

Renaissance recycling: waste paper and the modern environmental crisis

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One of the most pressing environmental concerns today is the issue of what to do with waste. Humans attempt to manage (or at least put out of sight) their waste through landfills, recycling centres and incinerators. But it is now widely recognised that the sea is contaminated with discarded plastic. Some waste, such as polystyrene, can take hundreds, thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years to biodegrade. Nuclear waste and other hazardous materials need to be stored for similar periods before they become safe. We might define the Anthropocene era as the period in which humans leave their mark on the geological record; the evidence will be the waste products that we leave behind.

Dr Anna Reynolds, Lecturer in the School of English, argues that we can think differently about waste by looking to the example of early modern England. In her project 'Waste, Waste Paper, and the Pre-Anthropocene World', she focuses on the life cycle of one particular product: waste paper in the 16th and 17th centuries. Scholars have tended to assume that at the time, paper was too valuable to waste. But as Reynolds shows, bookbinders, readers, grocers, cooks and housewives habitually repurposed unwanted books by using their pages to bind other books, to wrap food or line pies, and for toilet paper.

Paper, in fact, was too valuable *not* to waste.

Paper, recycling and the Renaissance

Although waste paper is known to literature scholars as the punchline of literary jokes (bad books are only fit for toilet paper), Reynolds's study reveals how it was a useful resource for everyday life in its own right. By paying attention to early modern attitudes about waste paper, she suggests that we can gain a new perspective on the products and materials discarded in our own daily lives. Waste does not necessarily mean items that are useless, dirty or exhausted; it can also be thought of as material with the potential for re-use. This a valuable lesson for our own age, as concerns about depleted resources and limited storage space for waste are coming to the fore. Gaining a fuller understanding of the meanings of waste and how they have changed over time is an important step in thinking about the impact and sustainability of modern lifestyles on the planet.

'Waste, Waste Paper, and the Pre-Anthropocene World' draws on ideas from a number of disciplines ranging from literary studies to archaeology, and from social anthropology to the emerging field of waste studies. One of the outcomes of the research will be

Privy Tokens, the first book-length study of waste paper. The book draws on a range of literary, visual and bibliographic sources to demonstrate how often early modern writers thought about possible uses for paper. These sources include dictionaries, inventories, registers, and poems. Overall, it is a surprisingly potent symbol.

In England, paper had replaced parchment as the main method of literary transmission by the end of the 15th century. This was around the same time that writers from classical antiquity, such as Catullus, Horace and Martial, were being rediscovered and circulated. These poets often referred to intimate 'reuses' for papyri marked with bad poetry. Reynolds uncovers how Renaissance poet John Donne altered this classical insult in surprising ways, including in a funeral elegy where waste paper is compared to the transience of the human body. Other writers, such as antiquarian John Aubrey and the poet Thomas Nashe, found their own meanings in the poignancy and usefulness of papers torn from an unwanted book.

An inherently transient book is the almanac. Containing information about the upcoming year, such as farmers' planting dates, festivals, astrological predictions and much else, almanacs were the bestselling annuals of their time – about one third of all families in England owned one. But at the end of each year, they became obsolete. Almanacs brought a huge amount of paper into circulation that was soon ripe

for repurposing, making them emblems of ephemerality and an example of early modern recycling. In an age when people meditated endlessly on mortality, almanacs also taught their readers that they were interconnected with their environment. Both the human body and the well-thumbed almanac eventually disintegrate, and 16th-century writers dwelt on this lesson about the natural cycles of decay and regeneration.

Why paper matters

Reynolds' project is very much at home at the University of St Andrews, where experts in a variety of disciplines study waste and the School of English has a wealth of research expertise in the early modern period. The library's Special Collections department holds a trove of 16th- and 17th-century literature, some of which refers to waste paper and some of which is literally made of waste paper.

Focus on a single, unremarkable object – waste paper – is part of a wider philosophical trend of thinking deeply about the complexity of commonplace stuff surrounding us. Items that we often take for granted can have surprising hidden lives that tell us about commerce, social values, and our relationships with our physical environment. Paying closer attention can open up new reasons to care about the materials and natural environment that are part and parcel of our daily lives.

Study of waste paper reveals an abundance of ideas about early modern

society in which patterns of production and consumption had not yet become what they are in our contemporary Anthropocene age. It raises questions about the ephemerality of a piece of writing, the ways that leftovers and remnants endure over the passage of time, the rhythm at which a society produces and consumes its literature, and how organic matter decays and finds new uses.

These questions highlight an overlooked dimension of English social history. But they are also of lasting relevance: how do we regard our own mountains of waste paper and the other byproducts of 21st-century writing and communication? 'Waste, Waste Paper, and the Pre-Anthropocene World' prompts us to look differently at – and live differently with – our own waste.

Find out more

Researcher profile: www.st-andrews.ac.uk/english/people/acr25

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