Memory, oblivion and the book of Shakespeare

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Variations sur la lettre, le mètre et la mesure

Shakespeare

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The problem of the materiality of the text in printed books has in the last decade or so elicited some quite exceptionally sophisticated discussions[1]. Less in the foreground of debate, perhaps, but equally valuable and instructive, are studies of book prices charged for small quartos of vernacular drama and poetry, studies of minor collectors of manuscripts and printed books of modern literature, and studies of annotators and readers other than academics and poets (whose marginal comments, valuable as they are, may have less to tell us about diversity of reading than those of a bored young female aristocrat venting her annoyance at a romance, or a common lawyer scribbling out an allegorical interpretation of a dangerous contemporary play).

Some of these studies have not even been undertaken, let alone written up and published, leaving us most vulnerable to the inspired but eccentric guess, or to the atypical anecdote. Where, for instance, is the study of the Oxbridge undergraduates of the 1580s and 1590s — those who read the French sonnets and compared them with their English imitators, who wrote the satirical but soft-bellied *Parnassus Plays,* who went on like Greene and Peele and Marlowe and Nashe to write for the public playhouses ? Was this generation different in the way that some commentators, Ferguson and Hunter for example, have suggested, from the generation of commonwealth men who preceded them, different in the value it placed on imaginative writers and writing ? Did all of their college tutors teach these undergraduates to admire Chaucer, as we know some Fellows at Oxford and Cambridge did, and were they as up to date in their tastes for modern poetry in English as, for instance, Gabriel Harvey was at Cambridge ? To pose these questions as part of a history of the book we shall need (among other tasks) to attempt a vigorous sampling of contemporary library catalogues of gentry families and the purchase of books of modern literature on behalf of university students. There *is* evidence in various sources of ownership, gifts and purchases, especially of books of English poetry, but the work of drawing it together and collating it largely remains to be done.

How plays in print were read — in good, bad or indifferent quartos — who bought copies of the first edition of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis,* which great lady had printed texts of *The Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* read to her nightly by her servants, and which other great lady, already in her fifties and living in the country, ordered her steward (in 1610) to buy her a copy of *Hero and Leander* — all of these make up the fascinating area of studies which considers how typeset books and handwritten papers of early modern literature shaped and were shaped by contemporary manners and social ideals. Let me take two brief but telling examples

of this "shaping". The first centres on a real love affair in the mid 1590s between a provincial clergyman and one of his married female parishioners. It appears that the couple contacted one another by letter, assuming the names of the lover and beloved in a volume of sonnets and lyrics written by Giles Fletcher and published under the title *Lucia.* Unfortunately for the couple, one their letters was intercepted by the lady's husband, who in a fit of rage tore the billet doux into pieces. As soon as he had calmed down, though, the husband stuck the bits of the letter together again, and he had his wife and the erring minister brought to trial in the local church court. It is not clear what happened to the lovers, or to the marriage but what is certain is that the love code of this sequence of lyric poems was adapted to a much more real-life purpose, perhaps allowing the couple to live out some of their encounters through the book (as a gift or as a symbolic item) and through the sentiments expressed in it.

Another example of books and manners involves both a late sixteenth-century aristocrat, Charles Blount, eighth Baron Mountjoy, and the most notorious of the Elizabethan generals. Montjoy was a great reader and annotator of his books, many of which were theological texts and moral essays (he debated with the Irish chieftains, and their priests, at a truce in his campaign against the Irish in 1600), and he won great esteem for his knowledge of and command in discussing theological niceties. He was an aristocrat, a man at arms, Penelope Rich's lover, and a student of letters, not to say a bookish man. His secretary, who served with him in the Irish campaigns, also reports of Mountjoy that he much enjoyed reading playbooks — contemporary drama in print — for recreation, and that he owned a good number of printed quartos of the drama. Yet Mountjoy would never attend the theatre in person, neither in the private nor public playhouses. This may have had various causes — a contempt for the vulgarity of watching plays, or a cautiousness about being seen by his social inferiors and sitting in proximity to them, or even a dislike of the kind of high-born company (his own peers, in fact) which frequented the playhouses. What is intriguing, however, and perhaps revealing in quite a different way, is that Mountjoy was the great friend of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, and very nearly his fellow-conspirator in the failed rebellion of 1601 — of the Essex who was a regular visitor at the theatre, who used a private production of *Richard II* to bolster up his own and the spirit of his conspirators before the attempted coup, and who was so obviously, even hectically, theatrical himself. Mountjoy, perhaps the smarter of these two noblemen, kept himself out of the theatre and its inducement to play-acting or to hysterical over-acting, thus avoiding the torments of self-consciousness performed in front of others. Safe in his study, scribbling all over his playbooks, did he observe so very carefully the distinction between courtier and player, though ? Again, there is no way of knowing. It may be that Mountjoy, educated through the Roman poets and dramatists, and through a book-based syllabus, simply would not or could not respond to the enactment of thought and feeling in theatrical space.

One subject which has not received much attention from historians so far is the *lexicon* of the book — its manufacture and reception — and the bearing this lexicon has on imaginative writing. Consider, for example, the word "press", the

wood and metal device on which printed sheets were run off during this period. Because of its potential meanings and nuances, of the physical body physically pressing another body, several literary students have recently emphasized — I believe overemphasized — the erotic and sexual connotations of phrases like "putting things to the press", or "pressing a page". Some poets — notably Ben Jonson — do pun on such matters, sometimes with lewd associations, but looking up the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* and drawing on a wider range of contemporary writers, generally less preoccupied than Jonson with the business of making books, one learns that the most important meaning for "press" before and long after the arrival of the printing press, was that of the mob and of the crowd, the *press* of human beings assembled together. In the thirteenth and early fourteenth century, the word is associated chiefly with riotous assemblies, the many-headed hydra of the common people, the plebs, but in the two centuries which follow — until and beyond the introduction of the first printing presses in London — it becomes specialised into meaning the crowd of court people (statesmen, sycophants, ambassadors, time-servers, servants, onlookers) mobbing or pressing around the monarch. No one, to my knowledge, has examined what happens when these two meanings of "press" interact — let alone with the other contemporary ones of pressing wine and metals, and with their sexual connotations. Thus, one of the key words associated with the manufacture of the book, and the divulging of knowledge which ensues — making knowledge vulgar to everyone is literally giving it to the public press — has within it a history of the wild but court-private press, the crush around the royal person, craving, begging, urging, pleading. There are contemporary writers who use the word not so much as a pun, but more as a paradox, uniting the two historical layers pointed to here, layers in many ways quite different in their social ambiance and significance.

What happens if we consider the vocabulary of the book through the simplest kind of historical lens in this way ? What of the word "leaves" (printed pages made from the pulp of rags, but also leaves on a tree), or the phrase "to be in print", (*not* just "set in type" by the end of the fifteenth century) or if we ask when the word "press" began to be the abstract institution of book creation as well as the place or workshop for making the books ? Again, it is Ben Jonson who, seeing the capaciousness of some of these keywords, tries to extend other book phrases and words into common parlance, or at least into the city chatter of beaux and smart youngsters as well as fops. In his city plays, for instance, he tries to make the word "edition" stretch into areas of fashion and social conduct, while aiming to classify the physical and social status, and bearing of individuals (often fools or gulls, interestingly) in terms of book sizes (duodecimo, quarto, etc.). These and other examples indicate how far writing books, making them, and reading them, were linked in the early modern period.

Attention to these common descriptions associated with the book, and its specialised languages, is but part of much larger area of study which seeks to understand whether (and if so, *how*) the early modern book, handwritten as well as in print, reorganised the imaginations of writers and readers. There have been several revolutions going on simultaneaously in this area. Perhaps the most

significant of these, begun over thirty years ago by Walter Ong and Marshall Mc Luhan, refined and rejected in part by Elizabeth Eisenstein, would have us believe that the printed page may have refashioned the imaginative consciousness of at least early modern readers. Spaces between blocks of typeset text, shaped into slabs of information, pages as holding areas for the new memory — a visual, tableau-like, memory, less active than that associated with earlier mnemonic devices, and focused on the young university student — these are among the topics broached in this slow and highly contentious revolution (challenged by students of memory like Carruthers, who argue that there was much less disjunction between the medieval, handwritten manuscript and the handmade but printed book). Another more recent revolution, fuelled by textual and bibliographical studies of Jonson's 1616 *Works* folio, and concerned to test the hypotheses of Foucault in particular, is centred on the *materiality* of the text, the "thinginess", the unauthoredness of the book as artefact and made object, and the construct of socio-economic forces.

There are, I suspect, important weaknesses in this line of analysis, but rather than dwell on these I would prefer to suggest that these problems, centred on spatial and physical presence, ought to be subsumed under one heading, "the Question of Iterability". All of these topics, which connect the book as thing to the book as site of disembodiment — in other words the relationship of matter to consciousness — are concerned with the *repeatability* of the printed book. For, whatever the caveats about the relatively slight differences which distinguish one copy of an early printed book from its neighbour (proof correction, format changes in production, retail sale with different contents), one striking quality of the printed book is the fact that it is an iterable (even with print runs of under five hundred copies) mass-produced thing. Again, although historians of the printed book have considered in some detail the fixity of print, apart from Lucien Febvre they have paid little attention to its arrival as a mass-produced object, or at least little attention to its lack of utility as such. Unlike, say, mass-produced buttons, household nails, or knitted stockings, the book does not *need* its repeatability. Switching one button from one coat to another, the true test of iterability is whether it holds the jacket together — one button has to be sufficiently like the next to fit a designed button-hole. By contrast, the book's practical uses do not depend on repetition, except for reuse in making pastries, blocking holes in the wall, or (beloved notion of Nashe and other Elizabethans) for wiping one's backside. It is as though in a strange but significant way, the book was so early in the history of technology applied to mass-production because it did not have to stand up to the test of one kind of utility. In another, more important way it did, though, and that was in its accuracy, its repeatable and testable information. Measurements, numerical tables, readings of degrees in longitude and latitude, biblical translations from Hebrew and Latin and Greek, all these needed to be correct, and the reader *needed* to know that — save for mistakes in knowledge or in printing — the book was accurate and identical with other copies.

How this might have a direct bearing on imaginative literature is the chief question we must address. The concept of iterability (same typefaces, layout, format) may well have influenced readers in a subtle but momentous way, influenced them to regard their experience of reading as repeatable, not only from one

reading to the next, but even from one reader to another. The book probably reorganised more than the means and spaces of thinking (Ong) or the *source* of thinking (matter rather than the author's individual consciousness : da Grazia and Stallybrass), more than this it reorganised the pleasures of the text into repeatable *sequence*, or at least it gave physical shape to that sequence for a large number of readers. Modern analogies are not always appropriate, but consider how videos have altered our daily habits, how we plan our meals in the evening around a film, or rewind the tape, or fast forward it to avoid what we cannot be bothered to watch — and consider how *this* reshaping is compounded by the adaptability of the elctronic text, which can repeat, unrepeat, get lost, become hard copy and so forth. It seems reasonable to ask whether, *mutatis mutandis,* an Elizabethan sonnet sequence in an early printed book, or Petrarch's poems, or a text of *Hamlet,* came to be viewed by their readers through the physical uniformity of the book, whether imaginative responses came to be associated with the accuracy of the text and the identity of one copy of an edition with another.

The question is relevant in another important context, which concerns the idea and phrase (as old as writing, even speaking perhaps) of the "Book of Nature", a comparison in which humans acknowledge (or assert) that they read the awesome totality of Nature within the covers of a book. Its chief aspect, for my present purposes, is that everything *within* the book is linked to, indeed constituted out of the same stuff, the same essence, the same being. It is the concept of *universality* which is uppermost in the cluster of medieval subtleties developed around the Book of Nature. Again, this is quite different from the concept of *uniformity* which comes with the printed book : one book is the same as another, yes, but in terms of its manufactured process, the serial order of its pages, the repeatable utility of pieces of type, cut blocks *et al* — all of which points to, perhaps enforces uniformity, but does not point to universality. *Within* the Book of Nature, a loaf of bread or a nightingale can be differentiated by the reader for whom God intended His reading, but the stuff of the bread and the nightingale is, in its essence, the same. Opening up one after another different copies of printed editions, what the comparison tells us is that process has been made uniform, sequence has been made repeatable, and that readings themselves are as uniform and repeatable — but not universal — as the material objects themselves. Consciousness of sequence is subordinated to material uniformity.

This line of argument could certainly be advanced into the much debated question of scribal and print cultures — their coexistence and rivalry — and into the problem of a consumer culture, conspicuous or not, and into the very vocabulary of the book — when is it metaphorical, literal, symbolic. Most intriguing is the relationship between Renaissance ideas about artistic imitation and memory on the one hand, and this repetition and uniformity on the other. This suggests one way of tackling again the vexed matter of individual writerly talent, which is to be differentiated from (if not set against) the communal activity of manufacture, and with it the separate or lonely but never singular act of reading — the author, in short, as opposed to his printers and publishers and readers and critics. To engage

with this question, let us consider John Milton's commendatory poem for the second folio of Shakespeare's *Comedies, Histories and Tragedies*, published in 1632 :

> *What needs my Shakespeare for his honour'd Bones*
> *The labour of an age in piled Stones,*
> *Or that his hallow'd relics should be hid*
> *Under a Star-ypointing Pyramid ?*
> *Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,*
> *What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name ?*
> *Thou in our wonder and astonishment*
> *Hast built thyself a livelong Monument.*
> *For whilst to th'shame of slow-endeavouring art,*
> *Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart*
> *Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book*
> *Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,*
> *Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving,*
> *Dost make us Marble with too much conceiving;*
> *And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,*
> *That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.*

At first sight, this is not a particularly impressive or significant poem, but it is worth noticing that it was the first piece Milton published in English, and that it was written at a moment in the early 1630s when a whole cluster of collections of poems and plays by the Elizabethans was being published — John Lyly's plays, Marston's, and a little later Donne's poetry, as well as this Shakespeare volume. The literary conceit of the poem — that Shakespeare has an eternal monument in the "wonder and astonishment" of his readers, and that he needs none of the usual edifices, pyramids, tombs, holy shrines (hence hallow'd relics) — can be traced back to Horace's *Odes*, as the editorial notes usually record, and may even be related to an epitaph which Shakespeare himself is thought to have written for a member of an Elizabethan gentry family, the Stanleys. Just as important, although not noticed often enough in modern commentaries, there are echoes of various of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, especially on the perdurability of art. Even more significant are the transparent allusions to *The Winter's Tale*, with its marble "statue" (really the living presence of Hermione which spellbinds the onlookers in the final scene) with its pronouncement of Apollo's oracle, and with, most conspicuously, its sixteen lines, reminding us of the sixteen couplets spoken by Time to measure the passage of sixteen years, from Perdita's birth in Sicily to her coming of age in Bohemia.

None of these allusions should surprise us, given that the young Milton draws so keenly and consciously on *The Tempest* in *Lycidas*, or *A Midummmer Night's Dream* in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. What might well surprise us, though, is how personal, even biographical, all the borrowings are in this piece — personal

about Shakespeare as well as about Milton, I believe. The date Milton gives for the composition of the poem, 1630 — going out of his way to make this clear, even though the folio was not published until 1632 — has long been subject to slight suspicion, but perhaps there is something entirely personal and accurate, at least symbolically accurate, about the date. The sixteen lines may simply be a measure of the gap since Shakespeare's death in 1616 — he, like Hermione, lives on, miraculously, making his beholders more stone than the feigned statue — but the date "1630" reminds us, uncannily, that this was Milton's twenty-third year, a climactic year he had written about in another sonnet on Time as a thief, stealing on him before he had written and accomplished what he should have done. Even more uncanny, in a Freudian sense this time, the twenty-third year, and the number 23, is Shakespeare's own Big Number. Without digressing into an abstruse numerological analysis, let us say that this number, again and again and again in Shakespeare's plays, is associated with Time's sundering of the father and the son (referred to four times in *The Winter' Tale* alone in these terms, but also in plays from *The Comedy of Errors* to *Hamlet*, and on to *Cymbeline* as well). Perhaps Milton too was aware of this number, deliberately connecting it to his own creative life, and, in my view, his assumed filial relationship with Shakespeare the poetic father.

In a poem where memories of the miracle of art over death (through *The Winter's Tale*) imply a bowing-down before the master who turns his readers, in a *marvel*, into marble, reworking the concealed Pygmalion story (present most obviously in *Venus and Adonis*) — just as the young poet surrenders most, he reasserts himself over the dead one by half-exposing Shakespeare's own Big Number. Compare Milton's "*my* Shakespeare" with Jonson's famous 1623 commendatory address to "*our* Shakespeare"; and see how Milton describes the second folio itself (in line 12) as "thy unvalu'd Book" — which modern editors persist in glossing, with some but by no means overwhelming warrant from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as "your invaluable (or precious) book", but which can also mean (perhaps *must* mean "your book which has not yet been valued aright, not understood or weighed, not yet given its true estimate, *before me and my judgement of you.*" What place the lexicon of book manufacture has in this — the book as a material object, but also the site of Delphic utterance itself ("Sybilline leaves" *perhaps*; certainly where the heart has printed on it a "deep impression") — undoubtedly requires further attention.

All that can be done at this stage, however, is to point to that line where Milton calls Shakespeare the "Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame", wondering if more is intended here than merely to call him brother to the female muses. The point at issue is whether the memory of Shakespeare is something akin to (even the beginning of) the museum memory or the databank memory, which places writers in relation to one another, as part of a cordex of literary achievement — in other words, that the book is not merely a document recording a text, since writers can escape from the physical text and the tomb, if Milton's conceit is to be believed : no, the book is the place of the New Memory which stores the physical book and the person writing and what had been written all in one, makes all of them uniform and repeatable and reusable. Milton, even as he praises Shakespeare for being the

Houdini of ancient writers, makes him serve a turn, makes him a memory which can be alluded to, caught into his own poem. To conclude, this is the reason why the *relic* of oblivion becomes so tempting a retreat to English writers at this time. A year after the Shakespeare second folio was published, in 1633, John Marston's plays were collected together and published. Marston had retired from play-writing in the capital to provincial obscurity some twenty years earlier, but he was troubled enough by *this* memory (or memorial) of him to insist that his name be struck out of the book in which his plays had been printed. Marston died not long after, and on his tomb he dedicated himself, in a Latin inscription, to Sacred Oblivion. The physical book, the memory of the dramatist and his personality, the intellectual burden of being remembered and numbered, in easy numbers, and then reused — all of these coincide in the concept and in the physical fabric of the Book, and in the history of how the imagination connected these to the person of the writer.

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1   This study outlines the issues I plan to deal with in a chapter on the history of the English Renaissance book for the multi-volume *A History of the Book in Britain,* to be published by Cambridge University Press.