



Reading the Book as Object

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Books are so common today, so much a part of the culture, we do not even notice ourselves taking them for granted. In general we pay them no particular respect or attention. They have their place in our daily lives and that, more or less, is the end of it.

In a different era, however, during the period when books first became widely available, they carried a power and value we find difficult to appreciate today. To get some sense of what it must have been like, we might imagine the aura that would surround 1994 ownership of one of a rare group of wafer-thin, satellite-connected "readers," each capable of instantly interfacing the user with anything in the world's major libraries. Books in thirteenth through fifteenth century Europe were like gold or silver; loaded with almost magical power. When they first became readily available, the ramifications for human learning were at least as profound as they are likely to be in the midst of the pending "electronic information revolution."

When we are lucky enough today to handle books from the era of manuscripts or early printing, they exude an authenticity and an integrity we find moving and awe inspiring. Why is this the case? Why do these old books, these inanimate objects, seem to speak so loudly, so proudly of their importance, of their moment in history?

Part of the answer was obvious to a young child as she was being interviewed by a National Public Radio commentator during a story about a store specializing in used toys.

"Do you actually prefer used toys compared to new ones?" asked the adult.

"Oh yes, some things" said the child. "Like what?" said the commentator. "Like books" said the child. "I like the used ones



because I imagine other children who have read them before me, maybe in bed, maybe in a corner of their room. I like that. The used books are much better that way."

Very likely few of us would differ on the point made by this child. We like the connection with the past when we handle an old book. We notice evidence left by past users—a well worked cover, finger marks accumulated from countless page turnings, perhaps notations in the margins. The old books carry with them a bit of the presence of previous readers, and that in turn makes the book more special.

But something more is happening. Why exactly is it that these objects exude such a dramatic presence? Why do they resonate so with the excitement of their time? Whence comes their power? The answer can be found, the author would offer, in taking a closer look at the thing itself and how it was made; the materials and techniques, the time and care that went into producing the book object.

To make the case, we could take a closer look at the production of vellum and parchment, or investigate calligraphy, typography, printing, or bookbinding. An exploration of

any of these arts would readily allow us to appreciate more deeply the significance of the material book. But let us consider papermaking, first because it will serve to make the point as readily as any of the other “technologies of the book” and secondly because, conveniently, it is the author’s specialty.

Seen in a brief demonstration, the making of a sheet of paper by hand appears deceptively simple. Indeed, it takes only a few seconds. But in its entirety, in an early European papermill, the process was long, laborious, and required the participation of many experts, much specialized equipment, and considerable capital outlay.

Consider first the raw material used to make paper in the best of early European books; old linen and hempen rags. Remember too, that until the invention of chlorine bleach in the early 1800s the method used to lighten the color of fine hempen or linen cloth was very time consuming in its own right. The cloth was immersed in a sour of milk or bran water, rinsed, transferred to an alkaline solution made from wood ashes, rinsed, washed, and then spread out and pinned down in an open bleaching field exposed to the sun. These steps were repeated continuously for a period of several months until the fabric “...seems of a uniform white, nor any darkness or brown color appears in its ground.”¹ Once turned into clothing, table and bed linen, and other useful items, the material was subjected to countless washings and dryings. In the end, the best quality old linen and hempen rags used in papermaking were of very high cellulose purity, tender, and very white in color.

After the rags were carefully sorted by skilled workers and cut into small pieces, they were wet down and fermented for a period of days or weeks to further cleanse them and to leave them more receptive to beating. After rinsing, the rags were beaten using mechanically driven trip hammers or “stampers” powered by a water wheel. All during the stamper beating, the

¹John Horner, *The Linen Trade of Europe during the Spinning Wheel Period* (Belfast, Ire: Linenhall Press, 1920), p. 371.

raggs were continuously washed using copious amounts of clear water. Again, prior to the invention of chlorine bleach, this was the only method of keeping the pulp light in color.

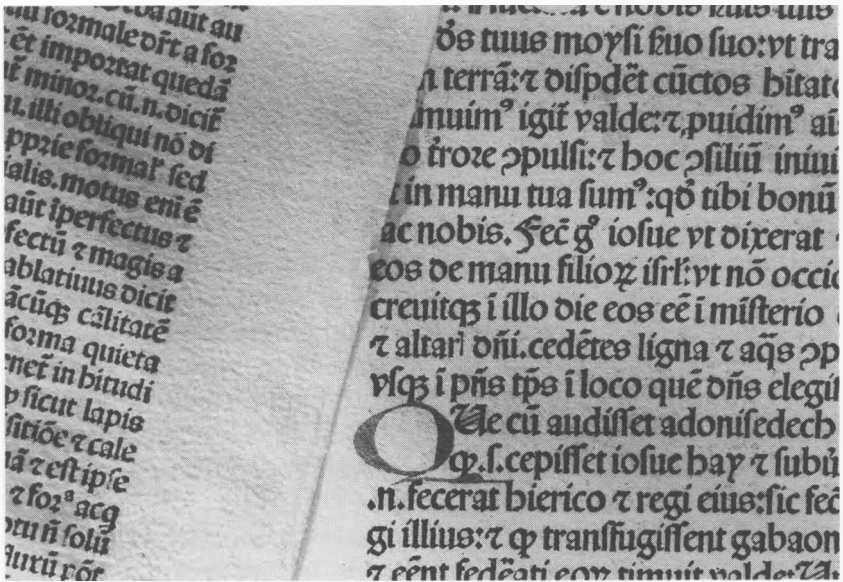
Following beating, the pulp was made into sheets by a skilled three-person team. The vatman formed the sheets on the flat sieve-like mould, and the coucher inverted the mould and pressed it against a damp felt thereby transferring the new wet sheet to the felt. After pressing, the layer separated each sheet from the felts. According to the eighteenth century paper specialist Lalande, working as a team a day's work would yield 1500-4000 sheets.²

Once pressed, the sheets were taken to the lofts to air dry. Later they were taken down, often sized by dipping the sheets in warm gelatin, pressed, hung to dry, and taken down again. Sheets intended for use in writing were often burnished by rubbing their surfaces with a smooth stone. The finished sheets were pressed, and then packed in reams and bales, ready for market. "On studying the sequence of operations which finally produce paper," says Lalande, "it can be seen that a sheet must pass through the workmen's hands more than thirty times, and approximately ten times under the presses . . ."³ From raggs to finished sheets, a ream of paper was many weeks in the making.

Why go to all this trouble, why expend such tremendous time and effort? The answer, simply enough, was that the market was clamoring for paper for books and writing. The demand, and the excitement about this important material drove the industry and fed the trade. The combination of the socio-economic atmosphere of the time and the fact that each sheet was made by hand together resulted in finished papers with tell-tale signs, with personality and character unlike that in later machine-made papers.

²Joseph de Lalande, *The Art of Papermaking*, trans. by Richard MacIntyre Akinson (Sixmilebridge, Ire: Ashling Press, 1976), p. 38.

³*Ibid.*, p. 56. For an additional reference, see Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: the History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (2nd ed.; New York: Dover, 1978).



Overlapping leaves from an early printed book.

With a bit of study one can learn to appreciate which papers were poorly made by hurried unskilled hands, and which were made with great care and an uncommon attention to detail. Likewise, similar signs, similar indications of skill and care can be seen in the other crafts that contributed to a finished book. Seen together as the book object, they help place the text in a given moment in history. The physical thing helps expand the meaning and value of the intellectual content.

Taking the time to learn about the various book trades allows one to perceive things about a book's time and place, or perhaps to glean something of the importance of its text when it was copied or printed. Attention to typography can help the knowledgeable reader mark the instant when type, first made to imitate strokes of the pen, was crafted into wholly different and new typefaces. With an eye for type, the reader can sometimes sense the date of the book without needing to hunt for the printer's mark or publishing date. Attention to the evolution of binding structures can allow the informed reader

to walk between stacks in a library and make good guesses at a book's era and country. With study, the book object acquires a new significance and speaks in whispers to its beholder. The object becomes a dynamic part of reading and understanding a book's contents. The world of the book and book culture begins to expand for those who can "read" the thing itself, as well as its contents.

Taken into the realm of scholarship, the specialist can look at a sheet of paper and say something about the attitude that prevailed in the fifteenth century shop where it was made. The binding expert starts to see a correlation between developments in book construction during a certain period and prevailing economic and social changes. These are subtleties that microfilm and digital recording will never capture; the readings possible only from books as objects.

What makes this lesson most curious, most compelling, is not so much what early book objects tell us about their value then, but what, ironically, they teach us about the preciousness of our own contemporary books now, and what they have to suggest about the importance to us of books not yet envisioned. In appreciating the older book object, we come to understand more clearly—across the spectrum of time—the significance of books, the importance of libraries, and the wonders of human culture. Learning to read the book as object may seem new and strange, but it is reading highly recommended.