M.A. English

SEMESTER I

Course III

BRITISH POETRY

BLOCK

I

Renaissance English Poetry including Milton

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This Block introduces you to English poetry of the Renaissance, which covers primarily the Elizabethan age of English literary history, but also extends into the Jacobean and Caroline periods.

Unit 1 provides a general introduction to the Renaissance, describing its social, political and religious contexts, and presenting an overview of the major poets and poetic genres of the age.

Unit 2 examines three of the best-known poetic forms of the Elizabethan age — the lyric, the sonnet and the pastoral.

Unit 3 deals with another major strand of Renaissance poetry — Metaphysical poetry, with representative samples.

Units 4 and 5 introduce you to the towering figure of the age in poetry— John Milton. Unit 4 describes the age of Milton and the formative influences on him, while Unit 5 deals with his most famous work, *Paradise Lost,* focusing in particular on Book IX.

The activities and discussions in each Unit attempt to help you analyze the formal and thematic aspects of different forms of Renaissance poetry. We hope that they will motivate you to read more of the poetry of this age and to come up with your own interpretations.

BRITISH POETRY

BLOCK I

Renaissance English Poetry including Milton

Contents

Unit 1

Introduction to the Age and the Poetry of the Age

<u>**Contents**</u>

Unit 1

Renaissance Poetry: Introduction

1.0 Objectives

This Unit introduces you to the Early Modern period in English literary history. The age marks the advent of the Renaissance, and therefore we begin with an overview of this epoch-making cultural movement which, along with the Reformation, forms the historical background to the poetry of the age. Then we move on to the political and socio-cultural conditions in England during the Renaissance. After a brief survey of the English Renaissance, we discuss Renaissance poetry in some detail – the major poets, poetical genres and popular themes. The period under our consideration here spans a long duration of time beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century and ending around 1660. Therefore, historically, our discussion follows a division into early and late Renaissance.

1.1 The Historical Context

1.1.1 The Renaissance

The term "Renaissance" means rebirth in French, and derives originally from the Latin "renascentia." As employed in cultural history, it primarily refers to the recovery and renewal of interest in the literary and philosophical texts of Greek and Roman antiquity. Homer, the first poet of the Western world, Plato and Aristotle, ancient Greek philosophers, Virgil, the Roman poet, Cicero, the Roman orator and statesman, and Livy, the Roman historian, came to be read again. The culture of Classical Greece and Rome became the significant foci of intellectual attention and gave rise to a new world view and a spirit that pervaded diverse spheres of life and art. The movement affected architecture, sculpture, painting and literature.

The Renaissance began in the autonomous cities of 14th-century Italy, Florence in particular. The Italians called it "*la Rinascita*," also meaning rebirth. They considered it a rebirth of the classic spirit as they viewed the sacking of Rome by the Germanic tribes in the 5th century AD as "a barbarous interruption of a thousand years of Western civilization" (Durant 67). Several Greek scholars used to visit Italy from Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. These scholars came and settled in Florence and other Italian cities, along with their invaluable texts and manuscripts, after the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 AD. This event is often used to mark the beginning of the Modern period in European history.

Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), known in English as Petrarch, is generally considered to be the father of Renaissance. An enthusiastic collector and commentator of Classical texts, Petrarch is important to students of Renaissance poetry as the celebrated writer of the passionate sonnets to Laura

de Sade, which were to serve as a model to many English poets. Giovanni Boccaccio, Petrarch's contemporary, friend and another Renaissance figure, wrote his *Decameron*, a collection of hundred prose narratives narrated during the plague in Florence and conveying the love of life typical of the age. The period of the High Renaissance, from the end of the fifteenth century, saw the flourishing careers of master painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo. Among the literary masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance are Desiderius Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1509), a humorous and erudite work by a Renaissance Humanist; Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513), a compendium of advice for the prudent ruler, which is often castigated for its unethical character; and Ludovici Ariosto's romantic epic *Orlando Furioso* (1516).

Renaissance art and literature embodied a new philosophy – reaffirmation of life and a zest for its marvels. It was characterized by freedom of thought, limitless ambition, love of splendour, aesthetic sensitivity, respect for the healthy human body (as evident in Da Vinci's interest in human anatomy), a keen appreciation of beauty, meticulous scholarship and a new and broader acquaintance with the world. Whereas the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages propounded the fallen character of man, the Renaissance scholars, drawing upon Platonic ideas, believed in the nobility and possibilities of the human mind. An ambience of exuberance and intelligence permeated every endeavour.

The Renaissance saw the beginning of a secular culture in European history. Of course, it did not sever the otherworldly connections of this world but recognized the place due to the temporal earthly existence of mortal beings beside eternity, in the divine scheme of things. The theocentric conception of the universe yielded place to an anthropocentric philosophy called Humanism, by which man became the measure of all things. One has to keep this new thrust in mind while reading Renaissance poetry. Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), quite rightly called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance," emphasized human capacity for achievement, man's quest for knowledge and the role to be played by liberal arts in the endeavour. The new celebration of humanity can be found in the words of Miranda in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (the play is discussed in Block II, Unit 5):

O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't! (Act V, Scene I).

To the Humanist scholars of the Renaissance, Classics embodied what historian Will Durant calls the "mental and moral heritage of the race" (47). They saw in these texts a fruitful basis for education and for the moulding of a perfect individual. Books were credited with infinite power to teach a virtuous life. As Maurice Evans puts it, "learning and the good life [came to be regarded as] almost synonymous; to know the best is to pursue it" (14).

The Renaissance idea of the complete man (*l'uomo universale*) consisted of the health of the body, the strength of character and wealth of mind (Durant 250). The idea of the Renaissance man is envisioned in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), translated into English by Thomas Hoby as *The Courtier* (1561). The book defines a 'gentleman' (a public servant at an Italian court, in particular) of refined culture, inner beauty of spirit, gentle birth and chivalric values. As you will discover later, this idealism is reflected in the thematic concerns of sixteenth- century English poetry.

The age of Renaissance was marked by unprecedented events with far-reaching consequences. The geographical discoveries of the era emboldened by the new spirit of the age deserve a special mention. Christopher Columbus discovered America with his arrival in the Caribbean in 1492. Sailing past the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa, Vasco da Gama discovered a new sea route to India. Ferdinand Magellan circumnavigated the world from 1519 to 1522. The maritime adventures were to pave the way for a long era of colonization and imperial glory for many European countries including England. It also broadened the outlook of the Western man by exposing him to the influence of other cultures. With *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (1543) Nicolaus Copernicus challenged the age-old Ptolemaic geocentric theory of the cosmos. We find the remnants of the old theory, nonetheless, in Milton's cosmology in *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan's journey from the earth at the centre to the other spheres is described.

The superlative claims of the Renaissance have been, however, disputed in recent times with critical revaluations of European cultural history. It is pointed out that due to the hierarchical organization of the respective societies which witnessed the movement it was only a small section of the population, namely, the male members of the political and intellectual elite, who benefited from the cultural revival (Hiscock 117). Secondly, the Renaissance was not, as is often assumed, entirely a reawakening from the ignorance of the 'dark' Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, the study of classics was never completely abandoned in Europe. Of course, many of the classical texts lay neglected in monasteries. But Homer, Virgil, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Cicero and Herodotus have always appealed to the Western mind. Similarly, medieval philosophy and scholasticism drew upon Aristotle. The eulogy of the Renaissance as an unprecedented move is, therefore, tempered. As a result of such reservations, the term 'early modern' has gained increasing currency in the place of Renaissance.

The influence of the Italian Renaissance spread across Europe in the succeeding centuries. It reached the then-insular kingdom of England only after the arrival of the Tudors on the throne in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and took the entire next century to be in full bloom.

ACTIVITY A

What do you understand by the term "Renaissance"?

DISCUSSION

The Renaissance was a movement in European cultural history. The term means "rebirth." Renaissance refers to the recovery and renewal of interest in ancient Greek and Roman literary and philosophical texts. The study of Graeco-Roman Classics led to a new world view and a new set of values. It reaffirmed earthly human life as opposed to the other-worldly life emphasized by the religious Middle Ages. The Renaissance world view was characterized by freedom of thought, limitless ambition, love of splendour, aesthetic sensitivity, respect for the healthy human body, a keen appreciation of beauty and meticulous scholarship. The movement influenced literature, painting, sculpture and architecture.

1.1.2 The Reformation

The Reformation was the second great movement which marked the beginning of the Modern era in European history. It is easier to understand many of the concerns of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poetry if one has some knowledge of the religious controversies of the age, the Reformation and its consequences. The Reformation began in Germany in the early 16th century. In 1517, Martin Luther, an academic at Wittenberg, posted his "ninety-five theses" at the entrance of the Castle Church, thus challenging the authority, doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Lutheran Reformation opposed the corruption and abuses in the Catholic Church and exposed the futility of several ecclesiastical rituals and beliefs. In many ways it advocated a return to the pristine faith of Christ and the Holy Bible.

But the English Reformation had less to do with such doctrinal questions. It had more to do with the desire of the heirless Tudor King Henry VIII to obtain a divorce from his Spanish wife Catherine of Aragon, and to marry Anne Boleyn, the Duke of Norfolk's niece. Henry had no doctrinal difference with Rome. In fact, the English monarch was bestowed the title *Fidei Defensor* (Defender of the Faith) for his anti-Lutheran tract *Assertion Septem Sacramentorum* (In Defence of the Seven Sacraments). Later, however, Henry encouraged Lutheran preachers in the hope of separating himself from Rome, as Rome had made clear its unwillingness to grant the divorce. In 1532 he was finally able to divorce Catherine. The English Church officially separated from Rome, and by the Act of Supremacy (1534) Henry VIII became the head of the new Church. Those who refused to impugn the Roman Catholic Church were imprisoned in the Tower or executed. Sir

Thomas More, the author of the Renaissance masterpiece *Utopia* (1516), was one of the significant names among the victims.

The Reformation had a profound effect on the reading and thinking of the people of the period. They began to read the Bible for themselves instead of relying on the scriptural interpretations given by the clergy. The New Testament was translated into English by William Tyndale (c.1494-1526) in 1525. From the 1520s till the middle of the sixteenth century half a million English Bibles were smuggled into England for a population of six million. Miles Coverdale (c.1488-1569), a Yorkshire priest, brought out the first complete English Bible based on Tyndale's work in 1585. A scholarly translation, the Authorized Version, also known as the King James Bible, came out in 1611. The King James Bible had a profound role in the formation of English as a language. Phrases such as "clear as crystal," "lick the dust," "a thorn in the flesh," "broken reed" and "root of all evil" which are still current in English owe their origin to it. Several writers of the Renaissance – John Milton, for example – looked up to the Bible for their subject-matter and inspiration.

1.1.3   The Political Conditions in England

England had suffered a long period of civil unrest in the fifteenth century. The years 1455-85 saw spasmodic episodes of conflict between the rival houses of Lancaster and York, called the Wars of the Roses. The accession of Henry VII (1485-1509) put an end to the long-drawn-out wars and marked the beginning of the Tudor rule which lasted till the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603. Although the end of the Wars of the Roses facilitated greater cultural dialogue and exchange with European neighbours for England, this had not led to sustained periods of national peace and security. After the death of Henry VII, his son ascended the throne as Henry VIII (1509-47) in 1509. We have already looked at his conflict with the Catholic Church under the heading Reformation. More's *Utopia* contains in imaginative form a satirical reflection on the political conditions of the age as well as its liberal aspirations for ideal conditions.

After the brief reigns of Edward VI (1547-53) and Mary I (1553-58), Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558. Conspiracies, plots and assassination attempts continued till the early years of Elizabeth's reign. The religious controversies and conflicts continued even into the seventeenth century and are reflected in the literature of the day, especially in Edmund Spenser and John Milton. For a short while, with Mary at the helm of affairs, England had briefly returned to Rome. But under Elizabeth, England became a Protestant country. The Acts of Uniformity were passed in 1559 and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church were adopted in 1563. Thus, England became nationalist in religion and politics. The Pope proclaimed war against England in 1587. This prompted Philip II of Catholic Spain to send a naval force against England, which is called in history as the Spanish Armada (1588). An ill-equipped English fleet was miraculously able to repel the attack. The withdrawing Spanish fleet was caught in storms and was lost.

This was taken by many Englishmen as a providential sign of their nation's future destiny.

Elizabeth's ascension ushered in a period of relative stability for England. Her reign is often called the Golden Age in English history. The period was marked by unprecedented prosperity, national self-confidence and cultural productivity. English adventurers undertook voyages beyond immediate maritime boundaries. Francis Drake sailed round the world in 1578-81. Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), one of Queen Elizabeth's favourites, reached what is known today as Venezuela in 1583. During the next year he founded a colony at Roanoke Island, which he named Virginia after his queen. The relative peace and prosperity of the age afforded Elizabethans the leisure to engage in literary pursuits. Most of what is called Renaissance English Literature was produced during the Elizabethan Age.

After the death of Elizabeth, James VI (1603-25), the Stuart King of Scotland, became James I in March 1603. The Crowns of England and Scotland were unified under him. He was succeeded by his son Charles I (1625-49). Charles's Arminian sympathies, which appeared to many Englishmen as a return to the Catholicism of the Pre-Elizabethan days, re-ignited dormant religious conflicts.[1] Charles I dissolved the Parliament in 1629 and imposed his personal rule. The troubles intensified in 1637 when he tried to impose a new prayer book on Scotland. The conflict between the King and the Parliament reached a critical climax with the Battle of Naseby (1645), which was a blow to the Royalist forces. Charles I was executed after trial by a parliamentary court on 30 January 1649. This began the eleven-year rule of the Parliament, which is known as the Commonwealth period. In 1653 Oliver Cromwell, who traced his descent to Henry VIII's minister, Thomas Cromwell, was named as Lord Protector. In 1658 Richard Cromwell succeeded his father with none of the abilities which his father possessed. He resigned in 1659. The Commonwealth lasted till the Restoration of monarchy in 1660, when Charles II, the son of Charles I living in exile, was brought back to England and crowned after the Breda Parliament voted that the government should be by King, Lords and Commons.

1.1.4 The Socio-Cultural Background

During the time of the Renaissance, the English society was hierarchical with the King on the top, and the nobility and gentry below him. The Elizabethan social norm was conformity with the status quo, what Alexander Pope articulated a century later in the following terms: "Whatever is, is right" (*Essay on Man*, Epistle I, line 83) The Stuart Kings propagated the Divine Right theory of Kingship. The monarch was the vicar of God on earth and disobedience to him was both the crime of sedition and a sin against God. The principle of social harmony demanded obedience and subordination, and

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[1] Arminianism recognized good works, rejected Calvinistic doctrines such as Predestination, and emphasized rituals of sacrament rather than the moral instruction of the sermon. It also endorsed government by bishops and a return to Catholic practices of worship.

any form of dissent was an anathema. To reinforce this idea, parallels were drawn between harmony in the human person, family, state and society. Just as the head (reason) ruled over the body, the king ruled over the state and the male ruled over the family.

Gender relations were organized on patriarchal lines. Woman was considered the "weaker vessel" after a biblical passage (1 Peter 3.7). Writing later in the seventeenth century, John Milton, who attributed the Fall of Man to Adam's having heeded the weaker judgment of a woman, Eve, in *Paradise Lost*, wrote in *Samson Agonistes*: "Therefore God's universal law / Gave to the man despotic power / Over his female in due awe" (lines 1053-5). As a woman ruler, Elizabeth had to employ emotional strategies to overcome such prejudices of gender and to gain the hearts of her people. She told the forces organized to repel the Spanish invasion: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (qtd. in Hiscock 134).

The ordinary Elizabethan woman had hardly any choice regarding her life-partner; it was decided by the father, who was the head of the family. Among the royalty and in aristocratic families, marriages were part of political alliances. In Elizabethan courtly love poetry, as in Petrarch, the woman is merely the object of male desire.

Majority of the English were illiterate. Grammar schools, such as the one where Shakespeare was taught before withdrawal due to his father's declining fortunes, imparted elementary education in large towns. But they were reserved for males. Otherwise, instruction happened in the lodgings of the master or clergyman. While boys were taught writing and grammar, girls were trained in useful occupations such as needlework. The Renaissance Humanists, such as John Colet, the Dean at St Paul's, and William Camden, Usher at Westminster, laid great emphasis on education. New colleges were established at Oxford and Cambridge and admissions were increasing. Latin was the language of scholarship and was part of the school curriculum. Tutors were required to formally accept the articles of the new religion. Those who did not were not allowed to matriculate.

The Elizabethan Age was also a period of enormous transition – from a feudal economy based on land ownership, and the rights and obligation that it entailed, to a bourgeois economy based on private ownership, investment, profit-seeking, competition, credit systems and speculation. With the crumbling of the old feudal system, the field of action now shifted from the battlefield to the court. The knight-warrior gave way to the courtier. The English court culture had become hedonistic since the time of Henry VIII. The royal court was the arena of not only political decision-making but also of literary activity. It witnessed opulent display and extravagant forms of entertainment such as masques. The courtier played an important social role in the Elizabethan society and a lot of poetry reflects this. Courtiers depended heavily upon royal patronage. But this patronage was not permanent. Men such as Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell, Walter Raleigh, and Robert

Devereux, the second Earl of Essex, fell from high positions on evil days, the first two during the reign of Henry VIII and the last two during Elizabeth's time.

While most of the uneducated confined themselves to farms, the educated moved in and about the courts. They secured posts in administration or were sent abroad on diplomatic missions. Membership of the court meant royal favour, enhanced social status and material advancement. It is this class which had the privileges of writing. Poets from non-aristocratic backgrounds relied on the support of their patrons, either the monarch or an aristocrat, who was himself a courtier. In those days a patron was as essential as a publisher today. A famous name in the dedication ensured greater success for the work. If the patron accepted the dedication, it could also secure a substantial gift. Shakespeare dedicated his poetical works to Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton. Samuel Daniel, another poet, was patronized by Mary Sidney, the sister of poet Sir Philip Sidney, and Bacon was attached to Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. John Donne's later life was one of humiliating dependence on actual or possible patrons. Naturally, these poets had to cater to the tastes of their elite patrons and the demands of court culture. They wrote in genres popular among the courtly audience, namely, erotic lyrics, romances and pastorals. In their satires, often veiled, the poets also addressed the issues concerning the court such as corruption, vices and sycophancy. In the brutal politics of the period, writers enjoyed no particular security of life or liberty. It is pertinent that six of the well-known writers discussed in this unit were either executed by the state or were in prison at one time or the other.

Thanks to patronage, it was not impossible for ordinary members of the society to aspire to literary achievement. Writers hailing from ordinary life-circumstances could write for the theatre, a popular art form whose support also depended upon the support of the larger public. Shakespeare was the son of a Warwickshire glover; Ben Jonson, the stepson of a bricklayer; Christopher Marlowe, the son of a cobbler; and John Webster, the son of a coach builder.

There were many ways in which a poem or an essay might find its way to a reader. It could be circulated both in manuscript and print form. It could be read aloud by scholarly students or to family coteries. The manuscript of Shakespeare's Sonnets, for instance, was privately circulated among his friends. The author might not have a hand in the dissemination of his work. Once a manuscript was sold to a publisher the author had no rights over it. A work could also be published in a pirated edition, that is, without the author's consent. The authors feared censorship of their works. But the Elizabethan authorities had no coherent policy of censorship. Rather, it depended on the whims of the ruler.

It should also be noted that despite the euphoria surrounding the Renaissance, the period was not one of all round progress and development for England. The average life-span of an Englishman was only twenty four years. Many

would die of Syphilis. People stank in the court. Vast numbers of the English population, engaged in small-scale agriculture, lived a life of poverty. The dissolution of monasteries and land enclosures adversely affected the poor. It was also the time of the Inquisition, the religious court installed by the Catholic Church to punish heresy, and great divisions in Western Christendom. During the reign of Mary, people who did not follow the Catholic faith were burnt as heretics. People were superstitious and believed in witches. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) by Reginald Scott (c.1538-1599) was a well-known book on the subject. King James I himself wrote *Daemonologie*, which was published in Edinburgh in 1597 and in England in 1603. Common people enjoyed public executions and cruel pastimes like bear-baiting. The dignity of Man which the Renaissance men professed did not extend to all men. In 1562 John Hawkins set out on the first English slaving voyage transporting his cargo of three hundred natives from the Guinea coast in Africa to the West Indies for sugar and animal skins.

1.2   The English Renaissance

The winds of Renaissance reached England sometime in the middle of the sixteenth century, rather late in comparison with Italy and France. The movement invariably had a cosmopolitan character. As the American poet-critic James Russell Lowell puts it, "every breeze was dusty with the golden pollen of Greece, Rome, and Italy" (148). In England a grand tour taken on the Continent was regarded as the final step of rounding off an aristocratic education. Thus several Englishmen visited Italy and France and imbibed the spirit of the Renaissance. Several European Renaissance figures also visited England. Erasmus, for example, was a friend of Thomas More and revised his *In Praise of Folly* while in England.

The precursors of the English Renaissance were classical scholars such as Thomas Linacre (c.1460-1524), William Grocyn (c.1446-1519), John Colet (c.1467-1519) and Thomas More (1478-1535). They were responsible for the spread of new learning. The adoption of Classical learning implied knowledge of the Classical authors as well as the ability to use Latin and Greek. Knowledge of the Classical tongues gave rise, for a while, to a disdain for the vernaculars. More, for instance, wrote his *Utopia* in Latin to gain an international audience. Nevertheless, the ultimate intention of the English writers was to make the vernacular as elevated as the classics. Further, the influence of the Classical languages enriched the vernaculars, including English, and enlarged their vocabulary. In fact, a large proportion of the English words with Greek or Latin roots entered the English lexicon during the time of the Renaissance. The Renaissance was also the age when English more or less received its modern form. Print culture was responsible for this standardization of language. The dialect of educated London came to be increasingly accepted for literary creation.

Literature in England had fallen into mediocrity after the death of Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400). But now Europe provided inspiration and literary models for a new beginning and the growth of a peaceful court provided

leisure for literary pursuits. Small wonder the Renaissance marks an age of unprecedented literary activity in England both in terms of quantity and diversity. The lack of a strong native tradition made the English poets turn to the Classics. Classic texts were translated, commented upon and imitated. Imitation was not a bad thing then but a rule and mark of scholarship and skill. Added to this was the inspiration of writers from contemporary Europe. Besides the influence of Petrarch upon the English sonneteers, the eclogues of Virgil and Theocritus provided models for Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* (1579); Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) for *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96); epics Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Torquato Tasso (1544-95)'s *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered; 1580) for Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). The thrust of political thought in More's *Utopia* follows the pattern of Plato's *Republic*. Similarly, Sir Thomas North (1535-c.1601)'s translation of Plutarch's *Lives of Famous Romans and Greeks* (1579) provided material for several of Shakespeare's plays. Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580) served as inspiration for Francis Bacon's *Essays* (1597), aphoristic pieces of practical wisdom. The Renaissance influence from the Continent merged with native traditions to produce a truly national literature in England. It was the ambition of the English genius to excel Greece and Rome, Italy and France. Let us have a brief survey of the English Renaissance writings. The poetry of the period will be discussed in the next section.

In prose Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon were the luminaries of the age. Thomas More is known to present-day readers as the author of *Utopia* (meaning both a good place and nowhere). The work explores through the account of a traveller named Raphael Hythloday alternative modes of political, social and economic organization. It was Bacon who introduced the theory of induction which eventually replaced the cold logic-chopping of medieval scholasticism. True to the spirit of the Renaissance, he formulated in his *Novum Organum* (which translates as "new instrument"; 1620) his principle of taking all knowledge to be his province. His *Instauratio Magna* (1620) attained European reputation. In his unfinished novel *New Atlantis* Bacon describes a fanciful new Utopia where scholars like him reside. His other works include the *Essays*, *Advancement of Learning*, *History of Henry the Seventh* and *Apothegms New and Old*. John Lyly, known as the first stylist in English prose, wrote a narrative *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1579) in his inordinately ornate prose, replete with antithesis and alliteration, giving rise to the term "Euphuism."

The emergence of England as a nation and its successes in confrontations with other European powers, especially with the Spanish Armada, made it conscious of its own past. As a result, chronicle-writing enjoyed vogue. Raphael Holinshed brought out his first edition of *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in 1577 and an enlarged edition in 1586.

Edward Hall wrote *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancaster & Yorke, etc* in 1548. Sir Walter Raleigh's (pronounced as Rawley by him) *History of the World* also belong to the same category of writings.

Richard Hakluyt (1552-1616) concerned himself with maritime adventures and wrote *Divers Voyages Touching the Discoverie of America & the Islands Adjacent unto the Same* (1582).

It was the Elizabethan drama which felt the Renaissance impulse in an equal, or even greater, measure than poetry. You will learn about William Shakespeare, the greatest of the Elizabethan playwrights, in Block III of this course. The other important Renaissance playwrights are discussed in Block II.

1.3 Early Renaissance Poetry

English Renaissance poetry refers to the verse produced roughly between 1557 and 1631. It was one of the formative years for English poetry, and therefore an understanding of what happens here may help you appreciate what follows in English literary history.

At the English court conducted in the Renaissance fashion, literary activity was an honoured and fashionable end. Henry VIII and Elizabeth themselves wrote poems. The poets also had an elevated conception of their vocation. Poetry was not only meant for recreation. It was part of the poetic function to draw men towards virtue. Defending poetry against the charges levelled against it by Stephen Gosson in his *School of Abuse* (1579), Philip Sidney in his *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) accorded the poet the status of a seer. To the Renaissance, the poet was a maker (the Latin word "*poēta*" is derived from Greek "*poiētēs*" meaning "maker"). Poetic creation was considered similar to divine creation.

Renaissance poetry was highly wrought and rhetorical. As Maurice Evans says, for the Elizabethan poet a poem was "a special kind of oratory. . . . a highly deliberate and formal artefact in which vocabulary, style and logic are all harnessed to a specific end, whether of praising a mistress, denigrating a vice, or telling a story" (30-4). Great stress was laid on decorum, the appropriateness of the style to a specific matter.

The poets made use of prefabricated moulds such as the sonnet, the lyric, the eclogue (a poem on a pastoral subject), the ode, the elegy, the epigram and the satire. We will discuss the genres of Renaissance poetry in a separate section (Section 1.4). Renaissance poetry had little interest in what would today be an admirable virtue – originality. The thrust was on imitation of the best. The trend continued till the Neoclassical period. It was the Romantics who first emphasized originality in the modern sense. The Renaissance poet, by contrast, relied on the reader's "ability to recognize verbal echoes" (Evans 29). On the one hand, this reliance on already existing models helped the poets overcome the formlessness from which medieval poetry had suffered. On the other, the poet projected his own personality into the work thus animating what would otherwise be mechanical conventions. This personal element gave the poems a youthful vigour, freshness and charm. Elizabethan poets also experimented with received models, especially with metrical

patterns, stanzaic forms and rhyme schemes. It may be noted that certain peculiarities of English as a language facilitated such experimentation. English is a heavily accented language in which the stress is flexible depending upon the importance of a word in a particular context. As opposed to the Classical meter which is based on the quantity of syllables, English metrical poetry is largely based on the accentual system.

The Age of Renaissance also saw the publication of the early critical works on poetry – George Gascoigne's *Certayne Notes of Instruction concerning the Making of Verse or Ryme in English* (1575), George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie*, and Samuel Daniel's *A Defence of Ryme* (1602). Thomas Campion's *Observations on the Art of English Poesy* (1602) dealt with prosody, especially the symmetry and proportion required in the composition of lines, and argued that rhyme was unsuited to the genius of the English language. These show the self-consciousness of the age's poetry and its occupation with form and function.

After the introduction of printing, the popular demand for poetry increased in England. Johan Gutenberg had devised the movable type printing in Mainz around 1439. In 1477 William Caxton, an Englishman, brought out a volume of Chaucer's poems. He also published Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* in 1485. Collections such as *The Paradyse of Daynty Devises* (1576) and *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites* (1584) enjoyed great popularity. The most celebrated anthology of the period was Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonnettes Written by the Ryght Honorable Lorde Henry Howard, Late Earle of Surrey, and Other* (popularly known as *Tottel's Miscellany*) published in 1557.

ACTIVITY B

After reading section 1.3, what characteristic features of Renaissance poetry can you enumerate?

DISCUSSION

English poetry of the Renaissance was inextricably related to the court culture and enjoyed great prestige. The poets had an elevated conception of their vocation. To them poetry was not merely meant for recreation. It had a didactic purpose as well. Renaissance poetry was highly wrought and rhetorical. The poets made use of prefabricated generic moulds such as the sonnet, the lyric, the eclogue, the ode, the elegy, the epigram and the satire, most of them borrowed from Europe. The stress was on imitation of great works composed earlier rather than on originality of the individual poet. However, the English poets infused their works with a personal element, a youthful vigour and freshness.

1.3.1 Major Renaissance Poets

Except for the work of minor poets like Alexander Barclay (c.1476-1552) and John Skelton (c.1460-1529) England had hardly seen any poetry since William Langland (c.1332-1386) and Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400). The Elizabethan Age amply compensated for this inadequacy. The major poets of the age – Thomas Wyatt, Earl of Surrey, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Michael Drayton and John Donne – are briefly discussed below.

1.3.1.1 Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey

The first English poetry of the Renaissance is the verses of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Lord Henry Howard (1517-47), known as Earl of Surrey. As we have seen, Surrey's poems were published in the volume called *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557). Both Wyatt and Surrey spent a long time in Italy. They were the foremost among the Elizabethan lyricists. Avoiding allegory, didacticism and mythological paraphernalia, Wyatt wrote in a brief and intensely personal manner. Most of his poems rely on conventional themes and modes of expression. His most famous poems "Forget Not Yet" and "The Appeal" are amatory poems in the courtly love tradition. The speaker asks his mistress, a *la* Petrarch, not to forget him, recounts her inconsistencies, and makes his final appeals. Wyatt's love poetry has a biographical basis. Anne Boleyn, who was later the wife of Henry VIII, was his mistress for a while. The liaison caused some scandal and Wyatt was imprisoned in the Tower twice. But he was released and was appointed ambassador to the Spanish court.

It was Wyatt who introduced the sonnet form, the Italian ottava rima (the eight-lined stanza with an *ab ab bc bc* rhyme used by Petrarch in *Il Canzoniere*) and terza rima (a rhyming verse stanza form which employs an interlocking three-line rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc*, used by Dante) into England. He followed the Italian models, experimented on a variety of metrical arrangements and wrote songs, madrigals (polyphonic musical compositions), sonnets, epigrams, satires, elegies and devotional pieces.

Surrey was Wyatt's disciple. He refined his master's metrical expression and further explored the formal possibilities of the sonnet. His sonnets are more effective and expressive than those of Wyatt. While Wyatt's sonnets are modelled on Petrarch, to be later adopted by Milton, Surrey modified the form and became the model for Shakespeare's sonnet sequence. We will discuss this modification under Section 1.4.1. Surrey's major contribution to English poetry is the blank verse (unrhymed decasyllabic lines). Elizabethan dramatists including Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe achieved their eloquent triumphs using blank verse. In this sense Surrey was the true precursor of the greater Elizabethans. Unfortunately, he was executed in 1547 on charges of high treason.

1.3.1.2 Sir Philip Sidney

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), a versatile personality and a model of the chivalrous courtier, was one of the leading Elizabethan men of letters. Like a typical Renaissance Englishman, he spent time on the Continent, read Greek literature and philosophy and engaged in disputations at Oxford. In 1572, the Queen granted him a license to go abroad for two years to attain the knowledge of foreign languages. He visited France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland and Italy and evinced interest in a variety of fields, especially Renaissance painting in Venice.

Sidney was a reputed sonneteer. His *Astrophel and Stella*, written between 1580 and 1584 and published after his death in 1591, was the first major sonnet-sequence in English. For this achievement he is called the English Petrarch. The sonnets numbering 108 are the result of a personal romantic engagement. In 1576, during his stay with his uncle, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, at Kenilworth Castle, he had fallen in love with Penelope Devereux, the twelve-year-old daughter of the Earl of Essex. She was probably betrothed to Sidney but was later given in marriage to Lord Robert Rich, Member of Parliament, in 1581. This personal loss, like that of Yeats's futile love for Maud Gonne, was a gain for literature. The attachment resulted in the series of sonnets addressed to the lady "Stella" (meaning star), Sidney's name for Penelope Rich. Sidney repeatedly puns upon her married name in Sonnet 37:

> Rich in all beauties which man's eye can see,
> . . . .
> Rich in the treasure of deserved renown,
> Rich in the riches of a royal heart,
> Rich in those gifts which give the eternal crown;
> Who though most rich in these and every part,
> Which make the patents of true worldly bliss,
> Hath no misfortune, but that Rich she is (lines 6-14).

In these literary effusions, Sidney called himself Astrophel (star-lover). The sonnets, along with the eleven songs in the volume, are notable for their fine notes of passion and elegant phrases. Their chief interest lies in the dramatic presentation of Astrophil's psychology. Going beyond the conventions of the Italian sonnet, the poet makes his utterances both emotional and reflective. They are the finest love poems in English literature before Shakespeare's sonnets. On a social level, they are also a subtle reflection upon the sexual politics of the Elizabethan court.

In 1590 Sidney wrote a prose romance *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, called in short as *Arcadia*. The year 1595 saw the publication of *An Apologie for Poetrie*, of which mention has already been made. Sidney exercised great influence on his contemporaries through his goodwill and intellectual attainments. He encouraged his friend Edmund Spenser to persist with his

magnum opus *The Faerie Queene*. Sidney's sonnet sequence inspired Spenser's own sonnets entitled *Amoretti* (1595).

1.3.1.3 Edmund Spenser

Edmund Spenser (1552-99) was the first major poet in English literature since Geoffrey Chaucer and one of the representative Elizabethan poets. Born in "[m]erry London, [his] most kindly nurse," to a parson of a Lancashire family and his wife, he represents the confluence of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Educated at Cambridge, he won the friendship of notable men such as Gabriel Harvey, who, at the time was leading a literary movement in favour of the classics. Harvey secured him the patronage of the Earl of Leicester. In the household of Leicester, Spenser met Philip Sidney, Leicester's nephew. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. *The Shepheardes Calendar*, modelled on Virgil and Theocritus, came out in 1579. The book consists of twelve pastoral poems or eclogues, one for each month of the year. The publication of *The Shepheardes Calendar* is widely held to mark the dawn of the English Renaissance.

Spenser went on to write *The Faerie Queene*, six books of which were published between 1590 and 1596. The work is an epic, a romance and an allegory.[2] Each of the books recounts the adventures and triumphs of a knight who represented a particular moral virtue. The virtues included Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice and Courtesy. According to Spenser's plan, the work was to get its unity from the projection of a grand character, King Arthur, who symbolized Magnificence, which was the result of being perfect in twelve moral virtues. As an allegory, it works at multiple levels – historical, moral and religious. For example, the Red Cross Knight in Book I represents the virtue of Holiness. Historically, he is the Earl of Leicester or Sir Philip Sidney, an embodiment of medieval chivalry. He could also be St George, the patron saint of England and the embodiment of England's providential security. Similarly, Gloriana is glory in general and Queen Elizabeth, "the most high, mightie and magnificent empresse" to whom the poem is dedicated, in particular. She held a twelve-day annual feast. Each day, a Knight is sent forth to aid someone in distress. The book itself is considered the epic of the English wars in Ireland under Elizabeth. With its Irish scenic background *The Faerie Queene* manifests a rare pictorial quality. Extremely sensitive to sensuous beauty, Spenser here anticipates Keats's dictum that "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." The melodious verse of the work also reveals Spenser as a master musician. He was a master of rhythm and introduced the end-rhyme. He is considered the first poet to extract the music out of the rebellious English verse. He also took recourse to archaisms for the sake of epic grandeur. Spenser wrote the work in the Stanza that bears his name, the Spenserian Stanza (a nine-lined stanza consisting of eight iambic pentameter lines followed by a single line in iambic hexameter,

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[2] An allegory is "a narrative . . . in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the 'literal', or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification" (Abrams 5).

also called an Alexandrine), which is known for its infinite cadence and adaptability. Keats used the same stanzaic form in *The Eve of St Agnes*.

Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) is a collection of love sonnets written in honour of Elizabeth Boyle, an Irish girl with whom he had fallen in love and married later. *Epithalamion* (literally meaning "upon the bridal chamber") (1595) is a marriage poem full of ecstatically sweet passion and mythological allusions, which celebrates his wedding with her in 1594. *Epithalamion*, a typical renaissance poem and the finest marriage song in the whole of English literature, presents a synthesis of the physical and the spiritual, a seamless blend of Christian and pagan elements. *Prothalamion* (1596) is another marriage hymn written on the occasion of an aristocratic wedding. Such marriage songs were popular in the Elizabethan age. Spenser's four *Hymns* on Love, Beauty, Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty show the influence of Platonic conceptions of Love and Beauty, which the Greek philosopher embodied in his *Symposium*. In 1595 he published *Astrophel*, an elegy on the death of his friend Sir Philip Sidney.

With his keen ear for melody, exquisite sense of beauty and splendid imagination, Spenser was to become the inspiration for Romantics like Keats, Pre-Raphaelites such as William Morris and even Neoclassicists like Alexander Pope. His lofty moral purity and a delicate idealism made him Milton's ideal as well. Milton called him "the sage and serious poet Spenser."

1.3.1.4 William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was as much a poet as a playwright. His poetic output consists of 154 sonnets and two long poems *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*. Both the long poems are replete with the bard's youthful precocity and exuberant imagination. *Venus and Adonis* (1592-3), which Shakespeare called "the first heire of my invention," was dedicated with an elaborate epistle to his patron, Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton. Probably it was written when the theatres in London were closed due to an outbreak of plague. The plot deals with the seduction of Adonis the hunter by Venus, the goddess of love, given in Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare's innovation was to make Adonis refuse Venus's offer of herself. Before long, Adonis is killed by a boar. Biographically, it could be Shakespeare's own experience of being overborne in the rye field by a woman eight years older than him – Anne Hathaway, who was to later become his wife.

The Rape of Lucrece was also dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. It was first licensed on 18 April 1593 and came out in 1594. The poem draws on the story of Tarquinius and Lucrece described in both Ovid's *Fasti* and Livy's *History of Rome*. Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king of Rome, rapes Lucretia, wife of Collatinus, one of the king's retainers. Lucretia commits suicide. This poem, unlike *Venus and Adonis*, is noted for its stylistic restraint and dignified and lofty imagery.

The sonnet genre was at its acme during the time and there is nothing surprising in Shakespeare following the fashion. Shakespeare's sonnets were published in 1609 in a small quarto volume generally thought to have been piratical. During the time, it was common to circulate poems in manuscript. Francis Mere in his *Pallad Tamia* (1598) mentions Shakespeare's "sugar'd Sonnets among his private friends." Scholarly consensus dates the sonnets between 1592 and 1596.

The Shakespearean sonnet consists of three decasyllabic quatrains, each rhyming alternately, and a rhyming couplet at the end. Many critics believe that the sonnets furnish a biographical narrative. They fall into two unequal divisions. The first 126 sonnets are written to a young man, a charming and talented member of an aristocratic family. To an extent, Shakespeare follows the literary convention of love-sickness with its eulogies, abuses and complaints. But the object of his love is a lord, the "Fair Youth." In the first 17 sonnets, the poet implores him to marry and beget children so that his beauty and grace will not be lost to the world. The later sonnets speak about his neglect at the hands of the lord and the presence of rival poets. Thoughts of old age and death also haunt him. But the poet, in maturity and love, realizes that his relationship with the lord is beyond considerations of advantage and feels contented in his condition. Sonnets 127 to 152, forming the second series, deal with a woman "dark of complexion and dark of character." The Dark Lady sonnets record the poet's love for her and her faithlessness. His master steals the mistress away from him but the poet blames her and not the lord for the betrayal. Sonnets 153 and 154 stand by themselves.

Besides these works, appended to the 1609 edition of the Sonnets was a poem called *The Lover's Complaint* probably by Shakespeare. A small anthology *The Passionate Pilgrim* was published by William Jaggard in 1599 with the name of Shakespeare on the title page. Similarly in 1601 *Love's Martyr* and *The Phoenix and the Turtle* were published. But their authorship is uncertain.

1.3.1.5 Michael Drayton

Michael Drayton (1563- 1631) was another major poet of this age. His career covered the whole generic spectrum of Renaissance poetry with sonnets, odes, elegies, pastorals, satires and, more importantly, historical poetry. In *Idea, The Shepherd's Garland* (1593), a collection of nine pastorals, he celebrated his own love-sorrows under the persona of Rowland. The work is similar to Spenser's pastoral *The Shepheardes Calendar* but without Spenser's archaism or didacticism. The idea of love was expanded into a cycle of sixty-four sonnets which were Platonic in spirit under the title *Idea's Mirror* (1594). In 1596 he published his long poem *Mortimeriados*, which deals with the Wars of the Roses in seven-lined stanzas. It was later expanded and republished in 1603 under the title *The Baron's Wars*. His monumental work is *Poly-Olbion*, "a topo-chrono-graphicall poeme" dealing with the history and geography of England, eighteen books of which were produced by 1613. He also wrote *England's Heroical Epistles* (1597, 1604), a series of

historical studies; and *The Owle* (1604) a bitter satire prompted by annoyance over the lack of patronage. A 1627 volume of his poems includes "The Battle of Agincourt" (1627), a historical poem; "Miseries of Queen Margaret," a similar poem; "Nimphidia, the Court of Faery," a little epic of the fairyland, written in a playful mood that recalls Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; "Quest of Cinthia" and "Shepherd's Sirena," two pastorals. "Nimphidia" is about the quarrel between King Oberon and the Knight Pigwiggen for love of Queen Mab and is comic in aim. In "Quest of Cinthia" he himself follows the moon-goddess. Cinthia symbolizes nature and the poet decides to live in love and innocence with her. In 1631 he published his last work, *The Muses Elizium*, an idealized portrait of the Elizabethan Age. His historical poetry is full of passion for England. His "The Battle of Agincourt" reminds us of Tennyson's patriotic poem "Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854). Drayton believed that he was living in declining times. His war poems celebrate the heroic tradition of England. His lifelong effort was to put his country, through poetry, on a level with Greece, Rome and Italy.

1.3.1.6 John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets

The poetry of John Donne (1572-1631) represents a singular strain in the Elizabethan poetic genius. Towards the last decade of the Elizabethan Age, the poetical propensities of the Renaissance bifurcated into two different traditions – the Classical tradition headed by Ben Jonson and the metaphysical school led by John Donne. John Dryden and Samuel Johnson designated Donne a metaphysical poet on account of the philosophical doctrines implied in his works and his flight to the spiritual. For instance, in "The Good Morrow" Donne invokes Aristotle to show why lovers cannot die: "Whatever dies was not mixed equally; / If our two loves be one, or thou and I / Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die" (lines 18-20). Aristotle had argued that a substance of similar nature and equal magnitude was indestructible. It is contrariety that causes corruption.

In his verses, Donne resorts to what George Sampson calls "twists and turns of cerebral activity and dissonant ejaculation" (169). While other poets refined style Donne refined thought. Look at the rationale which Donne furnishes for not killing a flea:

> It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
> . . . .
> And sacrilege, three sins in killing three ("The Flea," lines 3-4;18).

His experimental poetics is characterized by dramatic disharmonies, intellectual vigour, intensity of thought, subtle, overstretched logic, psychological dissection, violation of poetic decorum, a predilection for the rough speech idiom, command of pungent epigram and condensed expression. Donne's poetry was in part a reaction against the florid, sentimental style of poetry derived from Petrarch and popularized by Spenser. He searched for complex intellectual equivalents for emotion. Not

surprisingly, T. S. Eliot, in his *Metaphysical Poets* (1921) rediscovered in him a unified sensibility – "a sensuous apprehension of thought" – which Eliot felt was lost to the English verse later. Donne's criteria of composition were common sense and intellectual standards, not poetical principles. Even in his love poetry he hated convention and morals of chivalry which Sidney would have delighted in. He abandoned mythological imagery, regular metrical arrangement and even harmonious sound, traditionally considered an ingredient of good poetry. A distinguishing feature of this poetry is the conceit, a highly-wrought metaphor which brings together usually dissimilar ideas. For example, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (lines 25-6) he uses the metaphor of the legs of a compass for separated lovers. Donne also had a thirst for knowledge. His works are full of images borrowed from alchemy, astronomy, astrology, geometry, geography, philosophy – Platonic and medieval – theology and metallurgy. His sporting with strange themes and his disconcerting poetics anticipate the poetry of Robert Browning.

A number of poets began writing under the influence of Donne. These later metaphysical poets are George Herbert (1593-1633), Richard Crashaw (1612-49), Abraham Cowley (1618-67), Andrew Marvell (1621-78), Henry Vaughan (1622-95) and Thomas Traherne (1636?-74). Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan were primarily religious poets, but poets like Marvell also wrote love poetry. They wrote during the Jacobean and Caroline periods (See section 1.6). We will study the metaphysical poets in detail in Unit 3 of this Block.

1.4 Major Themes

As said earlier, most sixteenth-century English poets wrote poems to cater to the tastes of the court. Poems on love, pastoral joys, life at the court, and those which philosophically dealt with the transitory nature of life, along with chivalric romances, were the favourites of the members of the court. From the last section, which detailed the works of the major Elizabethan poets, you must have got a basic idea regarding the popular themes of the period. Elizabethan poets worked on a number of themes – love, death, time and mutability, virtuous life, patriotism and war, nature, religion, faith and morals. Many of these are conventional, and in choosing these, most poets were following the examples set by their counterparts on the Continent. However, the English poets, as in the case of the sonneteers, introduced a personal element into conventional forms. Let us look at some of the most common themes of Renaissance poetry.

1.4.1 Courtly Love, Beauty and Desire

Love has always enjoyed a popular profile in the history of literature. Courtly love is a medieval conception of nobly and chivalrously expressing love and admiration for a woman, usually a married one, popular among the European nobility. It is, paradoxical as it might seem, at once spiritual and erotic. Maurice Evans points out that courtly love demands adultery and secrecy. Love becomes a sophisticated parlour game and poetry becomes the public

and traditional outlet of feelings (67). The hedonistic court culture during the Tudor times encouraged courtly love poetry. Love letters and love poems came into vogue. Courtly love was the main theme of the shorter forms of Elizabethan verse, especially the lyric and the sonnet.

English love poetry has a number of precedents. The tradition of writing love poems had come down from the wandering minstrels of yore, especially the troubadours of 12th-century Provence in France. The chief theme of these songs was the love of the poor minstrel for the high-born lady. This practice perhaps traces its origin to the transfer of exaltation from Virgin Mary to the adored lady. In the years following the crusades, the Arabic tradition of writing love poetry had become popular in Moorish Spain. The old English love poetry also followed the same tradition. With his sonnets to Laura, Petrarch gave Renaissance poets the fashionable rhetoric of prolonged but unsatisfied desire for an idealized woman. Petrarch's love sonnets held sway on the English poetic scene, especially in aristocratic circles, and writing love lyrics became a literary fashion. A typical love poem consists of the thoughts of a melancholy lover who speaks of his love for an obdurate or disdainful lady (cruel fair) of high rank. It praises the lady's beauty, talks about its powerful hold over the lover, her scorn and the persistence of the man. The poets employed various metaphors for love. Love was worship, service, religion, war, sickness or captivity. The symptoms of love, its torments, its solitude, its hope, its righteousness and its weapons were the favourite themes of poets. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (written for Penelope Rich), Wyatt's "Forget Not Yet" and "The Appeal" (probably written for Anne Boleyn) and Spenser's *Amoretti* (written in honour of his lady love and later wife, Elizabeth Boyle) are typical examples of Elizabethan love poetry. That the English were ruled for half-a-century by an unmarried woman facilitated the elevation of courtly adoration to new heights. Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Ocean to Cynthia" is a representation of the same adoration in a different form.

Concomitant with the theme of love is the theme of beauty, especially female beauty and male admiration of it. Female beauty is dealt with, for example, in Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* sonnets 7, 9, 22, 26, 101, 102 and 103, and Daniel's *Delia* sonnets 18 and 28. Thanks to the influence of Platonism and the idea of Platonic love, for the Renaissance poets love was an ennobling phenomenon and beauty an elevated concept. According to Plato's theory of Ideas, everything on the earth had a superior, ideal original in heaven. What one finds on the earth is a shadow and symbol of the Idea, an imperfect 'imitation.' Thus, earthly love was a shadow and symbol of divine love, and earthly beauty, that of divine beauty. Plato makes a distinction between common love and heavenly love. Earthly love is selfish and physical. Heavenly love is rational and spiritual. The desire of the particular, however, it is assumed, would lead to love of beauty itself. Therefore contemplation of earthly beauty was a religious contemplation of the beautiful soul. Not surprisingly, though there is awareness that desire may lead to sin, as in *The Faerie Queene*, there is also a celebration of the sensuousness of love, as in *Epithalmion*. The friendship between the poet and the Fair Youth in

Shakespeare's sonnets is also to be seen in this light. Friendship between young men of noble minds is envisaged in Plato's *Symposium*.

Some poets consciously engaged the conventions of love poetry, many in ironic terms. For example, Shakespeare may be seen as mocking Petrarchan conventions in *Venus and Adonis* by showing a goddess wooing a man in vain. In his sonnets, though they celebrate beauty and love, the speaker confesses that his attraction is mere lust and sensuality, which leads to repulsion and remorse. Shakespeare also goes against Petrarchan conventions with his negative praise of his mistress. In Sonnet 130, he says: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; / Coral is far more red than her lips' red:" (lines 1-2). Donne's love poetry also reveals the questionable nature of love.

1.4.2 Good and Virtuous Life

Renaissance Humanism laid great emphasis on the harmonious development of the human personality at all levels of thought, feeling and action. It believed in the potential of a human being for a complete life. In poetry which drew upon chivalric traditions of medieval Europe, this was related to the idea of a 'gentleman.' In a letter to Walter Raleigh, Spenser said that his aim in *The Faerie Queene* was "to fashion a gentleman or a noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline." His idea was to present such an image in his knights, who were the personifications of a set of virtues. He also furnishes a set of vices to be shunned. This was also a form of enunciating Christian ethics in literary form. But Spenser celebrates not only Christian virtues such as Holiness but also secular-humanistic ones such as Justice and Temperance. Thus, the stress on a 'good' and virtuous life shows the influence of both the Renaissance and the Reformation.

1.4.3 Time and Mutability

Renaissance poetry was profoundly occupied with the idea of time. Taking time as a valuable fragment of eternity, it affirmed the temporal existence of mortal beings. On the one hand, it recognized the plenitude of this temporal life. Along with this was the acknowledgement of the mutability of human life. Poetry of the period is concerned with the invincibility of time, the question of what mere passage of time does to nature and all beings including humans. Mutability is the triumph of time. This obsession with time leads to a belief that man has only a stewardship of his abilities. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 2, the poet-speaker reminds the Fair Youth: "Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now, / Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held:" (lines 3-4). Sometimes the theme appears as a preoccupation with personal ageing and the worry about impending death. Death is a brooding presence in Donne's love poems. In "The Relic" the lover is already dead. Daniel's Delia sonnets 30 and 31 talk about death. Raleigh's "What is Our Life? The Play of Passion" also touches on death and the finality of human existence. Ageing is a major theme in the Daniel's *Delia* sonnets 34, 37 and 46. Thoughts about time and the passing of youth are made explicit by Shakespeare in the poet's exhortations to the youth. Sonnet 60 says:

And time that gave doth now *his gift confound.*
Time doth transfix the *flourish* set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of natures truth,
And nothing stands but for *his scythe* to mow (lines 8-14).

However, there is also a confidence that the battle against time can be won in symbolic terms, through love and poetry. As Shakespeare says in Sonnet 116, "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come" (lines 9-10). In Sonnet 12 he explains how the handsome youth can achieve a kind of immortality through his progeny: "And nothing'gainst Time's scythe can make defence, Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence" (lines 13-4). Shakespeare also incorporates the idea of granting immortality to his friend through his poetry: "And yet to *times in hope,* my verse shall stand / Praising thy worth, despite *his cruel hand*" (Sonnet 60, lines). The poet-speaker assures the Fair Youth: "So long as men can breethe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this [his sonnet], and this gives life to thee." (Sonnet 18, lines 13-4). Love, reproduction and poetry are considered human attempts at securing a kind of immortality.

The idea of time sometimes appears as the 'carpe diem" (seize the day) motif, one of the commonplaces of European literature: "The speaker in a carpe diem poem emphasizes that life is short and time is fleeting in order to urge his auditor—who is often represented as a virgin reluctant to change her condition—to make the most of present pleasures" (Abrams: 31). Spenser's lines in *The Faerie Queene* "Gather therefore the Rose, whilst yet it is prime" is considered a typical emblem of the transitoriness of beauty and the finality of death. The lover's exhortations in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* also employ the carpe diem motif. Touching upon the limitations placed on human life by space and time, he says: "Had we but World enough, and Time / This coyness, Lady, were no crime" (lines 1-2).

Spenser takes time symbolism even to the structure of his poetry. His marriage poem *Epithalamion* consists of 365 long lines (representing the number of days in a year) and 24 stanzas (representing the hours of the day). They deal with sidereal hours which "allot the seasons." True to the Renaissance belief in temporal existence, the poem shows us that the eternity of endless mutability establishes the life of a microcosm.

1.4.4   Polity, History and Religion

The political anxieties of the age are also reflected in its poems. "Ill Government," "Kings and Tyrants" and "The Difference betwixt Kings and Subjects" written by Robert Herrick, a Cavalier poet, deal with the political instability in England as a result of the struggle between the King and the Parliament. After his retirement, Milton formed the sonnet as a mode of political expression instead of using it for tender expressions of love. Among such "public sonnets" are the sonnet on the military career of Sir Thomas Fairfax, "On the Lord General Fairfax at the Siege of Colchester" (1648); and

"To the Lord General Cromwell," in which Milton urges Cromwell to reject the idea of uniting civil and ecclesiastical power. His "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" (1655) is a lament for the Waldensians (Vaudois), a Protestant sect butchered by Charles Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy. Marvell's "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" (1650) is an example of occasional poetry written to commemorate specific political events. See Section 1.4.4, for the historical themes taken up by the poets of the age.

The period also saw a lot of religious poetry. While many other themes (such as courtly love) were taken up either because it was a generic convention or because it was fashionable, religious poems were written out of conviction. Some of the best religious poetry of the period came from the metaphysical poets. George Herbert's *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633) is one of the finest volumes of devotional poetry written in English. It went through 13 editions by 1680. Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and the poems of Henry Vaughan also deserve mention. Milton was another poet who dealt with religious themes in his poems. Apart from *Paradise Lost*, which took up one of the greatest themes in Christian mythology, namely, the Fall of Man, Milton was also interested in the religious controversies of the age, the conflict between Catholics, Protestants and Puritans.

1.4.5 Other Themes

We have already noted that the Renaissance poets introduced a personal note into poetry. Whatever be the abstract theme critically extracted from the poems, a lot of poetry is about the poet himself. He talks about his self, his feelings, ambitions, aspirations, weaknesses and temptations. This is particularly so in the religious poetry of the age. Similarly, Milton's two poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, celebrate the joys of mirth and solitude respectively felt by the poet. Poetry itself is a theme in *Astrophil and Stella*, sonnets 1, 3, 6, 15, 28, 34, 50, 55, 58 and 90; and in *Delia* sonnets 4, 6, 7, 39, 40, 50, 51 and 52. The poets also wrote about nature. Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" is an imaginative, symbolic representation of the natural world. True to the Renaissance interest in Classical literature, many took recourse to mythological themes as well, Shakespeare's long poem *Venus and Adonis* being an example.

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ACTIVITY C

What are the main themes of Renaissance poetry?

DISCUSSION

A major theme of Renaissance poetry was courtly love. Related to the theme of love was the worship of beauty. These themes were ennobled beyond plain eroticism by the influence of Platonism and the idea of Platonic love. True to the Renaissance belief in human perfectibility poets also wrote on a good and virtuous life. Time and mutability was another prominent thematic concern in

the poetry of the period. Other themes included history and politics, the poet's self, nature and mythological themes.

1.5   Generic Forms of Renaissance Poetry

In Renaissance England, a poet's choice of the genre depended upon factors such as readership, the taste of the patron, the matter to be conveyed and, above all, the availability of European generic models. The favoured genres of English Renaissance poetry were the sonnet, the lyric and the pastoral. The poets also wrote elegies, satires, historical poems and, though rare, epics and romances.

1.5.1   The Sonnet

The sonnet appears to be the most popular genre during the Renaissance.
Let us, therefore, discuss the sonnet form in some detail. The term "sonnet" is probably an abbreviation of the Italian "sonetto" meaning "a little sound or song." The invention of the sonnet form is attributed to Pier delle Vigne (c.1190-1249) and other "Sicilian School" poets who were experimenting with troubadour verses from Provence (in south-eastern France). It was popularized by the Italian poet Petrarch in his sonnets to Laura. Dante employed this form for *Vita Nouva*. In its modern form a sonnet has 14 lines in iambic pentameter.

The sonnet has three varieties: Petrarchan, Spenserian and Shakespearean. The Petrarchan sonnet has two parts – an octave (a stanza of eight lines) and a sestet (a stanza of six lines). The octave may be further divided into two quatrains (a stanza of four lines) and the sestet, into two tercets (a stanza of three lines). The rhyme scheme is *abba abba cde cde* or *abba abba cde dcd*. There is a caesura (or sense break) and a volta (or turn of thought) at the end of the eighth line, that is between the octave and the sestet. Wyatt and Surrey imported the sonnet form into England. But Surrey experimented with the metrical pattern and rhyme. Surrey's sonnet, widely called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, consists of three quatrains and a couplet, and employs the rhyme *abab cdcd efef gg* or alternatively *abba cddc effe gg*. The final couplet is used to express the central theme and clinch the sonnet's argument. Besides Shakespeare, Sidney and Drayton also followed the new pattern. Spenser made a further innovation in the rhyme scheme: *ab ab bc bc cd cd ee*. The Spenserian sonnet is also called the linked sonnet because of the interlocking rhyme scheme.

It was a common practice among Elizabethan poets to write sonnet sequences. As we have seen during the discussion of the major authors, the greater Elizabethan successes in the genre belong to Philip Sidney, Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser. The other sonnet sequences of the period include Henry Constable's *Diana* (1592), Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592) and Thomas Lodge's *Phillis* (1593).

1.5.2   The Lyric

A lyric was originally a song meant to be sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. In its modern form it is short poem which directly expresses the poet's thoughts and sentiments. The Elizabethan lyric was close enough to traditional oral verse which lends the form a musical quality. It also shows the influence of the Italian madrigal (a contrapuntal musical technique) and air (a tune sung to the accompaniment of a viol – in England, a lute). The lyric is brief, melodious and exquisite. It includes a personal note and is also known for its dramatic immediacy. The Elizabethan age was the golden age of lyrical poetry. Every poet, big or small, tried his hand at lyrics. Significant specimens of Elizabethan lyrical poetry include Sidney's "The Dirge of Love" and Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love."

1.5.3   The Pastoral

The Pastoral came down to the Elizabethans from the ancient Greek bucolic poet Theocritus. The Theocritan idyll was adopted by the Italian humanist and poet Baptista Spagnuoli Mantuanus (1447-1516), known in English as Mantuan, who idealized the idyllic life of the shepherd. The genre implies a contrast between the complicated and corrupt life of the city and the simplicity and joyousness of the country. This is a tradition which continued even to the Victorian times and Matthew Arnold's *Scholar Gypsy* (1853). The popular pastoral poems of the English Renaissance are Spencer's *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) and Drayton's *Idea, The Shepheards Garland* (1593). Sidney inserted eclogues in his *Arcadia*. Milton's *Lycidas*, a pastoral elegy, condenses all pastoral themes and conventions into a single poem.

1.5.4   Historical Poetry

History was one of the main subjects of Elizabethan verse. This had to do with England's recognition of its destiny as a nation and the rise of patriotic spirit after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton and Edmund Spenser wrote on historical subjects in verse. Daniel's *Civile Wars between the Two Houses of Lancaster and Yorke*, written in 8000 lines, is a typical example of the genre. The first four books of the *Civile Wars* was published in 1595 and the next four, in 1609. It gives a picture of the misfortunes of England from the reign of Richard II until the break between Warwick and Edward IV. The tale is unfinished. Similarly, Drayton wrote *The Lamentable Civil Wares of the Barrons*, England's *Heroicall Epistles*, *Matilda*, *Battaille of Agincourt* and his magnum opus *Poly-Olbion*. *Poly-Olbion* was one of the longest poems of the period, next only to *The Faerie Queene*. It is more or less like a swansong for heroic England like John of Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act II, Scene i).

1.5.5   Epic and Romance

An epic is a long narrative poem usually dealing with a serious theme such as the deeds of heroes, usually divided into several books and written in the

grand style. The Renaissance writers of England had models ranging from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* to medieval *Beowulf* and the Italian Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. But epic is a rare achievement. The only praiseworthy epic works of Renaissance England are Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Abraham Cowley's *Davideis* (1668) remains incomplete.

A Romance is a fantastic narrative that deals with the heroic deeds of a chivalrous knight-errant. It is a product of the Middle Ages but continued to have its sway in Modern Europe. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is both an epic and a romance.

1.5.6 Other Genres

Elizabethan poets also wrote satires, elegies, epigrams, allegories and religious poems. Joseph Hall (1574-1656), John Marston (1576-1634), John Donne and several minor poets wrote satires but the satirical spirit is more alive in the 'humour' plays of Ben Jonson. A genre which stood midway between between shorter forms like the lyric and the sonnet and more ambitious genres like the epic and the romance was the longer poem. Drayton's *Endimion and Phoebe* was a long love poem. We have already looked at Shakespeare's two long poems. The popularity of the allegory, another traditional genre, was not surprising since the Bible was interpreted on an allegorical basis. Morality plays made it further popular. Among the notable religious poems of the age are Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, George Herbert's *The Pilgrimage* (1633) and *A Priest to the Temple or the Country Parson* (1652) and Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* (1650).

ACTIVITY D

What were the chief genres in which Renaissance English poetry was written?

DISCUSSION

The choice of genres during the Renaissance depended on a variety of factors – the availability of prefabricated models from the Continent, the taste of the courtly audience, especially the patron, readership and the content. Sonnet and lyric were the most popular genres during the period. Pastoral and historical poetry also enjoyed vogue. The poets also wrote romances, satires, elegies, epigrams, allegories and religious poems. Achievements in the epic genre were rare.

1.6 Later Renaissance – Jacobean and Caroline Periods

Both the Elizabethan Age and the Jacobean and Caroline Periods were periods of great religious ferment. In Section 1.1.3 we looked at the

developments that followed the death of Elizabeth I. She was the last Tudor monarch, and was succeeded by the Stuart monarchs James I and Charles I. The reigns of James I and Charles I are called the Jacobean and Caroline periods respectively, after the adjectival forms of their names. The careers of many Elizabethan poets and dramatists extended into these later periods. Some of the poets, such as the later Metaphysical poets, began writing only in the Jacobean period. Among the significant literary developments of the era are Chapman's translation of the *Iliad* and the publication of the Authorized Version of the Bible, both in the year 1611. The year 1625 saw the death of James I and the following years witnessed the fading away of the influence of Spenser. Milton, however, imbibed it and kept it intact. The period saw some important religious writings such as Thomas Browne (1605-82)'s *Religio Medici* (1642). Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), known as "Shakespeare and Spenser of the pulpit," wrote *Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651). Richard Baxter (1594-1655) brought out his classic work *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650).

The middle of the seventeenth century can be classified into two parts. The first division – the division is more social rather than literary – consists of secular and royalist writers called the Cavaliers and the second, the Anglicans and the Puritans. The Cavalier poets were writers of gallant and amorous songs. They were influenced by metaphysical poets like Donne and Classicists such as Ben Jonson. The chief Cavalier poets were Thomas Carew (c.1595-1639), Sir John Suckling (1609-42), Richard Lovelace (1618-58) and John Cleveland (1613-58). Thomas Fuller (1608-61) and Izaak Walton (1593-1683) were the Anglican divines of the period.

1.6.1 The Puritan Contribution

In order to understand English Puritanism we have to go a little back in time, to the days of the Elizabethan religious settlement. The religious compromise under Elizabeth was intended to appease all except those who held extreme views, on both the Catholic and Protestant side. Several radical Protestants were disappointed with the settlement represented by the *Book of Common Prayer* (1559), which sought to steer a middle course in doctrinal matters. Many of them had been refugees on the Continent, especially in Geneva, where they came under the influence of John Calvin, who represented an extreme strain of Reformation theology. They came to be known as 'Puritans'. Originally it was a term of abuse. Puritanism began as a movement to reform the English church, to bring it more in accordance with what is taught in the English Bible. The Puritans advocated abolition of episcopacy, and emphasized the authority of the Bible and personal righteousness. They stood for greater sobriety of life and values of austerity, self-reliance and self-denial. They were obstinately intolerant of all pleasures, especially art. The Puritans attacked the stage as demonic. Malvolio in Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* is widely held to be a satirical portrait of the English puritan.

The Puritans sought to eradicate any trace of Catholicism. They served as a political pressure group in England though their demands did not meet with

much success. Nevertheless, Puritanism made some notable contributions to literature. It produced its greatest poet in John Milton (1608-74) and its greatest prose-writer in John Bunyan (1628-88). Bunyan's works include *Grace Abounding* (1666), *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678; 1684), *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680) and *The Holy War* (1682). *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegorical tale about the spiritual journey of a Christian, is a prose classic of the period.

The great works of Milton's maturity – *Paradise Lost* (1667), *Paradise Regained* (1671) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671) – were published during the first decade of the Restoration. Though High Renaissance had passed by the time Milton began his poetic career, his epic poems *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, based on the theme of the Fall and Redemption of Man drawn from the Gospels and written in the grand style, reveal the ambitious character of Renaissance poetry. *Paradise Lost* is, of course, the result of his long meditations on the Bible. However, it is not entirely a religious poem. Its conception and execution show that Milton had imbibed the achievements of all the great epic poets of the past – Homer, Virgil, Dante, Aristo and Tasso. It would be more accurate to say that Milton combines the spirit of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Milton also projects his own feelings, knowledge, ambitions and aspirations into his characters. Satan is, perhaps unconsciously, identified with his own independent spirit. The English King symbolizes God, and the courtiers, the submissive and docile angels.

Despite his anti-Episcopalian views and lofty moral purpose, John Milton was not a morose puritan. As a matter of fact, he broke with Calvinism in 1644. He was too imbued with Humanistic learning that he was more a Renaissance figure than the representative of any radical religious sect. In fact, he was the last of the Renaissance poets. You will study Milton's poetry in Units 4 and 5 of this Block.

1.7 Summing up

We began this Unit with a historical survey of the Age of Renaissance both in Europe and in England. We looked at the Renaissance and the Reformation, two great movements which ushered in the Modern period in history, and the political and socio-cultural conditions in England. We proceeded to discuss the character of Renaissance in England. Then we took up English Renaissance poetry for detailed discussion. We briefly looked at the major poets, genres and themes of this poetry. We concluded with a discussion of the later Renaissance writers, Milton in particular.

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