

Hidden in Gilt: Fore-edge Paintings, Restoration-era Reading and Digital Elisions

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Historians of the book have long given priority to the fact that books are objects, and that their material forms are integral to their meaning and to the reading practices that help constitute that meaning. In contrast to a potentially abstract or disembodied notion of reading, then, using a book always suggests a physical engagement with it: as a volume to be held or leaned over, as paper to write on, or indeed as a paper technology for producing meaning.

Thinking through books means thinking in and around them. – Bradin Cormack, Carla Mazzio, *Book Use, Book Theory: 1500-1700*, 6

Perhaps no practice underscores the book's materiality more than fore-edge paintings, gilt-covered images that emerge along the edge of the book when the pages are fanned. Yet *no* recent studies in book history, marginalia or the history of reading cite this long tradition. Through a close reading of a Bible at the Houghton Library at Harvard University (1638), printed before the English Civil War but later painted with the portrait of King Charles II, the first half of this paper gestures at a history of Restoration-era reading that engages this neglected third dimension of the book, highlighting the ways in which the play between the Bible's unique binding, its fore-edge painting and the text encourage various (and sometimes competing) forms of reader participation. In the movement from closed book, edged in gilt, to open text read under the watchful eye of the King, the Houghton Bible is more than a collation of two-page openings laid flat with print: it is a multimodal, multimedia object.

When I first began studying the Houghton Bible, a librarian suggested I consult the microfilm facsimile, which of course one can read (at least in one sense of the word) without ever knowing it bears a fore-edge painting. Using the fore-edge painting as a case study, the second half of this paper asks: how do our contemporary remediations of books – whether digital scans, database structures, mark-up languages or microfilm – frame our understanding of the book as a three-dimensional object? Although it is now common to claim that electronic textuality sheds new light on forgotten practices of the past – and this is true – one might easily reverse the claim: that is, by flattening the book to isolated pages, digital texts have reduced and distorted how a book's many spaces and faces make meaning. In this way, fore-edge paintings invite us to reconsider not only the three-dimensionality of the book and alternative modes of Restoration-era reading, but also the omissions of the digital archives that now so frequently mediate our relationship to our objects of study.