

A Florentine Forefather

WILLIAM BUTTS

KING, Ross. *The Bookseller of Florence: The Story of the Manuscripts That Illuminated the Renaissance.* New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021. 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. viii, 481pp. Map, Illustrations. **\$30.00.**

In the 1430s a young boy destined to become arguably the 15th century's most influential bookseller apprenticed in a shop in the Via dei Libri (Street of Booksellers) in Florence, Italy. Four hundred years later and five thousand miles away a young Englishman opened a bookshop in a rowdy, flourishing hotspot in what was then the Wild West - Galena, Illinois. Another 150 years later a young bookseller hung his first shingle in that very same building. That's my meaningless "link" to Vespasiano da Bisticci (1422-98) – we love these absurd degrees-of-separation connections.

This column's last installment put to rest a rash of books about antiquarian booksellers – or so I thought. But a spate of new releases shows the public's continuing interest in a profession as antiquated as its merchandise, a unique trade that blends commerce with scholarship. Stir in a healthy dash of treasure hunting.

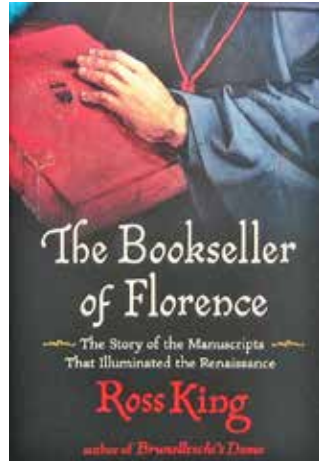
Ross King's *The Bookseller of Florence: The Story of the Manuscripts That Illuminated the Renaissance* dovetails perfectly with this reviewer's decades-long Italophilia, manifested lately in reading John Addington Symonds' 7-volume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-86), a groundbreaking survey that touches upon the hunt to

rescue from neglect and destruction early medieval manuscripts of ancient Greek and Roman works – the focus of King’s riveting study. While Symonds is a vast panorama of activity covering more than two centuries, King hones in on “Florence’s scribes, scholars, and booksellers [who] were at the forefront of a revolution in knowledge....”

The Florentine Renaissance conjures images of beautiful frescoes and altarpieces, of snow-white marble statues in sinewy poses, of the swelling burnt-orange dome of the city’s cathedral – all the handiwork of the city’s brilliant artists and architects. But equally if not more important for the centuries to follow were the city’s lovers of wisdom....These men were manuscript hunters, teachers, scribes, scholars, librarians, notaries, priests, and booksellers – bookworms who blew off the dust of a thousand years of history and tried to imagine and to forge a different world: one of patriotic service, of friendship and loyalty, of refined pleasures, of wisdom and right conduct, of justice, heroism, and political freedom; a world in which a life in a better society could be lived in the fullest and most satisfying way possible.

As you would expect from any good bibliophilic (as opposed to bibliophilic) history, *The Bookseller of Florence* gives context and texture to Vespasiano’s bookselling world by foraying into the development of handwritten texts prior to the impact of Gutenberg and moveable type. King brings out how change in technology hindered the survival of ancient Latin and Greek texts – the gradual shift from the easily-damaged papyrus that Romans favored to the durable parchment favored by early Christians. “For a Latin work from ancient Rome to survive the next few centuries and beyond, it therefore needed to be transferred to parchment,” writes King. “But this conversion from roll to codex was reliant on the

early Christians – the people who made the codices – deeming the writings of their pagan predecessors worthy of preservation and study.” The monks and other scribes who laboriously copied them often also allowed them to fall into neglect centuries later – rotting away in neglected monastery libraries, victims of fires, floods, mice and insects, loss and thievery, not to mention the sale of snipped-off illuminations.



Of course King notes scholar and manuscript hunter Poggio Brocciolini’s legendary visit with two friends to the Abbey of St. Gall in Switzerland, where some nice treasures were found in their dismal library. “Only when the three men left the library and went into the tower of the abbey’s church, where further books were stored... did they make their great discovery. At first they were appalled by the sight that greeted them: the books were horribly neglected and the tower both infested with insects and filthy with dust, mold, and soot... However, sorrow soon turned to disbelief and joy when they discovered among these sorry ruins the book that had been sought for more than five centuries: a complete copy of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. Poggio tried to acquire this precious volume from the monks... When the abbot refused, Poggio spent the next thirty-two days hastily copying out the entire text.”

So what, pray tell, did a bookseller have for sale before the advent of mass-produced printed books? After all, it’s hard to picture a shop filled with hand-lettered book-length manuscripts, each a unique labor-intensive production taking weeks or months - *right?* Well, King offers up some shocking statistics that may rock your world:

Historians have estimated that while 212,000 new manuscripts were copied across Western Europe in the eleventh century, the number rose enormously in the next century to 768,000. The tally of new manuscripts then jumped to 1.7 million in the 1200s....numbered jumped to 2.7 million in the 1300s....During the fifteenth century, almost five million manuscripts...would be produced....

To me, these quantities shift the Earth on its axis. Finally, at last, bookselling in an age of hand-lettered manuscripts makes sense. (What percentage of those hand-lettered manuscripts may yet survive today I would love to know, though I don't doubt modern scholarship has estimated that.) These numbers stagger the imagination as much as the process by which they're extrapolated intrigues – although King, sound scholar that he is, provides ample scholarly endnotes supporting these century-by-century figures (as, for that matter, this work is pleasingly and thoroughly footnoted throughout).

Thus emerges an image of what it meant to be a 15th century bookseller. Juggling an eclectic small mix of high-end customers – royals, nobility, civil servants, clergy, scholars – Vespasiano had well-developed “talent and abilities: to find scribes, to bind books, to tap a vast array of sources to locate the best copies of manuscripts on everything from ancient history to music and geometry – and to deal patiently and efficiently with the most exacting clients.” Today Vespasiano would be considered as much a publisher of one-offs as a seller of books both new and old. King paints a delightfully varied image:

...his clients had become diverse and widespread. He did work for the library of a church in Bologna and a convent in Ferrara. He produced books for the archbishop of Florence...For the Milanese ambassador to Florence he found a Quintilian. For the Florentine government...

he produced a beautiful manuscript of Leonardo Bruni's history of Florence. He provided a monastery outside Florence with the parchment for an antiphonary. He found and then dispatched a number of law books to a friend in Rome. And such was his renown that he began dealing with one of the most powerful men in Italy: King Alfonso of Aragon and Naples....

By age twenty-five Vespasiano was the most sought-after manuscript procurer in Italy and for decades was living large, even offering books for sale in Naples, home turf of uber-wealthy client Alfonso. King shows that as a businessman he was aggressive and influential, not just a hawker of wares. "His youthful studies in Niccolo Niccoli's book group," King notes, "his attendance at the lectures of Carlo Marsuppini in the Studio or participation in conversations beneath the Roof of the Pisans: such intellectual recreations reveal his devotion to humanist ideals of forging a better world through a study of the Ancients."

Also revelatory to this reviewer is that in later life Vespasiano wrote a book, *Vite de Uomini Illustri del Secolo XV* – in English *The Lives of 103 Illustrious Men*, which to my dismay has apparently never been published in English. This obscure work played a part in the Renaissance becoming known as the Renaissance, something that didn't occur until the late 19th century when Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt discovered a manuscript copy in the Vatican Library and its mountain of details became the catalyst for his seminal 1860 study published in English in 1878 as *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Vespasiano's work is by far the most cited work in King's study, providing as it does an enormous volume of material about the rich and famous of his century with which he worked.

The appearance of moveable type in Germany in the 1450s is usually described in terms such as "revolutionary" and similar verbiage suggesting sudden, abrupt change. King helps clarify and

refine this oversimplification. “Knowledge was about to get much cheaper and much more plentiful,” he quips regarding moveable type at one point, but he also makes abundantly clear what a slow-motion revolution it was, a roller coaster ride taking decades to take hold. “The production of printed books was steadily gathering momentum,” he writes. “By the end of 1468, more than 120 titles had been printed across Europe in the years since Gutenberg produced his first works in Mainz” German domination soon waned, though. “The year 1469 witnessed even greater advances in printing. More than forty new titles appeared in that year alone, but now the majority, twenty-four of them, were printed in Italy.” Fascinating are the many early publishing statistics King offers up to show Vaspasiono’s changing market. For instance:

Despite the proliferation of the printing press, manuscript production had peaked in 1470: more manuscripts were copied in that year across Europe than in any other year in history, in keeping with the upward trend in production in each decade since the turn of the century. However, the manuscript-to-printed-book changeover was fast approaching. Already by 1472...more books were printed than manuscripts copied.

Occasionally these early titles appeared in German or Italian, but overall “Latin was the language of the printing press. Between 1465 and 1472, 85 percent of all books printed in Italy were in Latin, a proportion that rose even higher across Europe as a whole: 91 percent.” It’s impressive indeed what scholars can extrapolate from scanty 15th century historical records, as is how King utilizes this scholarship – as, for instance, how the fact that printed books cost only about twenty percent of their manuscript counterparts did not guarantee robust sales. “By 1472, following some five years in Rome, [Sweynheym and Pannartz] had printed... 12,475 copies, the vast majority of which – some 10,000 books – remained

unsold.” From the days of incunables publishing was as fraught with challenges as it remains today.

Not surprisingly, Vespasiano saw no benefit in this shift from manuscripts to less expensive printed books. King points out that “Vespasiano’s book-buying public was so well served by his team of scribes and illuminators that the necessity and usefulness of the printing press – not to mention its economic viability – must have been less obvious to them than it was in, say, Mainz or Venice.” King even suggests that such was his influence he may have curbed the advance of printing in his region of Italy, pointing out that “The scale and reach of Vespasiano’s business may even help explain why no printing presses had appeared in nearby cities such as Pisa... Lucca, Siena, Arezzo, and Volterra.”

In the end Vespasiano couldn’t hold off this turtle’s pace juggernaut. By 1480, after a decade of political turmoil and decline in humanistic scholarship, he threw in the parchment and retired at age fifty-eight. “The sad fact is that despite his great eminence in the field, Vespasiano, like many subsequent publishers and booksellers, failed to make very much money” – a refrain not unheard-of today. His haughty high-mindedness proved his undoing:

Vespasiano refused to embrace printing as so many other booksellers and scribes had done...He even refused to stock printed books despite the fact that many other Florentine cartolai now supplied them in greater quantities than manuscripts and at a cheaper price. Vespasiano undoubtedly financed his deluxe manuscripts...by producing or selling secondhand cheaper works such as handwritten grammars and psalters. However, the market for such ware eventually collapsed with the arrival of print.

No review of a book set in Renaissance-era Italy would be complete without analogy to a “rich tapestry” – a tradition is a

tradition - so buckle up: What a pleasure it is in *The Bookseller of Florence* to observe Ross King artfully weaving the many intricate threads of 15th-century Florentine life among Vespasiano's crowd of the wealthy and educated. The cast of characters is vast, their relationships intricate, their business dealings and intertwined. The analogy to a wall-size tapestry may be shopworn but is oh-so-appropriate: Highly ornate, overflowing with figures, a panorama of activity.

Many and fascinating are the parallels between the shift from old to new technology – hand-lettered manuscripts to machine-printed books – and our current issues with digital texts. In Vespasiano's day “opposition to the printing press [came] from a number of writers who feared this technology would harm knowledge by propagating errors... The danger certainly existed that any errors introduced into texts could now be disseminated in many hundreds of copies.” There was also the elitist condescension that the ignorant unwashed masses would be a danger if exposed to ideas and education. Today the struggle is again between old and new technology – machine-printed books and digital texts. The astonishing ease with which texts may be digitally transmitted is offset by the accompanying ease by which a text may be instantly corrupted on a massive scale as well as the dissemination misinformation and a tidal wave of online criminal activity, including threats to national security.

Printed books will never triumph over digital texts the way they did hand-lettered manuscripts, but those who foolishly predicted digital replacing books have been proven wrong. The printed book has shown its strength and resiliency just as digital has shown its many weaknesses. Best guess is that books and digital may grapple but will learn to exist side by side. Ross King's *The Bookseller of Florence* illuminates the bookselling world of half a millennium ago and the contrast between the hunt for ancient treasures and the transition from old to new technology brilliantly – and to this reviewer the comparisons to 21st century bookselling are many and striking.