Brian Cummings. *Bibliophobia: The End and the Beginning of the Book*. **Clarendon Lectures in English. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2022. xxiv + 562 pp. ISBN: 9780192847317. $47.99 hardback.**

Books in danger are a part of Edmund Spenser's writing from the beginning of his literary career. In "To His Booke" he asks *The Shepheardes Calender* to make its way to its patron, Sir Philip Sidney, so "if that Enuie barke at thee, / As sure it will, for succoure flee / Vnder the shadow of his wing" (ll. 5-7), next priming it with a set of defensive responses to interrogation so that it might survive until it is "past ieopardee" (16). Books are powerful and ambivalent in the 1590 *Faerie Queene* (being much less visible in Books 4-6 than in Books 1-3, curiously): the scrolls and books of the library of Eumnestes in the Castle of Alma are "all worm-eaten, and full of canker holes" (II.ix.57) despite the poet's claim that Eumnestes's records are "incorrupted" (56); one of the weirder and scarier things about Busirane in Book III is that despite appearing just as dependent as Prospero on his "balefull booke" (III.xii.36) to uphold his magic, he is given a streak of bibliophobia himself: "His wicked bookes in hast he ouerthrew,

/ Not caring his long labours to deface" writes Spenser, as Busirane lunges with a knife at Amoret "for villeinous despight" (III.xii.32).[1] It is perhaps surprising that these parts of Spenser's writing, at least, do not find their way into Brian Cummings's book, which makes use of so many fragments and authors to understand its phenomena, and which ranges so fully, "from Sumeria to the smartphone" (x), from Ashurbanipal to Assange (adjacent to each other in the index). But the whole project is so resonant with Spenser's way of thinking, and with the literature of the early modern period more broadly, that readers will be happy to make connections themselves.

Bibliophobia, like *The Faerie Queene*, is in six parts. These are thematic, each of four chapters, all of which range freely in the space between "the end and the beginning of the book," constantly making transhistorical connections and following leads across centuries, or sustaining parallels between texts and episodes eras apart. "It works as a palimpsest of similar things, rather than by linear chronology or comprehensive study" (7), Cummings tells us. There is no sense of historical progression over its course, therefore; instead, the book gives us a kind of Spenserian circularity that begins and ends with the unfolding revolution of Big Data and has the Reformation as something like its center of gravity.

Part 1, "Death of the Book," begins by juxtaposing the very ancient and very modern, with an extended introductory function: the tech giants and their environmentally and spiritually destructive drives for data are put in touch with mimesis, pre-modern despotism, as well as the arrival of print and its theorists, via a host of intermediaries. Cummings characterizes *Bibliophobia* as "a pathology of the symptoms of knowledge and oblivion, or past and future" (7), and these chapters are theoretical with a touch of polemic. It is an implication of the book's structure, as well as an explicit theme in several places, that bibliophobia and its very close neighbors bibliomania and "bibliofetishism" (6; Sigmund Freud is not too far away for large stretches of *Bibliophobia*) are present in recurrent forms throughout history rather than decisively mediated by any technology more specific than that of the book itself. Book technology, too, is taken very broadly. Cummings is keen to remind the reader that printing was invented in Tang China rather than fifteenth-century Mainz, and he is skeptical of many of the claims book historians and theorists have made about

[1] Quotations from *The Shepheardes Calender* follow Richard A. McCabe ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems* (London: Penguin, 1999). Quotations from *The Faerie Queene* follow A. C. Hamilton et al., ed., Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, rev. 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2013).

irrevocable shifts in post-Gutenberg writing and thought: "The history of the book is more cyclical than made up of terminal points" (56).

Part 2, "Books and Violence," begins with the Nazi book burnings of 1933, the image that is most likely to come to mind upon reading the word "bibliophobia." It also flows very smoothly from where Part I left off, and shortly observes the link the Nazis made between their own acts of book-destruction and Martin Luther's 400 years earlier, broadening in its subsequent chapters onto histories of censorship, libraries and their destruction, burning, and the link between books and enslavement. Jacques Derrida, as well as Freud, is an important voice here, and the chapters of Part 2 justify the scope of the book as a whole. The Nazis did not just burn books, they fetishized them; "index" was both the printing industry's "favoured device" (119) and the byword for Catholic censorship; Augustine and Luther both read and produced an enormous amount and were each destroyers of books containing heresy, at once "bibliophobe" and "bibliolater" (118). "Books are inherently ambivalent," Cummings states (118), which could be viewed as the central insight *Bibliophobia* seeks to develop, and the principle underlying how far from book hatred, in any narrower sense, large sections of the subsequent parts get.

Part 3, "Sacred Text," cycles through major writing systems in world history. The first chapter centers around Arabic, Qur'ans, and the status of writing in Islamic tradition; the second on the transmission of Hebrew texts, the Jewish genizah and the archive; the third on the Greek alphabet and Egyptian hieroglyphics; and the fourth on Chinese writing alongside questions of power and control. This part demonstrates particularly strongly the willingness of *Bibliophobia* to aim for a global as well as transhistorical scope, or conversely an unwillingness to be limited by constraints of local expertise or language: this is really helpful, I find, as a prophylactic against conceptual narrowing, not to mention against Eurocentrism. These pages are replete with shiny book-historical fragments and artefacts from a very wide range of material cultures which drive the ideas and induce pauses for reflection and revaluation. At the same time there is a real willingness here to get beyond the book in its simple sense and deep into language itself, writing, and its alphabets, something which is returned to fully in the book's final chapter "Glyph."

Parts 4 and 5 perhaps get us closest to Spenser and his world, patterned as they are more thickly around the Reformation and European theology. In Part 4, "The Cult of the Book," iconoclasm begins to come firmly within the scope of *Bibliophobia*, and

one of the major achievements of the book is its repositioning of the binaries of picture and print, word and image, in the Reformation and beyond. "We are wrong to assume that anxieties about images and idolatry are different from ones about words and meanings" (230), Cummings argues in a chapter about book kissing (quintessentially bibliophilic, of course, yet immediately adjacent to consumption). Of the Reformation in particular he writes: "This is not a world in which a realm of images is threatened by rampant bookmen. It is one in which images and books face the same threat and the same promise" (232). Thomas More and William Tyndale's dispute is at the very core of this line of thinking, and it comes up in a few places as something of a touchstone; behind it is the traditional ambivalence of the book as at once material and immaterial. Part 5, "The Body and the Book," develops the theme. Four close-knit chapters on books as bodies (corpus, etc.), bodies as books, hands, tattooing, and sacrality bring us right to Busirane "Figuring straunge characters of his art, / With liuing bloud" (III.xi.31). Again this investigation gravitates towards early modern religious conflict, the Sack of Magdeburg, John Foxe, More, and the 1593 account of dissolution, *The Rites of Durham,* interfacing with Buddhist stupas, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, and Dadaism. The latter group—and really they are not distinct, only variously weighted in the texture—is a collective marker of the book's likeable ambition. "Beyond issues of faith and superstition—hardly uninteresting," Cummings writes on page 277, after a particularly fluid disquisition on "A three-way metonymy between Bibles, bodies, and bullets" (274) involving Nat Turner, François Rabelais, and Ned Flanders, "—lies a deeper question about the commensurability of the history of the book with the history of human embodiment and identity." This is only to restate the audacious suggestion made in Part 4 (and elsewhere), underpinning the prominence of religious history in *Bibliophobia*, that: "Rather than assuming holy books or icons are holy because of religious origin, perhaps we should consider the reverse: religions acquire their sense of the sacred partly from an aura of personhood surrounding the books, objects and artworks that embody them" (257). It is salutary to read a work that is able to combine religious and secular histories and literatures so fluidly under this aegis of the book and its enemies, while still able to find productive frictions elsewhere. This is in part the perspective of the book historian (though Cummings is not that only).

The final part, "Ghost in the Book," brings us slightly more firmly back to the world of Google, the NSA, as well as twentieth-century writing: Salman Rushdie, Franz

Kafka, James Joyce. It is notable throughout how many connections are made per page, how many directions opened, how many people mentioned, and though *Bibliophobia* assumes no specialist expertise I read this with Wikipedia closely at hand (which I intend as a good thing). An early paragraph runs:

> Benjamin and Barthes both saw mortality inscribed in symbolic systems. The French title chosen by Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," puns on *Le morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, one of the first books printed by William Caxton. The death of Arthur, like that of Achilles, or Jing of Jin (or for that matter the death of Jesus), is not only a famous narrative but a figure for a principle of narrative. In the modernist novel (in Hermann Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, or Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*) a physical book is a trope for how reading processes imitate a life's course. Mrs Ramsay "turned the page; there were only a few lines more, so that she would finish the story, though it was past bed-time." (8)

It is not a bad microcosm of the book more widely. This rhizomatic style (*Finnegans Wake* makes an appearance on the final page, fittingly), has itself of course something to say about how books can and should work in light of *Bibliophobia*'s other most distinctive feature, its concern with how the digital revolution is changing everything, again, even as in another sense it will change nothing about what a book really is. *Bibliophobia* has had a long gestation, with origins in Cummings's 2012 Clarendon Lectures at Oxford, and its acknowledgements, indices, and endnotes testify to an impressive and intricate scholarly framework which, of course, can nevertheless only amount to a tiny fraction of the information now held in the Web's digital library about every subject it mentions (though not necessarily readable in the ways we might assume). The book's strength is that it is guided by what Cummings calls "a more personal approach" (x), but that it also thinks actively about the stakes of this kind of engagement with other books, challenging ideas of how books might communicate with readers and relate to wider systems of knowledge. These elements together enable the sense of a free play of ideas throughout, liberated by the evident usefulness of this kind of investigation as a whole.

If *Bibliophobia*'s mixture of guiding "chance encounters" (23) and expansive capacity is Joycean it is also, naturally, Spenserian, and Cummings's subtending concern with the book not as a material thing *per se* but as a "text with limits" (19), "marking a boundary between material object and human subject" (382), is part of a wide and productive interface with Spenser's world. Spenser's books so often seem to work as books *par excellence*, so interested is he in how meaning is produced by them,

and in patterns of finding and reference. “Writing is the place where we keep things safe and then lose them” (406) Cummings writes at the end of *Bibliophobia*, after Joyce. Or, as Artegall advises the Giant in Book V, destruction in one place tends to imply augmentation somewhere else; with an agential twist, “there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought” (V.ii.39).

Conor Wilcox-Mahon
University College London