THE OXFORD FRANCIS BACON, AND THE MATERIALITY OF TEXTS

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THE OXFORD FRANCIS BACON project aims to produce a new 15-volume critical edition of the works of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the lawyer, natural philosopher, and statesman. It aims therefore to replace the great but outdated Victorian edition produced by Spedding, Ellis and Heath, and for the first time to publish works unknown to them, a good few of which have been identified by Dr Peter Beal FBA in his indispensable *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*. In the process we hope to improve and advance critical-editorial techniques at the very highest level; provide brand-new facing-page translations for the edited texts of the Latin works; and re-integrate Bacon's work into the study of early-modern philosophy, science, historiography, legal thought, and literature. The project belongs to the British Academy's portfolio and the work is being carried out by an international team of scholars supported by an advisory board chaired by Sir Brian Vickers FBA. So far six volumes have been published, work is proceeding apace on the others, and our efforts have so far been in a way to transforming our knowledge of the Bacon corpus in exciting ways.

A project editor sets about his or her business by taking on the sometimes exacting technical task of deciding which of a number of printed or manuscript witnesses to a text best represents it. Using this witness as a base-text the editor proceeds to test it word by word, and sentence by sentence from beginning to end, and if needs be emends it in the light of textual evidence afforded by other witnesses, other Bacon works, the sheer physical properties of the printed book or manuscript, and the historical contexts in which the text was produced. The object is to provide texts which Bacon would have acknowledged and, as far as possible, to give *readers* the wherewithal to make informed inferences as to the reliability of the text or any part of it.

Establishing the texts with unremitting rigour is our principal task but far from our only one. We also have a duty to serve the reader by offering contexts which draw out and deepen the meanings of the texts. For instance we might investigate the genesis of a text, its provenance, its history in manuscript, its passage through the press, and its relation to Bacon's literary career and ideas current in his day. Above all, we might look closely for meanings afforded by study of the *materiality* of the manuscripts or printed books which bear the texts. This study is often not given its due weight by scholars, even though it can fundamentally change not just the ways in which we

Figure 1: *Francis Bacon by John Vanderbank after an unknown artist (National Portrait Gallery, London).*

interpret the texts but the very ways in which we proceed to establish them. I shall use the rest of this essay to illustrate these truths.

There are no end of examples of the ways in which study of the materiality of the text has informed the project. One of the best concerns the *De vijs mortis*, a work first published by us, the sole witness to which is a single manuscript, Hardwick 72A, lodged at Chatsworth House. In this manuscript there are a number of leaves which do not bear continuous text but a succession of discrete passages each of which begins and ends on its own leaf. Inspect these leaves with minute care, and a surprising fact emerges—that all carry a vertical line of mysterious punctures close to their spine-edges, except for two leaves where the punctures appear near the fore-edges. These turn out to be redundant stitch holes which suggest that the manuscript was once disbound and rebound—in two cases with the leaves rebound the wrong way round. Taking this with the evidence of watermarks, we also find that many leaves have been bound in the wrong order, and that their original order can be reconstructed with some certainty. I need hardly add that analysis of these *material* minutiae—stitch holes and watermarks—could and did make a profound difference to our understanding of the manuscript's history and the text's meanings.

As for physical embodiments of text in *printed* witnesses, an iron rule of our kind of study is that there can be no critical edition without textual criticism and no textual criticism without analytical bibliography. Analytical bibliography is a set of skills which allows its users to read the text of a printed book in its relationship to the all-too-human processes whereby the text came to be realised or staged in a particular material form. Of course text may vary from edition to edition and, in their reincarnations from one embodiment to another, may take on traces of the successive material substrates which have upheld it, and we have to get a grip on such variations and adhesions. But more awkward still is the fact that early-modern books are not like modern ones. In Bacon's day copies within a *single* edition could (and did) vary significantly. Printers might cut pages out in some copies and insert new ones. They might halt the print run of a sheet and make stop-press corrections or alterations, and sometimes do that more than once—with the result that a number of different versions of the same sheet were created. Individual copies of a book were made up of a number of different sheets any one of which may have carried stop-press corrections, so we are faced with the possibility that every one copy in the edition might differ from every other. If the content of a new Dan Brown varied thus we would be heartbroken; if copies in an early-modern edition did not so vary we would be shocked.

An essential part of an editor's job is to get the measure of variant states in particular and textual fluidity in general. By way of example let us just ask how an editor might achieve this when studying a single edition. Suppose, for instance, that an editor finds that an edition printed under Bacon's supervision is the authoritative witness to the text being edited. The next step is to track down (say) 40 copies of that witness, choose one as a control copy, and compare the other 39 copies with it word by word, space by space, and comma by comma. For this one uses an optical device built for the purpose—a collating machine—to produce a swift and accurate record of press variants from the greatest (e.g. the recasting of a whole stretch of text) to the least (e.g. a single punctuation change). Apart from its value in establishing the text, such a record may be capable of telling us a lot about the text's chrysalis stage—the history and vicissitudes of its passage through the press—and may even alter our understanding of the social contexts in which texts thus transmitted would be understood. Incidentally, those coming to the editorial vocation from outside the field of literary scholarship are sometimes unaware of the collation requirement. Why have students of Copernicus never collated copies or scans of copies of the *De revolutionibus* (1543), and students of the *editio princeps* (1611) of the King James Bible never done likewise? Why, indeed, have the Cartesians never collated copies of Clerselier's indispensable edition (1657–67) of Descartes' letters? Better to find out sooner rather than later that in some copies the Clerselier edition *cogito ergo sum* may have a *non* in it. We look forward to the day when these Alices find the looking-glass.

Collation often identifies apparently trivial differences between copies, unconsidered trifles which may even have nothing to do with the author's text but which can make a serious difference to our understanding its material embodiment. Take, for instance, a couple of stop-press corrections to the pagination of the first edition of Bacon's *Instauratio magna* (1620), an edition which contained the *Novum organum*, the crowning achievement of his philosophical career, and which introduced the unfinished six-part meta-work of which *Novum organum* was part. In this great edition page 27 was numbered 35, and was then corrected during the press run. The same happened to page 30 which had been numbered 38. Put this finding together with an uncorrected lapse which leaves page numbers 173 to 180 out of the sequence altogether, and you have three lapses each of which is out by 8. If the editor sticks a torch into this unpromising crevice a whole new cave system gradually comes to sight. Contemplation of pagination errors leads by various twists, turns, and the occasional dead end, to the discovery that the printers were using work routines unique among those then current, to the unearthing of the largest archive of materials relating to a London printing house in the age of James, and to the establishing of new perspectives in which Bacon can be read and understood. In this connection collation also shows that some copies of the 1620 edition of the

Figure 2:
Instauratio magna (1620): engraved title (reproduced by permission of Trinity College, Cambridge).

Instauratio have one colophon and other copies another which supplanted it. The earlier colophon ascribes the production to the King's Printers Bonham Norton (1565–1635) and John Bill (1576–1630); the later ascribes it to Bill alone (Figures 3–4), a fact that agrees with the imprint on the famous engraved title of the *Instauratio* (Figure 2). So why was Norton's name dropped? Asking this question catapults the editor into quite new territory whose exploration may lead to fresh understandings of the politics of the book trade, and their intersection with state cultural policy.

An understanding of what's going on here begins to emerge when you see that 1620 was a critical year in a protracted and bitter legal struggle for ownership of the King's Printer patent between Norton and Bill and a third claimant, Robert Barker (1570–1645) who had been King's Printer since 1603. Bill's claim to a bona fide right to a share of the King's Printer business was upheld; whereas the claims of Norton and Barker seem to have been less secure such that in 1620 Norton sometimes held office with Bill, at others Bill held it with Barker, and at others still Bill held it all by himself. Bill never lost his hold on office because he was useful—especially to the king. For instance, he was associated with the printing of an unprecedented succession of lavish King's Printer editions. They were unique in that all were works by modern authors or editors who belonged to the top rank of early seventeenth-century intellectual life; all were produced in and only in just five years (1616–20); and all appeared in the prestige folio format. Among these were the collected edition of James's own *Workes* (1616), and the first two parts of Marc'Antonio de Dominis' anti-papal *De republica ecclesiastica* (1617 and 1620). Present too were the first Italian (1619), English (1620) and Latin (1620) editions of Paolo Sarpi's celebrated *Historia del Concilio Tridentino*, the manuscript of which had been brought to England in a clandestine operation abetted by important figures in the

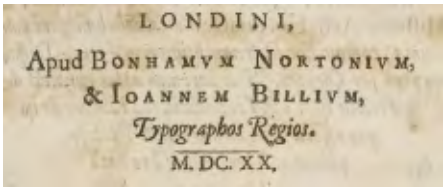
LONDINI,
Apud BONHAMVM NORTONIVM,
& IOANNEM BILLIVM,
Typographos Regios.
M. DC. XX.

Figure 3: *Instauratio magna (1620), e3ᵛ: earlier colophon (reproduced by permission of Trinity College, Cambridge).*

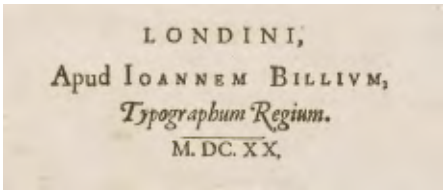
LONDINI,
Apud IOANNEM BILLIVM,
Typographum Regium.
M. DC. XX.

Figure 4: *Instauratio magna (1620), e4ʳ: later colophon (reproduced by permission of Trinity College, Cambridge).*

Jacobean establishment. And let us not forget Sir Henry Savile's subtle and scholarly edition of Thomas Bradwardine's fourteenth-century essay on predestination, *De causa dei* (1618), a book which Bonham Norton saw from the start as a commercial millstone but which was printed because the king wanted it as a contribution to the debates at the Synod of Dort. In fact every one of these works was deeply implicated in James's own cultural politics, in the attempt to foster an emergent 'official' national culture. Early and compelling evidence of this was of course the project for a new translation of the Bible, a project initiated in 1604 and culminating in 1611 with the printing of the first edition of the King James Bible by none other than Robert Barker. What has this to do with Bacon? My view is that he wanted to get in on the act, and publish his own elite folio, the *Instauratio magna*, in the wake of the others. In fact the *Instauratio* jumped the queue, and shoved the Latin edition of Sarpi off the presses, leaving Sir Andrew Newton, one of the translators preparing the Latin Sarpi, lamenting that at one moment the printers were plaguing him for copy, and at the next that printing had been put on hold to let the Bacon get VIP treatment.

Now all this was happening while the different claimants to the office of King's Printer were going at it hammer and tongs in Chancery. And who presided over Chancery cases? The Lord Chancellor. And who was Lord Chancellor in 1620? Why, none other than Francis Bacon. If you wanted to give your claim to be King's Printer a boost, you might well allow the Lord Chancellor's book priority over other work in hand. And if one of the claimants was currently out of favour with the court you would not be surprised to see his, Norton's, name dropped from the colophon and excluded from the *Instauratio*'s famous engraved title. In short, in the politics of the printing house, James I, and Chancery, we find yet another context in which the emergence of the *Instauratio* can be more fully understood. But that was not the end of the story for the work and its author, or for Barker, Bill, and Norton. In the very next year Bacon was thrown out of office for accepting presents—one of them from Robert Barker—from parties to Chancery suits. The dispute over the King's Printer patent with its intersecting Chancery cases ran on Jarndyce and Jarndyce-like until the end of the decade, by which time Bacon was dead, Bill almost so, and Norton and Barker in prison. As for the fate of the *Instauratio*, it went on to be revered as the greatest work of the 'British Plato' or denounced with equal force as the ignorant outpourings of a philosophical midget. Weighing the merits of such judgements is yet another duty the editors of *The Oxford Francis Bacon* relish.

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