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Press Numbers as a Bibliographical Tool

A Study of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, 1728

A CHARACTERISTIC of many eighteenth-century books is the presence of small numbers (not signatures or parts of signatures) at the foot of some of the pages. It has been the custom to regard these numbers, press numbers, as they are called, as bibliographically useless. R. B. McKerrow, for instance, calls them 'another sort of signature' which, he says, 'is seldom of much bibliographical importance, as it relates solely to the organization of the printing house.'¹ In a problem confronting the present writer, however, press numbers turned out to be of great importance; in fact, they were the only means of solving two of the paramount difficulties: the distinguishing of the different impressions among several copies of one edition and the ordering of these various impressions in their proper sequence. It is hoped that a demonstration of the use to which press numbers were put in this single problem may serve as an indication of their potential value in bibliographical investigation generally.

Before press numbers could be converted into a bibliographical tool it was necessary to determine in detail the practice which governed their appearance. In an article² which was the first serious attempt at an explanation of these numbers, R. W. Chapman demonstrated that in many eighteenth-century printing houses it was the custom for the compositor, once he had completely finished work on a forme, to put a small figure at the foot of one of the pages in order to indicate to what press the forme was to be taken. To this explanation McKerrow added that one might suppose the purpose of such a procedure would be twofold. Since the employees of a printing house were paid by piece work the presence of a press number on the printed sheets would afford a ready means of validating each pressman's claim for pay. Also, the use of the numbers would facilitate the equitable distribution of work among the presses by the overseer. As far as they go Chapman and McKerrow would appear to be correct. Neither,

¹ *An Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford, 1927), p. 81.

² 'Printing with Figures: A Note,' *Library*, 4th ser., III (1922-23), 175-176.

however, takes account of the important fact that often in a single book there are some gatherings which contain press numbers and some which do not.

One might, of course, assume, as Chapman implicitly does, that a number was customarily put in every forme, and consequently attribute the absence of a number to the compositor's carelessness and the pressman's neglect. Indeed, Johnson's inclusion of 'working without a figure' among the practices which, in a well-run printing house, should be punishable by fine² suggests that such carelessness and neglect did occur frequently. Nonetheless, accidental omission could serve as the sole explanation of unfigured gatherings only if such gatherings appeared merely occasionally in books otherwise completely figured. On the contrary, an examination of a number of eighteenth-century books shows the combination of figured and unfigured gatherings to be so widespread that one is forced to conclude that a customary practice is in question.

On this basis, one explanation might be that the overseer did 'figure' each forme of each gathering but the pressmen took the numbers out of the chase after the first few copies of a forme had been printed. One might argue that the purpose for which press numbers were used would be achieved if they appeared only on one copy of the whole lot printed at one time for a particular gathering. Let us assume, for instance, that the inner forme of gathering A was given to press number four to work off. As long as the number '4' was present on one of the copies of the printed inner forme of A, the overseer would know that the entire signature A was the work of those handling that particular press.

But while such a hypothesis may seem logical, in reality it raises more problems than it solves. Is it likely, for example, that the pressman would stop printing and remove the figure from the chase? Such an operation would mean a great deal of trouble and delay. The number would, of course, be wedged firmly in the chase. To take it out and insert a quad would perhaps involve removing and adjusting some of the furniture. And what would be the reason for following this bothersome procedure? It could not be that the appearance of the press number at the bottom of a page was considered a blemish, for if it were thought to be so the figure would have been taken out of the chase as soon as the purpose of its presence there had been served —

² *Typographia* (London, 1824), II, 489.

which was, as we have said, after one copy had been correctly printed. But an examination of a number of works shows that the same particular gathering is 'figured' in more than one copy of each of them. It would seem, therefore, highly improbable that once the number was locked up in the chase with the pages of type it would subsequently be taken out.

Thus one cannot reasonably suppose that it was customary for the overseer to order a figure to be put in every forme. But on what principle were some chases and not others sent to the press without a number in them? In one of the bibliographical notes to his edition of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, F. B. Kaye suggests one likely significance that could be attached to the presence of unfigured and figured gatherings in the same volume. 'It is very possible,' he says, 'that several sheets were assigned to the same press, each batch of sheets assigned to one press being figured once. There was no need to figure each sheet, since the press from which it issued could be identified by the one figured sheet in the group.'⁴

In effect Kaye contends that the following procedure took place: the printing of the inner and outer formes of gatherings A, B, and C of a particular work was all assigned to press four. Before he sent the chase containing the pages of type for inner A to the press, the overseer would have the compositor add the number '4' to it. When the other chases intended for the same press passed through his hands, he would add nothing to them. After the pressmen working number four had finished their assignment, therefore, only the edition lot of copies for gathering A would have an identifying mark on it. All the copies for B and C would be unfigured. It is at this point that the chief objection to Kaye's theory arises.

Obviously it would be only when the edition lot of the A copies was actually with the other two lots that the number '4' would act as a press identification for all three. As soon as the lot of the A copies was removed from the other two lots the latter would, with regard to the press from which they issued, become indistinguishable from the lots of unfigured copies coming from the other presses at work on the same book. And surely there must have been times when just such a situation occurred. Johnson in his *Typographia*, for instance, states that the warehouseman sent to each press enough sheets of paper to

⁴Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Oxford, 1924), II, 395.

print an edition number of one gathering.⁵ When this paper had been worked off, he goes on to say, the warehouseman took the heap away from the press to dry it. Therefore, at the end of a day's work it is quite possible that there would be two unfigured lots of sheets hung up to dry, one from press four, one from press five. If the overseer wished to check what each group of pressmen had accomplished that day, he would not readily be able to do so. Thus the purpose for which any press numbers were used would be defeated.

But that the press numbers lost their identifying force at one stage would not necessarily prove that Kaye's theory was wrong. In its defense one could point out that as soon as the unfigured copies were taken down from the drying poles, piled, and sent to the shelf with the other heaps of finished copies, the signature letters would serve to draw these various lots of unfigured copies to those lots on which their press identification had been printed. In the case of our hypothetical example all copies of D would be figured: the chase containing the pages of type for its inner forme would have had a press number in it since it was the first chase to be sent to a press other than four. Thus with sheets A and D figured, the unfigured sheets B and C, because of the order of their signatures, would form an obvious group with A and the unfigured sheets signed with the letters from E to the next figured sheet would form an obvious group with D. The overseer would use the existence of such groups to check the pressmen's claims for pay and to determine whether or not he was distributing the work equitably.

If, however, Kaye's theory is correct and the signatures as well as the press figures were used to identify what had issued from each press, we should not expect to find any such sequence of numbers as occurs in the two copies in the Harvard College Library of the first, quarto, edition of Gay's *Fables*. A collation of those volumes reads: []⁴, B-Z⁴, aA². The press numbers in both copies are as follows: L_{2v}-5, M_{3v}-7, Q_{3r}-4, R_{1v}-4, X_{2v}-4, Y_{4r}-5, Z_{4v}-5. A glance at these numbers will show that the signatures do not act to form groups, each with an identifying press figure. For if one considered B to L as the first group, then the half sheet aA would not be attached to any figured sheet and therefore could not be identified as the work of a particular press. Furthermore, if Kaye's theory is correct there would have been no need to figure sheets R and X as well as Q. All three were printed by

⁵ *Op. cit.*, II, 565.

press four, and, since no sheet with a different press number intervenes, the order of their signatures would have formed them into an obvious group and therefore only one of them, either the first of the sequence, Q, or the last, X, would have needed a press number. Kaye's suggestion, then, seems inadequate to account for this and similar cases.

If the three tentative theories just outlined must be rejected, there appears to be only one other possible explanation for the fact that a single copy often contains both figured and unfigured sheets. This explanation is that during the printing of an edition or impression of any particular book one of the presses handling the job would work without a number. The indication that a forme of any gathering had been printed by this press would be the absence of a number. An examination of a number of eighteenth-century books reveals that often when some (but not all) sheets in a book are figured there are more without press numbers than with them. This suggests that the figures were used to identify formes of sheets which had been worked off by any press other than the one which was doing the bulk of the job.

But why, it could be asked, were press numbers not put in all the formes? Why should one press during the course of one job work without an assigned number? As previously stated the appearance of figures on more than one copy of a gathering shows that they were not considered to be a blemish on the printed page. But it does seem possible that their use would be thought of as a bother to be avoided where possible. For the figures were not put in the chases until after they had been on a press — the proofing press. To insert a number would then involve a rearrangement of the furniture. Often undoubtedly such a readjustment would have to be made in order to correct mistakes revealed in the forme by the proof-sheet. But even then to put in a figure would entail extra work. If the overseer and the compositor could avoid such extra bother, and yet achieve the same result as if they had 'figured' every forme, it is at least possible that they would do so. And the only way in which such a result could be obtained would be by the arbitrary operation of one press without a number — probably that press to which the overseer thought most of the work should go.

Let us now turn to a consideration of the particular problem in which press numbers, interpreted according to this last hypothesis, served as the key to what appears to be the correct solution. The Harvard College Library has eight copies of the first, octavo, edition of

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. These copies are made up as follows: []², B-D⁸, E⁴, F², G-H⁴. In all eight of them the sixteen pages of the two half-sheets G and H are copper-plate engravings of the music for the opera's songs. In six of them the text, that is the dialogue and the words of the songs, ends on F^{1v}; the last two pages of the quarter-sheet F are taken up with booksellers' advertisements. In two of the copies — copies which we shall call VII and VIII — the text extends to F^{2r}; F^{2v} contains the same advertisement as the first six copies, and in the same setting of type.

The text extends over to an extra page in copies VII and VIII because on E^{3r} of those two copies appear the words and music of a song present in none of the six others. The inclusion of this material is, however, the only textual variation which marks VII and VIII as distinctive. Up to E^{3r} all their pages were printed from the same setting of type as was used for the copies without the song. The type for the material which occurs after E^{3r} is also of the same setting in VII and VIII as it is in the others but because of the presence of the extra song this type has necessarily been imposed in a different way.

Undoubtedly the half-sheet E and the quarter-sheet F which are sewn into copies VII and VIII issued from the press later than did those found in the six other copies. For the manner in which the extra song was printed indicates that it was not an original part of the type page for E^{3r} but a later insertion. As previously explained, the short airs for the songs common to all eight copies were engraved on copper-plates and printed on the two half-sheets G and H. The music for the extra song, however, was cut on to a wood-block and this block was placed in the chase with the type. It would seem obvious that if this song was originally planned for the first edition its music would not have been handled in this unusual manner.

T. J. Wise, it should be noted, maintains⁶ that the extra song was part of the original type page for E^{3r}, but he makes no explanation of the irregular printing of its music. One might support his categorical statement by positing a theory which, at first glance, might seem quite probable. Could it not have happened that the extra song arrived at the printing shop after the copper-plates had been engraved but before the printing of the half-sheet E had begun? If such were the case it would have been an obvious saving both of time and money to cut the music on to a wood-block and insert this block into the body

⁶ *The Ashley Library, a Catalogue* (London, 1922-36), II, 140.

of the type rather than discard one of the music plates already engraved and cut another one on which the new air could appear in its correct place. But then why, if the extra song was included in the first copies of the edition, was it removed from the later ones? The difficulty of finding a satisfactory answer to this problem is increased by the fact that the extra song appeared in the second edition with its music printed from the same woodcut. It is not likely that the publishers would take the extra song out of the first edition, save the woodcut of its music, and then include this woodcut as part of the second edition which appeared only seven weeks later. One must assume then that the song did indeed arrive late at the printing house — but so late that several copies of the half-sheet E had already issued from the press without it.

But how many copies were printed from the original imposition? Or, to put the question in a form more susceptible of solution, was an impression of the half-sheet E issued without the song and the change on E_{3r} therefore made before the chases were put back on the press for a second impression, or was there only one impression of the first edition, with the song and its music inserted in the page of type for E_{3r} before a total edition number of the half-sheet E had been printed?

There is evidence to suggest that at least two impressions of the first edition were worked off. On April 9 the first impression of the second edition of *The Beggar's Opera* went on sale at the booksellers' stands. Four of its pages — two pages of introduction, a page of a list of the characters, and, except for one block of type, the title-page — were all printed from the same settings of type as were used for the four pages which made up the preliminary quarter-sheet in the first edition. We know, therefore, that after the first copies of the first edition appeared for sale on February 14 some of the type from which it had been printed was still standing and remained standing until the second edition was put to press at some date before April 9. Since this type had not been distributed, the publishers quite obviously must have intended to use it again. And since it is not likely that by February 14 they would have formed such definite plans for the second edition as to warrant keeping type for its printing, one may suppose that the pages of type were not distributed because the publishers expected to work off another impression of the first edition.

But to prove conclusively that more than one impression was actually printed is a difficult problem. In the case of the eight copies in

the Harvard College Library the usual bibliographical technique for determining different impressions is of no use. A collation of these eight reveals no variation in the position of their signature letters. If more than one impression was printed, the pages of type must have remained locked up in their chases when they were not actually in use.

The failure of signatures to reveal any indication of different impressions leaves only one other feature of the eight copies which might have any significance in the solution of the problem. This is the incidence of press numbers. The following table will show how these numbers occur:

Harvard College Library Call No.	Copy	Press Numbers in [] ^a	Press Numbers in B ^b	Press Numbers in C ^c	Press Numbers in D ^d	Press Numbers in E ^e	Press Numbers in F ^f
Murdock 211.5*	I		B _{1v-1} (inner) B _{4v-5} (outer)	C _{7v-2} (inner)	D _{7v-2} (inner) D _{5r-5} (outer)	E _{4r-8}	
15459.628*	II		B _{1v-1} (inner) B _{4v-5} (outer)	C _{7v-2} (inner)	D _{7v-2} (inner) D _{5r-5} (outer)	E _{4r-8}	
15459.628.5*	III			C _{8r-2} (inner) C _{8v-6} (outer)		E _{4r-6}	F _{2v-6}
15459.628.15*	IV						
15459.628.10*	V			C _{8r-2} (inner) C _{8v-6} (outer)			
Mus 500.2.3*	VI			C _{8r-2} (inner) C _{8v-6} (outer)			
15459.628.20*	VII						
15459.628.18*	VIII						

If our theory concerning the practice followed in the use of press numbers is correct, we have among these copies representatives of at least three different impressions of the one edition. Quite obviously copies I and II and copies IV, VII, and VIII were printed at different times. In I and II the gatherings B, C, D, and E are figured, the three full sheets twice, once in each forme, and the half-sheet E once.⁷ In IV, VII, and VIII these gatherings are unfigured. Therefore the chases containing the pages of type for gatherings B, C, D, and E must have been removed from the press and then put back on again, since, as we have shown, it is highly unlikely that the figures would be taken out while press work was in progress. And surely if there were two separate printings of these four gatherings there must also have been two separate printings of the half-sheet F. For it is improbable that at one time enough copies of F would be run off to match the copies of all the other gatherings produced during two printings. The absence of a press number on F in I and II and in IV, VII, and VIII does not indicate, therefore, an origin in a similar impression lot. It means, probably, that during the times of the two separate printings of B, C, D, and E the press which worked off F was operating without a figure.

The press numbers in III show that the printing of that copy took place at a different time from the printing of either I and II or IV, VII, and VIII. Of course, one might argue that the unfigured copies of gatherings B and D in III are from the same impression lot as was used in making up IV, VII, and VIII. It is entirely possible that in this

⁷ I am assuming throughout the rest of the paper that the quarter-sheet signed F was printed as a half-sheet with the unsigned preliminary quarter-sheet and that both this half-sheet and the half-sheet E were printed by the usual method of half-sheet imposition. The assumption that the alternative method was used, that the outer formes of the two half-sheets were put on the press together and then perfected from the two inner formes, would not, I believe, invalidate any of the particular arguments.

It is interesting to note that at times press numbers can be the means of determining which of the two methods of half-sheet imposition was followed. If the same press number appears on pages of the half-sheets belonging to the same forme the second of the methods just outlined cannot have been the one used: there would be no point in the overseer's identifying the same sheet twice. The incidence of the press numbers on the half-sheets in *The Beggar's Opera* is however inconclusive. Only III has the same press number on both half-sheets E and F. On E this number is on a page of the outer forme, E4r, and on F on a page of the inner forme, F2v. Such an arrangement could mean that the second method of imposition was used or, on the other hand, it could be merely the result of accident.

particular case B and D have such an origin. However, one cannot conclude from this that there were only two separate printings of B and D. The argument about the possible significance of no press number applies here as well as it did in the case of the unfigured half-sheet F in I, II, IV, VII, and VIII. In this case it is unlikely that a considerably larger number of copies of B and D than of C, E, and F would have been printed while the chases for all these gatherings were on the press without figures in them. Yet obviously other copies of C, E, and F were worked off at another time, as is shown by the press numbers in III. One may conclude, then, that there were other copies of B and D worked off at another time also. It is possible, if in III B and D are actually from the impression lot used for IV, VII, and VIII, that there exist copies similar to III but with press numbers on B and D, these numbers differing from those found on the same sheets in I and II. It seems far more likely, however, that B and D in III represent a new impression, printed by a press working without a figure. In other words, the *absence* of press numbers on B and D was probably the means used to identify a certain press for the length of time it took to print one impression — the impression in which inner C was worked off by press two and outer C and the half-sheets E and F were worked off by press six.

It is possible too that V and VI may be representatives of still another impression — a fourth. But since none of the press marks in any of their gatherings is different from those found in gatherings of the other six copies, it is more probable to assume that V and VI were made up from sheets already printed.

A consideration of the press numbers shows, therefore, that there were at least two impressions of the first edition worked off before the addition was made to the page of type for E₃r as shown in VII and VIII. The problem now arises as to whether or not IV is a representative of the same impression as are VII and VIII. If all three were of one impression, there would be two possible explanations of the fact that the extra song appears in VII and VIII but not in IV.

In the first place, one could suppose that the entire scheduled impression of the half-sheets E and F was printed without the song on E₃r, and that some time later the extra material was added, the type for the remaining five pages rearranged, and more copies of the half-sheets E and F printed. But such a procedure would entail waste: some of the copies of half-sheets E and F already worked off would have to

be discarded since there would not be enough of B, C, and D to match them. It is not reasonable to assume that the publisher would be willing to incur such waste simply in order to include one new song in what, considering that two impressions had already been printed, would be a relatively small number of copies of the first edition. This first explanation is not, then, a very probable one.

Again, assuming that IV, VII, and VIII are copies of the same impression, one could suppose that the publishers decided to insert the new song before the total scheduled impression of the half-sheet E had been printed. The chase containing the page of type for E_{3r} would, therefore, be taken off the press, and in order to provide enough copies of the half-sheet F to match those already printed of E, the chase with the pages of type for F would be put in its place. While F was being printed the insertion would be made in E_{3r} and the type for E_{4r} and E_{4v} rearranged. When this was completed the chase containing these pages would be put back on the press and the necessary arrangements then made of the type for the half-sheet F. Obviously such a procedure as this would involve a great deal of trouble. And it is no more likely that the publisher would go to such trouble to produce a few copies with the new song than that he would be willing to incur waste to gain the same end.

One may assume, then, that VII and VIII represent copies of a different impression from IV. To add the song and to rearrange the remaining type before either of the two chases had been sent to the press to print an impression lot of half-sheets E and F would, of course, involve trouble, but not so much as would be involved if the changes were made during the actual printing. In one case only the compositor would be affected, in the other both compositor and pressmen. If this assumption is accepted, one can say that among Harvard's eight copies of the first edition of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* there are representatives of four different impressions.

Of these four the one of which I and II are representatives was probably the first. On February 6 Tonson and Watts signed a contract with Gay which gave them unconditional ownership of *The Beggar's Opera*. At that time this musical comedy was the theatrical sensation of London. Already it had been playing for a week to packed houses at the Theatre Royal in Lincoln's Inn Fields. All the critics and the prominent men of letters were loud in its praises. Tonson and Watts certainly would realize that the sale of their newly ac-

quired work would be both large and immediate. It is likely that they would order their printing shop to get out the maximum number of copies in the minimum length of time.

Indeed we know for a certainty that the first lot of *The Beggar's Opera* to appear on the booksellers' stands was printed in a very few days. Printing could not have begun before the signing of the contract between the publishers and Gay on February 6; the first impression probably was begun on February 7. From an entry in the *Monthly Chronicle* we learn that copies of the work went on sale on February 14. In the seven-day period from February 7 to February 13 one day, the 11th, was a Sunday. This leaves only six possible working days. And since at least one of these would have to be left for gathering and sewing, the work done on the first impression in the printing house could not have taken more than five days.

Any one of the four impressions, it is true, could have been printed within this short period. But a consideration of the press numbers shows that only in the case of the impression to which I and II belong was a procedure followed which would result in the production of a large number of copies. The inner and outer formes of each sheet in I and II were worked off by different presses and there were altogether five presses employed on the job. For the impression of which III is a representative three presses were used and only for sheet C were the inner and outer formes assigned to different machines. One press only did the printing for all the sheets in the impression lots to which IV, VII, and VIII belong.

Probably there was division of copy in the composing of *The Beggar's Opera*. If so, the printer, using his presses as they were used for working off I and II, could print twice the number of books which he could produce if he followed the method employed during the printing of any of the other three impressions. For, assuming that a day would be taken up with the composition of the type, one can estimate that four days would be left for the actual printing. During the working off of the impression lot to which I and II belong the maximum number of formes printed by any one press was two. Therefore, the number of copies in this impression could be as great as the number of copies which one machine working for two days on one forme could produce. On the other hand if III, for instance, were a representative of the first impression the greatest possible number of sheets in that lot would be equal only to the number of sheets which could

be produced by one press working for one day on one forme. For during the printing of this impression the maximum number of formes worked off by any one press was not two, as in the case of the impression to which I and II belong, but four. Is it not likely, then, that the first impression of the popular *Beggar's Opera* was that impression which potentially at least could be twice the size of any one of the three other known impressions?

It is possible now to arrange most of Harvard's eight copies of *The Beggar's Opera* in chronological order. VII and VIII would, of course, be last in the sequence; I and II first. Since V and VI appear to be made up of sheets printed during the time the two impressions of which III and IV are representatives were being worked off, those two copies would fall into place after both III and IV. The question now remains as to the order in which to arrange III and IV. It is impossible, I believe, to ascertain with any degree of certainty which of the two came first. When the copies are compared, no significant variations appear in the text and, as will be shown, a consideration of the music in the two copies is of no help toward a solution of the problem.

As already stated, all the music in the first edition of *The Beggar's Opera* was, with the exception of one song, printed on two half-sheets G and H from engraved plates. These plates would appear to have been engraved rather than punched because there is variation in the size of note-heads. Further, the plates probably were large, measuring about eighteen inches by twenty, for although different plates were used to print the two half-sheets in different copies, it is always the whole gathering that varies in general appearance between copies and never merely one page. We can assume, then, that eight pages of the music arranged in the usual order for half-sheet imposition were engraved on one sheet of copper.

Altogether the eight copies in Houghton show that five such plates were used. In I and II gatherings G and H were printed from a matched pair of plates: the music on both half-sheets has what could be described as a 'light-faced' appearance. The engraver who made these plates cut into the copper with thin sharp lines. In III gatherings G and H were printed from a different pair of matched plates: the lines on them were not cut so thinly and sharply as in I and II. Besides this difference in general appearance between the two pairs, there are variations in the spacing of the music and a few variations in time and key notations. On G_{1r} and H_{1r} of the 'light-faced' plate, for example,

there are unused staves of music which do not appear on the corresponding pages of the 'heavy-faced' plate.

In IV and V the G gathering is printed from the same 'heavy-faced' plate as was used in III. The H gathering is printed from the 'light-faced' plate used for I and II. In VI, VII, and VIII the G gathering is printed from a plate different from that used either for I and II or for III. A distinguishing mark of this plate is the use on G_{3r} of the long 's' in the word 'First' which is part of the phrase 'End of the First Act.' The H gathering in these three copies is made up of the same plates as was used for III.

It can be ascertained that the copies of half-sheet H bound into VII and VIII were run off later than those in VI and III for before the former lot was printed two additional sharp signs were cut on the staff of music for air 20 on H_{1v}. Collation reveals also variations in the H gatherings of VII and VIII. Before the half-sheet H in copy VIII was printed, the $\frac{3}{4}$ time mark for air 20 on H_{4r} was scraped away and a $\frac{6}{8}$ notation cut over it. Likewise, the $\frac{3}{4}$ sign for air 27 on H_{4v} was changed to $\frac{3}{2}$. The order of precedence established by these variations in no way contradicts that indicated by the press numbers.

On the basis of a comparison between the H gatherings in I and II and in IV and V it can be determined that IV and V are the later ones. On H_{2v} of IV and V two staves of music in air 8 have flat signs which do not appear in I and II. Again this evidence only corroborates what has already been learned from the press numbers about the relative order of these four copies.

A collation of the copies of half-sheet G in III, IV, and V is of no help in establishing the relation between III and IV since no variations occur. It could perhaps be argued that III must be antecedent to IV because it, like the first impression, has a matched pair of plates for G and H while IV has a mixed pair. But such an argument from analogy does not solve the problem. In the end, the sequence of impressions, four in all, must remain as established by the press numbers: first I and II, then either III or IV, and finally VII and VIII.

The way to this solution has been long and circuitous and indeed would be unpardonably so if the goal had been only to resolve the difficulties raised by eight copies of *The Beggar's Opera*. But this extended and minute discussion of one particular problem has been intended principally as an illustration of a method. The consideration

of press numbers, the significance of which proved to be the key to the solution, can, I believe, be the means in other problems of determining the number of impressions in any one edition, of ordering these impressions in their proper sequence, and of estimating, roughly, the size of each impression. Perhaps, within the period of their occurrence, press numbers may become one of the bibliographer's most useful tools.

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