

A CRITICAL STUDY OF SPENSER'S
MOTHER HUBBERDS TALE

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF SPENSER'S

MOTHER HUBBERDS TALE

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It is with deep gratitude
and sincere appreciation
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PREFACE

In this thesis an attempt is made to arrive at some understanding of what an important poet was trying to do in Mother Hubberds Tale and why the poem has its peculiar form and character. This implies a historical background of the poem. All the facts of a poet's life and surroundings are useful to the student who wishes to understand his works, for the circumstances and conditions under which that work was done control the tone of the poem.

The present study brings together material concerning the poem which the author hopes will help toward a sympathetic understanding of this product of Spenser's genius. Such a study, if in any degree adequate, will give to the reader a growing appreciation of this work of art and will cause him to value it as an important document since it portrays the life of the people at the time the poem was written.

Scholars until recently have been little concerned with Mother Hubberds Tale. As the nineteenth century progressed, increasing interest developed in the poem's meaning and its qualities as literary art. In the present century this interest has grown so rapidly that there is now a considerable literature devoted to this poem. It has now reached such a proportion as to form a body of literature sufficient to form the basis of a separate study.

This thesis is an effort to bring together in a coherent whole the literature about the Mother Hubberds Tale, with some attempt here and there at independent interpretation and evaluation. The method employed, therefore, has been primarily editorial.

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CHAPTER I

DATE AND BACKGROUND

In order to appreciate fully Spenser's Mother Hubberds Tale we must understand the political and social life of England at the time the poem was written, particularly the circumstances which provoked the satire.

For this purpose we must have an understanding of the history of the poem. Since the interpretation of the poem depends on a knowledge of the persons and events alluded to by Spenser, the date of its composition is matter of importance.

The volume of Complaints was entered on the Stationers' Register, December 29, 1590, and was published two months later. This was the first time Mother Hubberds Tale appeared in printed form. We have no references, quotations, nor any signs of its influence earlier than 1591. But Mother Hubberds Tale might have circulated in manuscript without leaving a trace. That it would provoke considerable interest among those represented in the allegory is certain. But in 1591 when it appeared in the volume of Complaints, there is no indication that the volume provoked any attack. Those mentioned in the poem, therefore, had probably read and voiced their feelings about it before its publication in 1591.¹

¹ Greenlaw, Edwin, Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory, p. 115.

A few lines quoted from Harvey's Foure Letters, dated September 5, 1592, will prove to us that he considered Mother Hubberds Tale dangerous and believed it to have followed Spenser's Faerie Queene.

Invectives by favour have been too bolde,
and Satyres by usurpation too presutuous,
. . . and I must needs say, Mother Hubberds
Tale in heat of choller, forgetting the
pure sanguine of her sweete Feary Queene,
willfully over-shott her malcontented
selfe; as elsewhere I have specified at
large, with the good leave of unspotted
friendship.

Harvey's statement might be taken as evidence that the poem was written in 1591.

The only positive reason we have for dating all of Mother Hubberds Tale earlier is Spenser's statement in his dedication:

. . . these my idle labours; which have
long sithens been composed in the raw
conceit of my youth, I lately amongst
other papers lighted upon, and was by
others mooved to set them foorth. Simple
is the device, and the composition meane,
yet carrieth some delight.

Spenser may have been forced to speak lightly of the poem, because it was so dangerous. But we do know the poem in its present form has undergone revision, for the narrative is broken at line 942. At this place the Lion changes his role from chief courtier to sovereign.²

Some minor pieces of evidence deepen the impression

² Davis, B. E. C., Edmund Spenser, A Critical Study, p. 35.

that Mother Hubberds Tale was completed in the year 1579. In the first part we have reference to a plague that was prevalent in England and France in the year 1579.

Corrupted had the ayre with his noysome breath,
And powdered on the earth plague pestilence
and death.³

Another piece of evidence is that the entire poem reflects the hatred of the French gallantry and intrigues especially characteristic of these years. Direct evidence is given us by the reference to Leicester's marriage.

But his late chayne his
Leige unmeete esteemeth.⁴

As the Queen did not know of this marriage until midsummer of 1579, the latter half of the poem was not written before August of that year. On the other hand the allusion loses its force if it was not written practically at the time when the court was excited over Leicester's marriage.

Now the poem falls into two parts: the first being primarily a satire on ecclesiastical conditions; the second a satire on the court. The latter again falls into two divisions; the first describing the Fox and Ape at court with its contrast of the true and false courtiers and its berating of Burleigh; the second the assumption of the lion's power by the Fox and Ape, with their discomfiture when the Lion awakes. There seems every reason to believe

³ 11., 7-8.

⁴ 1., 628.

the last episode is a warning against an alliance between Elizabeth and the Duc D'Alencon.

The Duc D'Alencon, a Frenchman, was one of the Queen's suitors. Simier, the Duke's Master of Wardrobe, has apparently entranced the Queen, who was abandoning herself to a frivolous mood which was worrying all England.

Greenlaw summarizes these conditions very forcibly:

These, then are the conditions in this strange year 1579-80. The Queen, madly infatuated with her "ape" and her "frog," adept in love-making and compliment mongering, is in danger of letting her affections run away with her judgment. Burghley is thought by court and country to favor the match, while Leicester, madly jealous, yet fearful, blows hot and cold. But Leicester is the leader of the Puritan Party, and the Puritans are panic-stricken at the danger. All the old hatred of the French "Monsieur's Youths" blazes out; contempt for their effeminate gallantry, for their subtlety, for their skill in making love. But Elizabeth, strange compound of statecraft, cunning, and mere woman, is happy. She adds the ape and frog to the "number of her beasts" and they carry the affectation much farther. The court circle is made up of lions, apes, frogs, partridges, dromedaries, and all the rest of Aesop.⁶

The situation at court was complicated by the proposed marriage between the Duke of Alencon and the Queen.

Leicester opposed this marriage, partly because of self-interest and partly because of his rivalry with Burghley, one of its supposed supporters. A few weeks earlier Simier, Alencon's Master of Robes, had told the Queen of Leicester's secret marriage with the Countess of Essex.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 114-115.

The result was that Leicester was very much out of favour with the Queen, who threatened him with imprisonment. In January 1579-80 his nephew, Philip Sidney, caused more trouble by protesting against the Alencon match in a letter to the Queen. This caused him to be banished from the court.

Spenser was aware of this grave political situation since he was secretary to Leicester at the time of the crisis. What was more natural than that the young poet, anxious to secure the further favor of his patron, should employ his choice satire to deride his enemies?

Taking these events into account and remembering that it was in the summer that the Queen learned of Leicester's marriage, one is forced to conclude that the latter half of the poem was written between August 1 and October 13, 1579.

The first part of the poem could have been written at any time between the summer of 1577 and the summer of 1579. But is it not altogether likely that, just as the satire on court life is written from first hand observation, the satire on ecclesiastical conditions is written from like observation, and is the outcome of Spenser's intimate contact with them? While he had heard at Cambridge much discussion of these evils, as a bishop's secretary he met them in the concrete. The most likely date, then, for the first part of the poem, is 1578 or 1579, when Spenser was

secretary to Young or shortly after he had left office.⁷

Perhaps the middle of the poem, with its transition from church to state, actually marks the change of secretaryship from Bishop Young to Leicester.

⁷ Padelford, F. M., "Date of Mother Hubberds Tale,"
Modern Philology, XI (1913) pp. 100-102.

CHAPTER II

PURPOSE

In order to understand Spenser's purpose in writing this satire, we must know that for many years it has been a matter of common knowledge that Mother Hubberds Tale consists of two poems joined together.¹ In the first part a fox and ape setting out upon their travels assume various guises. First, they are a pair of beggars, then a herdsman and his dog, then a priest and his clerk, and finally two courtiers, who, at the end of this part, are expelled from court. In the second part, the ape, under the guidance of the fox, steals the crown from the sleeping Lion, and together the usurpers rule the country until Jupiter sends Mercury to rouse the Lion.

In addition to the fact that the poem tells two different stories, there are enough differences between the parts to show that the second is an afterthought. In the first part the satire is general and aimed at general conditions in England; in the second part it is specific, and directed at a particular political situation. In the first, the Lion, who is mentioned only incidentally, is feminine and obviously Elizabeth; in the second, the Lion is masculine and a leading character. In the first part, the Fox

¹ Greenlaw, op. cit. p. 122.

and Ape associate with men, except for their meeting with the mule; in the second, all the characters are animals. Finally in the first part the two villains are equally important, whereas in the second the Fox is the leading character.²

In the light of these considerations, it is perfectly natural that there is a general agreement that Spenser wrote a general beast-fable satire and then later added a specific personal satire, without making a formal division between the parts.

The personal-political satire is the more interesting of the two, and requires much more detailed consideration. Spenser's purpose in writing this part appears from one of his personal letters to Harvey. He asserted that he sought no "mere gaine or commoditie." His was that "noble ambition which sees personal success and the public weal in one brave adventure."³ Spenser saw an opportunity to help Leicester and at the same time to gain added favour for himself. Spenser's defense of his patron, in Mother Hubberds Tale, did not extend beyond a passing reference to Leicester's marriage and a beautiful eulogy on the brave courtier. All his main efforts were directed toward Leicester's opponents with Burghley as chief target for

² Stein, Harold, Studies in Spenser's Complaints, p. 34.

³ Cory, Herbert E., Edmund Spenser, A Critical Study, p. 197

attack. He represented the Fox, or Burghley, as the foe of learning, arch deceiver, and conspirator against the common-wealth, and as backed by the Ape.⁴

The poem is not an expression of petty anger, as critics so frequently have said, because Burghley delayed the payment of the poet's pension. Greenlaw has stated the case very forcibly:

We have seen the Queen in the winter of 1579-80. was blind to what the Puritans regarded as a national peril, being completely infatuated with her dissolute and effeminate admirers. We have seen that there was a wide-spread fiction making the courtiers animals and the court an assembly of beasts--a beast-fable in application, appealing to the Elizabethan fondness for such allegories. With all this Spenser was familiar at first hand. He was in the service of Leicester, and at the very time of the crisis, in early October, was expecting to be sent on a mission for him. His patron, therefore, who had everything to lose by this marriage, since Burghley and not Leicester would rule the French favorites, should be warned of the danger; perhaps the Queen herself should be warned. So Spenser takes his imitation of Chaucer, written perhaps not long before, applies the beast-allegory to the crisis among Elizabeth's beasts, and with a daring not less great than Sidney's own, speaks his mind. Here we have reason for the traditional enmity of Burghley; we have also reason for Spenser's being shipped to Ireland the following summer; we have the grounds on which the poem was called in. Spenser was ambitious to succeed as Sidney was succeeding; his literary talents were to be a means for advancing him in the service of the powerful earl; at the same time he spoke sincerely the astonishment and terror of Englishmen at the imminence of the monstrous foreign alliance, to the dangers of which the Queen seemed through her passion utterly blind.⁵

⁴ Davis, op. cit., p. 34.

⁵ Greenlaw, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

Had Spenser been merely an insincere office-seeker, he would have chosen Burghley rather than Leicester as a patron. But the treasurer's foxlike ways seemed to be repulsive to him, and he was as blind to his merits and virtues as to Leicester's mistakes and vices. Perhaps Spenser's purpose was less pure than the frankness of Sidney's letter, which was written to the Queen advising against the French marriage, but even if he did play for high stakes and lose, the whole episode has a ring of conviction that gives us proof of his sincerity. It portrays one of the beautiful traits of Spenser's character, "a constancy to his friends; to their persons when alive, to their memory when dead."⁶

We can, therefore, conclude the discussion on Spenser's purpose in writing his satire by saying that originally he may have intended little more than a general satire, moralizing, as many others did during the period, on the world's vanities and on recent evidence of change and decay. He may have intended little more than a general satire on the idle soldiery, the simple common people, the clergy, and the court. But the poem in its finished form is clearly Spenser's attempt to point out the danger which threatened the Queen and his friends.

⁶ Whipple, E. P., The Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, p. 199.

CHAPTER III

EXPOSITION

Mother Hubberds Tale, which is probably the masterpiece of the volume of Complaints, is a fierce satire against the court and church which fell far short of what the visionary poet thought the court and church of England should be. It is full of different moods in which Spenser brings forth his favorite doctrine of the golden mean, applying it to various relations and activities of life.

The career of the Ape and Fox is a journey through three estates to the crown. They begin as common people, rise from this class to the clergy, and from the clergy to the court, where they mix among the nobility; in the end they climax their villainies by stealing the royal crown and making themselves king and prime minister. Thus for a time, they maintain a rule of oppression and injustice, supported by

. . . a warlike equipage
Of forreine beasts, not in the forest bred,
But part by land and part by water fed.¹

until Jove sends his son to awaken the rightful sovereign.

The poem may be divided as follows:

I

A number of people meet with a friend convalescing from an attack of the plague to entertain him by telling

¹ Lines 1108-1109.

stories; the most amusing story is told by Mother Hubbard. (Ll. 1-44)

II

The story is of the Fox and Ape, who begin their career, as common levellers, by complaining of the unfairness in class distinction and the division of property. (Ll. 45-194)

III

They disguise themselves as soldiers and become common laborers by caring for the husbandman's sheep. (Ll. 195-352)

IV

The imposters fall lower by becoming ecclesiastical parasites. In these lines Spenser gives us a subtle portrait of the priest and a vivid description of the corruption of the clergy. (Ll. 353-580)

V

The Fox and Ape meet with a representative from court and learn how to become courtiers. (Ll. 581-914)

VI

The two imposters usurp the throne and maintain a rule of oppression and injustice supported by foreign beasts. (Ll. 915-1224)

VII

Jove intervenes by sending his son to awaken the king. The Lion rushes to court, tries the Fox, but lets him go free, and orders that the Ape's tail and ears be clipped.

(Ll. 1225-1388)

A more detailed exposition reveals the specific attacks Spenser made. The Fox and Ape in the beginning of the story are discussing how they may better their fortunes. They are complaining of the unfairness found in the different fortunes of life.

Heare than my paine and inward agonie,
cries the Fox to the Ape.

Thus manie yeares I now have spent and worne,
In meane regard, and basest fortune scorne,
Dooing my countrey service as I might,
No lesse I dare sail than the prowdest wight;
And still I hope to be up advanced.²

The Ape is made to reply in homely idiom and subtle self-pity.

Deeply doo your sad words my wits awhape,
Both for because your griefe doth great appeare,
And eke because my selfe am touched neare;
For I likewise have wasted much good time,
Still wayting to preferment up to clime,
Whilest others alwayes have before me stept,
And from my beard the fat away have swept.³

There were two forces of disorder in the Middle Ages, the petty princeling, who tyrannized and oppressed all, and the leveller, who wished to do away with the distinction of class and with property, winning his way by sophistry. Spenser was at odds with those pseudo-socialists who demand redistribution with no real thought of community,

² Ll. 58-63.

³ Ll. 72-78.

but with hypocritical selfishness.⁴

Let us our fathers heritage divide,
And chabenge to our-selves our portions dew
Of all the patrimonie, which a few
Now hold in hugger mugger in their hand,
And all the rest doo rob of good and land.⁵

The Fox in his further reasoning gives us the doctrine of equality in nature.

For now a few have all, and all have nought.
Yet all be brethren ylike dearly bought.
There is no right in this partition,
Ne was it so by institution
Ordained first, ne by the law of nature,
But that she gave like blessing to each creture,
As well of worldly livelode as of life,
That there might be no difference nor strife
Nor ought cold mine or thine; thrice happie then
Was the condition of mortall men.⁶

The logical outcome of such doctrine in the eyes of a sixteenth century politician is mob law, condemned as a monster of many heads without reason. Even Shakespeare with his attitude of impartiality expresses his contempt for the multitude. We can hardly expect more tolerance from Spenser who was of the conservative type.⁷

The Ape and Fox, disguised as a soldier and his dog, meet a simple husbandman, of whom they obtain employment by caring for the sheep. In their robbery of the sheep we have a vestige of Spenser's original satirical purpose. Spenser gives us a glimpse of the treatment which the

⁴ Cory, op. cit. p. 200.

⁵ Ll. 136-140.

⁶ Ll. 141-150.

⁷ Davis, op. cit., p. 75.

common people might expect if Burghley and the French gallants should get control of the government.

The Fox and Ape are forced to flee when the husband-man (common people) demands a yearly account. They become ecclesiastical parasites, members of a profession which Spenser says, with a satirical allusion to the Anglican church, is

Much like to begging, but much better named;
For manie beg, which are thereof ashamed.⁸

The Ape and Fox soon meet with a priest, representing the church. Spenser then gives us a picture of the ignorance of the clergy, but later apologizes for this ignorance.

Of such deep learning little had he neede,
Ne yet of Latine, ne of Greeke, that breede
Doubts mongst divines, and differences of texts,
From whence arise diversitie of sects,
And hatefull heresies, of God abhor'd,
But this good Sir did follow the plaine word.⁹

At last the Fox wins the priest, who is very proud, by flattering him. In the advice which the priest gives at length we have, under the guise of idealism, an Elizabethan idea that the present is the best of all possible ages.¹⁰ But under the guise of this idealism we find two of the seven deadly sins, sloth and gluttony. There is, the priest says, no need to worry. We cannot feed men's souls. They must feed themselves, for we can but lay the

⁸ Ll. 351-352.

⁹ Ll. 385-390.

¹⁰ Cory, op. cit., p. 201.

meat before them. Christ, the Shepherd, is expected to do the rest.

To feed mens soules, and hath an heavie threat'.
 To feede mens soules,' quoth he, 'is not in man',
 For they must feed themselves, do what we can.
 We are but charged to lay the meate before:
 Eate they that list, we need to doo no more.
 But God it is that feedes them with his grace,
 The bread of life powr'd doune from heavenly
 place ll

The last two lines just quoted is a Biblical echo which makes the priest's argument more persuasive. These lines are similar to:

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life;
 he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he
 that believeth on me shall never thirst.
 (John 6:35)

Spenser reveals in the lines that follow the deadly sin of sloth. The priest says all the needless work of singing and going to mass is done away with; that going to church once a week is sufficient; that after people do this, they are free to follow any notion. This echoes Elizabeth's belief that the reading of the homilies to the people was enough.¹² In the following lines describing the "formal priest," Spenser feels the poetical impressiveness of the old ceremonies, filled with pomp and beauty.

By the time the priest ends his sermon the Fox has decided to become a priest and the Ape his parish clerk. They immediately inquire the easiest way to succeed. The

¹¹ Ll. 432-437.

¹² Cory, op. cit., p. 202.

priest now gives advice in masterly satire on how to succeed not only in the church but also at court.

For there thou needs must learne to laugh, to lie,
To face, to forge, to scoffe, to companie.
To crouche, to please, to be a beetle stock
Of thy great masters will, to scorne, or mock.¹³

The Fox and Ape fare well in their new guise, but are so zealous in carrying out the work as the priest advised that they are soon forced to flee once more. For a short time they wander in poverty, lamenting and mourning, until by chance they meet a representative of court.

The mule, all deckt in goodly rich array,
With bells and bosses, that full lowdly rung,
And costly trappings, that to ground downe hung.
Lowly they him saluted in meeke wise;
But he through pride and fatnes gan despise
Their meanesse; scarce vouchsafte them to requite¹⁴

The Mule condescends to give them news and advice. In an obscure and evidently a revised passage we get the allusion to Leicester's marriage which caused Elizabeth to become infuriated.

But his late chayne his Leige unmeete esteemeth;
For so brave beasts she loveth best to see
In the wilde forrest raunging fresh and free.¹⁵

The satire now grows more keen and more direct in its thrust at Burghley and the corruption of the court. The Mule informs them that the best way to gain entrance to the

¹³ Ll. 505-509.

¹⁴ Ll. 582-587.

¹⁵ Ll. 628-630.

court is to have a good bold face and to use big words. The Ape clothes himself as a gentleman, and the Fox as his groom. With the following qualities the Ape completely entrances the court.

For he could play, and daunce and vaute, and spring,
And all that els pertaines to reveling,
Onely through aptness of his joynts.
Besides he could doo manie other poynts,
The which in court him served to good stead:
For he mongst ladies could their fortunes read
Out of their hands and merie leasings tell;
And juggle finely, that became him well¹⁶

Spenser, by contrast, now launches into the more congenial task of portraying the perfect courtier, the ideal gentleman as the poet sees him in service to a noble prince. Among other things this courtly gentleman

. . . will not creepe, nor crouche with fained
face,
But walkes upright with comely stedfast pace,
And unto all doth yeeld due curtesie;
But not with kissed hand belowe the knee,
As that same apish crue is wont to doo;
For he disdaines himselfe t'embase there-too.
He hates fowle leasings, and vile flatterie,
Two filthie blots in noble gentrie;
And lothefull idleness he doth detest,
The canker worme of everie gentle brest¹⁷

He devises daily exercise, refreshes himself with music and with quietness, withdraws himself into the muses, "delight of life and ornaments of light." All his mind is fixed on honor. He spends his days in his prince's service, in order to win a worthy place, "through due deserts and comely

¹⁶ Ll. 693-700.

¹⁷ Ll. 799-805.

carriage." Here we have Spenser's idea of a perfect gentleman and a beautiful portrait of his friend Philip Sidney. We now have in striking contrast the picture of the Ape, whose manners are copied from all the corruptions of Italy in the heyday of the Italian Renaissance.

A thousand wayes he them could entertaine,
 With all the thriftles game that may be found;
 With mumming and with masking all around,
 With dice, with cards, with billiards farre unfit,
 With shuttlecocks, misseeming manlie wit,
 With courtizans, and costly riotize
 Whereof still somewhat to his share did rise¹⁸

While the Ape is beguiling the court with his pretense, the Fox is very busily engaged in all kinds of business activities. He seems to be well schooled in the art of trickery and is fast advancing himself at the expense of others. One of his chief occupations is his beguiling of suitors, which gives us Spenser's famous passage on suitor's delay.

Full little knowest thou that hast not tride
 What hell it is, in suing long to bide;
 To loose good dayes, that might be better spent;
 To wast long nights in pensive discontent;
 To speed today, to be put back tomorrow;
 To feed on hope, to pine with feare and sorrow;
 To have thy Princes grace yet want her peeres;
 To have thy asking, yet waite manie yeeres;
 To fret thy soule with crosses and with cares;
 To eate they heart through comfortlesse despairres;
 To fawne, to crowche, to waite, to ride, to ronne,
 To spend, to give, to want, to be undonne,
 Unhappie wight, borne to desastrous end,
 That doth his life in so long tendance spend!
 Who ever leaves sweete home, where meane estate
 In safe assurance, without strife or hate,

Findes all things needful for contentment meeke,
 And will to court, for shadowes vaine to seeke,
 Or hope to gaine, himselfe will a daw trie:
 That curse God send unto mineemie!¹⁹

This is one of the passages that Spenser probably retouched after his failure to become a great courtier.

Then we come to the final episode. The Fox's trickery is discovered and the Ape and Fox are compelled to leave the court. In this episode we are told that, after long wandering, the two conspirators come to a forest where the Lion lies sleeping, his crown and his sceptre beside him. The Ape is afraid and turns to flee, but the Fox gives him encouragement.

Scarce could the Ape yet speake, so did he quake.²⁰ He finally goes on tiptoe, filled with ambition, and steals the crown, sceptre, and lion skin. The Fox agrees that the Ape shall be king, "upon condition that ye ruled bee in all affairs and counselled by mee." They then proceed to court, where the Fox becomes a Machiavelian prince. The Ape protects himself by a "warlike equipage of forreine beasts." Professor Greenlaw interprets the last statement as meaning that the Ape surrounds himself with Frenchmen, foreign beasts, while he and the Fox plunder the country, despoil the rightful sovereign and native beasts.

Jove, at last, looking down on this reign of terror, sends Mercury to arouse the Lion. The winged messenger,

¹⁹ Ll. 895-914.

who may well represent Spenser, exhorts the Lion to arise and avenge his wrongs. The royal beast then shatters the palace gates and restores justice. But, with contempt, he punishes the rogues only by cropping the tail and ears of the Ape, and banishing both.

CHAPTER IV

INTERPRETATION

In order to interpret correctly the allegorical allusions found in Mother Hubberds Tale, we must be able to see that the tale consists of two distinct elements. The first story is a general satire on court life, such as we frequently find in sixteenth century literature in England and on the continent. The theme is a familiar theme of the Renard Stories.¹ The story reflects Renaissance life, as in the contrast between the noble courtier and the base, and the satire on suitor's delay. In the second part the allegory becomes more pointed and concerns specific individuals and events. The court, made up of beasts, is Elizabeth's court. The general satire on the life of the people is replaced by personal attacks.²

Almost all critics agree on the identification of the Fox as Burghley in the second phase of the poem, since no other prominent Elizabethan can be proposed as the one man who has the same characteristics as the Fox.

The character and policy of the Fox are given in the lines 1137 to 1204. This passage is summarized by Professor Stein as follows:

The Fox was cunning and grasping; all business

¹ Greenlaw, op. cit., p. 118.

² Ibid. p. 119.

passed through his hand; he sold justice; he loaded down his children with offices; he altered laws, giving as excuses his long experience; he put off measures on grounds of economy; he caused the decay of the nobility; he kept down men of arms and men of learning; he cared least of all for the common people; he allowed no one to have access to the prince but through him; and he turned all these things to his profit.³

These characteristics are not individually unusual, but it is significant that practically every one was charged against Burghley. One source for knowledge of these charges against Burghley is the correspondence now preserved in the Public Record Office, carried on by him and his spy Hirilli in the year 1585.

It is also worth noting that the Catholics and Protestants were able to agree on many things in their common hatred of Burghley, and when the volume of Complaints was published Burghley was very unpopular.⁴

We know from the history of the period that Burghley was a very powerful person and was the one person to whom the people had to appeal when they wished to get anything done at court; we also know that he thought very little of poets and soldiers and his policy was that of prudence and secrecy. Therefore, Burghley fits perfectly the picture of the Fox in Mother Hubberds Tale.⁵

³ Stein, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴ Greenlaw, Edwin, "Spenser and the Earl of Leicester," P M L A XXV (1910). 545 ff.

⁵ Stein, op. cit., p. 91.

As to the identification of the other two leading characters of the allegory there is some disagreement, but most present day critics accept Professor Greenlaw's theory that the Ape in the second part of the poem is Simier plus Alencon, and the Lion, Elizabeth. Professor Greenlaw states that the Lion in the first episode is a brave courtier, but does not definitely state who the Ape is. He brings out the thought that the Ape is bold and confident in the first episode, but in the second weak and cowardly, completely in the control of the Fox.⁶

Although he agrees with Greenlaw regarding the identification of the characters in the first part, Professor Stein gives us an interpretation at variance with Greenlaw's as to who the Lion and Ape are in the last part of the poem. He identifies the Ape as James of Scotland. He states that the only political alliance toward the end of Burghley's life was with James. He shows that the question of who would be the successor of Elizabeth was never forgotten from the time she took the throne until her death. The Queen never allowed this question to be discussed openly, but by 1590 the most likely person to become her successor was James VI. Elizabeth would not declare him her heir, but had promised not to support the claim of any other candidate. James, therefore, waiting patiently her death,

⁶ Greenlaw, op. cit., p. 552.

had nothing to do but to win over her advisers. Professor Stein goes on to say that in the year 1590 James and Burghley were officially friendly and that Burghley favored James's candidacy. He continues by saying James's reputation in England was in accord with the character of the Ape; that in the minds of the people, if not in fact, James was cruel, cowardly, and ambitious. He concludes his discussion on the Ape by saying that the poem is primarily an attack on Burghley and secondarily on James.

In discussing the interpretation of the Lion in the latter part of the poem, Mr. Stein brings out the thought that the Lion cannot be Elizabeth because of the language used in addressing her; that the Lion would seem rather to be England or the English people. He closes by saying the poem is an appeal to England to reject James, dominated by Burghley.⁷

Of the two discussions on the identity of the Ape in the poem, it seems to me that Professor Greenlaw's interpretation is more probable. When we consider the French intrigue as the one incident that was completely dominating the minds of the people at the time the poem was probably written, we cannot help thinking that the character represents Simier or Simier plus Alencon.

Professor Stein's interpretation of the Lion seems to

⁷ Stein, op. cit., p. 92.

me to be very reasonable. It does not seem plausible that Spenser, who was always so ready to flatter the Queen with flowery language, would come out with such boldness in speaking to the Lion if he meant the character to be Elizabeth.

It seems that the poem should be interpreted as a true picture of the world's vanities as shown by the hypocrisy and intrigues at the court. It also pictures the church of England during the sixteenth century with its religious abuses. Spenser's ecclesiastical eclogues in this poem are a warning to the evangelical wing of the church against the twofold danger of a reestablishment of Roman Catholicism and of the continuance in the national church of practices akin to it. The political allegory is a warning to the people of England of the danger of a foreign alliance with the French.

CHAPTER V

QUALITIES OF THE POEM

However interesting may be the allegory of Mother Hubberds Tale, we find a greater interest in its easy style, and in the fact that it is Spenser's best imitation of Chaucer. He uses Chaucer's narrative style, easy and natural, in giving his descriptions of the speech, dress and behavior among the several grades of society; and by his penetrating satire he shows us that he fully understands the life he describes. He tries to reproduce, as far as possible, Chaucer's method of versification and revives Chaucer's heroic couplet. This probably accounts for different passages in the poem that show an irregularity in meter. Examples of these are seen in the following quotations:

But this I wot withall, that we shall ronne
Into great danger, like to be undonne,
Thus wildly to wander in the worlds eye,
Without pasport or good warrantie.¹

His breeches were made after the new cut,
Al portugese, loose like an emptie gut;
And his hose broken high above the heeling,
And his shooes beaten out with traveling.²

In a writer whose natural melody is almost perfect in its smoothness and sweetness, such a deviation from his usual practice could not be due to accident. It was the result

¹ Ll. 183-187.

² Ll. 211-214.

of design. It was adopted for no other reason than that Chaucer was believed to have furnished the example of this sort of ruggedness. Because of their failure to pronounce the final e, the disciples of Chaucer conceded that his verse had a certain amount of rugged irregularity.³

Not only does Spenser copy Chaucer's meter and language, but he has also caught successfully the Chaucerian spirit. The description of the formal priest, who could not read or write, as well as the sermon that follows, with its excuse for the neglect of the pastor's duties, is in the best vein of Chaucerian irony. Like Chaucer he makes his morals clear, tells his stories vividly, and uses in places real humor. The following will give us an idea of Spenser's use of humor to enliven his style.

But tidings there is none, I you assure,
Save that which common is, and knowne to all,
That courtiers as the tide doo rise and fall.⁴

But he so light was at legier demaine,
That what he toucht, came not to light againe.⁵

Be you the soldier, for you likest are
For manly semblance and small skill in warre.⁶

Spenser's style, though chiefly in the lower key of prose, rises here and there to a pitch of eloquence that has the energy and ardour of great poetry. The tale shows

³

Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer, III, 57.

⁴

Ll. 612-614.

⁵

Ll. 701-702.

⁶

Ll. 199-200.

that it is a fuller growth of what is already apparent in the Calender. Mother Hubberds Tale represents the middle age of Spenser's genius if not of his life. He has reached the stage in his mental and poetical progress when his power of force is at its highest, but the higher sense of the beautiful he has not developed. The force of the poem is clearly seen in the description of the brave and honourable courtier and the still more famous passage in which the miserable state of a suitor for court favors is portrayed with bitterness of expression. The tone of the passage on suitor's delay is so earnest and passionate that we cannot help thinking it describes the wrongs and humiliations that Spenser had undergone. The abrupt flaming outburst of the last line of the passage has a mere tinge of personal feeling. But the thrust is not from the depths. Spenser, who was an idealist, did not complain; he hated not men but the vices of men.⁷

Another characteristic of this poem is Spenser's use of epigrams and balanced phrases which, in spite of the diffuseness of the age, the poets valued and cultivated.⁸

To speed today--to be put back tomorrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow.⁹

⁷ Cory, op. cit., p. 209

⁸ Jones, H. S. V., A Spenser Handbook, p. 104.

⁹ Ll. 898-899.

Justice he solde, injustice for to buy.¹⁰

And yet (God wote) small oddes I often see
Twix them that aske, and them that asked bee.¹¹

Although Mother Hubberds Tale is based on Renardic material, Spenser is able to choose only the material he wishes to use, and molds it into the style he desires. Professor Dodge has summarized this thought for us in the following words:

The satire is mainly concentrated, to be sure, upon life at the court and the intrigues of those in power, topics of direct personal concern to Spenser, yet the poem as a whole does survey, however imperfectly and insymmetrically, some of the main conditions of life in the nation at large. In this it harks back unmistakeably to Piers Plowman. Though the satire scope is of Langland, however, there is much in the style to suggest the vein of Chaucer, and the dramatis personae and stage setting are those of Reynard the Fox. The combination results at times in curious contrasts. In their first sojourn at court, the Fox and the Ape are among lords and ladies, suitors, a world of men, from the midst of which emerges the figure of the brave courtier; in their second sojourn there the world is suddenly transformed; for lords and ladies, suitors, men we have the animals of Caxton's book, the wolf, the sheep, the ass, and their like; it is the court of King Lion. Yet so spontaneous and creative are the acts of the poet's imagination that at no point in the long range of this satire are we checked by the sense of incongruity. The strange succession of scenes and figures, all admirably alive, the variety of artistic effects, ranging from grotesqueness to romantic beauty, the sudden eruptions of strong personal feeling from the levels of cool satire, the fluctuations of the style from crudity to masterliness, produce, in a small way, the sense of a world almost as

¹⁰ L. 1147.

¹¹ Ll. 373-374.

real as that of the Faerie Queene. This is medieval satire at its best. Nothing shows better the independence of his artistic eclecticism, his gift for taking here and there, and everywhere whatever appeals to his imagination, than the mediaevalism of this his own satire.¹²

Spenser is strong in the abundant learning of his day. He mixes past with present and with his knowledge of Renaissance life brings in his knowledge of classical myth. In accord with classical tradition, Jove is "father of gods." He is the god of political justice and the god of kings as well as king of the gods. This conception appears clearly in Mother Hubberds Tale.

Now when high Jove, in whose almightie hand
The care of kings and power of empires stand,
Sitting one day within his turret hye,
From whence he vewes with his black-lided eye,
Whatso the heaven in his wide vawte containes,
And all that in the deepest earth remaines.¹³

This passage can be compared to a passage found in Virgil's Aeneid.

But now an end of all there was, when Jove
a-looking down
From highest lift on sail-skimmed sea, and
lands that round it lie,
And shores and many folk about, in topmost
burg of sky
Stood still, and fixed the eye of God on
Libya's realm at last.¹⁴

We also have other lines in the poem that show Spenser's knowledge of Greek literature.

His minde unto the muses he withdrawes;

¹² Dodge, R. E. N., Cambridge Edition of Spenser

¹³ Ll. 1225-1230.

¹⁴ Virgil's Aeneid, Bk. I. Ll., 224-28, trans. by Morris.

Sweet Ladie muses, laides of delight,
Delights of life and ornaments of light.¹⁵

Compare the foregoing with:

But me may the Muses, sweet above all things
else, whose sacred symbols I bear, smitten
with violent love, first receive into favor;
and show me the path of heaven, and constel-
lation; the various eclipses of the sun, and
labors of the moon; whence the trembling of
the earth.¹⁶

If we compare this satire with the satires of Dryden and Pope, it would probably be considered rough, but it contains the same keenness of touch and breath of treatment found in the works of these masters of heroic couplet. The language is plain and well suited to clear and forcible narrative, and Spenser's use of the heroic couplet has all the ease of mastery. The poem contains shrewd comments and observations. His comments on Renaissance life show a humorous knowledge of both animals and human beings. With his moralizing tone he makes it clear to us that he is not ignorant of or indifferent to the ordinary objects of human ambitions.

Some parts of the poem are better than other parts. The insertion about Mercury is poor, a blemish on the story; the actual end, on the other hand - the Lion's coming to his house, the Ape's running about the palace in fear, and

¹⁵ Ll. 760-762.

¹⁶ Vergil's Georgics II, Ll. 475-478, translated by Davidson.

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the final judgment is amazingly swift and good.

Technically there is another blemish on the story in the mixture of allegories. At one time the Ape and Fox lord it over the other beasts; at other times they mingle with actual men, as at the court or in the church. At some places we have a complete allegory, much more commonly a partial one. But the production is genuine; it speaks of what Spenser knows without exaggeration; the bitterness is not very bitter, rather sour with a sourness experience has produced. After reading Mother Hubberds Tale we see that Spenser was a very wise man, exercised in every field of thought, and rich in knowledge of mankind, the proper study of man.

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

I

The date of the first part of the poem is 1578 or 1579, in which years Spenser was secretary to Bishop Young. The second part of the poem was written between August 1 and October 13, 1579.

II

The revised part of the poem reflects the hatred of the French gallantry and intrigue characteristic of the year 1579.

III

Spenser first wrote a general beast-fable satire then later added a specific personal satire.

IV

The last part of the poem was not based on petty anger, but was written as a warning to the Queen and Spenser's friends.

V

Almost all critics agree on the identification of Burghley as the Fox in Mother Hubberds Tale.

VI

The Ape is Simier or Simier plus Alencon. The Lion in the first episode is Queen Elizabeth and in the second episode England.

VII

The first part of the poem is a satire on ecclesiastical conditions; the second part is a satire on the Elizabethan court.

VIII

Spenser's comments on Renaissance life show a humorous knowledge of both animals and human beings. He makes it clear to us that he is not ignorant of or indifferent to the ordinary objects of human ambitions.

IX

Mother Hubberds Tale is Spenser's best imitation of Chaucer.

X

Spenser shows us in this satire that he has not only a knowledge of the age in which he lives, but also a knowledge of the past.

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