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Smith, Helen and Louise Wilson, eds. Renaissance Paratexts

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Which aspects of a book constitute the "text," and which its supporting materials? How do all of these interrelated parts reflect the author's intention, and how might they affect the reader's experience? *Renaissance Paratexts*, a thought-provoking collection edited by Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, explores a plethora of elements—structural, rhetorical, and typographic—to profitably expand Gérard Genette's notion of the "paratext." In his influential 1987 volume *Seuils* (translated in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*), Genette persuaded scholars to analyze the documents that "surround and extend" literary texts, deeming them a "zone of transaction." However, Genette's capacious introduction skimmed lightly over the perplexing diversity of early modern publications, and stopped short of treating translations, illustrations, or (less germane to this period) serialized publications. By focusing on the rich idiosyncrasies of the English Renaissance book, the contributors to this volume set out to correct Genette's omissions and blend structural theory with analytical bibliography at a time when digitization threatens to smooth away those very idiosyncrasies.

 Renaissance Paratexts attends to the "playful, proliferating and self-aware paratexts" of iconic works such as William Caxton's *Chaucer* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* alongside lesser-known sixteenth- and seventeenth-century titles. This enables the authors to problematize and overturn two of Genette's key tenets, namely that the author is the central key to interpreting a text, and that the text itself is immutable. While Genette viewed the main text as inherently stable in contrast to the "flexible and versatile" paratext, the prominent debate between Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns (*American Historical Review* 107.1) has demonstrated that the "fixity" of any early modern publication cannot be taken for granted. Genette's other contention is equally disputed: we no longer assume that the important paratextual objects originated solely with the author, or that they provide evidence of a unified authorial voice. Scholars of early modern print are well aware of the haphazard or opportunistic collaborations between publishers, editors, or translators that saw various early texts into print. Copernicus's *On the Revolutions*, for instance,

was famously shepherded to the press in 1543 by a persuasive student, but then branded with a misleading preface by the man supervising its printing; both of these secondary contributors indelibly altered the landmark work. This collected volume provides strategies for teasing out the contributions of these other figures—pledges made by earnest editors, deliberate errors by critical typesetters. Such examples effectively invert our presumptions about which paratexts are "printerly" and which "authorial," and provide richer insights into the functioning of these interrelated textual communities.

The eleven essays are arranged in three sections, focusing respectively on the material book, on the individuals behind the paratexts, and on those who read them. The first, most thematically coherent grouping considers a series of "previously neglected" paratexts. To gain a better understanding of the physical and semiotic details of "seemingly informational spaces" (10), Helen Smith deciphers title-page imprints and William Sherman examines when and why books began to conclude with "The End." Matthew Day analyzes deceptively innocuous running heads, while Juliet Fleming builds on her earlier studies of printers' flowers, arguing that far from being merely decorative, these typographical elements formed a genre-specific constitutive frame.

The next group of essays assesses how paratextual authors negotiated their prospective readerships, tactics that once again varied by genre. Sonia Massai argues that rather than be viewed merely as a "sales-orientated peritext," the editorial pronouncements that introduced theatrical works should be taken seriously as "part of the paratextual apparatus of interpretation and emendation" (106). Danielle Clarke contends somewhat elliptically that the page layouts of poetic "complaints" transmit gendered messages. The question of how readers responded to such messages is more elusive, and something that Genette's author-centric concept cannot easily capture. In attempts to correlate the presence or absence of certain types of paratext with particular types of reading, Jason Scott-Warren puzzles over the dearth of finding aids in the first edition of the *Faerie Queene,* while Wendy Wall tries to unlock the "mystery of [*The English Housewife*'s] enduring success" (167), and how it would have been used without tools such as alphabetical indices.

The collection closes by addressing two of the chief topics omitted in Genette's *Paratexts*: translation and illustration. While Louise Wilson focuses on "playful" translations of Iberian romances, Neil Rhodes conceives of translation as a "three-dimensional addition" to the text, a paratext designed to

transmit rather than mediate and which thus moves beyond Genette's original "horizontal" elements (109). Hester Lees-Jeffries mines illustrations from the *Songe de Poliphile* to test whether the interplay between books and real-world locales might be paratextual. Peter Stallybrass then contributes a deft conclusion replete with intriguing examples of visual and authorial rhetoric.

This collection joins a healthy corpus of recent scholarship dedicated to the physical and intellectual aspects of early modern footnotes, indices, notebooks, and textbooks. Ultimately grounded less in structuralism and semiotics than in material bibliography (McKitterick, Kerrow, and McGann), with its attention to the physicality of the production process *Renaissance Paratexts* falls solidly in the Eisensteinian camp that sees a fundamental distinction between manuscripts and printed texts. Jason Scott-Warren tantalizingly proposes that manuscript annotations—such a key part of the Renaissance reader's engagement with the text—be counted as paratexts (160), but his fellow authors do not pursue the idea. If some of these essays verge on pushing Genette's open-ended definition of "paratext" too far, this volume nonetheless offers useful models for how to marshal typographic evidence in support of textual or historical arguments. Particularly during the current rush to digitize the humanities, these case studies underscore the value of studying often-overlooked physical elements of published books—not just title-pages and dedicatory poems but tables, type ornaments, and even blank margins. For Gérard Genette, "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book," a "fringe" ripe with possibility. Here, this fringe becomes a window onto unwritten complexities—social, geographical, gendered—which, although they may not have reflected the early modern reader's experience, certainly shaped it.

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