

The Impact of Cheap Print on the Lives of the Poor, and the Rise of both the Quaker and Ranter Movements in Early Modern England

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Abstract

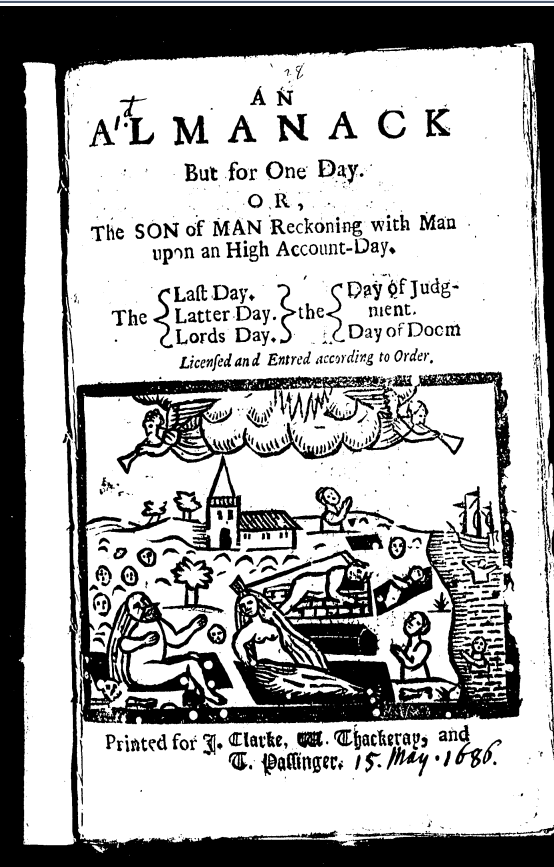
This paper looks into the impact that printing had on England during the Early Modern Period, through the development and distribution of religious “cheap print”. These were small religious books, ballads and images that were sold at very low prices to the public and from which they consumed new ideas and information that in turn shaped their world. The argument that is explored is that development of the printing press was an agent of change that led to the rapid movement of religious ideas among the poor, influencing their ideas of the divine and how they interacted with it. At the same time, as result of political and religious insecurities leading up to and during the English Civil War (1642-1651), radical ideas through cheap print emerged which then served as the basis for religiously political radical movements like the Quakers and Ranters. Through their ideas of the divine they sought to place a solution to the religious and political problems that had arisen in the country at the time and used print as a way to do this.

Introduction

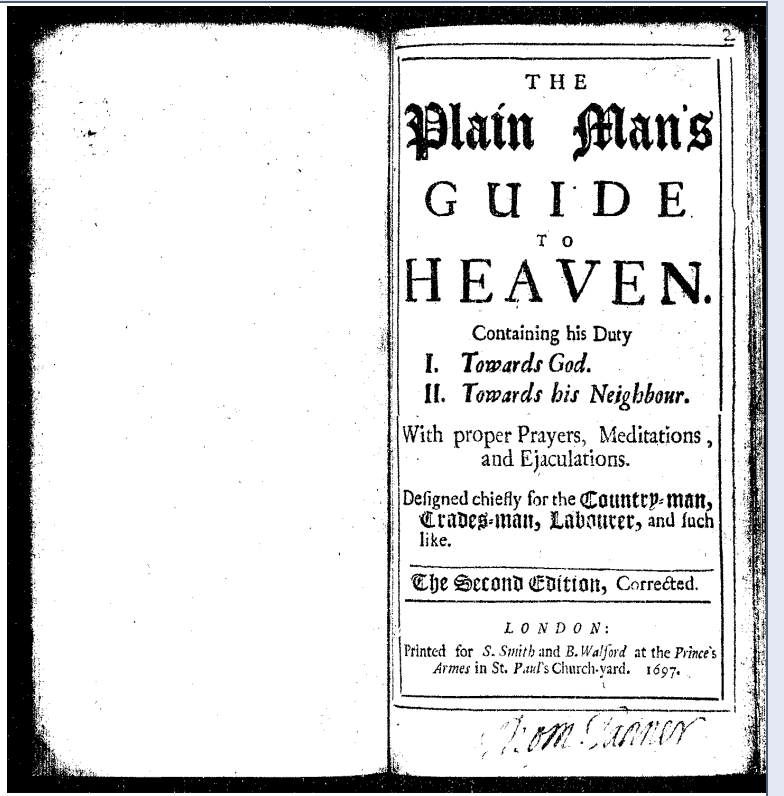
The second communication shift in human history occurred with the invention of the printing press by the hands of Johannes Guttenberg in 1450. An invention that forever changed the way that people communicated and how ideas reached people. This paper specifically focuses on the impact that printing had on England during the early modern period, through the development and distribution of “cheap print”. These were small books, ballads and images that were affordable to the public and from which they consumed new ideas and information that in turn shaped their world. The development of the printing press was an agent of change that led to the rapid movement of radical ideas through cheap print, which then served as the basis for radical movements that sought to re-shape the world in their image among them being the Ranters and Quakers. These groups were ones that took advantage of the possibilities brought by printing, not only to spread their ideas but also to bring them into fruition. What then was the impact of printing on the spread of these ideas? How did groups like the Ranters and Quakers use the cheap print market to their advantage? What impact did these radical ideas have on the lowest parts of society? These are questions that are further investigated in this paper, with the aim of presenting a better understanding of how the invention of printing impacted these groups and the ideas that they portrayed. What the invention printing press did, was allow their ideas to be cemented in the minds of people and preserved in a form that was accessible to them, which in turn allowed the groups to survive even after the end of the Early modern period in the case of the Quakers.

Methodology

While conducting this project, the methodology that was used, was the use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary source used, were gathered through the John Jay Library database of Early English Books. The database is one that contains pages and images of virtually every work printed in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and British North America and works in English printed elsewhere from 1473 to 1700. By their part, the secondary source used, were relevant scholarly sources which discussed the the topics that were touched upon throughout the project.



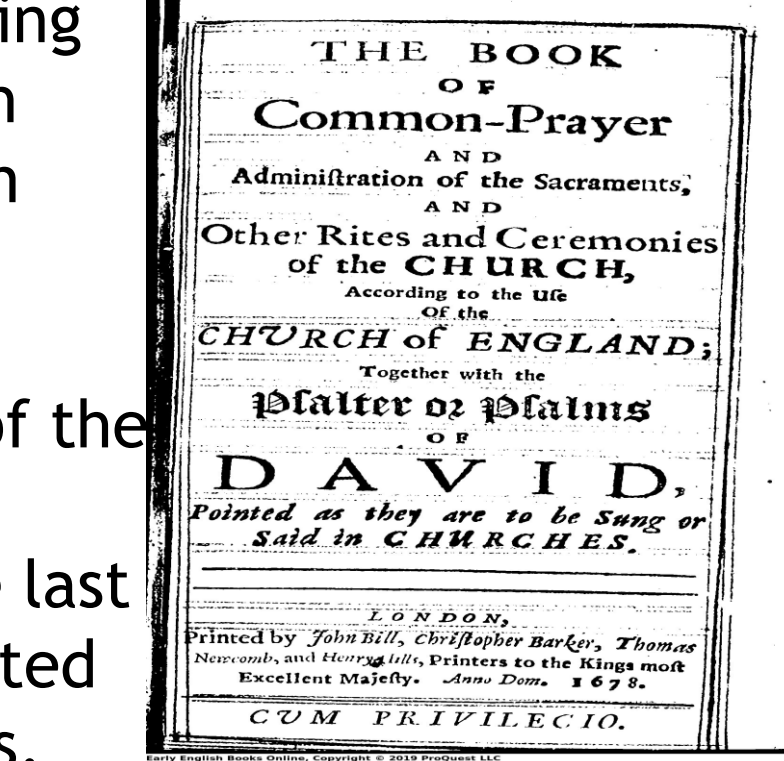
Top Left: Small book printed in 1686 expressing the need to repent before the day of judgment came.



Top Right: Small prayer book printed in 1697, serving as a guide to people on how to live a holy life.



Bottom Left: Short ballad printed in 1625, describing a sinner's encounter with god and devil in a dream and urging people to repent for their sins.



Bottom Right: Version of the Common Book of Prayer printed 1678. It was the last version of the book printed after 4 previous versions.

From Oral to Scribal to Print

The Printing Press was an invention that arrived in England with merchant William Caxton in 1476. From then, the spread of printed works throughout the country was one that slowly started to be seen. Once it did gain traction, its results could be seen on a large scale. Increases in literacy were ones that reach every part of the social structure English society, especially the merchant class, craftsmen and others which came to be greatly benefited by from the printed. By their part, for those at the bottom of society, the printed word was one that did not have much effect in the way that many of them lived their lives. For them the strong oral tradition that had always been in place was something that still remained important part of the lives. However, this did not mean that they did not come in contact with the written and printed word. Many illiterate people resorted to those who could read to have written or printed works read to them out loud. The Bible was the prime example of this. In poor towns around the country, those who not could read would gather in churches on Sundays to have the word of God read to them by someone who could. In homes as well, those who could read would do so for the rest of the family.

Expression Through Print

As the use and the spread of the printed word continued to spread throughout England it became tool for people to express themselves and in which oral tradition and both the written and printed work fed into each other. Libelous rhymes were one example of this, where people created them with the intention to humiliate or even make an accusation against someone else. For those who could not read and write, they would find someone who could write, and through them wrote songs and rhymes about the people they wanted to humiliate, which then circulated through towns and possibly the rest of the country. The use of imagery was also something that became useful when it came to producing such works. For people who could not read, drawings that went along with the songs being sung were ones that served to greatly amplify the impact that such works had on people. What started as a simple rhyme or song meant to be passed down between people was cemented in the written word in the form of written ballads and drawings. Thus when print became more available, it was not hard for these works to also make their way to the printed word and circulate the country. In the same way, song and rhymes which were originally written in print were ones that were able to make their way into oral tradition further feeding into something that was still strong among the people especially those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Religion and Print

Book of Common Prayer

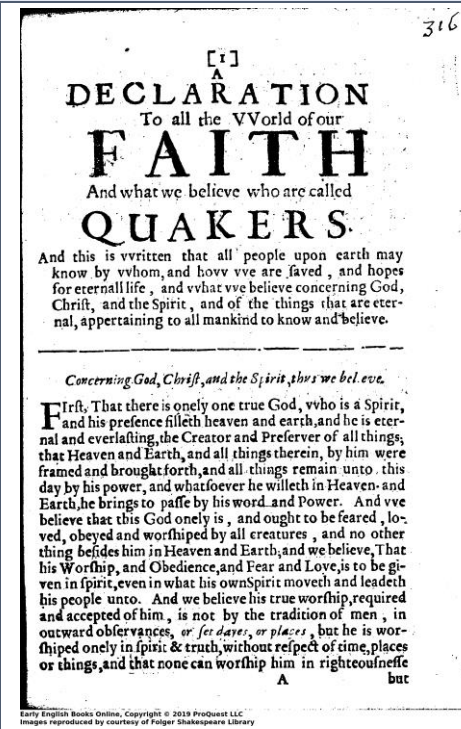
The relationship between Religion in England and print was one that came together in two of forms of religious print. The first of was main stream religious print which came in the form of the bible and what became know as the Book of Common Prayer. After 1517, with the start of the protestant reformation, in England, Protestantism gained regional support among some aristocratic families, while the throne remained stalwartly Catholic until Henry VIII, broke away from the catholic with the Act of Supremacy in 1533 and formed the Anglican Church. Under Henry VIII, save for some radical Protestant leanings while Ann Boleyn was queen, the new church was largely Protestant in name only, and the break from the Catholic Church had political more than religious meaning. This however, changed when he died and Protestants were able to exert more influence on his predecessors. With in that time, in 1549 they published English Book of Common Prayer, largely written by Arch Bishop Thomas Cranmer. The book became a revolutionary book, bringing prayer into English for the first time. This permitted people to communicate directly with God, a central belief of Protestantism, and made literacy a much more prominent part of English culture, since people were expected to be able to read it. What followed was more than century of conflict between Protestants and Catholics trying to exert their influence on the book which under the Act of Uniformity made the book the official prayer book of the country, one which every one had to read and practice. This conflict marked a many significant times in the country among which were the reigns of he queen Mary and Elizabeth I. By their part the poor, were ones that were required to attend church on Sunday's to hear the word of God and thus were influence by the ideas found in the Book of Common Prayer which was printed and distributed all over the country.

Cheap Religious Ballads, Images and Chapbooks

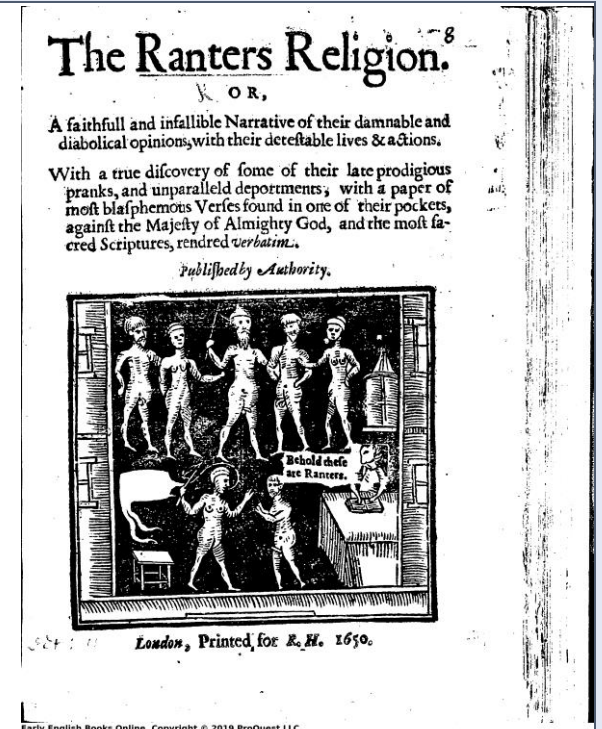
Intertwined with both the Bible and the Book of Common prayer, printing allowed for the rise of a cheap print market among which cheap religious print became popular. These printed works were posted on broadsides for every one to see in the case of ballads and images or were distributed at the hands of chapmen who travelled the country side with these small books. These forms of cheap print expressed messages of repentance, guides to live a holy life, messages of a loving god, and consisted of prayers books which people could have in their homes and where used educate the family in a religious life. What they enabled, was for prayer to enter peoples homes as now they could buy one of these printed works and in their own times read these works no longer solely relying on priest to interact with god.

Quakers and Printing

The Quakers were a group that began to rise in late 1652, and came to be known as a radical religious group who was disillusioned with the religious and political situation that the country was going through at the time and sought to bring their own solution to the problem. Their works were ones that reflected the believe that the light of Christ was within everyone and that this alone could help them reach salvation. They rejected the power of institutions like the church and instead emphasized that each individual could attain salvation on their own accord. Their use of print was seen in their works spreading their message and urging people to take part in the debated religious and political conversations that were taking place at the time. This was done by ministers that travelled the country preaching and carrying Quaker text were distributed and sold as they went, helped the movement grow in number and in support.



Left: Small pamphlet printed in 1658 expressing the beliefs of the Quakers.



Right: Small book printed in 1650 attacking the Ranters for the beliefs and vices urging people to stay away form them.

Ranters and Print

The Ranters like the Quakers rose due to the religious and political instability caused by the English civil war. Their ideas portrayed them as a group that believed that god was in everyone and everything and that his coming was internal to everyone. In addition, that they were a group that believed that evil, sin, and judgment did not apply to them because they were considered not to be real. When discussing the Ranters, the impact that print had on the movement was based on the pamphlets, and other printed material that were printed on them most of which were negative. The tracts were ones that portrayed them as being an extremely dangerous evil group that was not only set to destroy the godly world but also but also had been one that had been inspired by Satan. It was this from these works that attacked them that they became know and people formed ideas about who they were. At the same time by the authors of these works associating the devil with the Ranters they were able to both create and redefine his image and what he meant and things he was associated with in the minds of people during in the early modern period.

Conclusion

As an agent of change, the invention of the printing press was a technology that revolutionized both Europe and England during the early modern period. It became an invention that greatly enhanced the availability and distribution of the written word while at the same time adding to a strong oral tradition which remained a vital part of people's lives at every level of the social structure at the time. For the poor, although oral tradition remained the most important aspect in their lives and the things their did, both the printed and written word were ones that opened their world to vast new possibilities. At a religious level, it allowed both Protestant and Catholics to make use of the technology in their efforts to be the main religious force in the country. In case of the Quakers, its ministers were ones that used it create a very controlled system of distribution and communication, which allowed them to create a national movement which spread all over the country. In the same way, for the Ranters, works that were printed against them were ones that shaped the ideas of the groups people attributed to them. Although these works attacked them, they served to spread their beliefs among people increasing the popularity of the group.

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