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## Yet Another Crisis of the Book

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## //YET ANOTHER CRISIS OF THE BOOK//

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**ABSTRACT:** Book bindings and binding decor can reveal deep parts of our attitudes toward books and toward culture. Changes in attitudes toward the codex book during the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution are part of continual change in book culture. The re-binding of early printed books is exemplary evidence of these changes. The new bindings express both a rejection of pre-Enlightenment culture and an attempt to stabilize traditional cultural values. This also suggests how we might view events customarily considered to be “revolutions”.

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The English essayist Max Beerbohm titled his first book of essays *The Works of Max Beerbohm* (1896). He called the second collection *More works of Max Beerbohm* (1899) and the third collection *Yet Again the works of Max Beerbohm* (1909). Beerbohm genially doubted that things really change in the way people think they do. His book titles describe him as living amid something that seems to change but does not do so. He wrote a story, called “Enoch Soames,” about a fool who thought he could manage the knowledge of what posterity was to think of him. In the story he obtains, at great cost, the special privilege of finding out for a fact how little he mastered his destiny, how very odd the future is. Our best thinking about the past is also subject to the future, in which streams run that are deeper than we know. What poor fishes we are at taking it on.

From the point of view of the revolution currently seeming to arise from digital communication there is but one and only one other revolution in the history of print culture that seems to equal the power of the current dynamic of change. That is the invention of printing around 1450. This event created a change in the distribution and, eventually, in the retrieval of information. It did not change storage, which remained the codex book. The current digital revolution changes distribution, retrieval, and also storage, which is now data driven into newer boxes. The mix of purposefully dispersed information and randomly drifting information is also greatly altered. However, the history of communication records critical events other than but equal to printing and digitization—the invention of the alphabet, for example. Both events that concern us here today, the printing and the digital revolutions, share features marking the historical character of all other such changes in communication. These include the gradual transformation of older technology or practices and the deployment of machinery and tools around the world over decades or centuries; also, concurrent neglect and appreciation of superannated techniques, aestheticization of old and new, commodification of the new, as well as some species and moment of devaluing the past and valorizing a liberating future; and profusion of theories, nonsense, rages, and happy dances about the mechanization of life and the nature of the human person.

Many developments other than those accounted for by Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* in 1979 now supplement our account of the printing revolution. First, we have widened the chronology of the printing revolution. It didn't start in 1450, and it never ended<sup>1</sup>. We have had to change our understanding of its technology from bottom to top. The work of Paul Needham and Blaise Agüera y Arcas has overturned the traditional account of Gutenberg's techniques<sup>2</sup>. Also, we now acknowledge the many allied skills in producing print culture to include, for example, those of metal workers, marketers, navigators, and day-laboring haulers. We now have a wider and better view of the society subject to print technology, including the race, gender, and status of people in societies, and the many kinds of people who read or even knew about printed matter. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we now endeavor to widen our understanding of how this change occurred. It occurred because of religion, science, ideology, and capitalism, because of the desires, demands, thoughts, and feelings of people, because of processes of feeling, intellection, and communication of which the work of friskets and screw presses was not the only moving part.

If the revolution was centuries long and left no one out, perhaps there was no revolution. Or, to put it another way, perhaps there are so many revolutions that the notion of revolution helps us less than we thought it did in understanding change. For example, any time the stakeholders in Occidental written communication, if I may use this word “stakeholder” just for convenience, felt overloaded with the weight of available information—memorable or necessary or productive or just desirable information—they likely sought or precipitated some change in the machinery and practices by which information was stored, distributed, and retrieved. Was there ever a

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson (2002) has a good sampling of this point and some of the following points about the first edition of Eisenstein.

<sup>2</sup> See Agüera y Arcas (2000) and later work on this subject by Paul Needham and him.

period in which the stakeholders in Occidental textuality did not feel glutted with information? There was not: marginalia, indices, headers, pin-pricks, book-wheels, prefaces, glosses, and all other paratextual tasks attest to the long track of this particular snowball<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, there was one period of change since 1450 that confounded the world of printed matter as much as the rhizomatous growth of printing houses along the Rhine did and as much as the neural snowball of the last decades has. We call this period of change the French and Industrial Revolutions.

I contend that the stakeholders in print culture did feel, by around 1780, that their customary print culture had to change and that this problem was not resolved until around 1820. The resolution created the system of verbal communication central to the start of modern life. The story of the re-binding of early printed books from about 1780 to 1800 is an example of the solution they found to the problem the book posed in the Industrial Revolution.

To understand how bindings and binding decor expressed attitudes toward the book, it is necessary to look carefully at what a book binding really is (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Lacing boards. Tortelli, *De Orthographia*, Venice 1480, in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

The codex book requires a binding structure. Bindings look inert, but in fact they are matters of trimmed tension and precarious calm. Several kinds of hinges deployed to work together produce the stable structure. In the modern case and perfect bindings the hinge is the bonding properties of certain chemicals. The one working part of the traditionally bound book indispensable to it is thread, including straps and knots made

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Blair (2003) made this case in terms of techniques. Jonathan Sawday and Neil Rhodes' *The Renaissance Computer...* (New York: Routledge, 2000) takes up this issue in Renaissance literature and science.

of threading fabrics. The optimal degree of tension in the container is the highest degree tolerated by the contents. The binder, like a dresser putting on a corset, pulls lacings so tight that the contents are just about to pop out (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Lacing head. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Venice 1489, in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

A double bow tie stabilizes this maximum tension on a corset, but the binder laces and anchors several different knots that both control and are themselves powered by the tendency of the leaves to disperse—just as knowledge itself will do. A good binding (Fig. 3) integrates these balanced forces of the inner structure into the outer protective structure. The outer structure—boards and backstrip—is not mere shell or husk but is actually indistinguishable from the laces and cords when one understands them as distributed forces (Fig. 4). Clasps and catches buckling the two boards together at their foreedges are visible expressions of the same balance of forces that thicken, jell, and set the physical book. These bits of metal and leather also present the text as a structure balancing intellectual and spiritual rarefaction and condensation.



Fig. 3. Straps into boards. *The Anturs of Artur... Ms.*, 15thC., in Princeton University Library Special Collections.

Clasps, catches, corners, knobs, and other metal binding furniture bridge express

the inner and the outer circuit of forces, creating another circuit back and forth between visible and hidden and between what the verbal text publishes and what the codex encloses. Publishing, like binding, is a preservation project as well as a project of exposure—like the verbal text itself, which we know obliges readers to perform a task of understanding far more conflicted and fraught than it is straightforward and lucid. Brass corners on a binding indicate the depth of what is folded within, as do knobs and titling devices. Thus the order of forces imposed by the physical hinge, the fundament of codex binding, also appear as part of binding decor (Fig. 5). For example, in this blind-stamp of around 1485, described as a “spear-crossed heart lozenge” surrounded by annular, or ring-shaped, dots, the metalworker has framed or boxed his subject, visually supporting and cushioning it by images mimicking three-dimensional balls; the subject itself, within, is a wounded heart that, like a text, claims a place in the world it rolls through while simultaneously protecting itself.



Fig. 4. Clasp + catch. Floris, *Den wech des levens...* (Antwerp, 1542), in the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Binding decor emerged from binding structure. It was an aesthetic expression of certain aspects of the inner life of the codex book, both in manuscript and in print. By working on these forces in a second physical form, exo-skeletal binding decor suggests the immaterial experience or ideas inside readership. Protection of the physical codex turns into description of its psychic or spiritual life, honoring it, framing it, or asking for respect.



Fig. 5. Blind stamp. St. Jerome, *Vitae Patrum* (Strassbourg, 1485), at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Our gaze at a book is only one part of the intentionality of a binding. Its other, of greater consequence, is our grasp, physical and mental, of the object before us—a grasp taken with the purpose of causing the best and safest use of the codex. Just as the binder makes a binding grasp the book, the binding is how we grasp the book. Binding decor is a refined part of our grasp. It causes the gaze that comprises the grasp. Binding decor doubles the bound text, or mirrors it, or maps it, or models it. The binding is how we grasp the book. It represents some part of how we grasp knowledge, including the dialectic of exposure and concealment. It binds us to the book, or perhaps one can say it attaches us by a hinge that may swing easily or hold fast (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. “Angel Corset” by Gabriel Moginot, 2012.

Like a fancy corset, a decorated binding is, among other things, an instruction in social order and deportment. Unlike a corset, it does not instruct or offer a model to that which is inside of it, as it contains no agent. It is like a signboard directed at those on its outside, since the person who reads or otherwise uses a codex is not a simple spectator but is rather more like an artisan grasping tools.

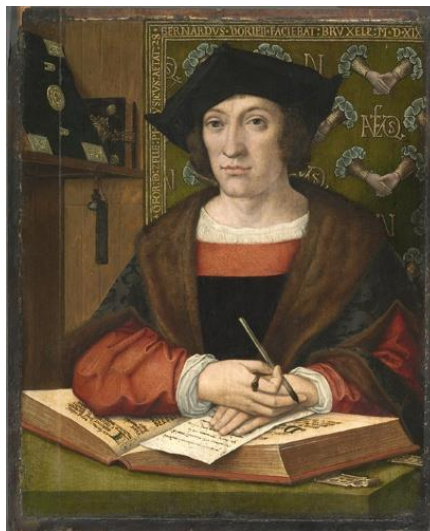


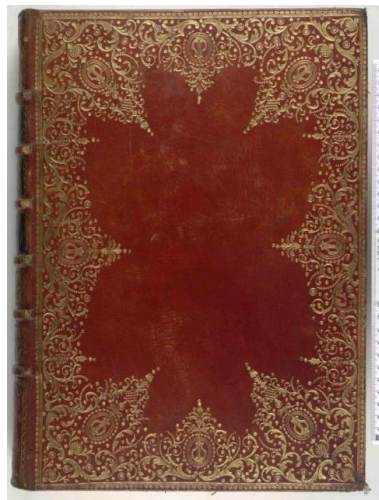
Fig. 7. Van Orley portrait Georges de Zelle, 1454.  
In the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts, Brussels.



Henri-Jean Martin suggested that the structure and appearance of a book, in the many sense of these terms, signifies the prevailing logic of a society. Following this line of thought, binding decor can show how persons ought to deport themselves. On the open counter of a book stall in a fifteenth or sixteenth century town, as in modern shop vitrines

, book covers offer suggestions about what their audiences should believe and do. The books in this portrait of Dr. Georges De Zelle, painted by Bernard Van Orley in 1519 with very effective arrangement of color, are characters in the room along with their owner. The shelved books face outward, cunningly placed in perspective. The larger book, probably black velvet over boards, has long straps that we can infer from the silver spots where they catch. De Zelle's monogram and personal emblems strewn on a painted panel with a border text fill the background. His bearing and character is compounded of responses to his studious circumstances. With large, harmonious features and bones, he seems to grow in front of our eyes while he studies. The decors of the two visible books are signboards publicizing earnestness, inwardness, citizenship, and science. They are spatial foci of the qualities of the world to which they contribute.

Binding decor is a visible expression of the base psychology of the book, from which it draws its power of displaying symbols and effects of ownership—collective as well as individual—artistic styles, motifs, verbal mottos, icons, and social and personal relations. It transforms these psychic, spiritual, metaphysical, and ideological materials into descriptions of order and instructions for deportment (Fig. 8). So, when we look at rococo bindings of the French eighteenth century we can see the entire aesthetic, in all its ramifications, summed up in the intimate pedagogy of the presence of books among those who practiced the manner of deportment normatively ordered by the dominative knowledge of the period. I take the motif of lattice-work to be a chief motif of the period (Fig. 9). Though the tools are mostly symmetrical, this included color and giddy delight.



**Fig. 8 Binding by De Rome. In the British Library.**

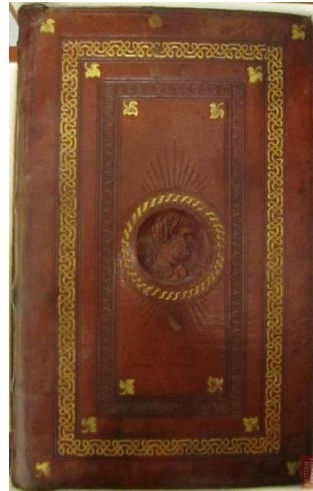




Fig. 9. Bindings by Padeloupe<sup>4</sup>.

Some of the leaders of revolutionary and Napoleonic France decided to re-shape the Bibliothèque du Roi into a library for research in the early history of printing understood as a key engine in the destruction of pre-rational culture. They made long lists of the most important and rarest specimens of early printing and instructed their agents traveling with or following Napoleon's armies, equipped with the names and shelf-locations of the old monastic libraries that owned them, to enter the old libraries, take the books, and send them to Paris. The monks often readily agreed, trading old indulgences for useful modern information. Kristian Jensen, in his recent *Revolution and the Antiquarian Book*, tells this story in absorbing detail. The revolutionaries rejected feudalism, and they wished to write history in a more scientific way. Those especially interested in early printing saw the opportunity to assemble and re-evaluate the evidence. They wanted the new national library to be a patriotic treasure, of course. But they also shared with the learned world the desire to explain the sources of knowledge as such, building vast new libraries on rational plans. Everything in history was to be explained by a natural science comprehending society as well as material reality and unifying the past with the present and the future. Earlier Occidental culture was subdued by progress. Science alone maintained it by submitting it to its study.

<sup>4</sup> I found this collage at <http://www.cyclopaedia.org/virtual/padeloup-links.htm>.



**Fig. 10. Discarded binding of Lascaris, *Anthologia Graeca*, Venice 1494.  
In the British Library.**

The stakeholders of print culture tended to think that old books, subdued by progressive society, needed to be clothed in ways suited to the new grasp on things. The new grasp had a social and even spiritual side, as well as what looks to us like the strictly scientific aspect. Rococo bindings by de Rome, Padeloup, and others, such as those we have seen, seemed dated once the social order changed. New owners, collectors and libraries alike, expressed by their purchases both the objective empirical character of the investigations into the past also the solidity of the culture. The stakeholders wanted bindings that expressed this position of knowledge in the advancing order of history. Books became expensive to a degree never before seen, and as a result they were expected to express the deportment of their owners and to advertise their ideas about the world. Binders were called upon to integrate old books into the apparently modern world of art, learning, and money.

Here is an example of the kind of bindings they had their bookbinders discard (Fig. 10). This is a plaquette binding on the edition of the *Anthologia Graeca, editio princeps* by Alopa in 1496. The edition is a monument of humanist learning, by one of the Byzantine Greeks who brought Hellenism to Renaissance Italy, and the decor of gilt and blind panels with gilt grape-leaf tools at the corners, the plaquette surrounded by a nimbus of long light rays, shows the keen mental openness, interest in letters, and the intimacy of the community of stakeholders in Venice and throughout Italy. I cannot of course show you any of the innumerable decorated covers discarded in ever greater numbers from about 1790 onward for a century or more, since they were tossed into the rubbish. I chose this one because we are reasonably sure that one or more bindings just like it were discarded from incunabula purchased by the Hungarian collector Count Charles Reviczky in about 1780. In 1790 he sold his collection of early editions of classics to Lord Spencer for the library at Althorp.

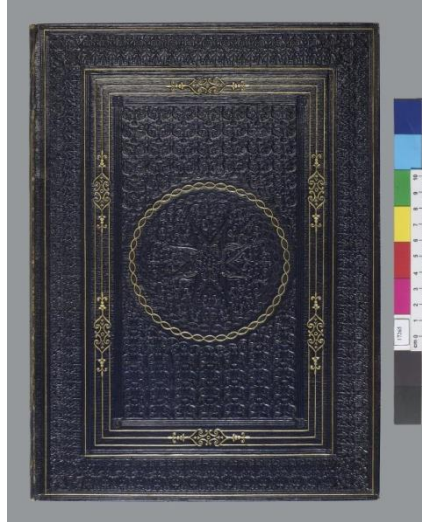


Fig. 11. Brunner, *Grammatica Rhythmica*, Mainz 1466.  
In the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester.

Spencer eagerly consumed these and continued the project of re-binding the old order into the new (Fig. 11). This is the decor his binder Hering put onto a book printed in Mainz in 1466 by Fust and Schoeffer called *Grammatica Rhythmica*. A dark forest of tools, deep blue-black like the leather they were pounded into, obliterates everything around it. A solemn cross dimly waves with ceremonial gilt surrounds, everything at its proper distance from the eye. Nor was this enough. Here is the doublure—the inside of the cover (Fig. 12). A crowded, fussy gilt outer panel, like a room stuffed with ostrich feathers and ferns, locks in a world of rich gold clusters connected by straight lines at right angles. This doubles the cover, complementing the distribution of gilt and blind.

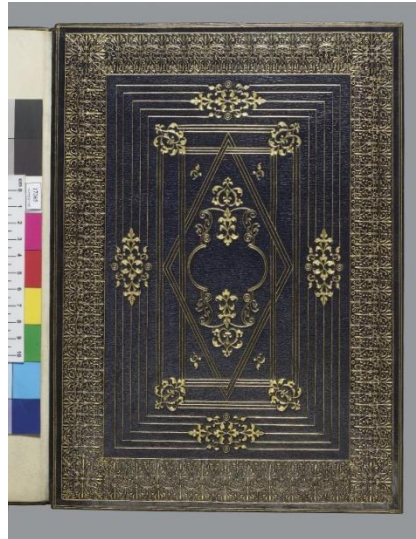
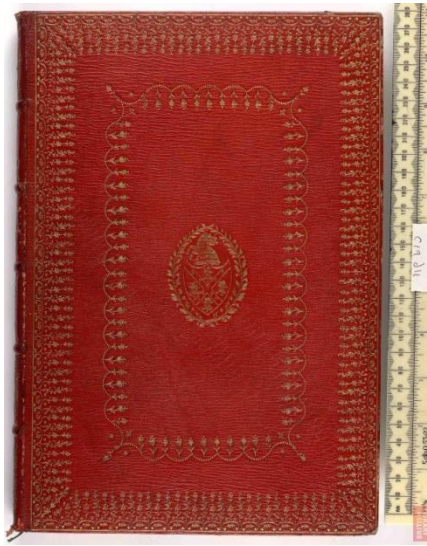


Fig. 12. Brunner, *Grammatica Rhythmica*, Mainz 1466.  
In the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester.

A binder named Payne did this for a collector named Cracherode (Fig. 13). The book is the Rome, 1466, *editio princeps* of Cicero's *De Oratore*, printed by Sweynheim and Pannartz. This is a simpler binding than the one Hering did for Spencer, but this plainer decor clearly reveals the same affect: a super-charged covering (straight-grain morocco) infested by dense, narrowly condensed, rather bland tools. The armorial center stamp had been the weapon of egomaniac book owners since the middle of the sixteenth century, though the art of jamming it into the beholder's eyes was perfected by Roman Baroque bookbinders in the third quarter of the seventeenth century.



**Fig. 13. Cicero, *De Oratore*, Rome, 1468, bound by Payne for Cracherode. In the British Library.**

Another bookbinder for the new world order was Christian Kalthoeber, a Prussian who lived in Britain (Fig. 14). He had a superb hand at extra-rich gilding, as did Jakob Krause and other great German binders of the later sixteenth century. Made about 1780-1799 this decor has the spirit of younger days of eighteenth century, but placed more in the mode of throwing spaghetti on the wall than in a mood of enlightened clarity. In this decor we see bits of classicized motifs, stringed pearls from the Roman Baroque, the anonymized floral rolls used on tens of thousands of nineteenth century book covers, half-fans and grotto coves, and a lattice or diamond-skewed grid at the center. (The most interesting visual element is the curved interventions of the grid surround.) The decor is explosively rich but nonetheless silent and inexpressive. Inside it is the *editio princeps* the complete works of Virgil printed in Venice in 1475. Lest we think that collectors and binders worked in this fashion only on incunabula, here is the doublure and end papers supplied for Gascogne's *Dromme of Doome*, London 1586, in 1808 (Fig. 15). The watered silk creates optical echoes like those of the gilding on the boards.



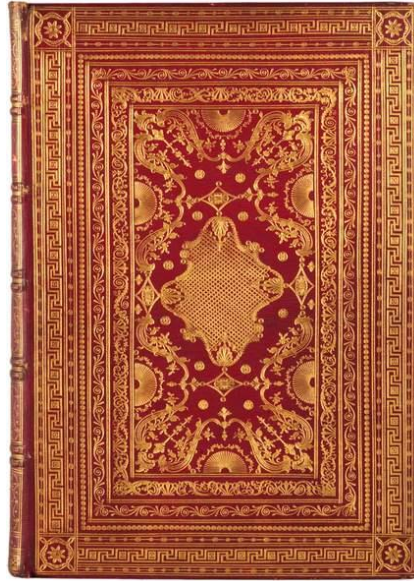


Fig. 14. Vergil, *Opera*, Venice, 1475, bound by Kalthoer. In the Princeton University Library Department of Special Collections.

Now all these are beautiful bindings. The work of Hering, Payne, Kalthoer and others, French as well as English, included beautiful bindings on simpler decorative schemes as well, and these artisan certainly did not invent gaudy bindings. But the massive re-binding, or re-branding, of old books for the new stakeholders, having sent tens of thousands of early bindings of boards, limp vellum, interim bindings, and pigskin into the garbage, replaced them with beautiful confections in yellow, ochre, purple, maroon, mauve, jet-black, blue-black, jade green, forest green, blood red, with prominent backstrip information. Materials governed decor in bibliophile bindings. These styles also turned into the artful bindings of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, invented by artistic and social attitudes that evolved into modernity.

These collector's bindings represent a mentality different from that of the *ancien régime* and from that of the modern world. We plainly see that these bindings are of the time and place of modern bibliophily and not of the profoundly different Occidental world from before the French and Industrial Revolutions. They are defensive, key-hole views into something supposedly greater than we, open to the public but fearful of subversion. Inside the structure of advanced knowledge throughout the nineteenth century, mathematical reason and verbal reason struggled together. These bindings are unconvincing —or, rather, they are convincing of something that seems to be not wholly what the stakeholders wished to convince themselves and others of. The boards are not wood but mashed-up paper, often acidic, and the hinging was superficial and weak. We see nineteenth-century eclecticism, poaching the globe: the historicist appropriation of motifs from their eras and places of origin into the world of the print culture of the wealthy in the first great age of global capital. These bindings represent a social, intellectual, geopolitical, and economic order of which we today are deeply critical. They are emblematic decors of ideals and dreams and fears, polychrome dress suggesting ideas empires within and without. These binders' shops were a sort of mill producing these regalia from the world of the passing day and the inner perennial

themes of the codex book. A richer, better illuminated environment than the past is nonetheless fueled by ancient conflicts and out-dated rules. The old affections did not change so quickly or so thoroughly as these people expected.

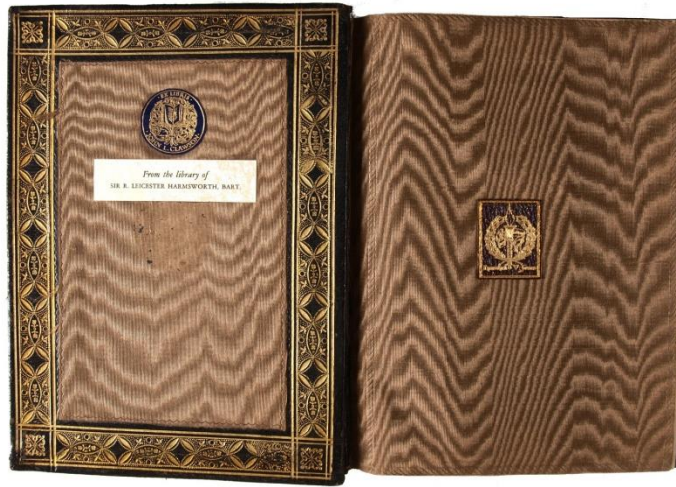


Fig. 15. Gascoigne, *Droome of Doom*, London, 1586.  
In the Folger Shakespeare Library.

In the history of the post-Enlightenment world, the bibliophilic ingestion of the mass of early books and metamorphosis of them by binding —and by institutionalization— helps to demonstrate that revolution comprises two contrary steps. The first is the objectification of that which will be changed. The advance of empirical science is usually a principal part of this. In our case, printed communication was made the object of rational and material researches. Both beneath and beside the scientific endeavor, what appears as a revolutionary impulse to change the ideas under which society functions is in truth a group of ideas that have already changed —already won— that include the ideas behind those, and the ideas behind them, and a vast ancient complex of old beliefs and principles that perennially re-form into new appearances. The second movement is the new holism, in which people apply a new order of valorized principles, with esteemed deportment consequent to them, to what had just been broken apart. This holism is implicitly if not explicitly theorized in the search for unity driving the empirical investigation. Thereby the nimbus of the sacred eventually re-appears. The bibliophilic bindings display the new holism that Occidental cultures formed as part of as the solution to the revolutionary changes in machine power and brought deep into all Europe by the French Revolution —even so far as the remote fastnesses of very old libraries.

Both moves, the naturalizing move and the renewed holism move, happened simultaneously to some degree, as they often if not always do. Revolutions extend rather than eliminate perennial moral conflicts. The notion of revolution pretends to elide them. In these moral dilemmas, all choices have some valence. Each does some good, and each does some bad. Every change, even revolutionary changes, chooses some advantages and some disadvantages. Confusion in the midst of moral dilemmas returns even after persons or societies have tried with hardness and brutality to cut away the old.



Part of faster and faster invention is faster and faster preservation, whether we know it or not.

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