

Books, Owners and History: Books Beyond the Texts

David Pearson

This paper sets out to explore some of the ways in which books as material objects, beyond their textual content, carry important evidence to enrich our historical understanding.¹ In an increasingly digital age, the sense that books matter as artefacts is an important one to communicate.

Books have been emblems of culture, and regarded as one of the defining characteristics of civilisation, for many centuries. They have been symbolically central to religions, they have been associated with learning and virtue, they have been signs of power. There is a particularly wonderful eleventh-century mosaic still surviving on the walls of St Sophia in Istanbul, which symbolises this very potently; it shows Christ flanked by the Emperor Constantine IX and his wife, and while the Emperor is holding a bag of money, Christ holds a book (*fig. 1*). We all know how much the coming of the book, and its spread to mass markets through printing, has brought education, entertainment, political change and spiritual development to millions over the centuries.

But although books remain very familiar objects, and are still being produced in great numbers, we also all know that we are living through a time of great change in which the role of the book is increasingly being questioned. The death of the book has been in the air for some time, following on from the communications revolution brought about by new technology. And although the death of the book is resisted and denied at least as much as it is forecast, let us not forget that the associated technology is still in its infancy. The e-book of today is nowhere near as convenient and flexible as the paperback we read on the train and in the bath, and Internet traffic continues to suffer from fragile networks, speed

¹ This paper is a revised version of the Founders' Library Lecture that I gave at Lampeter on 2 May 2001.



Fig. 1 Christ, with the Emperor Constantine IX: eleventh-century mosaic panel from the church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

restrictions imposed by the hardware, and the organisational chaos of what is out there. But let us not pretend that this will never change, or ignore the fact that the technology already exists to convert the world's entire documentary heritage to digital form. In some areas, particularly in science, most scholarly communication now takes place in electronic form and if it is not available through the desktop it might as well not exist. The world of the humanities is slower to catch up but there are already sizeable chunks of material available electronically. Projects to create full text digital versions of all known English books printed before 1800, for example, are in place and much has already been delivered on this front.

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, shall outlive this powerful rime, but the absolute need for books as the support structure within which the words are contained may soon disappear. *Fig. 2* shows an early eighteenth-century etching by Louis du Guernier which represents Literature saving the past from destruction by time. It is a wonderful image, with Literature fending off Father Time and his destructive scythe, while her cherubic minions in the background store away the precious scrolls which preserve the documentary heritage. The message is clear - the preservation of the scrolls is essential if we are to save the literature of the past from oblivion - but once the problems of digital preservation are solved, which they surely will be, there will be a rival medium which may be more readily accessible. When Thomas Burgess bequeathed his library to his newly founded college at Lampeter, and when Thomas Phillips augmented that benefaction with many thousands of books sent soon afterwards, they were both motivated by the belief that what the fledgling academy needed was a rich seam of texts to be quarried for teaching and research. They knew that without those physical copies of books on the shelves, the Lampeter students would have no access to that essential corpus of knowledge and ideas that made their studies possible, and also that the bigger it was, the better it was. The importance of a library as a storehouse of texts is still the fundamental driver behind most libraries today, and historic collections like the Founders' Library have gained an additional significance as repositories of rare materials which may not be readily available elsewhere. If you wish to read a particular text printed in the sixteenth century and the only copy within 100 miles resides here you will travel here to see it. That kind of world has already been eroded by microforms and other kinds of facsimile publishing, but if we move to one in which most of the texts you may wish to consult can be summoned up and printed off from your PC, wherever you are, that suggests a whole new



Fig. 2 L. du Guernier, *Literature saving the past from destruction by time*. Etching, c. 1700. Wellcome Library V7539.

dimension of questioning for the rows and rows of volumes in serried ranks on library shelves.

In fact, of course, what we need to do is separate out books from texts. When people talk about books, all too often they actually mean texts. Much of the veneration with which books have been surrounded for so long is really to do with texts, rather than with the books as artefacts; when Milton spoke of a good book as 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life', he was really praising the ability of words, put together as texts, to inform, inspire, educate and move.² If we move away from the idea that books are interesting primarily as gateways to texts, if texts are freed by the possibilities of cyberspace from the bondage of physical volumes, we can concentrate on the artefactual qualities of the books and come to realise what an important dimension that opens up.

Because, of course, books are artefacts, physical objects with unique qualities. The rising generation of book historians, influenced by the growing vogue for the history of reading as a key concept for understanding the reception of texts, has increasingly emphasised the physical form of the book as an important factor that 'reflected and conditioned the relationship between the book and reader', to quote from Kevin Sharpe's book, *Reading Revolutions*.³ But beyond the physical shape that they come packaged in, books develop their own individual histories which become part of our broader historical heritage. Books have not been passive vessels in their role as intermediaries between authors and readers; they have been tangible frames, noticed and respected as such, and fully exploited for the opportunities they provide for interaction between the texts and their recipients. Sharpe's book focusses on the private library of one particular seventeenth-century politician and landowner, Sir William Drake, whose annotated volumes and commonplace books make it possible to carry out a detailed analysis of the ways in which the books were used, and influenced his thought. Here is a difference between the world of books and the world of cybertexts. A book can be written in, defaced, altered, beautified or cherished, to produce a preservable object with an individual history. A computer used to display texts taken from a web-accessible databank does not have the same qualities.

² John Milton, *Areopagitica: and, Of education*, ed. by K. M. Lea (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 6.

³ K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: the politics of reading in early modern England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 46.

For many centuries, until the introduction of mechanisation in the printing and publishing industries in the nineteenth century, all books were unique handcrafted objects. Even before owners had the chance to make their own separate marks, the texts were set by hand, each copy represented a series of separate pulls on the printing press, and the resulting printed sheets were gathered, folded and sewn by hand. No two copies of a book of this period, even before leaving the bookseller's shop, can be truly identical; the printing process could introduce no end of slight variance between one copy and another, and the binding process yet more. The idea of uniform edition binding, with which we are familiar today, is a fairly modern one, and if you locate twenty copies of any particular eighteenth-century book, let alone a sixteenth-century one, the chances are that the bindings will all be different. Binding was just the beginning of a customisation cycle that developed as books passed from hand to hand and were owned by successive generations, each of whom could leave some mark – inscriptions, annotations, bookplates, new bindings, armorial stamps, defacements.

The main thrust of this paper, therefore, is concerned with looking at various ways in which the things that owners do to their books, and the ways in which the books are changed through the processes of ownership, can add significantly to our understanding of those books and their place in history. The history of individual copies of books, and of individual libraries and collections, can give us direct insights into the ways the books were read, how they were used and regarded, what influence they really had. These things can correct our possibly distorted perception of the contemporary significance of particular texts, where we may be unduly influenced both by our own literary tastes and fashions, and by the accident of survival. As Thomas Lloyd points out in his chapter on country house libraries in *A Nation and its Books: a history of the book in Wales*, 'nothing brings us closer to collectors than the books themselves. Lists tell us what owners possessed ... not what they read. Annotations, shelf marks, bindings, and repairs reveal what was cared for, while undamaged books or uncut presentation volumes indicate the opposite.'⁴ The Wellcome Library recently acquired a late seventeenth-century book by Johann Becher, a German chemist, who has a place in scientific history largely for his contribution to debates on the theory of combustion. The book, his *Novum*

⁴ T. Lloyd, 'Country House Libraries of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in P. H. Jones and E. Rees, eds, *A Nation and Its Books: a history of the book in Wales* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1998), pp. 135–46 (p. 136).

organum philologicum, is a kind of cross between a scientific encyclopaedia and a dictionary, in Latin and German, and it is not a book which is readily penetrable to modern eyes.⁵ It is also a rare book today, with very few copies known to survive, and you could easily discount it as a book of very little interest or impact. But we may not so readily dismiss its significance to the audience of its day when we note that this particular copy belonged to Robert Hooke, who wrote on the flyleaf that he paid 1s 9d for it in Moorfields in March 1693, and who was sufficiently interested in it also to note its purchase in his diary, from which we can deduce that this copy very probably came previously from the collection of Robert Boyle. Here we have direct evidence that this is a book which passed through the hands of two of the leading English scientists of the day.

The study of individual library collections, based on surviving books which can be associated with particular owners, and perhaps augmented by other evidence such as inventories or sale catalogues, has been quite a growth industry during recent decades and many valuable studies have been produced to explore the ways in which books were owned and used. David Selwyn's study of Thomas Cranmer's library, issued by the Oxford Bibliographical Society in 1996, is an example, which amply demonstrates the insights to be had from a detailed analysis of a particular collection. As David says in the introduction to that book, 'it was Cranmer's habit not only to underscore passages in the books that interested him, but to annotate the text in the margins. A study of his surviving books can suggest possible influences on his thought and shed light on the course of his theological development and his attitude on many of the disputed issues of the day.'⁶

Annotated books can provide us with a direct interface between the author and the reader, to see how the reader was reacting to the book's ideas, or the parts that were particularly interesting. The Founders' Library in Lampeter is fertile hunting ground for this kind of material. Fig. 3 shows an opening from a particularly nice example, a copy of Peter Heylyn's *Microcosmos, or a little description of the great world*, printed in 1621, a geographical-cum-historical survey of the countries of the world which was enthusiastically seized upon by a more or less contemporary owner who interleaved it throughout to give him space to write his own thoughts and reactions to the text. The notes on the flyleaf include a comment to the

⁵ Wellcome Library EPB Suppl. B/BEC.

⁶ D. G. Selwyn, *The Library of Thomas Cranmer*, Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, third series, 1 (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1996), p. lxviii.

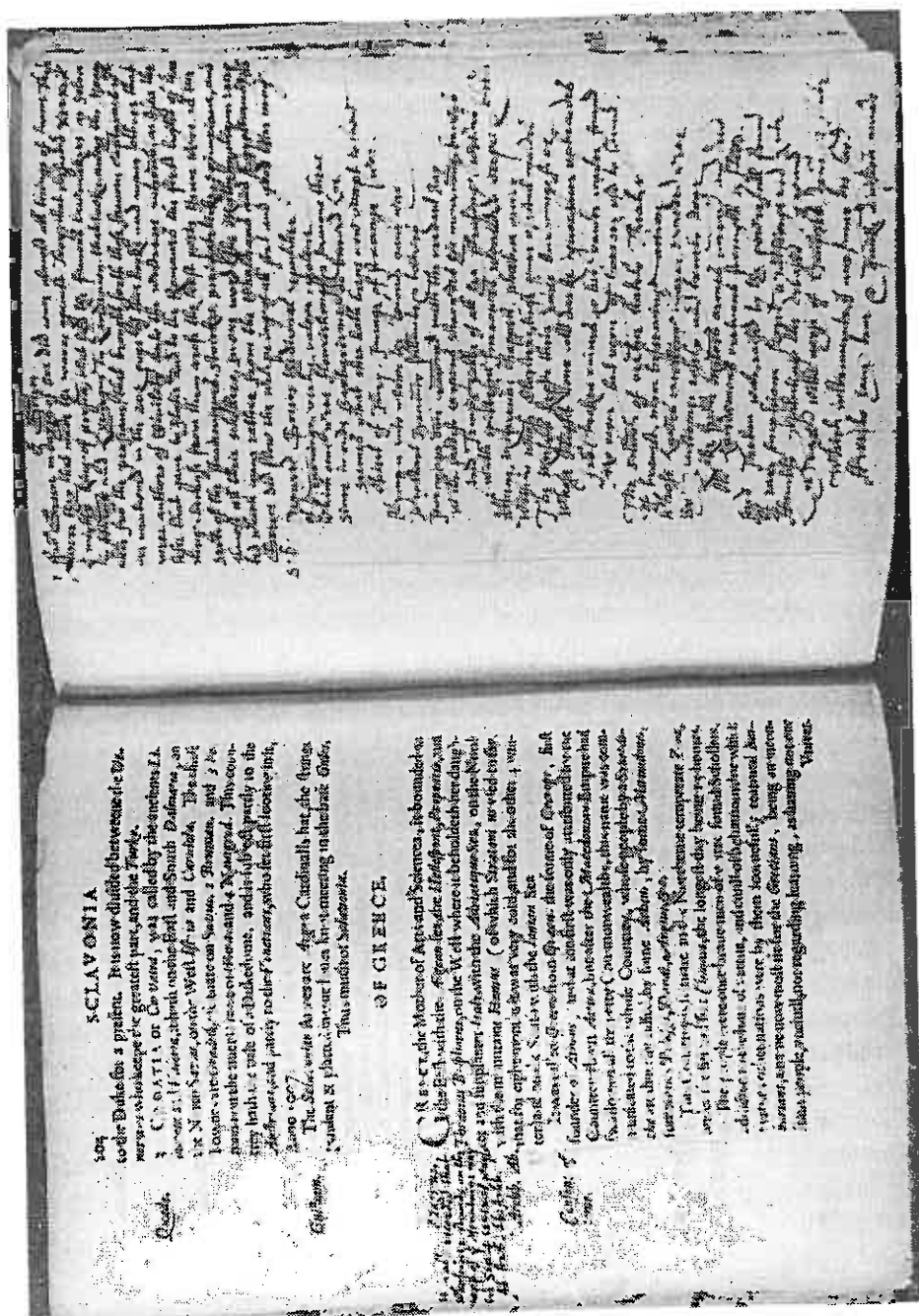


Fig. 3 P. Heylyn, *Microcosmos* (London, 1621), interleaved and extensively annotated. Lampeter, Founders' Library 17154/1E.

effect that the most observable passages in the book have been 'seriously selected by a first and second lection', that is, reading, but the annotations go well beyond copying out bits of text to replying to them and adding additional thoughts. There are numerous observations about other parts of the world and how they were perceived, going beyond the more moderate opinions fit to be expressed in print to the real xenophobia of early seventeenth-century England:

Spaine is like a libbards skin here a spott and there a spott inhabited. Shee swells soe every where with huge hills, and some question whether the mindes of her inhabitants or her mountatins bee highest.

The Brasilians cannot pronounce the letters L F R, of which one gave this reason, because they had neyther Law Fayth nor Rulers amongst them.

The owner was clearly a supporter of Charles I, as the annotations are peppered with staunchly royalist statements, and overall these notes give a nice snapshot of contemporary opinions on geography, history and national identity. The only sad part of this story is that the owner, despite his liberal use of ink to record his opinions, nowhere uses it to write his name, so we do not know who he was, a twist in the tail that is all too common in the world of provenance research.

Not everyone writes in their books to that extent, of course, but *fig. 4* shows another instance of heavy contemporary annotation taken from the Founders' Library, this time a late seventeenth-century theological text, which an owner of that time clearly found to be a stimulating read. *Fig. 5* is another nice example from the Lampeter shelves of a book which has been extensively enriched in manuscript, this time by a number of hands over several generations. The printed text is a medical work by Johann Crato, printed in 1558, a fragment of a larger work, which was bound up in the early seventeenth century with a quantity of blank paper added at each end to make a family recipe book, a manuscript compendium of domestic wisdom mostly focussed on medicine and cookery but which might have all kinds of other things thrown in. Recipe books like this are an important genre of household book in the early modern period, and social historians as well as medical ones are increasingly realising their importance as a window on the cares and practices of people at various levels of society. They were often used and added to over several generations, as is the case here. The handwritten texts begin with excerpts from Galen written out around the middle of the seventeenth century, but the book's pages now have a patchwork of material in several hands through to the late eighteenth century. Facing the Galen text is a poem

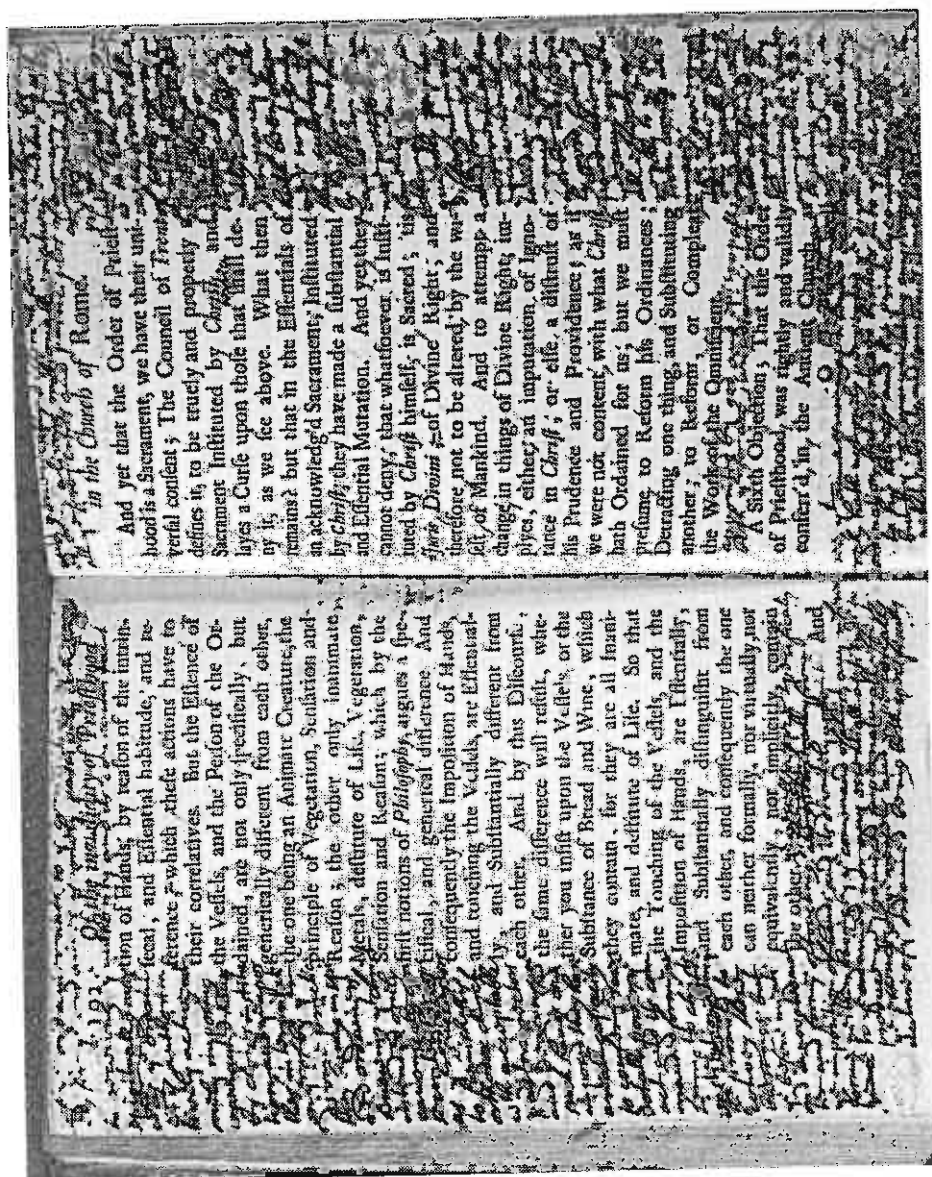


Fig. 4 J. Savage, *Rome's conviction* (London, 1683), with heavy marginal annotations by a contemporary owner. Lampeter, Founders' Library 25383/5F.

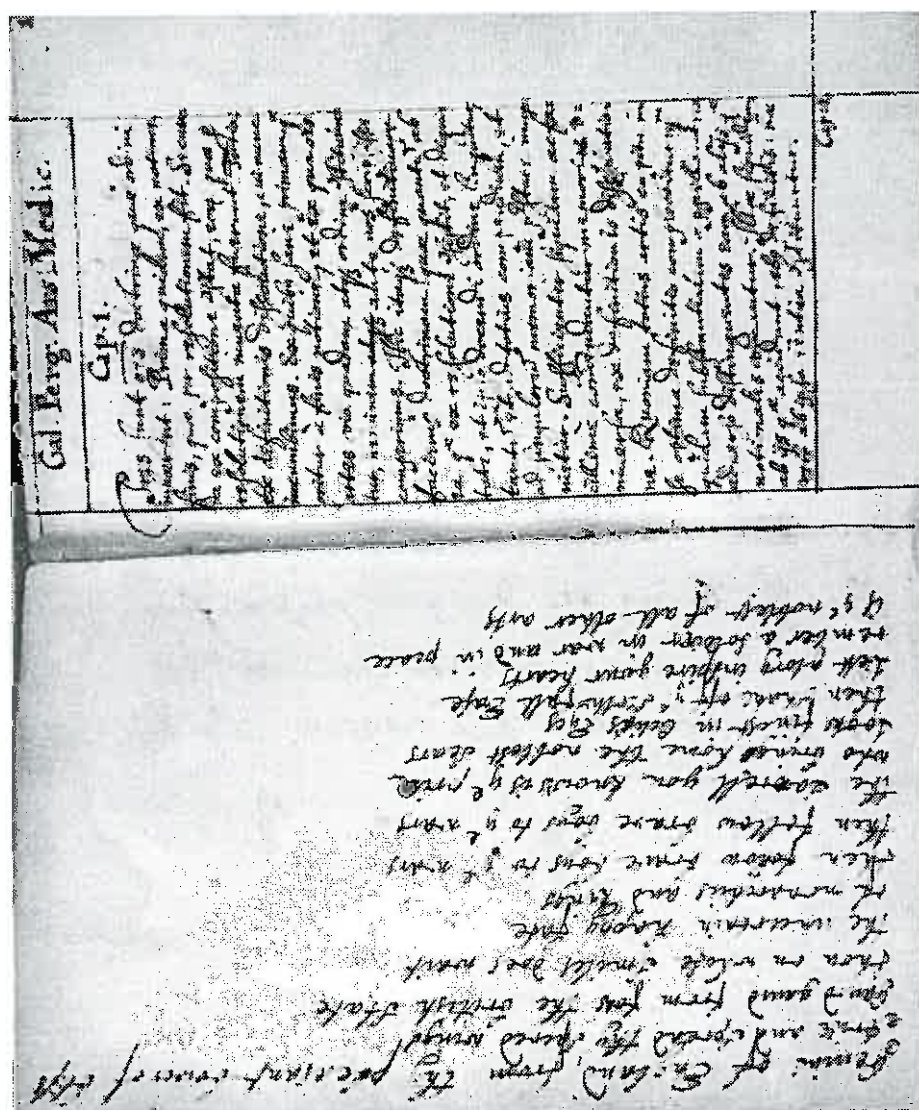


Fig. 5 Medical recipe book, with manuscript additions, seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Lampeter, Founders' Library 153126/48C.

called 'The Genius of England', probably copied around 1700, by an annotator who wrote out several other poems, including some on the age-old theme of the relations between the sexes:

Some say that marriage a dog with a bottle is
Pleasing their humours to rail at their wives
Others declare it an ape with a rattle is
Comforts destroyer, and plague of their lives.

There are also some rather more Swiftian verses on the joys to be found in the russet gown, young plump and round, leading on to the effects of venereal disease. This is all mixed in among a medley of more practical texts for cookery and healthcare, including recipes for making an egg pudding and a bread and butter pudding, and advice that 'a spoonful of cat's blood, drunk warm upon a fit of the Epilepsy, and at the new of the Moon certainly cureth the Epilepsy'.

The *Microcosmos* case is an example of someone using the book to interact with the text and record their own thoughts and reactions; the recipe book is more a case of starting with the original artefact, the published text and the codex that surrounds it, as something to be added to in order to make it more useful. The related theme of books as objects in which it is appropriate to record certain kinds of important information is most obviously seen in Bibles, and many people will be familiar with the kinds of family Bibles whose flyleaves are used to record the key facts of birth, marriage and death of successive family members. Fig. 6 shows a fairly humble example from the Lampeter shelves, a Welsh Bible of 1718, with the chronology of several generations of owners recorded: Enoch Moses was born at 12 midnight on 9 April 1775; he died between 6 and 7 pm on 12 September 1854. There is more than a popular habit going on here; the idea springs from a sense of the book as a holy and special object, the physical manifestation of the word of the Lord, the right place for a permanent record of these really fundamental facts of life. I have written elsewhere about a slightly more unusual example of this use of Bibles in a copy of the Coverdale version now in New Zealand, where a mid sixteenth-century owner used the opening page of the New Testament as a suitable place on which to record the bequest of property to one of his relatives.⁷

The kinds of annotations discussed so far generally give us insight into owners and their relationships with books and texts, but the things that

⁷ D. Pearson, 'The Howard Collection of Bibles and Liturgical Books in the Alexander Turnbull Library', *The Book Collector*, 50 (2001), 217-34 (p. 223).



Fig. 6 [Bible, Welsh]. 1718: first opening, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notes on births and deaths of previous owners. Lampeter, Founders' Library 25209/18F.

people write in their books can have other kinds of bibliographical usefulness. Historians have long valued the habit of Narcissus Luttrell, who amassed an important collection of political pamphlets in the late seventeenth century, of noting on the title page the precise date of publication, thus making it possible to work out the sequence of squib and counter-squib.⁸ The use of inscriptions in books to attribute authorship to anonymous and pseudonymous works is one of the cornerstones of Halkett and Laing's standard reference work; many of their attributions rely on notes found in individual copies, made by contemporary owners who were in on the rumour of the day, or perhaps had inside knowledge.⁹ Fig. 7 shows an example from the Lampeter tract collection, a late seventeenth-century pamphlet attributed by a contemporary hand to the authorship of Walter Charleton, the celebrated physician and antiquary. Both Wing, and Halkett and Laing, attribute this work differently, to Thomas Blount, and there is a piece of work to be done here to determine where the truth lies. The copy of *The established test* shown in fig. 8, one of the many pamphlets of 1679 surrounding the Popish Plot, has at the foot of the titlepage 'By Dr Nalson as Mr Proudfoot tells me'. This attribution has clearly not been established in the historical canon, as the pamphlet is listed anonymously in both Wing and the printed Lampeter catalogue. The Bowdler tracts at Lampeter are, not surprisingly, fertile hunting ground for interesting contemporary annotations. Fig. 9 shows a copy of a published sermon by John Gauden, with errata in the author's own hand on the title leaf verso, while fig. 10 is a copy of George Hickes's *Three short treatises* of 1709, also annotated by the author, this time with additional passages and corrections to the text for a planned next edition which was never in fact published.

We should not look only at what people add to books, we should also look at what they take away. Books have been mutilated for numerous reasons but all such acts become part of a book's history and uniqueness. Early religious and liturgical books provide one of the most common arenas in which to find this kind of deliberate erasure, following the ups and downs of ecclesiastical politics. The evolution of the Book of Common Prayer was a gradual process and the catholic liturgy continued in use throughout the reign of Henry VIII, but with changes and new procedures

⁸ See R. E. Stoddard, *Marks in Books* (Cambridge, Mass: Houghton Library, Harvard University, 1985), p. 18.

⁹ S. Halkett and J. Laing, *A Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publications in the English Language*, new edn (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1926-62).

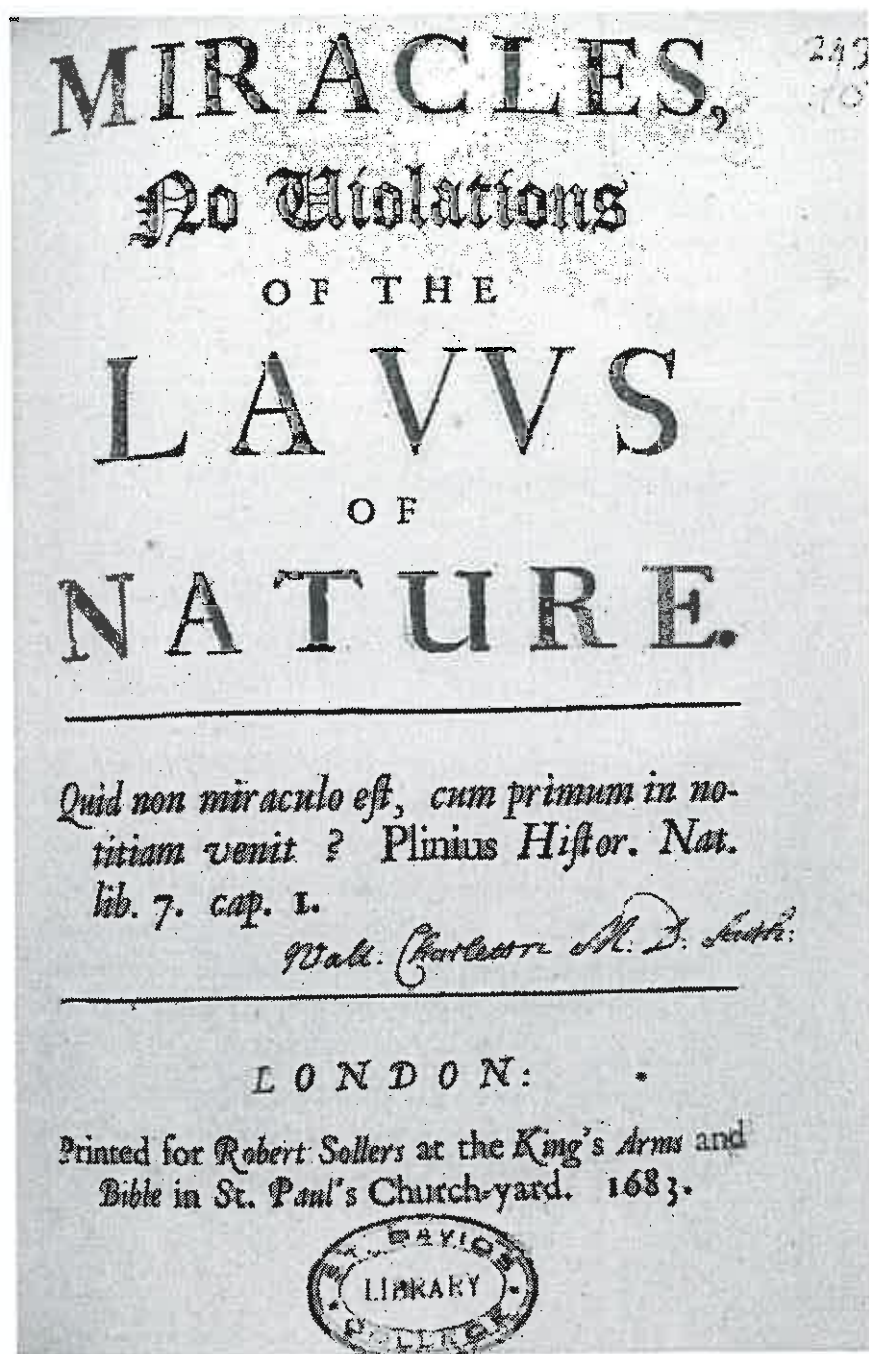


Fig. 7 *Miracles, no violations of the laws of nature* (London, 1683), with contemporary attribution of authorship to Walter Charleton. Lampeter, Founders' Library T.144(7).

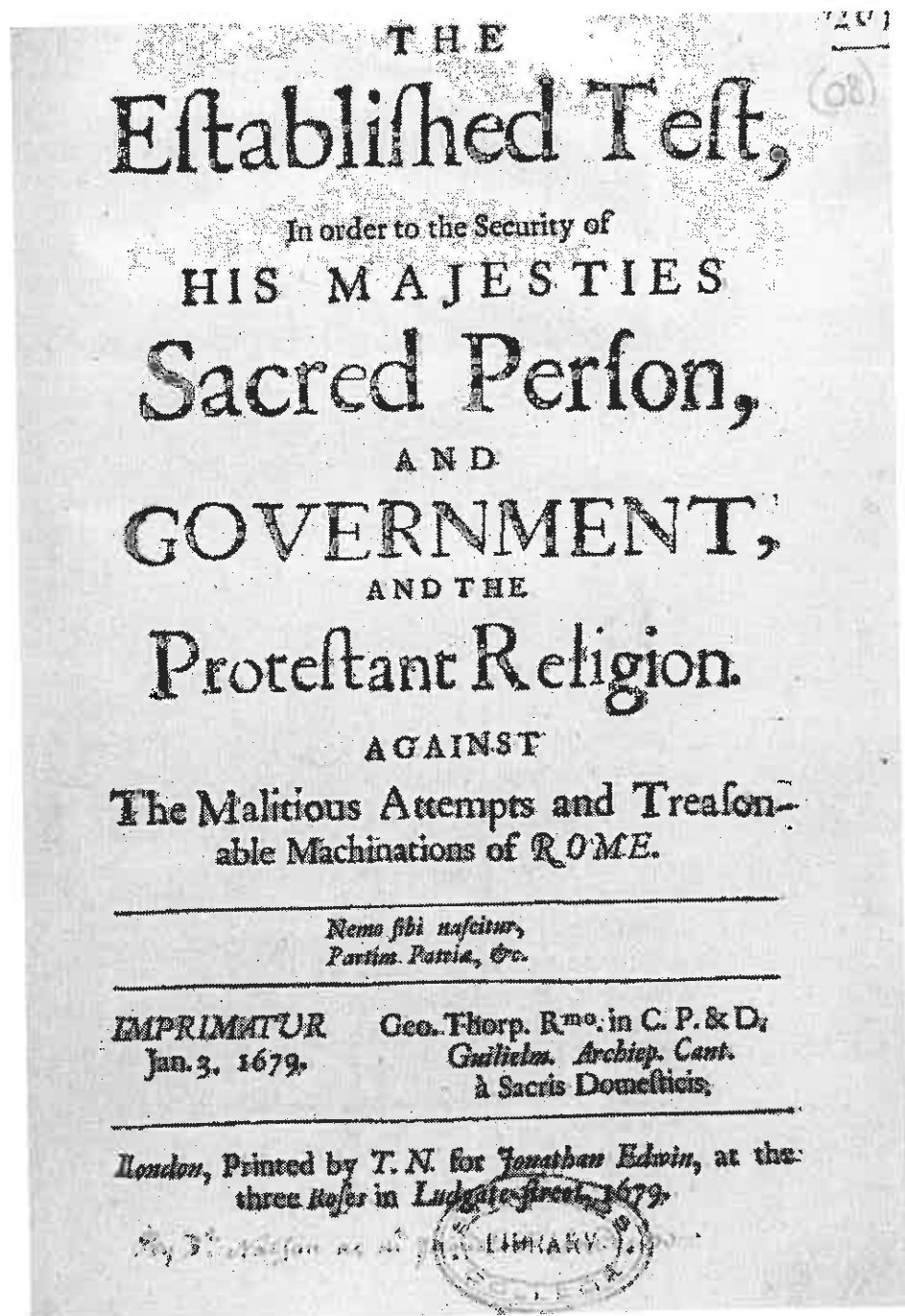


Fig. 8 *The established test* (London, 1679), with contemporary note at the foot of the title page, 'By Dr. Nalson as Mr. Proudfoot tells me'. Lampeter, Founders' Library T.61(8).

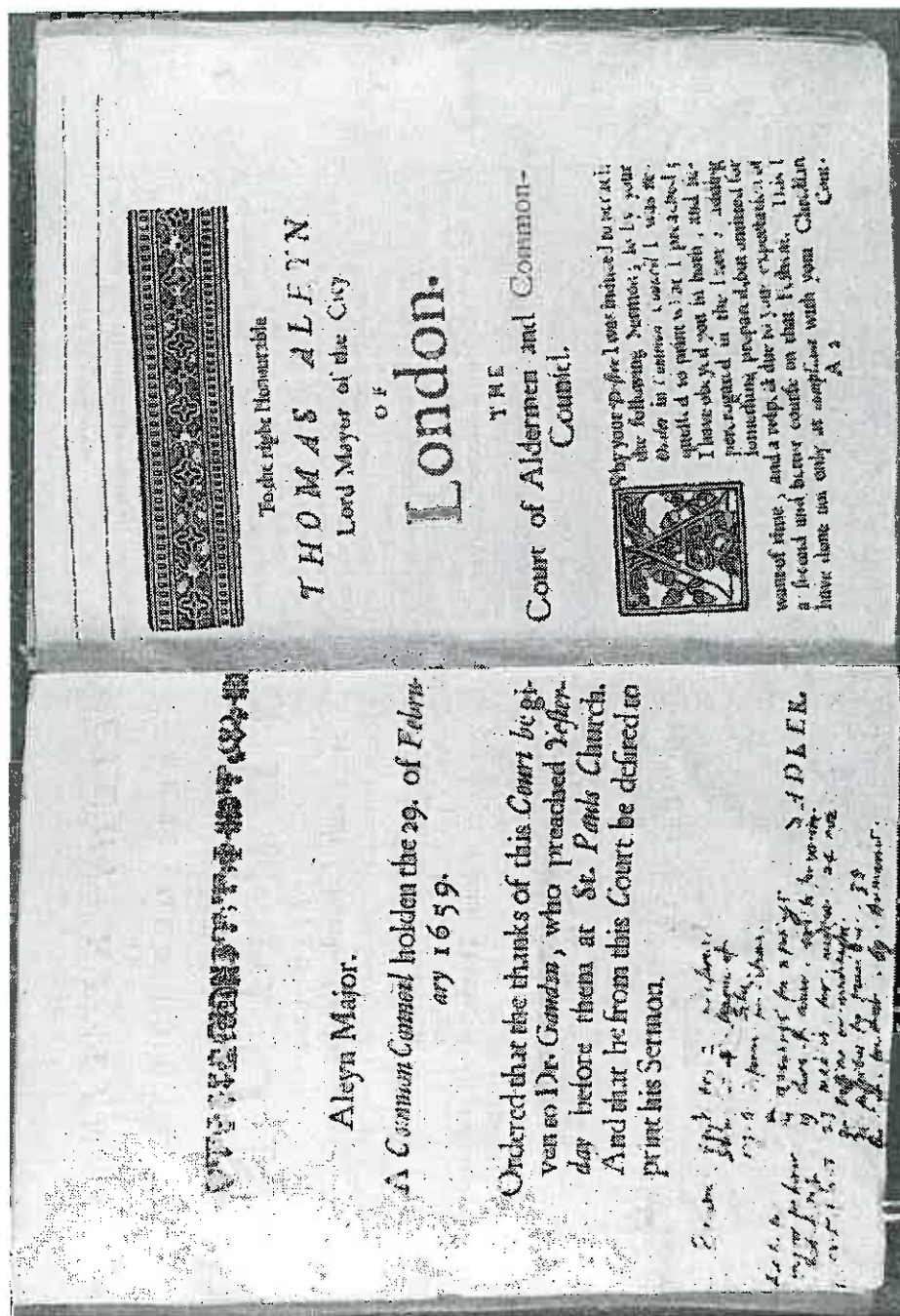


Fig. 9 J. Gauden, [*Kakourgoi*], *sive medicastri* (London, 1660), with corrections in the author's hand on the verso of the title leaf. Lampeter, Founders' Library T.467(1).

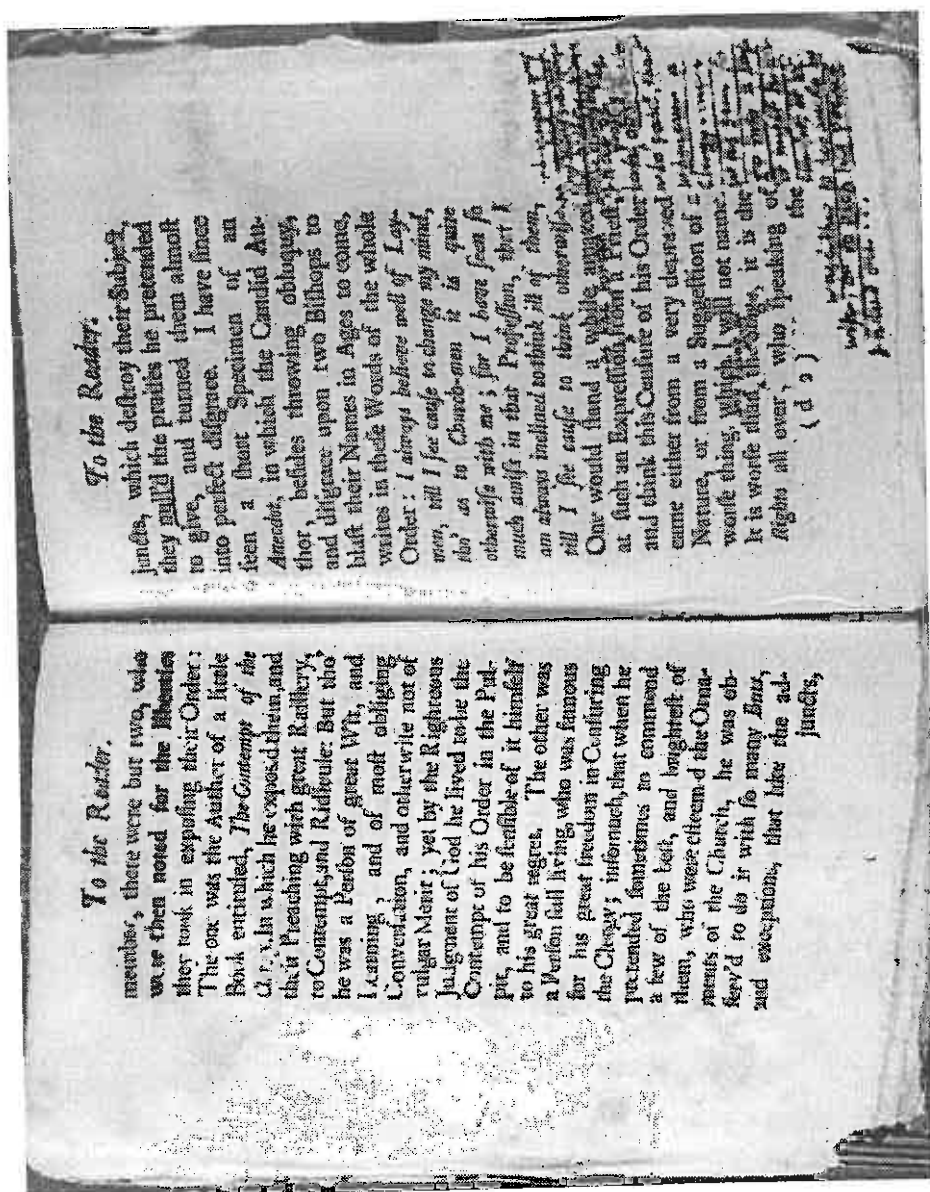


Fig. 10 G. Hickes, *Three short treatises* (London, 1709): an opening showing annotations in the author's hand. Lampeter, Founders' Library T.157(3).

gradually introduced. In 1542 it was decreed that all existing liturgical books should have the name of the Pope expunged and so surviving books from that time will often be found to have been systematically vandalised with a pen or a knife, taking out all references to the Pope and often also to Thomas Becket. This kind of defacement demonstrates the Reformation in action at a direct and personal kind of level.

Also on the subject of mutilation, it should be added that books often preserve, by accident, fragments of other books which have themselves been cut up as waste. During the sixteenth century, particularly, but also to some extent in the fifteenth and seventeenth, the relatively high cost of plain white paper meant that recycled materials were heavily used for making endleaves, spine linings and sometimes whole pasteboards. Many pieces of early printing, including examples from the earliest presses in Europe, are known of today only because discarded fragments of these things were used in this way instead of being used as pie cases or any of the other purposes to which waste paper might be put. Primary archival evidence of the workings of the book trade in the sixteenth century is almost non-existent today, except where booksellers' account books have been cut up and used as endleaves. In the 1950s an American researcher found some discarded bookseller's accounts of 1603 used in this way in a binding of the 1630s. The lists of books included an entry for 'Loves labours won'. Shakespeare scholars have long been intrigued by a list of his plays drawn up in 1598, which includes a play of that title alongside *Love's Labours Lost*, and there has long been speculation that there was once such a companion play whose text has not survived. This discovery added significant evidence to support that idea, although the play itself remains elusively lost.¹⁰

Nothing quite as intriguing as that has been found in the Founders' Library books, but the collection does contain its fair share of fragments from medieval manuscripts preserved in this way. This was another important source of waste material for bookbinders, as the sixteenth century saw the destruction of vast quantities of pre-Reformation manuscripts, either because they had become politically incorrect or because they were superseded by printed texts. Vellum is a good strong material for spine hinges and it is well known that Oxford binders in particular used cut up leaves to make pastedowns, although it happened in Cambridge and London

¹⁰ T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's 'Love's Labours Won': new evidence from the account books of an Elizabethan bookseller* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

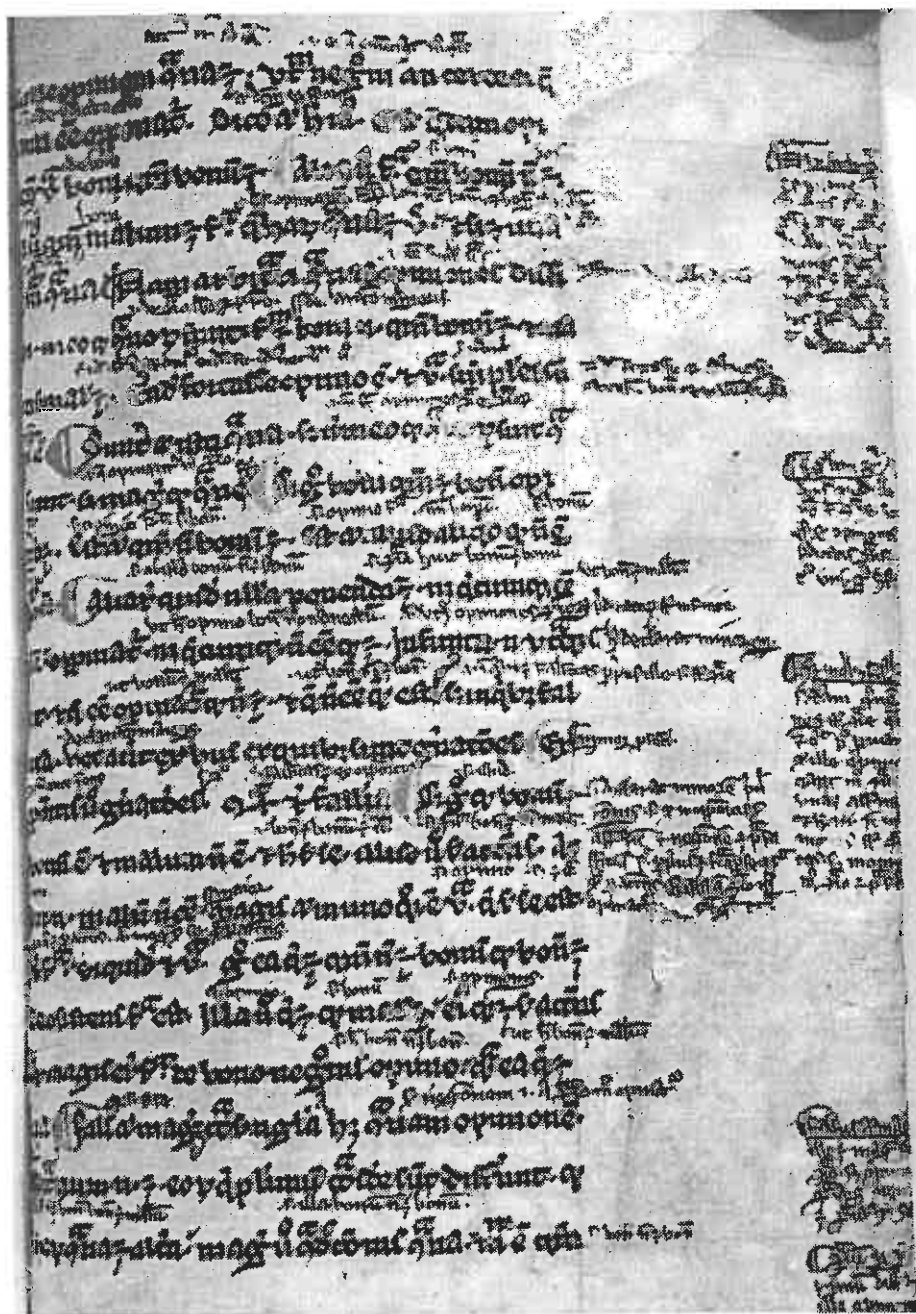


Fig. 11 C. Scribonius, *Historia de gentibus* (Antwerp, 1558), with pastedown preserving a fragment from a thirteenth-century manuscript of an Aristotelian text. Lampeter, Founders' Library 48B.

also.¹¹ Many fragments like this survive today, although they are merely the tips of icebergs of medieval libraries now lost. Fig. 11 shows a leaf from a mid thirteenth-century manuscript of a text of Aristotle, preserved for posterity as a pastedown in a mid sixteenth-century edition of Scribonius, bound in Oxford around that time, and now at Lampeter. Several other fragments like this are known today in Oxford bindings of the Reformation period now at Lampeter.¹²

Although the focus thus far has been on the kind of evidence found inside books, we should not forget the outsides. The hand-crafted nature of all aspects of early book production was mentioned earlier and bindings of this period, however humble, should not be ignored as constituent parts of the unique histories of individual books. Binders have been decorating the outsides of books almost since the codex format was invented in the first few centuries of the Christian era, and many people will be familiar with pictures of elaborately decorated bindings, produced for wealthy collectors down the ages, where the books become both aesthetically striking objects and vehicles for advertising the owner's wealth and status. Of course, most historic bookbindings do not look like this, and for every one of those there are hundreds more with a much plainer appearance. Throughout the handpress era, binders offered customers a range of possibilities for their books, from the simplest and cheapest to the fanciest and most expensive, decorated according to the fashion of the day. The fashions themselves changed, but there was always a spectrum of options. Every binding represents an active choice, dictated by the depth of the customer's pocket, by their individual taste, or by the judgement of the retailer as to what would sell most readily. Bindings can tell us something about owners, therefore, or they may tell us something about contemporary regard for the books themselves. It is more likely that an early seventeenth-century theological text will be found in a fancy binding than a contemporary literary one.

This paper began by referring to the growing question mark over the traditional physical form of the book which the digital age may pose, leading on to a question mark over whether we will want to go on preserving them. I hope it has demonstrated a range of reasons as to why

¹¹ N. R. Ker, *Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts used as Pastedowns in Oxford Bindings*, Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, new series, 5 (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1954), p. vii.

¹² Ker, *Pastedowns*, no. 130; D. Pearson, *Oxford Bookbinding 1500–1640: including a supplement to Neil Ker's Fragments*, Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, third series, 3 (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 2000), nos 58.1, 678.1, 766.1, 783a.1.

books can, in fact, matter. Of course they matter as texts, and will go on doing so unless we evolve some radical new communication process which is independent of words, but what I have been talking about is why they matter as objects, individual and unique objects, part of the historical fabric. The examples of annotated and altered books mentioned here have largely been particularly striking examples, and of course not every book on the Lampeter shelves is as extensively individualised as the *Microcosmos*. However, inspection of the shelves of any historic library will inevitably reveal all kinds of evidence to show who the previous owners have been and how they have done things with their books. People have left their mark in books as inscriptions of all kinds, by using bookplates, by putting their names or initials on the covers, by using armorial binding stamps. They may not always have annotated their books, and indeed most people do not, but the mere evidence of ownership makes it possible to recreate the private libraries of the past and deepen our understanding of the effects of books in history. Even an uninscribed book in a humble contemporary binding has something to tell us about its past status. The purely textual function of a collection like the Founders' Library has already changed radically since Burgess's day, in line with changes to the curriculum as well as newer changes in the delivery of information. That change is likely to continue but the books have much to teach us even in an age of cybertexts.

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