

Queer Failure and Early Modern Books

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“we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery”¹

“Courteous Reader, I have beene forced to vse a Printer who vnderstood not the language...”²

In this article, I will propose that the printed books early modern readers engaged with were regularly spaces of failure and shortcoming: that early modern books were, by their own descriptions, anti-ideal, that they were fundamentally awry, and that conceptions of wrongness operated at their heart. I will also suggest that the ways in which bibliography developed as a discipline over the twentieth century has served to downplay, trivialise and even moralise into shame or invisibility this sense of the book as error-prone; but I will also suggest that we are at a moment (I’m writing in the spring of 2025) in which bibliography is beginning to operate in a newly reflexive mode, opening up new ways of thinking about the study of material texts. Thanks in part to what Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment, repurposing an old term, call “critical bibliography”, the study of material texts is “undergoing an intense, sustained critical reckoning” in terms of its objects of study (the texts it centres and rejects); its methods (what it is appropriate to say about books, and the perceived limits of this discourse); the identities of its practitioners, past and present (who is included, and who is excluded); its ties, for good and for bad, to institutions (universities, societies, libraries, archives), as sources of validation, support, and gate-keeping, and the possibilities of bibliography operating outside such institutional settings; bibliography’s relationship to wider humanistic study (particularly literary criticism and critical theory); and bibliography’s 19th and early-20th century origins as the amateur pastime of a homosocial community of wealthy, white, male bibliophiles.³ We might think of this process as the application of

¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 11.

² Edmund Lechmere, *A disputation of the Church* (printed by Marc Wyon, 1629), [Errata].

³ Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment, “What Is Critical Bibliography?,” *Criticism* 64.3 (2022): 231-6, available at <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol64/iss3/1>; Malcolm Noble and Sarah Pyke, “Queer Bibliography: A Rationale”, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 18.2 (June 2024), special issue on “Queer Bibliography”: 147-314, 161. A compelling alternative to that homosocial, wealthy, white, male bibliographical community is offered by Noble and Pyke in their account of the vibrant and diverse “gathering” (they draw on that word’s twin social and bibliographical connotations) for a symposium on “Queer

critical, philosophical thought to a discipline which has been historically resistant to reflection: in the words of Maruca and Ozment, “a deliberate un-disciplining of bibliography.”⁴

To explore this world of early printed books and error, I will focus, in particular, on errata lists included in early modern printed books, and the addresses to the reader that sometimes accompanied them.⁵ As a preface to this, and to help me draw out some of the implications of this culture of error, I want to juxtapose two forms of knowledge that have very recently been put in dialogue with each other as part of the broad project of “critical bibliography”: that is, bibliography, and queer theory.

Bibliography, particularly in the form of bibliographical description, has historically been a powerfully norm-setting discipline, and one consequence of this normativity is that bibliography has in its past formations constructed an unhelpfully stable notion of print. Bibliographical description, in a traditional sense, is the account in words of a book’s identity considered across a number of categories, typically title-page transcription; format and collation formula; signature positions, catchwords, type, paper and plates; brief details of the book’s contents; and a list of individual copies examined and their location. This process of measuring, counting, and listing results not in a description of any individual copy, but rather in the necessarily speculative construction of an ideal from which all variant copies descend: an ideal which represents, in Fredson Bowers’ words, “the most perfect state of the book as the printer or publisher finally intended to issue it”, and which serves as a benchmark against which individual copies, with their various kinds of difference, can be identified and judged.

Because the ideal is often conjectural, it is frequently the case that no extant copies exactly match it: the paradox of bibliographical description is that, despite the trappings of

Bibliography: Tools, Methods, Practices, Approaches”, at the Institute of English Studies, London, in February 2023: see Malcolm Noble and Sarah Pyke, “A Bibliographic Gathering: Reflecting on ‘Queer Bibliography: Tools, Methods, Practices, Approaches’”, *The Journal of Electronic Publishing* 28(1) (2025).

⁴ Maruca and Ozment, “Critical Bibliography”: 231.

⁵ Scholarship on error and errata lists includes David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order 1450-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 97-165; Ann Blair, “Errata Lists and the Reader as Corrector”, in Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin, eds., *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), pp. 21-40; Seth Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self: the Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* (Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 15-54; Adam Smyth, *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), chapter 3; Geri Della Rocca de Candal, Anthony Grafton, and Paolo Sachet (eds), *Printing and Misprinting: A Companion to Mistakes and In-House Corrections in Renaissance Europe (1450-1650)* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

scientific objectivity (the rulers, the magnifying glasses, the fondness for charts and tables, the algebraic precision), it produces a description of a book that may not exist in this form.

The ideal copy underpins catalogues and is an immensely useful way of holding all the individual copies in an edition together at once, despite their differences, to produce the sense of a common object. This sense of a common object is necessary for any shared discussion of books, and the notion of the ideal copy is thus, if we can imagine such a thing, a pragmatic ideal. A maximally copy-specific conception of books – the opposite of the homogenizing of the ideal copy – can often, through its ceaseless granularity, produce a conversation of cross-purposes because participants are no longer talking about the same object. We can see some of these issues in *Early English Books Online*. EEBO wonderful but also paradoxical resource, in part because it flickers between these two conceptions of a book: drawing on the *English Short Title Catalogue* to produce its metadata in the form of an ideal copy, but generally offering images of digital facsimiles of a single witness. This flickering is not problematic as long as it remains visible and acknowledged: it becomes a problem when we shift between these competing ontologies of a book (as ideal copy, and as single witness) without realizing it, when, as Ian Gadd writes, the database “impl[ies]—albeit not deliberately—that the record [or ideal copy] and the copy [or individual witness] are one and the same thing.”⁶ This elision between record and witness is problematic for many reasons, not least because it reduces a reader’s sense of the teeming variety of early modern print culture: the ways in which books were so often erring.

A consequence of bibliography’s notion of the ideal copy is the establishment of a normative text which serves as a model against which other texts can be assessed, and found variously lacking, aberrant, or wrong. This normativity is registered in the often moralised language of bibliography: bibliographical description, according to G. T. Tanselle, “*rises above* the limitations of a single copy by reporting what emerges as *standard*”. It is a form of book-description in which “defects”, “deficiencies of individual copies” and anything that is “abnormal or defective in a given copy” “*must be purged.*”⁷

We might think of queer theory as bibliography’s other: the coming together of the two, not in alignment but rather productive tension, is bibliography’s most exciting recent methodological development, and owes much to the galvanizing work of Malcolm Noble

⁶ Ian Gadd, “The Use and Misuse of Early English Books Online,” *Literature Compass* 6.3 (2009): 682.

⁷ G. T. Tanselle, “The Concept of Ideal Copy”, *Studies in Bibliography* 33 (1980): 18–53, 21. My italics.

and Sarah Pyke.⁸ If bibliography is norm-setting, and if it creates an impression of expertise and mastery that very often makes it intimidating to anyone not already on the inside – whether through the complexities of collation formulae, or the sense that arcane practical knowledge can always trump interpretation – then queer theory works in the opposite direction. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam provides a manifesto for thinking patiently and sympathetically about texts that go wrong. Halberstam argues that failure – whether in the object of study, or in the method of studying – provides a way to break out of conventional ideas central to academic and more broadly capitalist thinking, particularly ideas relating to approved modes of knowing, the rearticulation of the already-familiar, profit, and competition. Halberstam’s focus is on contemporary culture, but his argument might resonate for our thinking about early modern books as objects of study that are error-prone.

Halberstam’s contention is that, in the pursuit of professionalization and “‘scientific’ forms of knowing”, scholars have developed highly routinized ways of working that require the disqualification of certain subjects for study and certain methods of working.

The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy.⁹

We might query Halberstam’s “visionary insights or flights of fancy” as itself a kind of routinized and romantic conception of thought, but Halberstam’s point about the cost of professionalization being exclusion still stands, just as bibliography, when invested in the ideal copy, shuns or trivialises variants and difference. In the face of these exclusions, Halberstam is interested in what he calls “discarded local knowledges that are trampled

⁸ It is notable that queer bibliographical work has tended to focus on later historical periods, and also on medieval studies: the early modern period has, at the time of writing at least, been subject to less investigation. The major exception to this is Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare’s Time* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁹ Halberstam, *Failure*, p. 6.

underfoot in the rush to bureaucratize and rationalize an economic order that privileges profit over all kinds of other motivations for being and doing.” For Halberstam, this means thinking about texts, films, and ideas that refuse to fit within traditional canons – particularly those that might be seen as trivial, or too everyday, eccentric, or even accessible for study. This kind of “low archive” provides the chance for modes of thinking that are less concerned with the appearance of rigor and order, but instead value inspiration and unpredictability. Halberstam aims to “resist mastery” and instead invests in “counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity”, and seeks to “privilege the naive or nonsensical”. Halberstam is inclined to “suspect memorialization” because “memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism” which “has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories”. Instead of memory with all its repressions, Halberstam searches for “certain forms of erasure”, and for “ruptures and contradictions.” And concerned that scholarly knowledge is often produced primarily or only in order to capture grant money and prop up institutions, Halberstam looks with hope to “illegibility”: to knowledge practices that refuse to rearticulate what is already known and which, by being in some sense institutionally unreadable, escape “the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject.”¹⁰

Failure is understood by Halberstam as a resistance to a kind of mastery that universities and capitalist society demand, a mastery that works by shutting off certain objects and avenues for study. Failure is a way of “resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall”, and instead “unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.”¹¹

Halberstam’s book is dedicated to “all of history’s losers”, but it is a work of idealism. And while like all works of idealism, it is easy to undercut with a certain kind of practical scepticism, it is worth sticking with Halberstam’s purposively naïve commitment to new ways of working, and to new objects of study, because it can encourage us to think about errors in books as more than those “defects” than Tanselle suggests should be “purged.” The marks that readers add to early modern books align with the qualities Halberstam sees as central to the work on “low archives” that queer theory encourages: that is, work characterized not by any kind of mastering of the text, but rather “failing, losing, forgetting,

¹⁰ Halberstam, *Failure*, p. 10. 5

¹¹ Halberstam, *Failure*, pp. 11-15.

unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing”. These are apt descriptions of the traces left by many early modern readers on the pages of their books: the underlinings, the question marks in the margin, the manicules. In this sense, early modern readers are queer readers. These terms are also apt descriptions of early modern books themselves, and by turning to errata narratives included in printed books, I want to argue that early modern books are losers – self-confessedly so – and that printers, stationers, and readers were frequently thinking about “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking”. Such a culture of print, in which error is a defining trait, suggests that bibliographers need to pause and think carefully about their methods, and the kinds of text they foreground – to the detriment of objects “that fall outside a distinct set of parameters”¹² – in order to make an argument about book cultures of the past.

Something like 471 texts, about 3% of books printed in England before 1640, include accounts of their errors in the form of a continuous prose description that introduces tables or lists or errata. Many more texts have tables or lists without a prefatory narrative, but for now my focus is on these continuous prose descriptions since these provide the thickest account of bookish imperfections. They go by various titles (Ad Lectorem; Addenda; Additions to the Copie; Advertisement; An Admonition; Certain extraordinary escapes; Corrigenda; Errata; Errors escaped; Escapes; Faults escaped; Obseruations for the Readers of this booke) but I will call them errata narratives.¹³

Errata narratives within this corpus vary in length between a prompt 11 words (“The faults escaped I leaue to the courteous Reader to correct”) and an essayistic 1,921. The average is about 260 words, which means errata narratives constitute, as a pool of text, approximately 120,000 words – about twice the length of *Paradise Lost* – that reflect on the intimate relationship between printed books and imperfection.

If errata narratives give us a low archive of the sort that Halderstam describes, what can we learn about books and readers from this body of text? We can start with a representative example, from William Lambarde’s *A perambulation of Kent* (printed by H.

¹² Kate Ozment, “Rationale for Feminist Bibliography,” *Textual Cultures* 13. 1 (Spring 2020): 149-78, 150. Quoted in Noble and Pyke, “Queer Bibliography”: 161.

¹³ Access to errata lists have been made easier, particularly at a time when the British Library’s resources including ESTC are not available, by my use of the online resource, *To the Reader: The English Preface in Print, c. 1475–1623* (2024) (<https://earlymodernprefaces.unige.ch>), compiled and edited by Devani Singh and James Misson. I am grateful to both Devani and to James for allowing me access to this resource before it was published. The potentials of this resource are explored in James Misson and Devani Singh, “Computing Book Parts with EEBO-TCP”, *Book History* 25.2 (Fall 2022): 503-529.

Middleton for Ralph Newberie, 1576), which prefaces a substantial table of more than 100 errors and corrections with this account:

SVndry faultes (gentle Reader) haue we vnwillingly cōmitted, in this Booke, imprinted in the absence of the Authour. Of these, some do blemish only the beautie of our owne workmanship: others do offend against the lawes of Orthographie: Some doe shrewdly peruert the sense of the writer, and will stay thee: others doe vtterly euert his meaning, and will mucche trouble thee. Suche therefore as be most daungerous, we haue here set before thine eye, beseeching thee to amende them with thine owne pen, before thou enter into the Booke: The whiche labour (we doubt not) but thou wilt the more willingly vndertake in this one copie, when thou shalt haue rightly weighed, what a worke it woulde be for vs, to perfourme it in sixe hundreth bookes.

For scholars interested in the process of book-making, this account is immediately instructive, although, as with the reading of any paratext, the urge to take the account as documentary needs to be checked with a recognition of the generic, imaginative, and potentially playful forces at work in this kind of writing. (Surely there is that kind of intent in this 1640 erratum note: “In some few Copies this fault hath escaped, viz. Saint Thomas More, for Sir Thomas More, pag. 520. lin. 24.” More wasn’t canonised as a martyr until 1935.)¹⁴ But with such caveats in mind, we learn that the author was absent from the printing; that this absence has an implied relationship to error; and that this noted absence suggests authorial presence in the print-shop was more common than scholarship has described. We also learn that the reader is asked to correct the text by hand before reading, following the corrections in the table: the role of correcting devolves down on to the reader who becomes, for a moment, a collaborator. We can also see that the errata narrative conveys to the reader a certain level of quite precise detail about bibliography. It does this in two ways. First, the errata narrative makes quite exact distinctions between kinds of error: in ascending order of “danger”, there are blemishes that serve only to muddy the beauty of the page; there are spelling mistakes; some twist the author’s meaning to a

¹⁴ Jeremias Drexel, *The school of patience. Written in Latin by H. Drexelius. And faithfully translated into English, by R.S. Gent* (printed by Thomas Harper, 1640), [Errata].

degree that will cause the reader to pause; and some entirely misrepresent the author's meaning and will confound the reader. Second, the errata narrative, in asking the reader to mark the text, makes a distinction between the single witness or copy in the reader's hands, and the edition of 600, introducing to readers the difference between edition and copy with which bibliographical description is often concerned.

If Lambarde's *A perambulation* cultivated a certain kind of book literacy in readers, it also contributed to the errata narrative's loudest refrain: that printing is difficult, and that printed books are inevitably flawed. This conception of print is repeated across the majority of errata narratives. "All Books are subect to some Typographical faults";¹⁵ "the presse cannot passe without escape"; "meruell not then (good Readers) that in so huge a volume, consisting of so manie leaues, lines, and letters, oftentimes varied both in forme and matter, a fault or two doo escape; were the Correctors care neuer so great, his di||gence neuer so earnest, his labour neuer so continuall".¹⁶ At the heart of these errata narratives is an irony that in describing how the book can be made more correct, they convey a sense of print as fallen and error-prone, and of the process of book-making and of reading as pragmatic, and not ideal.

The sense of a profound but also common connection between early modern print and error has been a refrain in recent bibliographical work that uses the experience of hands-on, letter-press printing as a route into understanding how printed texts work.¹⁷ Dylan Lewis has written on "queer makerspace bibliography"; working at BookLab, in the University of Maryland's English department, Lewis has seen how student printing often results in errors, and that these various kinds of slips and mishandlings can be tremendously valuable in helping students think about printing and books. In particular, errors serve often to help "dismantle dangerous systems of essentialism, narrowmindedness, and exclusion", and show that books are "at their core, queer objects that do not easily conform to normalized standards."¹⁸ This is not to say that it is not important for certain technical skills and competencies to be acquired in order to print, but rather that a central truth about

¹⁵ Gerhard Mercator, *Historia mundi: or Mercator's atlas* (printed by Samuel Cartwright and Thomas Cotes for Michael Sparke, 1635), "The Errata."

¹⁶ Thomas Lodge, *An alarum against vsurers* (printed by Sampson Clarke and Thomas East, 1584), [Errata].

¹⁷ Dylan Lewis, "Creativity, Experimentation, and Failure: Queering Letterpress Printing in the Humanities Makerspace," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 18.2 (June 2024), special issue on "Queer Bibliography": 257–269. See also Adam Smyth, "Printing as Creative Criticism", in Joe Moshenska and Leah Whittington (eds), *Creating Renaissance Criticism* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Lewis, "Creativity", 259, 260.

print emerges through this kind of hands-on trial: that printing is a continual relationship with error, and, as a consequence, any bibliographical study that suppresses that relationship is a misrepresentation of early modern print.

Like student participants in Lewis' queer makerspace, 16th and 17th-century readers would have come to understand that the business of printing was not about the pursuit of an ideal or perfect copy, but rather that imperfection was print's signature trait. According to Richard Brathwait's *Times curtaine drawne, or the anatomie of vanitie* (printed by Nicholas Bourne and John Dawson for John Bellamy, 1621), errata narratives "are growne so familiar with Bookes, as they become their Appendices", and readers are requested to correct "onely such as corrupt the sense". Lesser "[l]iterall errors", which we could call misprints, can be tolerated and left alone, not least because "they march in such ranks and squadrons, as they seeme incorrigible." As David McKitterick has observed about print and correctness, arguments between authors and printers were not about absolute standardization but rather "what degree ... [of] variation was acceptable."¹⁹ The question "how wrong could a book be to still be recognisable as the book it claims to be?" better captures an early modern book-maker's thoughts than "is the book correct?" And just as one achievement of print was the creation of huge numbers of books that were never read,²⁰ so the printing-press was also a radical force for the dissemination of imperfections. In errata narratives, printing is described as a reaching and a coming up short, and that coming up short is understood as predictable and also tolerable: "yet I haue done my best," we read in a sermon printed by Henry Bynneman, "but the matter beeing not mucche amisse, our labour is not lost."²¹

The happy rhyme of "sexual" and "textual" has produced many accounts of the printing press that frame this technology, both in the early modern period and beyond, as a force for reproduction: a mechanism for making texts live on, like genealogies. Twenty years ago, Douglas Brooks edited an influential collection that examined the entwining of the languages of printing and parenting in early modern England, and showed how conceptions of paternity were often understood and articulated in metaphors drawn from a culture's dominant writing technology. The introduction of printing gave new life to this old trope,

¹⁹ McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript*, p. 111.

²⁰ Blair, "Errata", p. 41, citing Hugh Amory.

²¹ Thomas White, *A sermon preached at Pawles Crosse on Sunday the ninth of December. 1576. by T.W* (printed by Henry Bynneman for Francis Coldock, 1578), "The faultes escaped."

and meant that “issues related to human reproduction, parentage, and child-bearing were often articulated in the language of the book trade”, and “authorship, printing, or publication” were often expressed in “the language of parenting.”²²

Attending to errors disrupts any easy connection between print and futurity. One consequence of reading lots of errata narratives is that we are less likely to tell a story of the onwards “triumph” of print. To arrange the history of the book as a linear narrative of improvement, where books get better and better, fails to capture the reality of print. Early books could be astonishing. Later books could be stuffed with slips. Books did not straightforwardly “succeed”, in any sense. In this regard, book history (bibliography’s cousin) could learn from queer theory’s recent work on alternatives to linear history (or “heterotemporality”),²³ as seen for example, in queer theory’s interest in figures who, in turning back, suspend or disrupt a version of history that is questing towards a future: Lot’s wife who turns back to gaze on Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19; Orpheus who looks back to his wife Eurydice as he leaves the underworld, breaking Pluto’s command.²⁴ Errors make readers turn back, too: to correct the printed book they thought they were about to read; to doubt the efficacy of the technology, and the printer, and the bookseller; to become involved, as they pick up their pen, in the story they thought had been finished.

Within this broader conception of printed books as tolerably imperfect attempts, errata narratives provide readers with a rich level of detail about the mechanics of book production, particularly as that process of production relates to the creation and circulation of mistakes. Errata narratives provide early modern readers with, in effect, a compacted education in aspects of book history, or what D.F. McKenzie called the “sociology of print”. McKenzie’s influential sense that scholars of the book need to uncover the community of human agents responsible for the book’s creation – “a sociology . . . directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption”²⁵ – aligns with the version of book-making that errata narratives describe. To read errata narratives is to be repeatedly informed about six features of book-making, in particular: stop-press correcting (the interruption of the printing

²² Douglas A. Brooks, *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 2005), p. 2.

²³ Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Will Stockton, *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze* (Routledge, 2009), p. 3.

²⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 5.

²⁵ D. F. McKenzie, “The Book as an Expressive Form”, in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 9-30 (15).

process mid-edition in order to correct errors, resulting in differences between witnesses within the same edition); simultaneous printing (the spreading of printing across multiple print shops with a consequent possibility of difference between copies); the transmission of authorial copy (potentially involving author, translator, scribe); the speed of printing and a general book-making atmosphere not of calm, careful work, but of haste, deadlines, pressure, and continual interruption (“The correction of Textual Errors (Courteous Reader) is a work of time, and that hath taken wing”; “wee had not such meanes to prevent [errors] as we desired...by reason of our hast, of hazard, and other interruptions”);²⁶ authorial absence from the print shop as a source of unreliability; and compositor ignorance, particularly in terms of compositors not knowing the language in which the text is being printed, or not possessing the necessary type (for example, for books in non-English languages). Errata narratives return to these features of the sociology of print with particular frequency; in fact, I suggest that errata narratives are the only places where these topics were repeatedly discussed in printed books.

These accounts of aspects of book production were more often detailed and specific than generic and imprecise. Accounting for errors in a book by John Downname on Satan and “the spiritual enemies of our salvation” by recourse to the mechanics of shared printing, the errata narrative is immediately exact: “Christian Reader, because there was some haste required in printing of this booke, part thereof from pag. 371 to pag. 578 was committed to another Printer, who wanting a Corrector suffered these faults to escape which are materiall.”²⁷ That readers were expected to be interested and literate in this kind of detail suggests a higher level of bibliographical knowledge than we might expect.

We very frequently see the contingencies of book-making, the ways in which events in the world crash into the already-taxing process of printing. Plague flares and interrupts work: “this Treatise was penned about the mids and heat of this Great Sicknesse ...and it should haue beene published aboue sixe Weekes since, but could not till now.”²⁸ The author changes his mind about which edition to use for his sources: “The places of S. Cyprian are sometimes cited according to an ould imperfect edition, which the authour vsed at the

²⁶ Francis Bacon, *Of the advancement and proficience of learning* (printed by Leonard Lichfield, 1640), “Errata”; George Wither, *Britain's remembrancer* (printed by John Grismond in 1628), [Errata].

²⁷ John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (printed by Thomas Dawson and Felix Kingston, 1604), [Errata].

²⁸ *Lachrymæ Londinenses. Or, Londons teares and lamentations* (printed by Bernard Alsop, Thomas Fawcet, George Gibbs, and Henry Holland, 1626), n.p.

beginning: but afterward he gotte the last edition of Pamelius.” The translator is ill, “so that being vnable himselfe to attend the dayly proofes, he apoynted a seruaunt of his to ouersee the same. Who (being not so well acquainted with the matter as his maister was) there haue passed some faultes much contrary vnto both our meanings and desires.”²⁹

Descriptions of the transmission of the text from author to print-shop, often via several mediating agents, both explain some of the book’s errors, but also convey, with rare illumination, the messy and contingent way in which texts moved through the early modern book world. Scribal and in particular authorial handwriting is a frequent source of complaint – “his hande beeing very harde & small”; “the strangenesse of his Character”; “in many places darke and obscure”; “the oft and thicke enterlining of the Copie”³⁰ – existing as a subset of a broader category that we might call the irksome and problematic author (“the Author, hauing sent his Copy, afterward sent sundry Additions, the insertings whereof in their due place was not easy”).³¹ But more generally it was not sole agents that were the focus of discussion, but chains of makers – precisely McKenzie’s sociologies – that would link or, very often, unlink. Here is a representative example, scrambling any sense we might have of print as a force for fixity by showing the tangled culture of manuscript transmission on which print depended. The book was written by William Perkins, but – of at least equal significance here – printed by John Legat and Simon Waterson.

Kind Reader. I intreate thee to be aduertised of two texts of Scripture, [...] pag. 578, 579. in way of prooffe of a rule there mentioned. They were quoted and vttered in those very tearmes by the Author himselfe: But because they faulted in some words, and were not for matter so well filled to the point in hand, as was meete, I set vpon them a marke in my Copie, either to be explained or wholly left out. Yet beeing in my absence, through the Printers hast, slipped in, much against my will, and now past helpe, I am forced to desire thee, for the time, in loue to passe by the examples themselues...Farewell.³²

²⁹ George Gascoigne, *The droomme of Doomes day* (printed by Gabriel Cawood and Thomas East, 1576), “An aduertisement of the Prynter to the Reader.”

³⁰ White, *A sermon*, “The faultes escaped”; James Hart, *Klinikē, or The diet of the diseased* (printed by John Beale, Nicholas Fussell, and Humphrey Moseley, 1633), [Errata].

³¹ Daniel Rogers, *A practycall catechisme* (printed by Samuel Man and John Norton, 1632).

³² William Perkins, *The whole treatise of the cases of conscience* (printed by John Legat and Simon Waterson, 1606), “Faults escaped in the most Copies are thus to be amended.”

Here, the author intended two particular passages of Scripture, but the scribal text was left with some kind of gap, which the scribe marked in their copy; the printers, working without guidance, reproduced that mark, which the reader is now requested to correct.

While the subject of compositor ignorance is often treated with a kind of resigned literary wit – “Although some of our Printers be not Homers, neyther seene in Greeke nor Latine, nor sometime exactly in Englishe, yet can they nod and take a nap, as well as any Homer”³³ – the accumulative effect was to chip away at any sense of the efficacy of book production.

Here is a 1596 errata narrative that distils several of these elements. Book-making here is not about techno-determinism, but imperfect workers, trying hard but harassed by time, exhausted, and working with flawed materials:

This copie past from my ragged hand after the first writing to the presse immediatly: for the whole worke had not about six whole dayes. The worke-men were wearied with the hand, and the hast might haue caused many errours. Wherefore I must desire thee, good Reader, friendly to correct these few faults which haue escaped.³⁴

Errata narratives, then, open up the sociology of book-making to reveal its contingencies and imperfections. But those errata narratives also fashioned particular conceptions of the reader: they were spaces where protocols and expectations of reading were described, and are important texts for our understanding of what an early modern reader was expected to be.

What kind of reader was formed by errata narratives? Readers were addressed in terms that were flattering, but which flattered by expecting the reader’s tolerance. The reader is “Charitable Reader”, or “Christian Reader”, or “Courteous Reader”, or “Friendly Reader”, or “Gentle Reader”, or “Good Reader”, or “Intelligent Reader”, or “Iudicious disposed Gentlemen,” or “Louing and best affectionated Readers”. According to errata narratives, books are objects which require forgiveness before they can earn celebration – “there be so many mis-prints, or misprisions, for words, accents, poynting” – and this is the

³³ Ludwig Lavater, *Of ghostes and spirites walking by nyght* (printed by Henry Bynneman and Richard Watkins, 1572), “An aduertisement to the Reader.”

³⁴ Jean Calvin, *Aphorismes of Christian religion* (printed by Robert Dexter and Richard Field, 1596), “Errata”.

reader's gift to give: "Diverse quotations in the Margine, something out of their due places, and imperfect pointings in the pages, the Reader is requested to pardon."³⁵

Readers are asked to forgive, and then they are asked to correct. The most common requirement made of readers – it hovers somewhere between a request and a command – is that they correct the listed errors by hand, with their pen, before "entering" the book proper (spatial, architectural metaphors are common). "Print," as David McKitterick has noted, "is an exercise in communal responsibility",³⁶ and readers are asked to collaborate in continuing to make the book, even after it has left the print-shop and the booksellers' shop or stall: "which I would pray thee to amend with thy Pen, before thou beginne to reade."³⁷ There are countless variants of a form which runs something like "The Christian Reader is intreated by the Author, before he reade these Treatises, to amend with his pen the faults which in his absence have escaped in the printing of them."³⁸

Once corrected, the reader is required to consume the book in a state of sensible vigilance. They are asked to take care when they read – "haue an eye to the Marginall notes, and referre them to their right places"³⁹ – but also to exercise judgement in what is and what is not meaningfully amiss. Early modern reading is, in these constructions, a process of both care and tolerance, a willingness to endure or read through a certain amount of textual interference, and to persist, passing over some flaws but not others: "wee therefore leave [the faults escaped] ... to be amended, censured, and winked at, according to the Readers courtesie or discretion"; or, as a book printed in 1603 puts it:

And as for thee wrōg placing of an V for an N, or an N for an V, and in printing two EE for one E, or one for two, and for thee mispoyncing of periods; thee correction of these I must bee forced for this tyme too refer too thye friendlye paynes.⁴⁰

³⁵ Foulke Robartes, *Gods holy house and service* (printed by Richard Cotes, Thomas Cotes, John Crooke, and Richard Sergier, 1639), n.p.

³⁶ McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript*, p. 117.

³⁷ Abraham Gibson, *A scholasticall discourse against symbolizing with Antichrist in ceremonies: especially in the signe of the crosse* (printed by Richard Schilders, 1607), "To the reader."

³⁸ George Downame, *The covenant of grace or An exposition upon Luke 1. 73.74.75* (printed by Stationers' Society, Dublin, 1631), n.p.

³⁹ Jean Calvin, *Three propositions or speeches* (printed by Thomas Dawson, Thomas, 1580), n.p.

⁴⁰ Henry Crosse, *Vertues common-vvealth: or The high-way to honour* (Thomas Creede, 1603), "JOHN PATES PRINTER too thee curteous reader."

Bibliography, for all its commitment to detail, is often ideologically invested in tidying up the reality of books, both in the construction of the ideal copy, and in the moralized language used to describe the actual copies which vary from this punishing ideal. In the face of this norm-setting, queer theory can provide a change of key that, perhaps paradoxically given queer theory's resistance to traditional ideas of historical accuracy, can help us capture something of the imperfect culture of early modern books. Perhaps my favourite errata narrative is this one, which will be my final example. It is presented as the book itself speaking directly to the reader in a voice that strikes us as human, or at least as a book-turned-into-a-human, and the description of the book by the book admits its own imperfections with a candour that is winning:

The Booke to the Reader.

I seeme to my selfe as a man decaied in his senses, or if you will, as an house shaken in his building. I must confesse my copy was of dim sight, & my hand-writing of ill scribling, like rough timber, knotty, and vnready. Therefore though I be pained in my heart, for my manifold maimes, and looke in the eie of my Reader, like one which commeth out of the house with a scratched face, yet I hope to obtaine fauor of thee gentle Reader, with desire to correct some errata, as followeth...⁴¹

The effect of reading this address, in which a book from 1612 looks us in the eye to describe itself as “like rough timber”, as “knotty”, as “pained in my heart”, is, for me at least, delight. A talking printed book! What a wonderful passage! But that delight is a response that bibliography, as traditionally practised, rarely admits: a sense of delight, even joy, at the nature of the objects of our study. Ditto, I would say, for all the errata narratives I have described above: to read them is to feel a jolt that is a mix of shock and recognition. We might smile; we might laugh; we might feel happy. What are we to do with these feelings? Excise them for some other occasion? In the book trade's sales catalogues there is certainly the hum of connoisseurial approval at the books under discussion, but even here, where bibliography is at its most advocatory, the language of bibliographical accomplishment is austere, committed to ideas of wholeness, coherence, and technical accomplishment. Books

⁴¹ John White, *English Paradise* (printed by William Hall and Richard Redmer, 1612), “The Booke to the Reader.”

are said to be “highly prized”, “remarkable”, and a particularly notable volume, like a book printed by Aldus Manutius, is figured as “the crown jewel” of a collection.⁴² (We see here the entwining of bibliographical and financial value.)

Bibliography tends to drain out affect – but it needn’t. As J.D. Sargan has noted, bibliography’s stance of “objectivity” risks repressing the real, and significant, affective, embodied responses we often feel as readers of early books. “Book historians love books,” Sargan writes. “In denying our affective responses to the books that we study, we inhibit a critical tool that could otherwise serve us.”⁴³ This is why we do what we do, so why not talk about it? That New Bibliographical performance of rigour and objectivity – the deep investment in empiricism, in charts and tables, in “scientific” methodologies – was to a considerable degree a consequence of New Bibliography’s early 20th-century’s need to establish itself as a discipline, or at least a sub-discipline, of legitimacy. But now, in 2025, when the study of material texts is established as part of literary and historical studies, that anxiety can relax: we can admit feelings. Queer bibliography can encourage the bibliographer to talk about affect: it “centers affect and embodiment,” write Noble and Pyke. “It attends to how and what printed matter makes us feel”.⁴⁴ The pleasure of reading has of course been a refrain in some varieties of literary criticism since at least Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), in which the reader-text relationship is one of embodied pleasure, eroticism and *jouissance*; but queer bibliography can remind us that while bibliography has traditionally had little time for affect, “many of us in the field study books because of the feelings we have about them.”⁴⁵ The most common space and occasion in which affect and bibliography do come together is the classroom: the language of delight, amusement, wonder, and pleasurable bafflement arises easily in moments when students are shown, and can engage with, early printed books and manuscripts – and I’ve enjoyed sharing with students printing errors and errata narratives and the general messiness of print, and seeing their intelligence linger in these strange and surprising features. It may be that the conventions of bibliography, as articulated in research papers

⁴² Sotheby’s (New York), “Bibliotheca Brookeriana: A Renaissance Library. The Aldine Collection N-Z”, live auction 25 June 2025, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2025/bibliotheca-brookeriana-a-renaissance-library-the-aldine-collection-n-z>.

⁴³ J.D. Sargan, “What Could a Trans Book History Look Like? Toward Trans Codicology,” *Criticism* 64.2 (2022): 571-86, 577.

⁴⁴ Noble and Pyke, “Queer Bibliography”: 166.

⁴⁵ Lewis, “Creativity”, 265.

and publications, need to relax to incorporate the give-and-take, the sense of thought-in-process, and the candid love for a subject, that characterises teaching.