



Arrangement and Cataloging of Manuscripts

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GUTENBERG'S INVENTION was the mass production of manuscripts. Even today a printed book is simply a manuscript in print. As a result the rules for cataloging manuscripts have generally followed the principles for cataloging printed books.

W. C. Ford's¹ brief remarks on manuscripts in Cutter's rules (1904) and the rules for manuscripts in the A.L.A. codes² since then (1908, 1941, and 1949) all recognized this fact. The more elaborate attempts to draw up rules only for cataloging manuscripts, such as those of the Library of Congress, the Minnesota Historical Society,³ and Dorothy V. Martin,⁴ all lean heavily upon the A.L.A. principles and even the Library of Congress list of subject headings.

It is true that every manuscript is a unique individual. But that does not justify rugged individualism in their catalogers. In the beginning each library had to work out its own practices for cataloging manuscripts, just as it had to do with printed books. But standardizing influences came early.

Chief, perhaps, has been the union catalog. Union lists from the thirteenth century *Registrum Librorum Angliae* to Seymour de Ricci's *Census*, and movements for national union catalogs of manuscripts in Germany, Italy, this country,⁵ and elsewhere—each sought first of all a finding guide, but each also pushed steadily if not sensationally toward standardization. Also publications, such as the articles in the *American Archivist* and other journals and the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Manuscripts⁶ of the American Historical Association have shared in the movement to standardize cataloging.

As with printed books, the cataloging of manuscripts has gravitated, sometimes uneasily, but always relentlessly, toward simplification. The describers give way to the finders.

Detailed description of the manuscript as a physical object, like detailed description of the printed book, was a necessary tool for the scholar in the days of private libraries, difficult and expensive travel,

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few and costly methods of reproduction. But champions of detailed description have outlasted its need; witness the rash of articles in the 30's, particularly from German writers, J. D. Cowley's⁷ elaborate instructions in 1939, and the forceful defense of detail by Dorothy K. Coveney⁸ as recently as 1950.

But, just as with printed books, elaboration collapsed of its own weight. It demands that the cataloger be a scholar and each entry a monograph. This takes time. Cataloging backlogs mounted and accessions were stepped up, particularly in the United States. Finally, as with printed books, there was a machine, the typewriter, and an increase in authors to be reckoned with.

Few large libraries which attempted full-scale cataloging on an elaborate plan were able to keep the pace. The debate at the Bodleian in 1890 between E. W. B. Nicholson and Falconer Madan was typical:⁹ "Nicholson had the scholar's dislike of leaving a problem unsolved and would have spent endless time over the details of date, provenance, and questions of text; Madan was convinced of the greater importance of overtaking the arrears of cataloging and of producing a catalogue within as short a time as possible." At the Bodleian, as at some continental libraries earlier in the century, the debate resulted in a "summary catalogue" rather than elaboration.

Just as with printed books, there has been much talk of the user. Miss Coveney, for instance (like Fredson Bowers for rare printed books and Jesse Shera and the documentalists for all publications) argues perfectionism: the catalog must serve all possible needs of all possible people for all possible time. It must not be concerned only with the needs of the text-seeker. Ranged against them are the champions of the "finding list" idea, currently so popular in the talk of a new code for cataloging printed books.

Thus Miss Martin says that the catalog serves as a "key to the collection as a whole," and W. H. Bond¹⁰ regards the catalog as simply a "finding index." After almost twenty years H. H. Peckham's sturdy creed still holds: ". . . the reader is doing the research; the staff need not do it for him. The curator's duty ends with steering the reader to the right or relevant collection, wherein the reader's subject is, or is likely to be, mentioned. Then it is for the reader to discover what he can, and he should be prepared to dig through a peck of chaff to reach his grain of wheat. That is what constitutes research."¹¹

There is some tendency to exempt from these considerations early manuscripts and valuable literary manuscripts.^{8, 12} Such an attitude,

however, can be defended only on sentimental grounds. The fact that a manuscript is an 8th century parchment fragment of the Vulgate, or in the hand of Columbus or Ben Jonson means, of course, that it is more valuable than other manuscripts and, therefore, more in need of being made easy to find in the catalog. (And the library will, no doubt, want to record somewhere a few unique features which will be used to identify the manuscript if it should be stolen.) But no scholar worth his salt will take at face value anything that any other scholar—let alone a mere cataloger—may have written of the appearance of the manuscript or any abstract he may have made of its contents. Apart from the error to which everyone, even catalogers, are prone, the cataloger may have thought unimportant the one thing the scholar wants to know—or will be glad to have found when he sees the manuscript.

Who are the users of the catalog? For Miss Coveney they are first of all, the "text seekers, of course, who will always constitute the majority." But she then enters a strong plea for the minority groups: "art historians" who want "brief descriptions of the miniatures and ornament;" people concerned with "heuristic, heraldry, sphragistic, and the like;" paleographers and those "interested in formats, types of parchment and paper, watermarks, methods of ruling and prick marks, arrangement of text, methods of punctuation and abbreviation, scribes, scriptoria, and the sundry other details of ever increasing importance, which will contribute to our palaeographical knowledge and the dating and location of manuscripts."¹³

But then she goes on to tell of the problems of the cataloger who "without being a specialist in the many subjects covered by the detailed study of a manuscript . . . must be the final judge of what he can omit," and to complain of defects in catalogs arising from the ignorance or undisciplined knowledge of catalogers: both outright errors and almost meaningless notes such as "in two clear hands, both somewhat current." Elsewhere she complains that, although the Bodleian *Summary Catalogue* description of a manuscript "rarely exceeds two lines and is of little use to other than text seekers," yet the *Catalogue* "still has no index [one has since been issued] and the last published volume (1924) treats the accessions only up to 1915. In spite, therefore, of its summary nature, it is still thirty-five years behind."

And here, unknowingly, Miss Coveney has listed the two overwhelming objections to her plea for elaboration: (1) Few, if any, catalogers are able to do that kind of cataloging; and (2) The cost

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even of a "summary catalogue" slows down the work tremendously; the cost of a full-dress elaborate catalog would be, therefore, prohibitive.

The text-seeker, then, is the only user the catalog can serve, even with early manuscripts. But, is he merely the "majority user"? Is he not rather every user?

The finding list is basic. If a manuscript can not be found, then no one—text-seeker, paleographer, or what not?—can study it. In 1890, the very year of the Bodleian discussion the Bodleian catalogs became briefly notorious at Oxford because the existence of a fifth century Jerome, which had come to the Library in 1824, became known to Oxford scholars only in that year, and then, not because of the library catalogs but because of an article by a German scholar.¹⁴

So the cataloging of manuscripts is like the cataloging of printed books: it has moved steadily toward standardization and simplification with accent on the catalog as a finding list.

What are the principles in constructing this finding list? Perhaps they are only two: the "catalogable unit" and "no conflict."

The "catalogable unit" may be a single manuscript or it may be a collection (sometimes rather large) of manuscripts. The collection consists of mutually related items, none of them perhaps individually of much importance but together forming a significant unit. Thus it may be letters written to or by one man and/or his immediate family, or it may be letters of documents relating to some person or event or subject. The only requirement is that the group of items have meaning as a group rather than as individuals.

The collection-device is, of course, also to be found in the cataloging of printed books. The Library of Congress, for instance, began in 1947 collective cataloging of material thought likely to be used in groups rather than individually; and the Armed Forces Medical Library has also used informal group cataloging schemes. Other libraries have pamphlets—sometimes even quite early pamphlets—cataloged as a collection rather than individually. And the composite printed book has always been here.

"No conflict" is the famous Library of Congress decision of 1949 that in the cataloging of printed books entries for personal names are established "in the form given in the work being cataloged without further search, provided that . . . the name conforms to the A.L.A. rules for entry, and is not so similar to another name previously established as to give a good basis for the suspicion that both names refer to the same person."¹⁵

Even with printed books "no conflict" does not serve well as a rule to be applied rigidly in every case. Rather, it should be an attitude, a brake on the cataloger's zeal to find out a man's full name and dates of birth and death, or the exactly correct form of a corporate entry. This is even more true of manuscripts. A man with pen in hand, writing perhaps only for himself or for his friends, will be less formal than when he prepares a title and text to appear in print where he who runs may stop and see. Obviously "no conflict" cannot be applied if the name involved is well-known and the scribe has made an easily recognizable error or used a form of the name no longer popular. But the cataloger's "research" to find an exactly correct form of entry should be as brief as is reasonably possible.

"No conflict" may also apply to the description of the catalogable unit: generally speaking, only enough detail is needed to set it apart from all other manuscripts and collections in the catalog. Perhaps title, collation, and notes might be somewhat as follows:

The title should tell simply and briefly what is involved. If there is a conventional title by which reference is made to the manuscript or collection in a printed book, that title should be used. Otherwise, a brief title may be constructed, using modern spelling and phrasing regardless of the age or usage of the manuscript. If there is a title to the manuscript that may be used, but the cataloger should freely expand or condense it if necessary. If the type of manuscript is important—e.g., will, letter, commonplace book, lease, inventory, warrant, telegram, etc.,—that should be the first word of the title. Brackets are needed only to enclose information not supplied somewhere in the manuscript itself.

Collation may be by leaves or pages, following the usage of the manuscript itself if there is one. For a bulky unit collation may be in volumes or linear inches or feet. Height should be specified only if it has some special significance.

Notes should be brief. They may touch on such topics as: (1) subject of the manuscript if the title is not enough (2) handwriting if not indicated in the title and if easily determined (3) printed versions of the manuscript if such information can be secured without long search (4) register or index or calendar of the manuscript prepared by the Library (5) former owners if they are important and easily identified (6) condition of the manuscript if it affects the text.

Ideally an entry should require no more than one catalog card; in practice, of course, some may be longer. An excellent list, constructed along lines somewhat similar to those here advocated is

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W. S. Ewing's¹⁶ guide to the manuscript collections in the Clements Library, although the titles and notes are sometimes more detailed or wordy than might be necessary, and, of course, the long lists of authors of letters and documents in individual collections could not appear on catalog cards.

A few words about the catalog itself. Usually the catalog of manuscripts is kept apart from the catalog of printed books, but scholars have been known to wish for a catalog which might list in one place all material of any kind the library might have relating to, say, Garrick. Certainly, if the manuscript catalog follows the A.L.A.-L.C. principles for cataloging printed books, habits of use learned in one catalog may be transferred with least difficulty to another. Filing may follow the same principles as in the catalog of printed books. The printed catalog of manuscripts has never yielded so completely to the card catalog as did the printed catalog of printed books at one time. Certainly the printed catalog has all the advantages of a book of ready reference in all times and places. But for the printed and for the card catalog the basic principles of construction are probably about the same.

Subject headings may be taken from a standard list such as that issued by the Library of Congress with, as in cataloging printed books, adaptations to fit special needs. Sometimes they are used rather sparingly; Peckham, for instance, suggested that although they were necessary when an obscure author touched on an important event or person, the reader should know the important people connected with subjects and events and be prepared to look under entries for these people rather than under the subjects with which they had been concerned. Added entries for people should be generously provided, but title added entries seldom.

Special additional records are often quite helpful. A chronological catalog is perhaps as useful for historical manuscripts as for early printed books. Registers such as those in the Library of Congress,¹⁷ and indexes, to the extent that the library can afford to provide them, can give much more analytical detail than is practical on catalog cards. Calendars, however, are expensive to prepare and the scholar will seldom accept even a lengthy summary as a substitute for a manuscript which he can look at himself simply by turning in a call slip. The accessions record is of use chiefly to staff rather than readers because its information is more general than that on public records and an accessions collection may have been broken into several catalogable units.

Arrangement is the point at which manuscript cataloging differs most radically from printed books. The many variant physical forms of manuscripts will not tolerate classification by subject except in the case of the bound manuscript dealing largely with one general subject. (Even such a manuscript may at times be better shelved as part of a catalogable unit.) Moreover, manuscripts are kept on closed shelves, so that any advantage gained by subject arrangement would be lost to the reader.

Classification should be loose, expansive, and easy for staff members to understand. Collections may be divided into broad groups determined by such things as geography, subject, date, or form. Within the group, the collections themselves may be arranged by some arbitrary sequence such as the order of their cataloging, or some general alphabetical, subject, or chronological arrangement. Separate manuscripts may go into a miscellaneous group with such simple subdivision as they may seem to require.

Arrangement within a collection, unlike the location of that collection on the shelf, does come in direct contact with the reader, and thus can make the collection more (or less) useful to him. But here again there is no specific rule, capable of universal application. If the collection is indeed a "catalogable unit" its material will fall naturally into groups and sub-groups. Generally speaking, with literary material alphabetical arrangements tend to be useful; with historical material, chronological arrangements. If the unit comes already arranged, it may be well not to disturb it, particularly if the arrangement has been frozen by an index or by binding.

What about the cataloger of manuscripts? Peckham felt that subject specialization was more important than formal library school training. Undoubtedly subject knowledge helps, but it may not be more necessary in organizing manuscripts than in selecting classification numbers and subject headings for printed books. The chief danger for the man with no more than subject background is that he may take his specialized knowledge as the equivalent of the ability to organize and catalog and be somewhat disdainful of what seems pedantic and clerical skills acquired by the professional cataloger.

Perhaps more important than either specialized knowledge or cataloging training is attitude. No cataloger is a good cataloger if he lacks a profound scepticism and a passion for order. His job is to bring order out of chaos, and he cannot do it well if he follows any rule or person blindly.

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