

Tudor Books and Readers: Materiality and the Construction of Meaning

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This collection has its origins in a conference on ‘The Consumption of Books During the Tudor Era: Printers, Publishers and Readers’, held at the Huntington Library in 2006. Its contents, however, only partially reflect that event, since a significant proportion of the essays (four out of the ten) have been written or co-written by scholars who did not attend the conference.

The book itself is beautifully packaged, using as its dust jacket illustration the ornate gold-tooled binding of a mid-Tudor royal presentation copy. It also makes some large claims for itself: the blurb, repeated on the half-title, describes it as ‘a comprehensive account of book culture’ during the period, and the subtitle ‘Materiality and Meaning’ suggests that it intends to address this difficult and slippery combination of ideas as a core theme.

The essays are grouped into three sections, preceded by an introduction by the editor John N. King and a short but useful prologue by Lotte Hellinga on printing under the early Tudor regime. This prologue begins engagingly with the statement that “‘The Tudor Period’ is a notion that is not helpful in the discipline of the history of the book’ (p. 15); and as Hellinga herself acknowledges, it is derived in large part from her introduction to Part XI of the *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Library*.⁽¹⁾ However, it also serves as a taster for her elegant and erudite new general introduction to early English printing, recently issued by British Library Publishing.⁽²⁾

The first themed section, entitled ‘Book format, marketing and the reception of books’, is mainly concerned with the economics and expediencies of production. The three essays taken together effect something of a

miniature paradigm shift – one which should have broad implications for our understanding of how early-modern readers (and writers) may have perceived the various possible hierarchies of size, format and overall visual impact. It is clear from the evidence of these essays that the relationship of ‘look-and-feel’ to content, then as now, was not as simple or as straightforwardly economic as many have so far assumed.

In the first essay, Joseph A. Dane and Alexandra Gillespie effect a gentle but firm debunking of the ‘myth of the cheap quarto’ (p. 25), demonstrating not only that the economic and production arguments for necessarily cheap quartos are weak, but also that this has implications beyond book history. The ‘myth’, they argue, being a long-standing key point of reference in Shakespeare studies especially, has led to assumptions being made about the socio-economic status of early Shakespeare (and other) editions: assumptions in particular about the relative affordability and quality of quarto as opposed to folio format which are not supported by Dane and Gillespie’s findings. The following essay by Steven K. Galbraith adds further weight to this argument by working in the opposite direction, arguing that if quartos need not have been ‘cheap’, then equally folios need not have been expensive, either. Some, he argues, were merely practical solutions to the production of huge texts; others were indeed a form of conspicuous consumption; but still others represented simply the cheapest combination of type and paper for that particular publication, large or small. Elizabeth Evenden’s essay on the printing of the second edition of John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (1570) is less immediately concerned with the issue of format, focussing instead on the textual archaeology of Foxe and Day’s tribulations as they attempted to corral this behemoth of a work onto the printed page. Indirectly adding force to Galbraith’s argument for a category of ‘folios of necessity’, Evenden goes deep into signature collations and typographical variations to provide vivid evidence for the ways in which the book grew and evolved even as it was in press.

The second group of essays is entitled ‘Print, politics and patronage’, its three essays taking a variety of approaches to these themes. Douglas A. Brooks, who sadly passed away while the collection was in production, chooses to take a Ben Hur-sized narrative approach at the start, beginning with the Mayas, Mesopotamia and Fifth-Dynasty Egypt, then spiralling gradually inwards to focus on the power play of Tudor monarchs and print, taking a good-natured swipe at the New Historicist critics’ love of spectacle along the way. His call for greater focus on the role of the book *trade* in Tudor power-politics might perhaps seem belated to book historians; but as Dane and Gillespie’s essay has already suggested, such advice may be timely for literary scholars wanting to take closer account of the pragmatisms of print history in their work.

Robert J. D. Harding returns the reader to the tangible, tactile world of the physical book, with a small but absorbing foray into the world of binding, looking at instances where the authors themselves had an influence on the choice of binding, most especially where the binding itself was intended as an extension of the message of the text. He notes that this practice was, in fact, rather rare: in most cases, the ‘meaning’ in this aspect of a book’s ‘materiality’ would often have been unconnected to its contents and selected for more worldly and pragmatic reasons, perhaps relating (as Jason Scott-Warren will suggest later in this collection) to a purchaser’s more general tastes in colour and textile. Cyndia Clegg’s essay, by contrast, is interested in the role of the book trade itself as mediator, looking at the relationship between Elizabethan parliaments and the use of printed complaint and counsel literature to attempt a dialogue with the Elizabethan regime. Less concerned with the materiality of the text than with the capability of print production to respond to specific socio-political circumstances, she focuses interestingly on the importance of print technology in the use of timing to effect meaning.

The final section, on ‘Reading and religion’, opens with Alexandra Walsham’s lovely essay on printing for refutation, where she shows that this practice contributed much to the ‘permeability of the boundary between Catholic and Protestant publishing’ (p. 165), and turned ‘the printed page itself [into] a debating chamber’ (p. 167). Walsham looks with a clear eye at the increasingly strident arguments between university divines, then contrasts the typographical and stylistic grandiosity of these ‘fierce, if tedious and turgid’ (p. 166) disputes with the mischievousness and informality of the more popular underground Catholic literature. Manuscript ballads which might have sunk without trace were circulated widely (and are known to us now) because they were reproduced in print for the purposes of refutation. Walsham makes the point, though, that

such ‘refutations’ may have been little more than lip-service, providing a vehicle for communicating with readers who could choose to ignore a Protestant preface in favour of the Catholic main text.

John N. King’s own essay follows, looking at the woodcuts in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* – specifically, the banderol texts in which King has long been interested. He makes thought-provoking points about the fluidity of meaning which might attach to these (sometimes blank) banderols, and explores the extent to which the inserted text was meant to be interpreted as the martyr’s actual words: often, he concludes, it was not, representing more a point for contemplation than historical truth. King’s passion for Foxe’s work shows in his opening statement that it is the ‘best illustrated book produced by the London book trade during the hand press period’ (p. 191). This does jar slightly: while it is certainly the most troubling, and often the most moving, many readers will surely have their own candidates for that honour. This is perhaps an uncharitable quibble, but I have raised it here because it bears on aspects of King’s introduction, to be discussed below.

Andrew Cambers follows King with a sensitive and illuminating discussion of one woman’s reading practices and marginal annotations, looking at Margaret Hoby’s diary and marginal notes and arguing that ‘cyclical, oral and above all familial reading was a central component of religious practice in [Hoby’s] household’ (p. 217). He shows that in the domestic households of the godly the traditional reading practices of monastic life lived on in a new form, but also that the Hoby’s annotations can help to recover the manner in which she approached her private reading, providing clues as to how influenced she may have been by page layout, printed notes, and typographical elements (such as italicized passages) in her personal responses to a text.

The concluding essay, by Jason Scott-Warren, discusses real and fictional early-modern inventories: the place of books within them, and by extension in the owners’ domestic spaces. It is the only essay to address directly the more abstract concepts implied in the collection’s subtitle. Scott-Warren makes the very good point that studies of ‘libraries’ extracted from inventories of a house’s contents do not always reveal the true importance (or unimportance) of the books themselves in the owner’s life. One is reminded of Bess of Hardwick’s almost book-free but apparently careful household inventories – did she truly have no library, or was it kept safely in chests left unopened when the inventory was taken? For Scott-Warren, inventories provide a kind of early-modern ‘virtual tour’ of a house and its contents, and for him (and us), this can reveal much about books, their owners, and their cultural/material priorities.

Taken as a whole, the collection is an interesting and valuable contribution to the field; but it does have a couple of curious aspects. The introduction, to this reader at least, seems to have been written for a slightly different book: it is weighted very heavily towards the history of the introduction of printing, and to the history of Tudor religious publishing in particular. While this is of course a very worthwhile subject, and some of the essays do indeed focus on this area, the degree of emphasis does not do justice to the breadth of the collection. As with King’s claim for *Actes and Monuments* and its illustrations, where he is understandably captivated by the book’s strange and problematic charisma (but to the detriment of a broader perspective), in the introduction he seems so enthused by his chosen subject that once again the perspective remains constricted. King’s justification for such heavy emphasis is that religious publishing ‘dominated the trade in books following 1500’ (p. 6); this is true, but even if trade dominance were the only criterion of importance (which is debatable) it does not seem helpful to exclude from a general survey mention of other high-volume areas such as legal publishing (which included large numbers of year books, collections of statutes, and proclamations, as well as legal treatises), and what would now be termed ‘reference’ publishing (grammars, chronicles, dictionaries, herbals, and treatises on the sciences, for example).

The corollary to this chosen emphasis is that other aspects are not discussed. The collection’s title, for instance, is suggestive of a number of questions worthy of interrogation: the place of books as artefacts in a wider material culture is one key area which is addressed directly by Jason Scott-Warren, but in the introduction not at all. The aesthetic of the codex, especially within the broader Tudor visual culture, is crucial to most of the collection’s essays (including King’s own), yet this, too, is left unexamined in the introduction.

This slight criticism, however, should not detract from the overall worth of the collection as a whole: the content is varied, rewarding and wide-ranging, and if the book does not achieve the promised comprehensiveness (too much to ask of a relatively compact essay collection), it nevertheless provides an illuminating and valuable cross-section of current approaches and topics of interest within the field.

Notes

1. Lotte Hellinga, *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Library* (London, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lotte Hellinga, *William Caxton and Early Printing in England* (London, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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