Lost and Found: Ben Jonson’s Autograph in Joachim Morsius’s *Album Amicorum*

“I cannot be optimistic enough to think that many more such reports of loss and destruction will prove to be false.” The sentiment is that of Peter Beal, compiler of the magisterial database *Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450–1700*. It appears near the end of an engaging essay entitled “‘Lost’: The Destruction, Dispersal and Rediscovery of Manuscripts,”¹ which, within a few short narratives, artfully captures the frustrations of scholars longing for manuscripts that no longer exist. Of course, in some cases, even though the original has disappeared, a facsimile has survived:

One that comes to mind is a *liber amicorum* inscribed by Ben Jonson to the theosopher Joachim Morsius [1593–1644] on New Year’s Day 1620. The inscribed page—giving the full quotation from Seneca of Jonson’s celebrated *Tanquam explorator* motto—was fortunately reproduced in facsimile in 1929.² The album was then in the Municipal Library of Lübeck. When I made enquiries about it in the 1970s they seemed to
confirm that the album had perished, with many other books, when Lübeck was bombed in the Second World War.³

Having recently completed a study on Stammbücher entitled The Album Amicorum and the London of Shakespeare’s Time,⁴ I realized that the facsimile in Heinrich Schneider’s 1929 book on the Morsius album was not the only survivor of the War. In fact, the album itself, with Jonson’s signature intact, rests comfortably on a shelf in the Bibliothek der Hansestadt Lübeck, along with other volumes of Morsius’s liber amicorum.⁵ Knowing that Schneider had already reproduced Jonson’s contribution to the Morsius album, when I prepared my work for publication I selected a second Jonson entry, from the album of Francis Segar (before 1564–1615) (fig. 1), an Englishman who spent 20 years (1595–1615) in Kassel, Germany, at the court of the Landgrave Moritz. Jonson penned a fulsome dedication to his friend Segar, and he signed his entry “Beniamin Jonsonius Londinensis, Apollinis & Musarum Sacerdos subscripsit,” styling himself as a priest of Apollo. (Others who signed Segar’s album include Inigo Jones, Walter Ralegh, Henry Wotton, the Earl of Essex, Prince Henry, and King James.) When I reproduced Jonson’s entry in Segar’s album, I offered the following commentary:

This is one of two Jonson signatures in alba amicorum, the other in the album of Joachim Morsius from Hamburg, an influential figure in Rosicrucianism, whose album is so prodigious it occupies five volumes (1610–40). There, too, Jonson writes in Latin and includes a dedication in praise of Morsius (vol. 2, fol. 311). This time, however, he indicates that he signed in London and provides the date: “Cal. Jan CIC DC XIX” ([1 January] 1619). The signature reads “Benjamin Jonsonius, Poeta Regius,” publicizing his relationship to the King as England’s first “poet laureate,” an honour conferred on him in 1616…⁶

Following the conventions of album signing, Jonson, writing in Morsius’s album (fig. 2), applied complimentary adjectives to his dedicatee. And, characteristically, he began his entry with “Tanquam Explorator,” generally considered to have been
his personal motto, here in its extended form: “Soleo enim et in aliena castra transire, non tanquam transfuga, sed tanquam Explorator” (“For I am wont to cross over even into the enemy’s camp, not as a deserter but, as it were, as an explorer”). Ian Donaldson, Jonson’s biographer, explains the expression, which is from Seneca’s Moral Letters to Lucillus II.5: “the spirit in which—so Jonson believed, as Seneca and Epicurus had believed before him—all reading should ideally be conducted, in a spirit of free but self-possessed enquiry; not forsaking one’s own beliefs, but to explore the ideas of others.” (Alternative translations of “explorator” are “scout” and “spy.”)

Throughout the album, a cramped hand (Morsius’s?) provides identifying notes on the contributors. On Jonson’s page, following Jonson’s “Tanquam Explorator” inscription, is an annotation referencing Matts. Martini in Lexico Philologico [Matthias Martinius, Lexicon philologicum]. Curiously, though, none of the first four editions of the German theologian’s Lexicon—1623, 1655, 1697–98, 1701—contains an entry on Jonson.

Volume 2 of the Morsius album, the volume containing Jonson’s signature, includes entries secured in some sixty cities, with numerous contributions from Hamburg (where Morsius was born), Rostock and Leiden (where he attended university), Copenhagen and Amsterdam (where, as everywhere, he explored questions of natural philosophy and theology). The entries in volume 2 primarily fall into two time periods: 1616–20 and 1630–36. A dozen signatures in the earlier group, including Jonson’s, were proffered in London from 5 November 1618 to 6 March 1620; two entries from Cambridge, one dated October 1619, document Morsius’s presence in the university town where he was granted an M.A. in 1619; and three entries from Oxford dated 16 October to 22 December 1619, one from Thomas James, Bodleian librarian, record his visit there. Among the best known of the London contributors to volume 2 is William Camden (1551–1623), historian and author of Britannia (1586), who signed on 26 January 1620 (fol. 252v).

Other figures of note in this and other volumes of the album include Thomas Erpenius, Professor of Oriental Studies in Leiden, who signed 29 November 1618, in Leiden (fol. 152); Henry Wotton, King James’s ambassador to Venice, who signed in London on
23 January 1619 (fol. 156); Robert Fludd, Paracelsian physician [no date or place] (fol. 544); Simon van de Passe, engraver, who signed in London on 27 January 1620 (fol. 702v); Heinrich Schütz, German composer, who signed in Copenhagen on 21 January 163? (fol. 775); Janus Gruterus, polyhistor, philologist, poet from Antwerp, who signed in Frankfurt on Easter Sunday 1616 (fol. 170); and Daniel Heinsius, Leiden professor, librarian, poet, who signed in Leiden in July 1619 (fol. 288).

Morsius also collected engravings and woodcut portraits of Queen Elizabeth; King James; Christian IV, King of Denmark; Frederich II, King of Denmark; Gustav Adolf, King of Sweden; Rudolph II, Holy Roman Emperor; George Villers, Duke of Buckingham; Justus Lipsius; Joseph Scaliger (lost); Tycho Brahe (lost), and others, all included in the album.9

For those who read German, the Schneider book offers a comprehensive account of the Morsius album along with an alphabetical inventory of the contributors to volumes 1 through 4, giving name, date, and place of signing, album page, and a brief biography, along with the source of the biographical note.10 Because the leaves of the four volumes are numbered consecutively, one can readily associate each name on the list with a particular volume: volume 1, fols 1–215; volume 2, fols 216–487; volume 3, fols 488–733; volume 4, fols 734–964 (volume 5 is a register).

Researchers should understand, however, that in Morsius’s lifetime the album was one stack of unassembled sheets, containing 779 album entries and 113 prints and pictures, as well as letters, poems, and other documents. Samuel Pomarius, Lübeck Superintendent, reportedly bought the papers in 1680 from an old woman, then passed them on to his son-in-law, Jacob von Melle (1659–1743), pastor of St. Mary’s Church in Lübeck and, from 1706, Hauptpastor or vicar. A polylinguist and a prolific writer, von Melle, in 1731, sorted and arranged the Morsius autographs and had them bound into four volumes. He created a register and had that bound in a fifth volume, then gave all five to the Staatsarchiv Lübeck. The album remained in the State Archive until 1881, when it was transferred to the Stadtbibliothek (the City Library).11 To speak of others who signed volume 2, then, is to offer an anachronistic observation, for when Morsius obtained the signatures, over a period of thirty years (1610 to 1640), his “album” was unbound.
In his essay on lost manuscripts, Beal speaks of the many ways manuscripts have been lost—through deliberate, accidental, or casual destruction; theft; vandalism; dispersal; misplacement; custodial neglect; fire; a friend or relative’s concern; even the sinking of the Titanic. He ends with another category: reports of loss that proved to be wrong. One such report concerns the “Burley Manuscript,” “which contained papers relating to Sir Henry Wotton’s embassy in Venice between 1604 and 1610 and much literary material, including texts of many poems and letters by Wotton’s friend John Donne.” According to Beal, both Logan Pearsall Smith, editor of Wotton’s letters, and Herbert Grierson, editor of Donne’s work, spoke of having examined the manuscript at Burley-on-the-Hill House, Rutland, before the 1908 fire that destroyed both the house and the manuscript. But Beal learned that this was not so. The manuscript, he reports, was discovered by the late I. A. Shapiro in 1960 at the National Register of Archives and was subsequently deposited on loan for him at the University of Birmingham. Shapiro thought that he had returned it to the Public Record Office, but in fact it sat for thirteen years, forgotten, in a safe in the Birmingham University Library.

The manuscript Shapiro found, then “lost,” remained lost until Beal, having seen a post–1912 inventory of the Finch manuscripts, including the Burley, launched an investigation that ended with the document’s being “rediscovered once and for all.”

A similar story may be told about volume 2 of the Morsius album. Beal came away from his 1970s inquiries believing that the album had perished in the bombing of Lübeck. In July 2007, unaware that the album was thought lost, I visited the Lübeck library and learned that volumes 3 and 5 (the latter the register) were “verlust,” though not in the bombing: after the War, they were never returned from the storage site where they were placed for safekeeping. The librarian delivered volumes 1 and 4 to me but explained that volume 2 was on exhibit at a nearby museum. Knowing, from Schneider, that this volume contained Jonson’s signature, I asked whether she could send me a photocopy of that page (fol. 311) and a page signed by Thomas Seget (fol. 468) when
the album was returned. In September 2007, the envelope arrived. That was the year Beal’s essay appeared, but it did not come to my attention until five years later. When I read the piece in August 2012, I looked again at my Morsius file, wondering whether the library had simply photocopied the facsimile in Schneider, which could indicate that the album was, indeed, lost. But I had the Seget page as well, which Schneider had not reproduced. Excited over the possibility that I had just “found” a “lost” manuscript, I made arrangements to visit Lübeck again. And in September 2012, I held volume 2 of the Morsius album in my hand.

Europe’s libraries preserve numerous *alba amicorum* from the Early Modern period. It is clear from a sampling of such manuscripts that Morsius’s album follows the conventions of the genre: those signing generally begin their entries with a motto, often a classical quotation, then inscribe a dedication to the album owner, and, typically, end with the date and place of signing. The contributor’s signature generally ends the entry, at times followed by a flourish approximating a “manu propria” or “mp,” verifying that the autograph is his own. Morsius’s album differs from others in that von Melle had a number of letters and documents bound into the album (all inventoried by Schneider). And, of course, it is of special value to scholars of Early Modern England, particularly theatre historians, in hosting one of only two known album signatures by the rare Ben Jonson.

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NOTES


5. Ms. hist. 8° 25, 1–5 (previously Ms. 4° 61 a–e).
9. For a list of the prints in Morsius’s album, see Schneider, 109–10.
11. Information on the history of the album is from Schneider, 112. For information on von Melle, see Hans-Bernd Spies, “Jacob von Melle,” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 17 (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1994), 19–20. When Lübeck was bombed in 1942, the bells of St. Mary’s fell to the pavement and became embedded there; they remain today as a war memorial.
14. Two poems by Thomas Seget are also in the album, one in memory of Albert Morton, Sir Henry Wotton’s nephew (fols 167, 167v), and one in memory of Sir Philip Sidney (fol. 186). Seget’s son Thomas is also represented through a poem in memory of Sidney (fol. 188) and a poem by Michael Clenovius the younger that begins with an anagram of Seget’s name (fol. 188v).
Figure 1. *Album amicorum* of Francis Segar, fol. 160 (Huntington Library, San Marino, CA; HM 743).
Præter aquas Helicon, et serta, Lyrasq[ue] Deoru[m] [sic—Dearum] Nil habet:

Cordatissimo
Generosissimo
et
nobis post nullos memorando.
D
Fran: Segar.
Amoris & Amicitiae ergo

Beniamin Jonsonius Londinensis
Apollinis & Musarum
Sacerdos
subscriptis.

—Magnum hoc ego duco
Quod placui tibi, qui turpi secernis Honestum
—Nil te quæsiveris extrà

Ista notavi unus—cui non sit publica uena,
Qui nihil exposuit soleat [sic—soleat] deducere, nec qui
Communi feriat carmen truiuale monetà.
Translation of Figure 1

Helicon has nothing except waters and the garlands and lyres of goddesses.
[Martial, *Epigrams* 1.76, lines 9–10]

For the
Most wise,
Most generous
and
more worthy of my memory than anyone else
Sir
Francis Segar
Out of love and Friendship

Benjamin Jonson of London,
Priest of Apollo and the Muses,
wrote this.

—I regard it as a great thing
that I have pleased you, a man who distinguishes the honorable from the base.
[Horace, *Satires* 1.6, lines 62–63]

—Do not search for anything outside yourself.
[Persius, *Satires* 1, line 7]

I alone noted these things—[the poet] who does not have a public vein—who usually spins nothing hackneyed, and who does not strike an ordinary poem from a common mint
[Juvenal, *Satires* 7, lines 53–55]

Translated by Markus Dubischar
Figure 2. *Album amicorum* of Joachim Morsius, fol. 311 (Bibliothek der Hansestadt, Lübeck, Germany; Ms. hist., 8° 25, 2).
**Transcript of Figure 2**

Tanquam Explorator.
Soleo enim et in aliena castra transire, non tanqua[m] transfuga, sed tanquam Explorator.

[annotation, in another hand, referencing *Matts. Martini, Lexico Philologico*]

Haec amoris mei & observantiae arrham
  Viro Clarissimo
  Eruditissimo,
  Consummatissimo
  Philologo.
Dominus Joachimos Moresio
Londini, dedi.
Cal. Jan. CIC DC XIX.

Beniamin Jonsonius
Poeta Regius.

—Sed defluit aetas
Et pelagi patiens, et cassidis, atque Ligonis.
Translation of Figure 2

As an explorer.
For I am wont to cross over even into the enemy’s camp,
not as a deserter but, as it were, as an explorer
[Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucillus* II.5].

[annotation, in another hand, referencing Matthias Martinius,
*Lexicon philologicum*]

This in observance of my love and earnest
Most Illustrious
Learned Man,
Perfect
Scholar
Sir Joachim Morsius
London, dedicated
the 1st of January 1619.

Benjamin Jonson
Royal Poet.

—The life is ebbing away
that could endure the sea, the helmet, or the spade.
[Juvenal, *Satires* 7]

Translated by Markus Dubischar