Robert Darnton’s identification of a ‘typographical consciousness’ in his landmark essay comes out of the observation that eighteenth-century book advertisements and prospectuses tended to include remarkably detailed information about typeface, paper, and other material features of the books being promoted.¹ So, for example, the prospectus for an eighteenth-century edition of a sixteenth-century French text on the customs of the province of Angoumois names the different typefaces used respectively for the text, summaries, and commentary, as well as noting the source of the superior paper used in the printing. By the early nineteenth century, when bibliographical information had become somewhat more standard, such a degree of specificity was more rare if still to be encountered, but the typographical consciousness noted by Darnton remained very much in play. Indeed it may be said to have intensified, fuelled both by the increased presence of printed matter in everyday life and by high-profile bookish practices such as the bibliomania. Moreover, as Jon Klancher’s work has shown, typography achieved ‘a strangely exalted sense’ around 1800 when the...
term broadened to include much more than the visual look of the page, encompassing both the entire physical form of the book and the history of printing’s invention, development, and dispersion. Under this extended definition typography was understood as a key to the history of the modern mind, and claimed a prominent place in the reconfigured field of knowledge effected by the reshuffling of the ‘arts and sciences’. As his primary example of this ambitious inflection Klancher turns to Thomas Frogналl Dibdin, who confidently proclaimed in his edition of Joseph Ames’s Typographical Antiquities that ‘[t]he History of Books is the history of human knowledge.’ In a telling conjunction, however, this sweeping intellectual claim appears in the lowly workaday genre of printing history, a genre lying outside the parameters of literary culture. As Adrian Johns points out, the history of the printing press was largely written by ‘printers, booksellers, and hacks, by antiquarians and amateurs’.

For all his mingling among the upper classes and their rare books, Dibdin’s career as bibliographical author, book designer, and book producer was importantly rooted in this genre from the fringes of the literary sphere. While his education and status as a clergyman allowed him to plant one foot in the world of letters and learning, his other foot was firmly planted in the printing house. Dibdin’s ‘true religion’, Philip Connell astutely remarks, was ‘the printed word’ (original emphasis).

Even as this set to print nourished the bibliographical turn that aligns him with the emergent object-based knowledge discipline coalescing around early printed books in this period, it also generated a distinctive type of book. The Dibdinian book, as epitomized in the Bibliographical Decameron he considered his finest production, is the focus of this chapter. Shaped by Dibdin’s enduring investment in the history of printers and printing, his books as material objects reflect the intensified typographical consciousness symptomatic of the juncture effected by Romantic bibliomania between the bibliophile’s library and the printer’s workshop. More particularly, in approaching typography as an art of performance, they introduced into the reading landscape of the early nineteenth century a form of book-experience that cut against prevailing protocols of authorship and reading.

Printing history remains a little-known genre in literary studies, and a brief turn to Joseph Ames’s Typographical Antiquities (1749) will help to set the context for Dibdin’s book-projects. A catalogue of early English printed books, Typographical Antiquities is a pioneering work of English historical bibliography, but it also proved foundational in a more material sense as a book that became the ground of later books. In 1785–90