Imag(in)ing Latin Literature: Digitized Manuscripts and Book History

This paper highlights how images of Latin literary manuscripts (I focus on one in particular) can offer assorted ways to introduce viewers to the field of book history and its attendant contemplation of elements of literary creation, circulation, and preservation. Such introductions also facilitate exposure to varied disciplines within and adjacent to the study of Latin literary texts, including Latin orthography, textual criticism, paleography, and the economies of literary production. I assert throughout this presentation that a greater appreciation of the various forms of labor that have permitted a given Latin text's creation and survival— appreciation acquired through close (digital) encounters with Latin manuscripts and other book historical methods—offers avenues for expanding the appeal of Latin literature to a wider audience.

A recent definition of the discipline of book history states that the field "aspires to study the historical consequences of the production, dissemination and reception of texts, in all their material forms, across all societies and in all ages" (Raven 2017: 1). This definition allows modern readers to recognize that that even though Roman authors did not, for many of the years in which they were composing literature, create or distribute their works in the codex format with which modern readers identify "books," "book history" nevertheless includes wax tablets, papyrus rolls, and parchment notebooks, along with the labor, professions, and technology that enable the publication and circulation of texts (Raven 2017: 54).

A modern technological form associated with book history is the International Image Interoperability Framework, or "IIIF." IIIF is a widely used set of open standards by which libraries and museums make available high-quality images of their collections in ways that

permit interactive engagement and detailed annotations ("How It Works," 2014). Images of the earliest extant textual witness to Book 3 of Ovid's *Amores*, a late 9th c. manuscript known as "Parisinus Latinus 8242" or, more simply manuscript *P*, are available through the IIIF server at the Bibliothèque national de France. Throughout this paper, I use images of this manuscript along with relevant descriptions written using a IIIF annotation tool named "Annonnatate."

If we imagine our students presented with annotated images from this 9th c. manuscript as opposed to a typed version available for free on the internet, their interpretation of the text, its history, and its cultural value may be enriched. They may notice, for starters, the heading INCIPIT LIBER - TERTIUS ("THE THIRD BOOK BEGINS") appearing in the middle of the page below, in smaller script, EXPLICIT LIBER SECUNDUS. Book Two thus ends with a declaration that "the second book is unrolled." Readers presented with this image have an opportunity to discuss the fact that Ovid's original work would have likely devoted a separate papyrus roll to each "book." The codex format, on the other hand, accommodates works longer than those of a conventional papyrus roll, permitting this 9th c. parchment volume to contain multiple poetic "books."

Viewers proceeding to read the first verses of the first poem of Book 3 will also see that the second word in the manuscript, printed in most texts as "vetus," is here written "v&tus" because the scribe used an ampersand for the "et" sequence of letters. Yet the Latin word for "and" (i.e., *et*) was not intended, even though the same symbol appears as the very next word to mean "and." The generous margins of the text reveal that this shorthand was unlikely related to any interest in saving space. An alternative explanation is that the *et*/ampersand ligature is a relic of the relatively recent reintroduction of spaces between words—a practice elsewhere ignored in

this manuscript, such as in the very next verse (3.1.2) where *inesseloco* appears without word breaks.

In exploring these and similar questions, viewers are more apt to imagine an actual person holding a writing instrument while copying this poem some 900 years after Ovid first composed it. Or to think about how many calves would have been necessary to produce the parchment for a volume of nearly one hundred pages. Or to consider what it took for this 9th c. book to survive to the present. In short, through encounters with this witness, modern readers can achieve a better understanding of the human labor and technological innovations that led to the production and ongoing preservation of these and similar books. We also can understand that "Ovid" was a name that warranted the expense of the book's creation and its ongoing preservation, thus encouraging additional exploration of this book's history—and of "book history" writ large—from antiquity to the present.

Works Cited

"How It Works." (n.d.). Retrieved October 1, 2024, from https://iiif.io/get-started/how-iiif-works/

Raven, J. 2017. *What Is the History of the Book?* Cambridge: Polity Press.