“FOR THE COMMON GOOD AND FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST:”
PARATEXTS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF NAVIGATIONAL WORKS

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Critic Michael Saenger has said that “marginal texts are no longer of marginal importance,” and he is right. Ever since Gérard Genette coined the term ‘paratext’ in his seminal work Seuils, or in its English translation Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, much attention has been paid to such texts. Genette offers the following explanation of the term:

More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a ‘vestible’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside ... or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.’

Although “it has become a critical commonplace to suggest that Genette’s survey of paratextual possibilities is insufficiently attentive to historical difference and change,” most of his terminologies and concepts are still relevant. He attempts to list and describe every kind of paratext, by which he means in essence everything that is “around” the text in question but not the actual main body of it, what in his own words enables a text to become a book and be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. He then divides these paratexts into peritexts (those materials closest to the body of the text and found in the actual book, such as titles, title-pages, dedications, prefaces, liminary verses) and epitexts (those materials related to the text yet outside it, such as interviews or notebooks). In this essay, I shall examine only paratexts and, within that category, only dedications and addresses to the reader, although this is not to underestimate the importance of other paratexts such as title-pages,

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4 Gérard Genette, Paratexts, 2.
with their potential for attracting buyers and readers, or titles, which may well differ in source text and translation, given the changed cultural context and audience.\(^5\)

Renaissance paratexts per se are now being recognised as playing the role of a “disguised advertisement,” the verb “to advertise” meaning in Early Modern English “to make generally known.”\(^6\) They could inform potential buyers about new knowledge found in the book but could also, Paul Voss argues, be used for “promoting reputations, establishing expertise … and encouraging investment.”\(^7\) In fact, he continues, “technical expertise became a service desired by others” and, thanks to the medium of print, “knowledge could be captured, packaged and sold” fairly easily.\(^8\) Where translations are concerned, paratexts written by the translator, according to Saenger, “offer a wide variety of perspectives on the problems and duties of the translator.”\(^9\) Voss’s comment on technical knowledge and Saenger’s on translators’ paratexts are especially relevant for this study of the prefatorial matters accompanying the navigational works translated in early modern England between 1528 and 1640, which were extremely important in the development of the country’s navy, adventures of exploration, and trade.

The title of a 1943 book states that *Europa aprendió a navegar en libros españoles* (Europe learned to navigate from Spanish books) and in the case of England this is definitely true.\(^10\) It is not, however, the whole story. Consultation of the newly established *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads Online Catalogue of Translations in Britain 1473–1640*, reveals a sizeable subset of navigational works; it is on these that I shall focus. The core corpus comprises fifteen texts which, including reprints, amount to fifty-five books. Of these, just under half were translated from Dutch; only about one third stem from Spanish originals.\(^11\) This knocks Spanish somewhat


\(^6\) Michael Saenger, *Commodification*, 36 and 55.

\(^7\) Paul J. Voss, “Books for Sale,” 737.


\(^11\) The difference in impact between the Dutch and Spanish translated manuals is discussed further in my doctoral thesis, “Foreign” Books for English Readers: Published