

Discovering the early modern library in late Renaissance Italy: A historical Prospero and his books

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Prospero tells us that he failed to prevent the duchy of Milan falling in thrall to Naples because the library into which he had retreated ‘[w]as dukedom large enough’ (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, c.1610-11). But the select volumes he takes with him into exile are not only, like the beauty of his daughter Miranda, diverting ornaments to deck his house. They are ‘brave utensils’, household tools with which to do things. They are the instruments of his personal power. They and his daughter alike are the means by which he gets his dukedom *back*, by which his issue become kings of Naples.

How did we get from the private Renaissance library, ornament and instrument of a princely household like Prospero’s, to the four L-shaped towers of the new Bibliothèque nationale de France, an open book accessible to the global public? François Mitterand’s announcement of his *grand projet* in 1988 focussed historians’ and philosophers’ minds on the history of libraries. Since that time French scholars such as Roger Chartier, Robert Damien and Claude Jolly have led the way in shaping the narrative of a distinctively *early modern* period in European library history. The narrative aims to explain how the development of new library economies and bibliographical tools after c.1530 laid the foundations upon which, centuries later, the new national libraries at St. Pancras in London and Tolbiac in Paris would be built.

From the mid-sixteenth century on, this narrative suggests, forward-looking libraries were reformed and recatalogued as instruments of discovery for a learned public. They made use of printed, universal bibliographies such as Gesner’s *Bibliotheca universalis* (1545). They were geared primarily to the collection and use not of manuscripts, like the fifteenth-century library, but of printed books. They were opened up to a scholarly public by a new breed of librarian-counsellors. The hero of this new era in library economy and bibliography and in intellectual history was Gabriel Naudé. Naudé features both as the author of an important treatise of 1627 on how to form a library, and as a key figure in the Franco-Italian *libertinage érudit* which paved the way for the northern European Enlightenment. For Damien, it was Naudé who left the old world of the princely Italian library behind in order to found a new and modern concept of the library in seventeenth-century France, a concept integral to the formation of the modern state and the modern citizen.

I shall review this powerful new narrative in library history by looking at the neglected case of the library of the last Duke of Urbino, Francesco Maria II della Rovere (1549-1631). From one perspective, the Duke looks like a historical Prospero and his library a relic of the old world of Renaissance learning that was fading into history when he died in 1631. It served entirely as an ornament and instrument of dynastic power, of Francesco Maria’s attempt to restore some dignity to his duchy, and was not open to the public – as Montaigne found when he visited in 1581. Burdened with c.15000 volumes, the shelves at the various locations found plenty of space for hundreds of volumes of Aristotelean commentary in Latin but for only two books in the French vernacular.

Fitting, then, from this perspective, that the destiny of the manuscripts and the printed books was assimilation into two different Papal libraries in Rome – the Vatican and the Alessandrina.

There is, however, another perspective – one which begins to discover traces of the early modern library in late Renaissance Italy. In the very years in which Montaigne failed to gain entrance to the collection, the Duke sought and obtained a copy of Gesner's *Bibliotheca universalis*, prohibited at the time by the Vatican. And if we look carefully at the inventories, we find that the Casteldurante collection was organised according to the principles of the new library economy that Naudé would later codify. In Vittorio Venturelli we have an in-house librarian-counsellor working to develop the new political theory of *ragion di stato*. And we find that the books on the shelves begin to tell us stories not about the Duke himself, but about a whole community of scholars – including Naudé – whose intellectual choices and pursuits shaped the collection. The books of this Prospero, it seems, formed at one and the same time a 'Renaissance' and an 'early modern' library.