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## [Book Review] Alastair Fowler, *The Mind of the Book: Pictorial Title Pages*

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Review: Alastair Fowler, *The Mind of the Book: Pictorial Title Pages* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), ISBN 978-0-0190871766-9, xii+220pp.

'Title-page forms are so multifarious', Alastair Fowler reminds us with judicious understatement in *The Mind of the Book: Pictorial Title Pages* that it would 'take several tomes to cover them all' (vii). Despite the daunting potential task at hand and the risk of being encyclopaedic rather than analytical, Fowler presents a judiciously curated selection of arresting and important pictorial frontispieces in English literary history from the start of printing until the end of the nineteenth-century. *The Mind of the Book* is divided into two sections. The first part is an introduction (pp.1-70) to the constitutive elements of the title page through history. Fowler surveys the main features of title pages, glossing the rise of borders and other architectural structures, the progressive inclusion and development of author portraits, printers' devices, emblems and chronographs, and charting the broad historical developments of the form. Fowler reminds us that the frontispiece is a relatively recent invention in the history of the book, for in the ancient world, 'texts had no titles in the modern sense, and therefore no title pages' (p.3), while the world of medieval manuscripts featured decorated opening phrases or words, rather than separate title pages per se. The autonomous title page, Fowler points out, is inextricably bound up with the development of mass printing in the West, starting with the Gutenberg Bible. The need to keep unsold (and unbound) printed copies in good condition necessitated the addition of a blank leaf for protection, and the blank leaf needed to bear a title for ease of identification. This early functional labelling soon acquired additional cultural and decorative weight, with Venetian title pages from the 1490s offering the first instances of decorative text borders. In doing so, Fowler outlines what he terms the 'chameleon history' of the title page, where some elements (such as the author portrait, title and name) have remained static over the centuries, while others, such as the amount and nature of pictorial decoration, demonstrate huge variations through history.

The second (and larger) part of *The Mind of the Book* presents a range of case studies of 16 specific (and noteworthy) pictorial title pages, starting and ending with editions of Chaucer. These range from the hybrid decorative title-page of Thomas Thynne's *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer* (1532), which combines both Medieval and Renaissance visual elements and technology, to the crowded visual imagery, in the form of a tableau with Latin inscriptions, of *The Great Bible* (1539). Fowler includes both Ben Jonson's *The Works* (1616) and Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1745) in his selection of exemplary frontispieces, before concluding in the nineteenth-century with Charles Dickens's unfinished serialisation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) and William Morris's superbly decorative designs for the title page for the Kelmscott Press edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1896), widely held to be one of the finest books ever produced. For each of the decorative frontispieces, Fowler provides a concise and knowledgeable commentary, including information about the designers, artists, printers, publishers and illustrators for each work. He also briefly glosses specific historical moments that the decorative title-pages engage with, as well as reproducing the title pages themselves. These 16 examples of decorated title pages through five centuries of English literature offer the reader a wealth of experiences, showing both the richness and variation of the form over the period. However, while Fowler's selection is a positive one, showcasing some of the greatest examples of decorative title pages, there are some serious omissions here. Worryingly, Fowler doesn't include any examples of frontispieces (pictorial or otherwise) of works by female authors in his study, despite the longstanding question of authorial attribution and visual representation of women authors. Missing from *The Mind of the Book* for example, is Margaret Cavendish's wonderfully confident and self-aggrandising self-representation on the pictorial title-page (strictly speaking, the title page verso) of *The Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668); the engraving by Pieter Louis van Schuppen after the portrait of Cavendish by Abraham van

Diepenbeeck (1596-1675) features the author in a typically masculine pose, framed by Minerva and Apollo, who both cast approving glances at the author. An account of Cavendish's extraordinary visual and textual self-assertion on the pictorial frontispiece of *The Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (a frontispiece image that she regularly reused for editions of some of her literary works) would have complemented Fowler's discussion of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) admirably, so this is a bit of a lost opportunity.

In a similar vein, Fowler does not venture away from the strictly literary-canonical path that he follows from Chaucer to Dickens, to look at the astonishing purchase of the pictorial title page in other genres of writing; *Pictorial Title Pages in the English Literary (Male) Canon* might have been a more accurate subtitle. For example, John Gerarde's *The Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: 1597, enlarged and reprinted 1633) was possibly the single most influential botanical work of its kind in the 17<sup>th</sup> century English speaking world; it also has one of the most richly and consistently engaging illustrated title pages anywhere, with a superb copper engraving done by William Rogers (Queen Elizabeth I's engraver). Fowler refers closely to the work of Rogers's apprentice Thomas Coxon (p.102) for the illustrated title page of Sir William Harington's *Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse* (1591) and devotes a section outlining the history of the illustration and printing of this landmark translation and adaptation, so it is a pity that there is no corresponding mention of the work of William Rogers on Gerarde's *The Herball*, which was in many senses, just as influential both in its visual appeal and cultural influence (*The Herball* famously includes the first ever woodcut illustration of a potato plant in England).

Fowler's aim, as stated at the start of *The Mind of the Book*, is to raise 'our interest in frontispieces and title pages usually passed over with a cursory glance' and to encourage a 'closer look' (vii). The modest size and relatively selective scope of Fowler's volume, together with his informative, easy going style, allows – even invites – us to do just that. Fowler wears his considerable learning lightly, and provides a user-friendly glossary explaining all the technical terms used in describing and studying frontispieces. This is an excellent book to dip into, with informative and appealing case studies of pictorial title pages through five centuries of English literary history; undoubtedly, after finishing *The Mind of the Book*, the reader will never again skip over a pictorial frontispiece as a mere worn-out convention, but will stop, look, and absorb.

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