

David Landreth. *The Face of Mammon: The Matter of Money in English Renaissance Literature*.

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“The chthonic character of Mammon is that of human institutions writ small,” says David Landreth near the beginning of his splendid book: “he is the demon we have made in our own image” (6). *The Face of Mammon* details an episode in the making of this emblematic character: the period between the latter years of Henry VIII’s reign in England and the early years of James I’s. The makers in question are literary artists clustered around the end of this period — Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Thomas Nashe — who, Landreth argues, are responding in their works to two prior developments, one monetary and one discursive (though this is a distinction that Landreth himself would resist). The first was the “Great Debasement” of English currency by the

crown in the mid-sixteenth century, and the second was the concomitant rise of a “circle of private and public men dismayed by the inequities of Tudor society and the misjudgments of the Tudor state” (including debasement). These “voiced their hopes for redress under the idealistic rubric of ‘commonwealth’” (21), articulating an “ethical and political orthodoxy” (33) that would persist for several decades. But, by the 1590s, this orthodoxy is “visibly reactionary and visibly disintegrating” (237), says Landreth. Reevaluation of the currency under Elizabeth I did not halt rising inflation, as anticipated. Writers such as Spenser are thus primed to ask questions of two sorts: how to account for the contingent nature and fluctuating value of money, specifically coin? And are strictly moral condemnations adequate to the “perverse and apparently self-sustaining malfunction[s]” (15) that coin seems to entail? These early modern writers, then, are poised at a complex and overdetermined historical moment: they are acutely conscious of the depredations of their money-driven economy, but they are wary of merely edifying pronouncements. Before the emergence of what we now call economics, they are not inclined to “construe money as an autonomous object of an autonomous discourse” (232), but they are well aware that it can be so construed. In their works, such writers give voice to what they know of money by speaking Mammon, sometimes personifying him (or characters like him), sometimes articulating his claims and premises, sometimes exposing those claims and premises to their own implied critique. Money talks, as Landreth reminds us, and he is interested in how, in this period, literary writers talked back.

That Mammon talks — that in this period he is both, as coin, material, and, as personification, discursive — is a key claim for Landreth, and one that leads him to several corollaries. Early modern coins, he points out, share this double being; they too are physical things and then also items whose value is given relationally within circuits of exchange. In this sense, he notes, coins resemble early modern people, who similarly have physical bodies and are integrated into, and given “personhood” by, “social institutions” (6–7). In his rich, nuanced, and persuasive readings, Landreth works his way along these analogies, linking one aspect of Mammon to another. In the first chapter, on the Mammon episode in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, he is given a voice of his own, speaking for a “futurity in which gold will have erased all other values” (67). In the following chapter he steps forward as Commodity, a “Mammon-like personification” (102) in Shakespeare’s *King John*, and then as Angelo, a character named for a coin in his *Measure for Measure*. In the third chapter on *The Merchant of Venice*, though, Mammon puts in his appearance as hard currency; Landreth explores the “obsessive ambivalence towards coins expressed throughout” (150). In the fourth chapter, Donne and Nashe engage in “materialist provocations” (187), celebrating “waste” — prodigal expenditure — as a “material relation . . . joining bodies to coins” (185). Throughout *The Face of Mammon*, Landreth is usefully specific and informative on the history and ontology of Renaissance coinage, but, in the end, the strength of the book lies less in the (somewhat sketchy) overall narrative that it offers than

in its subtle interweaving of early modern discourse and materiality, of words and things, within a poetically conceived economy.

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