

# Magna Carta in Print and in English Translation\*

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My central question today brings two historical periods together, the medieval and the early modern, to ask this question: ‘what did printing do to the Magna Carta?’

This essay focuses on the first printed editions of the charter in the sixteenth century, both in the original Latin, in 1508, and also in English translation, partially in 1527 and in its entirety in 1534.<sup>1</sup> These are key moments in the reproduction and broader dissemination of Magna Carta. I am especially interested in the way these early printed editions present this medieval text: both as an ‘ancient’ document from the past and as a crucial document for contemporary legal practice, in particular.

The invention of print technology is often represented as one of the great steps forward from the Middle Ages into modernity. Print culture is associated with increased levels of literacy, greater involvement in democratic process, and a growing sense of national identity. The technology of print allowed news and information to spread far more rapidly and brought people into greater connection with each other.<sup>2</sup> Printed texts were sometimes thought more reliable and authoritative than hand-written ones.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, print is often regarded as a transformative technology: a technological and social development that in part, at least, brought about the end of the Middle Ages.

When we think of the first Magna Carta as a physical object, we think of it primarily in manuscript form, written by hand in Latin and sealed with King John’s wax seal. Alternatively, with the advantages of modern technology, we may view the manuscript in facsimile, or in digital form on the internet. We may not be able to decipher the

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1 *Antiqua Statuta*, printed by Richard Pynson, London, 1508; *The Boke of Magna Carta, with diuers other statutes whose names appere in the nexte lefe followynge, translated into Englyshe by George Ferrers*, imprinted at London in Fletestrete by me Robert Redman, dwellyng at the syngye of the George / nexte to Saynt Dunstones church, 1534.

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn, Verso, London, 2006.

3 The most influential expression of this view is Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, but see also Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998; David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript, and the Search for Order, 1450–1830*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, and the excellent discussion of these debates and their specific reference to legal printing in David J. Harvey, *The Law Emprynted and Englysshed: The Printing Press as an Agent of Change in Law and Legal Culture 1475–1642*, Hart Publishing, Oxford, 2015.

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letter forms, or understand the Latin, but the image of the manuscript has become a familiar visual icon, offering several layers of authenticity, whether this be precise and legal, in the personal seal of the king, or more vaguely historical, in the pre-modern aura of the hand-written document.

But what happens to these elements of the text when it is set into type and duplicated to make many copies on the printing press? Print makes the text clearer and more readily accessible, to those who can read its Latin, or those who wish to read in English, but how many of the text's medieval qualities and characteristics survive the transformation to the new technology and the proliferation of variant copies?

There are a number of contradictions at play here. Early printed editions of medieval texts tried to maintain the authority of their manuscript originals, especially of foundational texts such as the Bible or statutes and legal charters. At the same time, they needed to commend their commercial innovations to prospective purchasers. The discourse of printing often treads a fine line between affirming that standard texts have not changed and affirming that new editions offer additional value. In the case of Magna Carta, there are fundamental differences between a manuscript copy of a text affirming a political agreement made in that year, for example, and a printed copy sold three hundred years later as a source for legal history and precedent.

Magna Carta was copied many times in manuscript form in the thirteenth century as a written record, but also as a text to be read aloud. Copies were sent to cathedrals, sheriffs' offices, county courts, and other places as successive versions were made and then copied anew. As David Carpenter tells us, in 1265 the de Montfort government sent copies of the 1225 charter to every cathedral where they were to be read twice a year before the people.<sup>4</sup> In 1300 the sheriffs were still supposed to read the charter four times a year before the people in the county court, in French, and possibly in English as well as Latin. (There are some French manuscript translations that survive, but no English ones.) Interestingly, Carpenter cannot resist his own light-hearted invocation of medieval stereotypes in the midst of this serious discussion. He writes, 'Some in the county court may have listened with rapt attention. Others probably went out to the ale house.' In the same year, 1300, Edward I ordered that Magna Carta be declaimed in Westminster Hall, both literally (i.e. in Latin) and also 'in the language of the country [*lingua patria*]'.<sup>5</sup> It is frustrating that the text does not specify which language this might be. English would have been the language spoken by more people at this time, but French was still used for parliamentary and legal records. Nevertheless, the principle is clear: the text will be read aloud from the manuscript copies.

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4 David Carpenter, *Magna Carta*, Penguin, London, 2015, p. 431.

5 *ibid.*

Carpenter has records of over 30 copies made in the century after Runnymede, though the practice of reading the charter aloud eventually fell into abeyance, and the text gradually became incorporated into other manuscript collections of statutes and charters.<sup>6</sup>

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the English Parliament grew more representative and more powerful, the charter became used less as a political document and more as a legal one, invoked more commonly in property law than political practice. Magna Carta was still often affirmed at the beginning of a parliamentary session, and was confirmed by Henry VI in 1423, but by the time the text was first printed in 1508, nearly thirty years after the arrival of print technology, it was being used primarily in legal, not political contexts. The earliest editions, then, were prepared for students and lawyers, who constituted an important market for printed texts.

William Caxton had established the first English printing press in Westminster in 1476, directing his business primarily to the royal court. His successor, Wynkyn de Worde, famously moved his press to the City of London, to Fleet Street, in 1500.<sup>7</sup> De Worde also set up a bookstall in St Paul's Churchyard, and many other booksellers followed suit.<sup>8</sup> One of the most successful early printers was Richard Pynson (born in 1448 in Normandy), who first printed Magna Carta in 1508.<sup>9</sup> Named as the king's printer, he printed law texts and statutes, as well as religious texts, romances, the travel book of Sir John Mandeville, and three volumes of Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry.

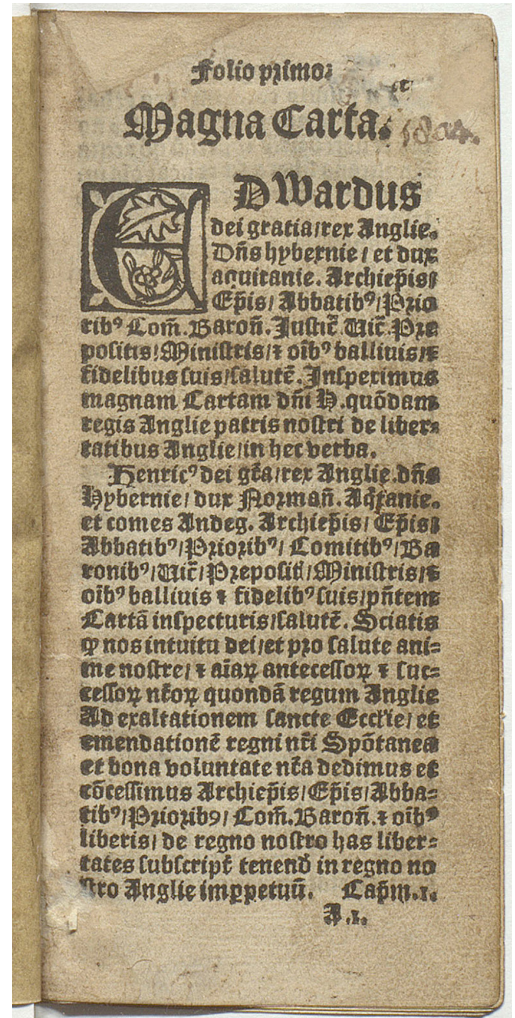


Figure 1: *Antiqua Statuta* (1508), fol. 1. Printed in Latin by the king's printer, Richard Pynson. British Library, C.112.a.2.

6 *ibid.*, p. 21.

7 *A Bibliography of Early English Law Books*, compiled by Joseph Henry Beale, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1926, p. 208.

8 Haruko Momma and Michael Matto (eds), *Companion to the History of the English Language*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2009, p. 289.

9 *Antiqua Statuta* (1508), *op. cit.*

Pynson's text of Magna Carta opens with a large decorated initial E in *Edwardus*. Like the font itself, and the rubrication that appears in many early printed texts, it is reminiscent of medieval manuscript style. This edition uses the font that becomes known as 'blackletter', the heavy gothic or 'textura' font that was modelled on the scripts used by the most formal and deluxe medieval manuscripts (see figure 1).

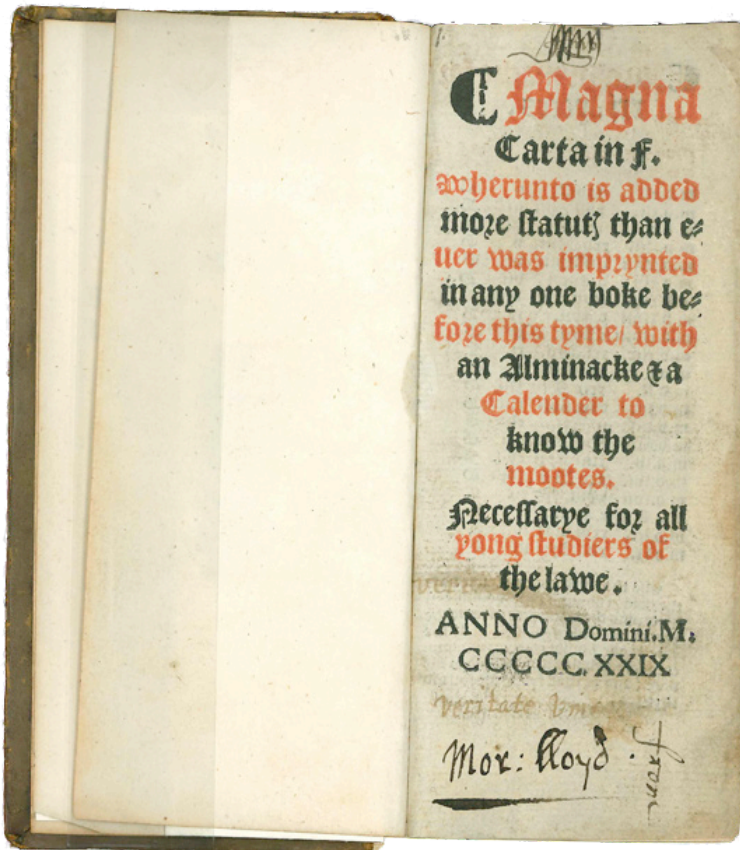


Figure 2: *Magna Carta in folio* ... (1529) [i.e. 1539], title page. Printed in Latin by Robert Redman. Boston College Law Library, Daniel R. Coquillette Rare Book Room

Roman and italic types were developed early in the fifteenth century, and were often used for works of humanist scholarship, but Gothic fonts were for several centuries preferred for older, authoritative texts such as bibles, legal statutes, and indeed, the printing of medieval poetry. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, were printed in black letter throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and were not printed in roman type until John Urry's edition of 1721.

Slowly but surely, print established its own conventions. Desmond Manderson in his essay in this volume writes about the layers of textual apparatus that surround medieval theological and legal texts in the manuscript tradition, where authoritative commentaries were recopied, along with new commentaries and unique glosses in

texts used for monastic or university study.<sup>10</sup> In the more commercial discourses and practices associated with print, by contrast, corrections and additions were incorporated into subsequent editions, which were often greatly expanded with new materials and commentaries.

In 1539 (originally misprinted as 1529), Robert Redman printed *Magna Carta* (the 1225 version) along with other statutes. His title page (figure 2) alternates red and black ink, and typically commends the work to the prospective buyer, ‘young studiers of the law’, as containing ‘more statutes than ever was imprinted in any one book before this time’.<sup>11</sup>

There is a small, but significant feature to observe on the first page of the text (figure 3) where blackletter is used for the text itself, but roman typeface is used for the title and the surrounding introductory or marginal materials: those elements we may describe as the para-text.

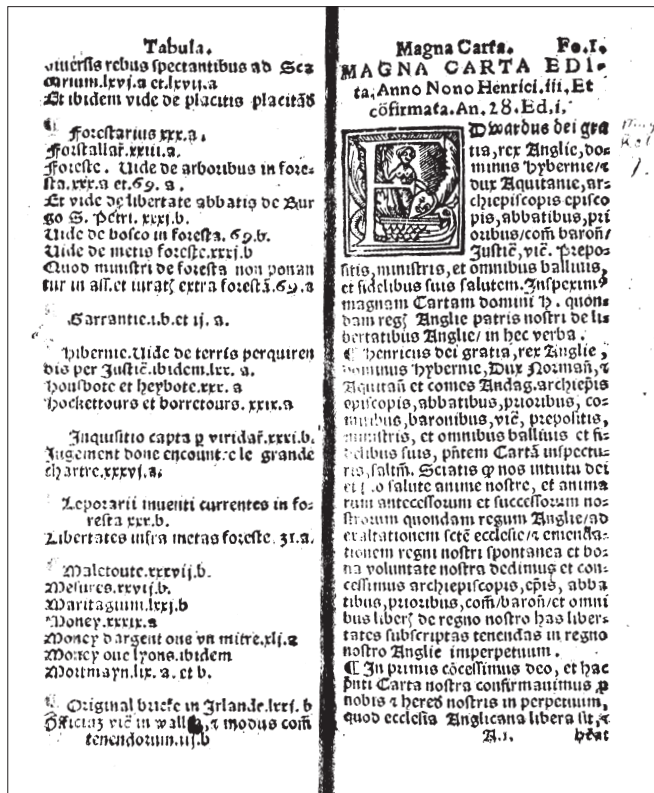


Figure 3: *Magna Carta in f(olio) ...* (1529) [i.e. 1539], fol. xvii–A1. Printed in Latin by Robert Redman. Early English Books Online, image 10 of 238.

10 See Desmond Manderson, ‘The other 1215’, in this volume at pp. 63–71.

11 *Magna Carta in f(olio) wherunto is added more statutz than euer was imprinted in any one boke before this tyme with an Alminacke & a Calender to know the mootes. Necessarye for all yong studiers of the lawe*, printed at London in Flete street by me Robert Redman dwellynge at the synge of the George nexte to Saynt Dunstones church, 1529 [i.e. 1539].

Even though this seems only a modest change, the differentiation is significant. It confirms that Magna Carta is a medieval text, marked by historical difference from the modern present, signified by the roman font that introduces and frames the older text.

This pattern of using fonts to mark out historical and cultural difference is seen at its most glorious at the end of the sixteenth century, in the great edition of Chaucer's works by Thomas Speght in 1598 (see figure 4).<sup>12</sup>



Figure 4: *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly Printed* (1598), frontispiece.

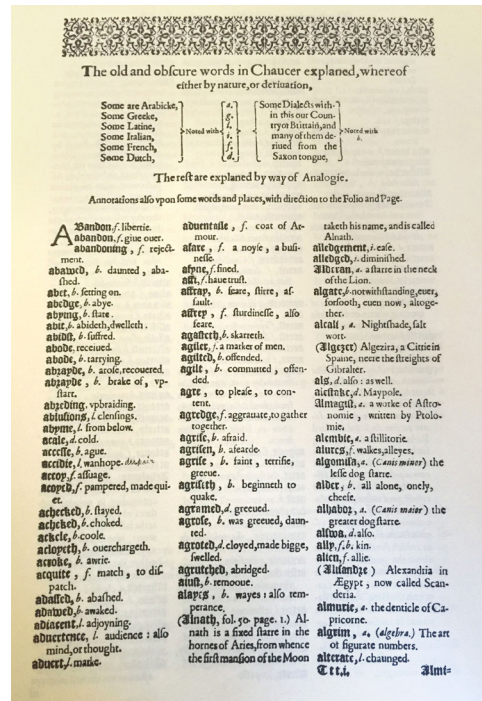


Figure 5: *The workes of our ancient and learned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed* (1602), fol. CII.i. Printed by Adam Islip, London; additionally edited by Francis Thynne.

Speght's elaborate title page uses roman and italic fonts, with epigraphs from both Chaucer and Ovid. The medieval poet is presented here surrounded by the full critical apparatus of humanist scholarship. There is a great deal of prefatory material in this edition: a biography, a family tree with an engraving of Chaucer and an image of his tomb, dedications, poems, and a long introduction. This latter is set in roman type, using italics for titles and foreign languages, but using black letter for quotations from Chaucer.

12 *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly Printed*, edited by Thomas Speght, printed by Adam Islip at the charges of Bonham Norton, London, 1598.

Speght is the first editor to include a ‘Glossary of Old and Obscure Words in Chaucer, explained’ but Francis Thynne in 1602 expanded his edition to set out the glossary in three columns, each using blackletter font for the medieval words, roman type for the modern meaning, and italics for the word’s etymological origin (figure 5).

The glossary provides a graphic illustration that blackletter is associated with medieval texts and languages that are becoming unrecognisable, that cannot be read without editorial assistance; here, typography is used to mark out the linguistic and cultural otherness of the medieval text.

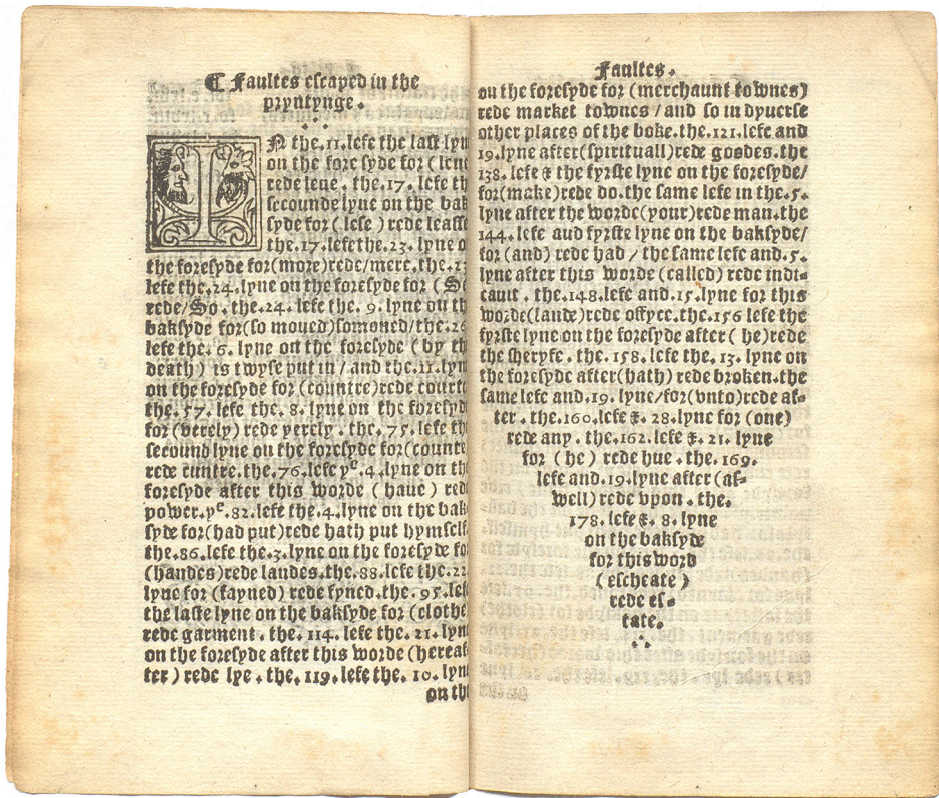


Figure 6: *The Boke of Magna Carta, with diuers other statutes ... translated into Englyshe by George Ferrers* (1534), fol. iv–v. Printed by Robert Redman, London. British Library, C.112.a.6.

A similar awareness informs Robert Redman’s publication of the first complete English translation of Magna Carta, by George Ferrers (c.1510–1579), into English in 1534.<sup>13</sup> Most of the text and commentary are printed in blackletter. This is generally

13 *The Boke of Magna Carta, with diuers other statutes whose names appere in the nexte lefe followynge, translated into Englyshe by George Ferrers*, imprinted at London in Fletestrete by me Robert Redman, dwellyng at the synge of the George / nexte to Saynt Dunstones church, 1534.

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agreed to be not a particularly successful translation, and there were many corrected and revised translations printed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nor was the printing itself without error. Rather ironically, the text is preceded by two pages of ‘Faultes escaped in the pryntyng’ (figure 6). This is a list of errors and mistakes but beautifully laid out to taper to an elegant point on the second page: an example of the printer’s skill even as he corrects his own errors. The text was reissued in 1541.

In that recorrected edition, Redman draws attention to the labours of printing, and the difficulty that would be involved in reprinting the text from the beginning. Indeed, he argues that so many of the technical words in Magna Carta are already obsolete, and almost beyond understanding:

For yf thys were to be cutte agayne / men shulde fynde if no easy pece of worke to take in hand, specyally when many of the termes as well French as latyn be so ferre out of use by reason of theyr antyquyte, that scarcely those that be best studyed in the lawes can understande them, much les then shal suche as come rawly to the redyng therof perceyve what they meane. And yet in the same yf they be well sought, is conteyned a great part of the pryncples and olde groundys of the lawes. For by serchyng the great extremities of the comon lawes before the makynge of statutes and the remedies provyded by them, a good student shal soone attayne to a perfyte iudgement. And bycause the moste parte of them retayne theyr force, and bynde the kyng’s subiectes unto this day, me thought it necessary to set them forth in suche sorte as men myghte beste have knowledge of them and knowledge can they have none except they rede them and what dothe it avayle to rede, yf they understande not, and how shulde they understande the meanyng which understande not the texte. For this cause I saye was thys boke translated into the Englyshe, whiche thoughe percase it shal not satisfye the lerned, yet shall it be a good helpe for the unlearned.<sup>14</sup>

Redman’s hierarchy of learning is clear: the translation may not ‘satisfy’ the most learned, but at least ‘the king’s subjectes’ will be able to understand the texts that govern them if they can read them in English translation and trace them back to their origins.

A more highly developed version of this discourse is found in Richard Tottel’s edition of 1556. Here the text of Magna Carta appears in Latin, but Tottel addresses his preface in English to ‘Gentlemen studious of the lawes of Englande’ in a calculated appeal to their love of a well-organised book, grounded in authority, and as encyclopedically complete as possible:

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14 *The great Charter called i[n] latyn Magna Carta with divers olde statutes whose titles appere in the next leafe Newly correctyd*, Elisabeth wydow of Robert Redma[n], London, [1541?].



But now to say also somewhat of this present work, albiet it might seme superfluous and nedelesse to haue emprinted it now againe so sodeinly being so lately done in so faire paper & letter by an other: yet when ye shal wey how in sundry places much here is added out of bokes of good credit, as examined by the roules of parliament, how ech where the truth euen of the best printes is ouer matched by theire faultes not fewe not a litle reformed, the light of pointing adioyned, the chapters of statutes truly deuided, & noted with their due numbers, the alphabeticall table justly ordred and quoted, the leaves not one falsly marked, with mani other help to correct it and further you, when (I say) ye shal haue weyed both al these by me performed, and the want of these in al other heretofore, I hope your wisdoms wil some espie that nether I have newe printed it for you causelesse, nor ye shal bye it of me frutelesse. This thought I fit in min own behalf first to haue sayd unto you; and so now I cesse further to trouble you from your more earnest studies; wherin I pray God to sende you most worshipful successe, to your own glorie and profit, to the comfort of your frendes, and auancement of your countree. R. T.<sup>15</sup>

The discourse of the printers and early publishers, far from affirming the fixity and standardisation of the new medium, is often uneasy and uncertain. The printer here adopts a flattering tone, while also trying to sell his new improvements in technical terms, at the same time as he voices his own doubts as to whether it was worth reprinting the text so soon. Still, more elements have been added, texts have been compared with the rolls of parliament, punctuation (pointing) has been added, chapters have been sorted and numbered, an alphabetical table added, and pages correctly numbered. Thus, ‘nether I have newe printed it for you causelesse, nor ye shal bye it of me frutelesse’. Tottel even invokes the national benefit: to buy the book will advance the student in ‘most worshipful successe’ for his own glory and profit, the satisfaction of his sponsors, and the advancement of his country.

Print culture certainly made medieval texts like Magna Carta more available to greater numbers of people, as well as rendering the text more comprehensible through the addition of punctuation, indenting and capitalisation, to say nothing of English translations. Yet the vagaries of print technology, human error and human interpretation inevitably complicate this history. After all, it was in the commercial interests of the printers *not* to fix the text, but to keep generating a market for new, improved and revised editions. Magna Carta in the sixteenth century blackletter editions was both reassuringly old, but also excitingly new, again and again.

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15 *Magna Charta cum statutis quæ antiqua vocantur, iam recens excusa, & summa fide emendata, iuxta vetusta exemplaria ad Parliamenti rotulos examinata: quibus accesserunt nonnulla nunc primum typis edita: apud Richardum Tottelum, London, 1556.*