The Book and Its Forms: A Lesson Learned
By Tom Amos

It is customary for librarians at Western Michigan University to possess faculty status. One thing that faculty rank does is to certify that an individual has the right, if not the obligation, to teach formal University classes in addition to the types of instruction that occur within the library itself. All that is required is to find a department or academic unit that can use your particular expertise.

In my case, the first step came when I spoke with Paul Szarmach, director of the Medieval Institute, to whom I proposed a jointly taught course on the history of the book. Since there was a Medieval Studies course, Interdisciplinary Studies in Medieval Culture, that could be devoted to any appropriate topic, the means to enroll existed.

The second phase of development came through the Lee Honors College and its Dean, Joseph Reish. Dean Reish was most agreeable to a history of the book survey as a part of the offerings of the College. The course, Honors 490/Medieval 500: The Book and Its Forms, was launched for the first time during the Fall semester, 1997. The title reflects the course objective of examining the different forms that "books" have taken—clay tablet, papyrus scroll, medieval codex manuscript, printed book, and electronic document—and the roles each form played in its respective society.

The course also offered the opportunity to "show off" the Special Collections holdings. The University Libraries collection includes many items used by the now-closed School of Library and Information Science for its history of libraries and the book classes. As a result, there is a clay tablet from Babylonia dated to 2,700 B.C.E., a fragment of Egyptian papyrus, and samples or solid holdings in just about every other component that comprised the survey course. The arrangement that brought the Institute of Cistercian Studies Library to Western Michigan University, and a commitment to acquiring rare books from selected historical periods has enhanced the collection even further. The Special Collections materials, along with many volumes on the history of the book found in the general stacks of Waldo Library, proved to be a treasure trove for student papers and projects.

First, however, Paul Szarmach and I had to organize the class. The syllabus (http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/grad/book/index/html) was based on a class taken with Professor David Kaser, Indiana University; in part, on a course offered by Professor Samuel Traister, University of Pennsylvania; and in part, from the sources uncovered when randomly browsing the World Wide Web. Readings from the textbook, Henri-Jean Martin's *The History and Power of Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 1994) were combined with "virtual field trips." This phrase refers to Internet Web sites that contain illustrations or exhibitions on the topics covered. There were also "real" field trips to The Scriptorium at Grand Haven and the Newberry Library in Chicago, where students could see a world renowned manuscript and rare book collection, and hear from experts in the field.

The class consisted of seven graduate students and one talented and courageous undergraduate. Fortunately, each brought different background strengths to the subject being studied so that the playing field was quite level. Professor Szarmach and I quickly saw the value of dividing the readings for each week among the students, and as a result, the course evolved into a seminar. We were also able to meet in the Edwin and Mary Meader Rare Book Room, a felicitous setting for book history, and informally gathered around a table to discuss the topics that had been studied. One week might see pieces of papyrus scattered on the table along with facsimiles of Greek and Roman books, while another week we would have the opportunity to examine the Libraries' facsimile of the Gutenberg Bible and other incunabula.

The students quickly became involved in teaching as well as learning. Each week, one or more of the class would prepare by reading a specialized article or book; he or she then shared the substance of the reading with the class. They also could either write papers or make oral reports. One student, Tracina Jackson-Adams, who has been the Cistercian Institute graduate assistant for the past two years, did a special exhibition that traced the history of modern fine printing from the Kelmscott Press to the 1990s. Student papers included the history of the book in Wales, examined the role of the book in Anglo-Saxon England, and looked at underground printing during the French Revolution.

There were benefits to students and faculty alike in the class experience. First, Paul Szarmach and I simply found it great fun to teach the survey. The Book and Its Forms. Not surprisingly, it became a learning experience for us as well as the students. Certainly, given the unique nature of the subject, plus the expanse of book history that was covered, students truly were given or found information that was not readily available in any other course on this campus. Moreover, a final conclusion emerged that is most important to include in this report. Prophecies of the "death of the book" will only come true if we do not take time to understand what the book is, what it has done, what it can do.

As the weeks passed, we rethought our approaches to the material, and modified our strategies in class so that the themes of the various topics might better relate to other courses, other research, other experiences in which the students were engaged. There is a major need for a regularly offered course that deals with the evolution of the "book" in the history of civilization—although the amount of history to be covered is almost impossible to survey within a single semester or session. Finally, The Book and Its Forms confirmed the fact that the University Libraries and the Special Collections Department have additional and important roles to play in furthering Western Michigan University's missions of teaching and research.