

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

4I.24

Wilson-Okamura, David Scott. *Virgil in the Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 2010. vii + 299 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-19812-7. £58.00 hardback.

David Scott Wilson-Okamura's *Virgil in the Renaissance* is an engaging and learned work of scholarship. Both the book's title and Wilson-Okamura's introductory framing of the book promise a broad overview of Virgil's reception in the Renaissance. Such a study is needed in early modern studies, Wilson-Okamura observes in his introduction, as a way to answer the question, "What did poets in the Renaissance know—or think they knew—about Virgil, and how did they interpret his major poems?" (1). But to pursue the issue of "what became of Virgil in the Renaissance—how he was received and how his poems were recycled" (1)—Wilson-Okamura focuses on Virgilian editions and commentaries printed between 1469 and 1599. Herein lies the disjunction between what *Virgil in the Renaissance* sets out to do and what it accomplishes. Despite its broad claims, this work's actual scope is far more limited, and it does not address some of the central issues with which Virgil's imitators grappled. Wilson-Okamura's work has almost no discussion of empire or fame, surely subjects of supreme importance to Virgil's Renaissance imitators, and relatively brief discussion of allegory, another clearly important issue for latter-day Virgils. In describing his method, Wilson-Okamura distinguishes his approach from the myriad works written on Renaissance epic on the basis that he recognizes multiple Virgils; despite such a variety of Virgils, though, he argues that Virgil's reception does not change substantially over place and time. All that said, the value of *Virgil in the Renaissance* will be apparent to all. Wilson-Okamura is a brilliantly lucid writer and a profound thinker, and he transforms a subject that might be dry as dust, Virgil's scholarly reception in the Renaissance, into a study that is expansive, insightful, and even fun. This is no small accomplishment.

Virgil in the Renaissance divides into three parts: "Publication," "Reputation," and "Interpretation."

"Publication" explores "which commentaries on Virgil were printed most often, and which commentaries were printed over the longest period" (10). Here, Wilson-Okamura asks how the Prince of Poets' name should be spelled, whether "Vergil or Virgil," as a way into his complex reception within the "Market for Virgil Editions and Commentaries" (15, 20). The second part deals with Virgil's "Reputation," examining a range of topics—"patronage, erudition, versatility, refinement, and style"—over three chapters (48). Chapter 2, on "Patronage and the *Eclogues*," probes matters from sexuality to style, from the question of "How Virgil Got Rich," to the question, "Was Virgil a Flatterer?" (50, 59). Chapter 3, on "Variety and the *Georgics*," explores Virgil's reception by focusing on such issues as "Style and Genre" as well as "Style and Variety" (91, 93). Chapter 4, "Morals and Minimalism," primarily examines the relation of "Style and Character," considering perceptions of Virgil's private life as they relate to his role as a public poet and, in the broadest terms, suggesting how Virgil's style defined him as a poet (one who was, and was not, Homer) (103). The third part considers "Interpretation" of the *Aeneid*, specifically approaching the first and second halves of Virgil's epic distinctly (10). Chapter 5, "Virgil's *Odyssey*," concentrates on "The Weight of the Underworld" in the literary, philosophical, theological, and historical reception of the first six books of the *Aeneid* (149). Chapter 6, "Virgil's *Iliad*," considers the legacy of the *Aeneid*'s last six books by focusing on key topics—the death of Turnus, and the love of Dido and Lavinia—as they bear upon the character of Aeneas and, by association, the education of readers from antiquity to the Renaissance.

In his study's "Epilogue," Wilson-Okamura makes his most forthright arguments. Here, he writes that "Virgil in the Renaissance was a style as much as an idea," and that "If we want to understand the *Aeneid* historically . . . if we want to read the epic that inspired Spenser and Tasso and Ariosto the way the poets read it, we must learn how to listen for sound as well as sense, for style as well as meaning" (251). This would seem to have been Wilson-Okamura's thesis all along; it also helps to explain the continuity which he claims for Virgil's reception history. Why not make that explicit earlier, though? As a study of the substance of style in

the scholarly reception of Virgil's poetry, *Virgil in the Renaissance*—though it might have a more fitting title and focus—has much to say about the “characters of style” in every sense: the way that style helps to define poets and genres, speaks to issues of imitation, shapes the character of a work and its readers alike, and charts the movement of history through, and as, linguistic change.

Wilson-Okamura concludes by alluding to style as the subject of his next book (he drops other hints along the way). “If Virgil's style was so important, why don't the Renaissance poets who imitate Virgil sound more like him?” he asks, identifying this as one of the “problems I will address in my next book” (251). Although he never names this book, a quick Google glance reveals the forthcoming work to be about Spenser's style. Given Wilson-Okamura's stylish and substantive approach to such matters in *Virgil in the Renaissance*, I am looking forward to his next book.

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ARTICLES: ABSTRACTS AND NOTICES

4I.25

Campana, Joseph. "Boy Toys and Liquid Joys: Pleasure and Power in the Bower of Bliss." *Modern Philology* 106.3 (2009): 465-496. Abstract by Deanna Malvesti.

Campana's article explores the ways in which liquidity and poetic and bodily pleasure operate in relation to heroic masculinity in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*. It considers both actual liquidity (fountains, water) and figurative liquidity (rhyme). The article also outlines the threat of "the pleasurable liquidity of aesthetic experience" in turning men into vulnerable boys, and conversely, the ways in which poetry imparts the sternest virtues through delightful experience. Campana argues that heroic masculinity in the poem equates to estranged labor in that bodily energy is deployed as virtue. He suggests that aesthetic pleasure, characterized by motion rather than stasis, provides a way to consider how the body "expends energy" and "exerts agency" in the absence of heroic violence. For Campana, "masculine energy" is characterized as alienated from the body and violent, while "female energy" is characterized as able to avoid capture and find alternate ways of action. Ultimately, Campana argues that the real quest of Book II is to "defeat varieties of alienation that render pleasure (or pain) a form of stupefaction that disables the body's vulnerability to the experiential and ethical dimensions available in a common corporeality."

4I.26

Ettari, Gary. "Harts close bleeding book': Spenser and the Dilemma of Reading." *CEA Critic* 71.3 (2009): 1-16. Abstract by Deanna Malvesti.

Ettari's article examines the sonnets in Spenser's *Amoretti* that foreground the themes of reading and seeing. He argues that Spenser's mode of seduction consists in altering Petrarchan ways of seeing that in turn present the formation of the self as a process of reading. For Petrarch, reading poetic metaphor leads to an unveiling of "truth." Conversely, for Spenser, the goal of reading is to alter one's behavior. While the associations between erotic persuasion and reading are not unique to the *Amoretti*, in this sonnet sequence, unlike others, writing is not lamented as ineffective but rather a sign of the speaker's success, and in the end, he achieves union with the beloved. The ways in which Spenser mobilizes reading and writing as dialectical and mutually dependent activities that serve desire are unique and necessary to the development of the poetic self.

4I.27

Wesley, John. "The Well-Schooled Wrestler: Athletics and Rhetoric in *The Faerie Queene*, Book II." *The Review of English Studies* 60.243 (2009): 34-60. Abstract by Deanna Malvesti.

Wesley's article considers wrestling matches in Book II of *FQ* in order to trace the relationship between physical education and strategies of rhetorical delivery and gesture. The article opens the definition of wrestling to include various instances of touch and use of the hands. Wrestling not only typifies the theme of self-mastery relevant to the poem but also illustrates the ways in which temperance requires both activity and control. Wrestling tropes in *FQ* invoke and qualify the associations between athletic and rhetorical language in Greek and Roman educational texts. These connections also appear in the educational treatise, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, written by Spenser's teacher Richard Mulcaster. Wesley argues that Mulcaster's book offers a paradigm for Guyon's behavior in *FQ*. He suggests that Guyon's identification with patristic and rhetorical educational strategies presents an alternative reading of wrestling in the poem that is not carnivalesque, an attribute that many scholars associate with the sport in the Renaissance.

EVENT REVIEWS AND NOTICES

4I.28

The Faerie Queene, part of “*The Faerie Queene Now Project*,” in collaboration with “Poet in the City,” staged at Kings Place, London, Monday March 7, 2011

Kings Place, an ultra modern conference and concert venue near London’s King’s Cross and St. Pancras Stations and the Eurotunnel international train terminal, played host to an unusual evening’s entertainment on March 7, 2011. Advertised as an “amazing,” “fabulous event,” a “passionate exploration of religion and spiritual yearnings,” and a “thought provoking exploration” of Spenser’s “continuing relevance in the 21st Century,” *The Faerie Queene* attracted great interest from Spenserians and Renaissance literary scholars and historians.[1] Hall One of Kings Place, a large, blonde, wood-clad performance space with full stage, back projection screen, and comfortable theatre seating, was duly filled with the knowledgeable and the curious. The Gheeraerts “Ditchley” portrait of Queen Elizabeth I presided over all, her image casting its regal eyes over proceedings as she trampled a map of southern England beneath her feet.

The whole “event” was officially “curated” (to quote their Facebook publicity material) by “Poet in the City.”[2] This London-based charity boasts an “extraordinary marriage between the business world and the world of poetry”:

It is a means of promoting a love of poetry amongst new audiences by means of live poetry events, and of funding educational work, in particular the placing [of] poets in schools where they can stimulate and inspire children and young adults to read and write poetry.[3]

The “event” itself, therefore, promised to “stimulate” and “inspire.”

The Kings Place audience was in fact offered a diverse group of presentations whose general theme was indeed *FQ*, but which bridged the divide between the academic and the lay auditor/spectator. Most impressive, and most promising from the evening’s performative aspect, were the opening readings by

David Fuller, Professor of English and former Orator of Durham University. With a soft, measured, and sonorous tone, Fuller read the opening stanzas from Book I, Canto i. The effect was mesmeric. The words and subtle nuances of Spenser’s poetry were brought vividly to life, especially the aural effectiveness of the alexandrine. Only when spoken can the rhythmic disjunct of this meter fully be appreciated, allowing the orator and the listener the time to relish the closing syllables of each stanza.

The overpowering religiosity of Fuller’s reading—a comment not intended as derogatory but rather revelatory—ensured that he retired from his onstage podium in reverent silence, there to join his fellow seated presenters. The audience did not, could not applaud his reading, the power of Spenser’s poetry seemingly too spiritual to warrant such worldly interruption. In consequence, Sulthana Begum, event manager of “Poet in the City,” made an uncomfortable journey from the wings to address the audience. She pensively invited us to applaud whenever we felt the urge. When next Fuller read from Book I, Canto ix, of the Red Cross Knight’s encounter with Despair, all were prepared to acknowledge his efforts more enthusiastically. In the circumstance, the dark, suicidal nihilism of these evocative stanzas proved even more moving than those of Canto i. Fuller’s slow delivery of Despair’s demise demonstrated how the alexandrine constricts the narrative as effectively as the rope that constricted the personifying character’s windpipe. Spoken by an accomplished orator, *FQ* achieved its full potential as a performance event. David Fuller fully justified the dominance of *FQ* in the pre-publicity material.

As already noted, Fuller was not alone on the stage. Assembled alongside him were the academics Bart Van Es and Ewan Fernie, as well as the contemporary poets Jo Shapcott and Michael Symmons-Roberts, the theologian Andrew Shanks, and the Islamic chaplain at Eton College, Monawar Hussain. This group forms “*The Faerie Queene Liturgy Project*,” whose website describes it as seeking “to create new liturgical texts and solidarity-building rituals for contemporary society inspired by the quest for holiness in Book I of Spenser’s epic.”[4] Recipients (along with Simon Palfrey and Elisabeth Dutton) of a grant from the AHRC/ESRC

“Religion and Society” program, this project group seeks to “investigate the spiritual possibilities of the present by rescuing from neglect one of the great epics of English literature.”[5] Their remit is to discover commonalities between Spenser’s poem and its meaning “in present-day England,” especially in comparison with the “insurgent religious intensity of other, ‘minority’ faiths.” This first section of the evening’s program was thus a work in progress, effectively advertising two “inclusive services” due to be staged at St George’s Chapel, Windsor (March 17, 2011) and Manchester Cathedral (May 8, 2011).

By way of introduction to Spenser’s *FQ*, and inserted between Fuller’s two readings, Bart Van Es gave a short talk on Spenser. This was aimed at those who had little or no knowledge of Spenser, or of the “fragile constructions tinged with an edge of complaint” that represent his epic poem. Claiming Spenser as a “poet with his tongue firmly nailed to the post,” Van Es relished Gabriel Harvey’s “hobgoblin epic” soubriquet, while describing this “odd poem, even in Spenser’s lifetime,” as a timeless favorite. *FQ* might be almost unknown to today’s younger readers, but, as Van Es confirmed, in the Victorian era it was read avidly by (and regularly to) children. “*The Faerie Queene* Now Project” seeks to rekindle this youthful interest.

Monawar Hussain’s subsequent talk highlighted the “Saracen” presence in Canto 2, and Spenser’s representation of the Muslim as the “holy Other.” Hussain saw twenty-first century re-presentations like “*The Faerie Queene* Liturgy Project” as an opportunity to ask a far broader question: “Must the relationship of the Christian and Muslim worlds be one of conflict or peace?” Offering very specific parallels between *FQ* and the “great Sufi tradition of Islam” that “resonates” through Spenser’s poem, Hussain commented on the Persian Sufi’s use of the “dragon” as a symbol of passion, and of the “knight” as a metaphor for transformation at the deepest spiritual level. He also highlighted the similarity between the Spenserian and Sufic representation of “struggle with one’s own destructive tendencies,” and the desire to “shield and protect” oneself from “animal passion.” This “Greater Jihad,” so Hussain termed it, involved an “inner journey to realize truth.” Whether undertaken by Christian or Muslim, these journeys are the same. Hussain’s observations are indicative of the twenty-first century “diversity and inclusivity” debate that continues in British political, social and religious circles. Situated within the wider project remit, they also demonstrate the tenor of the evening’s “entertainment,” and its relevance to the assembled audience.

A significant part of “*The Faerie Queene* Liturgy Project” consists of four poems, broadly Spenserian in theme (though, apart from Fernie’s “alexandrine” construct, not necessarily Spenserian in practice). These were voiced by their respective authors. One by one, Shapcott, Shanks, Fernie and Symmons-Roberts presented this quartet of poems, thematically associated by their elemental focus on Wood, Air, Fire, and Water. These were interspersed by compositions by the saxophonist and composer, Tim Garland. Kings Place provided the perfect acoustic for Garland’s haunting musical interludes. More music, “from the time of Spenser,” was also provided by the Choir of Royal Holloway, University of London, under their conductor, Rupert Gough.[6]

This first section of the evening over, the stage was cleared of rostrum, chairs and musical stands in preparation for the “*The Faerie Queene* Fable and Drama Project.” Written by Simon Palfrey and directed by Elisabeth Dutton, this dramatic piece was, yet again, another work in progress. Pre-publicity announced the “Drama Project’s” intention to “evolve new stories and a play through intense collaboration with heterogeneous educational communities”:

[T]wo ethnically diverse comprehensive secondary schools, both from socially deprived wards; and the radically different students of Oxford University.[7] The U.K. schools in question—George Mitchell School in Leyton, Greater London, and Bishops David Brown School in Woking, Surrey—provided an onstage chorus of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old schoolchildren. These young people, from urban areas of government-recognized economic and educational deprivation, spoke their respective lines in impressive unison.

The wider social objective of “*The Faerie Queene* Fable and Drama Project” is to offer students like these the opportunity to explore their own troubled experiences through recognizing similar “trials and temptations” in Spenser’s poem. As Palfrey explains:

The fact that the stories do not literally “describe” the students’ lives, but instead take place in an apparently alien or timeless world, should ensure that they have something of the concrete abstraction of myth, allowing for appropriation and adaptation in all sorts of contexts, educational and otherwise.

As a taster of this daring project, Palfrey and Dutton staged an excerpt from the larger dramatic piece, entitled “The Wounds of Possibility.”[8] This dramatic interlude was based on Book III, Canto vi of *FQ*, with its

realization of the metaphor of generation inherent in “The Garden of Adonis.” Palfrey and Dutton’s garden of fertility, described in the play as “the world’s seminary,” was peopled by a lisping Cupid, a prognosticating Merlin, the chaste Britomart, the Dwarf, and several Maidens and Attendant Spirits. It was certainly no idyll. Instead, the garden was a violent, oppressive environment in which Britomart is forced to strive desperately to retain her virginity.

The dichotomy of Britomart’s dual gendered virgin-warrior status was reflected in her innocent musing about her father and “that silly yucky little seahorse thing” that dangled between his legs. “I could be a boy,” so Britomart opined, “[b]oys can do anything.” Cupid taunted and tempted her with numerous animal masked “husbands” as Britomart struggled to retain her composure and her chastity. To the discomfort of the Kings Place spectators, Britomart then had her mouth sealed over with masking tape as her body was man- (or animal-) handled into a common garden wheelbarrow, in which she sat with legs dangling uncomfortably and vulnerably over the sides. As if enacting a forced rape, the masked figures spread her legs wide apart, in prelude to a disturbing birthing ritual that manifested around her powerless, immobilized figure.

The inherent violence of this closing image was in stark contrast to the rousing chorus of the British nationalistic anthem, “Land of Hope and Glory,” which subsequently boomed over the Kings Place sound system. As the play ended, the schoolchildren directed their final fateful lines at Britomart:

You think you’re just a little girl
Feelings bright and free,
Don’t you know you’re everyone’s,
Knight of chastity

Turning their attention to the assembled audience, the chorus directly and aggressively addressed us with accusatory menace:

Who the hell do you think you are
Expecting this from a girl
She can’t do your dirty work
She won’t save your world.

The entire drama represented Palfrey’s personal interpretation of Spenserian archaic language, artistically repackaged into a painfully topical exploration of twenty-first century social and cultural unrest. False expectation, inescapable fate, the violation of innocence, and the quest for a better life in a world dominated by oppression and urban decay, all found expression in the

drama. “*The Faerie Queene* Fable and Drama Project” is representative of Applied Theatre at its therapeutic, socially healing best. The untrained young performers executed their parts with commitment and integrity, while Oxford students and a professional actor completed the ensemble. As the Kings Place audience applauded, the youthful performers took their bows. This inaugural production of the “*The Faerie Queene* Fable and Drama Project” posed as many questions for the observer as it did for its onstage participants. These same questions resonate the louder in our twenty-first century climate of international unrest and sectarian mistrust.

Spenser’s *FQ* provided the overarching theme of this unusual and thought-provoking event. Those expecting an academic exploration of the early modern text found instead a re-envisioning of Spenser’s political, social and theological allegory for a contemporary multi-cultural British audience. It was not intended to offer answers to the nation’s woes, but to bring this epic poem, neglected by all but enthusiasts of English Renaissance literature, to a new audience. This new audience can, as we heard, explore the moral and spiritual intensity of *FQ* to discover truths about their own deprived social and spiritual conditions. It remained David Fuller’s haunting rendition, however, that conjured, like a latter-day Merlin, the true spirituality and impassioned simplicity of Spenser’s original evocative verse.

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NOTES:

[1] *The Faerie Queene*, Official Invitation Leaflet (2011) <<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/english/documents/pdf/newsandevents/poetinthecityfinalinvitationleaflet.pdf>> [accessed 16 May 2011].

[2] “*The Faerie Queene*—Poet in the City Event,” “*The Faerie Queene*” Now! Project, Facebook Public Event page (2011) <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Faerie-Queene-Now-Project/110124819055293#!/event.php?eid=175083625838647>> [accessed 16 May 2011].

- [3] "Poet in the City," Official Website (2011)
<<http://www.poetinthecity.co.uk/about-us>>
[accessed 16 May 2011].
- [4] "*The Faerie Queene* Now," Official Website (2011)
<<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/english/faeriequeene/about.htm>>
[accessed 16 May 2011].
- [5] "*The Faerie Queene* Now," Official Website.
- [6] *The Faerie Queene*, Official Invitation Leaflet.
- [7] "*The Faerie Queene* Now," Official Website. For more detailed commentary, see "*The Faerie Queene* Fable and Drama Project" (2011) <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/english/faeriequeene/fable_drama.htm> [accessed 16 May 2011].
- [8] My thanks to Simon Palfrey for kindly providing the "Kings Place Final Edit" of *The Faerie Queene Play* as staged that evening. All quotations are taken from this document.