THE CONSTELLATED AXIOCHUS AND THE MOUVANCE OF THE PRINTED TEXT

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Elizabeth Eisenstein’s concept of fixity, as presented in her work *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, is often misunderstood. Rather than referring to the permanent fixing, or galvanizing, of the wording of a particular text, fixity is Eisenstein’s way of drawing attention to the preservative powers of print through sheer multiplication of copies, since only increased numbers place a text beyond the reach of accident. It is a print concept that she opposes – not to the textual drift of medieval manuscript copying – but to textual extinction, the deterioration and loss of texts in manuscript culture.¹

Fixity might seem to be at the other end of the theoretical spectrum from Paul Zumthor’s concept of *mouvance*, a term for the fundamental instability of medieval manuscript texts. Yet it is my contention that both of these concepts are useful for understanding early printed books, in order to, as Zumthor says, try to perceive the text according to the mode of existence it enjoyed in its own time. Zumthor identifies *mouvance* as a potential incompleteness which the medieval text carries within itself, and this inherent mobility offers a sense of renewal.² In this paper I want to explore what *mouvance* might mean when applied to early printed books: not with a view to internal changes in wording, but rather to explore how external placement reveals a printed text’s potential for renewal through relational mobility. Particularly I will explore how some early printed editions of *Axiochus*, a pseudo-Platonic dialogue on how to die well, become different books according to how they are placed or fitted in a relational way with other texts. This is part of my larger thesis about the componental nature of all early printed books: a method of book production which viewed texts as pieces to be arranged and rearranged into larger wholes,

² Paul Zumthor, “Le poète et le texte,” in *Essai de Poétique médiévale* (Paris, 1972), 64–75; translated by Philip Bennett as *Toward a Medieval Poetics* (Minneapolis, 1992), 40–49.
quite different from the modern notion of a book as a perfected totality with restrictive boundaries.

Between 1480 and 1600 Axiochus was printed 40 times in separate issues; of these, eight survive today in Oxford libraries. These exemplars provide a cross-section of the different kinds of editions that would have been available in the period. What is remarkable is that, when we imagine what a reader would experience in picking up each of these volumes, a different book materializes in each case. A chronological description of these copies highlights how the construction and placement of the text speaks differently of what each one is as a book.

The first example is an edition of Ficino’s translation of Axiochus published in Paris by Guy Marchant in 1498. Marchant, despite being known for such works in the vernacular as the illustrated Danse macabre, printed mostly in Latin and aimed most of his works at a university clientele. Prior to printing this compilation volume, Marchant had printed 98 books, including works by Pico della Mirandola, Christine de Pizan, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (his introduction to Aristotle), theological texts by Bonaventure and Jean Gerson, and the ever popular Ars moriendi. At the time of this printing, Ficino was still alive and his Axiochus had already appeared in single issue in 1497, in a volume published by Aldus Manutius in Venice which included a number of works of Neo-Platonism. Ficino is the translator of both the first text, an excerpt from Athenagoras, and the Axiochus, which he, according to a reading of Diogenes Laertius, attributed to Plato’s disciple Xenocrates. The third text in this volume is part of the Tabula Cebetis which had a wide circulation in antiquity. It is another pseudonymous work, supposedly authored by Cebes the disciple of Socrates, and translated here by Ludovicus Odaxius of Pavia. However, the link with the Axiochus is made clear in the wording on the title page:

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