

## BINDING MARVELL: FORM AND CONTENT IN BOOK ARTS

BY HEATHER BAIN

The emerging field of Book Arts is currently quite separate from the scholarship of English literature, although the two disciplines contain many similarities. Successful book artists must conduct thoughtful analysis of texts, drawing upon images and themes to create designs that clarify or expand upon the work. This article explains the thought and processes that led to the creation of one of my own fine bindings, a parchment over boards binding of *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* tooled with parallel and oblique lines.

I first became interested in book arts while a student at Carleton College. I took several classes on creating Artist's Books and one curatorial seminar, where we put on an exhibition of Artist's Books from the college's library. I was especially drawn to the ways in which Artist's Books, though their printing, their materials, and, most of all, their bindings, could take the unity of form and content that we studied in English class and turn it into a physical object: prosody in three dimensions.

Such considerations were foremost in my mind when I began my education in bookbinding at the North Bennet Street School. The school, located in the North End of Boston, has the only full-time bench bookbinding program in the country, and one of only a few in the world. It emphasizes its status as a craft and trade school, but in the second year, once we had learned a number of modern and historical binding structures, we began to work mostly on fine and design bindings. Although these bindings require a high level of craft skill to be effective, they also function as works of art.

A fine binding is a book bound in leather to a high technical standard. A design binding is a type of fine binding which also expresses a design inspired by the book's contents. A number of techniques may be used, including leather inlays and onlays, traditional gold tooling, surface gilding, edges decorated with gold, graphite, or acrylic pigment, and inset panels of wood or eggshells. Ideally, all aspects of the binding, from the endbands and edge decoration to the flyleaves to the titling, will work together harmoniously to add meaning and visual interest to the design.

Metaphysical poetry lends itself well to binding designs because the poems have such striking visual images. While it is of course possible to create beautiful and meaningful bindings for books of a more abstract nature, I enjoy working with more concrete images. The nature of the imagery allows for simple but powerful designs that are easily understandable by anyone familiar with the work in question. When searching for texts to bind, I remembered reading Andrew Marvell poems at college, and one image in particular stuck in my mind.

I read a number of the frequently-anthologized Marvell poems in my introductory English Literature classes at Carleton College—*To His Coy Mistress*, of course, which has the distinction of being the only carpe diem poem that doesn't make me want to do violence to its creator, as well as *Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body* and *The Definition of Love*. In these poems Marvell's metrical structures and vivid metaphors struck me deeply, but what remained most firmly in my mind was the metaphor of parallel and oblique lines in *The Definition of Love*. The stanza in question in the Peter Pauper Press edition (which notes that it "follows the text of *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, edited by Professor H. M. Margoliouth and published by the Oxford University Press") appears thus:

As Lines so Loves *oblique* may well

Themselves in every Angle greet:  
But ours so truly *Paralel*,  
Though infinite can never meet.  
(ll. 25-8)

Fine bindings are usually done on commission, on text blocks expensive enough to merit the costly treatment, but as a student my options were more limited. I found a copy of Marvell's poems by chance in a second-hand bookshop. When choosing books to rebind, the text is not the only consideration, and text blocks are usually of less scholarly and more aesthetic value. The Peter Pauper Press editions are invaluable to novice bookbinders; they are inexpensive, but handsomely printed on good quality paper; they are issued in paper covers so there is not much work required to dis-bind them; and, most importantly, they are sewn in signatures, allowing them to be easily re-bound.

Having chosen the inspiration for my design, I had to decide which technique to use to re-bind the book. We had learned a number of structures that could be classified as fine bindings: millimeter bindings, with very thin strips of leather at the head a tail; full-leather French style fine bindings, and parchment over boards. I chose to do a parchment over boards binding both because I loved the form and wanted to experiment with it further, and because it seemed most suited to the design I had in mind: the grain of leather would take too much visual interest away from the tooled lines, whereas the crisp, marbled-smooth surface of the parchment would be a perfect substrate.

When I acquired the text block, we had recently taken an in-class workshop on parchment over boards bindings. Parchment is made by scraping, de-hairing and washing animal skins in the same preliminary steps as leather-making, but then instead of tanning the hides they are stretched taut on a frame and allowed to dry. The skin shrinks as it dries, but because it is under tension, it cannot shrink laterally. Instead, it becomes much thinner and the molecules in the skin are re-arranged, creating an incredibly strong, durable material.\* Parchment has been used as a binding material for centuries, and in fact many Medieval limp vellum parchment bindings survive in better condition than stiff-board leather bindings. The greatest difficulty in using parchment as a binding material is that it has a great aversion to laying flat, and will warp badly when exposed to changes in temperature and humidity. Over time, books with parchment glued to their boards can literally tear themselves apart. In our workshop, we learned some ways of counteracting this tendency, leaving us with stable books with minimal warping.

My first step was to choose a section of parchment for the cover. The parchment I used to bind the book was part of a cowhide I stretched and finished at Pergamena tannery during a parchment workshop there. Despite spending a long time with a power sander (and a brief but frightening amount of time with a knife modeled after a Medieval lunellum or "moon-knife," a semi-circular blade that parchment-makers would use to shave thin slivers off the flesh side of the skin), the skin was still quite thick. It had come from a relatively large animal, and though it was smooth-grained as all calfskin parchment is, the color and pattern varied from creamy white to mottled brown. I chose a section with visible veining running across it, some veins nearly parallel and some combining, to subtly re-enforce the visual of the tooled lines. The parchment needed to be sanded down further until it was flexible, and then backed with a piece of plain paper to give it stability.

The top, or head, edge of a book is almost always decorated in a fine binding. The other two edges may also be decorated, or they may only be trimmed. In keeping with the minimalist feel for the binding, I elected to only decorate the head edge. Since I knew I would be using gold for the decoration and titling, I gilt the edge using a technique called rough-edge gilding, where the book is gilt before sewing. The signatures are separated into their component folios and then shuffled into

---

\* I use "parchment" as the general term for skins prepared in this manner. The term "vellum" is sometimes used synonymously and sometimes used specifically for uterine calf parchment.

new folios, so no page is next to its actual neighbor. Then the pages are ploughed and put in the press, a layer of Armenian Bole is added, and then gold leaf is laid down on the edge and burnished. In the case of rough-edge gilding, the pages are then put back into the correct order, and the text block can be sewn. Rough-edge gilding creates a slightly rougher, more “natural” edge than standard gilding, and helps to mask small imperfections.

The next several steps in the binding process are structural instead of artistic, and are mostly invisible in the finished book. The text block must be sewn on parchment strips (I used red for contrast with the white parchment of the cover), and then the spine is glued up and, in a process called rounding and backing, given its shoulders and rounded shape. The book has structural endbands which are also sewn around parchment strips and then laced into the covers. I sewed the endbands with silk thread in red and cream, matching the color of the cover parchment and the parchment slips. The spine is lined, boards are cut and attached, and then, in a multi-stage process, the book is covered.

I planned the location of the lines: parallel on the front cover, oblique on the back, so that they were mirrored by the natural veins in the parchment. The lines were marked out with a pointed bone folder and a straight edge and then tooled with a hot line pallet and filled with 23-carat gold leaf.

Because the image that I chose to work with was so minimal, I wanted to make the rest of the binding simple enough that the lines would be the clear focal point. Although there is no convention for placing titling on fine bindings, I titled down the spine in gold to help visually balance the two covers. Making the title read vertically instead of horizontally, while it was much more complicated in terms of placing the handle letters, was an important consideration. I wanted the titling to unite the two covers, so that when the book stands open it reads as a single plane. The titling was done in 12-pt Centaur with individual handle letters and 23-carat gold leaf.

I strive, whenever I make a fine binding, to create a work of art that is beautiful but also meaningful. Because of the high level of skill and cost of materials required, fine binding is a highly specialized subset of book arts and not many people are aware of its existence. I hope this explanation makes more people aware of the possibilities of textual interpretation through book arts, including fine bindings, and how these interpretations interact with and are rooted in traditional textual analysis.

*Guild of Book Workers*

**Images**

Full view



Oblique lines



Parallel lines



Tape detail



Endband detail

