
Literature

Edmund Spenser

THE FAERIE QUEENE

Edited by A. C. Hamilton et al

787pp. Longman. Paperback, £39.99.

0 582 09951 X

A. C. Hamilton's newly revised edition of *The Faerie Queene* is a monument of scholarship designed to help the general reader make sense of Spenser's vast and allegorical poem. It is a significant improvement on the excellent first edition of 1977. The text has been thoroughly revised so that the first three books are now based on the 1590 edition of the poem and not on the more careless version of 1596, which introduced a series of errors and failed to correct others when they were reprinted with Books IV-VI. As professors Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki point out in their textual introduction, the 1590 edition was "very probably set from Spenser's own manuscript", whereas the 1596 version is simply a corrected reprint. Moreover, they argue that three compositors were employed to set the text – labelled X, Y and Z – with compositor X being the one least in tune with his author's preferred spellings, doubling up 't's and changing 'y's to 'i's in "little", "whiles" and "whilome". If Spenser corrected the proofs, as his editors agree he did, he clearly let some details pass. The detailed textual notes give interested readers a chance to work out the state of the text for themselves.

The footnotes are informative and especially helpful when explicating the history, context and sources, notably in explaining the religious allegory in Book I and the poet's use of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Holinshed and Harding's chronicles for the narration of Merlin's prophecies in Book II. There are also good notes, expanding and revising the earlier versions, detailing Spenser's use of Neoplatonic ideas in the representation of the Graces in Book VI, and Renaissance ideas of the natural world and its significance in the allegory of "Two Cantos of Mutabilitie". The commentaries on the dedicatory sonnets and the appended letter to Sir Walter Raleigh are also useful, informing interested readers of the scholarly and interpretative debates that these supplementary pieces have generated.

ANDREW HADFIELD