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## Gallimaufrey and Hellebore: Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson in dialogue with the past

### Abstract

Ben Jonson's play *Poetaster, or, The Arraignment* and Edmund Spenser's set of pastoral poems *The Shepheardes Calender* are two English Renaissance texts acutely aware of and concerned with their place in the literary canon vis-à-vis those who have come before. Each work attempts to establish the relationship of the English language to the Latin language and to create an authoritative English lexicon different than but related to Latin. My project compares the ways these two writers conceive of the classical tradition and use it as a counterpoint to their own understanding of the burgeoning English literary canon.

### Keywords

Spenser, Ben Jonson, English language, Sean Keilen, Sean, Keilen, English

### Disciplines

English Language and Literature

*Gallimaufrey and hellebore:*  
Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson in dialogue with the past

Writing at the end of the first century C.E., Quintilian discusses the use of archaic words in contemporary Latin at the end of Book I, Chapter 6 of his *Institutio Oratoria*. He writes, “Archaic words not only enjoy the patronage of distinguished authors, but also give style a certain majesty and charm.” (*Verba a vetustate repetita non solum magnos assertores habent sed etiam adferunt orationi maiestatem aliquam non sine delectatione*).<sup>1</sup> But Quintilian cautions writers to limit the use of archaic words to certain words in certain contexts. He writes, “such words must be used sparingly and must not thrust themselves onto our notice, since there is nothing more tiresome than affectation,” (*Sed opus est modo, ut neque crebra sint haec neque manifesta, quia nihil est odiosius adfectatione*).<sup>2</sup> Yet while Quintilian urges caution in using archaic words on aesthetic grounds, he also warns that these words may make writing or speech difficult to understand. He claims that speech, “whose prime virtue is clearness,” (*cuius summa virtus est perspicuitas*),<sup>3</sup> should never need explanation.

Quintilian carefully distinguishes between the literature produced by great writers of the past, and the language those writers used. In his view, one should imitate the former, but not the latter. For Quintilian, the fact that a famous writer once used a particular word does not necessarily mean the word is appropriate to use today. He points

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<sup>1</sup> Quintilianus, Marcus Fabius. *Institutio Oratoria*. The Loeb Classical Library. E.H. Warmington, Ed. H.E. Butler, Translator. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920. I.6.39., p. 130-131.

<sup>2</sup> Quintilian I.6.40, p. 130-131.

<sup>3</sup> Quintilian I.6.41, p. 130-131.

out several examples of words used by great writers that he views as unseemly -- *tuburchinabundus*, meaning “voracious,” used by Cato, and *gladiola*, meaning “small swords,” used by Messala.<sup>4</sup> Were these writers writing today, Quintilian claims, they would not have used these words, and thus neither should anyone else. For Quintilian, in imitating writers of the past, one’s language should always stay current.

In sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, English vernacular writers engaged Quintilian’s arguments about archaism in language as they attempted to establish the English language as one worthy of great literature. The period 1500-1650 was truly an era of linguistic instability in written and spoken English, seeing the introduction of more than 25,000 new words into the language<sup>5</sup>—a staggering number representing 167 brand new words each year for 150 years, with no repetition. Richard Foster Jones, in *The Triumph of the English Language*,<sup>6</sup> his monumental study of English between 1476 and 1660, argues that such a large number of new words entered English during this period as an effort to fill actual or perceived holes in the language as English came to be considered a suitable medium in which to write literature, rather than simply a medium in which to conduct daily lives and daily business.

These 25,000 words came from a variety of sources—some were borrowed directly from French or German, some were based heavily on Latin words (often through an intermediary language like French), and some were taken from regional dialects of English considered closest to English’s old Saxon roots. Where Quintilian’s discussion was concerned with unfamiliar words within one language—Latin—English vernacular

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<sup>4</sup> Quintilian, I.6.42, p. 130-131.

<sup>5</sup> Garner, Bryan A. “Shakespeare’s Latinate Neologisms,” *Shakespeare Studies*. 15 (1982), p.151.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, Richard Foster. *The Triumph of the English Language: a Survey of Opinions Concerning the Vernacular from the Introduction of Printing to the Restoration*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1953.

writers culled words from a variety of native and foreign sources. This rapid adoption of new words grew out a desire to enrich the language, but contemporary writers also understood that the language needed to be stabilized if it were ever to establish itself as a language capable of great literature.

The widely recognized instability of the English literary language during this period created a climate of struggle and debate between English writers eager to shape the emerging language. Some of these writers engaged Quintilian's discussion of archaism in Latin and explored how his ideas were relevant to the emerging English literary language. In her 1996 book, *Broken English*,<sup>7</sup> Paula Blank chronicles arguments among these sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English writers, and argues that debates over the language were used by different writers as an opportunity to reinforce social distinctions and assert their own superiority in a power struggle between literary rivals. Where all were trying to standardize the language, Blank argues, each tried to standardize it in his own way, creating and exaggerating linguistic differences to make the point.

One manifestation of this debate over the English language was Ben Jonson's reaction in the early seventeenth century to Edmund Spenser's attempts to change the language in the late sixteenth. In Edmund Spenser's series of pastoral eclogues, *The Shepheardes Calender*, written in 1579, Spenser tries to shape the English literary language both by reviving earlier features of English and by modernizing the language. Engaging Quintilian's discussion of archaism, Ben Jonson's play *Poetaster, or, The Arraignment*, written in 1601, responds to Spenser's linguistic experiment and presents

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<sup>7</sup> Blank, Paula. *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writings*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

its own theory for how the English language should relate to the Latin. Jonson objects to Spenser's constructed re-imagination of earlier English, and instead argues for an English language which is arbitrated by poets and which includes archaisms and foreign words only under the right circumstances. In this paper, I will explore the conflict between Jonson's and Spenser's different attitudes towards language, and draw conclusions about how their ideas of linguistic borrowing theorize the English language itself.

But first, a word on methodology. Perhaps the most memorable part of Quintilian's discussion of archaism in Latin is his series of questionable etymologies of particular words.<sup>8</sup> He begins by citing commonly held and completely plausible etymological claims, such as the belief that the Latin noun *cōnsul* meaning "consul" is derived from the verb *cōnsulere* meaning "to deliberate, take thought."<sup>9</sup> From there, he progresses through a series of etymological theories, each more dubious than the last. By the time he cites the claim that the word *pītuīta* meaning "phlegm" is derived from the phrase *quia petat vitam*, "because it attacks life," he has moved from the reasonable to the absurd. These claims sound more like the linguistic equivalent of urban legends than like historical arguments. The section makes playfully clear the inexactitude of any etymological claim, and suggests that a word's etymology is like a Rorschach test—an indeterminate blob onto which one can project nearly anything.

Of course, resources for research into the etymology of words have improved since Quintilian's day. One would hope, and this paper assumes, that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* represents a more reliable source for word etymologies than the folk wisdom Quintilian cites. In reading Spenser and Jonson

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<sup>8</sup> Quintilian, I.6.32-38, p. 124-131.

<sup>9</sup> Here and throughout the paper, all Latin definitions have been taken from: *Collins Gem Latin Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Joyce Littleton, Ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

one is struck by the way these writers try to present and portray particular words as originating in particular traditions, suggesting that some words are Latinate and foreign, while others are early native English. By comparing the linguistic histories suggested by Jonson and Spenser with actual etymological evidence from the *OED*, we can draw conclusions about the way Jonson and Spenser theorize the English language as composed of various words considered, although sometimes not actually, foreign or native.

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In *The Shepheardes Calender*, Spenser tries to change the English language by writing a theory of and conducting an experiment in linguistic borrowing. Through his model of borrowing, Spenser attempts to restore a primitive English language that is authentic yet infused with words from a variety of classical and vernacular sources. Spenser's language is heavily influenced by Chaucer's, whom Spenser considers an embodiment of both pure, undiluted English, as well as English which includes words from foreign sources.

The textual apparatus of *The Shepheardes Calender* suggests that Spenser's work is both revivalist—an attempt to bring back earlier features of English—and revolutionary—an attempt to incorporate innovative features into English. One brief glance at Spenser's publication as it originally appeared shows that *The Shepheardes Calender* was a complicated textual production. Each eclogue is adorned with a woodcut, which is followed by an argument summarizing the plot of the forgoing eclogue. Then the main text of the eclogue appears, followed by one or more “emblemes,” short final sayings which embody the sentiments of a particular character, often in a foreign

language. Finally there is a set of textual notes called the “glosse.” Indeed, reading the eclogues is no straightforward task, as one flips back and forth between argument, main text, and gloss—an act that is further complicated if one consults the textual notes in a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century edition of Spenser. While the woodcut, argument, and gloss are all important places where the text comments on itself, *The Shepheardes Calender* most thoroughly discusses its own goals in the dedicatory epistle. In the dedicatory epistle to the *Calender*, the writer E.K. presents the work as an attempt to revive and restore the language of Chaucer—a language which is paradoxically both pure and infused with foreign linguistic material.

Although scholars debate the authorship of the dedicatory letter, these arguments are ultimately inconsequential to its relationship with the rest of the *Calender*. The epistle is written to “the most excellent and learned both Orator and Poete, Mayster Gabriell Haruey,” by “his verie special and singular good friend E.K.,”<sup>10</sup> who also claims to have written the glosses which follow each eclogue. The identity of “E.K.” remains unknown and hotly contested, and many scholars claim that E.K.’s glosses were written by Spenser himself.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the actual authorship of the epistle and the glosses, through the persona of E.K., the *Calender* is able to comment on itself.

E.K.’s high regard for Chaucer is immediately apparent in the letter. The very first words of the letter are a quote from Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, “Vncovthe vnkiste.”<sup>12</sup> E.K. explains that this phrase means that he who is “vnknown to most men, is

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<sup>10</sup> Spenser, Edmund. *The Shorter Poems*. Ed. Richard A. McCabe. Penguin Classics Edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> See: Waldman, Louis. “Spenser’s Pseudonym ‘E.K.’ and Humanist Self-Naming.” *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*. IX (1991): 21-31.

<sup>12</sup> Spenser, p. 25, l. 1. E.K. quotes Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, I. 809.



regarded but of few,”<sup>13</sup> and suggests that the publication of Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* will bring the author the fame he deserves. Later in the letter, E.K. observes that Colin Cloute, a figure associated with Spenser, calls Chaucer “Tityrus the God of shepherds, comparing him to the worthines of the Roman Tityrus Virgile,”<sup>14</sup> suggesting that Chaucer holds the same honored place in the English literary canon as Virgil does in the Latin.

But E.K. admires Chaucer for more than just his influence on English literature—also for his formative influence on English *as a language*. E.K. calls Chaucer the “Loadstarre of our Language,”<sup>15</sup> a metaphor which reveals the way E.K. imagines Chaucer’s relationship to English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “loadstar” as “a star that shows the way, esp. the pole star.”<sup>16</sup> Particular stars in the night sky are often used by night travelers to orient themselves to their cardinal directions. By walking towards the north pole star at night, they can be assured that they are walking due north, and a little orienteering makes it possible to use the pole star to travel in any direction. By calling Chaucer the loadstar of our language, E.K. suggests that he represents a stable linguistic guide towards which all writers should strive. Yet this analogy suggests that while E.K. reveres Chaucer’s language, he does not intend to replicate it. Just as night travelers will never reach, and never intend to reach the pole star, Chaucer’s language can never be re-created—it can only be followed as a faraway guide. The rest of the *Calender* confirms this—while Spenser’s language is clearly influenced by Chaucer, it is definitely not Chaucerian.

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<sup>13</sup> Spenser, p. 25, l. 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Spenser, p. 25, l.4-7.

<sup>15</sup> Spenser, p. 25, l. 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Loadstar.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1989. Accessed Mar. 22, 2005. <<http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:8182/entrance.dtl?side=S>>.

Furthermore, just as Chaucer's English in E.K.'s imagination is both pure and infused with foreign words, so is the etymology of the word "loadstarre" both native and foreign. The two parts of the word, "load" or "lode" and "star" can each be traced back to Old English roots. Yet both words have cognates in several other languages. The linguistic source of "load," the Old English *lād* corresponds with words from Middle High German, Old Norse, and Old Teutonic. Similarly, the *steorra*, the Old English precursor to "star," has cognates in Old Frisian, Old Saxon, Middle Dutch, Old High German, Old Teutonic, and may even relate to the Latin *stella*, and the Greek *ἀστήρ*.<sup>17</sup> The complicated etymology of "loadestarre" demonstrates that the very concept of linguistic purity is a fiction—that even the oldest words often come from foreign sources. Just as "loadestarre" is both native and foreign, so is Chaucer himself a symbol of both native, primitive English, and of the inherently international nature of the English language.

By his use of the word "loadestarre" E.K. effectively admits that a certain amount of foreign linguistic influence is inevitable. Elsewhere in the dedicatory letter, however, he suggests that the current English language has deteriorated from its Chaucerian state by being polluted with too many foreign words. E.K. describes the current state of the English language as follows: many good and pure words, which originally belonged to English, have fallen out of use, and to fill the gaps in the language,

they patched vp the holes with peces and rags of other languages, borrowing here of the french, there of the Italian, euery where of the Latine, not weighing how il, those tongues accorde with themselues, but much worse with ours: So now they haue made our English tongue, a gallimaufrey or hodgepodge of al other speches.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The author is greatly indebted to Sonu Mishra for help with Greek.

<sup>18</sup> Spenser, p. 27, l. 85-91.

E.K. considers it a problem that the English language is now a hodgepodge, and believes that this has hindered the writing of English literature: “our Mother tongue, which truly *of it self* is both ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse, hath long time been counted most bare and barren of both” (italics mine).<sup>19</sup> In this passage, E.K. clearly imagines that a pure English, an English “of it self,” could be created, and indeed must be created in order to make English a suitable medium for writing great literature.

Consequently, E.K. suggests that *The Shepheardes Calender* will restore the primitive native English language of Chaucer. Of Spenser’s words, E.K. writes, “I graunt they be something hard, and of most men vnused, yet both English, and also vsed of most excellent Authors and most famous Poetes.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Spenser’s words, though unusual, are English and signs of his literary excellence. While E.K. associates Spenser’s word choice with learned authors and poets, he also claims it is appropriate because “such olde and obsolete words are most vsed of country folk, sure I think, and think I think not amisse, that they bring great grace and, as one would say, auctoritie to the verse.”<sup>21</sup> E.K. finds authority in early native English, which, he claims, Spenser restores by using “good and naturall English words as have been long time out of vse.”<sup>22</sup> Thus E.K. suggests that Spenser’s poems will both recapture English “of it self” and fill the void left by the lack of English prose and verse.

Yet each time E.K. tries to present the language of Chaucer as pure and undefiled, he reveals again that even Chaucer’s language has been influenced by foreign words. When E.K. claims that old folksy words add authority to language, he uses the word

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<sup>19</sup> Spenser, p. 27, l. 82-84.

<sup>20</sup> Spenser, p. 25-26, l. 28-30.

<sup>21</sup> Spenser, p. 25, l. 40-44.

<sup>22</sup> Spenser, p. 27, l. 80-81.

“auctoritie.” This word is unmistakably a derivative of the Latin *auctoritās*, a term used to denote the authority of ancient Latin and Greek writers. E.K. appears to believe that by using native English words, Spenser’s language comes nearer to a linguistic authority which is inextricably linked with the Latin language. Thus, Chaucer embodies, paradoxically, the undefiled English language and the language inseparable from outside influence.

The image of Chaucer’s language as both native and foreign inspires Spenser to create a language that is both revivalist and unequivocally new. In the letter, E.K. introduces two metaphors for reading and writing which again suggest that in trying to restore a native undefiled English, Spenser is necessarily influenced by other languages. Using walking in the sun as a model for reading, and singing songs stuck in one’s ears as a model of writing, E.K. suggests that Spenser’s language is influenced by what he has read. E.K. writes,

our Poet hath bene much traueiled and thoroughly redd, how could it be,  
(as that worthy Oratour [Cicero] sayd) but that walking in the sonne  
although for other cause he walked, yet needes he mought be sunburnt;  
and hauing the sound of those auncient Poetes still ringing in his eares, he  
mought needes in singing hit out some of theyr tunes.<sup>23</sup>

What E.K. intends to show is that Spenser’s primitive English word choices are involuntary—that they are based on what he has read. Yet the only writer E.K. refers to in this passage is Cicero, who wrote in Latin, and elsewhere in the dedicatory letter, E.K. complains about the paucity of English literary works. It therefore sounds as though, being “much traueiled and thoroughly redd,” Spenser has read a lot of Latin, and, as E.K. suggests, he will now imitate it. In trying to justify Spenser’s choice of primitive English words, E.K. actually reinforces Spenser’s dependence on Latinate words.

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<sup>23</sup> Spenser, p. 26, l. 30-36.

Just as Spenser's English is supposed to be both pure and influenced by foreign words, the presence of E.K.'s textual notes suggests that *The Shepheardes Calender* aims to create a literary language that is both old and new. Of his contribution, in the dedicatory letter, E.K. writes,

hereunto haue I added a certain Glosse or scholion for the exposition of old wordes and harder phrases: which maner of glosing and commenting, well I wote, wil seeme straunge and rare in our tongue<sup>24</sup>.

Thus the gloss will explain Spenser's work to the readers, who are unlikely to understand Spenser's archaic words. E.K. admits that while a gloss might seem natural in a text in another language, it is a strange addition for an English text. The inclusion of the gloss accords to Spenser's English text a status normally reserved for classical texts. Therefore E.K.'s glosses and textual apparatus, more so than the text itself, present the *Calender* as both ancient and modern.

Through E.K.'s contributions, Spenser is able to create an artificial main text that is tied to the commentary, but that theoretically could be read alone. The dedicatory epistle is notably silent on E.K.'s ideal relationship to the text. If one assumes that the goal of *The Shepheardes Calender* is to restore primitive native English, one would expect that E.K.'s role as glossator would only be necessary until readers become accustomed to this language which is both new and old. E.K.'s involvement would therefore simply be a temporary concession required because of the poor state of the language. E.K. does not suggest that his glosses will someday become unnecessary, however, and leaves the impression that Spenser's language, allegedly a restoration of pure and undefiled English, is and will always be, a foreign construction.

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<sup>24</sup> Spenser, p. 29, l. 168-172.

The physical appearance of the *Calender* confirms that Spenser's goals were not simply to restore but to revolutionize literary English. In his article, "The Appearance of the Text in Early Modern England,"<sup>25</sup> Mark Bland chronicles the changes in typefaces in late sixteenth-century England and the ways that authors and printers made meaningful choices to use particular typefaces in particular books. The *Calender* is an interesting text from this perspective, since it uses several different typefaces—italics in the argument of each eclogue, black-letter typeface in the eclogue's main body, and roman typeface in the textual notes. At the time of the publication of the *Calender*, Bland argues, the dominant typeface was still black-letter, and the use of roman in the textual notes would have appeared modern. The juxtaposition of the roman and black-letter typefaces would have presented the text as both traditional and forward-looking.

The eclogues themselves allow Spenser an opportunity to put into practice the theory of linguistic borrowing that E.K. outlines in the dedicatory letter. "June" is particularly interesting because of the re-appearance of Chaucer as an important figure. Consulting the eclogues, it is immediately apparent that while Spenser's language may be influenced by Chaucer, it is not Chaucerian. Spenser's language, which purportedly channels Chaucer's, is actually a constructed re-imagination of primitive English.

E.K.'s glosses to "June" suggest that Spenser is deliberately choosing Anglo-Saxon words rather than their Latinate synonyms. Spenser uses the word "make," which is Germanic and Dutch in origin,<sup>26</sup> to denote the process of poetic composition. E.K.

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<sup>25</sup> Bland, Mark. "The Appearance of the Text in Early Modern England." *Text: an Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies*. Ed. W. Speed Hill and Edward M. Burns. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> "Make," *OED*.

glosses the word as “versifie,”<sup>27</sup> from the Latin *versus* + *facere*.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Spenser uses the word “stye,” from Old English, which E.K. glosses as “situation and place.”<sup>29</sup> “Situation” comes from the Latin *situāre*.<sup>30</sup> Thus Spenser’s tendency is to choose Anglo-Saxon words while E.K. glosses them with Latinate synonyms. By glossing Spenser’s obscure native words with their more widely-known Latin counterparts, E.K. implies that Spenser’s word choice reflects a pure native antiquity. Yet in order to define the supposedly native words, Spenser must turn to foreign sources. In the *Calender*, the foreign words are the familiar ones, while the native words, which should be familiar, now seem foreign.

But careful analysis shows that Spenser has not cleanly reversed expectations—he has not necessarily presented all native words as foreign and all foreign words as native. The etymological differences between Spenser’s words and E.K.’s gloss words are not always clear. “Stye” is glossed as both “situation” and “place.” While “place” is a Middle English word, the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that it is originally from the Latin *platea*,<sup>31</sup> which means “street.” While the word is originally Latinate, it has undergone significant changes in meaning between its Latin origin and its use in Spenser’s work. The Latin word was adopted into French as the 11<sup>th</sup>-century word “*place*,” meaning “place.”<sup>32</sup> From French, the word was finally adopted into Middle English with the meaning it still carries today. The complicated linguistic history of “place” highlights how rarely a word actually has an unambiguous etymology. This etymological ambiguity

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<sup>27</sup> Spenser, “June,” l. 82, n. 82.

<sup>28</sup> “Versify,” *OED*.

<sup>29</sup> Spenser, “June,” l. 1, n. 1.

<sup>30</sup> “Situation,” *OED*.

<sup>31</sup> “Place,” *OED*.

<sup>32</sup> “Place.” *Concise Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary*. Accessed Mar. 25, 2006.

<[http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:8477/views/BOOK\\_SEARCH.html?book=t64b&authstatuscode=200](http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:8477/views/BOOK_SEARCH.html?book=t64b&authstatuscode=200)>.

undermines the idea that the pure undefiled native English ever existed at all, or that such a language could be resurrected, confirming that Spenser's project tries to create a language which is both old and new.

The example of "place" also reveals that etymology alone does not determine the way Spenser and E.K. present a particular word as native or foreign in the context of *The Shepheardes Calender*. Strangely, in the same line of the eclogue in which he uses "stye," which is glossed "situation or place," Spenser actually uses the word "place." While it may be the gloss of another word, "place" itself is still part of the main text of Spenser's eclogue, suggesting that no clear distinction between main-text word and gloss words exists. Similarly, the word "make" is itself not unfamiliar to Spenser's readers, and yet E.K. chooses to gloss it because of the particular definition of the word, "to write poetry," which Spenser uses in "June." Thus, etymology alone does not sufficiently explain the role of particular words in Spenser's literary language. By glossing certain words, Spenser suggests clear etymological distinctions between primitive English words and Latinate words, which are, in fact, less clear-cut than he imagines.

But Spenser most obviously demonstrates his inability to escape the Latin language in his gloss for the phrase "neighbour groves." E.K. writes, "a strange phrase in English, but word for word expressing the Latine vicina nemora."<sup>33</sup> In themselves the words "neighbor" and "grove" both fit Spenser's linguistic criteria for the main text of the eclogues—they are Germanic and Old English in origin, respectively. E.K.'s admission that the phrase is a word-for-word translation of a common Latin phrase reveals the superficiality of Spenser's escape from the influence of Latin. While

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<sup>33</sup> Spenser, "June," l. 52, n. 52.



translating the phrase may have eliminated all evidence of the Latin language, Spenser remains influenced by Latin literature.

In the imagery of “June,” Spenser again invokes Chaucer as an ambivalent symbol both of irretrievable linguistic purity and of the assimilation of foreign linguistic elements. As a literary influence, Chaucer is both present and absent. Lamenting Chaucer’s death, Colin says “The God of shepherds *Tityrus* is dead,/Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.”<sup>34</sup> Here Spenser suggests that Chaucer is both immortal like a God, and yet dead. This line also reveals that Colin mourns the loss not only of Chaucer’s literary influence, but also his linguistic influence. E.K. glosses “to make” as “to versifie,” suggesting that Chaucer, as Colin’s teacher in versification, influences his language.

Influenced by Chaucer, a symbol of both English *of it self* and English infused with foreign influence, Spenser creates a literary language which is both old and new. Yet the complicated textual apparatus and imagery of *The Shepheardes Calender* present the language as a scholarly construction rather than a natural language. It is the constructed and contrived nature of Spenser’s language to which Jonson will object.

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According to William Drummond’s notes of his conversations with Ben Jonson, “Spenser’s stanzas pleased him not, nor his matter.”<sup>35</sup> Yet being criticized by Jonson hardly placed Spenser in a category alone. An opinionated and prickly person, Jonson was known to bicker with rival playwrights Marston and Dekker, and criticized Shakespeare, Donne, and Sidney, among other contemporaries, on a variety of grounds.

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<sup>34</sup> Spenser, “June,” l. 81-82.

<sup>35</sup> Jonson, Benjamin. “Conversations with William Drummond.” *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*. Ed. George Parfitt. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. p. 461.

In the case of Spenser, Jonson specifically criticizes his language. In Jonson's posthumously published commonplace book, *Timber: or Discoveries*, he writes "Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language."<sup>36</sup> Where in *Timber* he only suggests, in his 1601 play *Poetaster, or, The Arraignment*,<sup>37</sup> Jonson explores his objection to Spenser's language, responds to Spenser's attempt to create what Jonson believes is an artificially pure language, and presents his own opinions of how the English language should relate to the Latin.

Originally from the Latin word *poeta*, meaning poet, and the suffix *-aster*, suggesting an inferior form of something, the word "poetaster" has cognates in Italian (*poetastro*), Spanish (*poetastro*), and French (*poetastre*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "poetaster" as "a petty or paltry poet; a writer of poor or trashy verse; a rimester."<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the etymology of "poetaster" is unrelated to the word "taste," which comes from the late popular Latin *tastare* through the Middle English *tasten*, meaning "to touch or feel."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the first listed uses of "poetaster" are in Jonson's own writings, suggesting that he may have introduced it to the English language.

Scholars have long read Jonson's satirical play in the context of London's "War of the Theaters,"<sup>40</sup> considering the work a manifestation of a power struggle between competing playwrights. But in *Poetaster*, Jonson explores both the relationship between English literature and Latin literature, and the relationship between the English language

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<sup>36</sup> Jonson, Benjamin. "Timber: or Discoveries." *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*. Ed. George Parfitt. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. p. 428.

<sup>37</sup> Jonson, Ben. *The Devil is an Ass, and Other Plays*. Eds. Margaret Jane Kidnie, et al. Oxford World's Classics Edition. New York: Oxford UP Inc., 2000.

<sup>38</sup> "Poetaster," *OED*.

<sup>39</sup> "Taste," *OED*.

<sup>40</sup> Kidnie, Margaret Jane. Introduction. *The Devil is an Ass, and Other Plays*. By Ben Jonson. Eds. Margaret Jane Kidnie, et al. Oxford World's Classics Edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

and the Latin language. Although a play set in Rome and containing classical authors and historical figures as characters, *Poetaster* is written entirely in English except for a Latin epigraph at the end. Even when the character Virgil quotes from his own *Aeneid* in Act V scene II, he does so in English translation. Yet while all characters speak in English, they incorporate Latinisms into their speech in different ways. Through conflicts between poets and poetasters, Jonson demonstrates that some ways of incorporating Latin into English are better than others.

In the final scene of *Poetaster*, Jonson tries to use poetic composition to police and discipline linguistic borrowing from the Latin, determining what is licit and what is illicit borrowing of Latin words and phrases. Jonson suggests that for English to be, like Latin, a language capable of producing great literature, it must not depend too heavily on Latin. Therefore, he attempts to show how purging English of certain Latinate words actually makes English more like Latin—sensical, self-sustaining, and inclusive of, but not dependent on, words from foreign sources.

The character Crispinus's forced purging in the final scene of *Poetaster* dramatizes the purging from English of its overly Latinate words. Crispinus is a poetical hack who throughout the play uses words indiscriminately borrowed from Latin. After Crispinus has been found guilty at a trial of planning to defame Horace by plagiarizing his works, Horace administers a pill which induces Crispinus to vomit. Horace then holds the bowl into which Crispinus vomits words he used in poems earlier in the play, and which, Jonson suggests, are too Latinate to be part of English.

Indeed, Crispinus's bad poetry is verbose and replete with Latinate diction. Crispinus often uses the wrong word, and one which is far longer than the one he needs.

When he accosts Horace on the street, hoping to show the famous poet some of his works, he says,

By Phoebus, here's a most neat fine street, is 't not? I protest to thee, I am enamoured of this street now, more than of half the streets of Rome again, 'tis so polite and terse.<sup>41</sup>

Though the road is perhaps quite lovely, it is neither polite nor terse—and neither is the pesky Crispinus. Yet the choice of these wrong words reveals something interesting about Jonson's argument. The English word "terse" is originally from the Latin *tersus* meaning "having been wiped off or cleaned." Similarly, "polite" comes from the Latin *polītus* meaning "having been polished or refined." Therefore, the Latin origins of Crispinus's English words make his comment clear—Crispinus is saying that the street is clean and orderly. Where the English words *polite* and *terse* do not quite fit, the Latin *polītus* and *tersus* make Crispinus's comment intelligible.

Crispinus's mistake, therefore, is directly importing Latin words without taking care that their English cognates have the same meaning. Furthermore, the resemblance between *polītus*, polite, and, polished, suggests that perhaps Crispinus meant to use "polished" rather than "polite." While in 21<sup>st</sup>-century English the word "to polish" can mean either adding a thin veneer, like nail or shoe polish, or removing dirt and debris, like silver polish, the *OED* suggests that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English, most uses of "polished," as a term of praise meant that the detritus had been polished away.<sup>42</sup> Where the beginning Latin student assumes that Latin words carry the same meaning as their English cognates, Crispinus assumes that English words carry the same

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<sup>41</sup> *Poetaster*, 3.1.24-28.

<sup>42</sup> "Polish," *OED*.

meaning as their Latin roots. Thus, Jonson suggests that Latin words cannot always be directly imported into English.

In the final scene of the play, when Crispinus is forced to vomit, Jonson demonstrates, through Horace, the role of the poet in controlling the English language. Horace, a figure for Jonson himself, holds the bowl into which Crispinus, the poetaster, vomits. Meanwhile, Virgil and Caesar stand nearby, watching the scene. Horace mediates between the poetastery of Crispinus and the political authority of Caesar and his favorite poet Virgil. Presumably, the act of vomiting words would have been staged with Crispinus saying the words with some kind of coughing or gagging sound, as though spitting them into the bowl held by Horace. Indeed, the text suggests that Crispinus's vomiting involves actually saying the words. Crispinus line reads: "Oh—*retrograde—reciprocal—incubus*."<sup>43</sup> Yet if the words are actually audibly spoken, Virgil and Caesar are not able to hear or understand them, repeatedly asking after each regurgitory bout, "What's that, Horace?"<sup>44</sup> and "What are they?"<sup>45</sup> Horace responds to these questions by repeating the words Crispinus has just vomited, telling them, "Retrograde, reciprocal, and incubus are come up."<sup>46</sup> If some of the words are hard for Virgil and Caesar to understand, Horace does not appear to have this problem.

Horace's role as mediator between poetastery and political authority in this scene is the result of his physical proximity to the representation of the vomited words. Horace acts as though he is able to actually read the words once they physically fall into the bowl. His ability to interpret them is linked with his ability to both hear and see the words

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<sup>43</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.427.

<sup>44</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.428.

<sup>45</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.433.

<sup>46</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.429.

Crispinus vomits. In order to be expelled from the language, Crispinus's words must be embodied in a physical object, which only Horace, as moderator of the language, is able to see. Unlike Caesar and Virgil, who will not even go near the illegitimate words, Horace holds the bowl which prevents them, presumably, from making a mess of the floor. Here Jonson clearly presents the role of the poet as one of moderating, controlling, and cleaning up the mess of English words. Thus, for Jonson, the distinctive characteristic of the poet is not, as one might suspect, the creative imagination. Rather, it is the poet's ability to arbitrate linguistic matters and do the sometimes dirty job of keeping certain words out of the language.

The final scene of *Poetaster* also presents the poet as a doctor who treats the English language, embodied in Crispinus, as though it has a disease. Initially reluctant to punish Crispinus for the plot to defame him, Horace later suggests that he be given a vomit-inducing pill in order to rehabilitate him. Horace says,

Ay. Please it, great Caesar, I have pills about me,  
Mixed with the whitest kind of hellebore,  
Would give him a light vomit that should purge  
His brain and stomach of those tumorous heats,  
Might I have leave to minister unto him.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, it is the poet who treats the distempered stomach and rehabilitates the body of the English language. The poet, like a physician, does not only identify and diagnose problems with the language, but also prescribes treatment.

Horace's role in this scene reveals a fundamental contradiction in Jonson's argument—he cannot help but highlight the words he wants to purge. Horace has to repeat the words which cannot be spoken, and only these words are embodied on the stage. *Poetaster* showcases rather than suppresses these words. Interesting to a 21<sup>st</sup>-

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<sup>47</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.357-361.

century reader is that many of the vomited words have become perfectly standard English words today: reciprocal, clumsy, and conscious, to name a few. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists *Poetaster* as the first usage of several of these words. Clearly, Jonson's attempt to purge English of them backfired, as his play popularized words that had not been used before. While Jonson theorizes the role of poet as one of excluding particular words from English, his own poetry has had the opposite effect of ushering new words into the language.

Jonson implies that only Crispinus's overly Latinate words are vomited—that the vomiting establishes the rules of linguistic borrowing by expurgating certain unacceptable words. For the most part, the vomit consists of single words which Jonson considers illegitimate as English—only once does a two-word phrase “barmy froth”<sup>48</sup> come together. Yet while Jonson suggests that Crispinus's regurgitation selects only certain unacceptable words, this suggestion is undermined by the very nature of regurgitation itself. Vomiting is inherently indiscriminate. When one has eaten bad food, one vomits not the offending dish alone, but one's entire meal. Furthermore, as Virgil observes, Crispinus has an abiding tendency for overly Latinized speech, which vomiting once will not cure. He says, saying “These pills can but restore him for a time,/Not cure him quite of such a malady”<sup>49</sup>. Vomiting, our body's last line of defense against harmful one-time ingestions, seems like an ineffective remedy for Crispinus's problem.

Analyzing the etymologies of the words Crispinus vomits confirms that they come from several different linguistic sources—not just Latin. Just as Spenser portrays particular words as early English which actually come from Latin, so does Jonson portray

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<sup>48</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.451.

<sup>49</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.486-487.

words as Latin which actually come from early English. While the vomit is supposed to purge Crispinus's excessively Latinate words, of the thirty words which are purged, eight—nearly one third—are Anglo-Saxon or Germanic in origin:<sup>50</sup> “glibbery,” “snotteries,” “chilblained,” “clumsy,” “barmy,” “froth,” “puffy,” and “clutched.” It is not clear why Jonson finds these Anglo-Saxon words offensive. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that perhaps the only etymological similarity between the thirty vomited words is that many were used by Jonson's rival playwrights Marston and Dekker.

Re-reading Crispinus's poetry in the other scenes, one comes across many more than thirty words that seem worthy of purging, yet Horace's medicine does not affect them. It is difficult to discern a pattern in the vomited words, or to predict which kinds of words Jonson would find offensive. Not all Crispinus's Latinate words are unacceptable, and not all Crispinus's unacceptable words are Latinate—yet Jonson himself stresses the connection between poor linguistic borrowing and the Latin language. What, then, are the rules of linguistic borrowing which Jonson tries to establish? Jonson's comment that “Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language” suggests that it is not Latinism *per se* to which Jonson objects, but a particular kind of Latinism which is affected. The etymology of “affect” itself confirms that Jonson does not object to all Latinisms—“affect” comes from the Latin *affectāre*. Yet what exactly makes a word “affected” for Jonson? He suggests that making this determination requires a poet's arbitrary power.

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<sup>50</sup> “Retrograde,” “reciprocal,” “incubus,” “glibbery,” “lubrical,” “defunct,” “magnificate,” “spurious,” “snotteries,” “chilblained,” “clumsy,” “barmy,” “froth,” “puffy,” “inflate,” “turgidous,” “ventosity,” “oblurant,” “obcecate,” “furibund,” “fatuate,” “strenuous,” “conscious,” “prorumped,” “clutched,” “tropological,” “anagogical,” “loquacity,” “pinnosity,” “obstupefact,” *OED*.



The fact that Jonson's "rules" of linguistic borrowing are hard to articulate suggests that they are less clear-cut than he likes to think. Clearly Jonson does not advocate purging all Latinisms from English—such a project would be as preposterous then as now. Nor does he object to all new English words, having introduced into English the word "poetaster" itself. Rather, he suggests that there is a complex system of guidelines for incorporating Latin into English. In Jonson's linguistic world, the rules for borrowing Latinisms are so complicated that, as 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholars, they are difficult to reconstruct. Just as unspoken rules of social etiquette are baffling to those outside that community, so are Jonson's rules of linguistic borrowing arcane to us.

One might wonder whether, to Jonson, linguistic borrowing relies on rules which can be taught, or instincts which must be felt. The strange metaphor of vomiting suggests that what Jonson presents as the rules of borrowing are really his own visceral borrowing instincts. Rather than teach Crispinus how to incorporate Latin into English more appropriately, vomiting only teaches Crispinus that he has done so incorrectly. At the end of the play, he is exhausted from vomiting and knows little more than when he began. The forced purging is as much punishment as rehabilitation. Jonson's reluctance to explain his criteria for borrowing Latinisms, and his emphasis on instinct, feeling, and taste sharply contrasts with the scholarly format of Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*, in which linguistic choices are exhaustively explained with textual notes.

Horace's efforts to rehabilitate Crispinus, however, suggest that proper linguistic borrowing can be cultivated with a particular kind of study. Virgil describes to Crispinus what constitutes a "strict and wholesome diet,"<sup>51</sup> giving him a list of authors which he should read. He instructs Crispinus to read Cato and Terence, while avoiding Plautus and

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<sup>51</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.491.

Ennius, known for their flowery styles, and described as “meats/Too harsh for a weak stomach.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, although Virgil claims that Crispinus has a “weak stomach,” there is no evidence that he is prone to vomiting or indigestion. In fact, he only vomits because he was given a vomit-inducing pill. One might argue that in this sense, Crispinus has a strong stomach—he was able, before being force-fed the pill, to digest those words which Horace and Virgil consider inedible. Thus through a strict diet of both reading and writing, Virgil suggests that Crispinus can cultivate a discriminating palate for words, much like thoughtfully sampling fine foods can make one’s palate more sophisticated. Learning to borrow correctly is a matter of developing a sense of linguistic taste—the taste of the poet.

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Spenser and Jonson present two markedly different visions of the role of poetry in creating the English literary language at a time when the very question of what was “English” was nagging at the minds of many. For Spenser, the poet’s job is to usher in linguistic change, not to control it. By contrast, Jonson clearly relishes his role in excluding words and arbitrating linguistic change. Jonson’s philosophy of linguistic borrowing might seem more restrictive by virtue of the fact that it is enforced with violent purging. For Jonson, the poet must control and regularize the chaos of language. While the most notable feature of Spenser’s text is the glosses which explain the unusual words he does choose to include in the *Calender*, the dramatic climax of *Poetaster* centers around those words Jonson aims to violently purge from English. While Spenser is eager to establish what English *is*, Jonson is more concerned with delimiting what English is *not*.

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<sup>52</sup> *Poetaster*, 5.3.497-498.

But simply dismissing Jonson's literary English as too restrictive fails to consider Jonson's and Quintilian's argument that language must not be affected. Where the vomiting analogy suggests that Jonson's language is natural and visceral, Spenser's complicated textual apparatus presents his language as a construction. Where Jonson's forcible exclusion of words from English might seem violent, Spenser's convoluted inclusion of words might seem ridiculous. Perhaps these two camps, which cannot easily be reconciled to each other, are both necessary and complementary philosophies at moments of linguistic instability, when a language needs both Spenser's revolutionary vision and Jonson's conservative, ordering impulse.

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