Introduction: 'the Case of Man'

In December 2015, together with four friends, I bought an iron Model Number 4 printing press with three trays of type, two composing sticks, a chase, two galleys, furniture and quoins, ink and paper for £400. The press was extraordinarily heavy: Dennis and I just about managed to carry it the ten yards from the East Oxford print shop to my car, swearing as we lumbered, and the precarious two-mile drive felt like a mistake from the moment we pulled away. The boot of my Honda Civic might collapse on the road at any moment; the car's nose was always just about to lurch suddenly skywards. At home, we couldn't lift the press onto the desk, so parked it on the floor, where it remained, and remains to this day.

A week later our group of five spent a first day with the press. Several of us had spent time in supervised print rooms, setting type and wielding inking balls and delightedly holding up sheets wet with ink, but that was under the expert gaze of a professional: 'tighten this'; 'the ink's too thick'; 'slot another thin space in there'. Fumbling unguided towards some kind of knowledge of the Model Number 4 was a different proposition.

We decided to print the first four lines from 'Stars', a poem by Keith Douglas written in 1939:

> The stars still marching in extended order
> move out of nowhere into nowhere. Look, they are halted
> on a vast field tonight, true no man's land.
> Far down the sky with sword and belt must stand[1]

With the slowness of tortoises, we picked out slim pieces of lead alloy type, slotted them into the two composing sticks set to the same measure, transferred the four lines to the galley tray, bound the lines with string, and then – in the absence of an imposition stone – slid these lines on to a flat glass shelf plundered from my fridge. Around the metal text we set the

[1] Keith Douglas, *Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 29.

bottomless iron frame or chase, and with a satisfying sense of the *ad hoc*, of problem solving, built a web of furniture, lower than the height of the type, round the upside-down, inverted metal letters. We tightened the quoins until the whole locked into stability and we could lift the forme up – giddy at the danger – without the parts moving. What we had was a thick, heavy slice of something that seemed only dimly related to Douglas's poem. This was as material as a text could get.

We spread some ink on the disk or ink table: the ink was viscous and utterly black, and pulling the rollers back and forth produced a sticky gasp as ink was distributed across the disk. We slotted the chase vertically into the chase bed, and placed the paper on the tympan using four hairclips (unsurprisingly, I couldn't find any gauge pins in the house).

Gill pressed down on the handle, quickly, with a triumphant sense of a new chapter, and the iron parts moved. Immediately the bottom roller fell off and the paper wrapped round the upper roller like the thousand laser printer jams we have cursed. 'Disaster', Dennis said, as we circled round as if a child had fallen from his bike. The ink was too thick, and the absence of a frisket or frisket fingers meant the paper stuck to the forme instead of pulling away. We needed some tack reducer to make the ink less sticky, but we'd have to wait for that. Abby put another sheet of paper on the tympan and I wrapped an elastic band round the top and bottom, outside the image area. We repositioned the roller. Tentatively, Gill pulled on the handle. The platen pushed the paper to the forme – Gill kept it there for a second or two – and then it pulled away, as we'd hoped. There was a clunk as everything returned to a resting position, and a communal pause. 'Look!', said Gill, peering closer, pulling the paper out (Figure 1). 'It's actually worked.'

This was Douglas's four-line fragment, but not as Douglas had ever imagined it. The lines were littered with errors: not 'order', in line one, but 'orper'; not 'into' but 'iuto'; not 'tonight' but 'tonignt'; not 'land' but 'laud'; not 'down' but 'bown'. Six errors in four lines, plus some looming spaces and a left-hand margin that descended tipsily down the page. Our fragment reminded me of the first gathering of Martin Marprelate's final publication in 1589, produced by an amateur printer, probably on the run while fleeing the authorities, with an irregular left margin, eccentric spacing, and uneven inking: a *mise-en-page* that performed the dramatic contexts of its production.

For 'fleeing the authorities', read 'untrained on a Model Number 4'. Philip Gaskell's rather weary reminder came to mind: 'It may be as well to emphasize at this stage that real (as opposed to theoretical) printing was a

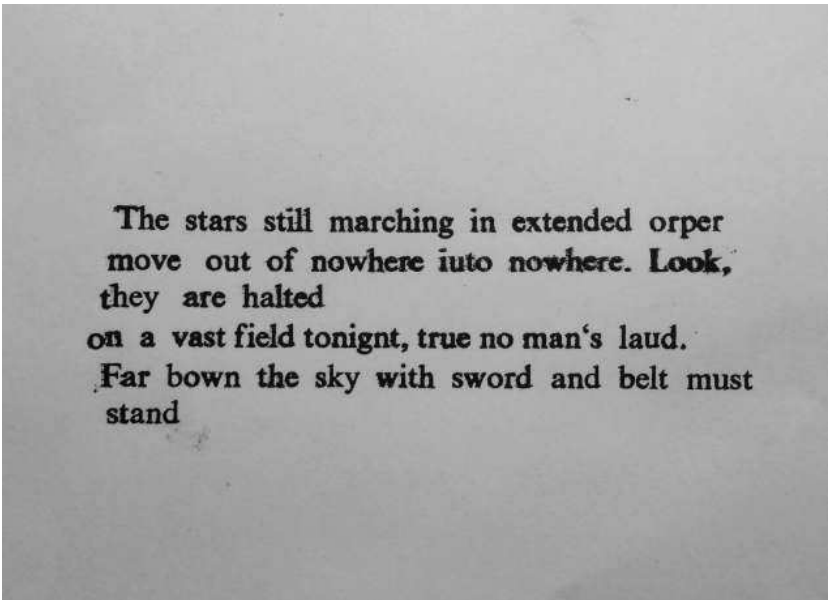
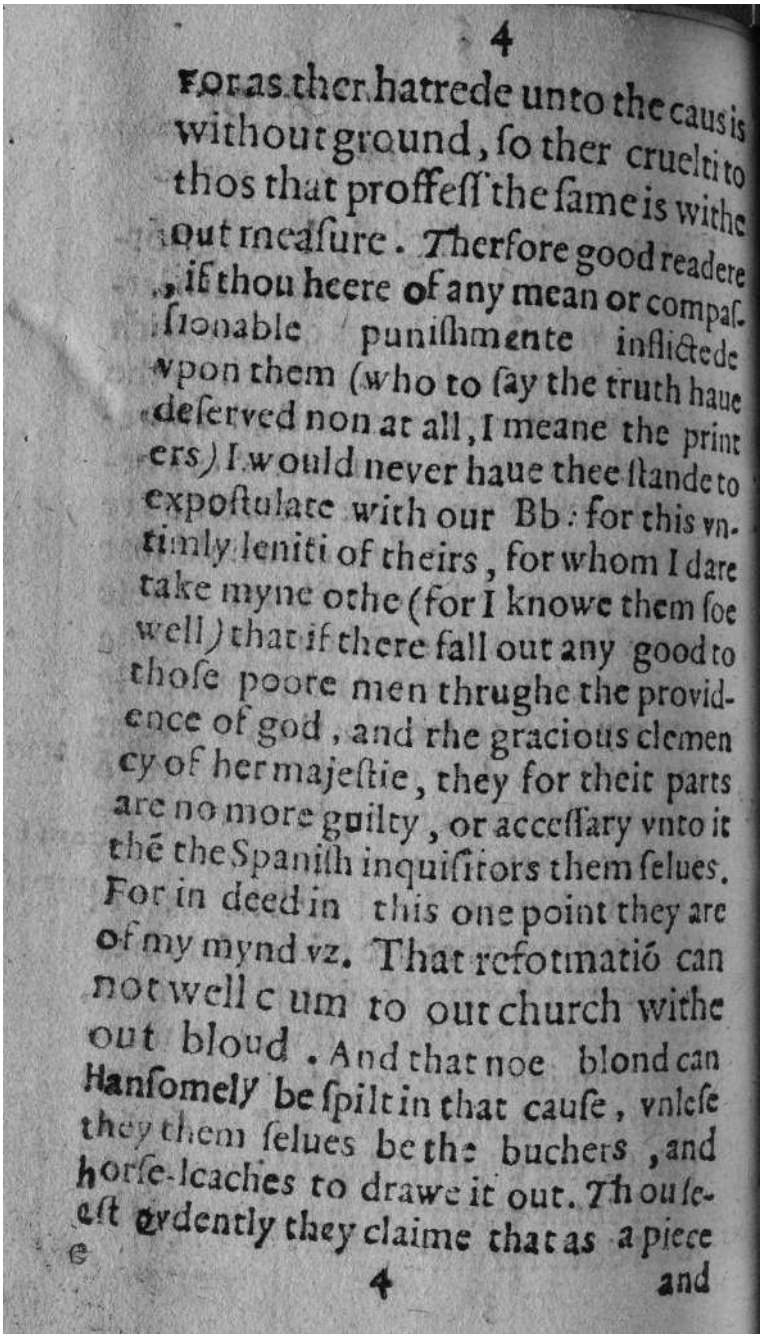

The stars still marching in extended orper
move out of nowhere iuto nowhere. Look,
they are halted
on a vast field tonignt, true no man's laud.
Far bown the sky with sword and belt must
stand

Figure 1 Keith Douglas, 'Stars', lines 1–4 (author's photograph)

complex craft carried out by fallible and inconsistent human beings of widely different capabilities.'[2] But even this first, flawed sheet taught us things, and as we continued to print, certain facts about the printing process emerged that struck a chord with features of the early modern book that I had been thinking about.

Printing is a manual task, a labour, but a labour composed of distinct kinds of physical interaction. Picking type and placing it in a composing stick is delicate and exact, the work of fingertips and a deft sense of touch as one feels that the type's nick is facing up in the stick. Justifying lines needs an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive-compulsive: any wobble, however weak, needs eliminating through metal blanks, a change in orthography, or even the insertion of thin slips of paper. Pulling the handle is hard work but requires a carefully calibrated final push as the paper kisses the type: too brief and the print is weak, too strong and it's a fuzzy mess. Removing the paper from the tympan needs neatness and precision, otherwise inky fingers leave a trace.

[2] Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 47.



4

For as ther hatrede unto the caus is
without ground, ſo ther cruelti to
thos that proffeſſ the ſame is withe
out meaſure. Therfore good readere
, if thou heere of any mean or compaſ-
ſionable puniſhmente inflicted e
vpon them (who to ſay the truth haue
deſerved non at all, I meane the print
ers) I would never haue thee ſtande to
expoſtulate with our Bb: for this vn-
timly leniti of theirs, for whom I dare
take myne othe (for I knowe them ſoe
well) that if there fall out any good to
thoſe poore men thrughe the provid-
ence of god, and the gracious clemen
cy of her majeſtie, they for their parts
are no more guilty, or acceſſary vnto it
thē the Spaniſh inquiſitors them ſelues.
For in deed in this one point they are
of my mynd vz. That refotmatió can
not well c um to out church withe
out bloud. And that noe blond can
Hanſomely be ſpilt in that cauſe, vnleſe
they them ſelues be the buchers, and
horſe-leaches to drawe it out. Thou ſe-
eſt evdently they claime that as a piece

e

4 and

Figure 2 *The Protestatyon of Martin Marprelat* (1589), p. 4. By permission of St Catharine's College, Cambridge (D.11.77(5))

Printing is a set of physical relationships between printer and type, and these physical relationships encourage in the printer a different imaginative relationship with language than a reader might experience, or a writer using other technologies to produce text (pen and paper; keyboard and screen) might enjoy. In the process of composing, imposing and printing, I came to think of the text less in terms of meaning and imagery – less in terms of the symbolism a literary critic mind find – and more as a problem or puzzle that occupies space, and that must be made to occupy a different space: from loose letters in a tray, to a composing stick, to a galley, to a locked-in chase, to a forme in the press, to marks of ink on a sheet, to a series of sheets needing folding and stitching. The process of printing was a series of interactions that, like a centripetal force, brought text into a more and more confined space. It's an oft-noted book historical corrective that what early modern print shops produced were not books, but sheets, unbound, unstitched, often unfolded, and this is true.[3] But it's a partial truth about the nature of text in the print shop, since that text passes through several stages of embodiment in order for sheets to be produced: the loose type, the set line, the tied-up galley, the boxed-in forme, the corrected proof, the sheet.

During this process, we were thinking about error all the time. We were obsessed with error. Printing brings errors into being with an astonishing frequency: it is difficult to appreciate how hard it is to set even the most unremarkable line of blank verse with any kind of accuracy until one tries. The processes of proofreading and correcting are efforts to confront this – in larger early modern print houses, the copy was read out loud while a corrector checked printed proofs, and we attempted to scan proofs carefully, using tweezers to pick out and replace or usually invert type in the forme. But it was difficult, and indeed for longer passages of text, almost impossible to eliminate error entirely. Certainly I came to think that the printer's calculation is not, *How can I make this book entirely free from all error?*, but rather, *How much error is tolerable for this book to be culturally acceptable, for this book to be legible as the book it claims to be?*[4]

[3] Peter Stallybrass, '"Little Jobs": Broadsides and the Printing Revolution', in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), pp. 315–341, p. 315 citing in particular Hugh Amory.

[4] David McKitterick has suggested that debates between printers and authors were less about absolute standardisation but rather 'what degree . . . [of] variation was acceptable'. David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order 1450–1830* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 111. See Chapter 3 for more on the inevitability of error.

Our printing frequently relied on acts of improvisation, or botching. Derrida described *bricolage* as the practice of re-using materials in order to solve new problems, of persisting with concepts that are broken but which are useful for the time being – 'the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from a text or heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined'.[5] Printing is similarly indebted to the recycled, the leftover, the repurposed: to misprinted pages used as backing sheets between the platen and tympan; to tiny pieces of paper, narrower than the thinnest blank, squeezed between letters in the forme to tighten the text; to wood blocks of various sizes slotted in to patch together the forme; to the piece of bent wire used to keep the loose lower roller in place; to the inventive adjustment of orthography to alter a word and thus the line length in pursuit of a justified line; to creative inversions of type when supplies run low. This culture of reuse is encouraged by the fact that printing always produces an excess. However small the job, there are material leftovers, remnants: proof sheets that had been checked and so served their purpose; flawed sheets where the roller fell off or the over-inked type produced a thick blur instead of words. We could throw these away, but since one principle of printing is the extraction of maximal value from minimal resources, the leftovers can be fed back into the process of production: fed back imperfectly, but as best they can. Printing, then, seemed to be a profoundly analogue process: operating not within the 1/0 of a digital economy, but rather on a continuum of tending-towards-better-or-worse.

The process of printing suggests a combination of the permanent and the transient. Sheets are printed that will become pages that may live on in the form of a book. But even as it flings out these new products, the print shop returns to where it started from: the type is cleaned (we used white spirit; early moderns called their alkaline and water solution 'lye'); the formes are unlocked and the type is unpicked and returned to the cases' individual compartments – this 'dissing' or distributing, a process both arduous and tedious, the early modern equivalent of holding down delete and watching on-screen text disappear letter by letter, and (in the moments when type is replaced in the wrong compartment) the most common

[5] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference* (1967; London: Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 351–370. Derrida glosses Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, as follows: 'The *bricoleur*, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses "the means at hand", that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous' (p. 360).

source of later error. Moving repeatedly through this cycle of setting, printing and distributing, I came to think of words as impermanent gatherings of letters that could always be rescrambled, anagrammatised, turned into other words. The dissing has finished. The case is ready for the next book. Which book will it be this time?

***

The point of this account is not to make an argument about 'hard' practice and its superior relation to 'soft' theory: such a position is sometimes articulated in book historical circles, played like a trump card, but my experience of printing has suggested an interrelation between printing and reflection, and between printing and writing, that crumbles any binary, any sense of hierarchy. What I experienced was a cycle of ideas. I brought to printing certain questions and assumptions about the literary imagination and its relationship to the technologies of production (to give one specific example: a compositor who became an author had a particular relationship to language, prompted by the experience of print house composition, that informed his literary writing); the practical experience of setting type and printing became one way, among many, of thinking through these questions and, in the process, new or modified ideas emerged about the nature of the material text and the agencies that brought it into being (in this case, I came to wonder if the compositor engaged with text less in terms of semantic meaning and more as a spatial problem). I thus started to think and write about literature differently, working with these new or modified conceptions, and these new conceptions in turn became the questions I brought to printing, the questions that framed my engagement with the press.

If *Material Texts in Early Modern England* could be said to have at its heart a single question, that question would be: What was a book, and how does knowing more about the material book illuminate the study of literary culture? I can let a little air into that rather dense formulation and frame my book in terms of two ambitions. First, I want to examine features of early modern bibliographical culture that have been overlooked, misunderstood or underexamined by critics. Past critics have neglected certain crucial aspects of bibliographical culture because those critics have often been operating with an anachronistic idea of what a book was. Early modern books in many ways resist our commonsensical bibliographical assumptions, and I hope to explore the gap between what we might expect a book, and book use, to be, and how in fact these categories operated in early modern England. If early modern books seem stranger things at the

end of this monograph than they did at the start, then I will have achieved one of my ambitions. Second, I want to think about the relationship between the materiality of the text (including the processes of book making) and the workings of the literary imagination. I will detail this latter ambition below, but for the moment it might be helpful to provide a brief overview of the chapters ahead.

Chapter 1, 'Cutting Texts', explores the rich culture of cutting up printed books in early modern England. At the centre of this chapter is the Anglican religious community of Little Gidding in the 1630s and 1640s, led by Nicholas Ferrar, who produced remarkable cut-and-paste gospels: Ferrar's nieces cut up and reordered, often on a word-by-word level, the printed text of Christ's life to create folio works of devotion, using knives, scissors and glue, that sought to resolve the contradictions between the accounts of Christ's life. These volumes are magnificently bound and formidably evocative of the skilled and time-consuming labour that produced them, but they resist or challenge many bibliographical and literary-critical variables of analysis. The books are printed, but they are also handmade, each one unique, bespoke: some libraries catalogue them as manuscripts; others class them as print. They are composed from printed texts, but those printed texts have been cut apart before being patched back together in a different order. How do these texts relate to a bibliographical language of, for example, edition (that is, all copies of a book printed from substantially the same setting of type)? They are literary works produced by knives and scissors, and so up-end most existing ideas of authorship, composition and writing. They are meticulous compositions whose production rests on a prior act of destruction, a cutting up of Bibles, and yet they instantiate the careful piety of the Little Gidding community. They are resistant texts even as they symbolise a Royalist Laudian orthodoxy. Little Gidding has previously been seen as an anomalous, even eccentric devotional experiment, but I hope to show how the cutting up of printed texts was widespread as a means of reading and of writing. I also show how cutting up texts was not necessarily an expression of hostility to a text but rather a form of careful and even pious reading. This new culture of cutting provides a vibrant context in which to read the poetry of George Herbert: Herbert's poems register, in ways not previously recognised, this practice of cutting. A new sense of the book, and of the bibliographical imagination, is thus opened up.

In Chapter 2, 'Burning Texts', I examine book destruction in order to explore the importance of transience to the culture of print. Scholars have often constructed a particular narrative about the capacity of print to fix

and stablise texts – a narrative which usually focuses on particular landmark folio volumes, like Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) and Jonson's *Workes* (1616). But there is another story: a story of loss, destruction, and often-purposeful impermanence. This chapter ranges widely across early modern literary culture (Milton, Cervantes, Donne, Rabelais, John Leland, Matthew Parker, Robert Cotton), but focuses in particular on Ben Jonson. In 1623, Jonson's library, including several of his works in process, was lost in flames. Jonson responded with an angry, fascinating poem of loss, 'An Execration upon Vulcan', a poem that registers the injustice of his creative losses while noting the many books that deserve to burn. What emerges in Jonson's poem, and across early modern literary culture more generally, is an expectation that printed books would not endure, and a commitment to the value of literary destruction.

'God helpe the man so wrapt in Errours endlesse traine', laments Edmund Spenser's narrator in *The Faerie Queene*, and Chapter 3, 'Errors and Corrections', explores what we, as readers and critics, can do with errors in early modern printed books. This chapter suggests that the history of the early modern book is also a history of error, and proposes that we need to learn how to treat typographical slips seriously, or, at least, that we need to think more about their hermeneutical potential. In this chapter I explore four technologies of book correction – errata lists, handwritten corrections, paste-in slips, and cancel pages – and use this rich material to offer two broad lines of argument. First, I treat errors as moments when, in breaking down, the book briefly but vividly reveals the processes of its production. Errors thus grant us a rare glimpse inside the early modern print shop. Second, I consider the ways in which authors including Robert Herrick, Edmund Spenser, Margaret Cavendish and John Milton responded to bibliographical errors as sources of literary potential. Error thus emerges not as a problem to be erased but rather as a signature condition of the printed book, and as a presence that authors recognised and responded to with creativity.

Chapter 4 examines printed waste in books in order to explore the ghostly practice of lost books living on in new volumes. When John Aubrey wrote a sketch of his own life, he added the instruction that he wished his *Life* 'to be interponed [inserted] as a sheet of wast-paper only in the binding of a Booke.'[6] Aubrey's comment was in part an expression of his modesty: his role, and his life, was to serve other people's fame. But his

[6] John Aubrey, *Brief Lives with an Apparatus for the Lives of Our English Mathematical Writers*, ed. Kate Bennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2 vols, vol. I, p. 429.

comment also alerts us to a wider culture of recycled books that has yet to receive sustained analysis: this chapter provides that first account. Early modern printed books frequently contained fragments of older texts in the boards, in the backing strips along the spine, in the hinges joining book to board, in pastedowns, or as flyleaves. The Bodleian Library's copy of Edward Lively's *A true chronologie of the times of the Persian monarchie, and after to the destruction of Ierusalem by the Romanes* (1597) carries fragments of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) as end leaves: to read Lively means necessarily to turn the pages of Sidney's love poems. What did it mean to read a book that was haunted by parts of an older book? What, and how, did Sidney's poetry now signify? This chapter provides a meticulous account of the practice of using pieces of older books to compose new publications, and then tracks across a number of literary authors (including John Taylor, Henry Vaughan and John Dryden) to show how richly this feature of the early modern book resonated in the literary imagination.

Running through these chapters is an investment in the relationship between the material text and the literary imagination, and I want to pause here to spell out what I mean by this.[7] Scholarship on the materiality of texts has grown to be accomplished at noticing and thinking about material features (format, size, typography, binding and so on, and the practices of production they suggest) as signs that shape the meaning of a text, alongside the linguistic or literary content. In describing what he called the 'double helix of perceptual codes' that secure a literary work's effects, Jerome McGann makes the case for the symbolic power of the materiality of the text, arguing forcefully that 'every documentary or bibliographical aspect of a literary work is meaningful, and potentially significant'. McGann doesn't explain his apparently careful use of 'potentially', which suggests that materiality may be meaningful but not significant, but he does argue that works are enriched and made more substantial as a result of the interplay between content and form, and that a reading of a literary work is thus more attentive to the sum of a text's workings if it considers materiality:

> both linguistic and bibliographical texts are symbolic and signifying mechanisms. Each generates meaning, and while the bibliographical text

[7] For a rich discussion of this question, exploring commonalities of 'form' in both literary formalism and studies of material form, see András Kiséry and Allison Deutermann, 'The Matter of Form: Book History, Formalist Criticism, and Francis Bacon's Aphorisms', in *The Book in History, The Book as History: New Intersections of the Material Text. Essays in Honor of David Scott Kastan*, ed. Heidi Brayman, Jesse M. Lander and Zachary Lesser (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 29–63.