

## 3 The Print Revolution and Its Impact

What was the print revolution? It was not just a development, a new way of producing books; it transformed the lives of people, changing their relationship to information and knowledge, and with institutions and authorities. It influenced popular perceptions and opened up new ways of looking at things.

Let us explore some of these changes.

### 3.1 A New Reading Public

With the printing press, a new reading public emerged. Printing reduced the cost of books. The time and labour required to produce each book came down, and multiple copies could be produced with greater ease. Books flooded the market, reaching out to an ever-growing readership.

Access to books created a new culture of reading. Earlier, reading was restricted to the elites. Common people lived in a world of oral culture. They heard sacred texts read out, **ballads** recited, and folk tales narrated. Knowledge was transferred orally. People collectively heard a story, or saw a performance. As you will see in Chapter 8, they did not read a book individually and silently. Before the age of print, books were not only expensive but they could not be produced in sufficient numbers. Now books could reach out to wider sections of people. If earlier there was a hearing public, now a reading public came into being.

But the transition was not so simple. Books could be read only by the literate, and the rates of literacy in most European countries were very low till the twentieth century. How, then, could publishers persuade the common people to welcome the printed book? To do this, they had to keep in mind the wider reach of the printed work: even those who did not read could certainly enjoy listening to books being read out. So printers began publishing popular ballads and folk tales, and such books would be profusely illustrated with pictures. These were then sung and recited at gatherings in villages and in **taverns** in towns.

Oral culture thus entered print and printed material was orally transmitted. The line that separated the oral and reading cultures became blurred. And the hearing public and reading public became intermingled.

### Activity

You are a bookseller advertising the availability of new cheap printed books. Design a poster for your shop window.

#### New words

**Ballad** – A historical account or folk tale in verse, usually sung or recited

**Taverns** – Places where people gathered to drink alcohol, to be served food, and to meet friends and exchange news

### 3.2 Religious Debates and the Fear of Print

Print created the possibility of wide circulation of ideas, and introduced a new world of debate and discussion. Even those who disagreed with established authorities could now print and circulate their ideas. Through the printed message, they could persuade people to think differently, and move them to action. This had significance in different spheres of life.

Not everyone welcomed the printed book, and those who did also had fears about it. Many were apprehensive of the effects that the easier access to the printed word and the wider circulation of books, could have on people's minds. It was feared that if there was no control over what was printed and read then rebellious and irreligious thoughts might spread. If that happened the authority of 'valuable' literature would be destroyed. Expressed by religious authorities and monarchs, as well as many writers and artists, this anxiety was the basis of widespread criticism of the new printed literature that had began to circulate.

Let us consider the implication of this in one sphere of life in early modern Europe – namely, religion.

In 1517, the religious reformer Martin Luther wrote *Ninety Five Theses* criticising many of the practices and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. A printed copy of this was posted on a church door in Wittenberg. It challenged the Church to debate his ideas. Luther's writings were immediately reproduced in vast numbers and read widely. This led to a division within the Church and to the beginning of the **Protestant Reformation**. Luther's translation of the New Testament sold 5,000 copies within a few weeks and a second edition appeared within three months. Deeply grateful to print, Luther said, 'Printing is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one.' Several scholars, in fact, think that print brought about a new intellectual atmosphere and helped spread the new ideas that led to the Reformation.



**Fig. 9 – J.V. Schley, *L'Imprimerie*, 1739.**

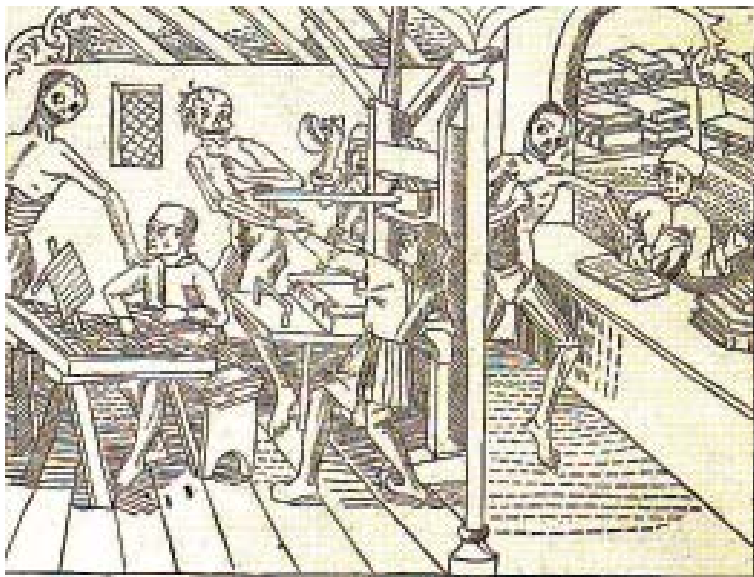
*This is one of the many images produced in early modern Europe, celebrating the coming of print. You can see the printing press descending from heaven, carried by a goddess. On two sides of the goddess, blessing the machine, are Minerva (the goddess of wisdom) and Mercury (the messenger god, also symbolising reason). The women in the foreground are holding plaques with the portraits of six pioneer printers of different countries. In the middle ground on the left (figure encircled) is the portrait of Gutenberg.*

#### New words

**Protestant Reformation** – A sixteenth-century movement to reform the Catholic Church dominated by Rome. Martin Luther was one of the main Protestant reformers. Several traditions of anti-Catholic Christianity developed out of the movement

### 3.3 Print and Dissent

Print and popular religious literature stimulated many distinctive individual interpretations of faith even among little-educated working people. In the sixteenth century, Manocchio, a miller in Italy, began to read books that were available in his locality. He reinterpreted the message of the Bible and formulated a view of God and Creation that enraged the Roman Catholic Church. When the Roman Church began its **inquisition** to repress **heretical** ideas, Manocchio was hauled up twice and ultimately executed. The Roman Church, troubled by such effects of popular readings and questionings of faith, imposed severe controls over publishers and booksellers and began to maintain an Index of Prohibited Books from 1558.



**Fig. 10 – The macabre dance.**

*This sixteenth-century print shows how the fear of printing was dramatised in visual representations of the time. In this highly interesting woodcut the coming of print is associated with the end of the world. The interior of the printer's workshop here is the site of a dance of death. Skeletal figures control the printer and his workers, define and dictate what is to be done and what is to be produced.*

## Discuss

Write briefly why some people feared that the development of print could lead to the growth of dissenting ideas.

### New words

**Inquisition** – A former Roman Catholic court for identifying and punishing heretics

**Heretical** – Beliefs which do not follow the accepted teachings of the Church. In medieval times, heresy was seen as a threat to the right of the Church to decide on what should be believed and what should not. Heretical beliefs were severely punished

**Satiety** – The state of being fulfilled much beyond the point of satisfaction

**Seditious** – Action, speech or writing that is seen as opposing the government

### Source A

#### Fear of the book

Erasmus, a Latin scholar and a Catholic reformer, who criticised the excesses of Catholicism but kept his distance from Luther, expressed a deep anxiety about printing. He wrote in *Adages* (1508):

'To what corner of the world do they not fly, these swarms of new books? It may be that one here and there contributes something worth knowing, but the very multitude of them is hurtful to scholarship, because it creates a glut, and even in good things **satiety** is most harmful ... [printers] fill the world with books, not just trifling things (such as I write, perhaps), but stupid, ignorant, slanderous, scandalous, raving, irreligious and **seditious** books, and the number of them is such that even the valuable publications lose their value.'

Source