

Manuscript and Print in London c.1475-1530

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The 'great divide' between the medieval and the early modern is nowhere more apparent than in 'the history of the book' – a field of study in which it has been particularly damaging to our understanding of the processes by which books and other texts were manufactured and distributed in the 15th and 16th centuries. The simplistic formula 'medieval = manuscript; early modern = print' reigned supreme for far too long – almost to the end of the 20th century – before being challenged by, among others, Don McKenzie, Adrian Johns, and David McKitterick. In her recent book, Julia Boffey also strides bravely and persuasively across these unsophisticated binaries.

The 'print triumphalists', as the late Harold Love called them, hailed the invention of printing as a cultural revolution. From the 1450s, when books could be printed, they argued, texts no longer needed to be copied by hand – printing enabled the production of multiple copies of identical and stable texts. Few would disagree that printing from moveable type was a highly significant innovation, in terms of technology and economics, as in culture, religion and politics – just try to imagine the European Reformation or the British Civil Wars without print. The new technology did enable texts to be produced much more quickly and (eventually) considerably more cheaply – but, as Love and others convincingly argued, the practice of copying texts in manuscript did not wither overnight as the 'triumphalist' view suggested. What actually happened was that some texts continued for a very long time to be reproduced by laborious hand-copying rather than by printing. This happened for a whole variety of reasons, as did the less frequent but rather surprising practice of a printed text being copied by hand – a fascinating reversal of the 'print trumps manuscript' hypothesis:

any attempt to construct a uni-directional model of script to print is quickly complicated by evidence of the many different kinds of scribal activity by which printed books were copied back into manuscript form, as also by the persistence of scribal copying more generally throughout the age of print. (p. 57)

Moreover, much careful research in libraries and archives has produced compelling proof that many early printed texts were nowhere near as stable as was once assumed. It is clear now that manuscript and print coexisted across the medieval/early modern divide and that most booksellers, readers and book collectors made little or nothing of the difference between the two technologies. As a present-day comparison, think of how easily most of us move between hardback and paperback, between printed and electronic text.

Those working in book history or print culture should be thankful that some medievalists are now engaging very fruitfully with the early modern, and vice versa. Julia Boffey has been in the forefront of this important development, handling and reflecting on books and other documents produced before and after the invention of printing. As a medievalist her deep understanding of the 'preconditions' of the advent of the printed text have encouraged and informed her exploration of what happened next. In *Manuscript and Print in London c.1475–1530*, she offers a coherent and well-argued case for treating the transition from script to print as a slow and uneven change rather than a sudden revolution.

Boffey follows the eminently sensible practice of studying not only books but other handwritten and printed documents of many kinds. The history of the book has broken free only relatively recently from an artificial and misleading concentration on the literary canon – texts of all kinds are now grist to the book historian's mill:

More is now known about the economic imperatives likely to have influenced the production of certain kinds of document or book, and which determined the centrality of London, rather than provincial centres, in the first century of English printing. Greater attention is now paid to the printing of documents rather than simply to books, and to the networks which promoted collaborations at home and abroad, or which underpinned markets and patterns of importation (pp. 4–5).

In these two sentences we have a neat summary of current concerns in book history: economics, a broad range of texts, networks of production and distribution, markets (domestic and beyond), and – of particular significance in this period – the importation of books from mainland Europe. In recent years, thanks to an ever-growing range of printed and online sources, a corpus of evidence has developed which helps to answer some key book-historical questions (p. 5):

... what perceptions did people have of printed material after its introduction into England, and how did these perceptions determine their own practices in dealing with books and documents, whether as producers or consumers?

In formulating so clearly the questions she is attempting to answer, Boffey sets the scene for her cogently presented study of early English, and specifically London-related, books and other documents.

Reflecting a recent 'spatial turn' in book history, the frontispiece map of London and its suburbs in the 15th century reminds us at the outset to think about exactly where book-trade businesses were situated in the growing capital. Business location is an important factor in book-trade history: those working in printing, bookselling and related trades chose their locations carefully in relation to a number of factors. The concept of 'London books' is simple but surprisingly useful. Boffey describes what the term means (books made and used in London) and introduces some interesting and original points based on a detailed discussion of two 'London books': *The Customs of London* (or 'Arnold's Chronicle') printed in c.1502 and a late 15th-century manuscript compilation (San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM 140). These two examples, both large collections of works from various hands, are used very skilfully to tease out some comparative points about manuscript and print – similarities as well as the more obvious differences. 'London books' are not necessarily about London, though both of these are. Even at this early date there are continental connections too (the first edition of Arnold had been printed in Antwerp):

For one reason or another, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries many of the books read and used in London reached the city from other places. Londoners acquired copies of texts by a variety of means (p. 20).

This variety of sources is simultaneously interesting and bemusing. Boffey's careful analysis of the primary evidence – for the most part the texts themselves – offers new and valuable insights, though the poor survival rate of the evidence inevitably means that some questions must remain unanswered.

Sometimes manuscript and printed documents ended up being bound together in composite volumes, suggesting that their owners and readers moved easily between both kinds of material, which is perhaps not too surprising when viewed from our multi-media age. The relatively modern distinction between manuscript and print has arguably been more significant for scholars and librarians than it ever was for contemporary users of early texts. A considerable space (the whole of chapter two) is devoted to an exploration of how manuscript and print 'came into proximity' (p. 46), beginning with Caxton's contacts with scribes and manuscript artists in Cologne and Flanders before his return to England to set up his printing press in Westminster in 1476. Networks are now recognised as a key feature of book-trade history. Caxton benefited considerably from his contacts with the circle of Margaret of York (sister of Edward IV) as well as with the merchant community of London.

Caxton, like many other early printers, familiarised himself with all of the technologies available for reproducing texts and developed great skill in deciding which titles to print. Economics was a key factor as also, at this period, was patronage. As a translator Caxton sometimes turned a printed text (of a continental edition) into manuscript before re-creating it as a printed text in English. After Caxton's death (in 1491 or early 1492), printing was concentrated in the City of London rather than in Westminster. In the 1480s and 1490s 'an increasing number of printers set themselves up in the city in order to profit from the diversity of markets it offered' (p. 125). Proximity to the Guildhall, the livery companies' halls, the Inns of Court, schools and religious establishments enabled printers to develop close contacts with communities of potential customers for their services, although take-up of the new technology proved to be uneven. Printing took over quite quickly from manuscript in the production of sermons and texts connected with civic and ceremonial events. In other cases, notably school books, the transition was rather slower. The impact of printing on London readers, individual and institutional, is the topic of chapter four. Cost was only one of a

range of factors that guided the choice between manuscript and print. The evidence for readership, though notoriously sparse, does sometimes allow for a degree of reconstruction, as demonstrated here by case studies of reading in the London Charterhouse, the prestigious Mercers' Company and the Bridgettine nunnery of Syon, the latter providing a rare example of evidence for women's reading at this period.

The final chapter is a very useful detailed case study of one person, the chronicler Robert Fabyan (d. 1513) and his use of manuscript and print. We learn that 'as a maker and user of books Fabyan moved easily between volumes generated by different modes of production' (p. 169). Printing was, of course, a European technology and it is helpful to be reminded (p. 172) that Fabyan, like many of his contemporaries, should be regarded as a 'European bibliophile'. Fortunately, the evidence of Fabyan's reading, although incomplete, has survived rather better than in many cases. Boffey provides some fascinating detail about the choices he made not only in his reading but also in the production of his texts in both manuscript and print. She also sheds new light – which is always welcome – on printing-house practices, by discussing the printer Richard Pynson's use of an annotated manuscript of one of Fabyan's chronicles. The 'textual afterlives' of Fabyan include the extensive use of his chronicles by, for example, the martyrologist John Foxe and the chronicler John Stowe. The latter had made copious marginal notes in the manuscript of Fabyan's 'Great Chronicle' which seems to have been in his possession for some years. The case study of Fabyan is a clear demonstration of how manuscript and print were both used in this period and how textual culture was transmitted to later generations in both forms. Although print would, eventually, become the dominant medium, at this period both forms were in parallel use for different purposes: '... individuals and communities made decisions about the material forms in which the texts they generated or used might be most effectively given shape and transmitted' (p. 206).

This is an important book about a key period in the history of texts and books. The production standard is good, as is the norm with British Library publications. The illustrations, some in colour, harmonize well with the text and help to demonstrate some useful points. Boffey's work will not replace that of Harold Love, David McKitterick, Don McKenzie or Adrian Johns but it is certainly worthy to stand alongside them, and indeed to complement them, as a seminal contribution to the ongoing discussion of the complex process by which manuscript slowly gave way to print. Boffey may help to undermine the 'print triumphalist' view of a printing revolution but she does so with commendable clarity, modesty and not the slightest hint of triumphalism.

The author is happy to accept this careful review and does not wish to comment further.

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