

Divine Art/Infernal Machine: Attitudes towards Printing in early modern Europe

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This paper presents portions of a work still in progress on the reception of printing in the West. For the most part it deals with the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century views that are discussed in my first chapter. However, I've retained the working title of my entire book – a title that was inspired by two eighteenth century images. One shows the wooden hand press descending from the heavens and entrusted to representatives of five European nations, each holding a medallion portraying a celebrated early printer. The other presents a Grub Street printing shop where workers with the heads of beasts labor under the direction of a two-faced master printer and a bookseller wearing a diabolical mask.

The juxtaposition of these two images conveys a sense of the ambivalence that is often attributed to Western attitudes in general – as suggested by Curt Bühler's comment: "Printing was regarded as a blessing and a curse; sometimes as both at once."¹ Yet to stop short with the polarities—blessing/curse; divine/infernal—is to neglect all that lies in between. Such dichotomies do not do justice to the complexity of reactions – nor to the generally favorable reception that the invention received in the West.

During the fifteenth century, according to Martin Lowry: "there was an immense range of individual opinions; all can be placed somewhere between committed acclamation and absolute rejection."² Even this seemingly cautious verdict seems too simple. There is ample evidence of committed acclamation; there is very little of absolute rejection.

Gutenberg's invention was repeatedly acclaimed as a divine art in the colophons and prefaces that came from early presses. In addition to the somewhat self-serving views of printers and editors, there were the tributes paid by influential elites—by cardinals and bishops, princely patrons and scholars—whose actions spoke as loudly as their words. Throughout Europe, German printers were invited to set up presses for the purpose of reproducing valued texts. Such evidence has led one authority to dismiss all talk of ambivalence and to assert that "it is abundantly clear from the earliest days of their appearance, printed books were considered and accepted as a great success."³

But here again is a verdict that seems to be too simple. Although there is little evidence of absolute rejection and much of "committed acclamation," fifteenth century commentators were not always single minded about the new presses. Initial enthusiasm can be documented; but so can subsequent disillusion and disappointment. Negative views are not hard to find.⁴ What needs more attention is that such views were most often directed not at the new art itself but at its unworthy practitioners.

¹ Curt Bühler, *The Fifteenth Century Book* (Philadelphia, 1960) 50.

² Martin Lowry, *The World of Aldus Manutius* (Ithaca, 1979) 24.

³ Paul Needham, "Haec sancta ars: Gutenberg's invention as a divine gift," *Gazette of the Grolier Club* #42 (New York, 1991) 104-5.

⁴ Brian Richardson, "The Debates on Printing in Renaissance Italy," *La Bibliofilia* Vol 100 (May-Dec, 1998) 135-55 p. 136. Richardson's article contains less evidence of actual debates than of imaginary dialogues composed by sixteenth century "poligraphi" such as Domenichi and Doni.

The paper will elaborate on these points while sampling diverse reactions during the first century after Gutenberg. It will conclude by reassessing the two images presented at the outset.