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ERECTED WIT AND INFECTED WILL: THE CRITICAL
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ERECTED WIT AND INFECTED WILL:
THE CRITICAL MILIEU OF SPENSER'S SHEPHEARDES CALENDER

by

Bernard James Fleming

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of Spenser's Shepheardes Calender.

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Introduction
Vision and Mode
in the
Shepheardes Calender

PREVIEW

In the "Dedicatory Epistle" to the Shepheardes Calender, E. K. establishes a critical methodology for evaluating Spenser's poem based on the aesthetic precepts of the Renaissance. He begins with the observation that Lydgate called Chaucer "the Loadestarre of our Language" because of his "wonderfule skill in making."¹ In his gloss to "April" (1.19), E. K.'s definition of "to make" is "to rime and versifye. For in this word making, our olde Englishe Poetes were wont to comprehend all the skill of Poetrye, according to the Greeke woorde..., to make, whence commeth the name of Poets." The purpose of this study is to examine the Shepheardes Calender in terms of the critical concepts implied in the word "making" which collectively constitute the mode of the poem and to demonstrate that an understanding of Spenser's use of mode in the Shepheardes Calender is necessary for an understanding of his poetic vision of man and his world.

Early in the "Dedicatory Epistle" E. K. refers to Spenser as the "new Poete" (p. 7), and he is careful to express this in relationship with Spenser's observance of the most important critical principles. The sources for these principles are eclectic, but synthesis of various ideas was an accepted and necessary aspect of Renaissance aesthetics. Although Spenser left no critical treatise which would definitely indicate where he derived his aesthetic principles, the aesthetic principles he demonstrates in the Calender are indicative of his conception of art, and his conception of art, as we will see,

is inseparable from his vision of man and his world.

The two major classical works which influenced Renaissance poetic theory were the Ars Poetica of Horace and The Poetics of Aristotle. Horace was a well established figure in artistic theory at the beginning of the Renaissance; Aristotle, however, was a new element which entered the literary stream primarily through sixteenth-century Italian criticism.² It is not likely that Spenser knew the Poetics first-hand, but it is certain that if he knew anything about the most important literary questions of his day (and it is self-evident that he did), then he must have known of the Italian interpretations of Aristotle and recognized various concepts as specifically Aristotelian. Whatever was new and important in aesthetic theory came to England from Italy, and the Italian biases in literary theory were "as applicable to English as to Italian art."³ It is important, however, to note that the Italian commentators did "interpret" Aristotle and that they tended to shape and mold his theories so that they would suit Renaissance notions of what art should be. Those notions were largely based on Horace. It is appropriate then to refer to Horace and Aristotle as sources for the classical aesthetic principles of mode manifested in the Calender; it is also appropriate to refer to a Fusion of Horatian and Aristotelian Literary Criticism during the period, as Marvin T. Herrick has demonstrated.⁴

Because of their prominent position in English Renaissance aesthetics, Sidney and Puttenham will serve in this study as

primary indicators of Renaissance trends in literary theory. Sidney particularly demonstrates extensive knowledge of Italian literary theory, and his sympathies lie with the Aristotelian precepts expounded by these critics.⁵ It is less clear what Puttenham's sources were, but if his Arte of English Poesie, as Gladys Willcock says, "represented the publica materies of its age,"⁶ then it is safe to assume that Puttenham, like Sidney, was aware of the Italian critics. Sidney and Puttenham express theories of poetry which are, in the main, similar and complementary. Our major interest in these theories lies in Spenser's application of them. Thus after identifying the major artistic principles derived from Horace and Aristotle and expressed by Sidney and Puttenham I will examine the ways in which Spenser's Shepheardes Calender illustrates these principles.

Puttenham, like E. K., begins his Arte with a discussion of making: "a Poet may in some sort be said a follower or imitator, because he can expresse the true and liuely of euery thing is set before him, and which he taketh in hand to describe: and so in that respect is both a maker and a counterfaior: and Poesie an art not only of making, but also of imitation."⁷ Puttenham explicitly connects the concept of making with the concept of imitation or mimesis, and this connection is also implicit in all of E. K.'s remarks. E. K.'s concern is to show that Spenser has properly employed such poetic principles of "making" as unity, decorum, verisimilitude, and allegory, all

of which are ultimately affected by the mimetic imitation of nature by art within the poem. In addition, he is anxious to show that Spenser has imitated the ancients and has developed his poem as part of a well established and consciously used poetic tradition. Imitation, therefore, falls into two categories: one may be termed poetic imitation because it refers to the strictly mimetic aspects of poetic creation, and the other may be called rhetorical imitation because it arises from the use of past authors developed by the rhetoricians Cicero and Quintillian.⁸ While there is a definite distinction between the two types of imitation, they are clearly of equal importance in E. K.'s mind, and the principles of each ultimately derive from the same source in Aristotle.

This source, the Aristotelian dictum that art imitates nature, was universally accepted by Renaissance artist and critics, and the relationship between nature and art was a major concern of the period. As an aesthetic principle, Aristotle's concept of imitation or mimesis is appropriately incorporated in his Physics which was known in England by 1555.⁹ The critics of the Renaissance followed Aristotle's method and dealt with imitation as a metaphysical question. The artistic principles of imitation, unity, decorum, verisimilitude, and allegory depend ultimately upon the assumptions made by Renaissance critics about nature and the ways art is related to it.

In his Defense of Poesie, when Sidney deals with the question of nature, he speaks in metaphysical terms:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honor to the heavenly maker of that maker, who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature; which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.¹⁰

The metaphysical basis of the Renaissance universe is clearly revealed here. There are two natures. One was produced by God who as a maker is conceived of as an artist in respect to this first, perfect nature. The second nature is that inhabited by man after the fall. This nature is not perfect, but it can be made to reflect the perfect nature through the artist-maker and his poetry. This defines the mimetic relationship between nature and art.

The metaphysical basis of art, as Sidney sees it, depends upon a correlation between the perfect world of God's original creation and the imperfect world of Adam's descendants. The mediating force is "man's erected wit" which displays itself in poetry and art. The artist, through poetry, is engaged in a divine task: to reveal the world as it should be rather than as it is. Herein lies the possibility for both pleasure and profit. The poet is engaged as a moral agent for all men; his purpose is to reveal the world as God intended it to be by using the fallen world and the men who inhabit it as materials to imitate this more perfect nature. Art is thus in conflict with nature as man perceives it in this world, and art affirms

reason and imagination as complementary agents for transcending nature.

Thus Sidney suggests a constant sense of comparison between two natures, two makers, and two states of human nature ("erected wit" and "infected will"). As the artist looks at the world around him and makes a work of art, the reader is expected to be aware of the ideal paradigm and draw conclusions on the basis of this comparison. The world should be perfect; this is what the artist attempts to reveal, and anything which does not participate in or further this is to be rejected. Moreover, the habit of comparison extends to parts of the real world insofar as some things or people (i.e., poets) are closer to the ideal than are others. In this way fiction can avoid the charge of untruth, and imitation is not limited to the creation of Utopias. The artist's purpose, as Sidney explicitly states, is to imitate the "works of that second nature" or reality, but his poetic means and his moral purpose are dictated by his constant awareness of the first nature created by God and the perfections which it displays.

We will see that Spenser employs Aristotelian mimesis in the Shepherd's Calendar. In the eclogues he focuses on nature with the mimetic eye. He reveals the human dilemma created by the fall of Adam by using nature as a device to mirror man's real experience of nature as well as the possibility of transcending this experiential realm through reason and art. He accomplishes this by developing the conflict between nature and art which he

imitates in dialogues between the characters. He has each character reveal his inner self by means of his response to the external world. Those characters who affirm the world of nature or who fail to perceive that it is fallen are revealed as morally limited. Those who can see the world as fallen and who look to another world for a solution to the moral problems inherent in a fallen world display the proper use of reason and confirm the necessity for the control which mimetic art can exercise over nature. In this way Spenser unifies thematic vision and artistic mode at their most essential level.

When Puttenham comments on mimesis, he shows the practical application of Sidney's more theoretical speculations. He states that the fantasy of art

may be resembled to a glasse as hath bene sayd, whereof there be many tempers and manner of makings, as the perspectiues doe acknowledge, for some be false glasses and shew thinges otherwise than they be in deede, and others right as they be in deede, neither fairer nor fouler, nor greater nor smaller. There be againe of these glasses that shew thinges exceeding faire and comely, others that shew figures very monstrous and illfauored. Euen so is the phantasticall part of man (if it be not disordered) a representer of the best, most comely and bewtifule images or appearances of thinges to the soule and according to their very truth. If otherwise, then doth it breede Chimeres and monsters in mans imaginations, and not onely in his imaginations, but also in all his ordinarie actions and life which ensues. Wherefore such persons as be illuminated with the brightest irradiations of knowledge and of the veritie and due proportion of things, they are called by the learned men not phantastici but euphantasiote... .¹¹

The overwhelming impression of Sidney's metaphysical comments is that the universe is rational and controlled by rules and laws. Puttenham seeks to apply these universal laws to the universe of art, thereby affirming the moral integrity and usefulness of

fiction through the concept of imitation.

Puttenham begins by saying that the form of art is an imitation of the form of nature; what nature reveals, art attempts to mirror or duplicate. To explain the process of imitation, he develops the metaphor of the glass, and he says that the "images or appearances" reflected in the glass of fiction are the means of illuminating "the veritie and due proportion of things." The universe displays "veritie and due proportion"; these are its laws, and they likewise become the laws of mimetic art. As the artist surveys nature, he uses unity, decorum, and verisimilitude to imitate the laws of nature. Each of these techniques mirrors a distinct and essential aspect of nature. They also become distinct and essential aspects of art, united ultimately by the fact that they lead to "knowledge."

Artistic unity is based on the artist's understanding of the metaphysical order of the universe. The Renaissance conception of unity was, like Aristotle's, organic. Each part contributes to the whole; there is a sense of causal order in the relationship between the parts. The presence of variety, fullness, and ornament added to their belief in the grandeur of the universe. As employed by the artist, unity becomes a relationship of parts which lifts man's mind out of the imperfect world of reality and directs it to the perfect world of God's creation. Each part in the work of art serves its technical purpose in the controlling scheme of the whole work;

likewise, the parts are related thematically to the concept of unity itself. In other words, the aesthetic principles in a well-made poem exist for the purpose of revealing truths about a well-made universe, and the parts of that work (i.e., characters, situations) can and should be morally evaluated in terms of their contribution or lack of contribution to that whole.

In the Calender, we will see that Spenser uses Colin as a unifying character, and he uses the seasonal scheme to develop the conflict between man and nature. As a shepherd, a lover, and an artist, Colin combines within himself the three major roles which are manifested in some degree by all the other characters. The eclogues are unified around Colin in a causal chain which shows him affecting and affected by the world that surrounds him. In "January" he rejects his pipe or art, defines his erroneous attitude toward nature, and thus inaugurates a progressive disintegration for himself which ultimately results in his death in "December." The use of mimesis, as well as the attitudes toward nature and art which this implies, sets up a unifying motif which supports Spenser's moral vision of man and the way in which art serves to help men avoid Colin's fate. Mimesis reveals a well-ordered universe for those characters in the poem who have the ability to see this order. Because Colin and others like him reject the power of art over nature, they cannot participate in this order and are morally and physically overcome by their fallen world.

Although unity and decorum are distinct techniques, there

is a close relationship between them. Each part is related to the whole in the world of fiction as in reality. The integrity of the fictional world must be preserved by using language, plot, and characters which are appropriate to it; thus the world of a tragedy, comedy, or pastoral is complete within itself, and each demands distinct and unique parts to form its whole. The justification for this lies in the fact that God's perfect nature reveals this integrity or decorum. In order to understand and imitate this nature, the Renaissance artists turned to the great works of the ancients which, because they themselves were well-made imitations, participate in the perfect world of God and also belong to the imperfect world of man. Imitation of sources and conventions appropriate to each genre was therefore believed to be a matter of imitating nature. Past works were a part of the universe in the same way that anything else is a part of the universe, and decorum became largely a matter of conventions related to the vision or theme inherent in any particular fictional world.

Thus we will see that Spenser employs decorum in the Calender to support the unity of his aesthetic and moral vision and to reveal his attitudes about man and his world. He divides the eclogues into three types (recreative, plaintive, and moral), and he imitates, respectively, the three major pastoral writers (Theocritus, Virgil, and Mantuan). In the recreative eclogues he imitates Theocritus according to the Renaissance rules of decorum, but he shows the limitations of the Theocritan pastoral

perspective when these eclogues are judged in relationship with the whole poem. Likewise, he uses Virgil for the plaintive and Mantuan for the moral. Spenser uses these sources and the techniques of decorum to examine the relationship between art and nature, and his purpose is to develop a vision of this relationship which is new. He accomplishes this by showing the moral limitations of his models in terms of their treatment of the art-nature conflict. He shows these limitations by playing each type of eclogue against the whole in terms of language, characters, plot, and conventions. Thus he can use the rules of decorum not only to criticize the traditional pastoral vision but also to create a new vision for pastoral.

Unity and decorum in turn are related to verisimilitude. The world of art reveals truth and knowledge. The concept of verisimilitude depends upon the "truth-likeness" created by the use of unity and decorum. The artist looks at the real world of nature and uses its particular aspects to reveal general truths about the ideal world of God's original creation before the fall. One way this is done is to relate particular characters to general types. These types are felt to be verisimilar because they are universal. Insofar as the poet's use of types can lead men to participate imaginatively in the ideal world by seeing its order and moral regulation, man can recover his original state. The poet seeks to reveal nature as it ought to be by using nature as it is. All of this depends upon the

reader's awareness of the necessity of constantly evaluating nature in terms of its ideal paradigm.

In the Calender, we will see that Spenser achieves verisimilitude by using particular women of the pastoral world to mirror the ideal paradigm. Thus the Bonibell of "March," Rosalind, and Eliza are each developed as types which represent the moral levels within Spenser's metaphysical scheme. Likewise, the men are related to types, specifically Narcissus and Orpheus. These male types define, within the metaphysical scheme conveyed through the women, proper attitudes toward nature and art. The male-female relationship is also developed to support the truth of the poem's aesthetic and moral vision about the art-nature relationship.

Because of Spenser's use of verisimilitude to assert the truth of fiction, and because the matter of allegory in the Calender has attracted much of the modern critical interest, it is necessary to reevaluate the question of allegory in terms of its contribution through mode to Spenser's vision. As we will see with mimesis, unity, decorum, and verisimilitude, Spenser has attempted in the Calender to harmonize a number of theoretical concepts and to use these to produce a work which is decidedly innovative, Elizabethan, and his own. This is no less true of the allegorical elements in the poem. We will find that Spenser's theory of art tends to use mode to support the ethical validity of fiction per se rather than to appeal to some external theological or philosophical construct. One

way Spenser achieves this is by using allegory, a form which by definition denies the ethical validity and truth of fiction per se, as an ornamental adjunct to a well-made poem. Rather than being the essence of the poem as some have maintained, the allegory is a specific kind of art form which is used with other specific art forms (i.e., elegy, panegyric, singing-match) to produce a morally useful vision of man and his world by demonstrating the ethical usefulness of art itself. This indicates that Spenser, like most of his contemporaries, was concerned to defend poetry against the charge of untruth and moral uselessness. Since the allegorical frame of mind was intimately connected with this criticism of art, Spenser's use of allegory itself to demonstrate that fantasy is in fact true and therefore morally useful was a remarkable accomplishment.

Thus, I contend that an examination of Spenser's use of mimesis, unity, decorum, versimilitude, and allegory in the Shepheardes Calender is, as E. K. suggested long ago, the proper method for understanding Spenser's thoughts about man and his world. The best scholarly comments on the poem have always acknowledged this relationship between vision and mode, yet, curiously enough, no attempt has been made to systematically develop the implications of this relationship. Edward William Tayler, for example, has studied the relationship between nature and art, yet he approaches it as a theme without investigating its foundation in the aesthetic concept of mimesis.¹² It is only, I think, on the basis of Spenser's use of the new

principle of mimesis adapted from Aristotle that his use of the nature-art theme can be understood. Comments on unity in the Calender have occupied the attention of many recent scholars such as Edwin Greenlaw,¹³ Mary Parmenter,¹⁴ A. C. Hamilton,¹⁵ and Robert Allen Durr,¹⁶ yet each seeks to demonstrate the existence of unity without showing the relationship between Spenser's aesthetic use of the concept and its thematic results. Aspects of decorum have occupied the attention of many scholars. Merritt Y. Hughes,¹⁷ Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr.,¹⁸ T. P. Harrison, Jr.,¹⁹ Louis S. Friedland,²⁰ Harry Levin,²¹ and Patrick Cullen,²² all deal with the question of pastoral sources either with respect to themes or techniques of expression, yet the fundamental sense of cooperation between these aspects is lacking. Verisimilitude in the poem is, I believe, a completely unexplored principle. This arises in part from the neglect of the mimetic principle, and I hope to show that Spenser's conception of poetic truth is a fundamental part of understanding the poem. It is not sufficient to posit that the poem does convey truth; it is necessary to understand the mode used to convey this truth and the relationship between this aspect of mode and the vision of the poem. Finally, the allegorical interpreters such as James Jackson Higginson,²³ Percy W. Long,²⁴ Jefferson Butler Fletcher,²⁵ and Paul E. McLane,²⁶ have been most remiss in terms of assessing the aesthetic context for the allegorical elements in the poem. Spenser's use of allegory can be best understood when it is

placed in this aesthetic context, and the implications of his uses of mimesis and verisimilitude produce, I think, new ways of assessing the allegorical mode. Without rejecting this scholarship, I hope to synthesize it into a viable methodology for evaluating the Shepheardes Calender, and I believe such a methodology will open new channels for studying Spenser's poem.

PREVIEW

Notes for Introduction.

¹E. K., "Dedicatory Epistle" to the Shepheardes Calender in The Works of Edmund Spenser, A Variorum Edition: The Minor Poems, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), VII, part I, 7. Hereafter all quotations from the Shepheardes Calender will be from this edition and will be designated by parenthetical page or line references within the text.

²Bernard Weinberg, A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), I, 349.

³Madeleine Doran, Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p.100. See also Joel Elias Spingarn, A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance with Special Reference to the Influence of Italy in the Formation and Development of Modern Classicism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), p.261.

⁴Marvin Theodore Herrick, The Fusion of Horatian and Aristotelian Literary Criticism, 1531-1555, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 32 (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1946), passim.

⁵See Kenneth Orne Myrick, Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman, Harvard Studies in English, 14 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p.215. See also Spingarn, pp.268-269.

⁶George Puttenham, The Arte of English Poesie (1589), ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), Appendix III, p.319.

⁷Puttenham, p.3.

⁸Weinberg, I, 60.

⁹Herrick, p.33.

¹⁰Sir Philip Sidney, The Defense of Poesie (1583) in Literary Criticism, Plato to Dryden, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), pp.413-414.

¹¹Puttenham, pp.19-20.

¹²Edward William Tayler, Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

¹³Edwin A. Greenlaw, "The Shepheardes Calender," PMLA, 26(1911), 419-451.

¹⁴Mary Parmenter, "Spenser Twelve Aeglogues Proportionable To The Twelve Monethes," ELH, 3(1936), 190-217.

¹⁵A. C. Hamilton, "The Argument of Spenser's Shepheardes Calender," ELH, 23(1956), 171-182.

¹⁶Robert Allen Durr, "Spenser's Calender of Christian Time," ELH, 24(1957), 269-295.

¹⁷Merritt Y. Hughes, "Spenser and the Greek Pastoral Triad," Studies in Philology, 20(1923), 184-215.

¹⁸Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr., "Archaism and Innovation in Spenser's Poetic Diction," PMLA, 43(1932), 144-170.

¹⁹T. P. Harrison, Jr., "Spenser, Ronsard, and Bion," Modern Language Notes, 49(1934), 139-145.

²⁰Louis S. Friedland, "Spenser as Fabulist," Shakespeare Association Bulletin, 12(1937), 85-108; 133-154; 197-207.

²¹Harry Levin, The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

²²Patrick Cullen, Spenser, Marvell, and Renaissance Pastoral (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

²³James Jackson Higginson, Spenser's Shepherd's Calender in Relation to Contemporary Affairs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912).

²⁴Percy W. Long, "Spenser and the Bishop of Rochester," PMLA, 31(1916), 713-735.

²⁵Jefferson Butler Fletcher, "The Puritan Argument in Spenser," PMLA, 58(1943), 634-648.

²⁶Paul E. McLane, Spenser's Shepheardes Calender: A Study in Elizabethan Allegory (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961).

PREVIEW