

## Cut/Copy/Paste: Fragments from the History of Bookwork

by Whitney Trettien

University of Minnesota Press, 2021 • 328 pages • ISBN 978-1-5179-0409-8

Reviewed by Michael Hampton

**ON OCCASIONS A PUBLISHER’S BLURB** can act as far more than a sales pitch and actually provoke a conversation—even better, offer up an entry point to not only understand, but to use a text critically. Blurbs matter, one could say, and when they do, they can also summarily aid any review process which might be called for. This one is pithy, and gets the ball rolling:

In *Cut/Copy/Paste*, Whitney Trettien journeys to the fringes of the London print trade to uncover makerspaces and laboratories where paper media were cut up and reassembled into radical, bespoke publications.

Thanks to the University of Minnesota Press, Trettien’s *Cut/Copy/Paste* comes in three distinct versions: clothbound for libraries, paperback, and as an online, open-source text via Manifold. When my commissioning editor at CBAA presented a short list of possible review titles for a future *Openings*, I initially chose to read *C/C/P* in its online version. I wanted to challenge myself as a reader, but more importantly hoped to see if any sort of nontraditional review format might be generated by this novel application with its interactive tools (allowing you to highlight, bookmark, annotate, etc.) and clickable access to supplementary hand-curated digital resources. After investigation though, and reaching a neurological threshold in terms of online eye strain, I ordered a physical copy too, satisfying a deep-seated craving for “real” books. So this review is the product of a hybrid reader response, suitably impure given Trettien’s chosen historical terrain at the junction of manuscript culture and movable type, and tuned to her mission statement, posited in the introduction called “This Book” to be “fundamentally recuperative.”

The book is divided into three sections, namely “Cut,” “Copy,” and “Paste.” Each is focused on an emblematic English literary figure or figures, and cleverly these chapter headings also combine to provide the title of Trettien’s book—a bibliographical novelty in itself. “Cut” is an extended study of the methodological procedures adopted at the remote seventeenth-century Anglican community of Little Gidding, Cambridgeshire, specifically championing the exquisite scissorwork of Mary and Ann Colet and their daring recombinant practice, effected by cutting and pasting both words and imagery from the blackletter 1611 King James Bible’s four books of the apostles, in order to construct novel and multiple readings that enable devotional user pathways. “Copy” attempts to rescue from oblivion the Essex-based curator/poet Edward Benlowes, specifically his patchwork collection of queered verse, *Theophila* (1652). Finally, “Paste” profiles the controversial, yet utterly charming, Restoration-era, magpie collector of ephemera, John Bagford, drawing on his two great bespoke folios, *Fragmenta manuscripta* and *Fragmenta varia*.

Trettien is passionately engaged with the radical practices (radical, at least, from a contemporary, normative perspective) detailed in these three case studies, but her feminist credentials find the greatest traction in “Cut,” which homes in on Little Gidding’s acts of collective decoupage and its boutique concordances or “Harmonies.” In the schismatic context of England in the mid-1630s, the novel “makerspace” (Trettien visualizes this



*Michael Hampton is a freelance writer who is based in London and has written extensively about artists’ publishing. A regular contributor to Art Monthly since 2009, his groundbreaking study, Unshelved: Reconciving the Artists’ Book, came out in 2015. Against Decorum, a hybrid collection of word reliefs and bibliographic fragments, was published by Information as Material in 2022.*

workshop with its hand tools, marbled paper, leather, miscellaneous typefaces, and rolling presses), run by Nicholas Ferrar, relied upon the artisanal and craft skills of his female relatives. These staff, whose handiwork was so refined that readers were often unable to distinguish between collage and the printed volume, were empowered to hack up a codex or religious engraving imported from the Low Countries in order to blithely “transform its prismatic sequences of folds and juxtapositions into a protofeminist technology capable of synthesizing religious dissonance and resolving interpersonal conflict.” Trettien identifies this productive urge as a convivial antecedent to the materiality of today’s unique artist book, in other words, female-gendered, “context-attentive” editing.

Edward Benlowes, the subject of “Copy,” emerges incrementally as a Caroline-era gentleman poet, patron-publisher, library donor, and ultimately transmedia assembleur, someone who benefited from how the “Jacobean grand tour helped to flood the literary landscape with new verse, new emblems, new icons, and new ways of thinking about the relationship between text and image and sound.” His main claim to fame is the complex verse sequence, *Theophilia, or Love’s Sacrifice*, which showcases the ways his baroque imagination resulted in a “materialist poetics.” Very much a project, it resembles a hybrid box file of “orphaned prints,” interleaved plates and cuts, and even random frontispieces and scored music. Trettien (who in an act of sustained research has examined twenty-six copies of the forty-five in existence), views *Theophilia* as a subtle affront to heteronormativity, and her modulated reading between digital facsimile and object per se discerns the work’s queer logic, helping to save Benlowes, who earned the dubious honour of being mocked in Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad*, from complete oblivion.

Many of these threads come together in “Paste,” a profile of the arch-scrapbook maker John Bagford. Described by Trettien as a “voracious scavenger,” Bagford pursued a career that coincided with the advent of the first London coffee/auction houses, places he frequented in order to network and pick up commissions from wealthy patrons. A runner or bookfinder who collected the most abject, disregarded materials, or in Gabriel Naudé’s words, “Libels, Placarts, Theses, Fragments, Proofs and the like” (an interesting dialectic emerges in *C/C/P* between Naudé’s inclusive librarianship and Thomas Bodley’s highbrow disdain of “Baggage Books”), Bagford bridged the historical transition between manuscript and printed word, his ambition nothing less than a complete history of

the book, purveyed through scraps. However, because of an erratic methodology, Bagford came to be viewed as a monster by Victorian bookmen such as William Blades, who labelled him “a wicked old biblioclast.” Trettien utterly rejects this smear campaign, redeems Bagford’s “bibliographic malpractice,” and situates him at the basis of “modern anglophone bibliography.”

Attitudes change slowly though, and even today, most librarians remain stuck inside a nineteenth-century paradigm, wary of remix culture, the sort of Early Modern bibliographic hip-hop represented by Bagford’s oeuvre. For instance, James Waddell recently griped (in “Manuscript men,” in the *Times Literary Supplement*, November 11, 2022) that “Robert Cotton, the Elizabethan antiquarian whose manuscript collection formed the nucleus of what would later become the British Library, whiled away his evenings cutting up and rebinding fragments of eighth-century Anglo-Saxon books, according to his own aesthetic whims.” This cut-and-paste practice is one which most resonates with today’s digital scholarship: the unsettled literary categories of the seventeenth century are a rich source and retrospective mirror of today’s interdisciplinary humanities and their hybrid technological means. Exquisitely written, *C/C/P* is a handbook that opens up new cognitive pathways, ones shown to join up with and validate absolutely contemporary phenomena such as certain types of perversely unoriginal writing, the appropriative energies of internet meme culture, mashed up underground zines, and so on. By excavating a largely forgotten past, Trettien’s well-argued book gives a long overdue respectability to the artist as assembleur (rather than deviant), even obliquely sketching out a precursor status—in these seventeenth-century practitioners of recombination—for the Romantic genius still to come, while putting pressure on how humanities curricula are currently designed and taught. A delightful, dangerous reading experience. ■