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978-0-521-03470-8 - The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England

Alexandra Halasz

Excerpt

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Introduction

Thomas Bodley famously wanted to exclude pamphlets from the library he founded at Oxford in 1603, claiming that they were “not worth the custody in suche a Librarie.”¹ The librarian must have occasionally disagreed, for over the years Bodley becomes increasingly admonitory: “the benefit therof will nothing neere contervaile, the harme that the scandal will bring unto the Librarie, when it shalbe given out, that we stuffe it full of baggage bookes”(222). “Baggage” means moveable or portable property. From the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, it is also a term of abuse, meaning “trashy” or “valueless”; a gendered abusive use referring to women who are promiscuous in speech or behavior continues into the nineteenth century. “Baggage books” are literally portable; they have been published in small formats (such as quarto or octavo) that allow for ease of transportation, of circulation. Bodley will not have them in the library both because they circulate too widely and because they do not require the learned man’s critical and custodial attention in order to circulate. But the scandal that the pamphlets portend to Bodley – that, included in the library, the pamphlets will undermine the authority of the Library – is not dissipated by their exclusion. Rather, the gesture of exclusion makes a problem of pamphlets’ claim to discursive authority explicit even as it attempts to assign them to another, amorphous place. It is a gesture whose implications may become clearer if we substitute for “baggage” the term “mass market.”

I do not make a four-century historical leap lightly. Whether the distinguishing term is “baggage,” “pamphlet,” or “mass market,” the boundary between discourses that count and those that do not has repeatedly been drawn in relation to the marketplace-situatedness of discourse. Any number of texts can cross the boundary – in either direction – without affecting the regulating function of the boundary itself. Though a hierarchical valuation of discourses may be a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon, the problem I examine in this book is historically specific. It arises, I will argue, in relation to the deployment

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 The marketplace of print

of print technology in Western Europe, for print enabled the increasingly widespread production of discourse as a commodity and in so doing disrupted existing patterns of production, circulation, and valorization. We now inhabit a world in which the mediation of print and even more recent technologies goes without saying and yet gives rise to variously formulated anxieties that a once-stable mediation of public discourse has become compromised by what might loosely be called marketplace interests. This book thus has a double agenda. It is a case study of early modern circumstances of pamphlet production on which is predicated a larger argument about the nature of the public sphere. The double agenda can be formulated as a single proposition. Close attention to the discourses in and around pamphlet production at the turn of the sixteenth century reveals a phobic conception of widely circulated discourses at the emergence of a public sphere that affords an instructive parallel to the twentieth-century lament for its decline.

Other, less intensely invested late sixteenth-century comments provide a more useful brief index to the problem this book addresses. Writing to Dudley Carlton at his diplomatic post in Europe in 1598, for example, John Chamberlain, the indefatigable news gatherer and letter writer of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, sends along a book and some pamphlets, saying: “You shall receive by this bearer your *Thesaurus Geographicus* . . . I send you likewise such pedlarie pamphlets and threehalfpeny ware as we are served with; make the best use you can of them, and use your owne censure, but if I be not deceived some of the satires are passable.”² The pamphlets are offered in the same spirit as the news of city and court that forms the bulk of Chamberlain’s letters to Carlton – they are of current interest and in public circulation. “Pedlarie pamphlets” and “threehalfpeny ware” name discourse as a commodity: “pedlarie” describes a mode of circulation and “threehalfpeny” a price.³ By these terms Chamberlain classifies the pamphlets and separates them from the book he sent “likewise,” Ortelius’s *Thesaurus Geographicus*. However commonplace for its time, Chamberlain’s distinction is worth pausing over, for Ortelius’s book is also a commodity. The effect of distinguishing the pamphlets as commodities is to denegate the commodity status of the book, or to render it incidental to the book’s reputation and use as a work of systematic learning, sanctioned by the university and several generations of learned men. In contrast, “pedlarie pamphlets” have no such sanction. But the pamphlets also complicate Chamberlain’s distinction, raising issues of authority for him, which he defers to Carlton: “use your owne censure.” Though authorial names and/or titles undoubtedly were attached to the pamphlets that Chamberlain sent to Carlton, or that Bodley excluded from his library,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

they are not recognized. By denying pamphlets names and authors, learned men like Chamberlain and Bodley manage their anxiety that discourse bearing no sanction other than its appearance in the marketplace might actually claim some authority.

The problem of pamphlets' place arises in part from the fact that books and pamphlets are implicated in a world that is also scribal and oral, a circumstance Chamberlain's letter nicely illustrates. Between its occasion, its subject matter, and its enclosures, it sets out an array of discursive possibilities: the letter itself, the gossip of the men in "Paul's walk" that Chamberlain reports to Carlton, and two kinds of printed text, one ephemeral and the other authoritative. The pamphlets' ephemerality associates them with the orality of gossip, their printedness with the authoritative texts that they materially resemble. Yet it is their printedness that allows them to circulate like gossip. Thus equivocally positioned, pamphlets are an anomaly. They present an enigma not only of discursive register and authority but of kind, for neither "pamphlet" nor "book" is a generic category, but rather, an indicator of object form that slides easily into commodity designation (and dismissal). The categorization of pamphlets by their commodity status, rather than by their authors, titles, or discursive kind draws attention to them as *only* pamphlets and thus distinguishes them from other discourses produced in small formats and sold in the marketplace. Yet no clear and stable lines can be drawn to distinguish between a pamphlet, a small book, and a book. Indeed pamphlets were sometimes collected and bound into books by booksellers as well as readers. Nor can "pamphlet" be considered as a clear unit of trade production; the "job" is measured in sheets (of paper), underscoring the continuum on which pamphlet and book exist. If at one end of the continuum "pamphlet" slides into bookness, at the other it is potentially interchangeable with the broadside ballad. Hence "pamphlet" functions as a floating signifier in the heterogeneity that characterizes the opportunities made available by print. Printed sermons, say, or a quarto edition of a court masque, are less likely to be called pamphlets than a collection of tales or jests, or the report of a battle or criminal execution. Yet any of those discourses would be a pamphlet or small book, capable of relatively quick production and wide circulation.

My specific focus in this book is on pamphlets, writers, and the book trade in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By marketplace of print I mean the practices involved in the making of books – writing and printing, and the processes involved in producing and circulating books – the capitalization of the book trade and its distribution procedures. "Discursive field," in contrast, describes the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 The marketplace of print

discourses that printed texts entered, addressed, or appropriated – whether oral, scribal, or printed. The development of the marketplace coincides with the rise of the vernacular as a religious and literate language and an increase in literacy not to be equaled until the eighteenth century, at least in England. If the combined effect of these changes, over time, is a realignment of the positions, coordinates, and vectors that shape the discursive field, the initial effect is one of sustained instability. Print permanently altered the discursive field not by bringing books to the marketplace (medieval *scriptoria* did that) but by enabling the marketplace to develop as a means of producing, disseminating, and mediating discourse independent of the sites and practices associated with and sanctioned by university, Crown, and Church. I use these terms metonymically; the point is not that learned, aristocratic, or religious discourses were monolithic or stable, but that the positions of (high) literacy, privilege, and authority they implied were challenged by the proliferation and variety of discourses in the marketplace of print. That challenge was an inchoate one, seen alternately as a potential benefit and as a threat. In either case, print seemed to promise a reshaping of the discursive field.

Two premises underlie my discussion. First, because pamphlets are – in the abstract – ubiquitous and polymorphous, they imply a generalized access to the circulation of printed discourse and thus open up the social space that will come to be conceptualized as a public sphere. At the same time, they imbue that nascent sphere with ambivalence about the loss of social distinction that generalized access suggests. In other words, the perception of pamphlets as a marginal format notwithstanding, they become an important focus for anxieties and hopes about print culture in general. My second premise is that the problem I am examining is at once structural and historical. The situation all writers faced was one that initiated a structural change in the conditions of discursive production, for print technology developed in a capitalist mode. Thus the structural problem is what the economic capital organizing the production and dissemination of discourse as a commodity means for (the work of) writing. But the marketplace of print only gradually effected qualitative change in the conditions of public discourse. For some writers, the structural issues of the marketplace did not immediately affect their production, while for others, especially for pamphlet writers whose discourses were at least partly identified with their commodity status, those issues precipitated a struggle to find ways of figuring and describing the altered conditions of their discursive production in historically specific circumstances.

Obviously I make no claim to survey the range of pamphlets produced, even within a limited period. But neither are my choices of pamphlets

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

accidental or random. Chapter 1 sets out the matrix of pamphlet production and circulation at the end of the sixteenth century in England and a theoretical framework for its understanding. It focuses first on general historical issues in the emergence of print and then on the structural conflicts within the English book trade that came to a crisis in the mid-1580s, resulting in a special commission of investigation that brought the social relations in the economy of print – questions of property, labor, control, and ownership – into an extended moment of sharp relief. Chapter 2 focuses on a single pamphlet, *Kind-Hartes Dreame*, written by Henry Chettle, a member of the Stationers' Company; chapter 3 on an exchange of pamphlets between two university-educated men, Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey; and chapter 4 on ballad books and historical fictions written by a silk weaver, Thomas Deloney. Each of the writers was known to the others and all of the pamphlets of the central chapters were written between 1592 and 1600. The near contemporaneity of the pamphlets and the acquaintance of each writer with the work or reputation of the others assumes a strategic importance because questions of reception and dissemination are so difficult to address in the absence of evidence external to the texts under examination. The point of the cluster or series is not so much that these pamphlets and writers read each other in this or that specific way as that they exemplify a process of witting and unwitting collaboration that produces the tropes and terms of a marketplace-situated discourse and an emergent public sphere. Chapter 5 takes up the question of the relationship between the marketplace of print and the public sphere by reading Jürgen Habermas's normative model of the public sphere against the accumulated evidence of the central chapters and the ways in which early seventeenth-century pamphlets represent the scene of consumption and the relations between production and consumption.

All of the pamphlets I discuss are known, some even well-known, in histories of English literature. Yet in focusing on pamphlets – certain pamphlets – I have subjected my discussion to an artificial boundary. In chapter 1 I make an extended case for “pamphlet” as an organizing category of analysis in terms of my argument. Here I want to address briefly the critical concerns that underwrite the boundary I have drawn. From a literary–historical perspective, the pamphlets I discuss are categorized as minor literature and assigned to one of several arenas of interest. Gathered and edited in the nineteenth century by gentleman-scholars involved in reconstructing the circumstances of Shakespeare's accomplishment, they were and are considered as “sources” for the work of major figures. That republication also made them available as “popular” literature and exemplars of “hack” or “professional” writing.

Cambridge University Press

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Alexandra Halasz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 The marketplace of print

As such, they have been important to the disciplinary investigations of social historians, where they serve as data for discussions of lower-class life, and influential in understanding eighteenth-century (and later) constructions of an opposition between “popular” and “elite.” Alternatively, the association of pamphlets with “professional” writers and with prose, especially prose fiction, inscribes them into a telos of the novel. As I reviewed this work in the very early stages of my research, I was struck by how the significance of the material was repeatedly established by reference to some other, more obviously compelling topic or purpose, by a kind of *post hoc* legitimation. Methodologically speaking, there is nothing wrong with such a procedure and it continues to produce distinguished and fruitful scholarship such as Michael McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel* or, more recently, Sharon Achinstein’s study of Milton’s fellowship with mid-seventeenth-century pamphleteers, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader*. But positioning pamphlet material in relation to now canonical genres or figures, or treating it as primary data, obscures questions about the literary and social meaning of pamphlets in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Writing about the process of canon formation, John Guillory argues that “the real social process is the reproduction not of values [said to be embodied in canonical works] but of social relations.”⁴ The social relations of pamphlets are unquestionably implicated in issues of canon formation, and it could be argued that the intersections I trace between the interests of writers, the book trade, and readers expose the process of a canon-in-formation, but I am not interested in making that argument. At the same time, however, in focusing on the ways in which pamphlet writers responded to the complex circumstances in and about which they wrote – their modes of self-description and allegorization, their attempts to figure production, the marketplace, and audience(s), I am engaged in work of historical recovery that clearly implicates our understanding of major figures and issues in Renaissance literature. The writers I discuss in the third chapter, Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey, for example, were involved in networks of patronage and coterie circulation. Conversely, writers of contemporary and subsequent high distinction, such as Harvey’s friend Edmund Spenser or Nashe’s sometime collaborator Ben Jonson, were keenly attuned to issues of the marketplace of print. Indeed, one of the more memorable phobic figurations of wide circulation is the image of Error’s vomit in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*, “full of bookes and papers” and “deformed monsters . . . blacke as inke” (1.1.20, 22). Recent work such as Richard Halpern’s *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, Evelyn Tribble’s *Margins and Marginality*, Wendy Wall’s *The Imprint of Gender*, and Arthur Marroti’s

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Manuscript, Print and the Renaissance Lyric – to name only a few of those books addressing the intersections between discursive registers and modes, literary form, and the practices of print – indicate the range of what Halpern calls “the historical renarration at work in Renaissance studies” (1). More particularly, any simple notion of a “stigma of print” has ceded to a highly nuanced understanding of various opportunities and strategies available in the two or more centuries during which manuscript and print coexisted as equally significant modes in public discourse.⁵

The artificiality of the boundary I have drawn around pamphlets is perhaps especially conspicuous from the perspective of new historicist interest in cultural formations, in literature as part of an ensemble of cultural practices. While this book is both a product of and a contribution to new historicist work on the culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I have resisted pursuing the resonances of my argument in terms of related period-defined issues. Early new historicists were criticized for claiming to open Renaissance studies toward the history of cultural formations while still producing readings that continued to operate in the interest of demonstrating the achievement of canonical figures and dominant discourses. More recent work that focuses on noncanonical, nonelite figures and discourses or thematic issues such as the construction of class, race, gender, and sexuality still produces what Karen Newman recently called “canonical effects,” in part because the Renaissance itself is a quasi-canonical category.⁶ To reinscribe pamphlet production into one or another of the familiar narratives about the literary culture of the period or the history of English literature, however much those narratives might be revised in the process, would be willy-nilly to emphasize either the period or the work of its major figures. Though such a reinscription would be both valid and important, it would once again mask pamphlets’ most interesting features, the ways in which they trouble categories within the discursive field and the distinctions between economic and cultural forms of value, in short, their dissolving effect on systems of classification or opposition.

Social relations, as Guillory goes on to argue, are not opposed to the reproduction of value but the means by which notions of value are produced and adjudged.⁷ Precisely because pamphlets are, on the one hand, caught up in questions about their value and authority, and on the other, neither susceptible as a group to canonical revaluation nor restricted as a commodity form to the early modern period, they keep open multiple avenues of access to the social relations in which they are implicated. And I have followed multiple avenues of investigation in

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Alexandra Halasz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 The marketplace of print

my research. My own intellectual commitments put me closer to the British variant of new historicism, cultural materialism, and its avowed sympathy with marxist discourses. My focus on issues of production and consumption has been refined by the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel de Certeau, whose tacit (and sometimes repudiated) engagement with the inadequacy of the marxist formulations of ideology and the base–superstructure model made available notions of the discursive field, cultural and symbolic forms of capital, and the practices of institutional and everyday life. I am also indebted to the work of historians examining questions of literacy, technology, economic development, and “popular culture;” to legal historians and their accounts of property, copyright, privacy, and the public domain; and, finally, to a productive nonalignment between two twentieth-century bibliographic traditions, the Anglo-American concern with establishing a definitive authorial text and the continental (predominantly French) concern with “the history of the book,” in which the complex interactions between writing, printing, publishing, and reading practices emerge.⁸

Of the pamphlets I discuss, only Deloney’s pamphlets had an indisputably wide circulation; they were reprinted regularly for some 200 years.⁹ Indeed, it might be argued that examining the implications of wide circulation would be better served by an investigation of the print production of sermons and other religious texts, or of schoolbooks, which account for such a large portion of early modern printed texts. Let me say here, first, that pamphlet production includes sermons and assumes literacy, and second, that I am not making an empirical argument but rather one that traces the emergence of imaginary constructs – authors, public(s), an abstract marketplace, a public sphere – out of a material process, the commodification of discourse. Nonetheless a certain empiricist desire accompanies the project. Where and how were pamphlets sold? Who bought them? Who read them? Where and how were they read? How did someone like Deloney, the silk weaver, or John Taylor, a waterman on the Thames, come to practice writing as a vocation? Where evidence exists, I have addressed these questions in the general, specific, or speculative terms the evidence permits. But the available evidence weighs heavily on the side of production; questions of reading and dissemination are far more elusive both in terms of the available evidence and my argumentative strategy of examining exemplary pamphlets. Because neither the contextual framing afforded by the first chapter nor the reading of specific instances of pamphlet production in the central chapters addresses the general questions of who read and what the actual post-production trajectories of pamphlets were or

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

might have been, I want to conclude these introductory remarks with a brief discussion of the existing evidence of reading, distribution, and dissemination.

The surviving external evidence of pamphlet readership consists largely of wills, probate inventories, and library catalogs. The form of that evidence emphasizes, indeed, distorts, the privacy of pamphlet reading, for pamphlets, if mentioned, are not individuated. In the 200 inventories of books in Cambridge University estates published by Elizabeth Leedham-Green, for example, 145 of the inventories include one or more entries of “additional bookes unnamed,” and such entries often specify that the unnamed books are small-format publications. In some inventories the number of quarto, octavo or duodecimo books unnamed equals or exceeds the named titles. As Leedham-Green notes, “we may suppose that such entries as ‘item all his other books’ conceal, among other things, a quantity of current vernacular literature not deemed worth the binding” (xiii). Robert Burton’s library offers a more specifically telling example of pamphlet presence at sites of institutional high literacy. The catalog reveals a fair number of pamphlets, including *Kind-Hartes Dreame* and pamphlets by Nashe, as one might expect, along with others by Deloney, Thomas Dekker, Samuel Rowlands, and John Taylor (all of whom I discuss) among others. On the one hand, none of these writers or texts by them is mentioned in Burton’s own public discourse. On the other, when the library was bequeathed to the Bodleian in 1640, 313 quartos and 104 octavos from the English books in Burton’s collection began to fill the lacunae created by Thomas Bodley’s earlier refusal to allow pamphlets into the Bodleian.¹⁰ Similarly, as I discuss in chapter 3, Gabriel Harvey’s ongoing reading of and desire to write pamphlets is attested not so much by his published writing as by its acknowledgment in his unpublished marginalia. And the pamphlets mentioned in the marginalia do not appear in the twentieth-century reconstruction of his library, so he evidently read them but may not have owned them, or kept them, or signed them, or written in their margins. What might be called the university archive suggests a fairly widespread reading of pamphlets together with an ambivalent perception of their value. When the Bodleian librarian chose from Burton’s books, he recognized the importance of pamphlet material, but when he made an accession list, he intermittently failed to note individual titles among pamphlets bound or “coupled” together into books. The Cambridge stationers or officials who did the inventories Leedham-Green published account for pamphlets only in terms of their (minimal) economic value.

Away from the universities, where books were obviously valued and pamphlets ambivalently so, the evidence becomes sparser but remains

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Alexandra Halasz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 The marketplace of print

revealing. An essay that reviews the wills of 67 English bishops who held office between 1600 and 1640, for example, finds only two-thirds of the wills mentioning books at all.¹¹ Of those that do and make provisions for their dispersal, 7 explicitly separate “English Books” as a testamentary gift to wives or other female relatives. A library originally belonging to a mid-seventeenth-century Midlands gentry woman, Frances Wolfreton, survived relatively intact until the nineteenth century and consisted primarily of small-format publications.¹² The catalog of the sale offered some 960 titles, of which only 5 were folios. (Only half of the material offered at the sale was printed before Wolfreton’s death and thus was presumably in her collection.) The collection included a significant number of pamphlet titles printed before she was born that she either inherited, received as a gift, or purchased secondhand as well as “chapbooks” of the mid- and late seventeenth century. Plays, jestbooks, poems, sermons, conduct books, story collections, and topical pamphlets evidently occupied her over the years. While the Wolfreton collection presents an apparent wealth of evidence, for she, like Harvey, often signed her books and otherwise wrote in them, no systematic reconstruction of the collection has yet been undertaken. Whatever the results such an effort might yield or the methodological problems that would beset it, it is worth underscoring the multiple contingencies implicated in the survival of those books offered for sale as a collection and partially individuated by titles in 1856. In her will Wolfreton identifies the collection in general terms: “all my phisicke bookes and all my godly bookes and all the rest” (200).

The evidence of the bishops’ and Wolfreton’s wills can be multiplied, but that multiplication would conform to the pattern of the Cambridge inventories – titles, and especially pamphlet titles, are not specified. To the predictable circulation of pamphlets among university men, then, we can add both vague and specific evidence of a female readership. The predilection among university men not to acknowledge pamphlet reading as a serious activity might be correlated with the evidence of female readership: reading fit for women’s leisure hours would demean male intellectual pursuits. That both men and women might have read and owned a similar range of pamphlets does not mitigate the effect or importance of such cultural posturing. If the evidence of pamphlet reading among both male and female members of the gentry, professional, upper merchant and aristocratic classes affirms Peter Burke’s point that early modern culture had not yet experienced the withdrawal of the upper classes from a common culture, both the tacit disavowal and the projective gendering of pamphlet readership suggest the imminence