

Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order 1450-1830

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Reviewer:

Susie West

The book I have before me feels rather expensive, well-made, a hardback with a striking dust jacket bearing an enlarged portion of an historic print. Inside, the paper is silky smooth, the ink dark and clean, the layout elegant with generous outer margins. The illustrations too are clean and clear, dropped into the text. Everything is present and correct, from the title page, to the scholarly apparatus of endnotes, and an index. A handsome product of the modern press, its binding allows the book to sit open where I leave it. Before I have begun to read, I am happy from the small pleasures that a well-made book brings. My expectations now begin to focus on the content, what the author wants to say: if my reading experience is to be marred, it is unlikely to be from major faults in production. Perhaps the tiniest typo may have survived the proof reading and correcting process, but I will not be distracted from pursuing the threads of the author's arguments. When I read this book, as surely as when this review itself is read, direct communion with the author's thoughts is possible. At least, I assume that after discussion with the editor, the interventions of the copy editors, the designer and the proof corrector, the author is happy to let the book stand as a true artefact derived from the original submission. And so I read on.

The author's main thesis is that what I have just related is a very historically specific experience. Of course I assume that the copy I am reading can stand for any copy in the print run, and that my comments regarding page 49, for instance, can be checked by any reader of any page 49. Since I have some familiarity with the legal framework of the nation state where this book is published, and with the high probity of the author, it does not occur to me that any part of this book may be missing text as a result of censorship or legal advice. There are no warning notices, and happily no errata notices either. I can read on with full confidence in the product. In effect, I am reviewing a stable product, where some of its authority as a work of knowledge comes from my confidence in the production process, as much as from the achievements within the text.

However, if the author and the reviewer were to go back to say 1500, we might have very different concerns. The stability achieved by reputable publishing houses in 2003 has probably only been possible for the last 150 years of printing. The first four hundred years of the use of moveable type also produced moveable content, unstable books. Why this should have been tolerated for so long, how deviations are detectable, and what the implications for historians (literary included) should be, are laid out here from the perspective of historical bibliography.

Chapter 1 starts with the present, and emphasises our assumptions about the fixity of print produced from mechanised processes, in contrast to our contemporary concerns about the instability of electronic texts. The former is an inheritance from the later nineteenth century. Recognisably modern bibliography emerged at the same time, and arguably carried the same assumptions back to the study of early printed books.

Bibliography, the elucidation of questions about how texts come to be represented on the page, has gone through considerable methodological and theoretical change since, but, as the final chapter suggests, there is more hard thinking to be done about the position of the basic source material (books) in this and its sister discipline of literary criticism.

The start of the long history of the printed book inevitably raises the question of the relationship of the printed version to manuscript production. Modern scholars are increasingly aware of the continuation of the scribal tradition well into the early modern period particularly for the circulation of literary manuscripts – that is, a functional separation – but the point is made that the conceptual distinction between the forms took up to 200 years to solidify. This is exemplified by librarians of the seventeenth century who began to separate out manuscripts and printed books in catalogues and on shelves. In other words, the obvious difference in the means of manufacture was not immediately relevant. Once this became the dominant means of classification, a significant fracture in understanding the history of the reproduction of texts occurred, one that we still need to address today. Printing was not a quick replacement of one time-consuming method of copying books, but a technology that supplemented contemporary expectations of what books should look like and how they should be read.

This theme, that printing was not adopted because it offered multiple identical copies, is developed across the first five chapters, focussing on the early printed book in detail up to the late seventeenth century. What printing was seen to offer changed within that period, beginning with the early decades of experimentation that saw pen and typeface used in the same book. McKitterick argues that readers of manuscript books in the fifteenth century were used to variations between copies, including the flexibility over adding illustrations from prints, and that printing was not seen as a resolution for this instability. It was attractive for its speed and relatively high volume production, which came to be seen as a guarantee that the ‘text’ would acquire longevity and survive better than in a manuscript copy.

The body of evidence from surviving books is that readers were tolerant of considerable variation in the experimental world of printing. Levels of finish (the addition of colour, marginal decoration) included differing levels of correction. It is crucial to understand the production processes of the early printing house, in order to accept the variants to be found across a nominal edition (one issue). Because proofs were read and corrected almost instantly to avoid tying up costly sets of type, errors spotted as sheets continued to be printed could be corrected at various times in the printing process. Sheets were gathered up for binding with no reference to the order in which they were printed, and so a heavily corrected print run could result in copies with variant printing on many pages. Sometimes late realisation of errors results in manuscript corrections, sometimes to the insertion of erratum slips, or even the replacement of whole pages. The early printed book is characterised by ‘bibliographical dissimilarity’ (p. 108), but contemporary readers were undismayed, preferring to comment on the wondrous speed of production. They were quite used to prefaces from the author regarding the wobbly state of the text that invited them to add their own corrections. In other words, there is plenty of evidence for a shared understanding of the mobility of texts and for the readers’ participation in part of the book’s manufacture.

For modern bibliographers, this means that there can be no ‘ideal copy’ of an edition, no perfect exemplar of a stable text because it has been reproduced in an unstable medium. McKitterick emphasises that the process

in which the author participated with the printer is not a linear sequence but a series of reflexive 'heterogeneous compromises' of which the reader becomes a part. We are left with the dominance of particularity:

To examine an early printed book is ... to seek to understand the people who made, used and read this particular copy, in this particular edition and on this or that particular occasion. (p. 139)

When, in that case, does an early printed book seem to be 'finished'? Probably never, since contemporary readers rarely seem to have added all the suggested amendments from the errata, although they did chase up missing pages. So, up to the early eighteenth century it is difficult to define the end of the manufacturing process, setting aside the separate processes in the binder's workshop. Not even institutional censorship had a guaranteed level of application within regions, let alone nations. All this adds up to considerable variation in reading experiences of the same 'text' across space as well as time.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, change is detectable not in the technology but in the way that print is discussed by commentators. McKitterick suggests that recent scholarship on the eighteenth century has been dominated by publishing history (author/bookseller relations, copyright law) rather than by production issues. There is a body of contemporary literature on the history of printing, particularly the European encyclopaedic projects of the later decades, that offer ways to identify perceptions of print. Authors stopped complaining in prefaces about the faults of their printers, although the mode of production and ensuing errata had hardly changed since the previous century. Printers began to achieve a higher status as a skilled trade in the context of the manufacturing revolution. Authors came to be treated a little better too, when their texts were no longer hastily shortened by the printer in order to resolve a miscalculation. Perhaps the most significant cultural influence on print quality came from the wider discussion about the need to stabilise language in print, through many dictionary projects and through anxieties about the consistent use of punctuation in denoting speech. Print was increasingly problematized as unstable, as the market for periodicals expanded after 1770, and as high quality images originally produced as scientific records became debased by cheap reproduction on ceramics and textiles. So finally the recognisably modern issues over standardisation, accuracy and quality control, used in relation to other manufactures, were introduced into discussions about printing.

From 1800, technological advances took over as the means to advance the newer concerns over standardisation in print. The social importance of printing and its possibilities is exemplified by its repeated references within Charles Babbage's essay 'Introductory View of the Principles of Manufacture', first published in 1832 and widely circulated. The old excitement about speed was joined by the new possibilities of accuracy in reproduction, particularly through casting copies of the original type formes, so that multiple printing was possible without introducing new errors (stereotyping). This was the nature of innovation by the close of this period; but the appearance of the book changed little, leading to the conclusion that the 'idea of the book' is inherently conservative, a notion that readers of the 1450s would recognise.

The final chapter returns to the disciplinary questions raised at the beginning: how can we deploy the body of evidence to be gathered from the systematic examination of many early printed books? What does this understanding of the material manifestations of instability of text alert us to, when considering issues of reception and interpretation? More questions than answers are offered, touching particularly on how literary theory might address the empirical data on offer from historical bibliography. The role of the reader has been a thread running through the earlier chapters, and it is suggested that the history of reading could pay greater attention to how the text is shaped after it leaves the author's hands, inserting the reader at the culmination of the production process, rather than as a recipient of a fixed form. The bibliographical interrogation of the book as artefact can generate much of interest to the wider history of the book community, whether one subscribes to the 'sociology of the book' perspective or not. By this account, there was no printing revolution before 1830, in the sense that there was no shared conceptual leap away from the prime concerns of manuscript transmission: textual survival through copying. Speedier copying and great numbers were

welcomed, but infallible accuracy could wait.

McKitterick deploys his great experience of handling early printed books to furnish the detailed examples and to argue the historical bibliography case for a 'back to basics' approach. The illustrations – only 44 in a book that relies on visual evidence – at times provide startling examples of what was acceptable variation in the early printed book trade. In a way, this book is also a plea for the continued scholarly need to handle the original artefacts, to assess and compare multiple copies, in order to produce fine-grained accounts to support wider syntheses in intellectual and social history. The provision of electronic databases and digital versions of selected copies will not obviously supersede some of the unique qualities of old books.

For those of us who are not historical bibliographers, but who rely on such accounts to feed our related interests, this book is a challenging read. Firstly, because it does have several polemical targets: contemporary librarianship, overly theoretical literary criticism (and those who rely entirely on the social construction of knowledge), reductive accounts of the 'printing revolution'. In wishing to refine the latter, it is of course not the first attempt, but I believe it is the first major account from the perspective of historical bibliography. We should pause here to consider its relation to a very successful account of the social history of the early modern book, Adrian Johns's *The Nature of the Book*.⁽¹⁾ Johns writes from within the history of science; his starting point is how knowledge is made and validated, and *The Nature of the Book* problematises the idea that the printing revolution provided 'fixity' of text through multiple copies, and hence reliable knowledge. Johns concentrates on the social practices around the production of the early modern book, rather than production practices. His answer to why the early modern book is unstable is largely derived from a range of social transgressions (embraced by the contemporary term 'piracy') that resulted in illicit and partial departures from the author's intentions. McKitterick makes it clear that even the most actively involved author could not guarantee a text in total accord with his intentions, simply because of production practices in the press room. This has rather different implications for the reader. The explanations for why this instability should be tolerated for so long are social, but can be related back to pre-existing assumptions about the circulation of texts. It is rather important that McKitterick can demonstrate that an understanding of the 'internal' history of written transmission (manuscript and print) can supply significant insights into this problem: historical bibliography is maturing.

Secondly, it pays the reader the compliment of assuming a reasonable understanding of early modern print production, when passing explanations of technical terms would be welcome. However, the extensive footnotes supply an impressive bibliography and the means to follow up queries. It also assumes a working knowledge of early modern French and Latin, necessary to the scholar handling the range of thematic questions alluded to throughout the book, but less certainly available to the specialist in the English novel, for instance. It ranges widely and sometimes too briefly, in the first half covering the earliest period, by insisting that illustrations need to be yoked back to their historic partner, the text, rather than adhere to the artificial divorce resulting from the activities of print collectors and the emergence of art history as a discipline. The second half places less emphasis on close study of individual copies, and more on contemporary literature about printing. The context of the post-1730s literature is a little sketchy, although this reflects the relative lack of attention given to the book as artefact by historians who work with the consumption of knowledge as well as of goods. Conventional periodization by labels is given short shrift: no use of the word Enlightenment, and one dismissive reference to the Romantic idea of the artist as individual genius. Of course the whole account of nearly four centuries suggests its own chronology for the early idea of the printed book.

The target audience is in many ways the post-graduate historical bibliographer (that is, attending to the material facts of books), onwards to the history of the book community (who tend towards the social meanings of the book as artefact), yet the rewards for the non-specialist include a finely nuanced vision of how the printed book carries meaning as a material object. Fledgling historians are routinely asked to deconstruct texts, from extracts newly typeset in modern text books, without, I believe, any induction into the mysteries of the original copy that supplied that particular text. There is no pretence that this is easily mastered, or that the tensions implicit in gaining insight into individual copies of books and the need to create an historical account based on the distribution of multiple copies (a readership) can be quickly

resolved. But this is part of the craft of producing history, and an extension of the familiar need to understand how the words got onto the page. However, to conclude on this note risks downplaying the sophisticated aspirations within *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order*. It is a stimulating combination of detailed exposition (1450-1700) and allusive synthesis (1700-1830) that offers real challenges for historians of the book and beyond to respond to. In particular, all those who read the more accessible *Nature of the Book* should reach out for it.

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Notes

1. A. Johns, *The Nature of the Book, Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), particularly Chs 1 and 2. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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