

Book Reviews

Exhibit Review

Sylvia Brown, John Considine and Amie Shirkie (Curators) *Marginated: Seventeenth-Century Printed Books and the Traces of Their Readers* (Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, February 15–May 15, 2010).

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The Bruce Peel Special Collections Library is perhaps best known for its western Canadian holdings, but *Marginated* is proof of its great potential to make contributions to other fields of historical and literary studies. A sequel to 1998's *Adversaria*, which featured sixteenth-century marginal annotations, the exhibit is curated by early modern English professors Sylvia Brown and John Considine, with the assistance of English graduate student Amie Shirkie. The three successfully combed through the library's seventeenth-century European texts to find and display a set of marginalia of impressive variety and depth. While one could mount an entire exhibit on, for example, biblical notes and commentary alone, the curators' goal is instead to explore the diversity of marginalia, defined broadly to include not only handwritten comments, but also printed annotations and binding materials.

The exhibit consists of fifty-nine books on display, with the interpretation communicated through the catalogue. The catalogue discusses the most notable marginal features of each

Past Imperfect

16 (2010) | © | ISSN 1711-053X | eISSN 1718-4487

book, whether comments on the text, ownership labels, prices, or children's scrawls. The research is meticulous. The curators use parish records to trace ownership inscriptions, and in one case college records combined with a list of church incumbents tell the story of a poor boy who grew up to become a vicar with his own copy of Thomas Fuller's *Historie of the Holy Warre*. A single name, remarkably, is the key to a man's life, as well as to a better understanding of what kinds of books a moderately well-off vicar might have had at hand. The curators also compare the books in the Bruce Peel Library to related books in other libraries, on databases, and even on book trading websites. This bibliographical thoroughness clarifies trends while making clear the individuality of the texts and the almost haphazardness of their eventual repose at the University of Alberta. Books are fluid, mobile, and impressionable, and each item in the exhibit has a story. Their vulnerabilities to the vagaries of fortune are illuminated as the catalogue notes, for instance, that works with the same labels have diffused to Oxford and New York as well as Edmonton. Given the transience of many collections and the only recent emergence of the study of marginalia, the *Marginated* catalogue is an important contribution for bibliophiles and scholars, providing an intelligent and much-needed record of some of the significant characteristics of the items in the University's permanent collection.

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The exhibit catalogue is not simply useful; it is also very attractively designed and produced, with copious images that repeat and complement the items on display. There are only a few cases where the reader might wish for more. Reproduction of the marked-up interleaves in William Lily's *A Short Introduction to Grammar*, for instance, is limited to one sentence

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magnified to a large size on a mostly empty page. Neither readers nor visitors to the exhibit, moreover, will get a chance to see the combination of childish and adult marginalia on Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* described in the catalogue. This is a shame since, for many visitors, the most memorable items will undoubtedly be those that relate to children. But these are only minor criticisms of a compelling display. Particularly striking are the books bound with pieces of other books, creating a visually impressive result, and those texts with extremely heavily annotated pages. Such examples are especially significant for the tension they create between "book as text" and "book as object," an important theme for book historians. The exhibit also draws attention to the richness of the books' histories, both synchronic and diachronic. Some of the most thought-provoking marginalia do not just show traces of readers, but in fact hint at a large contemporary community that included writers and binders. Other examples, such as a Victorian label in a text from 1700, are evidence of a book's longevity and its use by many generations. This history ultimately forces consideration of one's own place in book culture. The "University of Alberta Library" stamp that shows up on a few of the texts may one day be highlighted in another exhibit on marginalia.

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While such an exhibit could easily become insular and, though interesting, ultimately irrelevant, the curators make many excellent contributions to the broader bibliographical and historical communities. They draw attention, for instance, to a case where a marginal notation suggests the use of a word over thirty years prior to the first date listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. They also uncover traces of a previously unrecorded manuscript of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, used to strengthen the

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binding of another book, as well as an “original inference” that the teacher of the British king Maglocune, referred to in John Milton’s *The History of Britain*, might be the fifth-century Welsh saint Illtud (p. 124). The catalogue also points out a few fascinating examples of yet unstudied and undeciphered early modern shorthand, frequently used by the godly, the curators explain, to transcribe sermons. Visitors might occasionally be hungry for more analysis, as in the case where a reader copied a missing page of John Bunyan’s *The Acceptable Sacrifice* but did not pay much attention to italicization, punctuation, or paragraph breaks. What does this tell us about popular reading habits? What do we know about the role of the printer in making these judgments about formatting, and to what extent did printers and writers read differently from those outside the craft? These questions must be answered in another exhibit; the field is so broad and understudied that *Marginated* can only tantalize.

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The exhibit organizes this diverse set of items into nineteen themes, which allow the curators to address both the depth and breadth of marginalia in a limited space. Each theme consists of a few carefully selected examples that speak well to one another, illustrating an intriguing practice or thoughtful critical point. These include, for instance, a look at the different levels of analytical sophistication in marginal notations, and readers’ makeshift referencing systems. The catalogue draws additional connections when it refers readers to books from other thematic groups. Of course, some of the themes are stronger than others; the last is simply titled “A Final Miscellany,” for example, but its individual contents are interesting enough to forgive the absence of a unifying analytical

point. The diversity of themes does not allow for an exhaustive tracing of each trend, but at this early stage in the study of marginal notations, what is most important is a survey of ways to think about marginalia, as well as the opening of avenues for further pursuit. The curators' methodology, as well as their detailed, historical, and insightfully speculative approach to the analysis, will be a boon to the academic community, book collectors, librarians, and curious members of the reading public. The last will best appreciate the exhibit and its catalogue if they have a good understanding of bibliography and book history, since terms like *foliated* and *fascicles*, while discernable, are not glossed. The full weight of references to political figures, the significance of relatively obscure texts, and perhaps even the importance of the proliferation of books in this period will also pass over the heads of most people who are not experts in seventeenth-century European literature and history.

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While bibliography is an old pursuit, the study of marginalia is relatively new, and by drawing attention to its critical and historical value the curators have done a great service to all communities who work with or appreciate books. As the catalogue points out, "[w]riting marginalia and thereby registering critical reading leads...to the discipline of modern literary criticism" (p. vii). This exhibit invites critical reading of critical reading, and thus opens up new ways of understanding historical and literary thought. *Marginated* is a powerful reminder that books are not the static products of single authors. They are collaborative: books are questioned, critiqued, copied, doodled on, shared, and simply used by communities over time.