
Research Papers



Edmund Spenser's "The Shepherd's Calendar" as an allegory

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ABSTRACT

Edmund Spenser's famous poem "The Shepherd's Calendar" was published in 1579. The importance of "The Shepherd's Calendar" was realized by Spenser and his friends. They realized its relations to the past of English poetry and regarded it as the herald of a new movement likely to be condemned and misunderstood. It is edited by the mysterious friend called E. K. with explanatory notes, and prefaced with an elaborate letter addressed to Harvey, asking for his protection for the work, discussing the points that are likely to meet the criticism of the learned.

E. K. has been denied a real existence and regarded as a pleasant creation of Spenser by whose month he could blow his own trumpet. Most of the scholars have accepted the view that the initial E. K. stands for Edward Kirke, Spenser's fellow student at Cambridge.

The poem has twelve pastorals, each representing one month of the calendar year. They can be classified as moral, plaintive and recreative. Technically it is a poem of considerable merit, and shows great adroitness in dealing with various old age metres in a fresh and masterly way. As for the calendar itself is a collection of twelve eclogues, one for each month of the year, and mostly in dialogue. Spenser has used all varieties of the form, amatory, moral, religious, courtly, rustic, lyric, elegiac and shows himself at once the master of an old convention and the herald of a new spirit in poetry.

"The Shepherd's Calendar" was his first poetical effort. It is modeled on the pastoral popularized by the Renaissance. Poets and inspired by the great classics, Virgil and Theocritic. The twelve eclogues deal with the abuses of the church, his shattered love for Rosalind, Eliza's Praise and the rustic shepherd life.

Edmund Spenser's famous work 'The Shepherd's Calendar' was published in 1579. It won him a place in the highest rank of living writers. This is his first poetical effort. It is believed to be modeled on the pastoral popularized by the Renaissance poets and inspired by the great classics, Virgil and Theocritus. The poem has twelve pastorals, each representing one month of the Calendar year. They can be classified as moral, plaintive and recreative. Compton-Rickett says, "Technically it is a poem of considerable merit, and shows great adroitness in dealing with various old-time metres in a fresh and masterly way." One can observe the pictorial beauty in this poem.

The present paper deals with Spenser's 'The Shepherd's Calendar' as an allegory. As for the Calendar itself, it is a collection of twelve eclogues, one for each month of the year, and mostly, though not always, in dialogue. There is no prevailing metre, the first eclogue being in the six line stanza, the second in the famous metre which, as we have seen, is found as far back as the Genesis and Exodus of the thirteenth century, but which Coleridge thought himself to have invented, and certainly reinvented in Christabell, the sixth in Octaves; the seventh in the rather lolling eights and sixes, which the earliest Elizabethan poets had loved. An eclogue is a metrical experiment. It was regarded as a literary exercise with little hold on life. In this poem Spenser uses all varieties of the form, amatory, moral, religious,

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courtly, rustic, lyric, elegiac, and shown himself at once master of an old convention and herald of a new spirit in poesy.

The Shepherd's Calendar is a series of twelve eclogues, one for each month of the year, describing Colin Clout's unrequited love for Rosalind and containing interesting references to political and religious conditions; and literary friends and patrons. There is a criticism directed against the Elizabethan hierarchy and the exploitation and neglect of those on the bottom of society by the privileged. This poem questions and criticizes the courtly role conventionally assigned to Elizabethan poetry. Spenser's use of materials from popular culture – the calendar format, woodcuts, fables, proverbs, archaisms and dialect – represent an important part of his critique of established hierarchies. The individual eclogues discuss the relevant social issues. Such as the provision of social welfare, the relationship of church and state and the relationship of Christian humility to social hierarchy.

This poem is of deep interest. He can regard it as veiled autobiography or as a work of art of historic interest and high intrinsic value. The spread of education, the influence of the learning and culture of the Renaissance, the habit of foreign travel, the awakening of a national consciousness are the major concerns in this elegy. Spenser used the allegory form in it. The Shepherd's cloak was the acknowledged disguise of the over, the poet, the courtier, the pastor of souls, and the critic of contemporary life. The Shepherd's world gave him opportunities for description through personal reminiscence and vivid local colour. He made his poem the repository of his personal emotions, his religious and political beliefs, and his hopes and fears for art. In the dramatis personae he represents under a disguise, sometimes dark, sometimes transparent, himself and his friends. He is himself Colin Clout, Gabriel Harvey is Hobbinol, and Rosalind the object of his unhappy love. Under other names he alludes to other personalities; or gives expression to typical points of view.

E. K. has divided the Eclogues into Plaintive, Recreative such as all those which contain matter of love, or commendation of special personages, or 'Moral' which is mixed with some satirical bitterness. The plaintive and recreative poems are devoted to presenting Colin Clout in his double character of lover and of poet. Love is the main theme of January and December alone. There is a strain of melancholy in them. For mingling with the strain of melancholy which laments the cruelty of Rosalind rises the triumphant conviction that Colin is recognized by his brother shepherd as their chief singer, and identified by them with the great future of English verse. In April Hobbinol's reference to Colin's hopeless love is only the introduction to the recital of the lyric that he has written in praise of 'the Fayre Queene of Shepherd's all', a lyric of musical variety and beauty unmatched before in our poetry. In August the 'roundels flesh' of Perigot and Willie are 'yshend' by Cuddie, who recites 'a doleful verse of Rosalind that Colin made'. In November Colin himself rehearses a song which he made in imitation of Marot, 'farre surpassing his reach', comments E. K.

In the first four moral eclogues Spenser expresses his outlook upon problems of wider import than his own love and poetic fame. Colin disappears from the dramatic personae, and the style becomes more homely. February, in its brilliantly told fable of the Oak and the brier, contrasts the decrepitude of age with the arrogance of youth. Once the oak tree was godly one but now it was decayed. Here Spenser sees the true spirit of Christianity degenerated under the influence of Romish superstition and in the haughty brier the irreverent and godless temper of the new clergy, whose irreligion offered so bold a contrast to the simple piety of pure Christian faith. However in the eclogues of May, July and September, Spenser pertains to the Puritan cause. In October, there is a dialogue between two shepherds, Cuddie and Piers. They represent the two conflicting elements in the poet's own nature, the practical eager for fame, and inclined to value poetry as its market price, as a means to further his worldly ambitions – and the ideal, expressed in a passion for an art which 'was a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both, and poured into wit by a certain celestial inspiration'. This eclogue reviews the different themes of poetry and suggests the development of Spenser's own genius, and its response to the call of the heroic Muse.

This poem is an allegory. It symbolizes the state of humanity at large in its cyclical structure. It deals with different subjects such as love, religious controversies, moral questions, the state of poetry in England, and so on. In this poem Edmund Spenser shows a full acquaintance with the pastorals of Greece, Italy and France in respect of style. Though he imitates Bion and Virgil, he adapts and translates from Mantuan and Marot. He also acknowledges his debt to Chaucer, this ambition is to be English.

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In metre 'The Shepherd's Calendar' is experimental. Spenser has used metrical variety in this poem. He has tried his hand at forms suggested by the ballad, at the irregular four-stressed lines, at the regular line of five-feet, all traditional in English poetry, but finds fullest expression in the metre of Chaucer. He uses the ballad metre aiming at a rough effect. He is not interested in the line of four beats, popular in the fifteenth century. He made a delicate use of a triple rhythm. This can be found in the Eclogues of February and May. However, the melody lies in the poem. He creates an ideal atmosphere of the pastoral country in this allegory. It blends artifice with simplicity, and nature with convention. The term 'Shepherd' had come to mean 'poet', and by its reminiscence of Virgil, 'The scholar poet'. In this poem Spenser speaks of himself, it is as the Shepherd Colin.

Spenser himself declared that this poem is a modern work, about living people and contemporary affairs, and stating opinions upon some of them. Spenser used pastoral conventions as vehicles of allegorical and satirical allusions to contemporary political and religious problems, as well as his own life and loves. While writing this allegorical poem, Spenser was greatly influenced by classical and foreign models such as Virgil, Jacopo Sannazaro, Clement Marot, Geoffrey Chaucer and other English poets. This allegory is modeled on the French *Kalendrier des Bergers* – a almanac and describes the works of Shepherds' in the months of the year.

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