

# ‘THEY HAVE WHOLE WORLDS INSIDE OF THEM’

## A brief journey into the practice of book gift giving through history

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*This article analyses the practice of giving books as gifts through history, in Europe. It starts from the book as a ‘gift of power’ in the Merovingian and Carolingian time, going through the presenting of books amongst scholars as signs of friendship and professional appreciation, the book as ‘public gift’, and the emergence of the early nineteenth-century genre of ‘gift books’, to eventually reach the present days and the dispute between eBooks and physical books in gifting habits peculiar to the period. Wealth, symbolism, the ability to convey messages: different aspects are taken into consideration, to try and give reason of why books have always been considered so appropriate for gifting.*

**Keywords:** book symbolism; paper books; books as gifts; gift giving; eBooks



From an anthropological point of view, gifts seem to represent a fundamental part of existence: they have been described as the ‘cement of social relationships’, and countless are the reasons that lead people to donate to those around them.<sup>1</sup> Gifts, however, are not as neutral as they may appear:

they symbolise some of the qualities of both giver and receiver, and each of them is actually an action conveying some meaning.<sup>2</sup> In this perspective, it is highly interesting to consider how books have been deemed suitable gift material throughout history. If gifts are so symbolically charged, what does the gifting of books say about givers

and receivers? But, above all, what is the value attached to them, aside from their material worth, that makes them so appropriate for gifting? How did the practice of giving books as presents evolve? Has the value attached to them reached us unchanged, or has it transformed through time? This article will try to offer a brief overview of book gift giving through history, and some considerations on the value represented by the paper object, which still makes it such a great present.

First of all, it is necessary to clarify that – as long as the past is concerned – it is possible to identify a gift as such thanks to external cues, such as letters or journals, but also from indications within books themselves, caught in bindings, flyleaves, or title pages. Obviously, that is no simple task, since gifts – especially those made within households – did not leave as many traces as economic transactions did.<sup>3</sup> During the Merovingian and Carolingian times, for example, only ‘unbalanced’ gift giving made it into the records, that is gifts that spoke of power relations; it is interesting to note how, along with horses, weapons, and jewels, precious books were listed within those ‘gifts of power’.<sup>4</sup>

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In the Middle Ages, in fact, books were often rich gifts exchanged amongst rulers and members of both lay and ecclesiastical elites. An example of this practice is the so called Vivien Bible, a lavishly illustrated manuscript presented, in 846, to King Charles the Bald by Count Vivien, the

lay abbot of St. Martin of Tours.<sup>5</sup> This book, also called the ‘First Bible of Charles the Bald’, was one of the enormous, one-volume Bibles produced in the *scriptorium* of Tours, massive and beautifully decorated; it had been given to the King soon after Count Vivien had received his abbacy, and therefore was meant as a sign of gratitude and loyalty.<sup>6</sup> On a similar note, but with reversed actors, also kings could donate rich books to favourite monasteries and churches, in a gesture that signified patronage.<sup>7</sup> It is easy, here, to figure out how the focus was on the

wealth of the gifts (finest parchment, ornate handwriting, precious bindings, etc.), but this does not diminish the interest sparked by them being books, chosen for their opulence as well as for their symbolic meaning, which – considering that they were usually of a religious kind – connected them to faith and protection. This fluttering between wealth and symbolism can be visualised even better if one takes a step back in time.

During the 8th century Anglo-Saxon missions to spread Christianity in the Frankish Empire, precise conventions existed for what concerned gift giving between the Anglo-Saxon Church and its missionaries. It was a well-defined ritual inserted in the wider picture of a society in which the ritualistic exchange of precious gifts played a major role in the creation and strengthening of social relations.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, despite their being fundamental to the mission, books seem to have been evading the strict cage of that ritual: gift giving and book giving did not share the same 'ritual discourse', one that required senders to show 'conventional modesty' concerning what they were presenting.<sup>9</sup> The first explanation that comes to one's mind is of an economic kind: as books were not at all cheap, presenting them in the required way would have meant belittling their value; many of the traditional gifts exchanged in the same context, however, were precious, costly items, no matter how humbly presented.<sup>10</sup> Another explanation is to be found in the conceptualisation of the gift as symbol. As certain members of the Church strongly disdained material wealth, when exchanging precious gifts, they always treated them – and begged others to treat them – just as symbols of loyalty and affection; but books, especially sacred ones, were not mere symbols and could not be treated as such. They were holy in themselves, like relics, by virtue of the content they carried.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to that, books had also an 'advantage' over traditional gifts, in that they could explicitly

convey a message: this was the case, for example, with books gifted by city governors to monarchs and high officials, which could expressly carry the message of the hoped-for reforms or actions that the city was expecting from its rulers.<sup>12</sup>

A different context, one in which it is not curious at all to find gifts of books, is that of an intellectual milieu. In 1359, for example, Giovanni Boccaccio, one of the most relevant poets and writers of the Italian Middle Ages, moved to Milan in order to pay visit to his good friend and mentor Francesco Petrarca. To thank him for the hospitality Petrarca was offering him, Boccaccio brought him a copy of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. This, however, was not the first copy of the book Boccaccio gave Petrarca (he had already sent him one in 1351), and, surely, it was not the only book they gifted each other. Those interactions fit in a larger network of book lent, borrowed and, obviously, gifted amongst scholars of the time, who were extremely interested in showing each other the newest discoveries on the subject of antique and classical literary works.<sup>13</sup> In this environment, gifted books were tokens of friendship, gratitude, and embodiment of communal interests shared amongst kindred spirits. Some gestures, nevertheless, stand out for their thoughtfulness and affection; one of those, for example, is represented by the small, compact breviary gifted by Francesco Nelli, a Florentine notary, to Petrarca: Nelli had it made specifically for him after the poet's brief stopover in Florence while on his way to Rome. The notary, in fact, had noticed how the

breviary Petrarca owned looked too heavy in the hand of a pilgrim, and wanted something to make him more comfortable.<sup>14</sup>

**I**f in the early years of the Middle Ages, as mentioned above, manuscripts were considered suitable gifts amongst the members of the nobility, this does not seem to be the case anymore towards the end of the same historical period. In 1456, in fact, preoccupied with the customary New Year's gift to Charles VII on behalf of the Milanese Duke Francesco Sforza, the ambassador to the Valois court acknowledged how a manuscript would not suffice, and a horse had to be added.<sup>15</sup> Books still featured as gifts in asymmetrical relationships, but with a totally reverse role than that held during the Carolingian era: no more as gifts of power, but rather as items that courtiers and people from lower social ranks could present to their superiors.

**I**n this category of gifts to superiors, it is probably possible to also include those books which were given as 'public gifts', that is, dedicated to someone. In this context, the component of self-interest – of which gift giving is never completely free – is surely predominant. Gifts of this kind could be considered as a sort of investment: an author would gift a book to a person richer than themselves; in

exchange, the recipient would send back a gift of money and, through their reputation, would add to the importance of the work.<sup>16</sup> That is the case, for example, with one of Erasmus' fellow scholars who, unable to sell his books, would make revenue by gifting them to important people instead.<sup>17</sup> In this presenting of books to patrons, it is possible to see the faint shadow of what had always happened, for the longest of times; indeed, the difference with, for example, the gifting of the Vivien Bible is substantial: for one, Count Vivien was not an author actively trying to promote his work; moreover, his gift was meant as a thank you for something that he already had, and not for something that he had

hoped to receive. Nevertheless, it is not possible to completely overlook the fact that, with his lavishly decorated Bible, Vivien wished for good things to come as well. With the introduction of the printing press, things changed substantially, as more people started to dedicate books: not only authors anymore, but translators, printers, and publishers as well, all of them looking for patrons capable of helping them financially with

their endeavor.<sup>18</sup> If already marred, the most profound meaning of the gift was here completely shattered, as books were picked for no other reason than they being what donors were trying to sell. Dedications,

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however, did not completely cancel the poetry of gift giving: many works, in fact, were dedicated by literary men to their friends and colleagues as pure signs of friendship and professional appreciation;<sup>19</sup> but since whole editions were gifted, at this point, instead of single items, this discourse is probably straying from the purpose of this article.

The printing press did not influence only the dedication of books, but their whole use as gifts in a wider sense: not only did the number of available reading material increase; in fact, so did the number of people who could read it. While in the Middle Ages the gift of books had been somehow restricted to rich people and scholarly settings, from the 16th century onwards, the habit of presenting books expanded. Books were exchanged between spouses, as is the case, for example, of Jean de Coras, a Protestant judge living in Toulouse, and his wife, to whom he gifted various volumes with the intent of her using them for her 'recreation' while waiting for him; gifts were also a way to have books circulate in the countryside, when there were no routes developed enough for the passage of peddlers.<sup>20</sup>

The relevance of books as gifts can also be detected thanks to the emergence, around the beginning of the 19th century, especially in England and America, of a new, specific genre of books expressly called 'gift books'. Designed specifically as gifts (for example, they sported a page explicitly made to carry a dedication), usually containing miscellanies of prose and

verse, they were issued yearly for the holidays or for particular causes (for example, the 'anti-slavery gift books', created for, and sold during, anti-slavery fairs).<sup>21</sup> Although, as already said above, the focus of this article is on people choosing to gift someone else a book, and the reasons behind that choice, and not on agents inextricably connected to books (in this case, publishers) intent on advertising their product, this specific kind of books had certain characteristics that make it relevant for the analysis at hand: it shows, for example, that sellers were catering to a habit of gifting books that was surely widely developed. Moreover, it is interesting to notice how they were not just 'normal' books advertised as great gifts for the holidays (a trend well developed on its own as well), but were items specifically crafted for this purpose.<sup>22</sup>

As we approach the contemporary era, one cannot avoid mentioning the so-called *Jolabokafloð*, or 'Christmas Book Flood', the Icelandic tradition of giving each other books on Christmas Eve, and then spending the night reading.<sup>23</sup> Although Icelanders assure that they would never gift an eBook, this is undoubtedly something that has to be taken into account when considering book gift giving nowadays. For the first time in history, in fact, the paper book has a contender; nevertheless, the enemy does not seem to have an easy life. In the words of Cathy Langer, director of buying for Denver's Tattered Cover Book Store, in fact, although millions of households are equipped with eBook readers – and various seem to be the suggestions on

how to gift eBooks<sup>24</sup> – the paper book is still the preferred vehicle for gift giving.<sup>25</sup> Various reasons can be found. First of all, for example, it seems that eBooks feel too impersonal.<sup>26</sup> eBooks take away an additional layer of interest, which has been given to printed books throughout history by the possibility of them being second hand objects.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, print and paper have a ‘lasting value’, something that people want to gift.<sup>28</sup> Surely, it is possible to write a nice note on the email that informs a loved one of their newly received eBooks, but there is no way – at least for the time being – to make those words stick to the front page of that same eBook, thus robbing the recipient of the joy of reading them over and over again, at every opening of the cover, as it would be with a physical book.

**A**lso, it has to be considered that the value of gifts is not the same as their economic value, but it is actually established by their users: in this case, by givers and receivers.<sup>29</sup> And the value attributed to books as

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‘cultural objects’ influences the way they are perceived as gifts.<sup>30</sup> This affects both parts involved: in gifting a book, the giver acknowledges the receiver as ‘worthy’ of the cultural value of the object, at the same time establishing their own worth. In this perspective, gifting books is a ‘very strong, personal statement’.<sup>31</sup>

**T**o conclude, it is possible to see how books have been considered as a great gift material throughout history, for many different reasons. Through time, the book has always retained a special, symbolic value, which is still attached to the paper object, even if the focus has shifted from a heavily sacred

symbolism to a level of mostly pure enjoyment, as books gifted nowadays are mainly thought for people to enjoy themselves, to reflect, to be moved. Books are gifted because ‘they have whole worlds inside of them. And it’s much cheaper to buy somebody a book than it is to buy them the whole world!’<sup>32</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> C. Camerer, ‘Gifts as Economic Signals and Social Symbols’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 Supplement (1988), pp. S180-S214, there p. S182.

<sup>3</sup> L. Purbrick, 'Wedding Presents: Marriage Gifts and the Limits of Consumption, Britain, 1945-2000', *Journal of Design History*, 16:3 (2003), pp. 215-227, there p.215.

<sup>4</sup> F. Curta, 'Merovingian and Carolingian Gift Giving', *Speculum*, 81:3 (2006), pp. 671-699, there pp. 697-8.

<sup>5</sup> R. McKitterick, 'Script and book production', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> R. McKitterick, 'Charles the Bald (823-877) and His Library: The Patronage of Learning', *The English Historical Review*, 95:374 (1980), pp. 28-47, there p. 37; McKitterick, 'Script and book production', p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> D. Pratt, 'Kings and Books in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 43 (2014), pp. 297-377, there p. 298.

<sup>8</sup> J.W. Clay, 'Gift-giving and books in the letters of St Boniface and Lul', *Journal of Medieval History*, 5:4 (2009), pp. 313-325, there p. 314.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 323.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 324.

<sup>12</sup> N. Zemon Davis, 'Beyond the Market: Books as Gifts in Sixteenth-Century France', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 33 (1983), pp. 69-88, there p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> G. Billanovich, *Petrarca Letterato* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1947), pp. 96-7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> B. Buettner, 'Past Presents: New Year's Gifts at the Valois Courts, ca. 1400', *The Art Bulletin*, 83:4 (2001), pp. 598-625, there p. 604.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, 'Beyond the market', p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> K.F. Huff, *Printing friendship and buying feeling: exchange and gift books in the antebellum United States*, Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware (Summer 2012), p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11 and ff.

<sup>23</sup> Treehugger, 'The beautiful Icelandic tradition of giving books on Christmas Eve', <<https://www.treehugger.com/culture/icelanders-give-books-christmas-eve.html>> (28 February 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Bookriot, 'How to gift a Kindle book (and five reasons why you should)', <<https://bookriot.com/2017/11/03/how-to-gift-a-kindle-book/>> (28 February 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Mediashift, 'Print Books Still Rule the Holidays: The Trouble With Gifting an E-Book', <<http://mediashift.org/2011/12/print-books-still-rule-the-holidays-the-trouble-with-gifting-an-e-book347/>> (28 February 2018).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> WiseBread, '5 Reasons to Choose Traditional Books Over E-Books', <<http://www.wisebread.com/5-reasons-to-choose-traditional-books-over-e-books>> (28 February 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Mashable, 'Why Printed Books Will Never Die', <[https://mashable.com/2013/01/16/e-books-vs-print/#WQ\\_m4WthT8qy](https://mashable.com/2013/01/16/e-books-vs-print/#WQ_m4WthT8qy)> (28 February 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Purbrick, 'Wedding Presents', p. 215.

<sup>30</sup> P. Buckridge, 'Books as Gifts: The Meaning and Function of a Personal Library', *Australian Literary Studies*, 27: 3/4 (2012), pp. 1-14, there p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Shank, 'Print Book', n.pag.

<sup>32</sup> Neil Gaiman.