

‘The Divell’s Hand’: Touching Special Collections

1. Stephen Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern Europe: politics, medicine and sin* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015). The French monarchy also benefitted for a time from this curative phenomenon.

From the medieval period to 1732, when the ceremony was removed from the Book of Common Prayer, British kings possessed a special ability: the ‘Royal Touch’. This performance, which combined a belief in the power of the monarchy and an exercise in its public display, cured an extensive range of diseases and other ills, but was believed to be a treatment in particular for tuberculous lymphadenitis, a necrotic inflammation of the neck and its lymph nodes commonly known as scrofula. Touch formed a powerful link in the chain between subject, king, and God. Of all such hands-on monarchs, Charles II stood head and shoulders above the rest, offering the royal touch to over 92,000 scrofula sufferers, and, as astute royal observers noted, usefully shoring up the mystical position of the Crown following its Restoration.¹ Charles was, it can be said, a big fan of the power of touch.

Matthew Shaw

On Michaelmas Day, 1663, three years after the Restoration of the Crown, Charles visited The Queen’s College, Oxford. The College had not yet been rebuilt in the English baroque style, but like most of Oxford remained a medieval gothic pile, entered via a gateway on what is now Queen’s Lane. Charles came with his Queen, Catherine of Braganza, and the Duke and Duchess of York, with whom Charles had spent his exile. According to the antiquary Anthony Wood, one of the College’s fellows, John Skelton, welcomed the party, and ‘After that they went and saw the Chapple, then the Library, to see the divell’s hand.’ Following this curious activity, they were ‘meet with at the Chaple dore with the College horne

full of College bere and there they dranke’.²

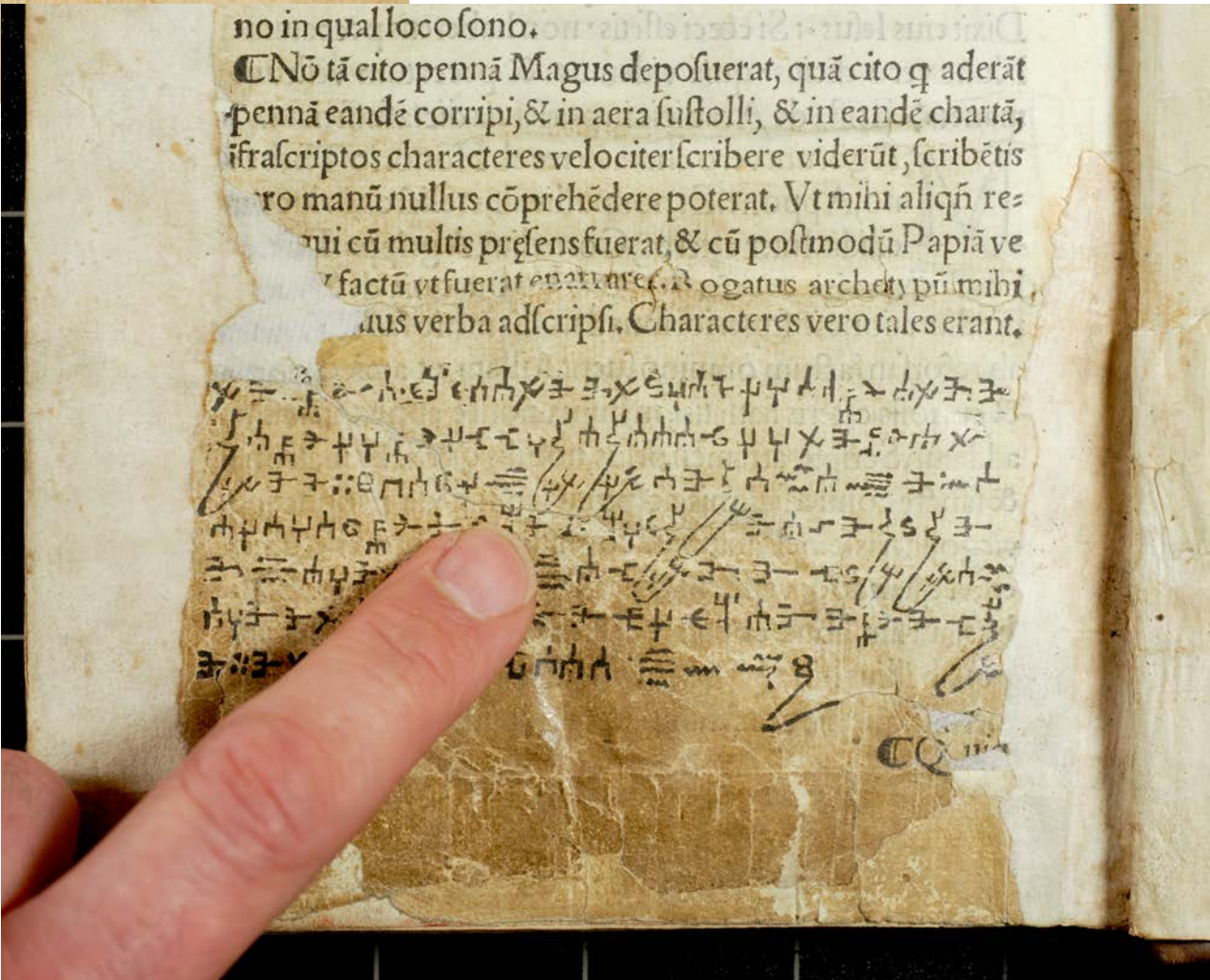
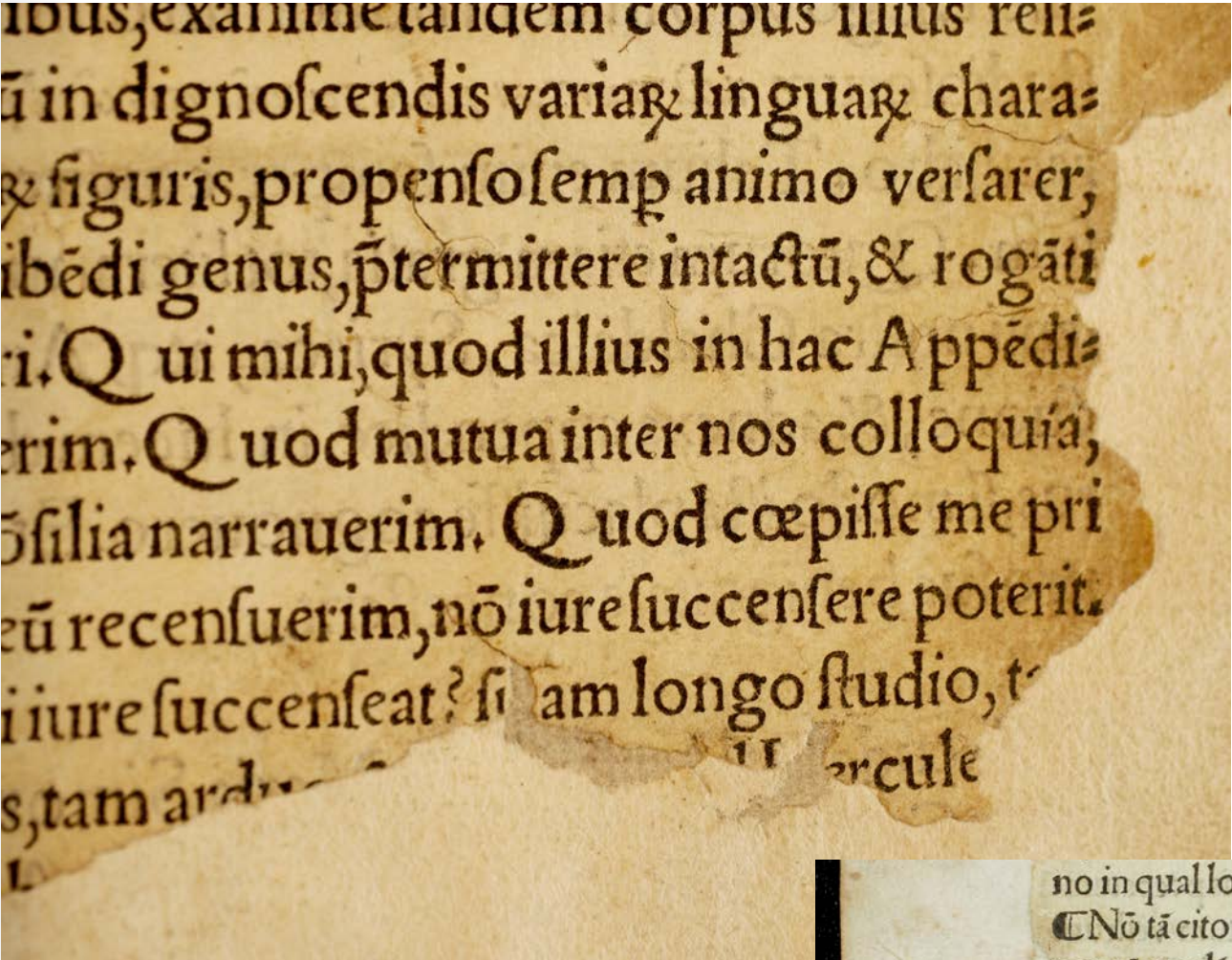
The ‘divell’s hand’ mentioned by Wood can still be found in a small quarto titled *Introductio in Chaldaicam linguam, Sryiacam atque Arenenicam* (Pavia: Maria Simoneta Cremonen, 1539), which was renowned during the early part of Charles’ reign, and which is now kept in a modern library vault built under the Provost’s Garden.³ Wood wrote ‘see’, but it seems more than likely that this royal visit was augmented by touch. On the verso of folio 212 are printed the words ‘Ludouci Spoletani p[re]ceptu[m] siue (vt vulgo dicitur) coniuratio. Cum subscripta Demonis responsione’, and at the foot of the page, the reader can still see the reproduced letters of this devil’s response – the ‘divell’s hand’.⁴ If the king was anything like the many other readers of this occult page, he traced the writing with his finger, adding to the darkening of the page with oil and grime, and adding to its sheen with his gentle rub.

Sandwiched between his arrival at College and a visit to the Chapel, the king observed – and we assume touched – a surrogate text in a hand possessed by the devil. The page today is still extant, if repaired and somewhat crumbling. The effects of generations of handling are evident. The page recounts the tale of a magus who saw a devil’s handwriting, providing the conjuration in Italian and records in Latin how he wrote it out. The bottom quarter of the page contains Ambrogio’s rendition of this baffling text, which is printed in an unidentified typeface and language, using what looks on closer inspection to be a specially cut set of type, resembling, but distinct from, Ambrogio’s Armenian typeface. The volume makes no attempt to interpret the characters. To the untrained eye, and before printers and scribal ink faded to different colours, it might even look like handwritten script; but in some ways, the ability to reproduce the text via print may have been even more powerfully loaded, reproducing and in some mystic way summoning the presence wherever editions were to be found.

One wonders what Charles’ visit, and his laying-on of hands, did to the occult power of the text. It certainly appears to have overshadowed the importance of the rest of the book, edited by Teseo Ambrogio degli Albonesi (1469–1540), which constituted the first European grammar of the Armenian and Syriac languages. Deeply involved in Christian Kabbalistic study, Teseo Ambrogio also used the first Syriac typeface in this work.⁵ The College’s possession of the text was noted at the time, and its obscure meaning also made it a resource for satirising donnish hands, as in the south-west Asia traveller and diplomat Francis

The author would like to express his thanks for the thoughtful comments and suggestions of the anonymous readers of the draft of this article.

5. Robert J. Wilkinson, *Orientalism, Aramaic and Kabbalah in the Catholic Reformation: The First Printing of the Syriac New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 11–28. The interest in such languages at Oxford also soon became tied to Charles II and his courts’ interest in mercantile expansion in the region: Simon Mills, *A Commerce of Knowledge: Trade, Religion, and Scholarship between England and the Ottoman Empire, 1600–1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).



Images courtesy of The Provost and Fellows of The Queen’s College, Oxford.

2. Wood’s *Life and Times*, quoted in J.R. Magrath, *The Queen’s College* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), vol. II, p. 62.

3. Ambrogio Teseo, *Introductio in Chaldaicam linguam, Syriacam atque Armenicam, & decem alias linguas: Characterum differentiarum alphabeta, circiter quadraginta, & eorum inuicem conformatio. Mystica et Cabalistica quae plurima scitu digna. Et descriptio ac simulachrum Phagoti Afranij. Theseo Ambrosio ex Comitibus Albonesii i.v. Doct. Papien[sis]. Canonico regulari Lateranensi, ac Sancti Petri in Caelo Aureo Papiæ Præposito, auctore* (Pavia: Maria Simoneta Cremonen, 1539). Queen’s Sel.c.29: Imperfect: Damage (some extensive with loss of text) on all after Ee4 following the appearance of the hand by ‘repeated inspection’ (Magrath, *Queen’s College*, vol. II, pp. 278–9, which also includes the claim that the ‘library was celebrated for the possession’ of this book during this period).

4. ‘Ludouci Spoletani’s order or (as it is commonly called) a conspiracy. With the signature of the Devil’s response’.

Vernon’s *Detur pulchriori, or, A poem in the praise of the Unviersity of Oxford* (Oxford, 1658):

While his Lines cragg’d, and hard to understand
Doe far more baffle then the Devill’s hand.
Yet the linguistic content of the book was important. Ambrogio’s text was influential in subsequent humanistic study, including the development of polyglot Bibles, and the volume has annotations showing it has been studied for its linguistic content. Tracing the text with a finger offered a range of ways of appreciating the text, in terms of the novelty of the script; the possible physical link to the presence of a devil, at various levels of remove depending on how one thought the text was produced; and the intellectual puzzle of translation. Certainly, Ambrogio’s Kabbalist mysticism may well have placed an importance on physically touching the text. The King’s visit was also a performance, of course, on both sides. The touching of the text by the King was a demonstration of reading, even if reading was not actually taking place, a performance repeated

by many visitors to the library since, even if they lacked Charles’ own power of healing.

Libraries, of course, are full of the consequences of touch, both physical and emotive. Writing, whether by hand or machine, is the echo of a physical process: of a hand holding paper and quill, of the bashing of a typewriter or laptop (whether by the author or an amanuensis). The act of studying is still largely a combination of the eye and the hand, as texts are read on screen or page and notes are produced on paper or electronic display. Pages are turned, indexes or endnotes referred to; and even Kindles require a somewhat unsatisfactory digital interaction to turn the pages. Reading begins with a child or teacher’s finger underscoring new words and letters. Touch allows the writer and reader to exercise their authority over the text.

For the librarian, such as myself, the consequences of such touches are more complicated, particularly within what are often called ‘special collections’, a description encompassing a host of formats partly preserved by libraries and consulted by readers for their materiality as well as for their contents: rare or older books, ephemera, association copies, artists books, bindings, manuscripts and archives, prints, drawings and photographs. Special collection curators, librarians and conservators, are caught between the poles of access and preservation. Books are organic, physical materials, and so handling speeds up the natural decay that afflicts all materials to a greater or lesser extent. Yet if books are never consulted, their purposes seem to be thwarted. Surrogates of various kinds, of course, offer a half-way house, and have a long history.

Copies of texts formed a central part of medieval and earlier textual cultures, as did editions and collections of texts in the humanistic world of letters – a manual activity, for scholars and artisans with ‘inky fingers’, as Anthony Grafton reminds us, noting that Jean Mabillon, founder of the discipline of palaeography, and his friends, ‘asked scholars and librarians across Europe to provide precise specimens from early manuscripts in their custody...tracing the original letter by letter, tongue in teeth.’ Such copying techniques used an embryonic form of tracing paper: a cow’s allantois or the pericardium of an ox, rubbed in linseed oil, turpentine, or pork fat and then dried to create a translucent membrane.⁶

The purpose of such copies may have been dissemination rather than preservation, but the outcomes were similar. Technology has aided the creation of such facsimiles, notably engraved collections of signatures and historical manuscripts. The reproduction of texts was seen as one of the possibilities of photography from its earliest days: in 1839, Henry Fox Talbot suggested that his invention of the photographic negative method – ‘photogenic drawing’, as he termed it – ‘may be employed with great facility for obtaining copies of drawings or engravings, or facsimiles of Manuscripts’.⁷ Large-scale reproductions of famous manuscripts in large calotype editions were created within the British Museum Department of Manuscripts within a generation or so. And, more recently, the capabilities of the cameras in librarians’ mobile phones create a shortcut response to reference enquiries, bypassing slower and more expensive reproductions services, and enabling images to be posted on social media with associated hashtags (*#FragmentFriday*, *#ManicleMonday*). As David McKitterick has noted in his study of texts and technological change, *Old Books, New Technologies*, new forms of facsimiles available on a mass scale ‘gave a new meaning to representation’.⁸ Lithography and photography vastly expanded the potential and market for reproductions in the nineteenth century, creating a new relationship between the original and the copy, and transforming both the history of art and bibliography ‘in a world where comparison and analysis were now possible on a scale and with a confidence without precedent.’⁹

For many students and researchers, the primary interaction with pre-nineteenth century books is now likely to come from such facsimiles. Millions of pages of Continental European, British and American books have been digitised, many by commercial firms in partnership with major research libraries, including the aptly-titled Alphabet (Google’s parent company), as well as through projects supported by government (particularly European) research council and philanthropic funds. Several generations of scholars since the 1920s have also relied on facsimiles in

9. McKitterick, *Old Books, New Technologies*, p.104. On social media’s ability to shake up the ‘comparison and analysis’, see Claire M.L. Bourne and Jason Scott-Warren, “‘thy Unvalued Booke”: John Milton’s Copy of the Shakespeare First Folio”, in *Milton Quarterly* 56: 1–2 (2022), 1–85 and Benjamin Card & David Scott Kastan, ““Wanting a Supplement”: Milton and the Partial Reformation of His First Folio”, in *Milton Studies* 65:1 (2023), 47–70.

microfilm form, following the mass photography of collections to be found in the British Museum and elsewhere. Thousands of these reels have now been digitised and formed the critical mass of digital collections such as Early English Books Online. Rather than turning the pages, readers experience the page through the touch of the mouse or trackpad. Touch – referred to as ‘haptics’ in the IT and user experience world – is linked to the control of the text, or at least to attempt to assert the reader’s will. Some may still use the spool handle or button controls for microfilm readers, inevitably overcompensating the speed or the slow crawl of the projected image. Touch can also undermine the mechanics of such representation. There is a story that the ‘Turning the Pages’ kiosks exhibited in a national library, which displayed digital images of treasures from the collections, and could be virtually leafed through by touching the screen, kept breaking down by failing to respond to fingers and thumbs. After examination, it was discovered that the popularity of the machines was their downfall, and the touch sensitive screen was being eroded due to the acidity of traces of urine on the screens. The kiosks, after all, were placed just next to the public lavatories.

But in general, such technologies allow us to interact with texts and other items in ways that are safer for the object, and often allow for improved searching and other forms of scholarly apparatus, as well as the possibility of remote access. With them, the pages following the ‘Devill’s hand’ might have been in better state – although less exciting. The serendipity of browsing, of flicking through pages, or the sense of where the most read section of a book is located by the way the book opens, is still largely absent from such technologies. The other forms of touch that inform reading are missing. Consulting The Queen’s College’s copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays (1623) is a profoundly tactile experience; Shakespeare can be thought of not just in terms of performance, but also in terms of how he is presented in the physical text. The size of the volume is, as its makers intended, impressively substantial. Making a collection of plays in the folio-book size was a relatively novel statement of the importance of Shakespeare, a format usually reserved to the higher arts or religious texts. As a result, turning the pages requires a full range of arm motion. There are other haptic clues on offer. The slight give and flex in the paper, for example, is important in revealing how it has probably been ‘washed’ at some point in its life, as booksellers sought to improve its appearance by cleaning it of marks and even annotations (ink and pencil notes remain, perhaps postdating this cleansing intervention). A crisper paper-feel would suggest that it had avoided such treatment. The weight and feel of the paper also suggest the prestige

that the printer might have attached to the work (in this case, good quality French linen rag paper). The weight of meaning, of financial value, and cultural importance, also weighs heavy on the curator in charge of such a volume, something that I still feel on those rare occasions when I bring it out for visits from past or potential benefactors. In contrast, there is the delight of the even rarer student in a special Renaissance literature class who is allowed to turn a page; indeed, it seems to be an emotion shared by others, including a former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who have occasionally had scholarly need to read it.

In contrast, consulting works printed during the French Revolution, or perhaps in Britain during the Second World War, can reveal coarser or flimsier paper that speaks of shortages and economies of war (a printed note to that effect is also often present in British works of the 1940s). Elsewhere, almanacs might reveal their ephemeral status – intended for sale via colporteurs to a popular audience – by their rough pages. A sense of reading a finely printed Bible or a nineteenth-century newspaper comes at least in part through the fingertips as it does through the eyes. Digitisation doesn’t deal well with the contours and pinpricks of hairs of parchment.

Touch can also offer up other clues. A page corner slightly turned, the way a book cracks open, and the physical remains of concentrations of dirt and grease that reveal a popular page or place of entry into the work, something that is now being opened up to more systematic study through scientific measurement of medieval manuscripts using devices such as densitometers.¹⁰ In the genomic age, we might now see that ‘a collection of books is also a bioarchive’, as the Folger Director Michael Witmore suggests. The DNA of membranes, pollen, beeswax and other haptic traces left behind by earlier readers is a relatively new avenue of research despite, in the words of biochemist Matthew Collins, it being ‘even harder to sample a rare book than human fossils or teeth’. ‘Project Dustbunny’ at the Folger Library has already harvested human DNA left in a 400-year-old Bible, and identified the readers as northern European, most likely with acne.¹¹

As well as haptic hints, the pleasure of the original – something hard to quantify – might also be missing in digital, cellulose or paper facsimile. Before the age of mechanical reproduction, the characteristics of a book resided in part in its weight, solidity, or in the physical sensation of the touch of its paper or parchment. My experience as a librarian and curator is that much the same is true today. It is a connection that can be witnessed by anyone looking on social media, as hardened researchers become excited about their meeting with a certain manuscript or printed text. Handling a book is, at least in part, a

10. Kathryn M. Rudy, ‘Dirty Books: Quantifying Patterns of Use in Medieval Manuscripts Using a Densitometer,’ in *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 2: 1–2 (Summer 2010). On the kissing of religious texts, for example, see also Kathryn M. Rudy, ‘Kissing images, unfurling rolls, measuring wounds, sewing badges and carrying Talismans: considering some Harley manuscripts through the physical rituals they reveal’, in *electronic British Library Journal*, 2011 and a fuller exploration in Kathryn M. Rudy, *Touching Parchment: How Medieval Users Rubbed, Handled, and Kissed Their Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2023).

11. ‘In Rare Books, Centuries-Old Proteins Can Reveal the Past’, *Shakespeare & Beyond* blog, 4 January 2019, at <folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/new-discoveries-in-rare-books-centuries-old-proteins-can-reveal-the-past/> [accessed 5 July 2023]. Ann Gibbons, ‘Goats, Bookworms, a Monk’s Kiss: Biologists reveal the hidden history of ancient gospels’, *Science.org*, 25 July 2017, at <science.org/content/article/goats-bookworms-monk-s-kiss-biologists-reveal-hidden-history-ancient-gospels> [accessed 5 July 2023].

matter of sensation and emotion, something that is difficult to codify in special collections policies. ‘What have you handled?’ is also an unspoken game played by library and archive workers. A Magna Carta? Beowulf? A Third Folio? Along with this can come a certain blasé: the senior maps curator who can never quite refold a map the way it was opened; the older librarians recalling the sound of tearing as they rummage through the ‘bran tub’ of a new arrival of material; the confidence over the material of earlier conservation practices, with papers soaked in arsenic, glued into ‘tipped in volumes’, folded in half to fit into a binding or on a shelf; the happy-go-lucky paper repair and the replacement of the sensation of paper with plasticisation. I still remember the odd thrill of my first bit of foliation in the early 2000s, creating folders containing roughly 200 folios (the somewhat arbitrary arrangements resulting from the maximum number such red cruciform folders could contain). There was a foliation supervisor, and a series of complicated rules about what is or is not foliated. If you think adding pencil markers to an eighteenth-century prime minister’s papers is a transgression, try going through with an eraser, hoping that Lord Shelburne’s papers would survive (unlike British dominion over the United States). I can still feel the sensation in my fingers. More common, at least for manuscripts in collections in the United States, is the replacement of the sensation of rough handmade paper with slipperier, shinier transparent archival polyester sleeves (often referred to by the brand name of Melinex or Mylar). Hours of study in archives, such as the Library Company in Philadelphia, which has a remarkable collections of paper ephemera, are less about the rustling of paper than the more sibilant sounds of plastic sleeves, and sometimes the sight of a fingerprint fading as the water evaporates.

Other sensations – and emotions – can be induced in the library. A collection that sat in my junior curator’s cupboard for a while consisted of what seemed to be thousands of folded ‘flimsies’, a thin, almost transparent paper, used to trace copies of letters during the Regency. Each one needed careful unfolding and flattening; a process requiring the careful sensation of touch, and a careful avoidance of the snagging that led to a tear. The sensation of such smooth paper after hours on the fingertips is a very different one to the pull of rougher rag paper. Archivists, special collections librarians, conservators and researchers will have their own haptic memories: perhaps the sensation of bunches of souvenir hair found in small envelopes, platted, or tied in ribbons, the strands hard as raw linguini, with

sorrowful letters of mourning of a lost child or wife. Or perhaps the cold, hard, sensation of pins, bringing to mind Adam Smith’s discourse on manufacture and the work lying behind paper and its accoutrements, and even the occasional pinprick from these more bloodthirsty proto paperclips that are still to be found keeping eighteenth-century papers together.¹² Such emotional and physical jabs cut across time, inescapably creating a connection between the ghostly creator or collector of the papers, and the professional imposition of curatorial order. It is an imagined link, of course, but no less vivid and important for that.

Apart from the watching eyes of reading room supervisors, and the sly looks from other readers, such touches are intimate and personal: a sensation of memories linked to the archive. Such touches help form the imprints of memory, understanding, and also the imaginative and emotional connection between the creator, owner and previous readers and custodians. But as Charles II’s visit to Queen’s College reminds us, touch plays a different role in the more public events that occur in libraries from time to time. Books and other items are regularly wheeled out (literally, on book trolleys) for a range of visitors. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) offers competency guidelines for rare books and special collections professionals. They offer a marked contrast to the stereotyped rare books librarian presiding over the special collections reading room as a stern gatekeeper. Outreach, exhibitions, and instruction form a section of the guidelines, which begins with the recommendation that the special

collections librarian ‘reduces administrative, physical and social access barriers to the special collections when possible’. Special collections are to be used ‘in classes... utilizing primary source materials (when conditions allow use)’.¹³ The presumption for special collections materials today is that they will be made as accessible as possible, rather than kept locked away or reserved for the most senior scholars.

Still, the guidelines are somewhat quieter on what librarians, archivists and curators inevitably refer to as ‘show and tells’, or pop-up exhibitions, usually not under glass, but in a seminar room somewhere in the institution. The *Guidelines* also include sections about Advocacy, Promotion, and Marketing, not least ‘internal advocacy which is also the means of articulating to management, budget allocators and organizational stakeholders the value of the special collections’.¹⁴ This, of course, was partly what The Queen’s College was up to in 1663 during the visit of the King. I sometimes wonder how the fellow, John Skelton,

marshalled his royal party. The practicalities and logistics of such displays are rarely taught at library school, and while the desire to expand access may happily match the wish to advocate effectively, a complex of protocols and politics of power come into play. Often there is something of a dance, and the VIP enjoys deferring to the expertise of the custodian who is showing the item, and even asks if they can take a photograph of it, or perhaps even touch it. But this is not always the case, and the visitor might go straight in to turning the pages without intervention from the librarian (and ideally an initial setting out of the terms of engagement). I can vividly remember having to intervene when a former education minister began to saw absentmindedly through the page of an almanac from the American Revolution with a business card he happened

to be holding. Every touch of an item, even that of a king (no less an education minister), is a step towards degeneration and decay. The Royal Touch is unlikely to be beneficial for the stability of ink, rag or parchment.

One means of protecting collection items might be the glove. Charles II’s father is often credited as popularising the glove as a fashion item for men in England: no cavalier could be considered well-dressed without heavily brocaded mitts.¹⁵ Gloves, notes Claire Robinson, ‘were a popular gift from courtiers and foreign dignitaries to the monarch and were often presented by the monarch as a sign of royal favour’, a function also sometimes served by books, and even sometimes combined into the same gift, as in the Bible and gloves given by Charles I to Sir Henry Wardlaw (1565–1637). Both the gloves and the Bible (now known as the Wardlaw Bible, consisting of the Geneva Bible, New Testament and *The CL. Psalmes of David in meeter, according as they are sung in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: James Bryson, 1640)) were extravagantly embroidered – the gloves on their tabbed gauntlets and the Bible on its cover. The gloves, in keeping with clothing practices of the day, could well have been ‘perfumed with fragrances from animal sources such as ambergris, civet and musk; floral oils derived from orange, jasmine, lily and other blossoms; and also spices like cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves’.¹⁶ The book was unscented, we assume, although such bindings may have had their own aroma: A Greek New Testament presented in 1578 to Elizabeth I during her visit to Cambridge University boasts an elaborate velvet binding with a gold centrepiece, attributed to the French protestant émigré binder, John Denys. When commissioned, the binder was warned that it should have ‘no savour of [oil of] spike’ for fear of offending the Queen’s nostrils; this is usually assumed to be a reference to the smell of dyed bindings, but perhaps raised

the possibility of scented bindings.¹⁷ Elizabeth was certainly surrounded by aromas: she was often gifted perfumed gloves, ‘prepared by mixing ambergris, musk or civet with a fatty base and then smeared on the inside of the gloves to keep the skin soft’, as Anna Whitelock notes in her intimate history of the Queen’s court.¹⁸

The glove has provided something of a touchstone in the history of the materiality, providing the site for Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones’ influential 2001 *Critical Inquiry* article, ‘Fetishizing the Renaissance Glove’, bringing a range of theory to play, and noting that ‘the monarch’s glove continued to be treated as a form of inscription as well as an extension of the monarch’s hand throughout the seventeenth century’.¹⁹ John Tradescant’s mid-seventeenth century cabinet of wonders contained the ‘knit gloves’ of Edward the Confessor, Henry VIII’s ‘hawking gloves’, and the ‘silke knit-gloves’ of Anne Boleyn. The collection was gifted to what became the Ashmolean Museum, and, in Stallybrass and Jones’ reading, ‘such gloves were stripped of their ability to transform the recipient with the power of the absent hand.’ Tradescant’s cabinet had come to represent a collection of curiosities rather than regal power, with the royal gloves listed in the ‘garments’ section of the catalogue alongside ‘a payre of Scotch gloves wrapt up like a ball’, their power related more to wonder and curiosity, rather than intrigue or monarchical status.²⁰ Special collections today might enact a similar draining of power, or perhaps refocus it towards a projection of institutional cultural capital.

Gloves today are more likely to bring to mind technical apparel – perhaps skiing, cycling or paddle boarding – than courtly exchanges. To the twentieth-century gaze, glove surely represent expertise rather than chivalric hierarchies: medicine, forensics

17. Claire Robinson, “An old and faithful servand”: A Pair of Early Seventeenth-Century Gauntlet Gloves given by King Charles I to Sir Henry Wardlaw’, *Costume*, 49:1 (2005), 8–31. David Pearson, ‘A Binding Presented to Queen Elizabeth I by Cambridge University, 1578’, *Book Collector*, 49:4 (2000), 547–50.

18. Whitelock, *Elizabeth’s Bedfellows*, p. 26.

19. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe’, in *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (2001), 114–32.

20. John Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantianum: Or, a collection of rarities* (London, 1660), p. 49. See also Stallybrass and Jones, ‘Fetishizing the Glove’, 118.

21. Sarah Cascone, 'Galleries, Auction Houses, and Museums are Joining Growing Efforts to Donate their Protective Medical Gear to Hospitals', *ArtNet*, 31 March 2020, at news.artnet.com/art-world/art-organizations-donate-medical-supplies-1818429; Kelli Brooks, 'Libraries, Archives, and Museums Donate PPE to Healthcare Frontlines Combatting COVID-19', in *Library Journal*, 3 April 2020, at <libraryjournal.com/story/Libraries-Archives-Museums-Donate-PPE-to-Healthcare-Frontlines> [accessed 23 May 2023]; Jessica Edie, 'Pandemic Objects: The Nitrile Glove', *V&A Blog*, 12 May 2020, at <vam.ac.uk/blog/design-and-society/pandemic-objects-the-nitrile-glove> [accessed 23 May 2023].

the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, in the spring of 2020, archives and libraries contributed boxes of stored nitrile gloves to desperate medical institutions, such as donations from the Victoria and Albert Museum to the London Air Ambulance team, in inversion of their usual role in heritage institutions in which, as one V&A curated noted, 'they protect what's outside from us'.²¹

In what might be termed 'the public mind', important, old, or historical texts held by archives and libraries, need to be protected from the hands of librarians and curators by gloves: in particular, by white gloves. The evidence for such concern is clear, since whenever a custodian appears on television or even on social media showing an item without gloves, there are letters. Over a decade ago, such complaints prompted one of the British Library Medieval Manuscripts section's most viewed blogposts on the reason why white gloves are not typically worn. Wearing white

gloves 'reduces manual dexterity', increases the risk of introducing dirt to the item or damaging inks; instead, clean hands, free from lotions, are preferred.²² The post suggests that the suggestion that white gloves are required is a modern phenomenon, popularised by the TV producer's encouragement of curators to use them when showing items as a way of emphasising the importance of the material. Viewers have become used to seeing them worn and some can be concerned if they are not present: a folk-belief as powerful as the Royal Touch. Other librarians and curators have also created videos, intervened on social media, and even created fan fiction – "Master Luke was misinformed",

C-3PO declared authoritatively. "Hands in gloves lack the tactility and manual dexterity of bare hands" – to prick the myth of the need for white cotton gloves when handling books and manuscripts.²³ Indeed, among colleagues one can sometimes detect a mix of frustration at the repeated challenges to their handling technique and eagerness to debunk the belief. Perhaps it is a common trait for a group of professionals when they have some particular expertise not widely known. The *New York Times* even published an article on the general dismay among archivists and librarians:

'Every time it comes up, I sigh deeply,' said Eric Holzenberg, the director of the Grolier Club, the nation's oldest private society of book collectors. 'And then I give my three-sentence explanation of why it's' – to use a milder term than he did – bunk.²⁴

It is unlikely that John Skelton would have used such language, even if he had a view on Charles removing his scented glove.

Since 2005, scientific advice has recommended that gloves should be avoided for works on paper and parchment (photographs and other materials, such as books bound in ivory or metal, are still recommended to be approached in gloves).²⁵ It is even sometimes suggested that the animal skin that provides the membrane for parchment manuscripts benefits from the oils present in readers' fingers and helps to keep the folios malleable. It is entirely possible that the science will change. Nitrile gloves are potentially slippery and reduce dexterity (as well as becoming hot and uncomfortable after a time), but patterning, changes in composition and thickness, might shift the balance in favour of glove wearing. Recent work on the presence of oils and water in fingerprints (which also pass through cotton gloves), drawing on forensic science, concludes that 'fingermarks on paper-based documents, books, and artworks cannot be prevented with simple handwashing, archives and cultural institutions should reconsider their object handling guidelines in light of this evidence'. Increased use of hand sanitisers, with their potential to damage ink, membrane and paper, could also play a role in a new calculus of risk.²⁶ Unused for centuries, and worn only relatively recently in television contexts, perhaps – just perhaps – a belief in gloves will be back on the library agenda.

For now, we are free to handle directly – and with care – the items that are being read and researched. The book containing the 'divell's hand', which I revisited for this piece, remains as uninviting as I remembered. The pages subsequent to the writing are shiny from touch, with obvious repairs to the many tears. The devils handwriting looks...unconvincing, but Charles II may of course have had other ideas, not least given his investment in the power of royal touch. The knowledge of the royal reader, and the physical evidence in the shiny paper of generations of curious scholars inevitably adds a layer of feeling and imaginative resonance to the item, a sense haptically reinforced by tracing the same page with one's finger – a kind of Doubting Thomas of the reading room. There is a glimpse here of the power that many people believed is inherent in the page, something clearly desired to be at work in illuminated manuscripts and other holy books, many of which took centre stage in religious events. Sharing the same sensation of feeling the page, gaining a sense of awe, even, from handling a text such as a first folio, or one with an important provenance, might be useful in generating some of the sensations that accompanied books in the world at other times and other places. This was once powerfully brought to mind in the

26. Although some gels have been found to be 'archivally sound': P. Garside, S. Hamlyn, C. Rogerson, E. Watts, M. Browne, and C. Derenzy, 'The response of the British Library's conservation department to the COVID-19 situation', in *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 19:1 (2021), 1–6, (p.3).

22. 'White Gloves or Not White Gloves', *Medieval Manuscripts Blog*, 19 August 2011, at <blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2011/08/white-gloves-or-not-white-gloves.html> [accessed 14 May 2023].

23. loeba, 'gloveless', *Archive of Our Own*, 22 November 2019, at <archiveofourown.org/works/21524035> [accessed 14 May 2023].

24. Jennifer Schussler, 'For Rare Book Librarians, It's Gloves Off. Seriously', *New York Times*, 9 March 2023.

25. C. Baker and Randy Silverman, 'Misperceptions about white gloves', in *International Preservation News* 37 (2005), 4–9.

basement of the British Library, where I was on a mission with the then curator of Ethiopic collections for materials for an exhibition on the magic of Harry Potter. The Ge'ez gospel books are, of course, revered as religious texts, with an intimate and important role in Ethiopian faith, but we were on the hunt for divinatory and other magical scrolls. In the near-distance, we could hear the Victoria Line rumbling through the basement above us, and we made our way into the relevant book cage. Mostly in blue conservation boxes were several dozen square leather boxes, with ties. Within them were the magical scrolls. We opened one, feeling the paper between our fingers. What did it say, I asked. The answer was a spell to summon a lion, 'but we wouldn't want to do that in here, would we?' In that moment, I agreed, completely, and we placed the scroll back in the box. The imaginative leap had taken place as the tube roared past.

The finishing touches to the draft of this article were finished on the day of the coronation of Charles III, a ceremony that

27. <nytimes.com/2021/01/20/us/politics/bible-inauguration-biden.html> [accessed 23 May 2023].

28. *The Coronation of Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla* (2023), at <royal.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2023-05/The%20Coronation%20Order%20of%20Service.pdf> [accessed 16 May 2023].

29. The Bible is described by the master of Corpus Christi, Christopher Kelly, quoted in Alastair Benn, 'The Gospel According to King Charles', *Engelsberg Ideas*, 5 May 2023, at <engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-gospel-according-to-king-charles/>.

30. <parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/mk707wk3350> [accessed 23 May 2023].

contains the full range of touch – from the homage of touching a silk-robe covered royal hand, a kiss from his eldest son (and an apparent absence of touch from his youngest), and the anointment with ambergris-free oil. A particular favourite among online commentators, Penny Mordaunt as Lord President of the (Privy) Council, grasped a sword (with the aid of a neck brace) for much of the ceremony, which represented the King's ability to decide between good and evil, before passing various further symbols of the state during the monarch's induction. The codex, however, also had its symbolic part to play in the ceremony. One of a small handful of Oxford University Press-published coronation Bibles, bound in what looked to be red Morocco and decorated in gold leaf – and proudly containing 350 misprints known in the 1611 King James Bible – was used for the oath, much as a range of books are brought out from the Library of Congress (or indeed, elsewhere; Joseph Biden used his 'storied family Bible').²⁷

The King places his hand on the Bible and says
The things which I have here before promised,
I will perform and keep. So help me God.
Following this, Charles 'kisses the Bible'.²⁸

The Coronation edition of the 1611 King James Bible was not the only codex integral to the 6th May service. Also present was the 'oldest non-archaeological artefact in England', the sixth-century St Augustine Bible donated to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in the sixteenth century by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. The Bible processed through Westminster Abbey on an acrylic and polyethylene foam stand constructed by Cambridge Conservation Consortium, held open by wide archival polyester strips, firmly screwed onto a burgundy velvet tray carried confidently by the master of Corpus Christi.²⁹ It wasn't the gospel book's first time at such a ceremony. Since the Second World War, the book (shelfmark CCCC MS 286) has played a role in the enthronement of the Archbishops of Canterbury, and its display in 1982 signified ecumenical relations when it was placed between Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Runcie during the first papal visit to England since the Reformation. On this occasion, it was held before the Dean of His Majesty's Chapel Royal, Bishop Sarah Mullaly, who read from a modern version of Luke. The sixth-century gospel book, dispatched by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century to accompany Augustine on his mission to England, was not kissed during the Coronation. Even Charles III appeared to just touch the cushion upon which it was carried. You can, though, scroll through the gospels yourself at the Parker digitisation project at Stanford. There is at least some magic in that.³⁰