

The Culture of Revision in the Early Modern English Book Trade

There is ample contemporary evidence of the special attraction of novelty for book buyers in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but new texts carried more risk for the publisher than titles already proven to be good sellers. Canny bookseller-publishers therefore attempted to benefit from the commercial safety of the reprint while simultaneously exploiting the cachet of the 'new'. They could maximise the sales potential of their books by reprinting an already market-tested text and repackaging it with new and improved ingredients, often provided by the text's original author. Such enlargements were never left unpublicised on the title-page which, as the primary means of marketing texts in the early modern book trade, was designed to function both like a dust-jacket advertisement intended for bookstall browsers, and as a separate advertisement posted remote from the physical volume.

It might be natural to assume that the form of any early modern title-page is entirely contingent on the text it announces, and that any influence exerted between them originates from the main text and affects the title-page, resulting in such identifying marks as the number of that edition or a description of its contents. But I propose another influence in the opposite direction, that the particularly commercial demands of the title-page exerted their own effect on the primary text. Given the safe bet of reprints and the marketability of new material, the promotional nature of title-pages therefore necessitated revised, annotated, or otherwise enlarged editions to be produced by the author, resulting in a cooperation, if not collaboration, between publisher and author to attract attention and sales.

Dr Jonathan Olson
The School of English
University of Liverpool
Cypress Building
Chatham Street
Liverpool
L69 7ZR