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## Review of Richard A. McCabe, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*

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of print culture: 'The King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer [with the KPH imprint] became the very pith and marrow of English official culture' (p. 246).

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*The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*. Ed by RICHARD A. McCABE. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2010. xxiv+826 pp. £85. ISBN 978-0-19922-736-5.

'O what an endless worke haue I in hand': quoting Spenser to illustrate his 'inability or unwillingness to finish his epic', Elizabeth Jane Bellamy touches on one response to state-of-the-art critical handbooks (pp. 274-75). This massive tome, a forerunner of the forthcoming Oxford *Complete Works* (edited by five of the contributors to this collection of forty-two essays), follows on the heels of three related collections in the past twenty plus years. The encyclopedic Spenser has not wanted for companions, handbooks, nor encyclopedias. Bart van Es's *Critical Companion to Spenser Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Andrew Hadfield's *Cambridge Companion to Spenser* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) are slimmer collections, whereas the *Oxford Handbook* is more congruent with A. C. Hamilton's properly epic *Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), a work whose ambitious scale and frequent oversights guarantee its ongoing relevance to Spenserians. A handbook is a different animal from an encyclopedia: McCabe has not aimed for such comprehensiveness. Rather, the elegant ordering of the contents—five parts on contexts, works, poetic craft, sources, and reception—with the avoidance of a single party line, enables the diligent reader to gain a paradoxically comprehensive view of contemporary Spenser studies.

But even here, there are further paradoxes. As John D. Staines's alert essay on historicism indicates, the twentieth-century professionalization of Spenser studies has had the side effect of making a writer once praised as 'the poet's poet' a pre-eminently difficult writer, 'a prime candidate for detailed exegesis' (p. 745), who is seldom read outside of the Academy. Another way of putting this is that though the *Oxford Handbook* will be indispensable for Spenserians and graduate students, it is unlikely to reach the chimerical 'common reader' (p. 733), especially at the cost of £85. McCabe and his contributors do excellent work in introducing the full range of Spenser's work to non-specialists, yet few of these are likely to open this book outside of the increasingly pricey precincts of university libraries.

Those lucky few are treated to an appropriately complex, shifting Spenser. McCabe's introduction highlights a guiding principle which underpins almost every essay: 'Without his literary skills, Spenser would be indistinguishable from the scores of secretaries, civil servants, and colonists who sought personal advantage on the fringes of empire' (p. 4). This sentence identifies one of the major preoccupations of Spenser studies in the past thirty years: his involvement in the government of Ireland as a colonial administrator, and his intense, problematic thinking about Irish affairs in *The Faerie Queene* and *Vewe of the Present State of Ireland*. Yet McCabe balances the self-interested secretary with the imaginative writer; he notes that the section on poetic craft is the major justification for the

*Handbook's* existence (p. 5). One of the strengths of the volume is that questions of craft are not restricted to this section. In addition to important essays by Jeff Dolven (on metre), Colin Burrow (genre), Kenneth Borris (allegory), and McCabe's own magisterial consideration of 'Authorial Self-Presentation', many contributors recur to formal questions. Linda Gregerson on the 1590 *Faerie Queene*, David Lee Miller on *Fowre Hymnes* and *Prothalamion*, Gordon Teskey on the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, and Mark David Rasmussen on *Complaints* and *Daphnaïda* are exemplary of this tendency in their attention to the half-lines, rhymes, stanza forms, poetic modes in which these texts are embodied. Even Elizabeth Fowler's judicious account of the *Vewe* underlines the risks in reading Spenser's opinions directly from Irenius's, and notes that more work is needed on the form of the Renaissance dialogue, in which the *Vewe* critically participates (p. 328). The value of such pervasive attention to form is shown by Teskey's deft remark that Spenser turns against *Mutabilitie* chiefly because 'He doesn't like the tone of her voice', and his linking of that voice with the new generation of satirists in the London of the late 1590s (p. 347).

As this suggests, form almost inevitably reflects context. Unlike the more doctrinaire positions taken in the 1980s and 1990s, contributors stress the congruence of historicism and formalism: the approaches of Rasmussen (p. 223) and Bellamy (p. 283) are two examples of the broader syncretism at work in contemporary criticism diagnosed by Staines (p. 752). At the same time, the contextual materials in the first part offer challenging views of Spenser and his society. In successive essays on religion and politics, Claire McEachern and David J. Baker complicate assumptions about Spenser's beliefs, cumulatively reminding the reader of the limits of our knowledge of his affiliations. As Baker puts it, 'Spenser can best be understood as a close student (and exemplar) of the problems around which Renaissance political theory organized itself, and not as a steady advocate of any one agenda or doctrine' (p.49).

Other important shifts in emphasis occur elsewhere. One of the editors of the Oxford *Complete Works*, Joseph Loewenstein, raises the bar for that text by exposing the textual shortcomings of the Johns Hopkins *Variorum* edition (1932-49); as Loewenstein's essay makes clear, the textual study of Spenser has until recently lagged behind with eighteenth-century paradigms (p. 657). Related advances in terms of book history are evident in essays by Claire Preston and Wayne Erickson, while the continuing prominence of influence studies is shown by searching, elegant work by Syrithe Pugh, Andrew King, and Anne Lake Prescott. The *Oxford Handbook* is thus a significant addition to the Spenserian library. What does it leave out? Individual Spenserians will have their own score cards; I would have welcomed more on language and questions of lexis; more on Spenser's influence on younger contemporaries such as Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Drayton. Yet as few readers have wished the unfinished *Faerie Queene* to be any longer, so it is difficult to wish more pages for this necessary epic.