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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long speculated about the outcome of the debate that takes place between Cuddie and Thenot in the “Februarie Eclogue” of Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*. Although in his introductory gloss E.K. claims that the eclogue is “rather morall and generall, then bent to any secrete or particular purpose” (Spenser 509), this statement has not deterred critics from hypothesizing as to what Spenser’s actual meaning might have been. The eclogue opens with a discussion between an old shepherd and a young herdsman’s boy regarding their perceptions of the seasons which soon turns into a debate centering on the merits of youth and old age. Spenser critics argue that the fable of the Oak and Briar, which Thenot relates to Cuddie, is Spenser’s oblique reference to the troubled relationships between particular individuals in Elizabeth’s court, while others believe that the fable is the poet’s Puritan analysis of Elizabethan religious turmoil. Most assert that neither Thenot nor Cuddie come out of the debate as the clear winner; therefore, the eclogue closes in an unresolved and tense stasis. Critics often focus on the fable at the expense of the dialogue between the Thenot and Cuddie, so they are comfortable with these analyses because if the relationship between the characters is unsettled, then various explicit historical or religious interpretations can be ascribed to the eclogue as a whole. However, I will argue that when Elizabethan society and contemporary literary and religious works are taken into consideration, the suggestion that Spenser is conveying his own provocative viewpoints should be discarded in favour of the idea that the entire eclogue is a sophisticated examination of the perennial conflict between generations, and how this conflict influenced the continued reformation of the English Church.
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Tara Chambers
For Zachary Sebastian
The wisest “Cuddie” I know