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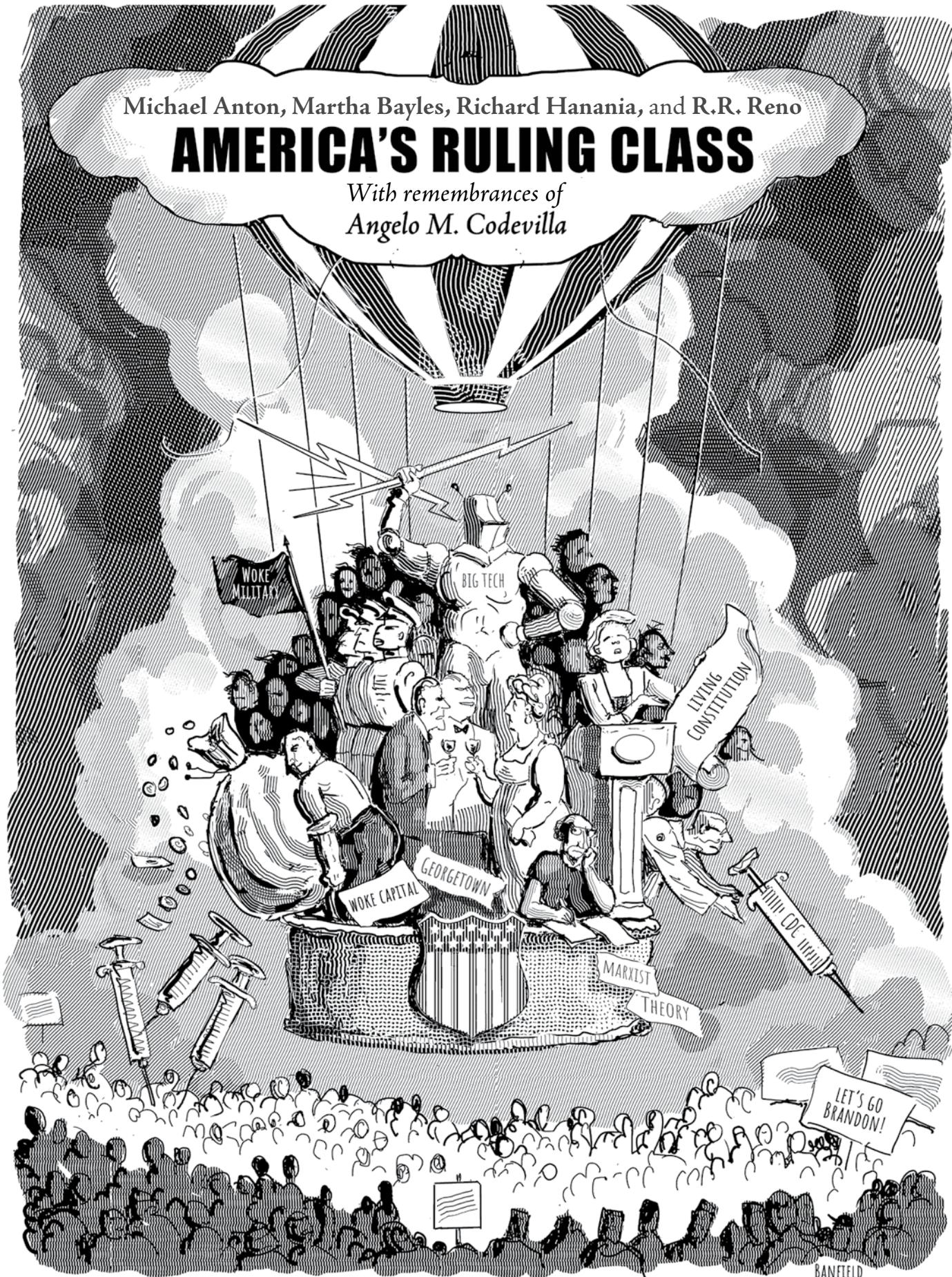
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## FAERIE GODFATHER

*Spenserian Moments*, by Gordon Teskey.  
Harvard University Press, 552 pages, \$47

EDMUND SPENSER (1552–1599) HOPED to be seen as the culmination of Western literary culture. Considered the greatest nondramatic poet of Elizabethan England, he is matched in preeminence only by William Shakespeare, his younger contemporary, and John Milton, his literary heir. He was born and buried in London, but nearly all his poetry was written in Ireland, where he spent the last 20 years of his life laboring on *The Faerie Queene*, a 36,000-line unfinished epic romance memorializing Queen Elizabeth I. This work—the centerpiece of his legacy—is the subject of much disagreement among scholars, in part because of the context in which Spenser wrote. While penning his career-defining poem, he helped administer the brutal colonization of Ireland by “new” English settlers (of which he was one) who were given the confiscated land of Irish chieftains and their followers. In his posthumously published response to the Irish rebellion that erupted in 1594, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (written about 1596), Spenser advocated harsh and destructive economic and military programs, including forced starvation of the rural population. His own castle (confiscated from the Irish) was burned, forcing him to flee with his family to London where he died in his mid-40s. Situated next to Geoffrey Chaucer’s grave in Westminster Abbey, Spenser’s tomb bears the inscription “the Prince of Poets in his tyme.” Viewed through the lens of his history with Ireland, however, many contemporary critics see *The Faerie Queene* as an aestheticized reflection of colonialist ambitions.

Enter Harvard professor and award-winning Milton scholar Gordon Teskey, who seeks to set the record straight with *Spenserian Moments*, a massive collection of 18 essays building on his first treatment of Spenser in the final chapter of his provocative book *Allegory and Violence* (1996). Although he calls out Spenser’s “nauseating flattery” of Elizabeth and his “deadly allegorical gaze,” Tes-

key’s study of *The Faerie Queene* refigures the poet as an improvisatory artist whose work is most valuable as a continuous practice of thinking about aesthetic, moral, and philosophical issues. It’s a conversation between poet and reader, not a plaudit for imperialism.

TESKEY ARGUES THAT *THE FAERIE QUEENE* is an exploratory text rather than a closed allegory and analyzes the way in which Spenser’s interlaced romance structure entertains and puzzles the reader into thought. He points out contradictions between the poem as we have it and Spenser’s frankly inaccurate account of it in the Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh accompanying the first installment of Books 1-3 (1590) but dropped from the second installment of Books 1-6 (1596). He also shows how the six completed books are discontinuous and inconsistent with each other. The receding of dynastic epic and complex allegory in Books 4-6 contradicts both the preceding books and Spenser’s elaborate structural plan detailed in the Letter, which, as Teskey suggests, may have been either a forethought or a misleading scheme already abandoned in 1590.

*The Faerie Queene*, then, is not like the immense, structurally pre-planned epic *Paradise Lost* by John Milton—a logically coherent artifact that decisively offers a continuous blank verse “argument” that cannot be refused. No, *The Faerie Queene* generates its thought line by line, stanza by stanza, moment by moment. It’s a collaboration between the poet and the materials he is assimilating—literary, historical, and personal—and between the reader and the thinking that he is encouraged to join. For Teskey, such moments “are like whirling eddies at a bend in the river, turning at once into themselves and releasing their energy downstream.” The endless quest narratives carry us along to new characters and into the concentrated allegorical tableaux often featured in published excerpts from Spenser’s enormous poem

(e.g., the “House of Holiness” from Book 1 or “Temple of Isis” from Book 5).

C.S. LEWIS CLAIMED HE NEVER MET A man who said he *used to like* *The Faerie Queene*, and at its best, *Spenserian Moments* cogently captures the experience of reading the poem for those of us who love it rather than attempting to interpret it as a text or ideology to be discarded or cancelled. The “moments of wonder” that we continuously encounter combine the stasis of thought with the momentum of narrative, provoking intellectual and ethical reflections that enrich, complicate, and transcend Aristotelian virtue. They also provide aesthetic joy. According to Teskey, such dynamic “fashioning” of readers is effected by a “vast, speculative project in which Spenser’s ideas are continually changing as he writes.”

Teskey’s argument about discontinuity seems stronger and more plausible than the claim that Spenser is not just a supremely gifted poet but a self-consciously philosophic inquirer. The splendid yet bewildering variety of the work certainly reflects the circumstances of its composition; the poet and colonial bureaucrat’s imperial project in Ireland turned literally to ruins by the end of his life. The poetic postscripts to that failure are Spenser’s “Mutabilitie Cantos,” published in 1609, ten years after his death. They consist of two cantos and two stanzas of a third depicting a coherent, imaginative, and philosophic testament set explicitly in Ireland while contrasting eternity and the order of nature with the inconstancy of this mortal world. It is telling that Teskey finds these cantos “the finest and most sustained arc of poetic inspiration” in the poem and that so many of the “Spenserian Moments” in this massive book on this massive poem focus on these final “fragments,” the subject of his first essay on Spenser 25 years ago.

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