Something Old, Something New, Some Shakespearian Redux

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Something Old: Once in a while I like to toss into my review mix something I’ve dubbed a retro-review – consideration of a book long since out of print, usually decades or even a century or more old. It’s generally a title I think many collectors, archivists or dealers may enjoy.
having on their reference shelves, whether informative, provocative or just plain entertaining.

Imagine my delight when, drooling over the new and newish books for sale near the main entrance at Indiana University’s fabulous Lilly Library this past summer – primarily softbound past exhibition catalogues – I ran across a Manuscript Society-related publication over half a century old: *Manuscripts Ancient – Modern: An Exhibition on the Occasion of The Manuscript Society’s Annual Meeting, Held at the Lilly Library Indiana University October 1-4, 1964.* (Myself and a handful of other antiquarian booksellers and rare book librarians were taking a week-long seminar there titled “Reference Sources for Researching Printed Americana” conducted
by the Lilly Library’s inimitable director, Joel Silver – but that’s another story.) Not only does this slim booklet appear hot-off-the-press brand-spanking new, but at one dollar (that’s right, one lousy buck) it’s a great bargain. Shipping actually costs more than the booklet itself. And the Lilly has enough in supply that they can fulfill as many orders as they can, so don’t be shy about picking up extras as stocking stuffers for Manuscript Society friends.

I’ve long advocated exhibition catalogues for their reference value, and *Manuscripts Ancient – Modern* is no exception. The legendary and innovative American antiquarian bookseller and the Lilly Library’s first director, David A. Randall (1905-75), provides the foreword to this elegant little production, whose sepia-tone front cover depicts a close-up of a rubricated capital letter “C” from a thirteenth-century *Commentary on the Psalms* inside of which a seated figure at a desk writes with a quill pen. Randall recaps the superb book and manuscript of pharmaceutical giant J.K. Lilly, whose collection formed the nucleus of the Lilly Library in 1955 – “But his collecting interests were not directed to manuscripts before [American and English literary manuscripts of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries].” Remarkably, “The majority of the manuscripts on exhibition here have been acquired in the past nine years.” Those nine years’ riches briefly touched upon here include “medieval manuscripts, the Upton Sinclair files, and the publishing records of the Bobbs-Merrill Company… the Bernardo Mendel Collection of Latin Americana, which is being rapidly augmented (8,000 manuscripts, ranging from the Conquistadores to the nineteenth century, have just been acquired), will make the Lilly Library, in this field, among
the finest in the Western world."

Randall was justifiably proud of his fledgling library’s already vast holdings. In addition to those categories already noted, this exhibition catalogue includes sections on “English History and Belles-Lettres,” “The Signers of the Declaration of Independence,” “A Smattering of Autographs of American Historical Personages,” “War of 1812,” “Maps,” “Western Americana,” “Famous Songs,” “Famous Poems” and others. All of which barely scratches the surface of this institution’s deep holdings. Having been in the Lilly Library’s rare book vault on more than one occasion with Joel Silver, trust me: Their treasures would suck your breath away.

*Manuscripts Ancient – Modern* is set up in a quaint three-columns per page format, every specialty highlighted taking from one column to a page. Unfortunately, it sorely lacks illustrations. Just one image for each of the 28 collections profiled would have gone a long way toward bringing these collections to life. But the catalogue was likely meant as an accompaniment to those attending the annual meeting, so illustrations were of little import. So what’s the sense of griping half a century after the fact?

The Manuscript Society was a cocky 16 years old when *Manuscripts Ancient – Modern* was published. Now a feisty 67 years old, the Society still hosts these lively annual meetings. Any lover of new or old manuscript material will find this charming survey of one of the country’s great public archives (and they’ve added a leaf or two over the past half century!) worthwhile, both in its own right and as a memento of the organization we all hold dear.

*Something New:* Editor Marc Michael Epstein’s *Skies*
of Parchment / Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts enlarged by knowledge of medieval to modern Jewish illuminated manuscripts by one hundred percent – that is, he took my fair to middling familiarity with illuminated manuscripts and added an entirely new, unthought-of
dimension to it. Who among us when thinking of illuminated manuscripts doesn’t conjure up Christian writings or perhaps an Arthurian legend or bawdy pastoral poetry?

“This book is a labor of love,” notes Epstein in his introduction, “a compendium of words and images by some of the best and brightest scholars in the field of Jewish manuscript illumination and beyond. It is the first attempt at a comprehensive survey of this field in more than thirty years.” To my audible relief, Epstein also remarks that “this work is intended for nonspecialists.” As for organization, imagine the complexity of covering this topic given not only the large time span, medieval to modern, but different languages coming from different continents – daunting at best. Epstein chooses to “venture beyond the traditional mode of cataloguing manuscripts chronologically and geographically by means of a sample page from each manuscript and a description of each manuscript’s origin, form, and contents…. Here, we will engage less in a survey of individual manuscripts than in a survey of iconography, East and West” – in other words, chronicling the diaspora by topic rather than by place and time. “We’ll look at the way the flow of the narrative is conveyed over sequences of illumination in various manuscripts, and at the ways in which themes are transmitted, comparing and contrasting East and West and the Jewish and non-Jewish use of motifs throughout various time periods.”

For the judaically-challenged among us only hazily aware of the Torah and no other Jewish texts, we learn from *Skies of Parchment / Seas of Ink* that “these manuscripts cover a vast literary and conceptual range… codes of Jewish law and practice; scriptural texts and commentaries; rabbinic texts; Sabbath, Festival, and High Holiday prayer
books; devotional books written specifically for women; secular and liturgical poetry; scientific and medical treatises; works on Jewish philosophy; kabbalistic texts; fables; and even romances such as Hebraized versions of the tales of King Arthur and his knights.”

“Parchments and Palimpsests: Scribe, Illuminator, Patron, Audience” opens *Skies of Parchment / Seas of Ink*, a quick introduction to the uninitiated (and refresher to the initiated) into the basics of illuminated manuscript production. The basics of parchment making are covered, different types of quills and reeds used, how different color inks are created and so on. One interesting distinction between Christian and Jewish manuscripts: Rubricated initial capital letters don’t exist in Hebrew manuscripts! “Hebrew does not have capital letters, so rather than illuminating a single initial letter, an initial entire word would generally be illuminated.” Jewish manuscripts also have their own specialized vocabulary -- terms such as *te’ amim* and *massoretic notes* pepper these pages. Best of all, several pages here are devoted to a delightfully informative pictorial how-to showing step by step how a manuscript is illuminated, in particular how gold is applied to create “the illusion of molten gold letters.” Did you know that, once burnished with “a smooth dog’s tooth fastened to a handle,” “The highly polished gold can never tarnish or fade. It will continue to shimmer brightly for hundreds of years”?

Epstein’s “Mapping the Territory: ‘Arb’Ah Kanfot Ha’Arez – The Four Corners of the Medieval Jewish World” is pivotal to any nonspecialist reader, a GPS to help keep your bearings as you navigate the far-flung foreign countries that constituted the Jewish world. Epstein leads the reader
by the hand, opening with a wonderfully appropriate 1581 map depicting a world with Jerusalem at its center and the continents splayed around it like a cloverleaf, the three “basic meta-geographic entities” that comprised the Jewish world. *Ashkenaz* consisted of France, Germany, England and parts of Europe, *Sepharad* was Spain and *‘Arav* meant North Africa and other points east. Different scholars then delve into each of these broad regions. They explore the manuscript styles and idiosyncrasies of each over many centuries and each region’s approach in manuscripts to different customs and liturgies. It’s a particularly dense and meaty chapter, superbly illustrated.

Other chapters address the complex iconography of Jewish manuscripts, the portrayal of women and families, the Jewish interpretation of the universe and spiritual realms in manuscripts, the evolution of images of the yearned-for return to Jerusalem, the change brought to manuscript illumination with the development of printing and modern interpretations of the illuminated manuscript tradition.

But the illuminated manuscripts themselves stand center stage in *Skies of Parchment / Seas of Ink*, though this is decidedly no mere pretty coffee table book. At times it’s almost hard to focus on the texts, so distracting are the hundreds of stunning images that preserve such a long and rich history. But it would be foolish to assume that, because of the dazzling and plentiful color illustrations gracing *Skies of Parchment / Seas of Ink*, a wealth of Jewish illuminated manuscripts survive at various repositories. Such, alas, is far from the case. Epstein notes that “Because of the depredations of book burnings, confiscations, and censorship, and the vagaries of expulsions and migrations, relatively little is left to
us of what was presumably an exceedingly rich and sophisticated tradition.” His retelling of the burning of 24 oxcarts’ worth of Jewish manuscripts – each cartload about the size of a small room – in thirteenth-century Paris is horrific: “In that one tragic conflagration, nearly every Jewish book in the whole of the Ile-de-France – a great center of Jewish learning – was utterly destroyed.” This instance was certainly far from solitary, too – we’ve all seen film clips showing mounds of books being burned in Germany not too many decades ago.

One of the greatest pleasures in reviewing books for Manuscripts is the chance to enlarge horizons. My knowledge of Judaica has primarily been confined to the historical Jewish autograph material we handle, so Skies of Parchment / Seas of Ink presented a steep learning curve. It’s a beautifully put together volume, though, that’s well worth the effort.

Some Shakespearian Redux: This column never reviews the same title twice, needless to say. In the Summer 2014 Manuscripts issue I addressed George Koppelman and Daniel Wechsler’s Shakespeare’s Beehive: An Annotated Elizabethan Dictionary Comes to Light, their exciting and painstakingly argued elaboration of why their copy of a sixteenth-century dictionary belonged to no less than the Bard of Stratford himself – intriguing, plausible, but ultimately unprovable in this reviewer’s opinion and therefore somehow unsatisfying. Yet only one year out Koppelman and Wechsler have made enough additional discoveries about their copy of John Baret’s 1580 Alvearie, or Quadruple Dictionarie that they’ve come out with a second edition, revised and expanded to include two pivotal chapters and other new material–
Shakespeare's Beehive

AN ANNOTATED ELIZABETHAN DICTIONARY COMES TO LIGHT

BY

George Koppelman & Daniel Wechsler

SECOND EDITION REVISED & EXPANDED

AXLEYTREE BOOKS
NEW YORK
something that normally doesn’t occur until many years after any title – so readers of *Shakespeare’s Beehive* may wish to investigate this most up to date edition.

“A second edition became a necessity as a result of research that we conducted over the course of the past year,” state the authors in *A Note to the Reader*, “evidence that we believe is important to share and helps to solidify and advance the credibility of our arguments and our claim.” This second edition is their chance to make their case more fully.

One of the two new chapters that Koppelman and Wechsler pin high hopes on is “Missing Leaves, and the Curious Case of John Frith.” The authors’ belated discovery that their copy of Baret was missing two preliminary leaves bearing three printed poems explained five previously unexplained handwritten margin comments that clearly reference the missing poems. Two individual words and two unusual word combinations bear margin annotations near those words in the dictionary itself, and the authors pinpoint intriguing specific uses of those words and phrases in various Shakespeare works. Most intriguing of all, the phrase “frith and feeld” appeared in one of these missing poems. John Frith was the elderly priest who officiated at Shakespeare’s marriage to Anne Hathaway, so the authors theorize that Shakespeare picked up on this use of the word “frith” and its unusual coupling with “feeld” and “extend[ed it] in the most dramatic and potentially extraordinary of ways” in his works. They make an intricate argument that only someone for whom the word *frith* held special meaning would have used this word together with *feeld* in various ways in published works, as did Shakespeare. They conclude, “Would it be sensible to try to explain away all of this as typical of
other Elizabethan books with early modern annotations, and suggest the multiple lines angling toward some of the most frequently speculated pieces from Shakespeare’s life as being nothing more than a product of coincidence?”

“Beyond Words” presents the authors belief that with such a preponderance of annotations regarding individual words and unusual word combinations with direct Shakespearian connections only by moving beyond words (and they note “a large number can be picked apart as trivial”) and weighing not only their sheer quantity but their variety and complexity can the case for Shakespeare as annotator of this book be accepted as unquestionable. After all, “it is the sum that is the driving force behind this study,” they emphasize. The real purpose of this chapter is to plea that “Even apart from any biographical details that our annotations hint at” – and there are plenty – “we believe that enough ‘Shakespearian textual evidence’ has been presented to give way to what a deeper scientific examination using modern technology could yield.” There, it seems to me, is the rub. The authors need the scholarly Shakespeare community to take a stance – and with luck stand alongside them in their belief. Otherwise, their bold claim, no matter how well argued, merely treads water.

I like to think this book (as with its predecessor) shows it is published by antiquarian booksellers – folks who profess to know a thing or three about book aesthetics and care a great deal about design and layout. From the paper stock and page arrangement to the lovely textured heavy stock cover done French style (that is, with front and rear flaps such as you find on a dust jacket), Shakespeare’s Beehive conveys the authors’ love of the printed word on paper. It pains me to write this, but as handsome as the 2014
hardbound first edition of Shakespeare’s Beehive is and despite my strong preference for hardcover over softcover, curious readers may well prefer this 2015 softcover version given the additional material. Thankfully, this Sophie’s Choice decision won’t have to be made by this reviewer.

But does this new edition “seal the deal” of Shakespeare’s ownership of this volume? Short of the miraculous discovery of a full letter indisputably penned by Shakespeare in which he mentions his copy of Baret and offers distinguishing details specific to this copy (spoiler alert: Ain’t gonna happen), this fascinating copy of Baret’s Alvearie will forever remain the most provocative Shakespearian attribution in existence – in my humble opinion. Do I wish it were so? Absolutely. Baret’s Alvearie is not just some book with Shakespeare’s questioned ownership signature – it bears no ownership signature at all – but a volume that bears abundant annotations which conceivably shed significant light on Shakespeare’s creative thought process. But clicking my red-stockinged heels together three times and repeating “Shakespeare owned this book” won’t bring us to Kansas. At this point it would represent a leap of faith, though Koppelman and Wechsler have done a thorough job of arguing their case. Until outside literary or scientific corroboration chime in decisively in the affirmative, I’ll be abstaining but watching eagerly.
Maass Research Grant

The Manuscript Society encourages applications for its Richard Maass Memorial Research Grant, available to graduate students currently enrolled at universities and colleges that are institutional members of the Society. Preference is given to doctoral students. The award, up to $5,000, supports research expenses directly related to the use of original manuscripts, such as travel to manuscript repositories, photocopy expenses, and other research fees. Applications will be accepted up to February 2016, with final decisions made by mid-March 2016.

The Society issues the award to the sponsoring institution, which disburses it to the recipient. Upon completing their research, the recipient is required to submit a detailed report to the Society’s Scholarship Committee. The recipient also agrees to recognize the Society’s support in any publication resulting from their research.

Interested students should send a letter of application, resume and anticipated budgetary needs, along with a narrative of their intended research in no more than three double-spaced pages. Applicants are strongly advised to explain how original manuscripts would be central to their needs. In addition, two or three strong letters of recommendation should accompany the proposal, including one from the applicant’s thesis or dissertation advisor. Application details are available at www.manuscript.org/2015maass.html

The Maass Grant is named in memory of humanitarian, benefactor, and legendary collector Richard Maass, a founder of the Manuscript Society.

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