



*Early Modern  
Literary Studies*

**Malcolm Jones, *The Print in Early Modern England: An Historical Oversight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). xii+452pp.+378 illustrations. ISBN 978 0 3001 3697 5.**

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I first stumbled into the world of the early modern print – and the early modern print in England – more-or-less accidentally. I was studying the textual experimentation of Nicholas Ferrar and family of Little Gidding, who in the 1630s produced harmonizations of the four gospels by cutting-and-pasting printed testaments into a new arrangement. As interesting as this textual re-arrangement of scripture is, the text is inseparable in these books from the hundreds of biblical prints that the Ferrars also included—the books present the gospel story in a spectacular way, matching illustration to story, but also employing fragments cut from prints to make new images, in much the same way as text has been reconstructed.

The Little Gidding books bear witness to the availability of illustrative prints in early modern, Protestant England. The images are copious. Many of them come from the Continent, primarily Antwerp, but many as well are English copies of the Antwerp originals, their English text designed for the local market. And so, while I had thought of early modern English culture as literary and not visual, both through a lack of visual artistic culture and through the prohibitions of reformed religion, the fact before me was that, when early moderns thought of scripture, they not only remembered words, but they remembered pictures as well. And, as Tessa Watt has demonstrated, the circulation of prints – from cheap woodcuts to high-end engravings – was common in the period. The Ferrars bought most of their prints at country markets and in shops in London. Prints, in fact, were everywhere. Further, as Antony Wells-Cole has shown more recently, prints had a general role in the decorative arts, providing subjects for paintings, wood carvings, and plasterwork.

However, it is one thing to know that such a visual culture existed, but another to actually see it, and to see something of the breadth of it. Malcolm Jones, in his *The Print in Early Modern England: An Historical Oversight*, has undertaken the massive task of bringing together the available bits and pieces of early modern English print art, from print series and stand-alone prints to fragments, lone extant traces of larger, lost works. In his foreword, Jones sets out his four principle criteria for inclusion, that the work be English, that it be issued as a single sheet, that it be dateable to 1500-1700, and that it be predominantly pictorial. These, though, are guiding ideas rather than rules, and Jones goes on to write 'I can safely say that in what follows, I have violated all four of these principles' (p. xi). The resulting book is a surprising and delightful study of a print economy that demonstrates the full variety of the market; there is, here, at least a bit of everything. Fortunately, Jones does not leave us unguided. After an admirably economical and informative introduction to the use and circulation of prints, he divides the book into four parts: one, 'A Structured World: Series and Schemata,' two, 'The Body Politic,' three, 'The Moral Order,' and four 'The Social Order.' One of the characteristics of Jones's work that I appreciate most is that he avoids making sweeping statements about early modern England, but rather, lets the prints tell the story. He writes about the prints, telling with judiciously-chosen detail their story: their influences, their makers and sellers, their market. Notable for this review, he draws connections between prints and literature, such as Ben Jonson's reference in *Volpone* to the 'obscene pictures' of the Venetian Pietro Aretino. What emerges is a complex and nuanced sense of these images and the culture that produced them. Jones writes that he has attempted to provide a broad history and sampling of prints and to organize them in such a way that any readers can find material on their interests, and it is no small matter to say that I think he has succeeded. Moreover, the book rewards free-ranging exploration: one can dip in anywhere and become engrossed in the images there and further in Jones's commentary.

Coming from a literary background, what I continue to find so striking about early modern prints is their visualization of the body: prints show the body in a way that words cannot, and these bodies are both entirely recognizable and at the same time strange, from the luxurious body of Lucretia stabbing herself (pl. 212), to the body of the Pope having his nose held to the grindstone by other bodies (pl. 128), to the no-body of 'Nobody,' a punning and purely English fellow who is all arms, legs, and head (pl. 372). Yes, like every other early modernist, I have seen this sort of thing before, but I want to mark here that, for me at least, the visual encounter with the early modern body (more precisely the early

modern figuring of the body) pulls me into the uncanny space of Greenblatt's speaking with the dead.

Perhaps the strangest bodies here are the abnormal ones, the stuff of tabloid and freak show. The early modern fascination with abnormality, framed in ways ranging from the monstrous to the marvellous, takes shape in prints such as the one of a 'horryble monster . . . cast of a Sowe' published by Hans Meldman in Nuremberg in 1531 (pl. 227). While Meldman's print is only one of many, it makes for my purposes a particularly rich example of Jones's project, worth our closer attention here. The print includes two vertically-oriented woodcut images of conjoined piglets, from two sides, the left showing the faces and front sides of the piglets, whose mouths and snouts have joined as to form a single mouth and snout, so that the whole forms a single, grotesque face, which is unquestionably the focus point of the entire print: a pig face broadened out so that it nearly resembles a kind of human caricature, both attractive and repulsive. The piglets' bodies become separate at the midsection. The back view shows, rather than the face(s), four ears, two conjoined almost as wings, in the center, and with a single orifice—the joined back corners of the inner eyes perhaps—just above. If one thinks of the sheet as divided into three vertical columns, these two woodcuts occupy the outside columns, leaving the middle of the sheet empty. Above each of the woodcuts, Meldman has printed an explanatory text, in German and in black letter. This print, in this original German state, is preserved in one copy in Gotha. It is the earliest conjoined piglet print (there are many) on record.

That Meldman's print entered English history (and thus Jones's book) is borne out by two witnesses, in the British Library and the British Museum, both of which have added a center column of English text, also in black letter, along with printer's woodcut devices at head and foot. The two copies differ in that the British Library copy has been cropped top and bottom, removing all the German text, whereas the British Museum copy (reproduced here) has only the bottom, with the original German printer's information, cropped, but retains the German explanatory text. This sheet aptly demonstrates a few points at the heart of this study. One, it is iconic of the larger movement of Continental prints into the English market, not usually so literally overprinted. Clearly someone brought in Meldman's prints and, adding to his work, remade it for the English market. Two, it marks one of Jones's bigger points, which is that there was much more import and influence of German prints in England than has been previously recognized. And three, that tracing the story of these prints is often very much a detection game: who was the English printer who imported Meldman's prints and then overprinted and retailed them? The clue lies in the woodcut

devices, which were at that date in the possession of Peter Treveris, a printer in Southwark, and Jones thus identifies Treveris as the likely importer, additional printer, and retailer of the German sheets.

Treveris's English text follows the German text in giving details of the location of the piglets' birth, and the particularities of their strange conjunction. Neither text, though, follows the broader cultural tendency to find in such 'monstrosities' signs of moral and spiritual reckoning, foretellings of divine wrath prompted by human sin. If we consider two more prints, we will observe both the early modern proclivity to see strange suffering as sign of divine judgment as well as the unusual movements of the print trade and its reach into literary culture. 'The true discription of a childe with ruffes borne in the parish of Micheham' was printed in 1566 and describes a child born with loose folds of skin around her neck (pl. 237). As with the conjoined piglets, the sheet shows both front and back views of the subject, but the text goes beyond documentary account, linking the loose folds to the showy ruffs of contemporary fashion. Verses titled 'An Admonition vnto the Reader' include

This ruffeling world in ruffes al rolde,  
dooth God detest and hate:

...

Our filthy liues in Piggs are shewd,  
our Pride this Childe dooth bere:  
Our raggs and Ruffes that are so lewd,  
behold her flesh and here [hair]

...

And ye O England whose womakinde,  
in ruffes doo walke to oft:  
Parswade them stil to bere in minde,  
this Childe with ruffes so soft. (p. 248)

As the verses make clear, God hates the fashion of 'ruffs' because the fashion comes out of the sin of pride, and it is thus 'our Pride' that this child bears. The right end of this bearing is that prideful people would also bear it, bearing 'in minde/this Childe.' The poem reads the monstrosity as a sign from God, meant to be read and applied in the rectification of sin. Significantly for this present foray into Jones's book, these clever, heavy-handed lines refer to just the sort of pigs as in Treveris's sheet, naming them as the commonly known

principle which is now applied to the girl: monstrous pigs show our filthy lives, this girl shows our pride.

As it turns out, though, not only unfortunate children had revelatory ruffs. The 1586 pamphlet *A most wonderfull, and true report . . . of diuerse vnknowne foules . . . lately taken at Crowley in the Countie of Lyncolne* tells the story of the capture of seven of the birds now (and from at least as early as 1605) commonly known as ‘ruffs.’ The writer describes the neck feathers of these birds in terms of fashion and in moral terms: ‘I would that the reporte of these monstrous Byrdes might admonish some Rufflers, that themselves are monstrously men’ (p. 250). The pamphlet’s cover features a woodcut of one of the birds, and in a reversal of the normal flow, this woodcut was copied on the Continent: four extant broadsides (three German and one Dutch) feature copies of the bird image and two translate the English text. In addition to demonstrating the possibilities of the print trade, though, the image also sheds some light on some dark literary lines. In one of Jones’s many comments linking image to literary text, he takes on lines from Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* in which the Puritan Ananias abuses Surly, who is dressed like a Spaniard:

. . . Avoid Satan,  
Thou art not of the light. That ruff of pride,  
About thy neck, betrays thee: and is the same  
With that, which the unclean birds, in seventy-seven,  
Were seen to prank it with, on divers coasts. (4.7.50-55)

The ‘unclean birds’ have been glossed as referring to the Spanish invasion of the Low Countries or the Armada, or alternately as Jesuit priests entering England. The infamous arrival of actual birds, understood as monstrosities, on the English coast in decades past should give Jonson scholars more to work with concerning these lines: the birds nicely capture curiosity, portent, fear of invasion, and suspicion of fashion.

In this tale of pigs and ruffs, I have gleaned but one of the hundreds of stories waiting to be discovered in Jones’s book. I should also, though, talk about the limitations of this work. From my perspective, an oversight of Jones is his minimal treatment of biblical illustrations, which he explains by saying that illustrated bibles fall outside the bounds of this study (p. 174). However, most biblical illustrations circulating in England were not in bibles but were in series of four and up, and by the 1640s, William Peake was selling a wide range of these illustrations, copied from Flemish originals, with English text. Not

surprisingly, the Little Gidding books collectively are one of the best records of this market, and George Henderson has asked whether the Ferrars may have played a role in driving that market. In any case, I raise these prints not as a matter of fault-finding, for any study of such a vast, amorphous, and elusive topic such as Jones's must have practical and even arbitrary limits. Rather, I regret that we do not get more biblical illustrations here because of how central biblical narrative was to early modern culture, and how remarkably vivid that culture's pictorial imagination was when it came to the biblical narrative. While these images can be found in other sources, the opportunity to see them in the context of the broad range of visual subjects that Jones charts would be instructive. For all the Protestant emphasis on the Bible as word, biblical illustrations nonetheless taught people to think of biblical narrative as bodies in space, and these bodies in space ought to be considered alongside other bodies, even particularly the sexually-transgressive bodies that Jones so importantly (and playfully) includes in his study.

Another criticism is that the book does not provide the dimensions of the prints that it reproduces, which leaves the reader guessing as to relative size. Another much more understandable limitation is that some of the images are tantalizingly small, rendering their text unreadable. Jones has, though, provided an appendix with the full text of selected prints, which greatly remedies the problem. Strangely absent is an appendix listing all of the reproduced images. While particular topics can be found readily through the book's index, an image list would be useful for finding images a second time, and such a list could have included both image sizes as well as precise finding information, such as shelf mark. In my experience, one can never have too much of this kind of information, especially given the possibility that a library or museum might have more than one copy of a print and may even have the copies shelved in different places.

Nonetheless, even given the increasing accessibility of early modern prints via electronic means, the marriage of high-quality images and deeply knowledgeable commentary in a book such as this is really irreplaceable. This is much more than a collection of images with explanation. It is a sustained examination with a character of its own: Jones is very much our guide here, with his own tastes and subjectivity, and that, finally, is a subjectivity well worth our attention. It has been formed by years of immersion in its subject matter, so that ultimately the guide himself and his material both form a storehouse of delights.

## **Works Cited**

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