Actio 2.3: A Day in the Life

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History of Libraries

I opted to write a free-verse poem for Actio 2. In the poem, I focus on the progression of books meaning more to women (and readers in general) after works are being widely copied and translated into multiple languages. I highlight historical references that follow in consecutive order to our readings for this week. I also largely focus from a woman’s perspective in the poem, since 40 percent of women became literate due to literacy rates increasing. I divide the poem into three parts:

Part I focuses on books becoming more popular and fashionable in Ancient times. A woman starts becoming interested in the Ptolemaic Mouseion Academy and kindles her curiosity for reading. I incorporated the image in the 300s BCE readings, of a woman standing, holding a scroll open, and looking intently at the words. This section also highlights how the Academy was the entire world to scholars who lived and worked there. However, as the readings also say, many scrolls were lost from this time period. But I consider how they would react if they would know how precious these scrolls would be to later generations. I also incorporate something from the readings on the 200s BCE page, particularly the legend of Alexander the Great wanting to translate every book into Greek, including everything he gained from the nations he conquered, and add them into a single, large library, all because of seeing the library of Ashurbanipal.

Part II focuses on book burnings, and how warfare made a lot of works be lost forever. I mention the libricide during the Ch’in dynasty in China (as detailed in the 200s BCE page), and how Emperor Qin Shi Huang obtained governmental control of information through burning books during the event called, "burning of book and burying of scholars." Also, beginning in 213 BCE, all works of the Hundred Schools of Thought, except those sanctioned by the government, were burned. 460 scholars in the capital were then buried alive. However, books were still saved, and literacy was still saved.

In Part III, I included elements from “Women and Libraries” section in the 100s BCE readings, particularly Flavia Melitine, who donated an entire library next to a health center. I also incorporated another image from the readings called “Favourite Poete” (Lawrence Alma-Tadem,
1888), which has a Roman woman who reads in the foreground with another one lounging in the background. In 100s BCE, it is was also mentioned that libraries were still being viewed as fashionable, Clark (1901) commenting, “they had bought their books for the sake of show, not for the sake of learning - just as with many who are ignorant even of the lowest branches of learning books are not instruments of study, but ornaments of dining-rooms.” However, I like to think women like Flavia knew the long-lasting, powerful value of books and libraries. Without further ado, here’s my poem:

**Part I: The Words Come to Life**

The woman approached the decorated library

The Ptolemaic Mouseion Academy steadily drew in more people

Like it held a font of the gods.

The fashion of books was spreading

Daughter of the rich, she cowed to fashion

But at part of her wouldn’t deny

Curiosity

She approached a shelf of unassuming rolls of parchment

Slid out a cylinder scroll with a hiss

Unrolled it, squinted her eyes

The foreign words made her eyes swim

Their meaning cleverly encrypted

Letting the stretched scroll droop in her hands, she looked to a scribe at a table

Bent, engrossed in his task

His work here at the Academy

Was everything

Past, present, future

Work, payment, board, community, mission
The woman stood aside him to see
Slowly, meticulously, new words etched onto fresh parchment
Ink glistening like black blood as it dried
The woman gazed closer
Her eyes felt relief perceiving Greek letters
It only took translation to turn stranger to friend

She re-rolled the encrypted scroll in her hands
Like reversing time
Strange, how these scrolls became fashionable
She set the scroll on a table
She didn’t think, as the scroll curled into itself,
These works are the future
Not a disposable fashion,
Though many were still lost.

The translated scrolls taunted her
They held the secrets of the encrypted scrolls
The woman didn’t deny her curiosity
She unrolled a scroll with familiar letters
Soaking in the words
Like drying ink.

Part II: Books Are Burned, Scholars Snuffed

Who would think
Books would become kindling
The woman’s eyes reflected waving flames
Emanating from the familiar Academy
It's as if books instilled fear
Spurred conflict
A fear inflicting people, leaders, Romans in the West
The dream of Alexander, Archimedes, Aristophane,
Eratosthenes, Euclid, Herophilus, Strabo, Zenodotus
To collect every book in the world,
Failed.

Who would know over 600 years
Wars and attacks inflicted libraries
Scrolls were scattered
Parchment shriveled in fire, their mortal enemy
Flames catching one another
Spreading the words in ways unintended

The books accepted their fates
Survivors were gathered, each a precious child
The people then became the scribes, the keepers
The woman knew now
These things that could so easily be extinguished
Are everything.

Who would guess
On the flipside of a coin, in the East
Books were kindling
A fear inflicting the Chinese Emperor
Qin Shi Huang knew the danger of the scrolls
Contained in the Hundred Schools of Thought
Practical books were kept
Agriculture, war, medicine were safe,
But the ideas deemed venomous
Burned
The words ascending in ashes
Awaiting to be reincarnated
Such was the libricide

Those privy to their contents were hidden within the ground
460 scholars, scribes, buried alive
Their hands stretching to the ashes of burning parchment, their loving labors
460 scholars, scribes wept for their loss, for the world’s loss
Books cannot be controlled
Though governments try
All they can do is attempt
To snuff them out

Lucky survivors were hidden
Though, the woman observed,
Books being closed from the world
Was no better than them being burned

Part III: A Library is Donated
This is a day the stories, the ideas rise from the grave
Flavia Melitine continues the work of scholars
Giving a library beside a health center
Knowing health of the mind
Is as important as the body.
The books are surrounded by windows, marble walls, and colorful flooring

The inscription:

“…She has set up the library in the sanctuary of Asklepios the Saviour.”

Attests to them finding

A proper sanctuary

A savior of words

Another Roman woman finds a poet she loves

Pours over the words as breath

Like they could take her over.

Her friend reclines behind her,

Yet the two are worlds apart

Through the magic of words

Although books are still used for show

Only pretty ornaments in ceiling-high shelves,

Not for learning, reading, empathizing,

Flavia knew

These fashionable things penetrate

Minds,

Imagination,

Empathy,

Forever.

There are now many who know

That these powerful, fragile things

Who survived

Are everything to those who are curious.