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### Hackett, Helen. The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty

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**Hackett, Helen.**

*The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty.*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. xv, 414 + 23 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-300-20720-0 (hardcover) US\$35.

Professor Helen Hackett's *The Elizabethan Mind* provides a suitably broad-minded introduction to an elusive topic: Elizabethans' understanding of their own minds. In some ways the book's subject seems tightly bounded, occupying the narrow space between people's ears, on a small island off Europe, in the brief time between 1550 and 1600. But, like Hamlet's nutshell, this space is essentially infinite. In Hackett's hands her subject expands to considerations of early modern poetics, politics, medicine, philosophy, emotion, gender, race, astrology, demonology, melancholy, autobiography, and stage-craft.

Hackett's lens on this varied material tends to be literary, and the book often gravitates towards the twin lode-stars of Hackett's previous work: Shakespeare and Elizabeth I. Their frequent appearances are points of familiarity not only for Hackett herself but also for the more casual reader who might be enticed by this volume's bold yellow cover and forgiving font size. The name recognition factor of these two figures is important given the extraordinary range of material Hackett presents, admirably attentive not only to canonical poets such as Spenser, Sidney, and Donne but also to accounts of ordinary life from ordinary people.

The introduction and first three chapters of Hackett's book lay out exactly why this period is a particularly rich one in which to consider the formation of the mind. Hackett suggests that England at this point found itself at several crossroads simultaneously: between humoral and anatomical understandings of the body (chapter 1), and between Catholicism and various forms of reformed Protestantism (chapter 2). Between these two fields of understanding lies another fault line, as the medical frameworks tend towards assimilating body and mind while religious and philosophical ones regard them as completely distinct. Chapter 3 surveys this tension in the emotional tenor of Protestant and Catholic poetry.

This section is followed by a pair of chapters on marginalized minds. Whether speaking against them or speaking for them, men's voices often make Elizabethan women hard to hear. Nonetheless, Hackett finds sites of female subjectivity in the emotional ambivalence of women's poetry, including that of

Elizabeth herself. Translation in particular offered women the opportunity to make subtle authorial choices, while ostensibly deferring to the authority of the (almost always male) original. The following chapter, on race, attempts to focus on the experiences of Black Africans in their encounters with England. Here Hackett acknowledges that her subject, always elusive, is impossibly obscured. Although representations of Black Africans abound, their interiority is out of reach, overwritten by the assumptions of English writers.

Hackett goes on to describe the various ways in which early modern minds were shaped by spectral forces, astrological and demonic (chapter 6). The imagination was especially prone to outside influence, leading to a general suspicion of the faculty (chapter 7). Against this background, literary defenders of the imagination, principally Sidney and Shakespeare, stand out starkly. Hackett then expands these considerations into the political sphere, via the analogy between individual mind and commonwealth (chapter 8). The monarch's hierarchical position over her subjects is compared to reason's pre-eminence over other faculties, though this analogy implies dependence as well as authority. Another tension arises over these three chapters, between the mind as permeable, vulnerable, always influenced, and the mind as disciplined and (in Charles Taylor's useful term) "buffered" from old-world enchantments.

Hackett's final chapters focus on how cognition was expressed on the page, particularly in Thomas Whythorne's autobiography (written c. 1576), Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), various prose fictions (chapter 9), and in on-stage soliloquies, especially Hamlet's, which were influenced by early essayists (chapter 10). An epilogue explores resonances between early modern images of the mind and images revealed by contemporary neuroscience. Hackett's concluding claim is that 1600 was a "moment of the mind" (340–1) where political anxieties led people to look inward.

This argument brings together disparate preceding material. *The Elizabethan Mind* is so dense with quotations it sometimes reads like a cento in the tradition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621–51). This is the book's great strength, allowing Elizabethans to speak their minds in their own words, but it comes with some dangers. More experienced scholars might want to hear more of Hackett's own critical voice, which is fairly subdued. Conversely, readers less familiar with early modern material might find the abundance of quotations (even in modernized spelling) intimidating, especially as referencing conventions such as "Sig." are used without explanation.

Though understandable in a book aimed at a more general readership, the book occasionally undersells the complexity of the period, particularly its religious textures. Hackett contrasts the “internal image” conceived by Catholic writer Nicholas Sander as he read scripture with a Protestant conviction that “making images in the mind was idolatrous” (227). Though broadly true, this description of Protestant thinking could warrant greater nuance, given that, in *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), Luther himself acknowledged the impossibility of reading Christ’s passion “without forming mental images of it.”

The occasional slight simplification does not, however, detract from the overall sense that *The Elizabethan Mind* is attentive to Elizabethan minds in the plural. The book will be a great aid to students who are getting to know the literary outpourings of Elizabethan minds for the first time. For more seasoned readers, it is full of reminders of what makes the period so lively and mind-expanding. The need to address a more general reader often leads to useful insights, for instance when Hackett cannily notes the gap between Renaissance admiration for copiousness and the modern reader’s likely frustration at excess and repetition (310). Her conclusion, however, suggests that the gap between past and present is not unbridgeable, as our own mental frameworks are “no less eclectic and jumbled than those of the Elizabethans” (349). It is a conclusion amply supported by a book that makes early modern interiority seem accessible, immediate, and exciting, while never losing sight of its distance, strangeness, and mystery.

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