Object Oriented Environs

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For Helen Smith, in “Embodying Early Modern Women’s Reading,” “the text enacts a physiological change” on the reader. In this essay, I should like to revise this statement to suggest that this “change” is actually an exchange between text and body. The marginalia left behind by early modern readers are visible traces of their bodily imprints upon the text and suggest that by their reading, the text becomes an extension of the reader’s body. Such exchanges need not be limited only to such visible marks. Recent scholarship has begun to study the often slightly less visible marks left behind by book users; Katherine Rudy’s work employs the use of a densitometer to examine these marks, which include oils from fingerprints, food stains, tears, and even blood stains that help to create a better idea of what parts of a text a reader read and how often that text was read. It is not just that “[t]he process of accessing the text was a corporeal one...impressing key content on the reader’s memory,” but that the

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1 Smith gives the example of Sir John Spencer recounting in Discourse of Diverse Petitions (1641) his speaking with a young woman who had left her father and was no longer talking to him. Spencer uses a book as a means of persuasion to affect the young woman: “then I took a Bible and bad her read the first commandment, and then she fell a reading and into a passion of weeping, and afterward spake with her father.” Smith points out that the act of reading has physically affected the woman — causing a bodily change. Elsewhere, Smith also makes a connection between the appetite and reading, arguing, “the empty stomach creates cognitive space.” Helen Smith, “Embodying Early Modern Women’s Reading,” Huntington Library Quarterly 73.3 (Sept. 2010): 418, 425.

text itself also becomes embodied, taking on features of its reader.³ Text and reader exchange properties. To say only that “[r]eaders’ bodies were molded and altered by the texts they read” is to ignore the other side of the equation.⁴ The reader is not only imprinted by the text but imprints the text itself (both literally and figuratively). The relationship between book and reader proves symbiotic, an example of facultative mutualism (where two entities are interdependent but not completely dependent upon each other), something, as I shall show, is illustrated perfectly in the figures of the Cardinal and his Bible in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. The Cardinal’s overpowering, poisonous character—he would be “able to possess the greatest devil, and make him worse”⁵—is both altered by his (mis)reading of the Bible and other religious texts (see 5.5.1–10), as well as being able to infect the book itself, allowing it to literally become poisonous, thereby killing Julia. In the play, the use of the book as murder weapon demonstrates how the boundary between book and body (of the reader) become blurred as both the permeability of the page and of the body is emphasized throughout the play.⁶

Here, it’s useful to consider the way the many meanings the term “body” describe or comprehend these blurred boundaries. From “the physical form of a person, animal, or plant” to “the main portion of a document or other text,” as well as “more widely: a material thing, an object; something that has physical existence and extension in space,” the *OED* lists approximately a dozen definitions that are applicable to the interpretation of “body” in *The Duchess of Malfi*.⁷ This permeability of both page and body serves in direct contrast to the repeated prison imagery set throughout the play. An example of the use of prison imagery can be found at

3.2.137–139, as the Duchess asks Ferdinand, “Why should only I, / Of all the other princes of the world / Be cas’d up, like a holy relic?” This quotation also serves as an example of the Duchess being conceived of as an object. The desire to “cas[e] up” demonstrates an attempt to prevent and stop up the leakiness of bodies and texts, but these attempts ultimately fail. Early modern skin, as described by Helkiah Crooke in *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), “serue[s] either for receyuing in or letting out, or both as neede shall require.” Bosola also speaks to the porousness of skin in act 4, noting that flesh is “fantastical puff-paste: our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in: more contemptible; since ours is to preserve earth-worms: didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? such is the soul in the body.” Here, and elsewhere in the play, the body represents the capability of being both and. The body can both take in and let out, be “weaker than those paper prisons” and serve as a more sturdy (bird) cage to entrap the soul—though just as with a bird cage there must be a door for the bird to get in/out, so too does death enable the soul’s escape from the body. This both and imagery occurs numerous times during the play and is also key to understanding the relationship between book and reader.10

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8 Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), 71; emphasis added. For Crooke, reading also relies upon more than just sight: “a man cannot see to read vpon a booke that is layd vpon his eye; because there wantenth the meane the obiect and the instrument of sense” (72). Reading is a multi-sensory experience with both text and reader affecting the other. See also Joshua Calhoun’s account of the palimpsested nature of paper, Calhoun, “The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper,” *PMLA* 126.2 (March 2011): 327–44.

9 Webster, *Duchess*, 4.2.125–128.

10 The hybrid nature of the book and body—where each is neither fully what it is supposed to be, fully text or fully human—is reflected in the animal/human imagery employed throughout the play. This quality of being “not quite” x or y is perhaps explained by Bruno Latour’s insistence that the world is full of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects.” Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Additionally, animals are often depicted as better off than humans (for example, see 1.1.58–61). (Cf. Donne’s “Confined Love.”) Humans are also called by animal names; Ferdinand calls the Duchess’s children “cubs” (4.1.33) and then “young wolves” (4.2.253). Perhaps most significantly Ferdinand is said to have “A very pestilent disease...lycanthropia” (5.2.4–5). Afflicted with the wolf-madness Ferdinand is representative of the (in)human relationship fostered between book and body. When the doctor announces that Ferdinand is afflicted with lycanthropia a direct connection
The Cardinal should be thought of not so much as a “man of the cloth” but as a “man of the book.” His own moral corruption has affected his book. I find it particularly interesting that the Cardinal does not deliver poison through what might be considered the more traditional routes (in food, drink, or even poison on a blade). In fact, I have yet to find another case of a book used as a murder weapon in a Renaissance drama. While the Cardinal’s use of the book is ostensibly related to the nature of his profession, and therefore tied to his identity, it also marks the intimate relationship between reader and book. The reader (of the play) is not aware of when the Cardinal has poisoned his book; instead, it appears that he simply speaks his desires into being:

Yond’s my ling’ring consumption:
I am weary of her; and by any means
Would be quite of—

Julia’s appearance interrupts the Cardinal’s lines, and less than 50 lines later, Julia kisses the poisoned Bible; it is almost as if the blurred boundaries between reader and book here are such that the Cardinal’s corruption, a corruption that Bosola describes in act 1, seeps instantaneously over to his book.

After Julia has kissed the Bible, the Cardinal tells Julia

Now you shall never utter it, thy curiosity
Hath undone thee; thou’rt poison’d with that book.

is made to books when Pescara, not knowing what the term means, says, “I need a dictionary to’er” (5.2.6).

For examples of each see Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and Middleton’s The Second Maiden’s Tragedy. There is also the additional common trope of a poisoned skull seen in such plays as Middleton’s Revengers Tragedy and Massinger’s Duke of Milan.

I use the word “reader” rather than “audience” because of the title page’s insistence that this text is both “As it was Presented priuatly, at the Black-Friers; and publiquely at the Globe, By the Kings Maiesties Servuants” and “The perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse things Printed, that the length of the Play would not beare in the Presentment.”

Webster, Duchess, 5.2.225–27.

“Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil, / But this great fellow were able to possess the greatest / Devil, and make him worse” (1.1.45–7).
Because I knew thou couldst not keep my counsel,  
I have bound thee to’t by death.\textsuperscript{15}

The Cardinal secures Julia’s silence through the use of a corrupted text. The imagery the Cardinal uses also suggests that through his counsel his spoken words have become engraved upon Julia’s body, binding her as a text to his book. However, much like ink from an annotation that bleeds through cheap paper, the Cardinal discovers that his words have seeped through and also imprinted upon Bosola, who has overheard his secret. More explicit cases of the body being written upon occur elsewhere in the play when the heart is described as a text to be read. As Ferdinand tells the Duchess to kiss a dead man’s hand, he also commands her to “bury the print of it in your heart.”\textsuperscript{16} Here the hand is seen as a text that should be imprinted upon the texts already implicitly present in the heart, thereby creating layers of text.

As Julia kisses the book, the action can be likened to that of a wax seal being applied to a letter, preventing Julia from being able to “utter” anything. This connection might not seem as far-fetched as it initially appears when one considers that wax imagery is in fact abundant throughout the play—most often associated with the Duchess—and therefore ever-present in the reader’s mind.\textsuperscript{17} Aside from being malleable, and therefore easily molded and imprinted upon, wax imagery also recalls the use of wax tablets for writing, thereby making the human both an active and passive agent (both imprinting and being imprinted upon), as well as tying the human body to the text.\textsuperscript{18} As was mentioned in the previous paragraph, the Cardinal’s secret is not kept—Bosola overhears. So while Julia is effectively silenced in her death, she has, however, imprinted upon Bosola, further emphasizing the both/and, hybrid nature that exists between text and reader. Julia and Bosola embrace at 5.2.161–62 as Bosola

\textsuperscript{15} Webster, Duchess, 5.2.272–76.

\textsuperscript{16} 4.1.46. Other examples of the heart as a text occur at 3.2.145–46 and 4.1.16–17. Additionally, in 1.2.379–80, the Duchess tells Antonio, “Being now my steward, here upon your lips / I sign your Quietus est.”

\textsuperscript{17} For examples of wax imagery see act 4 scene 1, especially lines 62–63, and 110–11. See also Lynn Maxwell, “Wax Magic and The Duchess of Malfi,” Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies 14.3 (Summer 2014): 31–54.

tells Julia, “Come, come, I’ll disarm you/And arm you thus.” The idea that human touch has the potential to engrave upon another—imparting information and enacting change—is first seen when Bosola touches the dying Duchess. It is only after Bosola notes “She’s [the Duchess’s] warm”19—implying touch—that his motives switch from concern about repayment for his deeds to that of avenging the Duchess’s death. Bosola asks “where were / These penitent fountains while she was living? / Oh, they were frozen up.”20 This can be viewed as the inverse of Julia’s lips being sealed—if the Duchess is often thought of as a wax figure, then here, the interaction between Bosola and the Duchess melts her wax figure—enabling Bosola to enter into the textual body of the Duchess.

The death of Julia by book also figures as a manifestation of the relationship we see between books and readers throughout the play. Act 3 contains several instances of this relationship as detrimental, sometimes even dangerous.21 Count Malatesta’s dependence upon books as his only source of knowledge leads to him being described as only seeming like a soldier:

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\begin{align*}
\text{DELIO:} & \quad \text{He hath read all the late service,} \\
& \quad \text{As the City chronicle relates it,} \\
& \quad \text{And keeps painters going, only to express} \\
& \quad \text{Battles in model.} \\
\text{SILVIO:} & \quad \text{Then he’ll fight by the book.} \\
\text{DELIO:} & \quad \text{By the almanac, I think.}^{22}
\end{align*}
\]

Delio’s clarification that Malatesta will fight by the almanac rather than the book is an important one. Almanacs were second in popularity only to the Bible in terms of books that early modern people would have

19 Webster, *Duchess*, 4.2.337.
20 Webster, *Duchess*, 4.2.358–360.
21 Shortly after the reader learns of Malatesta’s dependence upon books, Delio describes Bosola as a “fantastical scholar” (3.3.40) who “hath studied himself half blar-ey’d” (3.3.43–44). Bosola only demonstrates the possibility of the proper relationship between reader and text when he is imprinted upon by the Duchess (4.2). In act 5, the Cardinal also implicitly connects bad fortune with books: “the Prince set up late at’s book” and was “altr’d much in face / And language” after seeing a figure (5.2.93, 96–97) (emphasis added).
22 Webster, *Duchess*, 3.3.17–21.
owned; they also were normally sold alongside writing utensils. These writing tools, as well as the “blanks,” or inserted pages, that were included in almanacs, implicitly encouraged writing on the owner’s part. Malateste’s explicit connection to almanacs rather than books generally puts him in the position of reader as text—he becomes “A marginal note in the muster book.”

The “thingliness” generated by the act of reading—transforming objects into quasi-humans and humans into quasi-objects—is also represented by the large number of transformations the reader witnesses throughout the play. As Martha Lifson notes, “dramatic metamorphosis has been prepared for throughout the play, as things keep forming, deforming, reforming in rapid succession…the Cardinal turns soldier, the steward turns husband, a wife turns whore, a baby grows instantaneously, i.e., in stage time to a boy, [and] the Duchess turns grey overnight.” The act of reading creates a fluidity between book and reader—one where the topsy-turvy nature of the play helps to emphasize that book and reader can’t be separated. I would also argue that it is the Cardinal’s moral corruption and therefore corrupt relationship with his book that affects and brings about these bodily changes in the other characters.

In a play that is heavily aware of its theatricality, the playtext is also aware of its nature as a material text. The play is the first published English play to contain a cast list, but most importantly it also contains marked sententiae throughout the play through the use of quotation marks or italics. My point in listing all these details is to emphasize the material nature of the printed book, which also serves to demonstrate how the page tries to exert authority over the reader. The play includes 16 marked sententiae, with the highest number of sayings spoken by Bosola (a total of 4 instances, amounting to 25%). Even though “Q1 was published

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24 Webster, Duchess, 3.3.10–11.
26 The idea of a ripple-like effect—one person’s actions spreading out and affecting everyone else’s—is brought up in the opening lines of the play as Antonio likens “a Prince’s court” to that of “a common fountain.” See 1.1.11–15.
with the reader rather than the actor in mind,” the playtext attempts to restrict the act of reading for its audience with its pre-marked phrases (perhaps in the same misguided fashion as the Cardinal’s attempts to keep his secret by killing Julia). This does not account for the reader’s effect on the text. At the end of the play Delio speaks of the misguided nature of the Cardinal, Bosola, and Ferdinand:

These wretched eminent things
Leave no more fame behind ‘em, than should one
Fall in frost, and leave his print in snow,
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts
Both form and matter.

This suggests that the characters’ corrupted nature negatively affected the text’s ability to influence the reader. The page again attempts to exert its authority over the reader as the last two lines of the play (spoken by Delio) are also marked as sententiae.

And yet, as is fitting with a play that highlights the both/and of the body, there is also a hopeful quality to the ending of the play, one that I prefer over the negative outlook that argues for the futility of the characters’ actions in a chaotic world. Delio’s final words again remind the reader of the use of wax tablets for writing and the ease with which content can be erased—like one who “leave[s] his print in snow, /As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts, / Both form and matter.” The text, with its final two lines marked as sententiae, looks to the reader for recupera-

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29 Ibid., xl.
30 Webster, Duchess, 5.5.112–116.
31 “Integrity of life is fame’s best friend, / Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end” (5.5.119–20).
32 For further discussion of the different interpretations of the final passages of the play see Elizabeth M. Brennan, ed., The Duchess of Malfi (London: A&C Black, 1998), 136–37.
as a warning—they are not condemnations of the hybrid relationship between book and reader.

The knowledge that this is a corrupt world is something that the reader is confronted with from the beginning as Antonio states that

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\text{a Prince’s court} \\
\text{Is like a common fountain, whence should flow} \\
\text{Pure silver-drops in general. But if’t chance} \\
\text{Some curs’d example poison’t near the head,} \\
\text{Death and diseases through the whole land spread.}^{33}
\]

These lines also appropriately contain the play’s first marked sententiae. Several lines later Bosola, describes the Cardinal by saying, “Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil, but this great fellow were able to posses the greatest devil, and make him worse.”\(^{34}\) Antonio then describes Ferdinand as having “a most perverse and turbulent nature.”\(^{35}\) From the start, the reader understands that this is a corrupt world. But the bookending of the play with sententiae emphasizes not only the material object of the book, but also the importance of the reader in relation to the playtext. The reader is called on to commonplace selections from the text—to interact with and make the (new) text the reader’s own. It is in this action—of commonplacing—that the relationship between book and reader can begin again.

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33 Webster, *Duchess*, 1.1.11–15.
34 Webster, *Duchess*, 1.1.45–47.
35 Webster, *Duchess*, 1.2.91.