

## PRINTING, WRITERS AND READERS IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

The spread of printing to Renaissance Italy had a dramatic impact on all users of books. As works came to be diffused more widely and cheaply, so authors had to adapt their writing and their methods of publishing to the demands and opportunities of the new medium, and reading became a more frequent and user-friendly activity. *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* focuses on this interaction between the book industry and written culture. After describing the new technology and the contexts of publishing and bookselling, it examines the continuities and changes faced by writers in the shift from manuscript to print, the extent to which they benefited from print in their careers, and the greater accessibility of books to a broader spectrum of readers, including women and the less well educated. This is the first integrated study of a topic of central importance in Italian and European culture.

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Frontmatter/Prelims

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READERS IN RENAISSANCE  
ITALY

BRIAN RICHARDSON



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## *Preface*

The introduction of the printing press to Italy in or shortly before 1465 had profound consequences for all users of the written word. Books now became available in much larger quantities than before, they cost much less, and texts could thus be disseminated more quickly and more widely. The sale of copies of a text could also be controlled, in principle, to the benefit of its author. Texts in printed books were presented differently in some respects from those in manuscripts, and new texts were produced with new sorts of readers in mind.

My aim in this book is to provide an introduction both to this revolutionary means of diffusing the written word and to its impact on writers and readers. The first part describes the production and circulation of books. Chapter 1 summarizes the techniques of the printing process; chapter 2 outlines the wider contexts in which presses operated: the financing and selling of books, and the regulation of printing by states and by the Church. I then turn to the influence of print. Part II is concerned with writers: with the differences which printing made to the process of publication (chapter 3), and with the relations between writers and the world of print (chapter 4). The focus in Part III is on the public who read or who wished to read. After assessing the extent of literacy in the period, chapter 5 considers the affordability of printed books and the effect of the relative abundance of books on personal and public libraries. The final chapter looks at developments in the forms and the contents of the printed texts which were provided for readers.

The time seems ripe for a broadly based survey of this kind. In the past few decades, increasing attention has been paid to the need to build bridges between the study of the book itself and the study of the contexts in which texts were written, reproduced, bought, kept and read. D. F. McKenzie has argued persuasively in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* that there should be no border between bibliography and textual criticism on the one hand and literary criticism and literary history on the

other. Historians of the book are alert to the danger of divorcing books from their intellectual contexts, of allowing – to use a phrase of Roger Chartier’s in *The Order of Books* – their subject to become a history with neither readers nor authors. Especially since the publication in 1958 of *L’apparition du livre*, the pioneering work conceived by Lucien Febvre and written by Henri-Jean Martin, there has been a more widespread awareness of the technological and economic aspects of book production and consumption. As Luigi Balsamo stressed in an important article of 1973, ‘Tecnologia e capitali nella storia del libro’, a book is not just a ‘content’ but also an ‘object’, to be manufactured and traded alongside other commodities. Historians of Italian literature, including textual critics, have recognized that their subject is poorer if it is a history of authors unconcerned by who was going to read their works, what rewards they might receive for them, and how these works were going to be read, or a history of texts divorced from the processes by which they were diffused and the material forms in which they were received and interpreted – if, in short, they ignore Carlo Dionisotti’s call (in the memorable opening passage of his essay ‘Chierici e laici’, included in his *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana*) for the study of the real conditions in which that literature was created and transmitted.

My warmest thanks are due to those who helped in the making of *this* book. Foremost among them is Conor Fahy, himself one of the most skilful of bridge-builders between bibliographical and literary studies. He has generously offered valuable advice, information and constructive criticism from the earliest stages. Without his guidance and encouragement, and his expertise both in the techniques of printing and in the broader field of Renaissance culture, this book might never have been written and would certainly have been much the poorer. Richard Andrews was kind enough to read drafts of parts of the work and to offer stimulating suggestions. For help in obtaining information I am indebted to Christopher Challis, Franco D’Intino, Lotte Hellinga, Mario Infelise, Angela Nuovo and Oliver Pickering. Josie Dixon, Linda Bree and Jane Van Tassel of Cambridge University Press have piloted the enterprise with skill and tact. Finally, I am deeply grateful for the unfailing support of my family, especially my wife, Catherine.



### *A note on currency*

The basis of the monetary system in central and northern Italy during the Renaissance was 12 denari = 1 soldo, 20 soldi = 1 lira. However, coinage differed greatly from state to state. Florence, Milan, Rome and Venice all had a gold coin of similar value, weighing about 3.5 grams. That of Florence was called the fiorino (florin), while Milan, Rome and Venice each had a ducato (ducat). In the sixteenth century, these and other Italian cities began to mint a gold or silver scudo of slightly lower value; in Florence and Rome, for instance, the gold scudo began to replace the florin or ducat in 1530. The rates of exchange between the lira and the florin or ducat varied over time. The florin had a value of between 5.5 lire (in 1471) and 7.5 lire (in 1531). The Venetian ducat was worth 6.2 lire in the early sixteenth century but 10 lire at the end of the century.

There was also a wide range of coins of lesser value made of silver (for example, Venice had a silver soldo and a silver marcello, worth half a lira), and there was a varied petty coinage in base-silver or copper. The lira was simply a money of account until a silver coin of this value was minted, first in Venice under Doge Niccolò Tron in 1472 and then in other cities.

## *Abbreviations*

- ASV, ST Archivio di Stato, Venice, Senato Terra  
 BMC *Catalogue of Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century Now in the British Museum*, 9 vols. (London: British Museum, 1909–49)  
 EDIT16 *Le edizioni italiane del XVI secolo: censimento nazionale* (Rome: Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico, 1985– )  
 GJ *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*  
 GSLI *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*  
 GW *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1925– )  
 IGI *Indice generale degli incunaboli*, 6 vols. (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1943–81)  
 IMU *Italia medioevale e umanistica*  
 ISTC *The Illustrated Incunable Short-Title Catalogue on CD-ROM* (Reading: Primary Source Media in association with the British Library, 1997)  
 LB *La Bibliofilia*