

Early humanist indexing

Placing words (and letters) in piles according to alphabetical order was indeed a ubiquitous routine in the printer's workshop. The preparation of each index was in itself an exercise in textual analysis—one which was applied to many works which had never been indexed before. Here again one could develop an interesting contrast between the Florentine manuscript bookdealer Vespasiano, who persuaded notaries with fine bookhands to copy manuscripts for him in their spare time, and the Florentine printer N. Laurentii, who persuaded Bernardo Machiavelli (father of Niccolò) to index Livy's *Decades* as a spare-time job. Nine months were spent by Bernardo in 1475 listing the cities, provinces, islands, mountains, and rivers mentioned in the text. While engaged in this exercise, the elder Machiavelli was approaching Livy's text in a somewhat different way than had been employed by earlier generations of copyists and commentators. Petrarch, for example, was fond of citing St Augustine against the medical faculties of Padua, Bologna, and Paris. He upheld 'the investigation of the nature of man' while condemning 'the vain search for knowledge about mere things.' But an indexer of Livy's works could not afford to keep these two forms of knowledge quite so separate. Investigation of references to natural phenomena and other 'mere things' was built into the act of indexing all the major classical texts that were most admired by the early humanists.

Not only was the difference between the activity of copying and that of indexing in itself likely to produce diverse attitudes toward given texts; but the difference between collecting moral examples (as medieval preachers were wont to do when engaged in indexing compendia) and simply collecting neutral data pertaining to place names, flora or fauna, is also worth underlining. The act of indexing and cross-referencing which had been animated by the religious purposes of the teaching and preaching orders became more neutral and even amoral when applied to all manner of texts by printers who thought in terms of sales appeal.

This new, more business-like approach to copy-editing may be related to the more neutral, amoral treatment of politics and history which is often associated with the writings of Bernardo's son, Niccolò Machiavelli. The latter made several trips to printers on his father's behalf; he would have seen his father working over Livy and might have recalled Bernardo's marked-up copy when he wrote his 'Discourses' on Livy later on. The fact that his most 'notorious treatise' did not get printed until well after its author's death has been cited to demonstrate that printing was less consequential than I seem to assume. If printing 'was so crucial,' the argument goes, then why

did *The Prince* exercise its 'notorious influence' while still in manuscript form? Here again it seems worth stressing that the consequences of printing were not limited to spreading ideas. Just how Niccolò's views might have been affected by watching his father index a classical text for a publisher or simply by using indexes and printed reference guides on his own, are questions that must be left to specialists and cannot be handled here. But even a non-specialist may be allowed to suggest that Machiavelli's views should not be detached from the context of print culture simply because he had not seen *The Prince* through the press before he died.

The same point applies to many other writers and scholars who were contemporaries of Machiavelli—who belonged, that is, to the same generation as the earliest scholar-printers. The preparation of indexes and other procedures entailed in copy-editing pointed scholarly activities in a somewhat different direction than had the preparation of orations, dialogues, and other occasional commemorative pieces which had preoccupied earlier humanists. Objections posed by the latter to the barbarous language and bookhands used by the schoolmen were supplemented by new objections to the barbarous arrangement of medieval compendia with their great mass of elaborate digressions and seemingly unrelated details. The earliest printed editions were faithful replicas of these 'barbarous' scribal compendia, to be sure; but the very act of duplication was a necessary preliminary to later rearrangement. A disorder previously concealed by oral presentation and piecemeal copying became more visible to copy-editors and indexers and more offensive to publishers who valued systematic routines. Classical criteria of unity, internal consistency and harmony were extended beyond orations, poems, and paintings to encompass the rearrangement of large compilations and of entire fields of study which were not within the early humanist domain.

—from *The printing press as an agent of change* by Elizabeth Eisenstein (Cambridge University Press, 1979). Reprinted by permission of C.U.P.

□ 'Having shut the door behind his Egeria, (Mr Downing) went back to his work and was soon so absorbed in making his index, for he prided himself on his very complete indexing with every possible cross-reference, flattering allusions to which were frequently made in reviews, that time slipped by unheeded and it was half-past four.'

—from *Northbridge Rectory* by Angela Thirkell (1941), quoted by permission of Hamish Hamilton Ltd.