Afterword

Adam Smyth

In the manuscript now called Bodleian Ashmole MS 781 – the shelf-mark indicating it was once collected by the English antiquary Elias Ashmole (1617–92) – is a six-line verse titled 'Verses Made upon a paire of slippers sent for a New yeares guifte 1631'.

> Men may kisse our handes and gloues present
> To make their guifts performe their Complement
> Nowe both the tyme ~~deserues it~~ requires ~~and~~ yo^{r} choice care
> a Complement as newe as is the yeare
> With that Deuotion Romanists doe greete
> Their Demi Gods our guifts salute yo^{r} feete :/[1]

The manuscript is a small quarto written in a single hand across 170 pages, composed, it seems, during the 1620s and 1630s. The *Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450–1700* (*CELM*) provides a brief description of the volume and records twenty-two of its poems – verses by Donne, Lyly, Ralegh, Elizabeth I, and others; but, with its commitment to authorship and canonicity, *CELM* skips past this anonymous verse.[2] I came upon the poem via the sort of sociable exchange on which much scholarship depends (but which is not much mentioned in discussions of methodology): a friend, knowing I was interested in this kind of thing, mentioned it to me.[3]

By 'this kind of thing' I mean not verse accounts of footwear, but rather poems which establish an intimate relationship with a non-papery, non-codexical substrate: poems that cling to objects. This poem's opening 'Verses made upon' presents a founding ambiguity: is this poem *about* a pair of slippers given as a New Year's gift, a description of that subject matter; or does the poem imagine itself as *physically attached* to the slippers, written 'upon' them, whether

stitched in or inked across or pinned to the material? Is the poem a description of a gift, or is it part of the gift itself? If the latter, then the poem, now contained within the pages of Ashmole's manuscript verse miscellany, and with no shoe in sight, recalls its origins as a variety of object verse: it was once a poem written upon a thing.[4]

The poem written upon a thing, in the sense of being physically attached to the object that is the poem's subject, is a distinct category of verse. The best-known examples come from John Milton, who wrote a sonnet to be fixed to a door, and another to a clock (or, in a variant reading, to a sundial).[5] When the verses came to be printed in his 1645 *Poems*, Milton changed the titles to remove this object-specificity: what had been 'On his dore when y^e^ Citty expected an assault' became 'VIII'; and 'On Time. To be set on a clock case' became 'On Time'. This retitling removed the poems from a relationship with an object, and placed the verses in a literary context – a kind of 'dematerializing' (in the words of William Poole) of Milton's poetry.[6]

In fact, when one starts looking, there are lots of early modern poems that recall an object-origin – either as a literal fact (that is, they were once really attached to a door, or a clock, or a box, or a lute, or an hourglass), or as a conceit to play with (they imagine such a relationship, and find poetic and metaphorical animation in the connection).[7] Ben Jonson's 'The Hour-Glass' is one such poem. It appeared in many versions in manuscript with variations in terms of literary and material form, but in 1640 print it looked like this:

> Doe but consider this small dust,
> Here running in the Glasse,
> By Atomes mov'd;
> Could you beleeve, that this,
> The body was
> Of one that lov'd?
> And in his M^rs.^ flame, playing like a flye,
> Turn'd to cinders by her eye?
> Yes; and in death, as life unblest,
> To have't exprest,
> Even ashes of lovers find no rest.[8]

Alongside Jonson's well-known poem, a provisional corpus of these kinds of object-poems might include less well-known verses such as Daniel King's 'Lines written upon a locket which he constantly wore'; Richard Lovelace's 'Upon the Curtain of Lucasta's Picture, it was thus wrought'; Katherine Philips's 'Engraven on Mr. John Collier's Tomb-stone at Bedlington'; Matthew Stevenson's 'Upon a

silver box presented to his mistress, with this paper in it'; Edmund Waller's 'Written on a Card that Her Majesty tore at Ombre'; Patrick Delany's 'Verses cut by two of the Dean's friends upon a pane of glass in one of his parlors'; and William Mason's or Samuel Whyte's 'Verses written upon a pedestal beneath a row of elms in a meadow near Richmond Ferry, belonging to Richard Owen Cambridge, esq. September, 1760'. Numerous anonymous verses – 'Written upon a lute the gentlewoman being absent who was the owner'; 'A posy written on a pair of bracelets, and sent to his love' – could be added to the group. This tradition reaches an unsettling extreme with 'Written on a young lady's arm, when she was asleep. June 6, 1744', a verse which concludes with the line 'All this soft velum to bestrew with rhyme'.[9]

In his account of the origins of epigrams in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham observes that these poems often began as an 'inscription or writting made as it were upon a table, or in a windowe, or upon the wall or mantell of a chimney in some place of common resort'. Puttenham goes on to record how these object-poems were subsequently transcribed onto pages, thus becoming literary texts as literature generally understands that term (made of words, written on paper, and often bound in books): 'Afterward the same came to be put on paper and in books, and used as ordinarie missives, some of frendship, some of defiaunce, or as other messages of mirth'.[10]

Of all poetic genres, the epitaph is the kind of verse that most often experienced this trajectory. Poems that were originally written for a particular stone (*epi-taphos*: 'on the tomb') were often then transcribed into manuscripts, collected, and even printed. Scott Newstok has studied the ways in which epitaphs cut into stone tombs were 're-*cited* and re*sited* (as in re-*situated*)' as they moved into written, often printed collections of epitaph texts – 'a generic context larger than the original epitaph itself'.[11] For Elizabethan antiquaries such as William Camden and John Weever, the act of 're-citing' epitaphs in written collections on paper was a way to preserve these otherwise fragile inscriptions whose stony substrates were subject to iconoclasm and the erosions of weather, touch, and time. Writing in 1631, John Weever proposed a perhaps surprising media contrast between ephemeral stone monument and enduring paper book: while aristocratic tombs may have 'their brasen Inscriptions erazed, torne away, and pilfered [...] Books [...] and the Muses works are of all Monuments the most permanent; for of all things else there is a vicissitude'.[12]

This movement from attachment to a non-papery, non-codex surface, towards the page and book – a movement that is often a process of nearly but not quite forgetting or effacing this founding object-placement – is nicely illustrated by the textual history of Ben Jonson's epitaph on the Twickenham gardener Vincent Corbet, who died in 1619. Jonson's forty-line celebration of Corbet's life was printed as the twelfth poem in 'Under-woods' in Jonson's 1640 *Workes*. The poem remembers Corbet's peaceful life ('that knew nor noise, nor strife'), and recalls a mind swept free (like Corbet's nurseries) of 'uncleannesse, or offence'. Jonson, who feels on Corbet's death both gratitude and a plunging sense of a chance missed – 'Much from him I professe I wonne, / And more, and more, I should have done' – frames the loss of Corbet as a kind of self-death: 'I feele, I'm rather dead than he'.[13] The poem is followed, or concluded, by a quatrain, separated from the rest of the poem by a blank line ('*Reader*, whose life, and name, did ere become …').

But before Jonson's epitaph was printed in 1640, it had an earlier life as a verse on a large vellum funerary placard (58 cm × 56 cm). Here Jonson's verse is written in an elegant non-authorial scribal hand alongside verses by John Selden, in Latin, and Richard Corbet (poet, Bishop of Oxford and Norwich, and, most importantly, Vincent's son), in English, the three gathered under the heading 'Sacred / to / the Memory / of / Vincent Corbet'. The trio of verses are arranged in two columns, with a central pillar and borders filled with geometric shapes decorated in red and brown. An unattributed four-line address 'To the Reader' ('Reader whose life and name did ere become …') stands in the centre, not attributed to any of the poets but seemingly speaking for all three, along with the note, 'He Dyed the xxvith of Aprill in the yeare of our Lord 1619.' The placard has holes in the corners indicating where it was once nailed to the wall of St Mary's Church, Twickenham, after 26 April 1619, and fold marks indicate its subsequent circulation: these features of material form tell a story of both stasis and movement, and indeed Jonson's verse survives in multiple manuscript witnesses.[14] This vellum manuscript was subsequently owned by John Evelyn (1620–1706), and then by the librarian and antiquarian William Upcott (1779–1845), before it was later sold at the Duke of Berwick's sale in 1843. The most recent vault in its travels came on 29 May 1986, when the placard was bought by Yale University from London booksellers Bernard Quaritch Ltd, with a pre-sale estimate of $35,000.[15]

This, then, is the original form in which Jonson's epitaph appeared in the world: as one verse alongside others, on a handwritten vellum

placard nailed to a church wall, the trio of multilingual poems written and displayed with artful *mise en page* to mark a specific moment and a specific individual. Jonson's verse was occasional, and site-specific, and its form – both literary, and material – was radically distinct from that of its later printed iteration. There are reasonable grounds for an editor of Jonson to excise and separate off Jonson's verse from the Selden and Corbet poems that originally accompanied it, and to present the epitaph as a single-author verse, not least because that is how the epitaph on Corbet is presented to the world in 1640 – and that process of (we might say) tidying up is what all editors of Jonson have performed. But it's also the case that Jonson's poem is quite dramatically different in the 1640 *Workes* (in print, as the work of a single author, contained in a sequence of Jonson-only poems, one point in the development of Jonson's literary and bibliographical ego) compared to the vellum placard of 1619 (where Jonson is one voice in a group, and the relationship between lines by Jonson, Corbet, and Selden is important). It is not just that a manuscript lies behind, or before, Jonson's 1640 *Workes*, but rather that the poem had its founding meaning as a site-specific multi-author text pinned to a wall of a church. And although the 1640 printed text does not make direct reference to the 1619 funeral placard, something of this earlier history is remembered in certain awkward points of meaning which work like disruptions, or Freudian parapraxes, across the 1640 text. The opening words ('I have my Pietie too') suggest, but do not explain, a prior poem, and line 3's 'Would say as much, as both have done' implies two other authors, 'the Friend and Sonne'. The oddly demarcated final four lines to the 'Reader' – floating unattributed in the centre of all three poems on the placard, but positioned as a detached coda to Jonson's 1640 text – are also a way in which the printed poem refuses to forget its earlier materiality. Jonson's poem carried its earlier material form in its own language, and to leave behind the nailed-up vellum as we turn to the printed *Workes* seems wrong – in the sense of anachronistic; out of synch with how early modern readers encountered the 'same' verse in multiple forms; out of synch with how the 1640 printed text itself wants to be read.

What is exceptional about the St Mary's funerary placard is not so much its nature but rather the stark fact of its survival. Colin Burrow is probably right in calling the placard 'one of the most beautiful artefacts to preserve a text of Jonson',[16] but its beauty shouldn't conceal from us its more representative nature: many epitaphs, and many poems, have not-quite-audible textual histories which, if we

could hear them, would describe a relationship between non-codex materiality and literary text. The version of Jonson's epitaph on Katherine, Lady Ogle which survives in the Newcastle manuscript (BL Harley MS 4955, fol. 55) appears to be a copy of a funeral placard which records the design for Ogle's funeral monument that was never built; and Jonson's 'Verses Over the Door at the Entrance into the Apollo', which presents poems over the entry to the Apollo Room on the first floor of the Devil and St Dunstan Tavern, where Jonson and his followers drank and proclaimed, still survives today as the original (although restored) 84 cm × 68.5 cm wood panel, now owned by the Royal Bank of Scotland.

One of the achievements of *Literary Form After Matter* is to resist literary criticism's long-standing commitment to dematerialising writing. In the early modern period, when poems appear not only in manuscript and in print but also on or in walls, plates, stone monuments, glass windows, rings, and many other kinds of object and surface, this dematerialising is particularly unhelpful. Another achievement of this present volume is to encourage us to suspend teleological thinking as we consider poetry's composition, circulation, and consumption. As Esther Osorio Whewell puts it, this means 'paying attention, less teleologically than is usual, to processes, rather than to where they might need to lead' (p. 106). A chronological textual history of Jonson's epitaph on Vincent Corbet *could* describe a progression through time, from a founding moment when the funeral placard was written and hung in the church at the time of the funeral of Corbet, to the literary triumph, twenty-one years later, of Jonson's *Workes*. This progress could be organised around a series of binaries: from manuscript to print; from multi-author to single author; from hung-by-nails site-specificity to printed folio book; from occasionality to an abstracted sense of the literary; from material to literary form. But, as I've tried to suggest, Jonson's 1640 text won't quite shake off the memory of the vellum placard nailed to a church wall, even if it wanted to, and much better than telos is a reading of Jonson's verse as existing across all its iterations. The paradigm of 'from X to Y', with its aesthetic and moral judgements of improvement (from first to final; from provisional to finished; from draft to publication; from malleable to fixed; from occasional to for-all-time), misses much that is rich and alive and characteristic about early modern poetry. As Danielle Clarke writes in this collection, ideas of provisionality, change, and revision serve not as 'a barrier to the creation of meaning', but 'as core principles of form and poetic production' (p. 117). *Literary Form After Matter* shows us that poems do

not 'finish'; they are emergent forms, artworks that (the editors note, p. 9, quoting Kara Gaston) 'carry their own processes of becoming within them', and change (as Gillian Knoll brilliantly puts it) might be thought of not as 'something that *happens to* a being, but instead as a *way of being*' (p. 42). The revision, the added manuscript line in a different ink, the strike-through, the reworked passage, the reused poetic image, the transmission from manuscript on vellum to ink on paper, the verse that was pinned to a door and then was on a hand-written sheet and then was in a printed book, the thrilling sense of a poem being alive – this is not a noise to be turned down as an orchestra, tuning up before a symphony, falls into silence before properly beginning, but is rather the event of early modern poetry happening. With its joyful language of the experiment, its willingness to 'lean into the accidental' (p. 13), its ease with epistemological uncertainty, and its commitment to the classroom as the space for the most insightful thinking about close reading, *Literary Form After Matter* offers us a series of ways of entering into the corpus of Renaissance writing, a corpus which is, as the editors to this volume put it (p. 22), 'both shockingly present and always-already lost'.

Notes

1. Bodleian Ashmole MS 781, p. 165.
2. https://celm.folger.edu/repositories/bodleian-ashmole.html.
3. My thanks to the friend in question, Will Poole.
4. Slippers and writing went together: in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), Jack Wilton imagines his written papers being used for various non-literary purposes, including as 'a privy token' (toilet paper) or 'to wrap velvet pantofles […] so they be not woe-begone at the heels, or weather-beaten'. Pantofle, from the French, means a slipper or (as the *OED* rather winningly puts it), 'loose shoe'. See 'pantofle, *n.*', *OED Online*, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9012950165 (accessed March 2025).
5. William Poole, 'Milton's Two Poems to Be Fixed on Objects', *Notes and Queries* 56, no. 2 (2009): 213–15.
6. Poole, 'Objects', 215. Jonathan Sawday, 'The Poem on the Door: John Milton's Sonnet VIII and the Defence of London 1642–1643', *Review of English Studies* 75, no. 321 (October 2024): 419–71, considers the case for and against the poem being actually pinned to a door, rather than imagining this scenario. While Corns writes that 'only a fool would have pinned such a poem to his door in a beleaguered city', Sawday notes how 'notices were regularly posted around the city […] printed copies of title pages were hung from windows, doors, and posts for books that would be put on sale in the coming week' (433).

7. For an excellent discussion on poems written on books, often on the endleaves, and verses that imagine such a placement (such as Judith Madan Cowper's 'Written In Mr Wallers Poems: 1717', 'Written in the Fair Circassian' (1720), 'To Mr Pope. Written in his Works' (1720)), see Ben Wilkinson-Turnbull, 'The Materiality of Women's Texts, 1580–1760: Production, Transmission, and Reception', DPhil dissertation (University of Oxford, 2025), ch. 1, 'Endleaves.'
8. Ben Jonson, *The workes of Benjamin Jonson* (1640), 176.
9. *London magazine and monthly chronologer*, vol. 14 (December 1745), 617.
10. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 142.
11. Scott Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs Beyond the Tomb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 4, 6.
12. John Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (1631), 'The Author to the Reader' (n.p.), 3; the latter half of the passage is quoted in Newstok, *Quoting Death*, 7.
13. Ben Jonson, 'An Epitaph on Master Vincent Corbet', poem 12 in 'Underwoods', in *Workes* (1640), sig. 2B1r–v.
14. In addition to the 1640 *Workes* and the 1619 vellum placard, Jonson's epitaph's manuscript witnesses include British Library Sloane MS 1792, fols 61r–2r (c. early 1630s); Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.170, pp. 224–6 (1630s–1655); Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.262, pp. 42–3 (1637–51); Pierpont Morgan Library MA 1057, pp. 11–12 (c. 1630s–late seventeenth century); Rosenbach Museum and Library MS 239/18, pp. 4–5 (mid-seventeenth century).
15. Quaritch's sale catalogue no. 1066 (winter 1986), item 99. The item is now Beinecke Library, Yale University, Osborn MS fb.230. My thanks to Ben Higgins for talking about this object with me. I was first alerted to the existence of the funerary placard in a passing comment by Colin Burrow after a research presentation.
16. Colin Burrow, 'The Poems: Textual Essay', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/.