The Bard, the Bible and Book Formats
Smaller Books and Reading Habits in Early Modern Europe

Introduction
The eighteenth century entailed a change in printing, reading and writing books. Book sizes became smaller and the public gradually switched from reading a few key works (such as the Bible) repeatedly to reading extensive amounts of literature. An anonymous observation from Paris in the 1790s (cited from Reinhard Wittman) concluded that:

“Everyone, but women in particular, is carrying a book around in their pocket. People read while riding in carriages or taking walks; they read at the theatre during the interval, in cafés, even when bathing.”

Research questions
● How popular were large and small book formats?
● For which books, when and where did book formats change?

Historical records suggest that the size of books made a difference in how books were read and distributed:

Small books could be easily transported, carried in a pocket to places where individuals could read in solitude.
Large books were appropriate for reading out loud to an audience and for marking prestige.

Materials and methods
Data:
● Finnish National Bibliography (FNB)
● Swedish National Bibliographies (SNB)
● English Short-Title Catalogue (ESTC)
● Heritage of the Printed Book database (HPBD), which is a compilation of 45 smaller, mostly national, bibliographies, and is more uneven than the others

The bibliographies:
● Cover 2.64 million entries from the investigated period
● Provide good coverage of the publication record
● Include information on authors, titles, publishers, languages, publication places, publication years, book formats and other features of printed documents

Methods:
● Extensive harmonization of selected metadata fields
● Custom data science workflows in R and Python

Size matters, or at least the authors thought so...
From the early eighteenth century book formats already carried cultural connotations with regard to prestige and status. In a satirical text Joseph Addison (The Spectator, 6 November 1712) described authors of books in different formats (and sizes):

“I have observed that the Author of a Folio, in all Companies and Conversations, sets himself above the Author of a Quarto; the Author of a Quarto above the Author of an Octavo; and so on, by a gradual Descent and Subordination, to an Author in Twenty Fours. This Distinction is so well observed, that in an Assembly of the Learned, I have seen a Folio Writer place himself in an Elbow-Chair, when the Author of a Duo-decimo has, out of a just Deference to his superior Quality, seated himself upon a Squabb. In a word, Authors are usually ranged in Company after the same manner as their Works are upon a Shelf.”

…but the share of large books declined in the eighteenth century...
A statistical analysis of changes in book formats show the increasing popularity of smaller formats in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century. The development was uneven, however, and varied according to location.

● The Swedish case (SNB) shows a rise in the production of octavo books in the second half of the eighteenth century.
● In the British case (ESTC), a similar trend occurs earlier, but there is also an increase in the duo-decimo format, indicating an overall shift towards smaller books.
● The same trend is repeated in HPBD for the whole of Europe. The trend is clearer for German than Spanish cities.

… Shakespeare was made big by small books …
While continuously published, Shakespeare’s works were printed less frequently in the mid-seventeenth century. In terms of printed books, Shakespeare’s canonization happened in the eighteenth century through smaller book formats. The year 1734 was a crucial turning point with the rivalry between the publishers Jacob Tonson the Younger and Robert Walker sparking many editions.

…& the Bible gravitated to small formats!
While the Bible was read out loud, and thus suitable to be printed in larger book formats, it nonetheless gravitated towards smaller sizes.
● Larger books dominated Bible-printing until the mid-seventeenth century when octavo and smaller sized books overtook.
● Printing and reading the Bible changed especially in the German-speaking parts of Europe, and through the hands of two publishing houses located in Halle.
● Smaller Bibles were easier to carry around and read in solitude and may have been important for a more personal religious experience.

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