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SCRIBAL PRACTICES IN NATURAL HISTORY: The Archive of Philibert de Commerson (1727-1773)¹

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The writings of Jorge Flores are populated by a varied cast of vivid characters that range from a creatively deceitful Luso-Malay cosmographer to a legendary prophesying ape.¹ One of my favorites, no doubt due to my own research interests, is Mughal Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627): an active and refined collector, the son of the great Akbar was a passionate student of plants, animals, and stones, as well as a careful recorder of his own observations of the natural world—and naturalists-cum-scribes are precisely the protagonists of my paper. Flores focused on a manuscript treatise describing the emperor's household, written in all probability by Jérónimo Xavier, a Navarrese Jesuit missionary to Jahangir's court. Flores's analysis of Xavier's treatise impinges on a central theme of the research presented in this paper: the text never made it to press, but it circulated quite widely in manuscript form. The printing revolution, after all, was not half as revolutionary as we once thought. As book historians have been telling us for decades, and as Flores reminds us in his analysis of the Jesuit treatise, print did not extinguish manuscript communication.²

¹ Warm thanks to Jorge Flores, first of all, for years of unwavering support and priceless insights, and to Caroline Mezger (yet again) and James White for their superb proofreading.

¹ Jorge Flores, "Distant Wonders: The Strange and the Marvelous between Mughal Indian and Habsburg Iberia in the Early Seventeenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 449, no. 3 (2009): 553-81 and "Between Madrid and Ophir: Erédia, a Deceitful Discoverer?" in *Dissimulation and Deceit in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Feldon and Tamar Herzog (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 184-210.

² Jorge Flores, *The Mughal Padshah: A Jesuit Treatise on Emperor Jahangir's Court and Household* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 3-82. On Jahangir as a collector and naturalist, see Corinne Lefèvre,

What is the point in thinking about manuscripts? At a time when digital libraries such as Google Books and the Internet Archive are putting a rapidly increasing number of printed texts literally at our fingertips, we historians may want to ask ourselves whether and how our relationship with non-printed sources has substantially changed (in nature or degree) during the last two decades at least. It may also be interesting to think about the kind of manuscripts that we tend to use: narrative documents—from epistolary correspondence to texts that, for one reason or another, never made it to print—have long been historians’ privileged unpublished sources, at least for early modernists. They constitute, however, the tip of the vertiginous iceberg that must have been manuscript production in the age of print. For a number of years, historians of topics as deceptively arid as erudition and administration have been producing vivid and innovative accounts of another kind of manuscript sources. Lists, catalogs, inventories, forms, notes, and scribbles were the most common scribal products of the early modern period, although avowedly less resilient as historical sources. They may not speak by themselves as letters and treatises do, but on their surfaces are recorded the practices by which they were produced, circulated, and preserved.³

For historians of science in particular, the stakes in thinking about manuscripts are high as well. At some point or another in the early nineteenth century, the narratives of the Scientific Revolution and the printing revolution came together to weave the grand tapestry of European modernity. Purportedly born and raised in the same region (Western Europe) and around the same time (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), “modern Science” and print worked in tandem to help “the West” delimit itself from “the Rest.” This association proved resilient until at least three decades ago,⁴ when historians began to fiercely dismantle both mythical revolutions. And yet little has been done so far to explore one of the shadows cast by those narratives: the unquestionable endurance of a lively manuscript culture among practitioners of natural knowledge long after the impact of print.⁵ Astronomers, natural philosophers,

“Recovering a Missing Voice from Mughal India: The Imperial Discourse of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) in His Memoirs,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 4 (2007): 452-89.

³ For the history of erudition, see the seminal article by Ann Blair, “The Rise of Note-Taking in Early Modern Europe,” *Intellectual History Review* 20, no. 3 (2010): 303-316.

⁴ Nobody has probably articulated these two legendary events more sophisticatedly than Elisabeth Eisenstein in her ground-breaking *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵ The exception has been the history of erudition, especially with the work of Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). For the history of natural history in particular, see Staffan Müller-Wille and Isabelle

physicians, and naturalists never stopped being scribal scholars of one sort or another: obsessive in taking notes of their observations and readings; profuse in the annotations and *marginalia* with which they stuffed their printed books; patient in gathering archives that were more often than not destined, not for the press, but to sustain their scholarly investigations; greedy in getting their hands on their colleagues' papers.

The pages that follow aim at presenting some of the arguments and ideas that organize my current research project on scribal practices in the sciences between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. I will focus on one particular field of knowledge, natural history, which at the time mostly consisted of the description and inventory of the natural world—namely, plants, animals, and “fossils” or all things “unearthed.” The main challenge naturalists had to face back then was one that we, digital twenty-first-century people, are constantly complaining about: “information overload.” Like researchers in the Internet era, early modern naturalists were overwhelmed scholars. With the consolidation of European global networks and the rapidly expanding technology of print, students of the natural world were, from the sixteenth century onwards, swamped by a seemingly unstoppable flow of information: not only was there a rapidly increasing number of previously unknown plants and beasts to deal with, but also a growing number of books (like nowadays, not always necessarily good or useful) to peruse. Scribal practices, from notetaking to archiving, were the indispensable tools with which naturalists managed that flood of information.

One of the clearest examples of the centrality of manuscript practices of information management in the sciences is provided by the French physician and naturalist Philibert de Commerson (1727-1773). Commerson is nowadays mostly known for his participation in the famous expedition around the world lead by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in the second half of the 1760s. For two years the frigate *La Boudeuse* and the supply vessel *L'Étoile* navigated the South Seas and visited places such as Rio de Janeiro, Tahiti, Batavia (Jakarta), Sumatra, and Île-de-France (Mauritius). Besides a dozen naval officers and a couple of hundred sailors, Bougainville's expedition included an astronomer, two surgeons, an engineer, and

Charmantier, “Natural History and Information Overload: The Case of Linnaeus,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science, Part C* 43 (2012): 4-15; Elizabeth Yale, *Sociable Knowledge: Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, *Le Monde dans un carnet. Alexander von Humboldt en Italie (1805)* (Paris: Félin, 2017).

Commerson as botanist. The expedition caused a sensation among French polite society. Bougainville was received by Louis XV—along with the Tahitian he had brought along, Ahutoru—and hurried to publish his picturesque travel journal, which became an immediate bestseller and inspired Denis Diderot’s philosophical dialogues on some of the hottest topics of the Enlightenment, from colonization and slavery to sexuality and Catholicism.⁶

Historiography does not remember much of Commerson other than his Austral adventure. Upon his death in Île-de-France, he left behind a vast archive of manuscript notes and a considerable collection of specimens, but he published nothing apart from an article in the *Mercure de France* on the exotic and often scandalous mores of the islanders of Tahiti. He was elected as an associated member of the Académie des sciences, but only a week after his death (of which no news had yet reached the metropole). Commerson, nonetheless, stirred the interest of several nineteenth-century writers, who devoted a couple of hagiographies to him.⁷ No doubt, they were fascinated by a life and death that were surrounded by quirky stories. Commerson was known as something of a maverick during his studies of medicine in Montpellier—he was banned from entering the university’s garden for helping himself to its specimens, which did not prevent him from jumping over the garden walls at night and maintaining business as usual. His journey around the world also became the object of Parisian gossip due to the shocking discovery during the trip that the servant who accompanied him was not a man, but his cross-dressed female lover. And his testament was published soon after his death due to several curious clauses, including one by which he donated his body to the faculty of medicine closest to his place of demise for it be

⁶ [Louis-Antoine de Bougainville], *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate La Boudeuse, et la flûte L’Étoile; en 1766-1767, 1768 & 1769* (Paris: chez Saillant & Nyon, 1771). Antoine Lilti, “1769: The World’s a Conversation,” in eds. Patrick Boucheron et al., *France in the World: A New Global History* (New York: Other Press, 2019 [2017]), 415-20, deconstructs much of the enduring myth around Bougainville’s expedition and demonstrates that, at least for scholars, this was disappointing in comparison to James Cook’s Pacific travels. For a comprehensive account of Bougainville’s expedition and an edition of the journals by different members of the crew, including Commerson, see Etienne Taillemite, *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde, 1766-1769* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1977).

⁷ Pau-Antoine Cap, *Philibert Commerson, naturaliste voyageur* (Paris: Victor Masson et fils, 1861), and F.-B. de Montessus, *Martyrologe et biographie de Commerson, médecin-botaniste et naturaliste du roi, médecin de Toulon-sur-Arroux (Saone-et-Loire) au XVIIIe siècle* (Charlon-sur Saone: Typographie et lithographie de L. Marceau, 1889). There are more recent works on Commerson: see, for instance, Henry Chaumartin, *Philibert de Commerson: médecin-naturaliste du Roy et compagnon de Bougainville* (Vienne: imprimerie Ternet-Martin, 1967), Harry Liebersohn, *The Travelers’ World: Europe and the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15-32.

dissected and his skeleton to be exposed for the instruction and pleasure of the public.⁸

Although we do not know much more about Commerson's life, some elements of his biography provide promising clues for a study of scribal practices, although they require much further investigation. Two in particular are worth mentioning here. First, he seems to have been initiated during his youth to the craft of those who were paper masters par excellence: notaries. His father Georges-Marie was a *procureur* in his town of Châtillon, an advisor to the prince of Dombes—a territory formally independent of France until 1762—and above all a royal notary. It seems that the father expected Philibert to follow his professional and lucrative steps and that he trained his reluctant son for some time in the art of making and keeping official records. Philibert's stubborn inner calling would prevail and bring him to Montpellier to study not law, but medicine.⁹ This might seem like one more instance of filial rebellion, but it is interesting because he is not the only well-known early modern naturalist born into a family of notaries and trained during his youth in the art of legal record-keeping.¹⁰ In recent years, historians have highlighted some of the parallels and lines of transmission between scholarly, mercantile, and administrative practices of information management.¹¹ The question remains, then, whether and how these cases of contact between the world of naturalists and that of notaries constitute a mere coincidence, an eminently social phenomenon, or whether we can actually hope to trace cross-fertilizations of practices between both fields.

⁸ Cap, *Commerson*, 31, and Philibert de Commerson, *Testament singulier de M. Commerson, docteur en médecine, Médecin Botaniste & Naturaliste du Roi* (Paris: n.d., 1774).

⁹ Cap, *Commerson*, 8-9.

¹⁰ Early sixteenth-century Italian botanist Luca Ghini, who is often considered the inventor of herbaria—the most consequential paper technology in early modern natural history—was the son of a notary, as were the Jussieu brothers and Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton in eighteenth-century France. For the case of the Jussieu, see Louise Audelin, *Les Jussieu. Une dynastie de botanistes au XVIIIe siècle (1680-1789)*, archivist-paleographer dissertation (Paris: École nationale des chartes, 1987), 5-15.

¹¹ Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass, "Mediating Information, 1450-1800," in *This is Enlightenment*, ed. Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 139-63, and Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). In a remarkable study of Jean-Baptiste Colbert's private library, Jacob Soll has argued for another contemporary case of the circulation of practices between two distinct fields of expertise, antiquarian erudition, and political administration: *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Second, the case of Commerson points to another fundamental aspect of scholarly scribal labor: the role of “invisible” helpers.¹² To what extent were day-to-day, purportedly menial practices of record making and keeping in natural history performed by collaborators whose labor went unrecognized because they were considered social and intellectual inferiors to scholars? Servants, spouses, children, slaves, and other assistants were often involved in naturalists’ scribal work, but their contribution was obliterated from the historical record more often than not, partly because the reality of collaborative scholarly labor conflicted with the rising authorial figure (masculine, individual, gentlemanly) of the naturalist.

Commerson offers what may be the most shocking example of all in this respect. During his circumnavigation he was himself assisted by a servant who went by the name of Jean Baret. The story of Baret became famous at the time because he happened to be his cross-dressed female lover, Jeanne. Bougainville himself made the story famous in his *Voyage autour du monde* (1771), where he related how he and the crew found out the real identity of the fake servant only in Tahiti, where “Baret had hardly set his feet on shore with the herbal [*avec les cahiers sous son bras*] under his arm, when the men of Taiti surrounded him, cried out, It is a woman, and wanted to give her the honours customary in the isle.”¹³ Even the phlegmatic Bougainville was shocked: “How was it possible to discover the woman in the indefatigable Baré, who was already an expert botanist, had followed his master in all his botanical walks, amidst the snows and frozen mountains of the straits of Magalhaens, and had even on such troublesome excursions carried provisions, arms, and herbals [*cahier de plantes*], with so much courage and strength that the naturalist had called him his beast of burden?”¹⁴ Baret’s case, no doubt, is exceptional: but it is precisely because it is exceptional that we still have some trace of the role she played, with the notebooks

¹² On the assistants in English seventeenth-century experiments, see Steven Shapin, “The Invisible Technician,” *American Scientist* 77, no. 6 (1989): 554-63, and *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch. 8. On amanuenses and scribes as helpers in textual management, see Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 102-112, and “Hidden Hands: Amanuenses and Authorship in Early Modern Europe,” A. S. W. Rosenbach Lecture, University of Pennsylvania, March 17, 18, and 20, 2014, online on <https://repository.upenn.edu/rosenbach/8/> [consulted on 5 March, 2018].

¹³ Louis de Bougainville, *A Voyage Round the World. Performed by Order of His Most Christian Majesty, in the Years 1766, 1767, 1768, and 1769*, trans. John Reinhold Forster (London: printed for J. Nourse and T. Davies, 1772), 300-301. On Jeanne Baret, see Londa Schiebinger, “Jeanne Baret: The First Woman to Circumnavigate the Globe,” *Endeavour* 27 (2003), 22-5.

¹⁴ Bougainville, *Voyage Round the World*, 300.

under her arm, in the composition of the archive exclusively associated to the name of Commerson—were it not for her cross-dressing, Bougainville would not have written about a servant. Only by establishing a substantial body of often elusive empirical evidence can we hope to shed some light on these unnoticed contributors to the history of natural knowledge.

Commerson's papers, then, pose some questions that have to remain unanswered for the time being, but they also shed crucial light on at least three other aspects of scribal practices in natural history with which I would like to deal in the following pages. The first one regards reading. Even if naturalists during Commerson's time saw themselves as a generation of "Moderns" for whom the only book worth perusing was that of nature, reading remained central to their work. Much of naturalists' scribal labor went into managing bookish data, not first-hand observations. Take, for instance, a little leather folder carefully kept by Commerson: it contains about a dozen quarto notebooks bearing the title of "Notes & Excerpts of Some Rare Books of Natural History" (*Notice & extraits de quelques livres rares d'histoire naturelle*).¹⁵ Made over a period of several years preceding his circumnavigation, Commerson compiled in these notebooks reading excerpts from books that any eighteenth-century naturalist worthy of the name should have read: Carolus Clusius, Gaspard Bauhin, Paolo Boccone, Matthias de l'Obel. Under the heading "*pro primi desiderantur*," the compiler listed books he wished to read but on which he had not yet had the chance to lay his hands. Through the several hundred pages of the notebooks, Commerson took crisp notes on his readings, indicating basic bibliographic information for each book (author, title, date, format, and sometimes an assessment of the price) and then listing the excerpts (*citationes*), which extracted the information deemed worth retaining—mostly plant names and references on where to find their descriptions.

Erudite reading practices were central to the work of empirical scholars such as naturalists. Commerson's reading notebooks are an excellent example of how, during the early modern period, scholars read "pen in hand," copying and excerpting passages as they went through a text. The compilation of abundant reading notes was a common gesture among naturalists until at least well into the nineteenth century (the great Georges Cuvier had his assistants read and compile reading excerpts for him).¹⁶

¹⁵ Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle (henceforth BCMNHN) MS 885.

¹⁶ José Beltrán, "Ciencia amanuense: cultura manuscrita e historia natural en la Francia moderna (c. 1660-1830)," *Asclepio. Revista de historia de la medicina y de la ciencia* 71, no. 1 (2019), 257.

Excerpting plant names was specific to naturalists, but the practice stemmed from routine, extended during the Renaissance, of composing commonplaces (*loci communes*): that is, quotations from well-read authors, usually Greco-Roman classics.¹⁷

Another point of contact between erudite textual practices and the empirical work of naturalists is natural classification. The papers of Commerson provide a beautiful example of this link between material gestures of archival manipulation and the problem of taxonomy: a box containing 2,386 playing cards turned into paper slips. Commerson used the back of the cards as writing material for creating an etymological and historical dictionary of names that could be used for baptizing newly discovered species and genera of plants, each playing card corresponding to an entry in the dictionary. In principle an infinitely expandable filing system, the playing-card databased allowed the user to easily add new names, remove others, and modify their order—from the alphabetical one in which Commerson left his playing cards to one based, for instance, on one of the competing taxonomic systems of the time.¹⁸ The system may have seemed useful to some naturalists, such as the influential Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, who after perusing Commerson's databased composed one of his own (although he never completed it, his playing-card archive attained 2,227 entries).¹⁹

There is nothing exceptional in the use of playing cards as writing supports or for contriving a convenient filing system. Before industrial production as the nineteenth century would know it, paper was expensive and writing materials were constantly reemployed—Rousseau used the back of playing cards for the draft notes of one of *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and a contemporary Genevan physician embarked on a monumental, introspective, and rather narcissistic “history of my mind” for which he used no less than 35,000 playing cards. Playing cards were also made of stiff paper

¹⁷ Élisabeth Décultot, ed., *Lire, copier, écrire. Les bibliothèques manuscrites au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2003); Alberto Cevollini, *De arte excerptendi. Imparare et dimenticare nella modernità* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2006), and Iveta Nakládalová, *La lectura docta en la Primera Edad Moderna (1450-1650)* (Madrid: Abada, 2013).

¹⁸ Taxonomy was one of Commerson's main preoccupations as a botanist: although in his youth he claimed to be a partisan of Carl Linnaeus's taxonomic system—the one we use nowadays—rather than that of Joseph Pitton de Tournefort—which was still preferred by a considerable number of French naturalists at the time—, Commerson seems to have been working on some taxonomic proposals of his own, as in his “Index nomenclator amplissimus,” BCMNHN MS 803.

¹⁹ Philibert de Commerson, “Dictionnaire étymologique, mythologique et historique, pour servir à la creation de terms et de noms d'histoire naturelle,” BCMNHN MS 42, and Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, “Dictionnaire alphabétique des plantes et de leur usage en médecine,” BCMNHN MS 41.

in a standardized size, so they provided good materials for composing catalogs—Louis XIV’s general intendant of the galleys proposed to replace the register of oarsmen with a catalog made out of playing cards, and a librarian at the Mazarine in Paris completed a catalog of the holdings using playing cards in what probably constitutes the first library card catalog.²⁰

In the arduous quest for the order of nature, however, more common than Commerson’s playing card box was another filing system whose functioning was often similar to that of a malleable paper-slip catalog. Herbaria—that is, collections of plants that were dried and affixed onto paper sheets, usually one specimen per sheet—began developing in Europe in early sixteenth-century Italy, but they became a crucial paper technology for coping with order and the management of botanical information from the late seventeenth century onwards. Some herbaria, especially those of botanists primarily concerned with classification—such as the French Joseph Pitton de Tournefort and the Swedish Carl Linnaeus, whose taxonomic system we still use in our day—consisted of loose sheets, sometimes kept in purpose-built closets. Most taxonomies at the time were morphological in one way or another, that is, they were based on the form of some parts of the organism. Herbaria of loose sheets, like Commerson’s playing-card database, allowed the scholar to deal with the order of botanical species by physically manipulating files.²¹

The importance of herbaria for an inquiry into the scribal practices of naturalists is double. First, as we have seen, the management of empirical data—taking observation notes or keeping a herbarium—seems to be resonant with textual practices, such as compiling reading notes and organizing an archive. Second, like printed books appropriated by means of handmade annotations, herbaria were often hybrid artefacts: halfway between the collection of plant specimens and unique manuscripts. One of Commerson’s extant herbaria is an example of this sort of hybridity: bound as a codex rather than kept in loose sheets, it shows how notetaking allowed naturalists to draw a bridge between the management of bookish information and that of first-hand data. Entitled “Botanical Notebooks,” this herbarium was

²⁰ Claire Bustarret, “La carte à jouer, support d’écriture au XVIIIe siècle,” *Socio-anthropologie* 30 (2014): 83-98.

²¹ Denis Lamy and Aline Pelletier, “La conservation et la valorisation de l’herbier de Tournefort au Muséum national d’histoire naturelle,” *La lettre de l’OCIM* 130 (2010), 19-26, and Staffan Müller-Wille, “Linnaeus’ Herbarium Cabinet: A Piece of Furniture and Its Function,” *Endeavour* 30, no. 2 (2006): 60-64.

composed in the early years of the 1740s, when Commerson was around 16 years old.²² It consists of 5 notebooks amounting to almost 150 pages in which the young naturalist-to-be pinned down plants from his region of origin and carefully annotated information about each specimen, including “places” (“this plant grows in humid places”), synonyms or the different names given by different authors to the same specimen, and “virtues” (“this plant is good for fortifying the brain”). Commerson’s “Botanical Notebooks” are a half-herbarium, half-manuscript reading notebook: the annotations orbiting around the dry plants were actually reading excerpts from a classical textbook in medical botany: the fabulously successful *Dictionnaire ou traité universel des drogues simples* by Nicolas Lémery, a French apothecary and one of the first pensioners in chemistry of the Académie royale des sciences in Paris. Published for the first time in 1698, Lémery’s *Traité* was by Commerson’s time in its fifth French edition and had already been translated into Dutch, English, Italian, and German. All in all, the “Botanical Notebooks” are an exceptional artefact: probably entertaining for a student of botany but not very useful for a practicing scholar. Yet it illustrates beautifully what natural history was about at the time: to be a good naturalist, one had to become a superb information master.

One last question emerges from this brief survey of scribal practices in natural history: if naturalists invested much effort and many resources into composing manuscript records, what was the worth of these papers to others? Naturalists could be shamelessly greedy about the archives and collections of their fellow scholars, and some strove to acquire them—something that became slightly easier after their deaths. A good case in point of the value of naturalists’ collections of notes is, once again, the hectic life of Commerson’s papers. On the homeward trip of Bougainville’s expedition, the naturalist was dropped off in Mauritius along with Jeanne Baret, never to set foot again in France. Commerson’s death in 1773 soon triggered a controversy over the fate of his records and specimens. He had left a testament, one, as I mentioned, printed soon after the author passed away. In it, the naturalist divided his collections among three beneficiaries. To his executor and friend, a certain doctor Vachier, he left his library. To the king he gave all his botanical collections, which amounted to 200 folio volumes of dried plants gathered mostly by himself but also including parts of other naturalists’ herbaria, such as Tournefort’s, on which he had

²² Philibert de Commerson, “Cahiers de botanique, ou recueil de plantes sèches,” BCMNHN MS 200.

gotten his hands some years beforehand. To his only son Archambault, Commerson bequeathed whatever compensation the king might think appropriate in exchange for the herbaria, as well as his ichthyological collection and, more important, his manuscripts. Commerson did not forget Jeanne Baret, whom he mentioned as his “housekeeper,” to whom he left all his furniture. Interestingly enough, he also gave her the crucial task of sorting out his archives and collections before they went to the designated inheritors. The clause gives another clue to the degree of involvement Baret may have had in the work associated to Commerson’s name: the testament suggests that she was a collaborator close enough to be the only one able to organize it after his death.²³

Commerson’s testament was crystal clear. The problem, however, was that the document had been written right before the naturalist embarked on Bougainville’s circumnavigation; at the time of his death, eleven years later, the nature of his collections had changed radically, vastly enriched with specimens and information from the little-known faunas and floras around the Indian and Pacific Oceans—both areas that were the object of trans-imperial ambitions in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. By that time, the French crown was interested enough in the natural history of those regions to move surprisingly quickly regarding Commerson’s collection. A few months after the naturalist’s death, the governor of Isle de France, Jacques Maillard, seized the collections from Commerson’s own house and sent them to the residence of the minister of the Navy in Lorient, one of the main ports in metropolitan France. Commerson’s executor was furious: he wrote to the minister to claim the papers for Archambault Commerson, the naturalist’s son, as established in the naturalist’s testament, or at least to have them sold for the child’s benefit. He was careful to highlight that the herbaria and manuscripts were not made on the king’s orders or at his expense, and that therefore they were the scholar’s private property.²⁴ Vachier was neither the only nor the first to complain. Another individual had already entered the fight: Louis-Guillaume Le Monier, none less than the professor of botany at the Jardin du roi and a king’s physician, wrote to the minister as well and assured him that Commerson had entrusted him—in a letter suspiciously lost—with the revision

²³ Commerson, *Testament singulier*, 12-16.

²⁴ Clériade Vachier to an unknown recipient, Paris, July 15, 1774, quoted in Yves Laissus, “Catalogue des manuscrits de Philibert de Commerson (1727-1773) conservés à la Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d’histoire naturelle (Paris),” *Revue d’histoire des sciences* 31, no. 2 (1978), 137-8.

of all his manuscripts in view of publication. He claimed, therefore, that the manuscripts and herbals belonged to him, at least for a certain period of time.

Both Vachier and Le Monnier came late, however, for another scholar had already made his move: the unique Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, a virtuoso of courtly social skills, had successfully won Commerson's papers and collections for the Jardin du roi, of which he was the intendant. We do not know how Commerson's son and executor reacted to this outcome but, ironically enough, the Jardin du roi professor Le Monnier was infuriated. He did not hesitate to try a last shot at getting the coveted papers into his private hands rather than have them deposited at his own institution: he wrote to the Dauphine, the wife of the king's son, and asked for her mediation in gaining for him the papers and herbarium, graciously leaving "the rest," which was not much, to Buffon and the Jardin.²⁵ Le Monnier's efforts were to no avail: Buffon managed to have his way and Commerson's papers and collections came to enrich those of the Jardin's.

Even more ironically, the fact that the collections landed in the Jardin allowed another cheeky scholar to get his hands on them: Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu, member of the Académie des sciences, professor at the Jardin du roi, and the scion of one of the most influential scientific dynasties in the history of France. Slowly but surely, Jussieu borrowed one by one most of Commerson's manuscripts and nothing less than his entire herbarium, spanning 24 boxes and 45 folders, never to return a single item. Antoine-Laurent argued that his loans were in view of an edition of Commerson's work, but Archambault spent twenty years checking with Jussieu about the progress of his edition only to be politely rebuffed by the professor. When the Jussieu dynasty's library was sold in 1857, upon the death of Antoine-Laurent's son, the catalog listed seven of Commerson's precious manuscripts. Today, Commerson's collection of dried plants from the southern hemisphere can actually be consulted as part of the Jussieu family's herbarium. Scientific archives, especially when harboring precious records of rare natural phenomena, were coveted objects of possession: no inquiry into the scribal practices of scholars is complete without tracing the many lives that these archives have passed through until reaching us or getting lost.²⁶

²⁵ Draft letter from Louis-Guillaume Le Monier to "Madame," n.p., n.d., quoted in Laissus, "Catalogue des manuscrits de Commerson," 139.

²⁶ Lorraine Daston, ed., *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents, Futures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017) and, more generally, Etienne Anheim and Olivier Poncet, "Fabrique des archives, fabrique de l'histoire," special issue of *Revue de synthèse* 125, no. 5 (2004).

Manuscripts matter. A vast and varied world of scribal practices lurked below the surface of print culture. Like Jerónimo Xavier's treatise on Jahangir's household and court, unprinted texts circulated widely—sometimes more widely, and certainly more cheaply, than printed ones.²⁷ Yet there are also other kinds of manuscripts common among scholars, merchants, and administrators; lists, catalogs, archives, notes, and other forms of mostly non-narrative records show us that our information age was long in the making.

²⁷ Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and Their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Fernando Bouza, *Corre manuscrito. Una historia cultural del Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2001).