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Reluctant Virgins:
The Stigma of Print Revisited

by DANIEL TRAISTER

In 1614 John Donne wrote to his friend Sir Henry Goodyere to tell him (“but so softly, that I am loath to hear my self: and so softly, that if that good Lady [Lucy, Countess of Bedford, with whom Goodyere was visiting at the time] were in the room, with you and this Letter, she might not hear”) “that I am brought to a necessitie of printing my Poems.”

This I mean to do forthwith: not for much publice view, but at mine own cost, a few Copies. I apprehend some incongruities in the resolution; and I know what I shall suffer from many interpretations: but I am at an end, of much considering that; and, if I were as startling in that kinde, as ever I was, yet in this particular, I am under an unescapable necessity, as I shall let you perceive, when I see you.

Donne sounds as though he is about to undergo an exceptionally unpleasant experience. One of the “reluctant virgins” of my title, he represents himself as brought kicking and screaming, not to bed, but to the press. By his lights, he was to prove lucky. In the end, his chastity was preserved. Not until after his body had been laid to rest, wearing its famous shroud, were his literary remains violated by the rough impression of the printer’s black ink.

Donne’s response to the prospect of having his poetry printed is illuminated by J. W. Saunders’ article, “The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry.” This essay appeared some thirty-nine years ago; it remains a
small classic. The passage of time has failed to diminish its significance, while subsequent scholarship has made the issues it raises and its conclusions increasingly worth consideration by scholars in several fields. Both the new historians who investigate the social and political functions of English literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the equally new historians who investigate the impact on Western culture of printing from movable type, study issues directly related to those Saunders considered.

His footnotes, in fact, contain the seeds of important articles and books that, years after his work appeared, were to elaborate points that Saunders had tossed off almost casually in a few sentences. Some of the literary new historians and their historiographical sources especially have made significant use of his work.  

Other studies, however, among them some that have proved extremely influential written by book historians, have ignored Saunders, and not to the advantage of the subject they were attempting to advance. Yet his essay is particularly important for historians of printing and its impact. It should unsettle views that have come, like a juggernaut, to dominate recent approaches to early printing history. These views see the development of printing from movable type as itself a juggernaut, quickly “revolutionizing” the ways in which knowledge was disseminated in early modern Europe.

The criteria by which we now understand the impact of the shift from manuscript to print in the early modern period can be quickly enumerated. By comparison with texts which existed only in unique or few manuscript copies, printed texts, clearly more numerous, were more widely disseminated and thus able to be read in greater profusion. Amenable to standardization and correction, they offered inducements to rationalized organization of data through such “obvious” devices as exactly repeated page numbers and tables of contents, and also through alphabetized indices, dictionaries, atlases, and so forth. On the one hand, the existence of multiple, dispersed copies of texts and, on the other hand, the freeing of their contents from the substantive corruptions through repeated recopying to which manuscripts were forever subject, together made possible the preservation of knowledge, new and old, in a manner hitherto impossible. These characteristics Alvin B. Kernan has conveniently labelled “multiplicity,” “systematization,” and “fixity.” Their self-evident value explains why print triumphed over the manuscript book. They also explain why printing from movable
type appears to have had the rapidity of impact it did. But Saunders’ work provides evidence of an important exception to their sway.

Saunders’ major point may be summarized very simply. “A great deal of Tudor poetry,” he writes, “never passed beyond the manuscript stage, and . . . even where it did ultimately reach print, the manuscript was generally considered the normal medium of publication.” In developing this point, Saunders distinguishes “Court poets” from “professional poets.” The former, who were “Gentlemen,” “shunned print”:

Once their poetry had circulated within the manuscript audience, its job was done, and little attempt was made by its writers to preserve it or keep track of it.

In contrast, “professionals,” whom Saunders calls “the poor fellows that lived by poetry, directly or indirectly,” were dependent upon printed as opposed to manuscript circulation of their work:

Outside the theatre it was the printers who provided these poets with the best opportunity to capitalize their poetic genius. Though the pecuniary rewards were in themselves meagre and hazardous, and though few writers could expect any regular income from publications, nevertheless the printed page provided a ready introduction to the fruits of patronage, and thereby, in times which were literally desperate for many authors, a gateway to social advancement and security. So, whereas for the amateur poets of the Court an avoidance of print was socially desirable, for the professional poets outside or only on the edge of Court circles the achievement of print becomes an economic necessity.

As Saunders was to write some years later,

most of the writers whom we have regarded as pioneers of professional belles-lettres made use of their literary gifts as a means to an end rather than as an end in themselves, and were much more interested in social promotion at Court, the carrière ouverte aux talents, than in literary independence . . . Many of their complaints were not so much those of frustrated would-be literary professionals as those of neglected would-be political placemen.

Writing about a period, the sixteenth century, in which we have learned to expect that the formal written word will circulate in print, Saunders has identified an exception. It is an exception distinguished by social and economic status, and, at least partially, by genre.

Some examples will be helpful, although these cannot be exhaustive here. Saunders provides additional examples illustrative of the indifference or reluctance evidenced by many Tudor writers to committing their works to print. Examples occur also in the Stuart period and even later.

Among earlier Tudor writers, Sir Thomas Wyatt (dead in 1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (dead in 1547), both avoided print while they were alive. Wyatt’s translation of Plutarch’s *Quyete of Mynde* appeared in 1528. His poetry, however, did not begin to see print, usually anonymously, until the 1540s, and no genuinely substantial selection was printed until “Tottel’s Miscellany” (*Songes and Sonettes*) appeared in 1557, fifteen years after Wyatt’s death. Tottel also printed Surrey, of course, although earlier printed work by him had appeared in Sternhold’s version of Proverbs (1549–50).11

Later in the century, Sir Philip Sidney, dead in 1586 at the age of 32, only began to appear in print four years after his death, when the *Arcadia* was published. *Astrophil and Stella* appeared the next year, in 1591; two independent editions of the *Defense of Poetry* appeared in 1595. Among his more occasional works, *The Lady of May* awaited print until 1598, while the “Letter to Queen Elizabeth” appeared in 1663. The translation of the Psalms, completed by his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, was not printed until 1823. The original, unrevised version of the *Arcadia* did not appear in print until early in the present century, after Bertram Dobell’s discovery of the manuscript.12

Philip’s brother Robert, Earl of Leicester, died of old age in 1626. Also a poet, he is, however, entirely absent from literary history since none of his work was printed until the 1970s. Only in 1984 did it make its first monographic appearance in print, in the edition of Peter J. Croft, who had first recognized the significance of the manuscript in which Robert Sidney’s poetry is preserved.13

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11. Information about both Wyatt and Surrey is drawn from *STC*.


Professor Terry Belanger has suggested to me that, if *Sidney’s* *Stella* represents Penelope Devereaux, Lady Rich, or was generally thought to represent her, then Sidney might not have felt able to publish *Astrophil and Stella* while Lady Rich remained alive without facing a potential legal action for defamation. Some of the other literature produced by writers for small coterie audiences and containing obvious references to the affairs of living people might also have been kept from the press because of fears of just this kind. This would be an interesting explanation for some of the phenomena I discuss, but preliminary inquiry leaves me doubtful that it can be supported. Defamation, libel, and slander had been perceived as ecclesiastical rather than civil offenses at the start of the sixteenth century. But a “clash of jurisdictions” between civil and ecclesiastical courts, with specific reference to defamation and slander, increased in the 1590s, according to Louis A. Knafla; see his Chap. 6, pp. 123–54, esp. pp. 136 ff., in *Law and Politics in Jacobean England: The Tracts of Lord Chancellor Ellesmere* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977). Even if ecclesiastical courts claimed jurisdiction over actions, lawyers were prepared to go through contortions in order “to make a defamation plea look like something else” to a civil (secular) court (R. H. Helmholz, “Introduction,” p. ix, in *Select Cases on Defamation to 1600*, ed. R. H. Helmholz, Publications of the Selden Society, 101 [London: Selden Society, 1985]; Helmholz’s “Introduction” [pp. xi–xxi] provides extensive background). I believe one must conclude that, precisely because contortions would have been necessary successfully to prosecute in the secular courts an action for libel resulting from publication of any secular piece of writing, even if it included potentially slanderous or defamatory materials, Professor Belanger’s suggestion does not account completely, if at all, for the observed reluctance of Tudor and Stuart writers to appear in print.

13. Information about Robert Sidney’s attitudes to his own poetry, most especially his “wish not to be publicly identified as a poet” (pp. 1–2, perhaps complicated in his case by a desire to remain “free from any embarrassing suggestion that the younger brother was trying to rival the elder” [p. 3]), comes from P. J. Croft’s edition of *The Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Croft also discusses the manuscript in which Robert’s poetry survives. Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, sister to both Sidneys, was not as reluctant as her brothers to see her works in print. Whether because of her experience in working with Philip on, and then compiling, a translation of the Psalms, editing the *Arcadia* for its second, 1553 edition, or composing “The Doleful Lay of Clorinda, a
Philip’s friend and contemporary Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, died in 1628. He had appeared in print when an unauthorized edition of his play Mustapha was printed in 1609. Otherwise, his Certain Learned and Elegant Workes awaited printing until 1633, when Greville had been dead for five years; his Life of Sidney until 1652; and his Remains, Being Poems of Monarchy and Religion until 1670. The publisher’s “Advertisement” to the 1670 Remains asserts that Greville had revised his works in his old age and “at his death committed them to his friend Mr. Michael Malet an aged Gentleman in whom he most confided, who intended, what the Author purposed, to have had them Printed altogether.”

If we may believe the 1670 “Advertisement,” Greville, while still alive, had thus made more of a concession to print than either of the Sidney brothers seems to have made. Sir Edward Dyer, another of Philip’s friends, was similarly indifferent to appearing in print while he remained alive. According to his editor, Ralph M. Sargent, he seems also to have been entirely uninterested in the survival of his poetic manuscripts, making “no collection of his verse” and preserving neither “a single poem . . . in his own handwriting” nor “any comment . . . [by himself] about his own writing.”

Even a client of the Sidneys, such as Abraham Fraunce—normally averse neither to print nor even to appropriating the work of other writers (such as Thomas Watson’s Amyntas)—might find occasion when print seemed worth avoiding. Fraunce wrote a book of impresses for the Sidneys themselves but left it unpublished in manuscript; so far as I am aware, it remains unpublished to this day, although it survives, splendid presentation binding reasonably intact, at Oxford’s Bodleian Library.
Early Tudor writers and members of the Sidney circle were not alone in exhibiting such indifference to or reluctance about appearing as “literary” authors in print. Later writers exhibit many of the same attitudes.

John Donne, last seen in 1614 dreading the prospect of appearing as a printed poet, died in 1631. His Poems, edited by his son, appeared in 1633. Of his poetry, only the Anniversaries, commissioned, occasional, epideictic poems, together with the related “Funerall Elegie,” had been printed before his death, apart from a few scattered poems appearing either as songs or as selections printed in other people’s books. His religious writings, on the other hand, including his sermons, had frequently appeared in print before his death. Sermons were Donne’s job, getting them published part of it, in a way that his poetry—even his religious poetry—evidently was not.

Thomas Carew printed only ten of his poems, as well as his masque Coelum Britannicum, during his lifetime (“three of them without his name and at least one of these without authorization”). Once he was dead, however, printers allowed no grass to grow over his dead body: “on the day of his funeral (23 March 1639/40) ‘a booke called The Workes of Thomas Carew Esquire. late Sewer to his Maiesty being Poems and Masques’ was licensed to Thomas Walkley, who had published Coelum Britannicum in 1634; the book appeared in 1640.”

John Suckling, who appears from available evidence to have died in 1641, authorized publication of only five of his poems before his death. Two songs and two commendatory verses also appeared while he was alive (as well as a political pamphlet, written when he was nineteen but not published until he had fled to France in 1641). His Fragmenta Aurea, however, did not appear until 1646, five years after his death.

As late as the Restoration, Andrew Marvell’s Miscellaneous Poems only appeared three years after Marvell’s 1678 death. Edited by a person claiming to be Mary Marvell, his wife, the collection appears to have had no motive lofter than that of establishing her claim to Marvell’s estate; presumably, however, the printer thought the volume would find a market. The poet himself, alive well into the later seventeenth century, was apparently quite happy to publish very few of his own poems—mainly political, satirical, or religious pieces—while he was alive.

Many other writers, of course, did put their own literary work into print during their lifetimes. Some were at least as well-regarded as Wyatt, Sidney, Donne, and


Marvell. Spenser, for example, went to print as a young man, if without his own name on the title page, and later had no hesitation about seeing *The Faerie Queene* into print. For Spenser, trying to climb into positions of civil authority at Court, publication appears to have represented an unavoidable necessity, a kind of advertisement of talents in a manner already well-established among both Continental and English humanists interested in the prospects of a Court career. Necessary or not, publication appears to have made Spenser somewhat nervous, or else why did he so frequently avoid his name as author on his own title page? Those who needed to know and might be in a position to reward those merits his works had brought to their attention, he might have felt, could easily have found out his name; those who did not need to know would not, leaving his social position unsullied, at least to their rabble eyes.

William Shakespeare may carelessly have left the task of seeing his plays into print to a posterity which might or might not choose to do so, but Ben Jonson clearly differentiated himself from Shakespeare by the care with which he oversaw the printing of the 1616 folio of his *Works*, including his plays. Indeed, in publishing his plays with such care, Jonson appears to have been making a claim about the “literary” merits of that sort of writing (and, more precisely, about the literary merits of his sort of writing), not as highly regarded as more recognizably literary poetic forms during this period. He thus indicated his unusual authorial arrogance and his indifference to issues of social status which underlay the attitude of other writers who avoided print while they were alive. Jonson’s attitudes were consistent with respect both to his plays and his poetry. About his non-dramatic works, too, as Richard C. Newton has shown, Jonson was supremely conscious of the advantages authors received from printed dissemination of their works. 24

Nor was Milton behindhand in seeing his poetry or his prose into print while he was alive, even revising *Paradise Lost* from ten to twelve books in successive printed versions. Justification of God’s ways to man, however, may be supposed to excuse a lot of spilt ink; the same may be true of justification of Cromwell’s ways as well. (Cromwell’s ways may even have seemed to some to require rather more justification than God’s.) Milton had no option to remain in manuscript, given his very specific didactic and propagandistic aims.

“Grub Street” writers—pamphleteers like Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Dekker—consistently saw their works into print during their lifetimes; they depended for their meager living on whatever income such publications obtained for them. Nonetheless, as Sandra Clark reminds us,
“pamphleteering was an occupation with a low status and a bad reputation.”

These were not writers likely to worry too much about the status implications of their publishing careers. (In fact, however, some of them did worry about their status, comparing their present situation as poverty-stricken hacks to their pretensions as University graduates who once had faced great futures but had failed to fulfill them. Some were bitterly resentful of those upstart crows who, lacking their own educational advantages, nonetheless made names for themselves even in such unlofty domains as those occupied by the public theaters.)

Writers who committed their works to print, whatever their place on the social scale, pose few problems. Whatever their reasons, they were doing exactly what we expect writers in an era of print to have done. Even Jonson’s unusual attitude toward the status of plays as “literature” is likely to strike us as reflective of a predictable, more or less “modern” sense of the potential impact of print that his non-dramatic publications also reveal. Questions are raised instead by those writers who eschewed print.

That they are important questions is indicated by the surprisingly large number of such writers, which I have barely hinted at, as well as by their quality. Wyatt, Sidney, Donne, and Marvell—to say nothing of Shakespeare—are, all by themselves, a great many of those sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers whom we still read for pleasure. The significance for the study of printing history of the questions raised by their avoidance of print is suggested by Richard C. Newton, writing about Jonson, a poet committed to print. Newton could not have written in this way had he studied any of those writers who, unlike Jonson, were not committed to print:

The invention of printing bestowed, as Elizabeth L. Eisenstein has shown, an almost incalculable legacy on Western culture . . . . Of the effects that I am interested in . . . permanence and liberation from performance are especially important . . . Before printing, all poets could hope, but none could truly expect, to survive. Preservation of the text is therefore a principal buttress of poets’ immortal longings. The other buttress, equally important, is popularity, the instrument of which, before printing and the mass production of texts, was necessarily performance . . . . To “publish” a poem, before printing, meant to send it abroad, in manuscript of course, but also in performance.26

Wyatt and Surrey, the Sidney brothers, Greville, Donne, Marvell, and many other poets as well evidenced attitudes towards their writing which make Newton’s statement utterly without point to them. They seem not to have cared about permanence (Kernan’s “fixity”); and the manner in which their literary production circulated in manuscript, first and foremost to a small circle of friends and literary associates, makes its performative basis quite clear. They produced “coterie works, intended for an audience of close friends, clients, and family members,” as Arthur F. Marotti writes, and thus their “poetic ‘discourse’ was


27. Saunders, “From Manuscript to Print,” passim; Marotti, John Donne, Coterie Poet, passim.
deliberately adjusted to the ‘Occasion,’ written sometimes to please an audience of friends and, supposedly, always to please oneself.”28 “Popularity” does not seem to have been their goal.

Without a doubt Newton’s words, founded on a perception central to the new printing history, illuminate Ben Jonson (in whose work, he writes, “we first see the impact of printing on literature coherently assimilated”).29 Nonetheless, it is striking how partial this history is in its application because it overlooks so much contradictory behavior—or, more accurately, because Jonson, in his regard for printing’s capabilities, is exceptional, not typical, even among those writers who did not blanch at the prospect of having their works appear in print. Too many important Tudor and Stuart writers seemed not to care that,
lacking textual integrity and autonomy—impermanent, bound to performance—a manuscript, unlike a printed book, is never “complete.” . . . It is always the possession of its last possessor . . . always in process, always being interpreted for the needs of the social group that as an audience “possesses” it.30

These, too, are Newton’s words, demonstrating the inferiority of the manuscript book to the “fixity” of print. They are also words that echo, albeit negatively, precisely what Saunders describes his “Court” writers as valuing.31 Indeed, when Donne wrote to Goodyere in 1614, his purpose was not only to bemoan the harsh necessity that, he thought, was about to drag him into print, but also he was asking for the return of some of his own poetic manuscripts which he had sent to Goodyere but no longer had copies of in his own hands. Other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets were to find themselves in similar situations on occasion—Sir John Davies, for example32—a fact suggestive of their lack of concern for “textual integrity,” “autonomy,” “completeness,” “possession,” and the other appurtenances of what we, like Newton, assume to be an author’s authoritative interests in his own product.

Why, in an age of print, should these writers have regarded the prospect of seeing their literary output fixed in printed form with apprehension, disdain, or condescension? Were all of Saunders’ “Court” poets simply premature Luddites, opposed to newfangled printing?

Saunders found the explanation for their attitudes in social class or aspiration, as I have already mentioned. The Tudor courtier, modeling himself after Castiglione’s ideal courtier, regarded the practice of poetry as one of the “parts”

29. Newton, “Jonson and the (Re-)Invention of the Book,” p. 34.

As an observation only (for, although it is worth elaboration, that can hardly be done here), I note that there appear to be connections between this casual attitude towards their own literature, curious to us but (as I argue) characteristic of many upper-class or socially mobile English Renaissance writers, and a lower-class “attitude,” or activity, with literary resonances—and problematics—of its own. Consider Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of carnival: “carnival celebrated contemporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order. . . . It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Fabelais and His World, trans. Helène Iswolsky [1968; rpt. Bloomingtion: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984], p. 10). The peculiar ways in which Renaissance society privileged literary discourses suggest more than merely fortuitous connections here, although some scholars resist “the collapse of the fair into the literary text and vice versa” (Stallybrass and White, Transgression, p. 60).
of a gentleman that he must refine. To do so for the wider public, however, or, even more unspeakably, for gain, was demeaning. Court poetry had "no economic function to perform." It did, however, have a social function, for when it was properly pursued it signified the poet's gentility.

(Very tentatively, and trying to bear in mind the complications that arise from the economic constraints upon the publication of dramatic texts during the period, I would suggest that perhaps even the Shakespeare-Ben Jonson contrast can be partially explained in such terms. Shakespeare, who did not seek to print his plays, and whose poems were published in a way that causes scholars dyspepsia to this day, sought a coat of arms and gives every evidence of having relished attaining the status of a leading citizen of Stratford. Jonson, who carefully oversaw the printing of his plays, sought, not badges of merit, but monetary recompense. He had as well some points to make about the literary status of the plays he wrote; and he seems to have harbored few desires to be the leading citizen of anything much more than the Mermaid Tavern, so long as he might be employed, every so often, to write a masque for the Court. Harboring no illusions about his social status, he felt more free to seek—and to control—print, thus to secure his literary status, than Shakespeare.)

Poets may indeed seek to achieve immortality for themselves or those they write about through their verse; or what printing historians, following Kernan, may call instead the "fixity" afforded their words by print:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

But print provides not only for fixity but also for multiplicity: for publication of many copies of a work which can and will circulate without control to any and all audiences ("Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die"—thus also Shakespeare, quotable, as usual, for every aspect of an argument; and also quoted here from those Sonnets which it is by no means certain that he wanted to see in print). The Tudor Court poet may not have desired such multiplicity and such audiences and, in fact, seems precisely to have rejected them. Kernan points to the "tension, if not downright contradiction, between two of the primary energies of print logic, multiplicity and fixity," a tension which "has never been resolved." It was certainly not resolved in the sixteenth or even in the seventeenth century, at least not among some reasonably significant English writers.

Recent historians argue for the immediacy of the impact of print on European history. In at least one kind of writer in one small corner of Europe, however, we...
find reason to question that immediacy of impact, and hence the generalizations through which we have learned to think about printing history generally. I do not yet know whether the same sort of phenomenon that I have discussed here can be found among the literary writers of France, Spain, the Germanies, or Italy. Dr. Sandra Sider informs me that a significant number of sixteenth-century Catalanian Court poets also seem to have avoided putting their works into print, and it is at least clear that the question warrants additional and cross-cultural investigation.

Most scientists, theologians, and scholars generally, whose works were usually written in Latin rather than the vernacular, exhibited nothing like the reluctance to commit themselves to print that the English Court poets display. But this observation, too, requires investigation, and at least some exceptions come to mind. A well-established pattern of manuscript circulation seems to have functioned, for scientists, more or less like pre-prints function today, but most circulated manuscripts were intended ultimately to appear in print. Regiomontanus is but one instance that can be cited of a scientist who practiced this sort of manuscript circulation of a text prior to its printed appearance.

Other scientists, however, particularly among those who investigated topics we now group among the "pseudo" or "occult" scientific preoccupations of the age, circulated their essays in manuscripts and never published them at all. My own library possesses just such a manuscript, partly from the pen (or amanuensis) of Henry Percy, the "Wizard Earl" of Northumberland (Pennsylvania MS. E. F. Smith 4 [Eng.]), and Professor Linda E. Voigts is currently preparing a catalogue of as many such manuscripts as she has located in North American and European repositories. In their own age such occultists were not charlatans (or, at least, not always). Fearful of allowing the untutored too easy a form of access to the fruits of their studies, they adopted a deliberate and conscious policy of avoiding print for this reason—and also because they felt it prudent to avoid attracting the notice of various ecclesiastical authorities.

I hope it is clear that I have tried to ask a question, not to propose any definitive answer to that question. I do, however, mean to suggest the need for caution before adopting too readily all the tenets of an approach to print and its impact...

39. Information from Dr. Sandra Sider (letter, 8 May 1988). The names she mentions include poets who either remained unpublished during their lifetime or who published pseudonymously or through pirated editions; among them, inter alia, are Juan Boscan (d. 1542), Garcilaso de la Vega (d. 1536), Luis de Argote y Góngora (d. 1627), Hernán Pérez de Oliva (d. 1533), and Gil Vincente (d. 1537?).


Many additional references might be cited at this point, but one example will do for all: Henry Faul and Carol Faul, It Started With a Stone: A History of Geology from the Stone Age to the Age of Plate Tectonics (New York: John Wiley, 1983). The Fauls note that Copernicus’ De revolutionibus circulated in manuscript for some thirty years prior to its appearance in print (p. 33). Briefly discussing Galileo’s trial, they refer to “the more or less clandestine discussion of scientific concepts that could be at variance with theological opinion” during the Renaissance (p. 34), and themes of secrecy and hesitation to print recur throughout their history, especially with respect to reports on the fossil record and its implications for thought about geological time. Reluctance to publish such views is hardly an idiosyncrasy of the Renaissance. There are grounds for suspecting that a very similar hesitancy partially explains Darwin’s long wait between his apprehension of natural selection as the means by which evolution proceeds, shortly after the return of the Beagle in the 1830s, and his publication of this theory in Origin, 1859. As early as the 1840s he had begun to circulate his theory in manuscript drafts to Hooker and others.
which omits the kind of exceptions I have described. It certainly makes sense to regard multiplicity, systematization, and fixity as characteristics of what we have learned to call "print culture." That they become characteristic of something that can be called "print culture" as quickly as recent historians propose, however, seems on the face of it highly improbable. Wyatt in the early and Sidney in the late sixteenth century, Donne at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, and Marvell in the middle of the seventeenth suggest that the changes these terms refer to required a much longer period of time than any concept of "revolution" implies before they came to dominate the thinking of authors in ways we now automatically, anachronistically, and unthinkingly assume.

It is very tempting to propose that one possible result of a revisionist investigation I think well worth undertaking will be the validation of a suggestion offered by Alvin Kernan:

[N]ot until the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century did . . . [print] transform the more advanced countries of Europe from oral into print societies, reordering the entire social world, and restructuring rather than merely modifying letters.41

The reluctance of the Tudor and Stuart Court poets to prostitute their Muse to the public press certainly indicates that that transformation had not yet occurred in a small portion of England's writing society at the end of the sixteenth and throughout much of the seventeenth century.