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"All poetry is born of play": Spenser with Huizinga[1]

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This article puts Spenser into sustained conversation with the historian and play-theorist John Huizinga. In his *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949) Huizinga argues that "civilisation is, in its earliest phases, played" and he sees this play as fundamentally antithetical in nature, generated out of contrasts and competition. Reading *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) through the lens of Huizinga's antithetical understanding of the play concept, I consider how Spenser uses antithetical cultural play in the form of contrasting classical and popular elements, to generate a new vision for English poetics. My analysis concentrates firstly on the role performed by the editor E. K. in drawing attention to, and misreading, cultural difference. This is followed by a detailed examination of the *August* eclogue's depiction of two contrasting visions for English song. Reading Spenser companionably with Huizinga helps us to see how difference can be generative of meaning in the poem, producing a mixture in which curious and often comic collisions between cultural types challenge the reader to imagine new possibilities for English poetry. It is these bold acts of cultural play which arguably shape the extraordinary ambition of his literary project.

To read Spenser companionably with Johan Huizinga is to encounter a number of sympathies between early modern poet and twentieth-century play theorist and cultural historian. This is perhaps unsurprising as Spenser's playfulness is well-attested. Julian Yates has recently argued that "Spenser's fictions are constructed as an absorbing or immersive game space," while Joe Moshenska has emphasized that play is an "indispensable horizon within which to experience and interpret Spenser's work."[2] Play as a totalizing concept (a reading inaugurated by Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*) is an apt lens for a poet who roves eclectically and knowingly through genres and texts, creating worlds in which the reader can immerse themselves and play. Huizinga was acutely aware of the links between poetry and play, dedicating a chapter of *Homo Ludens* to the subject.[3] When drawing Spenser into sustained company with Huizinga, however, a very specific route into his use of the play concept emerges: play's reliance upon antithetical contrasts and competition.[4]

Huizinga thought in antitheses and his biographer, Willem Otterspeer, argues that an antithetical impulse is realized not only in Huizinga's view of history as a series of contrasts and reconciliations but also in his writing style which is heavily reliant on contrasting adjectives and oxymorons.[5] Huizinga's investment in contrast and reconciliation is inevitably also a driving factor in his study of play as the archetype of culture: *Homo Ludens*. It is here that Huizinga argues that "civilisation is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and it never leaves it."[6] In identifying civilisation and culture as played from the beginning, Huizinga argues that anthropology has shown how social life in the archaic period "normally rests on the antagonistic and antithetical structure of the community itself, and how the whole mental world of such a community corresponds to this profound dualism."[7] An independent concept, outside the "domain of the great categorical antitheses" such as wisdom and folly, the bedrock of play is nonetheless found in the dualism of these communities and it remains fundamentally contrasted with "ordinary life."[8] For Huizinga, the function of play is "as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These functions can unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something."[9] Play that relies on antithesis and contest includes games played by more than one person (Huizinga emphasizes that ""playing together" has an essentially antithetical character"), the unruly reversals of festival culture, the martial play of chivalric contest, the battle of wits that defines university disputations and literary feuds, the distinction between the player and the disguise in performance, and between the secular and the divine in ritual.[10]

Focusing on this aspect of Huizinga's reading of play, I will trace an antithetical impulse in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), considering in detail the poem's interest in drawing attention to playful contrasts between cultural forms associated with the elite and popular in order to create a new mixture, or hodgepodge, which will transform English poetry. It is arguably this bold act of cultural play which advertises the extraordinary ambition of Spenser's literary project.[11] In the process, the editor E. K. emerges as an important, albeit unreliable, cultural mediator who draws attention to different cultural registers in the *Calender*. In a self-important parody of the humanist reader, E. K. typically misinterprets Spenser's inclusion of popular elements, mocking them or downplaying their significance. His haughty dismissal of the rustic and the colloquial, however, has the effect of encouraging the reader to note points of antithesis which they can assess for themselves, potentially coming to rather different conclusions. E.K.'s paratextual labors thereby become a significant entry point into Spenser's game of cultural comparison and a test of the reader's ability to see precisely what is being played for.

Play for Spenser, as for Huizinga, is largely independent of judgements relating to moral or literary value, although readerly expectations relating to value are played *with*, particularly at the direction (or misdirection) of E.K. Instead, the cycle of contrast and reconciliation prompted by acts of cultural play reveals the central importance of the play function, and its reliance upon the antithetical dynamics of competition, for the forging of a new English poetics. Reading Spenser's cultural play with Huizinga's antithetical approach to the play concept shows how difference can be generative of meaning in the poem, producing a mixture in which curious and often comic collisions between cultural types challenge the reader to imagine new possibilities for English poetry and to see the value in a comingling of different,

antithetical cultural associations. A useful image for this process of cultural mixing is the "gallimaufrey and hodgepodge" (90-1) of linguistic borrowings so disparaged by E.K. in the Epistle, and which he notably sees Spenser's verse as countering.[12] If we read E.K. against the grain, as I will argue we must, given his repeated misreading of the work done by cultural play, then we can identify *The Shepherdes Calender* as a superior hodgepodge. A stew of different meats designed to serve the appetite of a discerning reader who can identify the constituent parts and recognize that when put into play with one another they produce something entirely new, this hodgepodge displays the versatility and range of the English language and "England's new Poete" (Epistle, 25), changing the English literary palate in the process.

When discussing Spenser's use of "auncient" (24) words in the Epistle, E. K. repeatedly uses antitheses, recalling the delight accrued by "naturall rudenesse" and "disorderly order" as "rough and harsh termes enlumine and make more clearly to appeare the brightnesse of braue and glorious words. So oftentimes a dischorde in Musicke maketh a comely concordance" (66-71). That which is rough, disorderly, and rude, serves to pull into relief that which is not, but the resulting contrasts also have the effect of creating a curious harmony out of discord. As Huizinga notes, "'antithetical' does not necessarily mean 'contending' or 'agonistic'" (47) and combining antitheses can result in new possibilities and creative mixtures.[13] Despite E.K.'s argument for the concordance achieved by Spenser's use of archaisms, when he highlights cultural difference in his glosses he frequently mocks the colloquial and the vernacular, seemingly unwilling to attribute a similar dynamic of "disorderly order" to the cultural realm. His mockery of popular voices thereby ironically belies the important dynamic of contrast and reconciliation which he himself attributes to the poem's archaic language. In what follows, I will argue that one of the primary

limitations of E. K. as a reader is his inability to allow the play concept free reign as he is stymied by a restricted view of literary value. Nonetheless, it is precisely the dynamic of contrast and reconciliation that E.K. unwittingly highlights throughout his glosses in *The Calender;* these provide the generative engine of Spenser's cultural play.

In *Aprill*, the eclogue seemingly in praise of Elizabeth, E.K.'s glosses help to shape a reading of which he himself appears to be unaware. Incorporating long digressions on the muses and the graces, E. K. also includes a number of short, puncturing explanations which emphasize the clownish rusticity of the scene. This initially belies the epideictic rationale for the epilogue, causing praise to become potentially irreverent, but also indicates how pastoral can accommodate different voices in order to achieve risky political effects, a reading missed by E. K. who fails to realize the import of Spenser's inclusion of English clowns into his pastoral world, seeing in them only an opportunity for self-serving mockery. Thenot's opening question to Hobbinoll "what garres thee greete?" (1) is glossed as "causeth thee weepe and complain" (66). The colloquial language sets the tone for what follows, undercutting any reading of the eclogue as a straightforward paean: E. K. emphasizes the disjunction between voice and subject matter and draws attention to the phrase's more formal iteration and the poet's decision to ignore it.[14] This disjunction is underlined by the glossing of "laye" (33) as "a songe" as here E.K. expounds upon how Colin's "laye / Of fayre *Elisa*" (33-4), sung by Hobbinol, is not "to be respected, what the worthinesse of her Maiestie deserueth […] but what is most comely for the meanesse of a shepheardes witte," going on to state that his naming the queen Elisa is the result of "rudeness tripping in her name" (67). The tone and voice of the song is appropriate to the rustic singer, even if it falls short of the formal conventions of

praise-poetry. For E.K., this provides an opportunity self-righteously to indicate his own superiority by implying that unlike the shepherds he would be able to direct his praise for Elizabeth in an appropriate register. While this serves to mock non-elite attempts to compliment Elizabeth, it is worth remembering that the shepherds, for all their rusticity, display a nimble virtuosity and generic range of style in both speech and song. They are also able successfully to remember and ventriloquize Colin's sophisticated verse. E. K.'s patronising tone therefore belies the complexity of the different voices in the poem and the intricacy of the cultural eclecticism that they exhibit. The use of the colloquial and the vernacular is not simply a reflection of the unsophisticated rusticity of agricultural workers but an indication of Spenser's willingness to employ differing voices in order to undercut any easy reading of his work as praising the queen. This is a technique which he will go on to employ on a much larger scale in *The Faerie Queene,* a text which displays a pointed ambivalence about the aging and heir-less Elizabeth even as it ostensibly sings her praises.

Colin's song describes the queen as a "Bellibone" (92), glossed by E. K. as "homely spoken for a fayre mayde or Bonilasse" (70). Perigot uses the same term in the *August* eclogue when he describes a woman he loves as a "bouncing Bellibone" (61). The use of such a "homely" word, one which is easily applied to far-from-royal shepherdesses, again undercuts Elizabeth's status. It is E.K.'s gloss which draws attention to the word's informal nature. Acting as an interpreter for readers unfamiliar with its meaning, E. K. assigns it the position of colloquialism (the OED notes that it may be a corruption of the French *belle bonne* and the earliest example provided is from *The Calender*).[15] This is one of the functions of E.K.; he assigns cultural importance to particular words or phrases as well as parsing their meaning, often in a very unsatisfactory manner which draws attention to his limitations. E.K. thus claims

a position as an arbiter of cultural value, drawing attention to the distinctions between the classical /elite and the rude/homely/popular. In doing so, however, it becomes clear that E. K. has missed the point of Spenser's antithetical play and that he fails to register its generative possibilities as he derides and mocks the inclusion of popular voices. The significance of employing such an inadequate mediator may lie in the testing impulse that we find in so much of Spenser's work as he repeatedly asks the reader to question the reliability of a text's different voices as they labor for interpretation, a labor which has famously been read as part of a process of self-fashioning.[16]

E. K. goes on to gloss the advice to shepherdesses to "Binde your fillets faste, / And gird in your waste" (133-4) when approaching the queen as "Spoken rudely, and according to Shepheardes simplicitye" (70). Rude simplicity, however evocative, again seems rather out of place in a poem of praise, potentially pulling the eclogue into a comic register which mocks the queen's female supplicants and their attempts to appear suitably and fashionably attired. As the queen exits, these same women are promised a reward of "Damsines" [damsons] (152). According to E. K., this is "A base reward of a clownish giuer" (70), small plums serving as a paltry gift from a rustic suitor. E. K.'s invasive interruptions into the reader's experience of the text draw attention to the fact that epideictic poetry has been yoked to the colloquial, homely, rude, and simple voices of shepherds who cannot pronounce the queen's name. E. K.'s tone is one of self-importance as he mocks what he sees as the failed attempts of the shepherds to pay tribute successfully to their monarch, but the irony is that the true object of mockery may be E. K. himself as his attempts at self-aggrandisement only serve to belittle the queen. The result is a complicated destabilising of epideictic pastoral which yokes interpretation to a roving and

untrustworthy mediator who displays his prejudices and misjudgements, begging the question of whether the reader will fall into the same trap or understand that a larger game is being played. As Huizinga states, “all play means something,” and E.K.’s highlighting of cultural contrasts, putting them into play in the *Aprill* eclogue, has important ramifications for how the reader interprets the poem.[17] While E.K.’s tone is often dismissive and patronising of the shepherds’ attempts to praise the queen, it is clear that their clownishness does important political work, pulling the monarch down to earth at a point when many were voicing their displeasure at the negotiations for a match with the French Duc d’Anjou.

In other eclogues, E.K. highlights antithetical collisions between cultural registers which again provide scope for mockery but which ultimately emphasize Spenser’s interest in putting cultural mixtures to productive work in his new version of pastoral. In *June*, Hobbinoll advises Colin to move to the dales where he envisages fairies, nymphs and the graces undertaking a country dance, while the nine muses “make them musick” and Pan pipes, with E. K. glossing “Heydeguyes” (27) as “A country daunce or rownd” (93). Hobbinoll claims that in this place where “shepheardes ritch” (21), fairies and divine spirits from classical mythology dance hand in hand with Venus’s attendants like countrywomen at a festival. This provides an intriguing reimagining of the image of the muses dancing with Apollo commonly found in visual culture, as here the muses help to provide the music for a very different dance where English fairies cavort with classical figures in a prosperous English valley. E.K.’s gloss conspicuously omits the presence of “friendly Faeries” (25), writing “The conceipt is, that the Graces and Nymphes doe daunce vnto the Muses, and Pan his musicke all night by Moonelight” (93). The omission potentially displays his prejudices as a reader for while he highlights that the “Heydeguyes” is a

country-dance, he neglects to include an important, non-classical element in his description of the scene. Nonetheless, Hobbinoll's image successfully reiterates (with the unwitting help of E. K.) the combination of popular and elite with which *The Calender* is preoccupied throughout, but here the mixture is presented within the context of the classical image of poetic inspiration: English fairies in an English landscape are inspired by the muses to dance a country dance, thereby exemplifying the transformation of English verse which Spenser envisages his cultural play achieving. Spenser returns to this image in Book 6, Canto 10 of *The Faerie Queene* when Calidore sees the Graces dance to the music of Colin's bagpipes on Mount Acidale. A pivotal moment in the book, Calidore's presence causes the Graces to take flight and Colin to break his "bag-pipe" (18, 5), echoing the moment when Colin breaks his pipes in *The Calender*.[18] The exchange of Colin's bagpipes for the music of the Muses and the piping of the god Pan, may signal Spenser's assumption of the role of epic poet as, for E. K. at least, Colin can be identified as Spenser, although as Richard McCabe points out, this attribution is "richly disingenuous."[19] It is also a further instance of English song moving into the classical world. The self-conscious reappraisal of a motif from the earlier work thus again links a dance to Spenser's investment in a commingling of English rusticity with mythical figures, but with the additional complication of the presence of an unidentified fourth grace described as a "country lasse" (25, 8). For those readers familiar with *The Calender*, this woman potentially augments the familiar scene by further solidifying Spenser's argument for a marrying of English and Classical images, as if one of the shepherd's "bellibones" had been transported to the world of epic. In this way, across the two genres of pastoral and epic Spenser is able to link the classical sources of inspiration and grace (beauty, art and joy) to English song and popular festivity.

In *March*, Thomalin hunts Cupid in an "Yuie todde" (67), glossed by E. K. as "a thicke bushe" (57), although more accurately an ivy tod is what happens when ivy grows without support, throwing out a mound of flowering branches, rather than a ground level bush. A tod is also a weight (28lb), usually of wool or hay, commodities familiar to shepherds. E.K.'s insubstantial definition belies the complexity of the image as Cupid hides in a tangle of ivy which is emblematic of the shepherd's economic interests. It is also the case that the OED notes a number of examples where an ivy tod is a shelter for owls so that Cupid may curiously become conflated with the symbol associated with Athena, his mother Venus' great rival.[20] Ivy is native throughout Europe, but the insertion of Cupid into a plant which would be such a familiar part of the English pastoral environment, coupled with its description as a "tod", which not only alludes to its shape but to the quotidian economics of shepherding (hay for food, wool as commodity) mean that the god of desire incongruously appears to be sheltering in a very work-a-day English setting. The yoking of myth to labor here evokes the agricultural premise of georgic but the setting is quintessentially English and thus has the capacity to recall the familiar agrarian world of Spenser and his contemporaries.

These images commingle classical pastoral and the English countryside and crucially connect the genre to the festival culture so wistfully evoked by Palinode in the *Maye* eclogue as he longingly watches those going maying "girt in gawdy greene" (4). The result is that characters from classical myth inhabit the familiar English world of agricultural labor and festival, accompanied by fairies which represent native ideas of the supernatural. The images of Cupid hiding in an "Yuie todde" while he is hunted by an English rustic shepherd and of fairies dancing to the music of the muses in the dales stand as models for the process of often-comic playful collisions that the

poem as a whole endeavors to bring about. This serves to announce Spenser's ambition for a national poetics that, while grounded in the classical, is distinctly and recognizably English. Spenser's cultural mixture crucially does not necessarily involve the subsuming of different registers into one another; the various parts can be distinct even as they become reconciled. Just like a hodgepodge of different meats, while they mix, their differences are clear to the reader with a superior palate (aided, however clumsily or counter-intuitively by E. K.'s mocking incursions).

The humanist paratextual apparatus appended to the poem thus creates a space in which cultural difference is acknowledged and accentuated, advertising Spenser's playful command of a discursive cultural field. E. K.'s glosses may at first read as mockery but the truly interrogative reader is asked to gloss E.K. himself and in doing so may reach rather different conclusions as to the function of Spenser's antithetical play. This privileges the knowing reader who surmounts E. K.'s gatekeeping, converting it into an invitation to read against the grain and use their acuity and scepticism to look for the true game being played. This is not an opportunity for lazy mockery but rather a sophisticated play of contrasts, a superior hodgepodge which elevates English verse and displays its potential to critique and compromise even the most pre-eminent of subjects.

The sophisticated nature of Spenser's antithetical cultural play is particularly evident in the *August* eclogue, and it is here that we see most clearly how it relates to his showmanship and his self-reflexive consideration of the role and power of the poet. The eclogue is organised around a singing competition between the shepherds Willye and Perigot, judged by Cuddie, "the vmpere of their strife" (107), and ends with Cuddie's rendition of a song composed by the absent Colin Clout. The eclogue represents the apogee of *The Calender*'s experimental "skirmish" to borrow Jeff

Dolven's term, between ballad metre and pentameter.[21] The competition takes place in a wood to which the shepherds have retreated in order to find shade from the August sun, a common motif in classical pastoral.

The eclogue is a self-conscious homage to Theocritus and Virgil, "made in imitation" (107) of the two poets. Willye's opening gambit, however, foregrounds the language of play: "Tell me *Perigot*, what shalbe the game" (1). Willye's teasing of Perigot, questioning him whether he "dare" (2) match his music, is met with Perigot's dolorous response that he has lost both his heart and his sheep and therefore his music is "mard" (12): "Loue hath misled both my younglings, and mee" (17). Perigot, determined on his game insists that "if in rymes with me thou dare striue, / Such fond fantsies shall soone be put to flight" (21-2). Willye accepts the dare (note the emphasis on this word, in the sense of a challenge, in the preceding quotation) and what follows is a jocular and comic competition in which the shepherds strive to outdo one another.

Perigot and Willye produce a roundelay composed in common ballad metre focused on the charms of a young woman who wears a green kirtle reminiscent of the green "coats" worn by women returning from maying. The roundelay proceeds by repetition, a song in which the singers repeat words or motifs, handing them between one another in a dextrous and witty exchange. Cuddie is unable to choose between the singers and decides that the shepherds should swap the prizes that they had pledged so that Willye takes Perigot's lamb and Perigot Willye's mazer. Cuddie then sings Colin's song. Composed in pentameters, Colin's song also relies upon repetition but in this case the continued repetition of the word "augment." Augment means to increase in value or size, but it is also a technical musical term used for the lengthening or prolation of time values; here, it also acts as an important thematic

motif and emphasizes the spacing and timing of the song's end words which are relentlessly augmented.[22]

There are some similarities between the singing competition's roundelay and Cuddie's rendition of Colin's song. Both Perigot and Colin suffer from unrequited love and love's grief is tethered to the pastoral environment. Perigot's complaint is punctured, however, by Willye's ironic "vndersong" (128), with the effect that it becomes comic, despite Perigot's professed depth of feeling. A distinction is also drawn between singing *with* in a companionable musical exchange composed in the moment and singing *for* in a form of memorised repetition which slides into ventriloquism. The eclogue thus produces two versions of a poetic relationship: one that is reciprocal even as it is adversarial, and one that involves subsuming the personality of the speaker into the voice of the absent poet. The formal differences between the roundelay composed in ballad meter and Colin's complaint composed in pentameter are also immediately obvious to the reader who in all likelihood will identify the former as belonging to popular song given the ballad's ubiquitous presence in both oral and print culture. Significantly, the collaborative composition of the roundelay will also act as a reminder of the polyphonic nature of ballads while Colin's song suggests that lyric poetry was often composed by a single and sometimes named author and may be designed to be read or spoken by one individual (even if the poem may be heard by many). The contrast between the roundelay which is composed extemporaneously and Cuddie's recitation of Colin's complaint from memory, also indicates differing ideas of permanence and corresponding value: the ephemeral/occasional vs. the memorable/durable.

The roundelay relies upon the witty repetition of words and rhymes but Colin's complaint, composed in a variant of the Provençal sestina, takes repetition to

a different level. End words are redeployed throughout in a sophisticated pattern which consistently augments the rhythm of the poem, including the augmenting of the end word "augment" itself. This produces a high level of formal complexity which would be nigh-on impossible to create spontaneously, and which E.K. conspicuously fails to comment upon, his silence potentially again highlighting his limitations as a reader of poetry. Alongside these formal disparities there are distinctions in theme and symbol. Perigot and Willye look back to spring time, the holiday of May Day, and therefore draw on imagery associated with festival culture. The bonny woman, or "Bellibone" (61), wears a chapelet of violets – violets flower in late winter and early spring and as I've noted, she wears a green kirtle which can be linked to the sexual freedom of maying. Colin's song, while also embedded in pastoral, does not recall festival culture or a specific moment in the ritual year. It links his grief to the augmenting power of the natural world and he calls for other sounds and voices to increase the resonance of his feeling. Tears are combined with "streames" (156) for example, so that the pastoral world amplifies his grief. In this instance, the song privileges addition rather than the circular motion of the roundelay indicating that the two elements of the eclogue have broadly different trajectories. This is countered by the use of repetition in Colin's song as the final three lines repeat all of the end words from the first sestina so that we finish with a distilled version of where we began. Perhaps this acts as a more formally complex version of the round created by the roundelay, one which is generated through repetition voiced by a lone singer rather than through an exchange between two voices. The roundelay's occasional nature, and its looking back to May Day, also ensure that it is both ephemeral and linked to the repetitive circularity of calendrical time. In contrast, Colin's lament is temporally unfixed, more universal, and has already been memorised by at least one reader/singer

in Cuddie. The “forest wide” (159) and “wild woddes” (166) contain no seasonal markers. The exception is Colin’s eliding of himself with the nightingale, a migratory bird which arrives in England in April. The nightingale only appears at the end of the complaint, however, signalling the imagined return of the absent Rosalind, her “voyces siluer sound” (181) changing his “chereless cryes” to “cheerefull songs” (182). Colin’s shift from keeping vocal company with the “shrieking sound” of generic “banefull byrds” (173) to imagining a world where he can “take a part” (183) in the night-time song of a specific species, one associated with the myth of Philomela, is a hopeful imagining of the effects wrought by the return of his beloved and therefore looks to a yet-uncertain future.

It is worth noting that the acts of augmentation in Colin’s song emphasize sound, foregrounding the use of the word as a musical term, whereas the sensory register of the roundelay is vision, in particular the power of the lover’s gaze. This helps to underscore the differences between the two complaints but also allows Cuddie’s rendition of Colin’s song to echo with the sound of lamentation which marked Colin’s original burst of feeling. This sensory link across time is strengthened by the fact that Cuddie is also in the woods as he recites Colin’s verse, rather than tending his sheep in the field. In comparison, the roundelay repeats the commonplace of love entering in at the eye, often with comic effect. Colin’s song begins:

> Ye wastefull woodes beare witnesse of my woe,
> Wherein my plaints did oftentimes resound:
> Ye carelesse byrds are priuie to my cryes,
> Which in your songs were wont to make a part:
> Thou pleasaunt spring hast luld me oft a sleepe,
> Whose streames my tricklinge teares did ofte augment. (151-156)

The woods, streams, and birds witness Colin’s lamentations, providing his first audience, but also operating as a pastoral chorus whose sounds “make a part” (154)

and "augment" (156) his feeling. Whereas in the roundelay we have a number of references to sight:

> *Per.* She roude at me with glauncing eye,
> *Wil.* as cleare as the christall glasse:
> […]
> *Per.* The glaunce into my heart did glide,
> *Wil.* hey ho the glyder,
> *Per.* Therewith my soule was sharply gryde,
> *Wil.* such woundes soone wexen wider. (79-96)

The vision of Perigot's bonny love glancing at him and penetrating his heart is a common trope of love lyric, but it comes immediately after an image of the "bellibone" distracting his sheep from the pasture in an absurd literalization of the phrase "making sheep's eyes" which turns the action of looking into eating or ruminating.

> *Per.* My sheepe did leaue theyr wonted foode,
> *Wil.* hey ho seely sheepe,
> *Per.* And gazd on her, as they were wood,
> *Wil.* woode as he, that did them keepe. (73-76)

The tonal contrast of the differing sensory registers of the two complaints is clear. Colin's lament is represented as an isolated voice in the woods, the harsh cry of his pitying tears accompanied by a chorus of weeping streams and shrieking birds. Perigot's love for his bonny lass is made up of glancing looks and adoring sheep. By this measure, pentameter verse is privileging serious depth of feeling, while ballad meter looks to comic effect and laughter. What this distinction does not preclude, however, is the potential for the reader to also find comic effect in Colin's woe, his exaggerated lamentations slipping into farce.

The roundelay thus reads as spontaneous, reciprocal, comic, ephemeral, and occasional. A display of varied and witty repetition which uses Willye's ironic undersong to puncture Perigot's grief, it utilises the imagery of popular festival

culture, harnesses popular ballad meter, and may fall into absurdity. Linking love to the gaze of Perigot but also to that of his sheep, it emphasizes superficiality but also a clownish rusticity and jocular bawdiness. Colin's complaint, in contrast, is memorable and rehearsed, and takes itself very seriously (also perhaps to the point of absurdity). It does not include the equivalent of Willye's undersong. It fixates on the pastoral's power to augment feeling in a manner which privileges growth and progression rather than the circular motif of the roundelay, albeit while still producing a formally sophisticated use of circular lexical repetition. This progressive trajectory is undercut, however, by *The Calender*'s overall inclination towards circularity as the motifs and style of the *December* eclogue mirror that of *Januarye*.

While the playful antitheses of the two complaints embedded in the *August* eclogue highlight a number of differences between popular and elite song they can nonetheless potentially be reconciled. There was always the possibility for cultural crossover for ballads as both oral transmission and print facilitated the mobility and porousness of the popular genre.[23] It is also of note that while ballads were typically described as a low genre, ballad metre was utilised by early English sonneteers and ballads could be composed in pentameter so that the boundaries between ballad and lyric are often more blurred than might be expected.[24] This blurring may be reflected in the fact that both songs have the potential to be absurd even as they employ different techniques. I wonder therefore if the juxtaposition of the roundelay and Colin's song in *August* serves as a reminder for the astute reader of the potential mixing of ballad and lyric in other contexts (a possibility missed of course by E.K.).

While the broadly oppositional movement between the two complaints in the *August* eclogue tracks a shift in tone as well as a shift in cultural sensibility, both are contained within the larger vessel which is *The Calender* itself. As such, the true

competition is revealed to lie not between Willye and Perigot, but between two competing visions of English song which are voiced by the same poet. In this way, Spenser displays his adeptness at different cultural voices, showcasing his ability to produce a holiday song and a formally complex lover's complaint. All of these often-incongruous collisions recall the antithetical basis of Huizinga's argument for the primacy of the play-element in culture as Spenser experiments with different cultural registers in order to forge a distinctly new style of English poetics; but by bringing them together, he also reconciles these multiple elements into an innovative mixture or hodgepodge. This movement from contrast to reconciliation would doubtless have pleased Huizinga. Spenser's playful experimentation with antithetical voices therefore does not result in a winner; rather, it is the play element itself which triumphs. Notably, while the *August* eclogue may indicate that pentameter verse and Colin's adoption of complex versification will win the game in which both the shepherd and the poet are engaged, Spenser's later career does not bear this out in any simple fashion. While he will not return to such a sustained engagement with ballad metre, time and again we see him combining seemingly antithetical cultural modes as if he cannot resist experimenting with, and displaying, his amphibiousness. Cultural play may then be a vital wellspring which powers Spenser's verse – a game which finds numerous generative possibilities in the antithetical play of elite and popular.

Reading Huizinga with Spenser in this fashion has presupposed that Spenser saw a distinction between different cultural registers, between what we understand as popular and elite. Spenser readily corresponds to what Peter Burke calls the elite "cultural amphibian" for whom the "little tradition was play," able to move between different cultural spaces with the ease of a frog exiting a pond.[25] It is also the case that, as Mary Ellen Lamb observes, writers from the elite and middling sort "invented

or produced" forms of popular culture "as a means of coming to their own self-definition."[26] Spenser's use of popular motifs in *The Calender* is an act of self-serving invention rather than a reflection of genuine popular culture and he acts as an important example of an elite writer who appropriates the popular for his own ends. Spenser's acts of appropriation are not necessarily benign and the more troubling aspects of his harnessing of the popular are bought into stark relief by reading the work with Huizinga, as a focus on the antithetical draws attention to how the popular can be represented as a source of potential ridicule and mockery, even as it helps to propel the creative energies of the poem. The rationale for this antithetical cultural play may partly lie in Spenser's interest in preserving, rather than erasing, aspects of English culture associated with the pre-Reformation past, particularly festival culture, but it also accords with the "obsessively dialogical" nature of the Spenserian imagination.[27] An interest in serious play (*serio ludere*) such as that expressed by Erasmus and Thomas More, was a hallmark of humanist culture and Spenser's interactions with his friend and mentor Gabriel Harvey also reveal a playfulness in relation to reading which may indicate a tendency towards a roving cultural palate. Famously, Harvey's annotations in his copy of Murner's *Howleglas* (1528) records how Spenser had given him the jest book as part of an exchange of "foolish Bookes" for Harvey's copy of "Lucian in fower volumes."[28] This trade may indicate that Spenser enjoyed confounding or teasing elite readers who were dismissive of certain genres, finding amusement in puncturing the literary condescension of his friends and readers alike. E. K. acts as a pattern for this imagined reader, his pomposity crying out for a sharp puncturing by the more discerning reader who can see the larger game being played. This was not without risk, however. As Huizinga argues: "To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play

spirit. Tension adds to the importance of the game and, as it increases, enables the player to forget that he is only playing."[29] Spenser's antithetical cultural play in *The Calender*, particularly when it is used to undercut the praise of a monarch or to mock a lazy humanist reader, is a gamble, albeit a calculated one. Its riskiness testifies to the significance of the play-function for the meaning of the work, indicating the gravity of Spenser's playful cultural eclecticism and its central importance for Spenser's project of redrawing the parameters of English verse.

In the *October* eclogue Cuddie complains that he doesn't get enough recognition as a poet. Piers suggests that he "Abandon then the base and viler clowne, / Lyft vp thy selfe out of the lowly dust: / And sing of bloody Mars, of wars, of giusts" (37-9). This looks ahead to Spenser's next literary project as he abandons pastoral for epic with *The Faerie Queene*. Cuddie's petulant refusal and his depressive insistence that "if any buddes of Poesie, / Yet of the old stocke gan to shoote agayne […] it wither must agayne" (73-7) causes an exasperated Piers to punningly exclaim "O pierlesse Poesye, where is then thy place?" (79). The place of poesy may be *The Calender*'s primary concern and reading the poem with Huizinga begs the question of whether poesy can in fact be found in the play of antitheses so memorably epitomised by Piers' contrast of the vile clown in the dust and "bloody Mars" (39), god of war. It is out of the play of contrasts, rather than the abandonment of the clown, that new shoots may emerge, and with it a new vision of English poetry. It is worth remembering after all that Spenser's next literary endeavor, *The Faerie Queene*, will begin with the exploits of a clownish knight in rusty armour.

[1] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016), 129. This is an unabridged reprint of the first edition published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. in 1949.
[2] Julian Yates, "Open Worlds? Spenser's Ecological Game Play," *Spenser Review* 50 (2020); Joe Moshenska, "Spenser at Play," *PMLA* 133 (2018): 19-35 (19). See also William Nelson, "Spenser ludens," in *A Theatre for Spenserians*, ed. Judith Kennedy and James Reither (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 83-100.
[3] On poetry and play Huizinga observes, "Play, we found, was so innate in poetry, and every form of poetic utterance so intimately bound up with the structure of play that the bond between them was seen to be indissoluble." Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 158.
[4] Huizinga's work, most notably *Homo Ludens*, has been a vital, if often underappreciated, influence on the work of cultural historians and literary historicists working on the early modern world, particularly Natalie Zemon Davis and Stephen Greenblatt. It seems appropriate then that the early modern writer who in many ways provides the cornerstone for Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* be brought into direct and sustained conversation with Huizinga. See Lisa Jardine, *Temptation in the Archives: Essays in Golden Age Dutch Culture* (London: UCL Press, 2015), 84-101.
[5] Willem Otterspeer, *Reading Huizinga* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 79; 84; 97.
[6] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 173
[7] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 53.
[8] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 6; 13.
[9] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.
[10] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 47.
[11] Spenser and his contemporaries were notably writing at a moment in English history when the forging of a distinct English identity and a corresponding English poetics took on a new urgency. See Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 3.
[12] Richard McCabe, ed., *The Shorter Poems* (London: Penguin, 1999). All references to *The Shepheardes Calender* are to this edition.
[13] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 47.
[14] Andrew Hadfield points out that the use of such a colloquial phrase belies the eclogue's subject of a royal triumph and signals the disjunction between the celebratory greeting of the Queen's suitor the duc d'Anjou at court and her subjects' fears about a potential match with a foreign, Catholic, power: *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2912), 132
[15] See "bellibone, n." in OED online (Oxford University Press, 2014).
[16] The classic account remains Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). One such instance of Spenser's testing impulse is the repeated deferral of naming in *The Faerie Queene*, another is the possible topical allusions to be found in his *Mother Hubberds Tale*.
[17] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1.
[18] Thomas P. Roche, Jr., ed., *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin, 4th ed. 1987).
[19] McCabe, ed., *The Shorter Poems*, xiv.
[20] See "tod, n. 2" in OED online. I am indebted to *Spenser Studies*' anonymous reader for drawing this to my attention.
[21] Jeff Dolven, "Spenser's Metrics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 385-402 (387).
[22] I am indebted to *Spenser Studies*' anonymous reader for drawing this to my attention.
[23] Patricia Fumerton, as well as highlighting the broad appeal of ballads and their mobility, notes that some broadside ballad tunes originated with courtly dances: "Digging into "Veritable Dunghills": Re-appreciating Renaissance Broadside Ballads," in *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Catherine Teresa Bates (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 414- 431 (420).
[24] Fumerton, "Digging into "Veritable Dunghills", 428-9. See also Eric Nebeker, "Broadside Ballads, Miscellanies, and the Lyric in Print," *English Literary History* 76.4 (2009): 989-1013.
[25] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 6th ed. 2006), 28.
[26] Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.
[27] McCabe, ed., *The Shorter Poems*, xiv. Clare Kinney writes that the *Calender* is a "strikingly dialogic text." Clare Kinney, "*The Shepheardes Calender* (1579)" in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 160-177 (166). See also Harry

Berger, Jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 277.
[28] Virginia F. Stern, *Gabriel Harvey: His Life, Marginalia and Library* (Oxford, 1979), 228.
[29] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 51.