

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Joseph A. Dane, *What Is a Book?: The Study of Early Printed Books* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). xvi+276pp. ISBN 978 0 2680 2609 7.

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The question ‘what is a book?’ is Joseph Dane’s primary concern in this at once introductory and invaluable study of early printed books. In his attempt to answer this question, however, Dane raises other ones: for example, ‘what is a book-copy?’ ‘And who’, Dane asks, ‘is it that can tell just what these things are?’ (p. 2). This book, with its many examples and lavish illustrations (forty in total), reveals that Joseph Dane is well placed to tell us. A crucial distinction that Dane maintains throughout this study is the difference between the abstract concept of the book and the actual material book-copy — that is, the physical object that exists in time and space, the material book that one can sell, read, annotate, rebind, etc. It is precisely this attention to, on the one hand, the idealised book and, on the other, the book as cultural artefact that distinguishes Dane’s work from the many recent publications on the materiality of the book (printed during the period of the hand press). In other words, Dane does well to foreground not only the productions of books but also their dissemination, reception, cataloguing, reproduction, etc. Another distinguishing feature of this study is its heightened attention to methodology: ‘What’, Dane asks early on, ‘are the methods scholars of books use in studying material books, and what are the implications of these methods on our understanding of what books are and do?’ (p. 2). If Dane’s book supplies a fine examination, indeed interrogation, of these methods, it also offers a remarkable reflection on the implications of these methods.

Dane’s study is divided into two parts: part one attends to what Dane terms the elements of material books (size, materials, mechanics of the press, page format and layout, typography, illustrations); part two explores the history of books and the histories of book-

copies (bindings, marginalia, provenance, enumerative and descriptive bibliography, facsimiles, as well as electronic books and databases). Dane tells us that he has organised his book ‘around familiar issues in bibliography’ (p. 12); however, the strength of this book is its ability to familiarise readers with integral concepts as well as to defamiliarise readers by challenging received and cherished narratives.

Part one will meet the needs of any student of the book as a physical object, especially those who seek a clear and coherent understanding of the field’s basic terminology. Dane’s coverage of the fundamentals of book production is excellent. But there is much more on display than the elements of book making: this book supplies us with ample information about how books were used. We learn, for instance, that the title pages of some early printed books were used as ‘advertising flyers’ (p. 22), informing the public where the book could be had; that printed manicules, such as those in margins of the 1602 *Works* of Chaucer, most likely served a didactic function but may also have been ‘purely ornamental’ (p. 25); that annotations by early modern readers of books could have been done in pencil, ink or crayon; that, *pace* Lucien Febvre, ‘no hard and fast rule govern[s] the meaning of typefonts’ (p. 123). Dane’s book really is a treasure trove for the student of early printed books, in part because Dane is a well-informed and rigorous book historian committed to the advancement of knowledge as much as its dissemination.

Part two is perhaps the richest section of this study, for it is here that Dane shines as an historian of the book as not just a physical but also a cultural object, an object conditioned by economic, historical and institutional forces. This section includes knowledgeable accounts of binding practices, marks in books as well as the early composite volume (*Sammelband*). It also incorporates a critical reappraisal of bibliographical terminology — in particular, a penetrating section on the key, although often confusing, terms ‘edition’, ‘issue’, ‘state’ and ‘variant’ (pp. 194–96). Part two concludes with two chapters on what Dane terms the ‘ersatz’ book as manifested in the form of facsimiles and forgeries as well as electronic books and databases. In the age of EEBO and ECCO, Dane’s critical interrogation of these databases — their digitalising practices; their bibliographical accuracy — is particularly timely, reminding us, as it does, that the digital versions of early modern books that many early modern historians and literary historians confront on a daily basis are far removed from the real thing.