The Problematic Printer in the 16th century

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Abstract

With the invention of printing in the 15th century, a new figure appeared in the history of the book: the printer. But not all the printers were the same. Instead of fulfilling the task as a reproducer and publisher of a manuscript, some printers incurred the displeasure of authors and other printers with inaccuracy, counterfeiting and piracy; they threatened the truth and the reputation of others. The dissatisfaction with these printers and warnings to readers are expressed in the 16th century by Martin Luther and Aldus Manutius in different documents. The perception of the problematic printer by this renowned author and printer and their reactions are in the focus of this study.

Key Words

Martin Luther, Aldus Manutius, printer, problems, sixteenth century

Introduction

The problematic printer of the 16th century often escapes the attention of studies on early printing: focusing on the invention of print and the new technological creations, they have omitted to question the phenomenon of these agents that incurred displeasure among other printers and authors. This study aims to portray the early printers as well as the changes in book production (Müller, 2002), using previous works on Humanistic (Febvre, 1971), Reformation (Cole, 1984) and general printers (Eisenstein, 2000), to deduce whether the circumstances of printing and the social background of printers can be seen as the cause for their behaviour.

Its central focus lies on two case studies, Aldus Manutius' (1502-03) and Martin Luther's (1525-45), focusing on their problems, complaints and solutions - expressed in letters or prefaces. Based on the results of the analysis and on the comparison of the different cases, this article examines which printers were problematic, what are possible reasons to explain their behaviour and if they changed their behaviour and their techniques from the first case to the second.

The 16th century printer

In the beginning, the invention of print was overshadowed by problems that were new and had yet to be registered and dealt with. While in the Middle Ages the book was still regarded as a "guarantor of truth" (Müller, 2002: 183), after the advent of print, it lost its

value and aura. The multiplication led directly from the start to an "overabundance of writing" (Müller, 2002: 183) and, therefore, to a degradation of value by print. Seen initially as a gift from God, print quickly threatened the Church and stricter censorship on printing, not just writing and singing, became inevitable to prevent clandestine commerce of books (supported among other things by counterfeiters).

The step from scribe to printer involved a new distribution of tasks and transferred the production "from cloistered precincts to bustling commercial establishments where robed scholars and merchants worked alongside craftsmen and mechanics" (Eisenstein, 2000: 139). In other words, the main actor in this new form of manufacture was the printer, a practical man of little education who fulfilled his job as a business person (or an early form of publisher), aiming for capital and profits. His print workshop served as a cultural centre where "[h]e was responsible for obtaining money, supplies, and labor, while developing complex production schedule, coping with strikes, trying to estimate book markets and lining up learned assistants." (Eisenstein, 2000: 25) This master handled machines and at the same time he marketed products, reorganising the book by adding a kind of cover to promote the own name, emblem and address instead of using a colophon. These activities were partly controlled by censorship that gave licenses to some printers, elevating them to a higher rank and marking the difference between privileged and unprivileged ones.

Furthermore, two more kinds of printers in the early 16th century can be named: the Humanistic and the Reformation printers. According to Febvre (1971: 218), the first ones stood out by being scholars, devoted to their job and their editions. They were unlikely to have an abundance of new texts and, therefore, printed ancient and classic books; these

editions did not deal with rights issues, as their authors were not alive anymore. It lay in the hands of the Humanistic printers, whether a book remained a guarantor of truth or not. Evidently, their editions of Greek and Latin classics were more at risk of duplication and counterfeit than others.

The second group proved, among other things, that the Catholic Church was not satisfied with print and that revolutionary movements like the Reformation preferred this invention. These printers characterised themselves by having a special devotion to the Reformation, more than to print, like Humanistic ones. They feared neither being connected to revolutionaries nor being named together with figures like Martin Luther. In fact, they played a key role in this movement, spreading the ideas of the Reformation quickly and widely. For this reason, it is impossible to not value their "support to the cause of the Reformation" (Cole, 1984: 330). Cole argued as well that Reformation printers were the "unsung but often prosperous heroes" (1984: 339), because they built a significant group, "above average in skill and education [because they] often opted for Reformation theology" (1984: 330). This theory still is to be proved.

To sum up briefly, there was not one printer of the 16th century. Although the majority might originate from a lower educated group, some distinguished themselves being educated and scholarly.

Aldus Manutius

Aldo Manuzio (lat. Aldus Manutius), born into a well situated family between 1449 and 1454 in Bassiano (Italy), could obtain a well-grounded humanistic education due to the social position of his family. Initially, he underwent traditionalist teachers lessons. Then he went to Rome, where he finished his Latin studies after which he went to study Greek. ("Il subit d'abord les leçons de pédagogues traditionalistes […] Puis il se rendit à Rome, où il termina ses études latines […] Après quoi, il alla étudier le greg […]" Febvre, 1971: 213.) Arriving in Venice 1490, he was "a man in middle-career with an established reputation as a scholar and pedagogue." (Pettegree, 2011: 60) These characteristics not only differentiated him from the general printers of the 15th and 16th century, moreover, they correlated with his vocation (as he said himself) to "print with the help of God" (*Petition,* 1503*; Warning,* 1503) high quality books of Greek and Latin classics, for which he used his own types (Aldine italics) and privileges obtained by the Senate of Venice. Manutius' accurate work and perfection transformed him into a famous printer of the Renaissance, known for his quality, creations and the typical octavo format editions.

Where there is fame, there is envy as well. Manutius's main problem became the counterfeiters, especially in Lyon. His petition to the Senate and Doge of Venice, written by a third party, reports that

> he has been robbed of his efforts, and his inventions are being corrupted […] At this very moment his types are being counterfeited and taken to Lyon where they are used to produce forged copies, and even worse, his own name Aldo Romano was put on them with his dedication and inscription: Printed in Venice in the House

of Aldo Romano. And there are so many errors in them that this is most shameful

to this Dominion as well as for the supplicant himself. (*Petition*, 1502)

The complaint about the name was not correct. In his own *Warning* (1503) Manutius

described Lyon editions without any information about the printer or place. This was

confirmed by Shaw (1993: 117) who stated in his chronology of Lyon counterfeits, that these

editions were anonymous until 1510. Nevertheless, Manutius' image had been damaged by

several points he was not willing to accept.

Excluding this complaint, there was still a considerable number of accusations expressed by

Manutius:

> Now from Lyon […] editions have been printed with lettering very similar to our own
> […] But on all of these you will find neither the name of the printer, nor the place
> where the editions were pressed, nor the date when they were completed […] no
> insignia will be seen [and] the paper […] is of inferior quality and emits a kind of
> heavy odour; the lettering, upon closer inspection, displays (as I would phrase it) a
> certain 'Frenchiness'; in the same way upper case letters are misshapen. […]
> consonants are not connected to vowels, but have been separated. […]
> Furthermore, with these sorts of errors which will be plain, it will be easy to
> recognise that these are not my editions. (*Warning*, 1503)

For Manutius, the problem was that they hastened to publish, driven by profit seeking

avarice, and tricking on readers by using his reputation. However, he was not only

concerned about the accurate printing of Greek and Latin classics; living from printing, he feared his income and sales might decrease significantly and, therefore, he aimed to stop the counterfeiters.

Manutius reacted in two different ways to solve his problem. First he wrote a petition against counterfeiters to the Senate and Doge of Venice in 1502, asking for more privileges - he had already obtained the ones for his cursive type and his books - that affected the sales of counterfeit editions. His arguments implied the damage of good books, the insecurity of his revenues and a fine to be paid "to a charitable institution, […] the executors, and another to the accuser." (*Petition*, 1502) His efforts were in vain: although the majority of the senate had accepted the petition, "The Lyon printers, who never precisely claimed to be producing Aldines, went on printing in the 'Aldine' italic for the rest of [Manutius] life and beyond, cheerfully aware of the ineffectiveness of privileges, bulls and warnings from the south." (Davies, 1999: 50)

The second intent was a letter, written one year after his futile petition and addressed to his readers, warning them by clarifying the differences to ensure that these inaccurate examples were not his work. It can be argued that this warning was more a personal justification to ease Manutius' conscience than a successful counterstrike. He was helpless, seeing that his official ways to claims right were spurned in France. Until his death in 1515, he did not gain one victory over the counterfeiters. The *Venetian Decree on Author-Printer Relations* in 1545 came years too late and affected mainly works written by still living authors. It declared all printed copies without permission to be fined: "paying a fine of one ducat for each book and author that are printed in contravention of this order, one month's

imprisonment, and the burning of all books found to be printed in such manner." (*Venetian Decree*, 1545)

It seems that Manutius' opponent in all these intents was the Italian Renaissance itself, which used counterfeits to spread its humanistic and cultural values all over Europe (Shaw, 1993: 122). Manutius' exemplary italic types soon became the expressive form for this epoch, much to the humanistic printer's regret. The case of Manutius is a peculiar example that not just a text can be counterfeited, but also a paratext: his famous name and his original octavo editions with his own italic types tempted the other printers more than the classic texts themselves.

Martin Luther (author and translator)

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben (Germany) and received his education in parochial schools. His faith in God was strong but his faith in the Catholic Church was not at all; the will to reform this institution was revolutionary and interpreted as a threat. However, he not only found opponents but also followers. The *Kurfürst zu Sachsen,* one of Luther's protectors, offered him a place to hide and so Luther came to Wittenberg in 1508 - the same year his first printer Grunenberg arrived to run the in 1502 installed printing press in town. Why was correct print so important to Luther? Print provided the support for his reformation movement. It is evident that correct print was one of Luther's priorities, as errors did not convince others, nor state seriousness and accuracy of his arguments.

The problem with the 16th century printer appeared for Luther with his first published texts. Using the press for propaganda against the established institution of the Catholic Church, and "insisting on Bible reading as a way of […] achieving true faith, Luther also linked spiritual aspirations to an expanding capitalistic enterprise." (Eisenstein, 2000: 170); but these capitalistic printers also threatened his Reformation with Bibles translated into German full of errors:

> Luther was to regret that some of his printers were indeed not only unknown but did inelegant or even poor printing. […] Luther notes how unhappy he is with the printing done by Grunenberg […] "It is printed so poorly, so carelessly, and confusedly, to say nothing of bad typefaces and paper. Johann the printer is always the same old Johann and does not improve." (Cole, 1984: 328)

For Luther "bad printing [was] a sin" (Cole, 1984: 328) and contrary to his aims; in fact, his problem was not just Grunenberg, but various problematic printers in general over a period of more than 20 years.

Although printing was essential to promote the Reformation, there were different reasons for printing Luther's ideas: the support of his ideas and the possibility for quick money in printing the famous reformist texts. In his *Admonition* and *Warning*, Luther kept his accusation general:

> that one steals and publicly robs the other of what is his, / and that you bring ruin on yourselves in this way? Have you too now become highway-men and thieves? or do you imagine / that God will bless and nourish you / by such evil pieces of work and tricks? (*Admonition*, 1525)

In this first part, Luther declared bad printers as shameless criminals and wondered whether they did not understand the contradiction in printing God's word and offending God at the same time by printing it incorrectly. Another point of his accusation was:

> that they handle my books so wrongly and infamously. For what they do is to print these in such a hurry / that when they come back to me, / I cannot recognise my own books! / Here something has been omitted, / there something is displaced, / there again the wrong word is printed, / and everywhere one sees a lack of revision. And they've also learnt the trick / of printing Wittenberg at the top of [the title-page of] several books, / which were never produced in Wittenberg, nor have they so much as alighted here. (*Admonition*, 1525)

The other part of his accusation referred to print under time pressure, leading to missed, changed or wrong words and sentences. For him, the cause lay in the fact that they were driven by avarice and envy. Own profit loss was not on his list as can be seen in his statement that: "It is not for my own sake […] since it was freely that I received / and freely that I gave it, / and I ask for nothing in return: / Christ my Lord has repaid me for many hundred thousand times over." (*Warning,* 1545) It was more the fact that his privileged printers lost money by the reprints of others. Nevertheless, the worst error for Luther was the inaccuracy and the sloppy work of the problematic printers, who distorted the truth and spread lies, not the word of God; their aim was only to make money.

Luther reacted in various documents as prefaces and letters to express his displeasure with the problematic printers. In his admonitions and warnings he addressed himself directly to

the printers, not the public or a secular influential authority. Therefore, the way to solve his problem was different from, for example, Manutius: he felt himself called by God for his task and laid the responsibility and decision in God's hands. Luther argued with quotes from the Bible, hoping that the own word of God would convert the printing sinners:

> For this reason, be warned, my dear printers / who are so busy stealing and robbing! / Since you must know / what St Paul said to the Thessalonians: / "That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: / because the Lord is the avenger of all such." This passage will some day come to smite you too. Even so, before that happens, such robbery will not make you any richer, / for, as Solomon says: "The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked: / but He blesseth the habitation of the just." And, similarly, Isaiah: "Woe to thee that robbest / thou shalt be robbed yourself." Shouldn't one printer be able to show consideration to another out of Christian charity / and wait for one or two months before reprinting the other's work? (*Admonition,* 1525)

The *Admonition*, written as a preface to his *Interpretation of the Epistles and Gospels from Advent to Easter*, was an appeal towards the printer's Christian faith, illustrating by means of biblical examples what they had to await if they continued as hitherto. The fact that twenty years later in his *Warning*, a preface to his Bible, he explained the cause behind their avarice, connecting it to the devils work, shows that even then after his *Admonition*, bad print was still an issue and it took more than just to threaten problematic printers with God's anger. Luther had to warn his readers from the devil's work produced by the criminals in their printing workshops:

Saint Paul says: Avarice is the root of all evil. […] You just have to look at the abominable / and terrible / goings-on and evil / which avarice causes through nasty profiteering, / whereby even well-bred / sensible / and notable people are so seized by these demons of avarice and profiteering / that they knowingly and deliberately / engage in what they know to be profiteering / and are thus willingly and consciously worshipping the idol of Mammon […] which means that they are rushing into the fires of hell and eternal damnation with open eyes and ears.

This very same accursed avarice, / amongst all the other evils / which it gets up to, / has also set about our work […] They just print it off quickly, as there's money to be made. Whereas (if they were true printers) they surely ought to know from experience that one can't be careful enough when it comes to such work / as printing. (*Warning*, 1545)

More than a warning, this statement was also an excuse for the behaviour of the printers that were possessed by the devil. By the time Luther wrote this, he had already collaborated with different printers who were more satisfying than Grunenberg, and was working with Lufft, to whom he had a close connection and a special devotion. In his case, the change of the local printer was at least helpful to the relationship with close printers. However, Luther was not able to control all the reprints made overall in Germany and the problem with errors was not solved successfully.

The case of Luther confirms the capitalistic motivation of printers, seen as well in Manutius' study. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the intention of these printers was not just profit, but to bring the Reformation to quick success, as all that mattered was the message of the

text, not the orthography. In other words, Luther created his own opponent: the Reformation made itself independent and its rousing force required fast print to reach its aim: the renovation of the Church.

The problematic printer

Is it possible to give a definition for problematic printers, comparing the results of this study? Following the theories of Pettegree and Eisenstein, this group would have consisted of multitasking capable merchants, craftsmen and mechanics or, in other words, of low educated businessmen, with poor understanding the true value of written texts. It would be too easy to argue that the phenomenon of the problematic printers was due to the social group they were in. Bourdieu supports this idea, on the one hand by stating that the *habitus* leads an individual to reproduce mechanically all learned (or not learned) and, on the other hand, by defending that education defines the field of the hierarchy one is in. In other words, in the present issue, the bad conscience of the printers cannot exist because of a lack of symbolic capital. Nevertheless, the problematic printers were a much more complicated field of study. Looking at Cole's theory of above average educated printers and Manutius, it can be deduced that good education did not save him from being dishonourable. It seems that the problematic printers formed a subgroup, appearing in all the other groups of printers: they were neither one special social group, nor from one specific country. Evidently, the problematic printers were more businessmen than scholars and the opening of book production to print implied that also people who were not sufficiently educated to understand them had access to different kinds of texts. And the clash of these printers and

people like Luther and Manutius were just the logical consequence of all these transformations in the history of the book.

Linked to this discussion there is still the question whether the printer themselves or the circumstances they printed in were the cause for inaccurate prints and counterfeits. To begin with Manutius it can be said that on the one hand the circumstances were decisive - less educated printers did not recognise the value of classic texts and the Renaissance was led by inspiration and the will to spread knowledge - but on the other hand the search for profit and the seduction by avarice transformed the printers themselves into the cause; even the educated ones like Manutius, whose own success was his undoing. For Luther it can be argued that the circumstance of the Reformation was significant as its aim was to spread a message (accuracy was just a desirable side-effect); furthermore the printers were once again a cause: as printing reformation texts led to fortune, the interest was high and the money was easy to earn. On the whole, the combination of both, circumstances and printers was the reason for counterfeiting and inaccuracies and the complexity of the issue cannot answer clearly which was the more frequent or powerful cause.

Finally, the question whether there was an evolution within the group of problematic printers from Manutius to Luther has no definite answer either; the different viewpoints on this issue defined their different reactions and approaches. While the printer feared for his reputation and business, as well as for the quality of the classic editions, the Reformation author used print to spread theological ideas and, therefore, feared that inaccurate texts would undermine his authority and endanger the movement by losing credibility. Both

hoped and tried to threaten their opponents with force majeure, in one case secular and in the other theological; and, furthermore, both felt that they were called by God to print and publish. Nevertheless, they could not stop the problematic printers who, inebriated by the success of others, adapted themselves by following the developments in the printing industry; whether classic editions or translations and new texts, all profit-yielding work was affected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is not one final definition for the problematic printers. They formed a constantly shifting subgroup that developed with the outer circumstances to improve their own life or to support ideas they liked - even if it was to the displeasure of others. This case study simply shows a fragment of a bigger picture that has yet to be studied. To compare more cases and to include more documents that treat this subject would lead to better results and clear answers.

However, the comparison of the two different cases has shown that the main interest of the problematic printers was not just the money, as might have been deduced in former theories, but also the will to support progress. Their egoistic and sometimes harmful behaviour is just another example of capitalism that has always been a dominant factor in the history of printing.

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