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Eloquence and Morality in the Old Poet and the New: Chaucer and Spenser

No reader of the Shepheardes Calender can ignore the determination of the poem's author and his first commentator, E.K., to place the poem in the Chaucerian poetical tradition.[1] The opening and concluding poems both recall a famous passage in Troilus and Criseyde; E.K. begins his epistle with a misquotation from the same poem, and recalls Lydgate's traditional eulogy of his master and Colin Clout's praise of Chaucer by comparison with Virgil, all in the same sentence; and the language of the poem and the comments on it by E.K. create a Chaucerian impression, even if the diction is in fact less 'archaic' than was once supposed. E.K.'s account of Spenser's work to date, 'his Dreames, his Legendes, his Court of Cupide', also sounds Chaucerian, especially if one remembers that sixteenth-century collections of Chaucer's works contained, beside the poet's own 'The Dreame of Chaucer' and 'The Legende of Good Women', a number of spurious items dealing with love, including 'The Court of Love'.

Chaucer's reputation in the sixteenth century was two-fold. On the one hand he was considered to be 'the poet of Puritanism',[2] on account of the attitudes to the clergy in The Canterbury Tales and in other works included in contemporary collections and then thought to be his, particularly The Plowman's Tale and Jack Upland.[3] The overt Lollard sympathy of The Plowman's Tale, and its antipathy to the ecclesiastical hierarchy with its pomp and riches, endeared Chaucer to Puritans, and coupled with his satires of clerics, provided literary authority for their own censure of Papists and their sympathisers. John Foxe, in the second edition of his Acts and Monuments published in 1570 (and many times thereafter), thought that Chaucer 'saw in Religion as much almost, as even we do now, and uttereth in hys works no lesse, and semeth to be a right Wicleuian, or els was neuer any'.[4]

On the other hand, Chaucer was admired as a model of eloquence worthy of comparison with the poets of antiquity, and as a love-poet, credited, besides his own works, with numerous other love poems and complaints, which help to explain his role as a pattern for the lamenting lover-poet in The Shepheardes Calender.

It is easy to understand why 'our new Poete' should wish to be considered the lineal artistic descendant of 'the olde famous Poete Chaucer', and Spenser's poem shows the influence of both aspects of Chaucer's contemporary fame. The concluding poem of The Shepheardes Calender pays homage to Chaucer's admired eloquence, and also draws our attention to the morality of what is surely The Plowman's Tale:

> Dare not to match thy pype with Tityrus hys style,
> Nor with the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde awhyle (9-10)

for the purpose of the work as a whole is

> To teach the ruder shepheard how to feede his sheepe,
> And from the falsers fraud his folded flocke to keepe. (5-6)

This poem, like the dedicatory 'To his Booke', recalls the valedictory stanza at the end of Troilus and Criseyde, and this, Chaucer's most celebrated single poem in the sixteenth century, has considerable structural importance in the relationship between the moral and eloquential elements in The Shepheardes Calender.

The 'Chaucerian' character of the February, May, July and September moral eclogues is well known in general, and becomes even more obvious on closer examination. The February eclogue is introduced by Thenot as 'a tale of truth,/ which I cond of Tityrus in my youth' (91-2). Although E.K. remarks that 'it is cleane in another kind, and rather like to AEsopes fables' than to a tale by Chaucer, the contention between the Oak and the Briar recalls that between the Griffon and Pelican in The Plowman's Tale. There is the same opposition between pride and humility, and there is indeed a verbal echo, as E.K. notices from 'Chaucer': the spiteful briar

> Causelesse complained, and lowdly cryed
> Vnto his Lord, stirring vp sterne strife. (48-49)

while The Plowman's Tale opens with the lines:

> A sterne stryf is stered newe
> In many stedes in a stounde. (53-54)

Perhaps the following lines provided Spenser with the idea for the dispute between two plants of such different sizes, for the strife comes

> Of sondry sedes that ben sewe;
> It semeth that som ben unsounde.
> For some be grete growen on grounde,
> Some ben souple, simple and small;
> Whether of hem is falser founde,
> The falser, foul mote him befall! (55-60)

Here he would have found the suggestion of an AEsopian fable (lines 57-8 remind one of the popular fable of the Oak and the Reeds), [5] together with the idea of interpreting it as a parable of truth and falsehood in religion.

In The Plowman's Tale the two plants are immediately identified as two opposed sides, which must to Puritan readers have seemed to represent Papists ('Popes, cardinals and prelates', 62), and Lollards ('I-cleped lollers and londlees'; 73), whom they thought of as proto-Puritans. In the February eclogue the contrast is not so simple: when the story is over and the emblems explained, E.K. obviously recognises truth in both. But of course his model in The Plowman's Tale does not present a simple opposition either. The Pelican protests:

> I dispysed not the pope,
> Ne no sacrament, soth to say; (1178-9)

rather, he deplores the corruption of the church and castigates prelates for their pride, pomp, wealth and, above all, for their assumption of lordship. In both cases, it is the degeneration of the pristine church of Christ which the poets lament.

The May eclogue is also related to The Plowman's Tale. Piers' 'hyred' shepherds neglect their sheep and spend their time elsewhere in 'lustihede and wanton meryment' (42), just as in The Plowman's Tale 'hyred men' do not 'helpe hir sheep' but 'wake,/ And drink pyment [and] ale apart' (431-2). The hireling shepherd is familiar from John 10.12, and elsewhere, including Chaucer's portrait of the Parson in the General Prologue: 'He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie' (C.T. A 514), but Spenser seems to have taken the revelry of the hirelings from The Plowman's Tale. Piers calls them 'faytours' who 'little regarden their charge' (39), a name which occurs throughout Part 1 of The Plowman's Tale in a line repeated (with variations) as a refrain:

> All such faytours shull foul fall! (436)

Later on, Piers concludes his fable with a warning against the friendship of 'falsers' like the Fox, and this uncommon word, which occurs again in the concluding poem (l.6), but only once elsewhere in Spenser's works, might possibly have been suggested to him by the homophone 'falser' (comparative adjective but with some grammatical ambiguity) in the refrains of the early stanzas of The Plowman's Tale (ll. 60, 84). Piers, expressing a familiar Puritan complaint against 'Louers of Lordship', [6] condemns those shepherds who, not content with their lot,

> ... gape for greedie governaunce,
> And match themselfe with mighty potentates, (121-2)

while the Pelican also condemns those who 'wilneth welde erthly honour' (118) and 'willeth to be kinges peres,/ And hygher than the emperour' (125-6). It is a theme Spenser takes up again in the July eclogue, where Thomalin's

description of the shepherds whom E.K. identified with 'Popes and Cardinalles' echoes the description of haughty prelates in The Plowman's Tale. Times have changed since pastors

> ... were lowe, and lief, ...
> They neuer strouen to be chief,
> and simple was theyr weede. (165-8)

Nowadays,

> They bene yclad in purple and pall,
> so hath theyr god them blist,
> They reigne and rulen ouer all,
> and lord it, as they list:
> Ygyrt with belts of glitterand gold. (173-7)

The Pelican preaches that priests should be

> ... lowlich and of low degree,
> And usen none erthly honours,
> Neyther crown, ne curious cove[r]tours,
> Ne pelure, ne other proude pall; (103-6)

and that they should

> Nat wilne sittings in hy see,
> Ne soveraynte in hous ne hall; (113-14)

This ideal contrasts with those that

> ... hye on horse willeth ryde
> In glitterand golde of grete aray,
> .....
> With golden girdles grete and small. (133-8)

Both poems continue with a condemnation of the avarice of these hireling shepherds at the expense of their flocks; the same stress on irresponsible and neglectful shepherds is found in the September eclogue. In all these examples Spenser shows his appreciation of 'Chaucer' as a moralist.

A different aspect of the Chaucerian inheritance emerges elsewhere in the poem. In the June eclogue Colin's eulogy of Tityrus recalls a long tradition of praise, going back to Hoccleve in its reproach to death, and especially dependent upon Lydgate. Colin is sure that

> . . . if on me some little drops would flowe,
> Of that the spring was in his learned hedde,
> I soone would learne these woods, to wayle my woe,
> And teache the trees, their trickling teares to shedde. (93-6)

According to Lydgate, [7] it was Chaucer

> That made firste to distille and reyne
> The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence
> In-to oure tongue thourȝ his excellence.

Both Lydgate and Colin are Chaucer's pupils, and neither aspires to the master's lofty accomplishment:

> And Chaucer now allas is nat alyue
> Me to reforme or to be my rede
> For lak of whom slouȝer is my spede
> Þe noble Rethor that alle dide excelle
> For in makyng he drank of þe welle
> Vndir pernaso þat þe musis kepe
> On whiche hil I myȝt neuer slepe. [8]

> The God of shepheardes Tityrus is dead,
> Who taught me homely, as I can, to make. (81-2)

> I neuer lyst presume to Parnasse hyll,
> But pyping lowe in shade of lowly groue,
> I play to please my selfe, all be it ill. (70-2)

No doubt both Lydgate and Spenser knew Chaucer's own exploitation of this conventional reference to Parnassus (ultimately from Persius) in the prologue to the Franklin's Tale (F721), and Colin is perhaps echoing the Franklin (F716-20) in his own modest characterisation of his verse (June, 77), a sentiment which he repeats in the November eclogue:

> But ah to well I wote my humble vaine,
> And howe my rymes bene rugged and vnkempt. (50-1)

Despite his modesty, however, Thenot compares Colin's accomplishment with his own 'fooleree', in words reminiscent of Lydgate's praise of Chaucer:

> Nay, better learne of hem, that learned bee,
> And han be watered at the Muses well:
> The kindlye dewe drops from the higher tree,
> And wets the little plants that lowly dwell. (Nov., 29-32)

Colin stands in the same relationship to him as Chaucer to Colin in June. Colin typically sees Chaucer as the poet of eloquent lyrical complaint (June, 83-6), presumably crediting him, in addition to his complaints and numerous passages of love-lament in the longer poems, with several works in the same kind contained in sixteenth-century editions, in which he could find models of a poet who though 'with loue ytake', could 'wayle his Woes, and lightly slake / The flames' (84-6): something which Colin himself despairs of ever achieving.

The pattern which Colin's life has followed, emerging as it does in this passage about Chaucer, and more generally in eclogues framed by poems dependent on Chaucer's masterpiece, Troilus and Criseyde, [9] cannot fail to remind the reader of the predicament of Troilus. Both of them experience the misery of unrequited love, the happiness of reciprocated love, and the misery of loss. Both have a rival who deceives their lady and makes her 'wexe so light' (June, 103). Chaucer's poem is about Troilus, and his success and failure provides continuing narrative interest. Of course, Colin's predicament is not quite at the centre of the Shepheardes Calender: his lady has already been won and lost when the poem begins. The structural circularity of Chaucer's 'fro wo to wele, and after out of joie' (I,4), is replaced in Spenser by the movement of the seasons, but in neither poem is the pattern simply circular. If winter and woe return, they are informed by the experience of the intervening time. Despite his misery, Colin's emblem in January indicated that he was still comforted by hope; in June, however, the hope 'that was, is cleane extinguished and turned into despeyre' (E.K. gloss on Colin's emblem). In December he reviews his life, and sees its changes in terms of the passing seasons: 'My haruest wast, my hope away dyd wipe' (108). Now in winter he looks towards death, and rejects the follies of youth:

> Sike follies now haue gathered as too ripe
> And cast hem out, as rotten and vnsoote.
> The loser Lasse I cast to please nomore,
> One if I please, enough is me therefore. (117-20)

The last line has a characteristic Chaucerian obliqueness. Compare the teasing lines in the Book of the Duchess:

> For there is phisicien but oon
> That may me hele; but that is doon. (39-40)

Some have thought that despite what precedes and the formal adieu that follows, the 'one' Colin means is Rosalind, but perhaps there is a suggestion of turning to higher things, prepared for by the conclusion of the lament for Dido in the November eclogue. There are a number of things in the December eclogue which recall the conclusion of Chaucer's Troilus. The world is transitory,

passing 'soone as floures faire' (T & C, V, 1841) just as for Colin 'The fragrant flowers, That in my garden grewe, / Bene withered' (109-110). Young readers are advised to turn their thoughts, like Colin, from looser things to God:

> Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
> And of youre herte up casteth the visage
> To thilke God that after his ymage
> Yow made . . . (T & C, V, 1837-40)

Troilus dies, and Colin takes his leave of life: his formal adieux (151-6) have a rhetorical pattern which reminds us of the anaphora in the patterned stanzas at the end of Troilus and Criseyde (V, 1828-34, 1849-55). Colin's failure in love leads him to eschew poetry, to hang up his pipe, and though this is a less histrionic gesture than his breaking his pipe in January, it has more of an air of finality: he has no hope. Troilus, too, finally hopeless, 'woot now, out of doute, / That al is lost' (V, 1644-5), and is less histrionic than before in his expressions of grief; while the narrator in Troilus and Criseyde shares Colin's rejection of poetry:

> Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
> In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche. (1854-5)

He is bitterly disappointed at the failure of a love story in which, despite his knowledge of the outcome, he has become emotionally involved with the fortunes of his hero and heroine. Despite the undeniable validity of the narrator's preference for 'the pleyn felicite / That is in hevene above' (1818-19) over this transitory world, yet as modern readers have pointed out, the source of the rhetorical power of the Epilogue is less the firm conviction of the moralist (as some critics have made it seem), than the sudden emotional revulsion of the disappointed love-poet.[10] The value of the human love experienced in Book III, and the conviction of its place in the scale of divine love, are confirmed rather than destroyed by the vehemence of the narrator's reaction to the end of the story. Could it be that Spenser as critic of Troilus and Criseyde, like Chaucer its poet, should give us cause to marvel 'that he in that mistie time, could see so clearely', and that 'wee in this cleare age, walke so stumblingly after him' (Sidney, An Apology for Poetry)?

The silence of Colin's pipe demonstrates his failure to appreciate the relationship expressed by Piers in the October eclogue (which E.K. classes with February, May, July and September as 'Moral') between the experience of love, the raising of the mind, and poetry. Colin's own miserable experience of love, love which ought to teach him to 'climbe so hie' and lift himself 'out of the loathsome myre' (Oct. 91-2), has rendered him poetically impotent. In the November eclogue, Colin declines to sing of his love (7, 10), but sings instead at Thenot's request a lament for Dido, in which

although he exploits his own experience of sorrow, he transcends it, and is able to 'rayse his mynd aboue the starry skie' (Oct. 94): his admiration and affection for Dido and his sympathetic involvement in the grief for her death, lead the poet from the contemplation of earthly things to heavenly consolation; Colin's song demonstrates the ideal poetical function outlined by Piers. The subject of his song is not his own, but given him by Thenot, as Chaucer stresses repeatedly that his story of Troilus and Criseyde is taken from 'myn auctor called Lollius', but in each case the poet involves himself in the course of the poem with the feelings he describes, [11] and is brought to an appreciation of the frailty of earthly life (T & C, V, 1828-55, SC Nov. 153-62), in comparison with the bliss of heaven (SC Nov. 173-202). But neither poem ends there. Chaucer's narrator goes on to denounce the classical poetry that tells such tragic tales of love, and Colin relapses into silence in December. But the rejection of poetry is not the answer; we do not believe Chaucer's narrator: it is clear we are not intended to, for the poet despatches his book to follow in the footsteps of some of the great poets of antiquity, and concludes with the request to Gower and Strode for their help in perfecting his poem. No more does Spenser intend the reader to share in Colin's personal despair of song.

Colin's emblem at the end of the December eclogue is missing, but E.K.'s gloss makes its tenor clear. The epilogue of Chaucer's Troilus offered an answer for 'the trustlesse state of earthly things' in eternity; Spenser put forward a similar idea in November and perhaps in December, but now there is a confident assertion of the permanence of art:

> ... All thinges perish and come to theyr last end, but workes of learned wits and monuments of Poetry abide for ever.

In the concluding poem Spenser turns again to the end of Troilus, to a passage which had already provided a model for his opening poem. When he began, he elaborated on a familiar fear, and, appropriately for a youthful writer convinced of the inevitable envy of the world, sought the protection of a patron. Now, following Colin's emblem, he echoes the words of Horace and Ovid, openly confident that he has 'made a calender for every yeare', and making explicit the implicit assurance that Chaucer reveals in his art; for while Chaucer cloaks his claim to a place in the line of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan and Statius under the convention of modesty, 'inviting comparison by eschewing comparison' as E.T. Donaldson observes, [12] Spenser's poem is presented to the public as a work already worthy of classic status, complete with the apparatus of introductory material and explanatory glosses familiar in renaissance editions of the great Greek and Roman poets. [13] Like Chaucer, Spenser sends his poem off to follow more elevated models (9-11): he sees his writing imitating 'farre off' the two admired aspects of the Chaucerian tradition: lyrical eloquence and morality, and he stresses that it has a permanent didactic

purpose:

> To teach the ruder shepheard how to feede his sheepe
> And from the falsers fraud his folded flocke to keepe.

But the teaching of The Shepheardes Calender is not to be limited to the contents of the 'Chaucerian' moral eclogues. The final motto of the whole work, 'merce non mercede', appropriately returns us to the October eclogue, where Piers claims that for the poet

> ... the prayse is better, then the price,
> The glory eke much greater then the gayne: (19-20)

and that his greatest honour lies in his role as teacher of youth. The true poet, according to Piers, learns 'to aspire' through the moral experience of love, which fits him to attempt the 'famous flight' heavenwards of 'aspyring' poesye in the transcendant eloquence of his song;. as Colin demonstrated in the November eclogue, and Chaucer in Troilus and Criseyde.

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NOTES

1. All references to Spenser are to Poetical Works, eds. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, Oxford 1912; to Chaucer are to Works, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd edn., Oxford 1957; and to The Plowman's Tale are to Chaucerian and other Pieces, Complete Works of Geffrey Chaucer, ed. W.W. Skeat, VII, Oxford 1897.

2. E.A. Greenlaw, The Shepheardes Calender, PMLA, 26, 1911, 441. Also L.B. Wright, 'William Painter and the Vogue of Chaucer as a Moral Teacher', MP 31, 1933-4, 170-71.

3. The Plowman's Tale is included in the second edition of Thynne's The Workes of Geffrey Chaucer (1542), and in subsequent sixteenth-century collections. Jack Upland was assigned to Chaucer in an edition of c.1540, and by Foxe in Ecclesiastical history contayning the Acts and Monumentes of thynges passed in euery Kynges tyme in this Realme, 2nd edn., 1570.

4. Foxe, II, 965; in Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, ed. C.F.E. Spurgeon, London 1925, I, 106.

5. Chaucer recalls this fable in Troilus and Criseyde, II, 1380-90, and I, 257-8.

6. A. Hume, 'Spenser, Puritanism, and the "Maye" Eclogue', RES, 20, 1969, 163.

7. Life of our Lady, see Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, p.19. See also p.24, The hystorye, sege and dystruccyon of Troye, and p.53, Stanza in Praise of Chaucer, written 1450-60 and printed by Stowe in 1561.

8. The hystorye, sege and dystruccyon of Troye, Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, p.24.

9. It was his best-known and most often quoted work before 1700. See Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, pp.lxxvi-vii and lxxix.

10. See, for example, E. Talbot Donaldson, 'The Ending of Troilus', in Speaking of Chaucer, London 1970; and J. Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer, London 1974, pp.188-91.

11. This process in Troilus and Criseyde is described by E. Talbot Donaldson in 'Criseide and Her Narrator', Speaking of Chaucer, pp.65-83. In the November eclogue Colin reveals his involvement in ll.58, 71, 77-8 and 101.

12. Speaking of Chaucer, p.95.

13. Editions of Virgil's Bucolics 'cum commento familiari', for example, had been in print in England since 1512, long before the rest of his works appeared, and in 1575, only four years before Spenser's Shepheardes Calender, Abraham Fleming published the first English translation of the Bvkolikes, 'with alphabeticall Annotations'.