**Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme**

Borris, Kenneth. Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism

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Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xv, 250 + 8 ill. ISBN 978-0-19-880707-0 (hardcover) US$80.

In this rich study, Kenneth Borris provides what he calls a "historically formalist account" of Edmund Spenser's poetics and its debt to early modern "literary Platonism." Although Borris admits his book tackles only a few aspects of the dense intellectual history of Platonism, *Visionary Spenser* offers a welcome corrective to decontextualized literary scholarship that would reduce Plato, and Platonism, to an anti-poetic tradition or a rigid set of criteria. Instead, Borris argues that Spenser draws on forms of Platonizing that were "favorable to imaginative literature." More boldly, he suggests that Spenser aspired to be a sort of "philosopher-poet" in the vein of Plato's philosopher-king.

According to Borris, Spenser inherited an early modern "literary Platonism" which coheres roughly around six related conceptual motifs, rather than a consistent set of arguments. These Platonizing motifs include accounts of poetic furor, beauty, *cosmopoesis* (or world creation), poetic legitimacy, idealized imitation, and allegorism. Writers might invoke any number of these motifs in various combinations in order to engage with Platonic thought.

To fill out this complex picture of Plato and Platonic thought, Borris's first chapter surveys these motifs across a variety of sources from antiquity through early modern Europe, including Plato's dialogues and direct responses to them (such as Marcello Ficino's famous Latin commentaries), as well as indirect, literary engagements with Platonic ideas (such as Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*). Such a magisterial survey would be useful for any scholar or graduate student looking to familiarize themselves with this heavily-trodden field of intellectual history, but the particular virtue of this chapter is Borris's deft negotiation of the manifold forms early modern Platonism takes alongside the nuanced positions offered by particular sources in response to the philosopher's work.

The two subsequent parts of *Visionary Spenser* focus on the presence of Plato and Platonizing motifs in the English poet's first major published work, *The Shepheardes Calender*, and his magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene.* In the two chapters devoted to the *Calender*, Borris makes a strong case for regarding Plato's *Phaedrus* as one of the key intertexts for understanding Spenser's poetic

project. Arguing against previous critics who have claimed that Spenser's Platonism is "untraceably diffuse" in the *Calender*, Borris mounts a particularly detailed explication and analysis of the verbal and visual allusions to Plato in Spenser's *Maye* eclogue and its emblematic woodcut. Specifically, he decodes their coordinating responses to the *Phaedrus*'s depiction of the soul as a chariot drawn by winged horses. Borris's third chapter extends this argument into an examination of Spenser's Platonizing view of beauty and enlightenment in the *Calender*, concentrating on the *August*, *April*, and *November* eclogues in particular.

While these rich chapters offer new ways of reading *The Shepheardes Calender* as a coherent whole, Borris's final two chapters on *The Faerie Queene* provide the most compelling account of Spenser's literary Platonism. These two chapters offer correctives to recent critics who employ a hermeneutics of suspicion, who sympathize with the poem's antagonists and who emphasize what seems to be a "dying fall" in Spenser's poetic project between the 1590 and 1596 editions of *The Faerie Queene*. Instead, Borris argues that such dialogic challenges are integral to the Platonism that Spenser inherits (as well as to Plato's dialogues themselves). If we sympathize with Spenser's villains, it is because we are supposed to wrestle with the challenges they represent, but these challenges do not necessarily destabilize or undercut the poem irrevocably.

Borris's fourth chapter, in particular, seeks to recuperate Spenser's Calidore, the knight of courtesy in book 6, who has been "blatantly victimized" by recent criticism. Calling attention to the references to Socrates in books 2 and 4, Borris resituates the conclusion of the 1596 *Faerie Queene* in terms of Plato's fable of the cave, in which the enlightened cave-dweller returns to darkness in order to bring others into the light. Not only does Borris suggest that Spenser models his own approach to poetry on this fable, but he notes that Spenser's supposed cynicism and dissatisfaction in the 1596 edition may echo the fate of Plato's chief protagonist, who was sentenced to death by the very city he tried to educate.

Borris's final chapter treats Spenser's Platonizing view of Gloriana, and his other maiden queens, as shadowy types. In Borris's account, Spenser's titular fairy queen is an intermediary figure who neither perfectly reflects a literal, earthbound woman (i.e., Elizabeth I) nor embodies a pure "Form" of glory. She thus represents the poem's aspirations toward representing ideals without limit.

Even if critics may ultimately be skeptical of Borris's claim that Spenser is a "philosopher-poet," the richness and depth of Borris's achievement in *Visionary Spenser* belies any whisperings among English literary scholars that studies of classical influences on canonical authors is passé. On the contrary, Borris's work demonstrates that such studies remain fruitful, literary fields of inquiry we ought to cultivate.

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Boutcher, Warren.
The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe. Vol. 1, *The Patron-Author.*
Vol. 2, *The Reader-Writer.*
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Warren Boutcher's nearly one-thousand-page *School of Montaigne* fields a critical history of Montaigne's unique role in promoting the ideal of "autonomous selfhood" (lxiv) in European and American culture. His book at first appears to challenge such autonomy by resituating Montaigne within the crowded cultural networks of early modern reader-writers who bore multiple financial and legal dependencies and various social and moral obligations. In early modern clientage networks and the constant, tense jockeying to win favour that they fostered, little would seem "autonomous."

But here is where Boutcher parts ways with other scholars who have contextualized the *Essays* in an attempt to defuse the idealism that has surrounded the work's reception for centuries. He insists that Montaigne's book nevertheless *did* liberate readers and that this enfranchisement proves one of the signal achievements of European literary culture. These two volumes thus confront one with a question: are readers autonomous from the institutions and values that inform their reading, or are they obligated to them? Is Montaigne's book a product of its time or a transhistorical model for thinking independently that anticipates, whiggishly or not, a future it helped create?

One thinker in particular underpins Boutcher's novel procedure in *The School of Montaigne*. Alfred Gell's 1998 *Art and Agency*, it is safe to say, constitutes