

Jeffrey Todd Knight. *Bound to Read: Compilations, Collections, and the Making of Renaissance.*

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of cosmopolitanism enrich the monochromatic greys of a limestone city” (372). As such, *God’s Plenty* has much to offer those interested in Canada’s changing cultural landscape, as well as students of this distinctive place, Kingston.

Note

1. For more, see Taylor (2007) and Scott (2012).

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Review of

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Since the Internet has become widespread, people have been lamenting that hypertext will be the end of literature, or predicting that it will save it. When ebooks seemed to take the world by storm, the same lamenting and exulting went on. One argument for and against ebooks is that electronic texts are not static. The printing press, the folklore goes, made texts immutable, and enabled the concept of a definitive edition to become reality. If the dominant format of text becomes electronic, every version could potentially be different from every other version. For some people, this might as well be the end of the world. For others, it’s the glorious future.

How refreshing, then, to discover that the idea of a fixed, definitive text is actually a rather new thing. The printing press did not, in fact, mean that every copy of a book was identical. Certainly you could argue that books started out as identical when they came off the press. But the way books were purchased, bound, consumed and even written meant that the text was not as unchangeable as we’d like to believe.

In *Bound to Read*, Jeffrey Todd Knight re-examines some of the early works of the Renaissance, or what is known to printers and bookbinders as “the early handpress era.” It was the age of incunabula, the first printed books, and though it made reproduction much quicker and easier than manuscript copying, it didn’t at first change how their composers or readers interacted with books.

Knight shows how much of our conception of books as stand-alone objects, as fixed and solitary texts, comes from the late-19th- and

References

- Scott, Jamie, ed. 2012. *The Religions of Canadians*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

early 20th-century ideals of conservation and cataloguing. In order to make books easier to find and use in a library, each individual work was contained in its own separate binding, and given its own call or catalogue number. At this time, many libraries—especially the better-funded ones equipped with their own in-house binderies—began massive re-binding efforts in order to separate books that had been bound together. It not only made the books easier to find but also reduced wear on books because scholars no longer had to handle and flip through pages they didn’t need to get to the ones they did.

Unfortunately, re-binding books in their own covers obscured a lot of really interesting information. In the early days of the printing press, the printed page might have become significantly less expensive to produce and purchase, but bookbinding costs didn’t change very much. It still required a skilled craftsperson to sew and cover a book (at least until publishers discovered all the ways they could cut corners and automate the process). Thus, books were often sold “in sheets” (that is, without covers) to be bound by whichever binder customers favoured, in whatever binding materials they could afford.

More importantly, because binding was expensive, and many early books were short (compared to modern “doorstopper novels,” for example), buyers would often group several books together for binding if they were the same size. Knight reconstructs some examples of these groupings by use of old library records and considers some rare examples of collected books that escaped re-binding. What he discovered is

fascinating. The collections that resulted from early printed book buyers having their volumes bound in groups aren't always organized in ways that would make sense to a contemporary reader. For example, a selection of plays might make sense to us, but some of the books that Knight considers have seemingly random contents. To a Renaissance reader, however, those groupings would not have been random. Some of them might simply result from a number of books from the same publisher being bound together or several works that happened to be the same size. Each one of them was the product of one reader's mind, and a closer look at which books ended up between the same covers brings out interesting aspects of Renaissance thought.

While the physicality of books is a particular interest of mine, and I'd have been quite happy with a book that stopped here, Knight takes his theme farther. Renaissance readers were not the only ones using the way their books were bound as a tool to organize their thoughts; writers were, too. Today, just as we think about books as self-contained, singular, fixed texts, we tend to think about writing as the production of an original informative work by a single author (or possibly a collaboration of two or more authors). Certainly, we recognize that writers are influenced by previous works, but if there is too much of another author in someone's book then thoughts of plagiarism surface. But the creation of the contents of a book—a play, an essay, a fictional tale—was not always an independent endeavour, any more than the creation of a physical book was. Originality developed as a concept over a long period of time, only reaching its pinnacle as the ideal in the last century or so. Books of the early handpress era were often responses to other books; they might be composed in direct response to a previous work, a connection that might be quite literal, as one of Knight's examples shows.

For instance, John Lilliat was an Elizabethan writer and musician who wrote largely in response to a book of sonnets by Thomas Watson. But he didn't simply set a copy of Watson's *Hekatompathia* on the table in front of him, take up a pen, and begin to compose on blank sheets of paper. Instead, he had his binder break up his copy of Watson's book and bind it with blank leaves and sections interspersed throughout. And it was on those blank sheets of paper, as well as on any empty spaces of the printed pages, that

Lilliat composed his own work, directly on the book that inspired it.

Lilliat lifted quotations and even whole sections of poems from the original work, and from other authors as well, and added to them, changed them and wrote responses to them. He seldom credited the author he was borrowing from—partly because his own audience had likely read many of the same books and would recognize them, and partly because in changing the passages, he was making them his own. If someone today created a book using this process and didn't very carefully credit each snippet, we would cry plagiarism (as we should, but that's an argument for another day).

Lilliat was certainly not an exception. Most writers of his day composed in similar ways, borrowing from, responding to and changing other works. Knight offers other examples and expresses the hope that other scholars will continue his work, and look at how the making of Renaissance literature was not a solitary process of original creation the way we think of writing today. And neither were texts as fixed as we assume; aside from binding books together, individual works were frequently edited, altered, updated and expanded (and not always by the original author).

Bound to Read draws one's attention to the production history of books, both in a physical and a compositional sense. The examples of different books that were bound together and of the different ways books in which were composed are valuable. Whether or not that value equals the rather steep cover price will depend on the individual reader. For casually interested readers and students, the library is probably the way to go; for anyone whose field of study directly intersects with the topics Knight covers, the cost might not be a factor.

While this book will likely be of most interest to scholars of Renaissance literature, it has interesting implications for such diverse fields as library science, the history of thought, and even new and emerging media. It would be a valuable text to give students in those fields and in others such as English literature or philosophy. Thinking about Knight's points in relation to the ebook arguments I have recently observed brings to mind the old saying "The more things change, the more they stay the same."