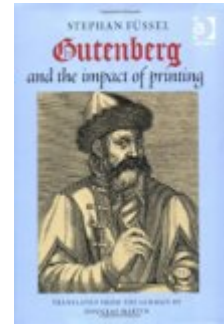


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephan Füssel. *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. 216 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3537-6.

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## Elite and Popular Print Culture in Early Modern Europe

Stephan Füssel's *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing* contains two major strands: one tells the story of the Gutenberg Bible in considerable detail. The other is a more broad-ranging consideration of Gutenberg's world and the impact upon and diffusion of printing through it. The work of a distinguished German scholar who leads the Institute for Book Studies in Mainz, this book draws upon decades of research. It was first published in a German edition in 1999, to coincide with the 600-year celebration of Gutenberg's nominal birth-year in 2000. Its translation into English is welcome and various sections of the book will appeal respectively to specialists in the field and to interested, but less informed, readers. Unfortunately, the price of the book, and the unlikelihood of it being released in paperback, means that this English edition will almost certainly reach a narrower audience than its German counterpart. Given this, the limited scholarly apparatus (especially the lack of footnotes) must be noted as a drawback for its likely audience.

In the early part of the book, Füssel tells the familiar story of Gutenberg's "invention of printing" with clarity and conciseness, filtering and distilling a great deal of scholarship, his own included. These sections would provide an ideal introduction for undergraduates or anyone new to the subject, and Füssel is assured on both technical and aesthetic issues. The detailed descriptions of and careful distinctions made between different editions of the Gutenberg Bible, however, are perhaps best suited to specialists looking for greater levels of detail. The later work and printing developments of Gutenberg's partner Johann Fust (and Fust's partner Peter Schoeffer)

in the wake of Gutenberg's death in 1468 are also examined, and lead into a discussion of the broader print culture that developed from the later fifteenth century. A chapter titled "The Spread of Printing" then briefly gives the general contours of the development of this culture across Western Europe. The section on the interactions between Germany and Italy are the most detailed and interesting. Others (notably on France) are rather perfunctory, although Füssel does provide more detail on England.

Cultural engagement between German lands and Italy, particularly in the form of humanist interactions, form a strong additional theme within the book and reflect its geographical core. An extended chapter on printing and humanism tells the story of how the development of printing technologies helped German humanists to participate in and contribute to wider intellectual developments. The circulation of multiple copies of classical texts—suitable for private study and teaching—was at the heart of this process. In a fascinating side note to this discussion, Füssel also provides examples of how cheap, simple publications can be rarer today than books considered more valuable at the time of printing. For example, no complete edition survives of the 28-page Latin grammar known as the *Ars minor* by Aelius Donatus, produced in many editions during Gutenberg's lifetime. Money-spinners like this were printed on the more expensive vellum, rather than paper, as they were destined for heavy use (until they fell apart) in classrooms.

Füssel certainly does not downplay the importance

of Latin texts, which made up 80 percent of books published before 1500. Yet while the shared international language of Latin was vital to the humanist enterprise, equally important was the new ability more easily to produce complicated texts in Greek and also Hebrew. Many of the key figures mentioned in this section of the book are particularly well known (Erasmus, Conrad Celtis, Johannes Reuchlin), but Füssel also discusses less-familiar authors and printers. In fact, his tendency towards comprehensiveness and inclusiveness makes sections of the book read a little too much like a richly annotated bibliography of humanist editions of classical authors. Some of his most interesting material instead concerns printing in the vernacular. These sections on vernacular publishing (almost entirely German texts) are both significant and fresh parts of the book, and demonstrate in some detail how printed materials reached audiences beyond highly educated ecclesiastics, nobles, and humanists. Füssel also gives a sense of the vigorous translation work being undertaken. This was one area where contributions by women are notable, such as the works by the noblewomen Elisabeth of Nassau-Saarbrücken and Eleonore of the Tyrol.

Füssel's chapter on popular books includes his most extended discussion of illustrations in early printed books. This chapter emphasizes the didactic and otherwise useful value of popular books, and includes sections on herbals as well as medical texts dedicated to general health and child-bearing. Much shorter chapters on broadsides and news, as well as the Reformation, round out the book. In the first, Füssel discusses how single-sheet, proto-journalistic publications circulated information on noteworthy events like terrible storms, discoveries of new lands, and the birth of monstrous children and animals. Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I also capitalized on the possibilities for communication and persuasion offered by such easily dispersed publications, as well as preparing more elite publications celebrating his personal achievements. Füssel notes how such widely available publications contributed to the "pre-history of the popular press" (p. 152). Shifting away somewhat from the specific development of moveable type, he also sketches out other facets of the new print culture, and in particular a world in which large-scale pictorial cycles in churches were supplemented (and in some respects superseded) by more private images. Cheaply produced woodcut prints made it feasible for the less wealthy to purchase private devotional images.

This discussion of widely available prints neatly segues into a chapter examining connections between

developments in printing and the Reformation. Here the importance of print was twofold. The first was that it provided a means for disseminating the word of God, especially through vernacular translations of the Bible. One of the most notable aspects of this section is Füssel's ability to convey how early modern and late medieval readers must have encountered these bibles as physical objects, and he also spends considerable time on Luther's approach to translation. The second was that printed pamphlets provided the means for the unprecedented public debates between Reformers and their opponents (and before long, as the new movement fractured, within the ranks of the Reformers as well). This latter aspect is dealt with in less detail, however.

Although not a large-format volume, the book is richly illustrated with sixty-two high-quality full-page color reproductions. These add substantially to Füssel's discussions of fonts, page layouts, illustrations, and the illuminations used to decorate early printed books like the Gutenberg bible. Despite its high production values, however, the book would benefit from more careful editing at a few minor points. The term "incunabula," for example, is used frequently throughout the book, yet given a careful definition only on p. 113, despite having appeared many times before this point. There are also some awkward italicizations, particularly variations of the word "bible," and the translator's occasional use of the word "Reformational" rather than "Reformation" seems unnecessary (see, for example, p. 169).

Füssel is ultimately a great enthusiast for printing in all its forms, and concludes with a discussion of recent developments in printing technologies and a consideration of future possibilities, including the single sheet of "paper" invented by Joseph Jacobson that has the capacity to display constantly changing pages of print. The history of printing has been a vigorous area of historical inquiry and debate for a number of decades. Key areas have included Elizabeth Eisenstein's contentious and influential thesis about the revolutionary quality of print, Roger Chartier's and Robert Scribner's work on aspects of popular printing in early modern France and Germany, respectively, and the large and growing body of research on the history of reading.[1] Füssel does not explicitly enter into these debates in this book. He does, however, emphasize the continuities from manuscript to print culture at least as much as the discontinuities. The extent to which printed books drew upon and were modeled after the form and content of manuscripts is given considerable weight here. The book is evidently not intended to be provocative in tone. But it does shift, in a stimulating

if not always balanced way, from in-depth examinations of traditional objects of study like bibles and humanist editions, to discussions of printed non-book publications like calendars and broadsheets and the broader culture that produced them.

Note

[1]. For an overview and a sense of the debates involved see the special AHR forum: Anthony Grafton, et al., "How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?" *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): pp. 84-128.

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