Beyond the book: recycling print in early modern England
Amherst, 25 April 2024

Thank you to Jane and Adam and Liz for inviting me and hosting me so generously. Early in my career I published a piece in *ELR* about almanacs – I can still vividly remember opening up, as a just-beginning academic, a letter of acceptance from Arthur Kinney, which seemed even happier for it being typed on an old school type-writer – and I published another about George Herbert and Little Gidding a few years' later. *ELR* has been a crucial landmark for me in our field. So I'm delighted to be here.

I'm going to talk today about print culture in early modern England, and in particular what we might call the reycled lives of print. I'm interested today in sheets and pages of written texts that live on in surprising places, often in the form of fragments or pieces, sheltering within larger hosts, serving functions we might not anticipate.

We're used to the printed word – the plays of Shakespeare; the poetry of Donne – coming at us in the form of the book. I want to suggest other ways in which the printed word was present in culture.

I'd like to survey this culture and suggest it's an important but often overlooked aspect of early modern literary culture that's worth thinking about. I'm going to move between a series of quite particular examples, but I hope also to think more broadly about how this culture of piece, fragment, waste, after-life, can help us think about some of the terms that underpin what we do as literary critics.

So: pieces of print, living on in places we might nto expect. What do I mean by that? Well, one crucial aspect of early modern book-making is the practice of using parts of earlier texts in the binding of new books: printed waste used to materially constitute and sustain the physical book, in terms of binding supports, or paste boards, or endleaves. Sometimes the waste might come from books that were once in circulation, books that have been torn or cut up (this is sometimes called 'binder's waste'); or it might come from what is often called 'printer's waste', the unused sheets lying about a print office that never had a life in finished book form: proof sheets, for example, or cancelled pages, or used frisket sheets, or pages carrying serious misprints, known as 'spoils', often unfolded since they never constituted a book. Crucially, at least for me, the waste often remains legible.

This [**slide**] is a book by the Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University, Edward Lively, printed in 1597, as *A true chronologie of the times of the Persian monarchie, and after to the*

destruction of Ierusalem by the Romanes. When we open the Bodleian copy of Lively's book, we see not only a title-page, but, facing that, parts of another printed text used as endpapers. The waste comes from the second quarto of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*: a book we may well know, a book literary critics use to organise histories of the period, a book that kicked off the mania for sonnet sequences in late Elizabethan England, of which Shakespeare's is only one, rather belated example. Facing Lively's title page is the top half of Sidney's sig. C2, sideways left to right, with the last 3 lines of what modern editors call sonnet 39 and all of sonnet 40: 'As good to write, as for to lie and groane'.

To spend any time in an archive of early modern books means confronting these kinds of hybrids – where [**slide**] sheets from a 1620 King James Bible might support a copy of Francis Bacon's *History of Henry VII*; or [**slide**] a Royalist pamphlet from Oxford in 1645 is bound in unsold sheets made from a different pamphlet printed in London in 1656; or [**slide**] a copy of Shakespeare's First Folio is bound with late-15th century sheets from Cicero. You can see the early printed text on the top left of the boards: sheets from a printed but never folded, and never bound, copy of Cicero, printed in 1485, but legible as a kind of silent, or nearly-silent, partner to Shakespeare's book – helping Shakespeare's work reach its readers.

These are just a few of the thousands and thousands of printed sheets carried inside other books and they represent a hitherto largely unexplored archive of what we might call de-centred or re-purposed or even spectral print: printed writing coming at us not in the form of the bound book, not in the central lane of reading, but in fragments, supporting other books.

Here's another [**slide**], rather spectacular, example. Where are we? We're not inside a book – we're inside a lute, a 17th-century lute, as it's repaired at a workshop in early modern Padova. You can perhaps see that the thin, 1.5mm ribs that structure the inside of the instrument, are covered with pieces of printed paper – a culture Sebastian Kirsch has recently studied between the 16th and the 19th centuries.[1] Lutes were high status objects, particularly those made by the most famous lute makers in Bologna, Venice, Padua, and Lyon, and – like many of those books that carry scraps of print – tended to have long lives, stretching across many centuries. They were also fragile, and scraps of paper and parchment were crucial in reinforcing joints and gluing cracks.

[1] Sebastian Kirsch, 'Fragments of Paper and Parchment in Musical Instruments', in *Quaerendo* 53.2 (2023), 91-120.

As a result, we witness a little drama of dependency and preservation we'll see elsewhere: the waste paper is attached to a more durable, illustrious object, and so the scraps endure, and lutes become carriers of pieces of text.

One way to think of books carrying fragments and lutes holding scraps is as a kind of scattered, distributed archive of print. Sometimes the fragments are texts we would very much want to read – like a sheet from a 1619 *King Lear*, for example, used as binding in a later German theological work, or a proof sheet of Milton's *Lycidas*, say, or of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, marked with corrections. But more often waste fragments come from the kind of short shelf-life texts we might expect, like last year's almanac.

Certainly early modern writers were themselves aware of this culture, and often saw the metaphorical or symbolic power in these cases of reuse and accidental endurance.

[**slide**] The seventeenth-century biographer and antiquarian John Aubrey, famous for his brief lives of the cast of learned eccentrics he saw around him, also wrote his own short autobiography and scribbled across the top of the manuscript containing his own life 'to be interponed as a sheet of wast-paper only in the binding of a Booke.' To be 'interponed' means to be placed between: Aubrey is imagining his written life being used as waste to strengthen the physical construction of another book. Maybe this is a straightforward statement of modesty; but Aubrey was surely aware also that to bind one's *Life* in another book means not only assuming an obscured second place; it also means helping to instantiate that other book, supporting another book into being; it means placing one's text alongside another, in sociable company, with the possibility of dialogue and relationship; and it means, crucially, being preserved. There are lots of other instances of literary writers reflecting on this culture – Thomas Nashe, John Taylor, John Donne, and John Dryden were all deeply interested in this way literary works might become material props – in the ways, as Nashe puts it, that the pages from his *Unfortunate Traveller* might end up wrapping velvet slippers. I can say more on this in the questions, if you'd like.

For now I want to think in a more sustained way about one particular space where these kinds of recyclings took place. And that's boxes.

Before I dig in to some specific examples, it's worth reminding ourself of what Lucy Razzall has recently written about, and that is, the imaginative

power of boxes in early modern culture – their hold over the imagination, even as they served sometimes humdrum administrative purposes – with connotations of secrecy and revelation, of trespass, of the promise of imminent revelation, a revelation that *remains just beyond our grasp*. This is a culture deeply familiar with Pandora, in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, who couldn't resist opening the box left in her care and so released curses upon mankind – death and sickness – leaving only Hope inside; and Psyche, Greek goddess of the soul, set multiple trials by a vengeful Aphrodite, the 4th of which tasked Psyche with travelling to the Underworld with a golden box to retrieve a piece of Persephone's beauty.[2] Like Pandora, Psyche is instructed to not open the box; the pull of the story is in part about the sheer imaginative power of a box that must not be opened. Persephone fills it with her beauty and on Psyche's journey back, as she re-enters daylight, [**slide**] Psyche – refracted here through Waterhouse's pre-Raphaelite aesthetic – can't resist. What escapes is not beauty but a black, crawling sleep – 'infernal and Stygian' – and Psyche slumps into a deathlike stupor.

But boxes were also boxes. [**slide**] Here's a first example of the kind of interaction I want to think about. This is a box held today at Nottingham University Library: a small box, 20cm by 28 by 8, made of thin wood covered externally with leather and tied with a cord – lightweight – and labelled, 'Writings concerning the purchase of lands of William Goron at Middleton'.[3] When we open the lid [**slide**] we're confronted first with a lovely, miscellaneous stack of documents on paper and vellum relating to land sales in several villages in Warwickshire between about 1615 and 1700 – like a real-life version of something Edward Collier might have painted in the 1670s and '80s, in his great letter rack paintings. Behind the documents, [**slide**] the box itself is lined with printed sheets which cover the surface and also form a rudimentary hinge for the lid. We can, if we're inclined, identify these sheets – this process of matching a fragment with a title, once miraculous, or fortuitous, is now usually easy via Early English Books Online. These sheets come from *His Majesties Royal Rights and Prerogatives Asserted, Against Papal Usurpations, and all other Anti-Monarchical Attempts and Practices*, by John Brydall, printed for George Dawes in 1680. The book was to be sold at Dawes' shop in Chancery Lane, and many copies would have found their way into the hands of the chattering lawyers spilling out of Lincoln's Inn, just yards away. But the sheets we're looking at here never made it into book form, and so never reached the lawyers; and

[2] The subject of books 4 to 6 of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, written in the 2nd century CE.

[3] Nottingham University Library, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections Mi Da 105/1-12.

someone with access to a print shop, looking, presumably, to use up unwanted left-overs, repurposed them to line the box, probably thinking little of the juxtaposition of this anti-papal work on royal prerogative, and the documents detailing the purchase of lands in villages like Middleton and Kingsbury.

[**slide**] You can see here a page from EEBO, on the right – page 133, in a section describing the reverence 'Heathens' had for their leaders – and on the left its placement, as part of an unfolded sheet, in the box, the text becoming more and more material as we move down the page until the words about royal sovereignty become illegible – the last line we can read is 'what a shame it is, for those Christians who', before the text gathers itself into a hinge.

We've probably not read John Brydall's anti-Catholic pamphlet, but here's [**slide**] a second example involving more familiar words. This is what archivists call a 'coffret' – which means a small coffer – and it served once as a document box, with a metal handle and a locking clasp, made of wood and covered in leather, leather which is tooled in gilt on the front and lid, and blind (meaning: without gold) on the sides and back. Coffrets like this were used for storing letters, books, documents, valuables, sometimes relics, often at home but also – that handle suggests – while travelling. The interior [**slide**] has been lined with printed sheets – quite carefully, [**slide**] including the lips and edges. These printed sheets come from editions of Horace and Virgil, [**slide**] in English and Latin, sheets printed by Joseph Davidson at the Angel in Poultry: Horace's Odes from 1742-3, and The Works of Virgil from 1743.

I think an object like this is fascinating because all kinds of questions spring up about *why these sheets,* and *what was the connection between the box owner and the printer,* and *was there a link between were the documents kept in this box and the contents of these classical epics?* But before we even get to *those* questions, I'm struck by just how non-bookish Virgil is, here: not folded, not bound, not a codex in a library or a tome on a desk but words coming at us in shards, from different angles, like overheard conversations, without the spatial logic of the book. And it's worth stressing just how common this way of encountering text was: text reached readers all the time in this recycled, non-book form.

Now in some ways there are parallels between the form of the book, and the form of the box. This box's tooled leather covering [**slide**] – you can see it here, with its very bookish borders made by rolls running round the edges, and its stamped floral centre piece – draws on the same skills used to bind quartos and folios. But still it's a different thing, to encounter Virgil in the lining of a document box.

What did early modern readers do with this sort of proposition? This is a fragment of Book 8 of the Aeneid, [**slide**] where Venus persuades Vulcan to order his workers, the Cyclops, toiling inside Etna, to stop making thunderbolts and instead forge weapons and armour for Aeneas. [**slide**] 'Brass and Mines of Gold in Rivulets flow;' we read, half-way down on the right, in the English translation, 'and wounding Steel in the capacious Furnace melts.' But then the narrative is interrupted – just as we get to 'A spacious Shield they form', the fixture from the clasp breaks through the lid, suspending the story. We can read fragments – 'The Cave groans'; 'griping Pincers turn' – but the narrative doesn't pick up for another few lines.

Did early modern men and women pause to read this page? Do these sheets still have literary power, is this still a literary text, or are they only material supports? Is this still Virgil, or is this is just the lining of a box?

One way to answer that question is to recall an earlier, late medieval culture in which boxes were *purposefully lined with important words to read*. [**slide**] Here is a 15th-century, French Gothic book-box (or coffer), bought by the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 2017. It's made of wood with a leather covering and metal fittings, and it has leather straps suggesting it was carried around – that it was a mobile thing. [**slide**] Inside there is a large devotional woodcut pasted on the lid of the coffer: [**slide**] a woodcut of God, together with a Latin prayer,[4] hand-coloured, which seems to have come from a liturgical book printed in Paris in 1491. So: a box lined with woodblock print – but a devotional image, rather than recycled poetry. The woodcut might have served as a kind of protective presence to the contents of the box (perhaps it held money, or legal documents, or medicine), or it might have *marked out* the contents of the box as religious (maybe the box held a Book of Hours, or a rosary). But what seems certain is that the coffer is *both utilitarian* – it's a box to hold and protect texts or objects – but it's also *overtly ideological* – the representation of God infusing the wood and the leather and the hinges with a meaning beyond the practical.

The owner of that coffret lined with Horace and Virgil was likely to be familiar with this this earlier, late-medieval tradition of devotional, box-lining woodcuts, and that earlier tradition would incline them to pause, and read -- or at least *notice*.

And I think perhaps 'noticing' is a good word. Another possible answer to that question, [**slide**] *did early moderns read these Virgilian sheets*, is to suggest that the text here is *flickering between states* – between the literary and the material: still legible, *just about*, as a story

[4] A chant for the Feast of the Trinity beginning: "*Te inuocamus, te laudamus, te benedicimus* …"

of Aeneas' preparations for battle, but *primarily* doing the very *non-literary job* of patching up this box, helping it hold together as an object to support some other documents – the story of Aeneas becoming the equivalent of *background noise* while the business of administration, correspondence, legal deeds, occupies the foreground. Virgil's poem is briefly glimpsed while the main subject (the list of rents, the letter from a friend) is elsewhere. The history of reading hasn't been very good at accounting for this kind of experience: the reading of texts *at the edge of our vision*, the stumbling on one text while looking at another: the broadside ballad glimpsed pinned to a wall as we walk past; the title-pages held on posts advertising plays; the rows of books laid out on stalls around St Paul's Churchyard. When we read today, in 2024, we may think of reading as our *solitary immersement in a single book*, but that's not really what happens. We read surrounded by other texts, half-thinking about other things, and while we might imagine 'good' reading as the silencing of these other voices, in reality reading is always about the entangling of the book in front of us with all the other things going on within and around us. Reading is always about many texts at the same time; is always plural and, in that sense, necessarily unfocused and dispersed.

[**image**] This is a deeds box that came to Worcester College, Oxford, when it purchased lands from one Thomas Wrench in 1741, [**image w. name**] not long after the college's founding. The deeds it contained were dated 1703-5 [**image**] – they've been removed now, stored separately, meaning the box itself has become an item to be classified, stored, and examined on its own terms – no longer merely a carrier of content. We still have the key to the external lock. The box was lined with pages from a text by William Howell, printed in 1679, *Medulla Historiae Anglicanae: The Ancient and Present state of England* – a popular, duodecimo text, printed in at least 11 editions up to 1701, providing a chronicle of English kings. Zooming in, [**slide**] you can quite easily read portions of this narrative: here's a part relating to 1642, and the reign of Charles I, describing the battle of Edgehill and the loss of 6,000 lives.

But what's most striking here [**slide**] is the rather ghostly presence of loops and curves, covering but not quite obscuring the written text, and converting what had once been sheets of historical narrative intended for a duodecimo book into something at least partly decorative – the pages carrying now the shapes of flowers and stalks and leaves. Historians of print call this *damasking* – the name links the practice back to a kind of cloth associated with medieval Damascus, and it means the printing of ornamental patterns over already printed sheets. Damasking is often

linked with censorship. In 1673, the Bishop of London issued an order to 'Damask or obliterate whatsoever sheets you have seised of a Book, intitled Leviatan', and a servant of the Stationer's Company was paid 30 shillings for damasking 45 reams of the second edition of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*.[5] A ream at this point means 20 quires, or 480 sheets – so that's 21,600 sheets of Hobbes, bedecked and partially obscured with swirls and patterns.

But damasked papers were used also as decorative objects – the practice has a fascinating double connotation of censorship and ornament – and produced book covers, pattern sheets, and also early wallpaper— in 1911, workmen pulling off a plaster ceiling at church's College, Cambridge, found the beams and joists covered with sheets originally printed by Wynkyn de Worde (an Indulgence of Pope Julius II; a poem on the death of Henry VII) layered, on their reverse, with repeating patterns.[6]

Damasked papers turn up quite frequently in deed boxes, too, and that's what we're looking at here. The pattern isn't quite censorship, but it does designate that the sheets are no longer necessary – their textual comment beside the point.

There's a long history of printed texts being over-printed in this way to line deed boxes. [**image**] Here is one is from Coleridge Cottage, in Somerset: 18th-century sheets detailing legal cases which have been covered up by ornamental over-printing. [**image x2**] You can see here that tendency of over-printing to create, as it obscures, newly heightened points of focus and interest.

The text used in this Worcester College box is relatively obscure – it's not the kind of thing to get the literary reader's pulse racing. But sometimes boxes preserve rare texts, or texts we might otherwise know nothing about. [**slide**] This is a box from Christ Church College, Oxford. It's very light wood, covered with leather, labelled 'Dr Gardiner's writings concerning his exhibitions to Christ Church'. For more than three centuries it contained two documents describing a financial [**image**] relationship between the city of Hereford and Christ Church, from the mid-17th century, both with beautiful pendant wax seals. The box today [**image**] is bare wood, oddly fresh in appearance, as if it was made this year, and not some time 400 years ago – although if you're eagle-eyed,

[5] Fleming, 'Damask Papers', p. 181.
[6] Fleming, 'Damask Papers', p. 189, and christstreasures.blogspot.com/2018/03/christs-colleges-historic-wallpaper.html.

[**image**] you can see the traces of printed text. The box looks like this because in 2002, Christ Church archivists realised the lining was composed of fragments of three extremely rare pamphlets. And while today I suspect institutions would leave the waste in place, 20 years ago, in a different conservation paradigm, their scarcity prompted the college to employ specialist book-binder James Brockman to lift the fragments of printed text, separating out text and object. You can see the 3 lifted texts here.

[**slide**] There are 2 leaves from this pamphlet, *The Speech of the Queene of Sluts at her execution at Tyburn on Wednesday February 25, 1662,* published in London in 1663. Only two copies of this text are recorded in the English Short Title Catalogue.

[**slide**] There are fragments of 3 copies of the same sheet from *The character of a cruel big-chested broker* – there are no other copies of this pamphlet in catalogues of early printed works: this looks like all that remains of this work.

[**slide**] And there are parts of *Pond's Almanack* of 1659 – and this is the Bodleian's only copy.

All of these texts are extremely rare and demonstrate the way that recyclings of the kind I've been looking at might preserve texts we would not otherwise have: the boxes serve to catch and hold texts fluttering through the air at the time, and so register what was being read – often, as here, upending out sense of the period by showing us pamphlets we've never heard of.

I'm interested in the way these texts have been meticulously removed. Of course there's a powerful logic to this: the texts, hard to read in situ, are now available in a form we are used to, and we can read the fragments that survive. That makes sense, particularly when we are talking about the single surviving copy – as with the rather wonderfully titled *The character of a cruel big-chested broker*.

But the decision to remove the texts means we are quite dramatically tidying up, and even obscuring, the originally hybrid object, and the culture of messy recycling I've been talking about today – and that process of disaggregation (the glued-in fragments skilfully extracted) raises the very fundamental question of how far we should attend to texts in their original material circumstances, or whether we're tipping over into fetishizing a materiality that serves only to obstruct our reading.

If we look these texts up on Oxford's central library catalogue, SOLO, each text is recorded as a separate item in a manner that masks the original placement.

[**slide**] Here, for instance, is the record for one of those texts – Pond's Almanac for 1659. First there is the edition-level record, describing the pamphlet in an ideal wholeness. This is followed [**image**] by the copy-specific description of our Christ Church copy – a fragment of sheet B, it records, 'having never been folded and cut open, with only leaves A1, A4, A5 and A8 extant.'

If we look down to the provenance note, there is a description of a box of deeds with printed waste, although the relationship between this object and the printed text isn't clear.

The catalogue, in other words, tugs the printed fragment towards a bibliographical culture that is more whole, more bookish, more recognisable, tidier, more clearly literary, than the print culture in which these fragments of Pond actually circulated.

To express that visually, instead of something like *this* [**image**], we have *this* [**image**].

I want to say three brief final things in response to this question of the merits of attending to these texts in their original physical settings – in peering inside the lined box, rather than opening the folder.

The first is that this culture of printed waste and re-use suggests that texts often circulated in fragments, not wholes, and were often not autonomous works but were physically attached to other objects. Writers were aware of this, and wrote into this culture; readers experienced texts in this way. Of course, this wasn't true for all texts – and the coherent, bound book was a powerful form in early modern England. But if we are interested in how writing moved through the world in early modern England, in the broadest sense, then we should avoid being too tidily bookish in our conception of texts. We might think of this culture of parts and fragments and recyclings as a chaotic print culture running alongside the book.

The second bigger point I want to emphasise is about the *place* of books – about where we go to find new texts to read, and the things we place alongside texts, the things we compare texts to. We usually read books in libraries – that is, in spaces where books are surrounded by other books. This means we're inclined to understand one book *in relation to another book*: we're enclosed within a bookish loop. But the library is an artificially mono-cultural environment: books, then, as now,

were all the time placed next to, and inside, and in relation to many other kinds of object, and it's useful to think of books as objects scattered across and entangled with culture in this way. [**slide**] Here is the 'Book of Expences' of the Kent MP, antiquary and drama enthusiast Sir Edward Dering from 1622. Dering is known today as the first recorded purchaser of Shakespeare's First Folio, and as an enthusiastic supporter of amateur dramatic performances of plays, complete with fake beards, but he has a nice line in granular financial record-keeping. Here are some of his outgoings he records for a slice of his 25th year.

Quinces and marmalade	00 08 06
Enamellinge a ringe	00 01 00
…	
Lemmans	00 00 08
…	
27 playbookes	00 09 00
Sir Iohn Harringtons booke of epigrams	00 00 06
…	
3 bookes for expences, whereof this is one	00 07 06
…	
Wax candle	00 00 06
…	
Barber	00 02 02
…	
2 per of gloues for my mother	00 02 04
A key to my box	00 00 08

Bibliographers have responded to his inventory by plucking out the book-titles, and letting the lemons fall to the ground. And if we read one of Dering's books in Chetham's Library, or York Minster Library, or any of the libraries where his books ended up, scattered, as they were, like many early modern collections, across a series of 19th-century sales, we're likely to place those books in a relationship with other books. But Dering's list suggests a different reading environment, one in which we could place his playbooks in relation to not only other playbooks, but also wax candles, and rings, and locked boxes. [**image**] This is the environment recorded in Dutch still life paintings of the period, where books are one object among many, and as the pages fold and the bindings sag, and the light fades, books and musical instruments and globes and silver jugs and bread seem to grow together – the work of keeping these objects apart seems less and less justifiable. *Intertextuality*, as a reading mode, has had a powerful hold over literary

criticism – the sense that texts operate in a network of other texts, borrowing and citing and quoting and subverting. We see this in discussions of Shakespeare's sources which offer a list of other written texts. It *seems* like an expansive way to read, moving from one text to another, but in certain respects it's the very opposite, understanding texts as things that only exist in relation to other texts; understanding the imagination as a simply literary affair; and serving to discourage any kinds of cross-disciplinary, or cross-material connection.

And my final point is that the central virtue of a text-object like this [**slide**] may be that it reminds us of the sheer strangeness, inconstancy, and contingency of the material forms that writing assumes. Confronted with this, we have in effect to relearn how to read, how to navigate the placement of text in space, wonder about where to start, where to stop, ask whether it is worth doing at all, and also, more abstractly, question the scope and limits of interpretation. The strangeness, and the problem, of what to do with this kind of object reminds us, I think, of the strangeness of all books, even of the most apparently orthodox kind.

The book in its bound, codex form, seems to us today a deeply familiar variety of object – we know the weight of it in our hands, and we've grown used to its particular structure and logic: of sequence, of page turns, of reading as a movement through time and through space, of double-spread openings, of linearity held in check by the possibility of reading back. The strangeness of the box-with-text reminds us of something we can easily forget – the *weirdness* (I mean that in the best sense) of material texts.

Books are letter-shapes pressed in ink on rectangular sheets made from recycled clothing, bound with the skin of dead animals and the wood from trees that once grew in fields and forests. How could they ever be invisible mere carriers of text? This is a weird and magical object, and one of the tasks of book history is to remind us constantly of that strangeness.