

The Birth of the French Book

Graham Larkin

Henri-Jean Martin, *La Naissance du Livre moderne (XIV^e–XVII^e Siècles): Mise en page et mise en texte du livre français*, in collaboration with Jean-Marc Chatelain, Isabelle Diu, Aude Le Dividich and Laurent Pinon, Paris, Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2000, 504 pp., 246 col. and 534 b. & w. ills., FF850.

This weighty *folio*, edited and largely written by France's most venerable book historian, mimics the format, and complements the contents, of the first volume in the *Histoire de l'édition française* (1982), edited by Martin with Roger Chartier. Whereas the 24 contributors to the earlier book range widely over the economics and sociology of print on many social levels, the present study is more exclusively dedicated to developments in page layout. It complements the earlier book in its rich display of illustrations, generally of very high quality and often in colour. As a result, some highlights are the expository illustrations showing multiple pages of the same book (pp. 154–57, 228–29), or the same page with variant hand-colouring (pp. 152, 260).

Martin's story, which synthesizes the work of many scholars, extends from medieval manuscripts to the grand projects of the Imprimerie Royale. Long passages discuss reading habits, patronage networks, educational systems and religious movements, not to mention his meticulously documented biographies of authors and publishers. Although this contextual information is sometimes tangential to the subject of layout, the details can be fascinating, as in the discussion (pp. 100ff.) of the careers of Guillaume Fichet and Johannes Heynlin, who arrived in Paris in the early 1450s. Martin details the staggeringly extensive evidence of their reading and writing habits, based on borrowers' lists from the Sorbonne, manuscript notes and autograph study copies. We learn that Heynlin employed a wide variety of scripts (p. 111), and that both he and Fichet were involved in early publishing, expressing a keen interest in typography. This discussion provides a suitably nuanced introduction to the abiding theme of the ideology of lettering styles. In subsequent chapters Martin traces the rise of Roman

script, which started as a kind of noble code circulating in a few courtly manuscripts, and then made a more concerted appearance late in the reign of Francis I (r. 1515–47). This classicizing trend is discussed in Martin's third and best section, 'Politics and Typography: The Triumph of the Roman Letter in France and its Consequences'. There is, indeed, a triumphalism inherent in the typographic and orthographic revolution exemplified by the work of the great designer Geoffroy Tory (1480–1533).

Martin deftly continues the theme of the ideology of Roman characters in subsequent chapters. For instance, he suggests that Sorbonne theologians reacted strongly against Estienne's revised edition of the Vulgate (1532) partly because it was printed in Roman type like other ancient texts (p. 289). Once alerted to the ideological stakes of typographic decisions, the reader can appreciate the importance of the lavish and scholarly Ronsard *folio* published in Paris in 1609, when such grand formats were usually reserved for ancient authors (p. 431).

Martin rightly attributes many of the key changes, including the adoption of Roman letters and the normalization of language by means of diacritical marks, to a French identity crisis in the face of ancient Roman and modern Italian culture. More questionably, he also attributes the linguistic normalization to 'l'esprit toujours un peu systématique, centralisateur et autoritaire des Français', as opposed to the innate pragmatism of the English (p. 197). But as the subsequent standardization of English spelling suggests, the transformation surely has less to do with abiding national character than with the power of print to reinforce cultural norms, sooner or later. This tendency is incisively addressed by Aude Le Dividich in a section on the French contribution to modern mathematical notation (pp. 340–47). (Here, again, the shadow of the ancients is strongly felt. Witness Desargues's signal failure to replace Greek mathematical terms with workaday French equivalents: 'colonne' for cylinder, etc.) Martin, for his part, habitually downplays the distinctiveness of print by stressing continuities with the manuscript tradition.

Particularities of print are best addressed in the exemplary discussion of illustration by Jean-Marc Chatelain and Laurent Pinon (pp. 236–69), which should be required reading for all historians of early printing. These authors uncover remarkably explicit statements about the pedagogical and aesthetic rôle of printed images in the prefaces and forewords to early illustrated books. They also trace the gradual liberation of images from texts during the second third of the sixteenth century, thanks to the many compilations of vignettes accompanied by short texts (in Latin *Icones*; in French *Tableaux, Figures, Peintures*). This tradition extends from emblem books to a reduced edition of Gesner's mammoth *Icones animalium*, consisting solely of images (p. 267). Illustrations can provide specific clarification of the text – the authors speak of the 'illustration philologique' – or they can improve scansion by generically signalling subject divisions. Both functions are shown on page 246, which reproduces two illustrated pages from a 1531 edition of Caesar's *Commentaries*. The first is a clever explication of fortifications

described in the text – a standard feature of scholarly editions since its appearance in a Venetian edition of the *Commentaries* in 1513. The second is a crude old woodcut with labels indicating the presence of Aeneas and various gods. This appearance of Trojan images in the text of the Gallic Wars is hardly an isolated case; in the same year the Venetian publisher Niccolò Zoppino also re-uses images of the Trojan War to illustrate an Italian translation of the *Commentaries*, and a re-used image of Aeneas and Anchises had appeared in a German translation of the work as early as 1508. On the next page, Chatelain and Pinon show some curious illustrations in Parisian editions of Livy. A 1530 edition includes a figure labelled LOYS ROY facing troops marshalled under the lion of St Mark (evidently Louis XII at Agnadello in 1509), while a 1515 edition utilizes a 30-year-old woodblock of Augustine celebrating mass in order to show 'comment les Romains sacrifierent aux dieux'. This hilarious grangerizing illustrates the serious point that 'in such cases, the essential function of the image is to mark the narrative order of the text: it indicates that here one is telling a story, rendering immediately perceptible the form of its eventhood (the battle, the siege, the religious ceremony) and, through placement, giving a rhythm to its unfolding' (p. 248).

Other illustrations reveal a growing historical consciousness, evident in Agricola's explanation for his images of ancient mining practices (p. 249), the remarkable illustrations to the 1538 Estienne Bible (p. 250), the numismatic rigours of Jacopo Strada (p. 252), and Mabillon's pioneering work on medieval palaeography (p. 456). Regrettably, the discussion of the 'historical legitimacy' of images fails to mention Francis Haskell's classic *History and its Images*, a book which discusses the latter two examples. Nor, for instance, do Chatelain and Pinon mention the studies of Frances Yates and Mary Carruthers in their discussion of medieval memory, or the fact that in 1953 William M. Ivins anticipated their observation that the illustrations to Brunfels's 1532 *Herbarum* represent plants in all their accidental particularity, as opposed to ideal specimens (p. 255). Most of the copious sources cited throughout the book – especially non-French studies – are narrowly bibliographical. It must be said, however, that Italian, German, Netherlandish and Spanish precedents are duly acknowledged throughout, leaving this reader questioning the legitimacy of the purported focus on the development of the 'livre français'. An overtly international scope, and a focus on themes rather than chronology, might have led to more pointed discussion of subjects like the transmission and transformation of layout techniques, the permeability of text and image, or the ways in which changing technologies affect the look of the page.

Moving into the seventeenth century, Chatelain provides an excellent overview of frontispieces – paper versions, as he puts it, of triumphal arches and retables. His related treatment of printed 'galleries', which continues the labours of Marc Fumaroli, nicely evokes the aesthetics, or erotics, of the classic French page (pp. 35ff.). Martin, for his part, is ill at ease amid the grander products of the Grand Siècle, a

lack of sympathy that leads to uneven – and often downright eccentric – results. It is strange, in a discussion of seventeenth-century French books, to find seven pages on St Teresa of Avila, but no mention of Perrault and Le Clerc's splendid *Labyrinthe de Versailles* (1679). Martin does mention Le Clerc in passing, in a good overview of cartographic publications (pp. 328–39). He also provides a lively discussion of typography in theatrical publications (pp. 417–31), revealing such Shandyesque features as a shaped poem printed sideways, or a fictive book title, read by the character Agnès in a 1663 edition of Molière's *Ecole des femmes*, which mimics a title-page by interrupting the left-aligned lineation with its oversized and centred capitals. Another witty *mise-en-texte*, reproduced on p. 424, is a description of a battle scene in a 1596 Horace. The first line reads BATAILLE, and the second *Ca, ça, tuë, tuë, tuë, ——— ça, ça, tuë, tuë, tuë, pif, paf*. This comic-book glossolalia, where words crowd a single line of text like bricks in a wall or soldiers in a motley battalion, is an eminently typographic mode of figuring the word.

A pictorial equivalent of this typesetting is found in the modular woodcuts from 1539 and 1542 editions of Terence, where images of the *dramatis personae* are grafted onto commensurate chunks of cityscape (p. 418). Characteristically, Martin does not remark on this combinatory mode of illustration, which dates back to the previous century. Jean-Marc Chatelain is more attentive to technical details of illustrations, discussing such subjects as the ascendancy of *intaglio* illustrations in the early seventeenth century. He astutely notes how, in the respective royal dedications to Valdor's 1649 *Triumphes de Louis le Juste*, the personalized frieze and the

initial word (SIRE, MADAME) are printed by Stefano della Bella from a single plate spanning the top half of the page (p. 352), with typeset text below. On these double-printed sheets the stylish blank tracts clearly help to conceal any discrepancies of inking and registration. Martin illustrates a similar image – della Bella's title-page to Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin's *Mirame* (p. 429) – but fails to mention that the surrounding proscenium arch is printed from a separate plate, ingeniously re-used to frame the subsequent illustrations depicting successive acts of the play.

Martin is more enlightening on the subject of reception. For instance, he points out that a fine book is sometimes a fashion statement, flaunted as much as it is read (pp. 170, 306), and that early dedications to noble patrons encouraged sales by signalling a book's chicness to non-courtly buyers (p. 150). Mystics provided another alternative to the earnest pedantries of professional historians. As Michel de Certeau observes, the mystic reader is less prone to follow a reasoned argument than to latch on to a provocative detail, then drop the book in favour of a more profound experience (p. 408). Tellingly, Martin goes on to deny visionary power to any material image ('une vision perd toute sa force à partir du moment où elle est concrétisée'). But surely there is a visionary quality to the quaintly uncanny heart-man in the *Images morales* published by Pierre Gallays (p. 412), not to mention Claude Mellan's famous centrifugal *Sudarium*. So far at least, independent works like Mellan's are another story. We must wait for the day when they are adequately assimilated into the history of printed books.