The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper

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In a recent and controversial history of The Norton Anthology of English Literature (NAEL), Sean Shesgreen claims that one of the three reasons for the anthology’s remarkable success in the 1960s and thereafter was its so-called innovational use of Bible paper. According to Shesgreen, “Bible paper had previously been shunned by anthologists: transparent and flimsy, it tears easily and bleeds profusely” (296–97). But the use of Bible paper allowed NAEL to offer sixty percent more content than its main competitor in a text that weighed twenty-five percent less, and more pages with less bulk allowed the printers to use a smaller format (octavo size rather than quarto size [297]). The new, flimsy-paper anthology was an unprece-dented success, but that success might be qualified by considering the degree to which substandard paper ultimately affected student perceptions of the literature printed on that paper. What message did the new medium communicate? Did the flimsy paper emphasize functionality over form, coding its printed contents as means to an end (e.g., an acceptable course grade) rather than as avenues of aesthetic exploration? In short, what is the rhetorical effect of cheap paper, especially as a medium for supposedly cherished literature?

Historically and conceptually, the anthology’s bookmaking innovation was hardly innovative. The flimsy paper is called Bible paper for a good reason: Bibles have a long history of being printed on cheap paper, as NAEL’s editors must have known. Similar tricks of cutting page costs to make Bibles more portable were used even before paper and printing: secular scribes in the thirteenth century wrote on “tissue-thin parchment” (Robinson 49) to create portable “Paris Bibles” “intended to meet the needs both of the student in the university classroom and the Mendicant preacher on a mission”
Printing-press technology itself developed only after papermaking technology reached Europe, bringing with it a cheaper alternative to parchment (Febvre and Martin 29–30).\(^1\) And in *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*, Ian Green demonstrates that “[c]anny publishers used nearly every trick in the book to expand markets and maximize profits” on Bible sales, including the use of “cheaper paper” (553). Like Shesgreen, in his discussion of Bible paper, scholars have focused on the increased portability, distribution, and ownership of cheaper Bibles. What tend to be overlooked, at least in current criticism, are the rhetorical effects of the surfaces on which words appear. This oversight is remarkable for three reasons. First, since recent textual criticism has been deeply influenced by D. F. McKenzie’s work on the “sociology of texts” and his view that “forms effect meaning” (13), we might expect to read more about paper, one of the book’s most basic forms. Second, paper is one of the formal features most legible to historical readers, especially the seventeenth-century readers I discuss here, who may not have understood the nuances of the printing press but who participated in and understood the nuances of the rags-to-paper economy. Third, as I will show, these readers actively commented on the rhetorical effects of paper quality.

Conversations (and controversies) about cheaply produced Bibles range through the dates and geographies covered in the *NAEL*, but in this essay I will consider the ways that the Protestant Reformation made the Bible—and, by extension, other books—more vulgar, to use a term associated with Bible translation and transmission. The Reformation’s doctrinal emphasis on personal reading and interpretation dramatically increased book ownership and literacy rates in Renaissance England as the Bible was made to be physically and intellectually grasped by readers in training.\(^2\) John Dryden famously decries the material effects of the Reformation: “The Book thus put in every vulgar hand. / Which each presump’d he best cou’d understand, / . . . / The tender Page with horney fists was gaul’d” (25; E1r).\(^3\) As Dryden’s critique suggests, physical graspability had interpretive consequences. Margreta de Grazia writes, “If words are to serve as transparent representations of things, their own thinglike or sensible properties must be overlooked” (231).\(^4\) For de Grazia, “the material properties of words” are “their duration as sound when spoken and their extension as marks when written” (233). To the thinglike properties of sound and symbol, I add texture. The texture of words—and the texture, especially, of the media on which “God’s words” were printed—was not overlooked by Renaissance readers, who had the capacity to recognize the things from which their texts were constructed. Examining the poetics of paper in Renaissance English texts, I assert the value of a critical approach that accounts for the rhetorical effects of what might be called “the natural history of the book.”

I begin with a discussion of paper quality and printing costs in Renaissance England that focuses on the books that most influenced literacy and reading practices there: vernacular Bibles. Though there are many voices and opinions in the debate over words as things in Reformation-era England, this essay is guided by one conversant in particular, Henry Vaughan (1621–95), who, while reading his “cheap” Bible (“To the Holy Bible,” line 16), is conscious of the intersecting lives of bookish words and natural matter in the past, present, and future. Vaughan offers a palimpsestic reading strategy that anticipates our own critical turn toward “polychronic” readings as articulated by Bruno Latour and Michel Serres and as convincingly applied to Renaissance literary criticism by Jonathan Gil Harris in his recent work *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*. Vaughan’s poem “The Book,” first printed in the second edition of *Siles Scintillans: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1655), relies on a read-
erly understanding of the social cycles of flax plants, among other things, as he itemizes the flora and fauna used to make his Bible (fig. 4, on page 338):

The Book.

Eternal God! maker of all
That have liv’d here, since the mans fall;
The Rock of ages! in whose shade
They live unseen, when here they fade.

Thou knew’st this papyrus, when it was
Meer seed, and after that but grass;
Before ‘twas dressed or spun, and when
Made linen, who did wear it then:
What were their lives, their thoughts & deeds
Whither good corn, or fruitless weeds.

Thou knew’st this tree, when a green shade
Cover’d it, since a cover made,
And where it flourish’d, grew and spread,
As it never should be dead.

Thou knew’st this harmless beast, when he
Did liee and feed by thy decrees
On each green thing; then slept (well fed)
Cloath’d with this skin, which now lies spread
A covering o’re this aged book,
Which makes me wisely weep and look
On my own dust; meer dust it is,
But not so dry and clean as this.
Thou knew’st and saw’st them all and though
Now scatter’d thus, dost know them so.

O knowing, glorious spirit! when
Thou shalt restore trees, beasts and men,
When thou shalt make all new again,
Destroying onely death and pain,
Give him amongst thy works a place,
Who in them lov’d and sought thy face!

Re-forming the Bible in Renaissance England

By the turn of the seventeenth century in England, vernacular Bibles were becoming cheap. They were made to be affordable, and as a result book ownership and literacy rates in England spikd. William H. Sherman claims that the Geneva Bible, “which went through more than 140 editions between the 1560s and the 1640s,” was probably “the most widely distributed book in the English Renaissance, and the one that played the most crucial role in changing the patterns of lay book ownership in the age of print” (71). In Renaissance England, according to Sherman, “literacy did not mean just reading; it meant reading the Bible” (72). The translation of God’s Word to a mass medium posed material challenges, and some readers were aghast at the poor quality of Bibles. William Prynne writes in Histrio-Mastix (1633) that some playbook “are grewne from Quarto into Folio; which yet beare so good a price and sale, that I cannot but with griefe relate it, they are now new-printed in farre better paper than most Octave or Quarto Bibles” (**6v). A printed marginal note adds,
“Shakespeers Plaies are printed in the best Crowne paper, far better than most Bibles.” Prynne’s complaint about the quality of paper in Bibles compared with that in Shakespeare’s First and Second folios suggests that the cheapness of Bible materials was inherently rhetorical. In a 1645 pamphlet, John Vicars appeals for a “Reformation” of the “sacred Book of God” and rails against the printing of Bibles filled with errors “wherby the sense is in very many places, feully corrupted and falsly mistaken” (“feully,” a misspelling of “foolly,” ironically reinforces Vicars’s point). Vicars further criticizes the “printing of our Bibles in very course and extreme thin and bad sinking-paper.” In Vicars’s view, Bible printing is a neglectful business that seeks after “filthy lucre” by using bad materials (7–8; A4r–v). These materials are not value-neutral, however, for they tend to affect Bible reading; errata may lead a reader astray, and “sinking-paper,” paper that is not well coated with gelatinous animal sizing, allows water-based handwriting ink to blot into its fibers, frustrating readers’ attempts to annotate the margins of their Bibles. Edward Leigh similarly condemns the use of cheap paper in Bible printing. His list of those who “unreverently handle the Scriptures” includes the usual suspects, such as atheists, papists, antinomians, and witches (38–41). Less predictably, printers “who print the Bible in bad paper” make the list ahead of heathens and Jews (41).

According to Green, “[t]he rapid expansion and diversification of bible production in England . . . was due primarily to a combination of God and Mammon” (98). He details English “publishers’ success in devising and disseminating cheaper, simpler bibles” to meet market demands (100). Publishers achieved this “diversification of formats,” Green demonstrates, not only by making Bibles increasingly smaller but also by manipulating paper quality (56–62). He shows evidence of folios being sold in three qualities of paper (superior, fine, and ordinary) and of quartos and octavos sold in two qualities of paper. Of course, cheaper production costs did not always mean that discounts were passed on to customers. In Scintilla; or, A Light Broken into Darke Warehouses (1641), Michael Sparke decries the “Monopolists” who were manipulating Bible prices (A1r). Sparke’s six-page pamphlet is filled with references to “quires”—used twenty-three times—and to relative paper quality: “thinne paper,” “good paper,” “Larger paper,” “better paper,” “best paper,” “excellent paper” (A2v–A3r). In one instance, Sparke complains that “Church Bibles of a thaner sort” were “cheaper” and “were excellent for poor Parishes” until the monopolists exploited the market (A2r). Sparke’s diatribe suggests the value of attending to what we might call the aesthetics of cheapness in relation to texts and especially paper. As Green notes, though there is a lack of reliable pricing data for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bibles, one can confidently discuss the relative cheapness of works and the rhetorical effects of the varied paper qualities discussed (and denounced) by Prynne, Vicars, and Sparke (39).

Even within individual printed texts, paper usage was not always consistent. According to David McKitterick, “[a]lthough printers usually endeavoured to ensure reasonable continuity of quality and colour throughout a volume, there were exceptions,” including a 1648 text printed on “stocks varying in colour between shades of brown and white,” a 1642 folio of the Greek New Testament printed on paper of different sizes, and a 1629 Bible composed of “[n]o less than seven different stocks, divided between discrete issues” (286). One must also consider the frequency with which discrete volumes were bound together, so that the variant paper qualities of Bibles and Bible aids (prayer books, metrical psalms, concordances, etc.) were juxtaposed. The expense of binding “meant that works rarely stood alone in self-enclosed units but were mixed with other works to save money” (Knight 309).
Leigh, who criticizes Bible printers for using bad paper stock, also repeats a material criticism of the printed Bible: “The Papists stile the Scripture . . . the black Gospell, inky Divinity” (40; G4v). When a printed Bible is accused of being a “black Gospell” and an “inky Divinity,” part of the criticism is that the communication of godly ideas is muddled in the process of textual production. For Catholics the Bible is supplemented by unwritten tradition, God’s direct, unmediated communication with the clergy. When the Bible is accorded sole authority, it becomes, in the view of Catholic critics, an idolatrous divinity made of ink. Or, materially, an idol made of flax, for the “basic constituent” of English printing ink in the period was linseed oil (Bloy 14).

Debates about the vernacular Bible in England, which centered on the issue of sola scriptura, were thus complicated by the practical means by which the Bible was made available to lay readers. In short, the Protestant Reformation and belief in sola scriptura gave rise to Bibles made cheaply of cheap materials. Bibles were more tangible, more accessible, and more handy. Their margins were markable, and readers were encouraged to write in them. Reformation Bibles were secular; what had previously been hand-copied by religious scribes was being mass-produced by merchants—sometimes with ghastly results, such as “The Wicked Bible,” a 1631 Authorized Version whose seventh commandment read, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Implicit in period debates about the Bible, the text that transformed reading practices in Renaissance England, is a debate about its material status as a set of metaphysical ideas bound up in the physical world.

Thomas More and William Tyndale, the early voices in debates over the introduction of vernacular Bibles in England during the reign of Henry VIII, disagreed about the role of the “unwritten”—that is, the mediating role of church tradition. Tyndale believed in sola scriptura, rejecting the authority of the church’s oral tradition. For More the biblical text was not the only source of revelation, and he rejected the grounds on which Tyndale wished to argue. As Germain P. Marchadour and Thomas M. C. Lawler point out, “More’s response [to Tyndale] . . . is not to quibble over the text of scripture but to interpret the sense of the passage in terms of the tradition of the church” (508). English translation (or mistranslation) was certainly a point of contention between More and Tyndale, but it has received more attention than the basic disagreement about textual authority. Essentially—or, rather, substantially—More and Tyndale argued over media and corruption. Tyndale distrusted the clergy as unreliable mediators between God and humans. Power corrupts. More, on the other hand, distrusted textual media as unreliable, citing as evidence the facts that some scripture has been lost, that we cannot know how much, and that parts of what we have are “corrupted” (Dialogue 115). Texts tend toward corruption, and that corruption is due not only to human error but also to material conditions. Paper is easily ripped, burned, and soaked. Bookworms are no respecters of crucial words, and knots of organic matter in the page can interrupt typography.

Words on Flax

Modern scholars in rare-book libraries can still see plants in paper. That is, we can still easily see what Vaughan saw when he looked at his Bible and recognized evidence of flax cultivation. The page space around and between words, frequently referred to as “white space,” is anything but white. Often assumed to be discolored by age, many of the brownish pages we encounter in archives have actually retained coloring from their production. For instance, the rivers that provided water for paper mills were not always pristine, especially in the spring (when they ran muddy)
or when the river banks were populated upstream. The stuff vat, the pot of macerated fibers used to make sheets of paper, contained about ninety-nine percent water, so it is no surprise that silty, muddy, or polluted water would render sheets of paper darker (Krill 9).

Looking more closely, one can see that the general impression of brownness is often enhanced by a network of flecks and fibers embedded in the page. They are so ubiquitous in early texts that they have become invisible to us. There are notable exceptions, however. Though most hairs in the pages of books are minuscule and one has to look closely to see them, it is harder to ignore long strands of hair that sometimes wind through the margins or printed areas of Renaissance books, even when the text on the page is not poeticizing the locks of a beloved. A feather embedded in a page of George Gascoigne's A Hundred Sundrie Flowres is even harder to overlook (426; Gg1v). Hairs are more common than feathers, but two varieties of vegetable matter are most commonly embedded in paper: bits and pieces of vegetable fibers that made their way into clothing (during flax processing) and then into paper and flecks of organic matter, presumably from riparian flora upstream, that were too small to be filtered out of the papermaker's vat. (Seasons and weather patterns could also affect the flecking of paper.) When one searches for readers' marks in books, flecks of organic matter can seem purposeful at first glance; in books where readers used small, marginal tick marks to highlight passages, it is sometimes hard to tell if a mark is made by pen on the paper or if the mark is organic matter in the paper. Occasionally a knot of organic matter embedded in the page will cause errors in the printed text, interrupting the type. Sometimes a large, husky piece of the stalk of the flax plant, known as a “shive,” appears in paper.12 An opening in a copy of the second edition of Thomas Hoby's trans-
lation of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1577) is particularly illustrative of the ecologies of textual production and consumption: a hair interrupts the impression of the typeface of a printed marginal note on the verso, a shive extends off the trimmed edge of the page from the margin of the recto, and a brown, iron-gall-ink manuscript note marks the page below the shive (fig. 1).

While describing another textual creature, a bookworm, Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) also points to the husks of flax visible in paper:

> This Animal [the bookworm] probably feeds upon the Paper and covers of Books, and perforates in them several small round holes, finding, perhaps, a convenient nourishment in those husks of Hemp and Flax, which have pass'd through so many scourings, washings, dressings and dryings, as the parts of old Paper must necessarily have suffer'd; the digestive faculty, it seems, of these little creatures being able yet further to work upon those stubborn parts, and reduce them into another form. (209–10; Ff1r–v)

Wormholes, in Hooke's summary, are further reminders of the organic nature of the page and of the other "form[s]" that flax has and can become. According to Heidi Brayman Hackel, "scatological uses for printed paper were often recorded and imagined" (81; see also Yates 107–08); the bookworm, it seems, quite literally cuts out the privy use of the middleman, leaving flax behind in "another form" and tempting one to comment on that which some books are full of.

The largest, most noticeable shive I have found, in a copy of the first printing of More's collected English writings (1557), bears the ink of a printed marginal note (fig. 2). Shives like this one are supposed to be eliminated in the process of converting plant to clothing. Their presence in the text is a reminder to Renaissance readers of the sartorial associations of paper. One might argue that, while some bibliographers prefer to focus on textual accidentals and substantives in the printed area, actual readers may have been more knowledgeable about this type of ecological accidental. A Renaissance reader may have known the Bible well enough to know that John 14, the cross-reference through which the shive cuts, is a passage in which Jesus explains the metaphysics of his incarnation. There is no intentional rhetorical interplay between words and matter, but there is the potential for it.

More striking even than bits of flax are swatches of cloth embedded in paper, like the one in Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex: The Law and the Prince* (1644; fig. 3). Appearing, appropriately, in "The Table of the Contents of the Book," the textured fabric, with threads unraveling into the text block, emphasizes the rag content of the book's pages. We will never know if a remarkable flax shive or an unpulped rag in the pages of Vaughan's Bible was the inspiration for his poem "The Book." We do know that Vaughan, like his contemporaries, comprehended the natural origins of paper and understood that flax had to be literally inhabited—broken in as clothing—before it could be used in papermaking.

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_Fig. 2_

Flax shive (19 x 1 mm) embedded beneath printed marginalia in Thomas More, *The Works of Sir Thomas More Knight* ... Wryten by Him in the Englysh Tonge (London, 1557; print; 1235; Z.26r; British Lib., C.11.b.15).
Flax and the Materials of Memory

Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin claim in their seminal study of book history that the growth of papermaking required a collaboration between the “industrial” and the “natural”: “The story, in brief, of the papermaking industry is that its development was always conditional on the supply of its raw materials” (33, 37). For instance, as papermaking spread westward from China, the technology had to accommodate geographic variances in plant species. In Europe “the extended cultivation of flax and hemp at the close of the Middle Ages . . . and the substitution of linen for wool in the making of underwear” created a timely “rag base” for the emerging paper industry (31). Furthermore, the symbiosis of the industrial and the natural did not necessarily end with a printed page. A book’s paper might have been used as toilet paper, reused as fertilizer for flax plants, then converted into linen underwear before once again providing pulp for paper.15

All these incarnations of flax—as plant, clothing, paper, and waste paper—remain simultaneously available. Present function does not obliterate past form. Clothing materials function economically and mnemonically, as Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have convincingly argued in Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory. John Donne repeatedly refers to his poems and prose as rags, summoning paper’s previous form at moments of artistic frustration (performative or actual) with an insufficient medium. For instance, in a poem appended

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Fig. 3

Cloth swatch (approximately 12 × 12 mm; enlarged here) embedded in paper in Samuel Rutherford, Lex, Rex: The Law and the Prince (London, 1644; print, C2r; Fisher Lib., U of Toronto, Forbes 00804). Photographed with standard light (left) and raking light (right) by Randall McLeod. Images courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.
to An Anatomy of the World he writes, “Can these memorials, ragges of paper, giue / Life to that name, by which name they must liue?” (“Fvneral Elegie,” lines 11-12; B7r). (Unlike the rest of the lines in the volume, those in “Fvneral Elegie” are visually “ragged”; every other line is indented.) Similarly, Donne refers to more than one of his letters as a “ragge of paper.”16 With a letter to Henry Goodyer, he includes a “ragge of verses” (“To Sir H. G.”; n.d.; Donne, Letters 88; M4v). In other letters, Donne further puns on “ragge” by referring to the “raggednesse” of his handwriting (“To Sir Thomas Lucy”; 4 Apr. 1619; Donne, Letters 224; F4v) and even allows paper rags and ragged writing to blur together, as when he writes, “Sir, you are used to my hand, and, I think have leisure to spend some time in picking out sense, in ragges” (“To Sir H. Wotton”; 4 Oct. 1622; Donne, Letters 136; S4v).

Rags—flax that has been further processed through inhabitation—frequently slide into associations with paper before they are actually put to that use, as when Dogrel in Abraham Cowley’s The Guardian (1650) says of the character Cutter, “Those breeches he wears, and his hat, I gave him: till then, he went like a Paper-mill all in rags” (B1v). Thomas Dekker and George Wilkins describe a writer so filled with vitriol that his words should appear on “paper made of the filthy linnen rags that had beene wrapt about the infected and vincible bodies of beggers, that had dyed in a ditch of the pestilence” (61; H3t). While Dekker and Wilkins imaginatively invoke pestilence-infected rags, Jean Baptiste Van Helmont, whose works were translated into English in 1664, resolves an actual dispute about pestilence by referring back to the flax origins of paper. He considers “whether a Letter that is closed with a linnen thred . . . be a partaker of contagion” and claims that “truly, paper is no lesse capable of contagion, than flax, from whence it is made” (1154; Gggggggggg3v). Perhaps the most compelling literary example of a garment’s persistent material associations appears in John Tatham’s play The Scots Figgaries; or, A Knot of Knaves (1652), when the Parson says, “Let Iezabell be brought before the Elders. . . . [J]et her smock be given to the Rag-men, it may come to be Paper, and her Condemnation writ in’t” (31; E4r). Here the broad industries of rag recycling, papermaking, and textual production are collapsed into a miniature economy where the clothing of an accused woman is made into a text that condemns her.

This smock-to-paper economy calls up the association of flax spinning with women’s labor. Margaret Cavendish likens flax spinning to writing (314-15; Rr1v-Rr2r). Juan Luis Vives pairs flax spinning and reading in the early education of a Christian woman (16-17). But Fiona McNeill has shown that because spinning did not provide a viable means of making a living in Renaissance England, the term “flax-wench” came to be associated with prostitution, and “spinsters and their tools routinely implied the opposite of chastity” (33). According to McNeill, in Twelfth Night “when Sir Toby assures Sir Andrew that his hair ‘hangs like flax on a distaff; and I hope to see a housewife take thee between her legs, and spin it off’ (1.3.99), he associates spinning flax, an even lower-paid labor than spinning wool, with syphilis, which stripped the hair” (33-34). Given that women were generally more experienced with flax than men and that the works I have cited suggest the legibility and rhetorical significance of paper grades, it is reasonable to infer that female readers possessed what we might call advanced literacy in the reading of textual media not only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but also well into the nineteenth. For until wood pulp replaced rags in papermaking, writers and readers actively participated in a material network of textiles and texts.
Flax Speaks

In a bookish ecological debate, the prosopopoetic plant and animal interlocutors in *Lusus Serius* or, *Serious Passe-time. A Philosophical Discourse concerning the Superiority of Creatures under Man* offer a unique historical perspective on the nature of books. Printed in Latin in 1616 and in English in 1654, *Lusus Serius*, by the German alchemist Michael Maier, presents eight representative animals, vegetables, and minerals arguing for the title “King of All Worldly Things Being Under the Command of Man” (138–39; G9v–G10r). Social utility, not natural prowess, is the subject of the debate among the plants, animals, and minerals, so instead of a lion arguing for his role as king of the beasts a sheep and a calf argue on behalf of the four-footed creatures. A goose argues for the birds, an oyster for the fish, a bee for the insects, a silk-worm for the creeping things, flax for the vegetables, and mercury for the minerals. Six out of the eight cite their textual roles as claims to preeminence: Sheep, Calf, Bee (source of wax tablets), and Flax all point out their usefulness in producing writing surfaces; Goose cites his quills; and Mercury invokes his role in making movable metal type.

In *Lusus Serius*, Flax tells his own story as well as any history of the book has presented it. Flax maintains that his growth “requires abundance of Labor in the preparation” but that humans are willing to go to all the trouble because of the benefits reaped from him. He then describes the process of planting and manuring the seeds, of tending the plant, and of harvesting it in preparation for making medicine, oil, or linen ([72]–74; D12v–E1v). The making of linen is especially difficult, and Flax offers a detailed account of cultivating, harvesting, combing out the seeds, allowing the plants to putrify in water, drying, cooking, pounding, separating with cleavers, separating with hackels, spinning, washing, drying (again), bundling, weaving, and finally cutting and stitching (73–74; E1r–v). All these steps, from flax sowing to linen wearing, take more than a year (Shammas 254). Even after the tedious, time-consuming process of working flax, there remain bits of what Flax calls the “rind”—which appear in clothing and later in paper as shives (figs. 1 and 2).

Converting flax to linen was worth the trouble because linen had a double life; after praising the uses of linen “while it is whole,” Flax speaks of the value of linen rags:

[When Linnen hath been so oft foul’d and apply’d to so many uses, and that so long, till it fall in pieces, behold a new production. For the raggs both of Linnen and cloth, be they never so much sullied, or torn, are gathered together to be carried to the Paper-mill, where they make their choice and wash them, and then steep them in water till they be in a manner putrifed, then they best them into a kinde of poultice, which being made very thin, and besprinkled with water, or laid upon little nets of Wire, is made Paper ... [which] brings innumerable helps to the conversation of man.

Having emphasized his role in human “conversation,” Flax concludes that “from Flaxe and Linnen there arises a new thing . . . like the Phoenix out of her owne ashes” (82–83; E5v–E6r).

In his closing arguments, Flax stakes his reputation on his role in the history of the book. He argues that printing on paper is superior to writing on animal skins because it makes possible the mass dissemination of ancient writings recorded on such older, scarcer forms of media. He points out the cost of materials for writing and reading and claims that “we must necessarily inuer, that in that time men of lower Fortunes were withdrawn and deterr’d from their Study, by those two great difficulties, the matter upon which they should write, and the dearness of Bookes” (84; E6v). He gives examples of poor philosophers writing in the sand for lack of materials and builds to the conclusion that “by the
Courtesie of *Flaxe*, the poorest man may have enough wherewithall to read, whereby to learne, and wherein he may dispose all things he hath either read, or hath been taught (85; E7v). Flax’s material cost-benefit analysis of the textual dissemination of ideas might as well be a pitch for the Reformation Bible or NÆL.

The grandest claim to preeminence that Flax makes, though, is that he is the fundamental matter not only of paper but also of the entire book:

> Pray look upon printed books, of what consist they? marry Flaxe, and for the Letters the greatest part of them is Oyle of Linseed thinned, unto which I adde, some Paper burn’d till it be black, (as it well may be) or any other smock made of Linseed, you have an Inke to print any Book. Therefore a whole printed book consists onely of Flaxe. Nor can any other claje a share in it, whether you will consider the Threads, or any thing else by which it is bound. (88; E8v; 2nd italics mine)

Flax argues that in a book bound only by stitching, he is solely responsible for all the materials (a significant claim for flax that I have not found elsewhere). Mercury, however, is unimpressed. Speaking on behalf of the minerals, he undermines Flax’s claim with an argument that seems surprisingly protoindustrial: Mercury makes metals, and metals make machines, and machines make the rest of nature serve as fodder. Mercury’s metal printing type is superior to all the other writing materials, he claims, so long as Flax’s paper and printing ink will be his “drudges” (129; G5r).

**Vaughan’s Palimpsested Pages**

If Mercury is superior to his interlocutors in *Lusus Serius*, he is noticeably absent from Vaughan’s poem, which focuses on the ecological remainders that a reader could have identified, not on the technological apparatuses used by printers. When Vaughan looks at his Bible’s pages, he sees seeds and flax and plants and linen. These things, like the words printed on them, have meaning for him. Like many seventeenth-century readers, he still lives in close proximity to the materials that make his paper. He inherits “1 small flax wheele,” used for spinning flax into thread, at his father’s death (Hutchinson 17–19). He wears clothing that can be recycled when it grows threadbare. And he knows the value of various types of paper. Had Vaughan happened upon a copy of *Lusus Serius* in the year he was completing the second edition of *Silex Scintillans*, he might have been pleased to see two of his own works advertised at the back of the book—though on a supplemental quire of paper visibly inferior to the paper on which the primary text was printed (Maier, quire 2A).

Unlike *Lusus Serius* and *Silex Scintillans*, Vaughan’s Bible is not extant. The plants and animals “scatter’d thus” in its bookish form have probably been further scattered. Perhaps bookworms fed on the husks of flax in his “aged book.” We can study the “flagrantly polychronic” Archimedes Palimpsest described by Jonathan Gil Harris, on which “[m]edieval liturgical script, modern forged image, and classical philosophical text” are layered and still discreetly legible (13), but we cannot examine Vaughan’s Bible and study its polychronic layers. Vaughan does give us some clues about the Bible, though. We know that he, or the poetic persona of *Silex Scintillans*, learned to read from his Bible (“To the Holy Bible” 5–8), a “cheap Book” that was given to him as a child (16). From Vaughan’s scripture quotations, we are fairly certain his Bible was an Authorized Version (first printed in 1611), with wording heavily influenced by Tyndale’s translation (Daniell 1). Like many extant Bibles from which children (and adults) learned to read, Vaughan’s Bible probably had markings in it—doodles, pen trials, practice letters, and maybe the death and birth records of those whose lives intersected it.17

We know Vaughan knew his Bible’s ecological origins. (Like many scholars, I
read "The Book" as a poem about a Bible.)"18

Vaughan observes that his Bible’s paper is
made from flax and its cover from the wood of
a tree and the skin of a “beast” (probably a
calf). "To see the world of nature as a book
was a Medieval and Renaissance commonplace,”
writes Alan Rudrum; "Vaughan’s originality is to see the world of nature in a
book" (Henry Vaughan 641). By itemizing the
ecological composition of a Bible, Vaughan
draws a reader’s attention beyond—and at
times away from—transcendent religious
ideas and toward its mundane matter. Dis-
cussing "The Book" as a prime example of
"hylozoic poetry," Diane Kelsey McColley
claims, "Part of ecological thinking is know-
ing where our artifacts come from, with what
cost to the earth, to habitats, to species, to
dividuals of those species, and in human

labor" (113). “The Book” itself, printed on
flax-flecked paper like the Bible it describes,
similarly recalls the natural history of the
media through which it is conceived (fig. 4).

While the poem emphasizes textual ecolo-
\gy, it further insists on the rhetorical value
of flora and fauna that are visible in sixteenth-
and seventeenth-century texts. The natural
media are part of the message. “The Book”
suggests that the visible traces of textualized
animals and plants could inflect the acts of
reading and interpretation. Composed and
printed during a century of religious refor-
mation and scientific revolution, the poem raises
a crucial question: how should one resolve the
tension between ideas and the natural mat-
ter that mediates those ideas in the forms of
texts? For Vaughan, questions about the roles
of plants and animals in a Bible can lead one

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**Fig. 4**

Henry Vaughan,
"The Book" and "To
the Holy Bible."
to meditate on materialism, religion, eternity, corruption, and mediation. Harris claims that “English Renaissance writers repeatedly recognize the polychronic dimensions of matter—the many shaping hands, artisanal and textual, that introduce into it multiple traces of different times, rendering the supposedly singular thing plural, both physically and temporally” (19–20). “The Book” is exceptional for its ability to draw multiple temporalities and actors (human and nonhuman) into a conversation about the translation of ideas into matter that is centered on concerns about the textual corruption of Bibles.

The structural features of the poem place special emphasis on the lines “Which makes me wisely weep and look / On my own dust” (20–21), a moment of temporal connection among natural things, an “aged book,” an “Eternal God,” and a reader who has become acutely aware of his own mortality. The lines gather all the scattered, corruptible textual elements into an intensely personal and poetic insight; the forms of Vaughan’s Bible effect meaning, to use McKenzie’s language. In the midst of the fourth stanza, there is a decided shift as the poet turns his gaze away from the animal skin that covers the book and toward his own skin. Line 20 acts as a volta, or turn, in the poem, shifting the emphasis from book to reader and from description to meditation. Given the stanzaic structure to this point, line 20 should be the sixth and final line of the fourth stanza. However, it enjambs into the subsequent line, “On my own dust; meer dust it is,” so that the expected sestet and quatrain form one ten-line stanza. (Even if the stanza were split into a sestet and quatrain, the enjambment linking such stanzas would still call attention to lines 20–21.) Though the poem is lyrical, the speaker does not refer to himself until line 20, where the initial first-person pronoun appears. The pronouns used by the speaker to this point in the poem are “they,” “Thou,” “this,” and “it.” Lines 20–21, where one expects the stanzaic break, are the most personal and intimate in the poem: the “me” and “my” in these two lines are the only first-person pronouns in the poem.

In the final stanza, the poet refers to himself again, but he does so in the third person (“him” [29]). By the time we reach the concluding lines, the charged moment of present-tense recognition highlighted in lines 20–21 is past, and the poet concludes with a hopeful prayer: “Give him amongst thy works a place, / Who in them lov’d and sought thy face!” (29–30). The last stanza looks forward to another temporality: the day of resurrection, when God will “restore trees, beasts and men” and “make all new again” (26–27). These lines also introduce a paradox: on the day when God restores all things to their perfect form, does the Bible remain a Bible, made from dead plants and animals? Or does it revert to living matter? Are plants and animals more perfect than the printed Word of God? As one critic observes, “Other poets of the time liked to expatiate on the ultimate reunion of the body’s dispersed dust,” but “Vaughan gives an individual turn to the idea when he reflects that the flax . . . the tree . . . and the animal . . . will all be restored in eternity to their original form” (Mahood 39–40). For Vaughan the corruptible text is reanimated by the poet’s awareness of the visible, persistent, perfectible materials from which it is made. The “them” in the last line is crucial because it is ambiguous; it allows one to imagine Vaughan seeking God’s face in his Bible and in the plants and animals with which his Bible is made.

**Vaughan’s Bible as a Book of Nature**

The second stanza, in which Vaughan recalls paper’s plant origins, perhaps best exemplifies the social ecology of texts, a phrase I want to use to put McKenzie’s “sociology of texts” into conversation with the practice of making texts from natural resources. McKenzie insists that bibliography is a study not only of “texts as recorded forms” but also of “production
and reception” (12), and he argues that bibliography and literary criticism can “show the human presence in any recorded text” (29). Bibliography and literary criticism can also recover nonhuman actors in the networks of textual production, and Vaughan’s close reading of his own Bible models such critical work. Human and nonhuman presence is accounted for in Vaughan’s discussion of the tree and the beast (the tree is “a Cover made” [12]; the beast’s skin is “spred” over the cover, or book boards [18])—but his meditation on his Bible’s paper offers the most detailed consideration of the ways nature and society commingle in Renaissance texts. In six lines, Vaughan takes us from a material description of a seed that became paper to a metaphoric abstraction in which “weeds” signify ungodliness. Vaughan italicizes the key terms in this progression from seed to grass that was “drest” and “spun” into “linen” that those “did wear” whose lives were like “corn” or “weeds.” More than half the italicized words in the poem appear in this stanza. Most striking in this italic highlighting is the way in which Vaughan links the “papyr” of his Bible to its plant origins (further emphasized by the unusual spelling, which recalls papyrus), then links the people who wore the linen to organic metaphors found in his Bible. In Vaughan’s reading, then, we see not only the vegetable origins of textual materials but also the vegetable origins of metaphors inscribed on textual materials.

This stanza draws together multiple temporalities into a time-bound reflection on the matter palimpsested in a Bible’s paper. Though Vaughan imagines the lives of linen wearers he cannot see, he is not simply imagining. He is extrapolating from material proof. Just as he can knock on the cover of a Bible and hear the difference between book boards made from a tree’s wood and those made from pasteboard, just as he can look at the cover of his Bible and see that it is made from an animal’s skin, so can he look at the pages and see that they are made from flax.

The evidence is in the paper, which is a palimpsest of natural growth, social processing, and textual production. Vaughan frames himself as a somewhat literate reader who can spell out the remains of plants and people in his pages, but he speaks to God as to an adept reader who perfectly comprehends the life of the plant and its wearers.

By invoking the lives of the linen wearers, Vaughan also invokes what Jones and Stallybrass have called the “material mnemonics” of clothing: “The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . are of particular interest in the history of clothing because clothes were still material mnemonics in metropolitan centers even as they were becoming the commodities upon which international capitalism was founded” (11). Rags hold economic value as papermaking materials, but rags also hold sentimental value: “the most worn-out piece of clothing can materialize an absent lover” (14). As I have shown, the idea that the past lives of clothes wearers haunt the present life of paper is not original to Vaughan. However, Vaughan lets us see more levels of accretion in paper: the growth and harvesting of a plant, the handiwork of the spinners and cloth makers, and the lives of the wearers. Vaughan realizes that the new text has not obliterated the old memories woven and worn into its constituent materials.

James Simmonds offers a valuable formalist reading that helps one see how flaxen object and poetic subject converse in “The Book.” Focusing on themes of “decay and preservation, the continuous transfiguration of life to death and death to life” in the poem (Masques 162–63), Simmonds convincingly argues that Vaughan’s interaction with nature was more bookish than experiential and that his poetry is best read as conversant with seventeenth-century religion, not nineteenth-century Romantics. In other words, “The Book” is a poem about ideas and matter, not a poem about being ecologically aware. Simmonds establishes the way “The Book”
works within the meditative poetic form. He acknowledges that the poem “involves medita-
tion on the creatures”—a type of medita-
tive poetry that draws doctrine from natural
observation—but claims that, in “The Book,”
the meditation on the creatures is part of a
more “basic pattern of meditation on death,
of which the book is an emblem” or memento
mori (“ Vaughan’s “The Book” ” 323, 325). “The
subject of the meditation is death,” he writes;
“its object... is the Bible perceived as a ma-
terial thing” (Masques 161).

One is tempted, in the spirit of mate-
rional culture studies and book history, to fix-
ate on the object, but Simmonds’s statement
that the subject is death reminds us that the
poem, with all its ecological description, is
rhetorical. I conclude by slightly amending
Simmonds’s insight: the subject of the poem
is corruptibility, not death, and its object is
a printed Bible made of culturally processed
natural resources, a Bible that is a palimpse-
st of plants and animals, social circulation,
religious tradition, and textual production.
Nature is part of the book’s poetic form. In a
moment of temporal insight, Vaughan looks at
the pages of his Bible and recognizes its poly-
chronic layers. He imagines the past and sees
the separate lives of actors. He looks at the
present, the book in his hands, and sees the
actors’ deaths. The book he holds is dead mat-
ter: his Bible is corrupt. The reader is corrupt.
His only source of hope is to look to the future
and envision the restoration. Material corrup-
tion can be reversed, for the dead matter that
inflects “The Book” when it appears in print
also preserves the quintessence of that matter.
Corruption and death in Vaughan’s cosmos
are not final. Matter is corruptible, but only to
a point. The structure of “The Book” contrasts
the earthly flux of material, time-bound cre-
ation with the heavenly stability of a creator
unbound by time or matter: “Eternal God,”
“Rock of ages,” “knowing, glorious spirit.”

For Vaughan, the interference—and inter-
reference—of things with words indicates a
broader tension between creator and created,
between the supreme idea and the dusty mat-
ter of human experience. A sense of longing
threads Silex Scintillans, an urgent insistence
on finding what is lost. And Vaughan most of-
ten looks for lost truth in the Bible and in na-
ture. “No book of seventeenth-century poetry
bears more obvious signs of the impress of
the Authorized Version of the Bible than Silex
Scintillans,” writes E. C. Pettet (32); and yet,
as another scholar has noted, “Vaughan is the
only metaphysical poet ever to be accused of
being a poet of nature” (Christopher 170). The
final couplet of “The Book” epitomizes the
seeking poetry of Silex Scintillans that looks
to the Bible and the Book of Nature for truth:
“Give him amongst thy works a place, / Who
in them lov’d and sought thy face?” Vaughan
seeks God’s face in the flora and fauna around
him and the flora and fauna from which his
Bible is fashioned. Vaughan’s Bible and the
Book of Nature merge in this closing line.
Words are things, and although—or possibly
because—both are corruptible, they allow the
poet and his creator to converse in a temporal
recognition that sees eternity in a seed of flax.

In Shakespeare and the Book, David Scott
Kastan makes what, in the wake of McKen-
zie’s sociology of texts, “is, or should be, a
self-evident assertion: that the material form
and location in which we encounter the writ-
ten word are active contributors to the mean-
ing of what is read” (2; emphasis mine). I have
emphasized location in this essay by focusing
on flax, a geographically determined natural
resource from which Western books were
made from the 1400s through the late 1800s.
I have offered what might be called a natural
history of the book by nudging the human-
istic study of texts into a conversation about
the ways in which the nonhuman etiologies of
texts impact cultural discourse. And while
this essay focuses on cheap Bibles in Renais-
sance England and their rhetorical effects on
rag-recycling readers like Vaughan, I would
argue that attending to the social ecology of texts allows for more nuanced readings of poetic form in texts as varied as millennia-old Eastern palm-leaf books and the latest, arsenic-free iPad, housed in a “recyclable aluminum and glass enclosure” (“iPad”).

Notes

I am grateful to Darlene Farabee, Virginia Garnett, Heidi Brayman Hackel, Randall McLeod, Kristen Poole, Lois Potter, Peter Stallybrass, Jonathan Walker, Thomas Ward, and Julian Yates for reading, engaging with, and challenging these ideas at various stages. The essay is most indebted to Misty.

1. According to Febvre and Martin, “there was nothing to prevent” the development of printing in the fourteenth century except “one primary material without which it would have been impossible, namely paper” (29–30). On the cheapness of paper relative to parchment, see Lyall 11; Thomas 16–18; and Stevenson 49–50.

2. Lori Anne Ferrell similarly claims that the textbook-like, “portable, material, ubiquitous” Paris Bibles were “symbols of a changing, increasingly intimate relationship between the Bible and ordinary people” (38).

3. In this essay, I cite both page numbers and signatures. When page numbers are not given in the source, I use only signatures.

4. Bone and Harrison have written broader, book-length studies of the changing dynamics of words and things that pay particular attention to the cultural impact of Reformation theology and the Scientific Revolution.

5. This semidiplomatic transcription retains orthography, initial capitals, and italics and silently emends spacing. Fig. 4 offers an image of the poem as originally printed.


7. See also Darlow and Moule, who reprint Scintilla along with a short introduction to early-seventeenth-century Bible prices (189–94).


9. Knight emphasizes the “proximate or ‘material intertextuality’” of these composite volumes (338). I am grateful to him for sharing his essay in advance of publication.

10. See Tilenus for an earlier (1606) use of “incone-Diunitie” and “blacks Gospell” (A2r).

11. “Whyther the apostles left aught unwritten, that is of necessity to be bylued” was, according to More, “that

matter, whychse is vndoubtedly one of the most specyall poyntes that are in debate bytwene these heretyques and vs” (More, Confutation 254).

12. Daniell claims that More’s criticism of Tyndale is fundamentally an objection to his translation of “four key New Testament words (presbuteros, ekklasia, agape, metanoeo)” (269).


15. On human waste as fertilizer for cultivated plants, see Cockayne 184.

16. 264 (L44v), 303 (Q4r); see also Oliver 56, 91–92. Oliver’s edition includes additional examples of Donne’s rag puns (47, 80, 93).

17. Sherman 76–86. Dickson provides extant examples of Vaughan’s book annotations.

18. See Christopher 181; Lewalski 346–47; Prineas 344, 355, Simmonds, Musques 181–62; cf. McColley 114–15. Rudrum disagrees but does not offer a counterargument (Rev. 426). Bolstering arguments in support of such a reading, the physical relation between the two poems creates an interface between the “aged book” described beneath the header “The Book” and the old, used Bible addressed as “O Book!” in the facing, opening lines of “To the Holy Bible” (fig. 4).

19. The word papyr recalls the material history of the Bible; for a brief, visual introduction to this history, see the online exhibit From Papyrus to King James: The Transmission of the English Bible.

20. Here Vaughan seems to be merging “corn of wheat” from John 12.24 with the parable of the wheat and the tares from Matthew 13.24–30.

21. For suggesting that this essay is as much about etiology as ecology, I am grateful to Marshall Groosman.

22. But see Goleman and Norris on the undisclosed materials used in making iPads and Kindles; see also Engelhaup 4245.

Works Cited


———. "To the Holy Bible." *Vaughan, Silex 81–82; H1r–v.

