Introduction

Lear: Do’s any heere know me?
This is not Lear:
Do’s Lear walke thus? Speake thus? Where are his eies?
Either his Notion weakens, his Discernings
Are Lethargied. Ha! Waking? ’Tis not so?
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Lear’s words seem prescient. Who is Lear among those Lears shown in figure I.1? There are video versions on DVD and on tape; paintings; hundreds of text versions with their thousands of notes. When we enter a library, we find the versions that I will be most concerned with below. But limiting the notion of Lear to these books does little to clarify who or what Lear is. There is the Lear of the 1623 First Folio. There is another Lear in the 1608 quarto, who says something quite different from what he says in the Folio passage, quoted above, and even seems to say it in prose, which by a strange convention of modern typesetting I can quote without respecting the line endings of the original:

Lear: DOTH any here know mee? why this is not Lear, doth Lear
walke thus? speake thus? where are his eyes, either his notion,
weaknes, or his discernings are lethargie, sleeping, or wakeing; ha!
sure tis not so, who is it that can tell me who I am?

There are the Lears in the eighteenth-century editions of Alexander Pope, Lewis Theobald, William Warburton, Samuel Johnson, and, more recently, in the editions of Michael Warren. Some of the more recent Lears result from the late twentieth-century view that the very assumption of a single play behind all the various versions entitled King
What Is a Book?

Lear is erroneous; there are actually two plays, or three. Yet this multiplicity of Lears is itself a simplification. It is not quite correct to say that figure I.1 above shows the First Folio, or the Theobald edition of Lear, or the quarto, nor that my quotations come from the First Folio or the quarto. Rather, what the illustration shows is the copy of the First Folio at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles, one that is not quite the same as other copies, my own copy of the second Theobald edition, and facsimile copies of the early quartos; the quotations are taken from an online facsimile of the 1608 quarto at the Huntington Library in San Marino and the Norton facsimile of the First Folio, whose texts may not be identical to that in other copies of the same book. Any of these can be used to read something we loosely describe as King Lear, just as any copy of the First Folio can be used to discover things about what we call the First Folio of Shakespeare. But the particularity of these objects is very stubborn, and the more we look at the material objects in this photo, the less easy it is to make the comforting, sweeping generalizations that might convince the theatrical Lear that we know, even if he does not, “who he is.”

This book is written as an introduction to the kinds of questions these Lears raise: what is a book? what is a book-copy? And who is it that can tell just what these things are? I am thus especially concerned with the language and methods of thinking that make such problems and their solutions possible. What are the methods scholars of books use in studying material books, and what are the implications of these methods on our understanding of what books are and do? My premise is that one does not need to be a specialist in book history, book collecting, or literary scholarship to consider the practical issues posed by physical books, any more than one needs to be a specialist in Elizabethan drama in order to deal intelligently with a play by Shakespeare.

An Introduction to Introductions

My subject here can be defined as the study of material books. My discussion in the following chapters is more closely focused than that, or more eccentrically focused than that, since physical books cannot, I think, be usefully studied in the abstract. The chapters below constitute an introduction to the study of material books as I have experienced...
them, complete with obsessions and moments of inattention. The conventional field I deal with is books printed during the hand press period, that is, a period in western printing history ending in the early nineteenth century. But I cannot claim to cover that field in the ordinary sense of academic coverage. Most of the examples I discuss come from fields and subfields I know best. These are roughly early English books to 1640 (STC books), eighteenth-century English books related to the reception of English medieval texts, and incunabula (books printed in the fifteenth century). And most of the problems I discuss are those that have caught my attention in the past: press variation, the notion of ideal copy, the peculiarities of facsimile reproduction, the uses and limitations of electronic resources. That this array of examples and even issues does not define a seamless field or corpus of information is something I acknowledge; I do not see how a scholar can or would want to construct a field of study in any other way.

To write a standard introduction to a field is to advance implicitly a set of dubious assumptions, key among them that there are effectively two areas, two levels of competence, two sets of material. The first consists of introductory material: basic knowledge, a set of procedures, terminology, etc. The second is the practical application of such knowledge in the field. You learn what a collation formula is so that you can subsequently use one to describe or catalogue books you find in a library. You learn how to use a database so that you can do your own bibliographical work. The writer of the introduction is assumed to be familiar with all facts and procedures that define or characterize the field.3

My objection to this assumption should be implicit in the above sentences. No one has the knowledge of any field in the humanities required to write a comprehensive introduction to that field. Nor will anyone but the most focused of specialists learn introductory material A or introductory procedure B in order to perform professional task C. Rather the reverse: most of us simply perform task C, adopting whatever language and procedures we need in order to make that task interesting. For the most part, we ignore all else. That is how we introduce ourselves to a field. Introductory language is thus bound up with the most abstruse of scholarly problems, and the most complex of problems is inseparable from the most basic terminology: you cannot operate on either of these levels without involving yourself in the other.

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The present book is introductory; but it does not shield the introductory student or non-specialist from what bibliographers find the most interesting problems in their field. Many of the examples and issues here are those I have written about elsewhere—cataloguing conventions, early Chaucer folios, fifteenth-century books. I assumed, studying these things, I would be writing for specialists, but I never thought that the things I was interested in were the province of specialists alone. There were many things that made material books interesting to me then and they are still the things that make books interesting to me now.

**Bibliography**

A technical term used to indicate the field I have outlined here is *bibliography*. The term, however, is not well defined either in a general or in a technical sense; it has ordinary meanings that have little bearing on the field (e.g., “works cited” lists), and even scholars of material books do not agree on what should be included within the technical definition. Bibliography is associated with what is now called *book history*, itself a conglomerate of fields of study and interest. Book collecting, librarianship, printing history, editorial history, literary history and criticism—all, in certain contexts, can be imagined as legitimate parts of bibliography since all are embodied in physical books. Most scholars would consider studies within these fields bibliographical to the extent that they focus primarily on material books rather than on the texts within those books, the distribution of those books, their social impact, or the history of reading practices.

I look at a material book: it is evidence of all kinds of things, all kinds of histories. There are innumerable points of interest and countless polemics in which I could engage. Bibliographers often focus on problems that seem overly scrupulous: the differences in typefaces on a single page, the tipped-in intrusive engraving in an otherwise pristine book, an anomaly in paper structure. Such bibliographical details or facts can be amusing, but they are not necessarily interesting in and of themselves. What interests me is the use and especially the misuse of such detail, how our handling of what we consider facts reveals flaws and rifts in our basic approach to any problem involving evidence. How do we get at the histories and polemics that the details we find suggest,
or how have I gotten at them myself? If those who catalogue books for libraries cannot establish conventions for describing two copies of the Gutenberg Bible so that the nature of those two copies can be compared, there is probably something wrong: either with the book or with the assumptions we bring to it. Which is it? If the physical evidence of early printed books does not support some fundamental cultural myth (say, the idea of the rise of humanism), something is wrong there too: is it in the evidence itself? or the way we discuss it?

Physical books constitute evidence, and material evidence is not something that should merely support our grander abstract notions and narratives (Fred is a murderer, and my job as an investigator is to find the evidence to convict him); evidence is something that challenges those narratives (maybe Fred, murderous though he is thought to be, didn't commit this murder; maybe there was no murder at all).

Each physical book provides evidence of some sort, facts of some sort, and presents problems of some kind. It does not matter whether this is a monumental book such as the Gutenberg Bible or a run-of-the-mill book, maybe a late edition of an unread seventeenth-century English play, maybe a book on your local library shelf. If monumental books happen to have received more attention in book history, that is because, well, they have received more attention in book history. Most of the information in these books is accessible to anyone. Serious work in the field of book history and bibliography consequently does not require a mastery of technical language, nor does it require a long or even brief apprenticeship under a mentor. The basic method of bibliography is simple and could be summed up as follows: the organization of readily perceived details of material books and a common-sense explanation of anomalies related to them. One of the greatest and most influential of late nineteenth-century bibliographers, Henry Bradshaw, stated that methodology directly: “arrange your facts rigorously and get them plainly before you, and let them speak for themselves, which they will always do.”

Whether Bradshaw’s facts actually will speak for themselves (and the conventional answer today is that they will not), there is no inscrutable mystery to any of this. And although professional bibliographers and experienced scholars may grumble, first-rate work can be done and is being done by beginning students in the field and by the rankest of amateurs. Certainly, if you examine a thousand books, you ought to be
in a better position to examine the thousand-and-first book; what you say about this book ought to be more interesting than what you said about the first book in this series. But there is no guarantee of that, and plenty of evidence to the contrary. What experts in this or any other field tend to say and think becomes more and more predictable as their presumed expertise deepens, and an overly schooled way of perceiving and defining books may obscure as many interesting details of book history as it illuminates. One of the reasons I am writing this present book rather than searching out anomalies in the vaults of rare book libraries is the unnerving feeling I have as I pick up a rare book that I know exactly what I will say about it before I even look at it.

**Bibliography and Technical Language**

In order to deal with books bibliographically, you must communicate with others who have dealt with those books. And this requires some understanding of the conventional language of book history and bibliography as well as the pitfalls and limiting assumptions of such language. Some of the language is basic: folio, format, flyleaves (I will present that in chapter 1). To learn what such terms mean is both useful and easy. Some is abstruse, and, however precise, its utility is far from clear: for all but students of technology, the names of the individual parts of the hand press are probably not necessary, and though some introductions to bibliography present that language as basic, I will skip over most of it here. In addition, some of the most important and interesting terms are problematic and the meaning of these terms far from settled. Even in an ideal bibliographical world, it is almost impossible to define “typeface,” and in the real world, even the best scholars err by describing leaves as pages or by reversing that seeming shibboleth, cancellandum/cancellans (the difference between a leaf that has been cancelled and the leaf that replaces it).

Such technical language serves various functions. Technical distinctions can be heuristic, in that they help us discover things that are there in the book itself; an anomaly in a collation formula might mark a history of revision or censorship in that text. Others are descriptive and can help us communicate what we find in books to others. It is useless for me to argue about my copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare (1623)
if you think I am talking about something you should find in your copy of the Second Folio (1634).

In certain contexts, such distinctions need to be respected; yet in most discussions of books, many of these distinctions will be tentative and their boundaries porous. Ordinary historical readers evaluate a number of book features (size, shape, page format, color of the type) in a somewhat impressionistic manner; they do not organize their perceptions systematically. Impressions thus are an essential part of book history in a way that they might not be in, say, physics. And if there is a split between technical language and the experience of such untutored readers, either historical ones whom we study or modern ones who study with us, that is due to the inadequacy of technical language to describe the basic reality of such a reader confronting a particular book.

There is thus no absolute canon of technical language used in book history or bibliography; “diverse men they spoke diversely” and different bibliographers and book historians will make use of varying terminology and conventions. Furthermore, the real world is itself imperfect, its features often self-contradictory and its history unknown; it does not conform to and sometimes stubbornly resists even the most careful distinctions defined by our technical terminology. The language I introduce here is only what is required to discuss particular issues and to understand other scholars when they discuss the same things.

**Books and Book-Copies**

The most basic term used here is *book* and this is also the most difficult. As used here, it will always be limited to its most ordinary senses. As more studies are written about books or “the book,” more typographical conventions are used to describe it (“the book,” “the Book,” “Book,” etc.). Thus, in Lucien Febvre and H.-J. Martin’s influential, but now quite dated, *The Coming of the Book*, it is nearly impossible to know exactly what the subject matter might be in any paragraph, as “le livre,” “des livres,” and “Le Livre,” permit an often bewildering passage from workmen to typography to European economic history to philosophies of reading. “The Book” is simultaneously a thing, a force, an event, a history.5

Exciting as these definitional leaps may be, I am taking a much more narrow definition of what the book is. A *book*, as understood here,
is always something that exists in immediate and direct relation to a material book-copy, and the distinction between the book and the book-copy is defined here as basic to any study of material books. A book-copy is always a material object that exists in time and space and carries with it its own unique history. It is what you are holding as you read this sentence. The word or term book, in this context, is a technical term; the word book refers to some abstract concept that allows us to speak of a number of book-copies as a unit, as essentially identical. The book known as “The Shakespeare First Folio of 1623” includes all extant two hundred plus copies of that book as well as the hundreds we assume to have vanished. A book in this sense (that is, when contrasted with a book-copy) can be described, but it cannot be held, seen, or sensed. The book-copy you are now reading is unique; but the book you are reading is the same one I am now inscribing to one of my friends.

Some fields of book history deal primarily with the abstraction of the book (for example, the textual history of Shakespeare); other fields within book history deal almost exclusively with book-copies, not books (for example, the study of book ownership, or what is called provenance). Descriptions, even casual ones, of a printed book will generally include two types of details: those pertaining to the abstract book of which this particular book is a representative (it has a title page reading “The Works of Shakespeare”) and those which are copy-specific (this copy has an ownership stamp of a local library). The difference is crucial but not always entirely straightforward. Imagine, for example, a lithograph by Edvard Munch. Conventionally, each copy is a member of a series, and may be numbered. The lithograph is thus the totality of this series and may finally refer to the plate used by Munch to produce each individual copy. The lithograph is both all of the real lithographs and none of them.

Now most examples in the real world likely include a frame; perhaps all of them do. But an art historian discussing the lithograph or illustrating it in an article would not include the frame; to do so would imply that the topic was not the work of art but rather what art historians might call the material support of this copy. Even in the case of a unique painting, a similar argument applies. To include a frame within an illustration implies that the topic of discussion is not the painting (which exists from its moment of completion until the present) but rather the state of the painting when joined to that frame.
If you were to go further and imagine a group of art collectors who are concerned more with the frames of these prints than with the prints themselves and who occasionally consider the lithograph absolutely inseparable from the frame in which it is found, you would be approaching the ordinary situation we find in book history. Here, the abstract notion \((book)\) blurs much more easily into the notion of a particular object \((book-copy)\); and the libraries and collectors who control such objects place considerable value on each aspect. Most of us, whether we are scholars, librarians, or even book thieves, find it hard to imagine the book at all apart from its embodiment in book-copies. I should emphasize that there is no moral distinction between those persons concerned with frames and bindings, those concerned with the book or the lithograph plate, and those concerned with the text in the book or Munch’s art. Shakespeare’s First Folio can provoke useful discussion of Shakespeare’s poetry, printing history, and the aesthetics of binding. But considerable confusion can arise when the various groups have to communicate and often mistakenly think they are talking about the same thing.

*Books, Book-Copies, Edition*

We can create any number of abstract categories of books: folios, books about fish, books bound by Grolier. All are legitimate; but not all are significant from a bibliographical point of view: “books printed by Aldus Manutius” is an interesting bibliographical category, as is “books about medicine”; “books of the great poets” would generally not be of bibliographical interest, although it might well be of cultural or literary interest; “books with the word the in the title” is, by contrast, likely to be of interest to no one, although it is certainly as real or legitimate as any of the other categories or series.

The most important of these units or categories for bibliographers and students of printing history is the *edition*. For early printed books, the term *edition* refers to those book-copies produced by a single setting of type at a printing house that were considered by their printers textually and economically interchangeable. Other terms used for this are *print-run* and *impression*, although these terms often refer to the individual sheet or book part. In most cases, when a scholar uses the word *book* in a bibliographical context, this is the unit referred to—the edition. It is the project foreseen and realized by a printer that results in
individual book-copies sold and distributed as interchangeable units. To speak of such a book as “the 1602 Chaucer” or “the Gutenberg Bible” in a bibliographical sense is to speak of these interchangeable book-copies, not of the beautifully or pitifully bound book-copy in a rare book room.

A bibliographical edition can include identifiable subgroups: some copies might be printed on vellum, some on paper. But within these subgroups each book-copy is regarded as interchangeable with any other of that subgroup. Copy-specific features (peculiarities of inking? type of binding? owner’s marks? missing pages? added pages?)—such things are accidents or contingencies, in some cases accidents of production, in others, accidents of later reception and history.6

Printing is distinguished from other methods of textual dissemination such as manuscript production precisely in what is implied by and the contradictions contained within such terms as repeatable, identical, representative, or, the term used above, interchangeable. Two book-copies of the same book from the same edition (for example, the Huntington Library and the Clark Library copies of the Shakespeare First Folio) are the same in ways that two copies of a text written out by a scribe or transmitted over the internet are not. Considered strictly as books, that is, as members of an edition, these two book-copies are not merely similar; they are identical. At the same time (and this is what makes the practical study of material books particularly interesting) the uniqueness of any physical object cannot be suppressed; in the face of that interchangeability constituted by the historical edition, the uniqueness of individual book-copies of the same book inevitably asserts itself.

The difference between these things—the book and its representative book-copies—can be thought of as a function of the institution of printing. But it is equally valid to consider this difference constituted by the intellectual assumptions of the scholar or observer. Compare figures 6.3 and 6.4 in chapter six with those in my conclusion, figures C.1 and C.2. Figures 6.3 and 6.4 are the work of professionals. Figure 6.4 I ordered from the Huntington Library photo department. I shot figure 6.3 (a page of the 1528 Regimen sanitatis Salerni), as I have before, from a professionally produced facsimile in F.S. Isaac’s English and Scottish Printing Types of 1930.7 Although figure 6.4 is from a book-copy at the Huntington, and Isaac’s facsimile from a copy at the British
Library (I think), stripped of their bindings, the implication is that *any other copy of these editions could have provided the same picture*; Isaac does not even identify the source of his facsimiles. The implication of the figures in my conclusion is different: my figure C.2 is not the title page of the 1602 Chaucer but the title page of *this particular copy*, and this book-copy has a history different from the history of any other book-copy in the edition. Who is this “Henry Mellor” who once owned this book?

In the context of what we call a book, book-copies are essentially the same. When we talk about the *book*, abstract bibliographical considerations take precedence over those of physics: certain real differences (the different molecules that constitute the different leaves) are irrelevant. A scholar thus might legitimately use my figure C.2 to represent not this copy but a unit of the book: “the title page of the entire edition.” But as soon as that scholar highlights or otherwise indicates the binding and the ownership marks, things change; the salient features of the 1602 Chaucer shown in my conclusion become copy-specific: they belong to the book-copy and not to the book.

There are many cases where the basic distinction made here will not be made explicit in our language. We can certainly speak of holding a book, even though we know we are really holding a book-copy. And there are doubtless many other expressions in bibliography and book history where the same thing holds: it is pointless to object to the phrase “turn the page” even though bibliographically what we turn is a “leaf.” As long as the use of terminology is clear or useful, only the professional bibliographers need worry about whether it is correct.

**The Hand Press Period**

My emphasis is on early printed books, particularly books printed in English and books of interest to English readers. The conventional cut-off date for histories of this kind is “around 1800.” In printing histories, the date marks the end of what is known as the hand press period, although production of books by the hand press continued much longer. An enumerative bibliographer might view this date as the final date included in the ESTC (the English Short Title Catalogue). A cliché that one often reads in book histories is that a printer working in

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the eighteenth century would feel quite at home if teleported to Caxton's press; and it is perhaps as useful to pretend to believe in this as it is to point out its obvious absurdities.8

The first decades of the nineteenth century see the development of lithography, the iron press, and stereotyping, a process that permits the reprinting of identical copies of earlier books without having to store bulky trays of standing type.9 These technological developments strain the bounds of traditional bibliographical language—language in large part designed to discuss books printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Such technology remains important to early book history, and the 1800 cut-off pertains only to the definition of the basic subject matter. Early printed books and early printed book-copies are enmeshed in the conventions of the modern book trade, nationalistic histories, and the often obscure conventions of bibliographical description and cataloguing developed in the last two centuries. It would be impossible to discuss seventeenth-century editions intelligently without some awareness of the twentieth-century cataloguing conventions that define them; in the twenty-first century, we need to have some basic understanding of electronic media as well. It would be equally naïve to suppose that the fifteenth-century books one studies are pristine and have not been subject to all the sophistications and sophistries of nineteenth- and twentieth-century technologies of copying and forgery.

Organization

I have organized my chapters around familiar issues in bibliography. Part one deals with basic procedures of printing and the basic parts of the physical book—size, paper, type, illustration. Part two deals with what can be imagined as the history of book-copies—cataloguing conventions, provenance, electronic media. Some of the chapters are reasonably straightforward, meaning, they can be understood simply by examining physical books; these include my discussion of the bibliographical language of basic book parts, such as binding, leaves, quires, format. Others are more complex, for example, chapter 11 on ideal copy, the bibliographical notion that is basic to the concepts of book reproduction and distribution, basic also to printing history in general.
I discuss this concept in a later chapter not because it is less essential to printing history than others but rather because it is less easily understood.

Although I have tried to organize these chapters such that they can be read in sequence, it is not always useful to move from simple to complex, to compartmentalize topics, or to hold off discussion of something interesting and difficult because more preliminaries seem required as its logical foundation. I thus bring up material where I feel it should be discussed, and I will occasionally follow the bibliographical implications of that material even though this does not fit some perfectly articulated map of the field. It does not make sense to me to discuss the cataloguing of Donatus fragments in chapter 11, their function as binding strips in chapter 10, and the implications for early literacy somewhere else.

You will thus not need to master any of the information in, say, chapter 5 on typography or even the terminology in chapter 2 to understand my discussion of provenance or my critique of electronic resources in later chapters. A reader who finds nothing of interest in any chapter here should move as quickly as possible to the next one. With one or two exceptions, each chapter contains an application of the language and principles that chapter presents. These are not selected because they are the central problems associated with the topic defined in that chapter but because I have had some special interest in them or experience with them.

There is only one general bibliographical rule or principle I have imagined that I have enough confidence in to pass on. You should examine a physical book under a single assumption, and you do not need any introduction to do this: never leave a library without knowing more than you knew going into it, and never close a book without knowing more than you did before opening it.