



The Archeology of Texts

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Abstract

The interpretation of literary texts is at least partly a form of archeology. The history of the book has become a separate discipline because for the most part literary history has ignored it. But it cannot be ignored: books change from era to era, and any new edition of a text necessarily involves a process of translation.

Keywords: *Book History, Editing, Illustration, Typography*

Books have been, for several millennia, the material embodiment of knowledge and culture – not the only embodiment (there are works of art, architecture, diagrams, maps), but for us, an essential one for any kind of knowledge involving texts. Texts, of course, do not need to be books – they do not even need to be written. The oldest poems were composed to be recited, only written down centuries later. Cicero composed his orations in his head, and wrote them down – or more probably dictated them to a scribe – only after he had delivered them, as a way of preserving them. Most of Montaigne's essays were dictated. Throughout history authors have never written books; they have created texts, not always by writing, which were turned into books by scribes, editors, printers, publishers. These then required a distribution system, the book trade, for the books to reach purchasers and readers – the finished book in the hands of a reader is actually quite distant from the author.

When texts become books they are material objects, manufactured at a particular time and, however subsequently mediated by interpretation, embedded within that time. Literary interpretation, unless it disregards history entirely, is at least partly a form of archeology. This is the book's historicity, the way it is situated in history. The History of the Book has become a separate discipline. It had to become a separate discipline because much of the time literary history has ignored it. My essay begins with an example of how it matters. George Herbert's *The Temple* was first published in 1633 in a slim duodecimo, a tiny volume of less than 200 pages, easily slipped into a pocket or purse – a

true *vademecum*: you could always have it with you. It retained this format throughout its many seventeenth-century editions. The standard modern scholarly edition, however, the Oxford English Texts version of F.E. Hutchinson, is a massive volume of 680 pages weighing 3.3 pounds. Nowhere in the compendious commentary is it acknowledged that the work is misrepresented by the modern format, that the original book's portability, modesty and discreetness were elements of its meaning and a factor in its reception.

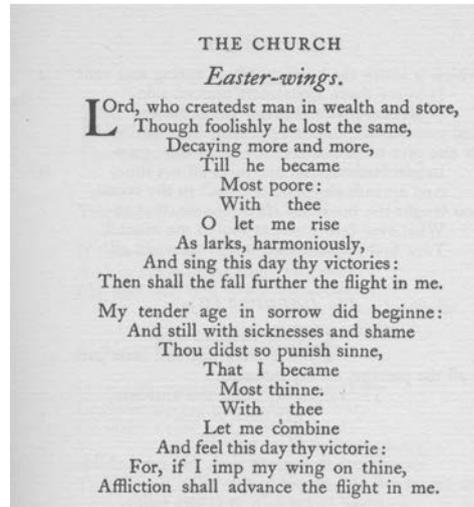


Figure 1 – George Herbert, ‘Easter Wings’ from *The Temple* in modern typography, Private Collection

The disregard of historicity extends to the editing of the modern edition. Figure 1 shows Hutchinson’s version of the poem *Easter-Wings*, which is the standard modern version. This looks quite straightforward, though the imagery evoked by the title makes more sense as it is printed in 1633 (figure 2), where it is clearly two sets of wings.

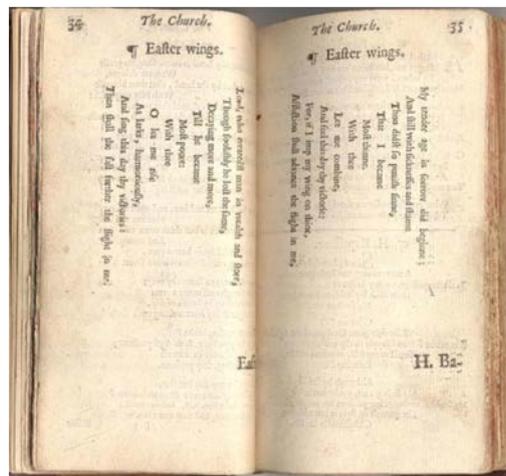


Figure 2 – George Herbert, ‘Easter Wings’ as printed in all seventeenth-century editions, Private Collection

But looking at it that way, it is not clear that we understand how to read it. If we turn the book so the text becomes legible, we see that what we assumed was the second stanza has become the first stanza. The poem makes sense this way; but do we even know that it is a two-stanza poem? Turning the book again, it looks like two separate poems, each titled *Easter-Wings*. There is no reason why this should not be the case: in the volume there are two poems called *Jordan*, three called *Love*, five called *Affliction*; and elsewhere in the book when a poem runs over onto the next page, the title is not repeated. Moreover, throughout the volume the pilcrows (the paragraph markers) are used to indicate new poems, not new stanzas. In fact, *Easter-Wings* makes sense in either order or as two separate poems. There is, however, a manuscript of *The Temple*, a scribal copy with corrections and changes in Herbert's own hand, which shows the poem – or poems – in progress, on facing pages, with many revisions: in the manuscript, it is clearly two poems with the same stanza form facing each other (Charles 1977, folia 27v, 28r).¹ Our scholarly Oxford text's typography ignores the poem's history, and simply closes down all the options embedded in that history.

How did we get from Herbert's two poems to our single poem? Why, in the preparation of the standard modern scholarly edition, was it assumed that the format was irrelevant? Presumably the vertical typography of the printed text was too playful for this scholarly edition; but is the playful format not part of the meaning? Clearly it was in London in 1633, but had ceased to be in Oxford by the mid-twentieth century. What kind of information, what range of meaning, then, do books preserve? The answer will change according to the time and place. In this particular case, the issue would have been what had to be censored out of the poem's presentation: censored is a strong word, but *Easter-Wings* has surely been deliberately misrepresented – devotional poetry is not supposed to be *fun*; neither is scholarship. Hutchinson claimed he was basing his text on the manuscript (which does not have the vertical typography), but as we have seen even this is not true: in the manuscript *Easter-Wings* is two poems, not one.²

Still, books change from era to era, and any new edition necessarily involves a process of translation. Shakespeare in the original editions has for several centuries been, for most readers, basically unreadable, and not only because of the archaic spelling, but because so much needs to be explained: we have, culturally, forgotten so much that in Shakespeare's time was common knowledge. The translation renders these ancient texts legible; but it also transforms them into something that speaks to us, not to a world 400 years in the past. Only by working with the original texts can we have a sense of what has also been lost – or, as in the case of *Easter-Wings*, suppressed. Books do certainly conserve the historicity of texts, but that historicity itself keeps changing: it changes as we do, as what we attend to does, as what we want it to account for and explain does, as what we acknowledge to constitute an explanation does, and most of all, as what we want out of Herbert or Shakespeare or literature itself does. All history, and all historicity, is constructed.

The idea of literature includes an idea of permanence – this is often credited to the print revolution, but that is nonsense. Horace declared his poetry *aere perennius*, more lasting than bronze, 1500 years before Gutenberg; Shakespeare claimed his sonnets, circulating in manuscript among his friends, would preserve his love even to the edge of doom. But most writing, in whatever form, scribal, printed, even carved in stone, has been utterly ephemeral – only seven of Sophocles' 120 plays survive; only fragments of Sappho. On the other hand, ephemera was precisely what kept printers in business: while the typesetting slowly proceeded on the monuments of early printing,

¹ In the Bodleian manuscript of *The Temple*, a fair copy entirely in a scribal hand, the two poems are on the recto and verso of a single leaf, and hence are not even facing each other.

² For a beautifully detailed discussion, see McLeod (1994, 61-172).

the same presses were turning out innumerable broadsheets, pamphlets, decrees, proclamations, prayers, ballads, etc.: these paid the bills. During times of crisis, polemical pamphlets filled the bookstalls in huge numbers and were swiftly replaced by the replies they generated. The pamphlets were characteristically unstable, often attacked or refuted before they were even published. They were also almost instantly outdated; for the publisher, the creation of a continuing market for instantaneous refutation was the pamphlet's greatest virtue.

The book in such cases was less a product than a process, part of an ongoing dialectic. But the critical element in that process, from the point of view of history – and the reason books have a history at all – was the very small group of purchasers who collected and preserved those ephemera, the bibliophiles who focused not on the obviously valuable but on the seemingly worthless. A single collector, a single connoisseur of the worthless, can be the agent of history – for example George Thomason, who for twenty years collected every polemical scrap relating to the English Civil War and Commonwealth, and thereby created a value for those ephemera and an invaluable archive for the future, the Thomason collection, about 22,000 items, now in the British Library.

Publishers of course also from the beginning had a vision of permanence, an idea of cultural capital – it is not accidental that the first printed book in Europe was the Bible. The dissemination of ephemera paid for the creation of The Great Book. And yet great books on the whole were not good business – the Bible soon became a best seller, but not soon enough to save Gutenberg from bankruptcy; most of the first edition of the *Hypnerotomachia*, today a bibliophile's treasure, remained unsold; the Shakespeare first folio sold out, but too slowly to keep its publisher in business; *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* sold very poorly, and did not become 'great' literature until the 1920s: literature, especially great literature, at least in its inception, has often been a losing proposition.

Think about what we want out of reading. When books were scrolls, the format assumed that the norm of reading was consecutive – you started at the beginning and read through to the end. But the history of reading is a history of changing modes of attention. The transition from scroll to codex is a transition from continuous to discontinuous reading: as Peter Stallybrass observes, 'the history of the codex is the history of the bookmark' (2002, 42). The Bible is a central example. The material reality of the Torah, a huge double scroll, would seem to preclude a discontinuous reading – it is all but impossible to read the book any other way than consecutively. And yet the rabbis, over many centuries, produced a commentary that demanded the most discontinuous of readings, a code of ethics that depended on the constant comparison of widely separated passages. Scripture was amenable to any amount of reordering and recontextualization, and the study of the sacred texts included, as an essential element, the development of a prodigious memory. The Christian Bible, through its narrative structure, seems no less to demand consecutive reading: it runs from Genesis to Apocalypse, beginning at the beginning and ending with, or even a little after, the end. But the material history of the sacred texts positively inhibits such a reading. John Locke said that 'Scripture crumbled into Verses, which quickly turn into independent Aphorisms' (1733, vii). Consider the difference between a fifteenth-century bible and a seventeenth-century bible. Gutenberg's page was a dense black mass of type. It included no verse markers, and did not even have running heads to indicate what book of the bible you were reading; that information, if you wanted it in the book, had to be put in by hand, along with any rubrication and decoration. A century and a half later, the Geneva Bible page, in figure 3, looks like an annotated school text.



Figure 3 – A page of the Geneva Bible, London, 1589, Private Collection

The annotations are designed as guides to reading, but it is increasingly assumed that the reader will require guidance. Increasingly, also, the Bible looks less and less like a whole continuous work, more like a compilation of excerptable fragments; and those, of course, could be used to bolster widely varying positions in theological debates.

The history of reading has some significant consequences for modern notions of the norms of reading. Is continuity really the norm? Consecutive reading is certainly essential if we are undertaking to follow a narrative or a logical argument. But reading has always had many other ends. Suppose we are reading for wisdom? Then the extraction of dicta might very well be our primary purpose, and separable nuggets of philosophy would take precedence over narrative or logical coherence. How many Anglophone people even know that there are biblical sources for ‘a drop in the bucket’ and ‘a fly in the ointment’? There are, of course, many books that are not designed to be read consecutively – books are not only literature: dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, handbooks of all sorts. Most modern books of information depend for their usefulness not on their narrative coherence or the persuasiveness of their argument, but on the capaciousness of their indexes – we go to them to find what we are looking for, and the coherence is that of the reader’s narrative, not the author’s.

If readers construct books, books also construct readers. Formats keep changing. We know what a book is because the title page tells us, but initially, books did not have title pages – why did those develop, and what is on them? This has everything to do with the book trade, the development of marketability. The growth of the title page involves a significant transformation in how the relation of books to readers was conceived. Unbound sheets in the bookseller’s shop were labeled; but to make the label part of the book, to make it not only what sold the book but what then encapsulated the book’s identity, was really a huge change (and even now antiquarian books missing their title pages have lost a large percentage of their value). Then develop tables of contents, chapter headings, glosses, notes, indexes – what, following Gérard Genette, we call paratexts: we still have some sense that they are not *really* part of the book. The most interesting and conflicted modern paratext is surely the dust jacket. Publishers spend huge amounts of money having these designed, often by famous artists, on the assumption that they attract buyers; and they are so highly prized by collectors of modern first editions that a book that has lost its dust jacket has lost a good deal of its value – there is even a market for

forged dust jackets (for the first editions of such novels as *The Great Gatsby* or *A Farewell to Arms*). But dust jackets are completely ignored by bibliographers, and routinely discarded by libraries. Is the dust jacket part of the book or not? The answer will depend on whom you ask.

Paratexts are guides to the material; but over the years what sort of information has the potential buyer required to turn her or him into a reader? (Women become increasingly visible as readers and book collectors from the sixteenth century onward). To begin with, not necessarily the author's name, which for a modern reader would be a primary selling point. Despite the fact that by the early seventeenth century Shakespeare's name was sufficiently famous to sell a number of books with which in fact he had no connection, most of the early quartos of his own plays were issued anonymously. Shakespeare's name first appears on the title page of a play in the 1598 quarto of *Love's Labour's Lost* – he had been writing plays for seven or eight years at that point, and both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which include his name (though not on their title pages), were selling well: he was already well known as a poet. Would his name on the 1597 quartos of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II* and *Richard III* not have attracted purchasers? But what the title pages advertise are the acting companies – *Romeo and Juliet* adds the information that the play is, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, 'excellent conceited', witty and poetical, and was played 'with great applause'. But this advertisement says nothing about the witty, successful author: plays were not yet literature; moreover, literature could still be anonymous.

For Shakespeare, 1598 was the watershed: in that year in addition to *Love's Labour's Lost*, his name appears on new editions of the two Richard plays, and thereafter regularly appears on the title pages of his plays and poetry (as well as on those of some other people's). But in general, the author remains an elusive character in book publishing well into the seventeenth century. Sometimes the concealment is deliberate, of course – in satires and polemics. But consider some less straightforward examples. The first editions of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Donne's collected poems identify the authors only by initials, Sir P.S.; J.D. The initials tell you that the author is somebody important – too important to have his name revealed; but if you belong to the right social or intellectual circle, you will know whom the initials stand for. The mystery, then, flattered those in the know, and assured everyone else that the book was prestigious. Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* offered purchasers a different sort of nominal tease. On the title page the name of the author is given only as 'Democritus Junior', hence an epigone of Democritus, the pre-Socratic philosopher-scientist who postulated the existence of atoms, and thus got to the heart of all matter. On the engraved title page commissioned for the third edition there is actually a portrait of Burton, but nothing identifying the image as a portrait of the author. Burton's name appears nowhere in the book. Surely not everyone knew who 'Democritus Junior' was, but that really did not matter: what attracted a purchaser was a large, handsome, obviously learned work, eventually with a very elaborate engraved title page. The obvious pseudonym served as both a claim of profundity and an intriguing puzzle. This vast treatise is not without its element of playfulness.

Let us turn now to what is for modern readers of encyclopedic works the most essential paratext, the index. Burton's *Anatomy* is certainly encyclopedic, but consulting it for information is a daunting task. Burton supplied the book with an elaborate synoptic outline, but this gives little help, not least because it includes no page references. This is a case where an encyclopedic index would seem called for. The 1621 first edition has none. The 1624 second edition was 'corrected and augmented by the author' – the improvements involved a promotion from quarto to folio and a good deal of new material, but still no mention of the author's name. An index is provided, but it is singularly erratic and vague: characteristic entries under A include 'All are melancholy' and 'All beautiful parts attractive in love'; under B, 'Best site of an house' and 'Black eyes best'. Though bugloss wine is said in the text to be effective in curing leprosy, neither bugloss nor

leprosy is indexed. Examples could be endlessly multiplied: what are readers expected to use this index for? Nor, as the work went through its many revisions, was the index revised: the seventh edition of 1660 has the same index as the second edition.

In contrast, continental scientific texts often have splendid indexes, which were clearly felt to constitute a significant part of the book's value – these were generally placed before the text, not at the end. But the English seem to have had more resistance to serious indexes than continental publishers: for example, both Helkiah Crooke's compendious medical encyclopedia *Mikrokosmographia* and Plutarch's great biographical compendium the *Lives* in Sir Thomas North's translation were issued without indexes. It is probably the half-hearted quality of Burton's index that is most striking, as if the publisher is asking, how do you make an index?

Moreover, as the Burton reveals, even when books acknowledge the value of an index, there is no agreement about the appropriate form for the references: how to list things, what needs to be cross-referenced, what, indeed, constitutes an adequate reference – no agreement, that is, about how readers are expected to construe what they are looking for. Here are some samples from the index to the 1550 second edition of Edward Halle's chronicle *The vnion of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, which covers English history from Henry IV to the Tudors (the first edition, published in 1548, had no index). 'Abell, ffetherstone and Powell, executed in Smithfield for treason' appears under both Abell and ffetherstone, but not under Powell. 'Abbot of Jerney hanged at Tiburn' appears under Abbot but not under Jerney. 'Acte made in Spain called Premetica' is listed under Acte but not under Premetica. The index is, however, consistent about the listing of proper names: only the given name is indexed. Thus Anne Bulleyn is under Anne, not Bulleyn; Stephen Gardiner is under Stephen. This is standard sixteenth-century practice; so Juliet asks 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?', not 'Wherefore art thou Montague?' If she were looking for him in a sixteenth-century index, she would look under R.

Even when the index was recognized as essential to the book, its utility was another matter. Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorick* in its 1567 first edition includes an index keyed to the book's folio numbers, not to page numbers (each folio consists of 2 pages, recto or front and verso or back; so a reference to the recto of folio 57 would be numbered 57,1, and a reference to the verso would be 57,2). This is an accurate and useful index. But the identical index is reprinted in the 1584 edition, which is foliated with *page* numbers, not folio numbers, rendering the index largely useless. Why then is the old index included? Presumably simply because the format seems to require it – handbooks need indexes, or at least, need to look as if they have indexes. This is the reason that we find so many books with marginal subject headings written in by their owners – readers require guides; and this I imagine was how the strange Burton *Anatomy* index was compiled, out of some reader's marginal subject headings.

The same text may mean different things to different readers – this is hardly a radical contention. The question, and it is always an open one, is how far the meaning is inherent in the text; and, if it is inherent, how far it is determined by the author; and, if it is, how far we can know the author's intention, or even whether the author's intention has any relevance at all. And is the meaning of a work several hundred years old the same now as its meaning when it was new – to what extent are meanings transhistorical; to what extent is Shakespeare's or Spenser's or Donne's historicity preserved by the texts of their writings? Is what we mean by Shakespeare what the seventeenth century meant? It is not that there are no answers to such questions, but the answers keep changing according to what we want literature to tell us and what we want out of reading. In fact, if we try to historicize early modern texts, the issue of the author's intention becomes especially complicated, since the author is often little more than a name, sometimes not even that, and must be deduced or even constructed out of the text – the issue becomes positively perilous when the text is the Bible.

When the author's name is deduced from the text, or inserted into it, the text generally must also be revised to suit it. As soon as Shakespeare's name became a marketable commodity it was attached not only to his works, but to poems and plays by less famous writers, producing a factitious historicity, but also testifying to how important the claim of historicity had become. Books preserve Shakespeare's historicity, and that was what sold the books. And since that historicity was increasingly what was meant by 'Shakespeare', the plays and poems were subject to any amount of revision and interpretation to produce an acceptable, marketable Shakespeare. Where exactly *is* the historical Shakespeare in that?

So I conclude with the changing ways in which the book market has constructed authors. Increasingly a frontispiece portrait became essential, as the author moved to the center of the text, replacing the publisher or the patron. The titlepage portrait in the Shakespeare folio is now so famous that it seems normative, but it is actually quite a new idea, and Ben Jonson, in his commendatory poem facing it, advises you to ignore it: 'Reader, looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke' (Shakespeare 1623). The picture, Jonson says, captures nothing of what is distinctive about Shakespeare: the wit, the intelligence, are expressed only by the writing. Jonson did not want his portrait in his own folio, published in 1616. Instead, he commissioned the allegorical titlepage in figure 4, anatomizing his place in relation to classical drama, with his name at the center of a triumphal arch.



Figure 4 – Ben Jonson, *Workes*, 1616, title page, Private Collection

But readers wanted portraits. So the 1640 Jonson second folio, published three years after his death, has as its frontispiece figure 5, an engraved version of the only surviving painting of Jonson done during his lifetime, by Abraham Blyenberch, probably in 1621. Adaptations of this portrait continued to confront readers in editions of Jonson throughout the century; and by the eighteenth-century bibliophiles began adding the engraving to their copies of Jonson's first folio, as if something were missing. Antiquarian book dealers now often advertise perfectly complete copies of the 1616 folio as 'lacking the portrait'. This may be simply ignorance; but it also reflects what purchasers for several hundred years have wanted the Jonson folio to be.



Figure 5 – William Vaughan after Abraham Blyenberch, portrait of Ben Jonson included in the 1640 folio (c. 1627), Private Collection

What we do to books is an index to what we want out of them, and it is a rare case in which we want simply entertainment or information. When Milton says in *Areopagitica* that ‘books are not absolutely dead things’ (1644, 4) he is arguing against an assumption that indeed that is what they are; and we could press very hard on the adverb ‘absolutely’. It is ironic, certainly, but it also surely registers the reasonableness of the counter-argument: books are not absolutely dead, but almost. We need to balance this sense of the insufficiency of the book against our own sense of the book’s finality. Milton’s argument continues by insisting that books ‘preserve as in a viall the purest efficacie . . . of that living intellect that bred them’ (*ibid.*). It hardly needs to be added that books do nothing of the sort without readers, just as the elixir in the vial has no efficacy unless you drink it – that is the point of the essay, the reason books must not be censored before publication: they must be allowed to reach readers. And embellishments and marginalia are commonplace because even in the hands of a reader the book never adequately expressed itself, always needed something more – explanation, decoration, something to help us remember it, or even simply our names, something to make it ours, something to make it not absolutely dead.

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Textual Trans-Formations

