

Recovery of Manuscripts

OUR ancient classics had a very narrow escape from total annihilation. Many, we know, have perished: many we possess are but fragments; and chance, blind arbiter of the works of genius, has given us some not of the highest value; which, however, have proved very useful, serving as a test to show the pedantry of those who adore antiquity not from true feeling, but from traditional prejudice.

One reason, writes the learned compiler of *L'Esprit des Croisades*, why we have lost a great number of ancient authors, was the conquest of Egypt by the Saracens, which deprived Europe of the use of the *papyrus*. The ignorance of that age could find no substitute; they knew no other expedient but writing on parchment, which became every day more scarce and costly. Ignorance and barbarism unfortunately seized on Roman manuscripts, and industriously defaced pages once imagined to have been immortal! The most elegant compositions of classic Rome were converted into the psalms of a breviary, or the prayers of a missal. Livy and Tacitus “hide their diminished heads” to preserve the legend of a saint, and immortal truths were converted into clumsy fictions. It happened that the most voluminous authors were the greatest sufferers; these

were preferred, because their volume being the greatest, it most profitably repaid their destroying industry, and furnished ampler scope for future transcription. A Livy or a Diodorus was preferred to the smaller works of Cicero or Horace; and it is to this circumstance that Juvenal, Persius, and Martial have come down to us entire, rather probably than to these pious personages preferring their obscenities, as some have accused them. Not long ago at Rome, a part of a book of Livy was found, between the lines of a parchment but half effaced, on which they had substituted a book of the Bible; and the recent discovery of Cicero's *de Republica* shows the fate of ancient manuscripts.

That, however, the monks had not in high veneration the *profane* authors, appears by a facetious anecdote. To read the classics was considered as a very idle recreation, and some held them in great horror. To distinguish them from other books, they invented a disgraceful sign; when a monk asked for a pagan author, after making the general sign they used in their manual and silent language when they wanted a book, he added a particular one, which consisted in scratching under his ear, as a dog, which feels an itching, scratches himself in that place with his paw—because, said they, an

unbeliever is compared to a dog! In this manner they expressed an *itching* for those *dogs*, Virgil or Horace!

There have been ages when for the possession of a manuscript, some would transfer an estate; or leave in pawn for its loan hundreds of golden crowns; and when even the sale or loan of a manuscript was considered of such importance as to have been solemnly registered by public acts. Absolute as was Louis XI, he could not obtain the ms. of Rasis, an Arabian writer, to make a copy, from the library of the faculty of Paris, without pledging a hundred golden crowns; and the president of his treasury, charged with this commission, sold part of his plate to make the deposit. For the loan of a volume of Avicenna, a baron offered a pledge of ten marks of silver, which was refused: because it was not considered equal to the risk incurred of losing a volume of Avicenna! These events occurred in 1471. One cannot but smile at an anterior period, when a countess of Anjou bought a favourite book of homilies, for two hundred sheep, some skins of martens, and bushels of wheat and rye.

In these times, manuscripts were important articles of commerce; they were excessively scarce, and preserved with the utmost care. Usurers themselves considered them as precious objects for pawn. A student of Pavia,

who was reduced by his debaucheries, raised a new fortune by leaving in pawn a manuscript of a body of law; and a grammarian, who was ruined by a fire, rebuilt his house with two small volumes of Cicero.

At the restoration of letters, the researches of literary men were chiefly directed to this point; every part of Europe and Greece was ransacked, and the glorious end considered, there was something sublime in this humble industry, which often produced a lost author of antiquity, and gave one more classic to the world. This occupation was carried on with enthusiasm, and a kind of mania possessed many who exhausted their fortunes in distant voyages and profuse prices. In reading the correspondence of the learned Italians of these times, much of which has descended to us, their adventures of manuscript-hunting are very amusing, and their raptures, their congratulations, or at times their condolence, and even their censures, are all immoderate and excessive. The acquisition of a province would not have given so much satisfaction as the discovery of an author little known, or not known at all. "Oh, great gain! Oh, unexpected felicity! I intreat you, my Poggio, send me the manuscript as soon as possible, that I may see it before I die!" exclaims Aretino, in a letter overflowing with enthusiasm, on Poggio's discovery of a copy of

Quintilian. Some of the half-witted, who joined in this great hunt, were often thrown out, and some paid high for manuscripts not authentic; the knave played on the bungling amateur of manuscripts, whose credulity was greater than his purse, But even among the learned, much ill blood was inflamed ; he who had been most successful in acquiring manuscripts was envied by the less fortunate, and the glory of possessing a manuscript of Cicero seemed to approximate to that of being its author. It is curious to observe that in these vast importations into Italy of manuscripts from Asia, John Aurispa, who brought many hundreds of Greek manuscripts, laments that he had chosen more profane than sacred writers; which circumstance he tells us was owing to the Greeks, who would not so easily part with theological works, but they did not highly value profane writers!

These manuscripts were discovered in the obscurest recesses of monasteries; they were not always imprisoned in libraries, but rotting in oblivion: in dark unfrequented corners with rubbish. It required no less ingenuity to find out places where to examine, than to understand the value of the acquisition, when obtained. An universal ignorance then prevailed in the knowledge of ancient writers. A scholar of those times gave

the first rank among the Latin writers to one Valerius, whether he meant Martial or Maximus is uncertain; he placed Plato and Tully among the poets, and imagined that Ennius and Statius were cotemporaries. A library of six hundred volumes was then considered as an extraordinary collection.

Among those whose lives were devoted to this purpose, Poggio the Florentine stands distinguished; but he complains that his zeal was not assisted by the great. He found under a heap of rubbish in a decayed coffer, in a tower belonging to the monastery of St. Gallo, the work of Quintilian. He is indignant at its forlorn situation; at least, he cries, it should have been preserved in the library of the monks; but I found it *in teterrimo quodam et obscuro carcere*—and to his great joy drew it out of its grave! The monks have been complimented as the preservers of literature, but by facts like the present, their real affection may be doubted.

The most valuable copy of Tacitus, of whom so much is wanting, was likewise discovered in a monastery of Westphalia. It is a curious circumstance in literary history, that we should owe Tacitus to this single copy; for the Roman emperor of that name had copies of the works of his illustrious ancestor placed in all the libraries of the empire, and every year had ten copies tran-

scribed; but the Roman libraries seem to have been all destroyed, and the imperial protection availed nothing against the teeth of time.

The original manuscript of Justinian's code was discovered by the Pisans, accidentally, when they took a city in Calabria; that vast code of laws had been in a manner unknown from the time of that emperor. This curious book was brought to Pisa, and when Pisa was taken by the Florentines, was transferred to Florence, where it is still preserved.

It sometimes happened that manuscripts were discovered in the last agonies of existence. Papirius Masson found, in the house of a bookbinder of Lyons, the works of Agobart; the mechanic was on the point of using the manuscripts to line the covers of his books. A page of the second decade of Livy it is said was found by a man of letters in the parchment of his battledore, while he was amusing himself in the country. He hastened to the maker of the battledore—but arrived too late. The man had finished the last page of Livy—about a week before!

Many works have undoubtedly perished in this manuscript state, By a petition of Dr. Dee to Queen Mary, in the Cotton library, it appears that Cicero's treatise *de Republica* was once extant in this country. Huet ob-

serves that Petronius was probably entire in the days of John of Salisbury, who quotes fragments, not now to be found in the remains of the Roman bard. Raimond Soranzo, a lawyer in the papal court, possessed two books of Cicero on *Glory*, which he presented to Petrarch, who lent them to a poor aged man of letters, formerly his preceptor. Urged by extreme want, the old man pawned them, and returning home died suddenly without having revealed where he had left them. They have never been recovered. Petrarch speaks of them with ecstasy, and tells us that he had studied them perpetually. Two centuries afterwards this treatise on *Glory* by Cicero was mentioned in a catalogue of books bequeathed to a monastery of nuns, but when inquired after was missing; it was supposed that Petrus Alcyonius, physician to that household, purloined it, and after transcribing as much of it as he could into his own writings, had destroyed the original. Alcyonius, in his book *de Exilio*, the critics observed, had many splendid passages which stood isolated in his work, and were quite above his genius. The beggar, or in this case the thief, was detected by mending his rags with patches of purple and gold.

In this age of manuscript, there is reason to believe, that when a man of letters accidentally obtained an

unknown work, he did not make the fairest use of it, and cautiously concealed it from his contemporaries. Leonard Aretino, a distinguished scholar at the dawn of modern literature, having found a Greek manuscript of Procopius *de Bello Gothico*, translated it into Latin, and published the work, but concealing the author's name, it passed as his own, till another manuscript of the same work being dug out of its grave, the fraud of Aretino was apparent. Barbosa, a bishop of Ugento, in 1649, has printed among his works a treatise, which, it is said, he obtained by having perceived one of his domestics bringing in a fish rolled in a leaf of written paper, which his curiosity led him to examine. He was sufficiently interested to run out and search the fish market, till he found the manuscript out of which it had been torn. He published it under the title *de Officio Episcopi*. Machiavelli acted more adroitly in a similar case; a manuscript of the Apothegms of the ancients by Plutarch having fallen into his hands, he selected those which pleased him the best, and put them into the mouth of his hero Castrucio Castricani.

In more recent times, we might collect many curious anecdotes concerning manuscripts. Sir Robert Cotton one day at his tailor's, discovered that the man was holding in his hand, ready to cut up for measures—an

original Magna Charta, with all its appendages of seals and signatures. He bought the singular curiosity for a trifle, and recovered in this manner what had long been given over for lost! This anecdote is told by Colomiés, who long resided, and died in this country. An original Magna Charta is preserved in the Cottonian library; it exhibits marks of dilapidation, but whether from the invisible scythe of time, or the humble scissors of the tailor, I leave to archaiological inquiry.

Cardinal Granvelle carefully preserved all his letters; he left behind him several chests filled with a prodigious quantity, written in different languages, commented, noted, and underlined by his own hand. These curious manuscripts, after his death, were left in a garret to the mercy of the rain and the rats. Five or six of these chests the steward sold to the grocers. It was then that a discovery was made of this treasure. Several learned men occupied themselves in collecting as many of these literary relics as they possibly could. What were saved formed eighty thick folios. Among these original letters are found great numbers written by almost all the crowned heads in Europe, with instructions for ambassadors, and many other state-papers.

Recently a valuable secret history by Sir George Mackenzie, the king's advocate in Scotland, has been res-

cued from a mass of waste paper sold to a grocer, who had the good sense to discriminate it, and communicated this curious memorial to Dr. M'Crie; the original, in the handwriting of its author, has been deposited in the advocates' library. There is an hiatus, which contained the history of six years. This work excited inquiry after the rest of the mss., which were found to be nothing more than the sweepings of an attorney's office.

Montaigne's Journal of his Travels into Italy have been but recently published. A prebendary of Perigord, travelling through this province to make researches relative to its history, arrived at the ancient *château* of Montaigne, in possession of a descendant of this great man. He inquired for the archives, if there had been any. He was shown an old worm-eaten coffer, which had long held papers untouched by the incurious generations of Montaigne. The prebendary, with philosophical intrepidity, stifled himself in clouds of dust, and at length drew out the original manuscript of the travels of Montaigne. Two-thirds of the work are in the handwriting of Montaigne, and the rest is written by a servant, who served as his secretary, and who always speaks of his master in the third person. But he must have written what Montaigne dictated, as the expressions and the egotisms are all Montaigne's. The bad

writing and orthography made it almost unintelligible. It proves also, says the editor, how true is Montaigne's observation, that he was very negligent in the correction of his works.

Our ancestors were great hidiers of manuscripts: Dr. Dee's singular mss. were found in the secret drawer of a chest, which had passed through many hands undiscovered; and that vast collection of state-papers of Thurloe's, the secretary of Cromwell, which formed about seventy volumes in the original manuscripts, accidentally fell out of the false ceiling of some chambers in Lincoln's-Inn.

A considerable portion of Lady Mary Wortley Montague's letters I discovered in the hands of an attorney. There are now many valuable manuscripts in the family papers of the descendants of celebrated persons; but posthumous publications of this kind are usually made from the most sordid motives: discernment, and taste, would only be detrimental to the views of bulky publishers.