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A Cautionary Note

On the night of January 25-26, 1904, a fire in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitari di Torino destroyed approximately 2,100 of an estimated 4,100-4,500 manuscripts, thereby greatly increasing the number of problems involved in obtaining information about that library's resources. Even before that fire, a scholar interested in the history or contents of a particular BNT manuscript would have found it difficult to obtain information without travelling to Turin. Although Pasini's catalogue was available for consultation outside Turin, certain manuscripts had been omitted from its listings. Other catalogues themselves remained in handwritten form in the library. Such was the case with the Index alphabétique des livres qui se trouvent en la Bibliothèque Royale de Turin en cette année 1713, a catalogue long overlooked yet which, in spite of the brevity of its entries, has an introduction that furnishes valuable information about the reorganization of the library after the fire of 1667. The handwritten Catalogo alfabetico dei manoscritti, prepared by Francesco Bencini and completed by 1732, groups illuminated manuscripts in the "G" section, which occurs out of sequence after the last of the alphabetized entries. Thus the 1904 fire added to already existing problems of incompleteness, inaccuracy and inaccessibility of sources by destroying such materials as a catalogue prepared after Pasini's and updated early in the twentieth century. Its loss meant the elimination of the library's only record of certain acquisitions, which themselves were burned at the same time.


2Giuseppe Pasini, Codices manuscripti Bibliothecae Regii Taurinensis Athenaei (Taurini; Ex Typographia regia, 1749), 2 vols.


4Bassi, 22.

5The entry for the 586 folio BNT Ms. L.II.14, which contains, among other works, Huon de Bordeaux, reads as follows: "Hues de Bourdeaux roman m.s. --No. 79." The HB, including prologue and sequels, occupies only fols. 283r-460v.

6The BNT has a photocopy of this inventory, the original of which is now in the Archivio di Stato di Torino.
Articles written shortly after the 1904 fire helped to create a very pessimistic outlook regarding the state of the French manuscripts which had survived that disaster; and while scholars have access to Sorbelli's inventory of the BNT manuscripts, no published catalogue now exists which describes the current physical condition of each of the remaining volumes. Therefore, anyone whose research involves a text for which he is obliged to rely on information obtained from secondary sources about the state and availability of that manuscript.

A recent dissertation, defended at the University of North Carolina, shows the necessity for some scepticism with regard to bibliographical sources. This dissertation, by Bernice Heard Waddell, presents an edition of the Auberon, which precedes Huon de Bordeaux in BNT Ms. L.II.14. The author, in speaking of the method she used to establish the text, says that she did not use the manuscript, but rather the 1878 edition by Arturo Graf, explaining that the "original intent to compare Graf's text with the manuscript was thwarted because the manuscript was burned in 1904.

Bassi, 27, and Meyer, 159.


"A fact duly noted by Sheila Edmunds, "The Missals of Felix V and Early Savoyard Illumination," Art Bull. 46(June 1964)1, 127. The Istituto di Storia dell'Arte della Facoltà di Lettere dell'Università di Torino is preparing a Catalog dei codici miniati della Biblioteca Nazionale di Torino, the first volume of which will be published in 1976. This should be an aid in determining whether a manuscript still exists.


Arturo Graf, I complementi della chanson d'Huon de Bordeaux, testi francesi inediti tratti da un codice della Biblioteca di Torino e pubblicati da... (Vol. 1: Auberon (Halle: Niemeyer, 1878).
Therefore this edition is based by necessity upon the text of Graf. . . "13
Any ambiguity in the use of the word "burned" in her abstract (meaning totally destroyed? or merely damaged?) is eliminated by a statement on the first page of her dissertation which says that "the poem survives only in the reading of Arturo Graf." From my own work with BNT Ms. L.II.14 for several months in Turin in 1971-73,14 it was evident that Prof. Waddell had reached an erroneous conclusion about the survival of that manuscript. To be fair to Prof. Waddell, one must note that she says in her dissertation that her information about the manuscript was "received in a letter to Professor U. T. Holmes from the director of the Biblioteca Nazionale of Torino, dated March 9, 1971."15 That letter is not quoted in the dissertation, but perhaps it contained statements that might be open to the same type of double interpretation as Waddell's use of the word "burned." However, as recently as 1960 Pierre Ruelle, in his edition of Huon de Bordeaux, noted the usefulness of a stay in Turin to consult Ms. L.II.14,16 and that same volume served as the base manuscript for Françoise Meunier's edition of the Chanson de Godin.17

In situations of this kind where there is contradictory evidence about the condition and availability of a manuscript, the most readily accessible source of information (aside from the depository of the manuscript) is the Institut de Recherches et d'Histoire des Textes, in Paris.18 It has a somewhat limited, but nonetheless useful, collection of photographs and microfilms, among which is a film of the Auberon in L.II.14. Moreover, the Institut keeps bibliographical files on research (both completed and in progress) on medieval French texts, and its records would have shown that, as of 1967, Jean Subrenat, Professor at the University of Provence, was already preparing an edition of the Auberon which was subsequently published in 1973. The IRHT provided the microfilm which Prof. Waddell, quoted in Olifant, p. 60

Waddell, Auberon, p. 1, n. 2.


Françoise Meunier, La Chanson de Godin (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1958); see esp. pp. xix-xxi.

40, av. d'Iéna, 75016 Paris.
As a service to scholars in general and particularly as a precaution against inadvertent duplication of research, one should inform the IRHT of both the topic and the manuscripts on which one plans to work.

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Jean Subrenat, Le Roman d'Auberon (Genève: Droz, 1973, Textes Littéraires Français, tome 202), foreword, p. 2; see also p. xiv-xv.

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The Anglo-Norman Text Society

The Anglo-Norman Text Society, founded in Oxford in 1938 with Sir William Craigie as President and Professor M.K. Pope as Hon. Secretary, has as its object the publication of a series of Anglo-Norman texts of literary, linguistic, historical and legal value and interest. To date, it has published twenty such volumes, and the number of texts in preparation continues to increase. Members have also recently finished compiling an Anglo-Norman Dictionary, and arrangements are currently in hand for its publication. It is anticipated that it will form a volume of between 800 and 1000 pages in double columns. A prospectus, including specimen pages, will be prepared and circulated to Members, to whom it is hoped to make available special purchase terms.

The officers of the society are: T.B.W. Reid, President; Ian Short, Hon. Secretary; R.C. Johnston, Hon. Treasurer; Ruth J. Dean, Hon. Secretary for America. The annual subscription to the Society is £3.00, payable on the first day of January each year to the Hon. Secretary, Dr. Ian Short, Westfield College, London NW3 7ST, England. Members receive free of charge all texts published by the Society in the years corresponding to their subscription. They may also obtain texts still available in print (excluding reprints) at considerably reduced rates. Further particulars will be supplied on request to the Hon. Secretary.