

“Scholar Adventures”: Bibliographic Detective Work as an Academic Librarian

[SLIDE] The title of my talk, “Scholar Adventures,” refers to a 1950 book by the late great scholar of Victorian literature, Richard Altick, and his most popular, accessible, and re-printed text, *The Scholar Adventurers*. Here’s my copy—it’s a reprint from a print-on-demand service. I was given my copy as a graduation gift from library school by my mentor, Tommy Nixon, now-retired English subject librarian at the University of North Carolina. I moved to Detroit for my new job as English subject librarian at Oakland University in 2015. One evening at home in the first few weeks of the new job, I reached for Tommy’s gift on my bookshelf to distract myself.

I recall starting in on Altick’s book, chuckling at its antiquated prose, still not sure why Tommy had selected this, of all books, to order specially for me. [SLIDE] The chapter that woke me from my paternalist musings, however, is entitled “The Case of the Curious Bibliographers.” Altick opens this chapter thusly [SLIDE]:

“Technical bibliography, as distinct from bibliography in its more familiar sense of the simple listing of books by or about a certain author, is a field of literary study which seldom touches the interest of the general reader... Its concern is with the physical minutiae of books and their history in the printing house, and its most practical usefulness is found not in literary history but in the rare-book trade” (37).

Altick continues his explanation of “technical bibliography” [SLIDE]:

“The protagonist in the drama of technical bibliography as a rule is nothing more lively than a certain kind of type face, a peculiarity of the title page, or a printer’s error on page 19 which distinguishes the rare first issue from the entirely common second. Yet it was in this superficially unlikely environment that the most sensational literary scandal of our time was unfolded” (37).

Such is Altick’s set-up to tell the story of [SLIDE] T. J. Wise (1859-1937), a highly respected bibliophile and book collector, who, thanks to the meticulous researches of Graham Pollard and John Carter, was exposed as having manufactured, authenticated, and sold fraudulent nineteenth century pamphlets. [SLIDE] In their 1934 book, *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets*, Pollard and Carter detail the appearance of batches of rare, early printings of famous Victorian-era texts that would appear on the market all at the same time. Curiously, these texts from Browning, Tennyson, Kipling and others were in mint condition, although many decades old at this point, and without inscriptions from their authors. Further investigations—published after Altick’s *The Scholar Adventurers*—has revealed that T. J. Wise ripped pages from about 200 rare books and pamphlets in the British Museum’s library to complete imperfect copies in his own collection and in copies now at the University of Texas.

The further I read into this chapter, the more Altick’s introductory strawman—the dull esoterica of printed books—revealed instead the exciting investigative work required of Graham Pollard and John Carter to make this remarkable discovery—their attention to detail, their consulting sales records, literary scholarship, and comparing multiple copies of the same pamphlets from the 1800s. Through interlibrary loan, I requested and received a copy of Carter and Pollard’s 1934 *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets* [SLIDE] (here’s my copy of Altick that I

marked up in 2015 to indicate my interest). Altick's subsequent chapters, too, ignited what has since become a deep interest in bibliography and book history, or accounting for the human labor of creating, printing, publishing, selling, circulating, and the use of books.

[SLIDE] When I arrived at my first job, I was the English librarian, responsible for helping undergraduate and graduate students and their faculty with their research. Then as now, I teach instruction sessions for classes writing research papers, and I purchase books to support faculty and student research. But because of Altick, and a book history course I'd taken in graduate school, I was attracted to my library's rare books collection—several thousand books that had been deemed rare or valuable by librarians or archivists over OU's 60-year history. But our library had never had a rare books librarian. From the archivist, who presided over the rare books, I gained access to the temperature-controlled, secure vault in which the books were stored, and started to learn more about the collections. At the start of my first job as an academic librarian, I was primed and looking for, if not Wiseian forgeries, the clues that books tell us within their material traces about how they were created. One collection in particular caught my attention—[SLIDE] the Marguerite Hicks Collection of Women's Writings.

In the time remaining, I'll give a brief introduction to the Marguerite Hicks Collection of Women's Writings held here at Oakland University. Then, I want to dive into one bibliographic mystery of a woman writer from that collection, Mary Morgan. The story I want to share today is based on my original research in the past few years, which has taken me to libraries across the United States and England for the sake of understanding the import of this collection as a whole, bit by bit.

The Marguerite Hicks Collection of Women's Writings features over 900 books by and about women spanning the 17th to 19th Centuries, including several unique copies, dozens of works existing in fewer than 10 copies worldwide, and books in rare condition: [SLIDE] in original paper wrappers and contemporary bindings. [SLIDE] (and with women's bookplates, author's corrections, etc) The collection boasts works by Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Sarah Churchill the Duchess of Marlborough, Susannah Centlivre, Anne Finch, Mary Wollstonecraft, and many more. It is the first collection of British women's writing in America and precedes the feminist recovery movement of the 1970s when scholarly interest turned to learning about or recovering women writers.

[SLIDE] Marguerite Hicks built the ambitious collection of women's writing predominantly in the late 1930s, purchasing the books from antiquarian dealers largely based in the United Kingdom. Hicks pursued her Master's degree at Wayne State in 1935 at the age of 44, after raising her two children. While "failing eyesight" prevented her from continuing on to her PhD, she became a book-collector. [SLIDE] Following the death of her husband, Hicks moved in with Professor of Folklore, Thelma James, and lived together in metro Detroit for forty years. In 1971 the women sold both of their book collections—Hicks's, of women writers, and James's of folklore, to Oakland University. I am currently working with professor of English at OU, Dr. Megan Peiser, on what we call "The Marguerite Hicks Project" to better understand how these remarkable women sought out and collected this incredible collection. We've been on grant-funded research to the British Library, and we've also scoured the archives of the Detroit Public Library and the Reuther Library.

[SLIDE] An informal inventory of "by a lady" texts of the Hicks Collection revealed the particular bibliographic mystery I'm going to share with you. Little can be more exciting to a literary

historian than to recover a text lost for centuries—a manuscript, hiding within the binding of collected periodicals, or an unpublished diary sedimented in the county records office. But even among the fully catalogued items of a university library hide items whose literary, historical, and cultural value is obfuscated by the insufficiency of access points for addressing new research questions. Items authored anonymously or “by a lady” are particularly subject to oversight in knowledge structures dependent on known-author identification. In particular, I stumbled upon this: [SLIDE] the fourteen-page chapbook *Mary the Osier-Peeler, A Simple but True Story* was printed by John White in Wisbech in 1798 and authored anonymously, per the title page, “for the benefit of the distressed family described in it.” The only known copy of this poem in the world is held by Kresge Library. While the poem is mentioned in 18th century book review periodicals, there was, until recently, no research on this poem.

The poem itself is a bit depressing: [SLIDE] The ballad follows the titular Mary, who supplements her meager earnings by joining the women of her community in the seasonal labor of peeling the bark of the osiers, or willows, grown along the riverbanks for the manufacture of hats, baskets, chairs, and more (and here’s a late 19th century photograph of the same practice of osier-peeling, uh, 100 years later). In the celebrations following the completion of the work, Mary meets and falls in love with William, and the two marry. The balance of the poem catalogues the trajectory of their ever entrenching poverty and ever increasing family: Mary sustains postpartum blindness, and one of her children, unattended, is “night burnt to the bone” (171); William suffers from fevered illness and cannot afford rent, and they are evicted from their cottage to a “lodging most wretched” (205); the children contract measles and smallpox, leaving some of the osier children “freed from their mansions of clay” (214). At twelve years of age, the eldest son, also named William, is sent out to work to help support his family, but he suffers injury and is sent to a voluntary hospital. [SLIDE] The poem ends with a lament upon the irrevocably injured young William’s return to his family: “Lame and useless I fear I must be— / But alas! the chief cause of my grief / Is, in want my dear parents I see, / Unable to give them relief!” (317-20): this petition is poised as the final direct quotation from the lips of the family’s representative supplicant.

While this poem is authored anonymously, the intriguing thing about it is the number of biographic, bibliographic, and geographic clues it bears. First, while anonymous, the textblock of this single known copy of *Mary, the Osier-Peeler* bears the printed initials “M. M.” on the final page above the woodcut ornament with which Wisbech printer John White commonly closed his chapbooks. [SLIDE] Secondly, that this poem is printed in “Wisbech” is curious. By the 18th century, legally, printing presses could theoretically be operated anywhere in England, but most books continued to be published and printed in London and other metropolitan and intellectual hubs such as Oxford. [SLIDE] “Wisbech,” at the time of the publication of this poem, had a population of about 5,000 and is located in Cambridgeshire, about 40 miles away from the university town of Cambridge. Thirdly, the hospital to which the injured lad is sent is, specifically, Addenbrooke’s, the voluntary hospital founded in 1741 in Cambridge. Finally, that this poem is intended “for the benefit of the distressed family described in it,” suggests that this work is more than one woman’s poetic fantasy, but that the situation described is rooted in truth. [SLIDE]

With these facts of this mysterious poem in hand, I applied for and received grant funding to go to Cambridgeshire in the summer of 2018 to try and find out more. Those of you who have

undertaken archival research know the messy nature of the endeavor. You must go prepared for all weather and conditions. Some archives don't allow computers, or pictures, and you'll need to copy everything by hand. Some archives aren't protected against the elements, and can be alternately freezing or sweltering. [SLIDE] Some are poorly lit, poorly ventilated. Some have strange opening hours and some don't respond to your requests to come, even though, in my case, I had written emails and phoned in advance for four months. My itinerary included public libraries, college archives, and local museums across three cities: Cambridge, Wisbech, and Ely.

I first researched the output of printers based in Wisbech that were active during this era. This narrowed the pool of possible authors: of the thirty-five known items printed in Wisbech, only one known author bears these initials: a Mary Morgan. [SLIDE] In 1798, the same year the osier poem appeared, John White also printed a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Caesar Morgan, Mary Morgan's husband. [SLIDE] In 1799, John White printed a collection of ancient poems supposedly in the possession of "Mrs. Morgan," called, *The Knyghte of the Golden Locks*. Additionally, John White also served as the librarian to the [SLIDE] Wisbech Literary Society, a gentleman's subscription library to which area clergy, merchants, and attorneys belonged, and of which Dr. Morgan, too, was a member. The familiarity of the Morgans with White and the fact that he printed other works that the Morgans had authored make plausible that the M. M. initials in the anonymous osier poem are those of Mary.

The berth of these publications harmonize with the geographic specificity of the Morgans' biographies. Rev. Morgan served as vicar of the parishes of Wisbech St. Peter and Wisbech St. Mary from 1792 until early 1802. Mary Morgan, the wife of a clergyman, would have been situated near the parish-supported poor and needy families like the osier family. [SLIDE] These war years were particularly difficult for Cambridgeshire: apart from serially poor harvests, unemployment, inflation, food riots, and fear of unrest among laborers sympathetic to the French cause, the further draining of the Fens for agricultural purposes compounded the impoverishment of the unlanded poor, who had for centuries made their living per the right of common and waste for gathering firewood, raising poultry, and hunting game, and who had assumed the custom of gleaning grain after harvest. The fencing-off of land into neat parcels of arable farm ground spatially marginalized the poor, which is where Morgan's poem meets them: on the banks of waterways, cultivating and tending to osiers, a high-moisture crop grown on the physical and social fringe of arable land and the connotation of social exclusion it was assuming.

[SLIDE] More compelling evidence corroborating "M. M." as Morgan's authorship arrives in the end of the text of the poem, wherein the twelve year-old son, farmed out to contribute to the family's income, "enfeebl'd and fault-ring, at length / He droop'd, and could carry no more" (ll. 287-88). [SLIDE] Injured, the child is taken to Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, one of the first voluntary hospitals: "To ADDENBROOKE's dome he was borne, Where humanity waits at the gate, To receive the diseas'd and forlorn, And deep sighing bewails their hard fate." (ll. 289-92) Patients of Addenbrooke's were supported through the annual subscription fees of parish churches and landed gentry, averaging one guinea and two guineas per year (£1, 1s, and 2£, 2s). [SLIDE] While the parishes of Wisbech St. Peter and St. Mary were not subscribers for the years surrounding the publication of the osier poem, the archives of Addenbrooke's Hospital indicate that a "Mrs. Morgan, of Wisbech" donated a lump sum benefaction of £20 in 1797. Of the 212 entities contributing to the income of

Addenbrooke's Hospital for the year 1797, 190 were male individuals, 11 were cooperative or institutional subscribers (including parishes and groups of individuals), and only 11 were female individuals. The narrative of gendered and institutional charity is here disrupted by the unusual appearance of a woman, without title or substantial fortune, making a donation several times the amount of landed gentry. This combination of geographic specificity of its provincial printing and the clerical assignment of her husband, the surviving printed output of John White, and the archival records Addenbrooke's Hospital uphold Mary Morgan as the poet.<sup>1</sup>

This discovery has a number of implications. First, it changes what we know about Mary Morgan. Apart from her 1799 *The Knyghte of the Golden Locks*, Morgan also published in 1795 a travel narrative, called *A Tour to Milford Haven*, detailing her experiences traveling with her husband to Wales—the book was widely read and well-reviewed during its time. This image on the screen is a letter, copied in Morgan's hand, that she received from Elizabeth Montagu, famed Queen of the Bluestockings, a group of intellectual men and women who gathered to discuss literature and politics. Anyone who researches Mary Morgan will now stumble upon my research on the osier poem, directing researchers back to the Marguerite Hicks Collection of Women Writers. Additionally, this research helps, little by little, correct the historical record. On the screen is an image from the Women's Print History Project, which is an online database that seeks to attribute and account for women's labor in the print trade: women writers, translators, printers, and publishers from the 1600s through the early 1800s. [SLIDE] Here is the corrected record for *Mary, the Osier Peeler*, which correctly attributes Morgan as author, directs researchers to an article summarizing my findings, and also points researchers to the Hicks Collection at Oakland University.

This is just one example of the research relating to this fascinating collection of women's writings. Since 2015, I've also been named Rare Books Librarian, and have continued my professional development to learn how to better care for our rare books. In learning more about our rare books, I stumbled upon a particularly momentous mystery. [SLIDE] In 1983, the archivist at Kresge Library discovered a book heist that had robbed us of about 100 of our most valuable books. Thirty-five years later, sifting through the filing cabinets in the university archives, I felt like Graham Pollard and John Carter, trying to solve the mystery of T.J. Wise's forgeries. I found that Oakland still had some essential pieces about the stolen books: the shelflist cards of heisted books, internal reports and lists of the missing items, newspaper clippings and police reports, and, importantly, the inventory of books that Marguerite Hicks sold to Oakland in 1971, typed up by Marguerite herself. These pieces, put together, suggested that the previous iteration of the Hicks Collection had very different strengths; by the 1940s, Marguerite Hicks had put together one of the most impressive collections of materials relating to the eighteenth-century publisher/novelist/ and playwright, Eliza Haywood. In particular, [SLIDE] Hicks had collected this 1742 manuscript in Haywood's own handwriting, acknowledging her translation work for the novel *Le Sopha*, or *The Sofa: A Moral Tale*, into English. While the title page of the 1742 translated novel does not acknowledge the translator, this receipt definitively attests to Haywood's creative labor. On the list of heisted items, this holograph manuscript stood out as unique, and likely

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<sup>1</sup> If you're interested in learning more about osiers, or want to read the osier poem, you can read the scholarly edition with introduction and notes here: <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/maryosier>.

the easiest to trace. In the thirty-five years between the heist and this present moment of discovery, technology had improved in our favor—namely, the advent of the World Wide Web. A few simple searches identified that [SLIDE] an eerily similar item was now in the Clark Library's holdings at UCLA. It is, in fact, Hicks's heisted Haywood manuscript.

Since this discovery, I've been working with the librarians at UCLA to retrace the steps of the manuscript. Currently, my library is happy to let UCLA take care of the manuscript and let it reside in the Clark, which is a special collections library devoted entirely to materials from the 17th and 18th centuries. To credit the collecting prowess of Hicks, who purchased this item LONG before women's literary history was considered interesting, the Clark has added Hicks's name to its catalog record, and a link to a digital surrogate of the manuscript that we have at our institution. [SLIDE] Further, we organized a conference held earlier this year, free to all in the profession, to think through questions of loss in libraries, archives, and museums.

While much of my work as a librarian involves selecting books for our circulating collections, and helping my department with its research needs, there's still a satisfying amount of discovery as the rare books librarian. While I started as an armchair detective, Richard Altick in hand, I now get to suss out secrets that books can tell us—and try to solve mysteries that take me on adventures. [SLIDE] Here I am, standing with my research collaborator, in front of the manuscript at the Clark, and here I am with two of their librarians. In short sleeves. In October. Book history and bibliography—the fields interested in uncovering the human labor of printing, publishing, use, and circulation of books—have turned me into a scholar adventurer, and I hope, students of ONU's honors program, that your research will do the same for you.