

## **Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe**

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If it is hard to write a book review, then it is much harder to make a book. Anthony Grafton's latest monograph, *Inky Fingers*, puts the difficulties of labour at the centre of this engaging study of book production in early modern Europe and North America (the latter included despite the expected limitations of the subtitle). He directs our attention to a cast of players more usually relegated to the wings of humanistic scholarship: printers, copyeditors, translators, compilers and other 'native-born son[s] of the new city of books that printing created' (p. 38).<sup>(1)</sup> In so doing, he reminds us that the life of scholarship 'could cramp the hands and buckle the back' (p. 4), to say nothing of the strain of texts and handwriting on the eyes. Building on the work of scholars including Anne Goldgar and William Sherman, and on Grafton's own extensive contributions to the intellectual and textual history of humanistic scholarship, *Inky Fingers* provides a stimulating account of the back-and-forth of making books, and how this process shapes texts' meanings and reception.

In its 360-plus pages (nearly a quarter of which, appropriately enough for a work on scholarship, are pages of extensive endnotes), a series of lively vignettes emerge in a collection of eight case studies of toilers in the scholarly fields, some of whom are relatively obscure. This is topped and tailed with a broader introduction and suggestive conclusion, 'What the Ink Blots Reveal'.<sup>(2)</sup> As the title of this final chapter suggests, a wry humour runs through the text, which remains consistently readable and accessible, with the publishers perhaps seeking an audience beyond specialists of the history of ideas or history of the book. General readers who do spend some time with *Inky Fingers* will find a large cast of inky toilers more usually hidden in the less-well trodden parts of rare book libraries, whose activities are revealed by Grafton through careful archival research in archives, and the comparison of editions and annotations. The roll-call of names, places and titles makes for a somewhat dizzying tour of the print capitals and major libraries of Europe—Venice, the Vatican, Antwerp, Oxford, London and elsewhere— especially in the first few case studies: by the time the reader has reached the final chapters, the pace has either slowed, or the reader has become more used to the dizzying bibliographic ride, which after a series of unexpected turns and enjoyable loops arrives, almost abruptly at each chapter's conclusion. A more plodding text might carefully, laboriously even, explore the wider context and lay the groundwork for these zingers. More thorough perhaps, but a less exciting read.

The book opens with the broadest-ranging chapter, and the one most likely to be assigned to reading lists, 'Humanists with Inky Fingers'. Based on a revised version of Grafton's Annual Balzan Lecture in 2010, it places the process of composition and correction in the social context of a printing shop, a place where scholars mixed with workers on painstaking, difficult tasks, such as proofreading texts in multiple languages. (3) Here we learn about the importance of lectors, who read the original manuscript text aloud to a corrector, who checked the setting of the type and sometimes made changes. Grafton highlights Anne Goldgar's insight that late-17th and 18th century correctors 'carried out many of the tasks of a modern desk editor or literary agent' (p. 38), and traces the role back to the classical era, a world before print, emphasizing the rich scribal culture which informed its growth. (4) Print also expanded the correctors' role, creating a 'new social type' (p. 38). Understanding the role of these correctors—highly educated men, employed by printers to correct text, straddling the worlds of scholarship and artisanal labour (and paid less than both authors and skilled printers)—reveals the otherwise lost history of texts.

Grafton offers a particularly striking example, the 1543 edition of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus*. Printed by Joannes Petreius, Copernicus was unable to see the text through the press as a consequence of both distance and ill health. As was the custom for such productions, Petreius employed two correctors Georg Joachim Rheticus and Andreas Osiander, who 'did not leave the work unchanged' (p. 54); when this interference was discovered in the 19th century, philologists recognised hundreds of changes, most notoriously that he 'dialed down the book's radicalism by claiming that Copernicus had presented his theory, not as the truth, but only as a hypothesis meant to stimulate discussion.' Supporters of the Copernican revolution have been indignant at this betrayal. Yet, Grafton notes,

Osiander's decision also helped to keep Copernicus's book in circulation [...] By the end of the sixteenth century, accordingly, the Copernican genie was out of the box (pp. 54-5).

This act, extreme as it was 'even seen in the context of Renaissance methods of correction', it also 'seems a prudent and ingenious effort to practice the corrector's trade' (p. 55).

This is an extreme instance, of course, and one that has left clear traces in the historical record. More examples would be welcome, but are no doubt difficult to uncover, and perhaps would become tedious for the reader. The evidence, however, seems clear that writers, readers, and printers expected the process of collaboration to improve the work (and on occasion introduce error). Close reading of documents in the Plantin archive by Grafton, for example, reveal the back-and-forth between author, 'castigators' or corrector, and printer (p. 48). It is a world, Grafton notes, that lasted for centuries; every time authors 'get enraged' by copyeditors, editors, or agents, they replay 'a scene that is deeply embedded in the classical tradition' (p. 55). But, Grafton notes, this is a 'landscape that is now disappearing' as publishing becomes digital, outsourced and, it is implied, without the infrastructure that supports literary careers, however precarious they once were (p. 55).

The remaining majority of the book moves out of the print shop and into the study or library, and historicises the scholarly toil and working methods from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. *Inky Fingers'* second chapter, 'Philologists Wave Divining Rods', considers the classical scholar and philologist, Isaac Casaubon, and in particular the status of uncertainty in textual editing. The central work of humanistic textual criticism is about discovering or 'divining' the authentic text hidden within later editions: a process, to some extent, of 'magic' and intuition that enabled Casaubon to produce his edition of the *Festus'* Latin lexicon, 'one of the masterpieces of sixteenth-century textual divination' (p. 59). Providing the thread for the chapter, shifts in the meaning of this term 'divination', which 'never entirely lost its pejorative sense, or the slipperiness that let it do more than one sort of duty' (p. 72), highlights the role of intuition in the editing, and even a sense of play. This magic, Grafton suggests, created a space for conjecture 'as scholars moved from redoing individual manuscripts created by incompetent scribes to creating new texts for print.' This space also suggested recognition of the limits (or conscious artistry) of scholarly intervention, 'a first step toward

framing a rational skepticism about what philology could achieve' (p. 77).

Chapter three becomes even more physical, as we learn how Jean Mabillon 'Invents Paleography', drawing on the skill and expertise of 'creative calligraphy'. The process of studying writing is never an abstract activity, but a process of 'microscopic attention' to marks of ink on skin and paper (p. 78). It is often a communal one, with scholars sharing their opinions around a manuscript, and the chapter opens with Mabillon, a librarian (Emanuel Schelstrate) and a painter (Giovanni Pietro Bellori) gathered around the Vatican Virgil [Vat. lat. 3225] in a period when 'the pursuit of scholarship and the art and craft of writing were clearly separate' (p. 104). While the trio dated it wrongly—misled by the pagan miniatures into dating it to the pre-Christian Roman Empire—the 'nature of the examination is still telling.' (p. 78) The point, Grafton notes, is that for centuries 'humanists had met in libraries to talk about manuscripts and examine them' (p. 78), a vignette that can still (outside of Covid-19 times) be observed in special collections reading rooms, offices, and strong rooms around the world. The techniques have changed somewhat, not least for conservation reasons. Materials for the production of early-modern tracing paper included the amniotic membrane of a cow's embryo, the pericardium of an ox, or paper from Venice or Lyon, rubbed with linseed oil, turpentine or pork fat; the animal parchment might attract worms unless kept in "'a portfolio and in urine'" (p. 94). On Mabillon's request scholars and librarians across Europe placed such fatty membranes over manuscripts, 'tracing the original letter by letter, tongue in teeth' (p. 93). Grafton notes,

we must imagine that across Europe, librarians and scholars laid sheets of oiled paper or scrape animal membrane on the most precious manuscripts in their collections, filled their pens, and traced their letters (p. 94).

These activities have an end result in sight: the production of printed facsimile and analysis of charters which 'transformed a field of study' (p. 102): *De re diplomatica*. In this task, as well as the collections and dissemination of texts, Mabillon becomes a kind of scholar-scribe. Grafton here is suggestive on the role of artisans in the productions of books whose power relied on their illustrations, such as those of Leonhard Fuchs (botany) and Andreas Vesalius (anatomy), as well as Mabillon's. In his book, Fuchs even included portraits of the artisans who illustrated the work. The norm, however, was for such artisans to remain hidden or, in the case of men such as Robert Hooke, supplanted by the scholars themselves: 'a new hybrid breed' who were an 'expert technician as well as an erudite scholar' (p. 103). Similarly, the growing number of antiquarians taught themselves the skills of copying, drawing and reproduction, as they captured and catalogued the ancient remains around them. By taking on the detailed work of the printing of facsimiles and other comparative, palaeographical products, scholars such as Mabillon, drew on and reinvented the 'creative art of humanistic scribes'. Here Grafton reveals the 'forgotten historical connection between new forms of scribal work—a brand of labour that actually expanded after the invention of printing—and one of the most original forms of early modern scholarship, palaeography' (p. 26). It seems likely the further work in this area would reveal the extent and variety of such activity beyond that of Mabillon.

Following these three chapters concerned with the ways mental and physical labour combine in scholarly work, are a collection of case studies exploring the significance and practicalities of compilation, crossing the borders between 'scholarly reading and writing' (p. 26).<sup>(5)</sup> Compilation was a central scholarly activity, a process of collecting, classifying, glossing, and organisation, drawing on earlier 'forms of close reading, excerpting, and storage'. Compilations had the potential to become 'epistemic machines that imposed interpretations and meanings on the apparently dull and indistinguishable extracts that were stored within them - or that mobilized them in support of novel, far-reaching arguments' (pp. 26-7). And, it should be noted, *Inky Fingers* is itself a work of compilation, based on pieces published elsewhere, but extensively remade 'into a book', benefitting from the scholarly dialogue and re-readings with others (p. 368). The first in this section of compilation case studies looks at how the comparative method might open up new vistas. Gathering materials in what looks 'like an extension of methods he probably mastered as a schoolboy', for example, Polydore Vergil revolutionised the conception of the early Church, revealing its Jewish origins through 'artfully arranged and regularly revised', interdisciplinary selections on all aspects of church

organisation and life (p. 119). How such materials might be gathered and turned into an archive (or a collection)—a kind of meta-compilation—is the focus of 'Matthew Parker Makes an Archive'. Here, Grafton provides an authoritative account of how libraries might be formed and used in the 16th century, with an emphasis on the importance of scholarly discussions surrounded by collections—a 'culture of conversation' (p. 151)—which helped Parker to assess the meaning of those collections. It is a reminder that as well as forms of cultural capital, displays of power, and a means of creating authority, libraries also remained (or became) a place of scholarly discovery. The final chapter of this trio, 'Francis Daniel Pastorius Makes a Notebook', opens with a mysterious joke about a crocodile made by the German Pennsylvanian Francis Pastorius in a 'sinuous loop' on the title page of *The Ark of Moses, or the History of the World*, held by The Library Company in Philadelphia. Drawing on Robert Darnton's insight that 'it is precisely when historical actors say or do strange and paradoxical things that we need to work hardest at interpreting their actions and sayings' (p. 153), Grafton puts the crocodile on trial, as it were, and in so doing reveals the humanistic—and religious—links between the old and new worlds.

If these three chapters reveal individual obsessions and interests, the final three unpack the ways collections of materials could be deployed 'for polemical purposes' (p. 27). Grafton shows how Annius of Viterbo began his forgeries of imaginary histories as a way of attacking a revival of Ancient Greek historiography. Another shaping of the truth (to breaking point), by John Caius, is the focus of Chapter 8, which unpicks Caius' attempts to shore up Cambridges' antiquity over Oxford and, along the way, helps to show the development of scholarly apparatus, methods, and standards, together with the importance of repositories such as the Tower of London, Thomas Bodley's library, the Library of Lambeth Palace, and numerous Cambridge repositories. Caius' mission helped to make the first case for research libraries and along the way developed the first printed catalogue of Cambridge University Library. The final case study considers the idiosyncrasies of Baruch Spinoza, and the 'rather large and diverse crowd of Jews and Christians, both imaginary ancients and troubling moderns. What, if anything, did he take from the learned traditions that surrounded him? And what did he refuse or fail to take?' (p. 233). By examining Spinoza's assault on the coherence of the Old Testament Grafton argues that Spinoza was not as idiosyncratic as others have suggested, but rather can be fruitfully placed in dialogue with a 'long and complex evolution by which the critical scholarship of humanists and forgers, ecclesiastical historians and eccentric critics helped to give birth to Enlightenment'.

As such, this final chapter, like the rest of the work, is brilliantly suggestive and demonstrates what can be achieved by bringing together the methods of the history of thought, the history of the book, and textual criticism. It shows how different and sometimes idiosyncratic methods, conversations, ways of organising information and source materials have shaped scholarship over time. Each chapter is a bravura performance suggesting routes for further study. Grafton is keen to acknowledge that there is still much to do: for example, 'the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* still needs a full Spinozan history of its own, one that will track the author's faltering but fascinating progress through the Hercynian forests of early modern humanistic learning' (p. 253). Others might bring theory more obviously to the task, and certainly more women might be visible in the work. We might learn more about the numbers, backgrounds, and overall careers, of the correctors and other, more humble, scholar-artisans toiling in the printing houses of Europe. Meanwhile, digital historians are likely to bring complementary possibilities to Grafton's more traditional and meticulous close reading in the search for the traces of inky fingers on the pages.

## Notes

1. Here, 'son' also implies 'daughter', as many of this cast, Grafton notes, were women (pp. 40-1); this is one of the few references to women and textual labour, the importance of which has been shown in works such as Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. On notes see, of course, Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Anthony Grafton, *Humanists with Inky Fingers: The Culture of Correction in Renaissance Europe*

(Firenze, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven, CT, 1995).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Grafton draws attention here to the work of Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT, 2010).[Back to \(5\)](#)

*The author is most grateful for this thoughtful and constructive review, which suggests a number of areas where more could—and should—be done.*

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