



Gavin Edwards. *The Case of the Initial Letter: Charles Dickens and the Politics of the Dual Alphabet*.

Gavin Edwards. *The Case of the Initial Letter: Charles Dickens and the Politics of the Dual Alphabet*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. 184p. ISBN: 978-1-5261-4629-8. Â£80.00 (hardback).

What if Charles Dickens was typeset as charles dickens? What if *A Christmas Carol* was typeset as a *christmas carol*? How does the change in capitalization impact our reading of the text? Gavin Edwards's *The Case of the Initial Letter: Charles Dickens and the Politics of the Dual Alphabet* is a thorough consideration of the use and abuse of the initial letter. The initial letter is the first letter of a word. It is not necessarily a drop cap or an ornamental letter that starts a chapter with embellishment. The upper-case initial letter is most often quieter than that "a C instead of a c" but, as we learn, it conveys dignity and carries political weight.

The book's title, *The Case of the Initial Letter*, is something of a double entendre. It at once suggests Sherlockian sleuthing and points to the question of whether the initial letter ought to be upper case or lower case. It is a quotidian concern in that we encounter these letters every day, but they ought not be taken for granted. Author Gavin Edwards, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of South Wales, argues that, "whether the dual alphabet is used in innovative or conventional ways, it is always an important generator of meaning" (2). Typographic levelling, wherein all letters are of the same case, can read as egalitarian; the upper-casing of names and government offices, for example, can read as hierarchical. Edwards states that the aim of the book is, "to demonstrate that typographic case " the conventions governing its use, and challenges to those conventions " does matter" (ibid.).

Edwards addresses a counterargument early in his book, citing perhaps the most famous advocate for the exclusive use of lower-case letters, typographer Herbert Bayer. Bayer (and his close colleague, László Moholy-Nagy, who is not mentioned in the book) were prominent members of the Bauhaus, the modernist design school that thrived in interwar Germany. They wanted to dispense with upper-case letters, arguing that they were superfluous. Edwards quotes Bayer: “we only use small characters because it saves time, moreover, why have 2 alphabets when one will do? why write in capitals if we cannot speak in capitals?” (5). (It is amusing to note that, while typing this review, I had to override Microsoft Word’s autocorrect function because it changed Bayer’s “why” to “Why”. It is a fitting demonstration of one of the ways that conventions of case are enforced in our present-day lives.) Edwards argues that, no, one set of characters would not do.

*The Case of the Initial Letter* touches on theories of design and typography (as above) and printing industry practices, including Joseph Moxon’s oft-cited seventeenth-century *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing*, but the focus is on the appearance of typographic case in published texts that were written for audiences who are outside of the industry. Multiple passages in *The Case of the Initial Letter* are transcriptions of, for example, correspondence and manuscript pages that are complex and creative in their use of case. Pip’s letter to Jo in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, typeset here in a mix of small and full caps, makes for a stark contrast on the page alongside the conventional typesetting of Edwards’s academic prose (129). Showing Dickens’s words typeset, as opposed to only reproductions of photographs of his original handwritten documents (130), is a strong rhetorical device; we know that the letters were intentionally set and not haphazardly scrawled. Such passages must have been an ordeal for the book’s proofreader, but they are, along with Edwards’s analyses of them, persuasive evidence that case variously dictates and liberates meaning.

The remit of *The Case of the Initial Letter* is wider than its subtitle, which focuses on Dickens, suggests. The book draws on three bodies of writing: Dickens’s novels, revolutionary Marxist texts and suffragist feminist works. These are not necessarily the first exemplars that come to mind; writings of the Bauhaus or poetry like that of E. E. Cummings might have been more obvious choices. Edwards, though, forges critical connections between Dickens, Marxism and feminism, making his argument across multiple time periods, regions and genres. Because Edwards goes into fine detail with each of these types of text, some pre-existing knowledge of one or more of them is useful for fully grasping the premise of the book. *The Case of the Initial Letter* is fundamentally an effort to redress “the failure of literary critics and cultural historians to accord the dual alphabet the attention that it deserves” (7). With all the authority that upper-casing can muster, this is a Good Book.

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