The birdcage of the Muses

by Walker Mimms

It’s a beautiful line:

Many are feeding in populous Egypt, scribblers on papyrus, ceaselessly wrangling in the birdcage of the Muses.

But it’s a mean one. It comes from Timon of Phlius, the Greek poet and philosopher who watched as the greatest poets of his age set off across the Mediterranean to write under the patronage of Ptolemy II. Theocritus, Apollonius, and Callimachus are probably the scribblers in question. And the new Library of Alexandria, then the greatest storehouse of human knowledge, was almost certainly the birdcage. It wasn’t just competitive scribbling Timon despised in these poets. It was, in his view, pedantry. When they could have been forging new directions in Greek verse, they instead burrowed in the stacks and set to work on a massive scholarly edition of the old poets with Alexandria’s first librarian, an
important Homer scholar. Books had infected them, sneered Timon from afar.

This attitude is unthinkable today, now that the paper book has finally met its rival and one of our treasured research libraries, like countless others in its shadow, is under the knife. We should be sticking up for these institutions. But, paradoxically, Timon is the starting point of an important new collection that reasserts the importance of the brick-and-mortar library in age when Google Books makes a very threatening case for its obsolescence. The twelve essays in *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* (edited by Alice Crawford) follow the library from Alexandria to the present day. Along this journey, the twelve decorated historians stop to treat basic, incidental questions that are fascinating in their own right—like how books were made in the past, how much they cost, how they were stored, how they were acquired, and by whom—but the book’s greater reward is its treatment of a much more difficult, more important question, which thrusts our current situation to the fore: how did readers throughout history feel about libraries? This question couldn’t have come at a better time.

Timon’s complaint was one answer. And he resurfaces throughout the collection in various guises, most poignantly in the essay on medieval libraries. An illustration from a late fifteenth-century manuscript copy of Jacques le Grand's *Le livres des bonnes heurs* depicts two scholars in a hushed reading room, each studying a book chained to the desk they share. Above their heads, a shelf on the stone wall displays a total of four volumes. This, Richard Gameson argues convincingly, was the medieval view of erudition:
The opposite of this depth? The Book Fool: a character in Sebastian Brant’s *The Ship of Fools* (1494) whose woodblock caricature adorned many editions of that book—a madman scribbling and wrangling in his own birdcage, surrounded by towers of the books he’s collected but not taken the time to read.

Andrew Pettegree exposes the untold neglect suffered by the great Renaissance libraries when print started to oust the expensive and glamorous manuscript. Robert Darnton’s riveting essay follows an eighteenth-century band of Swiss book traders as they smuggle *Fanny Hill*, bound inside Bibles, in sixty-pound backpacks through the Alps into France, risking nine years of hard labor if caught. Two essays explain the evolution of exclusive book clubs in Georgian England into subscription and public libraries in the Victorian era, the model for our current system, where the librarian became a filter for the geyser of print that sprung from the new steam-powered press. From here we’re taken into more familiar but well narrated territory: the politics of twentieth-century university libraries manuscript collection.

The history of books and libraries is a fragile one, and the specter of a digital takeover certainly haunts it. The essays in *The Meaning of the Library* don’t ignore this. Most of the contributors have extensive experience with digital archives and offer suggestions for a peaceful coexistence between the page and the screen. But this book isn’t about that realm.

Another new book, *Breaking the Book: Print Humanities in the Digital Age*, by Laura Mandell, Director of the Initiative for Digital Humanities at Texas A & M, takes up where *The Meaning of the Library* leaves off. It’s a “manifesto” of the digital humanities that promises no less than “to shape the digital instantiations of our cultural heritage by keeping, if we can, the best parts of book culture and letting go of the worst.” That’s a tall order for 180 pages.

This book is not designed for readability. But in detangling Mandell’s argument—part philosophy of language, part historical analysis—you get something like this: When print first exploded, books, products no longer of a pen but of a machine, became dehumanized in the eyes of their readers. This created all kinds of problems that still plague us today. The authorless, sterile realm of print floated far above the level of everyday human discourse and gave writers the illusion that they had special authority, that their books had an immediate, real impact on the world just because they were now mass-produced, widely available, and uncontested unless a note appeared in the fine print of the next month’s “Letters” section, at which point, well, who would care?
Mandell thinks this original, illusory “print authority” is responsible for the self-important, ineffectual scribblers who today fill our libraries, bookstores, and newsstands.

The digital age is the final frontier for Mandell, our chance to wipe the slate clean of this mess. Very well. But when she says that the anonymity of print engendered literary recklessness, or that the endless ocean and slow pace of print inhibits meaningful scholarship, the Internet is hardly the solution that rushes to mind. It’s true that the seismic shift from manuscript to print is a rich subject in the study of human consciousness. Mandell has entered an interesting discussion there. And it’s true that early print culture laid the foundation for modern critical discourse, for better and for worse. But the belief that the illnesses of criticism are somehow endemic to the print medium, and that its relocation to the Digital Ward can somehow cure it—these assumptions are unsupportable by the scope of this book.

In fact, if Mandell’s book sets any example, it perpetrates the same crimes of language it’s supposed to condemn. Mandell shrouds her premises in tortured, theoretical language, the over-“adumbration” of “catachreses,” and an obsessive over-quotation of other critics (an attempt to mimic in print the web’s information overload?). A paragraph on “Johnson’s leakage”—perhaps a digression on the lexicographer’s many secretions? Nope. It’s simply F. V. Bogel’s interpretation of Johnson’s Life of Richard Savage: “a conventional sign like quotation marks may only imperfectly inhibit a leakage between categories such as utterance and quotation, use and mention.” Ah, of course!

The image of Gameson’s silent scholars, chained books in hand, floats back into view. How does that version of scholarly depth compare to the one Mandell espouses in her closing remarks? (Her students are tasked with hyperlinking poems according to a color-coded legend: literary element, repetition, symbol, theme, ambiguity, emotion . . . ) Or to the online “crowd-sourcing interpretation tool” she advocates for use in elementary, middle, and high school programs? These tools can be useful, but are they really the answer to the shallowness and self-reference that afflicts criticism? In a strange reversal of fortune I find myself standing alongside Timon, watching from the shore as the convoys set sail. But instead of Alexandria, it’s a vaguer birdcage that awaits—one with equally wonderful opportunities but even loftier, shinier promises. These two books show us, one by its merits, one by its missteps, how careful we need to be in entering it.


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