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## **Influence of Renaissance on the Works of Edmund Spenser**

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### **Abstract**

*The Renaissance in England saw the revival in the study of Greek, bringing in enthusiasm and passion for classical learning. The Greek and Latin influence upon English literature was immense and there was huge production of literature. The indisposed, dark and tousled artistic scenario was substituted by the pioneering spirit of great sonneteers explicitly presented the idea of Renaissance individualism. The poetic conventions of the ancient and contemporary Europe made significant contribution in the enrichment of sixteenth-century English poetry. Edmund Spenser in his writings presented an amalgamation of past, present, history and myth. Renaissance Humanism also invigorated the spirit of scientific discovery as it believed in the concept of education of the total person and thus, giving rise to several polymaths. 'Amore Cortese' or Courtly love was inherent as the influence of Petrarch was omnipresent and Spenser presents myriads of emotions through his writings. The court was an integral part of poetic accomplishment as it was instrumental in the cultural developments of the epoch. The traditional forms, such as the pastoral and the eclogue, were rejuvenated. The court was the centre of literary production and there was significant experimentation with form, style, meter and genre. The prevalence of classical forms was inspired by the poetic translations of Ovid and Virgil as well as access to Latin works, this marked the revival of the epic form of writing.*

**Keywords:** *Renaissance, Greek, Latin, scientific discovery, Humanism, Petrarch, Amore Cortese, court, Ovid.*

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**Introduction:** The literature of Renaissance England was influenced by the works of Theocritus, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace and Juvenal. Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* were the main inspiration for Renaissance pastoral and georgic verse. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as well as Virgil's *The Aeneid* served as models for the period's epic poetry. Ovid significantly impacted Renaissance love poetry with his *Metamorphoses*, that provides several mythological stories about desire and transformation formulated with stylistic elegance. The pastoral verse was influenced by the poetry of

Medieval English authors such as William Langland and contemporary continental pastoralists such as Jacopo Sannazaro. The famous epic poets Edmund Spenser and John Milton were inspired by classical epics as well as Medieval English romances. Spenser made a drastic attempt to establish the epic form in England in the Elizabethan age by inventing the Spenserian stanza as the new form for his poem. In England, poetry was a genre closely associated with the royal court and the poets were either courtiers or educated and aspiring men in search of court preferment.

The poetic conventions of the ancient and contemporary Europe made significant contribution in the enrichment of sixteenth-century English poetry. The epic style had been popular in the works like Homer's *The Iliad*, Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, this was imitated, experimented with and followed by the English poets. Renaissance Italy was also a major influence on sixteenth-century English poetry with Petrarchism after the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304–74). Petrarch is most famous for his sequence of lyric poems(sonnets) about the poet's unrequited love for a beautiful woman called Laura. Wyatt and Surrey were adopting, appropriating and amalgamating the European influences in English poetry.

Edmund Spenser (c.1552-99) is considered one of the key figures of the English Renaissance. He combines the cultural, nationalistic, religious and humanist ideals of the sixteenth-century England with classical and contemporary European perspective. The eighty-nine sonnets of the *Amoretti* as stated in the 1595 edition correspond with consecutive dates, beginning on Wednesday 23 January 1594 and continuing with intervals to Friday 17 May 1594, these days correspond with the sequential order of scriptural readings that were prescribed for those dates by the liturgical calendar of the Church of England. It covers a span of two years- from the first day of a year (Sonnet 4) to a New Year's Day next year (Sonnet 62) concluding with the commencement of a third winter in Sonnet 89.

Spenser was a self-conscious poet and this was explicitly evident in the metrical, stanzaic, and prosodic experimentation. The Spenserian stanza consists of nine iambic lines rhyming ababbcbC, the first eight being pentameter, the last a hexameter or alexandrine, as employed in *The Faerie Queene* and in *Amoretti* he uses the extremely demanding, intricate and interlocking rhyme scheme of ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. The popularity of 'plain' style was declining as the Petrarchan sonnet form was gaining impetus, the 'eloquent' style was the obverse of the restrained minimalist 'plain' style.

### **Rejuvenation of the Classical Works in Spenser's Poetry:**

In his "use of Tudor Arthurian propaganda with its Virgilian emphasis on prophecy and fulfilment, Spenser achieves a deliberate fusion of past and present, history and myth." (Rivers 59) *The Faerie Queene* (1589 and 1596), *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* (1595) explicitly manifest Spenser's considerable knowledge of classical incidents, myths, topoi, and the lovely places ('loci amoeni'). There are constant and calculated references to as well as allusions from Horace and Ovid, while the verses are designed in the style of Greek

poet Anacreon. *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) utilizes Ovidian styles of oblique satire to voice his perspective of the political climate and Ovid's *Tristia* reverberates through Colin Clouts Come Home Againe (1595).

Spenser's line "The mery Cuckow, messenger of Spring" (Spenser, *Amoretti* 19.1) presents a semblance with Pliny the Elder's image of the cuckoo as the harbinger of spring in Natural History, Book X. The Arion myth in Sonnet 38 is reminiscent of Ovid's *Fasti* Book II, as the sonneteer compares himself to an unsuccessful man (unable to charm his beloved) like the state of Arion who was abducted by pirates and rescued by dolphins who were enchanted by the music of his lyre. *Amoretti* encapsulates the details of Homer's Penelope in Sonnet 23.

In sonnet 34, Spenser mentions Helice (constellation Ursa Major or the Great Bear) this alludes to nymph Callisto (violated by Jupiter) who was metamorphosed into a bear by Juno and given a place in heaven by Jupiter. Ovid too discusses this in Book II of *Metamorphoses*. In sonnet 67, Spenser mentions "hunter" and "deare" which are references to the Hunter Actaeon who watches Diana, the Goddess of virginity, bathing in the sacred grove and is punished by being transformed into a deer to be devoured by his own hounds. This was narrated in Book III of *Metamorphoses*. This sonnet follows the tradition of the chase as done in Petrarch's Rime 190 a style which was also imitated by Tasso. In Horace's *Odes* 3.30, there is a proud declaration of monuments more durable than brass ("Exegi monumentum aere perennius") which is echoed in "immortall moniment" (Spenser, *Amoretti* 69.10)

Sonnet 75 discusses the immortality of love and the beloved by means of "verse", Spenser explicitly asserts that poetic creations are invincible by destructive Time. The sonnet concludes with- "Where whenas death shall all the world subdew, /Our love shall live, and later life renew." (Spenser, *Amoretti* 75.13-14) This is similar to the pronouncement made by Ovid at the closure of *Metamorphoses*- "My fame shall live to all eternity" (Ovid 379).

The "reversals and revisions of myth and convention are typical of the *Amoretti*." (Bates 77) Spenser's mistress is described as "thretning rash eies which gaze on her so wide," (Spenser, *Amoretti* 5.7) as Diana detests Actaeon's voyeurism. In sonnet 67, on the other hand, the "panting hounds" are "beguiled of their pray," until the deer approaches its captor apparently of her own accord. The unattainable (elevated) object of love at her own accord comes to the lover and they are united in marriage (as in *Epithalamion*) The virgin's threatening eyes lose their power and Spenser equated to Actaeon is not only allowed to gaze but also to satisfy his desires.

*Epithalamion* succeeded the four untitled Anacreontic poems after *Amoretti*, all addressed to the same woman therefore Spenser became the first poet to climax his sonnet-sequence with a marriage-ode. This was an innovation derived from the Greek 'epithalamos' and Latin 'epithalamium', a tradition prevalent in the ancient custom. Spenser writes "So Orpheus did for his owne bride" (Spenser, *Epithalamion* 16), Orpheus was a remarkable musical poet who could enchant human and divine figures with his songs, he

journeys to Hades enchants Pluto with his music seeking the release of his dead wife Eurydice. However, he loses her again for disobeying a promise not to look back as he led her home. This story has been narrated by Ovid (*Metamorphoses* Book X) and Virgil (*Georgics* Book IV).

John Milton had referred to Spenser as “our Homer” (Bradford 12), “The whyles the boyes run up and downe the street,” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* 137) resonates the description given by Hesiod and Homer of young men accompanying bridal processions with dance and jocular song, chanting “Hymen o Hymen, Hymen” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* 140) Thomas Greene in “Spenser and the Epithalamic Convention” considers the sixty-first and the sixty-fourth odes of the Roman poet Catullus to depict how Spenser's modified writing is related to the classical and Renaissance ‘epithalamic’ conventions. In Ode 61 Catullus describes the wedding of Manilus and Vinia in short-lined stanzas which are grouped according to successive phases of the marriage ceremony.

In Line 345, Spenser mentions the “Oule” a bird of ill-omen and considered as unchaste. In *Metamorphoses* also there is reference to the bird’s “rattling bill” (Ovid 6.97) and as it is also the bird of vigilance if it is heard then something would be amiss. Spenser alludes to “little winged loves” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* 357) Cupid like figures that are frequent in Renaissance and classical love poems. In adherence to Ovid and the Renaissance creation and representation of myth Spenser presents Hebe (cupbearer to the gods) as the goddess of youth and rejuvenation. Spenser towards the conclusion of uses “tymely” (Spenser, *Epithalamion* 425) to suggest both appropriate moment and the temporal time, this also suggest the numerological structure and the connection to the end of the time at the Day of Judgement.

In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh about *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser termed his work as “a continued Allegory, or darke conceit” (Spenser 225) he was critically aware of the structural traditions of Virgil and Homer on which he was building. He selected the history of King Arthur as he was an exemplary king and a chivalrous knight, acknowledged by many, following the style of Malory, and it was the imaginative freedom of King Arthur’s adventures which provided Spenser with the narrative license of the poem.

### **Homo Universalise:**

Renaissance Humanism involved the revival and reinstatement of classical learning as well as invigorated the spirit of scientific discovery. A humanist was a classical scholar with dual purposes, firstly, to reclaim the precepts and values of classical life and secondly to study ancient Greek and Latin authors and imitate the diction and rhetoric of the masterworks. Spenser in the letter to Sir Walter Raleigh delineate the intent of *The Faerie Queene* as “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (Spenser 225).

Humanism established ideas that presented man as a creator, the Renaissance educated man possessed immense creative power and was considered a creature of great potential and values, a creation in God's own image. The age believed in the concept of education of the

total person and thus, giving rise to several polymaths, for instance Leonardo da Vinci was genius epitomized and reflected the Renaissance Humanist ideals. Sir Philip Sidney was as well an embodiment of the new Renaissance 'universal man'-a courtier, diplomat, soldier, and poet.

Spenser was capable of understanding and appreciating physical beauty as well as recognizing eternity, this gave rise to an ethereal blend however, at the closure the persona of the poet/creator/lover attains prominence over the unattainable beloved. There is use of numerology in Spenser's *Epithalamion* through the stanzas and the long lines the poet presents the moving of the twenty-four hours of the day and the three hundred sixty-five days of the year. In Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses the Pythagorean system of the harmony of contraries in his antithetical characters such as Una and Duessa or the triads like Fidelia, Speranza and Charissa (Faith, Hope and Charity) as opposed to the troublesome brothers- Sansfoy, Sansloy and Sansjoy (Faithless, Lawless and Joyless).

In *Amoretti* numerology is a part of the Neo-Platonic system as it presents the link between the cosmic and the temporal world, it is determined by the revolution of heavenly bodies (indicating the passage of time). Spenser, with his interest in Neo-platonic style of love, refers to Elizabeth Boyle as divine and the mythical gods and goddesses are also involved in the narrative love-life. There are references to Christ, his followers and the metaphor of the hunt.

**Significance of the Court and the Virgin Queen (Gloriana):** In the Elizabethan court the ability to write artful poetry was part of being an accomplished gentleman but it was also a way of cultivating the kind of persuasive skills essential in the world of Renaissance politics and diplomacy. The patronage system was an integral part of the royal court, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* with the image of the warrior virgin, Britomart paid homage to the monarch, Elizabeth I. The long allegorical poem with the eponymous Faerie Queene signifying Glory, the work was aimed at writing the history of the emergent British state and to instruct and educate a man thereby leading to the construction of the image of a gentleman or a noble person. The narrative amalgamates the key notions of sixteenth-century England like humanism, Protestantism and a sense of national identity. The court was the source of the development of culture and literature of the time and Spenser too was significantly affected by the politics of the time.

Spenser enjoyed the patronage of the Earl of Leicester who supported militant Protestantism at court, *The Shepheardes Calendar* furtively praised the Archbishop Edmund Grindal, who had been suspended by Elizabeth for his Puritanical stance. *The Faerie Queene* an epic presents the antagonists as Roman Catholics and the attempt of Elizabeth I to make her nation a bastion of Protestantism is evident. It was addressed to the monarch and satisfied the affiliation of the Earl of Leicester however Spenser was later disenchanted with the court as his political expectations and confidence began to dwindle. Petrarch being a great Catholic ends his Rime with a canzone to the Virgin Mary however Spenser being a non-Catholic and a humanist concludes *Amoretti* with *Epithalamion* (consummation of love in marriage), though both attempted to achieve a Christian resolution of the love affair.

**Amore Cortese or Courtly Love:** Petrarchan ‘topoi’, conceits and images employed by Spenser are traditional, love is associated to a judicial court, warfare, sickness, sea voyage, religious worship, ships in storms and with images of eyes, stars, Sun, fire, ice and Cupid. Spenser adopts and adapts to the original sonnet form ultimately becoming adept providing his own distinctive cadence and flow. In *Amoretti*, Sonnet 34 follows the Petrarchan conceit presenting the lover as a sailor stuck in a tempest with an overcast sky which leaves him shrouded in “darknesse and dismay” (Spenser, *Amoretti* 34.7) on being unable to see the eyes of his beloved which are like “lodestar”. Sonnet 64 follows the style of ‘blazon’ presenting the physical attributes of the beloved in a manner of a catalogue, her “ruddy cheeks”, “snowy browes”, “lovely eyes” and “goodly bosome”. The sonnet 74 celebrates the poet’s three figures of loves and admiration- his genetrix, beloved, and the sovereign (mother, mistress, and the monarch) all sharing the same name-Elizabeth. In the courtship, Spenser presents myriads of emotions, his dejection, rejection, failure, loss, together with passion, love, and triumph. The lover says that the scintillating charm and beauty of the beloved makes him wonder and he states- “I honor and admire the Makers art” (Spenser, *Amoretti* 24.4). The “maker” is synonymous to the Greek ‘poietes’ as Spenser in a self-congratulatory style appreciates his literary construct called ‘Elizabeth’. In the conventional Petrarchan style, *Amoretti* presents the constant flux between reciprocation-rejection and despondency-delight. The sequence concludes on a note of anxiety and despair as his union with the beloved seems to be delayed.

**Conclusion:** The Renaissance ensured that the languor that had overpowered the English poetry in the previous epoch was substituted by tempered, refined, decorous and eloquent literary works making the age significantly popular for its lyric poetry. The court was the centre of literary production and there was significant experimentation with form, style, meter and genre. The prevalence of classical forms was inspired by the poetic translations of Ovid and Virgil as well as access to Latin works, this marked the revival of the epic form of writing. The traditional forms such as the pastoral and the eclogue were revived and ameliorated to create new forms such as pastoral drama and pastoral sonnet sequences. Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” was favourably received by the contemporary readers.

The contemporary thoughts were highly inspired by the exemplary figures like Sir Sidney and his circle by which Spenser was also influenced. He employed his knowledge of the literature of antiquity as well as of Renaissance Italy and France, he was impacted by Renaissance ideals and was indebted to Virgil, Ovid, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, Marot and du Bellay. He considered himself to be the inheritor of the Middle Ages tradition of chivalry thus he was affected by the work of Malory (*Le Morte d’Arthur*). Spenser throughout his writing career manifested in his works the dual vehemence of humanism and militant Protestantism.

His works amalgamates the classical and Christian elements seamlessly and thus he is capable of going beyond the classical tradition. There are references to Tabernacle of God hinting at divine presence and the Prayer Book with regards to prayers preceding the

beginning of the communion in the marriage service as well as seeking blessings for procreation of children. "An astonishing accomplishment of Spenser's poem is that he makes one poetic whole for us without losing the intensely felt classical, or high Renaissance, or mediaeval character of materials so varied." (Tuve 383)

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