

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

No.4 'In case of bad workmanship, or accident'

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In the fifty years that press figures have been the subject of scholarly attention,¹ progress has been mixed. On the one hand we have made decided headway in applying them in bibliographical analysis, based on the recognition that – barring accident or oversight, cancellation or sophistication – there can never be more than one press figure per forme (i.e. figure and forme can be equated). We are now also well informed about the incidence of press figures in their heyday, the eighteenth century: between 40 and 50 percent of publications from the 1720s to the end of the century.² And we know that the period of their employment extends at least from the late 1620s to the late 1860s,³ though perhaps more attention needs to be devoted to the very early figures and the very late in order to eliminate the possibility that what appear to be press figures – symbols, letters and numbers peculiar to formes – are to be interpreted in some other way.

On the other hand there has been a reluctance to accept the equation of figure with press – for example, Gaskell maintains that

the highest press number in a series does not necessarily indicate the number of presses actually in use; often there were fewer presses at work than the number suggest, and there is also the possibility (though there is little evidence for it) that very high numbers – the figure '22' has been recorded – may have referred to pressmen, not presses.⁴

And W.B. Todd has argued that

the association of the figure with the man also permits a rational explanation of the large numbers in a few works . . . Actually, Strahan,

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1. I regard the period as having begun in 1949, with three studies: Walter E. Knotts, 'Press numbers as a bibliographical tool: a study of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, 1728', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 3, 198-212; Philip Gaskell, 'Eighteenth-century press numbers, their use and usefulness', *The Library*, 5th ser., 4, 249-61; and W.B. Todd, 'Procedures for determining the identity and order of certain eighteenth-century editions', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
 2. Daria Fedewytsch-Dickson, 'A New century of press figures', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 17 (1993), 85-6.
 3. B.J. McMullin, 'The Origins of press figures in English printing 1629-1671', *The Library*, 6th ser., 1 (1979), 307-35; 'The Bible and continuous reprinting in the early seventeenth century', *The Library*, 6th ser., 5 (1983), 256-63; 'The Lingering death of the press figure', in R.C. Alston (ed.), *Order and connexion; studies in bibliography and book history* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 39-47.
 4. Philip Gaskell, *A New introduction to bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 134.

the printer, may have owned only seven or eight presses and assigned to each three or more men working in shifts.⁵

Savage's note, 'Work with a figure',⁶ would seem, on the face of it, to settle the point: 'the pressmen put a figure into each form they work, corresponding to the number of their press', and in support it might be noted that the working of a hand press normally involves *two* men, one to beat the forme, the other to pull the bar, so that the argument for equating *man* and figure (as opposed to *press* and figure) is not particularly attractive, in that the figure would normally have to denote *two* men – the obvious exception is when one man works the press on his own (i.e. 'at half press'). Certainly in James Ballantyne's printing house in Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century there can be little doubt that the figures do indeed represent presses, even when they range as high as '25',⁷ and Andrew Strahan's '22' can similarly be explained once his full complement of presses is established.⁸

Also unresolved is the question of purpose: Why were press figures used at all? It is generally assumed that

Press figures ... [were] used for two very different purposes. One, which may have been the earlier and may have been connected with the use of symbols or letters rather than numbers, was to enable pressmen to identify their own work, probably so that they could keep a check on their wages. The other, for which the evidence is later in date (it appears to coincide with the practice of consecutive perfecting at different presses), and which may have been connected with the use of numbers as figures, was to enable the master to identify the pressmen's work so that he could penalize individuals in cases of bad workmanship. In the first case the pressman voluntarily put his mark on the sheets he printed; in the second the master compelled his pressmen to mark their work with the number by which their press was known, fining them if they failed to do so.⁹

Savage is obviously one of Gaskell's sources, but what Savage wrote – in continuation of the statement already quoted – was: 'for the purpose of ascertaining readily at what press a sheet [*vere forme*] was printed in case of bad workmanship, or any accident'. Savage mentions fines in a very limited context, as noted by Gaskell: 'in general pressmen are subject to a fine if they work without a figure, or a wrong one'. Despite Gaskell's allusion to penalties for bad

5. W.B. Todd, 'Observations on the incidence and interpretation of press figures', *Studies in Bibliography*, 3 (1950-51), 171-205.
6. William Savage, *A Dictionary of the art of printing* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1841), 814.
7. Nan Jaboor and B.J. McMullin, *James Ballantyne and press figures* (Melbourne: Ancora Press, 1994) (Monash Occasional Papers in Librarianship, Recordkeeping and Bibliography, no.4).
8. B.J. McMullin, 'Further observations on the incidence and interpretation of press figures', in O.M. Brack jr. (ed.), *Writers, books, and trade; an eighteenth-century English miscellany for William B. Todd* (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 177-200 (188-90).
9. Gaskell, *A New introduction*, 133.

workmanship Savage mentions none. What then did Savage mean by recording that the purpose of inserting press figures was to identify at what press faulty work had been produced (and therefore by whom)? *Were* fines imposed?

A number of sets of rules for the conduct of a printing house, along with scales of fines for their infringement, survive from the 1680s onwards in England.¹⁰ The categories of offence, more of which apply to the composing room than to the press room, are objective – for example, Moxon's 'customs' prescribe a penalty (or 'solace') 'If a *Press-man* leave his *Blankets* in the *Tympan* at noon or night', and the 1734 'rules and orders' include a fine of 1*d.* 'For leaving the Ink-Tub uncover'd'. Nowhere though that I am aware of is there provision for fining or otherwise disciplining pressmen for producing bad work. *Is* there any evidence that can be brought to bear on the question? A moment's reflexion will suggest that a penalty of any kind might be difficult to establish, given the possible nature of the infraction: how much would a few instances of defective inking or the odd pulled page number be worth compared with a wrongly imposed forme – or indeed with a compositor's leaving 'the Quantity of 20 loose Letters at his Frame 12 o'Clock Tuesday noon' in Bowyer's house, an offence which incurred a fine of 3*d.*

I must admit that I had always assumed that the penalty for bad workmanship was to make good any deficiencies in the offenders' own time, but again a belated moment's reflexion will suggest an apparently insuperable difficulty: anything which necessitated resetting (and doubly so if the fault occurred in the reiteration forme) would involve compositors, who would then need to be reimbursed for repeating work for which they had already been paid or were entitled to payment. Would remedying the fault be worth the loss of time, let alone the cost? And would there need to be an acceptance that beyond a certain time bad workmanship would simply need to be overlooked? Or would it depend on the customer whether bad workmanship was accepted or not?

What makes any interpretation of the purpose of press figures tentative is that the majority of printers – even in the eighteenth century – managed to conduct their business without recourse to them. Whatever the equation – with men or with presses – there must have been some other form of recordkeeping, since there is a third variable involved: the time at which individual formes were worked off. A record of who printed what, and when, must have been necessary whether press figures were used or not, since payment was by piece, not time. One such form of recordkeeping is illustrated by Stower's 'Press-Book':¹¹

10. Among them are: Joseph Moxon (ed. Herbert Davis and Harry Carter), *Mechanick exercises on the whole art of printing (1683-4)* 2nd ed. (London: OUP, 1962), 323-5, 'Ancient customs used in a printing-house'; Ellic Howe (ed.), *The London compositor* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1947), 30-32, 'Rules and orders to be observed by the members of this chapel', 1734; Keith I.D. Maslen (ed.), *Bowyers chapel rules* [late 1750s?] (Dunedin: Bibliography Room, University of Otago, 1976); C. Stower, *The Printer's grammar; or, introduction to the art of printing* (London: B. Crosby, 1808), 383-6; and J. Johnson, *Typographia, or the printers' instructor: including an account of the origin of printing* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1824), 2v., vol.2, 488-9.

11. Stower, *The Printer's grammar*, 380.

When given out to wct.	Names of Works.	No.	Signature.	Date when laid on.	No. of Press.	Hour when laid on.
Nov. 3.	Spectator - - - -	35000	R, E 2	Nov. 5, 6	6th, 2d	11 m. ½ p- 9 m.
4.	Holinshed's Chronicles	15000	4R, 4R 2	7, 9	1th, 4th	4, 8 m.

The Press-Book would have served this purpose, though it is curious to note that there is no provision for including the names of pressmen, only the numbers of presses, an omission which might be taken to imply that it was assumed that there would be a constant relationship between a pair of pressmen and a particular press for at least the duration of a particular pay period and therefore that there was no need to record names. The omission in Savage is supplied by Johnson, whose 'Press Book' has a column headed 'Names of Pressmen':¹²

When given out to wct.	Names of Work.	No.	Signature.	Date when laid on.	Names of Pressmen.	Hour when laid on.
Nov. 7.	Magna Charta.	1000	F	Nov. 9	W. Wells.	9 m. p. 7. mor.
9.	Puckie's Club.	750	H	12	W. Lovatt.	20 m. b. 10 m.
12.	Physiognomical Portraits.	500	G, G 2	15, 17	W. & L.	8 m. ½ p. 10 m.

12. Johnson, *Typographia*, vol.2, 483.

Here the apparent difficulty is that though the heading calls for *pressmen* the illustration records only one, but since the accompanying discussion stipulates that 'Before the revise is given to the compositor, the *names of the pressmen* [italic supplied] who are intended to work off the form, should be entered in the *Press Book*' I have concluded that the name of one man must stand for the pair of which he is a member.¹³ Johnson goes on to illustrate and discuss a *Check Book*, designed 'for the purpose of checking the bills of both the Compositors and Pressmen'; again only one name is recorded:¹⁴

Magna Charta, 8vo, Demy. N° 1000.									
Blotter.	Compositors.				Encribers.	By whom worked at Press.		Observations.	
	Johnson.	Bishop.	Congreve.			Outer Form.	Inner Form.	Here the making up of the sheet, press-work, the charge for make, &c. if any & all other charges should be inserted.	
B	e	r	s		7s. 6d.	W. Lovatt.	W. Watts.		
C	12	e			5s. 6d.	W. Watts.	W. Lovatt.		
D									
E									
F									
G									
H									

Note that in neither Press Book nor Check Book are press figures called for – i.e. the Books themselves provided sufficient record of which pressmen were responsible for which formes. It might be adjudged, too, that – like Stower's Press-Book – Johnson's Books were designed as a check on claims for payment. Moreover, bad workmanship in Johnson's scheme of things is insured against by other means:

[The Overseer] should, (where there is not a person engaged expressly for the purpose, as is the case in houses employing ten or fourteen presses,) go regularly round, about every quarter of an hour, to the different presses, and examine their work, point out defects, if any, and glance again over the heads, sides, and bottoms of the pages, to see if any thing has been drawn out by the balls, which frequently occurs from bad justification of the lines, and careless and improper locking up of the form.¹⁵

13. The entry for *Physiognomical Portraits* is explained thus: 'signature G, the outer form was laid on November 15, by William Watts, at 8 o'clock in the morning; the inner form G2, was laid on November 17, by William Lovatt, at half past ten in the morning.'

14. Johnson, *Typographia*, 485.

15. Johnson, *Typographia*, 484.

Under such a regime the use of press figures as a check on bad workmanship would seem superfluous.

The keeping of a press book, however, might be obviated by adherence to the practice enjoined in the 1734 rules for pressmen: 'VIII. The Press-men are desir'd to put in the Drawer, one of a Sort of every Job, with their Names, the No. wrought, and Day of the Month.'¹⁶

What both forms of recordkeeping suggest is that they were designed to keep account of wages due, and neither implies the use of press figures in order to ensure that end. Yet where press figures *were* used they were obviously important to the master; hence the fine – as much as 3*d.* in the 1734 rules – for working without a figure.

It has to be conceded that consistency of practice cannot be assumed. Nonetheless the available evidence – admittedly limited – tends to the conclusion that even when their use was in decline press figures were designed as a check on claims by pressmen for payment for work performed. In this light it is proper to reiterate: What *are* the implications for printing-house practices of Savage's observation that 'the pressmen put a figure into each form they work ... for the purpose of ascertaining readily at which press a sheet was printed in case of bad workmanship, or accident'?

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16. Howe, *London compositor*, 31.