The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance (review)

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abstract: "English translations of the *Metamorphoses* are the 'very life of difference'" (193).

This diverseness would not matter if the case studies were more compelling and sharply etched. Oakley-Brown's appetite for unfamiliar material is admirable; the chapter on Caxton, whose prose *Metamorphoses* has yet to be edited in its entirety, is especially welcome. The chapter on women Ovidians is valuable for dramatizing their notable scarcity in this patch of English literary history and for the alertness with which the exceptions have been located; they include three specimens of needlework from Hardwick Hall. Brought into the light, though, they look like modest discoveries. (As women coming to grips with suspect classical texts, these four pale beside Lucy Hutchinson translating the great atheist Lucretius.) A deeper kind of problem is an impressionistic laxness in argumentation, which keeps putting weight on shimmery evidence — for instance, to make a climactic claim about Elizabeth Talbot's Phaeton panel: "Instead of simply depicting women in a subordinate position, Talbot's Ovidian translation implicitly promotes their textual agency" (131). Implication here has to be routed through Ovid and Philip Hardie; the female figures in the panel are neither writing nor weaving. In discussing Sandys, a certain amount is made of his adoption of the trope of Charles and Henrietta Maria as a Neoplatonic hermaphrodite. A quotation from Graham Parry is misleadingly used to make this trope sound like the "prevailing image" in royalist ideology (74); finding it in Sandys (to set up a supposedly telling contrast with a distressing visual representation of the Ovidian myth in the illustration to book 4) requires combining passages from two panegyrics, one in which Charles is compared to, among other gods, Mercury (Hermes), and one in which his wife is called "Queen of love" (Aphrodite). It is hard to have confidence in such legerdemain once you start noticing it.

Production values are not commensurate with the purchase price. The textile panels are unattractively reproduced; one is available only on the dustjacket. A page break appears to have hiccupped onto p. 98. No one stopped Smart Quote software from turning *'tis* into *'tis*, or *locus amoenus* from transgendering into *locus amoena*.

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Michael Saenger. *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. xii + 170 pp. index. illus. bibl. $89.95. ISBN: 0–7546–5413–3.

Michael Saenger begins his book, *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance*, by observing that modern readers are not consumers of Renaissance books in the same way as contemporary readers were. Because modern readers are not in the position to buy original books, aspects of

these books designed to advertise and present the main text — such as title pages, epistles, and other front matter — seem strange. These materials have also been relegated to the margins of modern editions of Renaissance books and, for the most part, not been fully analyzed by modern scholars. Focusing his attention on front matter, or paratexts, of Renaissance books published in London between 1580 and 1620, Saenger examines how this overlooked element of book publication structured the way in which contemporary readers approached, engaged, and understood books, as well as how these preliminary pages served to "advertise, frame, and explain the text."

Laying the critical foundations, definitions, and methodology for this study in the first chapter, Saenger discusses front matter broadly, asserting that it is marked by a textual liminality whereby smaller texts refer to and mediate between larger ones. Not only does this liminality mark out a space within which readers and books interact, it also blurs lines between other elements, such as authors and publishers, art and commerce, truth and fiction. The second chapter, which constitutes the basis of the text, examines these distinct "genres of introduction" in the order in which Renaissance readers typically encountered them — title pages, dedicatory epistles and epistles to readers, and commendatory verse — along with subgenres such as title, subtitle, engraved frontispieces, frontispiece explication poems, and prefatory narratives. He examines the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which these pages mediate between the reader and the book, often developing, complementing, and challenging techniques utilized in other areas of the paratext. He illustrates that these techniques frequently attempt to negotiate a tension between respectability and marketing. This section demonstrates how paratexts often borrowed modes of thought from inside the main text to frame the book, and how the lines between paratext and main text are not really as sharply defined as modern criticism assumes.

The third chapter focuses more specifically on the use of "metaphoric inductions" in paratexts to create personified engagements as a "powerful means of encouraging the purchase of a book" by implicating the potential buyer-reader in a metaphoric relationship with the book. Of particular interest to Saenger in this chapter are metaphors relating to translation and printing error: both of these metaphors create an idealized and unattainable text which the readers can hope to glimpse through the printed book. Additionally, these metaphors create a personal relationship by describing the printing of texts as sexual relationships of both promiscuity and violation and as childbirth, both of which invite readers into a variety of roles, including comforter, protector, and nurturer.

In the last chapter, Saenger considers the implications of this analysis of front matter on conceptions of authorship and focuses on three books that "perform a *contemporary* act of excavating, framing and identifying a textual voice." Discussing the construction of actual and exegetical agency in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), William Baldwin's narrative of provenance for the text of *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), and Gower's dual role as both character and source-poet in *Pericles* (1608), Saenger demonstrates how the author-figures in these paratexts

serve not only marketing agents that solidify the value of the book, but also as liminal figures who attempt to delineate relationships between books and readers.

Saenger's *The Commodification of Textual Engagements in the English Renaissance* not only convincingly illustrates the marketing function of the preliminary pages in Renaissance books but also that these paratexts, while focusing on a commercial transaction, liminally mediate between the book and reader. In doing so, these paratexts shed light on the early modern London book trade, early modern readers as well as conceptions of literature and authorship. Refreshingly, Saenger moves beyond the small section of books usually examined by textual scholars to include also a wide variety of printed texts, such as instructional works, religious texts, and even a book that contains instructions for constructing devices and conducting magic tricks and paranormal experiments. The number of books discussed by Saenger in his slim volume is impressive and lends itself well to his comprehensive assertions regarding paratexts in Renaissance books. Saenger's analyses are clear and insightful but — at least at times — left me wishing for lengthier discussions of particular texts. Overall, the book makes an excellent case for further analysis of the front matter of Renaissance texts and lays a good critical foundation for doing so.

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William Kuskin, ed. *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing*.

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. xxviii + 394 pp. index. illus. bibl. $60. ISBN: 0–268–03308–0.

This edition of ten essays on English printing history is well-organized, with a descriptive list of illustrations, an excellent basic bibliography, and a helpful index. In many ways, the volume demonstrates where scholars are now in their pursuit of book history, an uneasy mixture of literary analysis, bibliography, history, theory, speculation, and received notions from twentieth-century scholarship. When the authors address the primary sources, the essays are at their best and most readable, weaker when they synthesize secondary materials, some of which are outdated; several essays become particularly opaque in their application of theoretical notions to Caxton and his legacy. Readers interested in obscure terminology — for example, anadiplosis, antimetabole, *fürstenspeigl*, governmentality, ideologeme, rhizomatic, uchronic — will learn much new vocabulary.

Kuskin's introduction points to the difficulties of writing well about general aspects of early printing history: there is much to be synthesized, not all of it dependable. Kuskin is strongest when he focuses on his sources for the book's title, Robert Copland's statement that he is "gladly folowynge the trace of my mayster Caxton" (7), along with Chaucer's "Gentilesse," its appearance in Ashmole 59, and its subsequent print history. The book is then divided into four sections.