

Introduction

The medieval library was a repository of unparalleled wealth to the general populace. Yet, unlike our libraries, the libraries of the middle ages did not have security systems. How were books protected from theft? Some medieval deterrents were chaining them to the shelf, chaining the reader to the bench, and the medieval book curse.

Subject: In many medieval manuscripts, scribes lent their creative powers to the inclusion of book curses and wrote them on the colophon of a treasured manuscript. Several threats were made in the medieval book curse:

- ❖ Bodily injury
- ❖ Physical torment
- ❖ Damnation
- ❖ Excommunication
- ❖ Anathema

Style and Form: Although some scribes were creative with a turn of phrase, generally there was not a standard poetic form or rhyme scheme employed in these writings.

Language: The language of the scribes knowledge would be employed in these works. Included here, however, are translations of the curses cited.

Location of the book curse:

Colophons are sometimes found in manuscripts and books made from the 6th century AD on. In medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, a colophon was occasionally added by the scribe on the last page of the work and provided facts such as his name and the date and place of his completion of the work, sometimes accompanied by an expression of pious thanks for the end of his task.

Book Curse Documentation
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Examples:

1. Damnation as curse recorded by Drogin from a 16th century French manuscript:

Should anyone by craft of any device whatever abstract this book from this place may his soul suffer, in retribution for what he has done, and may his name be erased from the Book of the Living and not recorded among the Blessed (70).

2. Excommunication was a formidable social punishment, abet a temporary punishment, brought about by the Church to exclude an individual from the community. Here is a 13th century English book curse that threatens excommunication:

*This is the book of St. James of Wigmore.
If anyone take it away or maliciously destroys this notice in taking it away from the above-mentioned place,
May he be tied by the change of greater excommunication. Amen.
So it be. So it be. So it be. (Drogin, 86).*

3. Anathema was a permanent form of excommunication that separated an individual from God and society. A curse of anathema:

*May the sword of anathema slay
If anyone steals this book away. (Drogin, 68).*

4. “The mixing of the planes of punishment was common in many book cures” (Anderson, 2003). From the monastery of San Pedro in Barcelona:

*For him that stealeth, or borroweth and returneth not, this book from it owner,
Let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him.
Let him be struck with palsy, and all his members blasted.
Let him languish in pain crying out for mercy,
And let there be no surcease to his agony till he sing in dissolution.
Let the bookworms gnaw his entrails...
When at last he goeth to his final punishment,
Let the flames of Hell consume him forever. (Basbanes, 35)*

My Entry: In the style of the Barcelona curse that layers the planes of punishment, so is this the intent of my book curse. The form is two stanzas with a simple rhyme scheme that interrupted at the word “endure” to affect the severity of the desire of the scribe for punishment. The language is this poet’s first attempt at Middle English as referenced in the work, “Everyman.” As a librarian, I was and am amused by the lengths and heights obtained and strived for in attempts to preserve information for future generations.

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References

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