



Virginia and Leonard Woolf, 1914.

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Cut and Paste: Virginia Woolf's Bookcraft

Consider the following image of a bookshelf from the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, housed in Washington State University's Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (Fig. 1). At first glance, the collection appears conventional. The shelves present a visually cohesive array of familiar book forms: gilt lettering, raised bands on spines, leather and cloth bindings.



Figure 1. Shelf at the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf Collection, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC), Washington State University (WSU). All photographs, unless stated otherwise, were taken by the author (2024) at WSU MASC and reproduced with permission from the Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf.

But look again, and its material coherence might start to fracture.



Figure 2. Woolf's rebound books (circled).

Removing a book from the shelf – let's say from the middle-left section – reveals a volume rebound in scraps of patterned paper, unevenly cut and loosely adhered, with the spine label excised in blocks and pasted in ribbons onto the spine (Fig. 3).

These books do not bear the marks of neglect; rather, their surfaces record deliberate acts of modification carried out by Virginia Woolf, for whom bookbinding formed a sustained component of her creative career.¹ In total, Washington State University holds approximately 200 volumes that Woolf rebound or re-covered, either partially or in full. This collection, substantial though it is, represents only a portion of her surviving bookbinding work.²



Figure 3. Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence*, 9 vols (London: privately printed, 1926), WSU PQ 2247 A2.

Encountering these volumes, one might reasonably question the level of Woolf's technical skill. For someone who practised bookbinding for decades, should the results not appear more controlled, more finished? This hesitation has a long critical history. For much of the twentieth century, and until relatively recently, Woolf's bookbinding was commonly regarded as little more than a domestic hobby, often characterized as careless, technically deficient, or marked by an apparent refusal to 'cut a straight line'.³ These characterizations have shaped the reception of her broader bookwork, consigning it to the margins of scholarship and limiting sustained engagement with its material significance.⁴

1. Woolf began bookbinding in 1901, and continued until at least 1940, a year before her death, as evidenced by her rebinding of B. Ifor Evans' *A Short History of English Literature*, which was published in 1940. Furthermore, the word 'career' is used deliberately, drawn from Woolf's own correspondence on her bookbinding practice. In a letter to Emma Vaughan, reflecting on the difficulties of lettering – an aspect of traditional binding she found particularly frustrating – Woolf remarks that 'still you can give more time to it in one week than I have done in the whole of my career' (Virginia Woolf to Emma Vaughan, 'October 1902', *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1880–1912*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 56).

2. Washington State University holds the largest known collection of Woolf's rebound volumes. Additional examples are dispersed across other archival and heritage collections, including the British Library and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. A substantial secondary holding is preserved at Monk's House, which contains a thirty-nine-volume set of Woolf's rebound *Arden Shakespeare*, completed in the late 1930s.

3. Geoffrey Bridgman, *Virginia Woolf: The Bookbinder and Bibliophile* (unpublished master's thesis, City University of New York, 2023), p. 50.

4. Donna Rhein notes that Woolf's book production efforts often appeared to be done 'without care'. See Donna E. Rhein, *The Handprinted Books of Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1917–1932* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 12. Furthermore, in a private letter from Anne Olivier to Alan Isaac, 18 March 1999, she classifies Woolf's bookbinding attempts as 'rotten' (reproduced in Alan Isaac, *Virginia Woolf, The Uncommon Bookbinder* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2000), p. 20).

Rather than contesting earlier assessments directly, this essay treats such criticisms as a prompt to return to the material record. By foregrounding Woolf's rebound library and examining these volumes closely, it reconsiders her practice of cutting and pasting as a method situated within a broader tradition of recomposition. Reading her bookcraft – her rebound volumes, working scrapbooks, reading notebooks, and editorial interventions – along the throughline of assemblage, it argues that, by working with fragments and scraps, Woolf extends modernism's piecemeal aesthetics beyond the printed page and into the material structure of the book itself.⁵

Cutting as Method: Woolf's Rebinding Practice

Across Woolf's surviving bindings, the cut fragments are better read not as signs of clumsy workmanship but as part of a deliberate and sustained practice of reshaping the book. From her earliest experiments to her later work, she repeatedly employs the same actions – cutting and pasting paper scraps – so that bookbinding becomes a practice of reconstruction

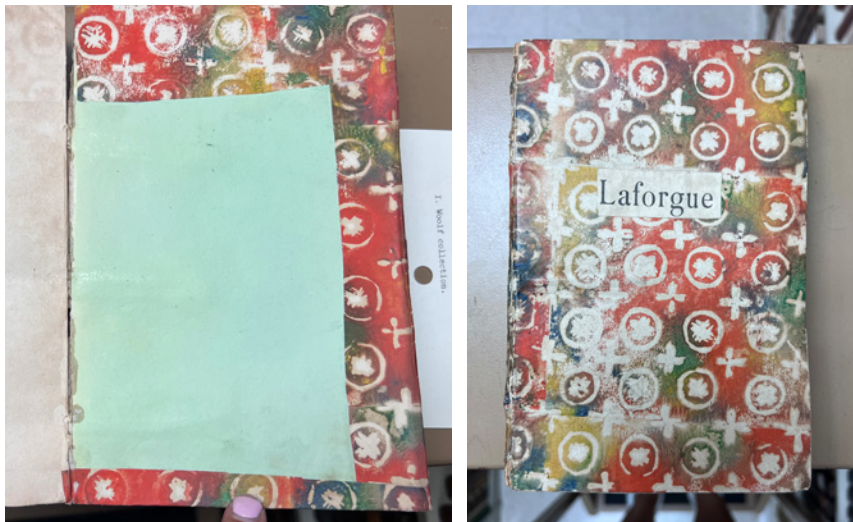
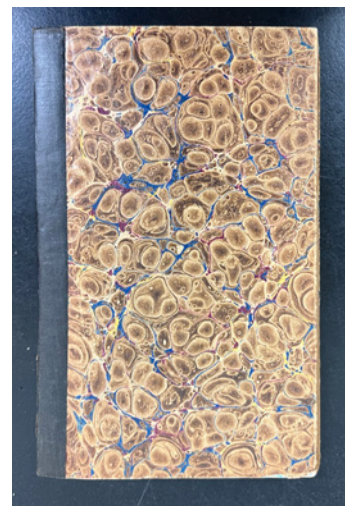
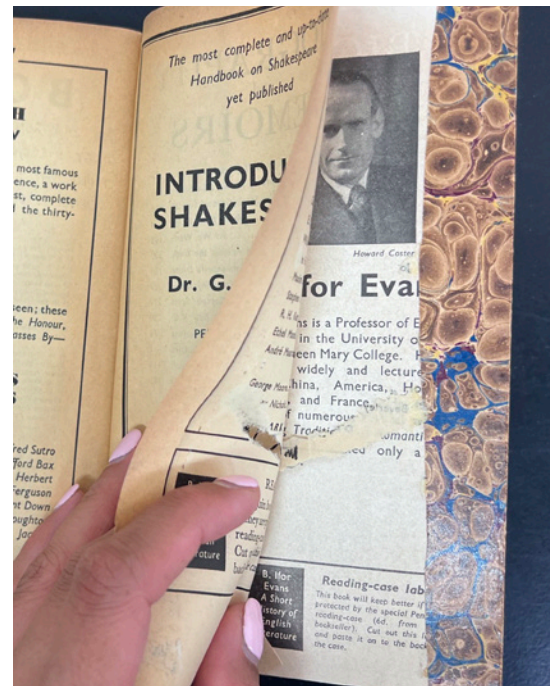


Figure 4. Jules Laforgue, *Oeuvres complètes de Jules Laforgue* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1917), PQ 2323 L8 A1; and Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* (Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1940), PR 8S E8.



rather than repair. This approach persists across decades, as evidenced by what are likely the first and last rebound volumes in her personal library: Jules Laforgue's *Oeuvres complètes de Jules Laforgue* (1917) and B. Ifor Evans' *A Short History of English Literature* (1940) (Fig. 4). The continuity between these examples marks a conscious departure from the guild-style conventions in which Woolf had been formally trained.⁶

Her most distinctive interventions, however, extend beyond merely re-covering boards with decorative papers. In several volumes, Woolf cuts into the interior in order to reshape the exterior. Title and spine labels affixed to the covers are excised directly from the short title pages, displacing the book's paratext and redeploying it as a design element.⁷ The result is not simply a rebound book but a visibly altered object whose exterior registers the act of its own making. The gaps left in the original title pages render the cutting legible, accentuating the production process rather than concealing it (Fig. 5).

Woolf's understanding of cutting as a meaningful material act is articulated explicitly in her writing on craft. In 1926, she reviewed the published journals of influential Arts and Crafts bookbinder, Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson, writing that

the man himself [...] is neither vapid nor insipid nor wrapped round, as so many idealists tend to become, in comfortable cotton wool. On the contrary, he was forever being stung and taunted [...]. There were days when [...] on 'turning the leather down at the headband I found it too short.' Then he flew into a passion of rage, 'tore the leather off the board, and cut it, and slashed it with a knife.'⁸

5. These gestures align with a modernist commitment to fragmentation – what some have characterized as a 'penchant' for 'totalizing chaos' – understood not as failure but as a generative, paradigmatic condition of making. (David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 11). This concept of fragmentation being a defining characteristic of modernism is explored further in the following: Marshall Berman, 'Introduction: Modernity – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 15–36, as well as in the works of Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Biely. More recent examples, grounded in a materialist turn, include George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and most recently, Laura Scuriatti, 'Fragmentary, Elusive, Modernist: The Mina Loy Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Modernist Archives*, ed. by Jamie Callison and others (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 55–69.

6. Woolf began formal bookbinding lessons in 1901 with Sylvia Stebbing and later trained under Annie Power, a pupil of Douglas Cockerell. Cockerell was widely regarded as the leading bookbinder of his generation (J. H. Willis, *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press 1917–1941* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. 6). Power began her career at C. R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft under Cockerell's supervision and later succeeded him as head of the Guild Bindery, continuing to work within the Ashbee-Cockerell tradition (Marianne Tidcombe, *Women Bookbinders 1880–1920* (Delaware and London: Oak Knoll Press and British Library, 1996), p. 68). Bindings produced under Power's direction typically featured gold-tooled decoration, quarter leather with oak boards, and plaited-thong clasps on rosewood, holly, or ebony boards, and may be identified by a monogram of her initials on the spine or inner boards (Tidcombe, *Women Bookbinders*, p. 168). Woolf's early bindings followed this conventional 'guild-style' model, including leather covers, embossed and gilt titles, and raised bands. She appears to have discontinued formal lessons around 1905, after which her work increasingly departed from guild standards in favor of faster and more improvised procedures, a style she largely maintained thereafter (Isaac, *The Uncommon Bookbinder*, p. 10).

7. Gérard Genette broadly defines the paratext as the 'threshold' of the text, comprising those elements that surround and extend the main body of the work (titles, prefaces, dedications, illustrations, and other framing devices) which mediate the reader's access to the text and shape its reception. See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.

8. Virginia Woolf, 'The Cosmos', *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 9 October 1926, p. 26.

Among the many episodes that might have demonstrated the bookbinder's lack of 'vapid[ity]' or 'insipid[ness]', Woolf selects this moment of rupture. She returns to the same logic at the close of the review, recalling his physical destruction of the Doves Typeface he had created ('he pitched his burden over the parapet into the water') as an act that 'saved the ideal from desecration'.⁹ What Woolf foregrounds is not refinement, but decisive bodily engagement with materials, and her emphasis on Cobden-Sanderson's somatic acts is therefore best read as a type of recognition.

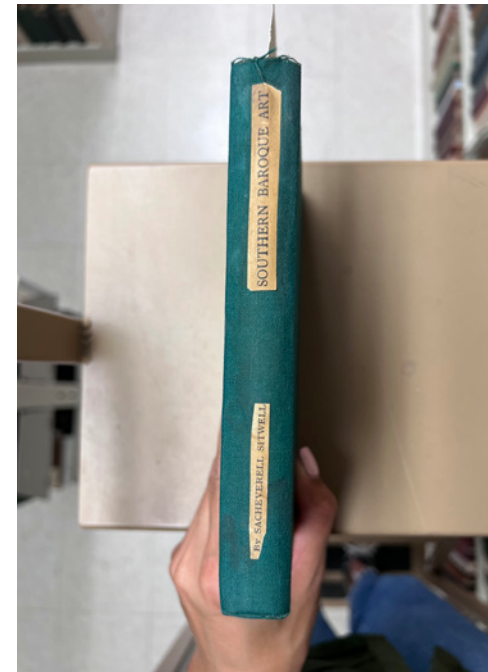
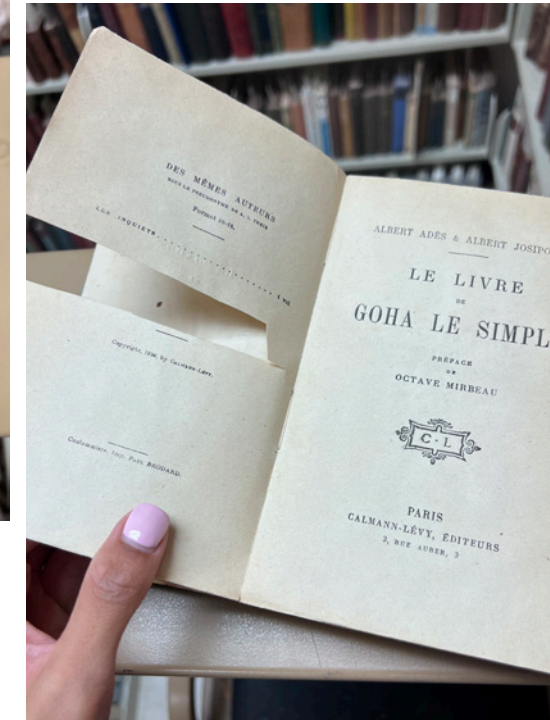
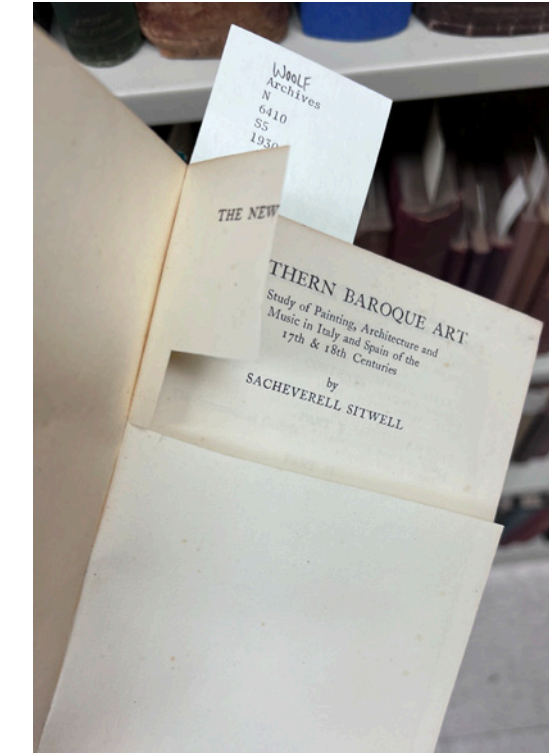


Figure 5. Sacheverell Sitwell, *Southern Baroque Art: A Study of Painting, Architecture, and Music in Italy and Spain of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (London: Duckworth, 1930), N 6410 55; and Albert Adès and Albert Josipovici, *Goha le Simple* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy Éditeurs, 1919), PQ 2601 D4 L5.



By 1926, Woolf had been binding books for over twenty-five years. In the same year she reviewed *The Cosmos* she rebound at least fifteen volumes from her library. In these works, the gestures she seizes upon in Cobden-Sanderson's memoirs (tearing, cutting, slashing) become, for her, a deliberate method rather than a reactive impulse. This logic is especially

apparent in volumes rebound during and after 1926, including the nine-volume presentation set of Flaubert's *Oeuvres complètes* (1930s; Fig. 3) and her rebound copy of Arbetet and Champion's *Oeuvres complètes de Stendhal*, vol. 1 (1926; Fig. 6).¹⁰

Across these examples, papers are cut unevenly and layered rather than trimmed flush, spines are assembled from varied materials, and labels are repositioned or left partially exposed. Uneven edges and visible joins resist a seamless finish, producing an effect that appears imperfect. For Woolf, however, this 'imperfect' look wasn't a flaw; it was what she intended.

This aesthetic inclination towards imperfection is further reinforced in Woolf's correspondence, where she reflects explicitly on her binding practices and on book design more broadly. For instance, in a 1938 letter to Lady Tweedsmuir, she describes rebinding George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* with 'scraps of leather so that it's garish', in contrast to what she calls its 'tidy but ugly' original covering.¹¹ By noting the 'ugliness' of the initial binding, she implies that her 'garish' intervention constituted an aesthetic improvement.

Her use of 'garish' further sharpens this stance and situates it within a broader historical divergence. Although the term now connotes tasteless excess, it originally referred to what was vivid or striking.¹² Its pejorative associations crystallized alongside Victorian material culture and, crucially, within the Book Beautiful movement, which prized harmony and refinement within craftsmanship.¹³ Woolf's embrace of the 'garish' – realized through the use of scraps that disrupt what she calls the 'tidy but ugly' – signals a decisive break from these aesthetic ideals. For Woolf, tidiness was, quite simply, boring.¹⁴

Woolf's bookbinding practice thus aligns with a distinctly 'modernist bricolage' of visual media.¹⁵ Figure 6 is particularly illustrative, combining three distinct materials (quite 'garishly') within a single rebinding: marbled paste paper for the boards, stripped wrapping tissue for the endpapers, and red leather for the spine. The effect is unmistakably handmade: it eschews both the materials and, consequently, the appearance of professional uniformity, presenting the volume instead as a consciously personalized object.

Through cutting and re-covering existing volumes, Woolf reassembles the book in ways that keep it open to continued handling and change. What might at first seem like mockery of traditional binding conventions is better understood as a deliberate separation from them. Rather than working within established bookbinding practices, Woolf aligns herself with a different lineage altogether – one that was coming into focus in the modernist moment: assemblage.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

10. The date of rebinding can be estimated through comparison with other volumes bound in the same paper. Woolf's 1930 copy of *Madame Bovary* employs identical covering materials, and since the Flaubert volumes were rebound using the same paper stock, it is likely that they were completed as part of a single, coordinated binding campaign. This places the date of rebinding on or after the publication of the latest edition in the group (*Madame Bovary* (New York & Chicago: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930)). The same method of material comparison has been applied to date the other example discussed here.

11. Virginia Woolf, '1 August 1938', *Letters of Virginia Woolf: 1936–1941*, 6 vols. ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), VI, p. 261.

12. 'Garish (adj.)', *Online Etymology Dictionary* [n.d.], < <https://www.etymonline.com/word/garish> > [accessed 20 January 2026].

13. Freya Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms: A New History of Collage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 190.

14. Evelyn Chan notes that 'Woolf both continued to be profoundly influenced by the Victorian age in which she was born, and simultaneously reacted against its traditions and values throughout her life'. See Evelyn Tsz Yan Chan, *Virginia Woolf and the Professions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 109.

15. Adèle Cassignoul, 'Betwixt and Between: Virginia Woolf and the Art of Craftsmanship', *(Re)constructions/(Re)inventions/(Re)mediations in 20th Century English Literature*, 54.1 (2018), 1–35 (p. 24).

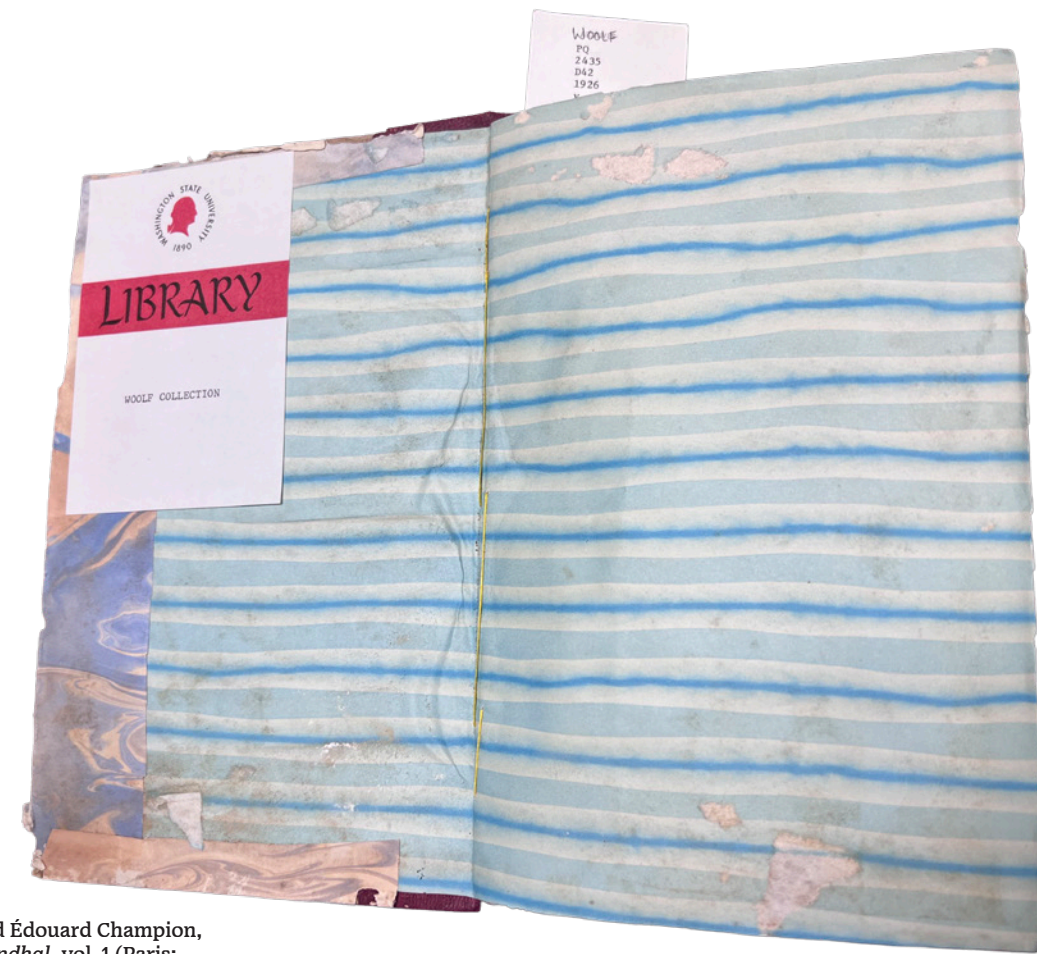


Figure 6. Paul Arbet and Édouard Champion, *Oeuvres complètes de Stendhal*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, Édouard Champion, 1926), PQ 2435 A8. [Previously PQ 2435 D421].

Cutting as Resistance: Woolf's 'Scrapbooks'

Woolf's repeated acts of cutting and pasting situate her bookcraft within a broader modernist investment in fragmentation, where meaning emerges through juxtaposition and material relation rather than formal unity. Although her altered volumes do not conform to the canonical avant-garde model of collage,¹⁶ they nevertheless participate in what Freya Gowrley defines as collage understood 'not [as] medium nor genre, but [...] a mode', privileging process over final product.¹⁷

This reframing allows Woolf's bindings to be understood alongside vernacular traditions of cutting and recomposition.¹⁸ Scrapbooking, in particular, offers a revealing parallel. As Ellen Gruber Garvey observes, scrapbook makers 'created value from their reading' by cutting mass-produced print into new arrangements, transforming ephemeral materials into bound volumes that preserved both information and interpretation.¹⁹ Moreover, scrapbooks draw together heterogeneous elements – newspaper clippings, advertisements, images, quotations – without subordinating them to a single hierarchy of value.²⁰ Woolf's rebound volumes operate according to a comparable logic. She extracts fragments from within the book itself and incorporates externally sourced materials into its reconstruction, creating volumes that resemble scrapbooks in both structure and effect. In doing so, she refuses to privilege one part of the book over another. Paste papers and other patterned sheets typically reserved for endpapers



16. Diane Waldam aligns the avant-garde movements of Cubism and Dadaism as being characterized by collage, *papiers collés*, montage, and other forms of assemblage. For more, see Diane Waldam, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992).

17. Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms*, p. 16.

18. For the critical framework against which Woolf's bindings have often been assessed, see Robert M. Seiler, 'Victorian Bookmaking', in *The Book Beautiful: Walter Pater and the House of Macmillan*, ed. by Robert M. Seiler (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 14–28. On the Arts and Crafts revival of fine printing and its emphasis on refinement and technical harmony, see James Nelson, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 48. Within this context, the ambitions of writers and artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James McNeill Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, alongside presses including the Daniel Press, the Chiswick Press, and the Kelmscott Press, shaped evaluative standards against which Woolf's bindings have often appeared deficient.

19. Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5.

20. For more on this topic, see Jessica Helfand, *Scrapbooks: An American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

21. Luisa Calè, 'Extra-Illustration and Ephemera: Altered Books and the Alternative Forms of the Fugitive Page', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 44.2 (2020), 111–35 (p. 112).

22. Calè, 'Altered Books', p. 131.

23. Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms*, p. 9.

24. Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms*, p. 10.

25. Dawn Ades, 'Collage: A Brief History', in *Peter Blake: About Collage*, ed. by Dawn Ades, Peter Blake, and Natalie Rudd (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), pp. 37–43 (p. 38).

26. Gowrley, *Fragmentary Forms*, p. 12; Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, p. 10.

27. Merry M. Pawlowski, 'Virginia Woolf and Scrapbooking', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 298–313 (p. 300).

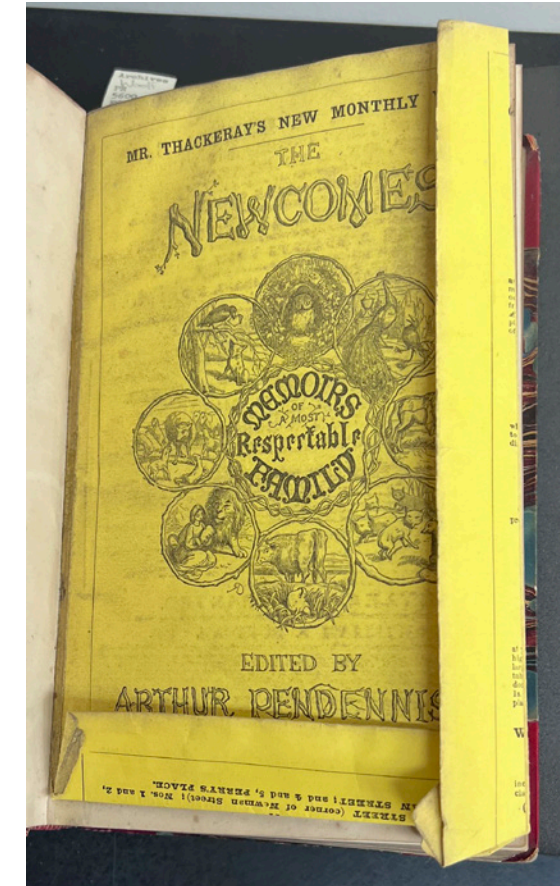


Figure 7. William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 22 vols (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), v, PR 5600 E69.



Figure 8. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Some Poems of Mallarmé* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), PR 2344 A24.

are repurposed as covers; interior elements are removed and repositioned on the exterior; and disparate materials – leather, paper, cloth – are combined within a single binding. The result is a materially variegated object in which no single component claims formal dominance.

In addition, she frequently inserted literal 'scraps' into the endpapers, treating the codex as a site of accumulation. In a Thackeray volume, Woolf pasted an advertisement for a new edition of *The Newcomes* onto the front endpaper (Fig. 7).

This intervention can be confidently attributed to Woolf, as it replicates the method used to attach Vanessa Bell's dust jacket to the inside front cover of *Some Poems of Mallarmé*, and corresponds to comparable alterations found in numerous other volumes from her library. Such gestures emphasize the book's capacity to serve as a receptacle for supplementary materials, drawing Woolf's practice into closer alignment with scrapbooking. As Luisa Calè observes, the codex enables 'textual transmission' and may function as 'an archival repository', a quality intrinsic to scrapbook form.²¹ By inserting extraneous materials into existing volumes, Woolf activates this archival dimension, transforming the book into what Calè terms a 'customized object' while engaging directly with the practical techniques of scrapbook making.²²

At the same time, her method departs from conventional scrapbooking. Rather than assembling unrelated printed matter into a new volume, she works within already published texts, embedding fragments into the structure of a pre-existing literary work (Fig. 8). The result is a book-length 'scrapwork': an object that unsettles expectations of finality and resists definitive closure.

Placing Woolf's bookcraft within longer histories of cutting and pasting further clarifies the stakes of this method. Like scrapbooking, earlier practices such as commonplacing have often been marginalized in art-historical accounts that attribute the 'invention' of cutting and pasting as a formal artistic strategy to Picasso and Braque's collage experiments of 1912.²³ This framing reinforces entrenched hierarchies between high and low art, modern innovation and pre-modern craft, professional artist and amateur maker.²⁴ Dawn Ades, for instance, distinguishes Cubist *papier collé* from 'long-standing popular pastimes' such as decorative pasting, arguing that Picasso's gestures, unlike those associated with scrapbooking or commonplacing, had 'everything to do with art'.²⁵ These distinctions rest on claims about intention, yet they also uphold gendered divisions between avant-garde experimentation and domestic craft. For instance, from the nineteenth century onward, discussions of scrapbooking were sharply gendered: men's albums were praised as orderly repositories for speeches and sermons, while women's were dismissed as trivial miscellanies.²⁶ By recovering and reactivating the techniques associated with scrapbooking and assemblage, Woolf's work unsettles these entrenched distinctions.

Take, for example, Woolf's *Three Guineas* scrapbook. By using the medium of scrapbooks as the working site of research for her essay *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf carries what was frequently dismissed as a 'domestic' pastime into the professional world of authorship and publication. As Merry Pawlowski notes, these volumes function as 'carefully curated collages', where copying, cutting, and pasting shape Woolf's engagement with contemporary political and cultural conditions.²⁷ Newspaper clippings, photographs, typed notes, and handwritten annotations are juxtaposed without hierarchical smoothing.

At the same time, however, the technical choices embedded in these scrapbooks retain traces of their domestic origin. In the first *Three Guineas* volume, for example, Woolf affixes clippings not with tape or glue – materials she routinely used in her rebound books – but with decorative adhesive labels traditionally employed as bookplates. These customizable and decorative labels, typically used to denote ownership of a book, appear frequently in her personal library. In her copy of *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (1902),

for instance, she not only inserts such a label but decorates the entire endpaper in oil pastel (Fig. 9). When similar labels reappear in the scrapbook (Fig. 10), they function not as marks of possession but as compositional devices. The migration of these materials from personal bookcraft to working research volume suggests a deliberate crossing of boundaries between domestic craft and professional authorship.²⁸



Figure 9. Front endpaper of Woolf's copy of William Wordsworth, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), PR 5850 F02.

Woolf's engagement with scrapbooks and notebooks therefore models what Helen Tyson describes as 'creative and critical experiment as the outsider's response to mass modernity'.²⁹ Rather than repudiating craft's marginal status, Woolf retools its procedures within literary production.

For Woolf, creative work involved 'an immensely complex creative interchange between what comes from inside and what comes from outside, a complex alternation of fusing and separating'.³⁰ Her scrapbooks and rebound volumes enact precisely this interchange: neither withdrawal from modern systems nor submission to them, but a reconfiguration from within.

The Book-As-Object: Book Production at the Hogarth Press (1917–1921)

The material logic evident in Woolf's rebinding and scrapbook practices extends into the public sphere of the Hogarth Press.³¹ Like her privately rebound collection, the handmade publications produced between 1917 and 1921 do not conceal their construction, but foreground it. Stitched pamphlet bindings, patterned and marbled papers, and visibly pasted title labels insist upon the books as made things, intentionally presenting themselves as assembled objects.



Figure 10. A page from the first of Woolf's *Three Guineas* scrapbooks (1931–33), from the WoolfNotes digital archive, <<https://www.woolfnotes.com/notebook-display/?pdb=58>> [accessed 29 January 2026].

Scholars have repeatedly noted this quality. Jennifer Sorensen, for instance, characterizes the handmade publications as 'thingy', 'materially-present' pieces of 'media',³² while Leslie Howsam observes that such books convey 'not only the obvious text on its pages but a further "text" in its format, materials, design, and impression'.³³ Read through these reflections, Woolf's Hogarth Press productions reveal the same piecemeal sensibility evident in her personal bookcraft: a willingness to accentuate the book's materiality, to present it simultaneously as literary work and art object.

Johanna Drucker's reminder that art encompasses 'crafts, popular culture imagery, mass culture productions, and the works of artists well outside the mainstream' highlights why Woolf's interventions are so significant.³⁴ Falling within Drucker's category of 'crafts', Hogarth Press books convey their objecthood uniquely through their 'evocation of handmade auratic materiality and in their incorporation of visual media in their book designs', while simultaneously expressing their status as objects within their traditional book forms.³⁵ By incorporating cut-and-paste techniques into both private experiments and public publishing, Woolf blurs the categories of craft, literature, and art, producing books that resonate with modernist aesthetics of assemblage while remaining grounded in everyday material practices.

Woolf's approach to book creation therefore reflects a sustained understanding of the book as a tangible object, one to be valued for its material as well as its textual qualities. Adèle Cassigneul captures this insight, emphasizing Woolf's dedication to the book's material dimension, where

content and structure intersect to render each volume an experiential object:

It seems to me that the power of the Woolfian text is to integrate this ephemeral humble gesture into literary creation, be it through page layout, montage or images, refusing to consecrate the text as an unalterable monument. It is to assimilate novelty and otherness to craft intermedial texts which preserve the singularity of the original creative gesture and make its lively and instinctive intensity durable. Then the vernacular craft, which is confined to the shadow of the workshop, becomes luminous and long-lasting literary Art.³⁶

Two points emerge in considering the early, handmade publications of the Hogarth Press: first, Woolf's own conception of books as crafted, material objects; second, the recognition of this materiality by readers and critics. Leonard Woolf repeatedly insisted that the Press prioritized textual content over aesthetic form, claiming that they did not 'embellish our books beyond what is necessary for ease of reading and decency of appearance'.³⁷ Yet scholars such as Leslie Arthur and Helen Southworth have challenged this view. Arthur stresses that the Woolfs 'were committed to ideas turned into objects, objects crafted by the human hand to do justice to the ideas enclosed within their fragile paper wrappers',³⁸ while Southworth notes more broadly that Woolf's treatment of her books demonstrates the 'degree to which Bloomsbury conceived of the book as a physical and visual object'.³⁹ The material features of the Press's earliest productions support these claims: produced in pamphlet form with brightly patterned or marbled papers, they were carefully designed to be seen, handled, and valued as objects. As Leonard himself later admitted:

For many years we gave much time and care to finding beautiful, uncommon, and sometimes cheerful paper for binding our books, and, as the first publishers to do this, I think we started a fashion which many of the regular, old established publishers followed. We got papers from all over the place, including some brilliantly patterned from Czechoslovakia, and we also had some marbled covers made for us by Roger Fry's daughter in Paris.⁴⁰

Grace Brockington observes how this approach was 'anomalous in the history of wartime publishing' when publishers typically retrenched due to paper shortage.⁴¹ This dedication to producing books with carefully sourced, aesthetically pleasing materials, even amid such constraints, indicates that these books transcended mere readability or 'decency of appearance'. Contrary to Leonard's claim, the books were seemingly crafted to be understood and appreciated as material objects. The deliberate choice of using varied paper covers, along with the handmade production process itself, underscores a vision that positioned these works as tangible, visual things, not solely literary texts.⁴²

This interplay between material form and literary content is strikingly evident in Woolf's reflection on producing Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude* (1918):

Yesterday & the day before we spent glueing the book, & have now paid all our debts; so that I suppose a great many tongues are now busy with K. M. I myself find a kind of beauty about the story; a little vapourish I admit, & freely watered with some of her cheap realities; but it has the living power, the detached existence of a work of art. I shall be curious to get other opinions.⁴³

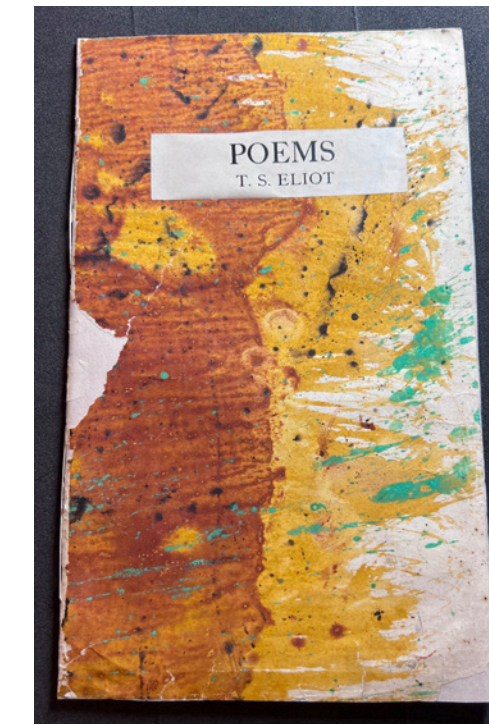


Figure 11. T. S. Eliot, *Poems* (Richmond: The Hogarth Press, 1919), hand-bound by Virginia Woolf, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Arch. AA d.141.

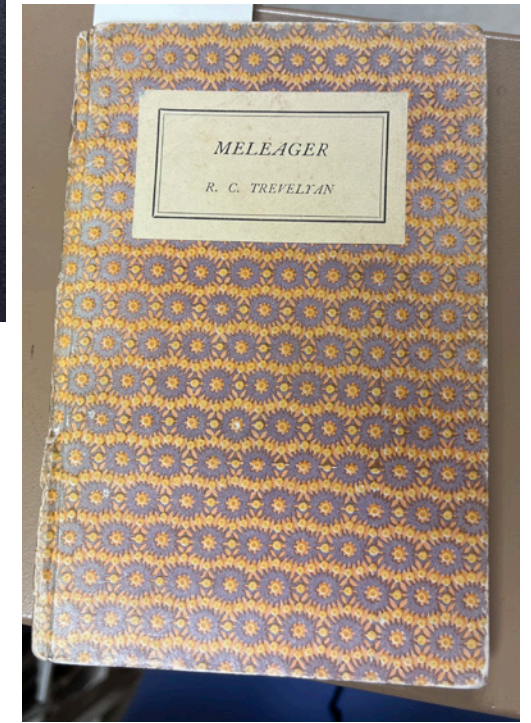


Figure 12. R. C. Trevelyan, *Meleager* (Richmond: The Hogarth Press, 1927), bound by R. & R. Clark, WSU PR 6039 R48 M44.

28. Luisa Calé, 'Frontispieces', in *Book Parts*, ed. by Dennis Duncan and Adam Smyth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 25–39 (p. 28).

29. Helen Tyson, "'Notebook Literature': Virginia Woolf and Marion Milner", *Critical Quarterly*, 66 (2024), 4–37, (p. 28).

30. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

31. Leonard and Virginia Woolf established the Hogarth Press in 1917 at their home, Hogarth House in Richmond, initially typesetting, hand-printing and binding books on their own hand press – including their first publication, *Two Stories* (134 hand-bound copies). Over the 1920s the operation expanded, moving into larger premises and publishing notable works such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and by the 1930s it had grown from a small private press into a more commercial publishing enterprise with bestsellers and wider distribution.

32. Jennifer Sorensen, *Modernist Experiments in Genre, Media, and Transatlantic Print Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 188.

33. Leslie Howsam, 'The Study of Book history', in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1–14 (pp. 3–4).

34. Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 61–62.

35. Cassigneul, 'Betwixt and Between', p. 24; Sorensen, *Modernist Experiments*, p. 239.

36. Cassigneul, 'Betwixt and Between', p. 35.

37. 'Anniversary Announcement' (1922), University of Sussex, *Leonard Woolf Papers*, SxMs-13/1/Q/3/Q/A.

38. Leslie Arthur, 'Bibliographers, Booksellers, and Collectors of the Hogarth Press', in *Virginia Woolf and the World of Books*, ed. by Nicola Wilson and Claire Battershill (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 115–20 (p. 115).

39. Helen Southworth, 'The Bloomsbury Group and Book Arts', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to the Bloomsbury Group* ed. by Victoria Rosner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 144–61 (p. 158).

40. Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911–1918* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 236.

41. Grace Brockington, 'The Omega and the End of Civilisation: Pacifism, Publishing and Performance in the First World War', in *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913–19*, ed. by A. Gerstein (London: The Courtauld Gallery, 2009), pp. 60–69 (p. 63).

42. For more on the philosophizing of 'things' see Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), 1–22. In this article, Brown distinguishes between utilitarian objects and 'things' which resist typical use or understanding, gaining a symbolic or subjective value.

43. Virginia Woolf, '12 July 1918', *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1915–1917*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 167.

As Jennifer Sorensen remarks, Woolf articulates a complex dynamic between the material solidity of the glued book and the text's 'vapourish' qualities, seemingly sensing a tension in the aesthetics 'between solidity and airiness', leading to her ultimately 'lay[ing] down her praise by complimenting the book's "living power" with the more objectified, weighty phrase: "the detached existence of a work of art."⁴⁴ For Sorensen, this indicates how the handmade Hogarth edition of *Prelude* amplifies the text's concern with material encounters, forcing readers to experience the story as mediated by the physical book itself. In this sense, the 'hypermediated' form of the Press's early productions collapses the divide between textual and material aesthetics.⁴⁵

The cut-and-paste techniques Woolf developed in her personal rebinding projects likewise underscore this collapse and, importantly, became a defining stylistic feature of the Hogarth Press. During its handmade phase, Woolf employed the same method of cutting titles – this time from separate sheets rather than from the internal title page – and affixing them to the covers. The uneven edges of these labels (Figs. 11–12) testified to her direct handiwork and contributed to the distinctive aura of Hogarth books. Even after the Press turned to commercial production, the practice of attaching cut-and-pasted labels persisted, though executed more evenly by professional binders. The persistence of this handmade aesthetic across the Press's lifetime is, as Jean Peters observes, what made Hogarth volumes so visually distinctive:

anyone who has seen a collection of Hogarth Press imprints would agree that [...] the design of Hogarth Press books is one of the features that sets them apart from the books of all other publishers. The design is totally original [...]. In spite of a move to mechanized operations, the books never lost their handmade appearance.⁴⁶

By institutionalizing her craft-based techniques into the Press's design, Woolf transformed the embodied actions of cutting and pasting into the visual language of Hogarth publishing, an idiom that resonated with modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and assemblage, while also asserting the book's status as a crafted, tactile object.

Cutting as Editing

Alongside Woolf's engagement with binding and scrapbooking, she also employed cutting as a method of editing. In fact, among all the volumes in Woolf's personal collection, her copy of *Jacob's Room* (1922) is the most extensively 'cut' (Fig. 13). Unlike her rebound books, where intervention is concentrated on the exterior, here the cuts occur within the textblock itself. Almost every page bears evidence of slicing. Of the few scholars who have examined and written about this text, Geoffrey Bridgman offers the most vivid account, describing it as 'the most alarming' in the collection and suggesting that Woolf 'went after the volume with a razor blade or a knife'.⁴⁷

At first glance, this does indeed appear to be the case. Many pages have been cut away at the top and bottom, a process seemingly connected to editing, though its precise purpose remains uncertain. The front cover contains a list of page numbers where Woolf cut out sections of the text and pasted revised sentences, possibly taken from another, later copy of the book, onto the original pages. Andrew Honey, conservation and preservation specialist at the Bodleian Libraries, suggested

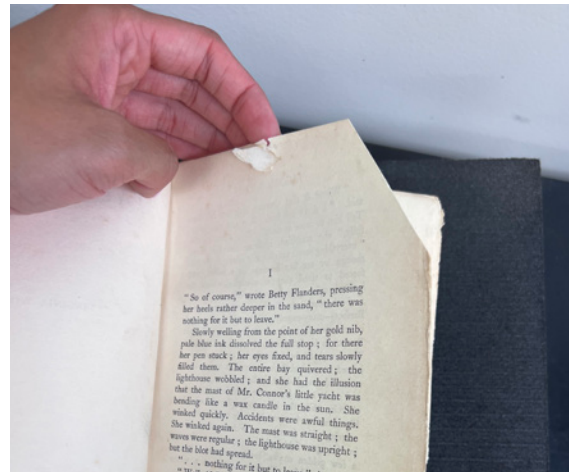
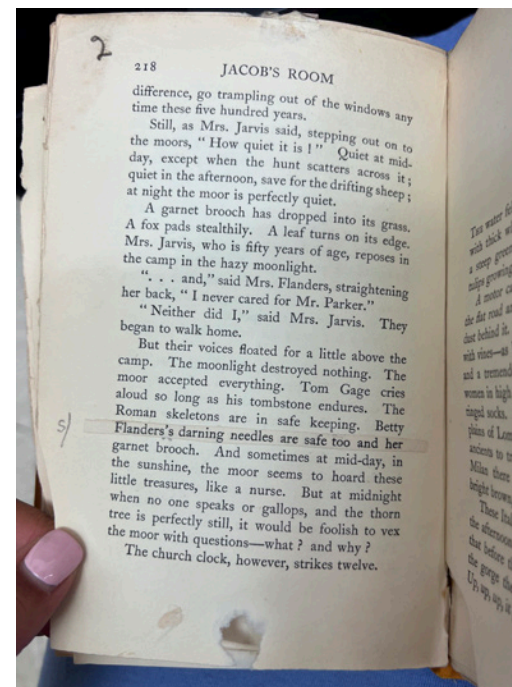
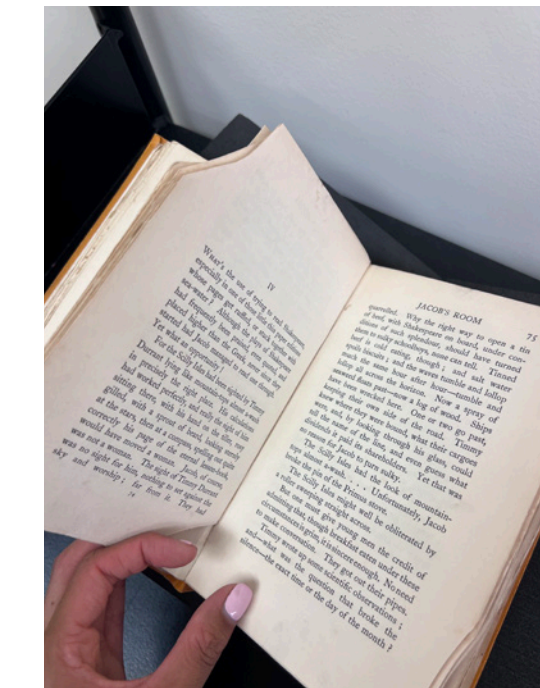
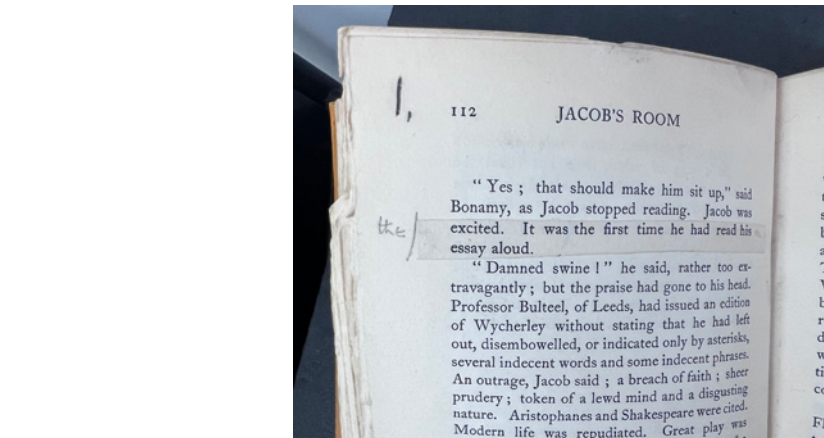


Figure 13. Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1922), PR 6045 O7J J3.



that based on the revised page numbers, these could be 'proofs that have been bound up at a later point', but concluded that the treatment of the book is 'puzzling'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Richard Lawrence, the Bodleian Bibliographical Press's master printer and Superintendent, agrees with Honey that 'they may be a set of proofs (or discarded sheets) bound up later', though neither could determine the reasoning behind the corners of the pages being cut, nor the inclusion of the cut and pasted sentences.⁴⁹

Closer comparison, however, clarifies part of this puzzle. Cross-referencing the pasted passages with the 2020 Cambridge University Press edition of *Jacob's Room* (ed. Stuart N. Clarke and David Bradshaw) indicates that

the inserted text corresponds – at least in the examples examined – to corrections introduced in the 1929 Hogarth British Uniform edition of Woolf's novels (or possibly its 1935 reprinting), which amended typographical errors in the first edition. The slips do not appear to derive from manuscript or typescript, but from a later printed state of the text. Woolf was therefore not improvising arbitrary revisions, nor binding stray proofs; she was importing corrected readings from a subsequent edition into her personal first edition copy.

This practice finds a parallel in her copy of *The Voyage Out*, held at the University of Sydney (Fig. 14). In this instance, however, Woolf used a typewriter to insert cut-out carbons of full paragraphs over old sections.

What emerges from these interventions is not vandalism but a materially enacted editorial process. By reopening the published book to further revision, Woolf transforms it into a layered artifact that bears the visible traces of successive textual states, thereby once again enacting the function of an 'archival repository'.

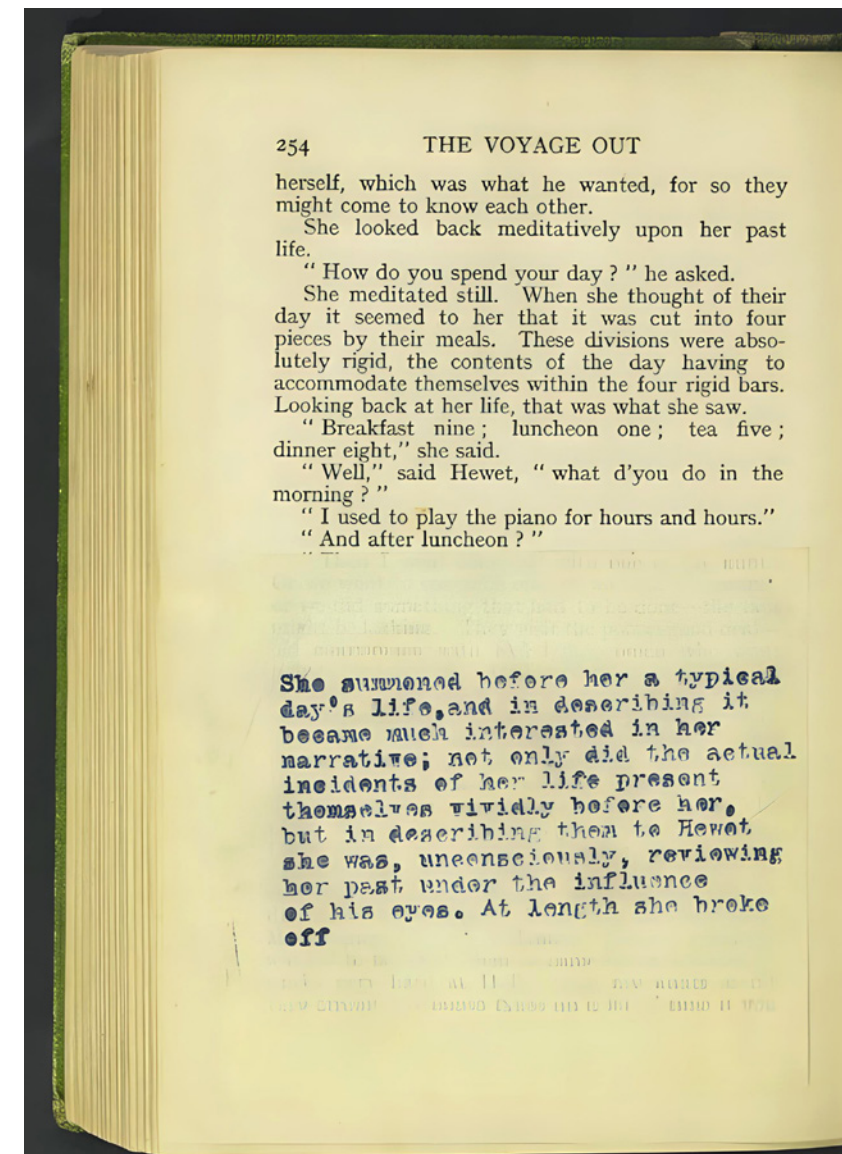


Figure 14. Virginia Woolf's personal copy of *The Voyage Out* (London: Duckworth, 1915), Deane RB 595.S 2, University of Sydney Library, <<https://digital.library.sydney.edu.au/nodes/view/13658>> [accessed 15 January 2026]. Permission granted by the University of Sydney Library.

Such gestures complicate distinctions between authorial creation and post-publication life. As Adèle Cassigneul suggests, 'typesetting, cutting, pasting and editing [...] actually accomplish the creative work and literally make – that is, bring into form, shape – the literary text'.⁵⁰ Whether or not one accepts that these alterations constitute new acts of creation, they unmistakably demonstrate Woolf's understanding of the book as materially open. For her, the book – whether in

production or already published – is not a fixed or terminal form. Rather, it remains subject to the interventions of its owner and, in some instances, its author.

At a moment when early twentieth-century art was abandoning ideals of harmony and totality in favor of 'disjunction and fragmentation', Woolf's haptic practices (cutting, relocating, layering, pasting) enact a comparable disruption at the level of the codex.⁵¹ In this sense, Woolf's altered books – including her rebound collection, working scrapbooks, and edited volumes – intersect with what Jae Jennifer Rossman identifies as the twentieth-century category of the 'book as art', which distinguishes conventional bookmaking ('the book arts') from works that treat the book itself as a site of aesthetic experimentation.⁵² While Woolf's bookcraft preserves the functional structure of the codex, it nevertheless fragments paratexts and reconfigures surfaces, aligning with the 'book as art' emphasis on transformation. The result is a hybrid form that remains legible as a book yet asserts itself as an experimental object.

Seen in this light, cutting becomes more than technique; it is a material articulation of Woolf's 'outsider' aesthetic.⁵³ As Gowrley observes, 'when we recollect the work of outsider artists – those individuals whose innate creativity has remained un-honed by the institutions of the art school, the gallery, or the art market – we often think of assemblage', noting that this medium has frequently been mobilized by marginalized makers to articulate dissent in visual and material form.⁵⁴ Woolf's assemblages can likewise be read as challenges to the entrenched divisions she herself inhabited and negotiated: amateur and professional; masculine and feminine; art and craft; high and low art. By persistently occupying these unstable positions, Woolf reconfigures the boundaries of creative agency and expands the material possibilities of the book.

44. Sorensen, *Modernist Experiments*, p. 214.

45. Sorensen, *Modernist Experiments*, p. 214.

46. Jean Peters, 'Publishers' Imprints', in *Collectible Books, Some New Paths*, ed. by Jean Peters (New York and London: R.R. Bowker Company, 1979), pp. 199–224 (pp. 210–14).

47. Bridgman, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 10.

48. Private email correspondence with Andrew Honey, 9 July 2024.

49. Private email correspondence with Richard Lawrence, 9 July 2024.

50. Cassigneul, 'Betwixt and Between', p. 22.

51. Waldman, *Collage*, p. 11.

52. Jae Jennifer Rossman, 'The Book as Art', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), pp. 661–76 (p. 661).

53. Tyson, 'Notebook Literature', p. 28.

54. Gowrley, *Fragmented Forms*, pp. 311, 353.