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Riach, H.A.

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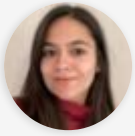
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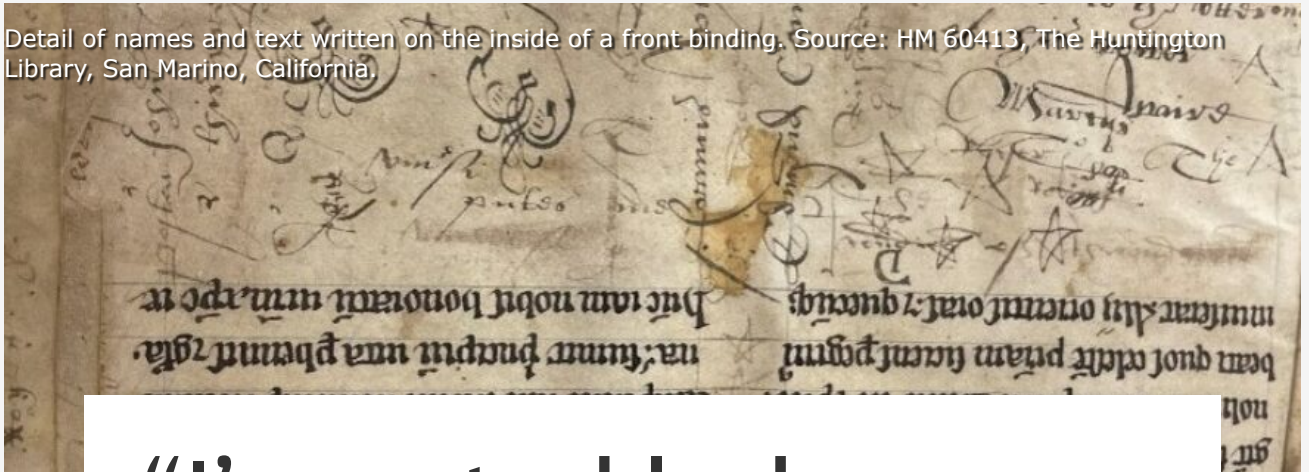
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Holly Riach

Detail of names and text written on the inside of a front binding. Source: HM 60413, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



“I’ve got a blank space, baby”: Untangling Organizational Strategies in Early Modern Manuscript Compilations

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How do you organize the texts you copy into blank notebooks? In this blog, Holly Riach reflects on the manuscripts she consulted at the Huntington Library, California, and explores what a blank page can tell us about the production and organization of textual collections in early modern England.

If you were wondering what early modern manuscript users and Taylor Swift have in common, the answer is their proclivity to write names (and practically anything else, see image 1) in the blank spaces which surround or fall between texts. While early moderns may not have been copying “a long list of ex-lovers”, as Swift proclaims to do in her 2014 pop hit, “Blank Space”, the header image – which shows the inner binding of HM 60413 covered with the names of owners and/or users of the manuscript – demonstrates their inclination to put blank space to good use.

This image is taken from a manuscript, produced c. 1570-1627, which I consulted during my time as a short-term fellow at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, in April of this year. The objective of my research (which is part of the ERC-consolidator **FEATHERS** project) was to investigate how early moderns used blank space to organize their notebooks and the implications that this strategy has for subsequent users of the manuscript and scholars today. Indeed, manuscripts which appear messy to the modern eye might actually have inconspicuous order, and an awareness of manuscripts as layered and evolutionary can allow us to uncover the different forms of agency and creativity employed by scribes as they copied texts.

Luckily for those early moderns who had such a penchant for filling space, blank pages were often left in manuscripts for both practical and aesthetic reasons. While we are likely to find names littering the blank inner bindings and outer flyleaves of a manuscript, there is also plenty of blank space inside: a manuscript producer might only copy text onto the recto side of a folio or intentionally begin new sections of texts on recto leaves, for instance, leaving blank pages scattered throughout manuscripts. Blank space was also consciously left in a manuscript as an organizational strategy and can, therefore, be understood as tangible evidence of the processes of manuscript production. Jonathan Gibson, a pioneer of the study of early modern blank space, coined the term ‘casting

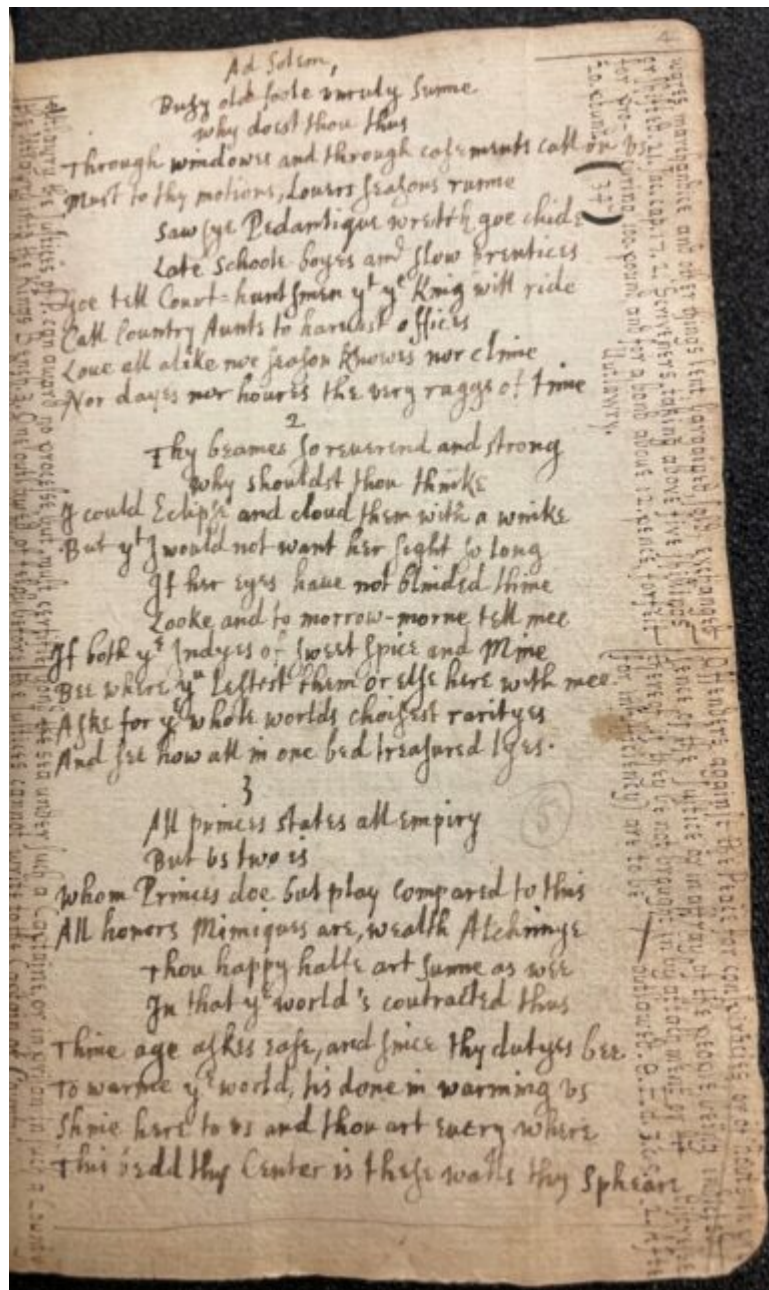


Animals and doodles drawn in the margins of a poem. Source: HM 172, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

off blanks' to refer to 'the practice of leaving several pages of a manuscript blank in order to create distinct sections into which to copy an as yet undecided number of texts' (2010, 208). This practice is demonstrated in HM 1338, a commonplace book in which the section headed "Apothegmes / & fragments of history" (fols. 64r-v) is followed by eleven blank leaves which are followed by a new section headed "Newes from Court" (fol. 84r). The different sections were likely mapped out with headings prior to copying, and a number of blank pages were left to be filled in with the appropriate material as and when necessary. The remaining blank pages reveal this strategy. Blanks could be cast in a linear way, from left to right and front to back, but they could also be cast in reverse; in order to create a material distinction between their texts, an early modern might flip to the very back of the manuscript, turn it upside down and begin to copy right to left and back to front (Gibson 2010, 209). Blanks could also be bound into a manuscript, as is the case in HM 904, better known as the miscellany of **Constance Aston Fowler**. Fowler copied texts onto blank gatherings and bound them together with more blank gatherings to produce her miscellany. Many of these pages remain blank to this day, as neither Fowler, nor any of her collaborating scribes, filled the pages with the intended content (Hackett 2016, 105-106).

I have come across no better visual representation of reverse cast off blanks than in HM 46323, a notebook which asks to be read forwards, backwards, sideways, and upside down. This manuscript has caught the eye of scholars interested in the intersection between law and literature in the early modern period due to its inclusion of both legal and literary material (Brooks 2017). If you are reading left to right, the manuscript begins with a number of poems, copied in a central column with wide margins, from well-known authors such as **John Donne** ("The Sun-Rising", in this copy entitled "Ad Solem", was copied on fol. 4r, and "Break of Day", untitled in this copy, was copied on fol. 5r; see **CELM** entry for comprehensive index of the poetic texts in this manuscript). If, instead, you were to read from right to left by turning the manuscript upside down, the manuscript would begin with a single poem, entitled "A new years gift presented to my father and mother by my Brother Thomas Calverly" (fol. 92r). This is followed by a lengthy copy of a law dictionary, though in order to read this you will be required to tilt the manuscript 90° to the right. The dictionary copy begins with a

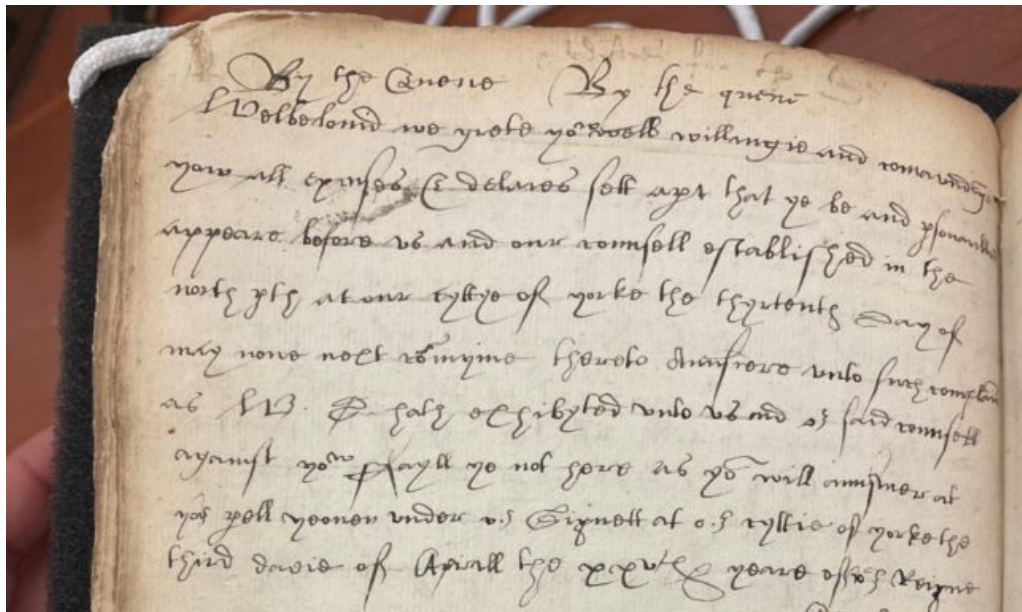
definition of 'Abjugation' (fol. 91v) and ends with a definition of 'Watermen' (fol. 1r). The text travels backwards towards, and eventually intersects with, the poems: the copyist made sure to fill up every bit of space that the poems do not, infiltrating their margins.



Passages from a legal dictionary copied in the margins of a copy of John Donne's "The Sun-Rising". Source: HM 46323, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The two sets of texts in this manuscript are so visually distinct and consistent in script and direction that the two sections of the manuscript are easily discernible to the modern eye, but this is often not the case. When blanks are cast into a manuscript from left to right, as in the example of HM 1338, the remaining blank pages might be filled by a number of other scribes who utilize the

manuscript for alternative purposes. In doing so, these subsequent users might disrupt and obscure the organizational strategy. In HM 60413, for instance, a subsequent user copied a letter headed “By the quene” on a page already entitled “medisines for the leges” (fol. 51v; see image 3). When these layers of texts copied onto blank pages build up, manuscripts can become a seemingly impenetrable mess of material assembled without rhyme or reason. I argue that if we untangle the layers of such manuscripts we might reveal layered organization rather than total chaos.



Detail of a letter copied on a page pre-headed 'medisines for the leges'. Source: HM 60413, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Due to an empirical gap between early modern and modern concepts of genre and organization it can be difficult to ascertain why certain texts have been collected together and how they relate to each other; what might have seemed like a natural connection to an early modern might be completely disconnected to a modern reader and vice versa. The Huntington Library holds a manuscript which demonstrates this gap precisely: HM 198, better known as the [Haslewood-Kingsborough manuscript](#). This manuscript comprises two distinct manuscripts which were bound together, as its frontispiece pronounces, by [Charles Lewis](#) in 1832. The manuscript is probably most well-known in modern circles of critics working on Donne: across both manuscripts, there are 123 poems by John Donne (65 in the first and 58 in the second; Armitage 1966, 699). My interest, however, lies in a note which appears towards the end of the first manuscript:

[[Manicule](#)] The remainder of this part formed

the conclusion of the same, which was reversed as if the entries, or transcripts, were intended to form a distinct collection: but it is not discoverable where= in exists any variation of character: Either by subject or otherwise. The next leaf formed the concluding one of the volume (HM 198, fol. 160v).

This memorandum writer alerts us to a very important material detail: the first manuscript had been re-bound so that the last section, which had previously been cast in reverse, has been flipped around. This decision prompts a jarring sensation for the reader who is met with a heavily marked flyleaf in the middle of the manuscript. This memorandum writer is confused by the decisions made by the early modern compiler: why did they choose to organize their manuscript in such a way? Clearly the reasoning behind the early modern producer's use of such an organizational strategy was lost to this memorandum writer. It is questions such as these which my research asks in an effort to improve our understanding of the practices of early modern organization, scribes and manuscript culture.

So, next time you buy a nice, new blank notebook, why not try to organize it early modern-style: leave blank pages, flip it around, reverse it. Perhaps it is not as odd as we might first think!

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