

Cutting and authorship in early modern England

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Abstract: This article considers the cultural practice of cutting up texts in early modern England. The article provides a taxonomy of evidence for this practice, in part based on the Anglican community of Little Gidding in the 1630s, where members of the group bought printed gospels and cut them up to reorder, and harmonise, the story of Christ's life. The article then considers the implications of this practice of cutting, including for how we think about authorship.

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In 1916, the poet and performance artist Tristan Tzara outlined his instructions for making a Dadaist poem:

Take a newspaper.
Take scissors.
Select from this newspaper an article of the same length as you plan to give your poem.
Cut out the article.
Cut out carefully every word of this article and put them into a bag.
Shake lightly.
Take out one snippet after another.
Copy down conscientiously in the order in which they came out of the bag.
This poem will be similar to you.
And therewith you will be an infinitely original author with a charming sensibility not however comprehensible to the people.¹

A consideration of the relationship between cutting up texts and authorial agency might usefully begin by enacting Tzara's instructions. Taking an article from a newspaper, and,

¹ Quoted and briefly discussed in Anke te Hesseon, 'News, Paper, Scissors: Clippings in the Sciences and Arts Around 1920', in Lorraine Daston, *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), pp. 297-327, p. 318.

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cutting up the text with scissors, and then gluing the word-pieces on to a sheet of card, I ended up with the following:

consumed relentless than presenting seriousness
 extremely flawed because either everyone resourceful Killing
 detective her
 continual she's away hanging
 enough
 who nagging has or only phone
 sells mid-conversation done, angry leader
 walking humour paper from Lund's fact

If this poem (if that's what it is) tells us something about the presence of Danish crime television in contemporary British culture, it's striking also for being almost rather good: I like 'Lund's fact', and also 'detective her'. The text hints, too, at an awareness of its own strange compositional processes: 'walking humour paper' is not a bad description of this Dadaist manner of writing, and seems to develop that tradition of punning on "feet" as both perambulatory and metrical that we see, for example, in Philip Sidney's poetry.² We might be tempted to characterise this as 'knowing' if we were dealing with a more conventionally authored text, but the process of aleatory cutting, and the consequent sense of poetry *qua* textual surface, inhibits the positing of a thinking origin upon which this kind of artistic reflexivity seems to depend.

We are reluctant to talk about intention in this poem because Tzara's method is usually seen as a writing process built around *chance*: the Museum of Modern Art in New York currently uses Tzara's instructions as part of an online exploration of the role of chance in art.³ But in fact the author snipping up text according to Tzara's rules necessarily makes a series of *conscious choices*: most obviously, which source text to select (I took the *Guardian Guide* of 19 January 2013, but I might have picked up something else, or I might have selected a different article from within the *Guide*), and where to insert line breaks: isolating 'enough', in line 5, along with all the other decisions about line-stops or enjambment, were expressions of my authorial control, despite the seemingly author-less process of picking out snippets. (There is, ironically, an indifference to form, a sense that form doesn't communicate, implicit in Tzara's content-centric instructions.) If Tzara's penultimate clause – 'This poem will be similar to you' – seems ironic (how can fragments-out-of-a-bag be self-expressive?; how can subjectivity be conveyed by chance?), the experience of actually following his cutting-as-writing instructions shows that it is not, or that it is not entirely.

² See, for example, sonnet 1 of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591).

³ <http://www.moma.org/interactives/redstudio/interactives/chance>.

While cutting up texts is a process associated particularly with collage and the early twentieth century, early modern readers often cut up their texts as a way of engaging with them, and they did this with little sense of transgression or taboo. Traditionally, a cut has been understood as an act of disapproval or censorship, and of course it often was: the devotional *Prymer* of 1537, now in Lambeth Palace Library, has a series of deep cuts through many pages, not unlike the canvases of Lucio Fontana, except that the sliced *Prymer* creates the impression of violent religious change and confessional discord.⁴ The cutting is affecting, here, because the depth of each incision (one blade stroke might cut through 20 pages) describes the weight placed on the blade, and so evokes the moment of cutting: it's thus possible to reconstruct quite precisely, and chronologically, the steady violence inflicted on this book. But the evidence for cutting I have been compiling suggests not censorship, or cutting as attack, but rather something more quotidian: cutting as an act that happened alongside reading and writing; a mode of textual consumption; something readers and writers did to their material texts. My central body of evidence comes from the Anglican religious community of Little Gidding, from the 1630s, where printed gospels were cut up and reordered in an attempt to harmonise the story of Christ; but these very remarkable texts are illustrative of a broader cultural early modern preoccupation with cutting.

What kind of evidence exists for this cultural practice? Here are 6 categories of evidence, with one or more illustrations of each:

(1) *Texts within texts: texts (whether manuscript or print) containing pieces cut from other texts (whether manuscript or print).*

The commonplace book of Sir John Gibson, compiled by the Royalist Gibson was imprisoned in Durham Castle in the 1650s, provides one example. This manuscript contains transcribed aphorisms and sentences, out of which Gibson constructs an anti-narrative narrative of his own life: the kind of textual recycling we're perhaps used to seeing in commonplace books, or texts related to commonplace books. But Gibson's manuscript also includes pages cut from printed books (including an emblem of Death and Time, from *Recreation for Ingenious Head-Peeces* (1654); a zodiac man from John Booker's *Uranoscopia* (1649); and the arms of Charles I (from later editions of *Eikon Basilike*), which Gibson annotates with his own hand, to create a defiantly Royalist, typological version of a life.⁵ Cutting up, and the insertion of printed fragments within his

⁴ This [*prymer in En]glyshe and in La[ten]* (1537), Lambeth Palace Library, Main Collection SR1 [ZZ]1537.4.01. The cuts run through many pages at a time, from the title-page to f. 206v. This volume also features printed text that has been painted over with red and brown ink or paint to obscure references to Thomas Becket. This latter practice is considered in Dunstan Roberts, 'The Expurgation of Traditional Prayer Books (c. 1535-1600)', in *Reformation* 15 (2010), 23-49.

⁵ Gibson's manuscript is BL Additional MS 37719. For Gibson, see Adam Smyth, "'Rend and teare in peeces": Textual Fragmentation in Seventeenth-Century England', in *The Seventeenth Century* 19.1 (Autumn 2004), 36-52.

manuscript, was thus a way for Gibson to produce a meaningful text at a moment of political weakness, and at a time when conventional narrative forms offered little capacity to represent his embattled life. It is often religious manuscripts and books that feature such fragments: the 1560s manuscript copy of the Book of Common Prayer and Psalter recently analysed by William Sherman includes illuminated letters cut from late medieval manuscripts.⁶ There is clearly a relationship between this excising of parts of text, and the better-known practice of commonplacing, by which sententious parts of text were copied in notebooks for future recycling. Cutting parts of texts might be seen as a material literalisation of this broader cultural practice of seizing text-parts.⁷

(2) *Texts that clearly appear to be the product of cutting up other texts.*

The most striking example of this is the series of Gospel Harmonies produced at Little Gidding in the 1630s and 1640s by the remote Anglican community led by Nicholas Ferrar. As one aspect of a broader religious curriculum, Ferrar's nieces took knives and scissors to printed gospels in order to reorder the printed text, to create harmonised volumes that recognised but then reconciled moments of discrepancy in the accounts of Christ's life.^{8 9}

In his unfinished biography of Nicholas Ferrar, Nicholas' brother John offers a description of the mechanics of the process of cutting and pasting that lay behind these Harmonies. Ferrar describes how the Harmonies were assembled in the Concordance room at Little Gidding, on large tables, the room hung with passages from Scripture pinned up on the walls:

[W]ith their scissors they [...] cut out [of] each Evangelist such and such verses and thus and thus lay them together to make and perfect such and such a head or chapter. Which when they had first roughly done, then with their knives and scissors they neatly fitted each verse so cut out to be pasted down on sheets of paper. And so artificially they performed this

⁶ William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 87-109; George Henderson, 'Bible Illustration in the Age of Laud', in *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 8 (1992), 173-216. See also Ann Blair, 'Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload ca. 1550-1700', in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 64: 1 (2003), 11-28.

⁷ For an overview of recent work on commonplace books, see Victoria E. Burke, 'Recent Studies in Commonplace Books', in *English Literary Renaissance* 41.1 (Winter 2013), 153-77. See also Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (Yale University Press: New Haven 2010), pp. 213-229.

⁸ Adam Smyth, "'Shreds of holiness": George Herbert, Little Gidding, and Cutting Up Texts in Early Modern England', in *English Literary Renaissance* 42.3 (Autumn 2012), 452-481.

⁹ Images of one of these spectacular Gospel Harmonies, from 1630, and now at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, can be seen for free online at <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/45243608>.

new-found-out-way, as it were a new kind of printing, for all that saw the books when they were done took them to be printed the ordinary way.¹⁰

(3) *Remade books: books that have been reordered by cutting.*

Numerous examples survive, although it is not always possible from catalogues to glean this information, and a certain amount of archival serendipity is required. To give one example: the Huntington copy of *A sermon preached at the funeral of Mr. John Bigg* (1691) has been cut up and its contents reordered (it also contains an ornamental border and a final 'FINIS' cut and pasted from other books). The book, here, is a reworkable thing, and (it seems) the remaking is not an expression of hostility but rather something undertaken in the spirit of a modification.

(4) *Instructions to cut: books containing prescriptions for cutting-as-reading.*

Some books invite readers to cut them apart: John White's *Briefe and easie almanack for this yeare 1650* (1650) instructs readers that 'the whole kalender [...] being cut out, is fit to be placed into any book of accompts, table book, or other.'¹¹ Texts offering this kind of advice tend to be utilitarian texts, like almanacs, but it is worth repeating the point: some texts encouraged readers to cut out sections from their printed pages.

(5) *Cutting in literary writing: literary works that suggest, or rely upon, a broader, recognisable culture of cutting.*

The printed verse miscellany *Recreation for Ingenious Head-peeces* (1663) includes many examples of spatialised poems: that is, verses whose wit derives from their layout on the page. Among them is a poem that appears as text on a narrow strip of paper, folded and manipulated: it begins 'This is love and worth commending', and the twisting form, its final words returning the reader to the start, enacts an ensnaring, never-ending vision of love.¹² The poem is presented as the product of scissors and knives: it seems to exist on a narrow, winding strip of paper, snipped dexterously from a regular sheet, and the wit of the verse relies on a recognisable material practice. Any aesthetic charge generated by the poem suggests the cutting up of a text was both somewhat unusual, but also eminently imaginable.

(6) *Representations: images of scissors or knives at the scene or reading / writing.*

Renaissance paintings of readers often include scissors alongside books, as we see in George de la Tour's *St Jerome Reading* (ca. 1635-8) and Quentin Metsys's *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1517), and while art historians have often read these scissors as emblems of

¹⁰ *Materials for the Life of Nicholas Ferrar*, ed. Lynette R. Muir and John A. White (Leeds: Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, 1996), p. 76.

¹¹ John White, *Briefe and easie almanack for this yeare* (1650), title-page.

¹² *Recreation for Ingenious Head-peeces* (1663), sig. S3v.

transience, we might interpret them, more literally, as one prop in a suite of tools used to navigate early modern books. While scissors might serve various functions (trimming candles, for example, or cutting the pages of an unopened book), they might also cut the pages of a text.

If we accept, or at least momentarily speculate, that readers cut texts as one way of engaging with them, what are the implications of this culture of cutting, particularly for the idea of the author and of the reader? Here are four broad ideas.

(1) *Cutting as an act that makes us reconsider narratives about the history of the book.*

Cut texts, and, in particular, those Little Gidding Biblical Harmonies, are important, in part, for the way they *don't* conform to a number of narratives that are used to define the early modern period, particularly in terms of book history. For book historians accustomed to narratives linking print with fixity and the establishment of a stable literary canon, these cut-and-paste Gospels convey the very opposite: a willingness to dismantle and reorder printed Bibles.¹³ For a history of the book that traditionally organises itself into a narrative of technological triumph – of the ‘text triumphant’, in Seth Lerer’s nice phrase¹⁴ – the Harmonies should cause us to pause. The Harmonies are a response to the culture and technology of the printing press by skilled amateur book-makers, who converted printed books into unique texts. The books also suggest that those narratives of the rise of print and its eclipsing of manuscript culture need to be reworked to recognise the overlapping worlds of the printed text and the handwritten manuscript.

(2) *Cutting as an act that enables us to rethink our relationship with letters and words.*

Cut-up texts like the Little Gidding Harmonies might prompt us to ask: what happens to a word when it is treated as a physical object? What happens to one’s relationship with a piece of text when it is cut out, held, turned around, glued back down in a new position? One way to think about this might be to consider the relationship a printer – or perhaps more specifically a compositor – had with text, in contrast to an author writing by hand, as the printer slotted metal type into a tray, and then, later, unpicked it to make a new page. How is our relationship to letters and words different if this is the medium in which we encounter them? Perhaps, like printers with their type, the Little Gidding Harmony-makers had an acute sense of words as mobile things, which can be rearranged, and which can always, through this process of rearrangement, be made to say more than they presently do.

¹³ For founding narratives about the impact of print and the history of book, see Elisabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁴ Seth Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self: the Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 16, noting the ‘celebratory’ story of ‘the spread of literacy, the dissemination of knowledge for its own sake, the facilitation of empirical science, the spatialization of our habits of thought’ purveyed, in particular, in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Elisabeth Eisenstein’s *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.

When we think of writing, when we imagine the moment, if we have in our head not the image of a pen hovering over a blank page, but, instead, scissors cutting out printed text, or fingers picking and unpicking type, I think we're inclined to engage more precisely and critically and usefully with the idea of writing. A blank page and a circling hand suggest a post-Romantic model of creativity, of writing *ex nihilo*, or inspiration, or a single, lonely author: unhelpful connotations, at least for the early modern period. If we think of writing as cutting, we're more likely to think of invention in its Renaissance, and classical sense: *inventio*, a gathering, an ordering, a laying out of pre-existing parts.

It is also worth noting that many authors spent a considerable time working, or in some instances living in, print shops: Ben Jonson was often at William Stansby's; Thomas Nashe worked as a corrector to the printer John Danter (who printed, among other things, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* in 1594); and Gabriel Harvey lived with John Wolfe (the printer of Harvey's *New Letter of Notable Contents*, 1593). To what degree were the creative imaginations of literary authors like these figures shaped by their time in printing houses? 'How does literature, and authorship, function differently if it is a form of textual production concerned with the seizing of word-parts - whether by cutting out text with scissors, or selecting and ordering ink-smearred type by hand?

(3) *Cutting is not destruction.*

In the twenty-first century, the destruction of religious books is widely regarded as a powerful cultural taboo: witness, for instance, the 2010 case of Terry Jones and his threatened Koran burning in Florida.¹⁵ Seen through this prism, the cutting up printed Gospels at Little Gidding may appear a surprising activity for a pious Anglican community. But in the historical moment in which members of the community at Little Gidding used scissors and knives on printed copies of the Gospel, their cutting was the very opposite of destruction. It registered religious devotion: if Protestantism encouraged believers to reflect carefully on every word, scissors and knives helped the members of Little Gidding to enact this on a physical, material level. Cutting up Gospels was a way of caring about the Word of God.¹⁶

Modern texts that proceed through cutting sometimes draw a similar, paradoxical connection between cutting and devotion, and so suggest an author constructing a reverential relationship with the prior (and now cut) text, despite the apparently destructive mode of composition. There is, ironically, nothing iconoclastic about many texts cut up with scissors: although, of course, scissors *might* be used for destructive purposes in other cases. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) is the product of the author taking scissors to his most cherished book – *Street Of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz, a

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/08/hillary-clinton-plan-to-burn-quran-disrespectful>.

¹⁶ Feike Dietz has recently examined a seventeenth-century illustrated Catholic manuscript based on the popular emblem book *Pia desideria* (1624), showing how fragments from different printed sources were cut out and combined to produce a new text. See "Gedrukte boeken, met de pen gelezen. Sporen van leesinterpretaties in de religieuze manuscriptcultuur," *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, 2 (2010), 152-71.

Jewish writer murdered in 1942 – removing much of the original to leave a story that is new but was also already there (7 letters cut from *Street of Crocodiles* leaves *Tree of Codes*). ‘Some things you love passively,’ Foer told Vanity Fair in an interview in 2010 in words that aptly characterise the cutting at Little Gidding, ‘some you love actively. In this case, I felt the compulsion to do something with it.’¹⁷

In these examples of cutting, what is the relationship between the early modern and the contemporary? What significance might we attach to the fact that a similar compositional method (the cutting up of an existing text) is used to register a similar relationship (of respect and even reverence) between author and text? What implications does this diachronic approach to authorship suggest about the act of cutting? What is striking about Little Gidding, seen from the vantage point of a twenty-first century which is both profoundly uneasy about the destruction of religious books, and which might (*pace* Safran Foer) regard the cutting up of texts as radical or dissenting, is that it was a Royalist High Anglican community, a conservative religious-political position that might seem to sit strangely with their forms of textual practice. What this suggests is that early modern cutting was a more quotidian method of textual consumption and production: something quite widespread (if we accept the kinds of evidence listed above), and not necessarily fraught with connotations of resistance or strangeness.¹⁸

(4) *Cutting and the edges of the book.*

If cutting is a form of engaging with the text – a form that isn’t necessarily censorious or transgressive – then it might prompt us to consider the degree to which the integrity of the early modern book – its coherent, bounded wholeness – often seems to unravel. In many ways, early modern books were material forms that invited their physical remaking: books were purchased unbound, for example, prompting readers to personalize texts, or to produce hitherto unexpected composite books, and, more generally, to make binding a first act of reception; blank pages were often included, particularly in hugely popular almanacs, onto which readers were invited to add their own handwritten notes.¹⁹ In such instances, authors had little control over the reception of their text, not only in terms of interpretation, but also in terms of the actual physical form of the book. Readers read in a culture of the impermanent, non-monumental book, which means, perhaps, that readers were at ease with remaking texts, and that a negotiation with the physical book was part of the act of reading.

I think it’s probably wrong to read such actions in a spirit of opposition, as *challenges* to a prior wholeness, as assaults on an author. The willingness to remake the

¹⁷ <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2010/11/jonathan-safran-foer-talks-tree-of-codes-and-paper-art>.

¹⁸ See Gill Partington and Adam Smyth (eds), *Book Destruction in the West from the Medieval to the Contemporary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming).

¹⁹ Adam Smyth, ‘Almanacs, Annotators, and Life-Writing in Early Modern England’, in *English Literary Renaissance* (Spring 2008), 200-244.

book – this sense of the book as materially negotiable – reflects the fact that the coherent, bound, unannotated, ‘complete’ printed book was not yet the dominant medium for conveying text. The establishment of the book through iconic publications like the Folios of Jonson and Shakespeare is one of the central narratives of seventeenth-century literary culture; but through much of the early modern period, the modern assumption that ‘the work is coterminous with the book’ was not yet axiomatic.²⁰

‘The work is [not] coterminous with the book’: that phrase, which comes from Juliet Fleming, is worth emphasising because it suggests that written texts were not always neatly contained within books, but spilt over, across margins, bindings, into notebooks, onto other surfaces. John Donne’s poetic work is not bounded by his 1633 book, but is spread out over a network of manuscripts, letters, other printed books, and seemingly endless variants. A separation between ‘work’ and ‘book’ is useful also because it reminds us that books were not the only form that texts might assume. If one problem with ‘the history of the book’ is its implicit bookishness, its relegation of other ways in which writing would be materialised (in broadsides, pamphlets, ballads, on walls, etched in glass), then the messy, always-unfinished world of early modern print can encourage us to be more inclusive.

We might also, and finally, consider cutting and writing not as two fundamentally different acts, but rather as similar modes of textual production. While it is perhaps tempting to regard writing as more sophisticated (because more mobile and precise) than the often infantilized act of cutting, every written word, and therefore every written sentence and written text, can only come into being through a process of selection: a process of eliminating or cutting out other possible words, letting them fall to the floor, and of grasping the word intended. Whether writing proceeds through pen, pencil, stylus, knife, scissors, typewriter, word processor, or any other local technology, is of course a significant material difference with consequences for our relationship to language; but on a more fundamental level, all these technologies are involved in the seizing, ordering and deploying of words: a process of snipping out, of writing *qua* cutting. Such a reframing is important because critics have often trivialized cutting as a kind of non-writing: in discussing the contribution of John Ferrar’s daughter Virginia to a 1640 Little Gidding Harmony, one recent critic writes, ‘but the writing is all his [John’s]; seemingly she merely pasted in the cuttings.’²¹ If cutting is thought of as writing, such clouding judgments spring less readily to mind.

²⁰ Fleming, ‘Afterword’, 548.

²¹David R. Ransome, “Ferrar, John (c.1588-1657),” ODNB (2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com./view/article/60958>.