‘A good Booke is the preitious life-blood of a master-spirit’: Recollecting Relics in Post-Reformation English Writing

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Introduction

[1] In Ancient Funerall Monuments, John Weever describes how ‘Reliques were euer holden in most reuerend regard, amongst all sorts of people, insomuch that in the taking of any solemne oath, they vsed to lay their hand vpon certain Reliques, as they did vpon the holy Euangelists’ (1631: P2v). His words point to what was seen in post-Reformation England as a perilously close relationship between sacred texts and relics. In medieval ecclesiastical jurisdiction as well as in liturgical practice, relics are interchangeable with the Bible, and thus they are particularly dangerous objects in the eyes of Protestant reformers striving to assert the singular authority of holy scripture. Swearing oaths on the Bible employs the book in a way which does not demand literacy – even without being opened, it has some kind of power which can be absorbed by touch, rather than through the intellectual engagement of reading.[1] In his recent discussion of the perceived dangers of the Reformation-era relic as a focus for lay piety, James Kearney contends that ‘the holiness of the relic is a function of its contiguity with the world and the flesh [...] Its materiality is not incidental to its meaning, but essential to it. Relics even more than images have the potential to lead to a misunderstanding of the sacred’ (2009: 58). Perhaps more so than the religious statue or icon, in its three-dimensionality the relic is a contentious object throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth because of the questions its materiality provokes: what exactly a reliquary contains and how it can be accessed is inextricably linked to the broader ideological dilemmas debated during and after the decades of the English Reformation.

[2] Recent criticism across several disciplines has drawn attention to the complex anxieties surrounding the material aspects of religious culture in England during and after the Reformation. One major area of discussion is that of changing attitudes towards sacred space; the Protestant battle for control over the sacred in the material world is now generally agreed to be one of modification and adaptation rather than simply eradication.[2] As Alexandra Walsham has persuasively argued, ‘the Protestant religion did not entirely relinquish the idea that the created world might be a vessel for supernatural grace’ (2005: 235). Walsham’s words bring in an important image here: the question of what exactly could serve as a ‘vessel’ of divine power is intensified in the reliquary as a religious object with troubling material and spiritual contents. My purpose in this essay is to examine some of the ways in which the relic persists as a powerful literary metaphor in post-Reformation English writing. Even after relics are literally and rhetorically attacked by royal injunctions in the 1530s, the image of the reliquary – an often ornate vessel containing blood or bones – endures well into the seventeenth century as a way of thinking about what a book or text might contain as a physical object which possesses some kind of intangible, numinous power. John Weever’s observation about the literal proximity of books and relics still has a certain truth, even in the seventeenth century: physical contact with a book, as with a relic, is sometimes as important as intellectual or spiritual engagement with its contents.

[3] I begin with a case study from the middle of the seventeenth century. John Milton’s pamphlet Areopagitica was published in November 1644 after the licensing order of 1643, and his defence of the
liberty of the printing press is constructed through a rich variety of metaphors, many of which engage closely with the materiality of printed books. In Areopagitica, as Joad Raymond observes in his work on the growth of the pamphlet as a literary and political form throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Milton is ‘supremely conscious of books as physical objects, and the experience of writing, handling, reading and smelling them inhabits his argument’ (2003: 272). Milton’s metaphor of the ‘good Booke’ as ‘the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalmd and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life’ – is one of the most arresting and oft-quoted from this pamphlet. He famously asserts that ‘books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them’, counselling that ‘We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labours of publick men, how we spill that season’d life of man preserv’d and stor’d up in Books’. This is because, we are warned, ‘who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroys a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye’ (492). Books hold within them something which as a pure ‘extraction’ on the printed page is a physical manifestation of the contents of the writer’s mind.

[4] This depiction of the book in positive terms as a kind of relic – an object which preserves within its pages some residual numinous qualities of the author – startles partly because of the strong Catholic resonances it invokes in a text in which the Church of Rome is held primarily responsible for the invention of licensing, and in which Roman Catholicism is proscribed from Milton’s outline of liberty in relation to the printing press (565). Throughout the pamphlet Milton criticises Catholic institutions for their history of ruthless licensing and censorship: ‘Nor did they stay in matters Hereticall, but any subject that was not to their palat, they either condemn’d in a prohibition, or had it strait into the new Purgatory of an Index’ (503). At the Reformation, he claims, they ‘sought out new limbo’s and new hells wherein they might include our Books also within the number of their damned’ (506). Milton’s criticism of the Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition (they ‘engendring together brought forth or perfeted those Catalogues and expurging Indexes that rake through the entralls of many an good old Author, with a violation wors then any could be offer’d to his tomb’, 503) resonates with his depiction of the post-publication censorship of books in particularly graphic and emotive terms as ‘a kind of homicide’, ‘a martyrdom’, or even, if the entire edition is destroyed, ‘a kinde of massacre’. In latter such cases the action ‘strikes at that ethereall and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe; slaies an immortality rather then a life’ (493). Later in his argument, Truth also becomes embodied: Milton writes of doing ‘our obsequies’ to ‘the torn body of our martyr’d Saint’ as it lies, ‘torn’ like a leaf in a book deliberately damaged and defaced by censors perpetrating a kind of iconoclasm (550). Volumes threatened by licensing become like reliquaries, sacred vessels which preserve ‘as in a violl’ an ‘ethereall and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe’ long after the author’s death.

[5] Elsewhere in his writings, Milton explicitly derides relics and other devotional objects as the paraphernalia of a ‘Paradise of Fools’. By this point in the mid-seventeenth century, relics were often the subject of ridicule in English literary culture; a broadsheet ballad, for example, satirises many relics including ‘a Bottle of Tears/ Preserv’d many years,/Of Mary’s that once was a sinner’. Richard Overton’s New Lambeth fayre (1642) similarly mocks the church of Rome and her relics, but in the same year the printers of this pamphlet also produced an anonymous pamphlet which reported with genuine dismay and suspicion the landing on the Cornish coast of Spanish ships intended for Ireland, in which were found many relics, including ‘a little water in a very small Vessell, which the Priests say is Mary Magdalens Teares’ (1642: A2v). Thus when Areopagitica was first published, the relic was associated
with a religion that at best was seen as foreign and old-fashioned, and at worst, suspicious and dangerous. Through his vivid imagery, Milton seizes on the identity of the relic as an object with a materiality that is challenging and culturally charged, and his language engages with the problematic material and spiritual characteristics of the relic in post-Reformation culture.

Milton’s polemical text is an extreme example of how the concept of the relic – as something which preserves both the material and the spiritual, treasuring up an intangible ‘essence’ – is brought into close proximity with ideas about writing and books in seventeenth-century England, in contrast with the literal juxtaposition of books and relics in previous centuries, as described by John Weever. In this essay I examine several encounters with relics and books in England and abroad from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, synthesising some important cultural and textual points of contact between relics and books. Such moments of contact, often expressed in more explicit ways than in Milton’s text, point to challenging questions about the location of the numinous or the sacred in the material world during this period, especially in human or literary remains. The first two sections of the essay, set in England and Rome as contrasting locations in post-Reformation Europe, examine the discourses surrounding relics as objects which must be alternatively believed in, interpreted, or challenged. The narratives I discuss demonstrate how relics may be deconstructed as profane objects which trick and deceive through their multiple layers of matter and rhetoric. Building on the ways in which these relics draw in both the faithful and their critics, in the final section I return to the persistence of the relic as literary metaphor, exploring how the image of a sacred vessel filled with blood or bones presents such an appealing way into thinking about what texts and books might contain as material objects.

I: Remembering English Relics

Erasmus visited the Marian shrine at Walsingham, Norfolk, in 1512. His satirical dialogue Peregrinatio religionis ergo (A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake), based on his experiences there and at other European pilgrimage sites, was first published in 1526, and so not long before statues, images, and relics were destroyed and forbidden in England.[6] One of the two speakers, Ogygius, has recently visited the famous shrines at Compostela, Canterbury, and Walsingham, and he describes the scene at the latter to his friend Menedemus, mentioning in particular that some of the Virgin Mary’s breast milk is displayed ‘on the high altar’. Their discussion continues thus (632-3):

Menedemus So it’s in plain sight.
Ogygius Enclosed in crystal, that is.
Menedemus Therefore liquid.
Ogygius What do you mean, liquid, when it flowed fifteen hundred years ago? It’s hard: you’d say powdered chalk, tempered with white of egg.
Menedemus Why don’t they display it exposed?
Ogygius To save the virginal milk from being defiled by the kisses of men.

Ogygius also recounts how he obtained his own secondary relic (a piece of wood on which Mary ‘was seen to stand’) which he treasured away in his purse, planning to ‘set it in gold, but so that it shines through crystal’. Ogygius insists that he cured an insane man with this relic, and in response to Menedemus’s scepticism, protests ‘To make fun of the saints is neither reverent nor prudent’ (637-641).
Menedemus’s questions about the way the relic of the crystal bottle of milk is displayed betray Erasmus’s suspicion of relics as potentially deceitful objects whose contents are not fully ‘exposed’, as does Ogygius’s implication that some relics, in contrast to this one, might be forged from ‘powdered chalk’. [7]

[8] Nevertheless, it is by virtue of being contained (and stored securely, often being hidden away in the less accessible, dark recesses of religious buildings – at Walsingham there is ‘very little light: only what comes from tapers’, 629) that blood, bones, and even gold and jewels become exclusive, sacred objects. As Ogygius reveals, only favoured visitors are allowed to come near the most precious treasures at both Canterbury and Walsingham, and even fewer are allowed to touch the contents of the coffers and reliquaries. Thus the opening of a holy object is tightly controlled and may be dramatically staged to orchestrate responses to it; Ogygius describes how at Canterbury in the tomb of Thomas Becket, a ‘wooden chest conceals a golden chest’ and he recalls that ‘When the cover was removed, we all adored’ the gold and jewels it contained (645). Similarly, in the sacristy, he was allowed a glimpse of some linen rags supposedly used by Becket to wash himself: ‘a chest with a black leather cover was brought out, placed on the table, and opened. Immediately everyone worshipped on bended knee’ (647). Such opening and displaying of the reliquary or coffer is crucial in emphasising the object’s value. [8] The medieval relic embodies a particular tension then, as an exclusive object which is enclosed and locked away secretly but at the same time represents an overflowing, outpouring of spiritual grace. [9]

[9] As Erasmus’s dialogue illustrates, gazing, kissing, and interceding were all ritual elements of the veneration of both primary and secondary relics. Ogygius claims that in response to his Marian intercession ‘the sacred milk appeared to leap up, and the Eucharistic elements gleamed somewhat more brightly’ (633). According to this description the bottle of milk seems to contain, to use Milton’s phrase, ‘a potencie of life’ manifested in its apparent agency when activated by words of prayer. Patrick Geary outlines the three principle interconnected beliefs that had to be held communally for the acceptance of a particular relic in medieval culture: that the person was a genuine saint, that their earthly remains should be venerated, and that the remains being venerated were those of the person in question (1986: 169-194). As he points out, the latter question of authenticity could be tested through examination of the tomb or reliquary for documentary evidence of some kind, and could be confirmed by the supernatural intervention of the saint himself in the performance of miracles via his remains. To this end, Erasmus’s cynicism is further implied through Ogygius’ interaction with the guide at the shrine. Ogygius recalls asking ‘what proof he had that this was the Virgin’s milk’, explaining that he wanted to know this ‘clearly for the pious purpose of stopping the mouths of certain unbelievers who are accustomed to laugh at all these matters’. In response, Ogygius reveals, the guide, ‘as if possessed, gazed at us in astonishment, and as though horrified by such blasphemous speech, said, “What need is there to inquire to that when you have an authentic record?”’ (633). Ogygius and his interpreter search out the ‘record’, finding it ‘hung so high it could not be read by just any eyes’, and thus literally elevated, like the relic it claims to verify (634). The document relates the biography of the relic in great detail, and after reading it Ogygius ‘was ashamed of having doubted, so clearly was the whole thing set before my eyes – the name, the place, the story, told in order. In a word, nothing was omitted’ (634-5). This apparently comprehensive document suffices to confirm his belief in the veracity of the reliquary’s contents. On a reliquary, as Seeta Chaganti rightly suggests, ‘inscription counted itself as an important enshrining sign’ (2008: 92). As evidenced by relics which survive today, the bones inside a reliquary may be inscribed directly with the name of the saint they are believed to belong to. The written word is important in cementing the tradition and identity of relics and for the faithful, the combination of relic and text
presents an assured truth about the presence of the sacred in matter.

[10] Visitors to medieval shrines wanted proof that they had seen or touched holy relics, and this demand for souvenirs nurtured pilgrimage industries. At Walsingham, second only to Canterbury as a site of pilgrimage in England, souvenirs for sale included a miniature monstrance enclosing a replica of the shrine’s vial of milk, labelled *lac Marie*. As Brian Spencer comprehensively illustrates, ampullae – small vials which could be filled with water from holy springs or wells – were the predominant type of pilgrim souvenir between the sixth and fourteenth centuries, before they began to be replaced by badges (1998: 147). Usually cast in tin or lead, they could be decorated with inscriptions or depictions of the saint’s martyrdom, or formed in the shape of a miniature church or a pilgrim’s scallop shell. Spencer observes that ampullae were made in a range of sizes to suit all budgets, but he suggests also that the minute dimensions of some of them might have served to emphasise the preciousness of their thaumaturgic contents (1998: 41). At Canterbury, ampullae had a particularly long-lasting popularity because, according to legend, immediately after Becket’s death the monks collected his blood in small vials. A drop of this blood mixed with water (to make ‘Canterbury water’) was said to have miraculous healing properties, and so the provision of ampullae enabled tiny volumes of this liquid to be conveniently carried away from the shrine. The treatment of the miniature vials in the medieval cult of Becket’s blood betrays a particular fascination with the dynamic of container and contents: Spencer describes how ‘ampullae that were believed to have unaccountably lost or rejected Canterbury water were suspended over the martyr’s tomb. The sight of these, and the belief that Canterbury water had the power to bubble and, as it were, boil over, probably accounted for the very positive way in which most ampullae were sealed’ (1998: 39). Spencer stresses the relationship between ampullae and reliquary chests as analogous receptacles of the sacred, and Hester Lees-Jeffries’s pertinent description of ampullae as a ‘formalized (and fetishized)’ way of carrying liquid from the shrine further emphasises their similarity to reliquaries (2007: 145). Inside the exclusive space of an ampulla, a material manifestation of the sacred in the form of holy water or blood could be, to use Milton’s words, ‘treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life’.

[11] Blood relics, and statues which miraculously exude blood, are some of the most highly valued objects in Christian culture, pointing ultimately to the pouring out of Christ’s blood at the Eucharist. Keith Thomas notes that in 1591 John Allyn, an Oxford recusant, had a quantity of ‘Christ’s blood’ which he sold for twenty pounds per drop as protection from bodily harm (1971: 33). As John Calvin scornfully points out in his treatise on relics, in the sixteenth century an incredible number of religious communities claim to have reserves of Christ’s blood: ‘In one place certain droppes, as at Rochell in Poitou the which Nicodemus (as they saye) dyd gather in his gloue. In other places violes full, as at Mantone and elsewhere, in other places goblets ful as at Rome, at Saint Eustace’ (1561: Biiiv-Bivr). One such relic in England, the renowned ‘blood of Hales’, was denounced by Hugh Latimer who inspected it for royal commissioners, reporting in a letter of 1538 to Lord Cromwell that it was ‘wonderously closely and craftily inclosed and stopped up, for taking of care. And it cleaveth fast to the bottom of the little glass that it is in [...] It hath a certain unctuous moistness, and though it seem somewhat like blood when it is in the glass, yet when any parcel of the same is taken out, it turneth to a yellowness, and is cleaving like glue’ (Corrie 1845: 407-8).[10] As enclosed objects, relics embody a tension between display and concealment and it is this tension which is seized upon by Protestant polemicists anxious to expose the deceitfulness of the relic.

II: Reporting from Rome

[12] Writing about his own travels some decades after Erasmus’s visit to England, the playwright and
translator Anthony Munday recalls ‘some of the Romish Reliques’ in the churches frequented by students living at the English College in Rome. First published in 1582, The English Romayne Lyfe describes many of the relics in the seven main churches of Rome, objects which are ‘honoured and worshipped, as if they were God him selfe’ (1582: Hir). At the church of St John Lateran, Munday relates, the purported relics include some of the Virgin Mary’s milk, Christ’s first shirt, a portion of the crown of thorns, and ‘a glasse vial, which is full as they say, of the blood of our Saviour, that ran out of his precious side hanging on ye Crosse’. When this vial is shown to the people they ‘take their hands, & hold the palmes of the[m] toward the glasse, and then rub all their face with their hands, with the great holines they receiue from the Glasse’ (Fiir). It is significant that Munday notes that the worshippers receive ‘great holines’ from ‘the Glasse’ – the reliquary vessel is as essential a part of the relic’s identity as the bloody contents, marking a point of transmission between the human and the divine, even when it is not touched directly.

[13] Gesturing towards the object is often not enough however; ultimately closer physical contact with the sacred container is desired, and Munday describes how in St Peter’s the priest on duty

taketh euerie bodies Beades, that layes them on the Aultar, and then he wipes them along a great proportioned thing of Christall and Golde, wherein are a number of rotten bones, which they make the people credite to be the bones of Saintes: so wiping them along the outside of this Tabernacle, the Beades steale a terrible deale of holynesse out of those bones, and God knows, the people thinke they doo God good seruice in it: Oh monstrous blindnesse [...] (Eiii)."

More explicitly than Erasmus, Munday is suspicious of the way in which the ‘great proportioned thing of Christall and Golde’ becomes a boundary between the material and spiritual, and thus a point at which the distinction between the sacred and the profane is dangerously blurred. While the beads ‘steale a terrible deale of holynesse’, a printed marginal note in the 1582 edition describes this as ‘A craftie kinde of cosonage, whereby the ignorant people are beguiled’. Munday portrays the extraction of the relic’s holiness through a language of thievery, emphasising the trickery and fundamental deceitfulness of relic rituals. Such a rhetoric of secrecy and mystery is, however, employed by those writing in defence of relics as well as those denouncing them. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit divine John Barclay defended ‘[the] Reliques we either deposite under the Altars, or lay up in Beautified Coffers’, explaining how ‘We diligently and devoutly apply our Handkerchiefs and Garments to the Coffin, or Bier, in or on which these Sacred Bones are laid, that secret Blessings may flow upon us’ (1688: B3r-Cr). Barclay argues that the Church, as it did in its early years, should continue to recognise miracles performed through relics, protesting ‘Nor are you contented only to take away all Honour from the Souls of the Blessed, but you make war also on their Bodies. I tremble to relate how many Reliques of Saints you have scatter’d in the wind, thrown into the water, consum’d with Fire; how often you have in scorn pluckt their sacred Limbs out of the Gold, and Gems, in which they were inclos’d, to expose them to Contempt. Posterity will lament their loss, we are asham’d for the Infamy of our Age’ (B2v). Employing apocalyptic imagery which resonates with Milton’s vivid depiction of censored books in Areopagitica, Barclay compares the literal exposure of ‘sacred Limbs’ when they are ‘pluckt’ from their jewelled reliquaries with their rhetorical exposure to the scorn and contempt of reformers. For both reformers and
those they attempt to reform, the relic embodies a very close relationship between literal and rhetorical containment and concealment.

[14] The pilgrims’ beads do not come into direct contact with the bones Munday sees, but they somehow ‘steale a terrible deale of holynesse out of those bones’ through being ‘wiped’ along the outside of the reliquary. Unlike the pilgrims in Erasmus’s dialogue, who are allowed to touch the contents of some of the reliquaries, visitors to Rome in the 1580s are physically distanced from the contents of the relic at multiple removes: they must leave their beads on the altar to be taken by a priest who will then touch them against the outside of the relic on their behalf. Through such performance the relic is reinforced as an exclusive object wherein the sacred is found concentrically bound up in human remains, but which can also transcend the bounds of the container and be absorbed into other materials. For those who believe, the reliquary constructs not an impermeable barrier, but a point of transmission. Munday seizes on the reliquary container as a particularly problematic element of the relic: it is because outer coverings of ‘Gold, Siluer, or Christall’ literally obscure the contents of a relic (if indeed, it has any contents at all) that deception is possible. Munday asserts that it is in fact he who reveals the truth and exposes the crafty deceitfulness of Catholic doctrine, protesting that

they tell the people, this is the Reliques of such a Saint, and this is such a holy and blessed thing: but they be either couered with Gold, Siluer, or Christall, so that we can not tell whether there be any thing within or no, except it bee sometime in a broade Christall Tabernacle, and there you shall see a company of rotten bones, God knows of what they be [...] (Fiiiv).

The juxtaposition of apparently historically specific relics with vague collections of bones is a significant factor in Munday’s attack. If pilgrims will believe that the vial before them contains blood from the side of Christ (and pay good money to see it) then they should also have no doubts about a pile of bones similarly displayed in a reliquary.

[15] In traditional worship before the Reformation, seeing was believing, epitomised at the elevation of the transubstantiated host at the Mass. To a hostile reformer however, the question of whether a reliquary contains the bones of St Peter or the bones of a pig is ultimately beside the point, because scripture is the only transparent source of truth, and reliquaries containing bones represent intellectual blindness to this truth. Calvin scorns the behaviour of worshippers who ‘haue bowed them selues and kneeled before the reliques, euen as before god. They haue lighted candles and torches in sygne of homage and honour. They haue put their trust in them: they haue had theyr refuge to them, as though the virtue and grace of God had bene enclosed in them’ (Aiiii-A5r). The final clause in this passage attacks the idea that there is any supernatural power at all in relics; it is impossible that divine grace might be ‘enclosed in them’. As Calvin protests further, closing one’s eyes in prayer before a relic prevents one seeing beyond the glass to the falsehood of its contents: ‘For many beholding a relique shut their eyes through superstition to the ende, that they seing shoulde see nothing at all: that is to say that they dare not looke in good earnest to consider what the thing is’ (Bir). Whereas traditionally positive accounts of relics emphasise the importance of touch and physical contact with the container, polemical works which denounce them return repeatedly to the metaphor of blindness, and the apparent inability to see the truth beyond the
materiality of the relic. In Protestant rhetoric, closing one’s eyes before a relic is transformed from a sign of piety into an unwillingness to look, literally and spiritually, at what is or is not contained in the reliquary. The texts I have here examined demonstrate the extent to which relics are objects constructed (and deconstructed) both by their physical features and by the pro- and anti-relic discourses which grow up around them during and after the Reformation.

III: Rewriting Relics

[16] So far this essay has considered some of the ways in which the relic, as an object which embodies a challenging combination of the material and the spiritual, is subjected to scrutiny and opposing interpretations during the Reformation decades and afterwards, both in England and in Europe. From recollections of relic worship and more polemical works against relics, I have drawn out some of the connections between texts and relics to consider the ways in which the physical features of the relic as a material object become the focus for rhetorical attacks on the troubling interface between the secular and the sacred they present. In this final section I return to the relic as a metaphor in post-Reformation English writing, exploring how and why the relic, as the embodiment of spirit in matter, becomes an appealing metaphor for thinking about books as sources of intellectual and spiritual nourishment.

[17] In her description of the elaborate bindings on medieval and early modern holy books, Alexandra Walsham (2003: 156) articulates how ‘Placed on the altar in close proximity to the consecrated host, such books were receptacles of numinous power’. Medieval Bibles with richly decorated covers were integral to the performance of liturgy, sometimes being kissed, like relics, alongside the other instruments of the mass (2004: 124-5). Crucially, Walsham points out that ‘Often enclosing fragments of the bones and other remains of martyrs and saints, book covers were sometimes indistinguishable from reliquaries’. Influenced by Eamon Duffy’s fundamental work on medieval lay piety (1992), Walsham goes so far as to suggest that Books of Hours were believed to have talismanic power: ‘No less than phials of holy water, wax tablets of the agnus dei, and objects which had come into contact with special hallowed places, they might be seen as sacramentals’, and notes also that in Lutheran Germany Books of Hours were believed to be, like relics, incombustible (2004: 141). Her evidence suggests that even after the English Reformation the preservation of Bibles and prayer books (rather than any other suspicious Catholic artefacts) as precious vessels for the Word was part of the Protestant assertion of the authority of holy writ above anything else, in a surprising material synthesis between reformed and traditional belief. Esteemed Protestant works could be similarly treated: John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments (or ‘Book of Martyrs’) may have been chained alongside bibles in churches.[11] Its title plays on the overlap between ‘monument’ as written document and tomb or sepulchre, and John N. King (2006: 8) argues that the book as a whole functions ‘in the manner of a symbolic reliquary that preserves for posterity the deeds and words that constitute the essence of saintly sacrifice’. Rather than the mortal remains of the Protestant martyrs, it is the written details of their lives and deaths that are sacred and must be preserved inside this doubly monumental volume.

[18] Yet apart from these more obvious connections between sacred texts and relics there are other, more implicit, ways in which the idea of the relic informs thinking or writing about books. As in Areopagitica, these points of connection are not always felt explicitly, but in the section which follows, beginning with Michel de Montaigne’s account of his visit to the Vatican Library, I will explore how these understated moments of reflection between texts and relics may be read fruitfully. Montaigne visited many of the Roman churches just a few years after Anthony Munday, and writes in his travel journal of seeing certain relics used in exorcisms during Holy Week, such as a ‘Veronica’ cloth which is elevated before the
assembled worshippers who prostrate themselves and cry out.[12] In contrast with other texts I have discussed so far, Montaigne’s travel journal is not a polemical work. In this text, the relationship between books and relics is enlightening in ways that are not engaged with religious and political debate, but is expressed in Montaigne’s personal recollections of the privileged quasi-sacred space of the Vatican Library.

Montaigne notes that the Vatican Library contains both religious and secular books from Europe and further afield, and he remembers that there were ‘a large number of books attached onto several rows of desks; there are also some in coffers, which were all opened to me; lots of books written by hand, and especially a Seneca and the Moral Essays of Plutarch’ (949). He makes specific reference to some individual volumes, including ‘a book by Saint Thomas Aquinas in which there are corrections in the hand of the author himself’ and ‘an Acts of the Apostles written in very beautiful gold Greek lettering, as fresh and recent [‘aussi vive et récente’] as if it were of today. This lettering is massive and has a solid body [‘un corps solide’] raised on the paper, so that if you pass your hand over it you feel the thickness’ (950-951). [13] Like the relics at Canterbury, as described by Erasmus, these treasured books are stored in ‘coffers’ which must be ‘opened’ for the visitor. There is, as at a cathedral shrine, an evident tension between permitted access and the secrecy and security of the library’s valuable treasures. However, Montaigne is pleased about the relative ease with which he accessed the library, recalling ‘I saw the library without any difficulty; anyone can see it thus, and can make whatever extracts he wants’ (950). Readers can take away ‘extracts’ from these books, as if visiting a medieval shrine armed with an ampulla which will enable them to share the spiritual succour offered by the material treasured up in the sacred site.

Montaigne’s encounters with books of particular value are partly characterised by sensuousness – he is allowed to handle the books and recalls how he touched them, observing the texture of the page under his hand, just as the priest ritually strokes the relics in Munday’s report from Rome. Authorial manuscript copies have a special value; Montaigne remembers seeing ‘the breviary of Saint Gregory, written by hand; it bears no evidence of the year, but they hold that it has come down from him from hand to hand. It is a missal about like ours, and was brought to the last Council of Trent to serve as a testimony of our ceremonies’. From more recent times, he sees

the original of the book that the king of England composed against Luther, which he sent about fifty years ago to Pope Leo X, inscribed with his own hand (950).

Montaigne superstitiously appreciates being able to touch the pages on which ‘there are corrections in the hand of the author himself, who wrote badly, a small lettering worse than mine’. Books such as these are legendary artefacts passed down through history ‘from hand to hand’, objects which allow physical contact with the past, and thus become a permanent embodiment, like Milton’s ‘pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm’d and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life’. Indeed, as James Kearney points out (2009: 7), pages of parchment may visually reinforce their identity as once-living skin, still bearing tangible signs of their fleshliness in the form of marks left by scars, blemishes, and hair follicles.
[21] Some decades later, Montaigne’s compatriot Gabriel Naudé insisted that ‘it is the very Essence of a Library, to have a great number of Manuscripts; because they are at present in most esteem, and less vulgar’ (1661: E3r). For both Montaigne and Naudé, the identity of the manuscript which has a distinctive material connection to its author is part of the ‘Essence’ of a library, in the same way that the touch-relic of a saint or martyr might be found at the heart of a medieval cathedral, defining its identity. Relics and manuscripts represent the desirable, the specialist, and the elite, to be treasured up. The contrast between the relative worth of manuscript and printed books in Montaigne’s account illustrates another way in which a book’s materiality defines its identity as much as its literary contents.

[22] As Montaigne’s narrative suggests, the connections between books and relics discussed so far are closely embedded in a broader discourse surrounding libraries and memory which evolved in the decades following the destruction of medieval monastic libraries. In Memory’s Library Jennifer Summit presents an important critical account of post-Reformation library-building, in which she describes how in the hands of early modern collectors such as Robert Cotton, the contents of medieval books were rescued and rediscovered. To a certain extent these new libraries were seen as sites of memorialisation of the medieval past; Summit observes that John Weever ‘calls on libraries to do what churches can no longer be trusted to do: to preserve the memories of the dead’ (2008: 193). Ultimately however, seventeenth-century libraries such as the Bodleian served a much more complex purpose than this. Summit stresses the function of post-Reformation libraries as sites of intellectual dynamism in which the contents of books, as well as being ‘imbalm’d and treasur’d up’, were debated and actively redefined. Although such libraries were locations in which the dead author’s spirit could be remembered for eternity through the preservation of his books, they could also be the site of regeneration, in which voices from the past could be challenged and debated, as if they yet lived. As Summit puts it, ‘in preserving the medieval past, the libraries of post-Reformation England also remade it into a body of evidence’ (15).

[23] Summit and other recent critics have frequently cited Francis Bacon, who in 1610 was called upon to oversee the founding of the library at Lambeth Palace. Bacon provides us with some elegant but not unproblematic comparisons of books with relics. At the beginning of the second book of The Advancement of Learning (1605), he declares that libraries are ‘as the Shrynes, where all the Reliques of the ancient Saints, full of true virtue, and that without delusion or imposture, are preserued, and reposed’ (Kiernan 2000: 56). Bacon presented a copy of The Advancement to Thomas Bodley to mark his refounding of the university library at Oxford, and in his accompanying letter praises books as ‘the shrines where the Saint is, or is believed to be’. Elsewhere he writes that the Christian church ‘did preserve in the sacred lap and bosom thereof the precious relics even of heathen learning, which otherwise had been extinguished as if no such thing had ever been’ (Spedding 1861: 3,151). Bacon’s metaphors compare books and libraries alike with relics and shrines, and in his language there is a slippage between book/library and relic/shrine as sacred places and things which mutually define each other. Post-Reformation libraries such as the Bodleian are depicted as new kinds of shrine removed from Catholic ritual and superstition, places where ‘saints’ may be found in a discriminating setting which acknowledges its medieval past but is not constrained by it.

[24] As Bacon sees it, books preserve learning at the same time as enabling it to be ‘improved or advanced’ (Spedding 1861: 3, 235). Even though their authors may be long dead, books have a voice which may yet be heard and challenged. The interplay between the living and the dead which characterises Milton’s metaphors in Areopagitica is also found here in the popular discourse of the early modern library as a living repository of knowledge located in the literary remains of deceased authors.
Summit points out (2008: 167) that Robert Cotton’s cabinet of curiosities, containing amongst other things a fragment of Thomas Becket’s skull, directly adjoined his library. By the seventeenth century, bones and books sit side by side as comparable sources of knowledge and discovery. However, although (as Bacon demonstrates) the idea of the relic is translated into secular locations and discourses in post-Reformation culture, the image is not freed from the complicated relationship of matter and spirit it embodies. While books are a location of intellectual and even spiritual contact with the dead, they must be carefully contained and controlled.

Conclusion

[25] Daniel Woolf argues that by the late seventeenth century ‘most Protestants could safely adopt an attitude of benign amusement to popular Catholicism, so long as it was kept outside the church and off the throne’. Surviving medieval relics began to be transformed into antiquarian curiosities; as Woolf puts it, ‘the antiquarian artefact filled the empty space left by the relic, by providing an object of interest for people in the present which could be more safely examined, fondled, cherished, and displayed, even it if were no longer venerated’ (2003: 194). It is important to appreciate, however, that the England of the post-Reformation years did not witness a straightforward replacement of the sacred with the secular. Even if relics and relic-like objects were no longer believed to be vessels of divine grace, they might still be treated with respect, reverence, and even superstition.

[26] In his first published poem, a sonnet commemorating Shakespeare for the publication of the second Folio, Milton praises the poet’s ‘honour’d Bones’ and ‘hallow’d reliques’, emphasising the futility of a marble tomb in contrast to the ‘live-long Monument’ of his intangible reputation, perpetuated through the printing of his literary creations. Milton’s words play into the long poetic tradition of connecting an author’s mortal body with his immortal corpus of work. Far from being an expensive book, however, Milton’s *Areopagitica* – a ‘meer unlicen’t pamphlet’- is an affordable product of the printing press which was published at a time when the pamphlet form was multiplying rapidly as a tool of public debate. After the Reformation, the banned religious relic becomes illicit and dangerous, demanding unsanctioned loyalty not dissimilar to that demanded by the politicised and possibly unlicensed pamphlet. Unlike manuscripts treasured up in elite libraries and collections however, the pamphlet is widely dispersed, a grubby ephemeral object which is ultimately disposable. The ‘breath of reason itself’ may be found in all kinds of books, including pamphlets such as this. Like the spirit at the core of medieval relics, reason transcends the material of the vessel it is held in whilst simultaneously drawing attention to its materiality.

[27] As demonstrated by the range of texts I have discussed in this essay, the idea of the relic remains a powerful one in literary culture following the English Reformation. The relic, as a material object which encloses both material and spiritual content, persists in English writing as a metaphor loaded with historical and religious memory, even as it appears to be de-sanctified. In ways that might be implicitly or explicitly expressed, the interface between the material and the spiritual, between the visible and the invisible, and between the secular and the sacred presented by the relic remains a commanding one for English writing about writing, even after the relic is removed from popular worship.

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NOTES

[1] For further discussion of non-literary uses of holy books, see Aston (1984). [back to text]

[2] Coster & Spicer (2005) provide a valuable outline of the major areas and current state of criticism in these fields. See also Woolf (2003), and Duffy (1992). [back to text]

[3] Complete Prose Works, vol. II, p. 493. All further page numbers given parenthetically in main text. [back to text]

[4] Paradise Lost, 3.484-497. [back to text]

[5] Religious Reliques, the Sale at the Savoy, upon the Jesuits Breaking up their School and Chappel (London, 1688). [back to text]

[6] Collected Works, vol. 40; page numbers given parenthetically in main text. [back to text]

[7] This relic was at Walsingham from around 1300 until the destruction of the shrine in the late 1530s. Along with the blood of Christ and pieces of the True Cross, the milk of the Virgin has remained one of the most popular Christian relics. Vials of breast milk are especially precious because of the belief that Mary’s body was taken directly to Heaven. See Rubin (2009: 138-150). [back to text]

[8] See Malo (2008) for further discussion of the ‘occlusion’ of medieval relics as objects which were manipulated in material and rhetorical ways. [back to text]

[9] The accounts of the medieval hagiographer Jacobus de Voragine, for example, illustrate how the tombs, shrines, and relics of saints provide access to the sacred in ways that are often visually and physically realised, in sensuous outpourings of oil, blood, water, scent, or heat. [back to text]

[10] Latimer also preached about this relic in a sermon of 1549: see Latimer (1562: Miiir). [back to text]

[11] Some debate surrounds this: Evenden and Freeman argue that there were probably relatively few chained copies (2005: 1288-1307). [back to text]


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Robert Southey has written a poem in which he speaks about the companionship books have given him. He says: My days among the dead are past. That is to say, he likes to enjoy himself in the company of books, which as Milton has described, are ‘the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.’ In the words of Emily Dickinson, there is no frigate like a book. To take us lands away. He sees the value of reading as a means to experience what the writer of a book has experienced himself. That is to say, the reader sees what the writer has seen personally from the book written by the latter. Wordsworth has defined poetry as ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ and as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions’.