



The State of Renaissance Studies II

THE SCALE OF EARLY MODERN STUDIES

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I am delighted to be part of this fiftieth anniversary edition of *English Literary Renaissance*. I have published two essays in *ELR*, both of which went on to form the core of later books: “Almanacs, Annotators, and Life-Writing in Early Modern England,” in 2008, which became the opening chapter of *Autobiographical Writing in Early Modern England* (2010); and “‘Shreds of holiness’: George Herbert, Little Gidding, and Cutting Up Texts in Early Modern England,” in 2012, which I revised into a chapter for *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (2018). I am grateful to Arthur F. Kinney and his colleagues for supporting my work in this way. I also had an essay on the poet William Strode rejected by the journal in 2003, but we won’t linger on that, except to say that it was the right decision, conveyed to me in the signature form of an Arthur letter: gracious, and written on an old typewriter.

It’s not often that we are granted the opportunity to pause and think in print about the state of play of our discipline, such is the pressure—particularly in the UK—for research to be quickly converted into published outcome. I’d like to use this welcome pause in an academic culture of haste to reflect a little on scale and early modern studies. Scale has been on my mind for the last couple of years while I’ve been working on early modern printed waste: the fragments of older printed books found in the bindings, paste-boards, and end-leaves of other books.¹ Waste of this kind—like the sheets from Hugh Plat’s *Garden of Eden* used as paste downs in a copy of John Taylor’s *Workes* (1630)²—is suggestive and challenging in all kinds of ways, but I’d like to use waste here to track through some of the different scales we might deploy to organize our research. By scale I

1. For an overview, see Adam Smyth, *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Eng., 2018), chapter 4.

2. *All the Workes of Iohn Taylor the water-poet: Beeing sixty and three in number* (1630), St John’s College, Oxford, Phi.2.46.

mean both a temporal and a spatial range. Should our research be “close,” “medium-close,” “distant,” “deep,” or “big”?

II

Close

Literary criticism’s most powerful mode is close reading: the minute attention to questions of meaning, form, syntax, grammar, and style. In my teaching, it’s generally the method that precedes anything else, and on which all other discussions depend; and it’s the skill that literary criticism most obviously has to offer to other disciplines. In work on material texts, close reading finds its equivalent in the recent attention to copy-specificity, as Zachary Lesser notes in his chapter in the present collection: to the particular physical features (annotations, provenance marks, signs of use, bindings, variants) that render the printed book in our hands a unique bibliographical object, even if it is also notionally one copy within a larger edition. The copy of Francis Bacon’s *The Historie of the Raigne of King Henry the Seventh* (1622) in the library of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, possesses just these kinds of copy-specific features, including printed sheets of waste that are used to strengthen the binding of the book.³ We might easily pass by this waste—as indeed scholars until recently generally did—hardly noticing the columns of text on strips of paper that serve to prop up the physicality of Bacon’s book. But upon closer inspection, and after some research, we find that these particular strips in this particular book come from unfolded sheets from an octavo edition of the King James Bible from 1620. Collectively, the waste covers passages from Matthew 22, 23, 24, 27, and 28: that is, the description of Christ speaking to the multitudes; and, in 27 and 28, the crucifixion, the rolling back of the stone from the tomb, and the news that Christ has risen.

The presence of these fragments of the Bible as binding waste in Bacon’s *Historie* raises all kinds of questions, not least in the way a sturdy bibliographical category like “book” has become tricky (is this one book, or two—or some number between?). As a bibliographical object, the book has become defiantly copy specific: singular in its nature (there are no other books with this juxtaposition of materials), and, if we are concerned with uncovering the nature of the partially obscured waste, requiring a forensic reading mode in which we track carefully across the partly visible

3. St Edmund Hall Library, Oxford, Old Library, AA 32.

letters of the waste, comparing particular moments in a word (the dash separating the syllables of “Tem-ple”) with possible source texts, to identify text, edition, and page. We are about as close as we can get, reading with a hyper-proximity that understands words less as conveyers of meaning and more as shapes, curls, loops, stubby straight lines, empty—or only secondarily concerned with—semantic content. I’m reminded of Juliet Fleming’s project of denaturalizing the processes and protocols of reading: “Words are burrows, tunnels, passages, expanding territories, and folding stars. It is a wonder that any of us can read.”⁴

III

Medium-Close

In his work on the circulation of lyric poetry, Matthew Zarnowiecki has proposed what he calls “medium-close” reading: that is, a reading of lyric poems that is “close,” or New Critical, in its attention to the specificities of language and form, but that also understands that “lyrics exist through time, and that rather than being single static instantiations, they vary and mutate.”⁵ This means attending to some (but not all) of the typically many iterations of a lyric verse, with the variants they usually present, and also considering the connections between the poem and the materials that surround it in manuscript or print. This is “medium-close” reading both in terms of temporality (lyrics exist through time) and space (the poem circulates within a larger textual structure, like a verse miscellany, or a printed octavo). Thus—to give an example not in Zarnowiecki’s book—a study of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 1 (“From fairest creatures we desire increase”) might note, alongside the 1609 printed text, the appearance of a version of the poem that combines lines 5–14 of sonnet 1, with lines 1–4 of sonnet 2, under the title “Cruel,” in a 1650s manuscript verse miscellany, alongside poems by Richard Crashaw, Thomas Campion, William Strode, Thomas Carew, Henry King, Thomas Fuller, Thomas Randolph, and Henry Wotton, with, in addition, about thirty pages in shorthand.⁶ Such a combination of striking variation alongside embeddedness in a miscellaneous collection—a sense of both motion and situatedness—is typical of early modern verse circulation, and the strength of “medium-close”

4. Juliet Fleming, *Cultural Graphology: Writing After Derrida* (Chicago, 2016), 130.

5. Matthew Zarnowiecki, *Fair Copies: Reproducing the English Lyric from Tottel to Shakespeare* (Toronto, 2014), 7.

6. Folger, MS V.a.148, f. 22.

reading might be that it captures the nature of this textual climate. As a way of reading, “medium-close” seems particularly helpful for responding to—but not being paralysed by—the multiplicities of early modern lyric circulation. A “medium-close” method would note this strange iteration at the level of the particular sonnet (why these changes? what are the effects? what does this suggest about the status of sonnet and author?), and would note also the nature and contents of the manuscript that bodies it forth (how is Shakespeare altered when intermixed in a soup of Crashaw-and-Strode-and-others?). Zarnowiecki’s spirit of cheerful approximation (“I most often examine two or three such mutations”) raises questions about precisely how in- or exclusive to be, but the virtue of “medium-close” may be that it is a reading method that early moderns would have recognized: as Zarnowiecki puts it, textual agents “are coming to terms with the idea that their works will be rewritten, recopied, modified, and changed,” and authors “meditate on this process.”⁷

What would “medium-close” mean for the Bacon-Bible waste I noted above? It would mean attending to the volume as a whole, as a hybrid of Tudor history and New Testament narrative; and it would mean considering the kinds of relationship we propose between the two texts. What, if anything, are we supposed to do, interpretatively, with the juxtaposition of the narrative of Christ’s crucifixion and rising alongside Bacon’s history of Henry VII as a proleptic work of warning and praise for James I? The alignment of those two narratives is potentially powerful, or affecting, or suggestive, particularly in a culture of typology and allegory, where history might be understood as a looping return of older stories rather than a linear progression. But is it meaningful to read in this way?

IV

Distant, Deep, Big

Franco Moretti’s model of distant reading is built around a commitment to counting, mapping, and graphing books. Books here are not texts to be individually read with precision and patience—indeed, books are hardly to be read at all—but are rather units to be amassed and aggregated in sufficient numbers so that certain characteristics of or relations within the group as a whole can be mapped or otherwise visualized, and, as a result,

7. Zarnowiecki, 8.

certain truths not previously apparent can be revealed. As Moretti says with characteristically iconoclastic relish, “we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how *not* to read them.”⁸ Reading, in Moretti’s formulation, is what we have to jettison in order to widen our scale. Thus, a table of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century genres of the British novel visualizes forty-four genres over 160 years, from the courtship novel and the picaresque, to the sensation novel and the imperial romance, and suggests, Moretti infers, that genres typically endure for the “twenty-five years or so” that mark a generation.⁹ The effect of representing texts in this way is to “place the literary field literally in front of our eyes—and show us how little we still know about it. It is a double lesson, of humility and euphoria at the same time.”¹⁰

In some ways building on Moretti’s call for distant reading, Jo Guldi and David Armitage have recently made a powerful case for history as the discipline capable of providing a corrective to the short-termism, within and outside the academy, that they see as contemporary culture’s great failing. As the world faces crises in the form of climate change, economic inequality, and more, Guldi and Armitage argue in *The History Manifesto* that it is history that has the capacity to offer a sense of the *longue durée* that can address this “shortage of long-term thinking.”¹¹

What this means, in practice, is the development of a kind of history that, in Guldi and Armitage’s slightly mystical formulation, is able “to wait steadily upon these vibrations of deeper time and then translate them for others.”¹² Guldi and Armitage lament the retreat (as they see it) within historical studies, between about 1975 and 2005, into micro-history: work that, with that temporal and spatial hyper-focus, resulted in a kind of “historical myopia”;¹³ a set of acutely rendered particulars, and a sometimes near-total mastery of an archive, but work that is (Guldi and Armitage suggest) unmoored from larger patterns of historical change. As a result of this temporal limit, historians working at this scale were crucially unable to speak to a wider public about issues that matter, and “[a]fter

8. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London, 2013), 48.

9. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* (London, 2005), 19–22. See also Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London, 1998).

10. Moretti, *Graphs*, 2.

11. Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (London, 2014), 1.

12. Guldi and Armitage, 5.

13. Guldi and Armitage, 4.

2,000 years, the ancient goal for history to be the guide to public life had collapsed.”¹⁴

As an answer to this, Guldi and Armitage advocate a shift toward historical work on a much wider scale, centred around “the explosion of big data” (ecological, governmental, economic, and cultural) that is newly available due to digital technology.¹⁵ Working on a much wider temporal scale, the scholar might offer now not, for example, the study of a single year in Shakespeare’s writing life, or the history of mid-seventeenth-century Newcastle-upon-Tyne through the eyes of a single scrivener, but rather—to lurch to the other extreme—the “deep history” of the human past, reaching back 40,000 years, or even more spectacularly, a “big history” which stretches back 13.8 billion years to the big bang.¹⁶ History thus becomes, in their vision, the critical curation of newly available data that offers answers to pressing contemporary needs through an account of the *longue durée*.

There are certainly paradoxes and problems in Guldi and Armitage’s polemic: their conception of the humanities as a discipline founded precisely “not to be instrumental” has become a vision of history as that which addresses issues “of common concern” to the contemporary public;¹⁷ and their faith in enablers of big data sources like Google (developer of Google Ngrams) and IBM (crucial for Franco Moretti’s *ManyEyes* distant reading software) to support without agenda scholarly work looks increasingly naïve in the years since the publication of *The History Manifesto* in 2014, when a sense of the internet as benignly connective has been replaced by a concern with fake news and political interference. But what does this widest of scales offer to early modern studies?

To return to my particular example: distant reading, and a sense of research as the aggregation and curation of large amounts of data, might be a promising scale for working on waste. Partly because finding examples of waste often relies on serendipity—catalogues generally fail to record these details—most work on waste, like most work on the history of reading, operates at the scale of the single case-study. This produces vivid individual stories, but what is lost—or never reached—is a sense of a larger culture of waste fragments: the ways in which waste behaved, or was made to

14. Guldi and Armitage, 8.

15. Guldi and Armitage, 12.

16. James Shapiro, 1599: *A Year in the Life of Shakespeare* (London, 2006); Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor’s Summer: A Scrivener, His City and the Plague* (New Haven, 2011).

17. Guldi and Armitage, 6, 118.

behave, across a much broader spread of geography and time. If we had not one, or five, instances of waste, but 3,000, or 10,000, or 100,000, and if we took our cue from Moretti and mapped this data, what other questions might we be able to ask? This desire for a larger scale of investigation prompted the idea of a database of early modern printed waste, a project I'm currently working on with Anna Reynolds and Megan Hefernan. The database will work by cataloguing waste and host as separate items, and then linking—or relating—them. Waste and host items are defined across some twenty-five fields, including author, title, year, printer, publisher, binding, marks of use, location, and, for waste, parts used. We are at present too early on in the project to see exactly the nature of the connections we will be able to make, but it may be that working at this scale will reveal something of the shape of an economy of early modern waste: relationships between printers and binders, for examples, where unwanted sheets passed between these groups, the waste tracking and making visible certain professional or even familial networks, nationally and perhaps internationally, connections that would otherwise be obscure to modern scholars.

Perhaps the most productive way to respond to this flurry of theoretical work on the range of literary and historical research is to adopt a methodology that toggles between these different scales. In the sometimes dizzying rush toward digital humanities-led big data projects, the powerful virtues of close reading, and related modes of attending to specificity, can be forgotten. Big data projects, which are by definition works of aggregation, operate at a scale and in an accumulative mode that means that they are effective in producing headlines: Guldi and Armitage advocate “generating and circulating digestible narratives,”¹⁸ and the elegant shapes of Moretti's graphs of (for example) publication rates of eighteenth-century Japanese novels tell an immediate, if also enigmatic story.¹⁹ Clearly the kind of macro-mapping advocated by Moretti, Guldi and Armitage promises revelatory representations of information we thought we knew, making clearer the logic that underpins broad economies of textual circulation and use. But these same representations are less helpful in catalyzing a more critical analysis. Skeptical, rigorous engagement with materials is more likely the product of work at a small scale, since critique is most commonly a matter of placing conceptual pressure on particulars as a means to

18. Guldi and Armitage, 119.

19. Moretti, *Graphs*, 6.

challenge more general rules. The fragments of sheets from a 1620 octavo King James Bible, placed within Bacon's *Historie*, have a powerful, copy-specific strangeness that repays the most forensic of readings; but we only begin to see the full range of significances of this material when our readings move back-and-forth between close, medium-close, and distant scales of interpretation.

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