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Boccaccio's Irene – All Alone in Rainy London

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Why was a wonderful French manuscript's cutting of an ancient Greek painter in Flemish dress left all alone in London? Where is the original manuscript? These are the questions that this cutting, seen during a (desperate) visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum triggered in my mind. This post attempts to answer to them and explores Boccaccio's cutting and its mysterious story by exploring the different digitized materials related to it.

It was a rainy morning at the beginning of October in London. The sky was grey, and the sidewalks were covered with yellow and red leaves. Somewhat heartbroken, I decided that I would try to cheer myself up and enjoy my last two days alone in London. What better way to overcome a break-up than visiting a museum? I have always believed that being surrounded by statues and paintings of mythological or historical episodes puts your problems into perspective – treating the eyes with art is always a great remedy. So that morning, I decided that my remedy would be the V&A Museum.

After a short queue in the rain, I finally got into the museum. Excited like never before (yes, museums and a big plate of carbonara in a restaurant are the things I missed the most during lockdown), I started the magic *time travel* that only art make possible: from Ancient Greece to Rome, from India to the Middle Ages and Renaissance in Europe. That day, on the second floor in the rooms 88A-90, there was an exhibition entitled *Fragmented Illuminations: Medieval and Renaissance Manuscript Cuttings at the V&A* ("Fragmented Illuminations"). I found myself surrounded by the highlights of the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance manuscript cuttings (over 2,000 of them!). As I am a student of the MA Book and Digital Media Studies at Leiden University with an obvious passion for books and manuscripts, my level of excitement grew.

Initials, music sheets, miniatures, and pages with decorated borders were brought together in a sort of *collage* from all over Europe (the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France, etc.). They were shining before my eyes in all their beauty, with their peculiar colours and fine details. However, I cannot deny my disappointment in seeing all of those magnificent cuttings alone, far away from their original manuscripts. Like orphans, the

cuttings had been *cut away* from their mothers, the original manuscripts, because of the ghastly practice of collecting single leaves, miniatures, and other ornamentation. This practice started in the late 18th century and became very popular during the 19th century (Wieck 234, 240). There are several reasons for the 19th century popularity of these fragments: first, due to breakthroughs in the publishing industry (like the refinement of wood engraving techniques and chromolithography), high-quality reproductions could be easily printed, meaning more people could be exposed to and appreciate these visual themes (243). Secondly, illuminations had a high value, “both literally and philosophically” (243). Indeed, many of the cuttings displayed by the V&A were cut and collected during this time.

Monks singing and playing the organ, brave medieval knights fighting against each other, and saints imparting their blessings transported me to the Middle Ages. But suddenly, one particular *orphan* miniature, different from the others, caught my eye: a woman – a painter – dressed in 15th century clothes, intent on painting a portrait (Fig. 2). Her dress is an intense blue, with thin gold decorations, that mirrors an object hanging above her, also seemingly made of fabric (like a lamp. But it could not be a lamp! A lamp in the fifteenth century? No). Behind the easel there is a table with two other portraits on it and small wooden bowls containing the colours used by the painter. Next to the small bench where the painter is seated, there is another table (or some piece of furniture) with two other male portraits. The room is hexagonal with high, narrow windows. It seems to be in the upper part of a castle. In fact, the sky above is visible. Bas-reliefs of (possibly) Ancient Greek women surround the top (Fig. 2). The whole miniature (from the dress to the style) seems to suggest that it was made in the Netherlands. My mind was straining to recognize the painter depicted. Her figure stood out from the other women represented in the cuttings present in that museum room: she was not a saint, nun, or scribe, but an artist. The cutting must have come from a non-religious manuscript. But who was that woman painting in the loneliness of her studio? And where did that cutting come from? Was the original *mother* manuscript still in good condition, preserved somewhere in the world?

To answer to my questions, I approached to read its description: “Irene, attributed to circle of François Le Barbier, from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des Cleres et nobles femmes*, about 1460-70, Prais, France” (“Fragmented Illuminations”). I was wrong about the origin of the manuscript – it was not from the Netherlands, but from France. The manuscript *Des Cleres et nobles femmes* was in New York – Spencer Collection Ms. 033 (“Des Cleres et nobles femmes”). I had been on the wrong track about this Boccaccio. (Sorry Prof. Grasso, my high school Italian and Latin literature professor! I know, for shame!) But I was curious and wanted to discover more about the manuscript and the figure depicted, especially since it was Boccaccio’s work. After finishing my visit to the museum, I began my research.

Soaked by London’s rain, I arrived at my hotel and turned on my laptop. I started to look for information about Irene. Irene (or Eirene) was an ancient Greek painter, the daughter of Cratinus, who was a painter himself (“Irene (fl.200 BCE?)”). She was first described as a great artist by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (“Irene”). During the Renaissance, Boccaccio decided to include Irene in his *De mulieribus claris*, a collection of the biographies of 106 women that stood out in history (for better or worse) – it is an inspiring inheritance for future generations of women (“Irene”). What impressed me was the number of miniatures featuring Irene in other manuscripts of *De mulieribus claris* scattered around the world that appeared on Google. (Most of them catalogued on the *Casa del Boccaccio – Ente Nazionale Giovanni Boccaccio* site.) Irene had always been portrayed while painting, but not only in manuscript miniatures: a fresco (Fig. 3), a small, portable altar (Fig. 4) and a statue (Fig. 5) were some of the examples I found. However, in his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny only mentions one of Irene’s paintings – a painting portraying a young woman (*puellam*) at Eleusis (“Irene”). This is reminiscent of the Irene of the V&A’s cutting.

Having acknowledged my ignorance about this painter, I decided to look again at the photo of the miniature I had taken at the museum: it was too blurry to see the details (Fig. 2). Moreover, I had forgotten to take a picture of its description. The only way to get the information about the

manuscript was to visit the museum's website. Funnily enough, in the last paragraph of the webpage about the exhibition, Irene's miniature was described as "one of the major discoveries made during the research for the display," ("About the Fragmented Illuminations on Display") as it belongs to a non-religious book (see Fig. 5). As such, I was not wrong about its uniqueness (although I reinvented the wheel somewhat).

In the description there was a hyperlink to the digitized version of the original manuscript, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*, preserved in the New York Public Library ("Des Cleres et nobles femmes"). I opened the digital manuscript, and I started looking for the page from which Irene's miniature was cut out. I was not successful. After searching for almost half an hour, my glance fell on the notes on the side of the manuscript: some leaves were missing and only 76 miniatures of the original 105 were present in the manuscript. One of these was Irene's miniature, displayed on the other side of the ocean. At this point, another question came to my mind: how did the manuscript end up in New York? My question was immediately answered by the first note: "Ownership: Arms f. 3, attributed to Claude, seigneur de Vissac (dates exceed 1415-1476). Obtained in early 18th century by Hobart passed to Lord Mostyn. His sale at Sotheby's (1920) to Sabin. Mme. Theophile Belin. Purchased for Spencer, 1936" ("Des Cleres et nobles femmes"). From France to England, then from England to New York.

But there was one last mystery I wanted to solve. Despite the French name of the miniature's illustrator (François Le Barbier), the style used seemed too Dutch/Flemish to me. There must have been a connection to the Low Countries. Unfortunately, information about the French illuminator was obscured by results about a more famous, homonymous French painter from the 18th century, Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier. But after a while, I finally found a website dedicated to book illuminators, with a page on the correct François Le Barbier. Employed in Paris, he worked as an illuminator between 1450 and 1480. His art was strongly influenced by Flemish and Northern French illuminations ("Maître François – François le Barbier (de oudere)"). So I was not totally wrong in

thinking that there was a Dutch/Flemish twist to the miniature. The Low Countries can be added to the story behind Irene's miniature.

It is incredible how many stories, places, and people are hidden behind a single manuscript cutting. Unfairly and tragically cut from their original manuscripts, unique miniatures like Irene's still have powerful meanings and messages to share with later generations. In some lucky cases, thanks to the new technologies and the openness of the internet, it is easy to bring together the *orphan* cuttings with their *mother* manuscripts. Moreover, it can also be said that Boccaccio's main message continues to live through these colourful miniatures: women from the past are still here to teach us. For instance, they show that art can be a remedy for a broken heart – or at least a helpful distraction.

Figures and Captions



Fig. 1 Red Telephone box on the way to the museum, sheltered from the rain (author's own).



Fig. 2 Photo of Irene (author's own).



Fig. 3 albot Master (1440 c.)
Detail of a miniature of
Irene painting a fresco.
London, British Library,
Royal 16 GV, f. 73v.



Fig. 4 Master of De Clères Femmes
and collaborator (1403)
Irene painting a face. Paris,
Bibliothèque Nationale
de France, Fr. 598, f. 92r



Fig. 5 Master of the Coronation of the Virgin (1401-1402), Irene painting a statue of the Virgin with the Holy Child, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Fr. 12420, f. 92v.



Fig. 6 Irene, attributed to circle of François Le Barbier, from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des Cleres et nobles femmes* (1460-70), Paris, France. Museum no. 4280. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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