

E. K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading

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As the mysterious glossarist of Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*, E.K. has long been a thorn-in-the-side of Spenserian critics who have bristled over inaccuracies and labeled him pompous and pedantic. While E.K.'s comments have perplexed, irritated and annoyed readers, an even thornier issue has been his identity, which Paul McLane terms "one of the darkest and most controversial mysteries in Spenser scholarship" (280). Far from being able to identify E.K., critics have yet to ascertain if he is real or fictional. Manipulating initials or historical evidence, some have identified him as Edward Kirke, Fulke Greville, or Gabriel Harvey; others conclude he is Edmund of Kent or Edmundus Kedemon, a persona of Edmund Spenser.¹

While we may never ascertain the identity of E.K., we are, nonetheless, drawn to speculate about the function of the glosses within the *Calender*. Short of coming up with a signed confession, we are left to mull over the *why* of E.K. instead of the *who*. If E.K. is a Spenserian persona, why would the poet create glosses that are at times inaccurate and why would he create a scholar-commentator who has for centuries irritated other readers? If E.K. was someone other than Spenser, why would the poet allow those pedantic and at times obtuse or off-target glosses to be included in a work whose presentation he seems to have so closely supervised?

Critics who hypothesize Spenser created his own commentary believe he did so either to lend an air of scholarly credibility to his text or as part of an elaborate literary game. In the former group, Michael McCanles asserts:

It is part of the fiction of *The Shepherdes Calender* that E.K.'s glosses and commentary are not part of the fiction. This fiction's success shows it to have been through the centuries a kind of *trompe-l'oeil* since editors, critics and readers have usually taken it for the real thing. (5)

McCanles demonstrates that through the glosses, a "part of the total literary artifact" (6), Spenser was able to transform his work into a scholarly edition: "In other words, what Spenser published in 1579 was not simply a collection of pastorals with a commentary attached. What he published was a fictional imitation of a humanist edition of classical texts" (97). In similar vein, Ruth Samson Luborsky in two articles in *Spenser Studies* has argued that its apparatus is integral to the design in the *Calender*. Through a study of other works printed by Hugh Singleton and of printed works contemporary with the *Calender* Luborsky convincingly argues for authorial intention in the overall design of the book and concludes "the presentation becomes important also as a unit of the poem's meaning" ("Allusive Presentation" 29).

Those who see the commentary as part of an elaborate literary game include Bruce R. Smith. Smith points to E.K.'s commentary as a "kind of academic in-joke":

E.K. represents one way of confronting a text: detached, analytical, aware of precedents, full of schemes, but curiously aloof from the emotional force of poetry. His commentary figures as a parody of a certain kind of overly zealous reader, a sixteenth-century example of *The Pooh Perplex* or *The Overwrought Urn*. (89)

More recently, Louise Schleiner has argued for E.K. as a "definable persona" created by Spenser in partial collaboration with Gabriel Harvey (404). She finds E.K. assumes four roles: "self-parodying teaser of Harvey"; "teaser of the general reader"; "friend showcasing his learning for his tutor-friend"; and "cover man for the eclogues' sensitive allusions to matters of ecclesiastical governance and court politics" (405).

While these options are not mutually exclusive, I would argue E.K. and his glosses serve a further function within the *Calender*, that of reinforcing the work's structural and thematic thrust. 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

and calls for the critical admiration and scrutiny of its audience. Certainly one of its most complex components is the relationship between the outer and inner fiction of the *Calender*. With its extensive apparatus of prefatory material, arguments, woodcuts, and subsequent glosses, *The Shepheardes Calender* does call attention to itself as a "book" in imitation of humanist editions of classical texts. This larger construct includes the fiction of the "new Poete," Immerito, and his reader/commentator E.K., whose introduction and glosses are replete with references to writers like Theocritus, Virgil, Chaucer, Skelton, and Marot as they place the work directly within the continuum of classical, British, and continental literary traditions and attempt to elucidate its mythological and linguistic background.

Subsumed within this fiction, however, is yet another fiction—that of the oral tradition. This most literary and bookish of texts has at its core unlettered singers and tellers of tales, such as Colin, Thenot, Cuddie, and Perigot. This inner fiction also focuses on the audience of the songs and tales throughout the *Calender*: for example, Cuddie, who is unmoved by Thenot's tale of the oak and briar; Thenot, who appreciates Colin's song of fair Eliza in "Aprill" as it is sung by Hobbinol (who had once been Colin's audience for that song and was moved enough to make it his); Palinode, who misses Piers' point in the tale of the fox and kid; and Thenot, who seeks consolation through Colin's elegy for Dido.

In this inner fiction, Spenser uses the figure of the shepherd to focus on the vocation of the poet-singer and preacher and to suggest analogies between the two, as Anthea Hume has cogently illustrated (49-56). Through language both the poet and minister have the potential to delight, to instruct, and to move the will to virtuous action. Moreover, what and how they love affects the determination and accomplishment of their goals. Rightly directed love of God and neighbor furthers the power of their words while a love of self, of earthly pleasures or ambition hinders them. Diggon and Cuddie, for instance, are both motivated by gain. Diggon's sheep suffer as a result just as Cuddie's refusal to pipe is a neglect of his metaphorical flock (Hume 50). Thus, the *Calender* encompasses not only the obligations and responsibilities of the poet and minister but their failures as well. Even those who choose to instruct and counsel do not always succeed as we see in the instance of Thenot and Cuddie. Lynn

Staley Johnson has focused on this failure of language in the moral eclogues:

Spenser suggests that the language that should be a common medium of exchange is not even legal tender in the *Calender's* pastoral world: like those dwelling in the suburbs of Babel, Spenser's shepherds do not use and understand language in the same way. (64)

Johnson shows how in these eclogues characters with different values seem to debate but actually engage in monologue, never reaching their intended audience.

Yet failure to communicate cannot be attributed solely to the orator or singer. If, to paraphrase Morrell, a great deal of good matter can be lost for the lack of telling, the import might also be lost for the lack of listening. In interchanges such as that of the July eclogue between Morrell, who prefers life on the "hyll" to that of the "lowly playne" (ll. 6-7) since the hills are "nigher heuen" (l. 89), and Thomalin who prefers the "humble dales" where the footing is fast (l. 13), Spenser reminds us not only of the complexity and difficulty of human communication but also of the fact that listeners as well as speakers have responsibilities. Jonathan F. S. Post has argued that the Protestant Reformation intensified the stress placed on the auditory and that Paul's assertion that "faith cometh by hearing" (Romans 10:17) provided authority for elevating the ear over the eye as the "superior sensory organ" (160). While the stripping of Duessa in Book I of *The Faerie Queene* illustrates the way in which vision must be mended, the many listeners in the *Calender* who mishear illustrate that a correlative corrective must be applied to the ear. As the properly or improperly directed love of the singer, storyteller, or preacher can affect his creation and performance so the love of the auditor can affect what he hears and how he interprets it. Morrell's appreciation of the "high" life and his belief that "When folke bene fat, and riches rancke, / It is a signe of helth" (ll. 211-12) ultimately affect his interpretation of Thomalin's recounting of the sights of shepherds "pampred in pleasures deepe" (l. 198) that Palinode saw on his pilgrimage to Rome.

Throughout the *Calender* we are constantly made aware of the limitations of language, the imperfect tool of imperfect humanity in the postlapsarian world. Peter C. Herman believes this reflects Spenser's difficulty "in

reconciling his poetic ambitions with the antipoetic strain within Protestantism" (29) and he sees the *Calender* constantly oscillating between Spenser's "vaunting ambition and the subversion of that ambition" (30). Yet throughout the *Calender* we are reminded that poetry is about more than earthly ambition. Colin's blazon of Eliza as sung by Hobbinol 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. Colin's elegy for Dido also suggests the power of poetry to console troubled hearts. Language—imperfect as it is in the postlapsarian world—is the necessary vehicle of ministers and poets who seek to serve God and the community. Although A. Leigh DeNeef sees Spenser's ambivalence about language as central to all of his work, he concludes, "To have committed himself so completely to the written word while entertaining such doubts about that word was one of Spenser's most heroic endeavors" (176). Perhaps he was able to move beyond this ambivalence because he did realize the necessity of transcending the realms of the narrowly personal and temporal desire for fame in the struggle to use language in the service of a greater good. I would not argue as S. K. Heninger, Jr. does that for Spenser "The verbal system is a disposable husk of no value in itself, to be thrown away as soon as possible in the construal of a poem" (310). For Spenser as for many poets during the period words, when rightly used and rightly understood, can be incarnational embodiments of the Word. Yet every good in the fallen world is subject to abuse. Spenser is imminently aware of the complexity involved in human communication, the potential for both success and failure that is dependent upon the intervention of grace.

When language fails in *The Shepheardes Calender* it is often because one of those involved in the exchange has failed to move beyond the limits of self. Colin is a fine singer. His panegyric to Eliza establishes his capable manipulation of language in the service of a greater good. Hobbinol and Thenot laud his accomplishments. Yet when Colin attempts to use his gift to serve his own desire, to win Rosalinde's favors, he is met with derision. Thus, in the January eclogue Colin laments the way the lass scorns his "rurall musick" and laughs at his songs (ll. 64–66). In the April eclogue Thenot marvels that Colin has the skill to compose excellent verse, "Yet hath so little skill to brydle loue" (l. 20). When Colin's fleshly desires

are unrestrained by reason, when he is guided by irrational passion, then his capabilities are severely limited. Hence, Thenot laments after Hobbinol's rendering of Colin's song to Eliza:

And was thilk same song of *Colins* owne making?
 Ah foolish boy, that is with loue yblent:
 Great pittie is, he be in such taking,
 For naught caren, that bene so lewdly bent.
 (ll. 154-57)

As an inspired poet serving the community (in the April and November eclogues, for example), Colin, through the grace of God, succeeds in reaching his listeners. However, when Colin would prostitute his muse by using his poetry for the satisfaction of his base desires, he fails and is as Leslie T. Whipp has noted "a negative foil for the brilliant new poet, Edmund Spenser" (22).

In the same manner there are listeners in the *Calender* whose inability to move beyond the limits in self results in failed communication. Palinode in the May eclogue is a good example.

This "worldes childe" (l. 73) lustfully longs "to helpen the Ladyes their Maybush beare" (l. 34). He espouses a *carpe diem* philosophy, a perspective identified in the Biblically apocryphal but nonetheless morally sapiential Book of Wisdom as wrong reasoning. When Piers condemns shepherds who live well while their sheep fare badly, Palinode questions

What shoulde shepheardes other things tend,
 Then sith their God his good does them send,
 Reapen the fruite thereof, that is pleasure,
 For while they here liuen, at ease and leasure?
 (ll. 63-66)

Palinode asserts that "good"—which he identifies with the temporal and material—must be enjoyed in life for when shepherds are dead "their good is ygoe" (l. 67). As a result, he cannot heed Piers' counsel, and the import of Piers' exemplary tale of the deceived kid and the false fox eludes him. Caught up in the world's ephemeral pleasures, Palinode is unable to comprehend the applicability of Piers' tale to his own situation.

Throughout the *Calender* language, especially its highest form—poetry—exemplifies Sidney's dichotomy between the erected wit and the infected will of humankind. At its best language not only enables humanity to achieve temporal greatness but can be spiritually salvific as well; however, the taint of original sin, fallen human nature, often presents an obstacle to the attainment of both worldly and other-worldly aspirations.

The difficulties of using and interpreting language are central not only to the inner fiction of the *Calender* but to the outer fiction as well. E.K. in his reading and interpretation of Immerito's work parallels the numerous listeners and interpreters in the eclogues. In doing so, E.K. functions as an exemplum—sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Through his glosses, he vividly presents a lesson about the art and responsibility of reading. E.K.'s response to Immerito's work is not ancillary to the text but as integral to it as Cuddie's response to the tale of the oak and the briar in "February" or Palindoe's response to the tale of the fox and the kid in "Maye." Although Evenly Tribble argues that the function of a gloss is to bridge a gap between "the author's intent and the words on the page" (163), E.K.'s commentary functions as something more or other than such a compendium. Whether the commentary is a deliberate creation of Spenser's or exists through permissive inclusion, it is not an appendage to the text but the text itself. And E.K. is as vital and central a character to the fiction of *The Shepheardes Calender* as Colin, Piers, Diggon, or Immerito. As E.K. responds to Immerito's work, he mirrors the various audiences in the *Calender* who respond to its tales and songs. Just as "February" is not simply the story of the oak and the briar but about Thenot's manner and telling that tale and Cuddie's response to it, about Thenot's values and Cuddie's as they interact, so *The Shepheardes Calender* is not simply a collection of eclogues written by the fictional Immerito but about E.K.'s engagement with that written word and the way in which his personality, beliefs, values, and learning color and shape what he has read.

In addition, there is also a parallel between E.K. and the figure of Colin presented in the "December" eclogue. As I have shown elsewhere, Colin in "December" details the practical things of the world he has learned. In tracing the seasons of his life, Colin articulates the way he applied

himself to things of “ryper reason” in the autumn of his life: he learns to build shelters for himself and his sheep and to read the stars; he learns the power of herbs, both in their medicinal properties and their poisonous ones. Yet he has not learned the cure for love’s wound. Absorbed in scientia, he has yet to learn *sapientia*. The shepherd-poet-lover has knowledge, but he does not have wisdom (“By the Waters of Babylon”). E.K., too, has the practical tools of his trade. In fact, E.K., through his prefatory material and glosses provides a commentary that fulfills most of the functions William W. E. Slight outlines in his study of Renaissance marginalia (685-86).² E.K. highlights allusions, clarifies meaning, provides paraphrases of obscure expressions, identifies figures of speech, and judges the aptness of expression, for example. Yet as Lynn Staley Johnson has remarked there is a curious dichotomy between Spenser’s presentation of Colin and E.K.’s response to him: “Whereas Spenser allows Colin to entangle himself in inconsistencies, to misapply certain terms, figures, and forms, and generally to subvert his own arguments, E.K. is relatively uncritical of Colin” (7-8). This suggests limitations in E.K.’s moral vision. Like Colin, E.K. has gained knowledge but perhaps has not attained the fullness of wisdom. E.K. could not, for example, see the criticism of Colin that Immerito/Spenser builds into the November eclogue. Leslie T. Whipp in delineating three traditions of Dido—Virgilian, Ovidian, and Augustinian—has shown that the latter emphasizes “the blindness of a man who would weep for Dido dead and know not to weep for his own dying to God” (23). Whipp argues that there is

yet another turn, for Colin is himself like Dido in having failed to resolve the conflict between the demands of his responsibilities as a poet-shepherd, and the demands of his love, the conflict which provides the slender, central narrative skeleton of the *Calender* as a whole. (24)

Yet neither Colin nor E.K. can recognize the similarity between Dido and Colin. Perhaps this is because both, in different ways, are the world’s children, their love of different facets of that world—Rosalinde/pedantic knowledge—hindering them from attaining true spiritual insight. E.K. as reader reminds us that knowledge is not an end in itself. While E.K. can appreciate Immerito’s literary expertise, his metaphors and lively expressions, he sometimes misses the spiritual import of his words. It

is no small matter that he is well aware of Immerito's classical allusions but much less attuned to the scriptural resonances of the poem.

Although E.K. may miss some deeper insights, at the same time we see something very positive in his response. As a reader, he is one of Immerito's flock and he has been well shepherded. He has been delighted by Immerito's poetry, as his prefatory material indicates, but he has also been taught and moved to the virtuous action of taking pen in hand and becoming a shepherd in his own right. In his response to literature, through his glosses and commentary, he seeks to edify others.³ Reading Immerito's work has helped him transcend the narrow bounds of self and his love of pedantry as *caritas* motivates him to serve the larger community. He is a dramatic example of a reader deeply involved in the poetry he has read and profoundly influenced by it.

While *The Shepherdes Calender* is about many subjects, it is ultimately about the word—the mouth that utters it, the hand that pens it, the ear that hears it, the eye that reads it, the mind that comprehends or fails to comprehend its full import, and the will that acts or fails to act upon that import. If Colin and various shepherds within the *Calender* dramatically illustrate the obligations of pastors and poets, E.K. functions as a lesson about the art and work of reading. E.K., whether a fiction of Spenser's—a deliberately created persona—or a glossarist whose comments Spenser allowed to be incorporated into the *Calender*, becomes a vital part of its design as he underscores fundamental themes of that poem: the ambivalence of language in a world of fallen reason, the difficult work of interpretation, the power of poetry, and the social and religio-political obligations of every Christian who loves and serves the Word.⁴

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NOTES

¹For a survey of the controversy engendered by E.K.'s commentary, see chapter one of Patsy Scherer Cornelius' *E.K.'s Commentary on The Shepherdes Calender*. Cornelius' first chapter also treats earlier attempts to identify the mysterious glossarist as do Osgood and Lotspeich in the Variorum edition of Spenser's minor poems (645-

50). All quotations from the *Calender* in this paper are from that edition. For more recent discussions of E.K.'s identity, see McCanles, Schleiner, Smith, and Waldman.

²Slights notes that while E.K.'s glosses "are not marginalia in the strict sense of being side-notes, they engage with Spenser's text in many of the same ways that marginalia do" (684).

³This work of edification is the purpose of such marginalia, as Slights argues: "Unlike manuscript marginalia, which usually record a reader talking to himself, printed marginalia address a wider audience, instructing readers in the relation of the parts to the whole and of the whole to the cultural discourse at large, occasionally redefining the work's readership in the process" (682-83).

⁴The idea for this paper was first prompted by discussion in a 1983 NEH summer seminar conducted by Elizabeth Kirk and further stimulated by discussion in a 1990 NEH summer seminar directed by John N. King. The lively exchange of ideas in both seminars has affected my readings of numerous texts over the years. I am also grateful for the released time provided by Arkansas State University that allowed me to develop this present paper.

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