

Poets, Pastors, and Antipoetics: A Response to Frances M. Malpezzi, "E. K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading"*

PETER C. HERMAN

Frances M. Malpezzi has written a fascinating article on how Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* contains within it a critique of bad readership and instructions on how to become the necessary analogue to Sidney's Right Poet, the Right Reader. We are particularly indebted to her parsing of the inner and outer fictions of the *Calendar* and to her demonstration of how E. K.'s responses parallel "the numerous listeners and interpreters in the eclogues. In doing so, E. K. functions as an exemplum—sometimes positive and sometimes negative" (187). We are also indebted to her demonstration of how the various failures of poetic rhetoric throughout the *Calendar* are as much the audience's fault as the poet's, for as Malpezzi rightly claims, the *Calendar* attempts to instruct its audience in how to read. Although Malpezzi's comments are insightful and enabling, I nonetheless have a number of suggestions that might have made her argument even stronger. First, at times her conception of the *Calendar's* audience and intended purpose would be enhanced by additional broadening and historicizing, that is to say by more fully taking into account Spenser's ambitions and generic contexts that may have faded for contemporary readers but would have been perfectly obvious to those of the sixteenth century. Second, Malpezzi's contention that the success or failure of particular speakers is always determinable by their motivation (*caritas* leading to success; "base" desires, i.e. erotic love, leading to failure) may not always be sustainable. Finally, I think that Malpezzi's case could have been further strengthened by recognizing

*Reference: Frances M. Malpezzi, "E. K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 181-91.

the fissures and unresolved tensions marking Spenser's treatment of poetry.

To begin, Malpezzi asserts that "As Spenser shepherds his readers into a pastoral world that teaches about art, religion, and love, he constructs a framework that belies *the simplicity of its rustic setting*" (182; my emphasis); yet in all likelihood Spenser's audience would not have interpreted the "rustic setting" as marked by its "simplicity." According to the Virgilian *cursus*, the eclogue is the precursor to the epic. Consequently, writing about shepherds and their loves does not invoke simplicity but signals Spenser's ambition to become England's Protestant epic poet, a fact that E. K. makes explicit in his introductory "Epistle":¹

following the example of the best and most auncient Poetes, which devised this kind of wryting . . . at the first to trye theyr habilities: and as young birdes, that be newly crept out of the nest, by little first to prove theyr tender wynges, before they make a greater flyght. So flew Theocritus So flew Virgile, as not yet well feeling his winges. So flew Mantuane, as being not full somd. So Petrarque. So Boccace; So Marot, Sanazarus, and also divers other excellent both Italian and French Poetes, whose foting this Author every where followeth. (18)

In addition to the writer's implicit ambition (made explicit by E.K.), a fact which necessarily blurs the easy distinction Malpezzi makes between licit and illicit, earthly and spiritual, motivations, there is also the inherent politics of the genre.

Malpezzi also could have strengthened her argument by recalling that eclogues were conventionally interpreted as political allegories. As George Puttenham will later write, pastoral verse was "not of purpose to counterfait or represent the rustically manner of loves and communication: *but vnder the vaile of homely persons, and in rude speeches to insinuate and glaunce at greater matters, and such as perchance had not bene safe to haue bene disclosed in any other sort*" (38; my emphasis). And once more, E. K. himself alerts us in the "Epistle" to precisely this fact: "And also appeareth by the basenesse of the name, wherein, it semeth, *he chose rather to unfold great matter of argument covertly*" (18; my emphasis). Hence the not very subtle hints to interpret several of the eclogues topically (more on this below). Additionally, Malpezzi ought to have broadened

her secondary sources to include important scholarship by Louis Montrose and Annabel Patterson on the politics of the pastoral in general and this eclogue in particular. To her statement that "Spenser shepherds his readers into a pastoral world that teaches about art, religion, and love," Puttenham might well have added "politics" because that is how a contemporary reader would have regarded Spenser's pastoral world.

Malpezzi also implies repeatedly that Spenser addresses a unified, homogenous audience. She writes that "Colin's blazon of Eliza as sung by Hobbino in 'Aprill' suggests the power of poetry to set forth *the virtuous ideal* and the power of the poet to instruct and lead *the community* in praise of that ideal" (185; my emphasis), and she concludes by remarking on "the social and religio-political obligations of *every Christian* who loves and serves the Word" (189; my emphasis). The religious-political situation prevailing during the later Elizabethan period, however, does not allow for an inclusive vision. When Spenser wrote the *Calender*, neither "the virtuous ideal" nor "the community" were single, monolithic entities. The operative question during this era would have been: what *kind* of Christian are you? and the wrong answer could result in imprisonment, mutilation, even execution.

In addition to the obvious attacks on Catholics peppered throughout the *Calender* (would Spenser have considered them part of "the community"?) Spenser's "left-of-center" Protestantism colors the entire poem, as exemplified by his making Algrind-Grindal the hero of the July eclogue. Paul E. McLane and John N. King, among many others, have shown that Spenser not only intervenes in contemporary religious disputes, but by siding with a figure stripped of his office and put under house arrest by Elizabeth herself, Spenser committed an act that could have led to either death or dismemberment. John Stubbes lost his hand for criticizing the queen, a fact that Spenser could not have been unaware of. In addition to Algrind-Grindal, there are other topical references. Thomalin and Diggon Davie can be identified with Thomas Cooper, Bishop of Lincoln, and Richard Davies, Bishop of St. David's, both of whom openly supported Grindal (King 35). Passages which on their surface might appear today to support such homogenizing terms as "the greater good" and "the community" might have struck Spenser's audience more like a versified op-ed piece.

"Aprill" certainly fits this description. Far from an exclusively apolitical setting forth of a "virtuous ideal," the poem implicitly criticizes Eliza/Elizabeth as much as it celebrates her. The sudden intrusion of Chaucerian diction into this national epithalamium—"Shee is my goddesse plaine, / And I her shepherds swayne, / Albee forswonck and forswatt I am" (97-99)—situates the poem in the tradition of Protestant, neo-Chaucerian satire (i.e., the *Ploughman's Tale*). But as Cain points out in his introduction, England's love for Cynthia implicitly criticizes Cynthia herself: "the lay speaks, though indirectly, against the queen's possible marriage to the French prince Alençon which in the late 1570s seemed all too probable. The marriage scheme was intensely unpopular in England, hence the assertions of rustic Englishness in the lay" (69). Colin may very well, therefore, be "an inspired poet serving the community," succeeding "through the grace of God . . . in reaching his listeners," but he is also a critic of the queen's marital affairs, delivering blame wrapped in praise.

In sum, the work's complicated religious politics are crucial. There were, then as now, many virtuous ideals, many communities. English Protestantism was neither a house united nor particularly tolerant of dissenting voices. Spenser's text certainly attempts to instruct and edify, but it is also a polemic that takes sides in contemporary religious controversies. Spenser's point in "Aprill" and other eclogues is not simply instruction in transcending "the narrow bounds of self" and serving "the larger community" (Malpezzi 189), but also an intervention in the dust and heat of controversy. In addition to exhortations to virtue, the poems also bundle together criticism of the queen, promotion of self, and promotion of England.

Concerning the relationship between the poet's success and his motivations, Malpezzi judiciously points out how Colin's self-involvement in "January" argues for a link between earthly desires and failed rhetoric. Yet it would be incorrect to assume that the poem condemns *all* earthly desires. In "Aprill," for instance, Hobbinol's answer to Thenot's regretful "Ah foolish boy, that is with love yblent: / Great pittie is, he be in such taking, / For naught caren, that bene so lewdly bent" (155-57) suggests that for him the problem does not lie with Colin's prostituting "his muse by using his poetry for the satisfaction of his base

desires" (186) but in Colin's not realizing that he is simply barking up the wrong tree: "Sicker I hold him, for a greater fon [fool], / *That loves the thing, he cannot purchase*" (158-59; my emphasis). Hobbinol, in other words, might have no objections if Rosalind had reciprocated Colin's attentions.

Also, the extent of Spenser's ambitions is crucial to understanding the *Calender*. Certainly, one aspect of this work is to encourage the edification of others and to be moved to, as Sidney might put it, virtuous action. Yet Spenser's own ambitions were material and worldly. He advertised his intention to become England's Virgil, and that meant becoming as much a figure at court and as politically involved as his Roman original. As "Aprill's" "Argument" tells us, "This Aeglogue is purposely intended to the honor and prayse of our most gracious soveraigne, Queene Elizabeth" (70). Teaching virtue, in other words, is part of a plea for patronage and for recognition that the New Poet is England's future Virgil, since "Aprill" also evokes Virgil's fourth ("messianic") eclogue. As Thomas H. Cain nicely puts it, Spenser's "purpose here is clearly self-promotion" (67). "Aprill," in other words, shows the New Poet using poetry "to serve his own desire," as, in Malpezzi's description of "January," the poem demonstrates his "capable manipulation of language in the service of a greater good." Indeed, in "Aprill," the greater good is almost inseparable from the poet's material gain. Spenser's aims, in other words, are not as divorced from the profit motive as Malpezzi seems to imply.

Richard Rambuss has recently reminded us that Spenser always wrote with an eye towards his own material advancement. He created the *Calender* while employed as secretary to John Young, Bishop of Rochester, and the poem "shows him looking to continue and advance that career by attaching himself in a similar capacity to some more highly-placed employer and patron. [The *Calender*] not only marks Spenser's auspicious poetic debut; it also serves through its display of his (secret) study as an advertisement of Spenser's qualifications for secretaryship" (29-30). Far from "transcending the realms of the narrowly personal and temporal desire for fame" (Malpezzi 185), the *Calender* is itself a plea for advancement and for fame.

The "October" eclogue, for instance, puts into question the blanket assertion that bad motives, i.e. worldly material gain, necessarily lead to rhetorical failure: "Rightly directed love of God and neighbor furthers the power of their [poet and preacher] words while a love of self, of earthly pleasures or ambition hinders them" (183). Cuddie, as E. K. writes in the headnote, "is set out the perfecte paterne of a Poete" (170).² But notwithstanding his perfection, he is also a failure, not because of his own failings, but because of the widespread "contempte of Poetrie" (170). Granted that poetry's success assumes an appreciative audience, yet this also means an audience that will *pay* for its pleasurable instruction. Poets may deal in the divine, but they are human and humans need to eat. Praise alone will just not pay the bills: "So prayesen babes the Peacocks spotted traine, / And wondren at bright *Argus* blazing eye: / But who rewards him ere the more for thy? / Or feedes him once the fuller by a graine?" (31-34). Cuddie's interlocutor, Piers, ultimately agrees with Cuddie's assessment, suggesting that his insistence on lack of remuneration needs to be taken seriously rather than as an indictment of Cuddie's worldliness:

O pierlesse Poesye, where is then thy place?
 If nor in Princes pallace thou doe sitt
 (And yet is Princes pallace the most fitt)
 Ne brest of baser birth doth thee embrace. (79-82)

The poem, in other words, asks for patronage by illustrating the "contempte" that poetry has fallen into. And unlike Colin, Cuddie is not an unreliable narrator.

I would like now to consider Malpezzi's treatment of Renaissance antipoetic sentiment. In both the article Malpezzi quotes and in the subsequent book,³ I argue for the importance of antipoetic sentiment in understanding the *Calender* in particular and English Renaissance poetics in general. Malpezzi quotes my assertion that the repeated failures of poetry within the *Calender* result in part from Spenser's difficulty "in reconciling his poetic ambitions with the antipoetic strain within Protestantism" (30), and she cites my characterization of the *Calender* as constantly oscillating between "vaunting ambition and the subversion of that ambition" (30). Malpezzi then challenges my position

by asserting "Yet throughout the *Calender* we are reminded that poetry is about more than earthly ambition" (185).

Two responses. First, I have suggested, poetry is at least as much about worldly ambition as anything else. Spenser wanted to rise, he wanted the Queen's notice and her material appreciation of his talents, and although ultimately his Irish estates were destroyed, Spenser's earthly ambitions were for the most part realized. But regarding antipoetic sentiment, Malpezzi still needs to take into consideration that Spenser wrote in the face of significant Protestant opposition to poetry, both secular *and* religious. A wealth of primary evidence demonstrates that for a committed Protestant such as Spenser, poetry and spirituality made for very uneasy companions because antipoetic sentiment was deeply ingrained within mainstream religion. To give three examples, each from the article, William Tyndale contemptuously dismissed all the accoutrements of Catholicism with the phrase "[they] gave themselves only unto poetry, and shut up the scripture" (268; Herman, "*Shepherd's Calender*" 16).⁴ Furthermore, Tyndale and the other early reformers were so identified with antipoetic sentiment that John Skelton included it among the "odyous, orgulyous, and flyblowen opynions" refuted in "A Replycacion Agaynst Certayne Yong Scolers Abjured of Late" (c. 1528; Herman, "*Shepherd's Calender*" 16):

Why have ye then disdayne
At poetes, and complayne
Howe poetes do but fayne?
Ye do moche great outrage,
For to disparage
And to discourage
The fame matryculate
Of poetes laureate. (351-58)

And Theodore Beza, Calvin's right-hand man, among other attacks on poetry, wrote an epigram entitled (in translation) "A Sportfull comparison between Poets and Papists" (Herman, "*Shepherd's Calender*" 17). If Spenser takes his religion seriously, as indeed Malpezzi argues, then he must also take seriously the antipoetic strand within his religious group.

Now, given the fact of antipoetic sentiment in the sixteenth century, given its distinctly English Protestant genealogy, and given the equally important fact that many Muse-haters considered fiction and religion mutually exclusive categories (hence the banning of the mystery plays and the ordinance forbidding all mention of Christianity upon the stage in the early part of Elizabeth's reign),⁵ to suggest an automatically *untroubled* connection between poetry and religion, as Malpezzi does, requires compelling evidentiary support.

Spenser's own uneasiness is first suggested by the fact that, pace Malpezzi's assertion that Colin succeeds in creating the eclogue recorded in "Aprill" "through the grace of God," Spenser (or E. K.) *never* ascribes Colin's talent to divine intervention. Rather, both Hobbinol and the headnote grant Colin entire responsibility for his creations: "Whereby he taketh occasion, for proofoe of *his* more excellencie and skill in poetrie, to recorde a songe, which the sayd Colin *sometime made* in honor of her Majestie" (70; my emphasis), and "Aprill" makes clear why such a declaration would have been antithetical to Spenser. Although Malpezzi finds "Aprill" a serene depiction of the poet's Orphic power "to instruct and lead the community," yet at the same time, Spenser clearly senses that he is at risk here:

I sawe *Phoebus* thrust out his golden hedde,
 upon her to gaze:
 But when he sawe, how broade her beames did spredde,
 it did him amaze.
 He blusht to see another Sunne belowe,
 Ne durst againe his fyrre face out showe:
 Let him, if he dare,
 His brightnesse compare
 With hers, to have the overthrowe.
 Shewe thy self *Cynthia* with thy silver rayes,
 and be not abasht:
 When shee the beames of her beauty displayes,
 O how art thou dasht?
 But I will not match her with *Latonaes* seede,
 Such follie great sorow to *Niobe* did breede.
 Now she is a stone,
 And makes dayly mone,
 Warning all other to take heede. (72-90)

In these stanzas, Colin suddenly realizes that there are limits to what he can or should do. Suggesting that Cynthia, who symbolizes both Elizabeth and Spenser's art, outshines Apollo (i.e., God) invites retribution for hubris. Spenser, in other words, registers his awareness of the limitations and dangers of poetic aspiration even as he engages in aspiration.⁶

In conclusion, Malpezzi's work would gain even more persuasiveness by taking into account Spenser's own awareness of the tensions between "pastors and poets" as well as of edification including pointed criticisms of the queen's religious policies and marital affairs. While Malpezzi rightly points out one of the many thematic elements of the *Calender*, that element needs to be modified by taking into account both the contentious, fractured nature of Elizabethan religious politics and the equally contentious, fractured nature of the poem itself.

San Diego State University

NOTES

¹All references to E. K.'s commentary will be to the page number, and all references to the *Calender* will be to the line number.

²E. K. also takes this opportunity to advertise a possibly forthcoming book by the "Newe Poete," "called *the English Poete*, which booke being lately come to my hands. I mynde also by Gods grace upon further advisement to publish" (170), proving once more that private ambition is as much at the forefront of this text as spiritual edification.

³"*The Shepherdes Calender and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment*" and *Squitter-wits and Muse-haters: Sidney, Spenser, Milton and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment*.

⁴For a fuller explanation as well as for many more examples of sixteenth and seventeenth century attacks on poetry, I refer the interested reader to my *Squitter-wits and Muse-haters*.

⁵E.g., the letter from the Privy Council forbidding the Corpus Christi plays does so on the following grounds: "wherein they are done t'understand that there by many things used which tende to the derogation of the Majestie and glorie of God, the prophanation of the sacraments and the maunteynance of superstition and idolatrie, the said Commissioners decreed a lettre to be written and sent to the baylyffe, burgesses and other the inhabitantes of the said towne of Wakefeld that in the said playe no pageant be used or set furthe wherein the Ma'ye of God the Father, God the Sonne, or God the Holie Ghoste or the administration of either the

Sacramentes of baptisme or of the Lordes Supper be counterfeyted or represented, or anythinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie or which be contrarie to the lawes of God or the realme" (quoted in Gardiner 78). Also, in 1586, one muse-hater recounted an example from Eusebius in which "A Poet, who for having lewdly applyed a peece of Scriptures to a fable, suddently lost his naturall sight" (quoted in Herman, *Squitter-wits* 52).

⁶See, for example, my analyses of "June" and "July" (*Squitter-wits* 136-43).

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