**Ethnographies of Paper in Early Modern England**

Helen Smith, University of York

[helen.smith@york.ac.uk](mailto:helen.smith@york.ac.uk); Department of English and Related Literature, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

**Abstract:**

In his lengthy poem ‘The praise of hemp-seed’, John Taylor (1578-1653) dwells on the manufacture of paper. This article argues that Taylor is concerned not only with paper’s origins as fabric and plant, but also with its etymological and global histories. Putting Taylor’s poem into conversation with travel narratives that described paper and other writing substances in sometimes excruciating detail, the article makes the case that Taylor invokes paper’s ancient histories and global traditions in order to efface them, claiming this remarkable substance as quintessentially British, or rather English.

**Keywords:**

Paper – John Taylor – nonsense – travel narrative – natural history – ethnography

In his lengthy poem ‘The praise of hemp-seed’, first printed in 1620, John Taylor (1578-1653) dwells on the manufacture of paper, declaring, in jaunty fashion: ‘For when I thinke but how is paper made/ Into Philosophy I straight waies wade’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Taylor, who styled himself ‘the water poet’ in recognition of his career ferrying passengers across the Thames, had a poem for every occasion, and undertook self-promoting voyages to Hamburg, Scotland, Prague and, by wherry, to York as well as up the Avon, followed by four further, less successful journeys late in life. He also claimed, in ‘The praise of hemp-seed’, to have attempted to sail down the Thames in a brown-paper boat, a voyage which, in his recounting, ended in pulpy disaster.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Critical accounts of ‘The praise of hemp-seed’ have to date focussed on Taylor’s world turned upside down, in which ‘the torne shirt of a Lords or Kings [*sic*]’ might be turned into ‘pot paper’ (small, relatively cheap sheets, usually with a pot watermark) and the ‘linnen of a Tiburne slaue’ into expensive ‘paper royall’ (D4v), as well as on the poem’s alertness to the ecologies of all – and by implication its own – paper sheets. As critics including Joshua Calhoun and Georgina Wilson have shown, Taylor delights in the transformation of hemp into ‘Ropes, halters, drapery, and our napery’ (D4r), and the subsequent metamorphosis of ‘ruind rotten rags’ into paper (D4v).[[3]](#endnote-3) This article argues that Taylor is concerned not only with paper’s origins as fabric and plant, but also with its etymological and global histories. ‘The praise of hemp-seed’ traces the root of ‘paper’ to ‘papyrus’ and invokes the alternatives to paper found both in a vaguely-characterised ‘antiquity’ and outside England. The poem’s grasp of paper’s origins and development is flimsy at best, however, effacing both the Chinese invention of paper and its pan-European flows in order to establish this remarkable substance as quintessentially British, or rather English.

Taking Taylor’s interest in paper’s international scope as its starting point, this article traces an early modern ethnography of paper. Joan Pau Rubiés has argued that, in early modern Europe, ‘the description of peoples became the empirical foundation for a general rewriting of “natural and moral history” within a new cosmography made possible by the navigations of the period’.[[4]](#endnote-4) As eminently human artefacts, paper and its cognates were frequently described by travel writers and natural philosophers. Paper was subject to the period’s intense appetite for collection and taxonomy: John Tradescant’s collection of rarities, for instance, included ‘Indian books made of *Phillyrea*’ and ‘Indian paper made of - Grasses. - Straw. - Rinds of trees’.[[5]](#endnote-5) The description of paper history and the paper culture of other countries was part of a mode of thought which sought to understand other cultures and simultaneously mark out those cultures as retrograde.[[6]](#endnote-6) This project, I argue, was intertwined with the early modern English passion for etymology, understood as ‘at once the act of uncovering the history of a word and, at the same time, remaking that word for present use by reconnecting it to this past’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In what follows, I bring Taylor’s poem into conversation with travel narratives that described paper and other writing substances in sometimes excruciating detail. Natalya Din-Kariuki argues that travel writing ‘tends to make its cultural, racial, and national allegiances, as well as, in some cases, its colonial and imperial ambitions, explicit’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Reading Taylor’s manifestly imperialist poem alongside travel narratives and natural histories allows me to tease out a nexus of associations between paper, papyrus, the Nile Delta, grotesque fertility and blackness or brownness: a combination that reinforces, and outdoes, the colonial commitments of early modern travel writing.

Taylor is primarily known as a nonsense poet, given to flights of linguistic fancy, rapid-fire inversions, strained associations and a thumping insistence on rhythm and rhyme, no matter the poetic cost.[[9]](#endnote-9) His overt, if not always lightly-worn, whimsy, propels ‘The praise of hemp-seed’ and allows Taylor to skip nimbly (or, in his own metaphor, to soar) over the painstakingly-observed detail of contemporary ethnographies. Framing his poem as a mock-epic by boasting he has ‘*here of a graine of Hempseed* *made a mountaine greater then the* Apenines [*sic*] *or* Caucasus’ (A2v), Taylor invites the reader to marvel at his ability to make something of almost nothing rather than to query the specifics of his claims. Yet he also promises a certain seriousness, pledging ‘*Here is mirth and matter all beaten out of this small seede’:* entertainment is twinned with substance as Taylor wrings every last drop of both humour and content from his apparently unprepossessing subject.

In a section of his poem titled ‘The originall of Paper’, Taylor speculates on the roots of the word. He initially offers a nonce (and nonsense) etymology, proposing that ‘paper’ derives from its tendency to propagate and disseminate religious error.

Some Authors doe the name of Paper gather,  
To be deriu’d from *Papa,* or a Father;  
Because a learned man of *Arrius* sect  
Did Christendome with heresie infect:  
And being in great errors much mistooke,  
Writ and divulged in a paper booke.  
And therefore *Nimphshag* thus much doth inferre,  
The name of Paper sprung from *Papaerr* (E2r)*.*

I have not found any other source for the idea that ‘paper’ derived from an Arianist (a byword for heresy in early modern England) who did not simply err in his scepticism about the coeternity of God and Christ but wrote down that error. The name ‘Nimphshag’ also appears to be Taylor’s creation.

Rather than offering a serious attempt at deriving the etymology of paper, Taylor’s characteristically woeful pun assembles a host of early modern anxieties in a flurry of tenuous rhymes. For a mid-seventeenth century English reader, ‘Papa’ would have invoked the Pope and the shadow of Catholicism as much as Arminianism. The passage’s association of paper with Catholic heresy calls to mind Spenser’s Errour, spewing forth a ‘vomit full of bookes and papers’.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is hard to say whether Taylor had Spenser in mind as he conjured his false etymology, but the water poet was certainly a fan of his Elizabethan precursor: in ‘The praise of hemp-seed’, he includes Spenser in a short catalogue of English writers who ‘did in Art excell’ and whose ‘lines had perish’d with their liues’ if not for paper (E3v).

Taylor plays fast and loose with his etymologies. A few lines after his first attempt at definition, he offers an alternative word history, arguing that

… some againe of lesse authoritie

Because it’s made of rags and pouerty,

In stead of Paper name it *Pauperis* (E2v).

The idea of paper being made from ‘rags and pouerty’ functions almost as a form of hendiadys, or perhaps a metonym made explicit, where the implication of poverty inherent in the rags that were the base material for early modern paper is spelled out. The effect is to weave paper’s reliance on the labouring bodies of indigent ragpickers, and on the dissolution of fortunes as well as clothes, into the substance of the sheet.[[11]](#endnote-11) Close to the end of his poem, Taylor returns to this theme, arguing that printers are reliant on paper, ‘the meanes to feed/ And cloath them, and their families at need’, and that ‘the Stationer’ could not ‘liue and eate/ If printed paper did not yeeld him meate’ (E4v).

Between these false etymologies, Taylor wedges a third, correct, option. ‘Paper’ derives from the French *papier*, and ultimately from classical Latin *paprus* and Greek *πάπυρος*, describing the papyrus reed and the writing material derived from it.

Some hold the name doth from a Rush proceed,

Which on *Egyptian Nilus* banks doth breed:

Which rush is cal’d *Papirus* for on it

Th’ *Egiptian* people oftentimes had writ (E2r-v).

Taylor, however, refuses to endorse this etymology. His last couplet is hard to interpret, inverting the order of writing and material and dodging the act of etymological derivation. Whereas in reality ‘papyrus’ derives from the reed and is applied to the writing surface, in Taylor’s account, it is writing that lends its name to the ‘rush’, while the poem remains evasive on the subject of what ‘papirus’ means.

Readers alert to Spenser’s Errour encounter a further echo here: Errour’s vomit contains not only books and papers but also blind frogs and toads. In *The Faerie Queene’s* first epic simile, Spenser compares the filth of Errour’s ‘parbreak’ (vomit) to the heaped mud of the Nile Delta:

As when old father Nilus gins to swell

With timely pride above the Aegyptian vale,

His fattie waves do fertile slime outwell,

And overflow each plaine and lowly dale:

But when his later spring gins to avale,

Huge heapes of mudd he leaves, wherein there breed

Ten thousand kindes of creatures, partly male

And partly female of his fruitfull seed;

Such ugly monstrous shapes elsewhere may no man reed (1.1.21).

The gross fecundity of the ‘muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile’ (1.5.28) was a commonplace in this period, derived from Pliny, and closely associated with the idea of spontaneous generation. As Lepidus tells Antony in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, ‘Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun; so is your crocodile’.[[12]](#endnote-12) The association adds a potent twist to Taylor’s assertion that papyrus ‘doth breed’ on the banks of the Nile, subtly informing the multiplying errors castigated in his previous lines, and reinforcing the association of writing with untameable proliferation.

Detailed knowledge about papyrus was available to mid-seventeenth century readers. John Parkinson (1566/7-1650), apothecary and royal herbalist, collated a mammoth herbal, the *Theatrum botanicum*, which he published in 1640, ten years after the appearance of Taylor’s collected works. Parkinson too dives into etymology, before explaining: ‘as *Pliny* sheweth, there was no *Charta* leaves of Paper made of the barke, but of the inner foulds, which they divided into thinne flakes … then laying them on a Table, and moistening them with the glutinous water of the river, they prest them, and after dryed them in the Sunne’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Parkinson tells readers that the larger the papyrus the more valuable it was, ‘but because the later times of that old age, grew so copious in writing and transcribing Bookes, that they could not at any price, get sufficient for their use’, new surfaces had to be invented.

In Parkinson’s description of the displacement of papyrus by parchment, we see a version of the early modern anxiety about the overplus of information: the idea that there was simply, in Ann Blair’s influential phrase, ‘too much to know’.[[14]](#endnote-14) ‘*Attalus* as it is thought first at *Pergamus,* invented the skinnes of beasts to be dressed and dryed, fit to serve that purpose, which ever since have been called *Pergamenae,* sheetes or Bookes of Parchment, for it is said that *Attalus* furnished his Library at *Pergamus* with 200000. volumes, written on this Parchment’. In his own title, Parkinson pledges an abundance of knowledge, promising ‘a more ample and exact history and declaration of the physicall herbs and plants that are in other authours, encreased by the accesse of many hundreds of new, rare, and strange plants from all the parts of the world, with sundry gummes, and other physicall materials, than hath beene hitherto published by any before’. The story of Attalus’s 200,000 books participates in the fantasy of complete knowledge that underpins Parkinson’s book, and gestures towards a past in which that knowledge was once collated and stored.

Parkinson’s titleis exemplary of the seventeenth century’s itch to collect and taxonomise. The plants he describes are, his title notes, ‘Distributed into sundry classes or tribes, for the more easie knowledge of the many herbes of one nature and property’. The word ‘tribe’ is telling: Parkinson’s book appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first use of the term to describe a natural historical group or subdivision, but the word inevitably invokes the division not of plants but of humans into groups (most notably the tribes of Israel), orders, or races.[[15]](#endnote-15) This is symptomatic of the constant movement between natural historical and ethnographic projects, in which foreign plants, writing surfaces and other natural and artificial objects are read as emblematic of cultural and material difference.

Taylor too invokes the ancient world as he charts the history of paper; he moves swiftly, and overtly, to align other cultures with the distant practices of the ancients.

For the most part antiquity agrees,

Long since the flood men writ in barkes of trees:  
Which was obseru’d late in *America,*  
When Spanish *Cortois* conquer’d *Mexica.*  
Then after in Fig-leaues and Sicamour,  
Men did in characters their mindes explore (E2r).

For Taylor, the practices of antiquity are supplemented by contemporary evidence, observed within a colonial dynamic that tropes non-paper writing surfaces as retrograde. Classical materials, invoked in supremely broad-brush terms, are used to establish colonial Ibero-America as prior to progress. At the same time, the colonised Americas are framed in the biblical terms of post-diluvian history and the Fall. This is a version of the dynamic described by Ian Smith, in which ideas of rhetorical or linguistic ‘barbarism’ were displaced from a defensive England onto a racialized Africa, in order to claim English as a literary and ‘civilised’ language.[[16]](#endnote-16) In Taylor’s poem, the writing surface itself is established as foreign and inferior, allowing Taylor to claim paper as an inherently English substance, despite the country’s relatively low rates of white paper production, and the historical and geographical realities of the invention and dissemination of paper-making.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The better-known though still debated story of paper – that it originated in around AD 105, when Ts’ai Lun, an official at the Imperial court of China, created a sheet of paper using mulberry and other waste fibres – is conspicuously absent from Taylor’s poem, which mentions China only once.[[18]](#endnote-18) Close to the beginning of his poem, and well before its turn to paper, Taylor marvels about the power of a tiny hemp seed: ‘From this small Atome, mighty matters springs’ (B3r). This is a joke about the heft of Taylor’s literary matter given his apparently trivial subject, as well as a commentary on the extraordinary impact of hemp. Taylor’s vision of what hemp can do is totalising and acquisitive.

From pole to pole, it cuts both Seas and Skies,  
From th’orient to the occident it flyes.  
Kings that are sundred farre, by seas and lands,  
It makes them (in a manner) to shake hands.  
It fills our Land with plenty wonderfull,  
From th’Esterne Indies, from the great Mogull,  
From France, from Portingale, from Venice, Spaine,  
From Denmarke, Norway, it scuds o’er the maine,  
Vnto this Kingdome it doth wealth acrue  
From beyond China, farre beyond Peru.  
From Belgia, Almaine, the West Indies, and  
From Guiny, Biny, Island, Newfound-land (B3v).

China and ‘th’orient’ are collapsed into a lengthy list of far-flung places, in a vision of world domination to which I return below. By including China as one destination among many (and indeed a destination that is always already surpassed; ‘beyond China’), the poem denies the possibility of acknowledging paper’s origins, or indeed of recognising hemp as only one of the materials from which paper can be made.

Other writers were alert, at least, becoming alert to the variety and quality of Chinese paper. As early as 1599, readers of Richard Hakluyt’s compendium, *The principal navigations*, could find reference to ‘China-paper’, and by 1625 early modern England’s most ambitious armchair traveller, Samuel Purchas (bap. 1577, d. 1626), could report confidently that the Chinese ‘lose not a Ragge of any qualitie, for as well of the fine as of the course, that are not of Wool, they make fine and course Paper, and they make Paper of barkes of Trees, and of Canes, and of silken Ragges’.[[19]](#endnote-19) In his 1671 *Atlas Chinensis*, the Dutch teacher and author Arnoldus Montanus (1625-1683) described ‘Kienningfoe’ (Jianning), ‘one of the most eminent Cities in *Fokien*…. The Streets are all Pav’d with Pebble, and very full of Inhabitants, that drive no other Trade but making of course Paper’, and ‘the County of *Vuchaufu’* (Fuzhou), where, he reports, ‘they make also great quantities of Paper, of the Canes and Leaves, which grow there in great abundance’. In terms at once celebratory and dismissive, Montanus concludes: ‘*China* affords several sorts of Paper, made of several Materials, *viz.* of the Body and Leaves of Cane-tree, Cotton, Silk, and Flaxen Clothes: that which is made of Cotton is not altogether so white as our *French* Paper’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Montanus simultaneously marvels at the ingenuity and variety of Chinese papers, and insinuates their inferiority when viewed from the standpoint of European discrimination.[[21]](#endnote-21) His book is a record of two embassies from the East India Company, a context which frames the description of Chinese papermaking in explicitly colonial terms.

The reinscription of writing surfaces as both prior and, implicitly, inferior to paper is still more overt in *The pleasant historie of the conquest of the Weast India,* translated and published in 1578. The volume’s title adopts the terms of Romance (it is a ‘pleasant historie’ and ‘most delectable to read’) to celebrate colonial violence. When it comes to writing, the book explains that:

The figures yt the *Mexicans* vsed for letters are great, by reason whereof they occupy gret volumes: they ingraue them in stone or timber, and paint them vpon walles, and also vpon a paper made of cotten wool, and leaues of the tree *Metl.* Their bookes are great and folden vp like vnto our broade clothes, and written vpon both sides. There are some bokes rolled vp like a piece of flannel.[[22]](#endnote-22)

These observations establish Mexican writing as decidedly foreign, emphasising the size of the characters and marvelling at the diversity of substances used for writing. At the same time, it displays a doubly domesticating impulse: where the Spanish text describes the fabric, texture and form of Mexican books, the translator renders these ideas familiar to English readers through the resolutely native terms of broadcloth and ‘a piece of flannel’.

In notably similar terms, though with a robust anti-Spanish twist, Purchas recounts that:

In the Prouince of Yucatan or Honduras, there were bookes of the Leaues of trees, folded and squared, which contained the knowledge of the Planets, of beasts and other naturall things, and of their Antiquities, which some blindly-Zealous Spaniards, taking for inchantments, caused to be burned. … Their bookes for this cause were great, which (besides their engrauings in stone, walles, or wood) they made of Cotton-wooll wrought into a kinde of paper, and of Leaues of Metl, folded vp like our broad-cloths, and written on both sides, Likewise they made them of the thinne inner-rinde of a Tree, growing vnder the vpper barke (as did also the auncient Latines, from whence the names of *Codex* and *Liber* for a Booke, are deriued by our Grammarians.) They did binde them also into some forme of bookes, compacting them with *Bitumen:* their Characters vvere of Fish-hookes, Starres, Snares, Files, &c.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Both of these accounts attempt to make the unfamiliar familiar: though Purchas and López de Gómara draw attention to how indigenous American text technologies diverge from European experience, they equate their observations directly with European writing culture, labelling the text surface as ‘a paper’ or ‘a kinde of paper’ and describing ‘their bookes’ or ‘some forme of bookes’.

The same dynamic is at play when Purchas attends to non-codexical forms, remarking that the indigenous peoples of Peru carry:

sundry cords and branches, in euery of which were so many knotts little and great, and strings tyed to them, some red, some greene, and in such varietie, that euen as we deriue an infinite number of words from the letters of the Alphabet, so doe they from these kindes and colours…. I did see (saith *Acosta*) a handfull of these strings, wherein an Indian woman did carry (as it were) written a generall confession of all her life, and thereby confessed her selfe, as well as I could haue done in written paper (Qqq5v).

The passage oscillates between a sense of the remarkable and a charting of the similar, recognising the complexity and capacity of colonial-era Andean record systems, and mapping them against the known quantities of the alphabet and the literary form of the confession, a clear marker of the conversionary and colonial dynamic of the Jesuit mission to Peru.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Taylor was alert to how paper (and by implication writing and printing) made armchair travel possible – including the armchair travel that brought different and distant writing surfaces into view.[[25]](#endnote-25) Without paper, he demanded:

How should we know the change of monarchies,  
Th’Assyrian, and the Persian Emperies,  
Great *Alexanders*, large, small lasting glory  
Or *Romes* high *Casars* often changing story?  
How should Chronologies of Kings be knowne  
Of either other Countries, or our owne? (E3r).

Paper brought knowledge into England and conveyed it to other shores. Taylor celebrates ‘The *Atlas*’ not as a means of bringing home knowledge of the world but as a way to send knowledge out into the world: it is, he insists, a form ‘that all histories doth beare/ Throughout the world, here, there, and euery where’ (E4r).

Like the atlas, and like the hemp ‘atoms’ mentioned above, paper knows no bounds:

The best is I haue elbow roome to trace,  
I am not tide to times, to bounds, or place,  
But *Europe, Asia,* Sun-burnt *Affrica,*  
*America, Terra incognita,*  
The Christians, Heathens, Pagans, Turkes & Iewes,  
And all the world yeelds matter to my Muse:  
No Empire, Kingdome, Region, Prouince, Nation.  
No principality, Shire, nor Corporation:  
No country, county, city, hamlet, towne,  
But must vse paper, either white or browne (E3r).

Like Taylor’s globe-hopping couplets on the mobility and monetisation of hemp seed, these lines are part of what Ayesha Ramachandran describes as an effort by early modern thinkers to capture ‘the world’, rendering it navigable and knowable.[[26]](#endnote-26) Paper’s ubiquity, described at first at the level of the empire or kingdom, becomes thoroughly domesticated as Taylor introduces the graspable and familiar scale of the corporation and the town. The dizzying geographical scope of Taylor’s imagination is also an exercise in discrimination: in Taylor’s poem, the apparently descriptive ‘white or browne’ of paper becomes a marker of racial difference. ‘Sun-burnt’ marks out Africa in particular as a site of visible difference, while ‘Turkes & Iewes’ are lumped together (in part because of the exigencies of rhyme) as categories of religious and racial alterity. Pushed to the end of the line, cheaper, lower-quality brown paper is made commensurate with the racialised ‘matter’ of Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and the Middle East.

Dotting from region to region, Taylor’s poem refuses the specifics of paper alternatives that were copiously detailed in early modern travel writing and botanical texts. In this, we can read it as imaginatively enacting paper’s replacement of older, long-enduring writing surfaces. In 1670, John Ogilby (1600-1676) published *Africa being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Ægypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid*. Like Parkinson, Ogilby offered a brief history of papyrus, mingling ethnography and etymology: ‘The Roots in former times serv’d in stead of Writing-Tablets, the Juyce of the Stalks wrought into thin Leaves, the Antients wrote upon, as we now adayes do upon our Paper made of old Linnen, and probably from this Plant took the name *Papyrus*’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Following a long sentence celebrating the ubiquity and uses of papyrus (a list reminiscent of Taylor’s robustly English praise of hemp), Ogilby concludes by registering the impact of paper imports on indigenous writing technologies: ‘But at this day by the carelessness of the Inhabitants, and the importing of our *European* Paper thither, it is by them esteemed of no worth at all’. This is a telling shift: describing the library at Amara, Ethiopia, in 1613, Purchas marvelled at its ‘three great Halls, each aboue two hundred paces large, with Bookes of all Sciences, written in fine parchment, with much curiositie of golden letters, and other workes, and cost in the writing, binding, and couers: some on the floore, some on shelues about the sides: there are few of paper: which is but a new thing in Ethiopia’ (Ccc6r). Not just writing and print but paper itself played a role in what Miles Ogborn has aptly termed ‘the work of Empire in the age of mechanical reproduction’, as paper displaced the ‘fine parchment’ and, perhaps, the craftsmanship and sheer expense of earlier books.[[28]](#endnote-28)

In an important essay, Miles P. Grier has explored how the materiality and appearance of books contributed to the project of creating and reiterating difference, leading to the establishment of ‘an elastic racial category of illiterate, legible blacks’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Grier’s essay reminds us that the idea of paper as an unremarkable substrate is itself part of the knotty legacy of imperialism, that ‘early modern book theory was irrevocably implicated with imperial projects in a way that cannot be ignored or wished away—only confronted and, potentially, changed’. Taylor’s ‘Sun-burnt *Affrica*’ serves the same racialised epistemology, made explicit in Taylor’s indented assertion that ‘The commodities of these blacke Indies are worth more white money to vs, then either the East or West Indies will ever be profitable’ (C3r). ‘White money’ was a term for silver; here, counterposed to the ‘blacke Indies’ (a tangled joke about Newcastle coal), it makes the racialised hierarchies of the poem explicit. Taylor aligns Africa and papyrus first with the error-strewn fecundity of the Nile and then with the muddied tones of brown paper. The extraordinary papyrus culture of Africa, and the richness of its libraries, have no home in Taylor’s account. Instead ‘The praise of hemp-seed’ relegates papyrus and other writing surfaces to the past, establishing paper as current, totalising and, in defiance of reality, resolutely English. This is another way of constituting the historical reality of a moment at which, as Ogilby attests, European paper displaced other materials.

Paper was far from the only substance described in detail by travel writers. Indeed, it was almost certainly described less frequently than many other objects and customs. It is, though, unusual if not unique in the degree to which descriptions of paper and books which appear *in* paper and books are necessarily and sometimes strikingly self-referential, calling attention to the points of comparison the reader holds in their hands. And paper is emblematic of the mutually-reinforcing impulses towards etymology, ethnography and acquisition that characterised early modern travel narratives and natural historical accounts, as well as Taylor’s prolific nonsense. ‘The praise of hemp-seed’ is acutely alert to one material history: that of the mashed and fretted rags that were transformed into paper. In telling that story, it hints at, but determinedly ignores, the twinned material histories of Britain’s paper imports and of the invention of paper and other writing surfaces, blending vigorous nonsense with snippets of etymology and history, in order to establish paper, against all evidence, as robustly and exclusively English.

1. John Taylor, *The praise of hemp-seed With the voyage of Mr. Roger Bird and the writer hereof, in a boat of brown-paper, from London to Quinborough in Kent* (London: for H. Gosson, 1620), D4r. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On Taylor, see especially Bernard Capp, *The World of John Taylor the Water-Poet, 1578-1653* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Joshua Calhoun, *The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 22-25, 41-2l; Georgina Wilson, *Paper and the Making of Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025), 106–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Joan Pau Rubiés, ‘Travel Writing and Ethnography’, in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242-60, 242. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John Tradescant, *Museum Tradescantianum* (London: John Grismond, 1656), D5r. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. There is a substantial literature on the early modern culture of collection and the movement of goods and objects. See, in particular, Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800* (London: Routledge, 2021), Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: the Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hannah Crawforth, *Etymology and the Invention of English in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Natalya Din-Kariuki, ‘Tediousness in *Coryats Crudities* (1611): Early Modern Travel Writing, Rhetoric, and Notions of Canonicity’, *Textual Practice*, 38:2 (2024), 318-36 ( 320). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Noel Malcolm, *The Origins of English Nonsense* (London: HarperColllins, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On heresy’s imaginative potency in early modern England, see David Lowenstein, *Treacherous Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. chapter 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On ragpickers, see Heidi Craig, ‘Rags, Ragpickers, and Early Modern Papermaking’, *Literature Compass* 16.5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12523> and ‘English Rag-women and Early Modern Paper Production’, in Women’s Labour and the History of the Book in Early Modern England *ed*, ed. Valerie Wayne (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 29-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series, 1995), 2.7.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. John Parkinson, *Theatrum Botanicum: the Theatre of Plants* (London: Thomas Cotes, 1640), Kkkkk6v. Pliny’s detailed account of papyrus making was conveyed to English readers by Philemon Holland in his translation of Pliny’s natural history, first published in 1601. Holland consistently translates ‘papyrus’ as ‘paper’. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On the intersections of religion, race and taxonomy, see Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For a summary of English papermaking and import rates, see Helen Smith, ‘“A Unique Instance of Art”: the Proliferating Surfaces of Early Modern Paper’, *Journal of the Northern Renaissance ,* 8 (2017), 1-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a compelling cultural history history of paper in China, including still live debates about its invention and development, see Jean-Pierre Drège, *A Short History of Paper in Imperial China* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Richard Hakluyt, *The Second Volume of the Principal Navigations* (London: George Bishop, Ralph Newbery and Robert Barker, 1599), \*4r; Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimes In Five Bookes* (London: William Stansby for Henry Fetherstone, 1625), Q4r. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Arnoldus Montanus, *Atlas Chinensis* (London: Tho[mas] Johnson for the author, 1671), 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. On European paper practices, and attitudes to paper, see Daniel Bellingradt and Anna Reynolds (eds), *The Paper Trade in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Materials, Networks* (Leiden: Brill), 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Francisco López de Gómara, *The Pleasant Historie of the Conquest of the Weast India, now called New Spayne Atchieued by the Worthy Prince Hernando Cortes Marques of the Valley of Huaxacac, most Delectable to Reade*, trans. T. N. (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), Bbb1r. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage. Or Relations of the World* (London: William Stansby for Henry Fetherstone, 1613), Nnn3r. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. On Khipu, see Gary Urton, *Inka History in Knots: Reading Khipus as Primary Sources* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. On armchair travel in this period, see Claire Jowitt, ‘Hakluyt’s Legacy: Representations of Armchair Travellers in Renaissance Drama’, in *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe, eds Daniel Carey and Claire Jowitt* (London: Routledge, 2012), 295-306. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. John Ogilby, *Africa being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Ægypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid* (London: Tho[mas] Johnson for the author, 1670), K4v. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English* *East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Miles P. Grier, ‘Inkface: the Slave Stigma in England’s Early Imperial Imagination’, in *Scripturalizing the Human: the Written as the Political, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 193-220; 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)