Pirates of the Press: Case Studies in the Prehistory of Copyright

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What do book pirates steal? Unlike buccaneers who plunder treasure from travelers, pirates of the press seize reprinting rights from other publishers.

In the prehistory of copyright, printers and booksellers sometimes navigated the dangerous waters of intellectual property by selling popular titles under false pretenses. In the British Isles, pirates operated even though London’s Worshipful Company of Stationers tried to closely guard booksellers’ privileges to print, known as ‘copies.’ Raids on the English book trade escalated until 1709, when a royal statute rescued writers and printers by arguing that ‘copyright’ accrued always from a work to its author. The 1709 Copyright Act became a landmark in literary history and international property law, although it never entirely stopped piracy, especially across regional and national boundaries. The problem resurfaces today: as global media companies amass rights formerly held by authors, book pirates trawl digital seas.

Our exhibition sailed the trade routes of early modern England and beyond, exploring the colorful lives of certain nefarious booksellers, the various means of identifying pirates, and the lasting impact of piracy on literary authorship and intellectual property law.

This journey begins on the Continent at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when French printers imitated the beautiful Venetian prints of Aldus Manutius, using counterfeits of his typefaces to produce Europe’s first print pirates. We then see such sharp practices imitated by London publisher John Wolfe, who sells Italian titles under false imprints to buyers in England and on the Continent. Lord Burghley, spymaster and chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth, used Wolfe to spread political propaganda throughout Europe.

By the early seventeenth century, English publishers are pirating books by English authors; at least one of them a piracy himself. Printers Thomas Pavier and William Jaggard defiantly reprinted a series of Shakespearean plays under false imprints, confirming the playwright’s rising value.

Ironically, a few years later Jaggard produces the monumental First Folio of Shakespeare, with each of the thirty-six plays acquired legitimately. Many of the plays were transcribed from manuscripts by scribe Ralph Crane, whom we also find here copying out manuscripts of an early dictionary of nautical terms written by sometime real-life pirate Henry Manwaring. John Milton, too, sailed close to the wind by publishing his own work without authority, and then becoming a censor of others’ works in the turbulent times of the English Civil War.

After reviewing the high points of English book-trade legislation, we end up at the Copyright Act of 1709. Yet piracy is unstemmed; by the late eighteenth century, the caricaturist known as 'Tim Bobbin' sketched a "rap at the pyrates" all over Great Britain who had sold eight different knockoff editions of his best-selling book on Lancashire local color. In the end, no single law could hold unscrupulous characters from the high seas of booksealing.

Our journey continues on the Continent, where we track the extraordinary career of John Milton, once a scholar, and later a political printer and pamphleteer, using his own work and the works of others to further political propaganda throughout Europe.

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In this cartoon and poem, John Collier delineates two "human passions:" the greed of book pirates, shown parading out of a book shop with their ill-gotten bundles of printed pages, and the grief of the legitimate author, in the upper right-hand corner, headed for bed in frustration. That pirated author is Collier himself, whose first great success as a humor writer, A View of the Lancashire Dialect, or, Tummas and Mary, after debuting in 1746, was pirated by publishers all over Great Britain. Collier’s complaint indicates how openly book pirates functioned even after the Copyright Act of 1709. Here, the names of the culprits are legible on the packages, while miniature figures of the country folk “Tummus” and “Meary” appear on the back of the pirate at center front.

In this exhibition, we examine the by-products of piracy: the caricaturist known as ‘Tim Bobbin’ sketched a “rap at the pyrates” all over Great Britain, who had sold eight different knockoff editions of his best-selling book on Lancashire local color. In the end, no single law could hold unscrupulous characters from the high seas of booksealing.

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