

Pietro Bembo

A Renaissance Courtier Who Had His Cake and Ate It Too

Ed Quattrocchi

This past March 11, at the Caxton Club Friday luncheon, I identified a selection of seminal books in the development of early modern Europe. My time limit of 45 minutes allowed me to talk about only a few books published in the time period from Gutenberg's Bible printed in 1455 to Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623. Neither would time permit me to expatiate on several works that deserved more commentary. The *Caxtonian* has invited me to do so in its pages, and this is the first of an occasional series I hope will shed light on some of these fascinating books.

Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* has historic significance not only because of its importance and that of its author at the height of the Italian Renaissance, but especially to me because of the rather serendipitous way that I acquired a first edition of the book, published by Aldus Manutius in 1505. About 20 years ago I used to browse regularly at Abraham's used bookstore in Evanston. One day Arnold Glass, the proprietor, nonchalantly motioned over his shoulder to a pile of books printed in Latin and Italian dated between 1500 and 1700 that I might care to look at. None was familiar to me, but I recognized a few titles. He offered me the nine books in the pile for \$900, which seemed like a reasonable offer, even though I had no idea how much the books were worth. I said okay, wrote him a check for \$900, and walked home with the books in a shopping bag.



Portrait of Pietro Bembo as a young man, by Raphael.

It was only a couple of days later that I had the leisure to examine my cache. Although none of the others was particularly noteworthy, one book stood out as special because I recognized the famous anchor-and-dolphin emblem of the Aldine Press and its signature italic font. It turned out to be a first edition of *Gli Asolani*, one of the most popular dialogues about Platonic love written in the 16th century.

Bembo prefaces the work with a heartfelt dedication to Lucrezia Borgia, the infa-

mously maligned daughter of Pope Alexander VI. It became an instant best seller and was reprinted at least seven times during the next seventeen years. Bembo revised the text in 1530, for the most part improving it, but eliminating the famous letter to Lucrezia. This revision is known as the second edition. By 1600 there were at least twenty-two Italian editions, one Spanish and seven French editions, which should qualify it as being one of the most popular books of the Renaissance.

The book interests me not only because of its influence in 16th-century Europe, but also because of its dedicatory letter and Bembo's working relationship with Aldus Manutius. Before publishing *Gli Asolani* in 1505, Aldus had published Bembo's *De Aetna* in 1495. This dialogue describes Bembo's ascent of Mount Etna while a student in Messina during a trip to Sicily to study Greek with the noted humanist, Constantine Lascaris.

One of the earliest books printed by Aldus with Francesco Griffo's first Roman font, it has come to be recognized by bibliophiles as the first modern book and the source of the Monotype typeface known as Bembo. So famous did the type become that it influenced typeface design for generations; many designers in the Caxton Club would immediately recognize it. Among the souvenirs he brought back to Venice was a valuable manuscript of Lascaris' that pro-

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vided Aldus with a text for his first Greek grammar, published in 1495. At that time Bembo worked with Aldus editing his famous five-volume edition of the *Works of Aristotle*.

The Lascaris manuscript was one of many that Bembo obtained for Aldus. Pietro, like Petrarch, was a serious book collector. He gave Aldus other gifts of his time, talent and ideas, like an antique Roman coin from the reign of Vespasian, with an engraved image of the anchor-and-dolphin, from which Jean Grolier drew Aldus' most famous of all printer's marks with the motto, "Make haste slowly." In addition Bembo worked in Aldus' shop as a scholar/editor. He introduced methods and standards as well as punctuation we now take for granted, through which he wrote one of the earliest Italian grammars and assisted in establishing the Tuscan dialect as the Italian literary language.

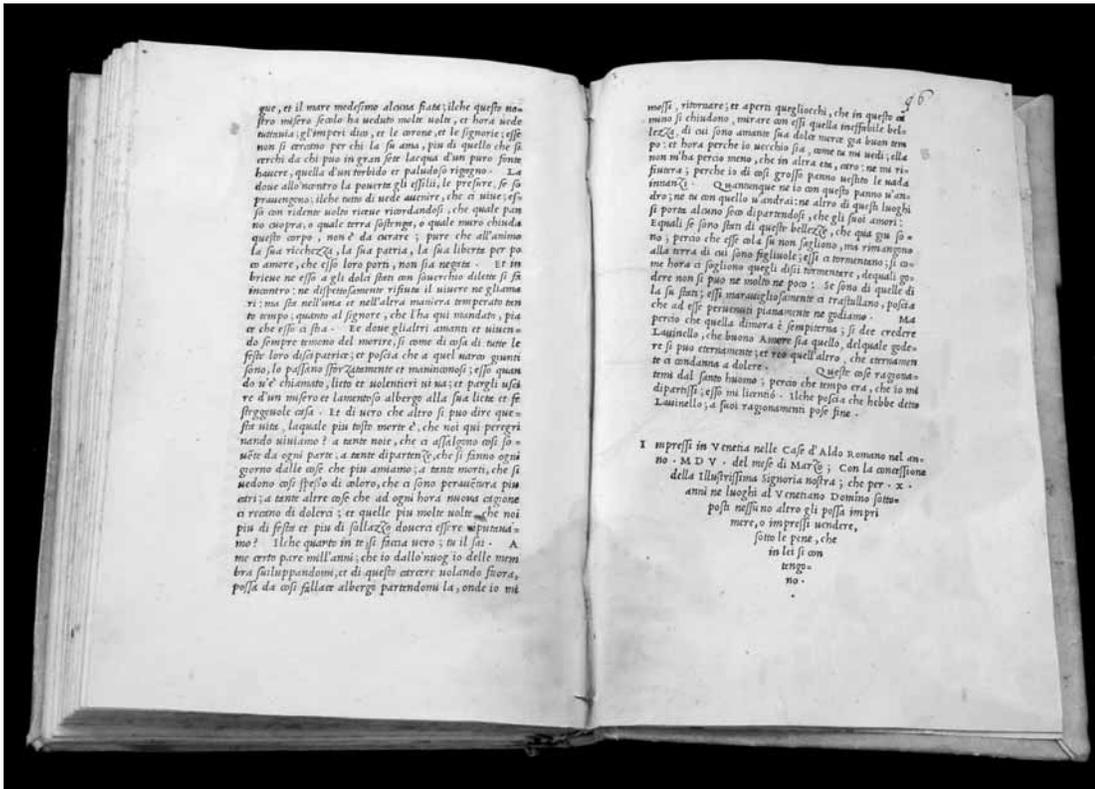
Bembo edited Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, the first book printed in the vernacular in Aldus' new italic type (designed to work well on octavo-size pages) in 1501. Petrarch, considered to be the father of Christian humanism, was a role model for both Aldus and Bembo. Born in 1304, while Dante was composing his *Commedia*, Petrarch, with Boccaccio, followed Dante as Italy's greatest poets, and he was also a scholar and bibliophile. In search of old Latin classics and manuscripts, he traveled through France, Germany, Italy, and Spain and recorded his experiences in journals as well as in his poetry. One of his journal entries describes his ascent up Mont Ventoux, which quite likely inspired Bembo's description of his ascent of Mt. Etna in *De Aetna*. Petrarch undertook his famous climb in 1336 after reading Livy's account of how Philip of Macedon climbed Mount Hermus in order to find out if he could see the Black Sea and the Adriatic at once from its peak, for which feat Petrarch has been called the first modern mountain-climber.

After publishing Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, the pocket-size books allowed Aldus to disseminate this popular Italian book of poetry throughout Europe as well as prized editions of the Greek and Latin classics. The following year Aldus published, and Bembo edited, Dante's *Commedia*, which was to become the standard edition of that most popular Italian poem for the next 300 years. Prior to the publication of this edition, most printed editions of the *Commedia* were encrusted with the commentary of Cristoforo Landino. In 1481 Nicolo di Lorenzo published in Florence the

most famous of these texts. It is one of the most monumental illustrated books of the 15th century. The publisher brought together one of the greatest artists, one of its most renowned scholar/critics of the 15th century and a skilled Florentine artisan, under the patronage of Lorenzo de Medici (the Magnificent). In this folio edition Landino's commentary printed in the margins is about five times the length of the poem itself. It gained fame, not only because of Landino's Commentary and Lorenzo's patronage, but also because of the edition's association with Sandro Botticelli. Originally Botticelli planned to provide headpiece illustrations for each of the 100 cantos in Dante's poem. The designs were to be executed by Baccio Baldini, a Florentine goldsmith and engraver. But the 1481 edition has only 19 of the 100 sketches that Botticelli eventually finished to accompany each of the cantos in Dante's masterpiece.

Despite its beauty and Landino's learned commentary, the 1481 edition, and several other editions with Landino's commentary, went out of fashion after Aldus' edition came out in 1502. Aldus and Bembo rejected the old scholastic practice of extended exegesis. They wanted the poet to speak for himself unencumbered by the interpretations of a secondary commentator. Bembo brought to the editing of the text a new philologic acumen unprecedented for vernacular works. Along with the many editorial innovations, he circumvented the corrupted 15th-century manuscript used by Landino by basing his text upon an authoritative 14th-century manuscript, a gift of Boccaccio's to Petrarch, that had found its way into the formidable library of Bembo's father, Bernardo. Bembo copied out the entire text in his own hand and presented the copy to Aldus for printing. Lorenzo's 1481 edition and Aldus' 1502 edition, along with Bembo's *Gli Asolani*, can be viewed in the Special Collections of the Newberry Library.

While Bembo was helping Aldus edit the *Works of Aristotle* and the *Commedia*, his ideas for *Gli Asolani* were germinating. This dialogue on love among courtiers and their ladies in a garden in Asolo is imitative of Boccaccio's *Decameron* in form, but it lacks Boccaccio's bawdy humor and racy style. Its wordy discursive philosophic discussion reflects the conventional Neoplatonic views on love current in the Renaissance, of which Bembo was a leading expositor. Asolo, the setting of the dialogue, like Urbino—used in Cas-



Colophon spread from the author's copy of *Gli Asolani*.

tiglion's *The Courtier* of 1528—is a beautiful Italian town made famous because of its association with the art and poetry of the high Renaissance. The Italian word *asolare*, “the leisurely passing of time without purpose,” was coined by Bembo. Robert Browning spent much time in Asolo and loved the town so much that he entitled the final volume of his poetry, *Asolando*, which was published in 1889, on the day of his death. The *Works of Robert Browning*, published in 1895, has an engraved picture on the title page of “Asolo: Brownings Italian Home.”

Gli Asolani is less engaging, lively, and philosophical than *The Courtier*, but the inspiration and model for Castiglione undoubtedly came from Bembo. Castiglione had been working on his dialogue for more than 20 years before the Aldine press published it 13 years after the death of Aldus Manutius. *The Courtier* recounts the discussion during four evenings at the court of Urbino in March, 1507. Throughout the four days of conversation Pietro Bembo, as a character in the fictional dialogue, displays the wit and charm of the ideal courtier. He is a master of raillery and a man of the world who does not take himself too seriously. But at the end of the

last evening, when the Duchess assigns him the task of explaining what kind of love is suitable for the courtier, Bembo turns philosophical. He delivers a highly serious, at times almost mystical exposition of the Platonic doctrine of love as understood by Renaissance humanists: the divine origin of beauty, the distinction between the worlds of sense and intellect, the various steps by which the sensual love of one lady is finally transformed into the spiritual love of God. This most famous segment of *The Courtier* reveals Pietro's mature reflections on Platonic love more profoundly and succinctly than his youthful exposition of his ideas in *Gli Asolani*. Bembo's influence on Castiglione is corroborated by the fact that when *The Courtier* was published by the Aldine Press in 1528, Bembo helped his good friend edit his masterpiece by reading and criticizing the text.

There is a notable irony in Bembo's role as a defender of Platonic love, because of what came to be known about his personal life. Between 1495 and 1507 when he was working with Aldus on Aristotle's *Works* and Dante's *Commedia*, as well as framing his dialogue in *Gli Asolani*, he must have fallen in and out of love with at least three women. Furthermore, both in the *Gli*

Asolani and in his role as a character in the dialogue of *The Courtier*, he is unquestionably a champion of the beauty, intelligence and virtue of women. The disparity between Bembo's idealization of Platonic love and his worldly and sensual personal life is epitomized in his relationship with Lucrezia Borgia, whom he met and wooed at the court of Ferrara in 1503.

Lucrezia was the daughter of the Spanish cardinal, Rodrigo Borgia, later Pope Alexander VI, and his mistress Vannozza Catanei. The Borgias were notorious for their ruthless pursuit of power in Renaissance Italy, and Lucrezia has often been represented by her many

detractors in the turmoil of the time as one of the most grasping of the family. Later historians in retrospect are more sympathetic, but she lives on, like her family, as a byword for depravity and excess; Victor Hugo wrote a play about her and Donizetti an opera, and she has appeared in many lurid novels. But her unsavory reputation is far in excess of her reputed villainy. She apparently was the pawn of her scheming father and bloodthirsty brother, Cesare, whom Machiavelli featured in the seventh chapter of the *Prince* as the epitome of a prince in part because of his “splendid wickedness.”

After 1503 Lucrezia's reputation was rehabilitated, as the Duchess of the court of Ferrara with her marriage to her third husband, Alfonso d'Este. There she gained a reputation as a celebrated patron of the arts, presiding over one of the most famed assemblages of poets, painters, musicians, and philosophers in the whole of Italy. Her husband, though mainly a warrior preoccupied continually with the intrigues and wars of Italy and Europe, was supportive of the court luminaries and of Lucrezia's patronage. Alfonso was the grandfather of Alfonso II, designated as the shadowy and

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imperious Duke in Browning's famous dramatic dialogue, "My Last Duchess."

Six years after her romantic interlude with Pietro, his friend and publisher of *Gli Asolani*, Aldus Manutius, fled to Ferrara in 1509 from war-riven Venice. For four years he had wandered the cities of northern Italy in search of a safe haven and found sanctuary with the Duchess at the court of Ferrara. About that time Lucrezia made an offer to establish the academy that Aldus had striven to found for most of his adult years, but the plan was never realized (Lowry, Martin, *The World of Aldus Manutius: Business and Scholarship in Renaissance Venice*, London: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 202-203). She encouraged Aldus to publish the poems of Tito and Ercole Strozzi, many dedicated to her, which eventually appeared in Venice in 1513. The book has a dedicatory preface by Aldus to "the Divine Lucretia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara" in which he refers to their common desire to establish an academy at Ferrara. Three years later,



An older Bembo, in a portrait by Titian.

Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, on which he had been working since 1506, was first published in Ferrara, with frequent, laudatory references to Lucrezia: "She shall ever grow in beauty, merit, fortune and good repute, just like a tender plant in soft earth." (*Lucrezia Borgia*, Sarah Bradford, Viking Press, NY, NY, 2004, p. 332) Aldus' relationship with Lucrezia must have been

more than casual, for he named her executor of his will, although he changed this in a later revision.

How then can a modern reader rightly interpret and appreciate the liaison between Lucrezia, the vixen, and Pietro, the renowned philosopher/poet and later a distinguished Cardinal of the Church? To answer this question provided me a sufficient motivation for reading *Gli Asolani* in light of Bembo's dedicatory letter to Lucrezia. The dedicatory letter, read apart from the historic



This Titian is thought by some to be a portrait of Lucrezia.

context, would not suggest that Bembo's preference for Platonic love over profane love is hypocritical. Bembo had met Lucrezia in 1503, when she appears to have read at least part of *Gli Asolani*. When he left Ferrara at the end of 1503, he promised to send her the whole, but the death of his brother, Carlo, on December 30, threw all his affairs into confusion. It was not until August 1, 1504, that he sent the work to her with the dedication. Bembo laments the loss of his beloved brother and compares his loss to Lucrezia's recently suffered losses, probably the deaths of her father and her child. Only in the final sentences of the dedication does Bembo pour out affection for her and intimates at their hidden love. He addresses her as a miracle of inner virtue as well as of external beauty. In the following months, Lucrezia urged Pietro to publish *Gli Asolani*.

If this were the only letter by Pietro to Lucrezia that has come down to us, its content would be consonant with his lofty ideals of Platonic love, but such is not the case. Although they parted company when Bembo's presence in Ferrara became too precarious, their correspondence, carried on over a period of 16 years, reveals more than a Platonic yearning. The originals of these letters are in the Ambrosiana Library in Milan, with other mementos of his friendship with Lucrezia. On display with the letters is a gold and crystal monstrosity, with a long lock of Lucrezia's hair, which Bembo kept inside a folded sheet of vellum secured with ribbon. In 1816 Byron visited

Seminal Books in the Development of Early Modern Europe

In the event that you missed Quattrocchi's March presentation, here is the list of books he selected:

1. The Gutenberg Bible
2. *The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*, William Caxton
3. *La Commedia*, Dante Alighieri
4. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Aldus Manutius
5. *Gli Asolani*, Pietro Bembo
6. *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus
8. *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli
9. *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, Erasmus
10. Luther's 95 Theses
11. The Reformation Bible; The German New Testament
12. The Polyglot Bibles
13. *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, Nicolaus Copernicus
14. *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Giorgio Vasari
15. *The Holy Bible... Newly Translated out of the Originall Tongues*, Robert Barker
16. *The Starry Messenger*; Galileo
17. The First Folio of The Complete Works of Shakespeare



The unique anchor-and-dolphin press mark of the Aldine Press, as it appears in the author's copy of *Gli Asolani*.

the Ambrosiana and regarded them “the prettiest love letters in the world”; he committed some of them to memory because he was not allowed to make copies, and when the librarian was out of the room stole one long strand from Lucrezia’s lock of hair, “the prettiest and fairest imaginable.” The letters have been published in a modern edition under the title, *The Prettiest Love Letters in the World: Letters Between Lucrezia Borgia & Pietro Bembo, 1503-1519* (translation by Hugh Shankland; David R. Godine, Publisher, Boston, 2004).

It is uncertain whether their relationship slipped from the lofty heights of Platonic love to the worldly lust of ordinary mortals, but there can be little doubt that Pietro’s thoughts and desires as expressed in his letters went beyond the boundaries of Platonic love. Here is an example of his expression of passionate love in a letter sent to her in Ferrara on July 4, 1503, a year before he sent her a copy of his finished manuscript of *Gli Asolani*, with his dedicatory letter:

I rejoice that each day to increase my fire you cunningly devise some fresh incitement, such as that which encircled your glowing brow today. If you do such things because, feeling some little warmth yourself, you wish to see another burn, I shall not deny that for each spark of yours untold Etnas are

raging in my breast.
And if you do so
because it is natural for
you to relish another’s
suffering, who in all
justice could blame me
if he but knew the
reasons for my ardor?

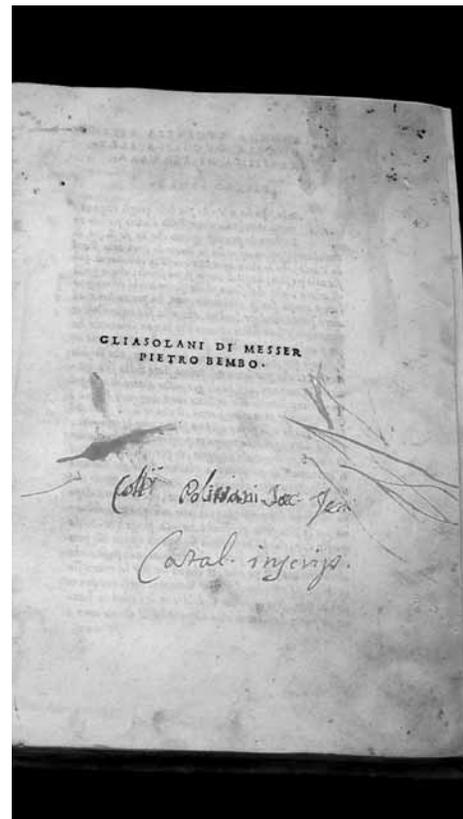
Aside from the obvious “un-Platonic” metaphor of her “untold Etnas” raging in his breast, it is noteworthy as an echo of Bembo’s previous publication in *De Aetna*, about his ascent of the volcanic mountain in Sicily. It is indeed interesting to read this expression of the pangs of unconsummated love at the time he is writing his *Gli Asolani*. Here is the plaint of

the fictional Perottino, the rejected lover in the dialogue, who argues that human love cannot bring happiness:

There are plenty of lovers, then, who vex and rack themselves without relief whenever their ladies stab them with one sidelong glance or three ill-tempered words, not to mention the number of times the creatures wound their lovers without knowing why, merely because they wish to put them to a little torture (*Gli Asolani* p. 54).

The popularity of *Gli Asolani* endured throughout the 16th century, but in 1530, some ten years after the death of Lucrezia, Bembo published a second edition in which he deleted the dedicatory letter. Presumably this revision of his text was owing to a diminution of his passion. Perhaps the unsavory rumors about Lucrezia resurrected after her death, and his growing stature as an icon of Christian humanism and as an aspiring Cardinal of the Church, made the deletion of the letter a prudent measure at the beginning of the Counter-reformation.

Pietro Bembo’s life and works epitomize the ideal courtier depicted in Castiglione’s appellation of the “Renaissance man.” Raphael, the most famed artist associated with the court of Urbino, painted Pietro’s picture. And the two most famed painters



Title page of same.

of the court of Alfonso d’Este at Ferrara also painted portraits of him. Bellini painted him as a young courtier, and Titian, his life-long friend, painted him at least twice, once as a robust Cardinal and later as a saintly aging prelate. Titian probably painted his official portrait to commemorate Bembo’s elevation to Cardinal in March, 1539. A few years before Titian’s official portrait, Benvenuto Cellini crafted a beautiful commemorative bronze medal of the bust of Bembo.

Whereas Pietro motivated four of the most celebrated artists in Italy to paint or sculpt his portrait, Lucrezia, famed for her beauty by friends and foes alike and by poets of the stature of Pietro and Ludivico Ariosto, apparently did not motivate the many artists at the court at Ferrara to paint her portrait. No authentic portrait of Lucrezia is known, though several paintings, such as Bartolomeo Veneto’s fanciful portrait, have been said to depict her. Often these images are simply part of Lucrezia’s myth. In her 30s she became deeply religious and died in 1519 at age 39 after giving birth to her fifth child.

In 1513, after taking Holy Orders,

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Denis Diderot and the Encyclopédie

Not a “Harmless Drudge,” Perhaps a Subversive, Certainly Capable

Pierre Ferrand

Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was an unlikely choice as the manager of what turned out to be the major publishing enterprise of the 18th century, the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers*. This was the famous French encyclopedia (seventeen volumes, in folio, of text, with more than 62,000 entries, and 11 volumes of illustrations), which became a compendium of 18th century knowledge and rational thought. Its impact was to shape many aspects of life in the Western world. Its subtitle can be translated as “A Critical Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, Trades and Handicrafts,” and is described as written by a group or company of writers (*Société de Gens de Lettres*).

When Diderot was in his twenties and early thirties, he earned a pittance from time to time as a tutor, particularly of mathematics, as an anonymous preparer of legal memoranda for lawyers and notaries, and even as a ghost writer of religious sermons though he was and remained of questionable orthodoxy himself. His most substantial job was that of translator of books. In an age when international copyright laws were non-existent, publishers had discovered a cheap way of publishing books: to print translations and adaptations of foreign texts. Diderot, self taught, was fluent in reading English and Italian, and French publishers had found him skillful and conscientious in adapting English books to their market on at least two occasions we know of, the translation of a British history of Greece and of a medical dictionary. These were labor-intensive and ill-paid jobs, but it was better than nothing.

Denis Diderot was a brilliant student in mostly Jesuit schools and was a Master of Arts, but he was almost totally unknown to the world of scholarship and to the general public. The only work he had

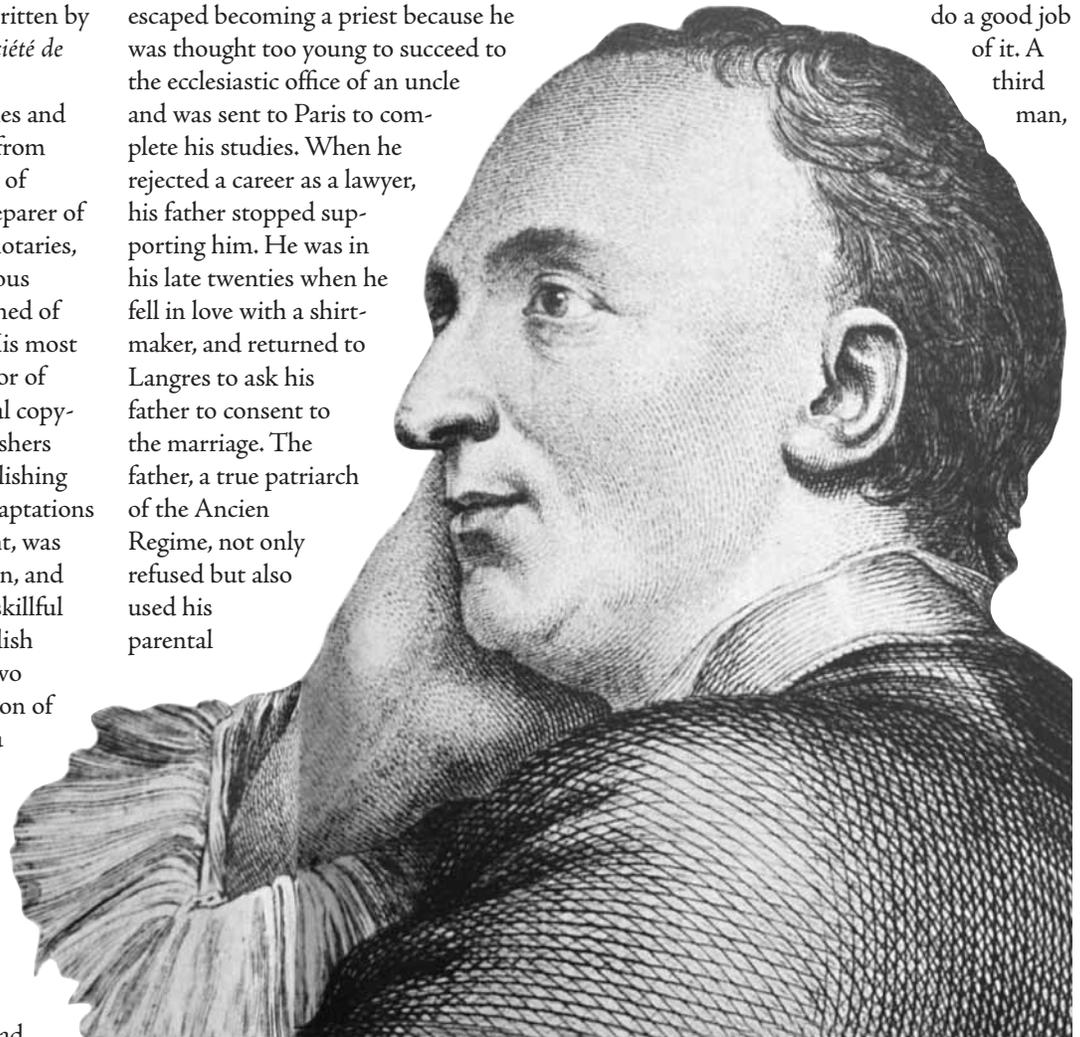
published on his own had been a translation with a commentary of a short essay by the British philosopher Shaftesbury. He was fascinated by Newton and thinkers like Bacon and Locke and the heretical English deists. (Voltaire had helped to make them fashionable in France decades earlier.) He was intrigued by English 18th century playwrights, and—like his contemporary, l'Abbé Prévost, best known today for his novel, *Manon Lescaut*—he was to fall under the spell of English novelists, especially Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne.

Denis was the son of a prosperous cutlery manufacturer in the conservative provincial town of Langres, where his family had ties to the local clergy. He escaped becoming a priest because he was thought too young to succeed to the ecclesiastic office of an uncle and was sent to Paris to complete his studies. When he rejected a career as a lawyer, his father stopped supporting him. He was in his late twenties when he fell in love with a shirt-maker, and returned to Langres to ask his father to consent to the marriage. The father, a true patriarch of the Ancien Regime, not only refused but also used his parental

powers to have his son confined in a monastery to prevent it. He considered a wedding out of question because the girl was of a lower social class than his family. Denis escaped and married her anyway, in secret.

The *Encyclopédie* began as a relatively modest venture. Andre LeBreton, a leading Parisian printer/publisher, agreed to a proposal to finance and issue a translation and adaptation of a two volume *Cyclopaedia: Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, published in England by Ephraim Chambers in 1728. But LeBreton soon determined that the two men who were to

handle the project were workhorses of little standing, unlikely to do a good job of it. A third man,



with somewhat better credentials, also proved unsatisfactory.

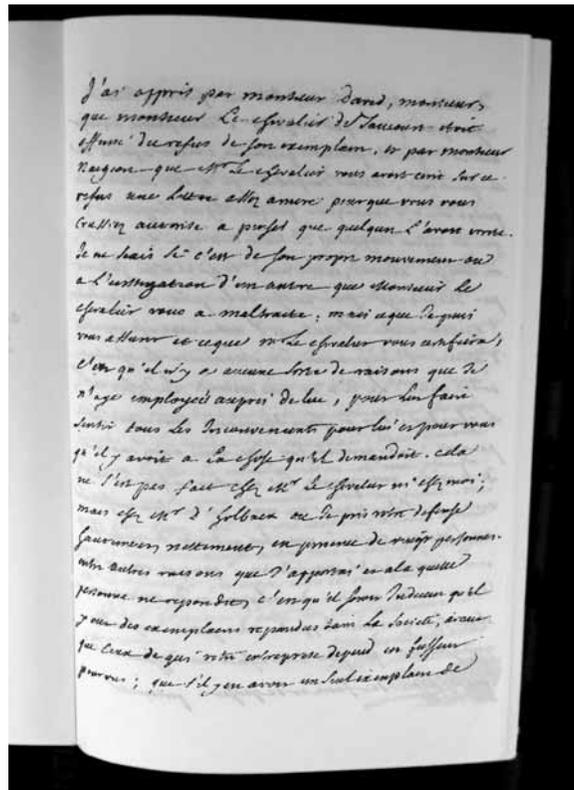
In the meantime, three other Parisian printers became interested in the idea of issuing an encyclopedia in French, and entered in a partnership with LeBreton for this purpose. The four associates agreed to ask Jean le Rond d'Alembert, four years younger than Diderot, to supervise the project. Though still in his late twenties, Alembert had already acquired an international reputation as a brilliant mathematician and physicist and had many contacts in social and literary circles. The partners then hired the less respectable and much lesser known Diderot as "translator," to do much of the actual work. This was 1746. Two of LeBreton's associates had formerly used Diderot as a translator and had been very satisfied with his services.

Diderot and d'Alembert became friends, and they convinced the associates to greatly expand the project, based on Diderot's novel idea that a couple of volumes and the work and skills of one or two men were totally inadequate for a survey of human knowledge, arts, and crafts. They wanted to create a many-volume work with many illustrations, and enlist a large number of experts in many fields to write it. They were eventually to recruit more than one hundred and fifty contributors to the encyclopedia. These included, admittedly, a few hacks, friends, boon companions or acquaintances of Diderot during his years as a drifter, but also famous men like Voltaire and many other distinguished writers, scholars, and public figures. This was a pattern eventually adopted by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other major encyclopedias produced in many countries.

D'Alembert's main contribution to the *Encyclopédie* proved to be a lengthy preface that chiefly elaborates on the ideas stated earlier in a "prospectus" sent to prospective subscribers by Diderot, although he also contributed a few articles on mathematics, some of the more aggressive essays on moral and philosophical subjects, and an article on "Geneva."

The Geneva article became famous

because Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote an ill-tempered and obscurantist response to it in 1758, the *Lettre sur les Spectacles*, which led to a final break between him and most of the leaders of the Enlightenment, including Diderot. (Rousseau, who was poor and a mediocre composer, was once employed by Diderot, out of friendship, to write many of the articles on music for the *Encyclopédie*. This was an impolitic decision because the articles are heavily biased against the French musical tradition.)



Portion of a letter to Le Breton, Diderot's publisher, on exhibit at the municipal museum in Langres.

On the whole, however, despite the fact that Diderot's resume had been questionable and that a number of his views were disturbing to the authorities and to his employers, he proved to be an excellent editor and manager of the French encyclopedia project. He wrote beautifully and knew how to explain complex ideas in a simple and appealing manner. An idea man with a wide range of knowledge, he was fascinated by many arts and sciences. He was also a quick study, very resourceful, a fast and very hard worker, and proved to be totally committed to the project, which he

was to steer through innumerable trials and tribulations.

Before the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* was published, Diderot got into trouble as a subversive writer. At the end of 1746, he published a brief booklet, *Pensees Philosophiques* (Philosophical Thoughts), an answer to Blaise Pascal's famous *Thoughts* published in the 17th century. Diderot's slim volume summarized in 52 numbered paragraphs many of the arguments of free-thinkers against established religion. The volume was ordered to be burned by the hangman.

Diderot managed to escape that fate, though a second subversive pamphlet of his was circulated in the following year. In 1748, he produced a frivolous novel in the then fashionable oriental mode, *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* (The Indiscreet Jewels), suggested by his mistress to make money she wanted. A volume of more than 200 pages, written, his daughter claims, in 15 days, its plot was based on a bawdy pun, though it is not particularly objectionable otherwise. It was, among other things, a mild satire of King Louis XV and his court. It differs little from the many "libertine" novels written by his former associates in bohemia during this period, and did not enhance his reputation as a respectable author. It is well-written, often with characteristic brio, and contains some fascinating discussions of serious subjects, including a critique of French classical tragedy which Lessing, the famous German

playwright, essayist, and theoretician of the drama read as a young man and which, as he has testified, deeply influenced him.

In 1747, he published a brilliant essay, *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (Letter about the Blind), in which he analyzed the way the world would look to the blind. He suggested that a blind man would doubt a God he could not touch and would not be impressed by the way the skies he could not see proclaim the glory of God. This was deemed subversive enough to land him in jail for several months. The entrepreneurs

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DIDEROT, from page 7

who employed him, the most prominent printer/publishers in France, successfully petitioned for his release. They were men of substance and, therefore, influence, and their interest in the *Encyclopédie* was primarily financial. They thought that despite his radical ideas, Diderot had become indispensable to the project that, with the collaboration of many of France's most prominent intellectuals, had become an enterprise of national importance.

It was so regarded by some key government officials who protected Diderot and his fellow encyclopedists as well as they could. So did Madame de Pompadour, the King's long-time mistress. Others disagreed, and considered a critical encyclopedia stressing reason rather than faith, as intended by Diderot and d'Alembert, to be a public menace. They included members of the royal family and the more devout courtiers, the Jesuits and key members of the religious hierarchy, and leaders of the Paris Parlement, or high court of justice (influenced by Jansenists, the dour rivals of the Jesuits). The Jesuits continually attacked the *Encyclopédie* as promoting heretical opinions, partly because their theologians had not been selected to write the articles on religious subjects, and also because they resented competition with their own *Dictionnaire de Trevoux*. Many clergymen and the Parlement opposed the *Encyclopédie's* secular approach, rationalism, and the materialistic "Spinozism" that informed some of its articles and essays, especially those written by Diderot and d'Alembert. There were violent pamphlets for and against the project, and Diderot, Rousseau, and others were also libeled on the stage. Diderot himself was portrayed as a crook, which he certainly wasn't.

Despite the many impediments and contretemps, the volumes started to appear: the first in 1751. Several times during the decades needed to complete the project, additional publication was forbidden by the government or by the Parlement, and damned by religious authorities. Volumes of the work were burned by the hangman. The Pope also formally condemned it.

In spite of official persecution and the desertion of some of his colleagues, eventu-

ally including d'Alembert, Diderot courageously carried on. He rejected the urgings of Voltaire to complete his task abroad because he felt obligated toward his entrepreneurs and their employees. Though publication of the last volumes of text was forbidden, Diderot managed to have them published clandestinely in France and distributed to their 4000 subscribers.

Because a number of the articles (a number of them essays of substantial length) in the *Encyclopédie* are unsigned, it is not known exactly how many of them were written by Diderot himself. Estimates range from 1000 to 5000. Only one of his colleagues, the Chevalier de Jaucourt (a Protestant), wrote more of them, some 7000. Quite a few of Denis' articles are intended as brief correctives to lengthy and more or less orthodox essays. His style, and that of many of his colleagues, was deliberately conversational. He wanted to entertain as well as instruct.

The *Encyclopédie* lists as its godfathers Francis Bacon, John Newton, and John Locke. It includes a large number of essays on theologic, philosophic, and scientific matters, on moral issues, on the arts and letters, on institutions, on political science, and, on what would today be called sociology. One of the essays on political economy Diderot published in it influenced Adam Smith. The articles are uneven in quality, and different points of view are represented, sometimes, but by no means always, in an effort to avoid sanctions by the governmental and ecclesiastical censorship. Though Diderot certainly had his own convictions and ideas (and sometimes several contradictory ones on a single subject), he did not insist on a homogenized presentation of the data. Inconsistencies did not disturb him; he considered them rather fun. Still, the main focus of the *Encyclopédie* is a stress on reason, often with a perfunctory and less than sincere phrase about "faith" in order to foil the censors. It is a deliberately critical and often challenging dictionary, fighting all types of unquestioning belief that most of its contributors called "superstition." It endeavored to promote tolerance, and is humanistic, indeed, centered on man and his works, although, interestingly

enough, there are no biographic entries as such. Famous people (including Shakespeare, Spinoza, and Joan of Arc), are referred to and discussed in the context of essays on other subjects. This was a deliberate innovation.

Quite a number of Denis' own entries deal with arts and crafts, another major innovation. He took great pains in visiting workshops, interviewed workmen in the various industries to learn their technical vocabulary, and commissioned engravings of diagrams of their machinery and equipment. The son of a handicraftsman himself, he respected them without any condescension and introduced them and their skills to the general public. He thought this was important because he believed in mechanical progress. Note that the *Encyclopédie* was essentially completed before James Watt's invention inaugurated the age of steam and, with it, the industrial revolution.

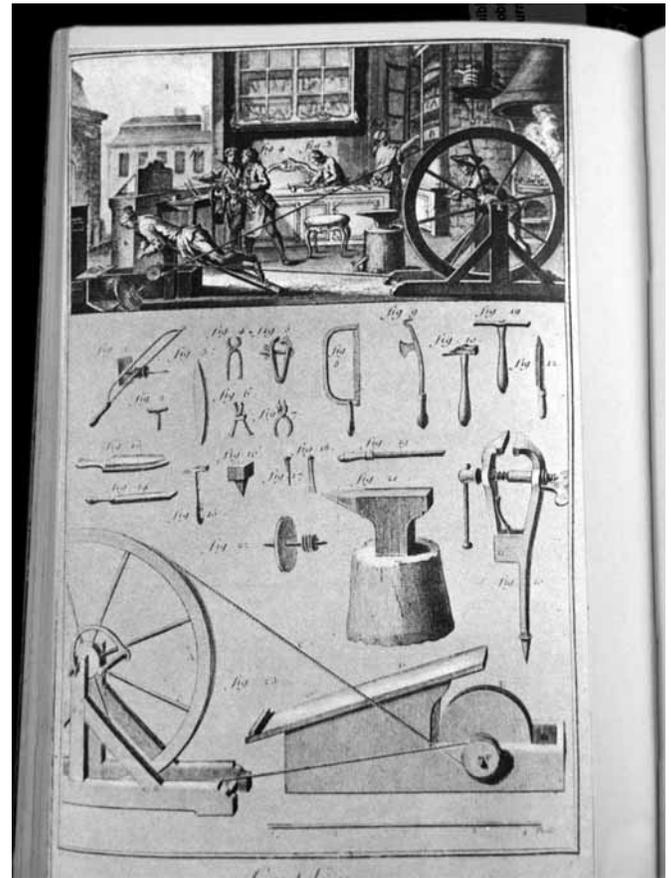
Diderot was aware that the many volumes he edited during more than two decades were short of perfection. He repeatedly had to rely on hacks, including his former companions in bohemia whose contributions were sometimes of limited value. They included those by Rousseau, who later became world-famous as an eloquent and passionate advocate of a decidedly mixed bag of ideas and attitudes in many fields and who, driven by paranoia, turned against his former friends and associates, including Diderot.

In his article entitled "Encyclopédie," Diderot pointed to a number of the weaknesses of what he considered to be his huge experiment and a first attempt to truly summarize human knowledge. While he admitted its imperfections, he said with some pride that he and his colleagues "had well served mankind" nevertheless. He acted as the editor, manager, and chief champion of this mammoth project for two decades out of conviction, selflessly, satisfied with a modest salary, while the entrepreneurs who financed the project made substantial profits.

Diderot, with his many progressive and even radical ideas, was hardly "a harmless drudge," as his conservative contemporary Samuel Johnson defined a "lexicographer, a writer of dictionaries." Also, despite the



Bound quarto volumes of the Lyon, 1780 edition



Tools of knife-makers, from one of the volumes of plates

enormous impact of the *Encyclopédie*, quite out of proportion to its relatively modest circulation, he cannot be summarized as merely a dictionary maker. Among other works, he wrote plays and several important novels, tales, and essays (many in dialogue form) about philosophical and moral issues. He pioneered in art criticism and in the theory of the drama and of acting as well. His letters, of which 780 have been preserved, also display him as fount of stimulating ideas, many of which are still pertinent today, and as a truly likeable person.

Diderot did not travel much. Mostly, he made some trips back and forth from Langres to Paris and visits to friends in the suburbs of Paris. Unlike many French intellectuals of the time, including his friend d'Alembert and Voltaire, he never succumbed to the blandishments of Frederick II, the famous King of Prussia. He simply did not like him, which is to his credit. But he believed, for a while, in the advantages of "enlightened despotism," and accepted the favors of Empress Catherine II of Russia who—to help him out financially—purchased his personal library and left him in charge of it during his lifetime. His one great trip abroad was to visit her in St.

Petersburg 1773-4. He stayed there about half a year, and was disillusioned by her and enlightened despots generally. He returned by way of the Netherlands and preferred its freer air by far.

A great deal of his output, apart from his work for the *Encyclopédie*, was published only in book form after his death, but much of it can still be read with pleasure and interest. His novels, essays and correspondence have become increasingly popular in France in recent decades. It is more difficult for Englishmen and Americans to make his acquaintance as a writer though many of his texts are available in English in convenient editions.

A significant portion of Diderot's work was distributed in manuscript versions as part of a handwritten review called *Correspondance Littéraire* which was sent chiefly to German and Russian key personalities and ruling princes by Frederic-Melchior Grimm. The purpose of this review was to keep Grimm's clients informed of current cultural developments in Paris, then considered the world's center of intellectual fashion. As a result, his writings became better known in Central and Eastern

Europe than in France, and German readers early had a close relationship with him.

He remains the German favorite among the writers of the French Enlightenment of the 18th century. Educated Germans know that he taught Lessing and others to appreciate bourgeois drama and that the two key German writers of the early 19th century, Schiller and Goethe, valued and translated him. Goethe, as a matter of fact, was the first to publish *Le Neveu de Rameau* (Rameau's Nephew), originally written 1761-2 in his own German version in 1805. That text was analyzed at length by the influential philosopher, Friedrich Hegel, in 1807. During most of the 19th century, *Rameau's Nephew* was known only in France in a retranslation of Goethe's German text into French since no copy of the French original was found (Goethe had mislaid or lost his own copy). Finally, in 1891, an autograph manuscript was discovered in a bouquiniste's stand along the banks of the Seine in an unrelated collection of plays and miscellaneous works.

Diderot's other novels originally distributed by Grimm include *La Religieuse* (The Memoirs of a Nun), written 1760, a

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moving account of a young girl forced by her family to enter a convent without a vocation. It was based on a true story of a woman who tried for a number of years to be released of her vows as a nun and live a normal life in a secular environment. Like Diderot's heroine, one of the problems she faced was the fact that, legally, the convent was expected to return the funds which had been donated when she entered the convent, and the convent did not want to do this. Diderot graphically describes the pettiness, meanness, and vicious cruelty of the way would-be rebels could be treated by the abbess, her fellow nuns and the religious authorities. Diderot also portrays a much kinder atmosphere that prevailed when the community was ruled by a genuinely benevolent mother superior. While he disapproved of convents as basically against nature, he was much too intelligent and balanced to present a one-sided picture.

His final novel, chiefly in dialogue form like *Rameau's Nephew*, issued in fourteen installments of the *Correspondance Littéraire* (1778-1780), is *Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître* (Jacques the Fatalist and his Master). Indeed, it has been called an anti-novel—Diderot has fun criticizing many of the plot devices and literary conventions of his time—and a philosophical novel, since its theme or refrain is that each person's behavior and all events are predetermined

and that human beings are powerless to change them. In the novel, this doctrine (like many of the statements of Diderot), is treated mostly as a joke, for Diderot was basically a skeptic, but at the same time analyzed in terms of its logical consequences.

The novel, which was inspired in part by Laurence Sterne's whimsy and Rabelais' uproarious love and enjoyment of life and as informed by his wisdom, is a fast-moving cascade of many amusing tales told by a master storyteller. It is never dull. There is one remarkable and more serious story, that of the psychologically acute account of an attempted revenge of a woman against her former lover, with a twist at the end.

Diderot generally wrote his novels, tales, plays, philosophical and critical essays, and dialogues on many subjects because he was intellectually engaged, and often because he had fun doing it. He often communicates this fun to the careful reader. To understand what Diderot actually means to say, it is useful to remember that he lived during the French Ancien Regime, when the expression of unorthodox opinions could have serious consequences for a writer. This did not encourage plain talk. Indeed, Diderot had no desire to be a martyr, or to be put in prison again, and he did not publish some of his texts during his lifetime, not even in Grimm's *Correspondance Littéraire*. He loved the medium of the dia-

SEEKING TRANSPORTATION POOL VOLUNTEERS AND USERS

I would appreciate hearing from Caxtonians across our Chicagoland area who might be available to drive those who need rides to Caxton dinner meetings. From these volunteers I will arrange rides for those who call me at 847-905-2247. —Steve Masello

logue, which allowed for the simultaneous presentation of differing points of view.

I won't give a complete critical bibliography of his many texts here, but briefly refer to a few more of his works, including his entertaining quasi-autobiographical play, *Est-il Bon? Est-il Méchant?* (Is He Good or Is He Evil?) first published in 1834, in which he does not hesitate to poke fun at himself. Another favorite of many readers is the *Supplement au Voyages de Bougainville* (Addendum to Bougainville's Travels), a dialogue about sexual morality that put Tahiti on the map as a supposed ideal of liberation. It also contains strong criticism of colonialism. There is also a dialogue called *Le Reve d'Alembert* (D'Alembert's Dream), and its sequel, which presents, among other things, an account of his vision of evolution and perpetual change in the universe that is a magnificent cosmologic poem in prose.

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BEMBO, from page 5

Bembo became secretary to Pope Leo X in Rome. Bembo's linguistic and rhetorical reform of the Italian vernacular found its mature expression in his vernacular humanist manifesto *Le prose della volgar lingua* (1525), where the Venetian proposed the 14th-century classics of Petrarch and Boccaccio as vernacular models for poetry and prose respectively. Bembo was appointed librarian of St. Mark's Cathedral in 1530, and he became official historian for the city of Venice. He is recognized as one of the most celebrated diplomats, poets, and humanist scholars of the 16th century.

Here is how Rudolf Gottfried describes Bembo in the introduction to his modern English translation of *Gli Asolani* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1954):

Bembo had what is surely one of the richest careers of the Italian Renaissance. To have lived in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the Venice of Aldus, and the Rome of Leo X; to have been portrayed in youth by Bellini and in old age by Titian; to have known Raphael, Vittoria Colonna, Politian, Erasmus, and Pietro Aretino; to have been chosen by Castiglione as his mouthpiece when he reached the climax of *The Courtier*; to have written two of the most famous treatises and the best Petrarchan verse of the sixteenth century; to have experienced first physical and romantic passion, then the responsibilities of parenthood through a liaison which resembled marriage, and finally the spiritual

honors belonging to a bishop and a cardinal:—it is not an exaggeration to say that Bembo both had his cake and ate it several times (p. x).

And so it is that a serendipitous browse in a local bookstore motivated me to become more familiar with an Italian humanist whom I had only known about in reading *The Courtier* and from occasional references in other Renaissance works. I am confident that were Pietro Bembo living in Chicago today, he would be a member of the Caxton Club.

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Photographs of the author's copy of Gli Asolani by Robert McCamant. Raphael portrait from the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, taken from the Web Gallery of Art. Titian portrait of Bembo from the National Gallery of Art, taken from mystudios.com. Titian portrait of (?) Lucrezia from the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.

Caxtonians Collect: Janis and John Notz

Eleventh in a series of interviews with members.

Interviewed by Kathryn R.J. Tutkus

Janis Notz primarily collects John Updike and M.F.K. Fisher. Fisher's first husband was an art professor at Smith College which Janis Notz attended. "I just love her writing. I majored in French Literature. Her writing is beautiful; it's about food, it's about France and it has a connection to my days at Smith. I have some of her autographed work and I have almost all of her books."

On John Updike, "*Rabbit Run* came out just about when I was in college. It had a big impact on me; I followed him and have many of his first editions and most of them are signed."

The Newberry Library and the Caxton Club, through Karen Skubish and Tom Joyce, were helpful when Updike spoke at the Newberry Library for the Chicago Humanities Festival and he was introduced by Phil Jackson. "He is a very literary kind of basketball coach. Unfortunately I was out of town, but Karen had a picture, got it signed for me and Tom Joyce had a couple of his books so he had them signed, inscribed to me by John Updike. That was really nice."

"I admire Updike because he is willing to try everything. A lot of authors find their niche and stay in it. He writes poetry—some of it's really bad. He writes plays, short stories, he writes essays, he's a critic, he writes novels and some of them don't go over and some of them are fantastic. But I admire the fact that he takes a risk."

"One of my book dealers likes Updike and has many of his books. But he has only one other female collector [she laughs] because he comes off as quite a misogynist. In that he's a man of his era. I also appreciate Updike because of the way the *Rabbit* series has covered four decades. He tries to cope with big questions—religion and racism and suburbia—so I live with his mysogyny."

John Notz says he does not acquire in the



same style as Janis does at all. "When I acquire I have the best of intentions of reading cover to cover, although now I'm a long way behind in that process. I don't reach for first editions or signed copies. I'm interested in the content and I purchase by subject matter."

His favorite subject matter "has changed over the years. There was a time that I would buy novels relating to the practice of law. I was a lawyer. But the field became so vast that that I couldn't keep up. When I approached retirement, my interest turned elsewhere. However, I will still read any Rumpole I cross paths with."

He doesn't use the word collecting. "I do not classify myself as a collector, but I sure do acquire." Maybe "amasser" is a good word for him. "When I read a book I've liked, it becomes a friend and I never want to part with it. I want to go back and revisit it."

"My father introduced me to Sherlock Holmes. I was obsessed by Sherlock Holmes. I'm sure I've read everything that Doyle wrote on Holmes. I branched out occasionally into other things that Doyle

wrote which I think are extremely interesting in their own right."

"I'm very active with the Chicago Literary Club. We prepare papers we present. I'm on a schedule of one every three years or so. Some of the papers have led to collections. For instance, I have a group of books on Prairie School architecture, and the artist Mucha." He likes to keep materials collected to support his papers because he's learned that when he comes back to them he will often have a "different slant." He compares it to a prism: "Turning it different ways is illuminating."

Another collection that started with a paper is the one on Marian Mahony Griffin. "I would classify myself as a collector of books on the Griffins. I have just about everything on

them that has been written. Mahony was the first female architect licensed anywhere. She worked for Frank Lloyd Wright, although she became embittered toward Wright because of the way he treated her husband. Actually, there is an exhibit on them at the Block Museum of Northwestern University now, with a symposium in November."

John and Janis became members of the Caxton Club in 1990. John knew Tony Batko through the Chicago Literary Club. "I was within earshot when he approached Janis to become a member. He had become aware of the collections she'd started so she was eminently suitable to the Caxton Club. I asked if I'd be suitable as well and he gave me a fishy look and said, 'Well we'll get back to you on that.' Within a reasonable period of time Tony reported that he had had no trouble with Janis whatsoever but he had a great deal of trouble with me. Of course he was pulling my leg because I know him very well.... At least I hope he was pulling my leg!"

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Bookmarks...

Luncheon Program

October 14, 2005

Saundra Taylor

“Everything You Would Want To Know About a World-Class Library, and Then Some”

Saundra Taylor will speak about the founding of the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana, truly one of the great rare book libraries of the world, housing over 400,000 books and 8 million manuscripts. She will touch on some of the library’s collections, which include items relating to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Sylvia Plath, Upton Sinclair and Andreas Vesalius, to name a few. As Manuscript Curator for the past 30 years and professor to future manuscript archivists and librarians, Saundra will describe a typical day, which, for her, includes “The joy of being overwhelmed by the sheer amount of fascinating material to read.” Finally, Saundra will speak about the many challenges she faces: providing access yet maintaining security, conservation, donor relations, collection development and, of course, mounting meaningful exhibitions.

An important meeting.

PLACES AVAILABLE

Collectors and Their Collections

Sunday, October 2, 2-4 pm

Bruce Barnett: “The Dance of Death”

Trained as a lawyer, and active in business for many years, Bruce now concentrates on book selling and collecting. He collects “The Dance of Death,” a literary, artistic, and musical genre based on the theme that life is short, and nobody is spared. Among those who have used the DOD theme are Breughel, Holbein, and Liszt. Bruce also collects Art Deco and Arts and Crafts.

Bruce and David Block operate The Book Block, antiquarian booksellers based in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Lake Forest, Illinois. He started as a customer and was hooked so deeply he became a partner. He will share with us some of his insights into developing a collection.

Bruce is located at 671 Balmoral Court in Lake Forest. As always, attendance must be limited, and advance reservations are requested. Please call the Club at (312) 255-3710 to hold your spot. The attendance fee of \$25 will be collected at the door. Refreshments will be served.

Dinner Program

October 19, 2005

David A. Richards

“Collecting Kipling”

“Collecting Kipling” is an extended rebuttal to the judgment of Robert Frost: “Collecting is the lowest form of literary appreciation. Very low.” Collecting is indeed play, a game, a gamble, but the process is also analyzable in components: the creation of order, the fascination with changes, curiosity about the past, and desire for understanding. The collector of Kipling, whose bibliography is the most complex of any modern author, experiences all these features in spades. Topics touched on will include shifts in Anglo-American bibliographic standards and practices, the problems of suppression and rarity, scholarship by collectors supplementing—and surpassing—academics, and finding human sympathy and understanding of the collector’s quarry.

David Alan Richards is managing partner of the New York office of the law firm of McCarter & English LLP. He graduated from Yale College, was a Keasbey Scholar at Cambridge University, and graduated from Yale Law School. He is currently working on a new bibliography of Kipling scheduled to appear in 2006. His is the largest private Kipling collection.

Beyond October...

NOVEMBER LUNCHEON:

Note date change! Friday, November 4, Caxtonian Jerry Meyer on “From Ruskinian Medievalism to Beardsley Decadence: The Influence of William Morris’ Arts and Crafts Movement on English Book Design and Illustration.”

NOVEMBER DINNER:

Sam Ellenport is proprietor of the Harcourt Bindery in Boston. His illustrated talk on Wednesday, November 16, is about another famous bindery: the Club Bindery, whose custom bindings were the first American bindings to rival European ones.

Please see page 10 for information on the new Transportation Pool for members.

All luncheon and dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of BankOne, Madison and Clark, Chicago. Luncheon: buffet opens at 11:30; program 12:30-1:30. Dinner meetings: spirits at 5 pm, dinner at 6 pm, lecture at 7:30 pm.

For reservations call 312-255-3710 or email caxtonclub@newberry.org. Members and guests: Lunch \$25, Dinner \$45. Discount parking available for evening meetings, with a stamped ticket, at Standard Self-Park, 172 W. Madison.