

# Small Press Publishing

A Short History of Print Culture:  
From Gutenberg to *Areopagitica*

With thanks to Richard A. Guthrie, “A History of Books” in *Publishing:  
Principles & Practice* (SAGE, 2011)

This history highlights the material limitations and potentialities driving the evolution of print culture:

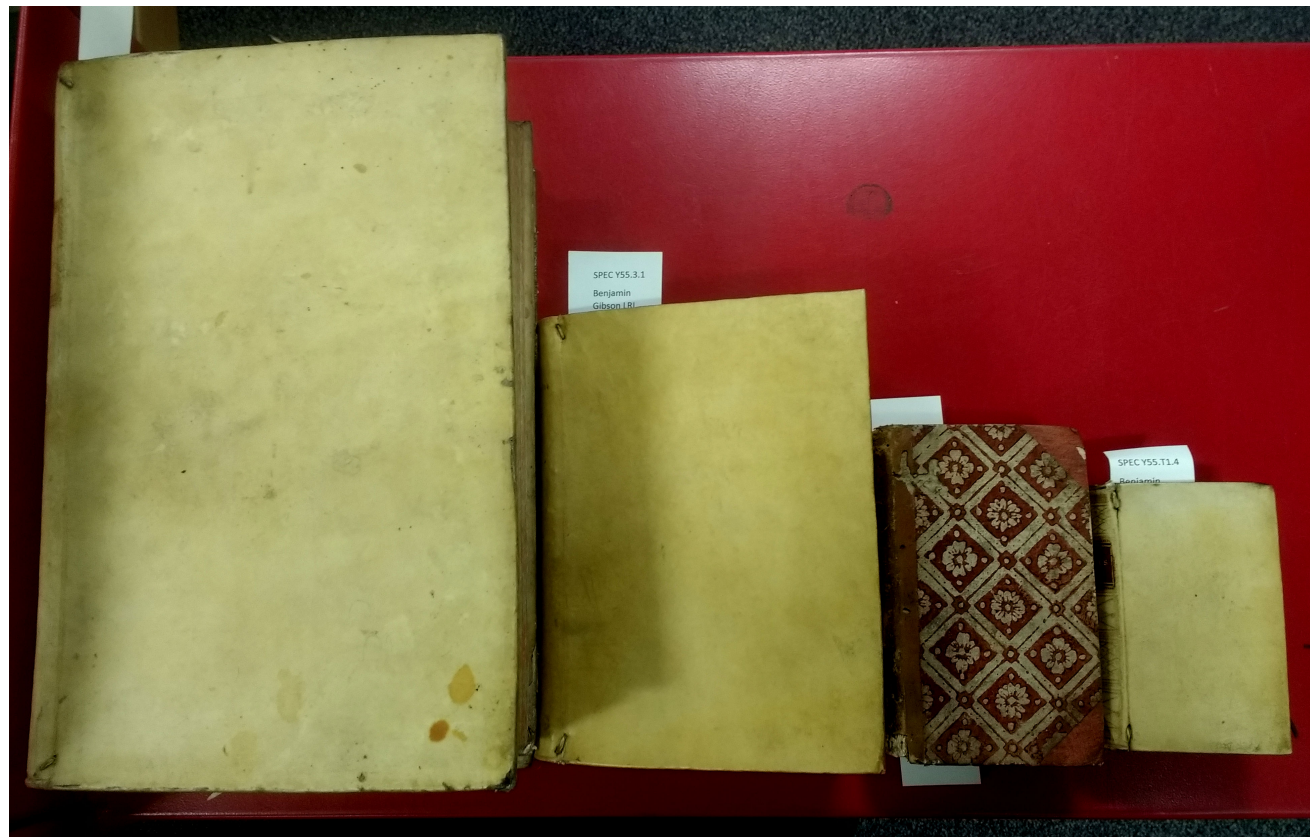
the evolution of letter forms – from script through northern Gothic Textura type mimicking script and the southern, Mediterranean developments of “humanist” type forms

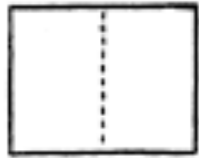
the development of moveable type – i.e. Gutenberg’s “25 soldiers of lead that have conquered the world”

the dependence of paper on the availability and properties of papyrus, animal skin [vellum], and cotton.

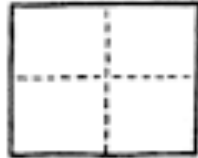
This history covers the emergence of “book” formats in folio, quarto, and octavo folds, and the quarto’s role in the convenience and popularity of the “pamphlet” format.

(One book technology not covered here is that of binding; pamphlets were either distributed loose leaf or loosely stitched.)

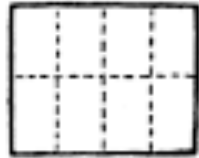




folio folding



Quarto folding



Octavo folding



folio (section)



Quarto section



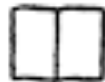
Octavo section



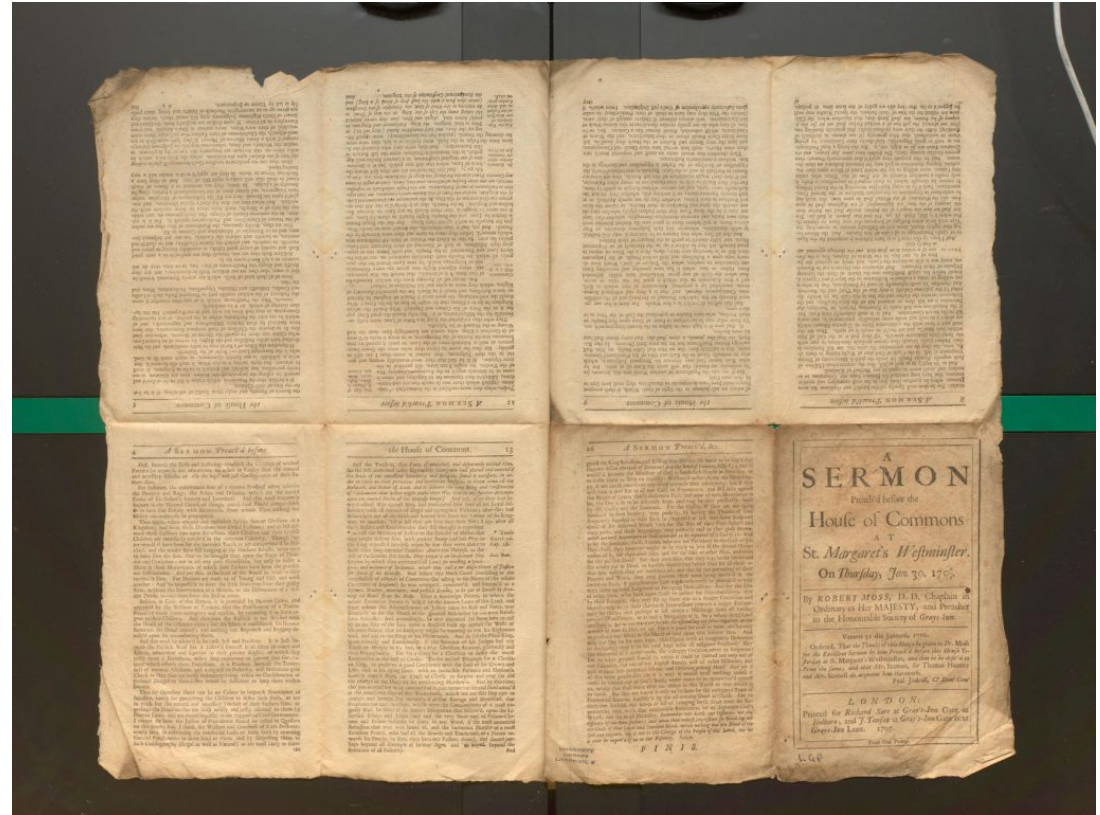
folio "opening"



Quarto "opening"



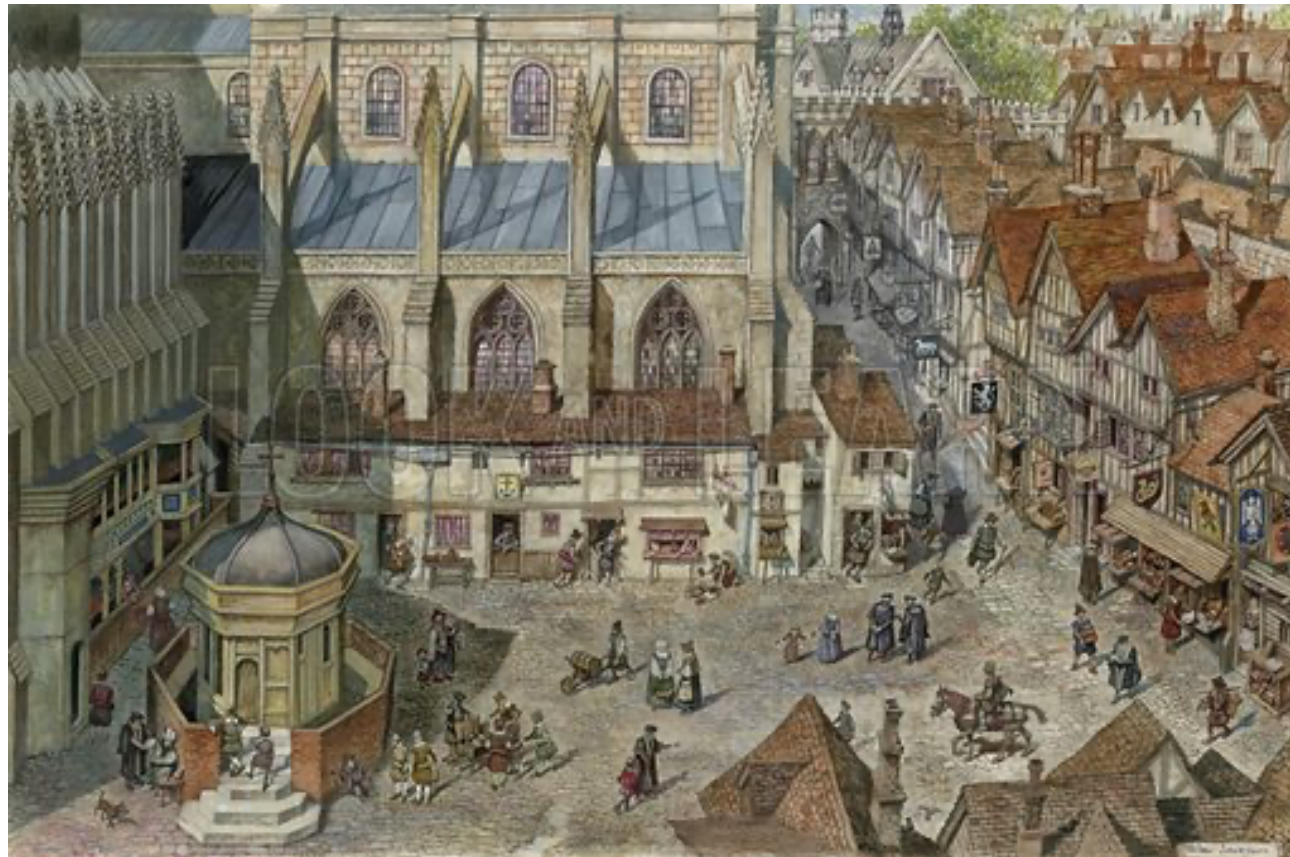
Octavo "opening"



The social dynamics of print culture can be seen in print's crucial role in the spread of literacy and the religious "reformations," often linked to emergence of modern "individualism" and rational "enlightenment" and/or to capitalism and the conquest of "New World" commodity frontiers.

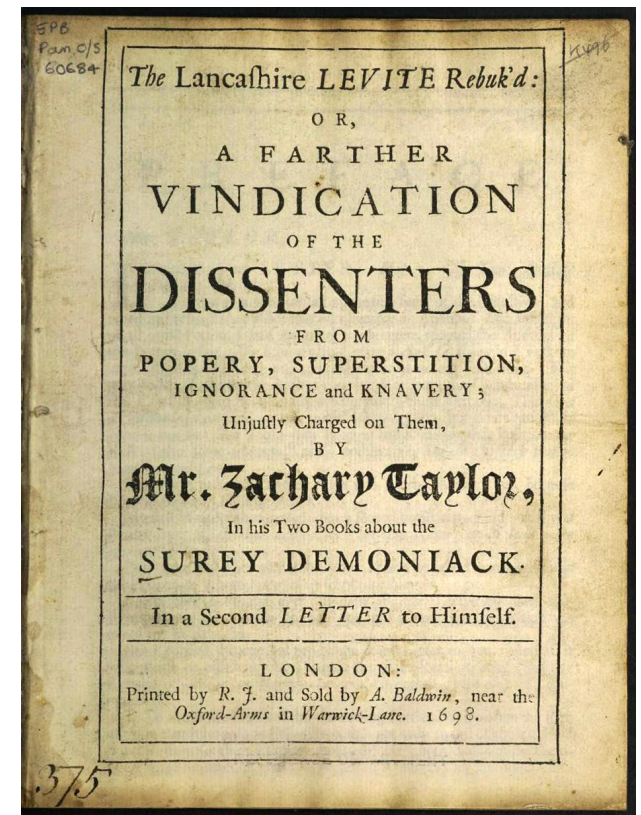
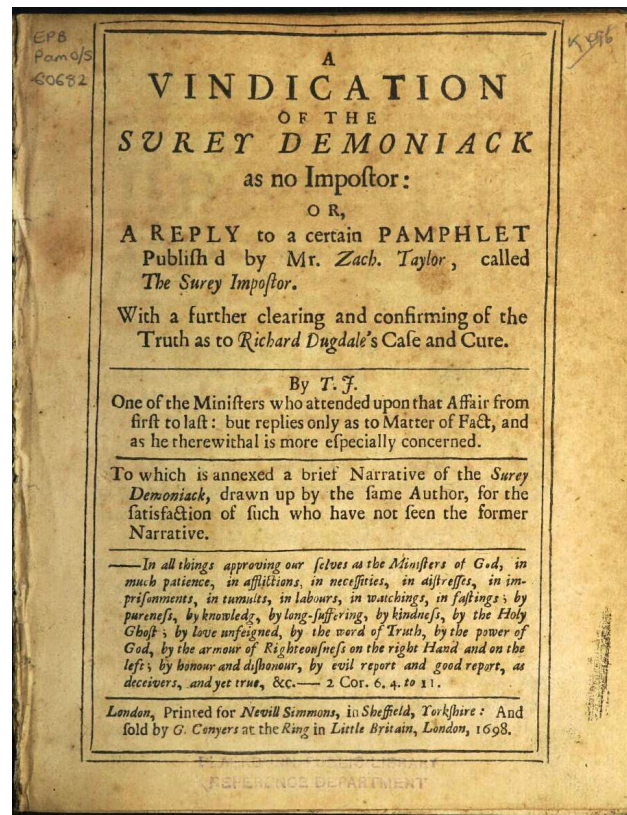
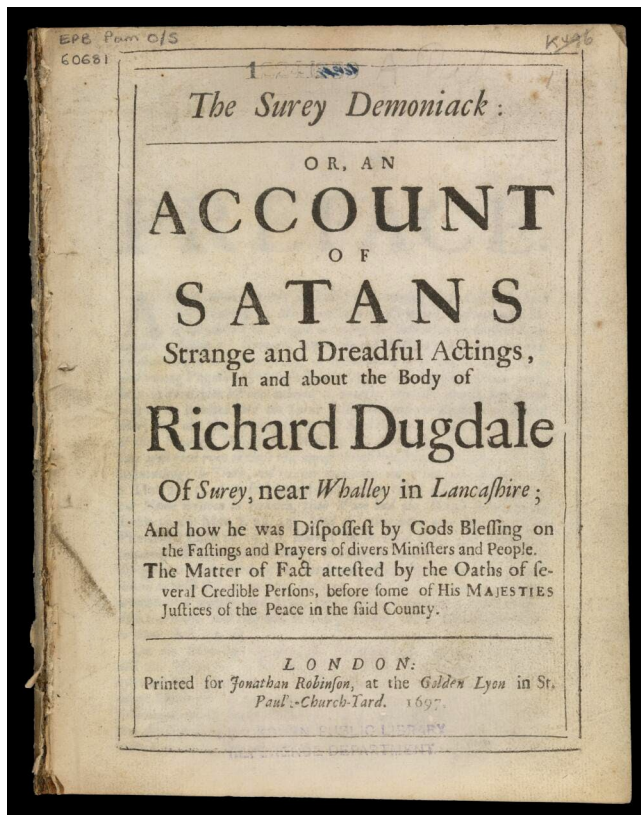
It also highlights, for our purposes, in the context of England's 16th and 17th century "pamphlet wars," the formation of a "public" and of "public opinion," instrumental to the emergence (in England, at least) of parliamentary democracy.

The age of pamphlets also emphasizes the oral and social dimensions of print culture, as we are asked to envisage the teeming milieu of hawkers, Mercury women and chapmen, and the innumerable booksellers, populating St. Paul's yard in London.



We can think of pamphlets as the “Twitter-sphere” of 17th century society. At the same time, historical understanding urges us to think of important differences. What might some of these be?

Pamphlet war between Zachary Taylor (the “Lancashire Levite”) and Thomas Jollie



## The [pamphlet war](#) between John Taylor and Henry Walker

**TAYLORS**  
Phyficke has purged the DIVEL.  
O R,  
The Divell has got a squirt, and the sim-  
ple, seame-rent, thredbare Taylor translates  
it into railing Poetry, and is now  
foundly cudgelled for it.  
By *Voluntas Ambulatoria.*



“The pamphlet above is one of a number of salvoes fired in an infamous pamphlet war that started in June 1641, between two writers called John Taylor and Henry Walker.

Taylor was a waterman who had lived in London since his apprenticeship in the early 1590s. Despite only a brief spell at grammar school, contact with actors and writers he ferried to the Bankside triggered a new interest in literature for him. From 1612, Taylor started publishing verses and experimented with other forms of print. For example, in 1614 he produced a miniature “thumb-bible” as a novelty for courtiers. He also experimented with a subscription model for selling books. By the 1630s, Taylor’s predominant output was satirical pamphlets.

Less is known about Henry Walker’s background. In 1638 he was admitted as a pensioner at Queens’ College, Cambridge. However, before this he was apprenticed to an ironmonger in Newgate market. By 1641 he was writing and selling anti-episcopal books. At the same time, he was also becoming well-known as an Independent ‘tub preacher’ – in other words, a preacher without a living.”

— [“The pamphlet war between John Taylor and Henry Walker;”](#)

Nick Poyntz, *Mecurius Politicus: A blog (mostly) about early modern history*

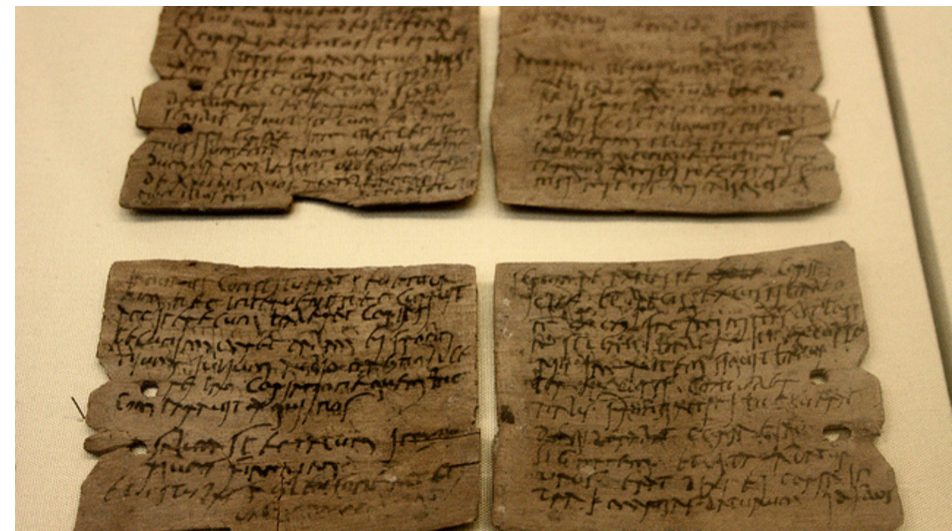
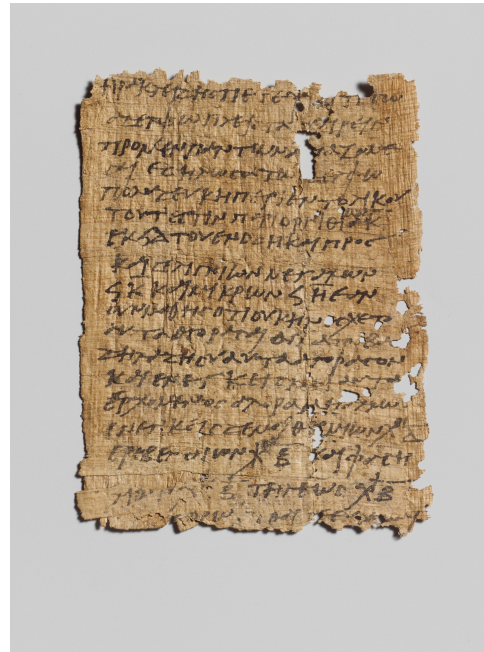


The history of the “Stationer’s Company” (evolved from stationers [scriveners] responsible for recording the loans of the exemplar manuscripts and checking that they had been copied correctly) as an arm of governmental attempts to control the press highlights the emergence of the democratic principle of a “free press.”

Throughout, the “small press” is seen as driving, expanding, and complicating the social dimensions of print culture.



# Background of print books—palm, papyrus, codex (from *caudex*, tree trunk), vellum (animal skin), wax tablets.



Destruction of Library of Alexandria in first half millennium AD:  
spread of book production/ print culture through Arab empire  
(into Europe via Cordoba).

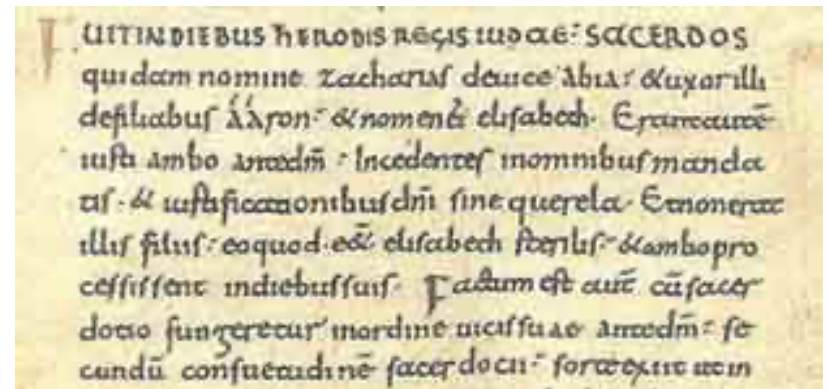
10th century Grand Vizier of Persia: 117,000 handwritten scrolls on  
400 camels taught to walk in alphabetic order  
(vs. just 500 books in Paris).



# Medieval scriptoria



Evolution of manuscript letter forms from Trajan's Column (AD 114) through uncial and half-uncial script (fore-runners of lower case hand, cf Book of Kells) to Charlemagne's attempted reformation (Carolingian script) to regional scripts like blackletter Textura (disparaged by Renaissance humanists as "Gothic").

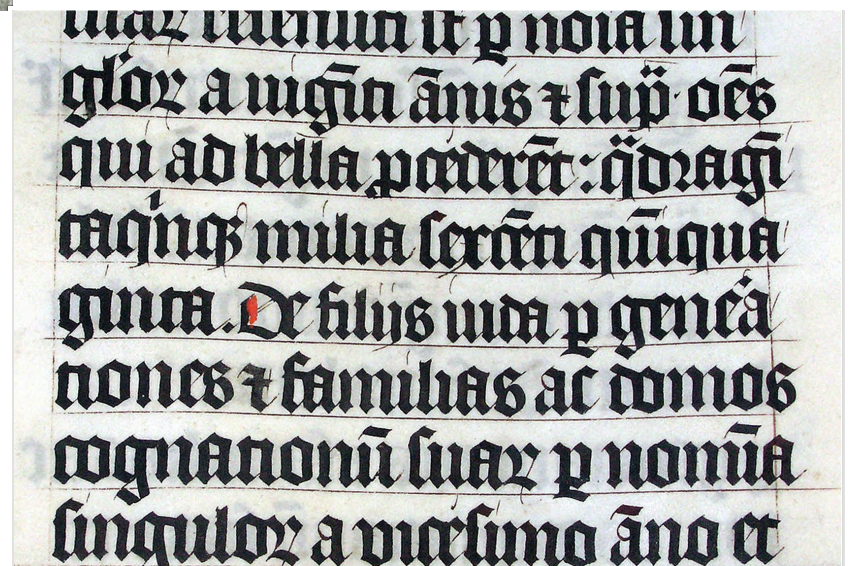


Uncial

A D E H M F P S N L R

Half uncial

a b c d e f g h m n o p q r



Emergence of stationers (scriveners) responsible for recording the loans of the exemplar manuscripts and checking that they had been copied correctly.



Challenge of church monopoly with 12th C emergence of secular scriptoria. Universities' growing demand for books: emergence of paper.

A craft that originated in China (discovery of Cai Lun in AD 104) and coming through Catalonia (1238), Fabriano in Italy (1276) and Nuremberg (1389).

Required sustainable supply of rags, so mills had to be close to large population centers.

## Traditional paper making process:





Demand for books increasing. Printing on raised and inked surfaces (letterpress printing—supreme over other methods of printing well into 20th Century) from woodcut blocks until mid-15th century.

An expensive undertaking.

Sell and produce model: books available and affordable only to clerics, wealthy merchants, aristocracy. Often bound together in omnibus volumes.

Humanist individualism, Renaissance education, importance of visual arts. Institution of banking. Two driving forces of commerce and passion for knowledge → invention of printing from moveable type.



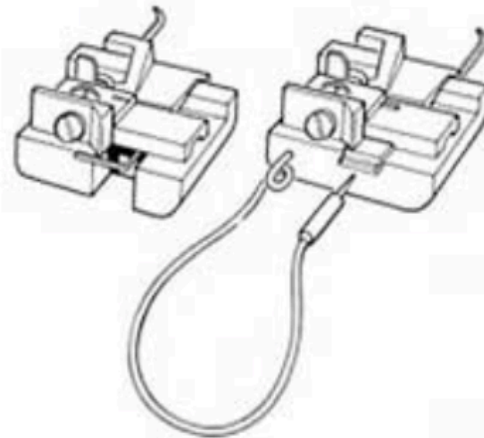
Gutenberg (ca. 1394/5 – 1468): brought wine press technology + jewellery techniques to invent *moveable type*, which reduced manuscript production time and costs by 90%



Punch



Matrix



Mold

Modification of the screw press, adaptation of the techniques of [punchcutting](#), brass mold-making, metal-casting.

Gutenberg's key innovation was the adjustable mold or hand-caster ([video](#)): two fitting parts that could be adjusted to fit the matrix of each letter, overcoming the problem of the necessity of a mold for each letter.



(Gutenberg cast at least 300 characters in order to provide slight variations of letterform throughout his Bible.)

# Casting metal type



Thick, oil-based ink (soot-blackened, though there is an “urban legend” that Bible copies were printed with mushroom-based ink).

Inclusion of antimony as part of the metal alloy (mostly lead with some tin) producing a sharp letter cast without shrinkage.



Antimony sulfide ( $\text{Sb}_2\text{S}_3$ ) is mentioned in an Egyptian papyrus of the 16th century BC. The black form of this pigment, which occurs naturally as the mineral stibnite, was used as mascara and known as *khol*. The most famous user was the temptress Jezebel whose exploits are recorded in the Bible.



Early documentation states that a total of 200 copies were scheduled to be printed on rag cotton linen paper, and 30 copies on vellum animal skin. It is not known exactly how many copies were actually printed. (Some say 180 copies.)

Most Gutenberg Bibles contained 1,286 pages bound in two volumes, yet almost no two are exactly alike.

Today, only 22 copies are known to exist, of which 7 are on vellum. If an entire Gutenberg Bible should become available on the world market, it would likely fetch an estimated 100 million dollars!



Political violence and destruction in Mainz (Gutenberg's hometown and home of movable type printing) hastened spread of printing across Europe, as printers became itinerant and were forced to look for new markets. —> Italy, in particular Venice and Rome

Aldus Manutius (1449 – 1515): humanist printing and first “pocket books.”



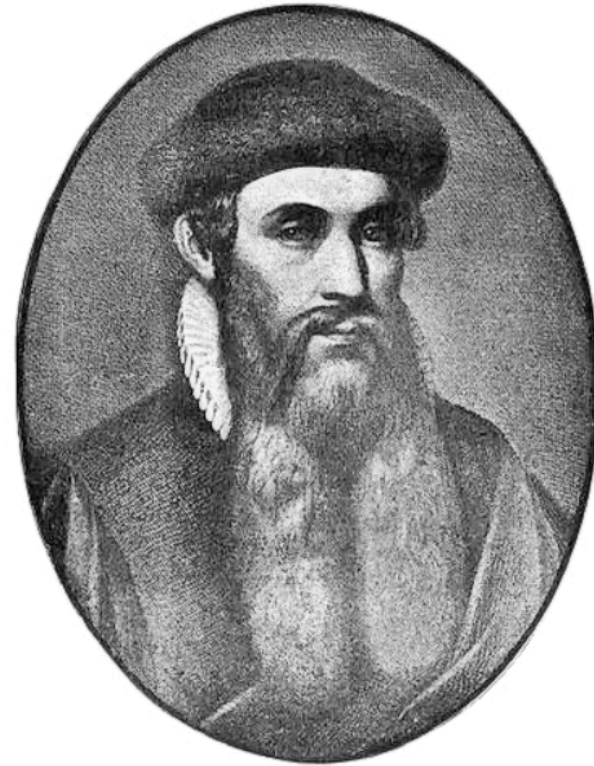
Moveable Type: a system of mass production —> single most important factor in the spread of knowledge and the move toward universal literacy in the West: “soldiers of lead that have conquered the world.”

By 1600 printers were able to produce over 1200 printed sheets a day.  
Produce and sell (or sell-through) model.



An oft-repeated statement about Gutenberg (the source of which remains unknown): “Who with his 25 [or 26] soldiers of lead has conquered the world.” Just 25 would be the more accurate quotation, since distinct “j” letterform came later.

A B C D E F G H I  
K L M N O P Q R  
S T U V W X Y Z &  
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r  
s t u v w x y z.



*fig 1. Blackletter Typeface & Johannes Gutenberg*



In Britain printing was first introduced by translator, editor and publisher William Caxton (1421-1491).



Weddid he though men wolde hym Kyf  
Into the herte ne coude in no maner Where  
Telle so muche sorow as I now here  
Coude telle of my wyues cursidnes  
Now quod our ofte marchaunt so good, you blisse  
Syn ye so mykil konne of that art  
Ful hertely I pray you tel vs part  
Gladly quod he but of myn owen fore  
For fory herte I telle may nomore

Here endith the prolog.

And begynneth the Marchauntis tale.

**S**om tyme ther was duellynge in lumbar dye  
A worthy knyght that born was at paury  
In whiche he liuyd in gret prosperyte  
And by .v. yer a wyfless man was he  
And folowyd his bodily delyt

Caxton occupied post of Governor of English Wool Merchants in Bruges, Belgium, and studied craft of printing in Germany, printing his first book in English in Bruges in 1475  
*(Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye)*.

Returned to England in 1476 and set up a printing press at the Abbey Precinct, Westminster “by the sign of the Red Pale.”

Printed first book in England in 1477 (*The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*).



Important role of Reformation in spread of literacy, in feedback with invention of printing.

Mass-produced books that spread ideas not in line with Rome's policies eventually became a grave challenge to its authority.

Books reached England at a time of historical and cultural flux, including a changing "English" language. Books helped England emerge from its isolation. First step in exponential growth in importance of English language throughout the world.



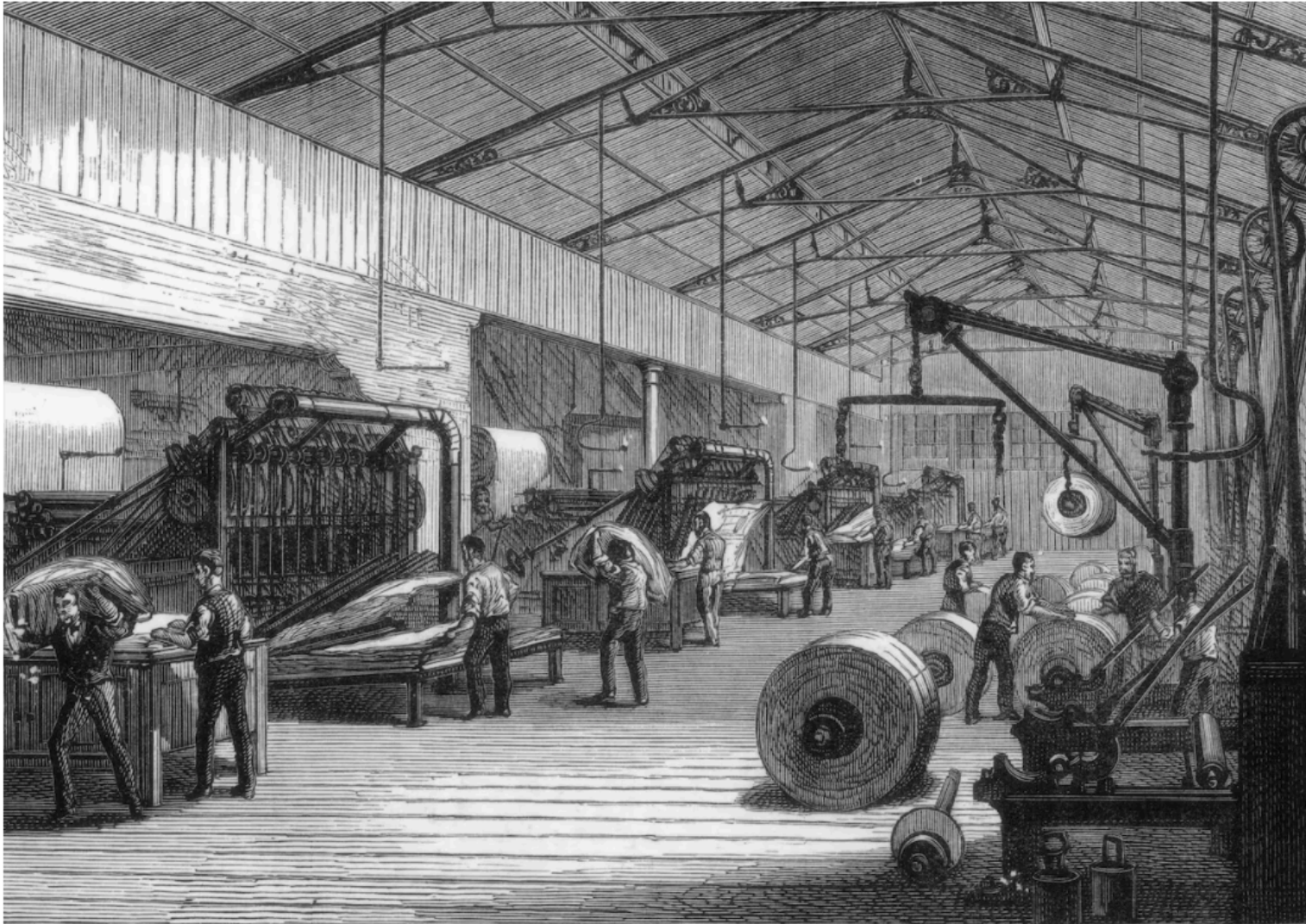
Gradual growth of literacy from 16th to 19th century.

Mass book sales only truly became a reality in 19<sup>th</sup> century explosion of literacy (introduction of “literature” to working-class Britain).

Early English trade. Caxton popularized Chaucer. After Caxton's death, his assistant Wynkyn de Worde moved their printing establishment to Fleet Street, beginning long tradition of print trade in the area around St. Paul's Cathedral.



"Fleet Street was cluttered with grotty shacks where one-eyed men hawked nuts, gingerbreads, oranges and oysters. It was an ideal location for the London press" CREDIT: GETTY



The former offices of the Daily Telegraph CREDIT: HERITAGE-IMAGES/PRINT COLLECTOR

Anglophone legal publishing began with John Lettou (also set up in London in 1482) and his partner William de Machlinia publishing England's first law book, *Tenores novelli*.

Richard III (reigned 1483-1485) promoted the trade by exempting books, publishing skills and printing paraphernalia from the anti-alien trade statute.

Authorial rights first recorded in Europe in 1486 (Senate of Venice granting rights in perpetuity to Antonio Sabellico for his *Decades Rerum Venetiarum*).

By contrast, power in the English book trade was firmly vested in the printer and bookseller, not the author. (A nearly unique circumstance in the world history of publishing.) English authors had to wait nearly 250 years before their rights were recognized in English law.

## 1533-1694: The Age of Control

Henry VIII reversed Richard III's trade exemption for books, bringing end to early trade era. Instituted system of Privy Council oversight of books throughout England. Royal Charter granted to University of Cambridge (1534) and to University of Oxford (1586)

Stationer's Company (scrivener's guild) finally granted sweeping Royal Charter over commercial printing throughout England in 1557, by Queen Mary, concerned with creating robust Roman Catholic controls over printed materials. Industrial privileges and trade-wide monopoly ("rights in copy") guarded jealously for 150 years.



Stationers' Hall © The Worshipful Company of Stationers & Newspaper Makers

“In effect, Mary provided the Stationers with a sixteenth-century royal edict to print money” (Guthrie).

Company's control over printing ran from 1557 to 1694.

Embedded in UK's publishing traditions and practices—the idea that publishers have the final say, not the original authors of literary works, which differs from most continental traditions.

Conservatism of books (= money) vs. radicalism of pamphlets.

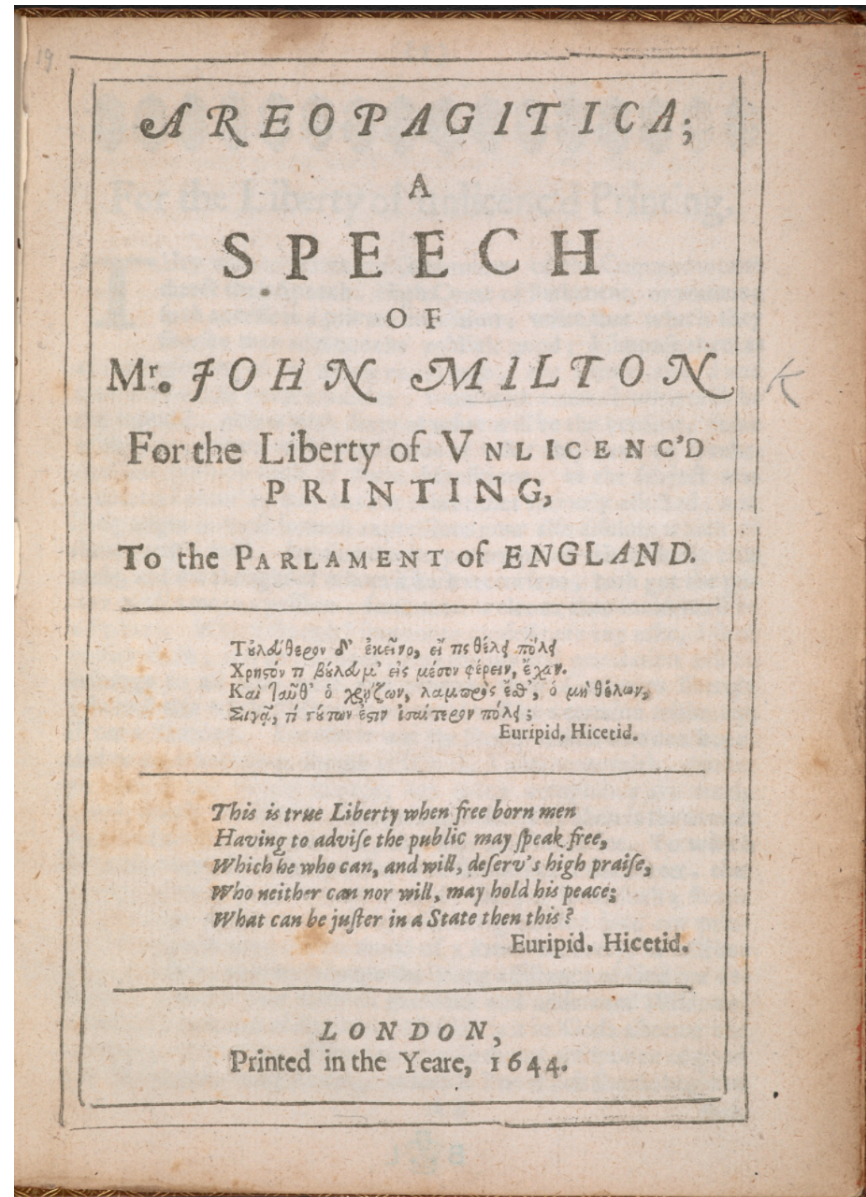
But Guthrie exaggerates the hold of Stationers over printing.  
Cf. Raymond's history of emerging pamphlet culture.

Stationers' Company's monopolistic printing powers were challenged by the Long Parliament in the early 1640s (Civil War, Star Chamber abolished).

Execution of King Charles I, Protestant sectarian movements, "wild, chaotic pamphleteering," explosion of private or self-publishing onto the scene.



Milton's 1644 pamphlet ("speech") against pre-publication licensing, *Areopagitica*.



Licensing Act of 1662 (post-Cromwell) returned all its prior publishing status, power, and functions to the Stationers' Company. But Jacobeans swept from power in 1688.

John Locke and other liberals solicited support for printing and other reforms from the new Dutch-born King, William of Orange.

In 1694, the English Parliament refused to renew the Licensing Act.

## Rise of the Publisher

1719 establishment of registration process for copyright for published works.

Dramatic 1774 House of Lords ruling in *Donaldson vs. Becket*, supporting statutory superiority in published works. Common law rights remained for unpublished manuscripts. Ruling cemented statute control over copyright law, ending pre-publication licensing and direct control of Stationer's Company.