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A GARDEN OF UNEARTHLY DELIGHTS

GERRY KENNEDY ONCE AGAIN takes up the story of his visit to Yale.

The realisation of a fantasy is proverbially fraught; the long-sought-after has a habit of failing to live up to the dream, and, to make things worse, is subject to the fickle vagaries of a first impression. In July 2001, having travelled up from the Big Apple to Yale University to inspect the fabled Voynich manuscript, I was hoping to gain a clear and calm overview of its delights that up until then had been supplied remotely by a computer screen.

Initially, the sheer privilege of being granted an audience with the volume was excitement enough; I had never before sat reverentially in front of any book, let alone a medieval tome. But somewhere at the back of my mind I possessed images of such rarities, of exotic embellishments to first-line letters or the stylised perspectives of scenes and figures that unfolded as part of a recognisable story. Regardless of one's acquaintance with ancient volumes, Mary D'Imperio was right to state that the Voynich manuscript stands 'totally apart' from other 'remotely comparable documents'.

Each page (or folio, as I learned to term them, recto facing, verso on the other side) that librarian Ellen Cordes turned, as we progressed through the various sections, revealed fresh wonders for which I had no reference points of any kind. The collection of plants seemed gaspingly surreal, the naked nymphs, whether splashing in ponds or disported on



Hart's tongue,
Bodleian 130, folio 11v



Theriac vase
de monstre



'Apothecary jar,'
folio 102v2



Development of idria



Detail, folio 83v

starwheels, sensually whimsical, the medicine jars voluptuously oriental. I struggled to find something of the everyday in it, but felt, like others, that some coherent meaning would emerge if only I looked long and hard enough.

The session lasted about forty-five minutes. This inadequacy was compounded by the aloofness of my bibliographic minder. I attempted to ask a few unprobing questions about how often the volume was shown and to whom, only to be met with complete silence. The ‘look don’t touch’ treatment may have been understandable, but the ‘seen and not heard’ addendum was an unnecessary stricture, turning me from a would-be suitor into a Voynich voyeur. Not only did the book itself seem unreal but the whole context in which I viewed it. Most people, for example, on a visit to savour New York, city of gleaming skyscrapers, would be well advised to take in a bird’s-eye panorama from the top of the Empire State—rather than merely ride its cavernous avenues in a taxi. It was like sightseeing New York on a video played within the taxi.

I exited the revolving doors of the Beinecke Library, carrying a \$40 unsatisfactory photocopy of the whole Voynich, feeling as dizzy as if I had spent the last three-quarters of an hour trapped in its portal’s clutches. I wasn’t sure what I had seen except for some document of star-status, clearly so rare and precious that it required the attendant services of a strict bodyguard. Fortunately I had arranged an interview that followed shortly after with another starstruck admirer, whose open enthusiasm reminded me that I was not alone in my infatuation. Phillip Marshall, a postgraduate student in biology at Yale, had seen the manuscript, and as a biologist had naturally concentrated his scientific attention on the large section devoted to plants. We discussed some of the possible identifications he had made. Outside the Beinecke glass box I found it soothing to think that it might be possible to temper a possibly irrational personal attraction with some kind of rational analysis.

Marshall has spent a good deal of time trying to make sense of the illustrations, but like others has met with scant success. If it is extraordinary that the manuscript has resisted decipherment by the most pre-eminent cryptographers of the twentieth century, it is even more so that

the copious drawings have not really provided a solid basis to our understanding of it. Codes and ciphers perhaps belong to a specialist realm of study; one would expect concrete images to be more amenable to interpretation. It may turn out that the Voynich script hides a large quantity of written gibberish, but the illustrations do not seem to represent the visual equivalent of mere scrawl or doodling. The strange fact, agreed by many commentators, is that there does appear to be some overall sense of intention behind them, a tentative thematic link.

The illustrations described in chapter 1 divide fairly readily into sections, suggesting a systematic purpose rather than a random rambling. Voynich analysts differ over the precise boundaries of these sections but in general concur that these fall into the herbal, astronomical, astrological or cosmological, balneological (or bathing), and a pharmacopoeia section, including a list of ‘recipes’. We shall view the illustrations utilising these useful headings but perhaps more importantly try to put them in an overarching thematic context.

At a general level the Voynich manuscript’s illustrations evince creative and positive life-generating natural forces, whether relating to the heavens or earth. There are few antagonistic images—no blood, lightning, monsters or mythical beasts that haunted the medieval imagination. There is none of the conflict or destructive tendencies that might be generated pictorially where human interaction and social institutions are concerned. For a medieval document it is surprising that there are almost no references to organised religion or the trappings of secular power, or more mundanely to everyday objects—tools, furniture, means of transport, and so on—that might point historically to a way of life. This creates a sense of otherworldliness and timelessness enhanced by zodiacal drawings of suns, stars, moons and ‘cosmic’ phenomena. Yet this in turn is brought down to earth by the apparent purity, youth and innocence of the naked bathing women undergoing perhaps some esoteric aquatic medical treatment associated with the benefit of the many depicted plants. Are we looking perhaps at some kind of magical herbal treatise that holds contentious secrets for the eyes of only a few?



9. 'Sunflower', folio 33v

Main column of handwritten text on the left side of the page, written in a medieval script.



Handwritten text located between the two circular illustrations, continuing the text from the left column.

