

Assignment 4: Your book's biography

Due 11:00 pm, Friday, May 16th (email to swerner@folger.edu)

minimum 4000 words; 50% of your final grade

The purpose of this assignment is to unite the three parts of the syllabus: the physical properties of books, the relationship between books and early modern culture, and books as vehicles for texts.

Your goal in this paper is to tell the narrative of your book's life, starting from its conception (when its creators—authors and/or publishers—first began to think about or take steps to arranging its writing and publication) to its initial appearance and subsequent dissemination until it reaches your hands today. It will be helpful to conceive of your book as consisting of two elements: the text that is contained in the copy that you have been examining and the physical object of the particular copy on which you have been focusing.

You should use the research tools that we have explored in the class (including the STC, Wing, and ESTC catalogs, the Stationers' Register, biographies of printers, the DNB and other scholarly biographies, and Hamnet), as well as whatever additional tools are useful for you. Other sources of information could be modern scholarly editions of your work, Folger curators, and secondary sources concerned with the work's printing and reception history.

Some of the questions you will want to ask include (questions in bold are ones that have not necessarily been part of earlier assignments):

1. Who caused the book to be written? Do we know who the author is? What other texts did the author write or compile or translate?
2. Who caused the book to be first printed? Who put up the money? From where did the manuscript come? Was there an ongoing relationship between author and publisher? Between publisher and printer? What other sorts of books did the publisher publish or the printer print? **If your book was not a first edition of its text, then what was the history leading up to the first edition, and the history through the subsequent reprints up until your edition?**
3. Who sold the book? Where was the book sold? What other sorts of books were sold there? Was the book sold in the same general location as it was printed? If not, why not?
4. Who read or bought the book? What information do you have about early modern readers of this book? To whom was the book designed to appeal? How popular was the book? **Were there later editions?** Are there signs of contemporaneous readers (i.e., readers who might have been the original owners of the book, or who had the book within the first decade or two of its printing)? Are there signs of later readers or owners, whether individuals or institutions?
5. How was this book used? Were changes made to its physical structure? When were these changes made? Was this book part of a larger collection of books? Was there a unifying principle to that collection?
6. **What happened to your text after the printing of your book?** Were there editions printed after yours? Were they printed by the same stationer or different ones? Are there records of rights changing hands?
7. Did your book have an afterlife either in the early modern period or in later centuries? Are there other works that respond to this book? Are there post-Renaissance editions of it? Twentieth- or twenty-first-century editions? Are those editions geared toward scholarly readers or to other sorts of audiences? Did the book spread beyond the geographical location of its printing? Are there translations of it?
8. Finally, bring the book to its current moment. **How did the book come to be at the Folger?** Perhaps, even, how did this book come into your hands?

Depending on the circumstances of your particular book, some or all of these questions might be relevant. If you don't know the answers to some of the questions, it might still be appropriate to note the questions in your paper. Many of these questions you should have already begun to explore in your assignments on your book's makers and your book's users. This paper gives you the opportunity to correct earlier mistakes, to expand upon your earlier research, and to shape it into a coherent story. You may find that you wish to include excerpts from your earlier work, and that's fine; you may also need to start afresh, which is also fine. The best papers won't simply insert earlier assignments into this one, but will reshape that research into a coherent story.

Your paper might not have an argument, but it should have a narrative. Try to write clearly and tell the story of your book in a way that is interesting as well as coherent. The strongest papers often convey an argument along with the biographical narrative, shaping observations about the book's life with commentary about what that information reveals to us about the book's use, cultural concerns, or theoretical issues involving in studying books or history.

A few practical details:

- At this point, all of you should be able to understand all the information that is included about your book in Hamnet. If you do not—whether it's a reference to the physical characteristics, a mention in the citation field, or any other aspect of the record—you should explore that now and contact me if you have any questions. Not all that information will be relevant to your research, but you will miss helpful information if you don't look at all of it.
- If your book was printed in London between 1554 and 1709, you need to work with the Stationers' Register to find out when and who entered the book. You also need to be able, to the extent it is possible, to identify earlier printings and later printings of your book and to whom and when those entries were made.
- All of you should be able to identify how your book came into the Folger's collection. If you haven't already, you should check with Head of Reference Georgianna Ziegler (gziegler@folger.edu) to inquire if she has any information about the book's acquisition; she is also a good source for help on pursuing leads and on understanding information in the catalog that you might otherwise find confusing.
- If you would like help dating the binding of your book, you can direct your questions to me or to one of the curators. Questions about dating handwriting in your book can be directed to me or Heather Wolfe, Curator of Manuscripts (hwolfe@folger.edu). Questions about a book's inclusion in an exhibition should be sent to Caryn Lazurri (clazzuri@folger.edu; you'll know if your book was exhibited because it will have an exhibition label in the back); some information about exhibitions after September 1996 is online at <http://www.folger.edu/Content/Whats-On/Folger-Exhibitions/Past-Exhibitions/>. In contacting any of these staff members, please be respectful of their time; they might not be able to respond to you immediately, or within less than a week or two's time, so build that into your research timeframe.
- Should for any reason your book not have an entry in the Register, or should you not be able to trace information about the Folger's accession, you should note that in your paper.

As always, cite all of your sources properly—I find parenthetical citation styles the easiest to use, but use the format in which you are the most comfortable. Any and all conversations with the curators should be cited, as should information gathered from the curatorial file. Don't forget to include a citation for your book, including its call number; please include the permanent url as part of this citation if you refer to the book's catalog entry. Citations from electronic databases and other online sources need to include a permanent url (not the address shown at the top of your screen) as well as the date/author/editor of the database and the date you accessed the information. (Electronic sources like the DNB often include a link that will generate a citation for you; use that.) If you are confused about how to cite something, please ask.

Finally, the word count is a minimum word count. I don't want you to be excessively wordy, but if you need more space to make your argument or to convey all the information you wish to include, then make it longer.