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Author(s): Heidi Brayman Hackel

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Practicing and Teaching Histories and Theories of the Book

Heidi Brayman Hackel

Oregon State University

As a scholar and teacher of early modern English literature and culture, I have long been interested in histories of reading and made use of the materiality of texts in the classroom. In my comments in the PAMLA Forum, I sketched some observations about the field, my thoughts about its implications for literary studies, and finally a few reflections about its place in my teaching.

Histories and Theories of Books

The most common name for the large field to which the papers in this forum belong — the history of the book — is revealing, complicated, and misleading. Neither the apparent disciplinary affiliation (history) nor the singular object of inquiry (the book) would seem to speak most directly to literary scholars, especially those increasingly attuned to the multiple agencies evident in texts. Further, the disciplinary claim of history obscures the interdisciplinary variety of scholarship that enlivens the field. Despite the seeming singularity of their subject, historians of the book work on an enormously varied set of questions. The history of the book encompasses three primary relations to texts: their production, distribution, and reception. SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing, has helped institutionalize this tripartite history of the book among Anglophone scholars. In the 1998 inaugural issue of its journal, *Book History*, the editors defined their subject as “the creation, dissemination, and uses of script and print in any medium . . . the social, cultural, and economic history of authorship, publishing, printing, the book arts, copyright, censorship, bookselling and distribution, libraries, literacy, literary criticism, reading habits, and reader response” (Greenspan and Rose ix). But even as early as 1982, cultural historian Robert Darnton described it “less like a field than a tropical rain forest. The explorer can hardly make his way across it” for all its subdisciplines (“What is the History” 110). As a broad category, the history of the book is often used interchangeably for two of these subdisciplines, the history of reading and the history of print culture. Especially within a discipline marked by attention to material objects, it is worth disentangling these subfields: the history of the book should not stand as shorthand for a history of print culture, nor should it be used synonymously for the history of reading.

The history of the book was early defined as “the social and cultural history of communication by print” (Darnton, “What is the History” 107), and much of the scholarship of the past twenty years has centered on print (including even this forum). While the term usefully defines a general approach, which attends to the material details of the production and consumption of books, it is worth exercising more specificity about the points at which one enters the conversation. Even if the codex, rather than the scroll, is the defining object at the center of the discipline, the story of the book clearly begins before Gutenberg. Medieval historians of the book, that is, have plenty to do. And certainly within early modern Europe, manuscript circulation continued to compete and coexist with print at least until 1700. The semantic flexibility of the word “print” itself in early modern England a century and a half after the introduction of printing there suggests the distortion of equating books exclusively with print in seventeenth-century England. Both “print” and “publish” could refer to an array of manuscript and oral practices, and contemporaries might purchase and shelve manuscript and printed volumes side-by-side. A closed manuscript volume, even if unbound, would have been indistinguishable to the casual observer from a printed one. In many cases, such distinctions are nearly irrelevant, for books might bear the marks of both print and manuscript practices, and many printed volumes with use become hybrids, containing owners’ marks, readers’ marginalia, and flyleaf scribbles.

If the history of print culture is a subdiscipline of the history of the book, the history of reading is arguably a broader field, encompassing a greater body of evidence than that found in books alone. Even an individual’s history as a reader might begin with any number of media, as readers acquired literacy skills through practice with hornbooks, embroidered samplers, whitewashed walls, engraved trenchers, and ivory squares. Cultural histories of reading, therefore, must incorporate the insights of book historians with evidence from other disciplines and other archives to answer questions about, say, the circulation of letters within families, the technological necessities for evening reading, and the cultural ideals for women as readers.

Like the parameters of the field itself, the funny singular in the name — “the book” — is worth noting and resisting. The English name for the field directly translates the French *histoire du livre*, a discipline shaped by the *Annales* school and codified in the *Revue française d’histoire du livre* (new series, 1971). But there is a strong influence as well from the German school, *Geschichte des Buchwesens*, which favors the plural. Anglophone scholars have made a move recently toward the plural as well; notably, Jonathan Rose, Robert Darnton, and Joan Shelley Rubin have used the plural form, but two massive collaborative projects — *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* and *History of the Book in America* — canonize the singular form. Tellingly, the singular form

invites the joke told by Janice Radway: upon identifying her field as the “history of the book,” a fellow conference participant asked, “which book?” This book is, of course, a reified abstraction, standing in for all codices and their development and influence over more than a millenium. This synecdoche is especially peculiar given the emphasis on the particular by most practitioners of the approach. Ours is a field defined by a reliance on case study and historical specificity rather than some single transhistorical notion of “the book.” And, in fact, the field first emerged vigorously among scholars of three cultural moments: ancien régime France, nineteenth-century America, and early modern England. The early scholarship clustered in these three periods, I would argue, because they were critical and transitional moments in the means of production, circulation, and consumption of texts.

Implications for Literary Studies

As Joan Shelley Rubin so usefully outlines it, the history of the book “has arrived” as a subdiscipline among historians, yielding “an enormous, wide-ranging body of scholarship” over the past twenty years (555, 557). English departments, too, have experienced a “quiet but pervasive concern for the history of the book” over this same period (Brown 689). For while it is true that the field is called the history — not theory — of the book, and we who practice it use the term “historians” of books or print or authorship or reading, the implications for literary studies are nevertheless clear and profound. If we take as the three subjects of literary inquiry authors, texts, and readers, the history of the book allows a theorized, archivally-based approach to contextualizing, situating, and understanding all three. The typography of seventeenth-century title pages, for instance, has helped scholars track emerging notions of authorship and explore early modern understandings of collaboration and literary property; variants across quarto and folio editions of playtexts have encouraged editors to reconstruct printing house practices and speculate about authorial revisions; material evidence in bindings, flyleaves, and margins has provided scholars with glimpses of the practices of earlier readers.

The history of the book offers an important model, too, of collaborative, interdisciplinary scholarship. The best work in the field draws upon the insights and tools from the disciplines of cultural and social history, literary theory, textual criticism, and bibliographical description. It is a field, too, dominated by collections of essays, rather than monographs. Perhaps it is the recognition that there is not a single universal, comprehensive, uni-legible history of the book, but rather many stories, that has placed scholars in productive conversation with one another.

Joan Shelley Rubin identifies as a central promise of the field “the potential to change historical narrative by throwing ostensibly settled issues into productive disarray” (566). She then examines a series of dichotomies challenged by historians of the book, among them high and popular culture, public and private spheres, orality and literacy, sacred and secular. Though Rubin’s audience is historians, clearly the history of the book offers a similar promise to literary scholars, for it also disrupts notions of authorship, assumptions about the contemporary popularity and reception of texts, and even our sense of periodization. One cannot, that is, study Shakespeare as a book historian without having to come to terms with several facts at odds with the current place of his plays in our culture: 1) parliamentary news was a trade specialty of the printer of the 1622 *Othello* quarto, Thomas Walkley, whose most popular publications were lists of members of the parliament and nobility (Lesser 157, 160-61); 2) Shakespeare’s best-selling work, the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, outsold his best-selling play, *1Henry 4*, by 4 editions (Blayney 388; Roberts, *Reading 2*); 3) Thomas Bodley, founder of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, resisted plays like Shakespeare’s as the stuff of “riffe-raffe” (so successfully, in fact, that the Bodleian had to pay 3000£ in 1906 to recover the copy originally given to the Library and then sold off); and 4) contemporary readers considered *Titus Andronicus* grounds for the Bard’s “immortal fame.”

As for periodization, once we shift our gaze to individual books, publishers, and readers, the tidy categories and dividing lines no longer make sense. Human beings do not observe periodization but instead stubbornly live — and read — beyond our literary and historical paradigms. One woman I have spent a great deal of time thinking about, Lady Anne Clifford, had the good fortune to live from 1590 to 1676; she returned at the end of her life to books she had first acquired as a young woman in the 1610’s. Surely she did not become a “Restoration reader” at the end of her life. Such bridges formed by readers or books across period divisions usefully remind us of the artificiality of those categories.

And, finally, as I hope my examples from Shakespeare show, the history of the book helps us perform the vital work of “estranging the Renaissance” as Marjorie Garber and others have put it. For a world in which authors camped out at their printers’ workshops, in which discarded sheets of a book might serve as paper underneath a pie or in the privy, in which students used bread crumbs to rub out their marginalia, is a world that takes considerable work — intellectual, archival, and imaginative — to recapture.

A Coda: Implications for the Literature Classroom

If, in the now famous witticism, authors don’t write books (but something like scribbles on legal pads, keystrokes on computers), books are, in fact,

what readers read. And it is this observation that compels me to remind my students about the gaps between the original and modern material forms of texts we are reading together. Anthologies of literature strike me as especially problematic in this regard. For all their wonderful usefulness in making available to undergraduates an entire canon of literature in one hefty, affordable volume, there is a danger in reading through the canon of English and American literature in a set of materially identical texts. One risks the disorientation of a tour bus version of the Grand Tour of Europe: instead of "It's Tuesday, this must be Vienna," our students may think, "It's page 709, this must be Marlowe." Typographically identical texts with the same apparatus, same typeface, and continuous pagination threaten to make invisible many of the crucial points, it seems to me, of such introductions to literature: that art responds to and helps shape an age, that art is historically situated and contingent, and that literature flourishes — but differently so — in oral, manuscript, print, and now electronic forms.

To remind my students of the material differences between texts, I drag in facsimiles, explain missing apparatus, show them different modern versions of the same texts, ask them to reflect upon their experiences with the footnotes. In my upper-level and graduate classes, I often ask students to do some sort of editorial exercise, asking them, for instance, to produce an edition of a single sonnet after consulting the original printed versions, if only, in Oregon, in microfilm or digitized versions. Curiously, the increasing availability of electronic archives has made such work more broadly possible. Early English Books Online (EEBO) will one day soon contain digitized images of over 125,000 individual texts printed in England between 1473 and 1700. Even as the primacy of the printed codex in our culture is challenged by electronic advances, these same developments make it increasingly possible in ordinary classrooms to illustrate the history of English print.

Certainly, such exercises remind students of something they already intuit: medieval and Renaissance texts are difficult, and they are not easy to read. But in taking the pedagogical risk of making the texts even more difficult, I am, I believe, also teaching my students about the ethics and aesthetics of reading as I encourage them to want access to the originals, to want to make the choices themselves, to claim an interpretive role from the beginning.

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