

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

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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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