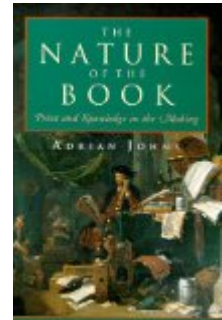




Adrian Johns. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xvii + 754 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-40121-8.



Reviewed by Arthur Williamson

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Adrian Johns's behemoth purports to provide a revisionist analysis of the rise of printing in early modern Europe. Deeply inspired and shaped by Steven Shapin's and, to a lesser extent, Simon Schaffer's work on the history of science, Johns seeks to explode the last area of "whiggery" (i.e., linear triumphalism) within this subject. If modern science has now emerged as a social construction, then no less was that agency so integral to it, the press. Johns's target is Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (1979). Eisenstein argues that print provided a "fixity" to writing, and in time a new culture that enabled people to compare texts, correct them (rather than continuously multiply errors), that created a common standard for the criterion of truth, and thereby underwrote experimental science and modernity itself. Nothing of the sort, insists Johns. Print was neither a stable nor atemporal category, as early modern people knew full and painfully well. "Truth" from the press derived from socially-constructed conventions that did not achieve general acceptance until the mid-eighteenth century Enlightenment, and

that would not become axiomatic and instinctive for yet another century. Even so, the cogency of print today continues to derive from analogous conventions that succeed only because they make radical skepticism socially difficult. Nothing is inherent to print, and, bluntly--or, "brutally," as Johns prefers--there simply is no such thing as Eisenstein's "print culture." At issue with Eisenstein, Johns stresses, is therefore not when print became stabilized as a coherent cultural medium, whether in the later sixteenth century or in the middle eighteenth century. Johns disputes what he perceives as her teleology of print.

Despite its enormous size, however, this study emerges quickly as rather less than what it claims to be. It focuses overwhelmingly on the years between 1660 and 1710, that is, between the Restoration and the copyright act. It also focuses on natural philosophy with the understanding that instability here will imply instability a fortiori in any other line of inquiry. Notwithstanding the occasional obeisance toward the continent, Johns is all but exclusively concerned with the English (not British) experience. Here his debt to Shapin be-

comes particularly glaring, and, although he does not say so, he seems to believe that England at this juncture comprises the axial moment for both natural philosophy and print.

The bulk of the book takes up in great detail the often angry and anguished interaction between stationers (printers, publishers, compositors, binders), booksellers, "mercuries," peddlers, licensers, patentees--not to mention patronage, coffee house society, as well as such august bodies as the Royal Society and the royal observatory. The point, underscored again and again (and again), is the weakness of authorial control and authorial voice. In the rough and tumble world of constant piracy and plagiarism, of false editions and composite editions, of quick epitomes and cheaply--produced redactions, and of continuously egregious errata, who could be confident of the writer's "true" meaning or of the putative points at issue between authors? In this world, Johns maintains, censorship carried more meanings than merely the nasty ones of today. Surprisingly, Johns does not consider legal libel, a matter that of necessity would become extremely problematic within this world. The history of printing, its invention and diffusion, entailed foci of contention that shaped the meaning, character, and authority of the medium. Even reading itself in the early modern world necessarily operated with different assumptions and differently configured objectives. Issues of corporate privilege and royal prerogative, of gentlemanly autonomy and the grasping of mere "mechanics," of "credit" and infamy, of "civility" and rapacity, all informed the dynamics that led to the modern world of print-dynamics, Johns stresses, that could have gone in any of a number of directions. Credibility only arose from newly created forms of sociability, and these structures, neither natural, nor inevitable, owed nothing to technology, but resulted from "hard work." The eighteenth-century illusion of human universality deliberately disguises these tortuous

(and tortured) processes that Johns seeks to excavate.

Johns so emphasizes the problems of the press and the reactions of the participants involved with it (on his telling, typically ranging from dismay to hysteria) that the reader is left wondering how the protocols of print actually did come together at all. Johns's methodological preoccupations and his concern to overturn Eisenstein lead him to stress cleavage and fissure at the expense of integration and coherence, even insecure integration and coherence. Johns is at his best when he steps back from the multi-valenced confrontations that fascinate him and considers the larger ideological structures through which the press was imagined and made meaningful. His discussion of John Streater's intellectual world of republicanism, spiritualism, physiology, and print during the English Revolution is genuinely exciting. Johns's account of Streater's Restoration volte-face--his alliance with the resolute monarchist Richard Atkyns and their defense of the royal authority--becomes a much more anemic discussion of political cut and thrust. Similarly, readers will likely wish that Johns had elaborated on Joseph Moxon's "Vitruvian principles" that apparently elevated printing from servile trade to learned "scientia." Freemasonry occasionally surfaces, and again readers will wonder how masonic notions of sociability interfaced with larger concerns about public discourse and the printed word. One might almost think that there existed long-standing, heterodox traditions associated with print. All of which must make us regret that Johns's lengthy discussion of the Edmond Halley-John Flamsteed confrontation barely notices that a dispute about going into print (or not) accompanied a dispute about orthodoxy. Severely circumscribed details, however plentiful, will only prove decontextualizing and thus impoverishing. Big books can also be stunningly narrow ones.

And this limited focus leads to a larger and what will be for many a decisive problem with

the claims this book makes for itself. Johns speaks of a "piratical culture" (146), a "stationers' culture" (159), a "genteel culture" (493), a "learned culture" (550), yet no culture of print? Johns's assertions can only go unqualified by adopting a highly selective and skewed approach to the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries. Of course print did in fact create a new world, one drastically different from that of script. Of course contemporaries were not only acutely aware of it but also celebrated as well as deplored it--and frequently with vastly less angst than Johns posits. Martin Luther saw it as the positive providential counterpoint at the end of days to the horrors of gunpowder: it is simply perverse of Johns to ignore this and cite a seventeenth-century manual that claimed (one imagines rhetorically) that the press had done ten times the harm of gunpowder (407). The reformers knew better. John Foxe, perhaps the most influential Anglophone writer in the early modern period, believed that each printing press comprised yet one more blockhouse against St. Angelo, the papal fortress. Sixteenth-century prints showed the reformers knocking down the walls of Babylon with bundles of printed books. For many the press possessed nothing less than an eschatological importance central to the historical redemption. Foxe surfaces but momentarily in Johns's account, as do apocalyptic expectations generally, a realm of thought with which Johns is visibly uncomfortable (52, 190, 230, 329, 335). Yet that is how these people saw their world and the press within it. As might be expected, Johns heavily emphasizes the qualifications and hesitations of thinkers like Francis Bacon and John Milton, but their larger vision becomes lost in the process.

To be sure, print from the outset prompted a huge range of responses, not unlike today's reaction to the internet, as Raymond Waddington has recently noticed. "Meretrix est stampificata:" the press early on could acquire a hostile, gendered image from writers distressed by their experience with it [1]. But by the end of the sixteenth century expectations of universal reform and, integral to

it, the imminent publication (in the fullest sense) of universally recognizable truth, had become exceedingly wide-spread. If print both required and helped create public space, then the intellectual foundations of that broader politics are all but unavoidable to any textured account of its history. We might wonder why Johns tells us so little about the politics of sociability and so much about the subjectivities of largely personalized disputes. This orientation naturally arises from the book's historiographical and epistemological context. Eisenstein wrote in the late 1970s, just before the main impact of Michel Foucault's thought--the latter's outlook being characterized by anti-political preoccupation with everyday struggles, severe subjectivity, critique of the Enlightenment with its universal claims, and firm insistence on the inherently arbitrary character of all "regimes of rationality." Writing in the late 1990s, Johns occupies the fading Foucauldian moment. For all the wealth of detail, for all the varied information it provides, Johns's book will likely become marginalized by the larger questions that now increasingly attract both scholarly and popular attention.

Yet another aspect of this book will limit its appeal. Johns chose as its epigraph some lines from Robert Herrick that wish "Extreame Scabbe" on those who read through the work and still reject it. The lines set what turns out to be a strikingly consistent tone throughout this remarkably self-regarding, self-referential, and self-indulgent volume. After nearly eight hundred pages informed by such a posture many readers may willingly risk the scab.

NOTE

[1]. R.B. Waddington, "Meretrix est Stampificata: Gendering the Press," in R.B. Barnes et al. (eds.), *Habent sua fata libelli: Books Have their own Destiny* (Kirkville, 1998), 131-41.

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