Responses to Patrick Spedding, “Cancelled Errata in John Buncle, Junior, Gentleman” (Script & Print 38.2, 115–21)

This item attracted very thoughtful consideration from Carlo Dumontet, Brian McMullin, John Lancaster, Richard Noble, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Spedding’s note raised the question of what to do if a cancellandum remains present as part of the physical structure of the book (obviously the ± symbol normally used to indicate cancels will not suffice), challenging a possible collation previously proposed by Brian McMullin as ambiguous. The editor and author invited correspondence from readers about the puzzle, and were pleased to receive a series of lively replies.

Initial correspondence from Carlo, Brian and John fairly promptly reached a consensus that no form of collation statement could capture the change seen in the Buncle text, and that a narrative explanation would be required. They also, after some consideration of possible collation options, agreed that this particular case did not truly represent a cancellation, because the printer’s instructions to the bookbinder appeared to signal that the additional errata should be glued to the existing errata, making it a more familiar slip-cancel. John then invited further comments, and the subsequent discussion went on to probe definitions of ideal copy and issue. The abbreviated correspondence follows, in order of receipt, with the permission of all those involved.

Carlo Dumontet, “The Tyranny of the Collational Formula”

The purpose of the collational formula is to show the physical make-up of a book at-a-glance. It is easier, clearer and more concise to say “A⁴ B–D⁸” rather than “Four gatherings, the first signed ‘A’ and of four leaves; the others signed from B to D, each of eight leaves.” But the latter statement, although cumbersome, is perfectly unambiguous and intelligible. The formula too should be unambiguous and intelligible.

The collational formula is an established element of bibliographical description, but one should not regard it as a standard the rules of which are so complete and perfect as to make it feasible to describe every possible variation in the physical make-up of a book by using letters, symbols and numbers only.

As for the problem at hand, my suggestion is to keep the formula simple and explain things in the statement of signing and the contents note. I cannot see how the problem of a pasted-over whole-leaf cancel can be unambiguously explained through the formula alone.

Why insist in making the formula explain everything and in so doing stretch it to breaking point (i.e., make it ambiguous and difficult to interpret)? I fear that
Brian McMullin next offered the following observations:

Whatever the solution proposed for representing formulaically the prelims in *John Buncle*—as indeed for representing any make-up not susceptible to conventional treatment—a note will be required explaining the particular situation, and to that extent we should perhaps not agonise unduly about the precise formula. Nevertheless, some comments may be in order.

I can think, in the present instance, only that the cancellation was effected once the four surviving copies had been bound; otherwise, as Patrick Spedding himself notes, it would have been a simple matter to replace one singleton by another, in which case the replacement would either have gone unnoticed or, if noticed, have been represented by an appended ‘(±)’—thus '[A]1(±)', to use one of Dr. Spedding’s alternatives.

I suggest that, at the time of binding, the publication already constituted ideal copy from the point of view of both the printer and the bookseller, that at that stage the prelims could be represented as $\pi^2 2\pi 1$ (or some other formulation that indicates a bifolium followed by a singleton). Extending the Errata listing is a belated attempt to create ideal copy, but one way of looking at the method of bringing about the improvement is to regard the added leaf as merely a species of slip, albeit a full page in extent, so that the collation would remain $\pi^2 2\pi 1$, with the ‘page cancel’ confined to a note, in the same way that the presence of a conventional slip would be reported.

This suggestion is obviously at odds with my use of such a formulation as ‘(±A1v)’ in 1982, a formulation, however, that I think could still be defended, especially as a note would need to be provided explaining the nature of the cancellation. (Printing paper of the late eighteenth century is not laminated, and so the notion of splitting cancellans and cancellandum [but wouldn’t they still be leaves?] can be disregarded.)

Perhaps in 1982 I erred in describing the phenomenon as a species of cancellation. Indeed, since no physical replacement has taken place I would no longer insist on regarding such instances as the present one as necessarily constituting cancellation but rather simply as an unusual form of correction via a slip, therefore not requiring any extra-ordinary treatment.

My final suggestion would therefore be to describe the prelims of *John Buncle* as $\pi^2 2\pi 1$ and to explain in a note that a full-page slip had been pasted over $2\pi 1v$, extending the Errata.
John Lancaster joined the discussion in early June, and after a few exchanges invited others to join the discussion, summarising the situation to that point:

The view we eventually arrived at (after a few false starts) is that since the cancel leaf is clearly intended to be mounted over the original errata, it should not be treated as part of the collational formula, but rather noted in the same way that any other mounted cancel slip would be noted in a bibliographical description. The fact of it being the same size as a leaf of the book, rather than a smaller piece of paper, does not alter the nature of the cancellation.

I think the fact that Patrick’s copy has the mounted leaf partially detached, remaining attached only at the inner edge, is misleading, resulting in an attempt to include it in the signature collation—an attempt which we initially made, before recognizing that it is neither an inserted leaf nor a cancellans leaf, but rather was intended to be mounted over the text to be corrected.

The instruction to the binder is unambiguous: “Directions to the bookbinder. Paste the errata on the back hereof over the former one.”

It doesn’t even say to paste the whole leaf—I wouldn’t be surprised to find copies with the leaf of corrected errata cut down and pasted over the original errata in the same manner as other cancel slips.

All in all, another fascinating bit of printing and bibliographical complication.

P. S. I don’t see that Bowers or Gaskell do anything more than mention cancel slips, with no discussion of how to record them. I’ve always thought they should be mentioned in a note, not introduced into the collation in some way, even though they clearly have to be mounted in a specific place, i.e. over the offending text. (A slip with additional matter, e.g. errata, is a different issue, though such slips are often called cancel slips.)

Richard Noble responded to John Lancaster on 24 June 2014:

Dear John et al.

The short answer is that the collational formula records the structure of the printed sheets of the book as issued, which is in no way affected by a slip pasted onto a leaf integral with that structure.

It is quite possible—likely in this case—that ideal copy (what this past week I’ve finally resolved for myself, in my constant search for a better term, as that which is “called for” in a book) should call for the pasting of the slip over the original page; but the slip itself, wherever it occurs, while it may figure in the printing formula of the book as a component of the kit that is to be structured by the binder, and is accordingly important, must feature in a description only by way of a fully informative note.
Thomas Tanselle then wrote in response to Richard Noble on 27 June 2014:

Dear John et al.,
I didn’t have time to read this exchange until now. I agree that patches affixed to leaves (or meant to be) shouldn’t be included in the collation formula. And I think this way of putting the matter is simpler and clearer than referring to structure, which is tricky. (One could of course say that it doesn’t matter where a paste-over cancel is reported as long as the situation is clearly described; but complicating the collation with this information isn’t likely to be as clear as a separate explanation.)

Regarding so-called “ideal copy” (which Richard brought up): as you know, I think the concept isn’t necessarily limited to a single form of an impression or issue but comprises all forms that were published; we ought to be talking about “copies as published,” to distinguish them from copies as altered by subsequent owners (or by the vicissitudes of their passage through time).

To which Richard replied on 2 July 2014:

Dear Tom et al.,
I think my use of “ideal copy” accords with the definition as given by Tom. My own understanding of it—with the proviso that phenomena will ultimately overtake and attempt to undermine any understanding of them—is “all forms (states) that taken together, as published, constitute a given issue, none of the variants individually or collectively constituting evidence for distinguishing, among those forms, another or other issues.” Something like that. “Issue” really is the key term here, since in general “issue” and “ideal copy” have a one-to-one relationship.

I referred to structure because the question seemed to be whether or not the issue formula that summarizes structure of the book as issued should take into account a pasted-on slip, even though the slip itself might figure in the printing formula.

The author and editor both wish to express their sincere appreciation to these contributors for their careful analysis. Bibliography is always evolving, and these sorts of liminal cases usefully clarify its principles, terminology and methods.
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