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Laurie Maguire. *The Rhetoric of the Page*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xx + 289pp. ISBN 9780198862109. \$43.00 hardcover.

In *The Rhetoric of the Page*, Laurie Maguire deals with the mutability and expansiveness of what she terms blanks, telling their broad history and mapping them onto a series of rhetorical figures. The work centers on actual blank spaces in books and on typographical signifiers of blanks: the markers of things that are not physically present in the book, and that the reader must imaginatively or literally supply. This means that the volume deals primarily with purposefully produced blank space and the signifiers of what Maguire terms blankness, rather than the unavoidable blanks that surround printed or written text such as margins and endleaves. As a result, the concept of blankness that emerges in *The Rhetoric of the Page* hinges on its authorial creation and the readerly participation prompted by such spaces. This adds up to what Maguire terms the “rhetoric of the page”: a spatial and typographical eloquence that has a particular effect on the reader, prompting a particular kind of interaction and intellectual response dependent on the parameters of the blank in question.

The scope of *The Rhetoric of the Page* is vast and the number of primary sources referenced tremendous: the bibliography includes, for instance, forty-one anonymously authored texts alone. The majority of the volume’s sources are early modern although some date from slightly earlier and significantly later periods, giving the study an impressive range, “from incunabula to Google books” (1), as Maguire puts it. A small number of manuscript sources are mentioned, but the volume is primarily about printed books, and a significant subsection of these are printed play texts. The three lengthy chapters deal with physical blank space, the etcetera, and the asterisk, respectively. As a result, Maguire’s study redeems the blank from its traditionally

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disregarded or denigrated position. She demonstrates that it is not an inferior or failed space, but a paradoxical and ostentatious space for creativity, eloquence, and dialogue.

The first chapter focuses on blanks, broadly defined, in medieval and early modern books. It overviews the spaces left in incunabula to be later filled in by miniaturists, which resemble the blank spaces that marked out the spaces for handwritten insertions of amounts and signatures in early modern printed forms. The most delightful gaps are those left by medieval scribes who, unable to decipher particular words, chose to leave blanks rather than risk corrupting the text. Also encompassed by Maguire's expansive first category are the omitted full names of authors and expected but absent paratexts, such as prefaces, and gaps left for censored material in editions of canonical writers such as Petrarch. What these varied blanks have in common, Maguire argues, is that they prompt readers to fill in the gaps—either physically or imaginatively—as well as their role in the development of creative and experimental authorial practices. These practices include playful errata lists, alibis, self-censorship, comically absent punch-lines, and innovative uses of *mise-en-page* such as Thomas Nashe's famous bordered empty box in *Have With You to Saffron Walden* (1596). The rhetoric of these blank parts of the page is, Maguire suggests, akin to apophasis: these spaces draw attention to what they profess to conceal and omit, be it a rude punch line or an indescribably monstrous portrait of an enemy. Although Maguire includes brief examples of more recent creative blanks, such as the empty scroll in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) and Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), the overarching narrative suggests that these older uses of creative blanks have, on the whole, been obfuscated in modern editions of early modern books. Scholars are no longer comfortable, as medieval scribes were, with the uncertainty of an uncontrollable blank space. Our editorial conventions have instead developed from centuries of increasing unease concerning the unfinished, the indefinite, and the potentially erroneous.

The subject of the second chapter is a more clearly defined marker of absence: the etcetera, which is often shortened to “&c” in early modern texts. Maguire catalogues the different meanings that “&c” took on in the early modern period: particularly interestingly, she observes how it came to stand in for body parts and violent acts that were culturally unacceptable to spell out in full, such as the vagina and descriptions of sexual assault. “&c” might, then, be either coy and euphemistic or take on a violence and offensiveness of its own. The other principal use of “&c” outlined

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by Maguire is more familiar to a modern reader, though unexpectedly complex: serving as a proto-dash, it might mark interruption and breaking off, but it might also indicate that the reader or, if in a printed play text, an actor, should prolong a sentence by repeating, listing, or improvising additional words. Rhetorically, then, “&c” is akin to the related figures of aposiopesis and apophasis: in breaking off, the “&c” draws attention to what has been omitted, prompting readerly supplementation and imagination in a similar manner to Maguire’s more expansive category of blank places. Crucially, for Maguire, this makes the “&c” sophisticated and playful: it “tantalizes with surplus and remainder, offers and denies completion simultaneously,” creating an interactive “game with boundaries and cusps, with abruption and continuation, with suspension and extension of meaning” (111). A reader of *The Rhetoric of the Page* will never speed past an “&c” without thinking carefully about its specific rhetorical effects again.

Like the second chapter, the third chapter focuses on a specific apophatic marker: the asterisk. Paradoxically present and absent as it draws attention to that which it stands in for, the asterisk takes on a rhetorical function that Maguire reads as “gnomic” (171). Like George Puttenham’s “Directour” or the related manicule, the asterisk typically points beyond the page to something else (172).¹ The chapter takes the reader through the varied functions of the asterisk: its use in the representation of an excess of emotion in works by Michel de Montaigne and Ben Jonson, and more recently by Man Booker Prize winner George Saunders; its standing in for oaths and profanities; its literal substitution for textual stars and flowers; the readerly insertion of asterisks into the margins when annotating and common placing; and its related use in anchoring sidenotes, which migrated to the foot of the page in the eighteenth century. As with the first chapter’s blanks and the second chapter’s etceteras, a narrative of readerly participation and authorial creativity develops: we see its experimental usage in the works of Thomas Nashe and Laurence Sterne (both of whom are recurring figures in the volume), as well as in twentieth-century poetry and prose. We are also reminded that modern editorial conventions remove and so flatten out the creative uncertainty and significance of asterisks, just as they do blanks in general. This is particularly frustrating for Maguire because, she argues, the asterisk plays a starring role (pun intended) in the field of apophatic markers. It is, she writes, “a

¹ See George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 235–6.

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metaphor for everything in the previous chapters,” emblemizing the way in which blanks in general denote the “interactive cusp between writer and reader” (222). The asterisk, therefore, is presented as an über- or meta- blank: it surpasses the “&c” and (paradoxically) the blank itself in its capacity to provoke and to emblemize the interactive and dialogic effect of blank or empty space.

Maguire’s epilogue broadens out from specific typographical markers to the more diffuse, metaphorical life of punctuation and, in the second half, the meaningful use of punctuation in printed play texts. These two topics crop up in each chapter, but here Maguire addresses them more explicitly and in doing so raises questions that warrant further exploration by scholars working in the fields of early modern book history and drama studies. *The Rhetoric of the Page*, then, traces the development of bibliographical forms of blankness and maps these on to rhetorical functions, demonstrating that they offer moments where the boundary between author and reader and the finished edges of the book are blurred. Through myriad examples, we observe the authorial creativity that these forms of blankness cultivated, but we also see the editorial erosion of this earlier creativity as a result of more recent anxieties concerning readerly autonomy and the uncertain effects of errors.

As the introduction acknowledges, the volume certainly bears traces of its foundation in the British Library’s 2018 Panizzi lectures (22): the various subsections of the three chapters contain numerous examples, and these at times feel catalogic rather than narratively connected. Similarly, while the inclusion of twentieth- and twenty-first century examples demonstrate the vitality of continued authorial experimentation with blanks and certain punctuation marks into the present, they do not always contribute to the overarching argument. Both of these features, however, help to produce the lively nature of *The Rhetoric of the Page*, which packages thorough and impressively wide-ranging bibliographical research and theoretically rich ideas into an impressively engaging and readable volume. Perhaps, after all, a study of the apophatic, the aposiopetic, and the blank will inevitably be catalogic and open-ended. It is fitting, then, that *The Rhetoric of the Page*, like an “&c,” lists and breaks off, and, like an asterisk, invites readerly supplementation and continued thought.

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