

from **War and a Golden Age-Discussion**

Mar 2, 2025 6:01PM

Jeffrey Shuster

With the printing of millions of books, the mid 1600s brought about what was called the “golden age of libraries” (Murray, 2019, p. 119). This was an age that produced librarians of distinction like Sir Robert Bruce Cotton. With the rising surge of nationalism sweeping the west, great pride was taken in some of treasured tomes at the Cottonian Library in Westminster. These included original manuscripts for *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, works that I read in English literature classes during my undergrad days (p. 123).

Of particular interest to me was how reading was tied to many societal ills of the late 18th century (Freedman, J. 2020, p. 246). Young women became afflicted with reading addiction and had trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality (p. 247). A purported rash of young people taking their own life from the influence of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Werther* (p. 221-22). These types of moral panics persist to this day, but the dawn of the literary author may have been where it began.

Instead of a bonus reading this week, I wanted to share my experience of the virtual visit to the library at St. Catherine’s Monastery Mount Sinai that Dr. McCook posted about. This event was hosted by The Bibliographical Society and featured a question-and-answer session with Hieromonk Justin of Sinai, the head librarian. The session began with a short documentary produced by the library showcasing manuscripts from the collection. Of particular interest to me were Greek translations of scripture that featured written commentary from Josephus and Philo. I had wondered if this was an early example of what we now call annotated books. I asked about this in the chat, but my question got lost in the shuffle from many queries to Hieromonk Justin.

The library itself was rebuilt in 1951 for ease of use and to create a more stable environment for the books. The library even has a fire suppression system that involves using gas to deplete the oxygen in a room. During the Q&A, Hieromonk Justin mentioned that heating and air conditioning were added to the library for the comfort of staff and visitors, but that the natural climate of the area is unique in that it’s perfect for book preservation.

Our speaker did go into the preservation techniques utilized by the library. For instance, the decision was made to not rebind ancient manuscripts even if they were becoming unbound. It’s not just about preserving the text, but the book itself and they didn’t want to lose what was left of the original binding. It is one of the only libraries in the world that have these early bindings. To protect these books, custom boxes are made from stainless steel for each of the 2,200 manuscripts. A protective foam lines the inside of these cases. I’ve included a link to the short documentary in my references below (The Bibliographical Society, 2025).

After the Q&A, the chat was split off into pairs so we could talk about what we had learned. I got paired with David Macfarlane, a Cambridge University professor. I asked him about his own experience in the field of library science. Professor Macfarlane teaches a class where his students manufacture their own pamphlets using a Gutenberg press. I asked him if some printed works from that era hold up better than others and he told me that books printed on rag paper had a great more durability than those made from wood pulp. He also related a funny story about one of the Popes who had become so exasperated with errors in printed Bibles that he proofed one all by himself. After this Bible was produced, it too had numerous errors. Every time a new edition

of a book was to be published, the type had to be set all over again. Errors in text were common as a result. Here is a link to his own archive of student pamphlets made from his printing class: <https://archive.org/details/handlist-of-pamphlets-cambridge-university-library/page/n1/mode/2up>Links to an external site.

References

The Bibliographical Society (2025, Feb 28) Virtual Library Visit - The Sinai Library: A Treasure Held in Trust [Video].
YouTube.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crcPdUqzrcA>Links to an external site.



Freedman, J. Enlightenment and Revolution. (2020) In Raven, J. (Ed.). *The Oxford illustrated history of the book*. Oxford University Press.

Murray, S. (2019). *The library: an illustrated history*. Skyhorse Publishing.

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Mar 3, 2025 10:57PM

Jeffrey Shuster

Dr. McCook,

You're welcome! Thank you for posting about this Bibliographical Society event. Being so far away from campus, I don't get to attend guest lectures so this was a wonderful experience!

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Mar 5, 2025 1:24AM

Jeffrey Shuster

Joy,

I think we were seeing how the novel really came into its own as an art form with increased literacy among the general populace and mass production of books. Were these suicides a consequence of people partaking in an art form they weren't ready for? Or maybe there was no rash of suicides, just a couple of isolated incidents that justified a moral panic.

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Mar 5, 2025 11:59PM

Jeffrey Shuster

Lori,

Thank you. I lucked out in that I had a Thursday afternoon open to attend that online event. It was actually an evening event over in England. I plan on checking out the other videos on the Bibliographical Society YouTube page when I have time.

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Mar 6, 2025 12:03AM

Jeffrey Shuster

Shelby,

Yes, the reading made me want to check Goethe and see what all the fuss was about back in the day. I also found it interesting how French became the first go to when translating a book from any language.

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Mar 6, 2025 12:16AM

Jeffrey Shuster

Shelby,

I don't believe the epic poem Beowulf would have been considered fiction at the time of its creation, but a retelling something that actually happened. It even had Christian undertones with Grendel being a son of Cain. I did find it hard to make declarative statements about Beowulf as an undergrad as it has no known author. It's still a bit of a mystery.

As for the coffee house, I seem to recall reading about calls to ban their use among young men. Maybe I'll hunt for that article for next week's bonus reading.

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Mar 7, 2025 11:41AM

Jeffrey Shuster

Liz,

I too have noticed that progress doesn't seem to be linear when viewing history. I've heard that in the East, time tends to be viewed as cyclical. I grew up with and saw amazing leaps in technology, but, at present, I see modern technology as flawed at the

very least or detrimental at the worst. Take, for example, electronic books. People marveled at the idea of being able to have their entire library accessible on an e-reader wherever they were in the world, but now Amazon will not allow you to store your e-books on a personal computer or external drive. They are now in complete control of the libraries their customers purchased through their store.