

1 Appropriating Printing

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For much of the seventeenth century, from 1637 to 1695, printing in England was controlled by statutes and laws which not only regulated the number of presses and printers that could operate in the country, but also determined what could, and could not, be produced.¹ The Acts and Decrees enacted by Parliament were a response to a widely-held fear that the freedom to print was a threat to society, a challenge to the crown, and a danger to the Church. But it was not just Acts of Parliament that hampered engagement with printing: so too did the trade's rigid structure and organisation. From the time William Caxton (1422–91)² introduced printing into England in 1476 no one was able to set up as a Master Printer without having served an apprenticeship. Master Printers defended their privileges and protected their skills,³ and it was only they, assisted perhaps by a journeyman or apprentice, who could issue printed material.⁴ The terms of apprenticeship were enshrined in law and first regulated by the Statute of Artificers (1563 and 1601), which authorised and made national that which had been usual practice.⁵ Later, the printing trade unions also exerted tight controls over who and how many people could join the trade, and what they could do.⁶ Just as parliament had imposed restrictions on the printing trade, so the trade itself enforced tight controls on who could join it. The controlled became the controller and as a consequence printing was almost impenetrable to those outsiders who wished to engage with the craft whether for pleasure or for profit.⁷

This chapter considers the work of those who, over the course of 500 years, have circumvented the system, operated outside trade conventions, and appropriated printing for their own purposes. Some were private individuals who participated in the craft either for leisure or pleasure; writers who turned to the medium to promote their literary endeavours; or pirate-printers who used the process for the production of fakes and fabrications, seditious and illicit literature. This chapter looks at how these typographic outsiders equipped themselves with the necessary knowledge and

skills to operate their presses, considers what they produced, and reflects on their reasons for so doing.

Printing at Home: From Palaces to Parlours

In the early eighteenth century, in the new era of comparative press freedom, individuals from outside the trade began to appropriate the press and print from their own homes, in order to fill their leisure time. It is a habit that persists today. Twenty-first-century home-printers adopt historical typographic technology to print for pleasure; and nearly everyone has a home computer which has placed the typographer's tools-of-the-trade in the hands of the everyman. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so many people took to printing that it soon became the craft most widely pursued by amateurs.⁸ These home-based printers operated outside the constraints of the trade; they were lay enthusiasts who were usually—but not always—male, wealthy, generally well-educated, and primarily interested in the products of the press rather than the mechanics of the process.⁹ By printing poems and prose of their own authorship, or written by their friends, they were 'vanity' printers who established their own private presses and employed the skills of professional compositors and pressmen to reproduce their literary endeavours. Probably the best known eighteenth-century home-printer was the historian, politician, and man of letters, Horace Walpole (1717–97).¹⁰ Walpole established his Strawberry Hill Press in 1757 at Twickenham, Surrey where he employed a single man to act as both compositor and pressman, to help print works of his own creation and those written by his friend, the poet Thomas Gray.¹¹ The English bibliographer and genealogist Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges (1762–1837) recruited the services of the printers John Johnson and John Warwick to help produce his many volumes of literature at his Lee Priory Press, Kent.¹² In addition, the English journalist, and radical politician John Wilkes (1725–97) briefly kept, in 1763, a large-scale printing office in his house in Great George Street, London, where he had two presses and eight men working for him.¹³ So large was the set-up that, in order to accommodate the presses, Wilkes had to 'call in carpenters to enlarge the hall'.¹⁴

Space and financial resources were the greatest deterrents for most aspiring eighteenth-century home-printers. Pressmen had to be paid, and typographic machinery was prohibitively large and cumbersome¹⁵ so the home-printer needed both a bank account and a house sufficiently large to accommodate the workers and material necessary for production. To satiate the needs of the home-printer, scaled-down presses were designed, manufactured, and sold specifically for amateurs who could operate them at home, without employing the assistance of a trade printer. The London engraver

and etcher, John Sutter, first advertised his portable press in 1769 for use by ‘noblemen, gentlemen, and ladies curious in printing’.¹⁶ Sutter had competition. John Brown first manufactured a ‘Portable-Printing Press’ in around 1770 and used it to print his own writings.¹⁷ Interest in scaled-down presses started with royalty. In England the Duke of Cumberland and his sisters printed works using a portable press at St James’s Palace in 1713.¹⁸ In France Louis XIV (1638–1715) reputedly printed on a scaled-down press.¹⁹ Once French royalty involved themselves with printing it was only a matter of time before other members of the Court took an interest in the craft. The Marquis de Marigny (1727–81) printed from his home in Bercy.²⁰ There is no evidence of what, if anything, Marigny printed, but his curiosity was primarily linked to the science, technology, and mechanics of printing. By contrast, Marigny’s sister, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson (1721–64, better known as Madame de Pompadour), was concerned with the artistic potential of the craft and was taught etching by the French painter, François Boucher (1703–70) under whose guidance she created fifty-two engravings of his drawings.²¹ Pompadour also developed an interest in typographic printing,²² and kept a scaled-down wooden press on which, it may be presumed, she printed works of her own composition.²³

It was, perhaps, inevitable that once Kings and their Courts had taken up printing, it should filter down through the classes and become ‘a polite study for humble patrons and people of more leisure’.²⁴ By the nineteenth century, printing was adopted by the middle-classes as an affordable, satisfying, and intellectually profitable pastime: ‘there is probably no art or science calculated to afford so much gratification to amateurs as printing, inasmuch as it is a valuable handmaid or assistant to all other arts’.²⁵ As a result, a trend in home-printing became popular with the middle-classes who started to use their leisure time to print calling cards, invitations for parties, or small publications of their own composition for private circulation. So large was the community of home-printers that by the mid-nineteenth century a number of companies, including Holtzapffel & Co., tool and lathe makers, London, were designing, manufacturing and commercially retailing ‘toy’ printing presses specifically for their needs.²⁶

The endeavours of the home-printer were supported by a range of literature. In 1864 David Garden Berri published *The Art of Printing*.²⁷ Aimed at popularising the typographic arts amongst the general public it sought to enable anyone, through a few simple instructions, to become their own printer. *The Art of Printing* was followed by several other illustrated guides, culminating with P. E. Raynor’s popular *Printing for Amateurs* (1875).²⁸ Designed for the layman, these volumes contained practical details on the machinery and materials required for printing, together with descriptions of the processes necessary for their handling. The fact that so many books

on printing were published and republished in the mid-nineteenth century demonstrates that there was a marked demand for typographic instruction from a public interested in doing it themselves. This literature is still available to the current generation of home-printers, but the Internet provides more interactive instructions, including videos on sites such as YouTube.

Just as nineteenth-century home-printers enjoyed seeing the products of their pens realised in print, so too did more established twentieth-century authors. V. S. Naipaul (1932–2018), James Herbert (1943–2013), and Terry Pratchett (1948–2015) each took an interest in how their words were reproduced and worked closely with their printers on the typographic presentation of their texts. Other authors, however, took production, quite literally, into their own hands by printing their own material. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)²⁹ and her husband Leonard (1880–1969),³⁰ founded the Hogarth Press in 1917 as a diversion from the pressures of writing. Starting with a small hand-press at their Surrey home, they not only printed Virginia's own work, but also that of other writers such as Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot, C. Day-Lewis, and E. M. Forster. In addition, the Woolfs' press provided avenues of expression for many artists, photographers, illustrators and designers. Following the success of *Kew Gardens* in 1919 the Hogarth Press evolved into a commercial enterprise.³¹ In 1946 it was sold to the publishers Chatto & Windus. The Hogarth Press, which had started as a diversion and escape from mainstream publishing, became a victim of its own success and succumbed to the commercial pressures which it had been established to avoid. In his autobiography, *Good-Bye to All That*,³² Robert Graves (1895–1985),³³ a friend and contemporary of Woolf, described how 'In 1927 [he] began learning to print on a hand-press. In 1928 [he] continued learning to print'.³⁴ Graves, together with the poet Laura Riding (1901–91),³⁵ founded the Seizin Press in London. Graves knew many people in the printing trade and his typographically-aware friend, the author Vyvyan Richards, taught him to compose type using a Monotype caster and how to print on an 1872 Crown Albion Press. The Seizin Press enabled Graves and Riding to print their own work, including Riding's first book of poetry, *Love as Love, Death as Death*, free from the constraints of publishers.³⁶

Both the Hogarth and Seizin Presses used historical typographic equipment on which to print their publications. At the turn of the twentieth century, printing was moving from a craft-based trade to a technology-led industry. Letterpress printing was giving way to offset lithography, hand composition to mechanical typesetting. The modern mechanical composing machines and printing presses were larger, more expensive and required specialist training to operate in contrast to the old hand-operated presses which were simpler to operate and maintain. As mechanisation became more prevalent, so too did union restrictions on who could and could not

operate the machines.³⁷ As trade printers began jettisoning the old technology in favour of the new, their redundant equipment became available to home-printers, who, like Woolf and Graves, appropriated it for their own purposes. Some authors preferred, however, to appropriate contemporary printing presses. Aldous Huxley (1894–1965),³⁸ for example, was interested in using modern printing machinery to provide high-quality books for the masses and wrote much on the subject.³⁹ But by-and-large home-printers appropriated historical printing equipment. It is a trend that persists today, as contemporary home-printers eschew modern technology in favour of historical equipment, drawn to the tactility of the process, the materiality of the operation, and the olfactory delight of ink and oils. There is also the satisfaction in having rescued, restored and brought back to life machines of a by-gone era, salvaging the past to serve the present: a sentiment that chimes with current environmental concerns to reuse and recycle resources.

Printing in Private: Pirates and Pornographers

Home-printers operate in full sight of the law and with the knowledge—and disapproval⁴⁰—of the trade. Pirate-printers, on the other hand, worked out of sight of the authorities and without the sanction of the trade, in order to produce fakes, forgeries and other typographic fabrications. The fear of forgery was one of the reasons behind the 1637 Star Chamber Decree which was also designed to prevent ‘abuses in printing seditious, treasonable and unlicensed books and pamphlets, printing and printing presses’. For centuries, however, everything from counterfeit banknotes to philatelic forgeries and seditious literature has been produced surreptitiously, and in defiance of Decrees and trade unions, either by fully indentured trade printers turned criminals, or by crooks using unlicensed pirate presses.

Seditious libel, printed in order to subvert the State or incite discontent, was produced behind firmly closed doors, usually by politically motivated or doctrinally sympathetic pirate-printers. In 1683, for example, John Culefant, whose regular profession is unknown, was convicted of offences against the King when he was tried for printing, and publishing, two scandalous and seditious libels: *The growth of popery*, and *Ignoramus Justice*.⁴¹ Culefant not only printed the material but also commissioned the copy, corrected the proofs, and encouraged the work. At his trial he was found guilty, fined and pilloried. Similarly, John Lowthorp, a clergyman by profession, was indicted in 1690 for a ‘high misdemeanour, in writing, printing and publishing a most pernicious, scandalous, seditious and notorious libel against the King and Government’.⁴² Lowthorp was stripped of the cloth and fined, and his books were burnt by the Common Hangman at Westminster.⁴³ So seriously did the State take the role of the printer, that in 1675 one nameless

convict, a scrivener by trade, was not only accused of printing scandalous libels but also for being 'a pretended printer'. He was fined, imprisoned and prohibited from 'exercising or using the trade of printing for three years to come'.⁴⁴

Forgery was particularly rampant in the late eighteenth century when, for the first time, the Bank of England issued low-denomination notes that were handled by people unaccustomed to paper currency and often illiterate.⁴⁵ They were the natural victims of forgers.⁴⁶ In 1789, for example, newspapers widely reported the arrest of three men in Dublin caught printing fake one guinea notes.⁴⁷ Counterfeiting was widespread and producing forgeries remained a lucrative trade for pirate-printers despite punitive penalties. In the eighteenth century anyone interested in calling on one of London's brothels could buy a guidebook, *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies* (1758-95), to help them find a lady suitable to their needs. Published pseudonymously and printed illicitly by John and James Roach and John Aitkin, their covert operations took place in plain sight and alongside their legitimate work in their printing house in Covent Garden, London. An echo of *Harris' Guide* was heard two centuries later in 1961 when an enterprising pornographer, Frederic Shaw, published in London a *Ladies Directory*.⁴⁸ Shaw was indicted for 'conspiracy to corrupt public morals', convicted and sentenced. Shaw was part of Britain's thriving mid-twentieth century underground press movement, which promoted anti-establishment ideas, allied itself with the hippy drug-inspired culture and championed a new age of sexual freedom. Publications included *International Times* (1966-72) and the Marxist paper *Black Dwarf* (1968-70). Perhaps the most influential was *Oz* magazine (1967-73). Published monthly by Richard Neville (1941-2016),⁴⁹ and achieving an average circulation of 30,000 copies, it became the chief organ of the British underground press movement. Renowned for its graphic invention and its constantly changing format, *Oz's* printers took full advantage of new printing stocks, including metallic foils, new fluorescent inks and the greater flexibility of layout offered by offset lithography. The magazine gained notoriety for its editorial policies and the forthright manner in which it tackled sex. But it was a cartoon image of a priapic Rupert Bear that caused particular consternation with the authorities. *Oz's* printing works were raided; its publishers were taken for trial and indicted for corrupting the morals of children and young people.

London's underground press did not end with the *Oz* trial, and there is still a flourishing network of pirate-printers prepared to run the gauntlet of the authorities and print the material the police would rather see banned. Probably the most apparent products of the underground press are London's 'tart cards' (1984-today) which appear in telephone boxes around the capital, advertising the services of the city's prostitutes.⁵⁰ Produced by an

established circle of underground printers, the early cards were manufactured on a range of obsolete equipment. Initially, type was created on a kitchen table using cut-out letters or rub-down characters such as Letraset; later word-processing systems drove low-quality bubble-jet printers, followed by personal computers which placed the typographer's tools-of-the-trade in the hands of the everyman. Printing was usually undertaken using offset lithography and occasionally letterpress by an established circle of pirate-printers working from unspecified addresses away from the centre of the city in order to avoid arousing the curiosity of the authorities.

Conclusion

Home-printers and pirate-printers, whether working in the fifteenth or twentieth century, had much in common. Both parties were dependent upon access to obsolete equipment. Home-printers used old machinery because government decrees and trade union rules, coupled with financial constraints, prohibited them from using current materials. In addition, technically advanced machines usually occupied more space and required greater skill to operate than historical equipment: both of which were beyond the average home-printer. Similarly, pirate-printers were often forced to work with antiquated machinery because it was cheap to purchase, and because its obsolescence may have rendered it unlicensed and therefore almost untraceable either by the trade or the authorities. For the wealthy home-printer, learning to operate the equipment was done under the guidance of a trade printer; but most home-printers were self-taught and simply followed the instructions provided by manufacturers manuals, or were guided by one of the many publications produced on the subject. Most pirate-printers, on the other hand, were indentured trade printers turned criminals, who simply transferred their skills across technologies. But whether home-printers or pirate-printers, their motivations for taking to the press are curiously similar. Each was inspired by the freedom to print whatever they wanted, the liberty to distribute their words to whom they wanted, and to appropriate typographic control—for better or for worse—for the everyman.

Today we are all typographers thanks to the advent of personal computers and the arrival of desktop printers. Such equipment has not only placed the typographer's tools-of-the-trade in the hands of everyone, it has also emancipated the printed word and appropriated it for the purposes of the digital era. Never in the history of printing have individuals experienced so much freedom to express themselves, with so much control on how they communicate, both in public and in private, or been able to do so at speed. They have done so without knowledge of printing, the hindrance of large expensive equipment, or having to engage the services of a printing

professional. Now everyone can control their typographic identity, whether to produce the mundane—such as newsletters, stationery, invitation cards— or the exotic, as seen in the large-scale digital typographic representations created by the artists Gilbert & George.⁵¹ Both the mundane and the exotic serve to demonstrate how specialised production equipment has ceased to be the exclusive tool of pre-press experts and become an instrument in the hand of the artist. However, the speed, freedom and comparative cheapness of digital reproduction has also initiated a resurgence of interest in mechanical process, and old typographic technologies have been made new again in the hands of a new generation of artists and designers, whose unfettered imaginations produce work that would have been unimaginable to their predecessors in print.

Notes

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- 21 Jean Adhemar, *Graphic art of the eighteenth century* (London, 1964), 43, 106, 108, 113.
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- 23 Perrin Stein, Marie-Anne Dupuy-Vachey, Eunice Williams and Kelsey Brosnan, *Fragonard: drawing triumphant* (London & New Haven, CT, 2016).
- 24 Moxon, *Mechanick exercises*, lii.
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