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Presses and Printshops

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Abstract

Women were enmeshed in the material workings of the early modern book trades. In the printing houses and shops of early modern Europe, women worked as compositors, proofreaders, printers, publishers, bookbinders, and wholesale and retail booksellers, and they conveyed and sold printed wares in the public spaces beyond the press and the printshop. The widows of stationers who took over the businesses of their husbands represent the most visible cases of a more pervasive reality—one in which women regularly worked to make and distribute the products of print.

Keywords

Book trade · Bookshops · Business · Printers · Publishers · Widows

Introduction

The first stationer listed in R. B. McKerrow's *Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers, 1557–1640* is Elizabeth Adams, an entrepreneurial bookseller active between 1620 and 1625 (Farmer 2020, 62; McKerrow 1910, 1). While the notices contained in the *Dictionary* record the contributions made by women like Adams to the publication, printing, and distribution of early modern printed books, their presence is entirely suppressed within McKerrow's introduction to the work, which extrapolates from the all-male hierarchy of the Stationers' Company to presume a book trade community composed exclusively of men.

More recent work, notably that of Maureen Bell (1987, 1996) and Helen Smith (2003, 2012), has begun to correct this imbalance by documenting women's active roles in the production and sale of early modern printed books. Women, they have shown, were enmeshed in the early modern book trades. Printing in the period was a material business, involving a range of objects and embodied processes: the handmade rag-paper used as a substrate, the metal type arranged dextrously into words on a composing stick and eventually locked up into a forme, the leather inking balls used to beat oily ▶ ink onto the type and soaked overnight in workers' urine—and of course, the printing press itself. The names given to the two press operators, the beater and the puller, make clear the intensive demands of such manual work. In the printing houses and shops of early modern Europe, women worked as compositors, proofreaders, printers, publishers, ▶ bookbinders, and wholesale and retail booksellers, and they conveyed and sold printed wares in the public spaces beyond the press and the printshop. The widows of stationers who took over the

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businesses of their husbands represent the most visible cases of a more pervasive reality—one in which women regularly worked to make and distribute the products of the printing press.

Women's Presses and Printshops

Early modern widows of printers and publishers often inherited the businesses of their husbands. Such a legacy could include not only the physical premises, ▶ paper, type, and other materials of the press, but also responsibility for any apprentices and, crucially, "the right to publish lucrative titles, rather than having to pay to acquire them" (Farmer 2020, 56). Most stationers' widows did not continue to print or publish after their husbands had died, and those who did might seem to "surface abruptly in the records upon the death of their husbands, only to disappear just as suddenly upon remarriage or their own subsequent deaths" (Smith 2003, 167). While women's scant presence in the Short Title Catalogue's (STC) Index of Printers and Publishers might indicate that women emerged into and receded from the trade according to this pattern, this model has been replaced by the more likely suggestion that those widows known to be active in the period between bereavement and remarriage had already been steady partners in the businesses which bore their husbands' names (Bell 1996, 18; Smith 2012, 102, 109–17).

Widow stationers such as Alice Bailey Charlewood Roberts and Joan Sturgis Kingston Robinson Orwin are now known to have provided continuity, maintained networks, and supplied direction for their businesses across successive marriages to different stationers (Neville 2020). The thrice-widowed Widow Orwin (as she most frequently styled herself) buried her third husband, Thomas Orwin, in 1593 and acquired "sixty-five titles to her name between 1593 and 1597," at which point her son Felix Kingston officially took over the printing house (Smith 2012, 102–70). Yet the Widow Orwin's continued presence in the family business is suggested by her appearance in the records of the Stationers' Company in 1598, 1599, and 1605 (Neville 2020, 86–87, 92). Moreover, Sarah Neville's tally of edition-sheets produced by Orwin's two presses when she ran them independently shows that their average yearly output surpassed or rivalled that of her husband's (2020, 88). The agency that Orwin exercised as the head of a productive printing house found its material correlative in her cutting away of her husband's initials, "T. O.," from the woodcut device she had inherited from him and which she went on to use as her own printer's device on at least seventeen occasions (Boeckeler 2020, 95, 106–08).

While the Widow Orwin may appear exceptional for her long career, trio of marriages, and unusually prolific presses, she is by no means unique in her successive marital unions, her role as the interim head of a printing house that would be passed on to her son, or her intention to leave her mark on the books she printed. She also epitomises one noteworthy trend in the history of the early modern English book trade. Alan Farmer has observed that women printers like Orwin who worked independently between their widowhood and remarriage were highly likely to remarry other stationers. In doing so, they "advanced their new husband to the position of a master printer" and seem to reveal their own desires to continue working within the trade (Farmer 2020, 52–53). Widow publishers who took over the business were generally risk-averse (opting to bring out fewer editions, and to publish works that had already proven to be good sellers), though a few were more entrepreneurial, choosing to publish new works and authors, and to do so more frequently, than did their husbands. The first strategy is exemplified by Joyce Macham, who was very active as a publisher following her husband Samuel's death, and who secured the business by republishing her husband's bestselling titles and largely retaining the same printers. The second, riskier model was adopted by Joan Broome, who published more titles than her husband William, forged alternative printing relationships, and undertook new business ventures as a wholesaler. Both approaches, which Farmer labels "conservative" and "entrepreneurial" respectively, had their benefits, and they show a sophisticated understanding of the trade which likely derived from

the women's longstanding involvement in the business prior to their widowhood (2020, 54–57).

The work of women was essential to maintaining the genealogies of commerce upon which the trade depended (Smith 2012, 103–06). According to Bell, seventy-five per cent of the women identified in the legal and administrative records of the book trade were "the wives or widows of stationers and of those at least 20 per cent were also mothers or mothers-in-law of stationers" (2002, 441). The influence of women on the output of the books officially published by their husbands and sons is illustrated by the career of Joan Butter Newbery. Following the death of her first husband, she speculated in newsbooks under her own name and was probably responsible for the subsequent family investments in the genre made by her second husband and by her son, Nathaniel Butter (Neville 2020, 80–81). The 5.4% of ▶ women stationers cataloged in the STC Index of Printers and Publishers does not account for the fact that many contemporaries of Newbery and Orwin "worked invisibly during the lives of their husbands and sons" (Smith 2012, 100). The widow stationer Anne Griffin has been identified as "the most prolific widow publisher from 1540 to 1640" on the basis of her role in bringing out sixty-eight editions over an eighteen-year period. Many of these were "silent editions" in which she co-invested with male publishers but in whose imprints she was not named (Farmer 2020, 57–58).

The material exigencies of life for the widows of early modern stationers are dramatically illustrated by some of the earliest printers in colonial America. Elizabeth Harris Glover, whose husband contracted a fever and died in 1638 during the crossing from London, inherited and continued the printing business that he had intended to establish in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Hudak 1978, 9–24). Following the death of her own husband around 1695, and with two small children in her charge, Dinah Nuthead applied for and received a license to print from the Governor in Annapolis, Maryland (Hudak 1978, 25–32). Thus, the verbal formula used to describe those printers' widows who "keepeth the printing house" after being bereaved suggests a range of pivotal roles borne out in the careers of widow stationers (Smith 2012, 90). Not only did such women "keep" or retain legal possession of the business, but they were also charged with the responsibilities that came with it, such as maintaining the premises in good order, supporting apprentices, keeping the books, and continuing the activity of the press (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2024).

In the absence of their husbands, women are known to have taken charge of the business by negotiating payments, printing unfinished titles, and taking on new projects. In some cases, a woman served as her husband's accomplice in the trade in illicit books, as when Anne Fowler remained in London to receive a shipment of Catholic books sent by her husband John from Paris (Smith, 2012, 111–14, 168). The extent to which "the printing house and household overlapped, and the boundaries between the two could be permeable" is shown by the fact that the penalties for dealing in seditious printed matter could fall not just onto the proprietors of a bookshop, but onto their domestic workers. Thus, in 1609 John and Joan Daubrigscourt, together with their female servant, were imprisoned for having imported a satirical Catholic work into London from France (Smith, 2012, 124, 168). Bookshops were generally attached to the homes of their proprietors and the merging of domestic and commercial space meant that women would conduct a range of business with the public: "Bookseller, Cash-keeper, managed all my Affairs for me" are the terms in which bookseller and author John Dunton characterized the involvement of his wife Elizabeth Annesley Dunton in their business (McDowell 1998, 37). The activities of these printers and publishers reveal that women could be active partners in the presses and printshops officially run by their husbands, and not only following their deaths.

Women with Inky Fingers

Beyond the "financial and proprietorial interest" women maintained in the trade, they also participated in the material work of making, selling, and distributing printed wares (Smith 2012, 96). In the

printing house, girls are known to have worked as printer's devils, or apprentices, and to have been tasked with removing sheets from the tympan of the press (McDowell 1998, 46). Female workers also engaged in work that required literacy. The Quaker printer Tace Sowle was made free of the Stationers' Company following her father's death and ran the family business for over fifty years; in 1705 she was described as "a good Compositor herself." In the colony of Rhode Island, the widowed Ann Franklin trained her daughters to be compositors (McDowell 1998, 36, 39). Young girls were also employed as readers or "lectores" who recited aloud from the copy text while the corrector checked the proofs (Johns 1998, 90–91, 93). In the humanist printing house of Christophe Plantin in Antwerp, the printer reported that his four eldest daughters read proofs aloud in the various languages he printed, including Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (Grafton 2020, 40–41). The widows, wives, and daughters of bookbinders likewise participated in the trade, and an official prohibition of female servants from binding or sewing books suggests that they, too, were engaged in this manual work (McDowell 1998, 51–28; Smith 2012, 97–98, 155–56).

Beyond the Press and Printshop

It has been estimated that the majority of women in the London book trade—about sixty per cent—worked in a distribution or retail capacity (Bell 2002, 440). Booksellers were a heterogeneous group. The relatively wealthy publisher-booksellers who speculated and sold books may be counted amongst them, but that group also included mercury women, chapwomen, hawkers, and an informal network of servants, binders, and wives of stationers who were also engaged in the work of distributing goods between printshops and the public (Johns 1998, 99; Smith 2012, 94). Mercuries were a mobile group of wholesale distributors who transmitted newsbooks and pamphlets from shop to shop (McDowell 1998, 55–58). They were typically the wives, widows, or daughters of printers and constituted a "mainly female community . . . that the formal hierarchy of the Stationers' Company so resolutely excluded" (Johns 1998, 310). More marginalized were the female hawkers and ballad-singers whose vulnerable social position is reflected in their elusiveness and mobility. Because they served as a means of identifying the authors or printers of seditious material, these women—many of whom were elderly, disabled, homeless, or financially desperate—appear in the historical record because they were arrested or interrogated for their dealings in illicit print (McDowell 1998, 58–62; Smith 2012, 157–62). The nearly destitute Ellen Vickers and her daughter Sarah Vickers Ogilbie were working as the sole breadwinners of their family when they were taken into custody for selling seditious ballads. Vickers was seventy-three years old and blind, her daughter was pregnant, and both appear to have been illiterate (McDowell 1998, 58–59). In their social precarity, they stand far removed from the women stationers whose printed newsbooks or ballads they may have cried in the streets in order to attract customers (Smith 2012, 148–57).

Conclusion

At the press, and in the printshop, as well as beyond them, women were actively engaged in the making and selling of early modern printed goods. Their involvement was, in part, a consequence of the material and geographical realities of urban space. The blending of domestic and commercial space in printing houses and shops facilitated the inclusion of women in a range of roles essential to the functioning of the trade, from manual work at the press to management of the entire operation. Typically, the participation of women in the book trade correlates with their proximity to the places of printing and with their status as widows, wives, daughters, and servants of men in the trade. But their relation to male book trade agents does not diminish the agency of these women, for many are known to have been respected and responsible business partners, overseers of their establishments, and valued workers in their own right. New scholarship continues to

uncover evidence for the hands-on involvement of women at all stages in the production and distribution of printed goods for the early modern book trade.

Cross-References

- ▶ Binders and Bindings
- ▶ Ink
- ▶ Paper
- ▶ Surfaces
- ▶ Typography
- ▶ Women Stationers

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