THE VANISHING PRESS: PRINTING IN PROVINCIAL FRANCE IN THE EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Malcolm Walsby

France had been relatively slow in following the lead of Germany and Italy in introducing print; the first book was printed in Paris in 1470. But after these inauspicious beginnings the new industry quickly spread to a large number of provincial towns and cities. In Lyon, printing started in 1473 and the presses rapidly made the most of the numerous opportunities offered by such a strategically placed city. Elsewhere, printers set up shop in a number of provincial towns: Albi boasted a press just a year after Lyon and this was followed by Toulouse in 1476, Angers in 1477 and Poitiers in 1479. During the 1480s the number of geographic locations where printing was established shows the enthusiasm for the printed book. New centres of print appeared in Bréhan-Loudéac in 1484, in Rennes and in Tréguier in 1485, in Rouen in 1487 and in Troyes in 1489. The proliferation of the presses, however, slowed during the final decade of the fifteenth century.

The presses continued to prosper in Paris and in Lyon though they mutated to adapt to more difficult market conditions. The size, importance and location of these two cities ensured that printers would find a sufficiently large readership for their imprints. Elsewhere, few presses survived the first period of enthusiastic experimentation. It is the bleak fortunes of the printers who sought to establish themselves in these other towns that are the focus of this article. The vanishing of the presses is a fascinating phenomenon which has attracted little interest and even less research. The absence of an overall national bibliographical overview has made work in this field particularly complicated.¹ It is still difficult to ascertain exactly what happened to printing in provincial France once the initial enthusiasm of the incunabula era had

¹ This situation is about to change: the publication of Andrew Pettegree, Malcolm Walsby and Alexander Wilkinson's *French Vernacular Books. A Bibliography of Books Published in the French Language Before 1601* (Leiden, 2007) will be complemented by Andrew Pettegree and Malcolm Walsby's *FB III & IV: Books published in France before 1601 in Latin and languages other than French* (Leiden, 2011).
disappeared. Yet it is certain that these decades, that have been dubbed “la mystérieuse période de la fin du XVe et du début du XVIe siècle”, hold the key to understanding the transformation of the printing industry in the provinces that led to the emergence of a stronger and better organised network of presses.²

To investigate the fortunes of provincial printing in more detail we will exclude the case of Lyon which rapidly built up a strong print culture. Its strategic location on the Rhône and the important place it held as one of Europe’s leading trading cities as well as its large population all contributed to make it an ideal place for ambitious printers and booksellers. This was not the case for most French cities and we shall begin by looking at what happened to the presses in these other towns and how the presses that had been set up so enthusiastically gradually disappeared.

The Weakness of Provincial Printing

The first decades after the appearance of the incunabula book in France were marked by a swift propagation of the presses through the provinces. We know of almost forty different centres of print situated in the kingdom of France, the duchy of Brittany and Franche-Comté before 1501. The nature of these centres varied a great deal, ranging from small villages such as Bréhan-Loudéac in Brittany to large conurbations. However, one of the specific features of the French incunabula world was the insignificance of the printed output of many of these centres. If a surprisingly large total of a dozen books can be credited to the press that was set up in Bréhan, many of the large towns only housed a printer for a few months giving him just enough time to publish two or three titles before he moved on. Thus we only know of six books printed in Tours, four in Dijon and just one in Orléans. The large number of places where books were printed in the incunabula era therefore masks the ephemeral nature of their presence in these towns.

The fragility of the achievements of these first presses is also demonstrated by the fact that the early implantation of a printer was sometimes completely forgotten even in the town where the printing had taken place. Thus when the presses returned to Rennes in 1524, after

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