



# Treasures from the Archives : a 16th century expurgated poetry book

In this guest blog, Dr Jane Sinnett-Smith, the Cambridge Theological Federation Librarian, looks at a book from the Westminster College rare books collections: *Poetarum veterum ecclesiasticorum opera Christiana* (*Christian Works of the Ancient Church Poets*, C BR60 FAB).

In 1578 the Jesuit Father Gerhard Massetus carefully read through this book of classical and patristic Christian poetry published for young scholars studying Latin.

He thoroughly edited out any mention of the author and publisher's names and covered up entire passages before signing his approval on its title page and placing it back into the Munich Jesuit College library, where it might be useful for the college's extensive teaching programme.

**But why was this seemingly unassuming poetry collection expurgated in this way?**

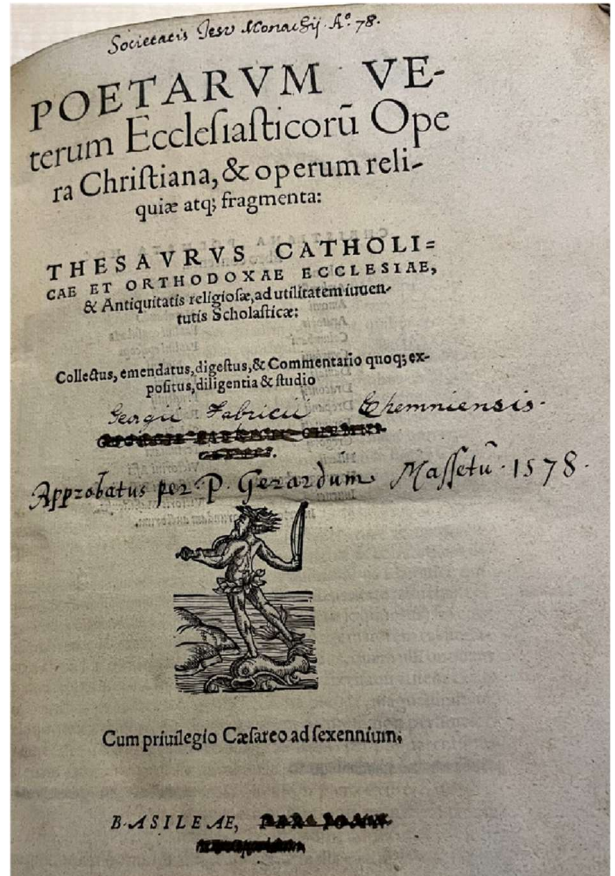
This copy of *Poetarum* preserves a snapshot of 16th century religious tensions in Europe, as well as a glimpse into the power of printed books to intervene in these conflicts.

In the 15th and 16th centuries the printing press revolutionised the spread of information, and in particular competing religious ideas: the publication and control of print was crucial to both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation [1].

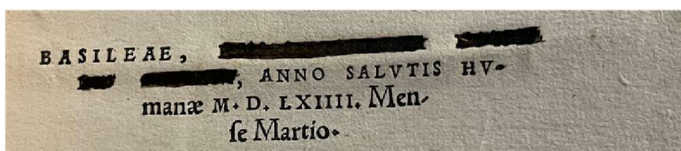
This book was compiled in 1564 by Protestant German classical scholar Georg Fabricius (1516-71), and published by another Protestant, Swiss printer Johannes Oporinus (1507-68).

At the very same time (1559-1564), the Papacy issued the first Index of Forbidden Books, which continued to be published until the 1960s. In its early form, the Index censored works by many Protestant writers and printers – including Fabricius and Oporinus [2].

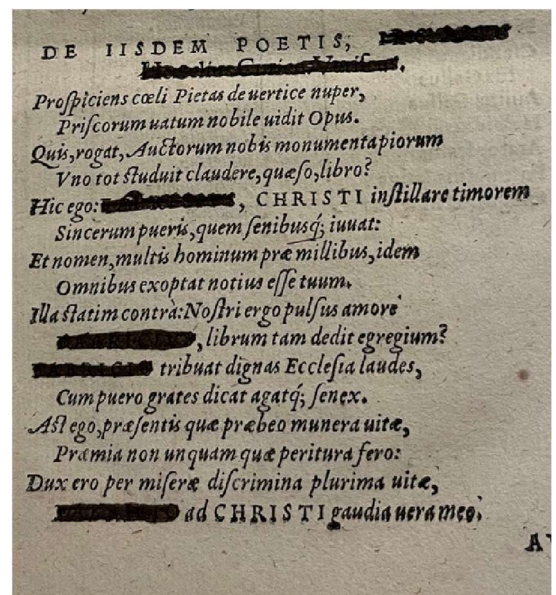
Catholic libraries (like the Munich Jesuit College library) were forbidden from owning books by these condemned authors – unless, that is, they were carefully expurgated by a trusted Catholic theologian such as Father Massetus.



Title page with Massetus's signature. Book I, sig. a1r

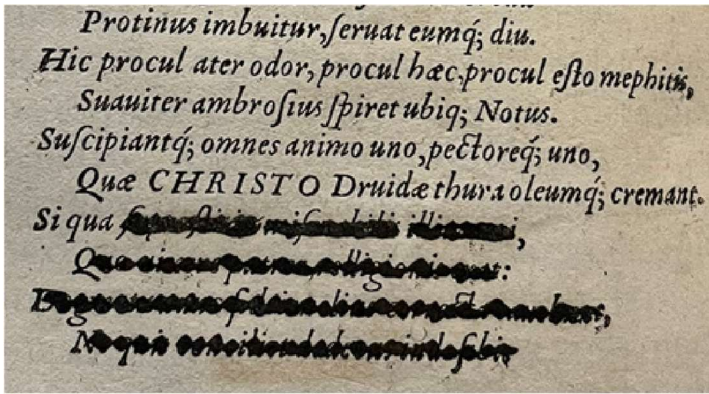


Censorship of printer's name, colophon Book II, sig. Y6r

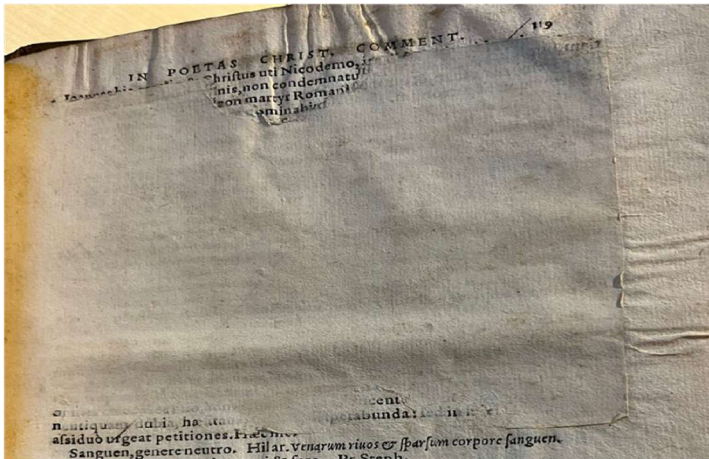


Censorship of author's name, Book I, sig. b4r

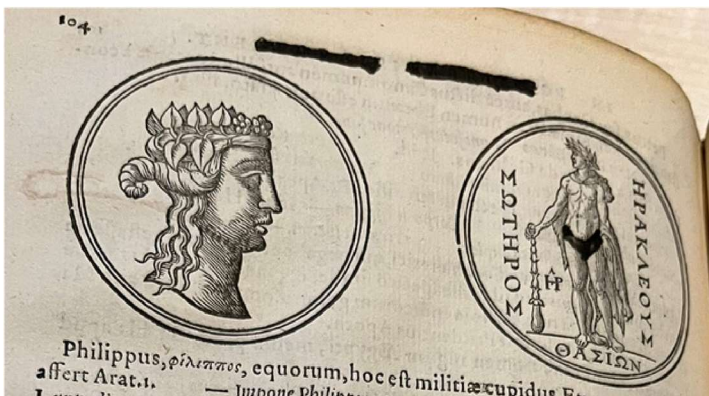




Criticism of Church Fathers, Book II, sig. A3v



Criticism of saintly veneration, Book II, sig. Q4r



Ancient Greek coins, Book II, sig. Q4r

## What did Father Massetus expurgate?

In addition to censoring nearly all Protestants' names, Massetus also pasted blank paper sheets over longer passages where Fabricius's commentary strayed into theologically contentious waters – the cult of saints, clerical marriage, the suggestion that the Church Fathers needed correction by Reformation scholars.

We can see where a later reader – perhaps a bookseller – has tried unsuccessfully to tear off these sheets and reveal the text beneath.

He has also censored the book's sole illustration, an ancient Greek coin of Dionysus and Heracles, carefully covering Heracles's nakedness with a black ink loincloth. The *Index* specifically prohibited 'lascivious or obscene' content, especially if children – like the students *Poetarum* was aimed at – might read it.

## And why in 1578?

This book was expurgated as part of a concentrated examination of the entire Munich Jesuit library in 1578-80 – two decades after its author was initially condemned by the Papacy. The scholar Karl Shottenloher has suggested that this belated expurgation was a bit of a last-minute effort by the Munich Jesuits to tidy up contentious material before the visit of papal envoy (and forceful censorship advocate) Feliciano Ninguarda in 1580 [3]. Massetus's censorship involved a complex mix of faith, practicality, and institutional politics.

Jane Sinnett-Smith, CTF Librarian  
Spring 2025

## References

- [1] Helmers, Helmer, Nina Lamal, and Jamie Cumby, *Print and Power in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2021)
- [2] *Librorum Authorumque S. Sedis Apostolicae, Sacrique Concilii Tridentini Autoritate Prohibitorum. Itemque Eorum* (Monachii: Typis Adami Berg, 1569)
- [3] Schottenloher, Karl, 'Die Zensur-Eingriffe in der Münchner Jesuitenbibliothek im Jahre 1578: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Tridentiner Index', *Buch und Schrift: Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft der Freunde des deutschen Buchmuseums*, neue Folge 2 (1939), 59–76

This blog post is based on an article which Dr Sinnett-Smith wrote for the Library Newsletter of the Cambridge Theological Federation (<https://www.theofed.cam.ac.uk/>) in October 2024.