

The Rationale for Rebinding at the Pierpont Morgan Library in the Early 20th-Century: A Study of Bindings by Marguerite Duprez Lahey

INTRODUCTION

Books in the Western world have historically been rare luxury items; for hundreds of years, they were mostly available to the wealthy or to those in religious communities. With the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, their status began to change, and by the end of the nineteenth century, they were no longer exclusive to a small segment of society. Graphic design historian Ellen Mazur Thomson, citing the work of German sociologist Georg Simmel, notes that this caused a signal change in the relationship between people and objects: “Endlessly changing fashion and its relationship to class now made the acquisition of objects and their display an occasion of some tension.”¹ At the start of the twentieth century, the previous century began to be seen as “drab and anti-intellectual, anti-artistic,” and there was a shift away from industrialization and mechanization.²

Until this point, hand bookbinding in America had been largely the province of immigrant craftsmen. With the growth first of Aestheticism, and then the Arts and Crafts movement, there was a sudden interest in hand-crafted goods, including books. In 1895, the bibliophiles of the Grolier Club began organizing the Club Bindery, going so far as to bring French master binders to New York to run it and, in the process, to improve the quality of American bookbinding.³ There was a sudden outbreak of exhibitions devoted to the craft, beginning with a display of bookbindings at Scribner’s, the publishing house, in 1895 and followed by shows sponsored by the Grolier Club, the Society of Craftsmen, and Houghton Mifflin, among others. In 1906, the Guild of Book Workers was organized to establish and maintain “a feeling of kinship and mutual interest among the workers in several book crafts.”⁴

With such attention being given to the craft, bookbinding became a socially acceptable form of artistic expression for the upper classes, and it was not long before the immigrant

craftsmen mentioned above were joined by home-grown products. This was particularly the case in New York.⁵ Even at this early stage, fine binding was a craft with a “strong feminine influence.”⁶ This was at least in part due to financial considerations. A 1905 article ruefully notes that while bookbinding is a fascinating and creative process, “Whether fine binding as a vocation or studio practice—outside of the regular binderies—can be made sufficiently remunerative to warrant those who have a taste for the art giving their whole time to it, is another question.”⁷ Meanwhile, as late as 1954, Lawrence Thompson characterized American binders as “(1) individuals with other sources of income, (2) binders attached to great special libraries such as the Folger, and (3) binders in shops maintained by Donnelley and Doubleday,” and acknowledged that “The predominance of women in the field of hand binding is readily explained by the fact that all but a few depend on their families, not on their craft, for their bed and board.”⁸

Many of the women who took up bookbinding were profoundly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement in England, and Art Nouveau in France. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, a friend of William Morris and one of the luminaries of the Arts and Crafts movement, not only exhibited his bindings at Columbia University but also accepted several American women as pupils.⁹ Many of these women continued their studies in Paris and returned to the United States to take on their own pupils.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

It was into a world on the cusp of a new appreciation of hand craftsmanship that Marguerite Josephine Duprez Lahey was born on January 22, 1880, in Brooklyn, New York. Her parents were Isaiah Antony Lahey, a lace importer from Ireland, and Margaret (Maggie) Ayton Duncan, a New Yorker of Scottish origin. She was the youngest of four siblings.¹⁰ Her family was wealthy; when her father passed away in 1913, he left an estate of \$84,200.68, which translates to roughly \$2 million in today’s currency.¹¹ Duprez Lahey was very much a product of a privileged background: she spoke several languages (in

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1905, an article described her as speaking “French, German and English and . . . studying Italian”), played the mandolin and the violin, rode horseback, and knew how to swim—accomplishments that defined her as a lady of leisure.¹²

Duprez Lahey’s background was key to her pursuit of bookbinding. In one interview, Duprez Lahey acknowledged, “I did not have to depend upon its [i.e. bookbinding’s] rewards for my living, which was important; fine book binding offers an uncertain future because it appeals to a very limited circle of people with the means to indulge their fondness for books.”¹³ Duprez Lahey was wealthy enough to devote years of her life to taking classes and learning from others—both at home and abroad—and her familial relations were such that she was encouraged to do so.

Much like another dynamic young woman at the Morgan Library, Belle da Costa Greene, Marguerite Duprez Lahey seems to have actively tried to change the narrative of her life in order to enhance her importance and interest. One newspaper article, for instance, describes her as being “of Huguenot and Virginian descent”—unlikely, given the identity of her parents.¹⁴ Another newspaper made much of the fact that her sister-in-law was the niece of the governor-general of Poland, as well as being the daughter of a Russian general.¹⁵

The exact details of her life and her introduction to bookbinding are likewise unclear. According to one newspaper account, Duprez Lahey suffered from ill health as a teenager, to the point that she had to leave school at the age of sixteen. Two years later, she read a newspaper article on bookbinding as an art suitable for women and was immediately intrigued. As one newspaper article put it, “Here was something in which she could indulge in the joy of work without injuring her health.”¹⁶ Another newspaper account claims that “As a girl she was taken to Paris by her father and there she discovered the art of bookbinding. She studied for a while at Adelphi College, but left before graduation to study binding.”¹⁷

Regardless of the exact circumstances of her initial introduction to bookbinding, it seems clear that she began taking classes at The School of Bookbinding for Women conducted by the Schleuning & Adams bindery in Manhattan.¹⁸ After two years of study with Alfred Schleuning, Duprez Lahey traveled to Paris, where it was generally assumed that there was a higher level of skill insofar as finishing techniques for books were concerned.¹⁹ Here, she had a harder time finding teachers—they were reluctant to take female pupils and “only agreed when she showed them what she could do.”²⁰ However, she was persistent, and her determination paid off. She studied tooling with Marius Michel, Jules Domont, Emile Mercier, and Antoine Joly; learned edge gilding from Chapiers and Koch; and studied design with Coulomb and Henri Noulhoc, who also taught famed Art Deco bookbinder Rose Adler.²¹ She continued to return to Paris to work with these masters every year for the rest of her life. It is to be noted, however, that she does not appear to have undergone

a formal apprenticeship with any of these master craftsmen; rather, she trained with each of them briefly.

By 1905, Duprez Lahey was already the subject of a glowing profile in the *Utica Sunday Tribune*, which quotes Alfred Schleuning as saying, “I know of no man or woman in America who can do such excellent work in bookbinding as Miss Lahey.”²² It is not surprising that she eventually came to the notice of J. Pierpont Morgan, although the exact means of this introduction is unclear. Some articles suggest that she was friends with Belle da Costa Greene; others, that the financier saw a book she had rebound and was favorably impressed. However the introduction took place, Marguerite Duprez Lahey began rebinding books for Morgan in 1908, when she received her first commission in a luxe edition of Frédéric Masson’s *Napoléon et les femmes*.²³

Duprez Lahey continued to work for the Morgan until her death on October 22, 1958. During her long association with the Library, she experienced the death of J. Pierpont Morgan in 1913, the transfer of the Library by the second J. P. Morgan to a board of trustees in 1924, and the retirement of Belle da Costa Greene, the library’s first librarian and director, in 1948. Over the course of her life, Duprez Lahey herself went from being a contract bookbinder to becoming the Morgan’s sole in-house binder, moving her studio into the building at 29 East 36th Street in 1941.²⁴ Her stature within the institution was such that she even gave bookbinding classes to Frances Morgan, the great collector’s granddaughter.²⁵ Outside the Morgan, she was equally famous: by the time of her death, she was widely acknowledged as “America’s greatest binder.”²⁶

CHARACTERISTICS OF DUPREZ LAHEY BINDINGS

An examination of Duprez Lahey’s work at the Morgan quickly reveals a distinctive aesthetic style. Most of her bindings have a leather component, being, if not a full leather binding, at least half or quarter leather. The leather is usually left fairly thick except at the edges where it is turned in over the boards. The majority of her bindings do not have much cover ornamentation, although almost all have title information tooled (usually gold tooled, but occasionally blind tooled) on the spine. Some books, presumably due to their perceived importance, received elaborate covers with extensive tooling, such as a fifteenth century book of hours (PML 591), which has an elaborate gold tooled design evoking the aesthetic of Art Deco (Figure 1). These seem to have been much more to her taste—this is the aesthetic of the books she made outside of her work at the Morgan as well, as seen in the blank books left to the library by her estate. It is also the style of the books with which she chose to be depicted in the photographs surviving in her scrapbook. Many of the books appear to be tight-backs with raised bands, possibly sewn on raised cords. All have endbands, mostly sewn in the French manner with two cores and a front bead.



Fig. 1. Marguerite Duprez Lahey and Catholic Church, *Book of Hours*, record 110865, text ca. 1507, binding dated 1925, full leather binding with gold tooling, front cover. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.

All of these characteristics are representative of the time in which Duprez Lahey was practicing. Leather covers, for instance, reflect the understanding of library preservation practices at the time. The Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth R. Spofford, wrote as early as 1876 that “The combined experience of librarians establishes the fact that leather binding only can be depended on for any use but the most ephemeral.”²⁷ Leather was widely acknowledged to be the most durable binding material. However, there was a simultaneous awareness of the detrimental impact of contemporary leather manufacturing practices: “Leather, more than any other material entering into bookbinding, needs careful watching . . . leather should be subjected to the severest test, since much of it is spoiled for the purpose for which it is made by the ingredients used in its preparation.”²⁸ It is not, therefore, surprising that Duprez Lahey not only used leather extensively, especially to cover ‘weak’ areas such as the spine and the joints of the book, but also took great care over the origins of the leather, claiming that there was “no leather like French *levant moroquin du Cap* . . . [the] skin of a goat, indigenous to

Cape Good Hope. The grain is large and firm. It is tanned and dyed in France.”²⁹

Tight-back bindings today are somewhat more carefully considered than in Duprez Lahey’s time, since they can (as many of Duprez Lahey’s books demonstrate) have a tendency not to open well, particularly when the textblocks are comprised of parchment pages. This was acknowledged at the time: one patriotic British observer comments that “In ‘forwarding’, whatever may be the opinion of the layman, every expert knows that the English and American binders are more forthright than the French, whose books are apt to be weak in the binding and so stiff in the back (to enable them to bear the overdose of gilding) that they open with difficulty and in time break.”³⁰ At the same time, however, tight-back books were considered more durable, particularly when they used thick leather, as Duprez Lahey did. Douglas Cockerell, the noted English binder, declared in his seminal *Bookbinding and the Care of Books* that:

The polished calf and imitation crushed morocco must go, and in its place a rougher, thicker leather must be employed. The full-gilt backs must go, the coloured lettering panel must go, the hollow backs must go, but in the place of these we may have the books sewn on tapes with the ends securely fastened into split boards, and the thick leather attached directly to the backs of the sections.³¹

It is possible that this concern about durability prompted at least some of Duprez Lahey’s binding decisions. After all, Pierpont Morgan’s purported aim was to create a library that would be an educational resource—his will stated that his collections should be made “permanently available for the instruction and pleasure of the American people.”³² A library that was primarily designed to serve scholars and researchers required books that were strong—and Duprez Lahey’s books were as strong as she could make them, even if they did not open well.

DECORATIVE SCHEMES

Duprez Lahey’s extensive use of leather allowed her to decorate the covers and spine of the book in either blind or gold tooling. Her fondness for gold tooling in particular is apparent in the mention she makes of it in almost every interview. Duprez Lahey was pardonably proud of her skill in tooling, and took care to underline the difficulty involved: “That book there . . . required just 374 hours to tool the cover alone. I was glad when it was done: it was like a load rolling off my hands. It was big and heavy and the constant pull on it exhausted me.”³³ Her emphasis on tooling reflects her French training; as one British observer commented, “When it comes to decoration the French may be ahead of the Anglo-Saxon,” going on to say, rather scornfully, “France regards the bound book

as a work of art—on the outside . . . to the tooler a book is something to look at rather than to use.”³⁴

This said, Duprez Lahey’s focus on tooling was representative of the tastes of the era. Cover decoration was the subject of great interest towards the end of the nineteenth century, and several of Duprez Lahey’s teachers were intensely involved in this debate.³⁵ Marius Michel, for instance, insisted that a book’s cover needed to reflect its contents.³⁶ At the same time, he was also a staunch advocate of the use of floral decorative forms, as opposed to direct illustration of the book’s contents. He advocated a thoughtful and subtle use of all aspects of a book’s binding, down to its color. As Ellen Mazur Thomson describes:

For Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet*, Marius Michel thought that intense, vibrant colours were out of place. Instead, he suggested using brown leather and simple incized lines, with little or no gilding. On the other hand, Victor Hugo’s *Orientales* called for strong blues, intense oranges, pure green inlays and gold gilding to evoke this poet’s vision.³⁷

Duprez Lahey seems to have absorbed at least some of this teaching; Marius Michel’s fondness for floral forms is echoed in many of Duprez Lahey’s designs, and Lawrence Thompson notes that “her understanding of the texts of the books she has bound is often brought out in minute but telling details.”³⁸ Not all of her decorative schemes, however, are easy to understand. Binders’ references to the book’s contents could be extremely personal and subtle. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, for instance, once admitted that a line from Tennyson’s *Tithonus*, ‘grassy barroes of the happier dead,’ inspired his decoration of the cover of *In Memorium* with bands of gold-tooled daisies.³⁹

This said, some of Duprez Lahey’s cover designs can be understood as a commentary on the book’s contents. Possibly the simplest of these is a guest book she created for a yacht, which incorporated a design of a yacht on the cover, made with leather onlays (PML 50093—Figure 2). Most of Duprez Lahey’s cover designs, however, are more sophisticated. For example, MS M.334, a 7th century French manuscript copy of *St. Augustine’s Epistolam Joannis Ad Parthos Tractatus Decem*, is bound in brown leather with French-style endbands of what appears to be plain, undyed linen thread. The only ornamentation is some gold tooling in the form of fish at the fore-edge. The fish are designed to mimic clasps (Figure 3). This decorative conceit evokes the idea of early Christianity through the iconography of a fish, while also reminding us of one type of early binding that may have been in use over the course of the manuscript’s life: the wooden boards binding compressed at the fore-edges with clasps. At the same time, the lack of colored endbands and the use of natural colored leather suggest monastic simplicity appropriate to the works of St. Augustine.



Fig. 2. Marguerite Duprez Lahey, *Guest book for a yacht*, no lettering, record 122686, n.d., full leather binding with gold tooling and leather onlay. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.



Fig. 3. Marguerite Duprez Lahey and St. Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos tractatus decem*, record 77209, text dated 669, binding 20th century, full leather binding with gold tooling, front cover. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.



Fig. 4. Marguerite Duprez Lahey and William M. Laffan, *Catalogue of the Morgan Collection of Chinese Porcelains*, record 77706, 1904-1911, full leather binding with gold tooling, doublure and front opening. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.



Fig. 5. Marguerite Duprez Lahey and Catholic Church, *Book of Hours*, record 121468, text ca. 1415, binding 1951, full leather binding with gold tooling, front cover. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.

The volumes Morgan published on his collection of porcelain, *Chinese Porcelains* (PML 77706 and 77707) were both bound in a simple full-leather binding of “Chinese yellow,” with the Morgan crest gold tooled on the covers.⁴⁰ The boards open to reveal elaborate leather doublures⁴¹ composed of several panels of differently colored leather, and gold-tooled symbols of “the emperors of the Ming Dynasty, the period in which the greatest Chinese vases were produced” (Figure 4).⁴² Duprez Lahey must have had these tools custom-made only for this book, taking the symbols themselves off the bases of the porcelain objects themselves.⁴³ The center panel of the doublures comprises a geometrical gold-tooled pattern that gives a sense of three-dimensionality to the surface. This is enhanced by the fly-leaf, which itself is formed of yellow moiré fabric adhered to paper. The patterning evokes the three-dimensionality of the Chinese porcelain, while the Chinese symbols and the colors used create a sense of exoticism.

However, why did some books receive bindings that seem so appropriate while other books did not? One 15th century French Book of Hours, MS M. 743, was rebound in green leather tooled with rows of gold polka-dots (Figure 5). Even assuming that the circular pattern was a reference to the divine, the binding’s modern sensibility is incongruous when paired with the book’s contents.

Other questions abound as well. Why were some books rebound in such elaborate bindings when others were not? One assumes that more decorative bindings were allocated to those books that were considered more valuable, but exactly why one book was considered more valuable than another is not always clear. Contrast the above binding with the French Book of Hours mentioned earlier, PML 591 (seen in Figure 1). This book, with text dating a mere century later, has a full leather binding in brown leather with an ornate gold-tooled Art Nouveau design around Pierpont Morgan’s seal. The design continues onto the spine, board edges, and even headcaps. The endband is in two colors, probably in silk, and there is a floral gold-tooled band all along the turn-ins.⁴⁴ This binding seems more in tune with the book’s contents as well as much more decorative. The floral elements, while distinctly Art Nouveau in sensibility, still evoke the natural world, and can therefore be related to the content of the book, while the use of extensive ornamentation evokes a memory of time when books were precious and scarce commodities, and books relating to religion were considered doubly valuable, often decorated with jewels, ivory, and gold.

CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

While Duprez Lahey’s bindings fit with contemporary thought and practice in the ways outlined above, there were certain idiosyncrasies. Some of these were faults in finish—while she was undoubtedly skilled at tooling leather, she was not always quite so neat when it came to other aspects of

finishing. The headcaps, for instance, in her bindings, tend to be unusually large and flat, coming over the endband at a sharp right angle.⁴⁵ A fine binder could also quibble with her squares—the length of board that extends beyond the textblock at the head, tail, and fore-edge of a book—as these tend to be uneven. However, more troubling than these minor flaws are the structural problems with her works. As mentioned above, her fondness for tight-back binding made the books she bound or repaired very difficult to use. Most do not open easily. The case is particularly dire when it comes to medieval manuscripts on parchment. The torqueing of the pages as these are opened can result in ink and paint flaking off, causing damage to the very book the binding is supposed to protect, and making it difficult for scholars to access the material within. This is occasionally exacerbated by her use of stiff cores for her endbands, which result in books that only open well if that core is broken.

Duprez Lahey's bindings can occasionally be difficult to handle, as well. The guest book she designed for a yacht includes a gilt paper 'sleeve' that folds around the textblock, presumably to protect the textblock from dust. This makes the book awkward to handle and maneuver. Similarly, a few of her gold tooled full leather bindings are encased in a leather slipcase chemise, similar in design to a 'dustjacket' and originally paired with a matching slipcase to protect the binding from abrasion. While the chemises do succeed in their protective function, they are somewhat stiff, with the leather at the spine in particular prone to cracking. Taking them off—as one must, to view the decorative covers—requires extreme care.

Like others at the time, Duprez Lahey did not leave much room in the joints for the book to open. This increases stress on the book when it is used, resulting in the joints being more prone to breakage.

Finally, Duprez Lahey's fondness for leather (and on occasion wood) has resulted in the paper facing the leather or wood becoming brittle and discolored due to the acidity of the wood or leather. This is at least partially due to the new methods of leather processing mentioned earlier, which aimed to "expedite the process and at the same time gain an unnatural evenness of color by the application of acids that have proved to be injurious and resulted in an inferior product."⁴⁶

These issues point to one of Duprez Lahey's key areas of weakness—her treatments are inconsistent. Binding styles do not always match the text date and style: as mentioned above, while one medieval manuscript may be in a binding that attempts to pay homage to medieval wooden board bindings, another may find itself in an Art Deco binding of green leather with gold-tooled polka dots. Similarly, Duprez Lahey does not seem to be aware of the links between binding aesthetics, structure, and function. While she may make historical references in decorative elements such as tooling, these rarely go so far as to coincide with the binding structure. Thus, a

book that is elaborately tooled to resemble a medieval binding does not necessarily have the corresponding medieval sewing structure, endbands, or wooden boards. These problems are ironic as, in an interview, Duprez Lahey waxed eloquent on "the minutiae of historical accuracy," saying that "only the French people appreciate and hold [these things] in due respect, for there is a disposition, even among the English, to depart from the canons of the past."⁴⁷

Even where Duprez Lahey succeeds in following best practices, she clearly does not understand exactly why they are best practices. For instance, when discussing edge gilding, she discloses a technique for gilding edges without trimming them, saying, "Cutting the leaves would be a mortal sin. You see, all these traditions are sacrosanct; it is not just a mistake, it is a real culpability to make the slightest infraction of one of them."⁴⁸ Trimming the edges can remove marginalia and, in the worst cases, fragments of the text. There is a real reason for not cutting the leaves, but Duprez Lahey dismisses the practice as a mere 'tradition.'

Finally, Duprez Lahey seems to have devoted a considerable amount of her time to rebinding books, rather than repairing their existing bindings. Much debate exists even today about the rebinding of books, which continues today, particularly in research libraries where "they strive to provide unimpeded access to scholarly books while maintaining those same volumes in perpetuity."⁴⁹ However, rebinding has long been considered undesirable; as early as 1905, author Fletcher Battershall wrote in *Bookbinding for Bibliophiles*, "As a rule, if a contemporary covering is still decently sound upon its back, it is best to let it stay there. One cannot better it."⁵⁰ Similarly, Douglas Cockerell castigated the rebinding of valuable books as "at best a necessary evil," while arguing that "Valuable books should either be issued in bindings that are obviously temporary, or else in bindings that are strong enough to be considered permanent."⁵¹

It is impossible not to wonder about the bindings replaced by Duprez Lahey, which were usually discarded. In some cases, notes as to previous bindings exist in the museum catalog. Discarded bindings included a "French 15th century parchment [binding] with ties" (MS M.334); "ca. 1730 rough blind-tooled calf" binding (MS M.776); and "red velvet" bindings (MS M. 373 and 348). Why these bindings were discarded remains unknown, bringing us to the final problem with Duprez Lahey's working practice: the complete lack of documentation. Duprez Lahey tracked her work primarily with a view to record payments and the service delivered. Thus, her receipts rarely mention even the title of the book, much less any detailed information—one from December 1911, for instance, reads, "For binding 1 volume in full red Levant, ribbed silk flies, style Francois I - \$50."⁵² There are no treatment records where the book is identified, the rationale for treatment noted, and the actual treatment described. Now required by conservation codes of ethics, "Such features are

designed to pin down decision-making by conservators onto a bedrock of empirical evidence, so that, for example, the future can reverse-engineer our present.”⁵³

In all fairness, these problems are not unusual for the time. In the last century, there has been a tremendous change in values and ethics in what is now called conservation, rather than bookbinding or book repair. In 1946, Pelham Barr, the Library Binding Institute’s first director, noted that as librarians were untrained in conservation theory and lacked sufficient knowledge to make conservation decisions, “determinations about which books to retain in their original bookbindings and which to rebind were randomly made.”⁵⁴ It was only in 1960 that the first graduate program in conservation opened in the United States, and even then the focus was primarily on works of art, as opposed to functional objects such as books. A formal code of ethics for American conservators did not exist until 1967, and it was not until 1994 that the Modern Language Association adopted its “Statement on the Significance of Original Materials,” which affirmed the importance of saving as much as possible of the original object.⁵⁵ All of Duprez Lahey’s ‘faults’ are entirely consistent with the era in which she flourished.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PATRON

To what extent are the issues above actually traceable to Duprez Lahey herself? While the technical binding problems such as the uneven squares are ultimately her own responsibility, it is not clear that she was the primary decision maker when it came to the aesthetic and perhaps even structural aspects of the binding. There is, unfortunately, a paucity of data in the Morgan archives as to the specific decision-making process—as mentioned before, Duprez Lahey did not document her treatment or binding process. In the face of this lack of documentation, it seems likely that, were the binding decisions not made solely by Duprez Lahey herself, they were made by Pierpont or Jack Morgan and Belle da Costa Greene and conveyed to Duprez Lahey verbally.

There are indications that Greene and Pierpont Morgan were both closely involved in the decision-making process. Duprez Lahey seems to have been on cordial terms with the former as early as 1912, even mentioning in a letter such trivialities as her search for a Pomeranian (“for I want an English dog”).⁵⁶ She appears to have consulted with Greene often, updating the librarian when she plans to order tools for Morgan bindings. For her part, Greene appears to have been deeply interested in Duprez Lahey’s work, going so far as to approach Anne Morgan, the daughter of the great collector, to ask whether she can arrange an exhibition of the binder’s work at the Colony Club, an exclusive club for women founded by Anne Morgan and her friends.⁵⁷

However high Greene’s estimation of Duprez Lahey, she did not trust the binder’s judgement completely. In a

surviving letter to the librarian, Duprez Lahey mentions that she is sending samples of leathers and papers she is planning to use in the rebinding of a particular book to Greene for approval.⁵⁸ Greene does not hesitate to declare her dislike of Duprez Lahey’s choices:

I cabled to you on May 17, immediately after receipt of your letter, to say that I do not at all care for the end papers which you sent me, and would prefer plain paper used. I am sure this will be a disappointment to you, and I am very sorry; but Miss Thurston and I both found the effect very much mixed up and not at all appropriate for the volume. If my cable did not reach you too late, I hope you will substitute a plain cream paper or a pale yellow paper, instead of the enclosed which you wish to use.⁵⁹

Another letter from Duprez Lahey asks for clarification regarding the spelling of the name of Geoffrey Tory on the binding for his illuminated book of hours.⁶⁰ That this was not considered a trivial matter is indicated in Greene’s immediate reply on the matter.

The intense involvement of Greene with the intimate processes of bookbinding accords with Duprez Lahey’s comments about her employers in various interviews. On the death of Pierpont Morgan the elder, she is quoted as saying:

Mr. Morgan had a remarkable knowledge of the minutiae of the artistic features of my craft . . . He also knew its canons, a rare accomplishment that shows sympathy with both historical and literary traditions. Every page of [Geoffrey] Tory’s illuminations bore the emblem of the *pot casée*, his sign manual, which is so intimately associated with him. After the death of his little daughter Agnes, the artist added the auger, or toret, as a play upon his own name, and explained that ‘the broken pitcher represents our body, a vessel of clay, and fate is the auger which pierces all alike.’

I have woven Geoffrey Tory’s name into the cover design of this Book of Hours as Tory always did himself, but Morgan would not let me use the broken-pitcher emblem, for he thought it too personal to the artist to be used upon anything but the work of his own hands.⁶¹

All of this suggests that Duprez Lahey’s work was mediated to a considerable extent by her employer, Pierpont Morgan—and by extension, Greene. This may explain some of the peculiarities of Duprez Lahey’s bindings. While not necessarily knowing much about the effect of different binding structures on varying textblocks, Greene and Pierpont Morgan nevertheless had decided opinions about the visual appearance of the books within their library. Belle da Costa Greene, who was trusted by Morgan to the extent that she was the only one except his lawyer to read his will, was also in sole charge of the library, and her mission was clear. In 1909,

she wrote to Morgan that her goal was to make his library “pre-eminent, especially for incunabula, manuscripts, bindings and the classics.”⁶² She was, in a sense, ahead of her time: one of her projects, a catalog of the first century of printed books, mystified her lover, art historian Bernard Berenson, who “saw the appeal of preprint books, especially the illuminated manuscripts that contained gorgeous, well-preserved pieces of art within their bindings. But he saw no artistic value in printed books, even the earliest examples.”⁶³

If Belle da Costa Greene was devoted to her work, her employer was no less dedicated. While he trusted Belle implicitly, he was still involved in the process of acquisition, making a point of “never purchasing an object he or Belle hadn’t seen.”⁶⁴ Although he had begun his collection by buying others’ collections en masse, after 1908, the bulk of his purchases consisted of “individual volumes or groups of manuscripts purchased at auction or through dealers,” suggesting a level of discrimination. He had a particular love for beautiful objects, and could be single-minded in their pursuit—one anecdote quotes him as follows:

I was told . . . in London, that the Byron manuscripts were in the possession of a lady, a relative of Byron, in Greece. Libraries in England were after them. I wanted them. I therefore, through the advice of an expert, engaged a man, gave him a letter of credit and told him to go to Greece and live [there] until he had gotten those manuscripts. Every once in a while, during several years, a volume would come which the relative had been willing to sell, until the whole was complete.⁶⁵

His son Jack was no less committed: he was “an ardent bibliophile” who continued to add to his father’s rare book collection until his death in 1943.⁶⁶

However interested the Morgans and Greene were in books, they still were not aware of all the intricacies relating to a book’s binding structure. As an anonymous observer notes in an article in *Lotus Magazine*, “The layman is not apt to distinguish between ‘forwarding’ and ‘tooling.’ He forgets that a book is a book, to be opened and read, and not simply to be looked at.”⁶⁷ This was a common failing at the time—Mirjam Foot, the noted book historian, quotes antiquarian bookseller Ernest Philip Goldschmidt (1887-1954) as saying that late nineteenth century bibliophiles were “too exclusively preoccupied with the artistic charm of their chosen objects, . . . too beglamoured with the reputed ownership of lovely queens and royal mistresses.”⁶⁸ That this was a problem at the Morgan can be seen not just in Duprez Lahey’s bindings, but also in a 1952 article by Morgan curator George K. Boyce which discusses the Morgan binding collection in terms of “jeweled and richly ornamented covers of heavy gold and silver,” “ivory plaques . . . contemporary oaken boards . . . stamped and gilded pink doeskin . . . [and] several fine specimens of these Gothic

book coverings, the *cuir-cisé*, blind-stamped, and panel-stamped techniques which preceded the introduction of gold tooling.”⁶⁹ The bindings of books were only considered of interest when they were elaborately decorative—more humble bindings that are now valued for the insights they offer into the lifestyle of less exalted members of the populace were not considered worth mentioning.

It is not unreasonable to assume that this widespread perspective may have influenced binding decisions at the Morgan. It is perhaps this attitude that Duprez Lahey referred to when, in an interview, she commented that knowledge of book history was extremely important to binders in America due to American collectors’ desire for books bound in ‘historic’ styles:

You must know the centuries when blind-tooling was the rule, and the centuries when gold was first used . . . You must know these things particularly for Americans . . . because Americans always want Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century bindings, even on new books. They do not realize that modern bindings are just as beautiful and infinitely more appropriate than ancient bindings. You can’t get a French bookbinder to make an ancient binding today, and you can scarcely get an American book fancier to order anything else.⁷⁰

Still, the Morgan as an institution was better informed than others. Belle da Costa Greene knew most if not all of the book historians and bibliophiles of the time, including Sydney Cockerell (who “had ‘an awful crush’ on her”) and Goldschmidt himself.⁷¹ Duprez Lahey herself included a clipping on the Cockerells’ binding of the Codex Sinaiticus in her scrapbook.⁷² The problem was one of a general widespread lack of information (and to a certain extent, interest) throughout the field in the relationship between binding structure and function, between aesthetics and use.

This points to another factor influencing the Morgan’s bindings—their purpose was not necessarily only to make the books they covered functional, or even durable. With increased mechanization, the use of cheaper wood pulp paper, and vastly increased access to libraries, books were becoming more and more readily available. Thanks to increased literacy, more people were able to take advantage of them as well. As Kevin Dettmar puts it:

Not only, then, can the average man or woman in the street now read; he or she can gain entrance to free public libraries, as well. Together, these two developments lead to an increasing fetishization of the private, home library, for those who can afford to establish one: a place where cultural and symbolic capital are guarded by economic capital, and heavy oak doors.⁷³

Increased access paradoxically led to the fetishization of the physical book. If anyone can access the contents, status

needs to be based on something else, and in this case, that object became the book's binding. Books became a source of status. The new focus on decorative bindings led to the use of books in interior decoration, to the extent that an anonymous author writing in Fraser's Magazine in 1859 referred to "furniture books" which served as "a kind of culturally ostentatious furniture."⁷⁴ A look at gentlemen's libraries of the period reveals the meaning of the anonymous commenter's remark—their bookcases were all lined with the same solid leatherbound tomes, each with raised bands and gold-tooled titling. This was not a new phenomenon—the Roman philosopher and dramatist Seneca (4 BCE–CE 65) condemned the focus on lavish bindings in his own time: "Our idle book-hunters . . . know about nothing but titles and bindings: their chests of cedar and ivory, and the book-cases that fill the bath-room, are nothing but fashionable furniture and have nothing to do with learning."⁷⁵

If books were beginning to become fetishized, the Morgans collected the rarest, most fetishized books of all, and it was likely important that they be sufficiently ornamental. The fact that so many books were rebound—and sometimes rebound in elaborate covers—suggests that there was some small desire to impress the value and beauty of the books upon the outside world.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that Duprez Lahey's books reflect the tastes of the time, as arbitrated by the binder herself and her employers. While her work may not meet with the standards of conservation today, it did conform to the best practices of the day; and in many cases, the problems she faced are still the focus of debate today. As Michèle Cloonan asks:

" . . . should conservators be guided primarily by the aesthetic or by the practical? Is historical accuracy regarding the date of the item being rebound or repaired more important than the immediate consideration of the use and handling the item will receive?"⁷⁶

Duprez Lahey approached her work with imagination and creativity, while working within the limits of her own and her employer's aesthetic tastes. While she did change the nature of the books themselves in doing so, one could argue that the books have already lost much of their original context.⁷⁷ A manuscript that was once part of a monastic library has lost an intrinsic part of its history when it reaches a Fifth Avenue mansion. In addition, many books acquired by the Morgan had already been rebound at least once before their acquisition, including some of the books rebound by Duprez Lahey. They were already in bindings that were not original to the text, in which case, why should it matter if those later bindings were lost? After all, some

of the eighteenth century bindings they sported would have been viewed by Duprez Lahey as lacking value and beauty—much as some view nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century bindings today.

Duprez Lahey may have caused damage to some of the books she rebound—a few have been rebound in recent years due to conservation concerns. However, this is not an unusual occurrence in the field of conservation and does not, by itself, condemn her as an incompetent worker. As Jonathan Ashley-Smith wryly notes, "It is not wrong to deliberately damage objects, we do it all the time through display or conservation treatment."⁷⁸ If it is acceptable to *deliberately* damage objects, how unacceptable can it be to damage an object through lack of knowledge?

Some of Duprez Lahey's bindings are now considered to have artistic value in their own right. They are held specifically in the bindings collection, and were exhibited during the binder's life. This accords with the fact that, by Cloonan's measure, Duprez Lahey would be deemed more a bookbinder than a conservator:

Aesthetics affect the decisions made not only by bookbinders but by conservators as well. However, some restraints are imposed on the conservator, who must be sensitive to the dictates of the artifact and its probable use. The bookbinder, on the other hand, may be able to give free rein to creative expression.⁷⁹

Whether the bookbinder has a right to this creative expression is a discussion that continues to this day. In 2003, the "Tomorrow's Past" exhibition at the Antiquarian Booksellers Association book fair in London showcased antiquarian books in modern conservation bindings.⁸⁰ Its popularity led to the exhibition becoming an annual event, continuing until 2011.

When considering Duprez Lahey's work, one uncovers more questions than answers. How should we view her role? How should her bindings be categorized? How did she approach the decision-making process? What was the rationale behind the selection of books for treatment, and for the selection of binding styles for those books?

Whatever our view of her work today, she was one of the most celebrated female bookbinders—if not one of the most celebrated bookbinders—of her time. At the Morgan, her work was highly valued, with Belle da Costa Greene describing her as doing "the very best bookbinding in America,"⁸¹ and in 1914, famed American book designer William Dana Orcutt mentioned Duprez Lahey as one of three binders whose work was highly prized by contemporary collectors.⁸²

Duprez Lahey herself was aware of her consequence, keeping a detailed scrapbook containing numerous press-clippings and glowing letters of thanks from clients, which she later bequeathed to the Morgan. Her pride in her work was reflected in each binding, no matter how minimal: she



Fig. 6. Marguerite Duprez Lahey and William M. Laffan, *Catalogue of the Morgan Collection of Chinese Porcelains*, record 77706, 1904-1911, full leather binding with gold tooling, doublure and front opening. Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.

stamped each book with her initials at the bottom of the turn ins on the inside front cover (Figure 6). Where the book has been covered in leather, her name has been tooled, sometimes in gold, and where the book does not incorporate leather, it may be stamped in ink. It seems appropriate that all of the books she handled are forever marked with her name.

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2. Lawrence S. Thompson, "Hand Bookbinding in the United States Since the Civil War," *Libri* 5, no. 2 (1954): 103.
3. *Ibid.*, 102. Ellen Mazur Thomson, "Aesthetic Issues in Book Cover Design 1880-1910," *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 3 (2010): 229.
4. *Ibid.*, 98.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Meyer, Ernest E. "The Art Industries of America: VI. The Binding of Books." *Brush and Pencil* 16, no. 2 (Aug., 1905): 35-36.
8. Lawrence S. Thompson, "Hand Bookbinding in the United States Since the Civil War," *Libri* 5, no. 2 (1954): 115-116.
9. *Ibid.*, 103.
10. Data gathered from census records on Ancestry.com.
11. "Wills and Appraisals," *The Sun*, July 11, 1915. Currency calculated using <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>
12. Lillian Gray, "Women Art Bookbinders," 1905 clipping from *Utica Sunday Tribune*, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
13. "Bookbinding is an Art as well as a Craft and a Difficult One to Follow, Says This Woman Expert," clipping from *New York Evening Sun*, December 20, 1916, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
14. Lida Rose McCabe, "Purveyor to His Majesty the Bibliophile," undated clipping from unidentified newspaper, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
15. "A Maker of Beautiful Books," undated clipping from *Town and Country*, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
16. Lillian Gray, "Women Art Bookbinders," 1905 clipping from *Utica Sunday Tribune*, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
17. "Miss Lahey Dies; Noted Bookbinder," clipping from *New York Herald Tribune*, October 22, 1958, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
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19. "Some Notes on Book-Binding," *The Lotus Magazine* 3, no. 2 (Nov. 1911): 57.
20. "Boro Woman Is World's Best Bookbinder, Skilled in Preserving Priceless Tomes," clipping from *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, January 29, 1932, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
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24. "Miss Lahey Dies; Noted Bookbinder," *New York Herald Tribune*, October 22, 1958, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
25. Untitled clipping from *British and Colonial Printer & Stationer*, March 16, 1916, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
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35. Ellen Mazur Thomson, "Aesthetic Issues in Book Cover Design 1880-1910," *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 3 (2010): 229-245.
36. *Ibid.*, 231.
37. *Ibid.*, 237. Italics in original.
38. Lawrence S. Thompson, "Hand Bookbinding in the United States Since the Civil War," *Libri* 5, no. 2 (1954): 109.
39. Holbrook Jackson, *Anatomy of Bibliomania* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950), 397.
40. Lida Rose McCabe, "Purveyor to His Majesty the Bibliophile," undated clipping from unidentified newspaper, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
41. A doublure is "An ornamental inside lining of a book cover, which takes the place of the regular pastedown and fly leaf. It is usually of leather or (watered) silk, generally with a leather hinge and is often very elaborately decorated. of leather." – Matt Roberts and Don Etherington, *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*, <http://cool.conservation-us.org/don/dt/dt1074.html>.
42. Lida Rose McCabe, "Purveyor to His Majesty the Bibliophile," undated clipping from unidentified newspaper, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
43. Lee Ambrozy, email message to author, March 29, 2015.
44. A turn in is "The extra length and width of the covering material of a book overlapping the head, tail, and fore edge of the cover, and turned over the edges of the board and glued to the inside surface. In leather binding, the leather is usually pared around these edges so as to make it thinner on the inside of the boards." – Matt Roberts and Don Etherington, *Bookbinding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*, <http://cool.conservation-us.org/don/dt/dt3860.html>.
45. A headcap is "The leather covering at the head and tail of the spine of a book, formed by turning the leather on the spine over the head and tail and shaping it." – *Ibid.*, <http://cool.conservation-us.org/don/dt/dt1725.html>.
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47. "Bound Morgan's Rarest Volumes," undated clipping from *Town & Country*, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.
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51. Douglas Cockerell, *Bookbinding and the Care of Books*, 1901, Project Gutenberg, 2008, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26672/26672-h/26672-h.htm>.
52. Bill from Marguerite Duprez Lahey to J. P. Morgan, record 152186, Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310); Morgan Library, New York, New York. The catalog title is Correspondence: between Belle Greene, MDL, and Ann Morgan.
53. Jonathan Kemp, "Practical Ethics," *V&A Conservation Journal* 56 (Autumn 2008): 14.
54. Randy Silverman, "Can't Judge a Book Without its Binding," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 42, no. 3 (2007): 295.
55. *Ibid.*, 303.
56. Letter from Marguerite Duprez Lahey to Belle da Costa Greene, August 4, 1912; record 152186, Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310); Morgan Library, New York, New York. The catalog title is Correspondence: between Belle Greene, MDL, and Ann Morgan.
57. Letter from Belle da Costa Greene to Anne Morgan, March 3, 1911. record 152186, Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310); Morgan Library, New York, New York. The catalog title is Correspondence: between Belle Greene, MDL, and Ann Morgan.
58. This appears to have been her standard practice – there are multiple letters in her scrapbook referring to patrons selecting leather from samples she had sent them.

59. Letter from Belle da Costa Greene to Marguerite Duprez Lahey, May 22, 1912; in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, record 122684, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York. The Miss Thurston referred to here is Ada Thurston, Belle Greene's assistant.
60. Letter from Marguerite Duprez Lahey to Belle da Costa Greene, August 15, 2911, record 152186, Morgan Collections Correspondence, 1887-1948 (ARC 1310); Morgan Library, New York, New York. The catalog title is Correspondence: between Belle Greene, MDL, and Ann Morgan.
61. "Bound Morgan's Rarest Volumes," undated clipping from unidentified newspaper, in Marguerite Duprez Lahey Scrapbook, 1905-1958, PML 51421, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York. Emphasis in the original.
62. Heidi Ardizzone, *An Illuminated Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 79.
63. *Ibid.*, 186.
64. Louis Auchincloss, *J. P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 53.
65. Francis Henry Taylor, *Pierpont Morgan as Collector and Patron, 1837-1913* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1957), 28.
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