

'Precious Reliques, written with her own hand': Reading Relics in the Seventeenth Century

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This paper draws attention to some important connections between the materialities of early modern texts and religious relics, arguing that the idea of the relic is a powerful one for thinking about what texts, writing, and books might contain as material and spiritual locations in post-Reformation England. Recent historians of the English Reformation, such as Alexandra Walsham, have suggested that sixteenth-century Protestant attitudes towards certain aspects of Catholic religion were not simply destructive. Rather, some material elements of pre-Reformation religion in England were more subtly adopted and re-defined within the new Protestant ideology, in processes more akin to mutation and gradual reabsorption. This paper argues that while most holy relics in England were subjected to violent acts of destruction and denunciation, the *idea* of the relic as a location of concentrated material and spiritual significance was transformed in the early modern period, persisting in seventeenth century literary culture in particular. The idea of the relic was relocated from religious places and discourses to those that were more secular, such as the new post-monastic libraries that were emerging as new kinds of intellectual 'shrine'. Using John Milton's famous and oft-quoted description of books as 'the precious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life' as a starting point, this paper points to some of the ways in which the materiality of seventeenth-century books of literary 'reliquiae' performs a communicative function between the living and the dead, embodying the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, and engaging with the materiality of the pre-Reformation relic in surprising and important ways.