A FORGOTTEN ARTIST:  
JOHN HARRIS AND THE RYLANDS COPY OF  
CAXTON'S EDITION OF MALORY  

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AMONG the treasures in the John Rylands Library one of the finest is the copy of Sir Thomas Malory’s “Book of King Arthur and his noble knights”, printed by William Caxton at Westminster under the title of Le Morte Darthur in July 1485. This is one of only two extant copies of Caxton’s edition of Malory and it was part of the Spencer Library which Mrs. Rylands purchased in 1892. The other copy has been in America since 1885 and now rests in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City. The Morgan copy is complete and perfect but for the flyleaf, while the Rylands copy lacks eleven leaves.1 These were replaced, soon after Earl Spencer acquired the volume, with artistically flawless facsimiles, virtually indistinguishable in appearance from the originals but marred by over seventy deviations from Caxton’s spelling and punctuation. Their imperfections would have mattered little but for two important facts in the history of the text: the removal of the only perfect copy from the British Isles by Mr. and Mrs. Norton Q. Pope of Brooklyn, New York in 1885, and the appearance in 1889 of H. Oskar Sommer’s monumental reprint of the Caxton Malory based exclusively on the Rylands (then Spencer) copy. Sommer copied the facsimiles without emendation,2 and the resulting text became

1 Namely, Sigs. li, rvii, rviii, Nii, Nvii, Tiii, Tv, eeiii-vi.

2 H. Oskar Sommer, ed., Le Morte Darthur, by Syr Thomas Malory (London, 1889). Sommer indicated the facsimile leaves by placing an asterisk (*) after the page and folio numbers. The perfect copy, in private hands in the United States, was collated for Sommer with the facsimiles and in his second volume (1890) he included the “Result of the Collation of Whittaker’s Facsimiles with the Original Pages” (ii. 26-28). Here Sommer lists most, but not all, of the facsimile errors and includes a few additional errors discovered by Sir Edward Strachey. Such an arrangement is clearly awkward and Sommer’s text would have been much closer to the perfection he sought if he had printed the original Caxton rather than the facsimile leaves where the Spencer copy was wanting. Until some twenty years ago, when the Rylands Library acquired a photostat of the Pierpont Morgan copy, there was no complete record in England of the missing pages other than the facsimiles in the Rylands copy.

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the basis for almost every modern reprint of *Le Morte Darthur*. The discovery of the Winchester manuscript in 1934 provided a text of Malory free from Caxton's alterations for Sigs. avi-eeii but not for Sigs. eeiii-vi at the end of the book for which the Pierpont Morgan copy is still the only authority.

Many of the facsimile errors preserved by Sommer may still be found in modern reprints based on Caxton's text.¹ Some of these errors in the portion of the text not corrected by the Winchester manuscript are by no means inconsequential. While the facsimilist occasionally corrects mistakes in Caxton, copying *Launcelot* for *Lanacelot* and repairing the turned letter in *qnyre* (eev), he more often transmits his own mistakes. Proper names are garbled as *Clartus* and *Clarras* are copied for *Clarrus* (eev* and eeiii*), *Bleoheris* for *Bleoberis* (eeiii*), *Gohaleaniyne* for *Gahallantyne* (eeiii*), and *Wyllyats de balyaunt* for *Wyllyars de valyaunt* (eev*). Meaning is blurred in phrases such as these in which mistakes occur: “*on fore* they yede from Glastynburye to Almysburye” for “*on fote* they yede . . .” (eeiii*) and “*thou were* the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the *breste*” for “*... ever put spere in the reeste*” (eev*). The most striking error occurs at the beginning of Malory's colophon which correctly reads (see plate):

Here is the ende of the hoole book of kyng Arthur & of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table/ that when they were hole togyders there was euer an c and xl and here is the ende of the deth of Arthur (eev*-vi)

Sommer follows the facsimile and renders “*the hoole book*” as “*the booke book*” which later editors interpret simply as “*the book*”, thus clouding the vital distinction between Malory's separate tales such as *The Death of Arthur* and “*the whole Book of King Arthur and his Noble Knights of the Round Table*”.²

In view of the part played by these facsimiles in the establishment of the Malory canon it seems appropriate to inquire further into their origin and authorship. Lord Spencer purchased the imperfect Caxton for £320 at the sale of the John Lloyd library in January 1816. This sale was enthusiastically reported by T.

¹ The Everyman Edition is but one example.

F. Dibdin, librarian at Althorp, the Spencer seat, and self-styled bibliomaniac, in the third volume of his *Bibliographical Decameron*.\(^1\) A few years earlier, under the patronage of Lord Spencer, Dibdin had produced the magnificent four-volume *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, describing in minute detail and with copious illustration the many precious volumes of the Spencer Library (which has since become part of the Rylands collection). Dibdin expanded his treatment of Althorp with two additional volumes, one entitled *Aedes Althorpianae* and the second *Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana* (1822). In this supplement Dibdin gave a full account of the Caxton edition of Malory for the first time and indicated that the missing leaves had been replaced with facsimiles:

By the aid of the incomparable skill of Mr. Whittaker, (who has supplied eleven leaves from the well known perfect copy in the Osterley library) the present volume has been perfected in the most desirable manner.\(^2\)

Thus Dibdin assigned the facsimiles to a Mr. Whittaker, and ever since that time every subsequent critic has adopted his attribution. What none of them has noticed is that Whittaker is not the only artist that Dibdin credits with the Malory facsimiles. In 1836, looking back at his bibliographical fame, Dibdin wrote his *Reminiscences* in which he recalled the purchase of the Caxton Malory twenty years earlier:

\[£320\] was a frightfully disproportionate sum; for an hiatus of eleven leaves, although now supplied by the unrivalled skill of Mr. Harris, is still a huge hiatus; nor could that supply have been yielded under an additional sum of fifty pounds sterling.\(^3\)

With no admission of contradiction, Dibdin assigns the Malory facsimiles to a Mr. Harris and the "incomparable skill of Mr. Whittaker" becomes the "unrivalled skill of Mr. Harris". Any attempt to clarify this paradox requires identification of both Mr. Whittaker and Mr. Harris as well as a closer investigation of bibliographer Dibdin himself.

Thomas Frognall Dibdin was a fascinating character. He

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did as much as any man to create and sustain the wave of enthusiasm for bibliography and book collecting which swept Great Britain during the early decades of the nineteenth century. As great personal libraries were amassed and countless precious examples of incunabula rescued from oblivion, he rode this wave to its crest, acting as the self-appointed chronicler of the age of "bibliomania". His slim volume of that name, which appeared in 1809, gave expression to the bibliographical spirit of the times. Greatly enlarged editions were published during the next forty years and continued to be published well after the author's death. Dibdin's stature as a bibliographer was enhanced by his projected revision and enlargement of The Typographical Antiquities of Great Britain, the first volume of which reached subscribers in 1810. Volumes appeared in 1812, 1816, and 1819, but Dibdin was forced to abandon the project short of his anticipated ten volumes for want of sponsors. The expanded Bibliotheca Spenceriana (7 volumes, 1814-23), the Bibliographical Decameron (3 volumes, 1817), and the Bibliographical, Antiquarian, and Picturesque Tour in France and Germany (3 volumes, 1821) followed in quick succession, and, as later observers noted, Dibdin was said to "bestride the whole literary world like a Colossus". Dibdin demanded a high quality of workmanship from his printers and his volumes are excellent examples of the typographical art of his day, richly embellished with engravings, illustrations, and facsimiles. These works established Dibdin as the prime bibliographical authority of his time. The following judgement of the Bibliotheca Spenceriana from Lowndes' Bibliographer's Manual of 1834 is typical of the contemporary estimation of Dibdin's work:

It is compiled with the greatest care and industry, and those who have had occasion to consult its pages, can testify to its accuracy and great utility.

Thus Dibdin's work was constantly referred to by later writers and his observations were cited rather than investigated.

Yet Dibdin outlived the bibliographical enthusiasm he helped

to bring about, and succeeding generations uncovered his weaknesses. It is now clear that Dibdin lacked the training, judgment, and temperament needed to achieve the tasks he undertook. For all their unimpeachable appearance, his stately bibliographical tomes are examples of inaccuracy, misstatement, and faulty discernment. William Jackson, the most recent bibliographer to examine Dibdin's work, concludes that he was "the most exasperating of bibliographers—hardly a statement he makes can be accepted without checking". Today, Dibdin's volumes are consulted for their typographical beauty and ample supply of literary anecdotes rather than for the bibliographical details on which he laboured so long and which were so respected by his contemporaries.

Dibdin credits two Caxton fascimiles to Whittaker in the Bibliotheca Spenceriana and in his Bibliographical Decameron he writes at length about the "modest, unassuming, indefatigable, and singularly-successful artist", John Whittaker. Whittaker's process for producing facsimiles is outlined; it depended largely on complete fonts of facsimile type of Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, and other early printers. Dibdin writes:

He has caused to be engraved, or cut, at a great expense, four founts of Caxton's letter. These are cut in the manner of binder's tools for lettering, and each letter is separately charged with ink, and separately impressed upon the paper. Dibdin then quotes the facsimile procedure in Whittaker's own words:

A tracing being taken with the greatest precision from the original leaf, on white tracing paper, it is then laid on the leaf (first prepared to match the book it is intended for) with a piece of blacked paper between the two. Then, by a point passing round the sides of each letter, a true impression is given from the black paper, upon the leaf beneath. The types are next stamped on singly, being charged with old printing ink, prepared in colour exactly to match each distinct book.

Dibdin also speaks of Whittaker as a skilled bookbinder and as

2 Dibdin, Bibliotheca Spenceriana (London, 1814-15), iv. 189 and 288. The volumes are The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye and Chaucer's The Tales of Canterbury (1st edn.).
3 Dibdin, Decameron, ii. 414.
4 Ibid. ii. 415.
the inventor of a process for printing in gold. Indeed, Dibdin includes in every copy of his *Decameron* a three-line specimen of Whittaker's gold printing, supplied "gratuitously". The enthusiastic author is obviously impressed with this new printing process and he glowingly describes the sole work so printed by Whittaker, an elegant edition of Magna Charta. Printed in gold on heavy paper, vellum, or satin, often with a ground of purple, and adorned with illuminations, the edition was presented to the King and some less illustrious book collectors. Dibdin himself received a copy on vellum.

As was to be expected, much of what was said afterwards about John Whittaker was based on Dibdin's extended account of him, and little notice was taken of contemporary references which were independent of Dibdin. As a bookbinder, Whittaker is listed in various London directories between 1809 and 1832 and he is credited with developing the Etruscan style of binding by John Hannett in *Bibliopegia* (1835):

> The Marquis of Bath possesses a copy of "*Caxton's Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*", bound in this coloured manner by Whittaker, of London, who some years ago brought the style to considerable perfection.

The same author mentions Whittaker again two years later as the inventor of the Etruscan style as well as "the restorer of deficient portions of works printed by Caxton, &c. by the use of brass type". Whittaker is also recognized as the inventor of printing

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3 John Andrews Arnett [i.e. John Hannett], *Bibliopegia; or, the Art of Bookbinding* (London, 1835), p. 98.

4 [Hannett], *An Inquiry into the Nature and Form of the Books of the Ancients* (London, 1837), pp. 155 and 190. T. W. Hanson in *Book Handbook*, No. 6 (1948), pp. 332-4 argues that the Edwards family of Halifax deserves credit for the Etruscan style. Yet he seems unaware of Hannett's account that "a style called the Etruscan was also invented by Mr. John Whittaker, and successfully practised by him... Messrs. Edwards, booksellers of Halifax, in Yorkshire, successfully pursued this branch, and several bindings of theirs exhibit borders of Greek and Etruscan vases, executed in a superior manner" (pp. 155-6).
a goodly friday for goddes sake / Here is the end of the booke

book of kyng? Arthur c of his noble kynges of the rounde table/that Whan they thare hole kynges there was ever an T andy ye/and yere is the end of the boke of Arthur /I pray you all jentyl men and jentyl wyrmemen that wath this booke of Arthur and his kynges from the begynnynge to the en yng / praye for me whyle I am on lyue that god dy whan I am deede I praye you all praye for my soule/for this boke was ended the yeere of the rygne of kyng edward the fourth/hys syr Thomas Malore kynghe as jhesu helpe hym for hys great myghte/as he is the servaunt of jhesu bothe day and nyght /

Malory's colophon as printed by Caxton (last line of Sig. eev  and top of Sig. eevi). (By courtesy of The Pierpont Morgan Library).

The same passage in facsimile. (By courtesy of The John Rylands Library).
in gold letters in Horne's *Introduction to the Study of Bibliography* (1814) where pre-publication specimens of the Magna Charta which Dibdin praises are described, and while Whittaker is referred to as "an ingenious bookbinder" no mention of his facsimile production is made.\(^1\) Ten years later, Whittaker was again printing in gold, and Johnson’s *Typographia* (1824) refers to "a most singularly splendid work in letters of gold, of the august Ceremonial of the Coronation of his most gracious Majesty, George the Fourth"\(^2\) which put severe strain on Whittaker's press. By 1839, when Charles Henry Timperley compiled his *Dictionary of Printers and Printing* from various earlier writings, Whittaker is referred to as "the late Mr. John Whittaker, an ingenious and eminent bookbinder of Queen-street, Westminster".\(^3\) Timperley lists 1812 as the date of the invention of printing in gold and he mentions no other works besides the Magna Charta and the Ceremonial of Coronation as products of that process. Timperley’s account is based directly on earlier writings and adds nothing concerning Whittaker. From the limited contemporary account of Whittaker that exists, he appears to have been a most creative and ingenious printer and bookbinder with an interest in the unusual, and a high degree of skill in both the crafts of printing and bookbinding. He does not, however, emerge as a unique and unrivalled facsimile artist of the stature required to produce the facsimiles in the Spencer copy of Caxton’s Malory. It seems reasonable, therefore, to consider the claims of the other candidate mentioned by Dibdin, Mr. Harris.

Dibdin mentions Harris for the first time in the 1822 *Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, the same volume in which Caxton’s edition of Malory is described. Harris is credited with reproducing two leaves of the first Hebrew Pentateuch\(^4\) and in 1836, in Dibdin’s *Reminiscences*, with at least three other facsimiles.\(^5\) But while Dibdin does little more than mention Harris’s name, his life and career can be pieced together from other

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\(^3\) Timperley, p. 844.
\(^5\) Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, i. 354, 497; ii. 956.
sources. John Harris was born in 1791 and was named after his father, a painter of recognized talent, who was regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy during his son's early years. The younger Harris showed artistic talent at an early age and when he was nineteen, in 1810, also exhibited at the Royal Academy. In the following year he became a student there and specialized in portraits in miniature, but soon developed an interest in producing facsimiles of early typography and woodcuts. About the time of his marriage in 1820 he was on the staff of the British Museum where his facsimile skill became almost legendary. Robert Cowtan, a personal friend of his, writes in his Memories of the British Museum published in 1872:

Mr. Harris is not so much distinguished as an artist as he is famous for his wonderful fac-simile reproductions of early wood-engraving and block-printing to supply deficiencies in imperfect books. In this curious art he is probably unrivalled, and the specimens that he has produced after Faust, Schoeffer, Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, Pynson, and other early printers, are marvellous and unique. Some of the handsomest and rarest volumes in the libraries of Lord Spencer, Mr. Grenville, the British Museum, and other collections, have been made complete by the "cunning" of his "right hand"; and some of the leaves that he has supplied are so perfectly done that, after a few years, he has himself been puzzled to distinguish his own work from the original, so perfect has the fac-simile been, both in paper and typography.

Cowtan also gives some interesting information concerning Harris's activities between the years 1816 and 1822 when the facsimiles of the Caxton Malory were produced. He relates that Harris executed the principal illustrations to the Bibliotheca

1 The fullest modern account of Harris is given in The Times Literary Supplement, 23 January 1919, p. 48. The author of this article is identified as William Roberts by Arundell Esdaile in The British Museum Library (London, 1946), p. 77. The D.N.B. fails to distinguish between Harris and his father who died in 1834 (see Notes and Queries, iv (1851), 330.) While Harris's conventional artistic activities are beyond the scope of the present paper, it should be noted that there was yet another artist named John Harris of the same period who may be confused with the facsimilist or with his father. This artist was primarily an engraver best known for his prints of sporting subjects and military and naval views. See J[ohn] Herbert Slater, The Bookman's Journal and Print Collector, ii (1920), 340 and 355, and Engravings and their Value, 6th edn. revised by F. W. Maxwell-Barbour (London, [1929]), pp. 371-3.


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Sussexiana (1827) and Dibdin's own Bibliotheca Spenceriana (1814-15). Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, librarian to the Duke of Sussex, acknowledges that "the correct lithographic delineations and fac-similes of early typography" were "by Mr. Harris", but Dibdin makes no such acknowledgement.\(^1\)

Another project of Harris's of the same period will bring the three main figures of this paper together. As mentioned above, Dibdin gave several full descriptions of the handsome Magna Carta printed in gold by Whittaker. He attributed the illuminations to Richard Thomson,\(^2\) but Thomson was an antiquarian, not an artist. In his own book on Magna Carta, Thomson acknowledges responsibility for the introduction and essays which were part of Whittaker's publication, but the illuminations were the work of someone else.\(^3\) The question of the responsibility for the art work in Whittaker's Magna Carta is answered by a statement which is part of the copy of that work in the British Museum (C. 23e. 5):

The greater Part of the Illuminations Illustrating some of the Pages of this Vol. of Magna Carta were Designed and executed by Me. . . .

John Harris, Artist
Writer of fac-similes to supply deficiency's [sic] to Caxton & June, 1849
other Early Printers &c—

Moreover, Harris's unique skill as a facsimilist can be seen in Pettigrew's account of an early Latin Bible in the Royal library, which was perfected and illustrated by "an ingenious artist" whom he identifies as "Mr. Harris, whose skill in repairing MSS. and early printed works is not equalled by any one of the present day".\(^4\) For the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851 Harris prepared an exhibit of his facsimile skills which earned him an honourable mention, and he supplied the judging body of the

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\(^1\) Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, Bibliotheca Sussexiana, vol. i, pt. i (London, 1827), 10. Dibdin himself claims responsibility for "the whole of the fac-similes in the first volume, and the greater number of those in the second volume" (Bibl. Spenc., i. pp. iii-iv). If Harris was employed by Dibdin in these early years, the bibliographer makes no mention of it.

\(^2\) Dibdin, Aed. Alth., p. 207.


Exhibition with a short account of his technique and its history. Harris was indeed employed on the Magna Charta produced by Whittaker, and he outlined for the jury Whittaker's method of printing in gold. Of greater interest is the artist's description of his career as a facsimilist:

It was about the year 1815 that I was first employed by the late Mr. John Whittaker, of Westminster, an eminent bookbinder at that period; and I believe the idea of having ancient books of the early printers, &c., perfected by fac-similes, was first suggested to him by the late Earl Spencer, for whom many books were so done; and numerous specimens are preserved of some of the rarest productions of the press in the library at Althorpe. . . . I continued to work for Mr. Whittaker till about 1820, when I was sent for by Lord Spencer, for whom I completed a Pentateuch in Hebrew and Chaldee, and several other works.

Harris speaks of other famous collectors who employed him and then he gives the following account of his early technique:

I made an accurate tracing from the original leaf, and afterwards retraced it on to the inlaid leaf by means of a paper blacked on one side; this produced an outline lettered page, which, by being gone over carefully and imitating the original, produced the desired leaf. This process was found to take up much time, and was consequently expensive, but it was the method I adopted while employed by Mr. Whittaker; and he, to carry out the deception still further, had two sets of tools cut of the large and small letters generally used by Caxton, with which he has often been at the trouble to go over the pages after my work was done, to give the appearance of the indentation of type.

This description coincides with Whittaker's account of the same process up to the preparation of the "outline lettered page"; but from that point onwards Whittaker's method is clearly a printer's invention depending on separate fonts of specially cut type. Yet such early type was quite irregular and unruly, with scores of characters used for the same letters or ligatures. William Blades, for example, has identified well over 400 separate pieces of type used by Caxton alone. If Whittaker had reproduced Wynkyn de Worde, Pynson, Fust and Schoeffer, and others as well, in this way, the necessary amount of facsimile type would have been overwhelming. Whittaker may indeed have produced some facsimiles with this crude method; with Harris's artistic

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1 Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851, Reports by the Juries on the Subjects in the Thirty Classes into which the Exhibition was Divided (London, 1852), pp. 403-5.
2 See above, p. 119.
skills, however, the "outline lettered page" could be filled in exactly and a single font of facsimile type could then be used to produce a slight indentation in the page and thus complete the perfect duplication of the original. This would suggest that John Harris was the facsimile artist responsible for the typographical facsimiles attributed to John Whittaker after 1815. It would also explain why Dibdin gives credit to Harris by name for the facsimiles in a Hebrew Pentateuch while attributing in the same volume the Malory facsimiles to Whittaker. The Pentateuch was printed in two different and distinctive Hebrew fonts and if Whittaker had undertaken to replace the two missing leaves by the use of his method, the expense of having the fonts cut for him would have been out of all proportion to the size of the project. So Harris the artist had to be sent for to make the facsimiles, and Dibdin described his work as follows:

These imperfections were supplied by Mr. Harris, chiefly with a camel-hair pencil, upon vellum, of corresponding colour and quality, and in a manner so completely satisfactory, as almost to deceive the most experienced eye. Perhaps Dibdin did not know that Harris was using this method on the Caxton facsimiles which were ascribed to Whittaker. Or perhaps he was so impressed with Whittaker's reputation and generosity that he chose to ignore his talented employee.

The omission can now be remedied in the light of what we know of Harris's career. He was married on 13 February 1820 and his independent work for Earl Spencer in that year may have given him the idea of leaving Whittaker's employment to find work on his own. So around 1820 he left Whittaker and found other employment as a facsimilist. As noted earlier, among Harris's earliest clients were Earl Spencer and Thomas Grenville. A typical entry in the Grenville library catalogue reads,

Twenty-one leaves [of Caxton's 1482 edition of The Canterbury Tales] have been admirably supplied in fac-simile by Harris, who has likewise perfected Lord Spencer's copy.

About 1820 Harris also began his association with the British

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Museum, where his facsimile skills were applied for over thirty years. Cowtan relates an anecdote in which the three outstanding Museum librarians Antonio Panizzi, John Winter Jones, and Thomas Watts were at a loss to identify the facsimiles in a rare volume. Harris himself was finally summoned and only with considerable effort could the artist detect his own work. This led Panizzi, the Principal Librarian, to obtain an order from the Trustees that all facsimile additions made to a book be marked at the bottom of the page. He himself adopted the formula

This is by J. H.—A. P.

on all Harris facsimiles.\(^1\) Panizzi thought highly of Harris and his skills, styling him "l'incomparabile Harris ". The following appraisal was written by Panizzi in his introduction to Lord Vernon's parallel reprint of the first four editions of *La Divina Commedia*. Recalling the acquisition of the Jesi edition, he notes:

Era mancante delle sei carte 205\(^{a}\) 206\(^{a}\) 214\(^{a}\) 215\(^{a}\) 216\(^{a}\) e 217\(^{ma}\) che feci rifare a mano sull' esemplare di Lord Spencer dall' inarrivabile Harris, il quale in tal lavoro sorpassò se medesimo.\(^2\)

Harris's clients included most of the major collectors in England as well as the leading dealers in rare books. Even King George III, an avid collector, used Harris's talents. Years later Harris was still the interest of royalty, as seen by this letter written by the Duke of Sussex recommending Harris to the Prince Consort.\(^3\)

The bearer of these lines is Mr. Harris, a very ingenious man, who repairs manuscripts and imitates old books in a way quite surprising, so as to make it impossible to observe them from the original. Should Prince Albert want his services, I can strongly recommend him to his attention and protection, having experienced much advantage from his services in my library.

Truly yours,

Augustus Frederick.

Kensington Palace,
September 19, 1841.

Harris's skills as a facsimile artist seem to have brought him


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generous compensation. A letter to Lord Leicester's librarian at Holkham describes Harris's prices as high and recommends a lesser facsimilist for volumes of secondary importance.\(^1\) Cowtan reports that Harris once received £12 for one folio leaf for which no perfect copy existed as a model and John Dunn Gardner paid Harris the amazing sum of £15 15s. for a single leaf of Caxton's *Golden Legend* which contained a large wood engraving.\(^2\) Panizzi's early biographer relates that Lord Grenville once had Harris supply facsimiles of a few missing leaves of a rare book and then presented the artist with the volume after showing it off to connoisseurs.\(^3\) Dibdin's estimate of "fifty pounds sterling" for the eleven facsimile leaves of the Caxton Malory does not then seem excessive.

John Harris's unique talents did not, however, bring him wealth. In 1858, through the advertisement columns of *Notes and Queries*, the literary world was acquainted with "The Case of Mr. John Harris, the Eminent Artist in Facsimiles". The column gives a little of Harris's background and then reveals his current situation.

Mr. Harris... gave his whole attention to the imitation, by Facsimile, of the various forms of early typography and its woodcut illustrations... For nearly forty years he has devoted his talents and energies to this art, which he made peculiarly his own; and there are few important Libraries in Great Britain or in America that do not possess specimens of his unrivalled skill. The consequence, however, of a close application, for so long a period, has been a gradual decay, and, latterly, a total loss of sight; and although his labours have imparted permanent value to numerous books of the greatest importance and rarity, they have unfortunately never enabled him to provide for misfortune or old age, and now, at the age of sixty-six, he is deprived of the only means he possessed of supporting himself and an invalid wife.\(^4\)

The advertisement was placed by friends of Harris with the object of raising a small annuity for his future support. Among the original subscribers were many men who made use of Harris's skills—Panizzi, Jones, and Watts from the British Museum,

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4 *Notes and Queries*, 2nd ser., v (1858), 180.
booksellers Payne, Foss, and Murray, and private collectors Henry Huth, Lord Lindsay, and quite fittingly Earl Spencer. The plea for funds must have had some success, and Harris lived the last years of his life in the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution for Aged Freemasons and their Widows at Croydon, Surrey. Although his sight was gone, Harris’s mind remained active and he was able to write poetry to celebrate his fiftieth wedding anniversary (1870) and compose, in his eightieth year, “Lines on the Royal Masonic Institution” (1871) which were sold to raise money for the Freemasons’ Life Boat fund. He died on 28 December 1873 at the age of 82.

As a facsimile artist John Harris was unique; no one else approached his skills in duplicating early typography and woodcuts. That he is responsible for the facsimiles in the Caxton Malory now in the Rylands Library there can be little doubt. Whether or not Dibdin was aware of his error when he assigned these facsimiles to John Whittaker in 1822, he corrected his mistake fourteen years later. Unfortunately, his mistaken attribution occurred in one of the finest personal library catalogues ever compiled, while his correction was buried in a footnote in his eccentric autobiography. The former was revered and consulted, while the latter was ignored and forgotten, with the result that the initial error has remained uncorrected to this day.

Under other circumstances typographical facsimiles such as those added to the Spencer copy of Malory might have little intrinsic interest. Being additions made by collectors and dealers to improve the appearance and value of imperfect volumes, they might be of no more concern to a scholar than a fancy binding. What is so important in the case of the Caxton edition of Malory is that the error-filled facsimiles reproduced “letter for letter” by Sommer were treated for over half a century as the only true record of the original text. Their importance has grown through the years, and it is only fitting that the proper artist receive both the credit for his uncanny skill in reproducing Caxton’s typography and the censure for his deviations from the text.