

SIR ROBERT COTTON'S RECORD OF A ROYAL BOOKSHELF

JANET BACKHOUSE

OUR knowledge of the early history of the English royal library, conveniently sketched out by Warner and Gilson in 1921,¹ has been considerably amplified in recent years.² An edition of the vital Westminster library catalogue of 1542 is now in preparation and will be of major advantage to future students.³ However, the Tudor rulers of England, like other noble owners of large quantities of books, did not confine the storage of reading matter to a single one of their many residences, nor to one specially designated apartment in any house. It is increasingly clear that the Westminster list by no means reflects even the entire royal collection of books in the one major palace at the time it was drawn up. The existence of substantial libraries in other royal residences is recorded in the inventories of Henry VIII's possessions taken soon after the accession of Edward VI and individual volumes appear variously among the diverse contents of private apartments, alongside hawks' hoods, dog collars, spectacles, scissors, knitting needles and other minor paraphernalia of everyday life.⁴ References to the contents of the royal library during the latter part of the sixteenth century are scanty, though all three of Henry VIII's children are known to have been interested in books and each quite frequently received them as gifts on appropriate occasions. Such books seem often to have been set aside for personal use. The New Year gift rolls of Elizabeth's reign show that, although some volumes were at once assigned to Thomas Knyvett, who apparently had charge of the library, the Queen herself not infrequently took possession of books that caught her personal fancy.⁵ Others were placed in the hands of her principal gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber, Blanche Parry,⁶ or her successor Mary Radcliffe, who also took charge of gifts of clothing and personal jewellery.

A brief and hitherto unnoticed list of manuscripts in one of the private apartments at Whitehall, probably written during the early years of the reign of James I, seems to record a small cache of volumes placed there in the time of Elizabeth and is of particular interest because it mentions identifiable items not previously associated with royal ownership. This list appears on the recto of a vellum flyleaf at the end of Cotton MS. Vespasian B. IV and is clearly in the hand of Sir Robert Cotton himself (fig. 1). The leaf, now numbered f. 25, was originally a pastedown. Traces of the fabric covering of the boards appear round three sides, matching similar traces on the corresponding leaf at the

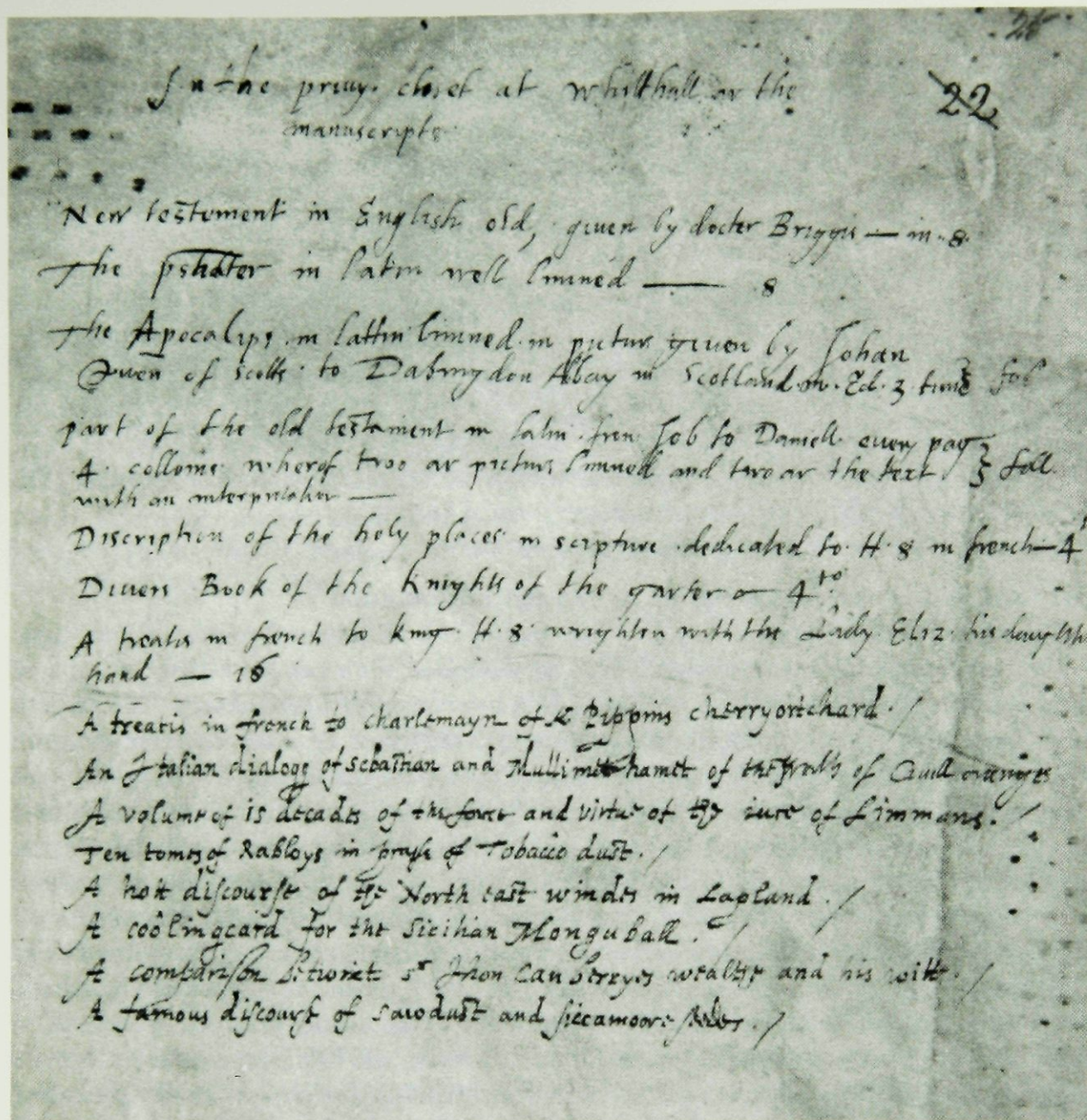


Fig. 1. The two book lists. Cotton MS. Vespasian B. IV, f. 25

front of the volume. The manuscript itself was once a royal book, containing two Latin poems addressed to Henry VII in 1497.⁷ The list reads as follows:

In the priuy closet at Whitthall ar the manuscripts

New testement in English old, giuen by docter Briggis — in 8

The psalter in latin well limned — 8

The Apocalips in lattan limned in picturs giuen by Johan Quen of Scotts to Dabingdon Abbay
in Scotland on Ed. 3 time — fol

Part of the old testament in latin from Job to Daniell euery pag 4 colloms wherof two ar picturs
 limned and two ar the text — foll
 Discription of the holy places in scripture dedicated to H. 8 in french — 4^t
 Divers Book of the knights of the garter — 4^{to}
 A treatis in french to king H. 8 wrighten with the Lady Eliz. his daughter hand — 16

This is immediately followed by a second list, in a different and more florid hand but apparently in the same ink, parodying a library list thus:

A treatis in french to Charlemayn of K Pippins cherry orchard
 An Italian dialogg of Sebastian and Mullimethamet (*sic*) of the Worth of Civill oranges
 A volume of 15 decades of the force and virtue of the iuce of Limmans
 Ten tomes of Rabloys in prayse of Tobacco dust
 A hott discourse of the North east windes in Lapland
 A coolingcard for the Sicilian Monguball
 A comparison betwixt S^r Jhon Canberryes wealthe and his witt
 A famous discourse of sawdust and siccamoore seedes

The hand of this second list has so far resisted identification.

One of the descriptions on Cotton's list, that of the illuminated psalter, is too vague to allow of reasonable identification.⁸ Two of the other items can, however, be equated immediately with manuscripts in the Royal collection in the British Library. The English New Testament given by 'docter Briggis' is Royal MS. 1 A. XII, an early fifteenth century copy of the revised Wycliffite text presented to Elizabeth by her chaplain John Bridges, Dean of Salisbury, as a New Year offering in an unspecified year. The volume retains its presentation binding of faded blue velvet, with impressions of the original bosses and clasps in the form of roses and fleurs de lys. The fifth item, the 'discription of the holy places in scripture', is almost certainly Royal MS. 20 A. IV, Marcel Brion's 'Tresample description de toute la Terre Saincte', a French treatise offered to Henry VIII about 1540. In 1547 this book, described as 'the description of the holy lande and (*sic*) a boke couered w^t vellat enbrawdred with the kings armes declaring the same, in a case of blacke leather with his graces Armes', was in 'the litle Study called the newe Librarye' in the Palace of Westminster.⁹ The lavish and distinctive embroidered binding survives to this day¹⁰ but the wording of the 1547 inventory entry perhaps suggests that the manuscript was originally supplemented by a map.

Books of the knights of the Garter (item 6) and similar heraldic records were standard New Year gifts to the monarch from Garter King of Arms. A series of nine such manuscripts, all still bound in crimson velvet and trimmed with gold, appeared on the London market in 1986.¹¹ They had been prepared for Elizabeth by Sir Gilbert Dethick between 1569 and 1580. In 1577 and 1597 annotations on surviving gift rolls record that Garter's offerings were handed into the care of Blanche Parry and Mary Radcliffe respectively.¹²

The Lady Elizabeth's treatise in French, addressed to her father, King Henry VIII (item 7), may have been the little manuscript shown to Paul Hentzner in 1598 as one of

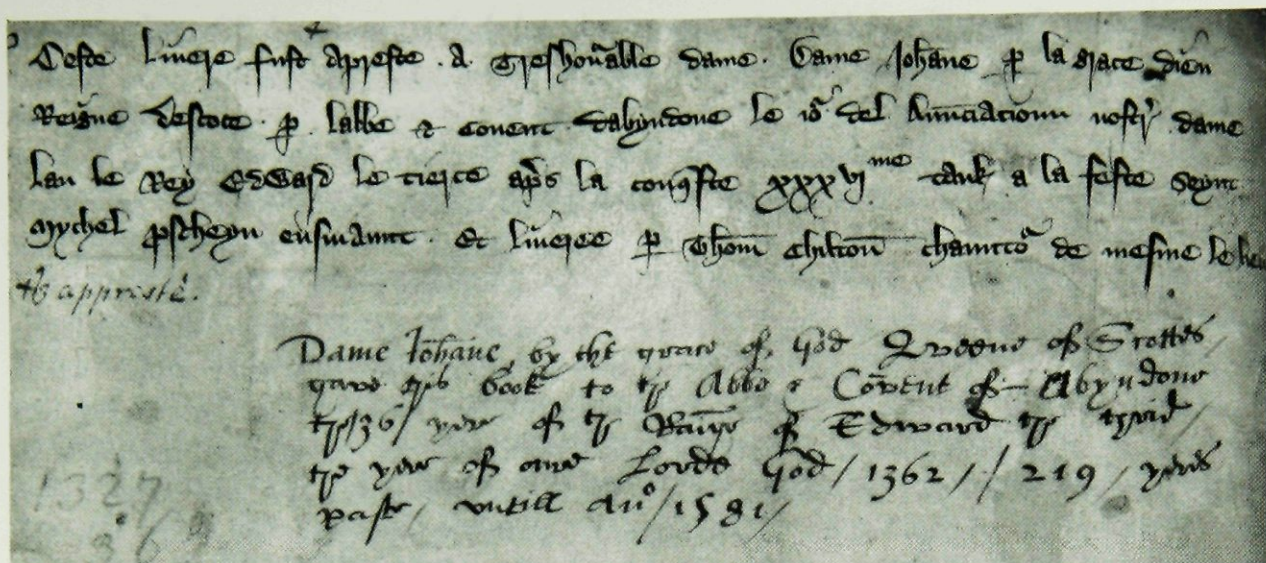


Fig. 2. Fourteenth-century inscription in the Abingdon Apocalypse, recording the loan of the book to Queen Joan of Scotland. Below is the mistranslation added by Stephen Batman. Add. MS. 42555, f. 4v (detail)

the special treasures of the palace.¹³ Elizabeth's youthful translations are well documented and two have survived. The earlier, her English version of Marguerite of Angoulême's 'Mirror of the Sinful Soul', addressed to Queen Catherine Parr as a New Year gift in 1545, is now Cherry MS. 36 in the Bodleian Library.¹⁴ The second, and more ambitious, Queen Catherine Parr's own 'Prayers and Meditations', translated by the Princess into Latin, French and Italian and offered to her father at New Year 1546, remains among the Royal Manuscripts as MS. 7 D. X. It is, however, unlikely to be the book mentioned by Cotton, as its dedication is in Latin and the dedication quoted by Hentzner is actually in French.¹⁵

The two remaining items, both described in some detail by Cotton, seem to be identifiable with two major thirteenth century illuminated manuscripts, neither of which has ever before been associated with the English royal library. The first (item 3) is, beyond all doubt, the Abingdon Apocalypse, now Additional MS. 42555 in the British Library. The second (item 4) seems to be a volume of the *Bible moralisée*.

As recorded by Cotton, the Abingdon Apocalypse does contain, at f. 4b, an English inscription describing the gift of the manuscript to Abingdon from Queen Joan of Scotland. This is, in fact, a mistranslation of the original Latin which precedes it, which records the loan of the manuscript to Joan by the abbot and community (fig. 2). The loan was to run from Lady Day (25 March) to Michaelmas (29 September) 1362 and the interests of the abbey were safeguarded not only by this formal entry but also by a further note, on f. 83, recording the number of folios 'escriptes & enlumines' contained in the volume. The implied misgivings of the lenders may have been justified. Queen Joan, younger sister of Edward III, died in the late summer of 1362 and there is no way of

telling whether the monks of Abingdon ever retrieved their property. A fifteenth-century inscription on f. 1b, reading 'precii xiijs', may indicate that they did not.

The mistranslation noticed by Cotton is in the hand of Stephen Batman (d. 1584) and is dated 1581. Batman had been domestic chaplain to Archbishop Parker (d. 1575), who employed him to collect manuscripts for the library which subsequently passed to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Batman was, however, a bibliophile and antiquarian in his own right and a number of manuscripts contain inscriptions in his hand.¹⁶ Alongside the note on f. 83 of the Abingdon Apocalypse he has written 'a me batman', but whether this implies that he owned the manuscript or merely that he had checked the accuracy of the fourteenth-century librarian's collation is unclear. For the last two years of his life Batman was domestic chaplain to Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Elizabeth's first cousin on her mother's side and even possibly her half-brother. He was Lord Chamberlain of her household in 1583. It is possible therefore that it was through Hunsdon that the Apocalypse passed into royal hands, a very suitable gift in view of its fourteenth-century associations. How it passed out again, after Cotton had seen it, we do not know, as there is no further evidence of ownership before the late eighteenth century. In view of its newly-recognized royal connections, it is, however, interesting to remark the remaining traces of a crimson velvet binding.

The last of the seven items seems to be a single Old Testament volume of the *Bible moralisée*, which is typically laid out with two columns of miniatures and two of accompanying text on every page. No extant manuscript corresponds exactly with what Cotton has written, but the volume now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is close enough to be a possible candidate.¹⁷ The Paris manuscript, MS. lat. 11560, is the second portion of a complete four-volume Bible. It begins, as described by Cotton, with the final passages of the Book of Job but it ends with Zacharias and the last portion of Daniel occurs on f. 213b of the 222 folio volume. However, the other three volumes of the set are all in England and there is every reason to suppose that they were here at the end of the sixteenth century. The first, containing the initial books of the Old Testament, is now MS. Bodley 270b in Oxford. It was given to Bodley in 1604 by Sir Christopher Heydon, writer on astrology, having already been in England for more than a century, for a fifteenth-century note recording the collation (f. 224b) is written in English.¹⁸ The two remaining volumes, containing Maccabees and the New Testament, are Harley MSS. 1526 and 1527 in the British Library. They were acquired for Lord Oxford from the library of the antiquary John Kemp (d. 1717), which was sold up in 1721. Kemp had purchased them in 1711 from the bookseller William Innys at a cost of £40.¹⁹ The signature of an unidentified fifteenth-century Englishman named John Thwayte occurs on the flyleaf of Harley MS. 1527, indicating that it too had spent a long period in England. The Paris manuscript has no recorded history before its appearance in the collection of Pierre Séguier (d. 1672), who was Chancellor of France from 1653. It is quite possible that the entire *Bible moralisée* was in England during the sixteenth century and that the one volume left the country during the troubles of the seventeenth century. It is worth recalling that a Psalter of St Louis, identifiable as the Ingeborg Psalter now

in the Musée Condé at Chantilly, is said to have been in the English royal collection, having been presented to Mary I by Philip of Spain at the time of their marriage, and to have made its way out of the country in or about 1649 through Pierre de Bellièvre, French ambassador to London in that year.²⁰ It is of course very tempting to equate the Ingeborg Psalter with the 'psalter in latin well limned' of Cotton's list, but unfortunately its size does not support the identification.²¹

Cotton described the books on his list as being 'in the priuy closet at Whithall', but it is not clear from existing descriptions of the royal apartments exactly which room he had in mind. The royal apartments were on the first floor and included a number of small rooms as well as the larger and more formal ones. The most detailed source of information is the inventory of King Henry VIII's goods and chattels, taken in 1547 and now Harley MS. 1419 A in the British Library. It enumerates small, often personal and everyday items in 'the Study at the hether ende of the Longe Gallerie' (ff. 113-114), 'the kynges secrete studie called the Chaier house for the furnytur of the same' (ff. 115-118b), 'the study nexte the kyngs olde Bedde chambre' (ff. 151-158b) and 'the litel Study called the newe Librarye' (ff. 186-188b).²² The third of these apartments housed (f. 157) 'A booke of paternes for phiosionamyas', against which is recorded 'taken by the kings maiestie hymselfe 12^o Novembre 1549'. This has been reasonably identified with the Holbein drawings of personalities at the court of Henry VIII, now at Windsor.²³ In the 'newe Librarye' were cupboards and drawers containing a variety of documents including (f. 187) 'uppon two Shelues paternes for Castles and engynnes of warre'²⁴ and the description of the Holy Land mentioned above. A small room described as 'the kinges rich cabonett' was fitted out with new cupboards, shelves and drawing tables for Charles I in 1630-1.²⁵ This has been tentatively equated with 'her ma^{tes} Cabanett' redecorated for Elizabeth by George Gower in 1588-9²⁶ and it is at least possible that one particular small room in the palace was the customary repository for books and documents used privately by the sovereign. Four of the seven manuscripts on Cotton's list were certainly gifts to Elizabeth or her father, Henry VIII. It seems extremely likely that all seven fall into the category of individual offerings taken in charge either personally by the sovereign or by someone in close attendance, rather than being assigned to the keeper of the royal library proper. Certainly, neither of the two items still among the Royal Manuscripts in the British Library can be recognised in any of the early royal library catalogues.

During the early years of James I's reign Cotton enjoyed the royal favour and was a frequent visitor in the palace of Whitehall. It was probably at this time that he saw and listed the cache of manuscripts in the privy closet.²⁷ His interest was doubtless not untinged with covetousness. The Cotton collection boasts a significant number of manuscripts originally owned by members of the royal family and this varied little group would have been very much to his taste.

- 1 G. F. Warner and J. P. Gilson, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collections* (1921), introduction.
- 2 See T. A. Birrell, *English Monarchs and their Books: from Henry VII to Charles II* (The Panizzi Lectures 1986) (1987); J. Backhouse, 'Founders of the Royal Library: Edward IV and Henry VII as Collectors of Illuminated Manuscripts', *England in the Fifteenth Century*, Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium (1987), pp. 23–41.
- 3 In the present context Westminster and Whitehall are synonymous. The relationship of the two adjoining palaces is studied in H. M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, iv, pt. ii (1982), pp. 286–343. The 1542 catalogue is currently being edited by James P. Carley.
- 4 The relevant inventories occur in Harley MSS. 1419 A and B.
- 5 For a list of surviving New Year Gift Rolls, see A. J. Collins, *Jewels and Plate of Queen Elizabeth I: the Inventory of 1574* (1955), pp. 247–53.
- 6 See C. A. Bradford, *Blanche Parry, Queen Elizabeth's Gentlewoman* (1935).
- 7 How Cotton himself came by this manuscript is unclear. It is tempting to suppose that it was originally one of the books which he found in the 'priuy closet' and that he abstracted it as a suitable place in which to note down his list. However, the opening page of the text, now f. 3, is inscribed 'phillips . 1600 . sept' in a contemporary hand. Some further writing at the head of this leaf has been obliterated. I am very grateful to Colin Tite for his notes on the manuscript. It is apparently not actually recorded among Cotton's books until about 1631, though this is not a clear indication that he did not own it earlier. However, 'phillips' has not yet been identified.
- 8 Cotton describes the psalter as octavo, the same size as Dr Bridges's Bible. The latter measures approximately 210 × 145 mm. Of the obvious candidates still in the Royal collection, the nearest in size is Henry VIII's personal psalter (MS. 2 A. XVI), which measures 205 × 140 mm. Queen Mary's Psalter (MS. 2 B. VII), certainly 'well limned', is 275 × 175 mm. The lavish 13th cent. psalter (MS. 1 D. X) is a substantial 350 × 240 mm., larger than the Apocalypse, 330 × 205 mm., which Cotton classes as folio.
- 9 Harley MS. 1419 A, f. 187.
- 10 Reproduced in A. Payne and R. Marks, *British Heraldry from its Origins to c. 1800* (1978), p. 113.
- 11 Sotheby's sale catalogue, 18 Dec. 1986, lot 203.
- 12 The 1577 roll is in the Public Record Office, Chanc. Misc. 3/39. The 1596/7 roll, untraced by Collins, op. cit., was sold at Sotheby's, 14 Mar. 1967, lot 201. Photographs are available in the British Library as MS. Facs. 672.
- 13 P. Hentzner, *Itinerarium Germaniae, Galliae, Angliae, Italiae* (Nuremberg, 1612), p. 127. He describes the 'Bibliotheca Reginae' as being well supplied with books in Greek, Latin, Italian and French, all bound in velvet, chiefly red, with clasps of gold and silver and sometimes with pearls and precious stones set in the bindings.
- 14 Fully reproduced in P. W. Ames (ed.), *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* (1897).
- 15 *Loc. cit.* Although Hentzner's original text is in Latin, he gives Elizabeth's dedication in French.
- 16 The Bodleian Library furnishes a number of examples, viz.: MS. Bodley 155, 'Stephan Batman the true onor of thys booke, which coste xx'; MS. Bodley 480, 'S. and B. belongs to me; ijs'; MS. Bodley 801, 'Stephanus Battemanus huius librij possessor'; MS. Auct. F. 5. 29, 'Stephanus Batman to his phrend Camden (?)'. Batman was in addition responsible for MS. Douce 363, an illustrated copy of Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*, in a volume that also contains material by Dr John Dee. His career and writings are outlined in the *D.N.B.* and references are given by M. B. Parkes in G. Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde, a Facsimile of Corpus Christi College MS. 61*, ed. M. B. Parkes and E. Salter (1978), p. 12.
- 17 I am very grateful to my colleague François Avril, who kindly answered my questions about the Paris volume. All four volumes of this famous manuscript were reproduced between 1911 and 1927 by the Société française de reproductions des manuscrits à peintures, with an introduction by A. de Laborde. However, each page of the *Bible moralisée* is painted on one side only and the intervening blank openings were not (understandably) included in the facsimile. The pages were, in addition, much cut down. Much of the bibliographical evidence, in the form of quire marks and inscriptions, is therefore omitted from the edition.
- 18 The collation note is dated to the 15th cent. in the Bodleian catalogues. It is actually very

- crudely written and hard to date, but must be much earlier than Heydon's donation in 1604.
- 19 C. E. Wright, *Fontes Harleiani* (1972), pp. 203, 209, 329 and 398. Wright suggests that the two Harley volumes were also owned by Heydon, but this appears to be based merely on the known history of the volume in Oxford.
 - 20 Warner and Gilson, op. cit., pp. xxii-iii.
 - 21 The Ingeborg Psalter, MS. 1695 at Chantilly, measures 304 × 204 mm.
 - 22 The personal use of favourite books by the monarch is perhaps accurately reflected in the miniature of Henry VIII seated reading in his bedchamber, Royal MS. 2 A. XVI, f. 3.
 - 23 See the exhibition catalogue *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII*, Queen's Gallery 1978-9, pp. 11-13.
 - 24 Drawings and designs of this type are among the items grouped in MSS. Augustus in the Cotton collection.
 - 25 *The King's Works*, iv, pt. ii, pp. 341-2.
 - 26 Ibid., p. 318.
 - 27 It is perhaps worth noting the botanical emphasis of the titles in the facetious list that follows Cotton's notes. Birrell, op. cit., p. 26 has drawn attention to James I's personal interest in books on fruit and, indeed, on tobacco, and it is just possible that this offers a supplementary indication of the date at which the two book lists were written into Cotton MS. Vespasian B. IV.

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