

## Readers, Auditors, and Interpretation\*

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In "E.K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading," I argued *The Shepheardes Calender* often illustrates the complexity and the limitations of language through both successful and failed attempts at human communication. If various orators and the fictional Immerito occasionally fail to express themselves clearly and cogently, auditors and the reader E.K. also have lapses in comprehension. In his response, "Poets, Pastors, and Antipoetics," Peter C. Herman ignored such important distinctions I made as that between Immerito and Spenser—between the author in the fiction and the author of the fiction—assumed the exclusions from my essay are the result not of focus but of an ignorance startlingly inappropriate even for students in an introductory Renaissance class, and, most significantly, failed to respond to my thesis. Let me address the points raised in "Poets, Pastors, and Antipoetics" methodically.

Herman first takes issue with my statement that Spenser's framework "belies the simplicity of its rustic setting" as he argues Spenser's audience would have recognized the eclogue as a forerunner of the epic (317). While Herman views the hierarchy of genres as arcane knowledge, "generic contexts that may have faded" for today's readers (316), I regard this as a given. I would not for a moment assert the simplicity of the *genre* or underestimate the endeavor of writing within that genre. The pastoral, however, gains impetus because it plays on the preconceptions of a cultured audience about the supposed simplicity of rural life in opposition to their own milieu. Pastoral writers often use the world of

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\*Reference: Frances M. Malpezzi, "E.K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 181-91; Peter C. Herman, "Poets, Pastors, and Antipoetics: A Response to Frances M. Malpezzi, 'E.K., A Spenserian Lesson in Reading,'" *Connotations* 6.3 (1996/97): 316-25.

"uncouth" shepherds to satirize problems of their society because they know readers have a penchant to be seduced by idyllic notions of rural life, to be moved by thoughts of valleys, groves, hills, and fields, of birds' melodious madrigals, of shepherds singing and dancing in a May-morning. But the pastoral, like a certain nymph, reminds us that truth is not in every shepherd's (or fox's) tongue any more than it is in every courtier's, that mutability reigns as flowers fade and spring yields to winter's day of reckoning. Rustic charm does not prevent the death of Dido; it does not erase the need of those who mourn her to find solace; nor does it guarantee the course of love (whether true or false) will always run smoothly. The disjunction between readers' expectations of idyllic bliss and the harsh reality of a postlapsarian life ruled by the elements gives the pastoral its cutting edge. The *guise* of the simplicity of the *setting* is inherent to the pastoral.

In his discussion of the pastoral, I would also quibble with Herman's assertion that E.K. makes explicit "Spenser's ambition to become England's Protestant epic poet" (317). To be precise, he makes clear Immerito's ambition. My concern with the interaction between E.K. and Immerito, the fiction of the reader and writer, as it mirrors the interaction between various fictional orators and listeners makes this distinction vital.

Herman finds me remiss for ignoring the political allegories of the *Calender* and the recent scholarship of Montrose and Patterson on the politics of the pastoral. The "not very subtle hints" from E.K. on the topicality of the eclogues (317) and the long history of the critical recognition of political allegory in the pastoral suggest this aspect is not esoteric but a basic foundation educated readers bring to the work. Instead of ignoring political allegory (or any of the numerous subjects that could have been dealt with), I focused the essay by looking at E.K.'s gloss as integral to the text rather than ancillary. Prior discussions of E.K. have concentrated on discovering his identity or arguing that he is a fictional character. Whether E.K. was an actual person or a creation of Spenser's, his commentary becomes subsumed into the fiction of the *Calender*.

Herman chastises me for implying "Spenser addresses a unified, homogenous audience" and assuming community and the virtuous ideal

were "single, monolithic entities" (318). I neither assume nor imply this, nor for a moment do I doubt Spenser's "intervention in the dust and heat of controversy" (319). Just the opposite. The fractious nature of Elizabethan society with its numerous religio-political disputes, however, does not preclude Spenser's having a sense of community or a virtuous ideal. Indeed, such a sense is at the very heart of the Reformation. In *The Transformations of the Word* John Wall focuses on Spenser as a Reformation poet, arguing that in his major works Spenser sought "the achievement of a Christian commonwealth to result from Prayer Book worship leading to charitable behavior" (83-84). For Wall, Spenser used his poetry as a vehicle for achieving the ends of the Reformation:

Putting a grid of possibility over "what is," Spenser opened before his contemporary reader directions for behavior, emphasized the significance of certain of those options, and thus enabled his poems to function (at least potentially) in a didactic way. He therefore made of his work not an object of knowledge but an instrument for knowing, transforming the contemporary social and political landscape into a place of new opportunities for change, moving it through ethical behavior toward the English Reformers' goal of community and commonwealth. (88)

While "imprisonment, mutilation, even execution" (Herman 318) have been used to shape community, so has poetry. Surely Spenser's concern for defining and serving his version of an ideal community is apparent in the many types of positive and negative communities he fictionalizes throughout his poetry. Nor does the implicit criticism of Eliza/Elizabeth within "Aprill" mitigate Spenser's sense of community and the virtuous ideal. Both the criticism of Elizabeth and the praise of Eliza in which it is embedded are effective tools for reform. As Wall has noted, "What we now read as idealized portraits and effusive encomiums were originally strategies of reform in a culture where criticism had to be voiced in the language of compliment if it were to be heard at all" (83). Like the good courtier whose advice to the prince might not always be welcome, the poet who has a vision of society's reformation must criticize circumspectly. Rhetorically, criticism often works better when included with praise (a tradition that continues today as evidenced by Professor Herman's introductory paragraph). While Herman notes, "There were, then as now, many virtuous ideals, many communities" (319), Spenser's

talents served to shape society in a very particular way; by intervening in the "dust and heat of controversy" he furthered the religious and political ends of the English Reformation.

If Herman did not insert absolutes in place of my qualifiers, did not interpret "often" to mean "always," he would realize we are in agreement that it would be "incorrect to assume that the poem condemns *all* earthly desires" (319). I never contend, as he would have it, that "the success or failure of particular speakers is always determinable by their motivation" (316). Rather, I wrote that language often fails "because one of those involved in the exchange failed to move beyond the limits of self" (185). Neither in the *Calender* nor in his other works does Spenser issue a blanket condemnation of earthly desire. Certainly the *Amoretti-Epithalamion* sequence gives a clear sense of the salvific nature of human love. As John N. King has remarked, Spenser adapts the Petrarchan clichés of the religion of love and "reapplies them to a state of grace achievable only through married love" (163). John Wall places Spenser's view of erotic love in the context of the Reformation:

In Cranmer's views, espoused in claims made in the Prayer Book marriage rite, the goals of the English Reformation involved developing a community built up through the domestication of *eros* and the forming of a commonwealth around the one table of the Christian family. (87)

Spenser would appreciate that there are both destructive and constructive varieties of erotic love. Just as the *Amoretti-Epithalamion* sequence suggests how the domestication of *eros* serves the ultimate community, the Church Triumphant, as procreative marital love and morally responsible parenting increase the count of blessed saints, Spenser provides in his works numerous negative examples: Verdant, the knight who removes his armor as he luxuriates in the Bower of Bliss, giving up his honor and defacing his nobility; Grill, whose base sexual indulgence bestializes him; and Colin, whose love for Rosalind brings him such suffering and causes him to neglect his sheep (they are so weak they can barely stand) and his metaphorical flock as he neglects his singing. These loves are not socially or spiritually salvific. If love can be more than base desire, so can poetic ambition. The advancement of the poet does not necessarily negate a commitment to a larger cause any more than pleasure in marital

sex cancels its salvific effect. The desire of a poet to be a politically involved English Virgil who has the power to effect reform can benefit him personally and still be socially and spiritually salubrious to others. Ambition is no less complex than erotic love.

Professor Herman looks at the "October" eclogue as a means of questioning that bad motives lead to failure. Cuddie is a failure "not because of his own failings, but because of the widespread 'contempte of Poetrie'" (321). Herman argues that "unlike Colin, Cuddie is not an unreliable narrator" (321). Cuddie's role in the context of the *Calender* is debatable and could be the subject of a full-length essay. Let it suffice here to say I am not as convinced as Herman of the reliability of the squint-eyed shepherd whose judgment in "August" is compared to Paris's and who in "October" confuses poetic fury with intoxication. In addition, the Argument does not necessarily mark Cuddie as an exemplary poet but as the perfect pattern of a poet who is unable to make a living from his poetry and attributes his failure to the contempt in which poetry is held in his society. Instead of being a perfect poet, might he be the perfect example of one who shifts the responsibility for his failure elsewhere?

Lastly, Herman takes me to task for failing to consider the antipoetic sentiments of the period. Citing such attackers on poetry as Tyndale and Beza (who, although he regretted his *Juvenilia*, did not abandon literary endeavor but went on to write a tragedy about Abraham and Isaac and to complete a translation of the Psalms begun by Clément Marot), Herman concludes, "if Spenser takes his religion seriously, as indeed Malpezzi argues, then he must also take seriously the antipoetic strand within his religious group" (322). The logic here is fuzzy. Spenser could have taken his religion just as seriously by recognizing the arguments of poetry's supporters as well as its detractors. Surely, Herman would not argue that those supporters were nonexistent in the period. Many even found divine sanction for poetry in the paradigmatic psalms and in Paul's injunction in Ephesians 5:15-20; the humanist curriculum suggests educators saw the inherent worth of classical literature, and many educators must have, like the later Milton, recognized "what glorious and magnificent use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things" (*Of Education* 637). Moreover,

conformity to the anti-iconic, anti-poetic, or anti-Disney sentiments of any age is not a reliable touchstone for gauging an individual's religiosity. Valuing poetry does not automatically call one's Protestantism into question. While Herman historicizes Spenser's poetics through statements by Calvin's French successor at Geneva, I prefer to do so through the work of Guillaume de Salluste, Sieur Du Bartas, the French Huguenot who took his politics, his religion, and his poetry seriously. Admired by Spenser and an influence on him (Lee 347, 349-50; Campbell 87-91; Prescott 51, 210, 233), and through his many translators (including Sidney and Thomas Churchyard—works now lost—as well as King James VI of Scotland, John Eliot, William Lisle, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Winter, Robert Barret, Josiah Burchett, and Josuah Sylvester) a pervasive influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Du Bartas ought to be more than a footnote in a Milton textbook. A too-often-ignored poem, *L'Uranie* synthesizes a Protestant poetic aesthetic (Malpezzi, "Du Bartas' *L'Uranie*"). The poem features a poet-pilgrim who has lost his way. Having prostituted his muse and flattered the unworthy, he is re-directed in his vocation by the muse Urania who instructs him about the source and end of poetry. Dramatizing a poet coming to an understanding of his responsibility to God, community, and self, Du Bartas imaginatively presents a poetic creed. For every detractor, poetry also had scores of defenders who were able to reconcile their often staunch Protestant views with an appreciation for poetry's inherent value and an understanding of the way it could serve their religious and political concerns. With an approach to poetry that was far from simplistic, Spenser, like Du Bartas' poet-pilgrim, was well aware of the way in which poetry could be abused and of the limitations of language and the difficulties of interpretation for postlapsarian humanity. Spenser, while aware of the "tensions between 'pastors and poets'" (Herman 324), was also concerned enough about the similarity between the two vocations to use the figure of the shepherd to portray both as they tend to their metaphorical flocks.

Herman and I are, in actuality, in agreement about many things, including the complexity of the pastoral genre, the political nature of the *Calender*, the fractious nature of Elizabethan society, and to a certain extent, the qualms Spenser must have had about poetry. My views are not as simplistic or as uninformed as he chooses to present them. At

the same time, I take issue with his response because he seldom deals with my central thesis, seldom focuses on the role of E.K. as reader. If his concern is with "Poets, Pastors, and Antipoetics," mine was with readers, auditors, and interpretation. His response gives no indication where he stands in relation to the role of E.K. in the fiction of the *Calender*. Does he view the gloss as ancillary to the text or integral to it? How does an understanding of Spenser's anti-poetic sentiments support, refute, or qualify my assertion that "E.K. functions as a lesson about the art and work of reading" (189)? Does E.K., who takes up the challenge of glossing as he immerses himself in the work of interpretation, entertain or articulate anti-poetic sentiments? Herman largely ignores my thesis, shifting the focus from the reader E.K. and the poet Immerito in order to further his own agenda, a concern for Spenser's anti-poetic sentiments. While I can appreciate the songs he pipes, I am less appreciative of his insistence that I sound the same note.

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