

Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice

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Author: Rosa Salzberg

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Reviewer: Alexander S. Wilkinson

Ephemeral City. Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice is surely one of the most significant and impressive works on early modern European print culture to have been published in recent years. Its author, Rosa Salzberg, is an Assistant Professor of Italian Renaissance History at the University of Warwick. That this is a first monograph, emerging from the author's doctoral research, makes it a truly breathtaking accomplishment.

Cheap print is a term without any very fixed definition, but is generally held to encompass broadsheets and short pamphlets whose purpose it was to circulate information quickly or to entertain. It was part of the rich fabric of daily life. It could be conservative or more subversive and its form embraced songs, poetry, news, devotional texts, laws, and advertisements. That such printed items could be run off the presses quickly to respond to developing events, together with its intimate interdependent relationship with oral culture, afforded cheap print a 'particular power' (p. 99). The premise of Salzberg's study is that we can, if we listen carefully enough to the 'paper echoes', hear the 'shifting, stimulating experience of life' in the city (p. 164).

Cheap print certainly has not been ignored by historians of the early modern book or for that matter by specialists of European literatures. While it has not generated the volume of investigation it truly deserves, it has been the subject of a number of exceptional studies. Scholars have been attracted to the fact that cheap print offers a valuable window into currents of contemporary attitudes and assumptions; it was, after all, consumed voraciously by all social classes. It is also an appealing topic in that it demands interdisciplinary investigation. Often performed, cheap print straddled the porous boundaries between orality and literacy. It also often had a strong visual dimension – woodcut illustrations were a not uncommon feature. The work of Tessa Watts, Robert Scribner, Denis Crouzet, and Antonio Rodríguez-Moñino, amongst others, stand as testament to the impressive scholarship carried out in this field over the past few decades – scholarship which spans most of the major print domains of Europe. There has been some work on cheap Italian print, but it is right to say that this particular subject has been waiting eagerly for its historian. It has now found it. Yet Salzberg's *Ephemeral City* does much more than simply fill a glaring gap in geographical coverage. One of the reasons why this book is so impressive is that it is one of the first treatments of the subject anywhere to explore the industry of cheap print itself – those involved in its financing, production, distribution and

regulation. It is also able to situate cheap print more firmly within its physical environment than in any previous study.

The focus of the monograph is on the buzzing commercial metropolis of Venice, a trading dynamo, and the most important printing centre in Italy – perhaps responsible for around two-fifths of all printed works in the Peninsula over the course of the 15th and 16th centuries. It was a vibrant urban environment, characterized by change and movement. In the opening chapter, Salzberg demonstrates the often very passionately held views held by residents and visitors to the city towards cheap print. The author draws with authority and skill from a wide range of often very fragmentary source material, including scattered references in literature as well as archival material. Although cheap print was read and consumed by a broad public, it came increasingly to be associated with the lower social classes, as something of base intellectual and material worth, as well as with cultural and physical ephemerality (p. 28). It became closer to a commodity than what might normally be associated with the ‘almost sacred nature’ of the book, often sold next to everyday products such as soaps, ribbons, and perfumes. Salzberg identifies three predominant anxieties over cheap print – ‘the status and motivations of the printers’, ‘the uncontrolled proliferation and commercialization of texts’, and the way in which these developments allowed ‘new writers and readers into the literary sphere’ (p. 30). ‘Two cultural systems were almost like tectonic plates, grating against each other and causing friction and heat: the more exclusive system of literary circulation amongst elites and scholars, the language of patronage, friendship and gift-giving, and the newer commercial culture of the press ... In practice, many writers signed up to the new creed while continuing to proclaim the old in their public presentations of themselves’ (pp. 32–3).

It is, however, the second and third chapters – written so evocatively – that are the heart of this book. We learn about a much more dynamic social world than we might have imagined – with rich and poor living side by side and on top of each other. Cheap print became an increasingly visible part of the city, and made it easier for the population to become consumers and producers of literature, and to connect. It was sold not only in the shops, but also out on the streets, in marketplaces, under clock towers, in the main thoroughfares, on bridges, and in other public sites where it was ‘performed, recited, posted up and handed out for free, to advertise other products or to inform the public about important issues or new laws’ (p. 49). The vast majority of the city’s printers were located in the most central, frequented areas. Certain geographical areas were associated with certain specialisations. Prime spots on the Merceria or the Rialto Bridge probably signaled a more prestigious outlet, while there were other cultural associations with other places and particular sellers who gained a reputation for particular goods (p. 54). The interconnections between cheap print and oral culture are stressed, and we hear the way in which street performances came to have an increasing strong commercial dimension, with the performers collecting contributions at the end, or selling a variety of products. Many of the areas turned into performance spaces were also marketplaces (p. 59).

The study also explores themes of mobility and professional versatility, and how these thread the careers of an array of individuals involved in the production and dissemination of cheap print in Renaissance Venice. It was a business that encouraged experimentation, both in production and distribution. Often individuals were involved in multifarious activities – in peddling books on the streets, in performing and in commissioning works. Peddling and commissioning books also overlapped with other forms of commerce, such as selling inexpensive consumer goods. High numbers of individuals involved in the trade were migrants. People such as Ippolito Ferrarese, a singer from Ferrara, or the Bindoni family, brought with them experiences and texts from elsewhere. When they arrived in Venice, they were able to tap into networks of fellow migrants, who often lived in defined areas of the city. They were able to access contacts within the commercial, technical and artistic worlds.

In the following chapter, ‘“In the mouths of charlatans”: pamphlets from print shop to piazza’, we are presented with a general overview of cheap print. Many texts did not remain in a single form, but changed, ‘reflecting fluid and flexible notions of authorship, authority and possession, and closely implicated in ephemeral transactions, interactions and performance’ (p. 100). This is especially true of chivalric literature, which was so popular in Renaissance Venice – as it was across Europe. Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, for

instance, was available in a variety of texts of different sizes from the 1530s. It was often adapted or parodied. Indeed, it was not uncommon for characters to be taken from a range of popular works and recycled. We learn about news, which was supplied as printed accounts, as celebratory songs or as poems. The news industry, as elsewhere, grew in the latter half of the 16th and into the 17th century, with more interest given over to international events. And as in many other parts of Europe, a two-tiered market eventually evolved of relatively expensive manuscript *avvisi* and the less expensive printed *avvisi*, which was watered-down to suit the needs of a broader audience (p. 109). We learn about texts offering practical medical and scientific knowledge, eagerly consumed by the public but which in large part were utter gibberish. For instance, the street singer and soap seller Baldassare Faentino offered a pamphlet which, amongst other things, offered a recipe to get rid of freckles or to 'make a cock sing when it is half roasted' (p. 111). We learn too of religious and devotional texts, including works of prophecy.

In the final chapter, Salzberg discusses the ebb and flow of interest from the authorities in overseeing the industry. We hear of the competing motives of the government, the local branch of the Holy Office, as well as, from the mid-16th century, Venice's guild of printers and booksellers. Overall, the clear impression that we are given is of increasing control being exerted over the industry – at least to temper its worst excesses. Indices of prohibited books were published, inquisitorial decrees were issued, and there were spates of prosecutions from government and the Inquisition which resulted in fines, banishments, ritual punishments and confiscations of illicit works. However, the industry it seems was permitted to function with 'relative freedom' as long as the contents of the pamphlets did not flout religious, moral, political or social mores too flagrantly. It may well have come as little surprise to many in Venice's publishing industry, for instance, that the authorities fined the printer and seller of the 1566 *Tariffa delle puttane*, a register of Venetian prostitutes outlining their services and associated costs (p. 141). Clearly, the boundaries of what was and what was not acceptable gradually became clearer over time. In general, though, there appears to have been quite limited interference by the authorities in what was a flourishing and cherished industry.

Ephemeral City is not a flawless monograph. In some respects, it is a real pity that the author could not have provided the reader with a much more robust sense of the contours of cheap print produced in Venice. In footnote 10, p. 11, there is an indication that *Edit16* – the Italian Short Title Catalogue for the 16th century – and the *Universal Short Title Catalogue* offered no ready means to search specifically for ephemera. However, one would have thought that these projects would, if asked, have been willing to share the information required to do so. Calculating sheet values from pagination and formats is reasonably straightforward, and this would have provided the mechanism to isolate the type of literature that was the focus of this study. This would have told us a great deal of what has left a record. Yes, by its nature, ephemera is ephemeral. What has survived in research libraries almost certainly distorts the true contours of what was once produced. It is likely, though, that such a survey would have pointed to key areas of cheap print worthy of further investigation, and a general statistical overview might well have allowed readers to contextualize the industry much better.

Other criticisms might also be made. The overview of cheap print provided in chapter four might have been longer and more detailed. A few pages devoted each to literature, news, scientific or pseudo-scientific literature, and religious and devotional print seems inadequate. We hear about printers starting off in the business of cheap print and then moving on to other things, but how important was cheap print to the day-to-day accounts of the more established printing houses? At times too, the pattern of change across the period rather gets lost in the structure of the monograph.

Such criticisms do little to diminish the fact that this is certainly one of the best and most original works on book history to appear in recent years. *Ephemeral City* is an outstanding piece of scholarship, and beautifully written. With great skill and no little charm, the author has succeeded in bringing an important but shadowy part of Venice's print culture out into the light. It is essential reading for anyone interested in European print culture, and will almost certainly shape the field for a long time to come.

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

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