

Reading the Early Modern Page

“Typographic Free Fall”

In 1509 a poem entitled *The Conuercyon of Swerers*, the work of the English court poet Stephen Hawes, was printed in London by the German émigré printer and stationer Wynkyn de Worde. The poem was a short (355-line) “verse sermon” against blasphemy, written in rhyme royal—the seven-line verse form associated with Chaucer’s poetry. And in his strictures against swearing—which is imagined as a second tearing apart of Christ’s body—Hawes seems to recall Chaucer’s opportunistic Pardoner condemning the “thyng abhominable” which is “fals sweryng.”¹ But, unlike the Pardoner, who cynically appropriates the rhetoric and rhythms of the pulpit to mercenary ends, Hawes’s poem is a sincere first-person narrative spoken by Christ himself, addressing the reader, and urging them not to “tere me whiche deyed for your sake” by taking God’s name in vain.² For this was a period when religious oaths—particularly the swearing by God’s (imagined) body parts such as bones, feet, or blood—were held to be a literal dismemberment of the divine.³

In the 1509 printing of *The Conuercyon of Swerers*, and in subsequent sixteenth-century editions, the poem begins as a carefully organized blackletter text, with each page containing twenty-eight lines of verse, divided into four (unnumbered) seven-line stanzas.⁴ The first two pages of the poem display the customary dense texture of blackletter type, almost devoid of punctuation save for the occasional *virgula suspensiva* (/) indicating a caesura: a mid-line break or pause. A single white line separates the stanzas from one another, which are rigidly left justified, with a ragged but still constrained right margin. This rhythmic textual pattern is established in the first two pages of the text, containing the poem’s initial eight stanzas. But on the third page of the book de Worde’s compositor detonated a typographic explosion (see Fig. 3.1).

Suddenly, words are scattered across the page in what seems like utter confusion. All pretense of metrical regularity is abandoned as, inexplicably, a series of

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Pardoner’s Tale*, in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 198.

² Stephen Hawes, *The Conuercyon of Swerers* (London, 1509), sig. A3^r.

³ Laurie Maguire, *The Rhetoric of the Page* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 184–185.

⁴ See Alice Morgan, “The Conuercyon of Swerers: Another Edition,” *The Library* 24 (1969), pp. 44–50.

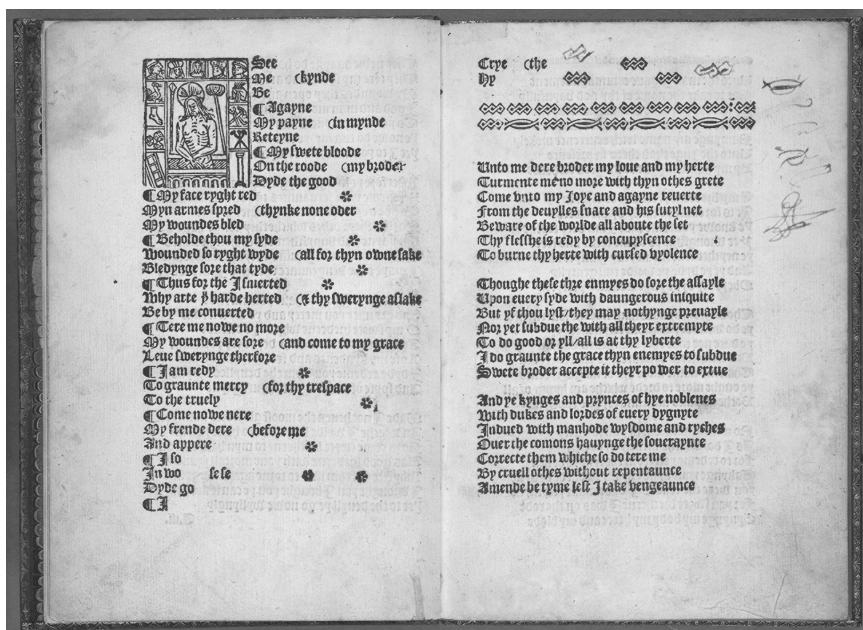


Fig. 3.1 Stephen Hawes, *The Conversion of Swearers* (London, 1509), sigs. A3^v–A4^r. Shelf mark: 61309. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

shortened lines, sometimes a single word or even an exclamation, erupt on the right-hand side of the page. Laurie Maguire has traced what she terms “the graphological” dimension of the poem, which she describes as “emotionally painful to read.”⁵ For it is both physically and cognitively challenging to assemble meaning from the printed words or symbols. It is as if white space—the white spaces so severely regulated by Hawes’s preferred stanza form—has begun to overwhelm the space of print, or (more imaginatively), that the remnants of two distinct poems, one on the left-hand side of the verso page, and the scrappy fragments of another on the right-hand side of the page, have been brought into textual collision with one another. As the reader’s eye struggles to make sense of the disjointed text, the poem seems to crumble into a chaos of single words and type ornaments, until (on the facing recto page) an ornamented rule is imposed on this jumble of type and space, and the regular, metrical-ordered, stanzas once more resume.

The clue to unravelling this typographic cacophony is to be found in the small woodcut which is located at the top of the verso page together with the apparently random scattering of six-petalled fleurons or type-ornaments. Many of de Worde’s printed works contained woodcuts of variable quality to make his pages more attractive, while also appealing to a less educated readership which he had

⁵ Maguire, *The Rhetoric of the Page*, p. 195.

identified as an important market for his books.⁶ The woodcut in the 1509 *Conuercyon of Swerers*, which acts as a preface to this section of Hawes's poem, depicts Christ as the Man of Sorrows, described in Isaiah 53.3. A dejected Christ is shown next to the lance and sponge with which gall and vinegar were offered to him on the Cross. The surrounding panels show some of the *Arma Christi* ("weapons of Christ") used in his torment during the Passion: the scourge, the hammer and pincers used to insert and then remove the three nails, the pillar where he was whipped during the flagellation, the ladder used in the deposition, and the dice with which the soldiers cast lots for his robe. The top row of five figures are depictions of some of the individuals mentioned in the differing gospel accounts: Herod Antipater, Judas, Annas, Caiaphas, and Pontus Pilate.⁷ The scattering of type-ornaments on the page become immediately recognizable within this context of the Passion. They represent the drops of Christ's blood—"my swete bloode" as the poem puts it—which Hawes and de Worde ask the reader (or viewer) to imagine as being dropped onto the very page in front of them. The poem itself is a first-person plea from the wounded Christ, beseeching the onlooker's pity and piety. These lines appear to be an extended version of a set of traditional verses known as "O man unkynde" which began to circulate in numerous versions in different manuscripts in England in the fifteenth century, and which evoke the hard-heartedness or "unkyndness" of the indifferent onlooker, as opposed to the generous kindness of Christ himself in his sacrifice.⁸

The only modern edition of Hawes's poem does not reproduce this typographic complexity on the page, reminding us of how sometimes meaningful early modern space has been erased to suit later print conventions.⁹ One early manuscript of Hawes's poem has survived, but this version, probably copied in the early sixteenth century, does not contain the "Man of Sorrows" section of the poem.¹⁰ Some modern commentators have claimed this section of Hawes's *Conuercyon of Swerers* to be the very first English printed "pattern poem"—that tradition of creating verses which, by varying the lengths of line, appear to form a shape or design associated with the subject-matter of the poetry on the page.¹¹ But it is not

⁶ H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers 1475–1640*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952–1970), I. p. 186; N. F. Blake, "Worde, Wynkyn de (d. 1534/5), printer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008).

⁷ See Shannon Gayk, "Early Modern Afterlives of the *Arma Christi*," in Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (eds.), *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 273–307 (particularly pp. 287–291); James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005), pp. 69–70, 180, 265, 399–400.

⁸ Gayk, "Early Modern Afterlives of the *Arma Christi*," p. 276.

⁹ Florence W. Gluck and Alice B. Morgan (eds.), *The Minor Poems of Stephen Hawes*, EETS 271 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 147.

¹⁰ British Library, Harley MS 4294, fo. 80^r.

¹¹ Margaret Church, "The First English Pattern Poems," *PMLA* 61 (1946), pp. 636–650; Bart Westerweel, *Patterns and Patterning: A Study of Four Poems by George Herbert* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984), pp. 86–87.

really a “pattern” that we encounter on the page of Hawes’s work, so much as a blood-splattered scene of distress and confusion. The page is designed to prompt in the spectator or reader a commensurate feeling of anguish which is resolved only through contemplation, penitence, and prayer, reminding us of how (in the words of Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen) “emotional and physical participation in the Passion is one of the great themes in late medieval and early modern Catholicism.”¹² And this participatory effect, one in which the flesh has been made to appear as words, or words as flesh, in the here and now of the reader’s own present, is achieved through a daring typographic combination of print, white space, ornament, and image.

This early sixteenth-century typographic experiment is rooted in an older, manuscript tradition: that of seeing Christ’s body as a book or document, and his blood as ink—a cultural trope that reached its apex in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹³ Not until we encounter the fragmented lines of (for example) John Donne’s or George Herbert’s printed poetry in the early 1630s, or (even) the discordant poetry of modernism, heralded by the appearance (in 1897) of the typographically anarchic poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance) by Stéphane Mallarmé, do we meet anything comparable. Mallarmé’s text sprawls across the page in a seemingly irregular pattern, deploying large areas of blank space which the poet described as an expression of a “surrounding silence” into which the paper “intervenes.”¹⁴ Blank space thus becomes a “simulacrum for the process of making meaning.”¹⁵ But the irregularity of *Un coup de dés*, which has been described as “typographic free-fall,” was nevertheless carefully controlled by the author, who left detailed instructions as to how the poem should appear in its final printed form.¹⁶ The texts of Hawes and Mallarmé, separated as they are by nearly four hundred years of print history, nevertheless remind us that poetry operates within a visual demesne, in much the same way that, in the case of Ezra Pound’s poem “The Return” (first published in 1912), the irregular stanza patterns enhance the poem’s visual, acoustic, and semantic properties.¹⁷

¹² Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), p. 32.

¹³ See Sarah Noonan, “Bodies of Parchment: Reading Manuscripts in late Medieval England” (Ph.D. diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2010), pp. 33–100.

¹⁴ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems of Mallarmé: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Henry Wienfield (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 121.

¹⁵ Stacy Pies, “Rhetorical and Social Geographies in Stéphane Mallarmé’s ‘Bucolique,’” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 35 (2007), pp. 590–609 (p. 605).

¹⁶ See Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 115–138.

¹⁷ See Hugh Kenner, *The Mechanical Muse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 44–46.

Script, Speech, Print, and Space

In his inquiry into the “conceptual and cognitive implications” of both reading and writing, David Olsen has remarked that “the history of reading is largely the history of attempting to cope with what writing does not represent.”¹⁸ This would seem to be true of Hawes’s early sixteenth-century poem, as much as it is true of Mallarmé’s modernist text. Both texts represent an assault on the linearity of print, as the eye of the reader or onlooker roves across the page, assembling meaning from the fractured lines or even from single words, suspended in the blank spaces of the page. But these texts are also productions which are resolutely tied to the medium of print even as (in the case of Hawes’s poem) they struggle to enunciate what print cannot reproduce—the visual experience of anguish. In similar measure, the contemporary African American poet, Danez Smith, has sought to express the catastrophe of violence enacted upon Black American communities in (for example) their poem “litany with blood all over” first published in 2017. The poem begins by insertions of increments of white space into the poem’s fractured lines: “i am telling you something i got blood on the brain,” until, on the poem’s final (verso) page, the whiteness of the page is overwhelmed by the repetitive phrases “his blood” and “my blood” printed overlaid and offset to present the reader with a typographically chaotic smear of print, which is difficult to read, but whose sense is unambiguous.¹⁹

Danez Smith is a performance poet who has acknowledged the early influence of the spoken words of Baptist preachers on their writing and recitation.²⁰ Early modern writers, too, by no means understood print or even script to be the inevitable destination of their words. Today, we tend to overlook the fact that the first audience for a text, even in the “age of print,” frequently encountered words as spoken rather than read silently, echoing the ancient tradition of aural dissemination, in which reading was “a public, spoken act performed within... a ‘textual community.’”²¹ It was within just such a (pre-print) community that Geoffrey Chaucer was shown to be participating in an early fifteenth-century manuscript depicting the poet reading his works at the court of Richard II—a manuscript which is itself a tissue of gaps where the scribe left blank spaces for illustrations that were never realized.²² Early modern people were familiar with listening to a text being read aloud to them on a weekly, indeed daily, basis via the practice of

¹⁸ David Olsen, *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 145.

¹⁹ Danez Smith, *Don’t Call Us Dead: Poems* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2017), pp. 49–52.

²⁰ Lanre Bakare, “Danez Smith: ‘White People Can Learn from It, But That’s Not Who I’m Writing For,’” *The Guardian*, February 8, 2020.

²¹ Nicholas Howe, “The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England,” in Jonathan Boyarin (ed.), *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 58–99 (p. 59).

²² Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 61, fo. 1^v.

lectio continua (continuous reading) whereby the entire Bible was read aloud over the course of the year, in the order prescribed in the liturgical calendar set down in Cranmer's 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*.²³ The tradition of poets reading their secular verses aloud lived on long after printed texts had begun to circulate, just as, today, modern poets and novelists are invited to read from their recently published works, in a public performance. For neither script nor print can ever fully replicate the experience of the heard or spoken word as it struggles "to cope with what writing does not represent." Edmund Spenser, for example, may well have read sections of *The Faerie Queene* aloud to a courtly audience in October 1589, before the poem was first printed, although recently doubt has been cast on whether such a performance took place.²⁴

Certainly, Spenser's epic poem was circulating in manuscript well before a copy reached the London print shop of John Wolfe in late 1589, since it was quoted accurately in a text published in 1588.²⁵ Manuscript circulation and oral performance were the preferred media for many writers in the early modern period, even when print was available as an alternative form of delivery. Very little of John Donne's poetry, for example, circulated in print during his lifetime. Instead, Donne chose the medium that he felt best suited the kind of audience that he wanted to address, moving between oral delivery in the case of his many sermons, manuscript circulation, and print.²⁶ In the case of his sermons, even in manuscript form, Donne was careful to control the circulation of copies.²⁷ As for his poetry, with one or two significant exceptions, print was rarely seen as the appropriate medium of dissemination. Donne's disdain for print—for books "baptized merely in the blood of the printing-press" as he memorably wrote in a Latin verse letter to a friend—was not just a matter of him clinging to the outward forms of gentility.²⁸ He was also acutely aware that many of his writings (both prose and poetry) might be found objectional on "moral, political, or theological grounds."²⁹ Donne wanted his writings to be read—of that there is no doubt—but he also

²³ See Alan Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 26–27.

²⁴ See A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene* (London and New York: Longman, 1977), p. x; Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 235.

²⁵ See Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetorike: or The Praecepts of Rhetorike Made Plaine by Examples* (London, 1588), sig. E3^r.

²⁶ See Gary A. Stringer, "The Composition and Dissemination of Donne's Writings," in Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 12–25 (p. 13); Ernest W. Sullivan II, *The Influence of John Donne: His Uncollected Seventeenth-Century Printed Verse* (Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

²⁷ Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 137.

²⁸ H. W. Garrod, "The Latin Poem Addressed by Donne to Dr. Andrews," *Review of English Studies* 21 (1945), pp. 38–42 (p. 40).

²⁹ Ted-Larry Pebworth, "The Text of Donne's Writing," in Achsah Guibbory (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 23–34 (p. 25).

wanted to select and control the audience for his work. Manuscripts could, of course, be copied and recopied. But, as Jane Rickard writes, for Donne “manuscript enabled a more personal transaction within which the work could enter into the possession of its reader, while print depersonalized the work, separating it from both author and reader even as it exposed the author to irreverent responses beyond his control.”³⁰ Hence, Donne’s poems might be sent to friends in letters, from whence they tended to circulate within the more closeted environment of copied and recopied manuscripts. Nevertheless, in this medium, they achieved extraordinary popularity.³¹ As Peter Beal records: “more transcripts of Donne’s poems were made than of the verse of any other British poet of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” and those which have survived probably represent only a “fraction” of the number of his poems that once circulated in this form.³²

Female writers were much more likely to see their works circulate in manuscript rather than in print. And for many women writers, manuscript collections represent the only witnesses to their authorial careers that we have inherited, given that “women in the period were expected to be too modest to vaunt themselves in print.”³³ That said, women certainly operated within a larger writing economy, working as scribes, copyists, translators, and correspondents, as well as performing multiple tasks in the actual production of printed books.³⁴ But still, the relative absence of female authors from the printed archive constitutes yet another form of gap. Thus (for example) none of the poems of Lady Mary Carey, the sisters Jane Cheyne and Elizabeth Egerton, Lady Elizabeth Delaval, Lucy Hutchinson, Esther Inglis, Martha Moulsworth, Julia Palmer, Lady Hesther Pulter, Lady Anne Southwell, or Gertrude Thimelby were printed in the authors’ lifetimes. Manuscript circulation was the preferred medium for women writers, whose work not only appeared in single-author manuscript books, but was also dispersed through different kinds of manuscript collection: “sprinkled throughout miscellanies, scribbled on the back of legal documents and so on.”³⁵ As collectors and anthologizers (in effect, functioning as literary editors), women might

³⁰ Jane Rickard, “John Donne, James I and the Dilemmas of Publication,” in Peter Langman (ed.), *Negotiating the Jacobean Printed Book* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 89–100 (p. 100).

³¹ See Piers Brown, “Donne, Rhapsody, and Textual Order,” in Joshua Eckhardt and Daniel Starza Smith (eds.), *Manuscript Miscellanies in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 39–55 (p. 40).

³² Peter Beal, “Introductions: John Donne,” CELM.

³³ Elaine Hobby, “‘Discourse so Unsavoury’: Women’s Published Writings of the 1650s,” in Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women, Writing, History 1640–1670* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), pp. 16–32 (p. 17).

³⁴ See Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 16–52.

³⁵ Elizabeth Clarke and Jonathan Gibbon, “Introduction,” in Jill Seal Millman and Gillian Wright (eds.), *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Poetry* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 1–10 (p. 2).

also gather together poems to create manuscript miscellanies, as in the case of Constance Fowler, a member of a Catholic gentry family who, in the 1630s, wrote to acquaintances asking for poems for her collection which would eventually contain poems by Ben Jonson and Henry King, as well as verses written by her male and female family and friends.³⁶ Fowler's manuscript miscellany, constructed in part from the reception of poems written by women presented to her as gifts, forms part of what Jane Donawerth has described as a larger Tudor and Stuart gift-exchange system in which material objects—"pendants, bracelets, handkerchiefs, gloves, smocks, ruffs, mantles"—as well as writings (including poems) were circulated. Indeed, the first extant poem in English written by a woman—a set of verses composed by Margery Brews and sent to her fiancé John Paston III in 1477—was presented as a gift.³⁷

Aristocratic women, such as Mary Herbert (née Sidney), Countess of Montgomery, or her niece Lady Mary Wroth, or (most famously, in the later part of the period) Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, sustained by literary or courtly networks of patronage and influence, might find ready access to print. But, with the notable exception of Emilia Lanier's *Salve deus rex iudæorum* (1611), women authors of the "middling sort" were usually ushered into print cloaked (sometimes thinly) in the guise of anonymity. The poems printed in Isabella Whitney's *The Copy of A Letter* (1567) and *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) appeared as the work of "IS. W." and were presented in a way that imitated the "dynamics of manuscript culture," which helped to offset the "anxieties attendant upon social and literary circulation" for a woman.³⁸ In similar measure, when, many years later, Anne Bradstreet's poetic collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* was printed as the work of "a Gentlewoman in those parts" (i.e., Massachusetts) in 1650, it was prefaced by an anonymous address to the "kindly reader" explaining that the poems had been published without the author's knowledge "and contrary to her expectation," since she had resolved that they would "never in such a manner see the Sun." But the circulation of Bradstreet's poetry in manuscript had led to the risk of incomplete versions of her work being laid before the public. As the author of the preface explained: "I found that divers [i.e., diverse people] had gotten some scattered papers, affected them wel, were likely to have sent forth broken peices to the Authors prejudice, which I thought to prevent, as well as to pleasure those that earnestly desired the view of

³⁶ See Helen Hackett, "Unlocking the Mysteries of Constance Aston Fowler's Verse Miscellany (Huntington Library MS HM 904): The Hand B Scribe Identified," in Eckhardt and Starza Smith (eds.), *Manuscript Miscellanies in Early Modern England*, pp. 91–112 (p. 92).

³⁷ Jane Donawerth, "Women's Poetry and the Tudor–Stuart System of Gift Exchange," in Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove, and Karen Nelson (eds.), *Women, Writing and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 3–18 (pp. 7, 9).

³⁸ Danielle Clarke (ed.), *Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney and Aemelia Lanyer: Renaissance Women Poets* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. xvi.

the whole.”³⁹ The anonymity with which *The Tenth Muse* was published was (however) rudimentary. The fourth prefatory poem in the volume (the work of Bradstreet’s husband, Simon) was entitled, “In praise of the Author, Mistris Anne Bradstreet,” one of five instances, as Gillian Wright notes, that Bradstreet is named in full in the book’s prefatory material.⁴⁰

As far as readers were concerned, manuscript circulation, even in “broken peices,” had certain advantages over print. As Arthur Marotti has observed: “In the process of manuscript transmission, texts were . . . by convention, open to reader emendation, supplementation, response, and parody. The text of a poem was malleable in a system of manuscript transmission.”⁴¹ Print, however, challenged that malleability, as the prefatory author to Bradstreet’s poetry was aware when they wrote of her “scattered papers” and “broken pieces” being stabilized on the pages of a printed book. Fixity and print seemed to go hand in hand since (according to Walter Ong), print tended to emphasize the “finality” of the printed, as opposed to the hand-written word which seemed to exist closer to the evanescent world of speech:

For print is comfortable only with finality. Once a letterpress forme is closed, locked up, or a photolithographic plate is made, and the sheet printed, the text does not accommodate changes (erasures, insertions) so readily as do written texts. By contrast, manuscripts, with their glosses or marginal comments (which often got worked into the text in subsequent copies) were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders. They remained closer to the give and take of oral expression.⁴²

Ong’s argument has been hugely influential on studies of the impact of the printed book in the Renaissance, as well as our broader understanding of the ways in which the diffusion of “literacy” gradually displaced “orality,” in both European and non-European cultures in later periods. Today, however, that argument has begun to look less sustainable. Print may have aspired towards “finality” but that did not mean that it achieved it, as (for example) the sometimes copious errata lists to be found in early modern books testify.⁴³ And, as we shall see, empty spaces were not infrequently left on the printed page to accommodate authorial

³⁹ Anne Bradstreet, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* (London, 1650), sig. A3^v.

⁴⁰ Gillian Wright, *Producing Women’s Poetry, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 63.

⁴¹ Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 137. See also Arthur F. Marotti, *The Circulation of Poetry in Manuscript in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁴² Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 130.

⁴³ See Adam Smyth, “Errata Lists,” in Denis Duncan and Adam Smyth (eds.), *Book Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 253–261.

revisions, second thoughts, and even to invite readerly annotation, long after the printed sheets had been pulled from the press and assembled into gatherings of pages. The production of a poem like Stephen Hawes's *The Conuercyon of Swerers* also qualifies Ong's firm distinction between the oral and the printed realms. For, once we attend to the manipulation of space on the printed page, any hard distinction between the more "open" world of manuscript culture, and the supposedly "closed" world of the printed text, begins to look much less absolute.

We can see the oscillation between print and space in another poem whose theme is blood, which circulated in both printed and manuscript form in the late sixteenth century. The poem illustrates, too, the ways in which textual space (and with it meaning) shifted as the same set of verses were transcribed in the two different media, demanding or inviting different interpretive strategies from readers. "Christes Bloody Tears" is a four-stanza meditation on the Passion written by the Jesuit priest, Robert Southwell, who was executed for treason at Tyburn in February 1595. When just the first two stanzas of Southwell's poem were printed in a collection of his poetry entitled *Mæoniæ. Or, Certaine Excellent Poems and Spirituall Hymnes* (1595) they did not look particularly unusual on the page. Printed as an unbroken continuous poem, the verses were handsomely presented with the title inserted into an ornamental cartouche, with a great deal of white space following the twelve lines of verse, and a ribbon ornament at the foot of the page.⁴⁴ The (partially reproduced) poem was designed to be understood as part of a meditative sequence of poems on the life of Christ, within the thirty-two-page quarto volume printed by Valentine Simmes in 1595.

It would have required an extraordinarily attentive sixteenth-century reader of the printed version of "Christes Bloody Tears," alert to Southwell's piling up of disjointed clauses, to sense that there was an entirely different way of seeing, and hence reading, the poem. It is only when the poem is encountered in a manuscript that its graphic qualities are revealed. Here is a transcription of the first six lines of the poem as they were presented in a manuscript version originally preserved at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, produced c. 1592–1609:

Fat soile,	full spring,	sweet olive,	grape of blisse
That yields,	that streams,	that pours,	that dost distil
Untild,	undrawne,	unstampt,	untouched of presse,
Deare fruit,	cleare brooks,	fayre oyle,	sweete wine at will:
Thus Christ unforst prevents in shedding bloode			
The whips, the thornes, the nailes, the speare, the roode. ⁴⁵			

⁴⁴ Robert Southwell, *Mæoniæ. Or, Certaine Excellent Poems and Spirituall Hymnes* (London, 1595), sig. C2^r.

⁴⁵ Waldegrave MS Stonyhurst College, MS A. v. 27 fos. 47^v–48^r (now on deposit at the English Province of the Society of Jesus, London), in Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (eds.), *St. Robert Southwell: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), p. 17.

In a linear encounter with this poem the eye moves, conventionally, across the page, reading each of the lines consecutively. But, by presenting the first four lines of the text as four columns, the reader is encouraged to contemplate (rather than simply read) the poem, with the eye travelling vertically down the first column—"Fat soile / That yields / Untild / Deare fruit..." then reverting to the conventional horizontal mode to read the concluding couplet, before returning to the top of the next column. In this mode of reading, the final couplet is read four times in a single reading of the verses. Thus (it has been suggested) the poem conforms to the variety of ways in which the rosary was said up to the mid-seventeenth century, when the Dominican rosary was established as the norm in the Catholic church.⁴⁶ Moreover, this arrangement "makes possible a visual metaphor in which the words, which roll down the page, represent the bloody drops of sweat that stream down Christ's body."⁴⁷ This may remind us of Hawes's representation of spots of blood on the printed page, or even Danez Smith's congealed print as a representation of blood on the contemporary poetic page. Once the eye has adjusted to this manipulation of graphic space in Southwell's poem, it becomes possible to recompose the poem entirely by abandoning the left to right linearity of text altogether, so that a diagonal reading (for example) becomes possible to produce an entirely "new" poem: "Fat Soile, / that streams, / unstamp't, / sweete wine at will...". Of course, it is perfectly possible to reproduce this arrangement (as here) on the printed page. But it is significant that when the poem was first reproduced in printed form in 1595, the compositor was either not provided with this *mise-en-page* in their copy text, or, not understanding the sacramental dimension of what they were fashioning, they decided to revert to a conventional linear rather than columnar layout, reinforcing the sense that *Mæonia* was not prepared for print publication by Southwell himself.⁴⁸

Quick and Slow Reading

The white spaces which we encounter on a printed page—the spaces between words or the spaces separating sentences, paragraphs, chapters, or other divisions of a work from one another, as well as the margins surrounding the text block together with empty or partially empty pages—are usually held to constitute the vestigial remnants of a neutral or passive substrate onto which the text has been imposed. But empty, blank, or white space, while it might initially appear to be

⁴⁶ Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 101.

⁴⁷ Shaun Ross, "Robert Southwell: Sacrament and Self," *English Literary Renaissance* 47 (2017), pp. 73–109.

⁴⁸ See Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, p. 104.

mute or silent, also represents an opening within the printed text, which allows “the world” to suddenly flow in from those “borders” beyond which it would appear to have been banished. Attending to these spaces takes us closer to that “give and take of oral expression” described by Ong. By the same token, a highlighted empty space might suggest an aura of provisionality surrounding the printed page, or even invite a degree of readerly participation of the kind that Hawes and de Worde seem to have envisaged when they devised the extraordinary typographic melee that we encounter on the second page of *The Conversion of Swearers*. At such points, many of these kinds of space (implicitly) ask the reader to “fill in the gap” in a way that might remind us of Wolfgang Iser’s theoretical conception of the blank as a fundamental element in the interpretive process.

Although the palette of the printed page in the Renaissance was predominantly black and white, there was some attempt to print incunabula (books printed before 1500) polychromatically.⁴⁹ Moreover, blank spaces might be left in printed texts, where it was intended to supply illustrative or decorative images or type forms which might, in turn, be hand colored. Red ink was frequently used on the title pages of prestigious titles, and rubrication used to highlight elements in the text in (for example) Catholic service books.⁵⁰ But the restricted palette of the printed page also invested white space with a new, locutionary, force. Although, as Ann Blair has warned, “it is delicate to assess the impact on past readers of features of the printed page to which we are not accustomed given the absence of contemporary comments on layout,” she argues that “blank space and font variation became central features of page layout.”⁵¹ This, of course, raises the larger question of agency, which is not always easily resolved. Who was responsible for the “look” of a text, and the array of paratextual features that it might exhibit? The author? The bookseller or publisher? The printers? Or perhaps a combination of all three? With some exceptions, it was printers who usually made the final decisions on page layout, so that the blank spaces of a printed text, which organized the content of the page and helped to guide readers through the book, are the moments when we can “hear” (or see) the printer rather than the author “speaking” most directly to the reader. Indeed, the deployment of varying amounts of space around midline punctuation marks has sometimes been used to identify the work of (usually unnamed) individual compositors in Elizabethan and Jacobean printing houses, where space functions rather like a compositorial fingerprint on the text.⁵²

⁴⁹ See John Boardley, *Typographic Firsts: Adventures in Early Printing* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019), pp. 79–89.

⁵⁰ See Philip Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2006), pp. 137–138.

⁵¹ Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 152–153.

⁵² Thomas Calhoun and Thomas L. Gravell, “Paper and Printing in Ben Jonson’s ‘Sejanus’ (1605),” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87 (1993), pp. 13–64 (p. 29).

The contrast between words printed in black ink and the white background of the page has stood the test of time remarkably well. When they first encounter an early modern printed book, today's readers are frequently struck by how legible the text is in terms of the strength or depth of the black, printed characters on the white (more usually off-white, cream-colored, or brownish) pages. This legibility is all the more striking when compared to nineteenth-century pages, or (today) cheaper, mass-market paperbacks where chemical reactions have left the paper yellowed and fragile. Hand-made paper fashioned out of linen and cotton rags is remarkably enduring, compared to machine-made paper manufactured using wood pulp. That a book printed in the early sixteenth century can still appear so relatively fresh is a testament to the skill of the papermakers, as well as those responsible for manufacturing ink.⁵³ A printed page, created perhaps five hundred years ago, and considered as a medium of information storage, still functions today just as well as it did on the day that the damp sheet was first lifted from the press and hung up to dry in a sixteenth-century print shop. Paper and ink technology has already comfortably outlasted more recent forms of data storage such as floppy disks, magnetic or paper tape, and punched cards. "A book, given acid-free paper and stable inks, will last for centuries in a dark dry room," the science fiction writer and co-founder of the genre of cyberpunk, Bruce Sterling, has observed. By contrast, Sterling writes, "nothing created with a computer has ever enjoyed such permanence."⁵⁴ Attempting to retrieve information from ten-year old magnetic tapes, for example, yields "error rates as high as twenty percent due to the deterioration of the magnetic surface"—a process of decay which has been termed "bitrot."⁵⁵ But even if the "hardware" and the "software" that we use to retrieve information from the printed page—the human perceptive apparatus and the skills known as "reading" taught from childhood—enable us to interpret script or print fashioned centuries ago, that does not mean that we read a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century page in the same way that our predecessors once read it.

"Reading," writes Adrian Johns, "is a deceptively simple practice," but it is also, he observes, an experience that "is extremely difficult to describe in words."⁵⁶ If this is true of our encounters with texts in the modern world, then it is even more true of any attempt to see the texts of the past through the eyes of long-vanished readers. But, just occasionally, we are allowed shadowy glimpses of a possible enactment of the early modern reading process by attending to a quite different medium: the oral form of the sermon. Sermons were among the most

⁵³ Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography*, p. 125.

⁵⁴ Bruce Sterling, "Delete Our Cultural Heritage," quoted in Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Bitstreams: The Future of Digital Literary Heritage* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Kirschenbaum, *Bitstreams*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 384–385.

popular (and free) forms of “entertainment” available in early modern London. Audiences—the word seems more appropriate than congregations—flocked to prestigious outdoor venues such as St. Paul’s Cross in London to hear celebrated preachers. Sermons rivalled and quite possibly out-performed the London theatres in their attraction for large crowds of spectators in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁵⁷ For performance was the essence of the seventeenth-century sermon.⁵⁸ Famously, John Donne’s final sermon on a text from the Psalms (68.20), “And unto God the Lord belong the issues of death,” delivered at Whitehall before the king and the court in February 1631, just a few weeks before his own death, was a histrionic performance of the *ars moriendi* (the art of dying). As Izaak Walton recorded: “Many that then saw [Donne’s] tears, and heard his faint and hollow voice, professing they thought the Text prophetically chosen, and that *Dr. Donne had preach’t his own Funeral Sermon.*”⁵⁹

Sermons were delivered on a chosen text, with preachers gradually unfolding multiple layers of meanings for their audiences. They were public demonstrations of skilled, professional reading and interpretation—the harbinger of modern literary or practical criticism. Of course, we shall never be able to recapture the experience of listening to Lancelot Andrewes deliver his Christmas Day sermon before King James in December 1622, on the text of Matthew 2.1–2, which recounts the story of the arrival of “the wise men from the East” in Bethlehem, and explores their question, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” But then the same might be said of a Jacobean performance of *Macbeth* or *Othello*. However, following on the printed page the sinuous pathways of Andrewes’s explication of the thirty-six words which comprised his text—an explication which became the springboard for T. S. Eliot’s poem, “The Journey of the Magi” (1927)—we become vividly aware of Andrewes not just as a preacher but as a reading personality. “The sermons of Andrewes are not easy reading,” Eliot observed in his exploration of the preacher’s distinctive styles of sermonizing.⁶⁰ And this may be because Andrewes’s words were not primarily designed to be read silently so much as they were intended to be heard, even if, beginning in 1592, printed copies of his sermons were published in extraordinary numbers—well over forty titles before his death in 1626. Andrewes’s method of reading (and speaking) is based on a process of dissecting and re-dissecting the scriptural passage, circling and recircling around the same phrases or groups of words, as in his Christmas Day sermon, “*Vidimus stellam*” (we have seen the star), “*Venimus*

⁵⁷ See Lori Anne Ferrell, “Sermons,” in Andy Kesson and Emma Smith (eds.), *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 193–201 (pp. 198–199).

⁵⁸ Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences*, p. 90.

⁵⁹ Izaak Walton, *The Life of John Donne* (1640), ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 75.

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Lancelot Andrewes,” in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 179–188 (p. 181).

adorare" (we have come to worship). He divides and sub-divides the text into ever finer distinctions, teasing out nuances of meaning, tracing echoes and shadows of other texts recalled from his memory to add to the shades of interpretation that can be "squeezed" (the word is Eliot's) from the handful of words upon which he is concentrating. Given the aural nature of the undertaking, repetition is integral to the activity, as Andrewes reconsiders, over and over again, what has already (one might have thought) been examined in exquisite and exhaustive detail. Reading Andrewes caught (as it were) in the act of reading (and, of course, explaining) is to be struck not just by the precision of this reader, his witty erudition, his sudden and striking turns of phrase ("*Christ*, is no wild catt," he suddenly exclaims at one point in the Christmas Day sermon) but by the deliberative, meditative pace of the reading and interpretation. As Andrewes puts it himself, in what seems like a commentary on his own procedure: "when we do it, we must be allowed leisure... We love to make no very great haste."⁶¹

Did early modern readers proceed at a more leisurely pace than we do today? The question is not easy to answer even if we admit the possibility that "people in the past... [did] not read in anything that might unproblematically be called the same way as us."⁶² The advent of printing, Paul Saenger has argued, "altered Western European reading habits." Printing (Saenger continues) "made highly legible and easily consultable volumes available... unprecedented numbers of individuals could participate in the rapid silent reading and reference consultation, unknown in antiquity, that medieval monks and scholars had invented."⁶³ But how "rapid" is rapid? And the question becomes even more difficult to address when we recall that our own experience of reading is eclectic: the type of text (as well as the task to which the text is answering) determines the method of reading that must be deployed.

Today, the study of earlier reading habits and procedures tends to circulate around the debate as to whether or not there was a shift at some point from an "intensive and reverent" style of reading, of the kind pursued by Lancelot Andrewes, to a more extensive "nonchalant" mode of reading, which included "browsing, skimming, or consulting."⁶⁴ Certainly, eighteenth-century readers of novels were advised by Henry Fielding to approach the task in a leisurely fashion. In 1742, at the beginning of the second book of his novel, *Joseph Andrews* (in a chapter entitled "Of Divisions in Authors"), Fielding counselled the reader on how the work should, ideally, be consumed. Reading, Fielding suggested, was a

⁶¹ Lancelot Andrewes, *Sermons*, ed. G. M. Story (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 111.

⁶² Johns, *Nature of the Book*, p. 384. See also Adrian Johns, "The Physiology of Reading in Restoration England," in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 138–161.

⁶³ Paul Saenger, "The Impact of the Early Printed Page on the History of Reading," *Bulletin du Bibliophile* 2 (1996), pp. 237–300 (pp. 242, 300).

⁶⁴ Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 179.

journey, in which space played its own part: "Those little Spaces between our Chapters may be looked upon as an Inn or Resting-Place where he [i.e., the reader] may stop and take a Glass or any other refreshment as it pleases him." As for the "vacant Pages which are placed between our Books," those were to be regarded as "those Stages, where, in long Journeys, the Traveller stays some time to repose himself, and consider of what he hath seen in the Parts he hath already past through." Reading was, ideally, a slow-paced perambulation, or (perhaps) an easy saunter, rather than a gallop through the landscape of the book. For the quick reader was liable to "miss the seeing some curious productions of nature which will be observed by the slower and more accurate reader." But in either case, Fielding wrote, "A volume without any such Places of Rest resembles the Opening of Wilds or Seas, which tires the Eye and fatigues the Spirit when entered upon."⁶⁵ Dr Johnson, on the other hand, some thirty years later, was undoubtedly a galloper. Hence his famously testy response, on being pressed (in 1773) as to whether he had read a new book "that had been much admired:" "I have looked into it," Johnson, responded, airily. "Have you not read it through?" his questioner persisted. "No, Sir, do *you* read books *through*?"⁶⁶ Johnson, whether in the guise of a dictionary maker, a literary critic, or an editor, was practiced at sifting, sorting, and pillaging books for information or apt illustrations. Watching Johnson turning the pages of a book, Boswell commented on how he seemed to read "ravenously, as if he devoured it" or, as another acquaintance put it, "he knows how to read better than anyone . . . he gets at the substance of a book directly; he tears out the heart of it."⁶⁷ But this carnivorous mode of reading, Fielding, too, had anticipated when he closed his chapter on book divisions by observing that "it becomes an Author generally to divide a Book as it doth a Butcher to joint his Meat, for such Assistance is of great Help to both the Reader and the Carver."⁶⁸

Fielding and Johnson were the heirs to nearly three hundred years of printed book production, and they knew that there were a variety of different ways of reading a book. But earlier readers knew, too, that different kinds of text might demand different reading protocols. In reading (for example) the scriptures, Thomas Cranmer advised that slowness was of the essence, although (recalling those who had witnessed Dr. Johnson reading) he compared the process not so much to eating as to digestion: "Let us ruminate, and (as it were) chewe the cudde, that we may have the swete juyce, spirituall effect, [marrow], hon[e]y, kyrnell,

⁶⁵ Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, 2 vols. (London, 1742), I. pp. 133–134.

⁶⁶ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), I. p. 493.

⁶⁷ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, II. p. 215. See also Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p. 173.

⁶⁸ Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, I. p. 136.

taste, comfort [and] consolation of them.”⁶⁹ Cranmer’s exhortation to read at a deliberative and meditative pace was derived from the medieval monastic practice of *lectio divina* (“divine reading”)—a slow, four-part process whereby reading was punctuated by meditation, prayer, and contemplation.⁷⁰ By contrast, in his *Actes and Monuments* (1563), better known as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe describes “a quicke Reader” who is able to “smel out the crafty iugling” of attempts to impose (in Foxe’s view) false or erroneous interpretations upon the records of the early Christian church.⁷¹ But, as the context makes clear, Foxe’s sense of “a quicke reader” is a person who is alert, acute, or perceptive, rather than one who is able to digest a text rapidly. A century later, in his *Life of Plutarch*, John Dryden certainly evoked “a quick reader,” who can anticipate the author’s thoughts faster than he or she is able to record them on paper.⁷²

Cranmer’s own description of his customary mode of reading, silently (we may assume) and slowly, pen in hand, diligently marking important passages, seems to accord with the kind of reading that Lancelot Andrewes pursued. It is the kind of reading, too, that is associated with humanism, where annotating or even copying an entire text was understood as part of the reading process, as much as it was to do with the reproduction of texts.⁷³ This is a model that would have been familiar to Erasmus, when he theorized that the task of the reader as interpreter was to extract the *Sensus germanus*—the “authentic sense”—from the verbal patchwork which lay before them. In this model, rooted in the reading and interpretation of the scriptures, reading and explication were indissoluble from one another. In the words of Terence Cave, “the authentic reading of the Bible demands the subsequent attempt to disseminate its *sensus* by means of commentary, paraphrase, translation, or preaching: a new discourse will be generated by the reading act, so that in effect ‘interpretation’ becomes a special mode of ‘imitation.’”⁷⁴ And this process inevitably called for a more meditative mode of reading. This sense of the term “reading” is preserved in the modern use of the word to describe not just the process itself, but the interpretive act which it generates, as in the varying “readings” that a modern poem or novel might generate among literary critics.

⁶⁹ Thomas Cranmer, *Certain Sermons Appoynted by the Quenes Majestie, to be Declared and Read, by all Persones, Vycars, and Curates, Euery Sonday and Holy Daye, in Theyr Churches* (London, 1560), sig. B3^v. On Cranmer’s reading habits, see John Strype, *Memorials of the Most Reverend Father in God, Thomas Cranmer sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1694), p. 2.

⁷⁰ See Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

⁷¹ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, 2 vols. (London, 1583), I, p. 58.

⁷² John Dryden, “The Life of Plutarch,” in *Plutarch’s Lives Translated from the Greek by Several Hands* (London, 1683), p. 80.

⁷³ See Anthony Grafton, “The Humanist as Reader,” in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (eds.), *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 179–212 (pp. 206–207); Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, “Studied for Action: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,” *Past and Present* 129 (1990), pp. 30–78.

⁷⁴ Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 80.

Lancelot Andrewes was, of course, not merely an exceptional reader, but, in his sermons, an exceptional performer of the act of reading, so that it would be unjustified to use him as an example of the generality of the early modern reading population—itself a fragment of the population at large. Moreover, a text might frequently be “read” by listening to it being recited.⁷⁵ But Andrewes was also reading (and preaching) when new kinds of text were appearing—texts (for example) that were designed to be distilled for their informational content far more rapidly than was customary in the appreciation of a sacred text, or even a text from pagan antiquity. And these new kinds of text were being presented to the reader in innovative ways. The production of these new kinds of text, and the new methods of reading that they fostered, involved closer attention to the white, empty spaces which are integral to that construction of contrasts—black and white—which appeal to the human visual apparatus, and that, in turn, allow us to embark on that singular process that we know as reading.

Reading White Space

Central to this change was the general “opening up” of the text on the page during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the gradual deployment of more and more white space on the printed page—the so-called “triumph” of “white” over “black” as it has been described. Although print historians have long been committed to this evolutionary model of the printed page, in fact, this intrusion of greater increments of space onto a page predates the advent of print. At the end of the fourteenth century, in Florence, a “new aesthetic of textual presentation” took hold—“a reform of script”—which can be understood (in David Rundle’s memorable phrase) as “the revenge of old men with tired eyes.” *Litterae antiquae*, which gradually replaced gothic scripts, created “space around the letters” as well as “space between lines and between words” and largely “uncluttered” borders. These innovations were designed to aid the clarity and hence the legibility of (written) text.⁷⁶

Today, modern readers of English early modern printed books are familiar with that sense of slight but nevertheless palpable disappointment when, on turning the first pages of a hitherto unfamiliar volume, or scrolling through a text as it appears on the computer screen in the case of a digitalized archive such as EEBO, they discover that the text in front of them is composed using the dense text blocks associated with the “textura” or “blackletter” typography—the form in

⁷⁵ See Roger Chartier, “Reading Matter and ‘Popular’ Reading: From the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century,” in Cavallo and Chartier (eds.), *A History of Reading in the West*, pp. 269–283.

⁷⁶ David Rundle, *The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain: The English Quattrocento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 22, 27.

which Hawes's *The Conuercyon of Swerers* first appeared in 1509. Even for highly trained modern readers, considerably more mental effort and concentration is required in following a blackletter text than is required of a text printed in familiar roman or italic type. This is not just a question of today's reader struggling to mentally translate unfamiliar letter forms (together with their associated abbreviations and punctuation marks) into their roman equivalents. Rather, the sheer density of the text on the page—the absence of the temporary restorative of white space which Henry Fielding commended—makes demands on the modern reader's cognitive capacities.

The heavy mass of blackletter text, unlike roman or italic text, does not assist saccadic eye movement—the “rapid, ballistic movements of the eyes that abruptly change the point of fixation,” which we use, reflexively and entirely unconsciously, while reading or (at much greater amplitude) when we gaze about a room.⁷⁷ Equally, the density of a page full of blackletter text quite possibly inhibits “parafoveal processing”—the skipping of the eye from one word to another, or even the practice of leaving out short words altogether, as we “preview” successive words before we “fixate” or process the target word as we read.⁷⁸ “Parafoveal processing” is particularly important when we read a text aloud, as opposed to reading a work silently to ourselves. What is termed the “eye-voice span,” which is “the amount of text that the eye keeps ahead of the voice when reading aloud,” is between fifteen and twenty characters, while parafoveal vision processes around fifteen to twenty characters of a printed text around the point of fixation. It is probably not a coincidence that the width of a column in ancient literary scrolls was approximately fifteen to twenty-five characters, suggesting that such texts were implicitly designed to be spoken rather than read silently.⁷⁹ And yet the jerky, saccadic eye movements that we employ in moving through a text consume far less time than that which we allocate (again, altogether unconsciously) to the brief pauses during which we fixate on a single point in the text, in order to abstract information. In this respect, reading may be akin to blinking. For a great deal of the reading process involves us in mentally filling in gaps, given that, when we read a printed page, “we get nothing but a blurred and latent idea of the form of the letters . . . during continuous reading, the number of focal points for the eye does not exceed two or three per line, and it is physically impossible for the eye to grasp

⁷⁷ See “Types of Eye Movements and Their Functions,” in D. Purves, G. J. Augustine, D. Fitzpatrick, et al., (eds.), *Neuroscience*, 2nd ed. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2001), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK10991/>; Arthur M. Jacobs, “On the Role of Blank Spaces for Eye-Movement Control in Visual Search,” *Perception and Psychophysics* 41 (1987), pp. 473–479.

⁷⁸ See Alan Kennedy, “Parafoveal Processing in Word Recognition,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 53 (2000), pp. 429–455; Manguel, *A History of Reading*, pp. 36–39.

⁷⁹ See William A. Jonson, “Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity,” *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000), pp. 593–627 (pp. 610–611).

the form of each individual letter.”⁸⁰ Modern research suggests that approximately ninety-five percent of total reading time is occupied with fixation, which takes up about the same processing time that the brain requires to recognize emotion in human facial expressions, so that describing a page as being “reader-friendly” may well be literally true.⁸¹

The role that white space plays in this process is rather different from Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the theoretical blank that must be filled in as we interpret an unfolding narrative. Medieval or Renaissance readers, of course, had no understanding of the complexities of the reading process that we have today. But then neither do most modern readers or writers. And yet the experience of print as opposed to script fostered new conventions of reproducing text in ways that were designed to facilitate the reading process, while also producing printed pages as economically as possible. And many of those conventions have survived into the modern age. Just as in the case of medieval manuscript copies of reference works or the Bible, for example, large-format, early modern printed reference works tended to be printed in a two-column layout, which introduced more white space onto the page, in the form of a central margin, and allowed for more paragraphing, since less space was “wasted” when a new line was begun.⁸² And this format certainly helped readers to navigate their way through texts, particularly those kinds of text which required “discontinuous reading.”⁸³

From Blackletter to Roman (and Back Again)

White space on the page helps to sustain the rapid absorption of a text by readers. Hence, areas of a text which are devoid of printed marks or characters are an important component of any reader’s encounter with a page. Modern readers soon discover that reading a blackletter text induces a vertiginous breathlessness, a feeling of the text moving forward, leaving us floundering in its wake, as our eyes move across the page without the micro-seconds of rest which the more “open” spaces of a text printed in roman type afford us, and which (paradoxically) allow us to consume a text more rapidly. We cannot be certain if early modern readers responded to the three main families of typefaces of the

⁸⁰ See Abraham A. Moles, *Informationstheorie und ästhetische Wahrnehmung* (Cologne, 1971), p. 59, cited in Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 119.

⁸¹ See Robert E. Morrison and Albrecht-Werner Inhoff, “Visual Factors and Eye Movements in Reading,” *Visible Language* 15 (1981), pp. 129–146; Keith Rayner, “Eye Movements in Reading and Information Processing: 20 Years of Research,” *Psychological Bulletin* 124 (1998), pp. 372–422.

⁸² Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p. 153.

⁸³ See Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible,” in Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (eds.), *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 42–79.

period—blackletter, roman, and italic—in the same way that we do today, since blackletter has been relegated to the margins of our typographic culture. Just as Jan Tschichold prophesied, today, in the West, we live in an almost exclusively roman-italic world. That world was first announced in England in the same year—1509—that Hawes’s poem was printed, when the first (Latin) texts printed in roman appeared.⁸⁴ Prior to the widespread adoption of roman-italic forms there is some evidence that “professional” Renaissance readers—scholars, authors of learned commentaries, annotators of classical works—disliked “Gothic” script, as they sometimes termed it, complaining (in the words of Petrarch) of the “tiny and compressed characters,” so that the reader bought not a just a book “but blindness along with it.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Eisenstein reminds us of European books generally: “so-called ‘Gothic’ type-forms competed on equal terms with ‘antiqua’ [roman] in most regions during the first century of printing...they outlasted the Renaissance in Dutch, Scandinavian, and German regions...they continued to make their mark on German texts throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.”⁸⁶

In the later seventeenth century, blackletter typefaces came to represent a “powerful combination of Englishness (the ‘English letter’) and past-ness (the ‘antiquated’ appearance of black letter...).”⁸⁷ That combination of an appeal to a “deep” Englishness and a mythical past lives on whenever we encounter blackletter today, particularly in a contemporary British context: in (for example) the mastheads of the two main conservative-leaning UK national newspapers, or in stock phrases which are invariably associated with blackletter script, such as signs bearing the anachronistic phrase “*De Olde Tea Shoppe*,” or pubs which advertise their (supposed) antiquity by deploying blackletter forms on their exterior signs. Typefaces have been compared to music in their capacity to both “manipulate” and “nourish emotions.”⁸⁸ And blackletter typefaces—Fraktur especially—have survived to convey an atmosphere of gothic horror since the 1970s in the logos of heavy metal rock bands such as *Motörhead* (replete with the entirely non-functioning “metal umlaut”). Blackletter flourishes, too, on the political fringes,

⁸⁴ See J. B. Trapp, “The Humanist Book,” in Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Vol. III: 1400–1557 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 285–315 (p. 290).

⁸⁵ Grafton, “The Humanist as Reader,” p. 184.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 201–202.

⁸⁷ Zachary Lesser, “Typographic Nostalgia: Play Reading, Popularity and the Meanings of Black Letter,” in Marta Straznicky (ed.) *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), pp. 99–126 (p. 107). See also Hyder E. Rollins, “The Black-Letter Broadside Ballad,” *PMLA* 34 (1919), pp. 258–359; Stephen K. Galbraith, “‘English’ Black-Letter Type and Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar*,” *Spenser Studies* 23 (2008), pp. 13–40.

⁸⁸ Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (Seattle, WA: Hartley & Marks, 2016), p. 19.

advertising far-right or white nationalist ideologies through the popular association of this typeface with German national socialism in the 1930s and early 1940s. In fact, the blackletter Fraktur typeface, which Tschichold held in such modernist contempt, was outlawed in Nazi Germany in January 1941, under a memorandum issued by Martin Bormann, where it was condemned as *Judenlettern* (“Jewish Letters”) and Antiqua script was adopted as the official German script. Ironically, the NSDAP letterhead on the memorandum announcing this decree was printed in Fraktur.⁸⁹

In England, the first use of roman type in a vernacular publication dates from 1559. The reasons for the gradual replacement of blackletter by roman type are multifactorial, including the adoption of Italianate fashion, economic prosperity, and type replacement as older types wore out and were discarded.⁹⁰ Blackletter was itself derived from Norman French scripts, and because of the use of Norman French in English legal culture, it became associated (as it still is, on occasions) with documents designed to speak with official authority. Blackletter would be gradually displaced in English printed books by roman type during the later sixteenth century, though it was still to be found in certain kinds of publication—jest books, romances, ballads, the Bible, official proclamations—long after it had been superseded by roman typefaces in the majority of English books produced from the 1590s onwards.⁹¹ This shift from blackletter to roman type is part of that more general transformation of the appearance of text on the page, described by print historians. Gradually, open space became more and more prominent on the printed page, in the form (in the case of prose) of more obvious spaces after periods (full stops), together with the spaces used in delineating paragraphs, and the provision of indentations. As Martyn Lyons observes: “Paragraph breaks had hardly been used before the sixteenth century, so that early printed books presented the reader with a dense mass of unbroken text... a daunting prospect for the modern reader.”⁹² Renaissance readers, considered in their guise as annotators, responded to these spaces in a text by appropriating them, insinuating (in Roger Chartier’s words) their presence “in the virgin spaces of the book... surreptitiously, clandestinely occupying the spaces... left free of printing: interiors of covers, blank pages, margins of the text.”⁹³

⁸⁹ See Hans Peter Willberg, “Fraktur and Nationalism,” in Peter Bain and Paul Shaw (eds.), *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press/Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 1998), pp. 40–49.

⁹⁰ Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, pp. 201–202.

⁹¹ See Mark Bland, “The Appearance of the Text in Early Modern England,” in W. Speed Hill and Edward M. Burns (eds.), *Text: An Interdisciplinary Annual of Textual Studies 11* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 91–154 (pp. 93–94).

⁹² Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 38.

⁹³ Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. 20.

This “feminization” of the empty spaces of the page, with its connotation of a guiltily overbearing masculinity, thus depriving pages of their original purity is a curious way of describing the interaction between a book and a reader. Perhaps a better (and more historically accurate) way to describe that relationship is one of invitation. For the proliferation of empty blank spaces on the printed page also provided an opportunity to supplement the printed text with manuscript emendations, a further qualification of Ong’s thesis of a hard distinction between manuscript and print. At the same time, printed texts began to appear as if they were composed out of “separate units,” echoing “the intellectual or discursive articulation of the argument in the visual articulation of the page.”⁹⁴ Although some texts which had first appeared in blackletter continued to appear in that format when they were republished in the seventeenth century, this older form became associated with an unmistakably “antique” feel—perhaps even a nostalgic conservatism—an irony when we recall that Italians termed the “modern” roman type “*antiqua*,” recalling its association with the combination of Roman inscriptions and the script known as Caroline miniscule.⁹⁵

In England, the more generous distribution of white space within a text printed in a roman typeface, while it need not be taken as a guarantor of a text’s intellectual modernity, quite possibly signaled certain class distinctions among intended readerships. Thus, romances aimed at a more middle-class reading public, which feature “wild martial action, unfettered by any consideration of probability or possibility, and related in a high-flown fustian style,” tended to appear in blackletter. By way of contrast, the “artistically and culturally more advanced romance” which dealt in heroic and courtly sentiments was designed to appeal to a more upper-class audience, and these were more usually printed using the open spaces of roman type.⁹⁶ Blackletter, for example, was the preferred format in which many of Thomas Nashe’s popular writings such as *An Almond for a Parrat* (1589), *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (1589), *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Diuell* (1592), and *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) were published. It may seem reductive to claim that a bourgeois (as we might now say) readership in the early seventeenth century was more comfortable with a densely cluttered blackletter text, driven onwards by its narrative, and redolent of cultural conservatism, as opposed to the more luxurious spaces offered by the more typographically minimalist roman text. And yet this seems to have been the case. Although it may appear counter-intuitive to the modern reader, who struggles with blackletter, “black-letter literacy” was probably “a more basic skill than roman-type literacy” in the early modern period.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Chartier, *The Order of Books*, p. 11.

⁹⁵ See Bland, “The Appearance of the Text in Early Modern England,” p. 93.

⁹⁶ See Charles C. Mish, “Black Letter as a Social Discriminant in the Seventeenth Century,” *PMLA* 68 (1953), pp. 627–630.

⁹⁷ Keith Thomas, “The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England,” in Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 97–131 (p. 99).

This skill was inculcated in successive generations of readers through their familiarity with the blackletter forms in which many editions of the Geneva Bible—the Bible familiar to Shakespeare—were printed in England after 1576.⁹⁸ But other texts, which formed the basic “toolkit” of literacy also tended to appear in blackletter rather than roman. As Femke Molekamp observes: “Black letter was used for children’s reading aids: the ABC, Lord’s Prayer, Catechism and Psalter, which formed the standard complement of texts for learning to read, were all usually printed in this typeface . . . Black letter appealed to the less educated reader when roman did not.”⁹⁹ For all that modern research on the reading process might suggest that the more “open” text of a page printed in roman is far easier to process than blackletter, the widespread use of blackletter when other alternatives were available is a classic example of habit and familiarity triumphing over utility—a rather more complex process than that implied by the phrase the “triumph of white over black,” which suggests an unfolding chain of evolutionary progress.

Just as in the case of modern “format wars,” as they have been termed (competing rail gauges, or competing audio and video recording media), the “best” technology is by no means guaranteed success in the marketplace. And the same was true of typefaces. We should not, however, assume that the decision to print a text in either blackletter or roman was simply a matter of unfettered aesthetic or ideological choice on the part of the printer or (least of all) the author. A dual (upper and lower) case, containing a new collection of roman or italic types, was a costly investment for a printing house, which would suggest that older, blackletter types would be used until they had worn out.¹⁰⁰ And, of course, texts might appear with mixtures of type on the same page: a predominantly blackletter text might nevertheless contain many foreign words printed in roman or italic. Thomas Nashe’s *Anatomie of Absurditie*, for example, when it was published in 1589, was a blackletter text. But the three-and-a-half-page dedicatory epistle, addressed to the courtier, Sir Charles Blount, was printed in roman type, as if Nashe was reminding his readers that this was now the preferred form in which gentlemen addressed one another on the printed page. In the text itself, Latin names and phrases, as well as English translations of these passages, are printed in roman type. Hence, the text exhibits a curiously multivocal personality when we meet a page which is set in a combination of roman and italic type, with the authorial “voice” occasionally intruding a blackletter presence in the form of brief interjections: “Furthermore, in the same place, he saith . . . Another sayeth . . . Another hath these words . . .,” each of these phrases being printed in blackletter (see Fig. 3.2).

⁹⁸ See Naseeb Shaheen, “Misconceptions about the Geneva Bible,” *Studies in Bibliography* 37 (1984), pp. 156–158.

⁹⁹ Femke Molekamp, “Using a Collection to Discover Reading Practices: The British Library Geneva Bibles and a History of Their Early Modern Readers,” *Electronic British Library Journal* (2006), Article 10, pp. 1–13 (p. 3).

¹⁰⁰ See Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography*, pp. 34–38; Michael Pollak, “Durability of Fifteenth-Century Type,” *Visible Language* 5 (1971) pp. 159–188.

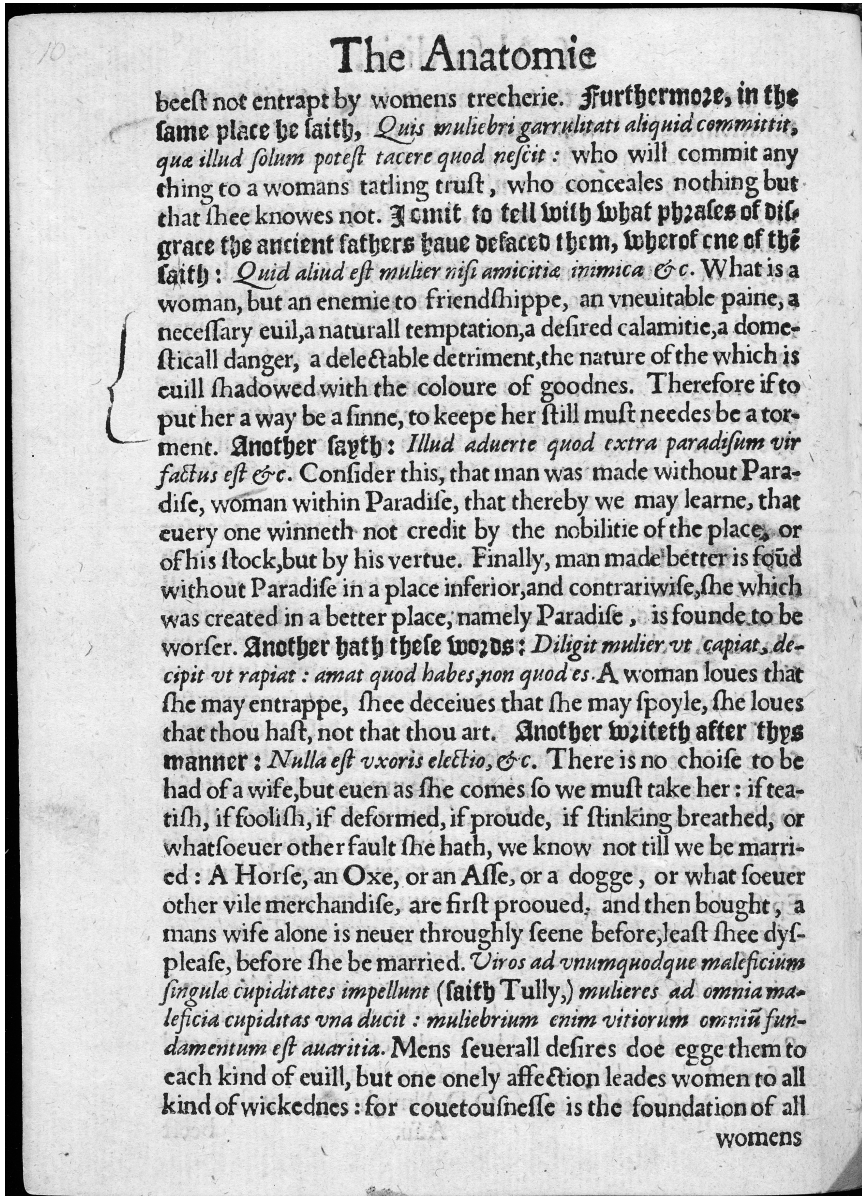


Fig. 3.2 Thomas Nashe, *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (London, 1589), sig. A3^v. Shelf mark: Mal. 566 (6). By permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

This typographical multivocality reaches its most complete expression, in the earlier seventeenth century, in volumes such as the folio commentary on English law written by Sir Edward Coke, and printed by Adam Islip in 1628 under the title *The First Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England*—a work that is still cited today by lawyers in the UK and the USA.

Fig. 3.3 shows an opening from *The First Part of the Institutes*, in which Coke is discussing indentures or agreements between two or more parties expressed in a legal document—a topic to which we shall return when we come to consider the appearance of John Donne's poetry on the printed page. Coke's pages, with their generous margins, providing (as we can see) ample space for manuscript annotation, employs a range of types and font sizes to differentiate text, translation, commentary, and citation. The text—Thomas de Littleton's treatise on land tenure (first published in 1481), written in legal French—is printed in bold blackletter. The English translation is printed in roman. Coke's commentary, printed in a smaller blackletter type, embraces the complete opening. It appears on the far left of the verso page, and the far right of the recto. The commentary itself deploys roman and italic forms to distinguish Latin words and quotations culled from

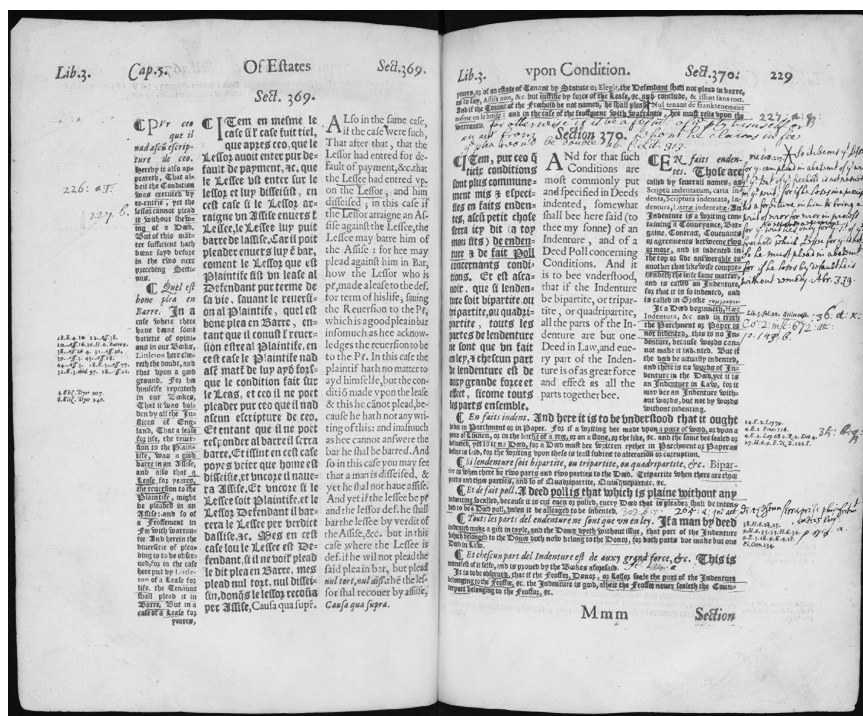


Fig. 3.3 Sir Edward Coke, *The First Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England* (London, 1628), sigs. 3L4^v–3M1^r. Shelf mark: Antiq. d.E. 1628/1. By permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Littleton's treatise. The outer margins of the page are reserved for citations, printed in small italic. The appearance of these hybridized pages is, at first, forbidding until the reader has learned to use typography as a navigational tool. White space within the text block is kept to a minimum. It is used sparingly to indicate chapter and section headings, but also, in the form of "negative space," to draw the boundaries of the columns. Using different types on a single page to distinguish languages was not unusual in the period. When Castiglione's *Libro del cortiginao* (The Courtier) was published in a three-column parallel Italian, French, and English version in 1588, the printer, John Wolfe, assigned each language its corresponding type: Italian in italic, French in roman, and English in blackletter. The paratextual information, however (a commendatory sonnet by Thomas Sackville and Hobby's dedicatory epistle), was printed in italic and roman, suggesting that blackletter was already a marginal type for this kind of work.¹⁰¹

Listening to the King's Speech in 1616

As Maureen Bell has noted, the undercapitalized English book trade made its money from "small format" texts (schoolbooks, ABCs, almanacs), ephemeral items (pamphlets, ballads, news books), and, above all, from various kinds of what would later be known as "jobbing printing."¹⁰² These were the kinds of text that tended to be printed most frequently in blackletter. From the 1590s onwards, however, more obviously "recreational" texts such as volumes of self-consciously reflective poetry, produced for a literate, leisured, and financially more secure audience, were usually printed in roman type. The major English poetic anthologies of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—*The Phoenix Nest* (1593), *England's Helicon* (1600), and *A Poetical Rhapsody* (1602)—adopted the "new practice of printing verse in roman type," replacing the blackletter forms found in earlier poetic anthologies such as *A Handful of Pleasant Delights* (c.1575) and *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576).¹⁰³ Although the poetic anthology, *Brittons Bowre of Delights* (1591) first appeared in blackletter format, the text was converted to roman when a shortened version of this work was printed in 1597.

In many instances, the decision in England to print a given text in blackletter or roman was not determined by the convenience or the preferences of the

¹⁰¹ See Thomas Hobby and Gabriel Chappuys (trans.), *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio Devided into Foure Bookes* (London, 1588).

¹⁰² Maureen Bell, "Introduction: *Mise-en-page*, Illustration, Expressive Form," in John Barnard and D. F. McKenzie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Vol. IV: 1557–1695 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 632–633. See also James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 34–36; Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, "What Is Print Popularity? A Map of the Elizabethan Book Trade," in Kesson and Smith (eds.), *The Elizabethan Top Ten*, pp. 19–54.

¹⁰³ Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric*, pp. 282–283.

printer, the bookseller, or (least of all) the author. Custom and convention were also important. We can see these typographic conventions at work if we consider the ways in which an admittedly unique author—the monarch—addressed his readers, who were also his subjects, in the course of a single year: 1616. In 1616 a folio edition of the *Workes* of James VI/I was published. James's *Workes* was a monumental volume of nearly six hundred pages, presenting the king's writings on the scriptures, his *Daemonologie* (1597), his treatise on kingship, *Basilikon Doron* (1599), and his defense of divine right, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) as well as various speeches delivered in the English parliament between 1603 and 1616. As was considered appropriate for the kind of elite audience to whom this costly book was addressed, the *Workes* was printed in a combination of roman and italic type, and in this respect it was typographically consonant with three other large-scale print productions that were issued in that year, all of which bore the title of *Workes* on their title pages, and all three of which were also printed in roman and italic type: George Chapman's English verse translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Ben Jonson's folio *Workes*, and the posthumous collected edition of the *Workes* of the Calvinist theologian, William Perkins, which began to be issued in 1616.

Other kinds of printed text were also associated with the king in 1616, and these, too, were printed predominantly in roman type: an anonymous adaptation of *Basilikon Doron*, for example; a printed version of James's speech given in the Star Chamber in June 1616; and an English translation of a French version of James's 1615 *Remonstrance for the Right of Kings and the Independence of their Crownes*.¹⁰⁴ But by far the most common texts printed in 1616 (as they were in every year of James's reign, and every year of the reign of every Tudor and Stuart monarch), in which the monarch appeared to speak directly to his subjects, were the various proclamations issued in the king's name. From James's reign in England (1603–1625), more than five hundred of these printed proclamations have survived, at an average rate of around twenty-three a year. Thirteen of these documents have survived from 1616, aimed at regulating (for example) the carrying of personal weaponry, or the use of certain denominations of coins, or the “punishing of vagabonds, rogues, and idle persons.”¹⁰⁵ Usually proclamations were published as single-sided documents—broadsheets—headed with the royal coat of arms, and concluding with the injunction: “God save the King.” Although the opening words of these formulaic documents—“By the King”—and the

¹⁰⁴ Anon., *The Fathers Blessing: or Second Councell to his Sonne* (London, 1616); James VI/I, *His Maiesties Speech in the Starre Chamber, the XX of June, Anno 1616* (London, 1616); James VI/I, *A Remonstrance of the Most Gracious King James I... Against an Oration of the Most Illustrious Card. of Perron*, trans. Richard Betts (Cambridge, 1616).

¹⁰⁵ See: *By the King. A Proclamation Against Steeleys, Pocket Daggers, Pocket Dagges and Pistols* (London, 1616); *By the King. A Proclamation for the Continuing of Farthing-Tokens* (London, 1616); *By the King. A Proclamation for the Punishing of Vagabonds, Rogues, and Idle Persons* (London, 1616).

heading of the document, together with paratextual information at the foot of the document, would be printed in roman, the body of the text would invariably be printed in blackletter, deploying the convention of direct speech.

As in the case of *A Proclamation Against Steeleys, Pocket Daggers, Pocket Dagges and Pistols* (1616), the text was issued as if it were a hand-written document, proceeding “from Our owne pen.”¹⁰⁶ Thus the king’s message was designed to suggest a degree of proximity between the royal author and the reader. Such texts were widely and rapidly distributed, to be posted up prominently in public spaces throughout the kingdom. Hence, the visual typescape of the public spaces of an English market town—the walls and doors of its Guildhall, a central inn, or the principal parish church—festooned with these kinds of proclamation, would have been a world of predominantly blackletter forms. But, of course, the great majority of the king’s (mainly illiterate) subjects would never have been able to read these printed sheets. Instead, they would have heard them being read out loud perhaps by a literate friend or neighbor, or, more formally, by the town crier or bellman. The ritual cry of “Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!” (a phrase derived from the Anglo-Norman and Middle French *oiez*, “hear ye!”) by which the crier commanded the attention of the audience recalls this aural dissemination of the king’s words. In these circumstances, being *shown* the text, with its heraldic device and its use of blackletter type, would have amounted to seeing a certificate of its authenticity.

Typographically speaking, these official documents were visually comparable to a quite different set of printed texts also designed for oral reproduction: ballads and song sheets. Broadsheets containing popular ballads designed to be circulated among groups of singers (many of whom would, again, probably have been unable to read) tended to be printed in blackletter.¹⁰⁷ Thus (for example) *The famous ratketcher [sic]* or *A Pleasant New Songe of a Jouiall Tinker* (both of which are song sheets, the printing of which can be unambiguously dated to 1616) were each printed in blackletter type, as were the vast majority of such texts throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁸ Texts of the Psalms designed to be sung, and printed with musical notation, would also appear in blackletter.¹⁰⁹ So, when the king spoke to the plurality of his subjects, he spoke in the typographic forms of blackletter, rather than in the new, modernized styles of roman type, which was the manner in which he addressed the courtly, political, and intellectual elites. And when his subjects gathered together to sing (whether in a sacred or a profane vein), they, too, sang from pages composed in blackletter. Whatever the semantic

¹⁰⁶ A “steellet” was the English form of the Italian stiletto; a “dag” was a handgun (OED).

¹⁰⁷ See Adam Fox, “Popular Verses and Their Readership in the Early Seventeenth Century,” in Raven, Small, and Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading*, pp. 125–137.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., *The Famous Ratketcher with his Travels into France, and of his Returne to London* (London, 1616); Anon., *A pleasant New Songe of a Ioviall Tinker to a Pleasant New Tune, called, Fly Brasse* (London, 1616).

¹⁰⁹ John Hopkins, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Collected into English Meter... with Apt Notes to sing them Withall* (London, 1616).

or cognitive challenges that we face in deciphering blackletter texts, our sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forebears quite probably saw these forms as the essence of print, long after they had been superseded by roman type in most texts containing “serious” literature.

Space and Meaning on the Early Modern Page

Modern paragraph separation and indentation, as well as the white space found (for example) at the beginning or the end of a book’s chapters or other forms of internal division, guide us in our reading, telling us when a theme or set of ideas has run its course, and a new topic or (as in the case of a novel) narrative episode has been embarked upon. This kind of white space is a form of extended punctuation. These customary modern divisions of a text into workable units are rooted in the decision, most probably made at the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century, to divide biblical texts into chapters to meet the needs of an international body of readers for a “standardized system of capitulation.”¹¹⁰ Although verse divisions of the Old Testament stemmed from the ancient traditions of Rabbinic commentary, Robert Estienne (Stephanus) was the first to print the New Testament with verse divisions of parallel texts of the Greek and Latin New Testament. Estienne’s Bible, printed at Geneva in 1551, thereby introduced greater increments of white space into the text block, and this became the standard method of presenting the text across different confessional traditions.¹¹¹

For all that this innovation undoubtedly helped readers navigate the scriptures, nevertheless, early modern prose tended to be printed in much denser blocks on the page than we are used to. William Slights has suggested that early modern readers “appeared to have valued opportunities to break up their reading into smaller units Paragraph indentations, engraved capitals, and material printed in different typefaces afforded some relief to the eye confronted with an otherwise solid page of blackletter type.”¹¹² While this may be true of the sense of “relief” afforded to the reader, the implication that those same readers had some direct say in how a printed text appeared is, on the surface, unlikely. And the comment raises another almost insoluble problem. How do we know that the early modern

¹¹⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission and Limitations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 347; Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing*, p. 56. See also Laura Light, “The Thirteenth Century and the Paris Bible,” in Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2: *From 600 to 1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 380–391 (pp. 385–386).

¹¹¹ Bruce Gordon and Euan Cameron, “Latin Bibles in the Early Modern Period,” in Euan Cameron (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3: *From 1450–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2016), pp. 187–216 (pp. 212–213).

¹¹² William W. E. Slights, *Managing Readers: Printed Marginalia in English Renaissance Books* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 76.

“eye” functioned in the same way as that of the modern reader engaging with these kinds of text, where “eye” means more than just the visual apparatus, but the larger habit of seeing and reading which is informed by education, context, custom, and practice as well as physiology?¹¹³ Even if early modern readers might indeed have relished the opportunity to digest a text in more manageable portions in the way that Slight has indicated, printers, intent on curtailing the costs of book production, were not always so accommodating. A single paragraph of prose, for example, whether found in a sixteenth-century romance (say) or in a theological work, might run over two or more pages, which endows the early modern printed prose page (whether produced in roman or blackletter type, or in folio, quarto, or octavo format) with an undifferentiated quality, which the modern reader often finds daunting.

Some Renaissance book producers seem to have recognized this difficulty. But providing more space on the page was not always their preferred solution to the problem. For example, Sir Philip Sidney’s unfinished prose romance, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (“The New Arcadia”) was printed in roman type, as a quarto in 1590 by John Windet. “Careful thought went into the design and appearance of the book,” H. R. Woudhuysen has observed; “it was the first book that the printer, John Windet, set in English roman type, which was probably newly bought for the project.”¹¹⁴ The very first paragraph of the first chapter of Book One of this lengthy work stretched over no fewer than seven and a half pages. Regularly, in the *Arcadia*, paragraphs run over two, three, or four pages, endowing the text block with a visually imposing quality, which is not in the least “reader-friendly.” The chapters themselves do not begin on separate pages, as is the convention of modern book design, where we expect a new chapter in a novel to begin on a fresh page, and quite possibly overleaf, leaving a largely empty verso or recto page to mark the transition. Instead, in the *Arcadia*, each new chapter begins on the same page as its predecessor, although it is announced by a chapter heading, using capital letters and Arabic numerals (“CHAP. 1,” CHAP. 2,” etc.) and an elaborate woodcut initial capital letter.

But, as though recognizing the difficulty that the text presented to the reader of this complex interweaving of stories with its large cast of characters, each chapter heading in the 1590 *Arcadia* is followed by a short summary—an “argument” as these kinds of precis became known—of the chief episodes and actions dealt with in the ensuing chapter.¹¹⁵ And these summaries are, in turn, tied to the text

¹¹³ See Eric F. Langley, “Anatomizing the Early-Modern Eye: A Literary Case-Study,” *Renaissance Studies* 20 (2006), pp. 340–355.

¹¹⁴ H. R. Woudhuysen, “The Circulation of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*,” in Margaret P. Hannay, Mary Ellen Lamb, and Michael G. Brennan (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Sidneys, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 41–55 (p. 52).

¹¹⁵ See Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 56.

through the device of a keying mechanism: a superscript Arabic numeral refers the reader to the precise point in the text referred to in the summary, which can be located in the margin. This device does not direct the reader to the sparsely intermittent paragraphs (as it might at first appear), but to the first and subsequent appearance of the character or action to which the reader is directed. So, "CHAP. 2" of the *Arcadia* begins with the summary:

¹ The pastors comfortes to the wracked *Musidorus*. ² His passage into Arcadia. The descriptions of ³ Laconia, ⁴ Arcadia, *Kalanders* ⁵ person, ⁶ house, and ⁷ entertainment to *Musidorus*, now called *Palladius*. His ⁸ sicknes, recovery, ⁹ and perfections.¹¹⁶

This mechanism also functions as a kind of miniature index to each chapter, since the numerals do not appear in the text consecutively in numerical order, and they are often repeated when a character or place reappears in the chapter. Thus, the keying mechanism of "CHAP. 2," which is divided into nine paragraphs, isolates nine features of the text, but these are signaled as marginal numerals in the following order in the chapter: 1, 5, 2, 4, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9.

This navigational tool is reminiscent of the ways in which the scriptures were made more searchable in the period. Assisting the reader by providing prologues or *argumenta* to the scriptures was a device familiar in the medieval period. The printed Geneva Bible was "the first English Bible to introduce numbered verses, each set off as a separate paragraph," when it was first published in 1560, and it also contained an elaborate system of reader aids besides the notoriously Calvinist marginal annotations.¹¹⁷ Each book of the Geneva Bible began with a lengthy prose precis entitled "The Argument," with each chapter given a shorter summation keyed to significant verses. At the top of every page was a running head consisting of "some notable word or sentence" which, as the Preface explained, was designed so that "by all means the reader might be holpen . . . which may greatly further aswel for memorie, as for the chief point of the page."¹¹⁸ Significantly, it is the page and not the verse, book, or chapter which was assumed to be the fundamental reading unit, suggesting, in turn, that individual pages may have had a greater significance for the early modern reader than they do for us.

Habituated as we are to the printed book, when we casually turn over a book's pages we are all but oblivious to the momentary pause or gap in the reading experience which, like the blink of an eye, induces an imperceptible pause or hesitation in our encounter with the text. Thus, we seem to continuously "blank" the medium of the page, foregrounding the abstract "text" as an unbroken continuity.

¹¹⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London, 1590), sig. C1^v.

¹¹⁷ Bruce Metzger, "The Geneva Bible of 1560," *Theology Today* 17 (1969), pp. 339–352 (p. 343).

¹¹⁸ *The Bible and Holy Scriptures* (Geneva, 1560), sig. *3^v.

It is only when we set about the task of retrieving specific information from a book that pages take on a greater significance. This speculation would seem to be confirmed by Paul Dover's recent account of the notarial practices of medieval and early modern merchants who, using pre-bound volumes of blank paper, kept records of their various transactions. "The unit of space that the merchant encountered in his writing was the page, and it was in terms of the individual page that merchants began to think."¹¹⁹

The navigational system deployed in Sidney's *Arcadia*, which was devised to help each reader make their way through the pages of this episodic narrative or even (perhaps) to trace the fortunes of a chosen character through the text in a more nonchalant way of reading, helps to compensate for the sheer density of the text on the page, and the parsimonious use of paragraphing. This device was not of Sidney's invention—he had died four years before the volume appeared. Rather it seems to have been constructed by Windet. A paratextual note which appears immediately after Sidney's dedicatory letter to his sister the Countess of Pembroke, in some (but not all) printed states of the 1590 *Arcadia* informs us that:

The division and summing of the Chapters was not of *Sir Philip Sidneis* dooing, but adventured by the over-seer of the print, for the more ease of the Readers. He therfore submits himselfe to their judgement, and if his labour answere not the worthines of the booke, desireth pardon for it.¹²⁰

However laudable this attempt at providing for the reader's "ease" may have been, the experiment was not repeated. When a hybridized version of *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* was reissued, and "augmented and ended" with the addition of the last three books of *The Old Arcadia*, the "summing of the chapters" and the keying mechanism were silently dropped.¹²¹

The episodic, rambling, first-person narrative of Jack Wilton, in Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), is a very good example of the ways in which Renaissance prose has been (often silently) re-edited to provide sufficient increments of white space to meet the demands of a modern reader. When it was first published in London in 1594, *The Unfortunate Traveller* was printed in a blackletter, although the paratextual information in the book's opening pages was printed in either roman or italic. The paucity of white space signaling paragraph breaks enhanced the density of the blackletter text on the page. Thus, the first seven pages of the text divided Nashe's prose into either twelve or fourteen

¹¹⁹ Paul M. Dover, *The Information Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 63.

¹²⁰ Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, sig. A4^v.

¹²¹ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia* (London, 1593) title page.

distinct paragraphs, depending on which of the two 1594 editions is consulted.¹²² These paragraphs are not easy to see. They are indicated (sometimes) by blank sections of the preceding line, and minimal indentation. By contrast, in the popular modern edition of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, as it was edited by J. B. Steane and published in 1972, those seven sixteenth-century pages are broken into no fewer than twenty-three modern paragraphs.¹²³ Steane was clearly correct in deciding how to re-paragraph Nashe's prose according to modern conventions. But this silent emendation of the Renaissance page though the introduction of twentieth-century white space highlights the extent to which sixteenth-century readers may have been rather more tolerant than we are of a text that had to be processed at an altogether slower pace.

The Search for Order

Bonnie Mak has observed that "blank space is crucial to the activity of reading, and especially silent reading."¹²⁴ By the same token, Roger Chartier has described how, in the Renaissance, "the uninterrupted continuity of the text" was gradually fragmented by indentation, which "through varying the left margin, make[s] the order of discourse immediately visible."¹²⁵ The white spaces between words themselves would appear to be vital to a modern reader, although it is perfectly possible to decipher a modern text produced without these customary gaps such as in the phrase that you are now reading once it is understood how the convention has been violated [*sic*]. But, habituated as we are to words organized into discrete units, the difficulty of reading an entire page, let alone an entire book, written or printed in this form known as *scriptio continua*, is self-evident.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to remember that defining individual word units by using spaces was not always the case. Texts from Latin and Greek antiquity, preserved in the form of the scroll rather than the codex, were written in *scriptio continua* with minimal punctuation, and no gaps between words other than (for a period from around the second century B.C.E.) the insertion of dots (known as *interpunctae*) between words rather than the blank spaces indicative of

¹²² Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (London, 1594), sigs. A3^r–B2^r. See also R. B. McKerrow (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, 3 vols. (London: A. H. Bullen, 1904–1905), II, pp. 187–197.

¹²³ Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*, ed. J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 254–262.

¹²⁴ Bonnie Mak, *How the Page Matters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 17. See also Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 4–5; Manguel, *A History of Reading*, pp. 41–53.

¹²⁵ Roger Chartier, "Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader" (trans. J. A. González), *Diacritics* 22 (1992), pp. 49–61 (p. 54).

¹²⁶ See R. W. McCutcheon, "Silent Reading in Antiquity and the Future History of the Book," *Book History* 18 (2015), pp. 1–32 (p. 8).

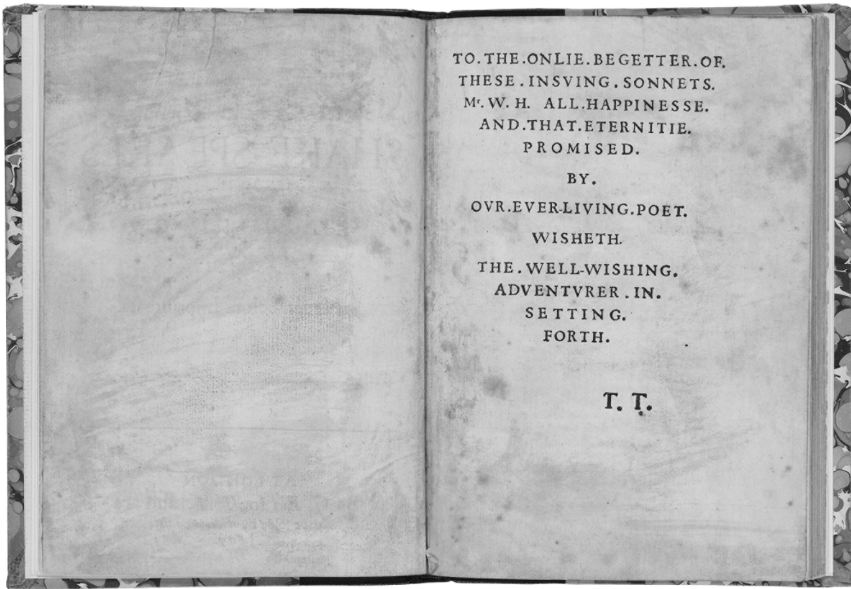


Fig. 3.4 William Shakespeare, *Shake-speares Sonnets Never Before Imprinted* (London, 1609), sig. A2^r. Shelf mark: STC 22353. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

word boundaries to which we have become accustomed.¹²⁷ Very occasionally, Renaissance book producers turned to this ancient convention when they wanted to endow some portion of the text with a quality of monumentality, as in the famously opaque dedicatory page of *Shake-speares Sonnets Never Before Imprinted* when it was published in 1609 (see Fig. 3.4). The effect of this combination of capital letters, white space, and *interpunctae* is curiously lapidary, inducing a momentary pause or hesitation as the reader traces the carefully centered words on the page: “TO. THE. ONLIE. BEGETTER. OF. THESE. INSVING. SONNETS. M^r. W. H. . . .”.

The absence of spaces between words in antiquity has been customarily explained by the assumption that, in the past, such texts were designed to be read aloud, rather than silently to oneself. This is still a point of debate, with some scholars arguing that a text written in *scriptio continua* by no means precluded the practice of reading a text silently to oneself. Moreover, some modern scripts function perfectly well without the seemingly “natural” device of a gap between word units—traditional Javanese as well as modern Thai scripts are both written in *scriptio continua*. In English, in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., words begin to appear in Anglo-Saxon Bibles and gospels separated one from another

¹²⁷ Otha Wingo, *Latin Punctuation in the Classical Age* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 14–17.

by distinct gaps—an innovation which (it has been argued) not only helped to give rise to the practice of “silent reading” (*lectio tacita*) but allowed the reader to “process” the knowledge contained within texts more rapidly, while at the same time allowing a greater range of “reader-competencies” to encounter the text of the holy scriptures.¹²⁸ Today, spaces are harmonized and regularized on the printed page within the text block. Modern typographic design advocates, for example, that no more than a single space should be used after a period (full stop), colon, or other mark of punctuation, since larger spaces “are themselves a form of punctuation.”¹²⁹ But early modern printers also saw punctuation as providing a spatial opportunity, of the kind that we glimpsed in the use of spaces surrounding a mid-line colon in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* when it was first published in 1667. The 1594 printers of Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller*, for example, followed the common practice of varying the amount of space following punctuation marks depending on the amount of type that was needed to right-justify each line.

However, dense blocks of text, characteristic of so many earlier Renaissance pages, tend to resist rapid skimming or searching in order to retrieve information. To assist this process, which is rather different from reading in a conventional sense, the page had to be reconstituted as a visual field. Thus, the search for information within a printed book began to be regularized in ways with which we have become familiar today.¹³⁰ The introduction of great increments of white space was crucial to this process. Andrew Pettegree has described “the search for order” conducted by sixteenth-century European intellectuals, and the public for which they were writing, and the ways in which this impulse made new demands on “the design and presentation of scholarly books.”¹³¹ In technical works (mathematical or geographical treatises, medical, legal, rhetorical, grammatical, or accounting textbooks) the ordering of matter into lists, or the representation of ideas via spatial relationships on the page, relied on the intersection of text and space. Tables and diagrams of contents—such as the schematic synopses or analyses with which Robert Burton equipped his compendious *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)—were “visual aids” designed to assist the reader to “organize

¹²⁸ McCutcheon, “Silent Reading in Antiquity and the Future History of the Book,” p. 9.

¹²⁹ Brinhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, p. 30.

¹³⁰ See Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, “Paperworlds: Imagining the Renaissance Computer,” in Rhodes and Sawday (eds.), *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1–17 (pp. 7–10); Blair, *Too Much to Know*, pp. 117–172. On the “analogue” or “predigital” search engine, which could include “human information brokering institutions” such as servants, concierges, and intelligence officers, see Anton Tantner, “Before Google: A Pre-history of Search Engines in Analogue Times,” trans. Brita Pohl, in René König and Miriam Rasch (eds.), *Society of the Query Reader: Reflections on Web Search* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2014), pp. 121–138.

¹³¹ Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 294.

information...transforming narratives apprehended in time into condensed graphic forms comprehended in space.”¹³²

Today, modern “professional” readers, retrieving information from a text that has already been read (or more often scanned or skimmed), sometimes rely on the “look” of a page to locate a passage that has already been encountered. Is the passage on a verso or recto page? Near the top or the bottom of the page? Before or after a paragraph break? Empty space facilitates this retrieval process. By way of contrast, medieval manuscripts certainly contained significant amounts of “empty” space. But, as Elena Gertsman has argued, these “visual lacunae” were spaces of contemplation, demanding “prolonged ocular commitment”—a gaze rather than a glance.¹³³ They were not primarily designed as navigational aids to allow the content to be rapidly plundered for information, in a fashion that seems to foreshadow modern electronic search and retrieval mechanisms. A foundational medieval encyclopedic work such as the widely copied seventh-century *Etymologiae* (Etymologies) of Isidore of Seville, for example, which summarized those portions of ancient learning which the early Christian church thought worth preserving, was not, in any sense, a text which utilized space to assist the reader. The twenty books of the *Etymologiae* covered topics as diverse as the structure of the physical world, geography, agriculture, food, and warfare. But its organization was such that later readers, working their way through a manuscript copy of this compendious encyclopedia, were driven to the margins of the text, to produce their own “finding aids.” Sections of an incomplete manuscript of the *Etymologiae*, probably produced in Oxford in the thirteenth century and now in the Folger Library, which presents the text in a two-column format, has been annotated, on page after page, by subsequent readers. These annotations consist of single words, extracted from the text, listing names and subjects. These marginal lists provide pathways or tracks through the text, helping a reader to navigate (both forwards and backwards) through the otherwise undifferentiated contents.¹³⁴ In effect, these readers had anticipated (though not actually created) the kind of indexing practice that Dennis Duncan has described as permeating the modern world—“the age of the index” as he terms it—associated with the “crawling and indexing” of the modern computerized search engine.¹³⁵

¹³² Bradin Cormack and Carla Mazzio, *Book Use, Book Theory: 1500–1700* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Library, 2005), p. 67.

¹³³ Elena Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books* (University Park, PA, 2021), p. 79.

¹³⁴ *Ethimologiarum secundum Isydori episcopi Hispalensis*, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.b.31. Book IX (fos. 63^r–69^r). See also Mary A. Rouse and Richard H. Rouse, *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts* (Notre Dame, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 191–255.

¹³⁵ Dennis Duncan, “Index,” in Michael Kennerly, Samuel Frederick, and Jonathan E. Abel (eds.), *Information: Keywords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 100–109 (p. 108). See also Dennis Duncan, “Indexes,” in Denis Duncan and Adam Smyth (eds.), *Book Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 265–274; Blair, *Too Much to Know*, pp. 132–144; Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*, pp. 294–295.

When these kinds of work began to appear in print, initially, they aped their origin as manuscripts, in which, since the thirteenth century, various finding devices had been deployed: running heads, different-sized initial letters, marked paragraphs, and so on. The *Summa grammaticalis quae vocatur Catholicon*, usually known simply as the *Catholicon*, the work of the grammarian and priest John of Genoa or Johannes Balbus, was a thirteenth-century Latin dictionary, combining elements of an encyclopedia and a grammar. It was first printed in a dense, two-column format at Mainz in c.1460.¹³⁶ In this format, just like the *Etymologiae*, it would have been difficult to consult, other than through the lengthy process of reading and rereading each page consecutively. Gradually, a conception of what we might now term “ease of use” began to inform the reproduction of these kinds of text, as the idea of searchability or retrieval began to take hold. As if realizing that such texts were to be consulted and read not as narratives but as compilations of information, space was deployed on the printed page to indicate separation, classification, and hierarchies of content. Fundamental to the operation of this kind of text was the gradual introduction of the alphabet to organize the contents, together with the index—a “reader-oriented” rather than “text-oriented” retrieval mechanism. Indexes only really came into their own with the arrival of printed texts, since indexes in manuscript books were “copy specific” in that every handwritten copy would have different pagination or foliation, whereas with printed pages, page numbering would (at least in theory) be “stable across an edition,” allowing for the efficient use of an index which, without uniform page numbering, is useless.¹³⁷ Pagination, in the sense of numbering each page of a printed book (recto and verso), or foliation (numbering each leaf of the book on the recto), which in turn allowed a passage to be “stored” for later reference or communicated to other readers, was not only a relatively late development but also often highly inconsistent, with errors in numeration being frequent. And this is why modern scholarship has turned to the use of the (partially) printed signatures (e.g., “sig. 2B^r”) at the foot of the first sequence of recto pages in each gathering to indicate page references, even though this system was originally devised not as a finding aid, but as a way of ensuring that binders picked up and folded the printed sheets in the correct order—which they sometimes nevertheless failed to achieve.¹³⁸

In the absence of modern, standardized reference and citation systems, tracing a Renaissance writer’s sometimes copious citations, usually to be found as abbreviated marginal references to the works of classical authorities, can be a remarkably frustrating and time-consuming business. Very few early modern writers

¹³⁶ See Lotte Hellinga, *Incunabula in Transit* (Library of the Written Word, vol. 62) (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), pp. 126–203.

¹³⁷ Duncan, “Indexes,” in Duncan and Smyth (eds.), *Book Parts*, p. 271.

¹³⁸ Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, p. 51.

were as assiduous as Ben Jonson who, when his play *Sejanus His Fall* was published in 1605, “wreathed its margins with long lists of precise references to classical histories and modern treatises.”¹³⁹ But Jonson’s careful explanation of this procedure in his dedicatory epistle to the play nevertheless betrays an insouciance towards citation which would not be tolerated today: “For the rest as *Sueton. Seneca.* &c the Chapter doth sufficiently direct, or the Edition is not varied.”¹⁴⁰ Early modern indexes to a book’s contents (when they exist) can be equally frustrating. Today, although the index is usually printed in the final pages of a scholarly book, it frequently operates as “the way into the book” in the same way that “much of our reading nowadays begins on the results page of a Google search.” The index (rather than the title page, and least of all the dedicatory pages beloved of Renaissance authors) has become our primary “port of entry to a book, and our first sense of its contents.”¹⁴¹ Renaissance readers clearly did not approach their books in this fashion, at least not until indexes became commonplace. Indexes, too, relied on alphabetic ordering, as did dictionaries and biblical concordances. But even though alphabetical ordering had been known for centuries, it was still considered to be an innovative device even in the early sixteenth century.¹⁴² So, one of the earliest printed dictionaries that we have inherited, the *Ortus vocabulorum* (“Origin of Words”) attributed to Galfridus Anglicus in the mid-fifteenth century, when it was printed in England by the king’s printer, Richard Pynson, in 1509 proudly advertised itself as deploying the latest technology—“alphabetical order” (*alphabetico ordine*)—on its title page.¹⁴³ Organization of content alphabetically is an ancient practice. But what seems (to us) to be such an obvious means of organizing material was by no means widespread in earlier periods since (as Michael Clanchy explains) “the average reader did not expect to use a medieval manuscript as a source of ready reference” and, moreover, “medieval intellectuals were ambivalent towards alphabetical order because it militated against their sense of hierarchy.”¹⁴⁴ The world was constructed and organized by God, and this organization might be reflected in any number of ways in written texts; but to adopt a system such as the alphabet as an organizing principle was to impose a whimsically arbitrary and above all fallibly human method on providential order.

¹³⁹ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 145.

¹⁴⁰ Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall* (London, 1605), sig. ¶2^r.

¹⁴¹ Denis Duncan, *Index, A History of the: A Bookish Adventure from Medieval Manuscripts to the Digital Age* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 126.

¹⁴² See Bill Katz, *Cuneiform to Computer: A History of Reference Sources* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press Inc., 1998), p. 3; Jonathan Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries They Made* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), pp. 56–57; Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, pp. 109–110.

¹⁴³ [Galfridus Anglicus], *Ortus vocabuloru[m] alphabetico ordine fere om[n]ia que in Catholicon* (London, 1509), title page.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 181.

It is at least possible that authors and compilers, in their guise as correctors in the print shop, and watching dexterous early modern compositors at work, rapidly selecting the correct characters and spaces from their divided cases in which the upper-case type (capital letters) was stored in a predominantly alphabetical system, would have become attuned to alphabetical order, in ways which would have been alien to a scribal copyist.¹⁴⁵ The copyist experienced words as discrete units, rather than as compositions of individual letters selected from a larger store of exactly similar letter forms. Scribes wrote words. Compositors, on the other hand, *assembled* words not just out of identical letter forms, but also the spaces surrounding them, in a process demanding what Michel Foucault has termed “the automatism of habit.”¹⁴⁶ In the production of a reference work, lists ordered alphabetically made consistent syntactic linkage, tying one entry in the text to the next in the form of a continuous narrative, redundant. Rather, each item might be perceived and understood as discrete, contained, and bounded by white space. Hence (to take the example of the printed *Ortus vocabulorum*), once a (Latin) word had been briefly defined, the text ended (whether at the beginning, midway, or at the end of the line), with blank, empty space, signaling to the reader that she should move on to the next definition, or use the convention of alphabetical ordering to search for a new term. This convention of separating “entries” (as we would now call them) into single, discrete, units is (to us) so obvious that remarking upon its appearance may seem otiose. And yet, the concept of the list—one of the oldest of all human written utterances—by no means relied upon the convention of using space in this way to organize cumulative entries in its very early forms. Lists produced in the Ugaritic script (dating from around 1300 B.C.E.) used space in an “awkward, ad hoc way... with word-dividers to separate items from numbers, ruled lines, wedged lines, and elongated lines.”¹⁴⁷ Lists, moreover, with their utilization of white space to separate individual items, possess a superficial visual resemblance to poetry, reminding us that lists and poetry were once closely aligned in a predominantly oral world: the three hundred lines of verse, for example, which comprise the “catalogue of ships” in Book II of Homer’s *Iliad*, where the different contingents comprising the Achean army besieging Troy are organized by ethonyms (names given to a particular ethnic group) and toponyms (their place of origin), utilizes poetry as a mnemonic recording or listing device, a reminder of the poem’s genesis in oral transmission.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ See Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, pp. 34–38.

¹⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 135. See also Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, trans. David Gerard (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 62.

¹⁴⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 121.

¹⁴⁸ See John Crossett, “The Art of Homer’s Catalogue of Ships,” *Classical Journal* 64 (1969), pp. 241–245.

Modern hand-written or printed lists are luxuriously reliant on a ready supply of paper. For all that we might scribble an ephemeral list of shopping items on the back of the proverbial envelope, the generation of such a list, with large areas of paper left blank, presupposes the ubiquity of cheap paper. Walter Ong has argued that “print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space.”¹⁴⁹ Although this may be true of print, Ong’s argument tends to minimize the skillful deployment of paratext and columnar space visible on the pages of medieval texts. The regular oscillation between print and white space, inherited from scribal culture, helped to make possible complex digests of information which became an accepted part of the way in which data could be stored and then accessed within printed works without deploying complex reading practices. Thus, a multi-lingual dictionary, such as that produced by James Nicolson in 1537, which offered lists of words in six languages (Latin, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and English) used the entire opening of the book to organize the lists of words horizontally in six vertical columns (see Fig. 3.5).



Fig. 3.5 Anon., *Sex linguarum*, Latine, Teu[t]honice, Gallice, Hispanice, Italice, Anglice (Southwark, 1537), sigs. A1^v–A2^r. Shelf mark: C.192.a.131. © The British Library Board.

¹⁴⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 119.

Such word lists are to be found in manuscripts, such as those compiled in England in the late fifteenth century, devised for English pilgrims to the Holy Land, and which showed useful English and Greek phrases.¹⁵⁰ The 1537 printed word list is a reference work—a dictionary in the modern sense—and yet the book is divided into “chapters,” opening with the first chapter “Of God of the Trinite of power and of riches.” The first word to be translated is, of course, “Deus,” which is then offered across the opening, in each column: “Deus God Dieu Dios Dio God.”¹⁵¹ Within this organizational structure, the columns are severely constrained, with white space being used to separate each example of the word from the next given in a different language. Using this spatially differentiated grid, the English reader is invited to approach the text either linearly, reading across the opening, or vertically, reading down each column. Of course, it was quite possible to replicate this disposition of space and text in a manuscript. The manuscript version of Southwell’s poem “Christes Bloody Tears,” as we have seen, uses a columnar rather than lineal approach to the text. Nevertheless, the spacing of the text in printed lists allows the reader’s eye to move with a degree of freedom which is not possible in a text that is organized in a narratively determined fashion. English Renaissance printed dictionaries, such as the *Shorte Dictionarie, for Yonge Beginners* (1533) of John Withals, Sir Thomas Elyot’s *Bibliotheca Eliotae* (1538), the Welsh–English dictionary of William Salesbury (1547), and Richard Huloet’s English–Latin *Abcedarium* (1552), all look and work in a very similar fashion: the page is divided into two (sometimes four) columns, with white space being used to separate each entry from the next.

Ornaments and the Problem of Emptiness

The function of space in works such as dictionaries is part of the retrieval mechanism devised to assist the reader. Today, larger areas of white space discovered in either a printed or hand-written text tend to be understood as an unblemished void. The margins of a text—either at the top and bottom or sides of the central text block—constitute (in the words of William Slights) “a visual boundary between print and clear space.”¹⁵² Indeed, the very word “margin” (or “margent” as this liminal space was frequently referred to in early modern texts) has come to mean a supplemental or secondary area. In terms of a book’s architecture, the “margin” forms part of the printed page, but it is not quite of that page, just as

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Wakelin, *Designing English: Early Literature on the Page* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018), pp. 28–29.

¹⁵¹ James Nicholson, *A vocabulary in Six Languages* (Southwark, 1537), sigs. A1^v–A2^r.

¹⁵² Slights, *Managing Readers*, p. 61.

(in a modern socio-political context) we speak of “marginalized” individuals or groups, consigned to the “fringes” of society.

In early modern printed books the margin was the area to which references, citations, or supporting glosses and information were consigned, as they had been in medieval manuscripts.¹⁵³ Empty margins or borders might appear to be a residual product of the printing process until, that is, we transfer our attention to certain distinct kinds of space within our own modern printed books, most obviously, volumes of poetry but also (for example) the large distribution of white space to be found in contemporary books and periodicals dealing with predominantly visual themes such as art, architecture, design, and fashion. White space, in these kinds of work, which may be aimed at the connoisseur rather than the “general reader,” signals a commitment to the visual appearance of the book and its contents—and this may well constitute a significant part of the book’s overall “meaning.” The generous allocations of white or empty space achieved by using deep margins and large empty areas at the top or bottom of the page, even entirely blank pages, might also be understood as markers of taste, discernment, refinement, minimalism, and (of course) luxury.¹⁵⁴ Not unlike a high-end boutique, which seeks to attract a privileged clientele and places very little in the window display, as opposed to the cluttered windows and shelves of a discount store, absence may often be a signal of privileged consumption. Modern graphic designers of advertisements, logos, and websites frequently congratulate themselves on their “bold use of space” designed to arrest the viewer’s attention. And the reverse also holds true: witness the typographically anarchic pages of the British “underground” press in the late 1960s and early 1970s in publications such as *Oz*, where political engagement was signaled by the visual appearance of the page, which threw a gauntlet down to challenge the risibly bourgeois insistence on legibility—a typographic landscape which makes the production of the minimalist *White Album* of the Beatles in late 1968 by Richard Hamilton all the more remarkable (see the Introduction).¹⁵⁵

The Renaissance equivalent of modern, typographically minimalist volumes were books purposefully printed with extra-wide margins known as “large paper copies.” In these instances, although the book was larger than usual, the text-block remained the same size as that which was to be found in less luxurious copies of the same work. The empty spaces to be found in such “large paper copies” might be signs of prestige and luxury, as well as a signal of a special relationship (or anticipated relationship) between the author or the bookseller, and some chosen recipients of the text.¹⁵⁶ In 1605, when Ben Jonson’s play *Sejanus* was

¹⁵³ See A. W. Pollard, “Margins,” *The Dolphin* 1 (1933), pp. 67–80.

¹⁵⁴ See Helen Armstrong (ed.), *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁵ See Richard Neville, *Playpower* (London: Cape, 1970).

¹⁵⁶ Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography*, pp. 136–137.

printed as a quarto by George Eld, a few copies were printed as large paper copies on high-quality, imported French paper, some of which were signed by Jonson himself.¹⁵⁷ But large paper copies could also fulfill a more functional role. For example, in 1588 and 1591 some copies of a much reprinted legal textbook on land ownership—Sir Thomas Littleton's *Les tenures de Monsieur Littleton*—were published as an octavo, but printed on quarto-sized sheets of paper, with the text appearing in the inner top quadrant of each page, furnishing readers with ample space to make notes on the contents, or record specific cases (see Fig. 3.6).¹⁵⁸ For some readers, even more empty space was needed since surviving copies (now in the Folger Library and the Huntington Library) were interleaved with additional blank pages, a topic to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

Paradoxically, for all that space within the confines of the printed book was managed in different ways and (arguably) with growing sophistication, early modern printers often seemed to express an unstated *horreur du vide*—a positive

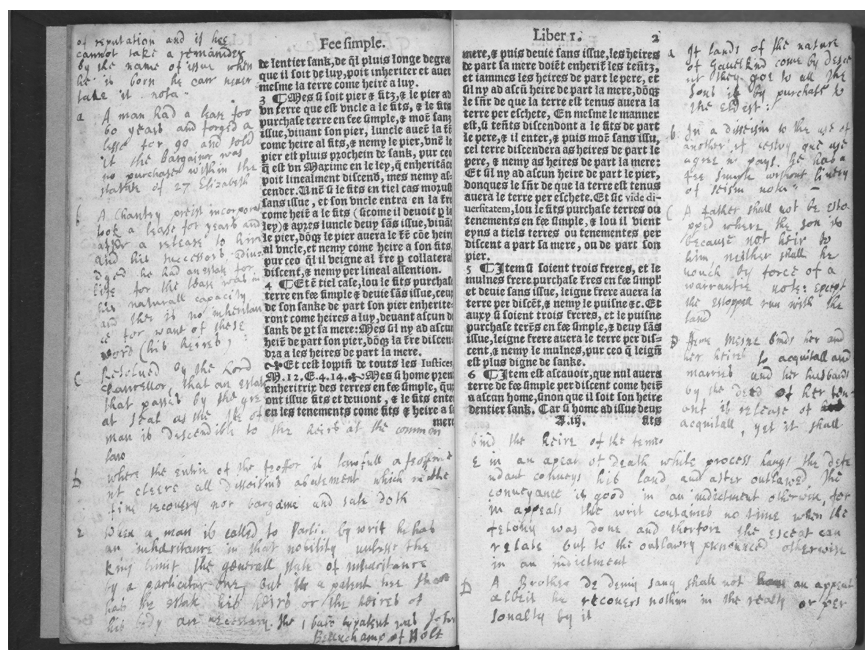


Fig. 3.6 Thomas Littleton, *Les tenures de Monsieur Littleton* (London, 1591), sigs. A2^v–A3^r. Shelf mark: 93060. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

¹⁵⁷ See Calhoun and Gravel, “Paper and Printing in Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus* (1605),” p. 16.

¹⁵⁸ See Caroline Duroselle-Melish, “Extravagantly Large Paper,” *The Collation* (Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC), November 17, 2015, <https://collation.folger.edu/2015/11/extravagantly-large-paper/>.

dislike of too much non-functional emptiness or white space on a printed page. In part, this may have been due to the economic cost of producing a book replete with white (unused) space. But the economics of print production do not explain why the otherwise empty white spaces of a printed book found in the vertical axis—at the top and bottom of the page—would frequently be filled up with different kinds of ornament. These printer's ornaments (or "knots" as they were sometimes termed) first began to appear in Venetian books in the late 1470s, with the earliest English versions—a Maltese cross design used by Caxton—making their appearance in 1486.¹⁵⁹ Head- and tailpieces, originally consisting of wood-cut fleurons (flower-shaped ornaments), then decorated ribbons, and finally elaborate pictorial arrangements, began to appear more generally in English books in the 1560s and 1570s. Customarily these abstract designs have been understood as primarily decorative, deployed to "fill the blank spaces at the beginning and end of divisions of the text" or "for the decoration of blank spaces."¹⁶⁰ Such ornaments (observes Mark Bland) began to "dominate the construction of English title-pages and the decoration of books during the 1570s and 1580s," while they also illustrated the growing "influence of Arabic and Ottoman culture on the English Renaissance."¹⁶¹

Today, when an early modern text is edited and reproduced using modern typographic and editorial conventions, the space-consuming ornaments which adorned Renaissance books are invariably jettisoned. They are understood, primarily, as "mere" ornament, a quirk of Renaissance page design, or perhaps a vestigial remnant of the illuminated manuscript. But such ornaments in early modern books, Hazel Wilkinson has suggested, "refocus the reader's attention on the *mise-en-page*, on the creative use of ink and white space" even if (as she concludes) we still have much to learn about the "grammar of ornament."¹⁶² Ornaments might also be understood as "helping to mark books as belonging to a particular genre or kind, as having come from a particular print shop, as being the work of a particular author or coterie—or, alternatively, as wanting to look as if they were any of these."¹⁶³ They operated as architectural signals to a reader as to the kind of text with which they were engaged, so that a printed funerary sermon, or a prayer book, with heavy black borders on the page framing the text, functioned as "a generic marker."¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ See Juliet Fleming, "How to Look at a Printed Flower," *Word and Image* 22 (2006), pp. 165–187 (p. 165).

¹⁶⁰ See Henry R. Plomer, *English Printers' Ornaments* (London: Grafton & Co., 1924), pp. 55, 57, 60.

¹⁶¹ Bland, "The Appearance of the Text in Early-Modern England," p. 95.

¹⁶² Hazel Wilkinson, "Printer's Ornaments and Flowers," in Duncan and Smyth (eds.), *Book Parts*, pp. 111–122 (pp. 116, 121).

¹⁶³ Juliet Fleming, "Changed Opinion as to Flowers," in Helen Smith and Louise Wilson (eds.), *Renaissance Paratexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 48–64 (p. 63).

¹⁶⁴ Juliet Fleming, *Cultural Graphology: Writing after Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 75.

But, in practical terms, ornaments performed a vital function in the print process: they helped to prevent otherwise blank spaces of the page from being smudged with stray ink from the furniture—the wooden wedges and quoins used to lock the type into place in the chase as it was prepared for the imposition of ink and then sheets of paper.¹⁶⁵ When printing on a two-pull press, the platen needed to come down on an even surface to make a good impression on the sheet. A completely blank page in folio format presented no difficulties. But a completely blank page printed in quarto, or a partially blank page printed in folio (less so in octavo) presented real problems.¹⁶⁶ So, when printers were confronted with otherwise empty space on a page partially covered in type, they sometimes promoted paratextual features (rules, signatures, or catchwords) further up the page, to provide a more even surface to engage with the platen, or else they deployed ornaments to fill the void. Paradoxically, printing a book with a great deal of empty space required just as much skill (if not more so) on the part of the pressmen as that needed to print a book with pages filled with type.

But it is still usually assumed that ornaments can have little or no impact on our understanding of the text, although they can provide useful information about the printing of early texts, such as (for example) the circulation of cases of type among printers, or the material interrelationship of two different texts printed using the same ornament.¹⁶⁷ When they appear on the surface of the page, ornaments, in Juliet Fleming's formulation, help us to see the printed page as "a visual field without semantic content...an abstract pattern whose intricate black lines and white spaces provoke sensations of movement and light."¹⁶⁸ As such, they contribute to the reader's cognitive reception of the text, providing, once more, a temporary respite for the eye and the brain. But ornaments also had a function to play in the overall construction of the text as a series of semantic units. Ornaments might signal a termination or a pause of some kind in the reading process, such as the ornament which appears in the lower portion of the page following the final sonnet of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* ("When sorrow (using mine owne fier's might)") when it was printed in 1591 (see Fig. 3.7).

In either of the two editions printed for Thomas Newton in 1591, the ornament (a floral motif in one instance and a ribbon ornament in the other) fulfills several functions: it signals to the reader that nothing has been inadvertently mislaid from the text and that the sequence has indeed ended. It also helped to protect the otherwise empty space in the printing process. But it also economically signaled

¹⁶⁵ Juliet Fleming, "How Not to Look at a Printed Flower," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38 (2008), pp. 345–371 (p. 354).

¹⁶⁶ I am grateful to Susie Cobbledick (Missouri Botanical Gardens Library) for advice on the practical function of ornaments in the printing process.

¹⁶⁷ See J. A. Lavin, "John Danter's Ornament Stock," *Studies in Bibliography* 23 (1970), pp. 21–44; J. A. Lavin, "The Printer of Hamlet Q3," *Studies in Bibliography* 25 (1972), pp. 173–176; Douglas Bruster, "Shakespeare's Lady 8," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66 (2015), pp. 47–88.

¹⁶⁸ Fleming, "How to Look at a Printed Flower," p. 171.

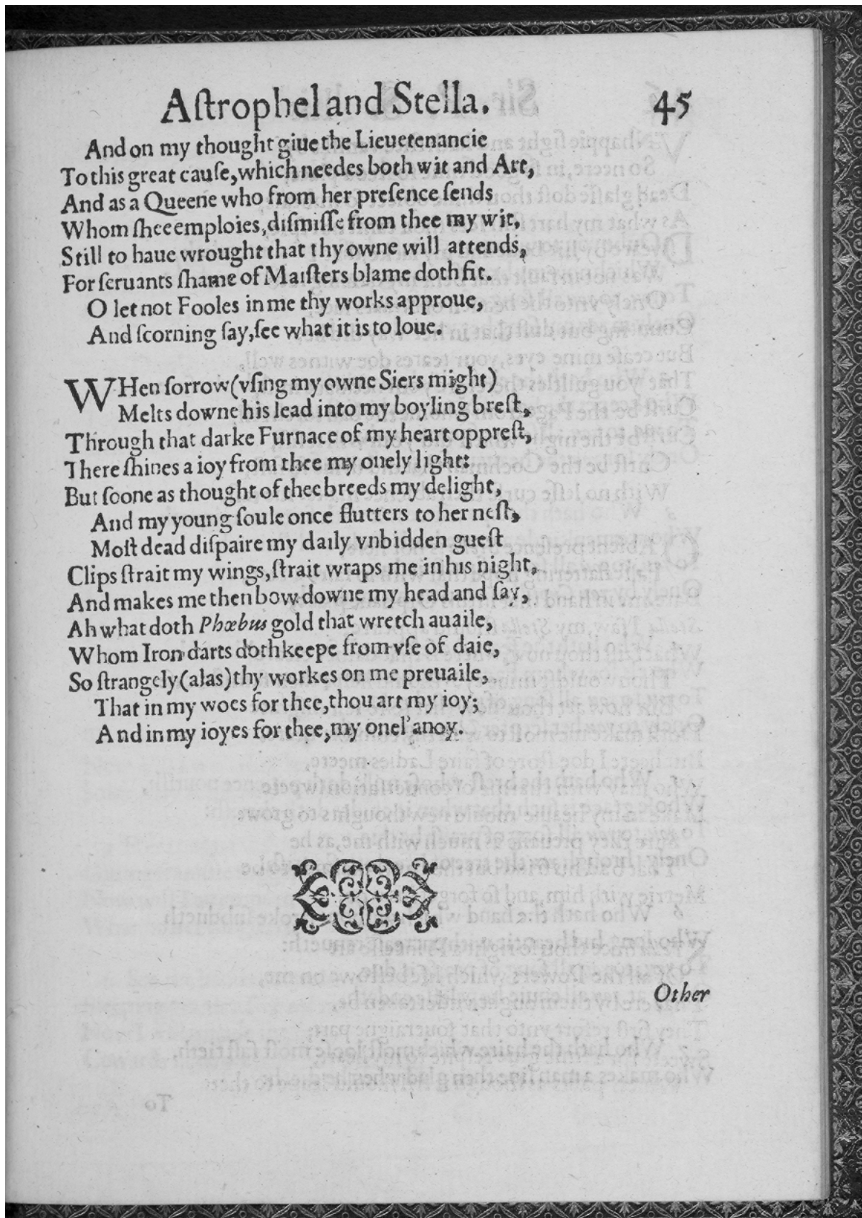


Fig. 3.7 Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir P.S. his Astrophel and Stella Wherein the excellence of sweete poesie is concluded* (London, 1591), sig. F4^r. Shelf mark: g. 11544. © The British Library Board.

to the reader a pause or a moment of transition in the organization of the text. Today, this point of termination or transition is marked very differently. In the standard modern scholarly edition of Sidney's poetry (that edited by William A. Ringler and first published in 1962 by the Clarendon Press), the final six lines of Sonnet 108 and the textual notes occupy just the very top of the recto page. The rest of the page is blank, as is the verso, as well as the subsequent recto interior title page ("Other Poems"), the verso of which is also (again) blank.¹⁶⁹

The provision of four virtually empty pages in a modern book to achieve what a sixteenth-century printer encompassed with less than a quarter of a page of empty space and an ornament underlines both the ubiquity of paper to which we have become accustomed, and also that modern commitment to empty white space on the page for which Jan Tschichold advocated in the 1920s. The provision of such blank spaces in modern books tends to follow a set of conventions. In the early modern period, there was, however, no agreed custom or convention which helped printers decide when empty space needed to be filled, or how much empty space on the page could be tolerated. That decision was probably made according to a printer's own estimation of the degree of skill which they possessed in leaving the page partially empty, and some estimation of the costs of paper. Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*, for example, was a visually complex work when it first appeared as a quarto printed by Hugh Singleton in 1579, which may have been designed to mimic the popular form of the almanac, with its monthly divisions, and use of woodcut illustrations.¹⁷⁰ The printers deployed a mixture of blackletter, italic, and roman type to differentiate sections of the work ("Argument," "Gloss" and the spoken dialogues), with each "month" being signaled by a woodcut. But the printers also ensured that any empty space of more than approximately a third of a page was filled with an ornament (see Fig. 3.8).

These "space fillers" were retained in the subsequent quarto editions of 1581, 1586, 1591, and 1597, though their precise locations in the volume shifted as the text was printed in different ways. The edition of 1597 was the most sparing in its use of ornaments to fill unused space, or the most successful in ensuring that very little such space appeared in the volume, since only one ornament was required.¹⁷¹ By contrast, when the highly skilled Richard Field printed Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* in 1596, he seems to have been relatively relaxed about the prospect of allowing considerable portions of empty space to appear in the volume, not feeling the need to insert these conspicuous markers, even though three of the hymns end on a page which is at least half empty.¹⁷² This relative tolerance of empty

¹⁶⁹ William A. Ringler, Jr. (ed.), *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 237–240.

¹⁷⁰ Abigail Shinn, "Spenser's Popular Intertexts," in Kesson and Smith (eds.), *The Elizabethan Top Ten*, pp. 157–167 (p. 159).

¹⁷¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender* (London, 1597), sig. K2^v.

¹⁷² Edmund Spenser, *Fowre Hymnes* (London, 1596), sigs. B4^v, D2^r, E3^v.

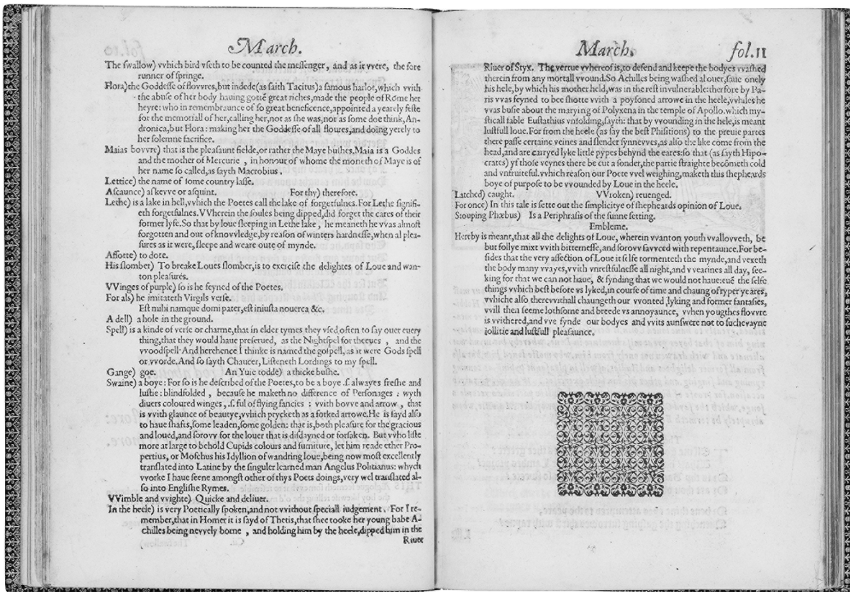


Fig. 3.8 Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (London, 1579), sigs. C2^v–C3^r. Shelf mark: STC 23089. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

space is very different from the policy adopted by the printer, John Wolfe, when he produced Thomas Watson's sonnet sequence *The Hekatompathia* or *Passionate Centurie of Loue* as a quarto for the stationer Gabriell Cawood in 1582. *The Hekatompathia* is comprised of 116 type-covered pages, with each sonnet and an accompanying explanatory note, printed singly on the page. Of these pages, only sixteen do *not* contain, at the bottom of the page, an ornamented tailpiece of some kind, whether in the form of different-sized ribbons, or stylized human or animal faces. Wolfe (or Watson) was determined to ensure that no single portion of unused space would be apparent in the book.

Empty space, devoid of either text or ornament, challenges the primacy of the printed word in the visual composition of a page in ways that some early modern book producers seem to have found distinctly uncomfortable. For how was a reader to know if such empty space was intentional, or simply represented a mistake or miscalculation within the print shop? Skilled printers were able to estimate the costs of printing a sheet, in different type sizes, by a single glance at the hand-written copy text.¹⁷³ But sometimes they made mistakes, so that texts were printed containing empty spaces which had never been designed as such. Moreover, empty space signaled (among many other things) a form of silence, reminding us of the paradox that “the absence of any explicit signifier functions

¹⁷³ Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography*, p. 7.

by itself as a signifier” or even that “the lack of a sign can itself be a sign.”¹⁷⁴ We can see this residual dislike of unadorned empty space manifest in the production of one of the most famous (and famously studied) books of the early modern age, the first folio edition of Shakespeare’s *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, issued by the syndicate whose principal members were the Jaggard firm (Isaac and William Jaggard) in London in late 1623. The printers of the “first folio” adopted various strategies to embellish pages that would otherwise contain large areas of blank space, or to mask any potential blank spaces altogether. When, for example, the final lines of a play took up less than about two-thirds of a page, then a “large triangular ornament representing a satyr” was used, and this device appears as a tailpiece, closing off twenty-four of the thirty-six plays which appear in the folio.¹⁷⁵ This satyr ornament, other than perhaps operating as a very generalized allusion to classical literature, has nothing whatsoever to do with the actual content of Shakespeare’s text at those places where it appears. It is simply an image used to fill space that would be otherwise devoid of printed characters.

Beyond the six blank verso pages to be found in the preliminaries, the first folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays, amounting to some nine hundred pages, contains five entirely empty or blank internal pages. Each of these blank pages signals that something had gone wrong in the printing process.¹⁷⁶ Generally, where it looked likely that a page would appear to be unavoidably empty, or largely empty, so the printers, as they set up the text forme by forme, consciously “padded out” the formes “to avoid the appearance of additional blank pages in the finished book.”¹⁷⁷ Padding the text might involve adjusting the type size, so that the text occupied more space on the page, inserting additional white lines around an act break, breaking lines of verse into half lines, adding a “wholly unnecessary” list of characters who appear in the play as a “space filler,” compressing or lengthening a verse line, and adding ornaments to the page.¹⁷⁸

This “padding” effect is apparent on the very first occasion that the “satyr device” makes its appearance in the pages of the book, at the end of *Measure for Measure* (see Fig. 3.9).¹⁷⁹ The text of *Measure for Measure* ends on a verso page, with just eleven lines of type. So, the printers filled this residual space of the page

¹⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), p. 77; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Das Auge und der Geist: Philosophische Essays* (1967), cited in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 169.

¹⁷⁵ Charlton Hinman, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), I. p. 37.

¹⁷⁶ B. D. R. Higgins, “Printing the First Folio,” in Emma Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s First Folio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 30–47 (p. 42).

¹⁷⁷ Hinman, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, I. p. 38.

¹⁷⁸ Hinman, *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, I. p. 38, II. p. 508; Emma Smith, *The Making of Shakespeare’s First Folio* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2015), p. 146.

¹⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies* (London, 1623), sig. G6^r.

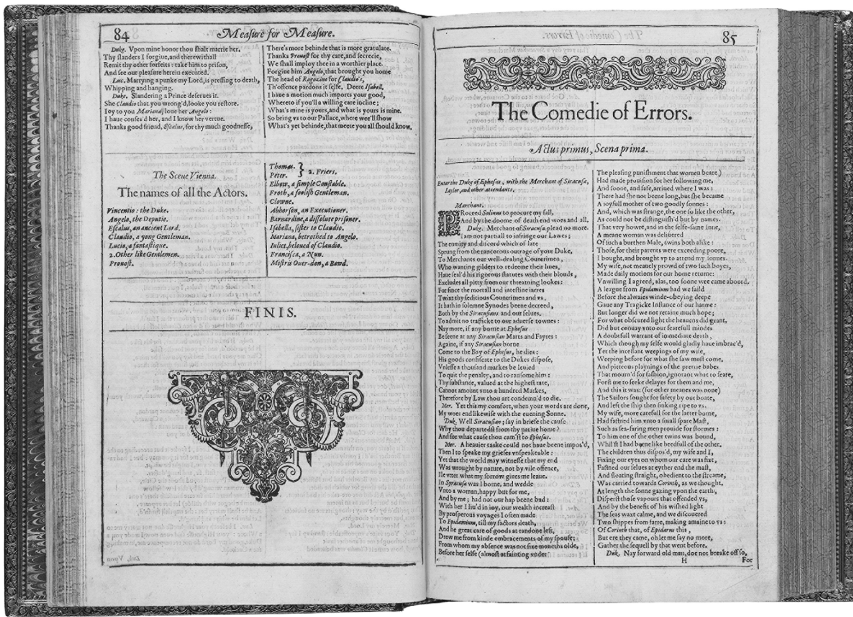


Fig. 3.9 William Shakespeare, *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies* (London, 1623), sigs. G6v–H1r. Shelf mark: STC 22273 Fo. 1 no. 09. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

with paratextual information most of which (today) we would expect to preface a printed copy of the play rather than appearing at its end: “The Scene Vienna” then “The names of all the Actors” (i.e., characters). Three ruled lines and the word “FINIS” occupy yet more space, and the satyr ornament occupies the remainder of the page, equivalent (judging by the text of the *Comedy of Errors* on the facing recto page) to around eighteen lines of text. Given that the ornament appears (as we have seen) twenty-four times in the volume, and that the text of the plays was printed in double columns, the repeated satyr ornament occupies the spatial equivalent of around nine hundred lines of text in the first folio, which represents well over half the number of lines of the shortest play in the volume (*The Comedy of Errors*) and nearly half of the text of the next three shortest plays (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Tempest*.) So, this ornamental space-filler, which takes the form of a highly stylized figure culled from classical mythology, half-hidden behind enfolding armature, who stares out at us, goggle-eyed, surrounded by swags of foliage (upon which it appears to be tugging), and who is perched above a representation of the face of an anonymous human figure, might justly be described as one the most frequent, though entirely mute, and hence unremarked, “characters,” who appears and reappears within the pages of the first folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays.

We can see a residual anxiety circulating around empty, non-functioning space on the printed page in the production of the posthumous folio edition of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, in 1609. Spenser has been described as a "print-fixated poet" who was highly attuned to the "look of the poem on the page, its magisterial succession of stanzas...perfectly adjusted to the strengths of Renaissance typography."¹⁸⁰ This is certainly true of the appearance of the printed pages of the early editions of *The Faerie Queene*. But, when we attend to the distribution of white space on the page, the issue becomes rather more complicated. In the 1590 and the two 1596 editions of the poem (the latter containing the second edition of Books I–III, and the first edition of Books IV–VI), all of which were printed in quarto, the printers filled up the few fragments of unused space on the printed page using an ornament. This ornament appears four times when more than approximately half a page would otherwise have been empty. Smaller amounts of empty space, however, might be tolerated. In the 1596 editions of the poem, some twenty or so blank spaces, each equivalent (in some cases) to a stanza or more, occur at the end of the various cantos. These spaces are unfilled with any device or ornament.

But these are exactly the kinds of space in the text, which, in 1609, the printers were obsessed with filling. In the 1609 folio, the printers deployed different styles of ornament to fill empty or unused space on the page. They used oblong designs to fill up the bottom of the page when around five centimeters of white space occurred at the end of a canto or (in one instance) at the end of Book V of the poem. In all, these designs appear twenty-one times in the 1609 volume. At the end of Books I, III, and IV, however, where large areas of empty space appear on the verso page (in the case of the ending to Book I) or on the recto pages (in the case of the endings of Books III and IV), the printers used a triangular tailpiece when the equivalent of around half a page or more would have been devoid of any other mark save for the signature and the catch-words in the case of the two recto pages. Only three entirely blank pages appear in the body of the 1609 text, and these operate to preface the opening of the third book, to preface the beginning of the second part (and fourth book) of the poem, and to preface the fifth book.¹⁸¹

These three blank pages, in other words, are signals of commencement, though this could hardly be described as a carefully thought-out scheme of any kind, since some books (e.g., the ending of Book V) finish on a verso page, which is immediately facing the opening of the following book, with no space of any kind inserted into the text to signal either endings or beginnings. Individual cantos, too, often end or begin indiscriminately, sometimes in the middle of a page, with a new section of the text signaled by woodcut ornamented compartments

¹⁸⁰ Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 145–146.

¹⁸¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London, 1609), sigs. L2^v, Q4^v, X4^r.

(of which four different kinds were used) that enclose the four lines of verse which form the preliminary argument to each canto. For all that Spenser may have been concerned with the “look of the poem on the page,” the printers of the 1609 folio of this expansive text were not interested in providing the reader with a pattern of clear and unambiguous marks of transition, and neither did they care to establish a “rhythm” to the oscillation between white space and print. Rather, they simply wanted to ensure that any unused space was filled.

By way of contrast, only once in the folio edition of Ben Jonson’s *Workes*, published in 1616 and printed by William Stansby, was an otherwise empty space filled up with a decorative tailpiece. In Jonson’s *Workes*, a satyr-like figure surrounded by foliage, though of an altogether less elaborate design than that which was used in the Shakespeare first folio, is to be found at the end of the four pages of short “character sketches” with which Jonson prefaced the folio’s version of *Every Man out of His Humour*.¹⁸² Much more akin to the space-filling practices of the printers of the 1609 *Faerie Queen* was the policy adopted by the printers of another folio: the 1616 *Workes* of James VI/I produced by Robert Barker and John Bill, “Printers to the Kings most Excellent Majestie,” as they proudly announced on that book’s title page. The 1616 *Workes* of King James contained four blank pages, each of which prefaced a new section of the book.¹⁸³ But Barker and Bill seem to have been exceptionally wary of partially empty space. Whenever a blank space of more than a quarter of a page appeared at the end of a section of the book, the printers deployed one of two different ornamental devices. The sumptuously produced folio, with its “extraordinary paratextual apparatus that steers readers towards a proper understanding of the works,” was printed with exceptional care, in a work that has been described as a conscious act of “self-canonization” by the monarch.¹⁸⁴ Discounting ornamental ribbons and headpieces used to introduce or separate different sections of the book, or the tailpieces used to decorate internal title pages, elaborate ornamental tailpieces appear on nineteen pages of the book. Kings, we might conclude, might fall silent, briefly, as they reached the end of an utterance, but the space of the printed page could never be allowed to appear to the reader as entirely mute.

Conclusion: Filling the Void

Ornaments on the pages of printed books inevitably shrank the regions of usable space that could be appropriated by readers for hand-written annotations or

¹⁸² See Ben Jonson, *The Workes of Beniamin Ionson* (London, 1616), sig. G4^r.

¹⁸³ James VI/I, *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James by the Grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland* (London, 1616), sigs. H3^v, Q5^v, 2T3^v, 2X5^v.

¹⁸⁴ Maria Wakely and Graham Rees, “Folios Fit for a King: James I, John Bill, and the King’s Printers, 1616–1620,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68 (2005), pp. 467–495 (pp. 471–472).

comments. Although it is unlikely that early modern printers were consciously seeking to “protect” the pages from annotation, that was, nevertheless, the effect that was (in part) achieved. Very occasionally, we find early modern authors intervening directly in the book-production process either to request extra blank space as a form of extended punctuation, or to indicate where ornaments should be placed. Sir John Harington, for example, not only specified where blank pages should be inserted into the printed text of his translation of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* issued in 1591, but even indicated the kind of type that should be used, and where a printer’s ornament (“some pretty knotte” as he termed it) should be placed.¹⁸⁵ But this level of intervention is unusual, even if the many carping comments with which authors introduced errata lists—“a compound of humiliation, irritation, prescription, wit, and regret” in Adam Smyth’s words—suggest that they cared very much indeed if their words had not been treated with due reverence by printers in the transition from manuscript to print.¹⁸⁶

David Olsen’s comment, however, on reading and writing raises a fundamental issue concerning the way in which texts were (and still are) received by communities of readers. When Olsen remarks that “the history of reading is largely the history of attempting to cope with what writing does not represent,” he is drawing our attention to the ways in which writing can only gesture towards speech. Texts, in this sense, “are never complete representations of what is said orally,” since they lack “devices for representing the illocutionary force of an utterance.”¹⁸⁷ That is true, however, only if we concentrate on the printed (or written) characters which constitute the text. In a wider sense, once we begin to see how texts might mobilize the empty spaces of the page, or deliberately set out to fracture the reader’s habituated surrender to the linearity of print, then we can see that this is only part of the story. Thus, Stephen Hawes’s poem tries not just to capture words, but also to express feelings, so that they can be reproduced in the mind and (perhaps) even the senses of a reader. White or empty or unfilled spaces may also make claims on a reader’s attention, disturbing the fixity of print, although quantifying those claims is not always easy.

The extent to which Renaissance book producers were also committed to producing texts which could be rapidly or speedily digested, is also a vexed point. Today, the modern reader undoubtedly finds many forms of early modern textual representation extremely difficult to cope with. And there may be (as we have seen) physiological reasons, as well as cultural and customary elements in play, which can help us to explain that difficulty. And yet, blackletter type continued to be used for texts aimed at the least skilled readers in the early modern world, even

¹⁸⁵ See Fleming, “Changed Opinion as to Flowers,” p. 53; Adam G. Hooks, *Selling Shakespeare: Biography, Bibliography, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 43–44.

¹⁸⁶ Adam Smyth, “Errata Lists,” in Duncan and Smyth (eds.), *Book Parts*, pp. 253–261 (p. 254).

¹⁸⁷ Olsen, *The World on Paper*, p. 145.

when relatively “easier” forms of textual representation were available. At the same time, the incorporation of different kinds of decorative ornamentation into a printed book might be understood as appealing to the graphic qualities of the text—the 1609 edition of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* as well the 1616 edition of James’s *Workes* and the 1623 Shakespeare folio were, all three of them, luxurious and prestigious books. Hence, they were deserving of appealing embellishment. But, as we have seen, the printers of these kinds of work were also making a virtue of necessity by solving a technical problem which also seemed to enhance the visual quality of the page.

Above all, the filling up of space (whether with textual padding or ornamentation) suggests a residual discomfort with large areas of emptiness in certain kinds of book. So, although the more general rule of the gradual “opening up” of the printed page in the course of the sixteenth century holds good, book producers nevertheless seemed ambiguous about certain kinds of gap or void in the texts that they produced. Empty space might help the reader to mark a transition in a narrative, or operate as a signal of termination or commencement, but it might also imply that a mistake had been made in the printing house, or (much worse, as we shall see) that a portion of the text had somehow gone missing. Empty white space on the printed page, when it was used to separate items into lists, or demarcate chapter or paragraph boundaries, was understood as playing an important role in the reader’s reception of the text. But other kinds of white space introduced a note of uncertainty into the experience of reading, and this may have had much to do with the ways in which empty space on the page (whether printed or in manuscript) could convey a range of meanings which, today, are largely alien to us. And it is to some of the social meanings of white or empty space both on the page and in early modern culture more generally that we now turn.