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Review: “The Voynich Manuscript” by Raymond Clemens

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The Voynich Manuscript

Edited by Raymond Clemens, Introduction by Deborah Harkness, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 304, Hardback \$50.00, ISBN: 978-0-300-21723-0

REVIEWED BY DAVID LANG

In 1921, renowned rare books salesman Wilfrid M. Voynich declared to the *New York Times* that he had in his possession proof to the world “that the black magic of the middle ages consisted in discoveries far advance of twentieth century science,” which he promptly valued at over \$100,000. (p.18) The proof that Voynich referred to was a medieval manuscript written in an unknown language, decorated with fantastic drawings of otherworldly plants and naked women bathing in interconnected pools of green liquid, with foldouts of intricate star maps and other miscellaneous etchings within. It was believed to be the work of Roger Bacon (1214–1292) or John Dee (1527–1608/9) by the finite number of individuals Voynich allowed to examine the manuscript; limited private access would continue after Voynich’s death in 1930 until 1969, when rare books collector H.P. Kraus donated the manuscript to Yale University. Popularly known as the Voynich Manuscript after its 20th century advocate, the medieval document, with its true name and author unknown, dazzled and perplexed all who studied it, including master cryptologist William F. Friedman and semiotician Umberto Eco. To date, there have been only two compilations of scholarly articles centered around research of the medieval manuscript. The first was gathered by Yale Professor of Philosophy Robert S. Brumbaugh in 1978, entitled *The Most Mysterious Manuscript: The Voynich “Roger Bacon” Cipher Manuscript*,¹ the second being the very collection under review, compiled by curator Raymond Clemens of the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 2016.

What sets Clemens’ *The Voynich Manuscript* apart is that it contains, for the first time ever in a format available to the public, a physical facsimile of the enigmatic medieval manuscript itself, copied meticulously to match the actual size and scale of each delicate original calfskin page. At 246 pages long, the facsimile occupies the center of the collection, with preceding pages vii to xi containing the “Introduction” by Deborah Harkness and the “Preface” by Raymond Clemens, followed by pages 1 to 59 containing six recently published scholarly articles on the study of the Voynich Manuscript. Clemens has decided not to paginate the facsimile with conventional numbering but opted instead to rely on the numbering of folios already present within the manuscript, which are believed to have been added in the 16th century. This means that readers must navigate the manuscript

¹ Robert S. Brumbaugh, *The Most Mysterious Manuscript: The Voynich “Roger Bacon” Cipher Manuscript* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

in the manner of Voynich and his successors, noting the number in the upper right hand corner of each right-side page as the folio number of the *recto* (the current page) and the *verso* (the following left-side page). Therefore, the first ‘page’ of the facsimile, *folio 1 recto*, which contains the *ex libris* of Jacobus Horčický de Tepenec (1575–1622), pharmacist to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612), is followed by *folio 1 verso*, then *folio 2 recto*, *folio 2 verso*, and so on. Clemens’ decision to leave the facsimile untampered with, only adds to the feeling of authenticity towards the copied manuscript, and invites the reader to explore and uncover the mystery as Voynich and many scholars have previously sought to do.

When one opens *The Voynich Manuscript*, they are first met with the cryptic facsimile of a letter “concerning the cipher MS”, written by the late Ethel Voynich only days after her husband’s death. Immediately, the reader feels as if they themselves are tasked with deciphering the riddle of the authorship and message of the manuscript by examining the primary source material, which ultimately serves as the collection’s *raison d’être*. Indeed, it is the actual Voynich Manuscript in physical form that serves as Clemens’ greatest contribution to the continuing saga of the mysterious manuscript, as the six scholarly articles serve almost exclusively to introduce the reader to the document and its history.

The first article, René Zandbergen’s “Earliest Owners,” is a well-written narrative of the earliest owners of the manuscript agreed upon by scholars, starting with the aforementioned pharmacist de Tepenec, and ending with the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), whose 1637 letter to Jesuit Theodor Moretus (1602–1667) was re-discovered in 2008 by historian Josef Smolka and now is the earliest known reference to the Voynich Manuscript. (p.5) Smolka’s recent contribution to the manuscript’s history is later matched by Greg Hodgins in the third article “Physical Findings,” whose radiocarbon dating of the calfskin pages of the manuscript in 2009 place the parchment’s origin between 1404 and 1438 with 95 percent probability. (p.28) Besides these two notable developments, the remaining articles, Arnold Hunt’s “Voynich the Buyer” and Raymond Clemens’ “The World’s Most Mysterious Manuscript,” only delve into the document’s history without proposing any new theories or approaches to uncovering the mystery, with the welcome exception of Jennifer M. Rampling’s “Alchemical Traditions.” In her article, Rampling proposes a comparative understanding of the pictures in the “balneology section” of the manuscript with 15th century alchemical imagery as a means of possibly uncovering meaning with the absence of philological understanding. (p.47) This approach of Rampling’s is the result of nearly a century of philological and cryptological failure with regards to deciphering the manuscript, which William Sherman’s article “Cryptographic Attempts” briefly covers, including the famed conclusion of cryptologist William F. Friedman that the manuscript’s message remains unknown even after forty years of research, the result of “an early attempt to construct an artificial or universal language.” (p.42)

As *The Voynich Manuscript* abruptly concludes with Raymond Clemens' closing article, the reader is left longing for more; the strange drawings explained, the authorship confirmed, the fantastic script translated and alphabetized, but to no avail. Rather, Raymond Clemens' *The Voynich Manuscript* best serves to introduce the reader to one of the greatest mysteries of the medieval European world by placing the very document in the hands of the reader, allowing them to take on the role of the historian and cryptologist that exists within one's self whenever curiosity is piqued by an unsolvable puzzle. Despite the disappointing nature of the articles within, which contain recent developments and new approaches countable on one hand, the quality of the facsimile provides more than enough historical value, with its otherworldly images and script that have excited and baffled scholars for centuries. It is the job of the historian to constantly pursue historical context and fact despite a myriad of seemingly indiscernible information, and indeed the Voynich Manuscript, with all its mystery, personifies this ultimate pursuit of truth, one in which the solution itself is not always as interesting as the problem itself.