REACHING FOR "UNKNOWNNE GAYNE"

IN

THE SHEPHEARDES CALENDER

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Although Spenser's The Shepheardes Calender has been regarded by some as a "heterogeneous" collection of poems (Bayley 33) with no central unifying theme, several bases for the work's unity have been proposed in the last few decades. One critic argues that patterns among the three types of eclogues—moral, plaintive, and recreational—create structural unity in the work (Davies 45). Steven Marx has made a convincing case for the theme of youth against age, while Lynn Staley Johnson sees the work as "a piece of political commentary" that carries "the theme of national and personal renewal" (12). The general consensus of recent criticism is that the Calender is a unified work, but as David R. Shore writes, "there is remarkably little agreement over the nature of that unity and the means by which it is achieved" (7). A motif which has been noted in the Calender is that of ambition. A number of critics have given brief mention of the presentation of this theme in the work, but I think that ambition is more central to the Calender than is generally acknowledged. Spenser's presentation of the theme is subtle and complex, first showing ambition in an unfavorable light, then gradually shifting to a favorable one as the Calender progresses.

In his "generall argument," E. K. defines the moral eclogues as those "which for the most part be mixed with some Satyrical bitternesse." These include "Februarie," which concerns "reuerence dewe to old age"; "Maye," with its "coloured deceit"; "Iulye" and "September," which discuss "dissolute shepheards and pastours"; and "October," which deals with the "contempt of Poetrie and pleasaut wits."

In "Februarie," two shepherds, Thenot and Cuddie, debate the comparative advantages of youth and age. Thenot, who has lived "thrise threttie yeares" (17), emphasizes age's ability to endure hardships, while Cuddie speaks of love and the other pleasures of youth. Thenot relates the story of the Oak and the Briar, in which a young briar brings about the overthrow of an elderly oak that had overshadowed him. The Briar, bereft of the Oak's protection from the elements, soon perishes. Thenot intends the fable to support his argument that youth needs age to help it grow, but the fable's symbolism is lost on Cuddie; he calls it "a long tale, and little worth" (240). Many readers take this fable at face value,
considering it a “tale of truth” (Greco 6) that indeed supports Thenot’s side of the youth/age debate. But a closer look shows that Thenot’s fable is not merely about youth and age but about overreaching ambition and its consequences.

Thenot’s description of the Briar emphasizes its pride and ambition and is designed to give the reader an unpleasant impression. He calls it “bold” (139), “a bragging brere, /Which proudly thrust” upwards (115–16). The Briar speaks to the Oak with “great disdaine” (139) and to the husbandman “With painted words . . . / (As most vsen Ambitious folke:)” (161–62). The Briar is two-faced as well as ambitious; when speaking to the husbandman, it conceals its pride and adopts an obsequious manner: “O my liege Lord, the God of my life, / Pleseth you ponder your Suppliants plaint” (150–51). After the Oak is cut down, Thenot recites, “Now stands the Brere like a Lord alone, / Puffed up with pryde and vaine pleasaunce” (222–23). At the fable’s termination (Cuddie interrupts it before its end), Thenot says, “Such was thend of this ambitious brere, / For scorning Eld” (237–38).

Patrick Cullen has observed that in The Shepheardes Calender, fables such as this one can be misleading. He writes, “the debate and the fable . . . are not necessarily equivalent: Cuddie is not the Briar” (32). Equally to the point, the Briar is not an Oak. The discussion in the eclogue is about youth and age, but Thenot’s fable is not about the Young Oak and the Old Oak. A briar can never grow up to be an oak, no matter how long it lives. The Briar suffers its downfall because it aspires to be something greater than it is or is capable of being. Thenot’s tale is what Roland Greene calls a “failed narrative,” an example of “the honorable Renaissance genre of the badly-told or ineffectual tale” (8). Thenot’s fable is at least as concerned with ambition and its perils as with the youth/age debate. This pattern of “ineffectual tales” that attempt to illustrate one idea but in fact illustrate another is repeated in the next moral eclogue, “Maye.”

The dialogue in “Maye” develops ideas already presented in “Februarie”: the questions of a shepherd’s duty and responsibility, and of youth and age. Palinode opens the eclogue by asking why, in “the mery moneth of May” (1), he and Piers fail to partake of the spirit of the season. They do not “merimake” but sit “as drownd in a dreme” (15–16). Piers’s reply recalls the debate of “Februarie”: “For Younkers Palinode such follies fitte, / But we tway bene men of elder witt” (17–18). The young shepherds who sing and dance in the woods, says Piers, are neglecting their sheep. Their own “elder witt” gives them a greater sense of responsibility for their charges.

Piers brings up the subject of ambition by telling Palinode of the time when shepherds had no wealth or property: “The time was once, and may againe retornne, / . . . When shepeheards had none inheritaunce, / Ne of land, nor fee in sufferaunce” (103–06). It was well thus, he says; they needed but little and this