

Advertising and Selling Books in the Fifteenth Century

The large majority of printed books that survive from the fifteenth century were sold through the book trade, but we have only vague notions of how they were sold. We may fill in our ignorance with romantic scenes based on the lower or primitive levels of marketing: we imagine fairs, salesmen travelling with their merchandise on their backs, colporteurs who sold cheap chapbooks, shouting out their wares in the marketplace, and inns where booksellers might periodically set out their stalls before returning to their wearying journeys on the country roads. All this with a touch of *Die Winterreise*, the more so as many of the earliest witnesses of the book trade are located in a German landscape. For all we know, at least some of these imaginings may have taken place, but for the fifteenth century there is very little hard evidence of transactions at this lower level. The evidence for the larger-scale business of the book trade is growing, however, for instance the study of Peter Schoeffer's development as a book dealer, demonstrated in Chapter 4 of this book.

Despite four centuries of incunabular studies, surprisingly little is known about the early book trade. Much of that knowledge is not much more than a century old, as archival sources have gradually been brought to light and been connected with the history of printing and its dissemination. Of even more recent date is the realization that the invention of printing with movable type entailed not only further inventions and technical innovation, but also development of the art of publishing and the skills of marketing. When you have a warehouse filled with hundreds of delectable books that you have produced in a relatively short time, how are you going to find buyers for them? How do you defray your costs and get a return on your investment? This is precisely the situation faced by the first printers in Rome, Konrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz. It is famously set out in a letter Bishop Giovanni Andrea Bussi wrote on their behalf to Pope Sixtus IV, dated 13 November 1471 and printed in their great edition of the Bible with commentary by Nicolaus de Lyra. Sweynheym and Pannartz added up the number of copies of the texts they had multiplied in print in a period of just over six years. This amounted to the astounding total of 12,475 copies – and this was in the really early days of printing.¹

1 Quoted in BMC IV, p. 15.

The Need to Advertise

Sweynheym and Pannartz's printed letter was not a sales advertisement – it advertised the printers' plight and pointed out the high quality of their wares, but did not offer books for sale. Colophons in early books often sing the praise of the book (and its printer) – sometimes in highly wrought, enigmatic Latin with punning allusions. Less common in those early days are preliminary texts by scholars or prelates commending the printer and the quality of his printing, as well as the accuracy of the text. In other books the printer himself may introduce the work with a prologue. William Caxton, for example, is famous for the long English prologues in which he certainly advertised the products of his press. Although Caxton clearly commended his books to readers and buyers, his tone is not overtly commercial, but this is open to interpretation. His prologues are mostly lengthy and wordy, and no instance is known of any of them having been separately distributed as advertisements for his books. Other printers very occasionally included short recommendations as a first or final page. There are, however, a small number of single sheets still extant that without doubt offer one or more newly printed books for sale. In contrast to the colophons of the same period, their wording is never enigmatic, for that would defy their purpose: to make the quality of what was on offer very clear to whoever was reading the announcement.

The advertisements surviving from the fifteenth century – just under 50 known at present – are the earliest witnesses of use of the printing press for retail purposes. The advertisements were multiplied in print to serve on multiple occasions, over a period of time and probably often in different locations. Their survival has been precarious. They are unspectacular single sheets of varying sizes, destined for strictly ephemeral use, produced as handbills to be stuck to walls in public spaces or handed out. Their modern equivalents are found on conference tables, but those of the fifteenth century are less eye-catching, at least to the modern eye; in limited space (most are printed only on one side), they provide in words what they lack in visual attraction. Only Gheraert Leeu, well ahead of his time, sought to attract viewers by the picture of a half-naked woman. Others, more restrained, usually stress the quality of the printing types in the books on offer, with the advertisement serving as a specimen. Further recommendations are that they are *printed* books, the place of printing a guarantee of high standards. Caxton alone draws attention to the price, without committing himself further than a reference to 'good chepe'. Elsewhere there is no mention of prices (they might be accommodated according to circumstance and demand); instead generosity is mentioned as a characteristic of the salesman, who is 'largus' or even 'largissimus' in Latin and 'mild' in Low German.