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Reviewed work(s): Donald Stump. Spenser's Heavenly Elizabeth: Providential History in *The Faerie Queene*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. Xv + 337. £47.99. ISBN 978-3-030-27115-2 (eBook) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27115-2>.

The series in which this volume appears – “Queenship and Power” – seems tailor-made for a study of Edmund Spenser, the poet credited as architect of the myth of Gloriana, and Donald Stump is well-suited to the task. Stump has two advantages over other scholars: an immersive knowledge of the primary material for Elizabeth's reign; and a deep understanding of the place of the queen in Spenser studies. Yet twenty years after Andrew Hadfield asked “Was Spenser a republican?”, and with Jean Brink now sounding a cautionary note against the very idea of the poet as court aspirant, Spenser's attitude to Elizabeth seems far less idolatrous than earlier critics assumed.

Stump is all too aware of Spenser's reputation as a hanger-on – “what are we to say against Karl Marx's characterization of him as ‘the Queen's arse-licking poet’?” (37). Salvaging a more subtle and sophisticated writer, Stump offers a nuanced approach to a subject too often viewed in terms of sycophancy or subversion. The poetry's the thing: “Drawing on the interest and the celebrity appeal of Elizabeth and her court, Spenser had found a way to teach abstract points using concrete contemporary events, not simply as illustrations, but as the very tools of instruction” (viii). This is a bold claim, and at a time when the links between royalty and celebrity in the reign of a second Elizabeth are under intense scrutiny, a problematic one. Stump concedes that “to modern ears, [Spenser's] celebrations of Elizabeth ring false because they seem overly idealized” (6), and his chapter titles demonstrate a willingness to confront this issue: “The Problem of Over-Idealization”, “the Problem of Flattery”, “The Paradox of Deprecatory Idealization”, and “Two Solutions to the Problem of Flattery”.

Stump layers his argument in ways that enrich our understanding of familiar figures, inviting us to look afresh at Spenser's image of his monarch: "With deep roots in the Old and New Testaments and more recent ones in English folklore and Elizabethan royal iconography, Gloriana represents a triangulation to accomplish three overriding aims of the poet: to celebrate the queen as part of a project, shared by Sidney and others, to create for England a distinguished national literature; to gain honor as an epic poet of the caliber of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso by depicting figures developed around the English founding myth of Arthur and the Round Table; and, in doing so, to set forth, in the fleeting details of a fictional Arthurian history, exemplary patterns of personal virtue and vice and of social justice and political disorder" (13-14). Here, in a single sentence, Stump conveys the scope and ambition of Spenser's conception and his poet's grasp of the range and richness of royal representation.

Key to Stump's argument is the suggestion that Spenser differed from Philip Sidney, who became disaffected with Elizabeth due to her cautious foreign policy. This claim frames the book, and is mapped out most forcibly in a short section entitled "Sidney's Elizabeth, Spenser's Queen" (312-18). Sidneians will take issue with the notion that Spenser developed a more favourable image of the queen after Sidney's death through having the benefit of seeing her grow into her role post-Armada and during the challenges of the succession crisis of the 1590s, but there is considerable virtue in reading Spenser forward from Sidney rather than backwards from Milton. Yet here again Jean Brink's recent work on the impact of the Sidneys on Spenser's career – Sir Henry included – complicates matters.

*Spenser's Heavenly Elizabeth* will be of interest to all those who see Spenser's epic poem as preoccupied primarily with royalty and with providential history. Stump wears his historicism lightly, precisely because as an interpreter of allegory and close reader of poetry he never lets historical context dominate discussion to the exclusion of form. His delicate

handling of the poetry achieves a fine balance between textuality and topicality. As a leading scholar of Elizabethan iconography who has documented her reign from every angle, from panegyric to polemic, Stump is ideally placed to tackle this weighty subject. Through his editorial and bibliographical energies he has been an enabler of decisive work on the image of Elizabeth. This magisterial monograph affords him the perfect opportunity to demonstrate his own unsurpassed expertise.

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