letters from librarians

The Library and Material Texts

PETER STALLYBRASS

FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS, ROGER CHARTIER AND I HAVE TAUGHT AN UNDERGRADUATE SEMINAR CALLED THE HISTORY OF Print Culture in Early Modern Europe and America. Although the content of the course has changed, one feature has been persistent: at least half our classes met in the rare-book libraries of Philadelphia. While we have often held the seminar in Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania, we have also gone to the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Free Library, and the Rosenbach Museum and Library. This would not have been possible without the extraordinary openness and generosity of the Philadelphia libraries and librarians. But the work of those librarians has not only provided an infrastructure for the course; it has also reshaped what we've worked on and how we teach it.

Here is one example of how working in libraries and with librarians has reshaped our teaching. Chartier and I were teaching Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, paying particular attention to problems of authorship and publication. We invited Leah Price down to talk about her groundbreaking work in her book *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, in which she looks at the continuing significance of the commonplace book long after its supposed heyday in the Renaissance. For the occasion, John Pollack, a librarian at Penn, searched through Penn's collections. He discovered an extraordinary variety of relevant materials, including a manuscript letter written by Richardson in 1754, commenting on "The Volume of Sentiments, &c." as "a dry Performance—vested of Story, and Amusement" (Letter). Richardson was referring to the commonplace book that he had assembled from his novels, which was published in 1755 as *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflexions, Contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison. Digested under Proper Heads*. The commonplace book was organized alphabetically by topic, ranging from "Address to the Rich," "Advantages of Men over Women," "Adversity," and "Advice to Young Married Women" to, at the other end of the alphabet, "Voluptuousness," "Wife," "Wit," "Writers," "Young Widows," and "Youth." At the same time, Pollack found a copy of the

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anonymous *Pamela Censured*, a well-known attack on *Pamela*. But the copy in the Penn library has the bizarre twist that sometime in the late eighteenth century it was bound together with twelve prints for *Pamela*, including graphic depictions of the "salacious" scenes that are the specific object of attack in the pamphlet.

Here, then, were two ways of approaching *Pamela* that could not be reduced to the "full text" (whatever that might be) of the novel. On the one hand, we have all Richardson's novels conveniently "digested" by Richardson himself "under Proper Heads" so as to offer "Instructive Sentiments"; on the other, an attack on Richardson's morals (which nonetheless fully quotes all the juiciest bits) combined with graphic engravings, emphasizing "Story, and Amusement," as opposed to the "dry Performance" of Richardson's commonplaces.

The same semester, Chartier and I were also teaching at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Although we were not aware of it when we organized the syllabus, Jim Green, the Librarian, had written foundational pieces on Benjamin Franklin as a printer and publisher in which he argued that Franklin's publication of Richardson's *Pamela* was at best a mixed success ("Benjamin Franklin" and "Middle Colonies"). The main problem was that the book was too long, by colonial American standards, thus tying up considerable capital in the purchase of a large supply of paper. Even though Franklin used small type so as to condense the novel into a single volume, each copy still required seventeen sheets of paper, rather than the one to four sheets that he used for almanacs, pamphlets, and most of his other printing. Franklin learned from the failure of his *Pamela* to compete effectively against imported editions that it was much safer to concentrate on short texts. Other colonial American printers followed Franklin's example. What to do, though, with popular long novels like *Pamela* and *Clarissa*? The solution was to print radically abridged editions. While Franklin's was the only unabridged edition of *Pamela* published in eighteenth-century America, there were thirteen abridged editions. Similarly, there were no complete editions of *Robinson Crusoe*, but there were thirty-seven abridged editions (Winans 178–81). So when American readers read *Pamela*, just what were they reading? Some undoubtedly read unabridged versions in imported editions, but many more read the small duodecimo editions of around a hundred pages in which the letters had been rewritten as narrative.

Pollack and Green thus transformed the course that Chartier and I were teaching. We were attempting to theorize the textual diversity of *Pamela* while being unaware of the material diversity of the forms in which "the text" circulated. Nor had it crossed our minds that the size of a book could be so crucial to its contents—that the cost of paper could determine what was included in and excluded from one of the eighteenth century's greatest international best sellers.

If the interaction of librarians and academics reshaped Chartier's and my course, it also reshaped our scholarship. Two years ago, several sessions of The History of Material Texts, a weekly seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, focused on the use of wax tablets in Western culture.[1] By coincidence, Chartier and I were teaching *Hamlet* the same year, and we were puzzled by Hamlet's comparison of his memory to an erasable book ("from the Table of my Memory / Ile wipe away all triuiall fond Records"). What exactly were "tables"? What kind of book would an actor playing Hamlet on the Renaissance stage have taken out, given that the metaphoric tables of memory are later supplemented by a notebook in the form of a stage prop ("My Tables, my Tables; meet it is I set it downe" [*Hamlet* 1.5.95–105])?

The book that Hamlet describes should have three material features: first, it should be small, so that it can be easily carried and used while he stands; second, either it must be written on with a substance that can be easily wiped out (chalk, for instance) or it must have an eras-

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able writing surface; third, given his distance from any table or desk, he must be able to hold it and write in it using only two hands. All these material features can be found in wax tablets, which were usually small, erasable, and written on with a stylus. But we found only one or two references to wax tablets in Renaissance England, even though there were hundreds of references to "pairs of tables," "writing tables," and "table-books." So what were Hamlet's tables?

In the Folger Shakespeare Library, we discovered three copies of small, Palm Pilot–size notebooks called *Writing Tables*. These writing tables are composed of a printed twenty-four-year almanac and other printed material, bound together with blank pages of prepared paper or parchment. Were the prepared sheets erasable, though, and how were they made? The coating of prepared paper can be clearly seen in the well-used 1604 copy of Robert Triplet's *Writing Tables* in the Folger Shakespeare Library. The top surface, a hard yellowing coating, is cracked, revealing a coat of something like white plaster beneath. Where the edges have been rubbed clean, the paper that supports the two coatings is now visible. Examining the Folger's 1625 copy of Triplet's *Writing Tables*, we were struck by the fact that the prepared paper had clearly been repeatedly wiped, although faint traces of writing remained as in a palimpsest. To test the tablets' erasability, Frank Mowery, the Folger's head of conservation, recreated the writing surface of the Renaissance tablets; made ink from oak galls and iron filings, following a Renaissance recipe; and wrote on the surface, using first pen and ink and then silverpoint and graphite pencil. With just a little moisture on a sponge (or even a finger), the ink came off immediately and completely. Graphite was equally simple to erase, while silverpoint left only a slight groove.

After Mowery's tests, the Folger cataloger Dever Powell, when relisting the 1604 copy to take into account our findings, noticed a small manuscript cross on the December page of the calendar. It corresponded to the following passage, printed between the entry for "The 13. day the shortest day" and Christmas:

> To make cleane your Tables,
> when they are written on.
>
> Take a litle peece of a Spunge, or a Linnen cloath, being cleane without any soyle: wet it in water, and wring it hard, & wipe that you haue written very lightly, and it will out, and within one quarter of an howre you may wryte in the same place againe: put not your leaues together, whilest they be very wet with wyping.

The fact that these instructions are printed as part of the almanac shows that the printed pages were always intended to be bound together with erasable leaves.

Only later did we discover that we were reinventing the wheel. Erasable tablets were still in use as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, and sales catalogs and written library records often gave a full account both of writing tables and of their significance in Shakespeare. Richard Kuhta, the Folger's Librarian, found that P. M. Barnard's undated sale catalog "of Rare and Interesting Books" offers a 1604 edition of Triplet's *Writing Tables* for sale and contains notes on its pages' erasability and on its relation to *Hamlet* and *Henry IV, Part 2* (Barnard, no. 149). The typewritten description in the 1580 Yale *Writing Tables* similarly records the quotations from *Hamlet* and *Henry IV, Part 2* (Adams). And pasted inside the front cover of the 1604 Triplet tables in the British Library is an auction note reading, "This is one of the earliest of those old Table Books alluded to by Shakespeare, and supplanted by the modern diaries" (British Lib. C.40.a.44). More recently, H. R. Woudhuysen provides a brief but excellent note on

> the pocket notebook or set of writing tables [that] became a staple of the publishing trade: the earliest known example, incorporating a calendar and useful information about fairs and so on, was produced by Francis Adams

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> in 1577 and, although they are now very rare, many editions were evidently printed. (21)

But perhaps our failure to know about the extensive prior records of erasable writing tables enabled us to see more clearly the specific problems that Renaissance tablets were invented to solve. Renaissance writers, from Philip Sidney to Michel de Montaigne, from merchants to schoolchildren, took notes outside or standing up or when no table was available (e.g., at a sermon). In these situations, it would have been difficult or impossible to hold pen, ink, and notebook in two hands and to write. Although graphite pencils were first used in the second half of the sixteenth century, they were rarely used for writing before the middle of the seventeenth century. (When Shakespeare writes of "pencils," he means a painter's brush, in contrast to a writer's pen. As late as 1798, the first American edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gave "an instrument used by painters for laying on their colours" as the primary definition of "pencil" ["Pencil" 116].) The usual implement for writing "on the go" before the adoption of graphite pencils was a stylus of silver or brass. In his translation "The Third Satire of Persius," John Dryden describes a reluctant student who "With much ado, his book before him laid, / And parchment with the smoother side displayed. . . ." In a footnote to the passage, Dryden comments: "The Students us'd to write their Notes on Parchments; the inside, on which they wrote, was white; the other side was Hairy: And commonly yellow. *Quintilian* reproves this Custom, and advises rather Table-books, lin'd with Wax, and *a Stile, like that we use in our Vellum Table-books*, as more easie" (309; italics mine). During the last year and a half, Karen Nipps at Houghton Library has discovered a stylus tucked into the binding of a table book, Don Skemer at Princeton Library has acquired three medieval styluses, as well as a Spanish erasable notebook, and the Folger has bought three writing tables dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, all of which use styluses as closing devices for their wallet bindings. The material evidence in libraries thus confirms and clarifies the literary evidence in Shakespeare and Dryden.[2]

In fact, as the material and literary evidence further showed, small erasable books were widely used by writers, artists, and musicians from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century. Such tablets were available to Chaucer's pilgrims, for instance. The friar's accomplice in The Somnour's Tale writes with a "poyntel" (i.e., a stylus) in a "peyre of tables." Chaucer's tables, though, are made "al of yvory" (373). While we have found no traces of such ivory tables in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, they became common in the eighteenth century. In "Verses Wrote in a Lady's Ivory Table-Book," Jonathan Swift reads the lady's ivory tables, which are "[s]crawl'd o'er with Trifles." And he emphasizes that the tables are erasable. A rival can "blot . . . out" what a previous lover has written with the simple aid of "Spittle and a Clout" and then "[c]lap his own Nonsence in the place" (351).[3] Benjamin Franklin made his own ivory table book in which to record his "Faults":

> To avoid the Trouble of renewing now & then my little Book, which by scraping out the Marks on the Paper of old Faults to make room for new Ones in a new Course, became full of Holes: I transferr'd my Tables & Precepts to the Ivory Leaves of a Memorandum Book, on which the Lines were drawn with red Ink that made a durable Stain, and on those Lines I mark'd my Faults with a black Lead Pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet Sponge . . . I always carried my little Book with me. (71)

Franklin would have had no difficulty purchasing such an ivory memorandum book in Philadelphia. David Hall, Franklin's partner, advertised such tablets for sale in 1748 (*Pennsylvania Gazette* 22 Sept.) and Robert Macgill advertised "ivory and asses skin memorandum books" as part of a general assortment of stationery "just imported from London" in 1773 (*Pennsylvania Gazette* 22 Dec.). In the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen owned an ivory memorandum book,

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which can still be seen at her house in Chawton, Hampshire.[4] But the kind of surface used in the Renaissance *Writing Tables* continued to be the commonest erasable surface, although by the eighteenth century it was usually called "asses skin." In Philadelphia, Nicholas Brooks advertised in 1774 an "improved patent asses skin" from which notes "may be rubbed of[f]" (*Pennsylvania Gazette* 5 Jan.), while John Keats recorded buying "some folio asses Skin for Memorandums" when he was traveling in 1818.

From Plato to Freud, such erasable writing surfaces provided models of both memory and the erasure of memory. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, the Archbishop of York says that the king will

> wipe his Tables cleane,
> And keepe no Tell-tale to his Memorie
> That may repeat, and Historie his losse,
> To new remembrance. (4.1.119–22)

And in a poem ascribed to John Donne, the poet writes, "The mind, you know, is like a Table-book, / The old, unwipt, new writing never took" (54). Hamlet imagines such a total erasure. From the tables of his mind, he will, he claims, "wipe away all triuiall fond Records, / . . . That youth and obseruation coppied there" so that his father's commandment "all alone shall liue, / Within the booke and volume of my braine" (1.5.95–108). Freud rightly noted, though, that total erasure of writing from the mystic writing pad was impossible.[5] The same is true for wax tablets and Renaissance writing tables. Despite repeated erasures, traces of previous writing always remain, even if they are visible only under ultraviolet light. If Hamlet thinks of writing tables as modeling a binary process of remembering and forgetting, the play itself insists on a different material feature of erasable tablets: the persistence of the trace. After act 4, Hamlet repeatedly forgets his father while "triuiall fond Records" persist as the "matter" of the play.

There are many kinds of literary research, and some make scarcely any use of libraries. That is not surprising. Sidney argued that literature is situated between history and philosophy, and archives have had radically different importance in the latter disciplines. There is no reason why historical perspectives should have a monopoly. But one of the hidden scandals of the literary profession is how infrequently those of us who work at the historical end of the spectrum turn for advice to the experts in the field: the librarians who handle an extraordinary variety of books as part of their daily business. While there is increasing public access to a wide range of primary resources through the Internet,[6] electronic texts, for all their virtues, bypass the crucial interaction between academics and librarians. The scarcity of that interaction is perhaps attributable to academics' fears that their ignorance will be humiliatingly revealed. If my experiences are anything to go by, the fears are fully justified. But the rewards of such an interaction far outweigh the humiliations. It is time that literary historians and librarians undertook the collaborative projects that, drawing on a range of skills and knowledges, have long been central to the sciences and social sciences.

Notes

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[1] Chartier and I were particularly indebted to presentations by Shane Butler, Jocelyn Penny Small, and Jessie Ann Owens. Owens's presentation expanded on her groundbreaking chapter "Erasable Tablets" in her *Composers at Work: The Craft of Musical Composition 1450–1600.*

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[2] Some of the implications of writing tables are pursued in "Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Early Modern Europe" (Stallybrass, Chartier, Mowery, and Wolfe).

[3] I am indebted to Joan DeJean for this reference.

[4] I am indebted to Nan Ridenhalgh for this information.

[5] See also Derrida and Fleming.

[6] A fine example of a Web site that gives public access to a rich collection of facsimiles is the Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and Image, initiated by Rebecca Bushnell and Michael Ryan. It can be found on the home page of the University of Pennsylvania Library (http://www.library.upenn.edu/). On the same page, under "E-Resources," then "E-Books," then "Online Books Page," there are links to several hundred online books, some in facsimile form.

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