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Introduction

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

THE eighteenth century was an age of ideas. In England it was also an age of censorship. That is not the familiar story. To the degree that an ‘enlightenment’ could be said to have occurred on English shores in the first half of the eighteenth century, it has generally been attributed to the early emergence of a national press that was more or less free from state oversight.¹ In 1695, earlier legislation stipulating that all books and pamphlets should be licensed before they were published was allowed to lapse. And from this moment on, so the story commonly goes, an unfettered press facilitated a marketplace of ideas in which the intellectual cream rose to the top while the scum was allowed to sink into obscurity. Liberty of the press became the foundation of political, literary, philosophical, and scientific progress. Voltaire, having spent time in the salons of London between 1726 and 1728, would later capture this view with characteristic élan. ‘Had there been a literary censorship in Rome, we should have had today neither Horace, Juvenal, nor the philosophical works of Cicero’, he asserted. And if ‘Milton, Dryden, Pope, and Locke had not been free, England would have had neither poets nor philosophers.’² It was liberty of expression that enabled intellectual and artistic innovation. And it was such innovation that set the nation marching along the path to modernity.³

Voltaire was wrong, though, and dangerously wrong at that. Despite the end of pre-publication licensing for printed books in 1695, the

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publishing industry remained subject to invasive government surveillance and harassment. If caught printing or distributing seditious, blasphemous, or treasonous books, printers and publishers risked imprisonment, fines, the pillory—even death. Spies and double agents lurked around every corner. Freelance informants were encouraged to turn on their colleagues in exchange for cash. Dissident authors and printers were hunted down like rats. As late as 1738, foreigners in London were comparing English suppression of the press to the conduct of the papal inquisition in Spain.⁴ Right at the heart of previous accounts of the early enlightenment in England we therefore find a paradox. Attending to censorship as it was experienced by the book trade rather than as a matter of legislation reveals liberty of the press to have been a mirage. How, then, did such a vibrant print culture manage to thrive under the strictures of a persistent and oppressive censorship regime?

This book is about that paradox and what happens when the constraints of state censorship are resisted from below. My answer to the question posed above is very simple. The climate of political engagement and intellectual controversy associated with the rise of a ‘public sphere’ in England was built not on the sudden emergence of a free press, but on the continuing secretive labours of a literary underground. For years, the common assumption has been that this hidden trade in proscribed books dwindled into irrelevance with the end of the licensing regime in 1695.⁵ It did not. If anything, authors, printers, and publishers became even more secretive in their methods and more guarded in their dealings with the public.⁶ They needed to be because the rigid structures of state licensing were replaced by less formal and thus more flexible modes of harassment and intimidation. For the sociologist Jürgen Habermas and his followers, it was the ‘elimination of the institution of censorship’ in England that ‘made the influx of rational-critical arguments into the press possible and allowed the latter to evolve into an instrument with whose aid political decisions could be brought before the new forum of the public.’⁷ According to this line of reasoning, it was the fundamental transparency of modern print culture that enabled the free exchange of ideas through which the ‘public’ would construct and come to recognise itself. Except the defining feature of

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metropolitan print culture in the early eighteenth century was not transparency but opacity. When anonymous pamphlets with false or incomplete imprints appeared in coffee houses and taverns, they did not help to construct a common civic identity committed to the open exchange of ideas. Instead, these objects reminded readers that there was an illicit world of shadowy puppeteers with unknowable motives pulling the strings of social discourse from behind the curtain.

And yet these clandestine activities also left footprints in the sand; patterns that could be identified, traced from book to book, and interpreted by readers. Here is an example. In the summer of 1710, a substantial octavo pamphlet of two hundred pages (or twelve and a half sheets) was published with the title *Soliloquy: or, Advice to an Author*. The author of the treatise was not named and nor was the printer, although the principal body of text was prefaced by a brief anonymous address, observing that it was ‘the misfortune of us printers; that having so freely accommodated our authors with our name and person, we have neither left us for our private use, nor are supposed to have any speech or utterance of our own.’⁸ The only person named on the title page was the wholesale distributor, who probably knew nothing of the author and may even not have known who printed the book he was selling. There was, however, a different kind of clue on the title page: an oblong arrangement of eight little fleurons.

On their own, these ornaments signal nothing. Just like founts of type, they were mass produced, cast in metal from matrices, and the same designs were used in multiple London printing houses at the same time.⁹ However, such specific arrangements of fleurons are, as one eminent scholar puts it, akin to ‘bibliographical fingerprints’, and the oblong on this title page was an identifiable quirk of human hands.¹⁰ Precisely the same configuration had been used two years earlier on the title page of another anonymous pamphlet, *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), and within a month of *Soliloquy* being published it would be reused for a new edition of a rabidly Whiggish pamphlet called *A Dialogue betwixt Whig and Tory*, which had originally appeared in 1693.¹¹ Looking further afield, extremely similar oblong groupings of the same ornament, extended or contracted by one or two columns, depending

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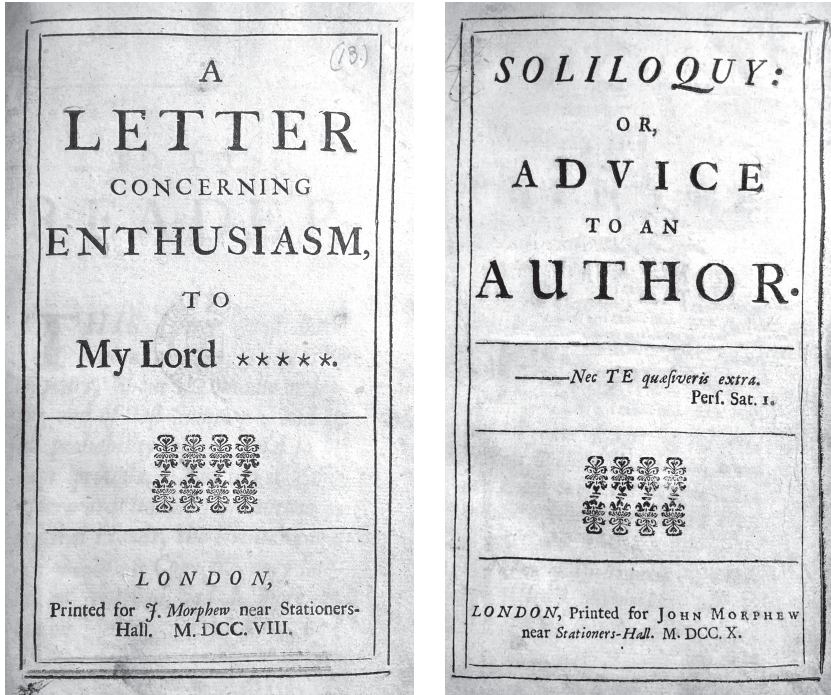


FIGURE 0.1. Four pamphlets decorated with similar arrangements of fleurons.

on the available space, can be found adorning the title pages of several other pamphlets of a militant Whig hue [FIG. 0.1].¹² These include the bellicose tract *Considerations on Peace and War*, which appeared on the London streets late in December 1709, just six months before *Soliloquy* was published, and the equally warmongering *The Offers of France Explain'd*, which would come out eighteen months later, in 1712, objecting to the settlement that would soon bring the War of the Spanish Succession to a purportedly unsatisfactory conclusion.¹³

We now know that *Soliloquy* and its lookalike predecessor *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* both came from the pen of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury. These texts have been treated by modern scholars as works of ponderous moral philosophy, befitting Shaftesbury's eminence among the leading figures of what Jonathan Israel has termed the 'radical Enlightenment'.¹⁴ Soon after *Soliloquy* was

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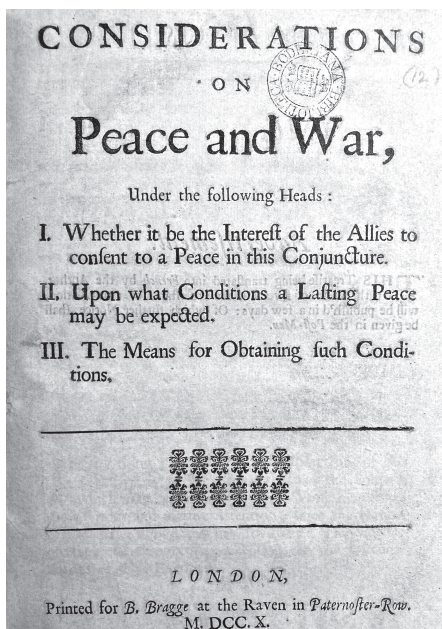
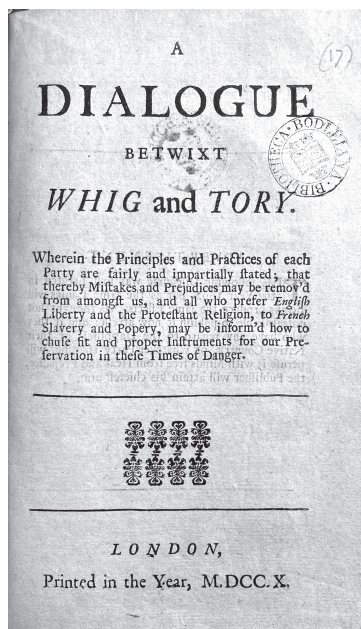


FIGURE 0.1. (*continued*)

published in its standalone form, Shaftesbury incorporated both essays into his *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), and in that context these texts positively demand the kind of weighty treatment that scholars have given them. Here the essays appear as works of serious intellectual ambition in the tradition of Machiavelli and James Harrington. However, in their initial pamphlet form *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* and *Soliloquy* appeared to be something rather different: anonymous potshots fired into the culture wars of early eighteenth-century England from the gloom of the literary underground.

The central contention of this book is that such patterns are not superficial. They matter because contexts shape the interpretation of texts. The same text can mean something very different when encountered in an anonymous pamphlet purchased from a back-alley dealer as opposed to when encountered in a properly attributed collection of works with an author's portrait and a legitimate imprint.¹⁵ They also matter because the lofty heights of the English enlightenment, with its apparent focus

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on and celebration of polite sociability and rational debate, can otherwise seem very distant from the rough and tumble of the clandestine book trade. Careful reassessment of the evidence reveals each to have been much closer to the other than has previously been assumed. We therefore need to understand how this system operated and where it overlapped with the above-board world of coffee-house sociability with which scholars of the period are already so familiar. How did authors and printers shield one another from government surveillance? What techniques did they use to disguise their handiwork? Where and from whom could dangerous books be purchased and where would they be read? What was the broader impact of clandestine printing, both on the book trade and on the reading public?

For years these fundamental questions have been assumed impossible to answer. In an essay first published almost thirty years ago, the influential book historian D. F. McKenzie asserted that the English clandestine trade was too elusive to merit sustained investigation. Whereas scholars of the French underground press such as Robert Darnton had been ‘richly served by their archival records,’ there was ‘nothing comparable’ for the English trade in dangerous books. Even by the start of the eighteenth century, McKenzie declared, the government’s ‘fitful and inefficient censorship has left few telling accounts to enliven our reports of those affected by it.’¹⁶ Except this claim, too, is false. Trawling through the English state papers reveals many hundreds—perhaps thousands—of documents concerning the investigation and prosecution of members of the underground book trade during the early decades of the eighteenth century, ranging from anonymous tip-offs and intelligence briefings to interrogation transcripts.¹⁷ These documents provide us with precisely the kind of privileged access to government enforcement that McKenzie thought unattainable.

At the same time, though, McKenzie was not wrong to emphasise the technical difficulties of this field of inquiry.¹⁸ After all, successful printers and booksellers remained one step ahead of the authorities by using cloak-and-dagger techniques to keep their activities secret. They did not get caught. In such cases official documents are often useless or,

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worse, misleading. Hence the importance of analytical bibliography, the evidential value of which McKenzie was notoriously reluctant to concede.¹⁹ Paying forensic attention to the physical attributes of illicitly printed books can help us penetrate the gloom surrounding their production: matching up ornaments and broken pieces of type to identify the handiwork of individual printers, using watermarks and other forms of paper evidence to determine false publication details on title pages, collating gatherings to identify where an illicit book was divided between multiple workshops, and so on.²⁰ On top of this, we have contemporary accounts of how the underground press operated, including directions to smugglers, instructions for dead-drops and secret handovers, and descriptions of the arts of disguise used by printers, such as the use of false names, dates, and places in imprints.

This book is, in many ways, both a case study in and a reckoning with McKenzie's legacy. My experience suggests that analytical bibliography is a more powerful tool than he was willing to acknowledge. And yet at the same time it is no panacea. Consider the following incident. In 1696 a brief pamphlet called *An Account of the Proceedings in the House of Commons, in Relation to the Recoinning the Clipp'd Money, and Falling the Price of Guineas* began circulating in London. On 28 October, parliament deemed the book to be 'false, scandalous, and seditious' and, having condemned the book to be burned by the common hangman, convened a committee to investigate its authorship and printing.²¹ During the course of their investigation, members of the committee learned that a disreputable printer called James Dover, who was known to mingle in dissident circles and had in the previous year been caught printing seditious libels from a press hidden in a cellar on Petticoat Lane [APPENDIX 2], had been overheard confessing his role in the scandal.²² Meeting with a friend at the Salutation Tavern on Newgate Street in the west of London, Dover had 'shewed him one of the said pamphlets, printed in the same character with that shewn him at the committee; and told him he had printed 1,000 of them; and had been paid for them; and had liberty given him to reprint as many of them as he pleased, to disperse'. He then attempted to recruit this friend to finance a second

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printing, telling him that if he 'would find his proportion of paper, and reprint the same, he should come in a partner with him in the profits thereof; telling him the same would sell well'.

When questioned about this story by the assembled committee, Dover initially protested that it was all lies. And, to demonstrate his innocence, he urged that 'he never had any letters of that character where-with the same were printed'. In other words, the offending book was printed in a typeface that he did not possess. The committee was welcome to inspect his workshop; they would not find a matching fount of type. A forensic interpretation of the physical evidence could lead only to one conclusion: that he was not guilty of this crime. At this point, though, Dover's stepfather, John Darby, another printer with ties to the literary underground, albeit of a very different political stripe, 'confronted him with his having lent him letters of the same character' as those used to print the book. This new evidence was evidently considered fatal to Dover's case, for at the next committee meeting he apologised 'for having so long prevaricated' and 'for having told them so many lies', and finally 'owned that he did print the said pamphlet' using the type borrowed from his stepfather.²³

What can we learn from this incident? That bibliography has its limits and we must be conscious of them. In the case of *An Account of the Proceedings in the House of Commons*, typographical analysis would seem to finger Dover's stepfather, John Darby, who had lent him the identifiable fount of type. There are indeed other books that show Dover using Darby's founts and ornaments when printing material on his own behalf.²⁴ And yet the contemporary documentary evidence shows just how careful we need to be in interpreting the bibliographical record. Sometimes a typeface is merely a typeface. Sometimes agency is an altogether more complex question than can be resolved by physical evidence alone. All of which ought to be enough to demonstrate that just as documentary book history is a shaky edifice when it lacks a strong bibliographical foundation, the opposite is also true: bibliography without book history risks fundamental error.²⁵ My method in this book is omnivorous, drawing evidence from across the board, including government papers, contemporaneous anecdote and commentary, and the

physical evidence of books and other printed materials.²⁶ I do not rely on one or two exceptional case studies but on a panoramic view of the underground trade *in toto*. Occasionally there will be moments when the documentary evidence seems to pull in one direction while the bibliographical evidence pulls in another. Such moments of evidential discrepancy are an inevitable feature of scholarship and in such cases it is the duty of the historian to adjudicate and pick a side.

What we find when we combine these complimentary modes of investigation is that during the early years of the eighteenth century the dividing line between the licit and illicit book trades was tissue thin. The underground press was not a distinct entity unconnected to the ordinary world but rather part of the same ecosystem as the above-board trade in books, pamphlets, broadsides, and other forms of ephemeral print. Within that ecosystem there were printers and distributors who specialised in contraband goods. Several such figures will repeatedly enter our story. We have met two of them already. Many of the same people who trafficked in works of controversy and polemic also peddled other varieties of black-market print, including forgeries of official documents and piracies of bestsellers. In due course we shall see that these two sides of the underground press need to be considered in tandem. But there were also otherwise respectable printers who dabbled in illicit material alongside their above-board businesses. And sometimes the lowliest deadbeats of the literary underground would attempt to go straight and become law-abiding citizens, only to be sucked back into the seedy underbelly of the book trade.

My aim in this book is not merely to compile evocative vignettes or sketch pen-portraits of the chief heroes and villains of Grub Street. Neither do I wish to become ensnared either in contemporaneous philosophical debates about freedom of the press, which nearly always occurred at an unhelpful level of abstraction, nor in the literary techniques of misdirection and innuendo that satirists used to skirt the laws against seditious libel.²⁷ I am concerned first and foremost with the material conditions in which dangerous books were written, printed, and read, for more than any other factor those material conditions delimited the imaginative parametres within which the philosophical and literary

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discussions could take place.²⁸ This book is as much a work of sociology as of book history or literary history or intellectual history; or what Darnton, following Peter Gay, called the ‘social history of ideas.’²⁹ My goal is to outline the rules of the publishing game and how to break them. Had it been written three hundred years ago, this book would, I hope, have been a very practical guide for novice authors and printers looking to make inroads into the ‘old trade of libelling.’³⁰ Wherever possible, I have tried to illustrate chapters with cautionary tales and the kinds of insider gossip with which a veteran of the trade might regale a nosy apprentice, not just to entertain them while they worked but also to prepare them for a life on the edge of the law.

The book is divided into four parts. The first deals with the legal and extra-legal challenges facing the underground press, with individual chapters on regulation, espionage, and prosecution. The second part explores collaboration within the book trade, looking at how printers, authors, publishers, and figures external to the trade worked together to mask their activities from government surveillance. The third part investigates how printers disguised their handiwork, ranging from forgery and the use of decoy imprints to the concealment of printing equipment and the smuggling of books from abroad. The fourth and final part of the book considers the circumstances under which the reading public encountered secretly printed books and considers how these books may have coloured attitudes towards print in the public arena.

In his preface to Shaftesbury’s *Soliloquy*, the anonymous printer of the book complained that members of his trade are not ‘supposed to have any speech or utterance of our own.’³¹ Yet their voices are everywhere in the documentary record: we hear them grumble and carp and bluff in sworn affidavits and correspondence with authors; detect their fastidious attention in marked-up manuscripts and proof sheets; taste their fear in the reports of spies and informants. And once we know what we are listening for, we can also hear them whisper in the typography and ornamentation of printed books and pamphlets, and even in the rustle of paper and the thud of bound boards. This book is an exercise in allowing the inhabitants of the literary underground to speak for themselves. All we need to do is listen.

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