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Manuscripts and Markets: The Case and Cause of Authors in Search of Publishers

Russell Ganim

In November 1996, the *New York Times* ran a front page article dealing with the crisis in publishing monographs in the humanities. The piece opened with the experience of a young scholar in Oregon who had sent a book manuscript on Theodor Adorno to a major university press who refused to read it for reasons of "marketability" (A1). As the report continued, it outlined the economic and editorial reasons why many researchers in the humanities, especially at the beginning of their careers, encountered significant difficulty landing contracts at presses that would have published their work in the past. At the moment the story appeared, it was relevant to my situation in that I was in the fourth year of my job at a research institution where a book, though not in all cases needed for tenure, is generally a decisive factor in retaining one's position. Within a month's time, the editorial board of the press to whom the manuscript had been submitted would vote on my project. While trying to fight off the natural apprehension that comes from waiting for an issue to be resolved, I was nonetheless relatively confident in a vote for approval. The press had conducted an extensive review process, which in effect took over two years. Both of the referees to whom the book had been sent recommended publication, though the first required significant revisions which accounted for about six months of this time frame. Senior colleagues whom I consulted about the situation suggested, quite reasonably, that acceptance was all but assured given that 1) the reader's reports were from two of the most noted names in the field (French sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature), 2) the press had published several titles in this discipline, and 3) the press had held the script for an especially substantial amount of time.

After the vote was taken, the story of the Oregon scholar in the *Times* began to resemble my own. I received first an email message, then a formal letter from the director of the press saying that the text had been turned down because of market concerns and, correspondingly, because a book on my topic did not correspond to current titles on the press's list. The director of the press expressed regret that the situation had not worked out in my favor, and thanked me for my patience during the review process. In my response, I asked the director for further details and for

advice as to where now to send the text, whereupon he simply repeated what had been said before and told me to consult the directory of the Association of American University Presses. Although the surprise of the press's action was personally disappointing, I realized that from a legal and professional point of view, I had no recourse. The only option was to accept the decision, start the submission process from scratch after 26 months, and find a suitable publisher (which occurred seven months later). Fortunately, there was still time to look elsewhere. Nonetheless, the consequences for tenure could have been disastrous if the manuscript had not been tendered at a relatively early date.

The situation did resolve itself, but in the two years that have elapsed since this event, I have come to believe that the experience is significant because it is symptomatic of grave problems in academic publishing, and calls attention to systemic and often unnecessary difficulties authors face during the submission process. My story is not atypical, and indeed, as I have related it to others, I have encountered other incidents strikingly similar to mine. These cases range from manuscripts that have been held for well over a year only to have the script rejected even in light of favorable external evaluations, to the basic quandary of sending a text to a press that historically published works in the author's field, but now opts not to do so for economic reasons. The purpose of this article, however, is not to malign a particular press, nor university presses in general because of unfortunate experiences. Without question, one could argue quite plausibly that the cases just cited do not constitute the professional norm. Nonetheless, it is true that a growing number of authors, especially those without contracts, suffer increasingly from instability in humanities publishing, and that university and trade presses, as well as the academic community as a whole, have done little to address the issue. In recent years, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has run a number of opinion pieces on this problem, and I will refer to some of these contributions over the course of this essay. Yet, unlike the *Chronicle* articles, I seek in this paper to describe the problem from an author's point of view, and to propose solutions from this perspective that will in some ways render authors in search of a publisher less susceptible to the uncertain nature of editorial policy.

The Myth of the Market

The argument from several presses that book-length manuscripts are denied publication because their "marketability" appears weak or doubtful must be examined and called into question. According to the *Times* article, many presses explain their need to consider sales as a major criterion for acceptance because university library budgets have been cut to the point where a specialized monograph that would have commanded a press run

of anywhere from 800 to 1000 copies twenty years ago now merits orders of only 300 to 400 books (A 14). The point is well taken, since, as the *Times* piece indicates, the prices of scholarly journals have increased dramatically over this time span, forcing budgetary competition between books and periodicals to a degree unheard of in the past (A 1). In light of such circumstances, James Shapiro writes, "It is hard to imagine a grimmer time in which to get a 'tenure book' published" (B6).¹ However, I argue that the emphasis placed on financial considerations needs to be rethought when one takes into account that at least in literary criticism dealing with foreign languages and literatures, a large number of university and independent presses require subventions in order to defray publication, promotion, and distribution costs. Often, these subsidies, which take the form of out-of-pocket payments from the author, or grants from the author's parent institution, run well into the thousands of dollars. To the extent that the author "pays" to have his or her work put in print by a reputable house, little has changed since the founding of the publishing industry centuries ago. In addition, as part of contract agreements, more and more presses stipulate that authors provide camera-ready copy, thereby saving the press the time and expense of formatting, copy-editing, and proofing. Consequently, the financial "burden" presses incur with respect to the logistics of preparation and publication seems, at least in some instances, to be on the wane. Given the growing number of tasks placed on the author, a significant number of presses have transformed themselves into contractors whose primary function, after editorial approval, is printing and delivery. Of course, many presses adhere to traditional practices of assigning an in-house editor to the script who works directly with the author and is in large part responsible for overseeing final revisions, formatting, and proofing. Currently through, these duties are increasingly assigned to the author, who is becoming more and more responsible for the text's final appearance.

I underscore at this point that the changing roles of presses do not in any way alter their ability to determine and maintain the highest academic criteria for the acceptance of monographs in the humanities. My goal here is to assess the mechanics and policies of manuscript selection in light of recent emphasis on "marketability," not to imply that intellectual standards have slipped. In effect, the obverse would seem to be true in that the difficulty some authors encounter in finding outlets for their research necessitates the submission of scripts that embody notably high academic achievement. What I stress is that from a financial standpoint, the argument that high costs and potentially low sales preclude acceptance of monographs must be challenged since, in many cases, an increasingly significant portion of publication expenses is borne by the author. Logic dictates that when subventions are taken into account, the

economic risks presses take when adding a title to their list seems reduced. Indeed, if tenure is in the balance, most authors would unhesitatingly assume these costs in order to associate their work with a reputable venue. As Bonnie Collier, associate librarian for administration at Yale Law School, suggests, "If there is no place for a humanist to publish, then there is no job interview, no tenure, no promotion, and certainly no standing in the field" (A 56). It is thus in the interest of authors to do what they can to maintain this "place to publish." Accordingly, if increases in the number and amounts of subventions would help remove some of the obstacles to publication, then presses should seriously consider this option in order to include more traditional monographs in their releases.

The reality of authorial contributions in the form of subsidies and desktopping serves to call attention to what in some instances is the myth of reliance of cost and marketability as the basis for editorial decisions. Certainly, one cannot fault university or independent presses for adapting to new economic circumstances. Yet, it is difficult to understand why specialized studies in the humanities continue to suffer given the efforts of presses to diversify and make inroads into supposedly more profitable areas. As the *Times* article points out, presses respond to monetary pressures by "focusing on books of regional interest or books with general or academic appeal that stretch across different disciplines, thus broadening the market" (A 14). Robert Baldock, a senior acquisitions editor at Yale University Press in London writes, "University press editors . . . need to continue to hunt for authors in fresh fields," which he states, "[often] come from beyond the campus" (B6). And indeed, the dramatic rise in the number of memoirs, biographies, sports books, and illustrative works on topics of local interest that university presses have recently published underscores this tendency. The question that arises is why then, could not some of the economic "benefit" from this change in policy be reinvested into publishing a marginally higher number of conventional, though not less valuable texts which, as the *Times* report mentions, "university presses were set up to publish" (A 14) in the first place? The question is especially relevant in view of the fact that these types of monographs make up a smaller and smaller share of the number of titles released per year, meaning that they constitute less and less of an economic pitfall. In most cases, one has trouble imagining that a university press, given the size of its budget and the diversity of its releases, would seriously imperil its economic viability by accepting a slightly higher percentage of specialized monographs.

One answer to this query is that editorial decisions are as much political as they are financial. While this statement may seem obvious, it merits attention in light of the current insistence on monetary concerns. In

large measure, "politics" takes the form of adherence to trends. Without question, trends are a natural and necessary part of any intellectual and/or commercial enterprise. They challenge and redefine standards and account for much of the innovation that results from putting original thought into practice. Yet, often because of trends, presses choose titles as much for perceived relevance as for perceived economic gain. Ken Wissoker, editor in chief of Duke University Press, argues that the scholarly community should accept this shift from "traditional" to "trendy" monographs, as part of the evolution of intellectual taste and discourse (B4-5). Wissoker's point is certainly valid, but when inordinate emphasis is placed on trends to the point where they exclude creative and deserving material of a different orientation, the danger becomes readily apparent. With respect to the more general interest titles that are increasingly prevalent in university press catalogs, I argue that regional studies and biographies, while no doubt noteworthy in terms of intellectual effort, more importantly give the impression of reaching out to a non-academic public. They prove to taxpayers that university presses serve a larger purpose than that of publishing books that only an elite would understand, much less buy. Similarly, scholarly books on "hot topics" convey to intellectual circles that a particular press is at the forefront of what certain important members of the academic community view as inventive and indispensable.

From a financial standpoint, while some of these "provocative" titles, especially those by well-known authors, may require substantially larger press runs than those of a traditional humanities monograph, it would be illogical to think that most would because the chief market is for all intents and purposes the same: university libraries and a small number of individuals. The sales figures Sanford G. Thatcher, director of the Penn State University Press, describes in a 1995 *Chronicle* article lend credence to this idea. Speaking of literary criticism, including works on "deconstruction, post-modernism, and the like," Thatcher writes, "Of the 150 titles [published in literary criticism by Penn State since 1985], 65 per cent have sold fewer than 500 copies and 91 per cent have sold fewer than 800. Only 3 per cent have sold more than 1000 copies" (B2). Thus, in terms of overall revenue, the economic benefit publishers covet from seductive titles seems minimal at best. Consequently, the image a press seeks to create and cultivate becomes as large a factor in its editorial policy as the economic conditions under which it operates. No doubt, many would argue that the two are inseparable, and indeed they are to a degree. What I claim here is that in light of the financial help available from authors, as well as the commercial benefit presses presumably receive through the publication of general interest, and (let us suppose for the sake of argument) even "trendy" titles, there *should be more room* for

the inclusion of at least some more traditional monographs. The pertinence of this argument is all too clear: people's livelihoods are at stake, and the academic community must address this issue in an active and direct manner.

Possible Solutions

What measures can be taken beyond authorial contributions, either monetary or technical? When I posed this question to a friend who works as a humanities acquisitions editor at a major university press, she answered that departments and colleges should change requirements for tenure. The *Times* article mentions this option, citing one scholar who suggests that the tenure process be revised so that unpublished manuscripts could be judged on their intellectual merit rather than only being judged as finished books (A 14). Shapiro suggests that young scholars be given time beyond what "a tenure track allows" to "turn their dissertations into books that have a broader appeal" (B6). Doubtless, these ideas are thoughtful and forward-looking in view of current circumstances. In addition, they indicate that departments themselves will have to make adjustments in order to improve the situation. Yet, at the moment, few research institutions seem willing to adopt these policies with respect to tenure evaluations. More significantly, however, the proposal to modify tenure criteria still places the bulk of the burden on authors and departments rather than asking the presses themselves to take steps to rectify the problem. Every party involved must be willing to bend in the interest of academic scholarship. If authors are willing to pay subventions that cover most publication costs, and if universities eventually agree to modify book requirements for tenure, then presses should be willing to make concessions with respect to the review process. Specifically, I contend that in view of the present difficulties facing authors, rules against double submission need to be reconsidered. While I do not advocate scrapping the press's right of exclusivity altogether, certain rights need to be granted to an author at the time a press asks him/her to submit the manuscript in full. Primary among these assurances is the option to send the text to another outlet if the venue holding the right of exclusivity does not render a decision before a predetermined date.

Certainly, many presses establish and respect such time frames and make them part and parcel of the review process. Referees must also do their part by producing reader's reports in a timely way. Nonetheless, in several instances, including my own, no schedule is/was set. One could argue that part of the fault lay with me for not having insisted on such a deadline. However, those new to the profession are often not in a position to ask such things of a well-known university press. Since some presses fail to come to a decision in an expedient manner, and because of

rules forbidding the author to submit the script elsewhere, authors find themselves hamstrung by delays and lack of leverage. The same modification should take place with respect to journal submissions, where editorial committees have been known to hold an article manuscript for over a year before making a decision. At the same time, it should be noted that most European presses make little issue of double submission, conducting a much more open review process when compared to American practices. Furthermore, the irony cannot be lost on the observer who notes that while several presses repeatedly invoke "the market" and "marketability" as justification for not publishing certain monographs, they steadfastly cling to policies against multiple submission which, in effect, stifle the author from operating more freely within this "market." If economic competition is to emerge as a more definitive standard in academic publishing, it must become visible at both ends of the spectrum.

In some instances, the causes for the difficulties beginning scholars in the humanities face are generational. While acquisitions editors at many presses tend to be young, press directors, as well as editorial committees (mostly university faculty members) are often made up of individuals at the mid-career stage or beyond. The logic of this division is clear enough: those starting their careers may be more aware of current trends and movements, while those with experience and success in publishing occupy the higher posts and make the decisions that come with rank. Yet, in light of the circumstances outlined, it would be useful to place a non-tenured faculty member with a proven record of research on the editorial board of university presses, if only in an advisory, non-voting capacity. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where a director of a press, or members of an editorial committee, long removed from the pressures of obtaining job security, simply overlook the fact that the press has held a manuscript for an inordinate amount of time before deciding to accept or reject it, or that the script is turned down even with favorable recommendations.

Representation of non-tenured faculty on advisory boards, though perhaps not as effective a means of rectifying the situation as changing tenure requirements or rules against multiple submission, still should be considered if for no other reason than it adds a different perspective to the process. The presence of junior faculty on press boards could serve as a "check" against underrepresentation in certain fields, delays in decision-making, and inconsistent policies or actions the press might undertake. From a general standpoint, the notion of "checks" on university presses is intriguing because, for the most part, few presses are subject to the kind of thorough internal and external evaluations that faculty and departments face. This fact is especially curious given that the vast majority

of university presses are in one way or another subsidized by the parent institution. Currently, the assessment of a press's performance comes in the form of book reviews of its titles. I would argue that this is not enough. The institutional role of the press needs to be brought back into focus as means of evaluating the press's function within university and academic circles. In many instances, university presses, though established by and for the academic institutions themselves, remain relatively independent with respect to the overall structure and administration of the university. As a result, many university presses, while in theory accountable to either Provosts' or Vice-Chancellors' Offices for Research, enjoy significant autonomy compared to their colleagues among the faculty or administration. In theory, the press advisory board (or faculty editorial committee) can assume some authority over the press, but in practice, many boards choose not to exercise this option to an appreciable extent. What I propose are biennial or quadrennial assessments, both internal and external, of the press's mission statement, its editorial policy, and its treatment of authors (why not draw up an evaluation form authors could fill out after having dealt with a press?). Measures of this nature could be implemented so as to shift emphasis, at least momentarily, from the bottom line. In so doing, more attention can be paid to how the press serves the intellectual interests of the university and of academe in general.

If university administrations cannot or will not require presses to renew, in some form, that aspect of their original mission to publish books primarily intended for limited, academic audiences, then these governing bodies should show flexibility in providing funds to small, start-up publishing outlets whose interests center on specialized journals and monographs in the humanities. Such venues already exist, and have proven quite successful in attracting excellent scripts. Nonetheless, many are privately financed and operate on precarious budgets. Institutional backing would enable these independent publishers to establish their presence in the field without fear of insolvency. In turn, the university could benefit from its association with an innovative press that signs fresh and thought-provoking authors in traditional fields. Initiative of this nature needs to be encouraged and rewarded given the problematic nature of placing manuscripts through conventional means. Of the suggestions outlined, this latter option seems the most promising in that it bypasses many of the bureaucratic and political obstacles that often come with submission to university presses. Frequently, these smaller ventures require large subventions, but their criteria for acceptance are almost exclusively academic in orientation. Consequently, editorial policy is often more focused and more consistent than is sometimes the case with university presses, lending the impression that decisions are made on intellectual merit alone.

The *Times* article does mention electronic texts as a potential solution to the problem, and while it would be unwise to dismiss this possibility, the central problem of Internet posting remains that of outside evaluation to determine what should or should not appear in public form. Online journals have made impressive strides in this area, and perhaps, over time, monographs could find in them a model. At present, however, standardized selection criteria for book-length studies do not exist for the most part, rendering the results of electronic publishing dubious, especially where tenure is concerned.

Lastly, it is incumbent upon professional organizations such as the MLA (national and regional), the AHA, and the AAUP (both the American Association of University Professors and the Association of American University Presses) to take up this issue and formulate their own response. These associations should sponsor conference sessions that bring together publishers, scholars, and administrators to discuss the situation in an open and constructive manner. The barriers are by no means insurmountable, but those who run academe must take more active measures to derive some consensus as to how tenure expectations, editorial policies, and the rights of authors should coalesce to benefit the entire profession by promoting worthy scholarship.

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Note

1. While in this article I will cite directly only one of Professor Shapiro's essays on this subject, I do wish to mention his numerous contributions in the *Chronicle* dealing with the current state of research and publishing. The reader will note the following pieces: "'Books in Chains': Are Borders and Barnes & Noble Saviors or Adversaries of Academic Publications?" 20 Dec. 1996: B8, "How Faculty Boards Serve University Presses," 4 Apr. 1997: B7, "University Presses Shouldn't Emulate Commercial Publishers," 8 Aug. 1997: B7, "University Libraries: The 7-Percent Solution," 12 Dec. 1997: B4-5, "There Has to Be an Easier Way to Find Worthy Scholarly Books," 30 Jan. 1998, "Books on Demand: What's Beyond the First Impression," 17 July 1998: B8, and "Wariness Greets the Latest Round in the Publishing Wars," 27 Nov. 1998: B 10.

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