

“Strange alteration!”: The Victorian Milton and a Book Bound in Human Skin

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In the collections of the Devon Heritage Centre, located on an industrial estate on the outskirts of Exeter, there is what at first appears to be an unremarkable, leather-bound, Victorian edition of Milton's poetry. On opening the volume, however, the reader finds an extraordinary inscription: “This Book is bound with a part of the skin of George Cudmore who with Sarah Dunn was committed to the Devon County Gaol on the 30th of October 1829 ... for murdering & poisoning Grace Cudmore his Wife.” In 1830, George Cudmore was tried, found guilty, and executed; his accomplice, Sarah Dunn, was acquitted. Cudmore was hanged, and dissected at the Devon and Exeter Hospital. Decades later, local bookseller William Clifford used Cudmore's tanned skin to bind an 1852 edition of *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, published by William Tegg. One of the mysteries that I seek to unravel here is what happened to Cudmore's skin between the dissection of his body and the binding of the book. There are, however, more fundamental questions prompted by the Cudmore *Milton* (as I will refer to it): why use human skin to bind a book, and why choose Milton's poems?

The book itself offers no explanation beyond the inscription stating the details of Cudmore's crime and trial. There is a disjunction between the shocking inscription and the rest of the book, which contains little out of the ordinary: it begins with a “Life of the Author” followed by Milton's major and minor works, and features illustrations after George Romney, Richard Westall, and J. M. W. Turner.¹ The Cudmore *Milton* is regularly mentioned in studies of the unusual practice of “anthropodermic bibliopeggy” (binding books in leather made from human skin), but it tends to appear as an addendum to discussion of more famous cases (see most recently Rosenbloom 124 and Brooke-Hitching 53). It has not been addressed specifically as an object of interest for studies of Milton's nineteenth-century reception or reputation. In mid-twentieth-century writing on books bound in human skin, descriptions of the origins of the Cudmore *Milton* often suggest the binding was somewhat happenstance: Lawrence S. Thompson writes in 1946 that Cudmore's “tanned skin *fell into the hands* of W. Clifford, a bookseller of Exeter, who used it for binding a copy of Tegg's 1852 edition of Milton” (96; my emphasis); in 1955, Walter Hart Blumenthal writes similarly that “the tanned skin came into the hands of W. Clifford” (83). The suggestion is that the circulation of this macabre souvenir was coincidental: if the tanned human leather merely “fell into the hands of” a bookseller, his choice of Milton's *Poetical Works* might be indiscriminate. But binding books in tanned human skin

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is rarely an arbitrary act. In this essay I explore the interpretive possibilities that this troubling object makes available when its creation is treated as intentional and revelatory.

Pamela K. Gilbert writes in *Victorian Skin* that “On the one hand, [flayed human] skins promise to tell us something about history, about human savagery, while on the other, their meaning is obscure. They are objects that speak to us, but we cannot understand” (215). The Cudmore *Milton* speaks to us in precisely this way: the gruesome volume seems to offer some insight into Milton’s place in nineteenth-century culture, while simultaneously raising more questions than it answers. What has Milton to do with George Cudmore and the murder he committed? As far as such a task is possible, I will make some suggestions about how we might understand this book, how we might read Milton’s poetry as inflected by Cudmore’s crime and his body, and vice versa. The disturbing envelopment of Milton’s text in Cudmore’s skin forces us to think about the materiality of the text, and particularly the presence of the body and bodily violence in Milton’s poetry; both body and text here have a relationship to sin and punishment, and even more specifically a sin shared between husband and wife; the binding suggests an association of Milton with revolutionary violence; and finally, the object makes manifest a power relation bound up in class, literacy, and the body.

There are two matters to deal with before examining the Cudmore *Milton* in relation to these ideas. First, I turn to Milton’s own body parts to briefly address accounts of his reception in the nineteenth century, and to compare the treatment of Milton’s body parts with those of Cudmore. I then provide an overview of the practice of binding books in human skin to identify patterns of meaning that may shape our interpretation of the Cudmore *Milton*.

Milton's Remains

In August 1790, a few enterprising men dug up a coffin from underneath the church at St. Giles Cripplegate, London—now surrounded by the Barbican—and opened it to reveal the remains of John Milton. According to Philip Neve, who published a pamphlet documenting the event (based mostly on reports from witnesses), the corpse “appeared perfect, and completely enveloped in the shroud, which was of many folds; the ribs standing-up regularly” (17).² The initially dignified state of the body was not to last. Neve describes the activity that followed:

Laming and *Taylor* went home to get scissors to cut-off some of the hair: they returned about ten; when Mr. *Laming* poked his stick against the head, and brought some of the hair over the forehead; but, as they saw the scissors were not necessary, Mr. *Taylor* took up the hair, as it laid on the forehead, and carried it home. The water, which had got into the coffin, on the Tuesday afternoon, had made a sludge at the bottom of it, emitting a nauseous smell, and which occasioned Mr. *Laming* to use his stick to procure the hair, and not to lift up the head a second time. Mr. *Laming* also took out one of the leg bones, but threw it in again.

(18–19)

Body parts were variously picked up, knocked out, tossed back, and pocketed. The pieces retrieved from the coffin were sold as relics, with much joking in the press that Milton must have been blessed with an uncommon number of teeth: the *English Chronicle* reported that “Milton’s *teeth* are now hawked about ... in every part of the town. Several *thousands* have already been purchased—*by the curious!*” (Read 1053).

This essay focuses on Cudmore’s skin, but Milton’s body parts can be seen as key to understanding his reception in the nineteenth century, both literally and metaphorically: consider Walter Savage Landor’s claim in 1846 that “A rib of Shakespeare would have made a Milton: the same portion of Milton, all poets born ever since” (246). (Six years later, B. B. of Pembroke writes in *Notes and Queries* that “it may not be out of place to tell you that I have handled one of Milton’s ribs” [368; see Howell 17]).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, during a period of intense cultural response to his poetics and politics, Milton's body was disassembled. Jayne Lewis suggests that "it would be hard to find an incident more thick with matter—or, at the time, more generative of literary material—than the apparent opening of Milton's coffin" (798).³ The accounts of this violation of Milton's remains—at once morbid and humorous—provoked some public controversy in the years that followed, feeding into the varied ways that Romantic writers understood their relationship to Milton through both his body parts and his disembodied spirit. Romantic writers and readers of Milton declared the value of his circulating body parts, associating them with his poetic power. They expressed a desire to keep him whole, to guard Milton from attempts to disrupt his legacy through disturbing his remains. They both struggled with the never-slumbering spirit who refused to stay dead and proclaimed a contemporary need for Milton's revived revolutionary spirit: "return to us again," as Wordsworth petitions in "London, 1802" (l. 7).

Two brief examples illustrate the range of responses to Milton's disassembled body parts in the Romantic period. William Cowper's poem "Stanzas on the Late Indecent Liberties Taken with the Remains of the Great Milton, Anno 1790" expresses similar concerns to Neve's pamphlet, exclaiming that it is a disgrace for Milton's resting place to have been disturbed and implying that it is a point of honor to divulge and circulate disgust at the act and its perpetrators. In Cowper's oft-quoted words, "Ill fare the hands that heaved the stones / Where Milton's ashes lay, / That trembled not to grasp his bones / And steal his dust away!" (ll. 17-20; qtd. in Howell 23). Cowper respectfully sanitizes Milton's remains here by drying them out: "ashes" and "dust" are not quite what Neve describes—Milton's bones sitting in "sludge . . . emitting a nauseous smell" (19). In John Keats's "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair" (1818), the speaker has a transcendental experience, is physically affected (perhaps aroused) by the sight of a Miltonic relic, his "forehead hot and flush'd" (l. 34). The lock prompts a revelation: Milton's "Spirit never slumbers, / But rolls about our ears" (ll. 3-4). As Deborah Lutz notes, "What makes a relic a relic is its closeness not only to a once-alive human body, but also to a still-alive body that venerates its tactility" (4). It matters that the hair that Keats gazed upon was thought *not* to have been taken from the coffin disinterred in 1790, but rather had been in circulation since Milton's lifetime.⁴ That the lock was cut from the living Milton both brings the beholder closer to Milton in the act of composition and avoids the moral problem of taking inspiration from a relic stolen from Milton's resting place.

The anecdote of Milton's disinterment has been used by scholars in various ways: two relevant works that take this event as a starting point are Michael Lieb's *Milton and the Culture of Violence* and Erik Gray's *Milton and the Victorians*. Lieb argues that a "sparagmatic mentality"—an investment in the idea of generative violence, bodily dismemberment that leads to renewal—is "fundamental to the Miltonic point of view" (16). He introduces this by dwelling on the ironic contrast between the events of August 1790 with the conclusion of Milton's poem to Manso, in which Milton imagines the reverential treatment of his own body after his death (Cowper makes reference to this in his "Stanzas"). I return to Lieb's identification of Miltonic *sparagmos* in my consideration of the Cudmore *Milton*.

Through the same anecdote, Gray unearths a metaphor for Milton's paradoxical influence in the Victorian period and the workings of literary influence more broadly. Following Lucy Newlyn, who frames the Romantic Milton as dual—at once overtly figured as the deified patriarchal Milton, and covertly recognized as a "negatively capable" Milton through poetic allusion—Gray identifies a different kind of duality as the defining feature of the Victorian Milton. Gray argues that Milton is at once invisible and omnipresent in Victorian culture, "direct" and "incalculably diffusive" (*Milton and the Victorians* 161); this second phrase is borrowed from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*). Hair, Gray suggests, aptly represents this duality: it both belongs to us and is the body part most easily separated from us. It is both "intensely personal or peculiar and also interpersonal and alienable" (163). My discussion of the Cudmore *Milton* draws on Gray's claim that Milton's mixed significance and absence are key to his Victorian legacy. It is partly because of his cultural significance in the nineteenth century that Milton is subject to the visual and material interventions that in turn disrupt his authority. The Cudmore *Milton* echoes the responses to the disinterment of Milton's remains, in both undermining and underscoring his cultural authority.

Books Bound in Human Skin

How does one tell the difference between human and animal leather? Carolyn Marvin notes that since “there is nothing perceptibly obvious about a book bound in human skin to suggest its composition, in this literature the magical nature of the subject matter makes it especially difficult to distinguish fantasy from fact” (133). The most precise test we currently have uses peptide mass fingerprinting to analyze the proteins present in leather samples to determine whether the material was once the skin of a primate. At the time of writing, this technique has been used by the Anthropodermic Book Project to test 31 books thought to be bound in human skin, around two thirds of which have been confirmed cases.⁵ In Megan Rosenbloom’s recent account of the project’s findings, *Dark Archives*, the Cudmore *Milton* gets a one-sentence mention (124); it has not been tested.⁶ For my purposes, it does not matter much if the book is or is not actually bound in tanned human skin. Either way, a relation is established between Cudmore and Milton, so that the story of the former’s crime envelops the poetry of the latter. We still need to address the binding of and inscription in the volume as a disconcerting paratext that presents the book in a particular way and shapes our response to it.

As noted above, there are only a small number of books that claim to be bound in human skin, and an even smaller number that have been tested and verified. In accounts of this practice, the examples given generally fall into three main categories: first, the criminal or retributive; second, the medical or anatomical; and third, the memorial (though of course these categories are not always distinct from each other). The books that do not quite fit into these categories tend to be those only rumored: anecdotally, the practice of anthropodermic bibliopegy is associated with the Nazi regime, but to date the Anthropodermic Book Project has not verified any books clearly linked to Nazi Germany (Rosenbloom 173).

The binding of the Cudmore *Milton* in the skin of a man executed for murder aligns it most clearly with that first category, the criminal. The most famous British examples are from the first half of the nineteenth century, when several human-skin books were created as a result of changes in law and medical practice. Most of these examples also cross into the second medical category, but in the stories told about them criminality takes precedence. The Murder Act of 1752 mandated post-mortem dissection (a substitute for gibbeting) as part of the punishment for murder: “better Preventing the horrid Crime of Murder” required a punishment that would constitute a “further Terror and peculiar Mark of Infamy,” since trivial crimes could often lead to hanging in the mid-eighteenth century (Richardson 35–37). As Rosenbloom writes, “By dissecting murderers, doctors became agents of state punishment, and dissection a public performance of humiliation” (137). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the demands of medical scholars for bodies to dissect had outgrown the number of people being executed, which led to the practice of body-snatching and resurrection men taking fresh bodies from graves. The Anatomy Act of 1832 aimed to curb these activities. By recommending that the bodies of the poorest in society, those who died in the workhouses, be made available for anatomical study, “What had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty,” as Ruth Richardson notes (xv). Most of the examples of British criminal anthropodermic bibliopegy are made with the skin of criminals executed in that last decade, between 1820–30.

Two of the most famous British examples are books bound in the skin of John Horwood and William Burke. Burke, of the infamous Edinburgh body-snatching partnership Burke and Hare, was executed the year before George Cudmore. His remains were put to a variety of uses, including the construction of a pocketbook using a portion of his skin, inscribed with the date of his execution. This must have seemed like a fitting punishment for someone whose crime was supplying bodies for dissection. Horwood’s skin, meanwhile, was used to bind a record of his crime and the subsequent case: the front of the volume is inscribed with the words “*Cutis Vera Johannis Horwood*”—“the genuine skin of John Horwood”—framed within embossed gallows. Steven Connor notes that the increase in the availability of criminal bodies in combination with the “long-established popularity of the genre of gallows confessions . . . suggests the aptness of binding criminal testaments in the skin

of the reprobate" (43). The typical aptness of these criminal cases does not apply straightforwardly in the case of the Cudmore *Milton*.

We might also include in the criminal category those rumored volumes associated with the French Revolution, where tanneries for human skin were alleged to be in use during the Terror, though the existence of such objects is indeterminate. In these cases, the retributive violence of revolution takes the place of sanctioned capital punishment. A newspaper cutting enclosed with the Cudmore *Milton*, titled "Exeter Curiosity," notes that "in most cases the use of human skin for binding has been due to a grim sense of humour, especially during the French Revolution, when the bodies of aristocrats provided material for making women's gloves as well as coverings for books." Though there are rumors of a specific tannery and even particular objects, such as an edition of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* bound in the skin of French aristocrats (Connor 43) and "a copy of the French Constitution of 1793 which is contained in a piece of human skin dyed a light green" (Thompson, "Tanned" 94), Rosenbloom notes that so far "any books ... tested with an alleged French Revolution pedigree have all turned out to be made from nonhuman animals" (46). Rosenbloom suggests the lack of concrete examples may be explained by strict French laws about the sale of human remains: if there are extant books bound in human skin from the period of the French Revolution, they exist only in private collections, out of sight.

The second identifiable category of books bound in human skin, the medical or anatomical, is connected to the criminal through dissection as punishment. There are a clear number of examples of books about the body that have been bound in human skin by medical scholars and physicians, which often make a clear connection between binding and book; the skin, removed from the body, is still conceptually linked to the corporeal. Thompson notes that the beginning of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of any "systematic interest ... taken by the medical profession in the practical uses of human leather" ("Tanned" 94), but anatomical volumes have a longer history: a book on virginity and female anatomy from 1663, *De Integritatis et Corruptionis Virginitatis Notis*, is bound in the skin of a woman, with a note stating it has "a binding appropriate to its subject" (Connor 44). I will return to the power imbalance implicit in these bindings below.

Both criminal and medical examples seem to result from easy access to the organs of the dead. The third category, memorial skin books, is different; they can fulfill a similar role to locks of hair exchanged between lovers, though are perhaps not so gratefully received. There are stories of admirers arranging for their own skin—either after death or an amputation—to be used to bind volumes as gifts for lovers (Blumenthal 81–82; Connor 45). Books have also been bound in human skin to ensure a place in cultural memory, rather than personal: in the early nineteenth century Ernst Kauffmann supposedly collected hundreds of woodcuts and arranged to have them bound in his own skin after death, so that he would be "remembered to posterity" after a disappointing writing career (Thompson, "Tanned" 98). One example of a verified cultural-memorial skin book, comparison with which may be illuminating for understanding the Cudmore *Milton*, is Phillis Wheatley's 1773 collection *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Not one but two copies of Wheatley's *Poems* have been proven to be bound in human skin by the Anthropodermic Book Project: Rosenbloom argues that the motivation to bind these books was "to create collector's items using the rarest materials to bind one of the most important works in African American literature" (109). The impulse is comparable to Kauffmann's, to make sure Wheatley is appropriately "remembered to posterity."

Wheatley's collection is an exception, but in most of these examples—the criminal, medical, and memorial—the relationship between the text and its binding, when the latter is human skin, is a strong one of aptness. This leads me to suggest a fourth broader category, including some of those mentioned above, which presents the relationship between text and cover as a kind of emblematic pun. For example, Thompson mentions a case of a customer "especially fond of tattooed human skins" who "managed to get hold of a human skin on which were tattooed two knights from the age of Louis XIII in single combat, and he ordered a copy of *The Three Musketeers* bound in it" ("Tanned" 99–100). There are many cases where the aptness of the binding for the book treads the fine line

between humor and horror: anecdotally, a 1793 edition of the Marquis de Sade's *Justine et Juliette* was "bound in female breasts" with a nipple in the very center of the cover (Thompson, "Tanned" 98). What most of these examples suggest, in all four categories, is that the act of binding books in human skin is anything but arbitrary.

What are the implications, then, of the binding of Milton's poetry in Cudmore's flesh? Why use Milton's poetry in this way? Can this binding be understood as an interpretive act, offering us a kind of pun, or suggesting aptness? The Cudmore *Milton* doesn't fit neatly into any of the four categories outlined above, but it can be read through each: we can consider the object from the perspective of criminality and punishment; anatomy and the body; reverence and the memorial; and as perhaps declaring a kind of emblematic referentiality.

The Cudmore *Milton*

Let us turn first to the criminal. As I have suggested, we might include in this category rumors of skin books made during the Terror: the tanning of aristocratic skin is part of a retributive punishment of the powerful. Regardless of whether the rumors of the human tanneries of the French Revolution are true, Gilbert suggests that "for many Victorians, the supposed flaying and tanning of humans came to symbolise the radical recent break with civilisation that the Terror represented" (181). If, as Gilbert argues, this association of flayed human skin and revolution was present in the minds of the Victorians, given Milton's own association with revolution, might the binding of an 1852 edition of Milton's *Poetical Works* in human leather be read in the context of the revolutionary events across Europe at the end of the 1840s? Or does the creation of the Cudmore *Milton* suggest a broader association between Milton's poetry and revolutionary "break[s] with civilisation"? Thomas Carlyle discusses the rumors of human leather in his 1837 work on the *French Revolution*: "Alas then, is man's civilisation only a wrappage, through which the savage nature of him can still burst, infernal as ever? Nature still makes him; and has an Infernal in her as well as a Celestial" (3.317). Carlyle identifies civilization with the fragile containment of skin, which is ruptured in revolution. There is much here that might make us think of Milton and "infernal" revolution: Carlyle's language recalls the image of the birth of Milton's Sin, bursting from Satan's head (*Paradise Lost* 2.746–58), and in turn Death "breaking violent way" from the womb of Sin (2.782).⁷ Joseph Crawford links the disinterment of Milton's coffin to a renewed engagement with his republicanism in the revolutionary context of the 1790s, arguing it is "fitting that the fragments of Milton's body should have been unearthed and circulated in the very year that his political pamphlets began to be reprinted, some of them for the first time in one-and-a-half centuries" (26–27); the binding of Milton's poetry in Cudmore's skin may be likewise recalling this connection between Milton and revolution.

The Cudmore *Milton* might exemplify the Victorian association between flayed human skin and the violence of revolution. However, this interpretation ignores the story of Cudmore himself, which may suggest a broader thematic connection. Connor comments on the record of John Horwood's crimes bound in his own skin:

When a criminal's skin is used to bind the book in which he appears to give his own admonitory account of his wicked life and deserved death, the anthropodermic binding enables a kind of graphic ventriloquism, a garbing of the book in the body of the criminal that corresponds to the garbling appropriation of his tongue. . . . Normally, it is the legal document that is binding upon the bodies it concerns; here the body's own binding seems to underwrite and circumscribe the power of the official record.

(43)

Does the Cudmore *Milton* also involve "a kind of graphic ventriloquism"? The leather is made from the skin of a criminal, but not to bind his own story or testimony. In place of a confession, the

Cudmore *Milton* contains only the inscription giving a brief description of his crime. Perhaps, then, the binding of this volume is a prompt to think about Milton's poetry in terms of crime and punishment. Are we to make a connection between Cudmore's crime and man's first disobedience?

We might better understand the relationship between the text and its binding by attending to the particulars of Cudmore's crime. Grace Cudmore was poisoned; after burial, she was disinterred, and arsenic was found in her stomach. Some accounts suggest the poison was administered by George Cudmore in elder blossom tea, and then in pills offered as medicine for the stomach ache caused by the tea. In other accounts he accused Sarah Dunn of poisoning his wife with arsenic-laced apples and milk, a strikingly domestic method. What are we to make of the claim that Cudmore tried to blame his female accomplice for their supposedly joint crime? The *Southampton Herald* notes that "each laid the blame upon the other of having instigated the deed" ("Multiple News"). One local newspaper reports that the wife of the constable heard Dunn ask Cudmore "if he forgave her": "He said it was her who caused him to do the deed. Dunn replied they were both equally guilty, and she hoped that they would both be equally punished" ("Assize Intelligence"). Other newspapers report that it was Cudmore who asked Dunn for her forgiveness, with Dunn responding "You are a bad man, and I am as bad as you, and deserve the same punishment, and I hope I shall have it" ("Devon Lent"). Some accounts note that Dunn's admission of guilt referred only to her living in sin with Cudmore, and not to any part played in the murder. Several local newspapers mention the detail that Cudmore requested Dunn be made to watch his execution; others add that she miscarried a child while she was being held in prison.

The lines that might be drawn between this narrative and Milton's poetry are many, if indistinct, like the crisscross markings in the human leather binding of the book. Victorian writers make use of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a marker and reminder of humanity's fallen nature. This is one way that Milton is, in Gray's sense, "dual"—he is kept present and distant through a consistent acknowledgment of the inescapably postlapsarian state of human existence. Victorian literature often recreates the events of Milton's etiological epic in a world that is distinctly marked by the grief of history. We see this in poetry in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Drama of Exile" (1844), which declares itself a response to Milton overtly and takes as its subject "the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness; with a peculiar reference to Eve's allotted grief" (102). In fiction, the inhabitants of Thomas Hardy's Wessex are repeatedly compared to Adam and Eve to mark their fallen nature and the inevitability of their failings: Milton's ambivalent expulsion is recast as simply unhelpful at the end of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).⁸ The Victorian acknowledgement of Milton's duality appears frequently in this pattern of recollection and departure: Anna K. Nardo calls this "Miltonic reverberation"—Milton is "recalled and cancelled simultaneously"—in her examination of George Eliot's uses of Milton (25). My suggestion is that as the Victorians seem to be both particularly concerned with their fallen nature and regularly make use of Milton to articulate that awareness, the Cudmore *Milton* might be functioning in the same way, to draw our attention to the complex horror of two lovers bringing death into the world and being punished for it.

If approaching this volume as an object associated with criminality leads us to sin and punishment, considering it in relation to books about the body offers a different perspective. Perhaps the Cudmore *Milton* makes a connection between the skin of its binding and Milton's distinctive poetic engagements with skin. Milton's descriptions of permeable, blushing, angelic skin in *Paradise Lost* (and the density of human skin in comparison) become intensified when the book containing these lines is itself encased in human skin. The fact that the leather, according to Thompson, "looks something like pigskin" indicates a particular softness: the nineteenth-century doctor and bibliophile John Stockton-Hough charmingly reports that "On the basis of his extensive experience ... skin from the human back [is generally] coarse-grained[, but] skin from a woman's thigh could be almost indistinguishable from pigskin" (Thompson, "Tanned" 96–98). We might then attune ourselves more to the distinctive importance of softness and skin in *Paradise Lost*. Softness in Milton's epic is bound up with angelic androgyny and queerness, as "spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both; so soft / And uncompounded is their

essence pure" (1.423–25). "Soft" is a key word for binding Adam and Eve's bodies together, and for drawing the reader into their intimacy. Christopher Ricks revels in the ambiguity of the word in Milton's separation scene—"Thus saying, from her husband's hand her hand / Soft she withdrew" (9.385–86)—noting that "soft" can be both adverb and adjective: the soft hand softly withdraws, "with a delicate fusion of two points of view, since the adverb has the neutrality of an onlooker, while the adjective puts us in the place of Adam as he feels Eve's hand" (Ricks 90). We also see this when Adam wakes Eve from her "unquiet rest" (5.11) by whispering "Awake / My fairest" while "Her hand soft touching" (17–18). All elements of touch are soft here, as softness belongs to both "hand" and "touching." As Neil Forsyth notes in his more recent analysis of Miltonic hands, "The grammar involves the reader in the experience" (314).

These lines recall an instance of Miltonic syntax from a report of Cudmore's case in the *Exeter Flying Post*, which has been enclosed within the volume:

The justice of his sentence was fully acknowledged; but whilst he unreservedly talked of the participation of the acquitted Dunn in the nefarious act, and did not deny his own, he was much less explicit on the later point, rather appearing to wish it to be believed that her's alone had been the hand by which the poison had been administered.

("Advertisements")

I hear Milton in "her's alone had been the hand." The soft binding together of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*—reinforced through Milton's innovation in their holding hands at the expulsion from Eden—sits in stark contrast to Cudmore and Dunn's renunciation of each other. Perhaps we are also prompted to consider that as *Paradise Lost* is the story of man's first sin, it also tells the story of the first time man covers his skin in shame.

Alongside this reading of Milton's concern with skin and sin there is an alternative perspective, perhaps more directly suggested by the violence of the Cudmore binding. The violence of the murder Cudmore committed, and his subsequent punishment, presents the body not as the site of desire and affection, but of destruction. Returning to Lieb's suggestion that Milton's writing expresses a pervasive concern with bodily dismemberment, we are left asking whether the violence memorialized by this volume offers any promise of regeneration.

This approach may also lead us away from *Paradise Lost* and toward the other poems contained in the Cudmore *Milton*. James G. Nelson notes that as "Tennyson, Arnold, Rossetti, and Swinburne naturally turned to Milton's sonnets for a guide when they wished to denounce the forces of reaction and repression," it is Milton's sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" that particularly functioned as the "prototype of the political sonnet" for the Victorians (30). (This sonnet, which Lieb argues clearly expresses Milton's "sparagmatic mentality" [29], is naturally included in the Cudmore *Milton*.) If flaying is so closely tied to revolutionary violence for the Victorians, as Gilbert suggests, and Milton's sonnet expressing his "sparagmatic sensibility" (37) is one of his most celebrated works in this period, the creation of the Cudmore *Milton* might express this association between Milton and revolutionary violence. The human binding speaks to Milton's enduring concern with bodies torn apart.

In considering the memorial implications of this volume, we could turn back to the disinterment of Milton's coffin. It is worth keeping in mind Gray's metaphor for Miltonic influence in addressing this case of binding: how much more difficult is it to think about the removal of a person's skin than hair, even after death? Connor suggests that skin cannot be considered a body part because it cannot be removed whilst leaving something that is recognizably still a body—unlike a leg, or a kidney (29). Though as Connor argues that skin cannot be considered a body part because we cannot imagine its removal, Lewis suggests "hair, of course, is not exactly—or at least is not only—a body part" because it can too *easily* be removed: it is "too alienable, too superficial, too uncertainly alive" (799). A relevant illustration of the "alienable" nature of this body part was exhibited at the Great Exhibition of 1851: a scene featuring Milton in his youth, embroidered in human hair (Daw 109). Where hair, for

the Victorians, was a material to be used for sentimental crafts and gifted or exchanged, the removal of skin is, as Connor notes, both unimaginable and constantly imagined.

Where exchange of hair was an appropriate activity for anyone, class distinctions and power relations are usually implicit in the exchange or sale of organs. The use of human skin in book binding often involves a significant difference in power between binder and bindee. We should consider the gap between the status of George Cudmore, the rat-catcher, and William Clifford, the bookseller. In Henry Mayhew's extensive nineteenth-century work of early sociology, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), urban rat-catchers are associated with their quarry: Mayhew writes of finding "a perfect nest of rat-catchers" in an "angular and obscure" court in Somers Town (225). Many of those whose skin is made available for dissection and subsequent tanning and binding practices would have held a similar social position, and the texts that they envelop include valuable works on anatomy, on law, and poetry.

Most of the bodies that were used for dissection were those of marginalized people (except for those rumored to be tanned during the French Revolution). Carolyn Marvin writes that toward the end of the nineteenth century the tanned skin of marginalized people was "attached to rare or high culture texts" (134) through which the "low body [was] reconstituted as high binding" (141). Marvin includes criminals in a list of marginalized groups associated with "orality," a lack of "control of bodily impulses," and "by extension, less literate competence"—along with "women, children, people of color" and "primitives" (131). Marvin argues that "all bodies are disciplined with respect to literacy. Some are disciplined by using it, and some are disciplined to keep away from it" (130). The Exeter bookseller Clifford fits the former category, George Cudmore the latter.

Records show that William Clifford of Exeter (c. 1821–78) primarily sold, published, and printed materials on religious subjects and works of local interest.⁹ In 1869, Clifford sold his business to Henry Eland, who placed an advertisement for his "Bible and Prayer Warehouse" in the *Exeter Flying Post*, announcing himself "Successor to Wm. Clifford" in the sales of "presentation bibles, prayer books, and church services, Eucharisticas, Christian years, hymns ancient and modern, &c." ("Advertisements"). We have a little more insight into Clifford's life due to the notability of his son, the mathematician William Kingdon Clifford (1845–79), husband of the writer Lucy Clifford (née Lane, 1846–1929), who moved in literary circles with the likes of Henry James and George Eliot. It is in the name "Kingdon" that a clue to the provenance of Cudmore's skin is revealed. The inscription in the Cudmore *Milton* states that the coroner who committed Cudmore and Dunn was named Francis Kingdon (c. 1781–1867) was the father of Frances or Fanny Kingdon (c. 1819–54), wife to William Clifford and mother to William Kingdon Clifford. It is then possible that, morbid as it may seem, the tanned skin of George Cudmore had become something of a Kingdon family heirloom.

This suggestion is even more confounding when we consider the context of the Clifford family. Monty Chisholm writes in a biography of Lucy and William Junior that the latter's "upbringing seems to have been conventional and strongly religious" (15), his "family background" providing him with "early High Church religious convictions and belief in Catholic theology" (18) that he later abandoned, becoming a "radical critic and fierce enemy of all organised religions" (27). Chisholm notes that Clifford Senior "had been a much-loved and respected citizen and had served the city well as Alderman and Justice of the Peace" (16). The evidence builds a picture of Clifford as a respected and religious man, with significant status in the community. What, then, is he doing with Cudmore's tanned skin?

Two further names crop up in association with the volume: in the early twentieth century, the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* noted the volume was "believed to have been bound" for Clifford by "an Exeter bookbinder named Lee" ("Notes"), and a bookplate in the inside cover of the volume reveals that before it was acquired by the Albert Memorial Library in Exeter in the 1880s, it belonged to a man named Ralph Sanders.¹⁰ It seems likely Sanders is the Exeter banker Ralph Sanders (c. 1808–88), who appears to have had a further connection with Clifford, also serving as a Justice of the Peace for Exeter. The National Probate's "Index of Wills and Administrations" shows that Ralph Sanders Esq. left a personal estate of £20,359 17s. 3d. on his death in 1888—according to the Bank of England, the equivalent of approximately £2.8 million in 2021.

There are two points to make based on this fairly scant biographical information. The first is that to some extent it places the creation of the Cudmore *Milton* at the meeting point of religious texts and the criminal justice system. The second, and perhaps more important, is that both the buyer and seller of this book bound in human skin were respected members of the Exeter community who had some local power and wealth. They fit the bill of the “gentleman collectors” Rosenbloom discusses in her account of “anthropodermic bibliopeggy” (49–65); they represented power and culture, where Cudmore represents a lack of it.

As the Phillis Wheatley books were perhaps bound to confirm their literary and cultural value by adding to their monetary value, Milton's poems may have been chosen simply as a representative of high culture. As Marvin writes, “books bound in human skin were devices to enhance the social position of their owners, exhibiting them as connoisseurs” (141); here is something, perhaps, that the Cudmore *Milton* and the relics taken from Milton's coffin have in common. Both Milton's disinterment and the use of Cudmore's body to bind Milton's poetry seem to have been motivated, at least in part, by money. Both narratives add value to otherwise plain objects: someone else's teeth are sold as belonging to Milton; an ordinary copy of Milton's poems is distinguished by its macabre binding.

In *How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, Leah Price discusses the division in Victorian literary culture between book collectors and readers, arguing that Victorian writers often showed disdain for those who engaged with books as objects to be displayed rather than as texts to be read. Although this is applicable not only to the nineteenth century, Price suggests that the Victorians particularly “identified themselves as text-lovers in proportion as they distinguished themselves from book-lovers” (4–5). The Cudmore *Milton* may be more book than text; examining links between Milton's poetry and its binding, as I have done above, may require us to ignore this distinction between reading and handling books. More recently, Andrew Stauffer's *Book Traces* examines the centrality of marking books and recording reading on the page in Victorian culture. Stauffer's study, which asks “in what sense ... the individual book [can]—as an instance of a specific, case-bound case history—speak within a larger framework of cultural analysis” (3) aligns with my approach. At the same time, there is a stark contrast between the books he analyzes—lovingly transformed by their readers through annotations and insertions—and the Cudmore *Milton*, marked only in ways that communicate ownership, rather than engagement. Yet if we accept an interpretation of the Cudmore *Milton* as a mere collector's prize, it still underscores both the cultural status of Milton's poetry and the potential for his words to be eclipsed by other narratives through material interventions.

The Cudmore *Milton* is an object that gives form to a complex power dynamic between the corporeal poor and the spiritual literate. In the same period when resurrection men were plundering graves to deliver anonymous bodies to doctors, and “Burking” led to vulnerable poor people murdered to provide bodies for dissection, Milton's coffin was opened and his remains were, if initially disrespected, subsequently revered as relics. The response reinforced his status through a proliferation of discourse concerning the value of his body, his life, and his writing. Though I note above the financial motivations for unearthing Milton's body, Neve records that Milton's coffin was dug up in order to confirm the exact location of his remains for the building of a monument (7). Milton's body parts are relics; Cudmore's are murderabilia. The Cudmore *Milton* has been treated as a curiosity rather than achieving the status of “relic of abjection,” a phrase Lorna Clymer uses to describe Cromwell's detached head (91). The act of using Cudmore's skin to bind Milton may then seem to reinforce the lowly status of the ratcatcher, his skin used as mere covering for the respected literary work as an extension of his punishment. However, this edition of Milton is primarily interesting *because of* Cudmore's story. The book is otherwise an unremarkable edition of Milton's poems; Cudmore's marginal position in relation to Milton is reversed through our interest. The book is catalogued under the name of Milton, but in attempting to untangle its mysteries “Cudmore” overshadows “Milton” as well as the various other names associated with the object (Clifford, Tegg, Lee, Sanders, Turner, Romney). One example of binding books in human skin puns on this conflict of names, which Thompson mentions as “the first authenticated binding in a criminal's skin”: the tanned skin of John Johnson, hung in Norwich in 1818, was supposedly used to bind a copy of Samuel Johnson's dictionary (“Religatum” 137). The dictionary remains Johnson's. This 1852 edition of Milton's poems is bound in George

Cudmore's history along with his flesh. This is why I have referred to the book throughout as the "Cudmore *Milton*," rather than identifying it by bookseller, publisher, or place.

Conclusion

Having asserted the primacy of Cudmore's story, I turn back to Milton to address what this strange volume might tell us about his Victorian reception. Objects such as the Cudmore *Milton* reveal a complex vision of Milton's Victorian legacy: returning to Gray and Newlyn's readings of the nineteenth-century Milton as inherently doubled, the Cudmore *Milton* strengthens our sense of Milton both as a figure of inescapably high cultural value for the Victorians, and one open to disruption and re-interpretation. Critics dealing with Milton's nineteenth-century influence—including, most famously, Harold Bloom, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar—have read Milton as being such a strong literary, patriarchal authority that he creates an immobilizing anxiety passed on as part of literary-poetic heritage, which must (in one way or another) be overcome. I have suggested the engagement with Milton presented by this strange mid-century edition of his poetry demonstrates that Milton's authority can be overwritten through material interventions.

The sense that we might understand Milton's place in Victorian culture particularly by attending to material interventions is strengthened through examination of other examples from the same mid-century period. For example, in 1846, a decade prior to the publication of Tegg's edition, Jane Giraud produced *The Flowers of Milton*, the first edition of Milton to be illustrated by a woman; Wendy Furman-Adams and Virginia James Tufte argue that Giraud's illustrations mark the beginning of an ecofeminist reading of Milton (225). Similarly, extra-illustrated editions of Milton's poetry and the Bible offer complications to Miltonic authority. The Kitto Bible is a mid-nineteenth-century extra-illustrated Bible containing more than 30,000 illustrative prints, housed at the Huntington Library in California. In the Kitto Bible, particularly in those volumes focusing on Genesis, illustrations of the Bible and those of *Paradise Lost* are mingled so that the distinction between them becomes unclear. In the sixty volumes of the Kitto Bible, the text from the original two volumes has disappeared amid the profusion of visual material; it is like the garden of Eden run wild without Adam and Eve to prune and control the plant-life. Furman-Adams and Tufte note that "*Paradise Lost* is, after the Bible, the most widely illustrated book in European history" (223); the line between the two is blurred in this case. The scale of the Kitto Bible has also collapsed any sense of authorship or ownership, which stands in conflict with the idea at the center of extra-illustration as an activity that functions to facilitate ownership of images through collection and collation. Milton's literary afterlife in the nineteenth century cannot be easily separated from these varied visual and material responses.

In her study of Victorian relic culture, Lutz suggests that the "need to attach chronicles and records to these objects shows us that these scraps of bone and hair are mere waste without a narrative accretion" (28); it has been my aim here to build some narrative around the Cudmore *Milton* to attempt to make some sense of it. Ultimately, though, the Cudmore *Milton* poses questions that are unanswerable; it is an inherently ambiguous object. Gilbert may be right in claiming that these "are objects that speak to us, but we cannot understand" (215). I would suggest that further attention to Milton's material legacy, in the century after his body was dug up and its parts redistributed, might reveal versions of the Victorian Milton as numerous as his teeth.

NOTES

¹ The contents of Tegg's edition appear in the following order: "Life of the Author," *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, "Arcades," *Comus*, "Sonnets," "Odes," "Miscellanies," "Translations," and "Com-mendatory Verses on Milton" toward the first half. Following the inscription noting Cudmore's crime and punishment, the frontispiece features a portrait of Milton; "Life of the Author" then contains two illustrations of Milton, including an engraving after George Romney's *Milton and his Daughters* (1793). *Paradise Lost* follows the "Life" and is the most heavily

illustrated, with four illustrations for Books 4, 5, 6 and 9, after Westall and Turner. Following *Paradise Lost*, four works feature one illustration each: *Paradise Regained*, *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, and *Comus*. Both the non-chronological order of the contents and the quantity of illustrations weight attention on the first two sections of the volume: the “Life of the Author” and *Paradise Lost*. The placement of *Paradise Lost* first of Milton's poems, after the “Life of the Author,” justifies my focus on Milton's most famous work—though as the Victorian poet A. C. Swinburne notes, “to appraise Milton’ is not merely ‘to appraise *Paradise Lost*’ (717; qtd. in Gray, “Victorian Miltons” 185).

- ² There was some debate over the identity of the body, as the coffin was unmarked, but it is now generally accepted to be that of Milton. Carol Barton presents a thorough investigation in support of this position in “Ill fare the hands” and in their biography Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns state without hesitation that “Milton's own mortal remains . . . were dug up and parts were sold as mementos by an enterprising sexton in 1790” (382).
- ³ For a detailed discussion of the literary treatment of poets' burial places later in the nineteenth century, see Matthews.
- ⁴ It also matters to Leigh Hunt, who gave Keats the lock of Milton's hair. Hunt wrote three sonnets on the lock himself, musing that Milton may have touched this very hair when composing *Paradise Lost*: “Perhaps he press'd it once, or underneath / Ran his fine fingers, when he leant, blank-eyed, / And saw, in fancy, Adam and his bride / With their heaped locks, or his own Delphic wreath” (ll. 1–8).
- ⁵ The Anthropodermic Book Project has identified approximately 50 books that claim to be bound in human skin. These figures can be found at <https://anthropodermicbooks.org/> (last updated May 2019); a list of confirmed human skin books, as of March 2020, can be found in Rosenbloom (229–30).
- ⁶ Tony Rouse, the only remaining member of the former Westcountry Studies Library staff, testifies via email that “To the best of my knowledge this book has never been tested to prove that it is human skin”; Megan Rosenbloom likewise confirmed that it has not been tested as part of the Anthropodermic Book Project.
- ⁷ References to Milton's poetry are given from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*.
- ⁸ The echoes of Milton in the ending of Hardy's penultimate novel have not gone unnoticed: for example, Penny Boumelha suggests Hardy's ending “offers a curiously inverted image of Milton's fallen world” (126), while Joan Grundy argues that the narrative of *Tess* “gains in power . . . from the shadowing in it of the primal, universal desolation of Milton's poem” (331).
- ⁹ Tracts printed or published by Clifford in the University of Exeter collection include J. H. Earle, *Popery, or the Papal System: A Sermon Preached in the Church at Ide, on the Fifth of November 1850* (Exeter: W. Clifford, 1850), and *Auricular Confession, Has It a Place in the System of the Church of England? An Enquiry Suggested by Recent Events* (Exeter: W. Clifford, 1852?) and John Mason Neale, *The Bible, and the Bible Only, the Religion of Protestants: Churchman's Answer to a Lecture on the Above Subject* (Exeter; London: W. Clifford; Richard Barrett and Sons, 1852). A longer list can be found on Ian Maxted's *Exeter Working Papers in Book History*. <https://bookhistory.blogspot.com/2015/06/devon-imprints-exeter-clifford.html>.
- ¹⁰ It seems likely that the bookbinder referred to was Samuel Lee, listed in Maxted's *The Devon Book Trades: A Biographical Dictionary* as “LEE, Samuel. Bookbinder's apprentice. Cornish's Court, North Street 1851. Born: Exeter 1832/33, son of Thomas, picture frame maker.”

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