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## OSU Professor a Detective in Search of Medieval Writings

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**By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic**

When detective Philip Marlowe takes a case, odds are he finds out who has killed whom and why. Usually he gets the girl, though he doesn't get to keep her.

When professor Frank Coulson takes a case, odds are he finds out whether a manuscript has scholarly significance. Usually, there are no girls.

"I think of what I do as detective work," Coulson said recently from his office at Ohio State University, where he teaches medieval and classical Latin and paleography. "I think of it as solving little mysteries."

An intrepid gumshoe -- "maybe a cross between an archaeologist and Monsieur Poirot," he said with a laugh -- Coulson has "crawled through" about 90 libraries in western Europe and the United States and has unearthed more than 120 previously unknown copies of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

(Coulson will talk about medieval Latin manuscripts tonight as part of the Aldus Society's History of Text series.)

"Whenever I examine a manuscript I want to know when, where, how and why it was produced. And under what circumstances," he said.

At times, when Coulson visits, say, the library at the Vatican, he will be the first person to handle a particular manuscript in a century or more. A common misconception: Because these manuscripts are so old, researchers know everything about them.

"It's not like that at all. What excites me about these (medieval) manuscripts is how little we know about them. There's a huge amount of uncataloged material."

Though one manuscript may be quite like another, still there can be crucial differences that can change the way one thinks about a text such as *The Metamorphoses*.

"You don't know if the scribe was a dolt or a dunce. You don't know what sort of errors he might have introduced into the text," Coulson said. "No single manuscript will give you a pure copy of the text."

Scholars are able, by identifying errors common to different texts, to group those texts into families. Further work along the same line can move scholars, so the theory goes, closer to the original text.

"We call errors spread among various manuscript families contamination. One scribe has looked at a manuscript that included an error and imported that error into his manuscript," Coulson said.

"It muddies the waters."

Marlowe knew why he solved mysteries, telling a cop buddy once, "I'm a romantic, Bernie. I hear voices crying in the night, and I go to see what's the matter."

Coulson knows why he solves mysteries, too.

“I love bringing this material to light and making it accessible to scholars,” he said.

And he needn’t travel to Florence or Paris to make a big find. Not long ago he rediscovered, in a manuscript in the OSU Library’s Rare Books Room, several lost poems by the 17th-century Italian Ippolito Grassetto.

Admittedly, Grassetto is a minor figure. And some of the cataloging Coulson has done with manuscripts of *The Metamorphoses* may seem almost clerical.

“But many scholarly discoveries that seem minor at the time,” Coulson said, “may, in fact, be far more dramatic in their impact when one steps back and looks at the larger picture.”

Knowledge is, by necessity, provisional. That is what keeps scholars in business. The more information is unearthed, the more an understanding of the past deepens.

Modern scholars who studied Ovid’s influence on Chaucer, for instance, tended to view their subject only through “the Moralized Ovid,” or a Christian interpretation of *The Metamorphoses*.

“Whereas my research has demonstrated there were multifarious ways or levels of interpreting the poem even in Chaucer’s day.”

Coulson recently won Ohio State’s Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching. His students now find a more sober scholar than they would have in his fiery youth.

“I was attracted by Catullus, who was writing about loss and love in a very emotional way,” Coulson said. “Only later did I turn to Horace. I think, as one gets older, one can appreciate the subtleties of a writer like Horace, who is -- how shall I say it? -- less emotionally charged than Catullus.”

They make movies out of guys like Philip Marlowe. But excepting Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* - - “The movie is unrealistic, from a scholar’s point of view,” Coulson said -- scribes and the manuscripts they produced are hardly the stuff of Hollywood.

How much less so the work of the scholar, trailing in the footsteps of the aforementioned scribe?

“My only plea or lament is that nobody thinks the kind of work I do is valuable any longer,” Coulson said. “And I don’t think that’s true.”