

## **Reprinting and the Political Economy of the Book**

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### **The Book in America: Economic Aspects of the Material Text**

Lea Library (Sixth floor of Van Pelt Library, 34<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Streets, Philadelphia—enter from Locust Walk); 3-5:30

Although literary critics, bibliographers, and historians routinely refer to the explosive growth of printing in the mid-nineteenth century, we have only recently begun to consider how both the international trade and local markets for books and periodicals were centrally shaped by practices of reprinting. A tremendous amount of what we ordinarily think of as printing is, technically, reprinting, defined as the resetting of type — that is, printing not from manuscripts, but from already printed texts. Part of what has always made publishing a precarious business is the difficulty of estimating the audience for a particular work. Prior to the development and popular use of stereotype and electrotpe technologies, publishers who sought to profit by publishing multiple editions of a work were forced to incur the considerable cost of re-composing the text. While pages that were difficult to set up, such as title pages, might be left in standing type in anticipation of further printings, publishers frequently found themselves scrambling to meet unanticipated demand for a particular work, hiring compositors to reset the text not long after the first edition had left the print shop. For instance, while Nathaniel Hawthorne's publishers assumed that The Scarlet Letter would do well, printing an uncharacteristically large edition of 2500 copies, popular demand for Hawthorne's controversial "Custom House" introduction prompted Ticknor and Fields to reset the type and to reprint another 2500 copies within two months of the first publication. Still unaware that they had an incipient classic on their hands, Ticknor and Fields neglected at this time to invest in stereotype

plates, and thus were forced pay to reset the type for a third time just four months later when they finally stereotyped the book.<sup>i</sup>

Reprinting is not only fundamental to the internal dynamics of the print-shop, however; it has long been a crucial factor in the regional, national, and international circulation of print. It was Scottish reprinters such as Alexander Donaldson who forced the courts in Millar v. Taylor (1769) and Donaldson v. Becket (1774) to define the nature and limits of British copyright law. English publishers largely ignored Scottish reprinters, who supplied their home market with cheap reprints of English texts, until Donaldson brazenly opened a shop in London in 1763, undercutting the London booksellers by as much as 30-50%.<sup>ii</sup> The copyright case that bears Donaldson's name served as a turning point in British law, establishing copyright as a statutory right of limited duration (rather than a perpetual right under the common law), and instantly transforming many of the most valuable English works from private into public property. The sudden availability for reprinting of texts by long-dead authors such as Shakespeare and Milton, and more recent texts by Defoe, Thomson, and Fielding, arguably helped popularize the very notion of classic texts in English; the first successful English reprint series was John Bell's Poets of Great Britain (1776-92), which ran to 109 volumes and sold for 1 shilling sixpence each.<sup>iii</sup> [3 Bell images; modeled on Elsevier 's uniform editions of Latin and Greek texts] In the wake of Donaldson v. Becket, literary works with expired copyrights joined early modern steady-sellers such as catechisms and primers as books that could be freely reprinted in a variety of editions for a wide range of potential readers.

In England, publishers' reprinting of their own texts was an ordinary part of doing business, while reprinting works that had fallen out of copyright protection had by the nineteenth-century become an important segment of the trade.<sup>iv</sup> In England's breakaway American colony, however, the publishing system was defined by reprinting from the Copyright Act of 1790 through the late 1950s. The same law that granted copyright to American citizens and residents explicitly denied such rights to foreign authors, bestowing on American publishers an extraordinary license, that of the unrestricted republication of foreign texts. By the mid-nineteenth century, authors and some publishers began to push for the passage of an international copyright law, but their efforts were blocked by tradesmen, chief among them newly unionized typographers, who argued that stereotype technology, when combined with copyright, would give London publishers too much power over the American market. When literary nationalists protested that American authors could not compete with the flood of cheap reprints of popular British novels, the print trades responded with a canny analysis of the politics of book distribution, arguing that, with the backing of an international copyright law, heavily capitalized London publishers could print off large American editions from British-made plates, greatly benefitting from economies of scale, supplying the American market at high prices without the risk of underselling, and maintaining a stranglehold on American reading. Reprint publishers contrasted the democratizing virtues of the frequent resetting of type with the dangers of a centralized media, arguing that reprinting allowed for local control over the circulation of print (also known as censorship), and for a more equitable distribution of profits. Multiple American editions of foreign works were not excessive or inefficient, but proof of the general diffusion of knowledge and of the benefits of competition between and among small-entrepreneur publishers.

Instead of viewing the burgeoning reprint market as a sign of colonial dependency, those opposed to international copyright claimed that national values were instantiated in processes of production. One identified an American book by its physical appearance—by its cheap paper and closely set lines of type, enabling three expensive volumes to be compressed into two or one—and not by its contents or by the nationality of its author. [two books, two title pages; note where first page of London edition ends]

For most of the nineteenth century, copyright advocates' appeals for the regulation of the book trade through universal respect for authors' rights were no match for the reprinters' insights into the realities of a decentralized literary marketplace—the difficulty of transporting printed matter between and among scattered cultural centers; the new nation's appetite for high-cultural works in mass-cultural formats; and the profits to be made in an uncertain, expanding market by publishing works that had already proved popular with readers. When copyright advocates finally succeeded in brokering an international copyright agreement in 1891, they had to accede to the demands of the International Typographical Union, which appended a “manufacturing clause” to the law, allowing copyright protection for foreign works only if they were produced from types set or plates made “within the borders of the United States.”<sup>v</sup> This provision remained in force through the late 1950s when both Britain and America ratified the Universal Copyright Convention, a treaty that did away with trade protections. For most of U.S. history, however, it has been the resetting of type that has defined what constitutes an American book.

In American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, I weighed the consequences for

American literary history of the fact that a market for literature in the U.S. was built and sustained through reprinting—both the unauthorized republication of foreign works, and the uncontrolled circulation of domestic and foreign texts in uncopyrighted newspapers and magazines. Taking reprinting into account disrupts the principles of textual order that underwrite most Americanist literary criticism. While our national literary history continues to be told as the story of a succession of works written by native authors, the circulation of literature in the antebellum U.S. was regional in articulation and transnational in scope. Whether published as part of a book series, a print miscellany, or a ladies' magazine, American literature was visible as such only in relation to British and European literary culture; it has taken a nationalist zeal to extract American writing from this context. [3 reprint ads; then Putnam's nationalism] Reprinting confounds our attempts to sort American writing by the class, race, or gender of its authors as well as by their nationality. Reprinting was a cross-media phenomenon, in which sentimental tales that were first published in expensively bound gift books reappeared as filler in local newspapers, and in which elite British magazines were reprinted in their entirety on newspaper stock, and mined for essays that were reassembled into regionally published "eclectic" magazines. [two New World shots, two Littel's title pages] One way to describe the disruption to the textual order caused by reprinting is as a disjunction between texts and their formats, where the presumptive addressee is altered and extended to include an unintended and unpredictable readership. Marks of class, politics, and religion grow fainter and get reassigned as texts are re-addressed by virtue of their republication. Although the precise field of circulation is unknown for any mass-market text, no single instance of publication marks the final destination of a text under the system of reprinting; the field of circulation is thus open-

ended, unknowable. [Littell's "Raven"; embeddedness of chain of reprints]. Another way to describe the challenge reprinting offers to Americanist literary criticism is as the sudden visibility of the complex interdependency of literature and other discourses. For instance, the circulation of ladies' magazines, sent to subscribers through the mails, vastly outstripped that of individual books, rendering elite literature dependent for its circulation on the stable periodicity of women's fashion. [Graham's cover page; Editors Book Table] The fledgling African-American press also relied on reprinting in order to maintain its base of subscribers, somewhat incongruously republishing Dickens's Bleak House in serial form in the spring of 1852—complete with its caricature of the abolitionist Mrs. Jellyby—side by side with heated debate over the abolitionist politics of Uncle Tom's Cabin. [Frederick Douglass's Paper] As regions hardened into sections in the 1850s, it often seemed as if the only literature Americans held in common was a reprinted British one. [Peterson's ad; note every private and public library line; range of prices, editions]

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i. See The Cost Books of Ticknor and Fields (New York: the Bibliographical Society of America, 1949), 156, 161, 170.

ii. See Mark Rose, Authors and Owners, 69-97.

iii. Bell's reprint series is perhaps best known for the volumes published to compete with his, the London booksellers' Works of the English Poets which culminated in Samuel Johnson's six-volume Lives of the English Poets. But Bell's series must be credited with much of the impetus behind the creation of vernacular English classics : the small format of Bell's volumes was designed to evoke Dutch publisher Elsevier's uniform editions of Latin and Greek texts, and, unlike the London series, his volumes were sold individually and in a range of binding styles to suit a wider spectrum of readers. For a detailed study of the ideological aims and publishing history of Bell's series, see "John Bell's Poets of Great Britain: The 'Little Trifling Edition' Revisited," Modern Philology 85 (2) 1987, 128-152.

iv. An important benchmark for the profitability of English reprint series is "Constable's Miscellany," which ran from 1826 to 1835 and sold for 3 shillings sixpence per volume. John Murray's "Family Library," edited by John Lockhart, and Leipzig publisher Tauchnitz's popular reprints of English and American books were successful and influential publishing models. See Philip Gaskell, A New Introduction to Bibliography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 303-304.

v. See J.J. Sullivan, "International Typographical Union Coyright Legislation, with a Resume of the Work Connected Therewith," in George A. Tracy, A History of the Typographical Union (Indianapolis: The International Typographical Union, 1913), 1111-1128. The union strengthened both the language of the law and copyright registration procedures in the 1909 recodification of copyright, alleging that publishers had attempted to circumvent manufacturing requirements by importing "mats" made from type set abroad, and by smuggling foreign-made stereotype plates into the U.S. under the guise of "old type metal." The 1909 law specified that plates needed to be made from "type set within the borders of the United States;" it also required foreign copyright holders to produce an affidavit testifying to domestic manufacture. See Sullivan, 1113-11123.