How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity?

Kathleen Lynch

The idea of the fixity of print—or the ability of print publication to establish a stable text (across multiple copies of one edition and then from one edition to another)—has been effectively banished from the lexicon of early modern scholars. Peter Blayney, working on the texts of Shakespeare’s plays, demonstrated decisively that stop-press corrections and other printing house practices (such as the hanging of sheets to dry in random piles) make for copy-by-copy textual variation within an edition of an early modern hand-press book, and many bibliographical studies have confirmed his findings. The proposition that the multiplication of printed copies is any guarantor of textual stability across those copies is at best a fiction. Multiply the possibilities for variation across editions, and one has the basis for a rich bibliographical study, but hardly a stable text.

I raise the prospect of a fixed text here only to propose that if we shift our attention from the fixity of the text to a fixation on completion, we may find that there are genres in which a desire for fixity is well served by the material limits of a print job. I propose that the teleologically driven spiritual experience (or Protestant conversion narrative) is one. But what are the implications of trade practices for the deeply interiorized identities that were coming to be modeled by religious dissenters in the mid-seventeenth century? This essay addresses the question with a focus on the textual history of one early important model for a life story, The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced (1647). My focus is on the number of sheets required to produce this book, and the fact that that number remained constant over multiple editions. I make no claims about the wide applicability of the specifics of this case. My point is not that the genre of autobiographical narrative came to be defined by a set number of sheets or even one standard format. But I hope to demonstrate
persuasively that for the emerging conventions of spiritual autobiography, material limits and conceptual limits were mutually supportive. I suspect that the conventionality of thinking in sheets is worth further study. Early moderns may well have thought in terms of sheets more often than we recognize. A sheet count was their equivalent of a page count. Both writers and printers habitually estimated the size of a work in numbers of sheets, just as we do with word and page counts.

The bibliographical description of a book—or its collation statement—gives us the information we need to calculate the number of sheets that was needed to do the job. This was an important aspect of the negotiation of a print job: how many sheets will it take? A printer or a bookseller would need to price the job, distribute the work to the typesetters, and calculate the profit margins on the basis of the number of sheets.

The collation statement for *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* is [32], 159, [1] p.; 8°. This formulation tells us that 32 unnumbered pages were followed by 159 numbered pages and then one last unnumbered page (the blank verso of p. 159). With each sheet folded in half three times in the appropriate sequence, the sheets were in the octavo format, as indicated by “8°.” Each copy of the book consisted of two sheets of preliminaries and ten sheets of text. See Figures 1 and 2 on the ensuing pages for a reconstructed view of the 32 pages of preliminaries.

Fig. 1: First sheet of preliminaries (sig. †), Henry Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* (seventh ed., 1658), as simulated by Impositor. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Fig. 2: Second sheet of preliminaries (sig. A), Henry Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* (seventh ed., 1658), as simulated by Impositor. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.
Mrs. Sarah Wight, 
Lately Hopeful and Religious.

Her soul now hopeful and joyful in \textit{grace advance}.

	extit{by the spirit of grace, in an empty nothing creature (VIII.)}

Dedicated to Mrs. Sarah Wight, by the Author of the Christian Reader, and A Postscript to the Reader.

Henry Isser:

To the Christian Reader and a Postscript to the Reader.

The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advance.

By the Spirit of Grace, In an Empty Nothing Creature (VIII.)

Mrs. Sarah Wight, Lately Hopeful and Religious.

Her soul now hopeful and joyful in grace advance.

To the Christian Reader and a Postscript to the Reader.

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Her soul now hopeful and joyful in grace advance.

To the Christian Reader and a Postscript to the Reader.
To the Christian Reader.

Last before (as pg. 55, 56.) and her drink being only fine water, till April 9, and sometimes in on of还不是.(scarce another.) That was this put to the Proofs; and in the mean while, one day after another was occasio of enlarging by Conferences, to have her fall drawing water蜂, and my current appearance, till June 11. and before June 11. and June 11. 1647. (which were the days of the Lord wonderful evening up her body by Earth, as is shewed, pag. 136.) This was all the Lord was pleased. Yet was this more good of the Lord magnified towards her, the church's admirer, the more his love therein melts and shrivels her (as pg. 91, 13.) 1647; and so always, and had once a few to enjoy in private; much the more may they be published, both for the better supply to themselves, and to many others, whom the Lord might please to refresh, and enrich thereby when no more was gathered, what might be contained in two fiftys or three.

The heavenly light of divine grace was more than most likely to return to Earth, within a few days. Here was the more cause of willingness to yield to this desire; and to prefix the Letter before (for the better supply to others) as in pg. 97. April 14, 1647. And after that day, and remaining as usual, and unable to be all for eleven weeks together to eat or drink, but only once in two or three, or once in four or five days, and full drinking was only then.

H. J.
A Letter of a Privy Councillor.

Mr. Salmas to the Reader.
The times in which we live, in the midst of dangers, and in the shadow of death, the blessings of God are more deeply valued by the true family of God, and more readily assailed by the devil, the world, and the flesh. Ps. 38:7.

A table of the most important Scriptures in this Book.

The Contents.

Of the Scriptures, &c., &c.

A Preface to the Reader.

A Thanksgiving day.

A Preface to the Reader.

A Thanksgiving day.

A Preface to the Reader.
The Contents.

His soul deliverance, p. 53. 2045. 59. 67. 86.
But admitt, and exalt the Creature, the first
But admitt, and exalt the Creature, the first

Mr. Saltmarsh's his Letter.

Dear Sir,

I salute you in the Lord, I did much enjoy in those
branches of the Spirit of God, which I found in
your former book. Of the riches of grace, and
of all your other chambers into which you have
written to me. How you have been in the
Lord, and in the Lord of love, and in the Lord
of love, and in the Lord of love, and in the Lord
of love, and in the Lord of love.

H. Jessey.

The Contents. (or Table) of the Book.

O Rest! the hand of God, her education, parents, and
progress, p. 1. 7. 6.

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The Contents. (or Table) of the Book.

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progress, p. 1. 7. 6.
What I have found noteworthy and worth puzzling about the collation statement is that with one minor adjustment, this statement does not change through multiple editions (at least seven in the seventeenth century). The adjustment comes about in the third edition (1648) when the text spills over to the final page, and the collation statement changes from “159 [1]” to “160.” In terms of the number of sheets, the printed book remains fixed through multiple editions. In looking for what does change in the text—and mindful of the focus on one’s immortal destiny, what I have already called the teleological orientation of this kind of story—I am positing that the physical properties of the book helped shape the model of godly selfhood that was being advanced in this narrative.

Exceeding Riches of Grace is a report of Sarah Wight’s fast-induced prophecies, first published in 1647 [Fig. 3]. Sarah Wight was an odd spokesperson for the tenuously allied community of mid-
century Protestant “saints,” many of whom were taking tentative steps towards separation from the established church: Sarah was a self-described “empty nothing creature,” a fifteen-year-old girl, whose fast had put her in a state of physical collapse, near death, but for that very reason she had become more receptive to God’s message of saving grace. In brief, the story told in *Exceeding Riches* begins in March 1647. Sarah is terrified that she has sinned the unforgiveable sin of despair; she fasts, falls into a delirious state, seems to become a spiritual medium. Domestic help is summoned, as are doctors and London ministers, including Henry Jessey, then-pastor of a growing dissenting church, and John Simpson, an influential Independent minister. Jessey assumes the role of a “Recorder,” a reliable eye and ear witness of the events that follow.

Sarah Wight takes to her bed on April 6. For weeks, she does not eat, and she drinks only small sips of water. Near death and over the course of several months, she murmurs spiritual guidance to others (mostly women) who flock to her bedside. Finally, one night, she feels that God speaks directly to her: “Thou art mine.” She asks “lord, what wilt thou have me do,” and she is instructed to follow Paul’s example, to rise and go into Damascus. She understands that she should “testifie and minister that Grace of God that shee had received, unto others” (134-35). On June 25, (Midsummer’s Day), she got out of bed for the first time since April 6, and she went with her mother to church at Great All Hallows in London, where she heard a sermon by John Simpson.

Thus ends an episode in Sarah’s life as it was first printed within a month of her recovery. She had retreated into a place of physical depletion where she received the word of God and came back out to testify her experiential truth of election. That story is being disseminated in print as encouragement to others.

But the book does not end there. There are several flourishes of codas, epilogues, exhortations, the outward-looking framing devices that get us into the territory of what Gerard Genette has called the paratextual elements of a narrative. These are elements in a book that
comprise the “threshold” into reading. They are frankly transactional in nature, inviting the reader to approach the text in a certain frame of mind or with a particular interpretive agenda.¹ Scholars of early modern women’s writing expect to find substantial paratextual buttressing in printed texts authored by women. The steady hand of Henry Jessey here, in his dual role of minister and editor, was necessary for the broader promotion of Sarah Wight’s experience as a providential event.

We cannot quite credit Sarah as the author of her autobiographical narrative. But the transcribed speech brings her voice to a wider reading public, along with the voices of many other lay men and women. It is also possible to read this narrative as one of struggle between Wight’s desire to control her own bodily intake and Jessey’s struggle to interpret that bodily experience as divinely authorized (as does Mary Fissell). But Vera Camden’s observation gets closer to the power dynamics: Sarah has thoroughly understood the terms of patriarchal discourse and found a “place of privilege” for herself within that discourse.²

Most critical attention to paratexts is given to those materials that comprise what we could call the front matter—and we will attend to those two sheets of preliminaries soon enough. But these thresholds exist at the ends of texts as well, as Bill Sherman has noted.³ In this case, we will look first at the end, as the end of this kind of autobiographical narrative carried a special burden. Had Sarah Wight experienced an authentic revelation of her salvific destiny? Readers would form their opinions in part on the issue of how long her comforts lasted.

At the end of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*, there are three separate movements that carry the reader out of Sarah’s story and back into contemplation of the lessons for his or her own life. The first is a dream (149). The second is a direct address to the reader: “and now, is this nothing to you, O ye that pas by, . . . ? Is there nothing that the Lord hereby speaks to your heart?” (151). The third brings the work to a conclusion with a brief prayer and an amen, followed by the printed “Finis” [Fig. 4]. As Sarah moves back into her community, so is the reader taken back into his or her
own life. “Amen” and “Finis” are among the most common and strongest signals that we have reached the end of a text. It is the stability of that “finis” that is at issue.

Why does the end of this reported spiritual experience matter? Henry Jessey’s congregation was an important hub of the dispersed separatists and semi-separatist churches spreading across the mid-seventeenth-century Atlantic world. The self-identified Protestant saints, who were seeking new criteria for association with like-minded believers, were also seeking assurance of salvation in face of the brutally stark doctrine of predestination. Many of them were turning to an experiential approach to religion, an approach that held out the promise of a sensate apprehension of one’s own salvific destiny—a sudden infusion of divine presence, such as the one that knocked Paul from his horse.

The visible saints were gathering churches, and in practical terms, they needed admissions policies. More than that, they were seeking to set standards for the authentic expression of godly selfhood.
For some groups, the delivery of an autobiographical narrative (which they would have termed a spiritual experience) would come to be a requirement for admission.

Jessey’s church would not move in that direction. Instead he, like many of his congregants, would turn to baptism, or rebaptism, as a sign of changed life. Even so, Sarah Wight’s narrative modeled some of the conventions of the conversion narrative, as it was coming to be used in church formation. Her return to John Simpson’s church at the end of the story, for instance, marked the acceptance of a community of like-minded believers. Her sense of spiritual assurance was endorsed by others. The end of the story, the return to community, becomes a new beginning. But could it also be a falling away? That was the fear. For anyone to continue their story of spiritual experience after such an extraordinary reception of grace was also to risk undermining that unwavering assurance. This narrative highlighted a single episode of Sarah’s life in such a way as to render problematic the continuation of the life story.

Sarah Wight’s is not only one of the first spiritual experiences of a layperson to be printed; hers is one of very few such spiritual experiences from the seventeenth century to have a printed afterlife. It is therefore a valuable case study of how one might continue the story of spiritual experience beyond conversion. *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* was a sensation. It enjoyed at least four editions within a year of its initial publication and several further editions and reissues through 1666. Each new edition presented Jessey and his printers with a fresh challenge (or opportunity) to rethink the end.

1666 was the year of publication for another autobiographical narrative, *Grace Abounding*, of someone else with a claim to being the Chief of Sinners, John Bunyan. For the printers of *Exceeding Riches of Grace*, it must have made sense to dust off the left-over stock and catch the wave of interest in *Grace Abounding*. But it may be equally important to think of *Grace Abounding* as directly responsive to the *Exceeding Riches of Grace*, which I am suggesting provided a clear and popular template for the
kind of story that we have been trained to think of as deeply personal, but that Bunyan himself well understood to be highly conventional among religious dissenters.⁴

Certain members of the book trade were instrumental in disseminating those narrative conventions as part of their wider promotion of dissenting practices and polemics. The title page of *Exceeding Riches of Grace* introduces us to several of the key players [Fig. 5]:

![Title Page](https://www.proquest.com)

First and foremost, we have Henry Jessey presenting himself as the “Recorder,” as he styles himself elsewhere in the text, as an accurate eye and ear witness. Jessey may well have been recognized, especially by London readers, as the minister of the first semi-separatist church in London (originally formed in 1616 by Henry Jacob). Jessey was a Hebrew scholar, with millenarian tendencies that would grow in the decade following this publication. He was a practitioner of a rigorous experimental method, at pains to produce a reliable observation of whatever case was at hand.

Throughout the text, the specifics of time, place, and witnessing are carefully recorded. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, as well as other historians of science, have emphasized the crucial role of reliable reporting in establishing early modern scientific communities. Religious dissenters were also trying to bolster the credibility of their experiential approach to religion. Jessey was influential in the establishment of a methodology of verification. He characteristically emphasized the reliable reporting of incidents as a way of cultivating networks of likeminded believers across geographical and national boundaries.
The names on the imprint of this title page are important and recognizable representatives of the dissenting press. Matthew Simmons had begun a lasting relationship with John Milton when he printed *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1643. Henry Overton was one of Thomas Edwards’ targets in *Gangrena* (as was Henry Jessey), and Hannah Allen is herself listed in the text as among the credible witnesses. The names of printers and booksellers were beginning to signal ideological affiliations in the 1640s, and they certainly would have with these three, who frequently collaborated on books with militantly religiously themes.

The risk to Sarah’s health gave this publication a whiff of mortality. Would the story end with her death? Will we be given the very latest and most intimate information? The attention to dates has already been mentioned as part of an observational methodology. But it may also be influenced by—or a reflection of—the pamphlet culture then in full bloom. The newssheet (one of the few genres that carries its own sheet consciousness within its categorical title) was shaping new expectations for readers. The stranger and more sensational the report the better.

Here, the printed “Finis” might well have marked the end of Sarah’s life. For the purposes of subsequent print publication, it was something of a challenge that it didn’t. With a life story, what comes next will be further experience. But with this type of life story—this example of extraordinary openness to a saving grace—what comes next could always be a falling away. The last page of the second edition has a status report, dated 27 September 1647. It is perhaps motivated by two things: an indulgence of readers’ interest in the outcome of this near-death experience and an assurance that nothing has consequently undermined the validity of this example of God’s immediate involvement in the life of a young girl.

The dated status report informs us that Sarah is recovering; her diet is not back to normal, but she looks well. Already starting a pattern, this is an endnote; it is not integrated into the text, not even placed before those ending movements out of the text that broadened focus to prayer and
example. In the 3rd edition, within months of Sarah rising from her bed, the status report is formalized as a “postscript,” another form of paratext—guiding our passage out of the text rather than revising the text. The postscript introduces a new anecdote that begins “To page 129. Adde this.” The story is of a time when Sarah procured a knife, intending to commit suicide, but try as she might, she could not harm herself with that knife. This addition supports the general theme of God’s providence, but the story of the knife does not belong to the period after the book was published. It is rather an episode in it. From a production standpoint, there is no reason this could not have been inserted into the text (as specified on p. 129).

For that matter, there was no reason not to incorporate the September update from the previous edition into the text itself. Instead, that status report was simply redated “at the writing hereof in this third edition.” That is, the remarkable news of Sarah’s recovery still has currency. Opportunities to revise the text are not being taken. This is indicative of Jessey’s experimental method; it is an editorial decision not to disturb the integrity of the original observation. Annotation, amplification, confirmation: they are essential elements of the methodology of verification, but they are all strictly consigned to the paratextual parameters of the event.

But there is more to say about Sarah’s well-being—including the durability of her spiritual assurance—and there is also room to say it. Whether we credit the printer or the editor or both, someone noticed that there was that last blank page available. In the third edition, these supplemental notes spill over to the last page, and another anecdote is added [Fig. 6]:
This anecdote is of a different nature. It is neither a remembered incident about Sarah’s original experience nor a follow-up observation, bringing the story up-to-date. It is rather an analogous story of survival while fasting, the story of Jennet Russel, a woman who survived fourteen days without food or drink together with her 4 small children “in the beginning of the Irish Rebellion.” The allusion to the 1641 massacre of Protestant settlers by Catholic Irish probably marks her as an English settler.

The analogy is fairly weak. There does not seem to be the same kind of mystical or oracular evidence of a direct apprehension of one’s election. Even so, this, too, is understood as a providential survival, and it gives some glimpse of the militaristic arm of the godly communities who were paying attention to Sarah Wight’s story.
Let us look more closely at the array and networks of the assembled witnesses that preface the anecdote, for the method of relying on credible witnesses is characteristic of Jessey:

“Msrs O’Neale (Dr. O Neales widow) whom Mr. Marshal, Mr. Nye, Mr. Calamy, Mr. Saloway, and others testify to be godly,) [sic.] affirmd to the Relator, that she saw it certified under the hands of Mr. Rob. Blare, and Mr. James Hambleton, &c. Godly Scotch Ministers . . .” that this is a true story.

With the anecdote about Jennet Russell, we have the representative move that really gets to the spirit of exemplarity with which Sarah Wight’s story is circulated. Sarah’s story is offered as a model, and we are beginning to see in the supplementary materials of the printed text some responsive examples. The continuation of Sarah’s story is not a necessary hook for these communities of believers, struggling for assurance of predestined salvation. The lesson is not really about the whole of one individual’s experience, but about the comfort to be derived from one overpowering salvific revelation, and the aggregation of many such individual experiences so that
others may be encouraged in their own searches for spiritual assurance. These new reports have also utilized the last available space on the last page. Note how diminished is the “Finis.”

There are no further changes to the end of the text in the 4th edition, which was also published within the first year of Sarah’s recovery. And there are no extant copies of the 5th. But in 1652, a 6th edition was published. There are new publishers involved, including Livewell Chapman, first apprentice, then husband to Hannah Allen. With the single surviving copy of this edition, we also have evidence of an individual customer’s identity, and that is George Thomason. He annotated the title page “Aprill 2.” Thomason characteristically dated his book purchases, and his practice gives us an opening to another kind of witnessing and ordering. Thomason’s is by far the largest surviving collection of printed pamphlets and books from the civil war years, and chronology of purchase was his organizing principle. Thomason’s dates allow us to situate books, sometimes with great precision, right in the controversies and pressing concerns of their day. His purchase of Sarah’s narrative, five years after its initial publication, also reminds us of the building and swiftly changing political crises—from war to regicide and on through the Cromwellian experiments in government, which in turn gave way to the restored monarchy—an improbable sequence of events throughout which this narrative somehow maintained a place in the book shops.

In the 6th edition, shifting font sizes allow for one more dated status report to be squeezed in on the bottom of p. 160:

“About Septemb. 1650. A Christian Friend visiting Sarah Wight, found her weak, her Bible open where she had been reading, and said, she speaks still the same language that is in the Book; and she said, I dare not slight the least command of Christ.”

What I am highlighting, of course, is that all of these updates are consigned to spaces outside the narrative proper. A new temporal perspective is never taken as an opportunity to rethink or recount the story. Despite the multiple opportunities and anecdotal prompts, the continuation of the
story is resisted, with the material constraints of the number of sheets at least bolstering, if not precisely establishing, a conceptual boundary. In terms of the usefulness of this story as a model for others, it is enough to indicate Sarah’s fidelity to the truths revealed in these extraordinary experiences. There has been no backsliding. That is the point, and the clarity of that point could get lost if all of Sarah’s subsequent consolations and doubts were to be narrated in subsequent editions.

Surely at a practical level, these decisions to abide by the material limits of the first printing are economically motivated. Paper was the most expensive component of a printed book, more expensive than the labor. Surely (again at some practical level) we are simply illustrating a thriftiness that must be part of the craftsman’s outlook of the printer. But in this case, these decisions also amplify or map onto a concept of conversion that gives prominence to a single transformative incident in a life.

It is not only at the end of the text where things change, however. There is a formidable array of prefatory materials at the beginning of the book. We can look there, too, for framing strategies—and evidence that someone was actively shaping a reader’s response throughout these multiple editions. In fact, there are many more changes in the preliminaries than at the end. Still, here too, the number of sheets—precisely two—acts as a limiting factor.

It might also be noted that in looking to the front matter, we are still looking in some sense at the end of the work. In terms of the circuits of communication, the reader picks up with these prefatory materials precisely where the author (or editor) ended. Preliminary materials were almost certainly among the last components to be printed. For this reason, it was conventional to begin the text of a hand press printed book with signature “B.” This was a nod to the expected preliminary materials, which would probably constitute signature A or, as in the first edition, two signatures, an upper case signature A and then a lower case signature a. Two signatures, two sheets of paper. These
material limits may be as arbitrary as they were self-imposed, but they were nevertheless rigorously adhered to through multiple subsequent editions.

If, at the end of the narrative, several assurances about Sarah’s continuing health were deemed necessary, at the front end of the story, a rhetoric of credible witnessing ruled. A community of receptive readers is being summoned. What was considered necessary or useful to say or demonstrate to them? How did these paratextual elements change over time, if they did? And what is the effect of those changes?

There are three epistles dedicatory. Together they establish a circle of credible witnesses and assert the geographical reach of the community of dissent. The first is to other congregations, “in London, Cambridge, Yorkshire and elsewhere.” The second is to Sarah Wight’s step-brother, Jonathan Vaughan at Oxford.

Fig. 8: Detail, sig. A7v, Henry Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* (first ed., 1647), © British Library Board, shelfmark 1418.i.52. Image published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission. Image produced by ProQuest as part of Early English Books Online. www.proquest.com
As are so many of the paratextual elements, this letter is dated at the end: “2\textsuperscript{nd} month Ziu, 2\textsuperscript{nd} day.” But such a date requires an asterisk, which is here keyed to an explanation of Jessey’s *Scripture Almanacke* (and refers the reader to his annual publication by that name). This is a kind of product placement, then. To think about it as such is also to acknowledge the unexpected role almanacs had in the emergence of autobiographical narrative, and further, to comment on Jessey’s own idiosyncratic contributions to the form. Jessey’s first foray into print was as the editor of a series of almanacs, begun in 1645.

As Adam Smyth has argued, almanacs provided all kinds of temporal frames for the placement of self-reflective personal experience.\(^6\)

Temporal framing devices (from tides to events in national history) were as likely to coexist uneasily as to provide any overarching coherence. But these juxtapositions were accepted. In his almanacs, Jessey added an overlay of Hebrew calendar references as a teaching aid. For instance, the pairing of
Ziu and April, seen in his first almanac (1645), was Jessey’s selling point. But he was also keen to
distinguish his almanac from others on the market with a blank column, conveniently left for
handwritten notes.

Important as personal companions, almanacs are relevant to this study of the establishment
of material limits in another way. Almanacs were almost always in octavo format, and comprised 2
sheets. An editor of almanacs, like Jessey, would be used to working with this tight format
constraint. In fact, that is the very element of almanac editing on which Jessey’s seventeenth-century
biographer commented: “Adding somewhat every year to the new, and omitting other things that
were in the former, least the paper and price should swell too much, ordinarily comprising the whole
in two sheets.”
By diverting from this principle, Jessey’s almanac experiment in 1646 illustrates brilliantly his sheet consciousness. Here, he compresses the typical information in the annual publication to a single sheet suitable for hanging on the wall [Fig. 10]. The only reason this copy survived, however, is that it was folded and bound into a volume.

Returning to the elements of the preliminaries, the third dedicatory letter, “To the Christian Reader,” is also dated at the end. The mid-July date indicates that as the book was going through the press, Sarah’s recovery went apace, though still uncertain. There is also a postscript to that letter (and here we move on to the second sheet of preliminaries) “for better satisfying some who would
know many particulars distinctly.” What do they want to know? They want to know who Sarah is.

This postscript introduces her family. They are respectable people. Her father’s brother was a minister; her mother is a gentlewoman who had some bouts of “distraction of Spirit” herself, but had been cured.

Hannah Guy, the maid, is also introduced. We are told that Hannah’s father went to Ireland “to avoid the Ceremonies here urged.” This makes the Guys part of the diaspora of Laudian dissent, those who were leaving the Church of England and possibly even emigrating rather than accepting a higher ceremonialism. Hannah is also “known to Mr. Cradock of Wales” (another radical minister) and “well known to many of his London-acquaintances.” Together with Sarah’s mother, Hannah Guy is treated respectfully throughout. This is an unusual deference to the society of women, as well as an understanding of what constitutes respectability that is neither class-based nor gender-based.

A letter from John Saltmarsh follows next in the preliminaries, applauding the publication for the edification of “Saints” and approving the experimental quality of the observation. Saltmarsh was an influential chaplain in the parliamentary army; his endorsement is corroboration of the militant edge to at least some forms of experiential religion in the civil war years.

A “Table of the places of holy Scripture that in this Book are opened, illustrated, and applied” follows. These scriptural models and echoes are the essential “proofs” that Sarah’s experience is divinely inspired. In this first edition, this table ends on a recto, leaving a blank page on its verso (a6v). This is valuable real estate, giving scope for the many small adjustments to follow in subsequent editions. The table of scriptural references will grow throughout the editions. The three final components of the preliminaries include: a topical table of contents, an endorsement of publication from Sarah herself, dated May 24, “I would others might hear how graciously the Lord has dealt with me,” and errata on the last verso of the preliminaries.
Each of the subsequent editions announced on the title page that it was “corrected, with proofs added.” Proof here denotes a scriptural reference. But the assurance of proof continues to gesture towards the building of credibility. A variety of surgical revisions and additions buttress the case. In the second edition, there is an expanding sense of community in the first dedicatory letter to churches. Godly congregations in “Suffolk” and “Essex” are given a shout out.

There is also evidence in the second edition, however, that Jessey’s dedication to Jonathan Vaughan (the step-brother) in the first edition, was not well received. That letter is gone. In its place, there is a letter to Sarah Wight’s mother, Marie Wight, widow. But Jessey was a thrifty writer, not at all adverse to recycling prose. Here we get a view into Jessey’s rewriting strategies, involving precisely the kind of revision that we don’t find in the body of the text. With only the most minor, necessary substitutions (daughter for sister, for instance) the introductory section is the same. New prose, appropriate for the address to Mrs. Wight, begins on the second page of the letter. And some left-over passages from the letter to Jonathan Vaughan are repurposed for an address to the Christian reader to fill up a page that was left blank by the shorter letter to Mrs. Wight. On the facing recto, Mr. Saltmarsh’s letter is more formally announced.

Still in the second edition, the shifting elements and small changes include a supplemental date to one of Jessey’s letters. Fonts change, and margins are adjusted, so that something like Sarah’s endorsement of publication, which took up a whole page in the 1st edition, is more compactly printed in the second. This is a category of adjustment that speaks to the layout skills of the printers. It also sheds a different light on the charge of poor quality that is often leveled at mid-century printers. We might think instead of the higher premium being put on the conservation of materials and the dissemination of news.
One other category of change is worth pausing on, as it too is indicative of the kind of sustained editorial attention that is not found in the narrative itself. This includes surgical revisions to the content.

The first edition had named in “A Postscript to the Reader” some of the London acquainances who visited Sarah [Fig. 11]. It is essentially a list of credible witnesses, and they range from ministers to aristocrats to “Hannah Trapnell” (who would herself become one of the most infamous of mid-century women prophets), and “Dinah the Black.” In the second edition, a new name is added to the list of witnesses: “Msrs Jane Done sister of the Lady Mayerne.” In that same list, “Dinah the Black” becomes “Dinah the Blackmore,” and the list of names is followed by a justification for naming them. The very precision of these revisions highlights the ongoing cultivation of that validating community. Indeed, that cultivation continues in later editions. In the 1652 edition, there is a new mix of witnesses: Mrs. Mary Leek, Hanna Trapnel, and Dinah the Blackmore are gone. In are Lady Bointon, Lady Saxfield, Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Tracy of Roterdam,” and others. Five years on,
Jessey is freshening up the list of credible witnesses. The need to establish that circle remains current, but all kinds of shifts in allegiances dictates a new mix. Jessey’s authorial reach for as many credible witnesses as he can name should not obscure the reality that each witness will have his or her own perspective on the events described—and as Jessey was obliged to note, Wight’s brother was not the only person to object to Jessey’s inclusion of their name.

Other minor shifts and revisions in later editions include a new letter from Mr. John Brown to his cousin, Mrs. Wight, in the 3rd edition. Brown was a kinsman from Shrewsbury (and possibly a welcome male relation to substitute for the excised brother). In the 4th ed., a new anecdote is squeezed in. It does not bring the story up to date, but it has an epigrammatic punch: “they wonder now how I live, and eat so little: They might wonder how I lived before ...”

The 6th edition (1652), the one collected by Thomason, has its own new update, clearly answering detractors (and possibly therefore an indication of the growing divisions among dissenters). According to the update, one day Hannah Guy visited Wright to say, ”It is reported that you deny ordinances.” Sarah is thus able to answer these charges by pointing out that continuing ill health restricts her activities, even including church going. Then a promise is made, that “Other Passages since the Book was made, are reserved for the SECOND PART” [Fig. 12]. This promise will remain unfilled, but it speaks to the pressures of a particular kind of continuing interest in Wight’s story—what happened next? Jessey seems to be wavering, finally, in his strategy of fixed attention to the singular exemplary event in her life.
For the 7th edition, another six years on, the promise of a second part is repeated, and amplified—there will be correspondence, including some from Amsterdam! Crucially, this 1658 edition adds news of Sarah’s brother’s death. We are told that Sarah is taking care of her “afflicted” mother and that she has her own health issues. She is “much troubled” and “grieved by” the personal attention. When she was in better health, she went to All Hallows. But since the death of her brother, she has pretty much withdrawn, “hindered from enjoying the Lord in publick or private Ordinance in a great measure.” Signed H. Jessey. Colman-street 22. Sept. 1657.  

The news of Jonathan Vaughan’s death is cast in solicitous terms. But the publication of this edition also speaks to a market opportunity. The previous year, a letter from Wight had been published as *A Wonderful Pleasant and Profitable Letter* (1656) [Fig. 13]. It described her despondence over the death of her brother. The printed letter presents a different view of Wight’s spiritual experience from that of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*. This view does not quite contest the status of the conversion experience as the defining moment of Wight’s life. But the letter speaks to a cyclical—or seasonal—understanding of life.
Once again, the question of Sarah’s voluntary authorship is doubtful. But in the letter, Wight writes movingly of her “winter season of affliction” and of “mourning for the loss of all that comfort: I have been stripp’d so bare of seeming comfort since, that I cannot boast of that, nor of any comforts, nor of the God of comforts; nor of any enjoyments, or experiences; nor of any gifts or graces; but of the giver alone.” (24)

What matters (in her maturity) is not so much what has changed, or that things change, but how her accumulated life experiences have taught her to search for, to be patient for, spiritual comfort. Any one of these moments of comfort can become its own object of meditation—you work your way back into it, you use it as an inspiration, if only for patience.

What is the nature of religious conversion—a moment of inspiration or a slow, and bumpy progress? These two publications about Sarah Wight’s experience present different cases. The
Letter, as I said, does not quite contest the view of conversion as a single transformative moment in a lifetime, but it helps us to see how determined the published narrative of her spiritual experience was to keep close focus on that single moment—with just a few well-placed and well-tended hints of continued confirmation.

Throughout multiple editions, the paratextual elements of *Exceeding Riches of Grace* maintained the currency and the credibility of this extraordinary experience. Durability or fidelity to the changed life was crucial. But as long as that fidelity could be briefly signaled, that was understood to be enough. The promised “Second Part” of Sarah Wight’s story never came, because it was never really deemed necessary. Rather, the kind of continuity sought by adherents to experiential religion was the kind secured by increased church membership, by the adaptation of the model, by the spread of the type of godly selfhood. That was the rationale for bringing Jenet Russell into Sarah Wight’s book. And that is the rationale of another publication that could also figure in this intertextual history. *A Looking Glass for Children* was published after Jessey’s death, apparently on the basis of stories about children that he had collected. Were these, perhaps, meant for the promised “Second Part” of *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*? In some sense, they continue Sarah’s story by expanding its applicability.

How does the fixity of print become a problem for religious identity, then? It tends to make that identity seem easily fixable. As I have argued in *Protestant Autobiography*, the genre of the Protestant conversion narrative was born in print. Print was a convenient medium for fixing these stories precisely at a point where they won the affirmation of fellow believers. *Exceeding Riches of Grace* is an especially clear-cut case that the material limits of a printed book—the number of sheets allotted to the job—could have some impact on the shaping of a life story. Sarah Wight’s story was an important model for a narrative form that would be quickly codified in the decades following its publication. The textual history of her story illuminates a way of conceptualizing the relationship of an extraordinary event in a life to the whole of that life—and especially to the salvific afterlife. Sarah
Wight’s was a story demanding a durable fidelity to the truth revealed in an extraordinary episode. It was not a story with room for further unfolding.


They married in 1651. Her name did not appear on any imprints after that. Chapman’s business was interrupted frequently in the 1650s and 60s. He escaped abroad in 1662. On return in 1664, his business was ruined.


[Edward Whiston], The Life and Death of Mr. Henry Jessey (1671), 63.

Barbara Ritter Dailey identified some of these witnesses and analysed the communities involved in “The Visitation of Sarah Wight: Holy Carnival and the Revolution of the Saints in Civil War London,” Church History 55 (1986): 438-55. I have a study of Dinah the Black’s appearances here and elsewhere underway. But much work remains to be done on the intermixing of classes and political and religious interest groups, as well as the changes in Jessey’s witness list over time.

Jessey had many contacts among the English exiles abroad, as well as among the Jews in Amsterdam. Earlier in the decade, he had published an English translation of Caspar Sibelius’s
account of Dutch Protestant missions, Of the Conversion of Five Thousand and Nine Hundred East-Indians (1650).


11 A dedicatory letter to Lady Fleetwood is signed by “R.B.” Several candidates for “RB” have been suggested; one of them, Robert Brag, was the rector of All Hallows and had been listed among the witnesses to Sarah’s earlier experience.