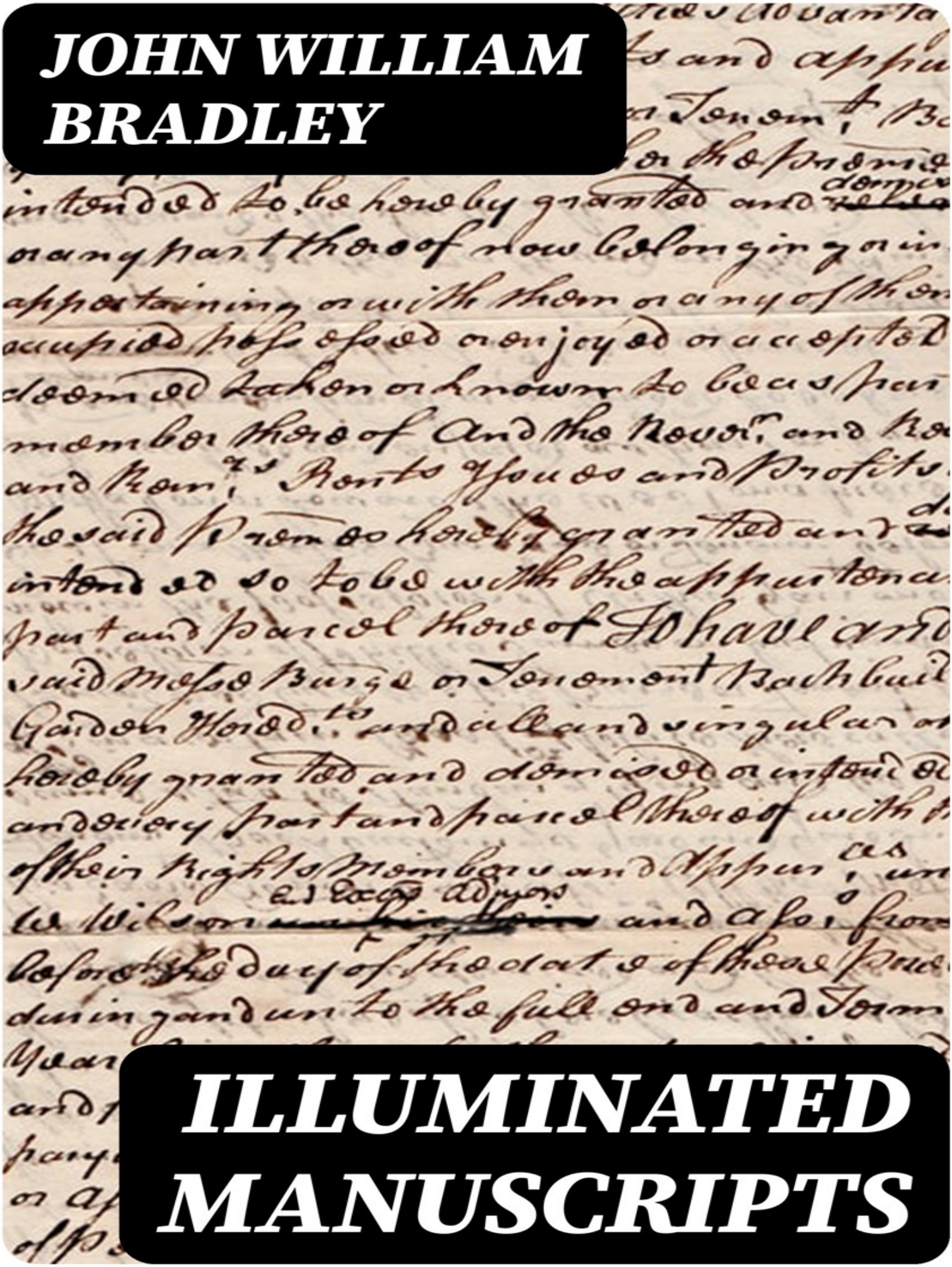
JOHN WILLIAM BRADLEY



ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

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THE desire for decoration is probably as old as the human race. Nature, of course, is the source of beauty, and this natural beauty affects something within us which has or is the faculty of reproducing the cause of its emotion in a material form. Whether the reproduction be such as to appeal to the eye or the ear depends on the cast of the faculty. In a mild or elementary form, probably both casts of faculty exist in every animated creature, and especially in the human being.

Art being the intelligent representation of that quality of beauty which appeals to any particular observer, whoever exercises the faculty of such representation is an artist.

Greatness or otherwise is simply the measure of the faculty, for in Nature herself there is no restriction. There is always enough of beauty in Nature to fill the mightiest capacity of human genius. Artists, therefore, are measured by comparison with each other in reference to the fraction of art which they attempt to reproduce.

The art of illumination does not aim at more than the gratification of those who take pleasure in books. Its highest ambition is to make books beautiful.

To some persons, perhaps, all ordinary books are ugly and distasteful. Probably they are so to the average schoolboy. Hence the laudable endeavour among publishers of school-books to make them attractive. The desire that books should be made attractive is of great antiquity. How far back in the world's history we should have to go to get in front of it we cannot venture to reckon. The methods of making books attractive are numerous and varied. That to which we shall confine our attention is a rather special one. Both its processes and its results are peculiar. Mere pictures or pretty ornamental letters in sweet colours and elegant drawing do not constitute illumination, though they do form essential contributions towards it; and, indeed, in the sixteenth century the clever practitioners who wished, in bright colours, to awaken up the old woodcuts used to call themselves illuminists, and the old German books which taught how the work should be done were called *Illuminir bücher*. Illuminists were not illuminators.

In the twelfth century when, as far as we know, the word illuminator was first applied to one who practised the art of book decoration, it meant one who “lighted up” the page of the book with bright colours and burnished gold.

These processes suggest the definition of the art. *Perfect illumination must contain both colours and metals*. To this extent it is in perfect unison with the other mediæval art of heraldry; it might almost be called a twin-sister.

As an art it is much older than its name. We find something very like it even among the ancient Egyptians, for in the Louvre at Paris is a papyrus containing paintings of funeral ceremonies, executed in bright colours and touched in its high lights with pencilled gold. But after this for many centuries there remains no record of the existence of any such art until just before the Christian era. Then, indeed, we have mention of a lady artist who painted a number of miniature portraits for the great biographical work of the learned Varro. We must carefully observe, however, that there is a distinction between illumination and mere miniature painting. Sometimes it is true that miniatures—as *e.g.* those of the early Byzantine artists, and afterwards those of Western Europe—were finished with touches of gold to represent the lights. This brought them into the category of illuminations, for while miniatures may be executed without the use of gold or silver, illuminations may not. There are thousands of miniatures that are not illuminations.

At the period when illuminating was at its best the miniature, in its modern sense of a little picture, was only just beginning to appear as a noticeable feature, and the gold was as freely applied to it as to the penmanship or the ornament. But such is not the case with miniature painting generally.

Lala of Cyzicus, the lady artist just referred to, lived in the time of Augustus Cæsar. She has the honour of being the first miniaturist on record, and is said to have produced excellent portraits “in little,” especially those of ladies, on both vellum and ivory. Her own portrait, representing her

engaged in painting a statuette, is still to be seen among the precious frescoes preserved in the museum at Naples.

The term “miniature,” now applied to this class of work, has been frequently explained. It is derived from the Latin word *minium*, or red paint, two pigments being anciently known by this name—one the sulphide of mercury, now known also as “vermilion,” the other a lead oxide, now called “red lead.” It is the latter which is generally understood as the *minium* of the illuminators, though both were used in manuscript work. The red paint was employed to mark the initial letters or sections of the MS. Its connection with portraiture and other pictorial subjects on a small scale is entirely owing to its accidental confusion by French writers with their own word *mignon*, and so with the Latin *minus*. In classical times, among the Romans, the “miniator” was simply a person who applied the *minium*, and had nothing to do with pictures or portraits at all, but with the writing. That the rubrication of titles, however, was somewhat of a luxury may be gathered from the complaint of Ovid when issuing the humble edition of his verses from his lonely exile of Tomi:—

“Parve (nec invideo) sine me liber ibis in urbem:
Hei mihi quo domino non licet ire tuo.
. . . . .
Nec te purpureo velent vaccinia succo
Non est conveniens luctibus ille color.
Nec titulus minio, nec cedro carta notetur
Candida nec nigra cornua fronte geras.”[1]
Tristia, Cl. 1, Eleg. 1.

[1] “Go, little book, nor do I forbid,—go without me into that city where, alas! I may enter never more.... Nor shall whortleberries adorn thee with their crimson juice; that colour is not suitable for lamentations. Nor shall thy title be marked with minium, nor thy leaf scented with cedar-oil. Nor shalt thou bear horns of ivory or ebony upon thy front.”

There are many allusions in these pathetic lines which would bear annotation, but space forbids. The one point is the use of minium.

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VELLUM AND OTHER MATERIALS

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As vellum is constantly spoken of in connection with illumination and illuminated books, it becomes necessary to explain what it is, and why it was used instead of paper.

We often find writers, when referring to ancient documents, making use of the words parchment and vellum as if the terms were synonymous; but this is not strictly correct. It is true that both are prepared from skins, but the skins are different. They are similar, but not the same, nor, indeed, are they interchangeable. In point of fact, the skins of almost all the well-known domestic animals, and even of fishes, have been used for the purpose of making a material for writing upon. Specifically among the skins so prepared were the following: the ordinary lambskin, called “aignellinus”[2]; that prepared from stillborn lambs, called “virgin parchment.”

[2] Strictly *agnellinus*.

From sheepskins was produced ordinary “parchment,” and also a sort of leather called “basane” or “cordovan.” Vellum was produced from calfskin; that of the stillborn calf

being called “uterine vellum,” and considered the finest and thinnest. It is often spoken of in connection with the exquisitely written Bibles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as of the highest value.

Besides these were the prepared skins of oxen, pigs, and asses; but these were chiefly used for bindings, though occasionally for leaves of account and other books liable to rough usage.

Before the tenth century the vellum used for MSS. is highly polished, and very white and fine. Afterwards it becomes thick and rough, especially on the hair side. In the examination of certain MSS. the distinction of hair side and smooth side is of importance in counting the gatherings so as to determine the completeness, or otherwise, of a given volume. Towards the period of the Renaissance, however, the vellum gradually regains its better qualities.

Thus it may be seen that the difference between vellum and parchment is not a mere difference of thickness; for while, in general, vellum is stouter than parchment, there is some vellum which is thinner than some parchment. Not only are they made from different kinds of skin, but the vellum used for illuminated books was, and still is, prepared with greater care than the parchment used for ordinary school or college treatises, or legal documents.

The fabrication of both parchment and vellum in the Middle Ages was quite as important a matter as that of paper at the present time, and certain monastic establishments had a special reputation for the excellence of their manufacture. Thus the “parcheminerie,” as it was called, of the Abbey of Cluny, in France, was quite

celebrated in the twelfth century. One reason probably for this celebrity was the fact that Cluny had more than three hundred churches, colleges, and monasteries amongst its dependencies, and therefore had ample opportunities for obtaining the best materials and learning the best methods in use throughout literary Christendom. As to the name “vellum,” it is directly referable to the familiar Latin term for the hide or pelt of the sheep or other animal, but specially applied, as we have said, to that of the calf, the writing material thus prepared being termed *charta vitulina*—in French *vélin*, and in monastic Latin and English *vellum*.

The name “parchment” had quite a different kind of origin. It is an old story, found in Pliny's *Natural History* (bk. xiii. ch. 70), that the ancient use or revival of the use of parchment was due to the determination of King EumenesII. of Mysia or Pergamos to form a library which should rival those of Alexandria, but that when he applied to Egypt for papyrus, the writing materials then in use, Ptolemy Epiphanes jealously refused to permit its exportation. In this difficulty Eumenes, we are told, had recourse to the preparation of sheepskins, and that from the place of its invention it was called *charta pergamena*.

Pliny and his authority, however, were both wrong in point of history. Eumenes, who reigned from about 197 to 158 B.C., was not the inventor, but the restorer of its use (see Herodotus, v. 58). It was called in Greek μεμβράνα (2 Tim. iv. 13).

We may mention, by the way, that neither vellum nor parchment are by any means the oldest materials known. Far older, and more generally used in Italy, Greece, and

Egypt, was the material which has given us the name of our commonest writing material of to-day, viz. paper. The name of this older material was *papyrus* (Gr. πάπυρος and χάρτης). As a writing material it was known in Egypt from remote antiquity. It was plentiful in Rome in the time of the Cæsars, and it continued, both in Grecian and Roman Egypt, to be the ordinary material employed down to the middle of the tenth century of our era. In Europe, too, it continued in common use long after vellum had been adopted for books, though more especially for letters and accounts. St. Jerome mentions vellum as an alternative material in case papyrus should fail (Ep. vii.), and St. Augustine (Ep. xv.) apologises for using vellum instead of papyrus.[3] Papyrus was also used in the early Middle Ages. Examples, *made up into book-form—i.e.* in leaves, with sometimes a few vellum leaves among them for stability—are still extant. Among such are some seven or eight books in various European libraries, the best known being the Homilies of St. Avitus at Paris, the Antiquities of Josephus at Milan, and the Isidore at St. Gall.

[3] Thompson, *Greek and Latin Palæography*, p. 33.

And in the Papal Chancery papyrus appears to have been used down to a late date in preference to vellum.[4]

[4] Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Aug. Molinier, *Les Manuscrits*, Prélim.; Lecoy de la Marche, *Les MSS. et la Miniature*, p. 24.

In France papyrus was in common use in the sixth and seventh centuries. Merovingian documents dating from 625 to 692 are still preserved in Paris.

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WRITING

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SEEING that illumination grew originally out of the decoration of the initial letters, our next point to notice is the penmanship. The alphabet which we now use is that formerly used by the Romans, who borrowed it from the Greeks, who in turn obtained it (or their modification of it) from the Phœnicians, who, lastly it is said, constructed it from that of the Egyptians. Of course, in these repeated transfers the letters themselves, as well as the order of them, underwent considerable alterations. With these we have here no concern. Our alphabet, *i.e.* the Roman and its variations, is quite sufficient for our story. In order to show as clearly as may be the varieties of lettering and the progress of penmanship from classical times to the revival of the old Roman, letters in the fifteenth century, we offer the following synopsis, which classifies and indicates the development of the different hands used by writers and illuminators of MSS. It is constructed on the information given in Wailly's large work on Palæography, and in Dr. de Grey Birch's book on the Utrecht Psalter. The former work

affords excellent facsimiles, which, together with those given in the plates published by the Palæographical Society, will give the student the clearest possible ideas respecting these ancient handwritings.

Omitting the cursive or correspondence hand, the letters used by the Romans were of four kinds—capitals (usually made angular to be cut in stone), rustic, uncials, and minuscules.

The rounded capitals were intended to be used in penwork. Uncials differ from capitals only in the letters A, D, E, G, M, Q, T, V, for the sake of ease in writing. It is said that this class of letters was first called uncials from being made an inch (*uncia*) high, but this is mere tradition; the word is first used on Jerome's preface to the Book of Job. No uncials have ever been found measuring more than five-eighths of an inch in height.

For the assistance of such students as may wish for examples we must refer to certain MSS. and reproductions in which the foregoing hands are exemplified.

CIRCA FOURTH CENTURY.

Capitals, yet not pure.

The Vatican Vergil, No. 3225, throughout (Birch, p. 14; Silvestre's *Paléographie universelle*, pl. 74).

With regard to the relative antiquity of capitals and uncials, M. de Wailly observes: “The titles in pure uncials, but less than the text itself, give an excellent index to the highest antiquity. This is verified in MSS. 152, 2630, 107 of the Bibl. du Roi, etc. MSS. of the seventh or eighth century, whether on uncial or demi-uncial, or any other letter, are