

Amphora V



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THE RESTORATION OF
FINE BINDINGS

By the Rev. Fr. Charles A. E. Brandt

ON MY WORKBENCH lie some twenty odd volumes, all rare and precious. With the exception of two volumes, they are from the Special Collections of a number of Canadian university libraries. Mostly they are full leather bindings in calf, with the leather fast to the spine, displaying the cords which bind the signatures to one another and to the boards. And mostly the titles are skiver-titles, having been executed with individual hand letters, thus giving the clue to their area and time of origin—17th, 18th, and 19th century England. Among the books there is a 1688 edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in full red leather with delicate tooling in gold on the spinal squares; two copies of Cowley's *Works*; a 1718 edition of Prior's *Poems on Several Occasions*, exquisitely designed with blind tooling; a 1524 Paris edition of the *Works of Aristotle* with fine brass clasps, sewn on double leather cords which, along with the leather headbands, are laced into the oak boards; a 17th century edition of *The Works of That Famous Chirurgeon Ambrose Parey* sewn on double cords; the *Opera Marcelli Malpighii*; and so on.

But these priceless works are in a sad state of preservation, indeed. Almost without exception the leather has been contaminated by acids and airborne moisture. The slips are mostly severed and the hinge leather broken, allowing the boards to work free from their moorings. In several cases the title-skivers are missing, the hand-sewn headbands are broken off, and the pages at the front and rear of the books are frayed, with the

corners of a number of the pages either dog-eared or completely missing.

Every university library has a number of books in such a condition. To have them rebound, trimmed and machine sewn by a commercial binder would involve destroying in whole or part their historic and intrinsic worth. To have them restored, so as to retain all that is essential to their original printing and binding, is a costly business, usually beyond the budget of an institution—which often is given funds to purchase these rare additions to its collection but no funds to preserve and repair them once they have been obtained.

One solution, however inadequate, is to house these broken and boardless volumes in specially constructed boxes made somewhat in the fashion of a slip-case, only with a hinged lid, to be placed back again on the library shelves. This will at least keep the several parts in a given area. At best this arrangement is but a stalling technique and make-shift affair.

The only really satisfactory solution is to have the books restored, preserving all that is valuable in them and at the same time permitting their use by those who need them. This paper is concerned with this process of restoration.

Let us take as an example one specimen that has arrived at my workbench with specific instructions that it be restored: the *Opera Marcelli Malpighii*. This precious document, printed in France in the early 17th century on mould-made paper has been rebound at least once, and judging for the style and state of disintegration of the calf-leather binding, rebound in the early 19th century. One headband is partially missing and the slips to one of the boards are broken, but the sewing, on first inspection, appears to be the original and in good repair. The leather on the joints is broken and leather is missing from corners and edges of the boards. The outside folios of several sections are split, several page corners are missing, and others are dog-eared.

First, it is necessary to make a decision concerning the condition and general worth of the present binding. Such a decision is often difficult to make. If the binding is in a poor state of repair it may be best to give the book a new binding and to mount the old one inside the new—in this way keeping a record of its history. In the case of *Opera*, although the corners are

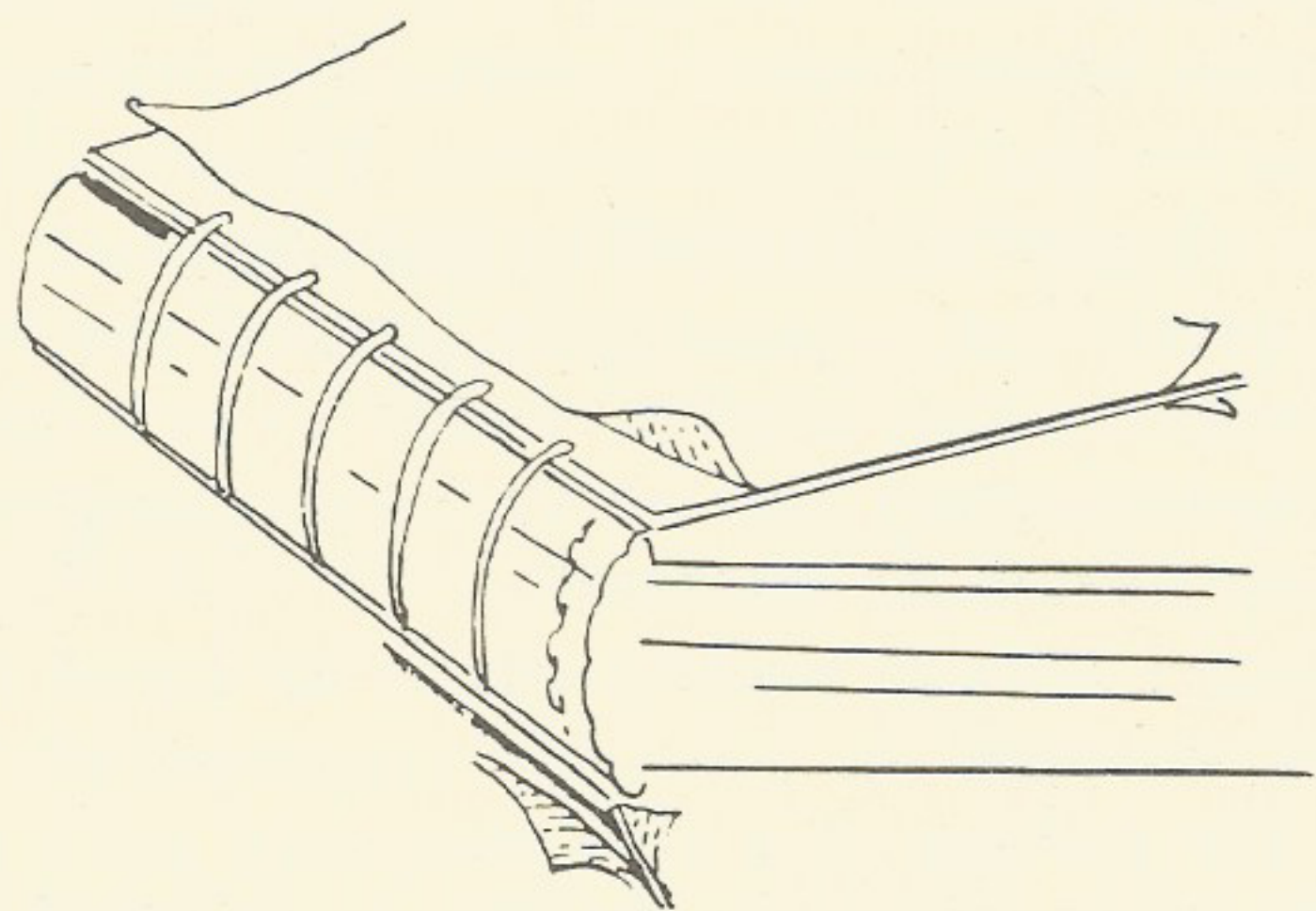


FIGURE 1. *End papers and leather lifted preparatory to receiving new spine leather.*

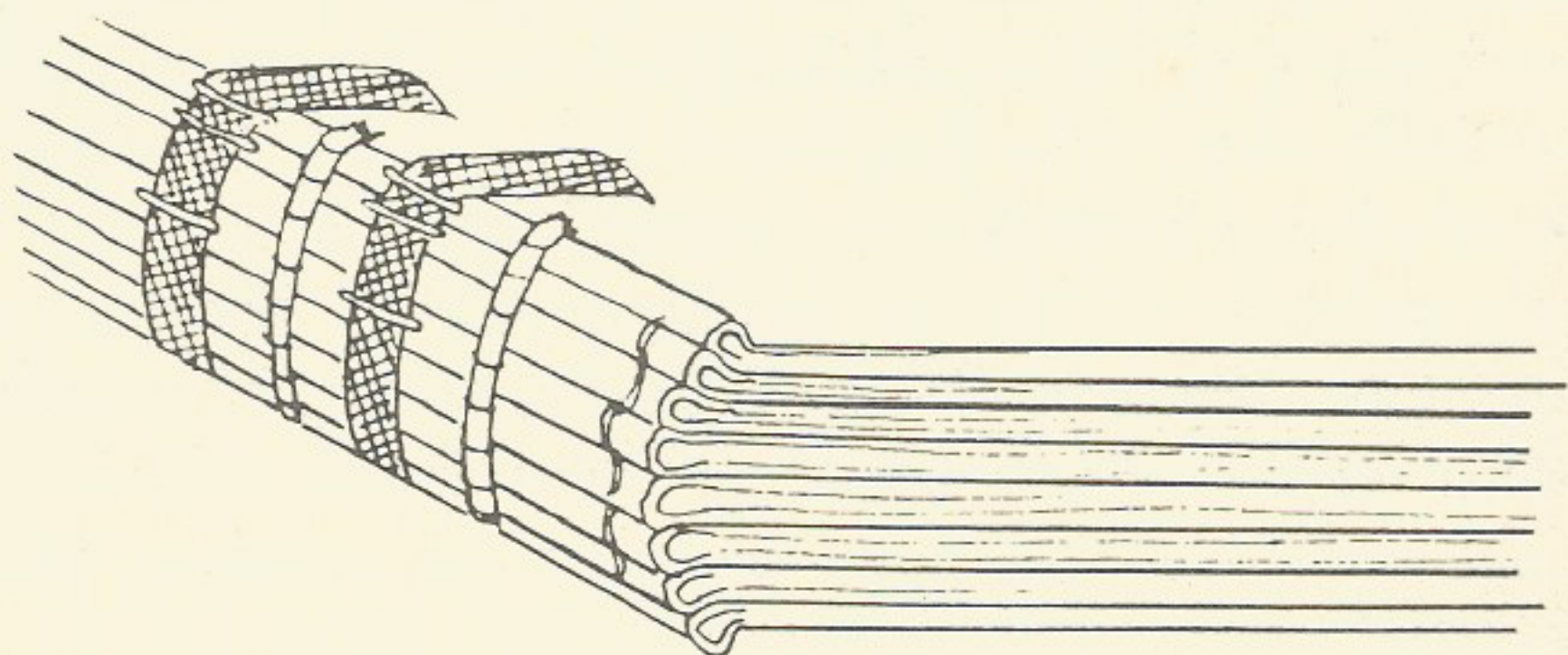


FIGURE 2. *New linen tapes sewn in between the old cords.*

worn and the leather broken along the hinges (and even though it is not the original binding) the general state of preservation and the excellence of the craftsmanship warrant its repair.

It is necessary to remove the old, already loosened, leather from the spine. Possibly the best method of doing this is to apply pieces of blotting paper to the tight back and allow an hour or so of soaking. This will usually free the spine leather so that it can be lifted off in one piece. The spine must then be thoroughly cleaned by soaking with paste and then scraping — always taking care that no moisture penetrates the backs of the sections. This would not only weaken the sections but would also discolour them. The leather at the rear of each of the boards and the leather at the worn corners must be lifted; the end papers will also need lifting at the head and tail on the inside of each board preparatory to receiving the new spine leather. Figure 1 illustrates this procedure.

The heart of restoration is to see that the slips are secure to the boards. The book must be re sewn on new tapes or cords or, if the sewing is intact, new tapes must be attached so as to provide slips for attaching the boards. A book is simply a group of sections held to one another by sewing around the cords, the ends of the cords (the 'slips') in turn being bound into the boards which form a protective covering. It is quite possible to mend a book beautifully without securing the slips to the boards. Only the restorer knows what has been done and here his integrity is vital. On *Opera* the sewing is apparently the original and quite intact. After cleaning the spine I apply a light coating of adhesive and then place new lengths of linen tape over the spine between the old cords. I make these tapes secure to the spine by sewing around them through several sections at each end of the book as shown in Figure 2. Later, after the new spine leather has been attached, these tape ends are attached to the boards by sticking them to the inside of the boards and covering them with the end sheets. This method secures the boards to the signatures and along with the new leather over the hinge makes a strong and lasting union of signatures and boards.

A piece of new leather needs cutting for the spine. I purchase my leather from Russel of Hitchen, Herts. He supplies a lovely oasis morocco leather which skives most beautifully. He also

supplies a "Hermitage Calf" which is perhaps the ideal leather for restoration work, as it can be stained to match the existing binding leather. This new leather I cut to size, providing for the overlap onto the boards and the turn-in at the head and tail. I pare the leather on a piece of glass at the two ends and along the edges where it will slip under the old board-leather. Triangles for the worn corners are prepared in a similar fashion. I then soak the leather in paste and stick it directly to the spine after having given the spine and the edges of the boards a thin coating of adhesive. Then, using band nippers, I work the leather around the cords and stick the leather to the boards, bringing down the old leather on top of the new and working the leather around the top and bottom of the boards. Because of the adhesive, the leather sets very quickly, and I proceed immediately to tie up the head and tail of the book with a piece of string and then to set the headcap. The old spine leather is soaked in paste, adhesive applied, and then stuck to the new spine leather, and again worked well on to the cords and into the spinal squares with band nippers. This must then set for 24 hours. After this time the boards are opened, the corners are lifted and repaired, and the end sheets are pasted down into place. Then follows a careful examination of torn and dog-eared pages, split folio backs, etc. With Japanese tissue paper or silk gauze and fine hand-made repair papers these tears and blemishes are soon put in order.

Opera Marcelli Malpighii stands restored. It is a valuable book and every contemporary part of this valuable document and its binding have been preserved. The repairs are neat, cleanly done, with no attempt to conceal the fact that repairs have been executed. This is of course important to the archivist who is interested in what part of the book is original and what part is repair. The book is integrally bound with new spine and corner leather, the sewing is intact, the slips are attached securely to the boards, there is strong leather at the hinges, pages and signature folds are decently repaired. With reasonable care and handling, housed in a room where moisture and temperature are controlled, the binding should serve its purpose for many years to come.

*Fr. Brandt is a member of
the Hermits of St. John the Divine, Courtenay, B.C.*