman of the neo-Platonism of the Renaissance.

Aristotle, too, was a philosopher of abiding interest for Spenser. He seems to have effectively taught Spenser the doctrine of the golden mean which finds an effective embodiment in Guyon who stands for Temperance. The very groundplan of *The Faerie Queene*, which is to celebrate twelve cardinal virtues, is perhaps suggested by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. If it is not Aristotle himself, it must have been some of his very numerous commentators who seems to have enumerated the twelve virtues each of which was to be dealt with in one of the twelve projected books of *The Faerie*

Queene. Spenser's Prince Arthur is described as "the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private moral virtues, as Aristotle hath devised." writes a critic, "Spenser follows the great formative work of Elizabethan and later English culture, the Nichomachean Ethics."

Classical Mythology:

Another Renaissance feature of Spenser's work is his employment of classical mythology for ornament and illustration. Being a devout Christian he did not believe at all in the multiplicity of pagan-deities, but, like Shakespeare, Marlowe, Lyly, and almost all the rest of his contemporaries, he was attracted by classical mythology which he freely drew upon in his works. Very like Milton he uses his profound and vast knowledge of this mythology even when his sincere aim is to drive home a Christian moral. At any rate, the frequent references to classical mythology give the language a veneer of richness and exoticism which was so much sought after by the English writers of the Renaissance.

Emphasis on Self-culture:

A new creed of humanism arrived with the Renaissance in England. It taught that the universe was not, as the Middle Ages had believed, theocentric (that is, centred in God), but homocentric (that is, centred in man). Much emphasis came to be laid upon man, human life, the material world, and man's activity in this world. Such things had hitherto been despised, for man was taught to concern himself with his welfare in the next world. The new humanistic thinking, which put human interests paramount, gave special importance to self-culture which did not mean simply the cultivation of the well-known Christian virtues but implied a harmonious development of the human personality on all planes—thought, feelings, and action. More concretely, it meant the cultivation of "the twelve private moral virtues, as Aristotle hath devised." In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser celebrates not only Holiness but also other virtues, like justice and Temperance, which are more of secular and humanistic than of Christian nature. Spenser's aim in his great poem is not just to teach people to submit passively before the Divine Will, or to seek for divine Grace, but in the manner of a Renaissance humanist (as for example, the Italian Castiglione) "to fashion", as he himself writes, "a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline."

Some Other Renaissance Features:

The age of the Renaissance in England was, as has been often said, "a young age." It was marked by unprecedented ebullience and adolescent impatience of all fetters—intellectual, religious, and even moral. It also developed a craving for sensuous thrills. Renaissance Italy had burst forth into hectic activity in the field of arts like painting, music, and sculpture which in the Middle Ages were looked down upon as too mundane. England in the late sixteenth century produced a number of great musicians such as Byrd, but she remained devoid of the plastic arts. However, in the poetry of the age we often find the sensuous touches of a painter. Spenser's poetry is well known for its sensuous and more specifically, pictorial quality. He was in the words of Legouis, "a painter who never held a brush." But, what is more, Spenser—with all his Platonism and puritanism notwithstanding— seems too frequently to indulge in the pleasures of the senses for their own sake. His paradise seems to be as earthly as that of Omar Khayyam himself. He spends all his art while describing the beauty of the nude female figure, which he does quite voluptuously and with untiring zeal, dwelling on each and

every part with great patience and a greater joy. He is, no doubt, uncontaminated by the virus of the Italian pornographic eroticism which is evident in works like Marston's Pigmaliion and even in Marlowe's Hero and Leander and Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, but his taste for the delights of the senses is quite apparent. For instance, see the following sonnet:

Coming to kiss her lips (such grace I found),  
Me seem 'd I smelt a garden of sweet flow'rs,  
That dainty odours from them threw around,  
For damsels fit to deck their lovers, 'bow 'rs.  
Her lips did smell like unto gilliflowers,  
Her ruddy cheeks like unto roses red,  
Her snowy brows like budded betlamoures,  
Her lovely eyes like pinks but newly spread,  
Her goodly bosom like a strawberry bed.  
Her neck like to a bunch of cullambines.  
Her breast like lilies ere their leaves be shed,  
Her nipples like young blossom 'd jessamines;  
Such fragrant flow 'ers do give most odorous smell,  
But her sweet odour did them all excel.

#### THE REFORMATION

##### Introduction:

The very important movement called the Reformation was started in Europe by the German clergyman named Martin Luther sometime in the early sixteenth century. This movement was intended against the growing corruptions of the Pope of Rome and his deputies and had for its aim the taking of Christianity back to the original religion of Jesus Christ and the Holy Bible. A permanent cleavage came to separate Roman Catholicism and the new "religion" termed Protestantism. Most of the Englishmen under Henry VIII and later his daughter, Queen Elizabeth, embraced the new religion which recommended simplicity amounting to abstemiousness as against the luxury and pageantry of the Popish religion. Spenser was much influenced by the spirit of the Reformation which he, however, tried to reconcile with that of the Renaissance. He was a devout Christian and, as such, adored the Bible. The thought-content of the Four Hymns is a compromise between Christianity and neo-Platonism to which we have already referred. As regards his sincerity as a Christian, there can be no doubt, even though his Christianity puts a few hurdles in the path of his voluptuous enjoyment and his sensitive appreciation and assimilation of the Greek and Roman antiquity.

##### Illustration:

Spenser is not only a Christian but a Protestant. As such, he is extremely and zealously critical of Roman Catholicism which the Reformation was sweeping off the English land. The first book of *The Faerie Queene*, read on a particular plane of symbolism, is a representation of the conflict between--Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, ending in a decisive victory for the former. It is the work of a zealous partisan who loads the dice too obviously in favour of his own religion. Una may be justly considered to be representative of Protestantism. Her champion is the Red Cross Knight representing Holiness. Duessa, who represents Roman Catholicism, is false, deceitful, and corrupt and is supported by the arch-trickster . Ajchi-ma-gq: Orgoglio. the horrible monster,

symbolises the multifarious corruptions of the Roman Catholic Church. The evil designs of Archimago and Duessa to create a schism between the forces of holiness and Protestantism are shown by Spenser to be frustrated with the help of Prince Arthur. To which side Spenser's sympathies lie is crystal clear. He powerfully, though indirectly, lashes at the follies and corruptions of the papists and satisfies his fervour by showing them put to rout by the forces unleashed by the Reformation.

Odd Synthesis:

The synthesis of the elements of the Renaissance with the features of the Reformation appears to be odd. But Spenser was a child of his age which itself effected such a synthesis. About that age Lytton Strachey observes: "It is, above all, the contradictions of the age that baffle our imagination and perplex our intelligence; the inconsistency of the Elizabethans exceeds the limits permitted to man." "To Spenser", says another critic, "as to his contemporaries, the best of all three worlds, the ancient, the medieval, and the Christian Renaissance, were almost on one plane," And Spenser moved quite glibly on this "one plane." He was at once a Hellenist, a humanist, a Christian, and a medievalist. Let us now consider him in his last-mentioned manifestation.

## THE MIDDLE AGES

Introduction:

Broadly speaking, the Renaissance signalled the end of the Middle Ages and the arrival of the modern times. Though Spenser represented in himself what the Renaissance stood for, yet he also showed in his work some elements associated with the Middle Ages. In this respect he lags behind his times which were not yet far from the Middle Ages. Let us consider briefly some elements associated with the Middle Ages which we come across in his work.

Medieval Chivalry:

Spenser was the last English writer who wrote about medieval chivalry, love, and courtesy, and believed in them. Though *The Faerie Queene* has a didactic aim very much pertinent for Spenser's contemporaries, yet its setting and times are medieval. The allegory works through a multitude of knights and monsters, damsels in distress, magicians, and enchanters. As C. S. Lewis has well put it, the surface of the poem consists of "interlocked stories of chivalrous adventure in a world of marvels." Now these stories and this "world of marvels" were quite distasteful to Renaissance scholars who scoffed at them as things from the ignorant past. But, as we have said, Spenser believed in them and looked at them with singular wistfulness. While gathering the flowers of the New Learning he could not forget the flavour of the medieval lore.

His Recourse to Allegory:

Spenser is a mediaevalist in his frequent recourse to the old-world device of allegory or what he called "the dark conceit." Allegory in the Middle Ages was a conventional medium of poetic utterance. Even Chaucer, "the first of the moderns," wrote most of his poems in the allegorical form, though, of course. *The Canterbury Tales* has somehow escaped unhurt. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth century the followers of Chaucer continued writing in the form of allegory. Happily, however, in the age of Spenser the vogue of allegory was discarded in favour of a direct and realistic form of poetry. But Spenser continued sticking to the convention of the Middle Ages, and filled his *Faerie Queene* with such allegorical complexities as have for him earned the censure of both

the critic and the reader in spite of such defence as Hazlitt's who said that the allegory in *The Faerie Queene* does not "bite" anybody.

Diction and Alliteration:

In his diction and frequent employment of alliteration, too, Spenser seems to be going back to the Middle Ages. It was perhaps his admiration for his "master" Chaucer which led him to archaize his diction. Many of the words he used in *The Faerie Queene* were out of date even in his own age; but he employed them to lend an old-world flavour to the setting of the poem, which was the England of the Middle Ages. Ben Jonson rightly complained that Spenser wrote "no language". In his frequent employment of alliteration, too, he reminds one of the alliterative measure of verse which was in use before Chaucer. Spenser did not revive that measure but practised too frequently its salient features. Lastly Spenser's love of myths, symbols, antiquarian details, and his discursiveness and leisurely progress with the narrative are also suggestive of the manners and taste of the Middle Ages rather than of the age of the Renaissance.