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A Note on Spenser and the Scottish Sonneteers¹

Despite the disagreement of some scholars, it has been generally assumed that Edmund Spenser devised the Spensarian sonnet and that the Scottish poets James VI, Alexander Montgomerie, Thomas Hudson, and others, who used the form, were imitating Spenser. The question is raised by certain dates of publication. Spenser first published sonnets in the form graced by his name in 1590; they were the seventeen dedicatory sonnets accompanying the *Faerie Queene*. Six years earlier (1584), however, James VI had published *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the Divine Art of Poesie* which contains twenty Spensarian sonnets: one by Thomas Hudson, one by Robert Hudson, one by M. W., one by William Fowler, one by Alexander Montgomerie, and fifteen by James himself.

On the basis of these dates Oscar Hoffman argues that Montgomerie evolved the form and Spenser adopted it from him.² George Stevenson points out that Dr. Hoffman overlooked a sonnet inscribed by Spenser to Gabriel Harvey which is dated July 18, 1586, although it was not pub-

¹ All references to individual poems are to these editions:

New Poems by James I of England, ed. Alan Westcott, Columbia University Press, 1911.

The Poems of Alexander Montgomerie, ed. James Cranstoun, STS, 1887.

The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt, Oxford University Press, 1912.

The numbering of the poems in Mr. Westcott's edition is much more conveniently referred to, so I have used it, but there is a newer edition of James' poetry. *The Poems of King James VI of Scotland*, ed. J. R. Craigie, STS, 3d. series 22,26, 1955, 1958. For the reader's convenience I list here the corresponding numbers of the poems cited.

Westcott		Craigie
	<i>Amatoria</i>	
II		1
III		2
XII		5
	<i>Miscellanea</i>	
XXI		13
XXIII		15
XXXII		20
XXXIII		21
XLVII		31
L		33
Appendix II		Uncollected Poems
IV		VIIIa

² Oscar Hoffman, "Studien zu Alexander Montgomerie," *Englische Studien*, xx, (1895), 51.

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lished until 1592.³ Stevenson argues that the Scots' priority of publication is therefore not great enough to be significant.⁴ Herbert Cory glances at their evidence and decides for Spenser on the grounds that he was the greater and more versatile poet.⁵ Allen Westcott and Stevenson, without yielding much credit to Montgomerie, assume the probability of independent invention. James Craigie attributes the invention to the circle of poets around James.⁶

Most aspects of the question have been discussed by the scholars mentioned above: the capabilities of the poets concerned, the poetic activity of Scotland and England, the probable French inspiration, the dating of the sonnets and the dates of publication, the mutual awareness of James and Spenser, and the intercourse between the English and Scottish courts and literary men.⁷ Only the sonnets themselves have not been considered.

If, in addition to the rhyme-scheme, the sonnets by Spenser and James and his coterie were alike in style, subject matter, manipulation of the form, and in theme, one might discount the evidence to the contrary and assert that even though the exact exchange between the poets is not demonstrable it must have occurred. Thus the question might be opened again. An examination of the sonnets however, confirms the probability that the Scottish poets and Spenser developed and used the form without awareness of each other's activity. The poets' use of the form is very different.

There are similarities, as one would expect; all were, as far as we know, subject to similar influences. They were reading other English sonneteers, and DuBartas, DuBellay, and Petrarch. They were interested in poetic theory. And in using a common verse pattern they committed themselves to likeness, except insofar as they were able to change the form without destroying it.

The Spenserian sonnet is not a distinct form as are the English and Petrarchan sonnets, which, besides rhyming differently, move and develop

³ George Stevenson, *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie*, Supplementary Volume, STS, 59, (1910), xlv-xlvii.

⁴ Stevenson and Hoffman overlook a sonnet by Spenser which must have been written around 1582. Sometime between 1580, when Spenser left Leicester's employ to go to Ireland, and 1588, when Leicester died, Spenser addressed a sonnet to Leicester. It was published with *Virgil's Gnat* in 1591. The content and tone of the sonnet indicate that it was written nearer the earlier date. The editor of the *Variorum* dates it 1580.

⁵ Herbert E. Cory, *Edmund Spenser, A Critical Study*, Berkely, (1917), p. 234-5.

⁶ J. R. Craigie, *Thomas Hudson's History of Judith*, STS, third series, 14, (1941), xcii-ci.

⁷ A summary discussion of all these matters is in J. R. Craigie's introduction to *The Poems of King James VI of Scotland*.

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differently. The Petrarchan is a fourteen line poem composed of two quatrains and two tercets. The English is a fourteen line poem of three quatrains and a couplet. The Spenserian is also three quatrains and a couplet; structurally it is the English form, but the interlocking rhyme can blur the construction so that the poet can ignore the quatrain and write a sonnet which has more the movement of the Petrarchan (Spenser, *Amoretti* XXXVII; Montgomerie, *Sonnets* 1; James, *Miscellanea* XXXIII). Because Spenser never overrides the inherent construction as entirely as Montgomerie sometimes does, the logic of his sonnets usually progresses through the three quatrains to a conclusion in the couplet (*Amoretti*, II). The grammatical structure of the poems also is molded to the form. Each quatrain contains a completed sentence, and the phrasing is so arranged that it corresponds to the line. Each line, then, is end-stop and caesuras are blurred. Spenser writes few run-on lines. The verse is smooth, without great variation, never rough (except for the sonnet to Harvey). The commonest substitution is of a trochee or spondee for the initial iamb.

James' sonnets have not the consistent smoothness of Spenser's but submit to the same logic. There are a few exceptions; one, a catalogue (*Miscellanea* XXI) has only the logic and structure of a list. Spenser confines his catalogues (*Amoretti*, IX, XV) more closely within a grammatical construction. In another (*Miscellanea* XXIII) James completes the first sentence at the third foot of the fifth line, the fifth line is run on into the sixth, and the seventh into the eighth; he slurs the form as Spenser never did.

In this respect Montgomerie's sonnets resemble Spenser's even less. He is less consistent than James and Spenser in handling the form so that his sonnets vary considerably in character. Some are rough, sonnets only in scansion and rhyme. He often ignores the quatrain and melds the couplet with the preceding lines (*Sonnets*, I). End stop lines (XXV), each line broken into several short phrases (LV), frequent and positive caesuras (LXX), midline sentence endings (XXV), a change of cadence in the middle of a sonnet (VI); all these characteristics cause a halting, rough, staccato movement. This seems more typical of his verse than do the smoother, sweeter lines of several sonnets (*Suppl. Vol. Misc. Poems*, XXI-XXVII) which are more like Spenser's and more in the manner of the conventional love sonnet.

The ruggedness of Montgomerie's sonnets is aggravated by another characteristic which he shares with James. Both poets use alliteration indiscriminately. With each repetition of sound Montgomerie's line slows and breaks into individual words. Often a line is a list; one sonnet begins "Of Mars, Minerva, Mercure, and the Musis/" and continues "A cunning

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king a cunning Chancellor chuisis./” Line after line will have three or four words in alliteration. Scarcely a single poem is without instances. James is like him in this practice, following his own prescript in the *Reulis*, “The most part of your line shall run upon a letter.” (*Amatoria*, II 1, 4, 5-8; III 11, 12, 13; XII 1, 7; *Miscellanea* XXXII 1).

Alliteration is not common in Spenser’s sonnets. It appears frequently in the sonnet to Leicester and several times in the one to Harvey. In other instances, particularly in the *Amoretti*, it is an occasional device, useful to emphasize a parallelism (XI 14) or to form an epithet (XIII 1, 2). Whenever it occurs it is subdued. All three poets are alike in preferring masculine rhyme, but Spenser frequently employs feminine rhyme (*Amoretti* II, VI; *To Harvey*; *Visions of the Worlds Vanities* I; II) or rhymes on secondary accents (*Amoretti* III).

In content the sonnets of the three poets are not much alike. It may seem meaningful that Spenser calls one sequence *Amoretti* and James calls a group *Amatoria*; however, only twelve of the twenty poems in *Amatoria* are sonnets, and they have none of the sequential unity which Spenser gave the *Amoretti*. Several of the *Amatoria* are not on the subject of love and so are without even the unity suggested by the title. In Montgomerie’s work there is no such grouping of poems at all. In the love poems of all three poets we find the time’s conventional manner and imagery. That the poems are alike in this respect is not significant, but it is significant that as they differ from the conventional they continue to differ from each other. This means that the Scots poets are not imitating Spenser, nor Spenser them. As Spenser develops his own mode, he introduces into the *Amoretti* elements of neo-platonism and displaces the conventional manner and imagery (*Amoretti* XXVII, LXXVIII, LXXIX, LXXXVIII). Neo-platonism is not a theme in Montgomerie’s and James’ work. If their love poems move from the conventional it is toward a more personal occasional tone and manner which is typical of all their work (Sonnets L, LV). They become more concrete as Spenser becomes more abstract.

The personal and occasional character prevails in sonnets written on other subjects by the two Scots. Montgomerie uses the sonnet in the manner of the flyting (XIX, XX). He threatens his enemies (XX). He abuses a former friend (XXI), his own lawyer (XXIII), and appeals to the king to restore his pension (XIV). This is immediate, direct, open poetry of statement. James is again like his master. He writes sonnets in praise of learned men (*Miscellanea* XXIII), to give advice to his son (Appendix II, IV) and about current events (*Miscellanea* XLVII, L). Their poems do not arise out of concepts nor are they written to express the sort of abstraction which Spenser is wholly concerned with in *Visions of*

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the Worlds Vanities. Nor are their poems about the idea of love or about the nature of love as are the *Amoretti*. Even in his most occasional poems such as the commendatory and dedicatory sonnets and in some of the more personal of the *Amoretti* Spenser is less detailed, less specific, less concrete than the Scots.

Nothing in the character of the sonnets written by Spenser, on one hand, and two of the most important of the Scots poets would support an assertion that one imitated the other. Only in form are they alike, and it seems reasonable to assume that if the familiarity of one with the works of the other was sufficient to lead to imitation of form there would have been some imitation also of manner, subject, and structure. That Spenser and the Scots poets were not familiar with each other's work in the form increases the reliability of the conclusion that they developed this sonnet form independently.

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