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The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700 (review)

William W. E. Slights

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Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham. *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 298 pp. U.S. \$70.00 cloth.

Since there aren't many jokes in the book, I should probably point out the two I spotted. According to Christopher Marsh, "Greensleeves" has "recently been voted the most annoying telephone hold tune in England," and the editor of a website on stress management has said, "Every time it comes on the line, I want to smash the phone with a pick-axe" (176). Second, the so-called "Wicked Bible" of 1631 printed the seventh commandment as "Thou shalt commit adultery" (137). If Caroline drama is any measure of the mores of the time, the exhortation to adultery worked. Other information in the book is equally engaging, though less funny.

Crick and Walsham have meticulously assembled and substantially contributed to this collection of twelve essays on the continuity of the spoken, handwritten, and printed word over a four-hundred-year period. The authors, most of them affiliated with history departments in England, are following paths previously mapped by such distinguished historians of the book as Chartier, Ong, Clanchy, Parkes, Sharpe, McKenzie, Love, Grafton, Beal, Marotti, Woolf, and Eisenstein. I place Elizabeth Eisenstein's name last in my (incomplete) list because almost every essay in the collection explicitly or implicitly takes issue with the thesis of her influential two-volume study, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1979). Each writer, whether by editorial urging or personal conviction (or both), attacks or at the very least seriously tweaks Eisenstein's argument that the shift from scribal copying to moveable type printing in the late fifteenth century constituted nothing less than a "communications revolution" (Eisenstein 1:25). One essay refers to "Eisenstein's classic formulation of the triumphalist impact of print" (261). Academic triumphalism is poor form, as the New Historicists have made clear about E. M. W. Tillyard's "classic" *Elizabethan World Picture* and historians of all stripes have said of Christopher Hill's not-so-classic pronouncements about the causes of the English Civil War.

But was Eisenstein really so blind to the points the present writers are making about the limitations of print and the continuity of scribal and oral promulgation of texts in the period? She certainly makes the point that "even 'book' learning was governed by reliance on the spoken word—producing hybrid half-oral, half-literate culture that has no precise counterpart today" (Eisenstein 11), a point that Anthony Musson's essay

on the oral “publication” of laws at town crosses and markets helpfully develops, and she is well aware that “the first century of printing produced a bookish culture that was not very different from that produced by scribes” (26). These historians are still leveling many of the same criticisms at Eisenstein’s accounts of printing house culture and the spread of printed works by Latin-literate humanists throughout Europe that Anthony Grafton launched so vociferously in his 1980 review of Eisenstein.

Eisenstein-bashing aside, these essays make a forceful case for viewing the various forms of communication—speech, handwriting, and print—not as competing modes but as complementary and mutually reinforcing ones, a point that Walter J. Ong, SJ, made on many occasions. I once heard Father Ong “confess” that he had not *written* a word of his most recent book but had, rather, dictated it into a recording machine from whence it was typed by a stenographer and set into print electronically. There were more books being published, he pointed out, in the television/computer age than ever before. Movies and the like were certainly not displacing books, however they were being produced. Something similar is true of the intertwined networks of preachers, proclamation readers, scribes, amanuenses, and printers who plied their co-existing trades from 1300 to 1700.

The essays are divided into four groups: I. “Script, Print, and Late Medieval Religion,” II. “Script, Print, and Textual Tradition,” III. “Script, Print, and Speech,” and IV. “Script, Print, and Persecution.” With Parts I and IV treating religious writing and one of the essays in Part II focusing on seventeenth-century bibles, the volume is heavily weighted toward religion, as, indeed, was the entire period under discussion. Felicity Riddy puts the case that in the early fifteenth century *publication* of a work entailed presenting it, often orally, so as to stimulate public discussion. She concludes her essay with a highly speculative account of the (non-)publication of Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation of Love*. David d’Avray explicitly takes on Eisenstein (not to mention Foxe and Bacon), arguing that “Printing was important but not decisive” in the spread of the Protestant Reformation (51). Toleration, not the printing press, he says, determined the longevity of heretical ideas. What d’Avray calls the “technical” and “complex” arguments about the loss rates of scribal copies that he “inflict[s]” on his readers (52) may not be riveting for the general reader—whoever he or she is—but they are meticulously and pointedly made. Finally, in Part I, James G. Clark provides a balanced, detailed account of the extent of English Benedictine acquisitions of printed texts (which began more quickly than acquisitions by university libraries) and Benedictine involvement

with printing in general, particularly at the abbeys of St Albans and St Augustine's, Canterbury.

Part II opens with Anthony Munson's piece on textualized legal authority in the late Middle Ages. While there was always considerable doubt about whether legally reliable evidence could be obtained other than by *viva voce* testimony, precedents were increasingly recorded in ways that provided a degree of uniformity and consistency in pleading and judicial practice (103). They were gathered first in Year Books and, influentially, in Littleton's *Tenures* (1481) and in Coke's *Institutes*. Thus the spoken, written, and printed word reinforced one another in the promulgation and enforcement of the law. Another type of legal document, the earliest charters, has recently been edited by Julia Crick, who here traces patterns of perpetuated error in the manuscript and print versions of the Latin charters of pre-Conquest England in order to reveal attitudes toward authority and change. These are the kinds of "authoritative" documents that antiquarians such as John Dee, Edward Coke, and John Selden gloried in citing to substantiate their accounts of England's past. Scott Mandelbrote employs a similar technique of tracing perpetuated errors in the production of bibles from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. At times, he elides the disparate textual cultures spread over these three centuries in ways that feel like shortcutting rather than cautious synthesizing.

In Part III, Andrew Butcher's essay about the function of script in "a Late Medieval Town [Hythe in Kent], c. 1300–1550" argues that the ceremonial expression of civic custom and identity undercuts the distinction usually drawn between pragmatic and literary records. In an essay that stands apart from the others, Christopher Marsh makes the persuasive claim that musical satire and sexual innuendo flow powerfully and sometimes disruptively between the lines of broadside ballads when they are exhumed from the archives and re-imagined in performance along with their traditional tunes. A somewhat different kind of performance figures in Jonathan Barry's argument that in Bristol between 1640 and 1714 the bellman and the Recorder of the Assizes commanded more political authority with their oral proclamations than did all the "printed papers" that inundated the town (201).

Alexandra Walsham's essay "Preaching without Speaking: Script, Print, and Religious Dissent" begins Part IV. If you know her splendid essay "'Domme Preachers'? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print" (*P&P*, 168 [2000]: 72–123), you will already have a good idea of what she is arguing here about Protestantism and printing, namely that religious "persecution catalysed enthusiasm for the press as

a valuable missionary tool and stimulated renewed appreciation of the advantages of scribal publication in a climate of censorship” (226). Thomas S. Freeman’s essay looks at similar communication strategies among the Marian exiles, who relied heavily on scribal copying to spread the word to their co-religionists and, in England, to avoid detection. Ann Hughes argues that, while some orthodox Presbyterian preachers reluctantly acknowledged the need to distribute their sermons widely (as only print could) in order to counter mistaken sectarian views, this did not mean that print was replacing the immediacy of pulpit oratory or the targeted intimacy possible in handwritten forms of debate. Her chief witness is Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena* (1646), about which she has recently published a hefty monograph. Margaret Aston contributes a brief but wide-ranging and learned “Epilogue.”

A signal achievement of the volume, taken as a whole, is to realign medieval and early modern periodization so as to emphasize continuities in the goals as well as the methods of communication. A small defect of the title is omitting the key words “in England.” In terms of historical methodology, the essays embrace an admirably broad range of strategies and evidence, from the very local to the geographically and chronologically sweeping. Monocausal explanations and radical paradigm shifts are clearly out of fashion. Each historian should be a hundred-eyed giant of learning, looking this way and that. But be careful not to flash your Argus eyes triumphally, like the peacock.

William W.E. Slights
University of Saskatchewan