

'The gathered text, 1650-1750'

The idea that print provided a more 'stable' medium for early modern authors' works than open-ended manuscripts was once taken as a critical commonplace. In recent years the stability of print has been questioned by scholars working in a number of fields: textual editors, for instance, have demonstrated the importance of respecting the multiple states of many early modern texts, while the borders between manuscript and print have been blurred by studies of marginalia and other forms of annotation or emendation. This paper further questions the stability of the printed text by focusing on one of the early modern book's fundamental physical characteristics: its gatherings. The paper establishes that disruption in the sequence of gatherings that make up a printed text (caused, for instance, by problems in shared printing or authorial intervention in the printing process) was a common textual phenomenon during the late seventeenth century. It argues that, rather than overlooking or ignoring such disruption, early modern publishers and authors often used it as a rhetorical device that could signal a text's generic miscellaneity; highlight a text's illicit legal status; or even create ethical connections between the character of an author and the physical appearance of his or her text. For those who worked with printed texts during the hand-press book period – whether as authors, publishers or readers – the ever-present possibility of a text's dispersal back into individual gatherings was at least as significant as the appearance of stability provided by the printed medium. The paper concludes that modern scholars should attend to the sense of contingency generated by the joint processes of gathering and dispersal in their readings of early modern texts.

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