ENGL 666—Histories of the Book

Spring, 2016       Craig Kallendorf
TR, 12:45-2 pm      Todd Samuelson

ENGL 666 focuses on the physical book as a carrier of literary and cultural meaning. It is designed to provoke students of English and American literature, historians, and librarians into looking at the books they read rather than through them, to see the physical form of a book as a carrier of meaning along with the text. The course will have three components: 1) History. We will look at the production, distribution, and consumption of ‘books’, beginning with cuneiform tablets in ancient Mesopotamia, proceeding through manuscripts and printed books, and concluding with computer-driven texts. We shall focus our attentions on the history of textual production, not as an end in itself, but as a way to begin discussions on topics like the dissemination of texts and the scientific revolution from new and different perspectives. 2) Theory. Attention will be paid to the intersections of book history and literary/cultural theory, in such areas as reception theory and the ‘book as body’, to show how book history can illuminate research in areas like class and gender that are also at the center of literary and historical studies today. 3) Practice. With the assistance of Dr. Todd Samuelson, curator of rare books at the Cushing Library, we shall spend at least one full session making paper, setting type, printing on a hand press, and binding a small pamphlet. Parts of many other sessions will also be held in the Cushing, where we will use the library’s holdings to illustrate what we have been reading about. Special attention will be paid to the Dawson Collection, a newly acquired repository in the Cushing Library that contains some 10,000 books and manuscripts ranging from the Middle Ages to the present.