

The Spenser-Harvey Letters: Composing Identity through Quantitative Poetry

Edmund Spenser, the late-sixteenth century poet, author of eclogues and epic among numerous works, wanted to be a modern, English Vergil. His verse certainly presents itself as taking the image of the Roman author. The proem to his *Faerie Queene*, Spenser's equivalent of the *Aeneid*, is fairly well known for proclaiming, with wording at times almost identical to that in the Latin epic's beginning, that Spenser has followed the path of Vergil's literary career. Ten years before, in 1580, he formally began his career with the *Shepherd's Calendar*, a book modeled on the *Eclogues*, which adapts the bucolic form for modern England. Spenser's imitation of Classical authors does not stop at Virgil or a work's form; it stretches into the center of creating an identity for himself and his writing. Around the same time he was producing the *Calendar*, Spenser exchanged letters with Gabriel Harvey, a poet, like Spenser, in his youth, attempting to establish himself. They playfully discussed their lives, an earthquake that shook England, and, fascinatingly, their attempt to impose the quantitative rules of Latin verse onto their own language, working to create a new metrical form as part of a small Elizabethan movement. Scholars have deeply analyzed Spenser's, Harvey's, and their near contemporaries' goals, their endeavors to create a new image, reshape (and improve) their poetry and society by excoriating what the poets viewed as "the taint of cultural inferiority" with the introduction and refashioning of contemporary poetry by means of a Classical identity (Helgerson 1992, 35). Attridge 1998 as well offers a wonderful technical account of quantitative verse and into Renaissance education and attitudes towards art and culture. The authors, however, focus primarily on Elizabethan attitudes, examining what use of quantitative meter entails for the literary character of Elizabethan England.

This essay, then, seeks to extend the lens more deeply into the Classical world, to examine what exactly the intimate Spenser-Harvey correspondence reveals as part of the movement towards quantitative metrics. Scholars have focused on the how the Roman adoption of Greek verse mirrors that of the Elizabethans—see Attridge 1974, especially chapter one. Yet, what does the way in which individuals composed their own and their literary identities through ancient forms reveal about how the Classics overrided personal identity? How do the Classics shape the way in which we view our own selves?

References

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