



Gill Partington and Adam Smyth, eds. *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary*

Gill Partington and Adam Smyth, eds. *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary*. *New Directions in Book History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xi, 216p., ill. ISBN 9781137367655. £58 / US \$95 (hardback).

This lively book helps inaugurate Palgrave's series *New Directions in Book History*, the *raison d'être* of which is to publish "monographs that employ advanced methods and open up new frontiers in research" (i). Rather than showcase an innovative methodology or rethink a hackneyed subject area, Gill Partington and Adam Smyth broach a neglected topic, suggesting that squeamishness about book destruction has hindered the study of a range of artistic, literary and cultural practices. Contemporary art bulks large: there are interviews with Ross Birrell, Nicola Dale and a hilariously uncooperative Tom Phillips, a clever piece by Partington on John Latham, and a vivid survey of other artist book destroyers by Kate Flint. Adam Smyth entertainingly discusses the "quasi-editorial" (43) blaze which destroyed Ben Jonson's library, and Heather Tilley and the late and much lamented Stephen Colclough write subtly on Victorian fiction: the former on *Our Mutual Friend*, the latter on *Vanity Fair* and *Wuthering Heights*. Two essays are outliers. In the lead piece, the only chapter to focus on a historical episode of book destruction motivated by censorship, Heike Bauer re-examines the survival of some items from the Nazis' destruction of the archive of Berlin's Institute of Sexual Science. Anthony Bale's valuable discussion of ownership inscriptions in medieval manuscripts seems tangential to the volume's theme. He does, however, provide in the same piece a handy overview of book destruction across the Middle Ages as a whole. Smyth does much the same for the Renaissance in his Jonson essay and Colclough includes in his piece a fascinating account of the book destruction that was a necessary part of the activity of mid-Victorian circulating libraries.

Some essays explicitly attempt to demystify book destruction, to reclaim it from what the editors estimate is its current taboo status. Smyth suggests that: "Today, we're inclined to see the loss of old books as unfortunate, or even tragic, but early modern bibliophiles were quite happy for most texts to go the way of the pie dish, or the privy, or the vegetable market." (48) Were people in the past really more sanguine about book destruction, less worriedly possessive about books' materiality? They can hardly have been more sanguine than the twenty-first-century manager of the book shredding plant we meet in the opening pages of the introduction, who has no interest in the content of the books he destroys: "Can't read them," he says, "They send me to sleep." (1)



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As the editors say, the moment when a book is destroyed is one in which “[its] complex nature ... becomes especially visible, and when the fraught relationship between its insides and outside – its materiality and its semiotic content – is most urgently felt” (9). Book destruction is a topic, therefore, resonant with much current work in book history on the relationship (or absence of relationship) between materiality and meaning. The essays in this book open up a rich seam. Future work—there are many types of book destruction not mentioned in this book—will perhaps want to distinguish more sharply than Partington and Smyth’s authors do between such things such as the destruction of unique texts (Ben Jonson’s holographs, for example) and the destruction of individual copies of texts that continue to exist elsewhere (such as the printed books destroyed by Latham, Birrell, Dale and Phillips). But there is much to admire and enjoy in this collection, the quirkiness and scholarliness of which bode well for future volumes in the series.

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