

Reflective Paper for the Osler Essay Contest

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Writing my essay on Ugo Benzi's commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms was a unique opportunity for me to engage with real manuscripts, that I had only previously read through the intermediary of collations and critical editions. In all honesty, I decided to enter this essay contest because I knew that as a student of medicine, it would probably be my final chance to engage Latin texts in an academic setting. Having discovered that the Osler Library held a collection of rare books, including original handwritten editions, the choice was clear.

Manuscript studies and reading ancient texts composed for their own time poses many challenges. My specific case also had added difficulties. My experience with Latin essentially only covered the classical variant and its authors; medieval Italianate Latin, with its different vocabulary, orthography and occasionally syntax, forced me to relearn some aspects of the language. My translation efforts also progressed more slowly than what I was accustomed to.

I was initially bamboozled by vastly different calligraphic conventions than what my modern self is accustomed to: “r” looked more like a 2, “s” was either written as f or, terminally, as a 6, and “c” resembling a truncated τ. Further, the profuse use of abbreviation was often downright impenetrable: for example, the phrase “est huiusmodi ergo et cetera” is condensed down to only 7 (!) characters. Even using tools like Cappelli's *Lexicon Abbreviatarum*, a vital resource to decode abbreviations in medieval manuscripts that I became accustomed to rapidly, it was difficult to tease out meaning at a very basic level. I am lucky that a recent edition was available for loan at the McLennan library.

Handling precious books also requires preparation. I read selections from a textbook on manuscript studies, also available at the McLennan Library, including a very helpful section on “what to expect” when entering an archive to consult manuscripts. I was also grateful to the staff at the Osler Library, that granted me access to the consultation room and demonstrated proper handling and care. I tried my hand at live transcription using pencil and paper; but I was not up to the task at the time, and was graciously allowed to take photographs.

I am confident in stating that my ability to approach original sources greatly increased as a result of this experience. I was undoubtedly faster and better by the end of my transcription and translation; and as I revised my previous work, I realized I was able to understand passages that had previously caused me great difficulty. For those passages that I was not able to understand, or that were rife with scribal error or corrupt, I delved for the first time into light textual criticism, by comparing the manuscript to a later printed edition. From this, I attempted to emend my transcription according to the standards found in the literature, which was more difficult than I expected: choosing the correct reading of a lemma or phrase often requires true comprehension of the passage in question.

I am asked, in this reflective piece, to explain “how using library material helped [me] to

increase the scope, depth, and significance of [my] subject.” This is quite an understatement. Without the Osler Library, my project would have been simply impossible. There is no substitute to the real, physical manuscript, with its imperfections and annotations that betray its history. To read words as they were written nearly six hundred years ago puts my life into perspective. There is something very powerful and indelible about thoughts that have outlived generations and travelled across continents; one feels humbled by something so much larger than oneself. I am keen to believe that a flicker of this awe was also shared by Ugo as he studied Galen, his predecessor of 1200 years, or by Galen as he commented on the Hippocratic corpus half a millennium older.

I am no Luddite, but this project has convinced me more than ever of the necessity for libraries to maintain some sort of a physical and accessible collection; these works truly are the heritage of humanity. This is not a heritage however, that is simply limited to the works themselves; the archival tradition and the expertise of librarians is also crucial to future researchers, historians, and the general public. This appreciation is not new. Dean P. Lockwood expressed a similar sentiment of gratitude regarding the same manuscript that I studied in a letter to William Willoughby Francis, of the Osler Library: “[...] I hasten to tell you how deeply I appreciate your helpful interest and your care in looking over the pages and annotating them. Your offer to give me further help is very generous, and I shall probably appeal to you again [...]”.

It is difficult to exaggerate the value of this research essay to me. In a curriculum that neglects the humanities aspect of medicine more and more, this was an opportunity I simply could not miss. I believe it was a rare synthesis of my interests in History, Latin, and medicine, and I am deeply grateful to my mentor Faith Wallis and the Osler Library for making this fantastic experience possible.