

H-France Review Vol. 10 (March 2010), No. 39

Jef Tombeur, *Femmes et métiers du livre/Women in the Printing Trades. Pays Anglophones et francophones européens*. Preface, Caroline Archer. Paris : Talus d'approche, 2005. xvi + 291 pp. Bibliography, and index. 32 euros (pb). ISBN 2-87246-099-3.

Review by Janine Lanza, Wayne State University.

The volume *Femmes et métiers du livre/Women in the Printing Trades. Pays Anglophones et francophones européens* by Jef Tombeur has two main purposes. First, Tombeur endeavors to gather a fairly comprehensive, although somewhat quirky, bibliography of the literature dealing with women in the printing trades. In fact, Tombeur states this central purpose several times. On page 26, for example, he notes “[c]et essai sur la place des femmes dans l'imprimerie...n'a pas la prétention d'innover. Ni même de refléter une réalité que nous estimons bien malaisée à cerner. Il s'agit simplement d'examiner ce qui s'est dit hier et se dit aujourd'hui sur le sujet.” This statement is a fairly accurate presentation of the book, as most of it can be considered an extended annotated bibliography. He focuses primarily on the English and French speaking parts of Europe, although from time to time Tombeur expands his scope to include pertinent women in North America and Eastern Europe. Several of the early sections consist of extended bibliographic entries examining a number of key texts on women in the printing trades. Tombeur enhances the interest of his book by providing copious internet sources on the subject. Whenever possible he provides internet addresses for the articles and books he discusses. Particularly valuable are the bibliographies he has found online which provide key leads for scholars of women in publishing. Whenever possible the book provides online sources that are completely open, without requiring payment, subscription or physical presence in a library. While this seems a worthy goal, it seems to limit the scope of Tombeur's findings. Without making recourse to databases like JSTOR or ProjectMUSE, to give just two examples, Tombeur misses the opportunity to inform his readership of the many valuable resources available in limited access databases. Given that many of those who read this book will likely have access to libraries and other scholarly resources, this seems at cross purposes with Tombeur's desire to provide a full repertoire of resources in his text.

Another lacuna in Tombeur's admittedly expansive bibliography, this one an intellectual rather than practical issue, is his decision not to include works that deal with women as the intellectual, as opposed to physical creators of text. So, for example, while Tombeur mentions in passing Carla Hesse's *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, he does not include bibliographic information or commentary on that work. Similarly, Tombeur does not cite Dena Goodman's and Elizabeth Goldman's *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France* on women and the printed word or a number of other works that deal with women's intellectual accomplishments in the world of the book trades. There is a large body of work that explores the ways women authors shaped publishing trends, writ large, scholarship that Tombeur, for the most part, leaves aside. Tombeur is clearly not blind to these works. In addition to mentioning Hesse's work, Tombeur states, in a discussion of Paula McDowell's *Women of Grub Street* that such works “exposera...que l'intérêt porté aux femmes dans les métiers du Livre s'est trop souvent focalisé uniquement sur les 'bourgeoises”(p. 21).

Perhaps falsely characterizing women authors as socially and economically privileged, he excludes a key element of book production. His explicit goal, on which he remains focused to perhaps too great a

degree, is to illuminate the women who composed type, created fonts, turned the presses and oversaw production. Just as Tombeur puts aside the role female authors had in the book trade writ large, he demonstrates little interest in the myriad women who swept up printing shops, folded finished pages or sewed them together--the repetitive, physical tasks necessary to assemble a final volume. While Tombeur makes an assumption about the class position of women authors, he draws a perhaps artificial line between those women who performed what he calls the menial work in the printing shops and those who engaged directly with the presses; work that he characterizes, undoubtedly correctly, as both physically and intellectually challenging. But it seems that given the impossibility for women to serve in apprenticeships, that it was exactly those women who folded pages or sewed books together who could have hoped to move to the presses at some point. Even if that was not the case, and given that most of the women printers had family connections to the trade it seems unlikely, it still seems to be practicing the same exclusionary tendencies Tombeur sees in other works that discuss only male printers to exclude the entire range of work done in printing. While women binders did not touch presses or compose pages, their work was nonetheless crucial to the finished product and, as such, was an integral part of the creation of the finished book. In addition, by excluding women writers Tombeur, in another fashion, limits how he imagines the path from blank page to tome in ways that obscure their full participation.

The second section of the book is devoted to presenting brief biographies and vignettes of notable women printers in Anglophone and Francophone Europe, although Tombeur does discuss several North American printers as well. These entries reveal some of the unexplored themes that underlay Tombeur's text. It is evident from these biographical sketches that virtually the only way for women to enter the printing trades, especially before the 1880s, was to be born to or marry into a printing family. So we have Sarah Griffin who came from a family of engravers, married a printer and then oversaw the integration of her children, male and female, into the trade. Similarly Mary Cooper put her hand to the press after her husband's death, working not only with hired help but also with her son to manage the family enterprise. Tombeur notes the prevalence of endogamous marriages as one of the hallmarks of printing families, although he might have explored the implications of such marriages in greater depth. They likely served as the path for women's training in the trades where they were excluded from formal apprenticeships, as well as affording them the presence and authority they would have needed to oversee male printers.

Family membership in printing dynasties also afforded women access to capital, technology and networks and clients and authors--all crucial elements of a successful business. The single example Tombeur provides of women printers who did not work in some way or another within a family enterprise were Quaker women producing religious texts in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. The decision to allow women to print was here attributed to Quaker notions of spiritual equality, although Tombeur's limited information about these anonymous women does not allow him to go further in his analysis. In other ways, he recognizes the potential importance of religious institutions as spaces where women might print. For example, in his treatment of women's role in the production of incunabula (a text printed before 1501), Tombeur notes the prominence of convents as centers of production for texts written by powerful female abbesses like Hildegarde of Bingen. But he laments the virtual lack of information about women's work activities in religious book production, as much as he cites it as a subject in need of further exploration.

According to Tombeur, after the 1880s women faced a changing atmosphere in the trades. Slowly there came to be more opportunities for them, even without the benefits of family connections. Some women were able to undertake formal training, and unions, while still hostile, began gradually to admit the possibility that women could become printers. In this regard, the Couriau affair was a turning point. Initially an action by the printer's union in 1912 to exclude a married man from the ranks of printers, according to Tombeur this event initiated a change in attitude about women and printing. In some

ways this incident serves as a conclusion to this book, helping to point the way to a future where women would not predominate printing but would nonetheless have growing opportunities there.

The biographical section provides useful leads about where scholars might go to undertake further research on female printers, although it does not include the extensive bibliographical notes that appear in the first section. The final part of the book is the bibliography itself which is comprehensive and divided into a number of useful sections. Tombeur first presents a bibliography of printed material, although in breaking from the usual practice includes very extensive information about locations of these materials. In addition to including a bibliography of primary sources, although a quirky one in that it does not include material on women as the authors of texts, the book includes bibliographies of literature on women in the printing trades in several particular sources. Tombeur lists all of the relevant material to be found in St. Bride Library, London, the site of an extensive collection on printing. He also combs the Cambridge Bibliography of English and American Literature to unearth all of the pertinent material listed there. A bibliography comprised of materials from the *Maître de Garamond* rounds out this selection of specialized source collections.

Finally, Tombeur provides a chart of all the female printers (1473-1948) from the Carpathian basin figuring in the Répertoire de la bibliothèque National Széchény in Hungary. These specialized appendices provide a useful key to understanding how prevalent women were in printing, even if it is difficult to go much further than these cursory entries, as Tombeur shows in his text. However, these supplements would be of greater use to researchers if the author had explained more fully his reasons for extracting these sources as compared to other possible bibliographies or collections, such as that at the Newberry Library in Chicago for example, which undoubtedly contain material of interest. That issue aside, the bibliographic aids Tombeur provides, along with the extensive online resources he lists in his text, make *Femmes et métiers du livre* a work of interest to scholars of publishing, trades and women in those contexts.

Janine Lanza
Wayne State University
jmlanza@wayne.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172