

The printing workshop: labour, wages and conflict

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

A printing shop of the sixteenth century was a workshop of a new kind. It gathered, under the direction of a master, workers with different skills who performed different tasks in a coordinated sequence: the compositor set the type from the manuscript, the pressmen inked the forme and pulled the sheets, the corrector read the proofs and marked errors, and apprentices and assistants dried, folded and stacked the sheets. A large shop might operate several presses at once, each served by two pressmen, and employ a dozen or more workers.¹ The work was organised to a daily quota of sheets per press, so that the productivity of the shop depended on the discipline and coordination of the team.

The printing workers occupied an ambiguous position in the guild city. Printing was a new trade that did not fit into the traditional guild structure. In Basel, the printers were attached to the guild *zum Safran*, the guild of the grocers and spice merchants, which accepted members of various new trades. The journeymen printers were often mobile, moving from city to city in search of work, and formed associations of their own that defended their wages and working conditions. Conflicts between masters and journeymen over wages, hours, meals and the number of apprentices occurred in several printing centres, most famously in Lyon, where the journeymen printers went on strike in 1539 in one of the first documented labour disputes of modern Europe.²

The correctors formed a special group. They were educated men, often university students or graduates, who knew Latin and sometimes Greek and Hebrew, and whose task was to ensure the accuracy of the printed text. In a learned printing house like Froben's, the correctors were scholars in their own right, several of whom later became professors, pastors or printers. The corrector was, in a sense, the quality controller of the printing business, and the reputation of a printer depended on the care of his

correctors. Erasmus himself often acted as a corrector of his own works in Froben's shop, standing by the press to correct the proofs as they came off.

The printing workshop anticipated some features of industrial production: the division of labour, the coordination of specialised tasks, the separation between the owner of capital and the wage workers, and the conflicts over wages that this separation generated. It also anticipated the importance of quality control and of the reputation for accuracy. Modern financial institutions, whose products are information and trust, face similar problems of organisation, supervision and quality control. The four-eyes principle, which requires that important transactions be approved by two persons, and the internal control systems that FINMA requires of supervised institutions have their distant ancestor in the corrector who read the proofs before a book went to press.

1 Notes

1. On the organisation of labour in sixteenth-century printing shops (compositors, pressmen, correctors), see the standard literature on the history of the book. To be verified for Basel. ↩
2. On the strike of the journeymen printers of Lyon in 1539 (le grand tric) and similar conflicts in other printing centres, including Basel, see the literature on the social history of printing. To be verified. ↩

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