

Introduction to Part 2

All readers have power.

CLAUDIA GUADALUPE MARTINEZ, *A Velocity of Being*¹



Studying old books may sometimes feel like, in William Sherman's words, 'strolling through a deserted village or ghost town.'² In the margins and across brittle pages, the modern scholar encounters the dusty footprints of long-gone people. Their annotations, markings, and greasy fingerprints draw vague outlines of what was once a vibrant space of learning and enjoyment, of criticism and heated debate. Although they do not always present a coherent reflection of feelings and ideas, traces in old books show glimpses of the circumstances in which they moved. In this capacity, traces of use are not only a deserted village but a world of their own, providing a valuable way to come close to historic readers and the concerns, thoughts, associations, or perhaps flashes of boredom they encountered while reading the book.

Contrary to autobiographical works such as diaries or letters, readers' traces are not self-standing entities but are inherently intertwined with and dependent upon various elements of the book for their existence and meaning, including text, paratext, image, the space of the page, and material aspects of the book. Traces could spontaneously be left on the go, emerging from the reading practice or left by readers who, through annotations or adaptations, actively embraced their 'lectoral agency' – a concept coined by Slights to describe readers' ability to, similarly to publishers or editors, impact and transform the book's textual, paratextual, visual, and material contents.³ Either way, the early modern book was an object which could be appropriated and transformed in the hands of its readers.

1 Claudia Guadalupe Martinez, 'Dear Reader', in Maria Popova and Claudia Bedrick (eds.), *A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader* (New York: Enchanted Lion Books, 2018), pp. 42–43, p. 42.

2 Sherman, 'The Social Life of Books', p. 164.

3 See: Slights, *Managing Readers*, pp. 89–93.

The study of readers' traces allows for an insight into the considerations and movements of actual historic readers, and thus for a comparison between their behaviours and those stimulated by the formative paratextual programme in Liesvelt's and Peetersen van Middelburch's Bibles. The following three chapters will therefore explore reader-book interactions through the lens of the additions, adaptations, and traces that early modern Bible users left in their books. From a modern perspective, one might presume that the sacrality of a Bible would ensure that it remained predominantly untouched and unchanged, and that any readers' traces found would mainly concern theological, devotional, or meditational reflections.⁴ However, this proves not to be the case. The readers of Liesvelt's and Peetersen van Middelburch's Bibles left a wide scope of traces and adjustments in their books, ranging from pressed flowers, rusty stains of objects, and children's drawings, to extensive genealogical annotations, prayers, struck-through words, and quick calculations. The extent of traces of reading and use in the surviving Bible copies points towards a use of the Bible that went beyond its function as a textual carrier, and also related to its physical qualities as a heavy object, provider of paper, and presenter of usable space. The wide margins, pastedowns, and flyleaves provided ample blank space for readers to leave their thoughts, concerns, and associations alongside the text, or to simply use the available paper for an unrelated note.⁵ As 'waymarks' in processes of personalisation, the various traces that occupy the open space of the book make each Bible copy into a unique and distinctive object, one that reflects what happened when that very copy reached the hands of its users.

4 See: Sherman, *Used Books*, pp. 72–73.

5 In addition, as was typical for early modern printed books, the paper used by Liesvelt and Peetersen van Middelburch for their Bibles was prepared by gelatine sizing – i.e. the impregnation of paper with a gelatine-like substance to prevent the paper from absorbing water-based ink – in order to create a writable surface. The paper that was used in Liesvelt's and Peetersen van Middelburch's Bibles was, in all probability, imported from abroad, as almost no paper was produced in the Low Countries before 1585. Paper was usually imported from North-Eastern France, and sometimes from Germany and Italy. Unfortunately, little is known about the purchases of paper by Dutch printers in the early sixteenth century. See: Gerard van Thienen, 'Papier (incl. productie, watermerken, papierhandel)', in Marieke van Delft en Clemens de Wolf (eds.), *Bibliopolis: Geschiedenis van het gedrukte boek in Nederland* (Zwolle/The Hague: Waanders Uitgeverij/Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 2003), pp. 17–19, p. 18. As Joshua Calhoun argues, the fact that the paper was sized, and hence 'annotatable', should not be taken for granted: the paper had to be actively prepared for it, demanding an extra step in the creation of the book. See: Joshua Calhoun, *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), pp. 100–126.