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Review of: Spinoza To The Letter: Studies In Words, Texts And Books by Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkerseds

William H. Beardsley
University of Puget Sound, wbeardsley@pugetsound.edu

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Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkens, eds. *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books*

Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books by Fokke Akkerman; Piet Steenbakkens

Review by: W. H . Beardsley

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Fokke Akkerman and Piet Steenbakkers, eds. *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books*.

Brill's Studies in Intellectual History. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005. xii + 344 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$105. ISBN: 90-04-14946-5.

Among philosophers of the early modern period, Spinoza presents a particular challenge to his editors and translators. Unlike Descartes, for example, who directed the publication of his major works personally — and whose near obsession with such minutiae of presentation and publication as the relative merits of section titles in his *Meditations* is well-documented — Spinoza allowed his philosophical writings to reach their final form through a more convoluted process. From intimate café discussion to rough drafts in letters, to fair copies, to handwritten editions and Dutch translations, to printed texts and translations, the transmission of these works moved gradually from a small circle of friends outward to a larger public. For each stage of this complicated progression Spinoza's editors and translators have available, in the words of the editors of this volume, "important data, testimonies, specimens and traces of virtually any textual situation one can imagine" (xi). Nevertheless, there are few major studies of Spinoza's texts and their transmission. The present volume, drawn largely from papers presented at a conference held in Groningen in 1990, is intended to offer "a sampling of the questions that still need to be studied" (xiii) concerning Spinoza's "words, texts and books."

There are, for example, two interesting and informative discussions of Spinoza's use and command of Latin. Latin was Spinoza's fifth language. As a young man he spoke Portuguese at home with his family, Dutch on the street with his friends, and Spanish at Hebrew school. While Descartes learned his Latin as a very young child and mastered an elegant neoclassical style under the guidance of his Jesuit teachers, Spinoza learned his Latin relatively late in life, and specifically for the purpose of communicating his philosophy to a wider audience. His, then, is the dry, pedantic Latin of late scholastic philosophizing. Michele Beysade's "Deux Latinistes: Descartes et Spinoza" discusses this comparison with care and in considerable detail.

Several of the papers deal with Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, including a study of the complexities of translating Spinoza's use of the first person, two interesting discussions of his method of citing scripture and other Hebraic texts as well as a study of the relationship between the Latin text of this work and its various translations into Dutch. One focus here is the tricky interpretative problem of whether this complex work is best understood as a work of systematic philosophical speculation or as an extended commentary on scripture. Spinoza, unlike

Descartes, seems never to have been overly concerned to target his audience. Other chapters deal with Spinoza's *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*. These include possibly the most useful contribution to this volume, Eugenio Canone and Pina Totaro's "Index locorum du Tractatus de intellectus emendatione."

Two of the papers sketch out opposing positions in an ongoing debate concerning the authorship of two minor works previously attributed to Spinoza, one dealing with rainbows and the other with probability calculations. Michael John Petry argues that Spinoza is indeed the author of these works, and J. J. V. M. De Vet attributes them to Salomon Dierquens. While the question remains far from settled, these chapters offer a taste of the sort of problems faced by editors of Spinoza.

Other contributions to this collection include an attempt by Johan Gerritsen to identify the first printers of *Renati Des Cartes Principia philosophiae*, Spinoza's reworking of the first two parts of Descartes's *Principia*, through an elaborate study of characteristic cracks and imperfections in type and ornamentation. While the issue is not settled, the paper presents an interesting overview of the techniques employed by small printing firms in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, as well as a window into the analytic complexities facing those concerned with identifying printers and publishers of early modern texts solely on the physical evidence of the books themselves. The volume also includes a study of the publication of Spinoza's work in Germany in the nineteenth century, an inventory of copies of Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* extant in the Netherlands, as well as reflections on the challenges of editing the correspondence of Hugo Grotius.

This is a wide-ranging volume. While there is little of direct interest to historians of philosophy, there is much to hold the attention of those concerned with the production, transmission, and editing of early modern texts.

W. H. BEARDSLEY
University of Puget Sound