Authority in European Book Culture 1400-1600, ed. Pollie Bromilow

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In the volume’s “Introduction,” Pollie Bromilow explains the book’s focus: to explore “what happens when power and the signs of domination (authority) converge in the form of the text.” Power differs from authority because the latter “retains a semantic link back to the process of textual creation” (5). Usually, this “process of textual creation” equates to print and its role in reinforcing authority. Texts become famous and exercise authority not because readers use and cite and search for the original printed text, but through adaptation and modification in later printings. The newly printed text might even undermine its own “primary authority.” Such a description might seem to limit the scope of the volume to authorship and book culture. But Bromilow wishes to extend the notion of authority beyond literary texts to any “cultural discourse that is politically enabling,” discourses such as historiography, religion, or royal power (12-13). If there is one common thread to these studies beyond the broad and sometimes slippery notion of authority, it is materiality. Or, we might bring these two themes together by saying that these essays explore the point where authority intersects with the history of the book.

The eleven studies that follow are arranged chronologically. We might nonetheless think of them as falling under two broad headings. The majority of these studies deal in some form with literary texts. The rest focus on texts that fit more comfortably under the heading of propaganda or polemics. In most cases, the authors delve into the materiality of their texts and explore how they were shaped by and in turn helped to shape the world of power.
The notion of the paratext is now quite familiar to historians of the book, and a recurring feature in many of the essays. In “Manuscript, Print, Orality and the Authority of Texts in Renaissance Italy,” Brian Richardson considers how texts in print received “added value” from paratexts. So for example a dedication that had originally addressed a named individual might be replaced in a later printing by a preface addressed to readers in general. Richardson observes that this development resulted from print’s wider reach. It might also be worth considering here how some medieval authors working in manuscript culture felt the same tension between the individual recipient of the work and a potential larger audience, and indicated as much in a titulus, preface, or colophon. That is to say, even before print, authors had the sense of a potentially expanding audience for their texts. Richardson also considers how visual components might “add value” to the text, such as engraved title pages that portrayed Dante or Boccaccio in a classicizing style with laurel wreaths. It might be interesting to consider whether and how such title pages constitute a further development of the author portraits one sometimes finds in medieval manuscripts.

Pollie Bromilow likewise focuses on paratexts in her essay, “Fictions of Authority: Hélisenne de Crenne and the Angoisses douloureuses qui procedent d’Amours (1538).” The work in question is a story of illicit love between a young married woman and a man of low status. It is an “educational project,” told to help readers avoid a similar fate. (One is reminded of Christine de Pizan’s Livre du duc des vrais amants.) Bromilow explores how the work constructed itself as authoritative, both in the text and in the paratext. Challenging the recent view of Leah Chang, who described the 1538 publication as a contest between the printer Janot and Hélisenne (a pseudonym for Marguerite Briet) staged on the work’s three title pages, Bromilow sees instead a kind of collaboration, even an elevation of female authorship which is promoted on the title page and, more subtly, in a woodcut at the end of the first book. The book even includes an account of its own fate in the hereafter, when Jupiter desires to have it printed. Thus the work presents itself as “a highly desirable cultural object.” The collaboration between printer and author only strengthened de Crenne’s stature as an authority.

In “Competing Codes of Authority in mid-Fifteenth Century Burgundy: Martin Le Franc and the Book that Answers Back,” Helen Swift turns our attention to manuscripts. Swift is proposing new ways to think about patronage in the mid-fifteenth century. Most studies assume a kind of harmonious relationship between writer and patron. Swift chooses instead a case that illustrates conflict: Martin Le Franc’s Complainte, a five-hundred-line sequel to the Champion des dames in which the Champion returns to its author and argues with him over the failure of the earlier book. She sees the Complainte not as an apology for that failure, but as a plea of Le Franc to his patron, Duke Philip, to seek reconciliation with France. Le Franc does not simply flatter his patron, he masters him. In this reading, the Complainte appears as a more subtle and interesting text than at first appraisal.

In “Print and Political Propaganda under Pope Julius II (1503-13),” Massimo Rospocher looks beyond high art to find the popular representation of the pope in contemporary vernacular prints, mostly poems about contemporary events, that were cheaply and swiftly printed and then distributed and posted in public places. During the first decade of the sixteenth century Julius figured large in these prints, sometimes being attacked, sometimes defended. Thus alongside his real wars, we find him embroiled in a “war of print.” Rospocher sees this development, which he finds happening elsewhere in Europe,
as an overlooked preamble to the great pamphlet wars of the Reformation a decade or so later.

Robert Aleksander Maryks attempts to account for the great success of Juan Alfonso Polanco’s Short Directory for Confessors, the first published Jesuit book on sacramental confession, printed in seventy-six editions with various translations. Maryks finds it unaccountable that the Directory, in his estimation the relic of a medieval past when religious authority trumped freedom of conscience, should have enjoyed such popularity at a time when the Jesuits were turning to the new ethical system of Probabilism that “often undermined authority to the advantage of conscience.” To explain this, he argues that the work must have owed its popularity to the rhetorical value of Polanco’s name as author, which must have assured readers of the book’s authority. Its actual usefulness to confessors, he assumes, must have been “relatively minor” (197). In this account, readers become the witless and powerless pawns of the Jesuit hierarchy. I wonder what readers themselves might have said about the value of the Directory. Dismissing the manual as medieval in orientation does not help us come to terms with its success. Maryks lets a facile periodization cloud the issue.

Other essays explore the “viral” rather than hierarchical nature of book culture (Adrian Armstrong), the dialogue between early modern authors and their classical models (Albert Schirrmeister), the fate of one text (the travels of Johann Schiltberger) from manuscript to printed book to printed pamphlet (Samuel Willcocks), Denis Sauvage as editor (Catherine Emerson), the efforts of Henry VIII to subordinate polemical works to the needs of his diplomacy (Tracey A. Sowerby), and the importance of print in Magdeburg during an uncertain political period in the mid-sixteenth century (Jane Finucane).

The quality of the essays is a bit uneven, but they do cohere remarkably well to the stated theme. Taken together, they serve to ground the notion of authority in the materiality of manuscripts and printed books, and they encourage us to think more critically about how texts came to be regarded as authoritative.