

The Purple Island: or, The Isle of Man. Phineas Fletcher.

Ed. Johnathan H. Pope. The Renaissance Society of America Texts and Studies Series 8. Leiden: Brill, 2017. x + 252 pp. \$138.

Seldom read, rarely taught, and almost never the subject of discrete scholarly inquiry, Phineas Fletcher's allegorical atlas of the human body, *The Purple Island: or, The Isle of Man* (1633), is often treated as something of a curiosity in the canon of seventeenth-century poetry. The "Seventeenth-Century Spenserians"—of which Fletcher and his father, Giles, are numbered—are typically overshadowed by their namesake and by the better-known schools of metaphysical and Cavalier poetry, initiated by John Donne and Ben Jonson, respectively. Despite its relative obscurity, however, *The Purple Island* makes incisive commentary on topics as diverse as English geography, the current state of anatomical knowledge, the relation between body and soul, and Stuart politics.

The most familiar counterpart to *The Purple Island*—and clearly a major influence on Fletcher's poem—is the House of Alma episode in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, where the rooms of a house are allegorized as the parts of the body, emphasizing that synergy and balance are fundamental to the proper functioning of household, body, and spirit. *The Purple Island* differs in that its allegorical body is the geography of a fictional Pacific island; it also goes much further—both in the level of detail and sophistication of its anatomical knowledge and in its allegorical commentary on a wide-ranging set of issues. Medical knowledge had advanced significantly in the nearly fifty years since the publication of *The Faerie Queene*, as William Harvey's exposition of the circulatory system (published in 1628) would eventually supplant Galenic humoral physiology and open new possibilities for allegorical writers like Fletcher. While Fletcher's body remains humoral in its basic composition, he nevertheless asserts the importance of rivers and small tributaries—the functional equivalent of vessels and capillaries—to the sustained health of the island over against the centralized authority of a single capital city—or the heart. Fletcher's island, then, might be read as a microcosm of the body, an individual's spiritual health, and the state itself—and in this latter regard, the poem offers an implicit rebuke to the absolutist ideology propagated by the Stuarts where power resided solely within the heart or the head.

Johnathan Pope's welcome new edition of this fascinating poem, the first since Frederick Boas's 1908 *Poetical Works of Giles and Phineas Fletcher*, offers a relatively sparsely annotated text along with a comprehensive and highly informative introduction that usefully outlines the multiple contexts that animate the poem. Unlike A. C. Hamilton's magisterial edition of *The Faerie Queene* that makes a significant scholarly intervention in its own right, Pope's primary goal is to introduce readers to the rich and varied issues sifted in Fletcher's obscure poem, and set them within several important seventeenth-century debates concerning anatomy, theology, and poetics. As Pope readily admits, *The Purple Island* is a complex poem; Fletcher's method is as much that

of an anatomist as that of a poet. Pope's introduction and apparatus allow us to both grasp the poem's intricate allegory and, just as importantly, appreciate it as poetry.

Pope's edition also includes a brief biography of Fletcher, a bibliography of scholarship on the poem, and a history of the text, including reproductions of the original 1633 edition. These reproductions illustrate that *The Purple Island* already contained copious marginal annotations, written by Fletcher himself, both to reference other works and to assist readers in making some of the poem's allegorical connections. In Pope's edition, these annotations are reprinted at the bottom of the page, interspersed with the editor's own notes (with Fletcher's notes indicated by "P.F."). This page layout is not ideal, making it difficult to differentiate the author's own notes from later editorial interventions. Presumably, Fletcher's notes are where they are for a reason, and repositioning them takes us even further away from the way the author wished us to encounter the poem. Pope has made relatively few alterations to the poem's punctuation and orthography. In short, Pope's is an edition of *The Purple Island* that I hope will introduce a generation of new readers, especially graduate students in nondramatic Renaissance literature, to this important yet understudied poem.

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The Mirror of Information in Early Modern England: John Wilkins and the Universal Character. James Dougal Fleming.

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xiv + 292 pp. \$109.

James Dougal Fleming is right, it is best to have a copy of John Wilkins's *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668) alongside any discussion of that text. It need not be the versions available online, as Fleming suggests: bound print facsimiles (over 400 pages) are available for no more than \$60. No matter its intent, Wilkins's essay offers us a contemporaneous explanatory dictionary of thousands of ordinary early modern English words and phrases along with a look at the state of knowledge and information of the time from the perspective of the co-founder of the Royal Society. Fleming's book opens up a welcome discussion of Wilkins's real character, which has not been fully studied or described in the almost 350 years of the book's existence. What is a real character? Quite simply it is a writing system that would by its design directly reveal the extralinguistic reality of any thing or notion without linguistic mediation.

Fleming studies the current and past state of information technology within the broader question, "What is information?"; an early history of shorthand writing, which he claims leads directly to Wilkins's character; binary codes; universal and philosophical languages; communication studies; phenomenology; and a detailed analysis