



Citation: M. Durrant (2025) The Queer Lives of *The Life of H.H.* (1822, 1688, 1650-1651). *Jems.* 14: pp. 213-238. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.36253/JEMS-2279-7149-16527>

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Editors: D. Pallotti, P. Pugliatti (University of Florence)

The Queer Lives of *The Life of H.H.* (1822, 1688, 1650-1651)

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Abstract

The article explores how the early modern book trade and book use have shaped the biography of the notorious seventeenth-century printer, Henry Hills (c. 1625-1688/1689), particularly as this pertains to our knowledge of his sexual history. Key to this analysis will be Hills' Particular Baptist confession-cum-conversion account, *The Prodigal Returned to His Father's House* (c. 1650-1651), which is said to have been composed whilst Hills served time in the Fleet for having entered into a bigamous (and apparently Ranter-inspired) relationship with the wife of a Blackfriars tailor. As the article highlights, *The Prodigal* is no longer extant; our knowledge of *The Prodigal* is actually based on a book published much later in 1688, *The Life of H.H.*. Earlier critics and editors have relied on *The Life* to access *The Prodigal* – and, by extension, details related to Hills' sexual history and his character – without properly acknowledging this crux. Consequently, we have failed to address the ways in which Hills' sexual history has been produced and augmented by the material forms that enable that history to be read. To offer alternative readings and methodological counterpoints, the article will attend to the *longue durée* of the four surviving copies of *The Life* taken from collections in England and North America, in which we find former owners and users transforming their copies of *The Life* by pulling those copies apart and binding them up in new material and editorial configurations. This copy-specific evidence helps to register the ways in which book use and collection activities have impacted representations of Hills' sexual history. By extension, the article maintains that they together reveal a potential for queerness that is being played out via deployments of *The Life's* material form.

Keywords: Biography, Material Texts, Printers, Queer Bibliography, *Sammelbände*

1. Introduction: 'The Prodigal, Then and Now

The printer Henry Hills' (c. 1625-1688/1689) Particular Baptist confession-cum-conversion account, *The Prodigal Returned to His Father's House*, which is thought to have been first published by Giles Calvert (1612-1663) in 1650-1651, has had a rather chequered critical reception. Composed whilst Hills served time

in the Fleet Prison for having entered into a 'open living arrangement' with the wife of Thomas Hams (Lynch 2007, 305), a Blackfriars tailor who had sued him for £250, *The Prodigal* has often supported commentators' efforts to throw back the metaphorical 'cloak' of Hills' deceitfulness (Anonymous 1733, 37) and to expose him for what he really was: that is, an 'unpleasant and unreliable character' (Blagden 1960, 168). In large part, his unpleasantness and unreliability has been located in his habitual political backslidings. To quote Julie Stone Peters, Hills worked 'for a number of conflicting enterprises' (1990, 53), rising from a labouring-class background to serve as printer to the New Model Army and the Leveller movement, official printer to Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate, printer to Charles II's Restoration government and printer to the Catholic James II's royal household and chapel. Hills combined his official printing for consecutive governments with a successful corporate career, rising, by the mid-1680s, to be Master of the Stationers' Company, and along the way, he changed his religion several times over, starting out amongst the Particular Baptists and ending his career as a Roman Catholic via a dalliance with the Church of England.¹ Pinning Hills down as the author responsible for writing *The Prodigal*, in which his capacity for politico-religious unfaithfulness finds a neat corollary in an admission of bigamous excess, has enabled commentators to put a documentary fix on the 'volatile' nature of Hills' life and career (Mendle 2001, 127), and the 'insincere' text of 1650-1651 (Smart 1925, 386) has been used by later scholars to damn Hills as an 'obsequious flatterer' (Morand 1969, 41), a 'strained and unconvincing' spiritual self-writer (Watkins 1972, 49), and even as a morally 'shameless' figure (Haffenden 2009, 141).

More recently, however, Hills' *Prodigal* has been reassessed. William E. Smith III argues 'evidence embedded' in this 'autobiographical work' demonstrates 'conclusively' that Hills was in fact 'a Ranter' (2017, 257-258). *The Prodigal's* engagement with notions of sinlessness illustrates how Hills had once embraced the 'antinomian strain found among certain segments of the Particular Baptists', a 'characteristic that would eventually lead him to see bigamy as licit for Christians' (258). Hills' imprisonment in the Fleet 'proved to be the end of [this] phase of his religious life – Hills being a Ranter' (*ibid.*); nevertheless, for Smith, Hills' post-Ranter *Prodigal Returned* confirms his earlier 'experimentations' with a set of pantheistic beliefs that actively 'challenged the moral codes of England in the mid-seventeenth century' (264). By drawing *The Prodigal* in from the margins of scholarly accounts of Dissenting selfhood in the early modern period, Smith's research has usefully recast Hills as a sectarian libertine in the orbit of other well-known former Ranters, including Abiezer Coppe (1619-1672) and Laurence Clarkson (1615-1667), who, in professing that 'individual conscience' placed England's godly above 'all laws', sought a more erotic kind of spiritual liberation by way of materialist rituals of drinking, swearing, and extra-marital orgiastic sex (Smith 2014, 8).

William Smith's argument is important because it is atypical, at least in the sense that he takes seriously Hills' *Prodigal Returned*, a text that has been marginalised from scholarly accounts of Dissenting selfhood in the early modern period. But then Smith does share with *The Prodigal's* detractors an apprehension of Hills as author and therefore as source for this 'autobiographical work'. This position might seem straightforward enough, but it can be a difficult one to sustain. In large part, this is because Hills' *Prodigal Returned* does not survive in its original form. Assuming it was actually published by Calvert in 1651, that earlier version of *The Prodigal* has since been lost.

¹ For a cradle-to-grave capsule biography that outlines Henry Hills' conversions and political negotiations, see Ian Gadd 2004. My own monograph on Hills' life and afterlives – including chapters on his beginnings, his imprints, his Catholic conversion, and his often tense relationship with his eldest son and namesake, the pirate printer, Henry Hills Junior (c. 1654-1710) – is forthcoming with Manchester University Press.

In fact, everything we know about Hills' 'autobiographical work' comes from a belatedly-printed, cheaply made and highly censorious biography, *The Life of H.H.* (Figure 1), which claims on its title page to contain a '*Relation at large of what passed betwixt him and the Taylors Wife in Black-friars, according to the Original*'. The imprint formulation at the foot of this later text's title-page tells us that *The Life* was 'Printed' for 'T.S. in the Year 1688', which is some thirty-seven years after '*the Original*' (i.e. *The Prodigal*) is said to have been first published (Anonymous 1688b).

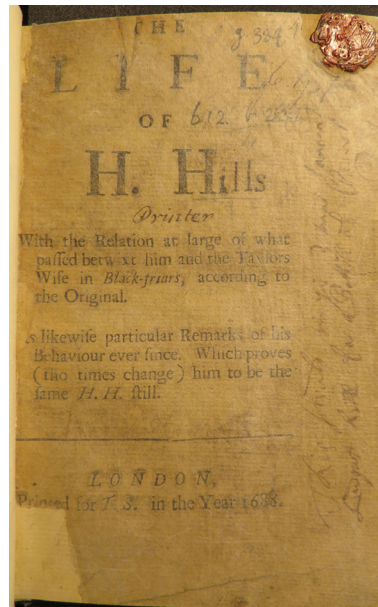


Figure 1 – The British Library's copy of *The Life of H.H.* (1688). From the British Library Collection: BL 612.b.25(4.), main title page. Courtesy of the British Library

What, then, are we reading when we say we are reading *The Prodigal Returned? The Life of H.H.* contains five documents that apparently formed part of that '*Original*' publication of 1651. These include:

1. a supporting statement addressed 'To the Reader' (A2r-A2v), written by Hills' Particular Baptist pastor, the wealthy merchant and leader of the Devonshire Square branch of the Particular Baptist Church, William Kiffen (1616-1701);
2. a 'Premonition to the Reader' (A3r-A5v), written by another Baptist leader, Daniel King, who is identified in the text as Hills' 'friend';
3. a copy of a Hills-authored 'Epistle To all the Saints in General' (A6r-B1v), which he directed towards the Particular Baptist brethren from whom he had apostatized;
4. Hills' central confession-cum-conversion account (1-42), 'The PRODIGAL Returned to His Fathers House';
5. and finally, 'A True Coppy' of a letter authored by Hills (43-46), in which he pleads for leniency and forgiveness from the cuckolded tailor, Hams.

If these five documents were included in the ‘*Original*’ publication of 1650-1651, then it is clear that *The Prodigal*, like other autobiographical forms from the period, was not the ‘sole product’ of one easily definable author (Graham *et al.* 1989, 2). Its epistle ‘To the Reader’, written by Hills’ Particular Baptist pastor, Kiffen, and King’s ‘Premonition to the Reader from the hand of a Friend’, suggest instead that *The Prodigal* was underwritten by multiple authorships. Hills’ ‘PRODIGAL Returned’ confession was, by extension, seemingly embedded within a larger, multivocal and hybrid work, flanked on either side by paratexts that were meant to be read in relation to each other, including epistolary forms, such as Hills’ ‘Letter’ to the cuckolded Hams, in which he pleads for leniency and forgiveness on behalf of himself and his family. Some of these ‘*Original*’ documents feature dates that refer us back to the originary scene of *The Prodigal*’s composition. Hills’ ‘Epistle’, for example, is dated ‘Jan. 28. 1650’ (Anonymous 1688b, B1v); his letter to Hams is dated ‘Dec. 12. 1650’ (46). Whilst Kiffen’s prefatory missive is undated, King’s does bear a date; however, that date (‘July 15 | 1672’) seemingly takes us out of time and out of context (A5v). This may well be the result of a printing error (is it meant to read ‘1652’ rather than ‘1672?’), though the possibility remains that this document was, as Larry Kreitzer posits, composed and added at a later date (2012, 48). Adding to the text’s complex temporal positioning, *The Life* concludes with one final document:

6. a scathing biographical sketch entitled ‘*A View of part of the many Traiterous, Disloyal, and Turn-about Actions of H.H.*’ (47-54).

‘*A View*’ details Hills’ post-1651 activities, including his later backslidings from the Particular Baptist faith to a more moderate form of Protestantism after the Restoration, and his subsequent conversion to Catholicism following James II’s ascension. Like all the other documents that make up *The Life*, ‘*A View*’ is another reprint, this time of an anonymous biography that originally appeared in single-sided broadside format in 1684-1685 (Figure 2).

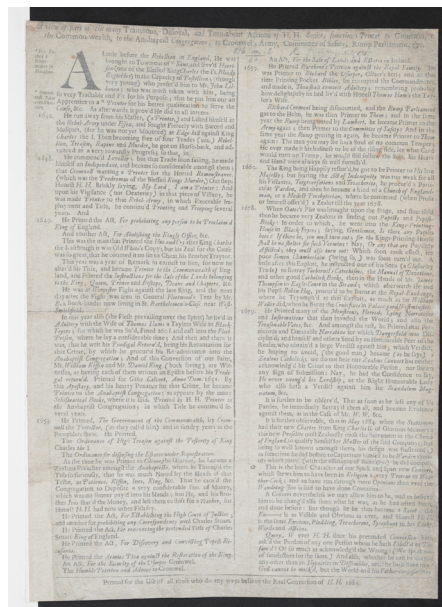


Figure 2 – The anonymous biography, *A View of part of the many Traiterous, Disloyal, and Turn-about Actions of H.H.* (1684-1685). From the British Library Collection: 74/816.m.2.(60.), broadside. Courtesy of the British Library

To quote Kate Loveman, '*A View*' functions as a 'sarcastic commentary' upon the confessional documents that precede it, offering an alternative paratextual lens through which the authenticity of Hills' first-person claims to spiritual regeneration can be interrogated (2008, 37). By reading '*A View*' alongside Hills' claims to confession and repentance, *The Life*'s readers are called on to locate disjuncture between the then and the now in Hills' life story by reading between texts. So, in one part of *The Life*, we find Hills-the-narrator asserting that his confession 'is not a fiction or imagination ... but the truth' (Anonymous 1688b, B2v); Kiffen signs off his own epistle 'hoping' Hills' confession is 'reality and truth' (A2v), while King asserts that Hills' 'repentance is real' (A4r). This collaborative claim to 'authentic faith', so 'crucial' in Dissenting accounts of religious experientialism (Baker 2005, xviii), is compromised by evidence provided in the concluding document of '*A View*', which bookends *The Life* by telling us that 'this conversion of our Saint' (Anonymous 1688b, 49) was just another example of Hills' dissembling nature, 'Religion he [made] use of upon all changes' (54). Hills only 'writ this Book' to procure his 'Re-admittance' into the Particular Baptist community, and by this '*Apostacy*, and his hearty Pennance for that Crime', he became a 'Printer' to the congregation (49). To reinforce the idea that Hills was driven by mercenary motives and that his textual self is not to be trusted, it is also claimed that he became a preacher amongst the Baptists, and that he 'thump'd the Tub' with such enthusiasm that 'he caus'd the Congregation to Deposit a very considerable sum of money' into a Particular Baptist fund; Hills then absconded with the money in 1659, leaving the Devonshire Square Baptists to 'shift for a Teacher' (50). I have found no evidence to support this claim, but by presenting an alternative account of Hills' dealings with the Baptists, the author-editor-compiler of *The Life* attempts to convince us that, despite Hills' claims to the contrary, this godly performance of repentance really is a work of fiction.

Whilst I do not want to undermine Smith's interventions regarding Hills' 'Ranter sexuality', there is clearly another story here, and one that puts pressure on terms like 'evidence' and 'embedded' (Smith III 2017, 258). Until a copy of that 1651 text is found, our major source for Hills' Ranter-inspired experiments with bigamy is really *The Life* compilation of 1688, and *The Life*'s status as a transparent form of documentary disclosure cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, issues to do with reliability become even more acute if we read *The Life* in terms of the way the text marketed itself: that is, as a '*Relation*'. As Frances Dolan reminds us, 'the designation of a text as a relation ... announced its particular claim on the reader's trust or belief' (2013, 2). Author-editors of 'true relations' would often support their truth claims by listing 'living witnesses' (3), or alternative narratives, to the events they describe. Such texts assure the reader of their authenticity through their claims to accurately reproduce 'original' documentation (4). These authors 'assemble a kind of archive to substantiate truth claims' (*ibid.*) and in doing so the textual relation becomes evidence of its own claims to authenticity. *The Life* works in broadly similar terms: it refers to 'Mr. William Kiffen and Mr. Daniel King' as 'living ... Witnesses' to Hills' extra-marital relations with the tailor's wife, both having 'written an Epistle' before his confession (Anonymous 1688b, 49); its title page promises an '*Original*', too. But as Dolan tells us, such affirmations 'cannot be verified' but rather 'stand in for the proofs toward which they gesture' (2013, 4). For example, many of the details that I have already rehearsed in relation to *The Prodigal* – that Hills was sued for '260 l.' by the tailor Hams, and that his confession-cum-conversion account was published by 'Giles Calvert' (Anonymous 1688b, 49) – are details found only within the biographical document of *A View* and its subsequent reprint in *The Life*. Further, given that *The Prodigal* is no longer extant, *The Life* becomes the only evidence that Hills' confession ever existed in the form that we have it now, and even this works 'on the assumption that it was actually printed' (Loveman 2008, 37, n. 78). Ultimately,

though, we cannot really know this, since there's nothing outside of this document to challenge *The Life's* own claims to documentary realism, and this includes its title-page assertion that Hills committed some sort of sexual infraction with a '*Taylor's Wife*'.²

Attempts to pin down *The Prodigal* as 'first-person evidence' (Como 2018, 406) of Hills' sexual misconduct have, by and large, tended to side-line such opacities, and as a consequence earlier commentators have failed to properly address the ways in which Hills' libertine sexual history has been produced and augmented by the material forms that enabled it to be read. Building on recent developments within the field of queer bibliography, particularly research that has explored the queer affordances of pre-modern material texts (Masten 2016, 109-149; Magnani and Watt 2018; Trettien 2022, 99-182; Sargan 2022), this article generates new readings and approaches to the absent *Prodigal*, arguing for a sense of the mobility and multiplicity of Hills' 'autobiographical work', whilst also underscoring the fact that the interpretive co-ordinates of Hills' 'Ranter sexuality' are historically variable, discursively contingent, and materially situated.³ As part of this argument, I will attend to *The Life of H.H.*'s post-print history, as copies passed into readers' hands, and as those copies were subsequently bound up in new material and editorial configurations. In the next section, this will take us to the Bodleian Library's copy of *The Life*, which does not survive as a stitched or bound codex, but rather in the form of torn fragments that have been tucked into the proof pages of a failed nineteenth-century attempt to reprint Hills' lost *Prodigal*; I then turn to two other copies of *The Life* – the first held at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, and the second at the Houghton Library, Harvard University – which together survive within the 'multibook compilations' of user-generated *Sammelbände* (Knight 2013, 2); in conclusion, the article returns to the UK, this time to turn to an individually-bound copy of *The Life* held at the British Library, where I will linger on a curious red wax seal that is impressed upon its title page. Tracking across and between these versions and variants, and hopping between the 1650s, the 1680s, and, in the following section, the 1820s, will help to reorientate the discussion away from a sense of Hills' 'confession-cum-conversion' account as a fixed, finalised, or unmediated source that neatly satisfies our will to knowledge around Hills' 'Ranter sexuality'. Made up, made over, remixed and sometimes cut up: this article will ultimately propose that book use, as well as collection activities, have each impacted and helped to shape representations of Hills' sexual history, and that these factors and forces together reveal a potential for queerness that's being played out via deployments of *The Life's* material form.

2. 'a proposed reprint': Bodleian Library, Arch. H d.40

Tucked within its half goat binding and marbled paper boards, Bodleian Library's Arch. H d.40 archives the proof sheets of a proposed reprint of *The Life of H.H.* by the private press of

² As I have argued elsewhere (Durrant 2018), a number of Hills' rivals, as far back as the mid-1650s, conjured his bigamy in both royalist satire and anti-sectarian polemic, and so there appears to be little doubt that Hills was once embroiled in a sexual scandal; however, the exact nature of that scandal, up to and including the identities of those involved, needs to be treated with a good deal of skepticism.

³ The field of queer bibliography has also begun to define itself – both in terms of the textual materials it is interested in (i.e. queer literature and archives) and the methodological approaches it takes to the material text – in some recent symposiums, such as Malcolm Nobel and Sarah Pyke's 'Queer Bibliography: Tools, Methods, Practices and Approaches' (Institute of English Studies University of London, 2023), as well as conferences, including the 'Queer Bibliography Conference' (UCLA California Rare Book School, 2024). Noble and Pyke's recently published special issue for the *PBSA*, 'Queer Bibliography', and their introductory essay to this emerging sub-field (2024), will serve as an important landmark in the study of 'the queerness of the book-as-object' (152).

Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, a project that began in around 1822. Figure 3 gives an indication of the anticipated title page, which scraps *The Life of H.H.* title, opting instead for the one that apparently accompanied the now lost original: 'THE | PRODIGAL RETURNED | TO HIS | Father's House. | BY HENRY HILLS.'

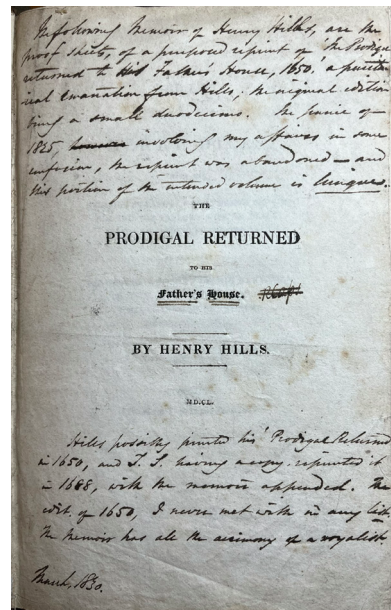


Figure 3 – Thomas Davison's proposed reprint of *The Life of H.H.* (1825). The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Arch. H d.40, proof title page. Image is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

An accompanying 'ADVERTISEMENT' indicates how the reprint was to be promoted:

The excessive rarity of this Memoir [i.e. *The Life*], of which no other copy, known to the writer, has occurred for sale than that purchased by Edward Rowe More[s], at the dispersion, by [Samuel] Paterson, of the Bibliotheca Monastica Fletewodiana, in 1779,⁴ has induced the Editor to give the present reprint; the impression being strictly limited[,] to fifty copies, and those only intended for private circulation.

EDITOR.

[March,] Jan 1, 1825.

⁴ The *Bibliotheca Monastica-Fletewodiana*, a printed catalogue of rare books auctioned by the bookseller Paterson (1728-1802) at Essex House, the Strand, in December 1774 (rather than 1779), does indeed record the sale of the 'Life of Hen. Hills' to the antiquarian Rowe Mores (1731-1778) – *The Life* featured in lot 172 and sold, alongside four other tracts, for eighteen shillings (see Paterson 1774, 9).

The hand-written corrections to the title page and to the 'ADVERTISEMENT' suggest that by January (or rather March) 1825 the 'EDITOR' was still ironing out specifics. Was the intention to issue more or less than fifty copies? Why aim for 'private circulation', and who might have formed a part of its coterie readership? The rhetoric of 'private circulation' generates the impression of 'intimacy in small social circles', in which books are passed 'from hand to hand' (North 2003, 24); the phrase is occasionally also attached to more 'salacious', 'under-the-counter' publications (McCleery 2002, 172), although the question of whether this excessively rare 'Memoir' was intended to be read as a spicy exposé is one that Arch. H d.40 refuses to answer, since the whole project was abandoned in or after 1825.

We know this because of the manuscript notes that are inscribed onto the proposed title page. Written in an italic hand and dated 'March, 1830', the 'EDITOR' provides contextual details, at first to do with biography:

The following memoir of Henry Hills, and the proof sheets, of a proposed reprint of 'The Prodigal Returned to His Father's House, 1650,' a puritanical emanation from Hills, the original edition being a small duodecimo. The panic of 1825, involving my affairs in some confusion, the reprint was abandoned – and this portion of the intended volume is unique.

The 'EDITOR' then turns to thorny issues to do with provenance:

Hills possibly printed his 'Prodigal Returned' in 1650, and T.S. having a copy, imprinted it in 1688, with the memoire appended. The copy of 1650, I never met with in any list.

When these inscriptions are read alongside the 'ADVERTISEMENT', those promotional claims to the 'excessive rarity' of *The Life* take on a new dimension. Here, notions of 'rarity' are replaced by the problem of absence: 'The copy of 1650, I never met with in any list'. Despite the title ('THE | PRODIGAL RETURNED') and that confident assertion of authorship ('BY HENRY HILLS'), Hills' 'puritanical emanation' is just not there; or, rather, the version we might want, that 'copy of 1650', is not there – at least not yet. Additional remarks related to the editor's 'affairs', which were apparently 'in some confusion' due to the stock market crash and bank failures of 1825, add to this context of absence a personal crisis that remains unarticulated, but that similarly worked towards the project's abandonment.

It is not exactly clear who that editor was, and neither is it altogether clear who was tasked with printing the proof sheets. An interleaf featuring the imprint of Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown does include the name of the printer Thomas Davison (d. 1831) and his address on Lombard Street, Whitefriars. Posthumously represented as an 'establishment-orientated' figure (Cochran 2011, 123), Davison was, according to an obituary that appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in December 1831, highly regarded by his peers because of the 'beauty and singular correctness' of his printing; by all accounts, Davison was also lauded for the 'sweetness' of his singing, 'which retained to the last all the compass and freshness of that of a young man' (Urban 1831, 183).⁵ Today, Davison is best remembered as John Murray's (1778-1843) favoured Byron printer, although another printer named Thomas Davison stalks records from the same period. He kept a shop on Duke Street, Smithfield, and as far as his reputation went, the Thomas Davison of Duke Street was a far cry from the Thomas Davison of Lombard Street. Rather than being famed for the beauty of his printing or his singing, this other Davison was one of Regency London's 'leading ultra-radical publishers' (McCalman 2004, 133), responsible for editing and publishing

⁵ On Davison's experiments with printing and with printing ink, see Isaac 1997, 10-18.

politically incendiary weeklies, including the *Medusa, or Penny Politician* (Feb. 1819-Jan. 1820); he was well-known as a 'republican, a deist and a Painite' (Morgan 2018, 20). Hardly an 'establishment-orientated' figure, then, but as Gavin Edwards indicates, the two Davisons have often been conflated in 'modern checklists of London printers of the period' (1996, 277); elsewhere, David Worrall posits that the Davison of Lombard Street and the Davison of Duke Street are in fact one and the same person, and that Davison used the profits from his more vanilla ventures to cross-subsidize his radical publications and lifestyle (1997, 147).

It is a fascinating conceit, not least because it would add an extra layer of meaning to his involvement in *The Prodigal* project of the 1820s, which sought to revive the confession of an incarcerated printer who, for the first few decades of his career at least, was a key agent in the production and dissemination of Leveller, republican, and religiously dissenting tracts. Indeed, it might not be unimportant that, when *The Prodigal* project got underway in 1822, the equally notorious Davison of Duke Street had only just been released from prison himself.⁶ In 1820, he had been fined £100 and sentenced to two-years' imprisonment in Okeham gaol, Rutland, for his involvement in the publication of blasphemous libels, including materials that were critical of the Bible. Upon his release, Davison of Duke Street fell on financial hard times and suffered from serious bouts of ill health; by 1831 he, like that other Davison of Lombard Street, appears to have been dead. If the two Davisons are really one, the implication is that in his final years, the politically radical Davison was embroiled in an editorial project that looked back to the political radicalism of the seventeenth century by way of Hills' 'puritanical emanation'; however, to quote the 'EDITOR' again, the 'confusion' of life and of human 'affairs' obviously colluded to ensure that this turn to the past would remain incomplete.

As a consequence, Arch. H d.40 survives as a material trace of what might have been. Outside of the title page and 'ADVERTISEMENT', Arch. H d.40 contains the specimens of eighteen leaves of printed text, which derive from the concluding portion of '*A View*'. These leaves are paginated 1 through 18, which suggests that the editor of the 1820s edition of *The Life* intended to depart from the organisational principles of the original, moving '*A View*' from the back of the book, where it stood in *The Life of H.H.*, to the front. Thus what originally served as a concluding paratext, enabling readers to retrospectively reinterpret the documents of *The Prodigal* in light of damning evidence related to Hills' later conduct, was, in the revived edition of c. 1822-1825, reworked to serve as a prefatory threshold, shaping the reader's attitudes of what's to come. Replete with editorial notes, redactions and corrections (Figure 4), these pages capture the sense of a messy, working document, and one in which the final shape of the intended reprint was still in play. They also reveal that the approach adopted by the 'EDITOR' – whether that was Davison or another agent – involved scissors as well as pen and ink. This is because Arch. H d.40 also contains printed fragments cut from seventeenth-century books, including some derived from Hills' printing, as well as two fragments of printed text cut from a 1688 copy of *The Life of H.H.* (Figure 5). Marked up with hand-written corrections to spelling as well as punctuation, these printed remains represent the flotsam and jetsam of the editor's reading and research, a process that involved the destruction of an antiquarian book in order to establish the material parameters of a new one.

⁶ For a contemporary account of Davison's trial and imprisonment, see Davison 1820.

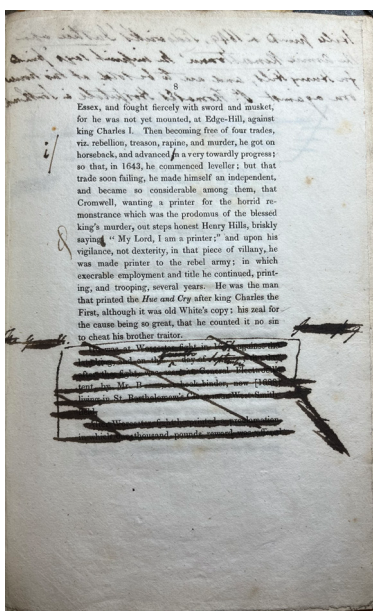


Figure 4 – Editorial amendments in Davison's *Life of H.H.* (1825).
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Arch. H d.40, 8. Image is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

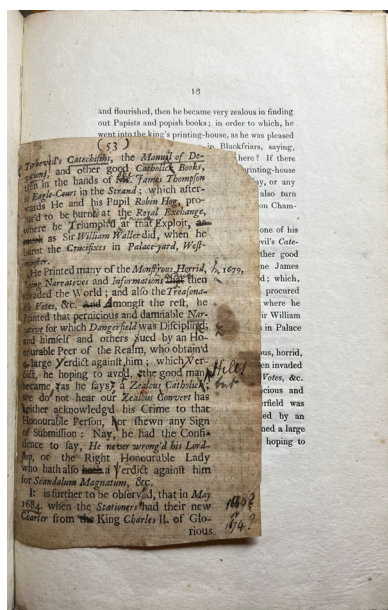


Figure 5 – Printed fragments derived from a 1688 copy of *The Life of H.H.*, interleaved within Davison's *Life of H.H.*
The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Arch. H d.40, 13. Image is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Yet no matter how hard the 'EDITOR' dug into his copy of *The Life* – pulling that copy text apart in an attempt to locate a standard version of *The Prodigal* – it did not take him back to

the authentic ‘*Original*’ that *The Life*’s title page promises. Looking back in March 1830, the ‘EDITOR’ bemoaned that he ‘never met with’ *The Prodigal* of the 1650s, and as I have rehearsed in the introduction to this article, this is because *The Life* of 1688 is currently our only access to it. Arch. H d.40 is a (failed) reprint of a reprint of which no original copy as survived, and as a result, it has the potential to send us on strangely circular journeys. Take, for instance, Oxford’s SOLO catalogue entry for the abandoned *Prodigal* project of the 1830s, where we find two links to two related items.⁷ ‘The Life of H.H.’ link guides the user to a digitised copy of the 1688 publication archived on *Early English Books Online*; the second related item, ‘The prodigal returned to his father’s house’, simply loops the user back to SOLO’s entry for nineteenth-century proof pages that make up Arch. H d.40. ‘Unknown to Wing’, it says, and so there is nowhere to go: in the absence of *The Prodigal Returned*, this link returns us, like the wayward son of the prodigal parable, back to where we started.

That is to say, it is hard to properly straighten out *The Life*, even if that embedded title, ‘The PRODIGAL Returned to His Fathers House’, offers a version of those ‘directional metaphors’ that Sara Ahmed describes in the contexts of heteronormative relations (2006, 69), which organise a spatial (re)orientation, or moral progress, away from ‘deviant’ (*ibid.*) desires towards the filial embrace of ‘the father’ and ‘the family’ (74). Drawing on Ahmed’s critique of ‘directional metaphors’, Roberta Magnani and Diane Watt argue that pre-modern cultures of textual production repeatedly disrupt ideals of patrilineal ‘linearity’, of straight lines and ordered progress, defining them instead in the queer terms of ‘dissonance’ and ‘instability’ (2018, 252). Their point is salient given my discussion of *The Life*: it is made up of textual parts drawn from multiple temporal moments, whether that be ‘Jan. 28. 1650’, ‘Dec. 12 1650’, 1651, ‘July 15 | 1672’, 1684, and 1688; *The Life*’s main title-page points us backwards to the promise of an ‘*Original*’, but with Arch. H d.40 standing in as a case in point, *The Life* emerges as a text that seems also to frustrate attempts at duplication, eschewing bibliographical desires for completeness and origin, as well as our attempts at cataloguing it. Unwilling to conform to that nineteenth-century editor’s attempts to fix it into place and to establish the terms of its lineage, and seemingly short-circuiting contemporary cataloguing practices, *The Life* reveals itself as a rather less concrete bio-biographical record than we might assume: to quote Magnani and Watt again, it is much more ‘refracted’, even ‘non-binary’ (2018, 256).

3. ‘*plurality of wives*’: Ransom Center, 1688, DC 122.8 V513 1637 & Houghton Library, EC65.A100. B688t No. 3

Rather than taking queerness as a methodology in and of itself, Magnani and Watt deploy a revisionist book history as a means of discovering or producing queerness in pre-modern material texts. In this section, I extend this approach by turning to two copies of *The Life of H.H.* – the first held at the Ransom Center (Figure 6), the second at the Houghton Library (Figure 7) – which together survive within the ‘pick-and-mix’ assemblage of the *Sammelband* (Scott-Warren 2019, 139).

⁷ See <https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/44OXF_INST/35n82s/alma990106313950107026>, accessed 1 December 2024.

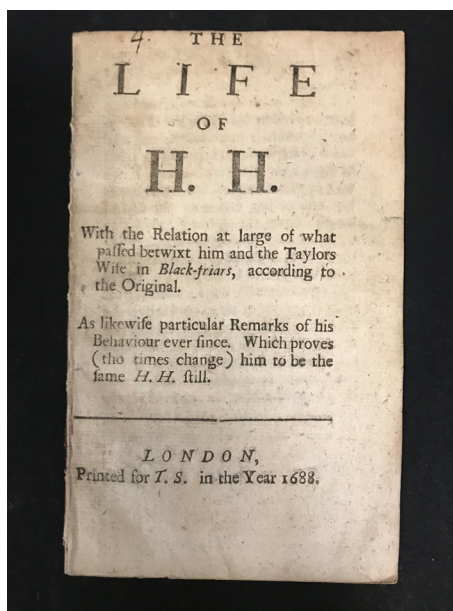


Figure 6 – The main title page accompanying the Ransom Center's copy of *The Life of H.H.* (1688). DC 122.8 V513 1637. Book Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Public domain

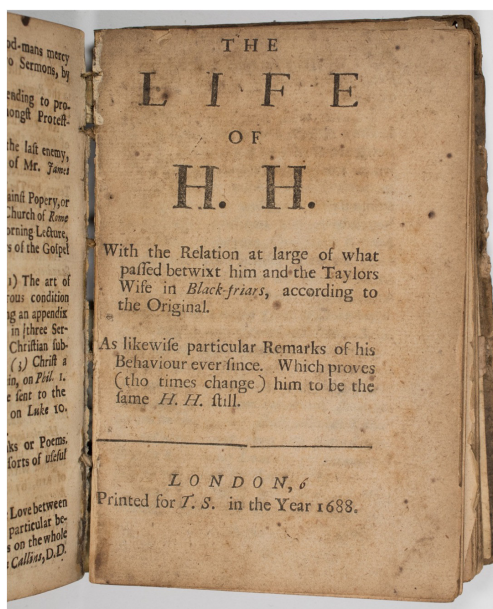


Figure 7 – The main title page accompanying the Houghton Library's copy of *The Life of H.H.* (1688). EC65.A100. B688t No. 3. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Courtesy of the Houghton Library

The copy of *The Life* at the Ransom Center has been bound into a bespoke volume containing five other printed ‘lives’ of Protestant converts (and, in the case of Socinus, the life of one anti-Trinitarian heretic), which have been arranged in order of their publication:

1. Vignolle’s *Abridgement of the Life of Henry the Great, the Fourth of that Name: King of France and Navarre. Translated out of French* (London, printed for Nath: Butter, 1637);
2. William Garrett’s *Anthologia: the life & death of Mr Samuel Crook ... who being dead, yet speaketh. By W.G. an eye and ear-witness of both* (London, printed by James Flesher for Philemon Stephens, 1651);
3. John Biddle’s translation of Samuel Przypkowski’s *The Life of that Incomparable Man, Faustus Socinus Senensis, described by a Polonian Knight* (London, printed for Richard Moone, 1653);
4. the anonymous *A brief relation of several Passages of the life and death of William Barton of Shrewsbury, in October, 1661...* (London, printed for John Allen, 1664);
5. Oliver Heywood’s *A narrative of the holy life, and happy death of that reverend, faithful and zealous man of God, and minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Mr. John Angier* (London, printed for Tho. Parkhurst, 1685);
6. *The Life of H.H.*
7. William Crashaw’s translation of Niccolo Balbani’s *The Italian Convert: news from Italy of a Second Moses: Or the life of Galeacius Caracciolus the Noble Marquess of Vico* (London, printed for Abel Roper, 1689).⁸

Turning to the Houghton’s *Sammelband*, which is labelled simply as ‘Tracts’, we find that *The Life* has here been bound up with four texts written by, or written about, Catholics and Catholicism. These tracts include:

1. the anonymous *Advice from a Catholick to his Protestant friend, touching the doctrine of purgatory* (Douai(?), n.p., 1687);
2. the second edition of the anonymous *History of Pope Joan and the Whores of Rome* (London, n.p., 1687);
3. *The Life of H.H.*
4. the anonymous *A Letter of Advice to a Young Lady, Being Motives and Directions to Establish Her in the Protestant Religion* (London, printed for Richard Baldwin, 1688);
5. the anonymous’ *Rome’s rarities, or, The Pope’s cabinet unlock’d, and Expos’d to View: Being a true and Faithful Account of the Blasphemy, Treason, Massacres, Murders, Lechery, Whoredom, Buggery, Sodomy, Debauchery, Pious Frauds, &c. of the Romish Church* (London, printed for J. Norris, 1684).

How might we account for the rival confessional contexts into which these (as yet unidentified) former owners have archived their copies of *The Life*? Is *The Life* a mid-seventeenth century Ranter record, as Smith has it, or one more concerned with Catholic subjectivities? Perhaps it’s both: printed in 1688 when Hills was openly identifying as a Catholic, although made up of documents apparently composed whilst Hills is thought to have tested the boundaries of mid-century puritan piety back in the early 1650s, *The Life*, and the life that it represents, can

⁸ As Figure 6 shows, the Ransom Center copy has the number ‘4’ written onto its title page, which implies that it may once have stood as the forth tract in an entirely different *Sammelband*. Compare this with Figure 7, which shows that the Houghton copy has a number ‘6’ on its title page, numeration that might well imply the same thing.

be read bi-focally, since both cut across and between apparently disparate religious boundaries. This has rendered *The Life* open to apparently competing material redeployments.

So, in the Ransom Center's *Sammelband*, *The Life* finds a place alongside the lives of a high-profile French Protestant (*Henry the Great*) and a Catholic-to-Protestant convert from Italy (*Marquess of Vico*), as well as the intra-Protestant conversions of English clerical figures from Anglicanism to radical nonconformism (*Crook* and *Angier*). The Ransom Center's volume also makes room for the life of a low-born figure, whose debauched, criminal behaviour brought him to prison, self-reproach, and godly penitence (*Barton*). *The Life of H.H.*, which features documents apparently composed in the Fleet, might sit comfortably alongside the *Barton* text, but it would be a push to say that William Barton (d. 1661) and Hills are analogous in their spiritual trajectories. Barton the butcher fell into drinking, gambling, and, ultimately, murder. He was imprisoned in Shrewsbury's gaol and executed, but not before he found godly assurance of salvation through thoughtful prayer and scripture reading. Brought to a particularly definitive conclusion by the hang-man's noose, Barton's *Life* offers its consumers a fairly fixed vision of spiritual renewal through corporeal suffering, repentance, and, in the end, death. Conversely, *The Life of H.H.* conjures a far more cynical vision of confessional transformation, since in its concluding phase, it details Hills' post-confession tergiversations, 'Religion he still making use of upon all changes' (Anonymous 1688b, 54). In this context, *The Life* might have closer thematic affinities with the 'life' offered up in Vignolle's *Life of Henry the Great* of 1637, which focuses on Henri IV of France, King of Navarre (1553-1610), a Protestant supporter of French religious reform who was widely celebrated in Elizabethan England, but whose name took on queasy connotations following his conversion to Catholicism. Describing his broader place in the early modern English cultural imagination, Gillian Woods argues that the King of Navarre 'represented a person who had changed and a person who was change itself. His conversion to Catholicism undid the meaning of his previous representation' (2013, 71). When read in relation to *The Life of H.H.*, published only three years after Hills' 'Mercenary' (Anonymous 1688b, 54) conversion to the Catholic faith, we might discern the compiler's interest in religious commitments that blur, rather than reinforce, what Woods describes as 'oppositional confessional categories' (2013, 69-70).

That said, it might be wrong to assume that the owner-compiler of the Ransom Center's *Sammelband* was reading *The Life of H.H.* for details around Hills' experiences. A reader-supplied table of contents situated at the beginning of the collection, which is entitled 'Tracts in this Volume', suggests a far more complex understanding of *The Life's* authorship. Here, we find that the owner-compiler has condensed and reworked the titles of the printed texts that he or she has assembled, and in the case of *The Life*, these processes of reworking have suggestive consequences:

1. *The Life of Henry the Great, King of France & Navarre.*
2. *The Life & Death of Mr. Same. Cook Minister.*
3. *The Life of Faustus Socinus Senensis.*
4. *The Life & Death of William Barton.*
5. *The Holy Life & happy Death of Mr. John Angier minister.*
6. *The Life of H.H. by William Kiffen.*
7. *The Life of Galeacius Caracciolus the noble Marquess of Vico.*

The phrase 'by William Kiffen' insinuates that this owner-compiler's interests lay as much with Kiffen, the Particular Baptist minister and Hills' co-author, as with 'H.H.' the Particular Baptist convert, registering as it does a sense of Kiffen's accountability for *The Life*.

It is a small moment of readerly (re)interpretation that seems to momentarily blur issues of agency and authorship, although it is one that does have a history. The anonymous *The holy sisters conspiracy against their husbands*, printed on 26 January 1661, also called attention to Kiffen's support of Hills' sexual misdemeanors, situating their relationship within the contexts of a fictional meeting of radical millenarian women on Coleman Street.⁹ Here, sexual and spiritual promiscuity combine in a virulently misogynist attack on the female visionaries who spoke and wrote themselves into political discourses during the 1640s and 1650s:

For Husbands we will have none,
 But Brothers in puritie;
 We will not be Wives
 And tye up our Lives
 To Villanous slaverie;
 But couple in love and feare;
 When mov'd by the spirit to't;
 For there is no sin
 To let a Saint in,
 When he has the grace to do't.
 And thus are we taught,
 No folly is wrought,
 When Brothers will exercise.
 Both *Kiffin* and *Hills*
 (No Printer of *Bills*)
 Have prov'd it in ample wise. (12)

The 'holy sisters' stage a rebellion against hierarchical norms of social and political order. They reject the authority of 'Husbands' and they together associate marriage with 'slaverie'. Their obedience is instead directed towards their 'Brothers' in a gathered congregation, with whom they 'couple in love and feare' when 'mov'd by the spirit to't'. 'Both *Kiffin* and *Hills*' are summoned as hypocritical caricatures of promiscuity, figures who, by espousing claims to election and holy inspiration, aided and abetted this weakening of the masculinist hegemony in order to satisfy their own sexual appetites. In the Ransom Center's copy of *The Life*, we find that these attachments have been sketched out within the manuscript table of contents, where the phrase 'by William Kiffen' binds Hills' former pastor more fully to *The Life's* story of sexual errancy, and in doing so it raises a question that we never thought we had to ask: whose *Life* is it anyway?

The Houghton volume blurs our reading of *The Life* in other ways, particularly in terms of the sexual taxonomies that have recently supported its interpretation. As noted above, this book binds four texts alongside *The Life*. Two of them fall within the advice genre, with one written by a Catholic (*Advice*), and the other written (nominally at least) by a Protestant (*A Letter*). One issue that appears to link these two texts is an interest in libertine sexualities and atheistic beliefs, although in one of these examples, those issues are dealt with in complex and potentially even duplicitous ways.

The *Advice from a Catholick* of 1687 is perhaps the more straightforward of the two. It begins by characterising its unnamed (presumably Protestant) addressee as a 'Libertine', who,

⁹ One obvious context here (particularly given the reference to Coleman Street) is the so-called Venner rebellion, a failed coup led by the Fifth Monarchist Thomas Venner (d. 1661) against Charles II in January 1661. On Coleman Street and its radical associations, see Adrian Johns 2008, 33.

having rejected the doctrine of Purgatory ‘as *Folk talk*’ (Anonymous 1687a, 1), is likened to the ‘Atheistical Philosophers’ (2). The *Advice* subsequently leaves libertinism and atheism behind, outlining, across just eighteen pages, the historical precedents for a belief in the purgation of souls. The *Letter of Advice* of 1688 – written, according to its title page, by a ‘*Person of Honour*’ for a generic ‘*Young Lady*’ of quality, and published to establish others ‘*of that Sex*’ ‘In the *Protestant Religion*’ – begins its narrative by giving a name to one of the ‘Atheistical Philosophers’ only hinted at in the *Advice*. This comes as part of an extended account of a society in which moral and gender boundaries have been eroded by bad reading habits. Young women, we are told, have thrown down the bible in favour of the ‘extravagancies of *Romance-Amours*’, which are not only ‘*daily read*, but almost hourly *practised*; and *Women act* more than *Romances can write*’ (Anonymous 1688a, 4). Meanwhile, young men are avidly reading the materialistic philosophies of ‘*Mr. Hobbes*’, shaping their lives under the belief that they are ‘*all bodies*, and ... *no souls*’ (*ibid.*). This results in sexually excessive desire, and with that excessive desire comes a challenge to masculine as well as national/racial boundaries:

the Eastern Country-Laws allow not with more freedom *plurality of Wives*, than our new English Customs admit *plurality of Mistresses* ... the *Liberty* of our men *exceeds* theirs: for they are permitted no more *Wives* than they can well *keep*, but ours allow themselves as many *Mistresses* as they can any way *get*. (5)

From its anti-Hobbesian polemic, its scenes of outlaw liberty and appetites, *A Letter* turns to an extended discussion of the character ‘of *Papists*’, and the text’s narrator speaks at length about their ‘*ignorance and superstition*’, and how that religion is, like the ‘*Romance-Amours*’ and the books of ‘*Mr. Hobbes*’, lacking in ‘*reason or belief*’ (10–11). But as this part of the narrative develops, the text’s motives and agendas become murkier; indeed, in conclusion, *A Letter* will stage a U-turn. Its narrator works himself into such a state of heightened ‘*anger*’ over ‘the *Papists*’ that he decides it best to simply offer them ‘*Charity*’, as well as reconciliation, extending, in the end, the ‘*bond of peace*’ (47–48). While the tone seems straightforwardly moralistic throughout, *A Letter*’s ending reveals the text’s playful complexity in an ironic reversal of expectations, a process that is typical of ‘the Protean flux’ that Jocelyn Harris associates with ‘Hobbiist attitudes’, and with the writings of Libertine poets who participated in shaping them (1990, 328). In other words, the ending undermines (and may be intended to undermine) the simple moral condemnations that it simultaneously sets up, an ambiguous quality that, once spotted, starts to make itself known elsewhere within the Houghton *Sammelband*.

Responding to Protestant polemical writings that used the legend of a female pope ‘as conclusive proof of papal depravity’ (Freeman 2006, 63), *Pope Joan* of 1687 reviews a range of fake news stories related to ‘this *Androgyne*, or *Hermaphrodite*’ (Anonymous 1687b, 1) in the hopes of dispelling them, but in the process it is caught up in publicising the transgressions it seeks to contest, including the claim – laden with sodomical potential, and referenced twice – that when any Pope is ‘*first placed in the Porphyry-Chair*’ (14), which ‘hath an hole made’ to test whether the papal candidate is male, ‘his *Genitals*’ are vulgarly ‘*handled*’, and only ever ‘by the youngest Deacon’ (14). Seemingly confirming the ‘anti-Catholic association of Catholicism with paganism’ (Marotti 1999, 14), *Advice from a Catholick* pulls its proof for the existence of Purgatory from pre-Christian antiquity, including the ‘*Ægyptians*’, whose ‘*Opinion that Souls* were to be purg’d’ after death came largely from the fact that, in life, they were ‘*drench’d in the voluptuous Pleasures of the Flesh*’ (Anonymous 1687a, 3). Fleshly pleasures similarly preoccupy Anonymous’ *Rome’s Rarities*, which offers up a range of alleged debaucheries committed by England’s heretic ‘*Other*’, including sex between Catholic men, sex between men and young boys, between men and goats, dogs, and dead bodies; however, even here the text might not

be what it seems (1684, 154-156). There's the occasional assurance that the anonymous author will censor out the worst of the debaucheries – 'I'll leave off this filthy discourse' (30) – but this almost never happens. The text lingers over its vivid descriptions of 'Sodomy, Buggery, [and] Incest' (190), which might suggest that behind its easy moralism, and the ghoulishness of its anti-Catholic stereotypes, there is the potential for pornographic titillation. In places, there might be hints of wink-wink humour, maybe even the possibility of a camp sort of parody, if camp is to see 'everything in quotation marks' (Sontag 1964, 519). This seems especially apparent in the text's self-conscious overstatement of modesty: 'I blush to think', writes the anonymous author, 'that I have offended the chaste ears of the Protestant Reader by harping so long upon such loose Notes', and he wonders if he has made the reader's 'Cheeks glow at the rehearsal of such immodest actions' (1684, 30).

How might our 'Cheeks glow' when we read the 'loose Notes' of *The Life of H.H.* alongside the likes of the *Advice, Young Lady, Rome's Rarities*, or the *History of Pope Joan*? What meanings are rehearsed when *Pope Joan* comes to an end, and, following on in this volume's organisational sequence, *The Life* begins its story of Hills' bigamy amongst the Particular Baptists? Or when *The Life* reaches its 'FINIS', and the *Young Lady's* account of the 'Romance-Amours', 'Mr. Hobbes', and a 'plurality of wives' takes to the stage?

In the introduction, I suggested that *The Life* undercuts Hills' repudiation of his 'detestable wickedness' (Anonymous 1688b, 43) by setting those past articulations in juxtaposition with competing evidence, primarily in the form of its concluding document, 'A View', where 'H.H.' is described as an 'Envious, Plodding, Treacherous, Sycophant' (54). The documents that make up 'The PRODIGAL Returned' set up moral frameworks that are, in the end, rendered ironic by *The Life's* editorial interventions. As a package, the Houghton *Sammelband* is governed by similar logics of reversal, in that it binds together texts that give off different kinds of moral signals, texts that seem to pull strongly against their own claims, sometimes even to comic effect. If, to quote Jeffrey Todd Knight, 'How we collate is how we think' (2013, 184), then the thinking here might be governed by the queer pleasures of contrariness, which is articulated in terms of transgressed boundaries between, amongst other things, 'bodies' and 'souls', the fictions of 'Romance' and the philosophies of 'Hobbes', as well as in terms of sexual phobias/fantasies that are reinforced and at the same time denied.

And pleasure, too, in the juxtaposition of Hills' 'Ranter sexuality' alongside other forms of sexual nonconformity. The Houghton *Sammelband* is striking not only because it binds *The Life* – and therefore Hills' Particular Baptist confession – in juxtaposition with 'Tracts' related to Catholicism and its early-modern representations, but because in doing so Hills' cross-sex sins are provocatively cross-hatched with anti-Catholic descriptions of 'Sodomy, Buggery, [and] Incest'. Jeffrey Masten's work on the circulation history of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592), and that play's appearance within a *Sammelband* held at the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich, alludes to a similar scenario. Masten asks why the Zentralbibliothek's copy of *Edward II* was not bound alongside 'other plays, or tragedies', but rather with a 'theological tract that marches squarely into the raging intra-Protestant controversy over whether it is permissible to execute heretics, and a text on the "reign of Turks" and other "oriental" religions' (2012, 17-18). Masten considers how the play's complex mingling of same-sex desire and Reformation politics can be better understood when read in relation to the 'habitat' of this *Sammelband* (17), concluding that it at least 'underlines that ... what we might call "homosexuality" exists in a complex network of legal, religious, ethnic and national discourses' (19). By the same token, the Houghton's *Sammelband* attests to an analogous phenomenon: in making Hills' heterosexual sin of bigamy a material bedfellow of the 'Sodomite', of 'Eastern Country-Laws',

of the '*Androgyne*, or *Hermaphrodite*', it underlines that what we might call 'Ranter sexuality' exists in a discursive relation with other sexual/confessional/racialized identities and practices deemed outside the bounds of early modern propriety.

In many respects, this is not an especially new point. Valerie Traub has, for example, written on the 'flexible and capacious' nature of pre-modern sexuality as a 'category of analysis' (2010, 251), and Traub points out that if there has been a recent trend in histories of early modern sexuality, then it has been 'toward the slippery borders and uneven edges where erotic desires, bodies, and acts rub up against other bodies, fields of signification, and social concerns' (253). However, if scholars of the period are cognizant of what Stephen Guy-Bray terms 'the rhetoricity of sexuality' (2013, 200), and the mediating role that language plays in the nebulous constructions of pre-modern sex, there remains room to consider how these mediations were playing out at the level of the material text. Back in 1996, Margreta de Grazia gestured towards this issue when she asked whether 'the new mechanics of the press', which brought with it not fixity but 'malleability and provisionality', was 'attended by transformations in how thought and sex were construed' (2005, 91). We might extend this point to ask how pre-modern practices of textual compilation and binding produced, augmented, and refracted knowledges of sexual activity; how, when early modern books 'rub up against' other books in the 'habitat' of the user-generated *Sammelbände*, 'the instability of sexual signification' that Traub examines (2010, 254) is made, remade, and passed down to us.

4. *Wax Impressions: British Library, 612.b.25.[4.]*

The British Library's copy of *The Life of H.H.* (BL 612.b.25.[4.]) is the only surviving witness that is currently individually bound, although it does appear to have previously existed as part of a *Sammelband*.¹⁰ According to the British Library's online catalogue, this copy was formerly owned by the Anglo-Irish naturalist, physician, slaveowner and celebrity bibliophile, Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753). Figure 1 shows the title page of the British Library's copy, which bears Sloane's purchase code ('g 384'); reference to this purchase appears on the recto side of folio 185 in Sloane's library catalogue (Sloane ms 3972C vol 1), and following Amy Blakeway's analysis of the chronology of acquisition in this record, it seems likely that Sloane acquired his copy of *The Life* in about 1696 (2011, 9). It may have been Sloane or one of his assistants who manually reworked this copy's title to make the identity of its biographical subject, as well as his profession, more unequivocal: 'THE | LIFE | OF | H. H[ills] | [*Printer*]'. That said, the figure who, with pen in hand, added 'ills' and '*Printer*' to this title page may have been someone else, because there are other hands at work on this title page. For instance, running up the right-hand margin of the title page, and written in a different hand to the one that left the 'g. 384' code, we find the following statement: 'This sealed in the 3 tons tavern Ludgatt Hill for a Bottle of Claret'. The book's foredge has been trimmed – this may have happened in 1947, when BL 612.b.25.[4.] was rebound as a single volume in a British Museum binding – and this appears to have cut away more evidence of marginalia, perhaps the commenter's name; however, in lieu of an autograph we do have, on the top-right corner of the same page, a red wax seal featuring a personalised heraldic image, which has been impressed by a signet stamp, probably a ring (Figure 8).

¹⁰ For instance, this volume's call number (BL 612.b.25.[4.]) indicates that it was once fourth in a tract volume. We are well aware of the nineteenth-century practice of breaking apart *Sammelbände* and individually rebinding their component parts (see Knight 2013), and this scenario probably helps to account for the current situation of BL 612.b.25.[4.].



Figure 8 – A red wax seal, impressed upon the upper right-hand corner of the British Library's copy of *The Life of H.H.* (1688). From the British Library Collection: BL 612.b.25(4.), main title page (detail). Courtesy of the British Library

If, to quote Donald F. McKenzie, 'forms effect meaning' (1999, 13), what meanings are generated here by the presence of solidified red wax? Reading the wax impression alongside the accompanying manuscript note ('This sealed in the 3 tons tavern Ludgatt Hill for a Bottle of Claret') is suggestive of a deal being done over a book in a Ludgate tavern, in which a wax seal has been facetiously attached to a book in the contexts of a strong drink, but who 'sealed' BL 612.b.25.[4.], and why?

It may be the case that the figure behind the wax is the 'T.S.' mentioned in *The Life's* imprint; however, despite the fact that the personalised heraldic image imbedded within the red wax is still quite legible, I have yet to identify the agent who made this wax impression, whether that was 'T.S.' or someone else. The design of the seal does indicate that its owner was a member of the landed gentry, and possibly above the rank of gentleman;¹¹ it is also possible that this figure had connections with the Stanleys of Lathom. The first and fourth quarters of the shield actually derive from the Lathom family's arms, and the crest, which shows a motif featuring an eagle with wings disclosed beneath what appears to be a swaddled baby, is again consistent with the Lordship of Lathom, which was inherited by the Stanleys in 1385 – subsequently Earls of Derby from 1485. On the basis of the design of the second and third quarters of the shield, which feature three diagonal stripes (or 'bends'), Andrew C.G. Gray has posited (in private correspondence) that its owner may be a member of the Staffordshire Stanley branch; however, he cautions that this was a very common design in the period, and without tinctures our heraldic image remains very difficult to identify.¹² Consequently, the identity of the individual behind this seal has remained

¹¹ The helmet (or 'helm') design is facing to the dexter (or right) side of the chief, with its visor closed, which indicates that the owner was at least at the rank of esquire (i.e., the eldest son of a knight or peer).

¹² In private correspondence, Gray, Image Librarian for the Heraldry Society and *Heraldry Archive* Editor, has posited that it may be the arms of the Mayvesyn (or Malveysin) family of Ridware in Staffordshire, which

frustratingly out of reach. Clearly, Hills had made enemies in high places – in this instance it may have been a figure who was somewhere in the social and genealogical orbit of the Stanleys of Lathom – but who exactly that was, and how ‘T.S.’ got their hands on *The Prodigal* documents in order to reissue them, are issues that, for now, require further investigation.

Answering the ‘why?’ of this red wax seal is equally challenging, although it is a question that might help to shed a little more light on the ‘who?’ I have been unable to find examples of wax seals being attached to early modern printed books in this way. Typically, wax seals can be found on early modern letters, diplomatic documents, and even quire booklets, but this is usually in an administrative context. Early modern wax seals were conventionally affixed to documents as a means of securing them, although beyond this more practical function, pre-modern processes of sealing ‘were highly meaningful social acts’ (Whatley 2019, 1–2), serving as material emblems of closure, identification, and authentication – denoting, for example, that the contents of a document had been ‘read and sanctioned’ by the bearer of the seal (Daybell 2012, 107). If we were to read our 1688 example in the contexts of convention and precedent, then BL 612.b.25.[4.] may have been sealed to confirm the identification of ‘H.H.’ (The title-page insertion of ‘ills’ and ‘Printer’ works, in a similar sense, to bring to the text’s paratextual surface clearer signposts about Hills’ identity and his professional status.) Additionally, the seal may have been affixed as a symbolic act of closure, an explanation that seems especially plausible when *The Life* is read within the contexts from which it first emerged.

Hills’ conversion to Catholicism in the mid-1680s, and his subsequent work as official printer to James II’s Catholic court, made him a target for Williamite supporters. Given its associations with James’ polytheizing campaign on behalf of English Catholicism, Hills’ Blackfriars printing house became a particular *foci* for anti-Catholic hostility. So much so that when news leaked that James II had fled for France on the evening of 11 December 1688, sparking anti-Catholic rioting across the City of London, Hills’ ‘Popish Printing House’ was set on fire and ultimately ‘demolish’d’, destroying his ‘Presses, and many Reams of Paper and Books’ (Anonymous 1688c). Hills’ printing house had been subject to several coordinated attacks in the weeks that led up to its eventual destruction, including on 13 November 1688, when a ‘Rabble’ made up of ‘1000’ apprentices, labourers, and disbanded soldiers ‘broke [Hills’] Windowes’ and ‘threatened’ his life (SP 44/97, 15). By this point, Hills had recognised that the game was up: he signed his last will and testament on 10 December 1688 (PROB 11/398/114, 44–45), the day after he was granted a travel pass (SP 44/338, 159), which enabled Hills to leave London for mainland Europe, where he joined James’ exiled court in Saint-Omer in the Pas-de-Calais region of northern France; within the year he would be dead. Presuming that *The Life* was published at around the time that William of Orange landed in southwest England on 5 November 1688, one scenario is that it was issued as part of a broader campaign to drum up support for attacks on the infrastructures of James II’s Catholic court, which in this instance involved smearing the name of James’ royal printer by raising the ghosts of an old sexual scandal ‘*betwixt Him and the Taylors Wife in Black-friars*’. And if one of the significations of pre-modern sealing was closure, then the sealing of BL 612.b.25.[4.] could indicate that this smear campaign had worked, that James’ printer, ‘Henry Hills’, was, to quote from one contemporary satirical tract, finally ‘*out of the way*’ (Anonymous 1689, broadside).

featured *Gules three bendlets Argent*, or Red with three Silver diagonal stripes. We know that an heiress of the Mayvesyns – Elizabeth (née Cawarden, b. 1577) – married a Stanley of Pipe Ridware, and so as Gray suggests, the owner of this seal may be a member of this Staffordshire Stanley branch. My thanks to Gray for his kind assistance in reading and understanding this seal.

The ‘3 tons tavern Ludgatt Hill’ was apparently the perfect venue to hatch a covert scheme and to celebrate its success over a glass of claret. In his anti-Whig satire, *Familiar and Courtly Letters* (1701), Thomas Brown (1663-1704) records that ‘mean’ and ‘obscure’ Whig propagandists were known to ‘drink a Glass of Wine’ at the ‘*Three Tuns* upon *Ludgate-Hill*’ (Brown, 133). In 1704, the former secret agent, imposter, and anti-Jacobite conspirator, William Fuller (1670-1733), claimed to have ‘had several meetings ... at the *Three-Tuns* on *Ludgate-hill*’, accompanied, he tells us, by a ‘Cabal’ of Whiggish conspirators (22). This reputation was also acknowledged by the Presbyterian minister, Benjamin Bennet (c. 1674-1726), who complained that when ‘a Company of Lords and Gentlemen’ gathered to honour ‘the Memory of King William [III]’ at ‘the *Three Tuns*’ in 1717, their choice of location immediately brought about talk of an imminent ‘Plot’ in the popular press (1717, 395). Bennet’s point was to dispel such aspersions as fake news, but with the title page to the British Library’s copy of *The Life* standing in as a case in point, it’s possible that the ‘Three Tuns’ dodgy reputation as a place of conspiratorial intrigue amongst Whig factions and anti-Jacobite plotters was well earned.

As an outlier in a culture where the sealing of cheaply-made printed books doesn’t seem to have been the norm, and as a little material cue that has the potential to send us down a conspiratorial rabbit hole, our red wax seal is a queer little thing. For a start, the title page of BL 612.b.25.[4.] has the effect of making us think about *The Life* in terms of material stuff that might otherwise seem extraneous to it. These might include the traces of its previous *Sammelband* organisation, but it also extends out to include the ‘impressing’ technology of a signet stamp (Newman 2019, 5), a block of red sealing-wax ready to be softened by heat, and ‘a Bottle of Claret’ ready to be imbibed. Quite unexpectedly, the material traces impressed into the title page of BL 612.b.25.[4.] tip us over into a world of wax and booze and Ludgate taverns with dubious reputations, and in doing so this copy of *The Life* helps to clarify what Jason Scott-Warren means when he talks of the early modern book’s ‘situatedness’ as ‘an object among other objects’ (2019, 251). And situated, too, as an object of a particular time and a particular place, which has been mediated by particular agents who had particular political agendas in mind. Indeed, the tendency to assume that *The Prodigal* was reproduced in 1688 ‘Without comment or amplification’ (Lynch 2007, 305) comes unstuck when we allow wax to enter into the picture. “[W]ax can hold a shape’, but as Lynn Maxwell reminds us, it can ‘also be softened and made malleable, melted and re-formed’ (2019, 45); malleability is a key property of wax as an ‘impressible’ technology since ‘wax can always melt’ (2016, 455). (If we were to put a flame to our red wax seal then it might still yield itself to new material configurations and shapes. All that’s required is a bit of heat, and our motif of an eagle and a swaddled baby might well be effaced and supplanted by a different impression). Wax introduces a semantics of malleability, and therefore of provisionality, and this provides a useful context as we approach and attempt to interpret Hills’ *Prodigal Returned* and its present situation in *The Life of H.H.*

Even some of the most basic facts of the case melt away when we apply enough contextual heat. Smith, for example, calls Hills’ ‘autobiographical work’ ‘*The Prodigal Returned*’ because that is the title given to it when those ‘*Original*’ documents were reprinted as *The Life* in 1688; yet in 1660, the anonymous author of an anti-Baptist tract would give Hills’ ‘autobiographical work’ a slightly different title: ‘*The Prodigal son returning to his Fathers house*’ (Anonymous 1660, broadside). The different title formulations may seem trivial, but the words ‘*Returned*’ and ‘*returning*’ do carry with them distinct connotations, with the former suggesting a completed act, while the latter suggests a movement that is incomplete, and it has a here-and-now quality to it. The present participle ‘*returning*’ is actually more appropriate as a way of framing the first-person documents reproduced in *The Life*, since Hills’ self-construction is marked by

hesitancy, and 'The PRODIGAL', at least as it survives to us, reads as if it is uncertain of its outcome. For instance, Hills tries to apply the Prodigal Son parable (Luke 15:11-32), with its departure-and-return structure, to his own situation as a prisoner in the Fleet, but this analogy comes unstuck. Unlike the Prodigal Son of the parable, who, having fallen into self-inflicted destitution, is welcomed back into his father's house, Hills ends his 'PRODIGAL Returned' as an outcast, 'having not as yet been entertained again' by members of Kiffen's Particular Baptist congregation (Anonymous 1688b, 39). Kiffen and King's prelims seem to have been designed to ease Hills' return to the Particular Baptist community, but Hills ends his 'PRODIGAL Returned' in an anguished state of 'longing', still waiting 'to re-injoy ... fellowship and communion with the Saints' (40). The open-endedness implied by the word '*returning*' is therefore useful because it suggests that whatever *The Prodigal* was, it may not have been designed to be read as fixed and finalised, but rather as evidence of a more malleable and provisional self that was still in the process of taking on a new form.

The provisional nature of Hills' spiritual experiences finds itself replicated at a material level, since changes were made to the 1684 broadside, *A View*, when it was re-formed to become the conclusion to *The Life*. So, 'he writ his *Prodigal Return'd*' in the broadside of 1684 becomes 'he writ this Book the *Prodigal Return'd*' in *The Life's* version of 1688 (49), the broadside pointing to the existence of an original outside of itself, while the reprint points to the text readers have already encountered while reading *The Life* compilation. Interpolated passages not included in the 1684 broadside include the suggestion that in 1659 Hills had an unnamed royalist printer taken into custody for printing material in support of Charles II's restoration, and it quotes him as 'saying, *What Print in Right of the King, sure we have had King enough already*' (52). *The Life* has also integrated a new conclusion into the document of *A View*, stating that the anonymous 'Publisher' – presumably the 'T.S.' of the text's imprint – 'will prove to *H.H.s.* face' that the accusations the work presents against him are true, but only 'if [Hills] hath the confidence to deny any of them' (54). These final interpolated words goad Hills into a face-to-face encounter, suggesting that this is an on-going story, one that might take us off the page, out of the book, and into a waxy world that's quite apart from the one that we think we should be getting when we read *The Prodigal Returned* (or '*returning*').

5. Conclusions: Proteus and the She-Bear

What, then, are we reading when we say we are reading *The Prodigal Returned*? Open the Bodleian's Arch. H d.40 – a nineteenth-century 'proposed reprint' that contains within it fragments torn from a 1688 copy of *The Life* – and the answer is that it's a bibliographical object made up of multiple textual parts cut from pre-existing sources; turn to the manuscript notes on the proposed title page, and the answer might really be that it is an object that we have not yet 'met with'. The two *Sammelbände* I discussed have introduced other answers: it is a text that needs to be read in relation to others rather than in isolation; it is a text that asks us to conceptualize Hills' 'Ranter sexuality' in relational terms and on a queerer kind of continuum. BL 612.b.25. [4.] reminds us that our access to the documents of *The Prodigal* are shaped by their publication contexts in 1688 rather than 1650-1651, and that Hills' 'puritanical emanation' might be better understood as a set of mobile texts that were materially remixed and remodelled, and all within peopled environments that appear to have been governed by embodied interactions with material objects, from books to signet stamps and through to wax.

To put all this another way, that term 'embedded' just won't do, because it conjures the image of the printed book as a fixed, monolithic mass; as a case study, *The Life* calls on us to

reach for other images, for other metaphors, which might together resist the ‘neatening and straightening’ (2024, 152) that Malcolm Noble and Sarah Pyke associate with the discipline of bibliography. Wax – a material that ‘is queer insofar as it ... refuses to maintain one legible shape’ (Maxwell 2019, 25-26) – is one, but *The Life* does offer others. In its concluding document, ‘*A View*’, Hills is described as ‘a very *Proteus*’ (54), an analogy that links his turncoatism to the Greek ‘god of shapes’ (Marlowe 2013, 1, 4, 412), who transmuted himself into a strange variety of appearances to avoid capture, and a figure whose name finds its etymological root in the phrase ‘the first’, meaning the beginning, the ever-recurring start of something new. Versatile, mutable, and capable of assuming many forms: what applies to Greek gods of the sea and early modern printers can just as easily apply to the books that seek to represent them. After all, the multiform Proteus – whose presence in early modern literatures signals ‘dissolved’ boundaries between sex and gender (Knowles 2003, 680), and ‘queer’ forms of identity making (Starks 2020, 272) – does resonate with the ways in which Hills’ ‘*Ranter sexuality*’ has been mediated and remediated by the material forms that have transmitted it, processes that have produced multiplicity and variability, as well as lapses and gaps.

If Proteus won’t do, we can look for metaphors outside of *The Life*, including those that can be found in an anonymous secret history narrative of 1733, *Revolution Politicks*, in which Hills’ power of reinvention is linked not to the artfully ambiguous Proteus, but to the Classical topos of the she-bear, whose ferocious sexual appetites were thought to make her give birth to a formless, eyeless, hairless lump of flesh, which she would then have to lick into the shape of a cub by way of her own bodily fluids: ‘*Henry Hills* ... had a Way (as they vulgarly call it) by licking himself whole again’ (Anonymous 1733, 37). Of course, this is hardly a neutral representation, but it remains a wonderful image, since it queers an already queer notion of generation: to quote Michael Bristol, the she-bear ‘literally makes babies ... without the cooperation of or the assistance of an inseminating male’, and she therefore embodies an ‘inversion of the normal birth process’ (1991, 160). From the perspective of the pre-modern books I have been reading, Hills’ status as a self-licking she-bear offers another metaphor for us to think about books, bodies, and lives that don’t enter into the world fully formed, but are licked and re-licked into a variety of shapes across time and space. In place of the ‘heteronormative’ reproductive metaphors that associated printing with parenting (Maguire and Smith 2019, 296), and that located print’s ideality within the confines of patrilineal procreation, the she-bear guides us towards nonconforming books within books, copies within copies, and texts that take their shape from existing matter, and all the while, *The Life*’s promised ‘*Original*’ emerges as the least interesting thing we could look for.

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