An addition to the Harvard Collection of Francis Barlow

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An Addition to the Harvard Collection of Francis Barlow

THOSE who read the article on Francis Barlow's Aesop in the Autumn 1948 issue of this Bulletin, and are still curious about this little known and highly talented English seventeenth-century painter and book illustrator, may be interested to know that a rare work of Barlow's, Sir William Denny's Ptelecanideth: or, the Christian Adviser against Self-Murther, London, 1653, has recently been placed on deposit in the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts of the Harvard College Library. Compared with the sumptuous Aesops of 1666 and 1687, and the handsome Theophila of Edward Benlowes, 1654, Denny's modest octavo is as discreet as a work on suicide should be for a 'god-fearing' society. But its frontispiece and two full-page plates (one repeated), all signed by Barlow, are of distinct artistic merit. The frontispiece, depicting a pelican piercing her breast to feed her young, perhaps explains the choice of Barlow as illustrator of this work, since his talent in drawing animals and birds was already well known. On the other hand, the two text illustrations are completely in the style of the imaginative, mystical drawings for Benlowes' Theophila, published only the year before. So more probably the latter consideration was the deciding one, particularly since both books seem to have been semi-private publishing ventures.

The Ptelecanideth, however, is much the rarer work. Whereas the Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England ... 1641-1700 lists twelve copies of the Benlowes, it records only five copies of the Denny, and even this proportion may prove to be high.

By happy chance, the Theophila in the Department of Graphic Arts is an exceptional copy, with all the illustrations (some of which are frequently lacking) and is in a contemporary full morocco presentation binding, with Benlowes' arms on the covers in gilt. The Ptelecanideth is no less notable a copy: in contemporary green morocco gold tooled, the Britwell Court copy, sold at Sotheby's 13 March 1923, lot 218.

Thus these books form fitting adjuncts to the great Aesops described in the Bulletin article, and with them provide a comprehensive basis for the study of Barlow's art.

PHILIP HOPES

2 B 1670 and D 1691.
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