

*The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature 1485–1603*. Edited by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 9780199205882. £89.

THE EDITORS of this weighty volume assert that it ‘offers a controversial version of what matters in the literature of the long sixteenth century’. They invoke and then challenge C. S. Lewis’s characterization of the mid-Tudor decades as ‘the Drab Age’ – many of their contributors are also explicitly concerned to prove Lewis wrong. And the volume as a whole does demonstrate that there is much that is intellectually and artistically stimulating in writings of many genres and every decade of Tudor rule.

In order to demolish Lewis’s influential and enduring construction of the sixteenth century, the volume follows some apparently conservative practices. First, the term ‘Tudor’: as the editors acknowledge in their introduction, recent scholarship has challenged the usefulness of a term which is only retrospectively applied to a period of history, and which ‘had little purchase in its own era’. But they assert nonetheless a connection between rulers and the cultural production of their subjects, asserting that much ‘Tudor literature’ was composed in response to ‘policies emanating from the monarch, or performed in his or her name’ – whether or not that ‘name’ was self-consciously Tudor. Many of the essays here collected demonstrate clearly this connection between literary production, politics, and the crown, most frequently, of course, in relation to the controversies of the Reformation. The incontrovertibility of these connections lends some weight to the editors’ assertion that the appellation ‘Tudor’ is as appropriate to the nation ruled as it is to the monarchs ruling: however, this negotiation of terms creates difficulties, perhaps, for an articulation of literary dissent in the long sixteenth century. And scholars will struggle to deconstruct, even in their own minds, images as powerful as the bejewelled Holbein Henry VIII, for example – or ‘The Tudors’ as an HBO soap opera, neither of which are democratic representatives of a broad national culture.

Secondly, the essays are arranged not according to theme, genre, or method but by date: there are four parts to this book, labelled simply ‘1485–1529’, ‘1530–1559’, ‘1560–1579’, and ‘1580–1603’. The effects of this are generally very positive as unusual and potentially fruitful juxtapositions of materials are created: the reader familiar with, for example, Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy* encounters an essay on the topic between a piece on ‘William Baldwin and the Tudor Imagination’ and another on John Proctor’s *History of Wyatt’s Rebellion*. However, the periods spanned by these divisions are too long for any section to provide a true synchronic snapshot. The editors, wishing to avoid labelling periods and the concomitant danger of suggesting a ‘simple diachronic plot’, nonetheless recognize

too the danger of organization of the volume appearing rather arbitrary, and so proffer an explanation of their chosen chronological divisions. The first sub-period runs to Henry VIII's break with Rome, the second covers the 'turbulent period of evangelical and conservative reformation', the third represents the heyday of the Inns of Court writers, the fourth that of the University Wits. These characterizations curiously mix the literary and the historical, for all that the editors assert each sub-period reflects a 'literary phase': though they wisely refrain from naming each period, 'to avoid suggesting that *all* works produced within these time brackets conform to the same cultural imperatives', the editors have in practice both conflated the literary and historical, and hidden the titles of their diachronic plot in their introduction instead of proclaiming them in running titles.

Since periodization creates narratives, the editors simply use it to create a new one, to challenge Lewis's. In the first three sections, material is arranged chronologically but in the fourth section 'familiar' late Elizabethan authors are deliberately paired with 'mid-Tudor counterparts', in order to 'illustrate how the more renowned writers are rooted in the earlier, less studied era'. There is again a danger here: to rehabilitate mid-Tudor literature by arguing that later Tudor writers were indebted to it creates a new diachronic plot and might keep the mid-Tudor writer from literary appreciation on his or own terms. This would be a shame since the editors finally proclaim that their ambition is to offer the reader 'a taste of how fascinating some of these forgotten authors and their texts are'.

And there can be no doubt that this collection, for all the inevitable difficulties of theorizing its method, wonderfully fulfills this ambition. This reader, coming to the volume with an interest primarily in Tudor theatre, reached the end of it eager to read also medical dialogues (as discussed by Phil Withington in his chapter on Thomas Smith and William Bullein) and translations of the Psalms (as treated by Hannibal Hamlin in his chapter on Coverdale and Mary Sidney). It is often only as a reviewer that one reads a tome of this sort cover to cover, but the reader who does so may well be rewarded with serendipitous delights, and enjoy for example the fact that Thomas More and John Bale must ironically rub shoulders. Topics covered range from the art of war to life writing, from topography to translation, from Italian travel to the Tudor imagination. The writers discussed range from the iconic to the less familiar: although the volume seeks neither to diminish the 'hypercanonical' status of Shakespeare nor to offer a comprehensive view of the literature of the long sixteenth century (the editors note that Thomas Sackville, William Forrest, and 'Lewis's maligned Peend' are 'regrettably absent') yet it is intriguing to note that, for example, Sidney and Spenser each receive one essay apiece, but John Heywood receives two. This is due, perhaps, to his generic variety, as he is discussed firstly as a dramatist

in Thomas Betteridge's stimulating performance-based discussion of court drama, and secondly as an allegorist in Alice Hunt's engaging study of his *The Spider and the Fly*.

Hunt's essay is supplied with clear, full-page reproductions of illustrative woodcuts from the early printed editions of Heywood's text: these are essential to the reader's understanding of the essay, but it is generally a delight of this volume that the publishers have not stinted on illustration. There are thirty full- or half-page black-and-white plates of woodcuts or manuscript or printed pages: the modern reader is thus given a flavour of the physical aspects of the sixteenth-century texts which in many cases must have strongly influenced their interpretation by earlier readers.

The essays comprising the volume take a range of approaches to their subjects: some are primarily codicological, others relate to political history, others to the interrogation of genre, and so on. But all of the essays are informed by clear and careful close readings which exemplify and support the arguments presented. They do this in such a way as to make the arguments not only compelling, but also accessible to the reader for whom the texts discussed are unfamiliar. This book is thus in the very best sense a handbook – it will offer inspiring and useful support to the reader of the primary texts of Tudor literature. It will be useful to student and lecturer alike in providing introductory material to new texts, up-to-date summaries of extant scholarship, and full bibliography. The editors' unusual choice to supply bibliography of primary texts only at the end of each chapter, leaving secondary material to the comprehensive bibliography at the end of the volume, has two welcome results: it avoids repeated listing of certain secondary works but also highlights for the reader the welcome focus of each individual chapter on the primary texts of Tudor literature.

An epilogue to the volume is supplied by Helen Cooper, who writes on 'Edmund Spenser and the passing of Tudor Literature'. Cooper's essay is a generous response to the chapters which have preceded it, copiously drawing together as it does reference to *Respublica*, *King Johan*, *Utopia*, to the romances of Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Southampton, to printing, to ploughman literature, to Puttenham. It arranges authors into a new diachronic plot: for example, 'Hawes and Batman and Goodyear are concerned with the human soul within a fallen world, as Bunyan was later; Spenser, like Langland, is also portraying a polity that is far from ideal'. As Bunyan seems to validate a less celebrated triumvirate, so Langland is placed in the plot-line apparently to offer his support to one of the Tudor Greats. Intriguingly, Cooper's essay, which also has much to say about Spenser's indebtedness to Chaucer, seems to imply that the 'passing' of Tudor literature is the passing of the heritage of the Ricardian poets. It is in some ways a curious ending to this lively and ambitious Handbook, but it is one which

must be welcomed by medievalists, and it is one which will serve as a practical example of the need at once to embrace and undermine the reading of literature by period.

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