Date submitted: 30/07/2009

# Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Detecting and Interpreting Sophisticated Copies

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**Meeting:** **163. Rare Books and Manuscripts, Preservation and Conservation** and **Library History**

*WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL*
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy
http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm

## Abstract:

*To reconstruct the past it is often necessary to deconstruct the evidence. This is the case in studying individual copies, where sophistication (perfecting copies) may hide much bibliographical evidence. As metrics are increasingly applied to the field of bibliography in the service of the History of the Book, it is ever more important to understand the evidence. This lies at the heart of bibliography, since it requires an understanding of the construction of the book as a physical object; only when the copy is understood can it be interpreted accurately.*

*My talk will focus on the reconstruction of individual copies, outlining the bibliographical skills needed to detect sophistication (distinctive illumination or decoration, distribution of watermarks, etc.) and demonstrating the repercussions of such investigations. I will present (and illustrate in images) several examples, such as a copy printed on vellum of the Epistolae of St. Jerome, printed at Mainz by Peter Schoeffer in 1470. It was sophisticated at the end of the 18$^{th}$ century and now is a composite of three different copies. That bears on making an educated guess about the number of copies printed, the number of vellum vs. paper copies, and the distribution networks of the edition, since the illumination points to distribution in Germany, the southern Netherlands, and Paris at an early date. I will present at least two other examples of sophisticated copies. For one of these, the copy which provided the supplied leaves has been able to be identified, thanks to modern on-line resources. I will also briefly touch on historical fashion for sophisticating copies, and the pitfalls reconstructed copies and Sammelbände can create for provenance research.*

Hot topics in the field of the history of the book are bibliometrics, provenance, economics of the trade, distribution networks, readership, and provenance, and much of the attention paid to these areas is fuelled by the welcome emphasis placed on copy-specific descriptions of rare books. But copy-specific descriptions can easily overlook an important aspect of a copy: when it has been sophisticated, that is, when a copy has been perfected by the addition of leaves from another book, usually leaves from a copy of the same edition, or facsimile leaves.

I will limit my discussion today to copies sophisticated within an edition, and not facsimile leaves.

I think everyone would agree that only by understanding the evidence can it be interpreted properly, and yet sophisticated copies are often ignored. This is due in part to the lack of bibliographical skills needed to detect them. One needs to be familiar with the methods of book production: how printed sheets are folded and gathered, rubrication and illumination styles, and palaeographical evidence, and these are skills not always sufficiently sharp, even among professionals.

Detecting sophistication has long been important within the book trade. Supplied leaves as a matter of course would constitute a refundable defect in the trade, if the sophistication is not mentioned at the time of purchase. This is not to say that sophisticated copies are not desirable by collectors. Depending on the circumstances, sophistication can be forgiven in a copy, if not even adding to its interest and attraction. In other cases, however, sophistication merely disguises an imperfect copy. Therefore, at the most basic level rare book librarians should be concerned about sophisticated copies for monetary reasons: in making acquisitions they need to ensure that they are spending their institution's money in full knowledge of what they are acquiring.

More important is the impact sophisticated copies can have on historical data, and I will outline today three examples of sophisticated copies, explain how they were detected, and reflect on how their sophistication bears on their use as historical data.

History Counts. Numbers, statistics, probabilities are more and more important in the field of book history as in other areas of historical research. Even when talking to laymen and -women about rare books and manuscripts the most common questions relate to numbers: how many copies were printed, how many copies survive, how long did it take a scribe to write a manuscript or a printer to print a book -- and the application of bibliometrics has become increasingly sophisticated. So, why in this age of measuring everything are we still satisfied with a crude understanding of a single copy? Let me give you an example.

Several years ago a copy of St. Jerome's *Epistolae*, printed at Mainz by Peter Schoeffer in 1470, was consigned for auction at Christie's London.[1] In cataloguing the book it became clear that the copy was a composite, made up from three different copies. Its sophistication could be fairly easily detected by the different styles of illumination. The bulk of the book had been decorated by a contemporary south Netherlandish artist; while 27 other leaves had been supplied from a copy decorated by a contemporary French artist (with a miniature added at Paris just later, in about 1510), and a further 7 leaves had been supplied from yet another copy, decorated by a contemporary Flemish or German artist.

Interestingly, this copy of St. Jerome has a distinguished, recorded, provenance spanning 3 centuries, having been owned by the Duc de Rohan, Prince de Soubise, Count MacCarthy-Reagh, Prince Michel Galitzin, and Sir Robert Abdy. The fact that leaves had been supplied from rather obviously different copies did not disturb these bibliophiles, and in fact they praised it. In Prince Galitzin's catalogue of his library he brags that, owing to Count MacCarthy's addition of new leaves, it is now one of the most perfect copies. The fashion among 18$^{th}$- and 19$^{th}$-century collectors for perfecting copies can be and is forgiven by modern bibliophiles, as can be seen by the higher-than-average prices paid for copies with such provenance. But fashions in book-collecting history is a subject for another talk.

Recognising the composite nature of this copy of St. Jerome bears on our interpretation of edition size and distribution networks. In only a handful of cases do we know edition sizes in the fifteenth century, so that we must rely on educated guesses based on surviving copies. A book subject more than any other to such study has been the Gutenberg Bible. Speculation over many decades led to guesstimates ranging from 54 copies printed on paper and 16 on vellum to 240 on paper and 30 on vellum. The edition size question for the Gutenberg Bible was largely settled with the emergence in 1982 of a letter by Pius II reporting that he had been shown sheets of the Bible, and that the number of copies completed was either 158 or 180. He wrote: "of the number I am not certain; of the perfection of the books … I have no doubt". There is therefore, contemporary documentation for the edition within a narrow range of about 160 and 180 copies. Similarly, the ratio of paper to vellum copies has been debated and figures have been put forward largely, if not solely, on the basis of the ratio of surviving copies. Most recently, Paul Needham has argued for a ratio of 3:1: 120 paper copies to 40 vellum.[2]

The 1470 edition of St. Jerome's letters was printed at the press which immediately succeeded Gutenberg, and, like the Gutenberg Bible, was printed on both paper and vellum. Knowledge of its edition size and the ratio of paper to vellum copies thus have special interest to early printing historians. In their study of the edition, Lotte Hellinga and Eberhard König have identified 99 copies, of which 14 are on vellum.[3] The addition of the copy offered in 2000 should increase the overall number not by one, but by three, since the copy is witness to 3 different vellum copies not otherwise known. This is a significant increase in a small sample and alters the ratio of paper to vellum copies from 5.3:1 to 4.6:1.

The illumination is also a key to the contemporary distribution of the edition. It further supports Eberhard König's findings, based on the illumination in surviving copies, that the edition was distributed primarily in France, the Low Countries, and, of course, Germany.[4]

Detecting the sophistication in this copy also bears on its later provenance. It seems a safe assumption that the Duc de Rohan and Prince de Soubise had owned the copy from which the French illuminated leaves had been extracted, and that that copy had been in Paris from close to its date of printing in 1470 and remained there during the intervening 3 centuries before its next ownership, by the Duc de Rohan, is known. Needless to say, any knowledge of the early provenance of the other portions of this copy of the *Epistolae* was lost when the book was sophisticated by Count MacCarthy.

Metrics also play a large role in studies of provenance and history of reading. But even when data is extracted from copy-specific descriptions, pitfalls can lurk in undetected sophistication.

Consider the case of Robert Hedrington. Robert Hedrington is a little known 16th-century English book collector who attracts attention chiefly for two reasons: his ownership stamp giving his name and date (1577), and the fact that he owned almost exclusively English incunabula. Eight books survive with his ownership stamp: 2 manuscripts and 6 printed books, of which 5 are English incunabula. His use of an ownership stamp is early; this did not become common practice until the next century. It is tempting to read into his proportionally high number of English incunabula a conscious collecting choice. If one did, Hedrington would be the earliest example of a collector collecting English incunabula *per se*, a phenomenon not otherwise documented until the third quarter of the 17th century, 100 years later.

One significant indication of Hedrington's conscious collecting habit could be seen in his apparent ownership of not one but two copies of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, translated into English and printed by William Caxton in 1483. Surely the owning of multiple copies is a sign of collecting for collecting's sake and therefore we *should* consider Hedrington to be a century ahead of his time as the earliest collector of English incunabula. Our evidence for Hedrington owning multiple copies of the 1483 *Golden Legend* is De Ricci's excellent *Census of Caxtons*. De Ricci lists copies numbers one and 59 as having belonged to Robert Hedrington in 1577.[5] Copy one is the Spencer copy in the Rylands Library, Manchester, and copy 59 is the Botfield copy, formerly at Longleat. It was only when the Botfield copy was catalogued for auction at Christie's in 2002 that Hedrington's ownership could be correctly understood.[6] Both the Rylands and the Botfield copies had been sophisticated, as de Ricci had indicated, but only on physical inspection was it clear that the Hedrington stamp in the Rylands copy appeared on a supplied leaf. It is the only leaf in the Rylands copy with Hedrington's stamp, and it is a leaf missing from the Botfield copy, an absence filled there by a facsimile leaf. Therefore, Hedrington owned one copy of the *Golden Legend*, not two. It must be remarked that his – the Botfield copy – was a spectacular copy, with full contemporary colouring.

A third, and final, example of a sophisticated copy provides evidence of the 18th-century attitude to rare books in a rather curious form. It is well known that bibliophiles of the late 18th and 19th centuries washed and perfected their books in an effort to return them, in their eyes, to a pristine state; a copy of the second edition of Caesar's Commentaries, printed at Venice by Nicolaus Jenson in 1471, provides an unusual twist to this truism. It is a handsome copy, with contemporary Italian decoration, bound in the 18th century in lovely red morocco by the Parisian bookbinder, Derome, and owned shortly thereafter by Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex. Written in the margins are brief annotations in a very attractive contemporary humanist hand. What was curious was the fact that in four leaves, the text block had been cut out and replaced, leaving the original margins completely intact. In this case the margins, with their contemporary humanist annotations, had been retained, not replaced, or even washed. The sophistication was not obvious: all the pages of the book had been given a red border, which effectively disguised the cut-out and replacement. Somewhat more curious, the replacements were made on conjugate leaves, which further disguised the sophistication. The paper was from the same edition, if from a different copy, so that was normal, and the distribution of watermarks was normal for a folio, i.e. one watermark per conjugate pair.

Most sophistications are done to make an imperfect book complete. In this case, the copy was already complete, so why the intervention? The only clue offering an explanation to this curious feature was the ghost of interlinear annotations which just extended into the preserved margin. Clearly the late 18th- or early 19th-century owner of the book had found those interlinear annotations undesirable and so had the page replaced while retaining the margins with their acceptable, aesthetically-pleasing humanist annotations. This sophistication is remarkable evidence of the value judgment exercised by a bibliophile of the period (Contemporary humanist hand: good. Later working hand: bad). It also shows a new nuance to the truism that largely defines bibliophilia of the late 18th and 19th centuries when considerable time and effort was spent in an attempt to return copies to a state "as clean as when it emerged from the printing press".

While understanding sophisticated copies relies on being able to deconstruct them figuratively, it is reassuring when the deconstruction can lead to reconstruction. Thanks to the internet and on-line catalogues providing copy-specific details, it was possible to identify the copy from which the 4 leaves just discussed were taken. It is in Uppsala, and is missing exactly those leaves.

In the examples outlined above, the sophistications were detected by employing fairly simple bibliographical skills. One doesn't need to be a paper historian or watermark specialist to recognise supplied leaves, but one does need to be familiar with collation and format. You can detect supplied leaves in the majority of cases simply by examining the distribution of watermarks. But first you have to know that 1) sheets of paper in the handpress era generally have one watermark at the centre of one side of the sheet; and 2) a folio is made up of sheets folded once to form two leaves, so that only one leaf of the conjugate pair should show a watermark. (Sheets for quartos are folded twice, so that the watermark occurs in the gutter across two leaves; folded yet again for an octavo, so that the watermark occurs in the upper margin of 2 of the 8 leaves, (you have to work out which two!), etc..) Once you know what to expect, the anomalies become obvious, i.e. when you find a watermark in each of a pair of conjugate leaves, you know something needs to be explained. Generally speaking, it is abnormal or inconsistent behaviour that is the clue. As already discussed, consistency of illumination and decoration is revealing, as are annotations. Supplied leaves in a copy of Terence[7] were detected by the interlinear annotations still visible in certain leaves. Wormholes appearing or disappearing suddenly can also be a clue.

Extended margins are a common clue to supplied leaves. This copy of Galileo's *Il Saggiatore* (1623)[8] was sophisticated by the addition of the first quire, detected through its extended margins. Its title-page bore the ownership stamp of Federico Cesi, founder of the Accademia dei Lincei, under whose auspices *Il Saggiatore* was published. Cesi's ownership would therefore be significant. But, since the title-page was not original to the copy, Cesi's ownership could not be interpreted any further than the simple fact that he had owned a copy, a fact one might have surmised anyway, owing to his and Galileo's close association. Any further annotations in the copy would have no bearing on elucidating Cesi's reading of the copy and reaction to the text.

To reconstruct the past it is often necessary to deconstruct the evidence. History is investigation and analysis; bibliography is investigation and analysis. I urge you to hone your investigative skills and apply good old bibliographical methods to the fundamental building blocks of book history: books themselves.

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[1] Christie's, London, 20 November 2002, lot 82.

[2] Needham, Paul, "The Paper Supply of the Gutenberg Bible", *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 79, 1985, 303-374, esp. 308-311.

[3] I am grateful to Dr. Lotte Hellinga for sharing these numbers with me in private communication.

[4] König, Eberhard. "Buchschmuck zwischen Druckhaus und Vertrieb in ganz Europa, Peter Schöffers Hieronymus-Briefe von 1470", *Johannes Gutenberg – Regionale Aspeckte des frühen Buchdrucks*. Berlin: 1993, 130-148.

[5] De Ricci, Seymour. *A Census of Caxtons*. Oxford: 1909.

[6] Christie's, London, 13 June 2002, lot 41. See also A.S.G. Edwards, "Robert Hedrington His Bookes, 1577", *The Book Collector*, 40 (1991), 102-3.

[7] *Comedia*e, Strassburg: Johann (Reinhard) Grüninger, 1 November 1496;Goff T-94. Christie's, London, 3 June 2009, lot 70.

[8] Galilei, Galileo, *Il saggiatore nel quale con bilancia esquisita e giusta si ponderano le cose contenute nella libra astronomica e filosofica di Lotario Sarsi Sigensano*. Rome: G. Mascardi, 1623; private collection.