

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Current scholarship suggests the futility, if not impossibility, of reading the poetry of Spenser and his contemporaries outside its political context.¹ Even for a poet physically removed from the court during most of his mature years, that context clearly includes the circle of educated readers – statesmen, careerists, aristocrats, the Queen – who are his primary audience. Hence, one question posed by the present study is, How does Spenser view his role as a poet vis-à-vis the structure of power in Elizabethan society? Recent criticism has argued that Spenser, however protestingly, acknowledges his own fundamental lack of authority: Elizabethan poets *qua* poets are powerless; they cannot “author” their own utterances, but owe their very speech to those who may command it.² This view rests on a number of important assumptions that grow mainly out of the post-modernist, post-structuralist climate of the 1970s and 80s, particularly among the so-called “new historicists.”³ Contemporary readers have learned a great deal about the manipulation of utterance by political authorities; hence we are quick to recognize the propaganda potential of any discourse.

The question of the poet’s authority cannot easily be divorced from the other major focus of this book, literary pastoralism. That the pastoral mode is bound up with the issue of poetry and power has been understood at least since Empson.⁴ According to his thesis, the pastoral certifies a social order by imaginatively dissolving the distance between rich and poor, noble and commoner: “The effect was in some degree to combine in the reader or author the merits of the two sorts [of people]; he was made to mirror in himself... the effective elements of the society he lived in” (p. 12). Empson stresses the viability of the pastoral “trick” from the point of view of those at the top of the social hierarchy. As putative spokesman for those with wealth and privilege, the poet assures his readers that they are in effect microcosms of the social order, since they can vicariously

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

participate in, and possess all the virtues of, its lowest ranks. On the other hand, this trick has benefits for the poet and his peers as well. For as the modest pastoral virtues are the authentic ones, there can be no reason for the spiritually surfeited to envy the mere wealth or status of their betters. They are – and must feel themselves to be – part of a plenitude. Hence for the poet the result was the sustaining illusion of personal power and freedom: “You take a limited life and pretend it’s a full and normal one” (p. 110).

More recent studies of Renaissance pastoral have stressed the subservient status of courtly poets mentioned earlier. In a provocative article, Louis A. Montrose has anatomized the Elizabethan “pastoral of power,” whereby poets trained in humanist schools subservise and flatter the autocratic regime to which they owe their vocation.⁵ The theory of pastoral articulated by Montrose is the fullest expansion to date on the Empsonian theory. But where Empson tends to accept at face value the pastoral poet’s self-identification with his social superiors, Montrose places this strategy in an ironic perspective. For him pastoral implicitly entails self-deception. For if the pastoral strategy permits the high to imagine themselves as no better (or worse) than the low, it also elevates the low, namely the poet himself, to the level of his privileged readers. In enacting the imaginative equality of the humble and the mighty, the poet ceases to be merely an instrument of social mediation and seeks to become instead an agent of self-transformation. Mirroring the act of putting the complex into the simple and the high in the low, he arrogates to himself the implicit superiority that enables the act in the first place. I would add that such an exercise in dissimulation is not necessarily ingenuous: Spenser, dubbing himself as the anonymous “Immeritó” in *The Shepheardes Calender*, acknowledges his essential humbleness pending his readers’ endorsement of the function he proposes to perform. Like Peter Quince and his rude mechanicals, or Prospero as epilogist, he depends on the assent of his betters to bring off the trick at all. Yet the potential for self-delusion in all this is clearly evident. In claiming the role of mediator the poet implies his own elevation to a position of real authority in which he alone can give convincing voice to an operative myth of social harmony.

The emphasis on the pastoral poet’s social status and on pastoral itself as a response to political power aligns it with other reflections on the poet’s function in Renaissance courts. It is no accident that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

the “courtly” pastoral flourishes at a time when Italian humanism was giving way to courtliness (*cortegiana*) – or, as some prefer to put it, “civic” to “courtly” humanism – as a socio-cultural mode more in tune with the new autocratic principalities of the sixteenth century. The new genre of Renaissance pastoral, for which Voltaire observed the Italians “had no models, and in which they have never been surpassed,” was largely the achievement of Sannazaro.⁶ Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* has been called the ideal place for a fifteenth-century humanist.⁷ But the revised *Arcadia* of 1504 also reflects the nostalgia and sense of isolation of a *déclassé* courtier at the Neapolitan royal court. Sannazaro’s pastoral persona, Sincero, fuses the classical nostalgia of the Renaissance humanist with the dislocation of the Renaissance courtier. This blend of motives is evident in Sannazaro’s desire to reconstitute the past on the model of classical Rome: Sincero’s vision in Prosa 12, for example, which takes place in a blasted pastoral landscape, is not of the Sebeto but of the Tiber.⁸

Certain motifs common in early Renaissance pastoral recur in Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* (1528), where the search of the learned courtier for a vocation is deflected in an elaborate game of disguise and dissembling.⁹ Here too, as still later in Tasso, one senses that the cultivation of wit and grace is aimed at preserving the ego from external encroachments.¹⁰ It should be noted that implicit in these Renaissance courtly works, whether pastoral or other, is the premise that beneath his humble mask the author has the capacity to exercise a certain autonomy. In the case of the pastoralist, whether we think of him as fleeing from cultural crisis into an Arcadian “landscape of the mind” or fashioning a calculated stance toward the politically powerful, poetry is an instrument by which the relatively powerless may forge a surrogate power through language. In doing so the pastoral poet may be deceiving himself by mistaking a wholly derivative authority for one intrinsic to himself. Yet occasional exaggerations of his own autonomy notwithstanding, he may legitimately claim to be expressing the shared values of a cultivated elite as well as memorializing its individual or dynastic virtues. Such a claim in turn confers a certain authority on the poet himself. In this light, pastoralism emerges as the quintessential form of courtly culture in its literary aspect.

Yet this more or less established view of courtly literature in general, like that of pastoral, is sharply challenged in recent theory.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Montrose sees Elizabethan pastoral as chiefly instrumental: the poet is a courtier who writes, and his main function is to flatter the real bearers of power by lending eloquence and an air of respectability to their reigning political myths. A “medium” rather than an “analogue” of courtliness, Elizabethan poetry exists to certify the social subordination of all courtiers to an authoritarian power structure.¹¹ Within this general system, pastoral poetry must be viewed as the ultimate dissimulative mode, “ironic through and through.” Drawing on Puttenham’s discussion of allegoria, the dissembling trope, Montrose argues that “Puttenham understands literary pastoral to be the characteristic poetic kind of a complex, strife-ridden, and authoritarian civilization – a fallen world of conspiracy and duplicity” (p. 31).¹² Pastoral poets, including Spenser, are “*unavoidably* compromised by the desire to rise and the need to please” (my emphasis). Like Puttenham’s pastoral trope, Spenser is a “cunning Prince-Pleaser,” part of an elaborate system of strategies by which Elizabeth and her ministers orchestrated her dominance of all classes and factions in England throughout her reign. Hence, when the pastoral poet criticizes courtly conduct, it is at best an intramural affair: by ostensibly attacking abuses of privilege the poet in fact perpetuates the myth of the ideal courtier and so endorses the social structure it exists to sustain.

This view strikes me as unnecessarily reductive. Most readers recognize a certain play, in both senses of the word, in Renaissance courtly literature and a fortiori in the pastoral. This play generally derives from the delicate maneuvering of the courtly writer within a confining yet challenging social milieu.¹³ Sir Thomas More’s courtier in Book 1 of *Utopia*, or Castiglione’s in Book 4 of the *Cortegiano*, uses obliquity and dissimulation as much to reform as to certify the social structure.¹⁴ The function of obliquely addressing a power elite comports especially well with the dissimulative strategies of pastoral, which allow the poet to proclaim his innocence and naïveté while questioning his audience’s actions or values. Montrose himself has lately arrived at a similar conclusion. Reflecting in a recent article on his own and others’ assumptions about Elizabethan ideology, Montrose writes that

we should resist the inevitably reductive tendency to think in terms of a subject/structure opposition. Instead, we might entertain the propositions that subject and structure ... are interdependent and thus intrinsically social

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

and historical: that ... collective structures may enable as well as constrain individual agency.¹⁵

As this caveat implies, monolithic concepts such as that of an Elizabethan “pastoral of power” deny altogether the habitual assumptions of poetic authority underlying older theories of pastoral. In the name of a severe historical determinism such a construct threatens the long-held view of pastoral as a playful but educative response to social and political issues by a poet who has a ruler’s ear. In this scenario, the distinction between poetry and propaganda becomes mere fantasy; the literary shepherd, a literal sheep.

Despite such recent revisions, however – or perhaps because of them – the contemporary challenge to more traditional assumptions about pastoral compels one to question these assumptions once more.¹⁶ The investigation undertaken in the following pages examines literary pastoral in the context of certain broad historical considerations. Towards the end of the Renaissance the overt didactic intention of the humanist allegorical pastoral begins to wane.¹⁷ At this time, especially in the drama, one begins to hear a new note. In the Prologue to Daniel’s *Queenes Arcadia*, we are told that pastorals

best become a claustrall exercise,
Where men shut out retyr’d, and sequestred
From publike fashion, seeme to sympathize
With innocent, and plaine simplicity.¹⁸

The note of deliberate dissimulation (“seeme”) is clear enough. As for “claustrall exercise,” More’s utopian critique of the nascent capitalism of Tudor England also takes place in a kind of cloister, a privileged space of freedom. This privilege is assumed by men closely associated with regimes whose power they mediate in their writings and on whose pleasure they depend for the very leisure, in their occasional periods of retirement from business, that makes such writings possible.¹⁹ Yet however mitigated by the autocratic courtliness of the sixteenth century, the humanist tradition still permits them the indirect approach of a playfully disguised fiction as a way to criticize and even to influence their patrons.

At least since Vergil, this obliquity has been part of the pastoral convention. To Vergilian pastoral is attributed not only the genre’s

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

use of allegory and indirect social criticism, but the very model of a literary career. Vergil's shepherds are thinly disguised poets and protégés who enact the educated Roman's struggle with the burgeoning Augustan regime.²⁰ This transaction undoubtedly appears more equal than it was in fact. And perhaps partly for this reason Vergil comes to be viewed as the exemplary courtier-poet. His canonical progress through the genres, the *rota Vergiliana*, a staple of Renaissance imitation, is predicated on a mutually gratifying relation of the poet and his patron-prince.²¹ This conception of the court poet's authority retains at least the suggestion of an authentic *quid pro quo*. The poet confers gifts of his own that go well beyond the act of flattering an authoritarian regime. In celebrating those in power Vergilian pastoral reflects the assumption that a polity must also be a community and that a community entails more than the simple mediation of power relationships. It also embodies ethical values, including those attached to aristocratic otium. As I will try to show in my first chapter, classical pastoral habitually assumes that part of the poet's function in society is to define and exercise the traditional aristocratic prerogative of contemplation, thereby clarifying the ontological foundation on which the social structure rests. Though strictly speaking he is politically powerless, through his pastoral persona the poet claims a degree of power which he derives from the freedom of a "claustrall exercise" in havens of imaginative retirement that he shares with other courtiers.

This conventional balance in the pastoralist's view of himself is still viable in the Renaissance pastoral, as well as in the ideal of courtliness it reflects. Renaissance poets write and talk about their writing as though their careers amounted to more than a well-dissembled exercise in the pursuit of reflected power. However subordinate their actual situations, the best of the courtly poets presume an educative function. While sharing the exigencies of other courtiers, they are unique in that they can speak, and the power of speech at this time can hardly be exaggerated. It is true that the scope of their speech is not without limits: hence the nearly universal praise of dissimulation.²² Yet the very anguish attached to the actual limits of their freedom suggests that the notion of absolute, "unavoidable" subservience and flattery is too simplistic.²³ Once again, one might cite a recent pronouncement by Louis Montrose:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

An ideological dominance is qualified by both the specific professional and/or class interests of cultural producers and by the relative autonomy of the cultural medium being worked. In other words, sufficient allowance must be made for the manifold mediations involved in the production and reproduction of an ideological dominance: for the collective and individual agency of the prince's subjects, and for the specific character and conventions of the representational forms they employ.²⁴

In Elizabeth's England, as in Guidobaldo's Urbino, literature is part of a larger courtly game. And that game is worth playing precisely because some degree of freedom is an indispensable ornament of any courtly or other viable society, as our knowledge of truly unfree societies serves to remind us. The Renaissance poet is no lawgiver – nor did he dream he was. But his intimacy with the world of power that tolerated, and indeed authorized, his existence permitted him at least a minimal opportunity to affect that world. Those in power listened to him when he spoke; this is borne out by the occasional violence of their reaction when they felt he spoke out of turn. Pastoralism, with its negotiation between the ideal realm of Socratic discourse and the real world of Renaissance courts, was the perfect medium for exercising and reflecting upon this particular “limited life.”

In this dispute Spenser is an important case in point. Though physically absent from court, except for occasional visits, during the last twenty years of his life, Spenser's art is motivated, if not compromised, by “the desire to rise and the need to please.” The result is a complex relationship between the poet and his courtly audience. Spenser's own assessment of his role views the communal memory of author and reader as the locus for constructing a viable historical mythology. The aim of such a construction is to legitimize the current polity by grounding it in Platonic paradigms of justice and truth and thus to discover the underlying meaning of historical change.²⁵ The model for this view of poetry is the *Aeneid*, whose immersion in history caused it to be viewed in the Renaissance as ideally fusing action and contemplation. Hence for Spenser in the early books of *The Faerie Queene*, “visionary” moments are also “prophetic” because historical action is the consummation of individual contemplation.²⁶

Spenser's effort to recreate Vergil's version of power is ultimately a failure. In Book 4 he is clearly moving away from the centers of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

power and historical vision toward new internal sources of inspiration, a movement interrupted by his early death (p. 188).²⁷ Yet if Spenser in his last years is unable to sustain the Vergilian model, retreating from the more optimistic view of the celebratory historical epic, he remains, in his own mind at least, an authoritative source of values, the moral center of his world. From this angle Spenser's career begins to look like Dante's. In various works, but especially in the *Purgatorio*, Dante sees his exile as a long digression from and return to the personal figura of Beatrice, for him the core and penultimate terminus of his creative life. It has been suggested that this conception is derived from the medieval (and Renaissance) reading of the *Aeneid*, and occasionally of the Vergilian corpus as a whole, as an allegory of "man's life in time."²⁸ This allegory, as we shall see, enshrines in turn the Aristotelian concept of the "estates" or genres of life, in which one normally progresses from action to contemplation. In the *Commedia* contemplation culminates in a personal, figural vision prompted by love; directed toward an embodied beauty, eros becomes the medium of vision, and the figure of the beloved its appropriate object.²⁹ In Spenser, I shall try to show, such a possibility is already adumbrated by Piers in the "October" eclogue and is fulfilled in his latest work.

Unlike Dante, however, as a Renaissance poet Spenser tends to chart his career in terms of the pastoral. Always the vehicle of his reflections on his role as a poet, Spenserian pastoral oscillates between the claims of the Tudor social myth and those of the literary, specifically the figural, tradition as modified and transmitted by Dante and others. The pastoral – or at least its Vergilian articulation – begins with the flight of Astraea, and Elizabethan courtly pastoral obsessively returns to the "courting" of Astraea in the historical figure of Elizabeth. As this book will argue, in the course of Spenser's career Elizabeth is gradually displaced by a personal figura whose significance evolves with the poet's outlook but who re-emerges in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*, and the late love-poetry as the mediatrix between his visionary powers and the objects of imitation, i.e. between the self and history or "the world." In short, "Rosalind" (as she is sometimes called) usurps the function of Gloriana in Spenser's personal poetic economy. In the process, Spenser's conception and practice of pastoral undergo a corresponding evolution. Beginning with a Vergilian confidence in the poet's prerogative of educating the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Prince and constructing a cultural community, in his dynastic and national epic Spenser creates an image of power sanctified by his own imaginative idealizations: “ceremonies of innocence,” in Yeats’ resonant phrase. This version of pastoral is akin to the pastoral of power, though it denies the mere instrumentality of the poet. In the final decade of his life, however, Spenser asserts a more independent and tangential relation to the centers of power, though maintaining a commitment to the poet’s unique contemplative function. In this final phase love assumes an increasing importance; the personal *figura* becomes supreme.

Before turning to Spenser’s development as a pastoral poet, I shall explore several theoretical assumptions about both pastoral and the poet’s traditional function in courtly culture. In doing so, I shall try to avoid the sometimes cumbersome terminology of contemporary theory, though I hope I have profited from its insights. Instead, I have tried throughout the book to cast my argument in terms of traditional literary-critical and cultural-historical studies.³⁰ To write in the late 1980s on a standard topic in Renaissance literary studies is to take on the burden of an impressive body of theoretical work from a number of post-structuralist perspectives that has for a decade or so been trained upon the literary and cultural premises and practices of the English and European Renaissance. As will be clear to the reader from the outset, the present book does not primarily seek to add to this body of work. While I do not ignore its practitioners or its provocations, I have been willing to submerge the lively issues of the day in an argument that will strike some readers perhaps, as it has from time to time struck me, as speaking itself from the far side of a chasm that has opened up of late in the literary body politic. To such readers my Yeatsian title, intended to convey at least a whiff of historical irony, may even have a nostalgic ring. Clearly, those of us in literary studies who are not “theorists” (a dwindling company, it sometimes seems) must register as fully as possible the implications of structuralist and post-structuralist inventions. At the same time, the imperative remains to continue the activity of engaging with words written in the past. If the theoretical contributions of the last twenty-five years help to sharpen our awareness of the manifold quandaries and aporias of such a project, so much the better.

In chapter 1, then, I begin by examining the traditional debate, from late antiquity on, about the relative claims of the active and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12923-7 - Ceremonies of Innocence: Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser

John D. Bernard

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

contemplative lives. In this debate the normal supremacy of the *vita contemplativa* is derived from the Hellenic concept of a gentleman (*kalokagathos*) and his cultural development (*paideia*), ideals which in later times it devolves increasingly upon poets to uphold. I then go on to show how Vergil, as read in the medieval allegorical tradition, bequeathes to this debate a literary typology in which the *vita contemplativa* is closely associated with pastoral. The result of this review is to make it clear that antedating the Renaissance pastoral of power is a pastoral of reflection and social rectification, a version of pastoral implicit in Spenser's personal revisions of the mode. The chapter argues, therefore, that the Western literary tradition from the outset entails a tension between the expectation of flattering political power and the moral imperative to maintain a fruitful use of otium. Partly by invoking the example of his predecessors, the pastoral poet as an exponent of the *vita contemplativa* is implicitly licensed to chasten the personal conduct and urge the collective responsibility of his social superiors. This tension is necessarily heightened in the more centralized and autocratic courts of the Renaissance, but the traditional ethical imperative remains viable.

In the remaining chapters I re-examine Spenser's use of pastoral in the context of these considerations, from *The Shepheardes Calender* (chapter 2) and the 1590 *Faerie Queene* (chapter 3), through the pivotal *Complaints* and *Colin Clout* of 1591 (chapter 4), to the 1596 *Faerie Queene* (chapter 5) and the last poems (chapter 6). The argument that runs through these chapters is that the full understanding of Renaissance pastoral depends on our recognizing the importance of the historic link between the literary mode and the philosophical *vita contemplativa*. Spenser's works reveal with increasing clarity that the contemplative life, which is the oldest Western myth of fullness as well as the earliest justification of special privilege, lies at the heart of the pastoral poet's métier. In the parallel evolutions of pastoral, the *vita contemplativa*, and the social function of poetry in aristocratic cultures, one outstanding feature is the dignity of the poet. And this dignity – this authority – continues to rest, the evidence suggests, on his exercising the contemplative prerogative as a potentially fertile collaboration in the cultural forms of production.

It is my contention, therefore, that a pastoral of contemplation balances the pastoral of power in the literary culture of Spenser's