

'Spenser as Poets' Poet'

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was born in London, of middle class parents and attended Merchant Taylor's school. It was Charles Lamb who called Spenser 'The Poets' poet' and in giving him that honoured title, the prince of English essayist was not wrong. Spenser is regarded as the poet's poet and the second father of English poetry. He is regarded as the poet's poet in more than one ways. There are several grounds for recognising Spenser as the poet's poet. Spenser can be regarded as the poet's poet in the limited Renaissance sense in which he may be deemed as the poet not of common man but only of scholars and poets well versed in classical lore and humanistic studies. According to this interpretation Spenser is not the poet of the common man but only of poets and scholars, endowed with the gift of poetry in their nature. During the Renaissance, poetry of the type that Spenser wrote could really be appreciated by those who were familiar with classical writers and authors of the Renaissance. Knowledge of classical mythology and acquaintance with Ovid, Homer, Petrarch, Ronsard, Aristo, Tasso, Plato and Aristotle was absolutely necessary for a person to appreciate and understand Spenser. Since only scholars and poets had that necessary equipment to understand Spenser and the common man had not that facility to understand him, Spenser has been called the poet of poets and not the poet of the ordinary man. One who really seeks to enjoy Spenser shall be required to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of

- (1) The pastoral tradition of Virgil
- (2) The romantic and moral traditions of Aristo and Tasso
- (3) The philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle.

because Spenser's poetry is grounded in the aforesaid traditions of the great masters of the past and the present. It is in this narrow sense that Spenser has been regarded as the poet's poet. But that never was the intention of Charles Lamb

when he called him the poet's poet. Lamb had several other qualities and contributions of Spenser in view before he gave him that honoured title.

Spenser is recognised as the poet's poet, because it was Spenser and not Chaucer who gave to poetry and poets a place nearer to God, the great maker. Spenser had supreme trust in poetry and the vocation of the poet. He had intense conviction in the value of poet's work and believed the poet as the chosen agent of God. In return of faithful service the poet was granted a measure of that permanence which is in God alone. That was what Spenser thought, the ultimate inspiration of his labour and the source of energy. The poet was responsible to his country as a nursery for native tongue, to the truth and soundness of his doctrine; for the action it prompted and the desires it aroused and the thought it directed. He was responsible to the giver that his talent was sedulously cultivated and worthily employed.

It was Spenser's greatness that he looked upon the poet as not only a mere lover of beauty but as man charged with a mission to work for the elevation and redemption of mankind. Spenser believed that poetry was noble and necessary part of the complete and well ordered life, and that the ideal that it should teach was one of supremacy of poetry and greatness of the poet's vocation makes Spenser the poet's poet.

Spenser is considered the poet's poet in England because he set about to perform that great work for the glorification and elevation of English poetry which no one had done before Chaucer. No doubt Chaucer had written poetry of a high order, but in spite of his best services to English poetry, it could not stand comparison with the poetry of great European writers. Now Spenser set out to endow ~~poetry~~ England with poetry, great in kind, in style, in thought, and to show to the world that "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 order to

accomplish this great task Spenser set about achieving those vital and permanent qualities that Virgil, Catullus, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, Marlowe and Ronsard had achieved. He studied the works of these poets so that he might become acquainted with their excellences and shortcomings, and while composing his own verses, transcend them and beat them hollow in their own line.

It was Spenser's great achievement to have improved English diction, style and versification. He enriched the English language and made it musical and a fit medium of expression. Spenser's mixture of the old English words with classical syntax produced something new for English poetry. He enriched the English language by importing foreign words and by coining new words. He realised that for the purpose of great English poetry, there was need of a new language which could be made only by a poet. He treated the English language as if it belonged to him and he to it. He altered words, made one word do the duty of another, interchanged actives and passives, transferred epithets from their proper subjects and gave them any shape that the case may demand. In this way he created a truly royal style - beautiful, flexible and magnificent.

Spenser's Contribution to English Versification was wide and varied. Spenser experimented with the quantitative system of the classic, the syllabic system of the French, and the system of Chaucer until he evolved something of his own in the form of the Spenserian stanza. Spenser's greatest contribution was the Spenserian stanza which firmly established itself as a metre of all kinds of narrative or reflective poetry. On account of its grace and voluptuous turn of rhythm, the Spenserian stanza is admirably suited to the pictorial as well as a musical faculty of a poet. This stanza exercised the

deepest fascination on romantic poets and was used admirably by Thomson in *The Castle of Indolence*, by Keats in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, by Shelley in *the Revolt of Islam*. and by Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In the words of Davis Daiches —

"The Spenserian Stanza that he invented for a unique occasion, as the medium for expressing things unattempted either before or since, passed forthwith in to the common heritage as of all verse forms the most purely English by nature and decent."

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