

# The Shepherd's Calendar

JANUARY AND DECEMBER

By Allyn Wood

In the first eclogue and the last, Colin Clout addresses Pan, complaining about his life. These are the only two eclogues in monologue; they are different in scope but with many comparable passages; and they are the only two in the particularly sustained musical rhyme scheme of iambic pentameter sixains rhymed ababcc.\* But in January, Colin is immature, in December he has grown old. In the two complaints, Spenser subtly communicates the vast difference in Colin's experience—he is *comprehensive*, as in "February" he only plays. Through images of his relationship with nature, first so superficial and comradely and demonstrative, deepening into reality and resignation with a passion that, having ceased to battle, will spend itself in wonder; turning his life to fit a year, the four ages with the four seasons, Spenser tells a serious story of experience. There is room for a lot of comparison in the two eclogues, but we shall have time only for a glance.

At end of winter, young Colin leads his emaciated sheep to pasture, himself as thin because of love, and thus begins,

"Ye Gods of loue, that pitie louers payne,  
(If any gods the paine of louers pitie:)  
Looke from aboue, where you in ioyes remaine,  
And bowe your eares unto my dolefull dittie.  
And Pan thou shepherds God, that once didst loue,  
Pitie the paines, that thou they selfe didst proue."

Aged Colin, as winter blows, sending him to the shelter of a briar, thus begins:

"O soueraigne Pan thou God of shepherds all,  
Which of our tender Lamdkins takest keepe:  
And when our flocks into mischaunce mought fall,  
Doest save from mischiefe the unwary sheepe :  
Als of their maisters hast no lesse regarde,  
Then of the flocks, which thou doest watch and ward:  
I thee beseche . . . Hearken awhile . . ."

All of a lifetime is between these beginnings. The youth has felt nothing deeply until now. His god is a god of lovers, not of love, whose sympathy is because he failed in earthly passion—a sensient

\*Notice that "August" also composed of sixains in that rhyme-scheme is entirely different, anapestic feet tripping among the iambs, and as dialogue, the stanza is broken generally into quatrains and couplets between the speakers.

sympathy, not because he understands. He is pagan and unpredictable: who knows whether he will pity? He is a god of the very newly disillusioned. Colin recognizes his limitation when within his later complaint he says,

“But ah such pryde at length was ill repayde,  
The shepherds God (perdie God was he none)  
My hurtlesse pleasance did me ill upbraide,  
My freedome lorne, my life he left to mone.”

So it is to a Pan conceived in vaster terms that Colin admits the other proved irresponsible: to the mysterious half-man half-beast guardian of man and beast, Christ unified with previous demi-god, not destroying him but controlling him and putting him to service. They together make mature Colin's god of love.

The youth declares there is no summer between his spring and autumn, but grown old he says it was his summer then, not his spring that was wasted by love. Time has lengthened; he remembers the merely athletic, stretching period of his life which somehow vanishes from muscle and memory the moment that one really loves, making it seem as if life has only now begun. The wastefulness of love is not because of love but because he was carried away by it, and spurned by Rosalind, failed to put it to constructive use. “A thousand sithes I curse that carefull hower,” cries the boy— “And eke tenne thousand sithes I blesse the stoure,” when he first saw and loved her. Grown old, “Why liuest thou stil, and yet hast thy deathes wound? Why dyest thou stil, and yet aliue art founde?” he asks himself with pensive detachment. Love has been an instrument of ravage and an instrument of growth. Rosalind grows from a person to a symbol of unattainable perfection.

“She deignes not my good will, but doth reprove,  
And of my rurall musick holdeth scorne.  
Shepherds deuise she hateth as the snake,  
And laughes the songs, that Colin Clout doth make.”

At this, the boy breaks his pipe and flings himself on the ground—the athletic period returns to muscle only to dramatize how far the spirit has outgrown it. He thinks that because Rosalind scorns poetry he will cease wooing her with it, while in reality it is his only means of speaking to her.

“Ah who has wrought my Rosalind this spight  
To spil the flowres, that should her girlond dight?”  
(Dec.)

In the life of one who tries to write, how often perfection seems to refuse homage; or of one who loves a person, and offers confidence, it is discovered that the real self is undesired. Colin is true to Rosalind to the last, for which I at least would have little sympathy if it were not that Rosalind as a concept has become greater and worthy.

With a tinge of scorn, the youth declares that he does not complain of Hobbinol, the other shepherd boy, who seeks his friendship with gifts that Colin re-gives to his love. He is too centered to give second thought to the one who loves him unselfishly. But in age Hobbinol comes first— not that Hobbinol stands between him and the perfection that Rosalind has become: rather he is a valued messenger, perhaps the only way of reaching her. The last, unthought of way, through friendship.

There is a nuance of difference in the references to and comparisons of man's state with nature, in the two eclogues. It is difficult to pin down one illustrative stanza in each, for it imbues them all and is most effective cumulatively. Let us take these.

“Thou barrein ground, whome winters wrath hath wasted,  
Art made a myrrhour, to behold my plight:  
Whilome thy fresh spring flowrd, and after hasted  
Thy sommer prowde with Daffadillies dight.  
And now is come thy wynters stormy state,  
Thy mantle mard, wherein thou maskedst late.”  
(Jan.)

“Gather ye together my little flock,  
My little flock, that was to me so lief:  
Let me, ah lette me in your folds ye lock,  
Ere the breme Winter breede you greater griefs.  
Winter is come, that blowes the balefull breath,  
And after winter commeth timely death.”  
(Dec.)

In the first, nature is a mirror of his plight, but the connection is no stronger than an artificial image. Nature itself is diffuse, independent, spectacular— it weeps tears that turn into icicles, but not over his grief; they mirror his grief for him. That is all very well, but something is lacking which is real, and which is present in the imagery of his age. “. . . After winter commeth timely death”; it is timeliness; finally the union of his life with, **into**, a form that is beautiful and vast, in which the little tumults of despair take form and are uttered again, in order, with calm and wonder. No longer separate, they are the most felt part of the question, Why? Where? that reaches forth from one turning life to the edge of all the turning worlds. All things between he loves because they share; they are going **because**; they are going **there**. “Gather ye together,” he says to those that depend on him.