

A BINDING OF HUMAN SKIN IN THE HOUGHTON LIBRARY: A RECOMMENDATION

In early June the Houghton Library announced in a blog that scientific testing had confirmed that a book in their collection, a copy of Armand Houssaye's *Des destinées de l'âme*, nouvelle édition, Paris [c. 1880], is bound in human skin:

<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/houghton/2014/06/04/caveat-lecter/>

The result was not a surprise. Houssaye had presented this copy to Dr. Ludovic Bouland (1839-1932), who in an accompanying autograph note stated unequivocally what he had done: "a book on the human soul well deserves that one should give it a human vestment." He had, he wrote, long preserved this piece of human skin, taken from the back of a woman, and had had it prepared in the manner of vellum. He referred to another book he owned, a collection of seventeenth-century medical tracts including one on virginity, also bound in human skin but tanned with sumac. This latter volume, bound and gilt-tooled by Lortic, is now in the Wellcome Library, London, and it too contains an autograph note by Bouland, stating that the "curious little treatise on virginity" seemed to him to deserve "a binding congruent with its subject," and hence leather made of female skin which he had tanned himself. From information summarized in the Houghton blog, it appears that to get the skin he wanted, Bouland excoriated the body of an indigent female mental patient.

I was not happy with the Houghton blog, which was shocking in its crudity, opening with the sentence, "Good news for fans of anthropodermic bibliopegy, bibliomaniacs, and cannibals alike." I wrote to the Houghton and complained about this sentence, which was removed at my request. (The blog's web address, incorporating "caveat-lecter", still maintains the jocular tone.) As I have recently written in e-mails to members of the Houghton staff, I believe there is a fundamental ethical question which the Houghton Library has not addressed: what should a library do when it learns that it is the owner of a book bound in human skin? My own suggestion, which I will enlarge on, was that the appropriate action would be to remove the skin from the volume and give it respectful burial, "in commemoration of an unknown and powerless human whose rights were so egregiously violated by a member of the medical profession." Two commentators to the Houghton's blog made similar suggestions.

Judging from the replies to my e-mails, it is clear that the Houghton Library does not contemplate such an action. I suggested that the Library allow me to contribute a blog post, making my arguments on the site where the book in question had first been publicized, and inviting further discussion. The Houghton Library has declined this suggestion, on the ground that the Houghton Blog was not intended to be a forum for debate. And yet there is value in the public airing of controversial matters, summed up in the aphorism of (Harvard Law School graduate) Justice Louis Brandeis: "sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant." Such an airing ought to be welcomed by the Houghton Library, which is embedded in a proud tradition of inquiry that reaches back to the earliest years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and allows us to claim Harvard College and its library as America's premier cultural institution.

The central point of the Houghton Library's response to my suggestion — since they have not made the point publicly and officially, I paraphrase in general terms — is that, having accepted Bouland's volume, first in the 1930s on loan, and then in the 1950s by formalized gift, they have an obligation to preserve it. My reply is that although preservation is a central responsibility of libraries and museums, it is not one isolated from wider questions of ethics. There are times when the "good" of preservation must be weighed against other compelling responsibilities. Indeed, the field of ethics would not exist if there were never conflicts of competing "goods" to be weighed. If preservation, or for that matter the simple property rights inherent in transferring ownership of a book from a private individual to the Houghton Library, were declared to be an absolute imperative, trumping all conceivable opposing claims, we could hardly say we were operating under an ethical system at all. We would only be mindlessly adhering to an arbitrary hierarchy of rules.

The respectful treatment of the dead has been a central value of most human societies. This instinct of respect is not the property of any particular society, culture, linguistic group, or religion: archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians can trace it around the world and across the millennia. It is this tradition that Dr. Bouland violated as a medical student, creating macabre curiosities that eventually became objects of commerce. He sold his books at auction in Paris, 4-5 July and 20-21 November 1928, and there was a final posthumous sale, 17 June 1933. Presumably Dr. Bouland's curiosities were offered in one or other of these sales. In the *Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux* for 1910 (vol. 62, col. 661), an acquaintance of Bouland's, Paul Combes, recalls having been shown one of these volumes; by his recollection the subject of Bouland's flaying had been a female patient who had died in a hospital either in Metz or Nancy. In the preceding number of the *Intermédiaire*, another doctor recalled that when he was an intern in Beaujon in the mid-1870s, one of his colleagues carried a tobacco pouch made from a woman's breast, as souvenir of his time in a hospital in Tours. Medical students: indigent patients: female patients. The connection is clear. A reader of Bouland's notes accompanying his human-skin volumes cannot miss that it was significant to Bouland that he had exerted his power upon a woman. The skin of a male would not have fulfilled his psychosexual needs in the same way. Essentially, he carried out an act of post-mortem rape, and two volumes, in two libraries, are now its tangible witnesses.

The Houghton Library and its ownership of the skin of this nameless French woman of the nineteenth century has striking parallels with the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and its long-time ownership of the remains of Sara / Saartje Baartman, a woman of the Khoikhoi ethnic group of South Africa, who in the early nineteenth century was brought to Europe and put on public display as the "Hottentot Venus" in both England and France, being subjected to countless humiliations including examination of her genitals. After her early death in 1815 she was dissected, and written about by the naturalist Georges Cuvier who saw in her anatomy similarities to monkeys and orangutans. Baartman's remains including her skeleton were kept and for long displayed by the Musée de l'Homme. This generations-long misuse of Baartman was brought to wide attention in (Harvard Professor) Stephen Jay Gould's scathing essay, "The Hottentot Venus," in his essay collection *The Flamingo's Smile*, 1985. In the mid-1990s the newly elected president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, publicly called for the return of Baartman's remains to her native land, for respectful burial. Years of delay ensued, held up by protests from the director of the Musée de l'Homme, but in 2002 the French National Assembly finally voted in favor of return. Baartman's remains are buried in the Gamtoos Valley, near where she was born. A plaque at the site includes a poem in her memory by the South African writer Diana Ferrus; its final word is "peace".

In the case of Sara Baartman, her use as a sexualized display piece in England and France created a large body of reports and images within which, even through the prejudiced eyes of those who viewed and interviewed her, we can gain some sense of her personhood and personality. In the case of Dr. Bouland's victim, we have not even a name (we may call her "the Unknown"); nor a place, beyond the hints of Metz or Nancy; nor, except in the vaguest terms, a date: at a guess, she may have died about 1865-1870. But there is also a significant difference between the posthumous treatments of Sara Baartman and of Dr. Bouland's victim. Dissection and the preservation of body parts for examination were then, and are still, considered valuable tools for the advance of science and medicine, and however misguided the interpretations of Baartman's examiners, they were part of a tradition whose goal is the increase of knowledge. In the case of "the Unknown," there is no trace of a research purpose that could benefit humanity. Simply by the prevailing standard of "égalité", Dr. Bouland's treatment of the corpse before him was indefensible, a pure act of power.

Yet "the Unknown" was a human being with the same rights to respect that we all can claim. That ought to be enough to guide our actions. Houghton's blog refers to this volume as "a popular object of curiosity, particularly to undergraduates." That is precisely how it should *not* be treated. It is a polluted object, one that should not be further defiled by such mishandling. When the volume was tested to determine whether Bouland's binding really was human skin, the question ought to have been raised beforehand: depending on the answer, how may our ethical obligations change? For me, the answer is clear. Just as Sara Baartman deserved peace, so does "the Unknown." The Houghton Library, and Harvard University more widely, will bring honor to itself if it can acknowledge its moral obligation in this matter and proceed on the right path.

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