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Article Review 1

Overty, J. F. (2008). The cost of doing scribal business: Prices of manuscript books in England, 1300–1483. *Book History, 11*, 1-32. doi: 10.1353/bh.0.0007

Review of "The Cost of Doing Scribal Business: Prices of Manuscript Books in England, 1300–1483"

Overty begins her article "The Cost of Doing Scribal Business: Prices of Manuscript Books in England, 1300-1483" by exposing a lack of attention to the "quantitative analysis of the book trade" (2008, p. 1), noting a dearth of investigation into the market economy of the time and specifically supply and demand as they relate to the costs of manuscript production and therefore prices of those manuscripts. For Overty, research into this economic situation will aid scholars by adding detail to the picture of the book trade as it shifted from monastic to commercial production, how the trade responded to demands of an increasingly literate society, and how members of that society were able to "obtain manuscript books at affordable prices" (2008, p. 1). The author expresses the research focus of her study in three questions: "Were labor or materials more significant in determining a manuscript's price? How did fluctuations in the availability of professional scribes affect production costs, and thus prices of manuscript books, especially after the Black Death? And did increased demand and subsequent specialization in manuscript production (that is, a shift towards economies of scale) lower the price of manuscript books?" (Overty, 2008, pp. 1-2). As hers is a quantitative analysis, Overty describes her data sources and explains the qualifications surrounding their use. She has chosen to utilize secondary source compilations or transcriptions of the primary valuation documents resulting in a collection

of valuations for 371 works. Comments regarding the difficulty of establishing and comparing medieval book prices are explained and accepted as a caveat of the comparisons that follow (i.e., a true price should include the labor and materials costs for all craftsmen involved in the production as well as the market value of the manuscript book but such complete and standardized price lists are difficult to find in primary source materials). Further, Overty notes that the majority of her sources are actually valuations for loaned manuscript books at medieval educational institutions, meaning values were assigned by librarians based on replacement costs of the manuscripts plus an additional amount intended to goad students to maintain the works in good condition and return them. For this reason, these valuations are assumed to be higher than actual market prices. Recognizing the layers of qualification inherent in an analysis of her data and the difficulties of direct comparison of the data, Overty explains that her intention "is not to assign average or specific market prices to the manuscripts", but rather to "gauge fluctuations in manuscript valuations in the period covered, as these may well imply similar movements in market prices" (2008, p. 3). At this point, Overty discusses the exception in her data sources: the fact that the Hereford Cathedral Library data series does allow for direct comparison of manuscript valuations over time. The series includes valuations for 33 works c. 1300 and again c. 1400. The data are included in a table that shows an average increase in manuscript value of 174% for these 33 works. This data point becomes the impetus to begin investigation into her first research question regarding whether labor or materials costs predominated in a manuscript's price. The search for documentation of the total costs of medieval manuscripts results in just eight examples from the study's stated time period being found, but for Overty the consistency of labor versus materials costs in these few examples is sufficient. In three tables Overty shares the details of the production costs and goes on to analyze the data in the text with the result that on

average about 75% of production costs were due to labor with only 25% due to materials. In this analysis, Overty explains the issues with comparing the production cost data as the eight sources vary on cost categories included (i.e., materials costs for ink, gold leaf, and metal clasps are not included in seven of the eight examples), and goes on to elucidate general manuscript production material and labor costs of the time based on evidence provided in other cited scholarly research. Based on this analysis, the author ultimately concludes that the relative predominance of labor costs over materials costs is substantiated and thusly answers her first research question. An investigation into her second research question leads from the answer to the first. As Overty states, "if labor indeed accounted for upwards of three-quarters of manuscript production costs, it stands to reason that those costs would be especially sensitive to severe fluctuations in the labor market as was the case in late fourteenth century England" (2008, p. 7). The severe fluctuations were labor shortages with concomitant wage increases due to the bubonic plague of 1347-48. Subsequent episodes of the Black Death in 1360, 1369, and 1375 "kept long-term population recovery at bay, rendering labor scarce and wages high" (Overty, 2008, p. 7). Overty then goes on to connect labor shortages to the scribal book trade specifically through a series of assumptions made from existing scholarly research. Thusly, artisans, including by assumption scribes, resided in urban areas where their work was facilitated. These areas also facilitated the spread of plague due to poor sanitation and overcrowding, resulting in increased mortality for scribes and therefore labor shortages and higher wages that in turn led to increased manuscript production costs. Yet the very significant increase (174%) in manuscript value between 1300 and 1400 evidenced by the Hereford Cathedral Library data requires an additional explanation, as it is atypical for the time. Overty explains several factors that may have resulted in more significant labor shortages for scribes and therefore significantly higher wages, higher manuscript

production costs and therefore higher manuscript prices. Overty cites existing research suggesting the clergy had higher death rates due to their advanced age and "deathbed duties" (2008, p. 9). She links clerics with scribes; "scribes were often university-trained men in clerical orders, as their education enabled them to both read and write Latin" (Overty, 2008, p. 9). And, even if many scribes were not clergy, Overty cites research that claims contemporary accounts suggested university-trained, educated men (i.e., scribes) had higher mortality than the general population (though, as her endnote states, subsequent research questions this claim). Further, the relatively few individuals who were proficient in Latin were in high demand and could request higher wages. Latin proficiency would have been necessary for writing the manuscripts in the Hereford Cathedral Library and other collections in Overty's data set, hence those proficient in Latin were likely to be scribes. Overty uses the evidence of high mortality rates for urban artisans, clergy, university-educated men, and Latin literates and assumes, by the tendency of individuals in these groups to also be scribes, similar mortality rates and therefore labor shortages for scribes. She answers her second research question by stating, "the sharp increase in manuscript book valuations after the Black Death, as illustrated by the data set from Hereford Cathedral Library, seems directly related to the shortage of scribes" (Overty, 2008, p. 10). To address her third and final research question, Overty looks at the changes in manuscript value over the full time period of her study by comparing data sets from 1300, 1320-40, 1360 and 1483. The data shows an average decrease of almost 40% from the early fourteenth to the late fifteenth century manuscripts. Overty proceeds by analyzing the value differences in light of what is occurring in the book trade, with particular attention to the increased demand for manuscripts and increased efficiencies in production of manuscripts in the late Middle Ages. She notes that increased demand for manuscripts was the result of the economic recovery that was

the hidden 'benefit' of the Black Death for those who managed to survive it, namely "population contraction caused by numerous waves of plague had the effect of both increasing real wages and lowering prices, and thus greatly increasing disposable income" (Overty, 2008, p. 11). In addition to consumer purchases, income was used to send children to school thus increasing literacy, "especially in the vernacular" (Overty, 2008, p. 12). This vernacular literacy initiated a new market for vernacular writing and manuscript books. The book trade in the late Middle Ages had to respond to this increased demand. Overty cites other scholarly research to explain that demand was met by increasing manuscript production efficiency through various methods, including collaborative writing/copying amongst many artists (almost a proto-assembly line), standardization in layout and decoration, and the development other time-saving techniques. The late fourteenth century saw the creation of the role of stationers, "who often functioned as both an independent craftsman and a mediator between customers and other book artisans" (Overty, 2008, p. 12), which helped increase the number of manuscripts produced. Overty also mentions the role that decreased materials costs played in manuscript prices, but notes that she will undertake a full examination of these materials costs at a later date. She concludes her article by stating that the Black Death caused the cost of manuscript production to rise over the course of the fourteenth century. Whereas in the late fifteenth century, the ramifications of the Black Death (i.e., increased disposable income leading to increased vernacular literacy) caused the cost of book production to decrease as significant demand necessitated improved efficiency of manuscript production.

The evaluation of Overty's article will be covered from two perspectives. The first is a discussion of her textual arguments based on the data and other scholarly research; the second is a review of the data presentation itself. Overty sites her scholarship within the domain of other

medieval manuscript book study but allows for a lack in quantitative analysis specifically related to the fluctuations in costs/prices of manuscripts due to supply and demand changes; a lack that her study intends to help alleviate. A PhD candidate at the time of writing, her background in both economics (BA from New York University) and medieval studies (MA from Fordham University) gives her a unique frame of reference and helps to explain her interest in writing this article which seems to bridge the subject areas of her educational past ("Contributors", 2008, p. 397). Her intended purpose in illuminating the economic context of medieval manuscript production is clearly stated: to provide additional understanding of how the book trade met demands of a growing reading audience and how that audience was able to obtain (i.e., purchase or borrow) manuscript books at reasonable prices. Overty specifically defines the time and place of her study: 1300–1483, England. She also clearly defines her three research questions and comprehensively explains the data she will use in her quantitative analysis. Equally, she readily relays the difficulties in finding extant evidence of manuscript production costs and explains the assumptions she must make about the data in order to draw comparisons. The decision to use university valuations as proxies for market value is clever and expedient and allows her to analyze the data she actually has in light of her stated purpose. Providing a finer definition for her goal by explaining that she wishes to "gauge the fluctuations" instead of "assign average or specific market prices" (Overty, 2008, p. 3) is honest and allows the reader to see the valuations/prices as guides rather than as absolutes. It is also particularly important in establishing the boundaries of her quantitative analysis, because one can easily question the dissimilarity of the data as one continues through her article. However, in one instance at least, the data comparison is straightforward and compelling, and that is the Hereford Cathedral Library valuations in which 33 of 40 works were valued c. 1300 and again c. 1400, providing a

direct comparison of cost changes over time. The significant increase in value thus discovered provides the crux for the analysis of her first and second research questions. (As an aside, there are three instances where valuation actually declined, and significantly. A comment on these declines and a suggestion or two as to their possible cause would have made her quantitative analysis a bit more comprehensive. Exceptions are interesting, at the very least.) Overty's determination of the percentage of production costs devoted to labor versus materials is reasonable and ultimately compelling. However, the reader must be aware that she is only working from a total of eight primary sources—not an incredibly significant data set—but as so few sources exist, she is drawing conclusions from the information available and is open about this qualification. Going beyond the data in her tables, Overty reviews existing literature to make a case for low materials costs generally. And using her eighth production cost example, she brings in the idea that scribes were often paid in trade instead of wages, so the labor costs were under-reported, an important point in her arguments to explain the significant increase in book values post-plague. Overty's arguments surrounding her second research question are a fraction less compelling in that she has to resort to a series of assumptions to triangulate the proof of her claim that there was a significant scribal labor shortage—more significant than in other trades—in the late fourteenth century. As described in the above summary, she does this by citing high mortality rates for urban artisans, clergy, university-educated men, and Latin literates and assumes that scribes would have similar mortality rates as they tended to be urban artisans, clerics, and educated men who could read and write Latin. These assumptions allow Overty to state that scribal labor shortages caused production costs to increase (because production costs were comprised overwhelmingly of labor costs) and therefore prices, as represented by the university valuations, concomitantly increased. A review of Overty's final research question

finds a few issues with the data she states support her claims. The logic of her arguments is accurate and founded on past scholarly research; it is the data with which she substantiates those arguments that is somewhat suspect. Overty notes that her complete data set, including valuations from 1300–1483, shows a steep rise in value during and immediately after the plague years and an equally steep decline at the end of the fifteenth century. The decline is explained as partially due to the increased demand for manuscript books and the economies of scale it enabled. She additionally notes a rise in wages and reduction in prices generally led to an increase in disposable income for a large portion of the population. This additional income not only funded a growing consumer economy, with a thirst for status symbols like manuscript books, it also enabled more children to be educated. Education included literacy, and literacy in the vernacular in particular, which necessitated the creation of more vernacular manuscript books. Overty continues by cataloguing the ways in which the book trade responded to the increased demand by increasing efficiency of production. With efficient production (i.e., lower labor costs per manuscript book) and lower materials costs, prices came down as well. What the argument shows is that an increase in demand for vernacular works would tend to reduce costs. What the data show is a reduction in valuation for Latin works. While the logic of her argument works, the data in particular do not explicitly prove it out, nor does she explain this qualification of the data in her conclusion. Perhaps the real reason the Latin works from 1483 saw a reduction in value is actually due to a lack of demand for them as demand for vernacular works increased. Perhaps they were seen as moldering, old university copies, much abused by years on loan to various students, and therefore worth less than they used to be. Highlighting this distinction between vernacular and Latin works in relation to the data would have helped to ground her argument in the reality of the data, thus making it more trustworthy. One other point on the final

data set: Overty includes the year 1400 in her graph on page 11 and notes that data for that graph was compiled from Appendices A-C. The only source providing valuation data from 1400 is the Hereford Cathedral Library compilation, and this data is *not* included in Appendices A-C. Did the error occur in the creation of the graph? Was it an oversight in the composition of the appendices? Regardless of the source of the flaw, it is troubling and forces the reader to question all of the data representations. If the valuations from 1400 were purposefully not included in the calculations, then Overty lost a powerful data point in of support her arguments. Figure 1 illustrates the rather more compelling graph Overty could have used to show the trend of increasing valuations (therefore prices) through the plague years followed by decreasing valuations (therefore prices) after the plague years.

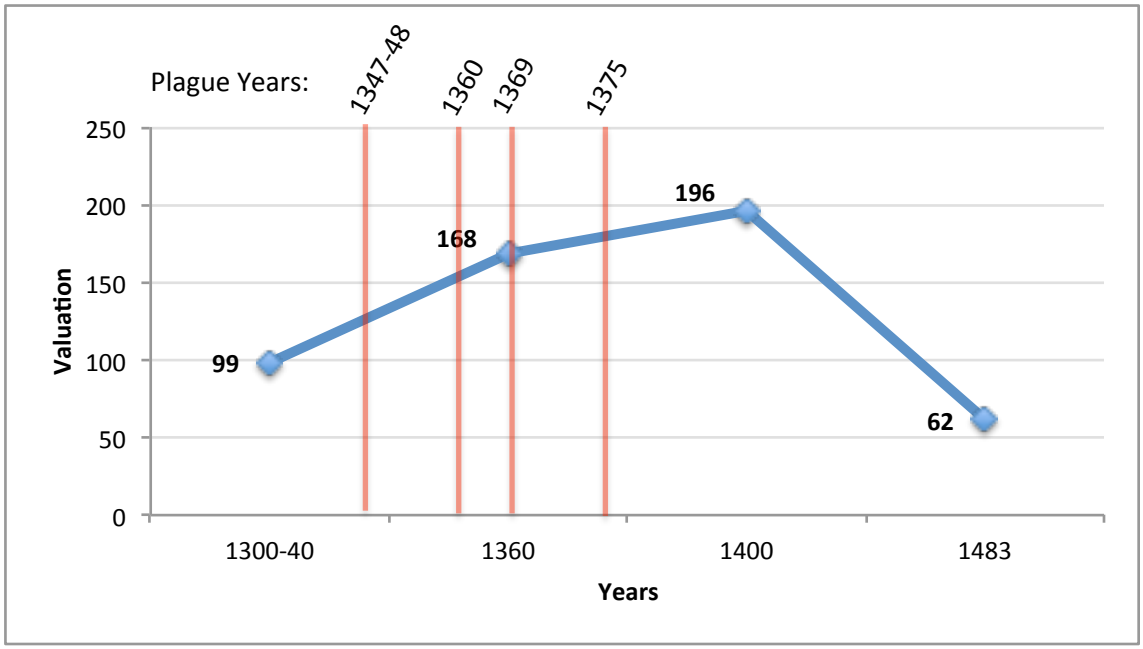

Figure 1. Compiled from data in Overty's Appendix A, B, C, and Table 1. Separates data for the years 1360 and 1400 and includes Hereford Cathedral Library data from 1400. Plague years are also designated.

While the tables and graph that Overty includes seem detailed and telling at a cursory glance, an actual inspection how the data is represented yields room for improvement. In particular, for Table 1 and Appendices A-C, Overty converts the valuation to pence for ease of calculation. However, she leaves Tables 2-4 unconverted. Converting all table data to pence would have increased the ease of comparison between tables for her readers, and certainly this is preferable in a quantitative analysis. Also, Tables 2-4 would have been profitably combined into a single table. Again, such a change would allow for comparison of costs between the data sets as well as clearly illustrate the differences in cost itemization that she notes in her text (e.g., ink is included in Table 4 but not Tables 2 and 3). "Graphical displays should . . . encourage the eye to compare different pieces of data" (Tufte, 2001, p. 13). "To be truthful and revealing, data graphics must bear on the question at the heart of quantitative thinking: 'Compared to what?'" (Tufte, 2001, p. 13). Equally, Overty could have made her data more compelling by transforming table data into graphs. Tufte explains, "Graphics *reveal* data. Indeed graphics can be more precise and revealing than conventional statistical computations" (2001, p. 14). Overall, Overty's article is well researched, and she cites her sources frequently to substantiate her claims. She also includes additional discussion in her endnotes as well as contrary or alternate viewpoints from other scholars. Finally, regarding the implications of Overty's research, her work furnishes an economic context for production and readership of manuscript books in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As the prices of manuscript books impact who is able to buy them, and as the prices are shown to decrease over time, the audience who can afford these books broadens, potentially affecting the significance/meaning/history of any given manuscript book. The social/cultural impact of the price changes is significant and would add to other book history analyses of this time period and geography. As Darnton says, "to draw out [a work's] full

significance" it must be related to "all the elements that worked together as a circuit for transmitting text" (2006, p. 17). Overty's work would certainly provide additional information for the production and purchase aspects of Darnton's communication circuit model.

References

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