


# JEAN GROLIER AND THE RENAISSANCE

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 THE LONG LIFE OF THE GREAT BIBLIOPHILE JEAN GROLIER IS BOTH A MIRROR and microcosm of key years in the history of French culture. Pupil of an Italian humanist in Paris; secretary to Louis XII at Blois; treasurer of the French Armies under Louis XII and François Ier in Milan; patron of Italian and French scholarship, music and publications; numismatist; antiquary; book collector; and major government official of Henri II and Charles IX, Grolier's biography comprehends to an astonishing degree that of the Renaissance in France.<sup>1</sup> The year of his birth in Lyon, 1479, is close to those of Rabelais and Tory and is contemporary with the earliest beginnings of the great printing industry of that city. Situated on one of the main trade-routes between France and Italy, Lyon was one of the chief commercial centers of the North, where Grolier's ancestors had been prosperous businessmen throughout the previous century.<sup>2</sup> His father Etienne, recorded as *marchand bourgeois* in 1495, was employed as treasurer at the court of the Duc d'Orléans, the future Louis XII, who continued the Italian campaigns of his uncle Charles VIII. Etienne Grolier received the important appointment as treasurer to the French Army in Milan, where he is first recorded in 1506.

Since the Groliers claimed descent from a Veronese nobleman (who supposedly came to France in the 13th Century) Etienne's Milanese residence, followed by that of his son Jean, may have been viewed as a return to the land of their forefathers, comparable, on a modest scale, to that of their king, Louis XII.<sup>3</sup> Son of the poet-prince Charles d'Orléans, Louis claimed possession of Lombardy as the grandson of Valentina, daughter of Giangaleazzo Visconti II, and wife of Louis Ier of Orléans. The complex

## THE LIBRARY OF JEAN GROLIER

French claims to Lombardy were also based on the marriage of Galeazzo Visconti II to Isabelle, daughter of King Jean II of France. This precocious princess, who knew Greek and Latin as a young girl, was the sister of four great bibliophiles—King Charles V and the Dukes of Anjou, Burgundy and Berry. The latter's librarian, Pietro da Verona, stemmed from the Groliers' ancestral city.<sup>4</sup>

Although forced into a Milanese marriage as ransom for her father, the brilliant Isabelle may have felt at home in Lombardy. Her father-in-law, sponsor of Petrarch, founded the University of Pavia, where her husband was to establish a splendid library.<sup>5</sup> Like his Visconti patrons the great poet was linked with both France and Italy. Petrarch's vision and sympathy for the achievements of Antiquity—of such incalculable significance for the creation of the Renaissance—was stimulated by many years of French residence. There, the cosmopolitan Papal Court of Avignon (which employed the poet's father as notary after his exile from Florence with Dante in 1302) together with the beauties of the Provençal landscape, may have aroused in Petrarch a revolutionary new freedom and spontaneity of approach to classical art and thought. His infectious enthusiasm for Antiquity increased in later years, when the poet was attached to the courts of the despots of Northern Italy. As a resident of Milan, Verona, Padua and Venice, the very same North Italian centers with which Grolier and his fellow Frenchmen were to be so closely connected in the first decade of the 16th Century, the poet, who was also a priest and a diplomat, hoped to lead his tyrannical protectors toward classical virtue by pursuit and collection of the Antique. The rationale for assembling Greek and Roman literature, coins, gems and sculpture was that through true appreciation of the classical achievements one would acquire "virtus", manly strength and rectitude. Each splendid souvenir of the heritage of Greece and Rome was to function as an "exemplum virtutis", spurring its proud possessor to emulate the spirit in which it was wrought.<sup>6</sup>

Among the ways in which Petrarch urged his despotic hosts to "follow the way of the Ancients" was that of establishing great court libraries. The poet may well have been impressed by the vast Papal library in Avignon as well as by the descriptions of the libraries of Antiquity—the standard attributes of enlightened rulers. France was already renowned for its great book collectors in late Roman and early Christian times. Writing at the end of the 5th Century, the Bishop of Clermont, Apollinaris Sidonius, described one of his friends' libraries as divided into Christian and profane sections (*epist.* ii. 9, 4), while another acquaintance had a library in three parts—Greek, Latin and Christian (*epist.* iv. 11, 6).<sup>7</sup> Although far from Italy, Sidonius' circle shared the views of Seneca—"Leisure without books is death; it is a tomb for the living man" (*epist.* 82, 3)—and must have felt with Cicero, who, having moved into a recently built country place,



noted that "Since Tyrannio has arranged my books, the house seems to have acquired soul." (*ad Atticum*, iv. 8.)

Fine bindings were already sold by the yard in Rome, where the *parvenu* bibliophile provided the subject for much satire. Lucian of Samosata demanded of such a book purchaser "what good, then, does it do to you to buy them, unless you think that even the bookcases are learned because they contain so many works of the Ancients?"<sup>8</sup> Collectors in Gaul as well as Italy were open to similar criticism—Ausonius, professor of rhetoric at Bordeaux (Burdigala) asked the proud possessor of an Instant Library, "because with purchased books thy library is crammed, dost thou think thyself a learned man and scholarly, Philomusus? After this sort wilt thou lay up strings, keys and lyres, and having purchased all, tomorrow thou wilt be a musician." (Auson. xix. 7.) That Grolier was acquainted with the ancient criticism of opulent bibliophiles would seem inevitable, since texts of all the authors quoted above were included in his copious classical collection.

Petrarch bequeathed his books to The Republic of Venice, with the hope that they would be the cornerstone of a great urban library in the ancient tradition, but most were taken over by the Carrara, tyrants of Padua. Inspired by Petrarch, the Carrara had portrait medals struck. These provided public images of the family, shown in Roman garb, identifying Carrara might with classical right, and are among the first monuments in miniature of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> The Carrara were defeated by other former protectors of the poet—the Visconti of Milan—who incorporated the Paduan library with their own at Pavia, in 1388. With the defeat of the Sforza-Visconti by Louis XII in 1499, much of their library went to Blois, where Grolier was to be Royal secretary. A few years later the books were moved once again to the court of the king's nephew and heir, François Ier, at Fontainebleau, and, for the last time, to Paris, where they provided the royal nucleus of the future Bibliothèque Nationale. Grolier himself was to become an heir of Petrarch's library as well as his thought. He must have shared Petrarch's passionate, personal feeling for ancient literature. Describing his love of books, Petrarch praised them as "welcome, assiduous companions, always ready to appear in public or go back in their box at your order, always disposed to speak or be silent, to stay at home or make a visit to the woods, to travel or abide in the country, to gossip, joke, encourage you, comfort you, advise you, reprove you and take care of you, to teach you the world's secrets, the records of great deeds, the rules of life and the scorn of death, moderation in good fortune, fortitude in ill, calmness and constancy in behavior. These are learned, gay and useful and ready-spoken companions, who will never bring you tedium, expense, lamentation, jealous murmurs, or deception."<sup>10</sup> Among Grolier's greatest treasures was the 14th Century manuscript of Suetonius' *De vitis duodecim Caesarum*,

owned by Petrarch, with many notations in the poet's hand.<sup>11</sup> Now in Exeter College (Oxford) this was one of the works which went from the Carrara to the Visconti, and might even have been—if the account is true—the very copy of this famous text studied by Petrarch at the time of his death, which supposedly took place at the poet's desk, as he was writing the life of Julius Caesar. Grolier, by including this manuscript in his resplendent Milanese library (ca. 1510), could view himself as the heir of classical antiquity; of Petrarch and his Carrara and Visconti patrons; of the Visconti university library. If, as was probably the case, Grolier selected the binding that encased his treasured manuscript, he could also regard himself as restoring it to a covering worthy of its contents, studded with visual references to the ancient world within. By including his arms in the center of the fore-edge, and his signature on the lower half of the last leaf of the text (cut away by a later owner), the recently ennobled Grolier could see himself as the heir of the learning and the lords of classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance.

Another Latin manuscript of the early Renaissance, a text by Petrarch's young friend Boccaccio, formerly owned by Grolier and now in the Vatican Library, reflects the influence of Petrarch in the treatment of its covering in the antique style, known as a plaquette binding.

Grolier's life-long love of books was due in part to his early education in one of the Parisian colleges under the supervision of a Bolognese humanist, his tutor Gaspar d'Argile. Since the bibliophile's introduction to the world of learning seems to have been without the tortuous, almost monastic rigor that characterized most of the Parisian Schools at the end of the 15th Century, d'Argile's tutelage must have been closer to the happier education of Renaissance Italy. His humanistically inspired training provided a distinctly practical as well as intellectual advantage for Grolier, the talented son of a *marchand bourgeois*, since France was more and more concerned with the conquest of Italian land and culture during the years of Jean Grolier's education.<sup>12</sup> His father was already installed in Milan as treasurer in 1508, the year in which his tutor published a commentary on Suetonius' *Lives* printed in Lyon by an Italian and dedicated to Jean Grolier. The introduction to d'Argile's text makes it clear that he, together with Jean Grolier (then aged 29), had spent the early summer in Lyon where his student was *notaire et secrétaire du roi*, a position Jean Grolier must have had since 1506 when he is first recorded as such at the royal château of Louis XII at Blois.

One of Grolier's favorite authors, Livy, may have been of particular interest to him because the Roman historian like Grolier himself had been a court secretary. Grolier's fondness for Livy continues the traditional French interest in that ancient writer's works