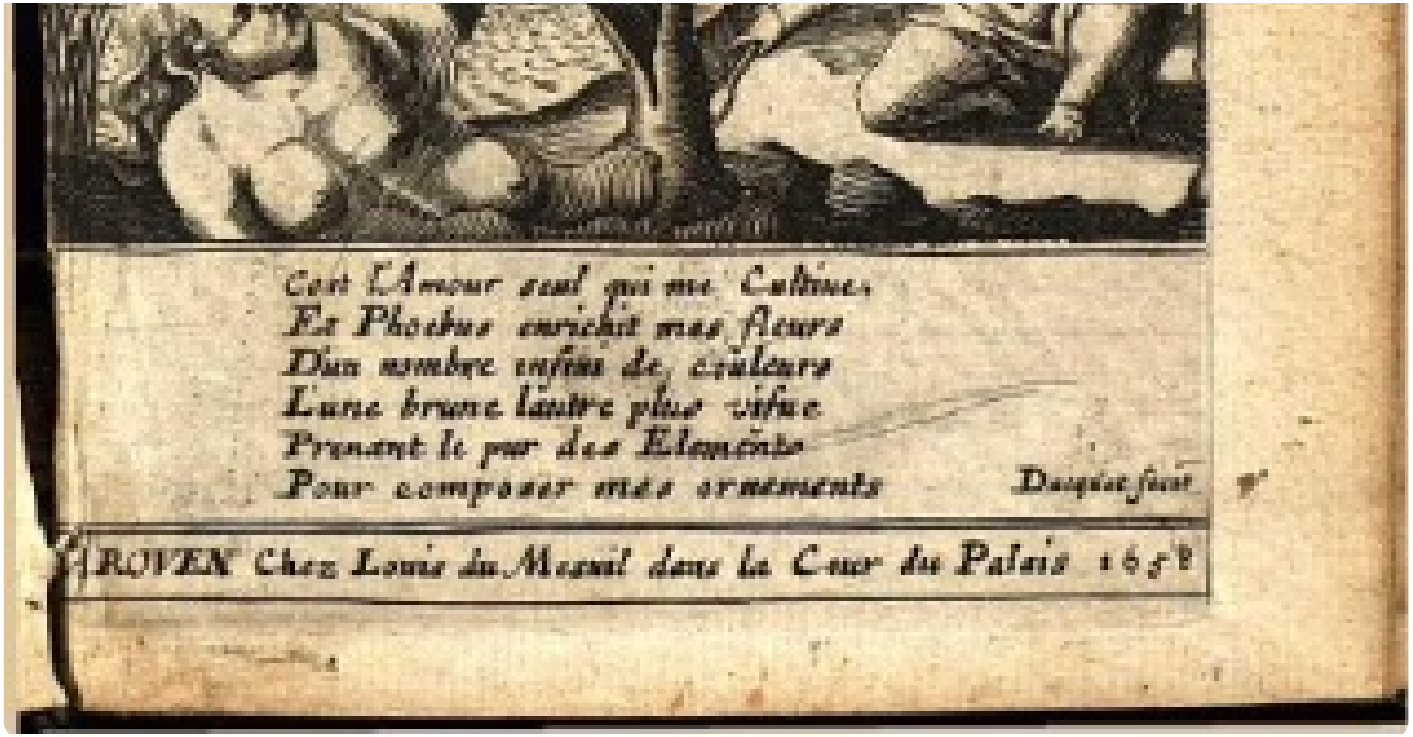
PRESERVING THE WORLD'S RAREST BOOKS

Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, this Book about Tulips is Too Good for You

Few flowers can claim to have more of an influence on human history than the Tulip. They are best remembered as the object of inflated expectation during the Dutch ‘Tulipmania’ in the early 17th century. This famous financial bubble, which was largely driven by wealthy investors, saw the price of tulip bulbs climb to extraordinary heights in the 1630s. Even after prices tanked in 1637, the tulip remained an elite commodity.

As interest in cultivating exotic and distinguished gardens increased throughout the seventeenth century, the tulip took on new meanings as a symbol of personal distinction and connoisseurship.

Le Floriste François



A frontispiece image of a tulip on the 1658 Rouen edition of de la Chesnée Monstereul's Le Floriste Francqois. (Caen, Eleazar Mangeant, 1654). Digital Library of the Royal Botanical Garden: https://bibdigital.rjb.csic.es

Gardening manuals are as old as print itself but by the seventeenth century, an elite interest in gardening had created the need for a new kind of book, one that could guide the choices of the connoisseur, distinguishing the *floristes* from the *jardiners.* First published in Caen in 1654, *Le Floriste François* is one of the earliest treatises on tulips to be published after the bubble burst in 1637. It was written by a gentlemen

gardener, the Sieur de la Chesnée Monstereul who dedicated it to a noblewoman, Mademoiselle de Beuvron. Like many French gardening books, *Le Floriste François* was printed in a small octavo format, designed to be easily carried around by a noble woman to supervise the work of her gardener. The text contains a history of the tulip, how one might cultivate the flower, and a catalogue of tulip names with their distinctive colours. The text also contains several poems written by prominent members of the Norman elite including Madame de Scudéry and the founder of the Caen Académie, Jacques Moisant De Brieux.

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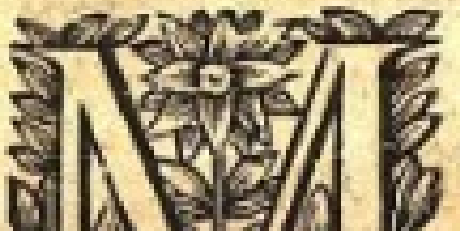
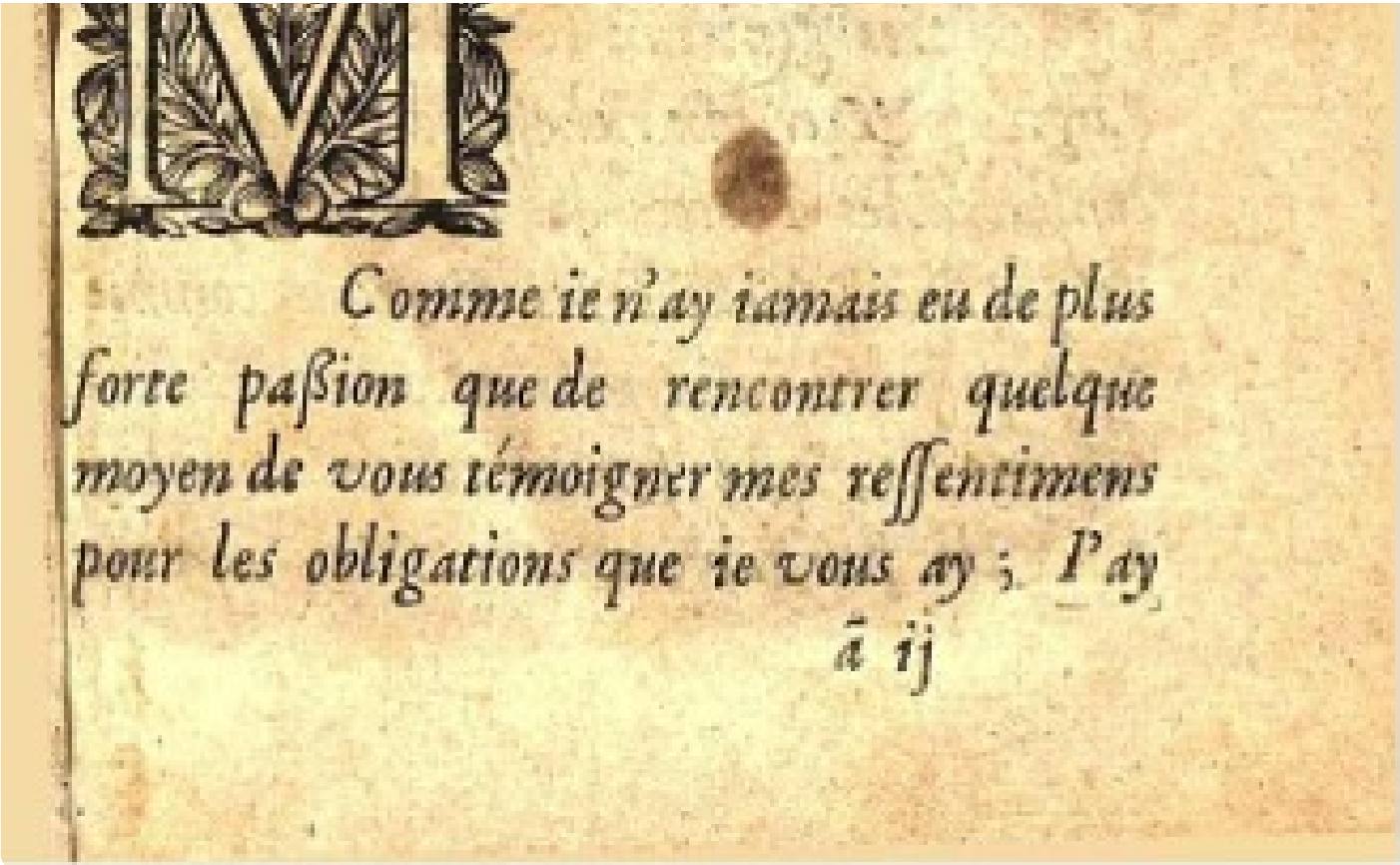
MADEMOISELLE DE BEVVRON.



ADEMOISELLE

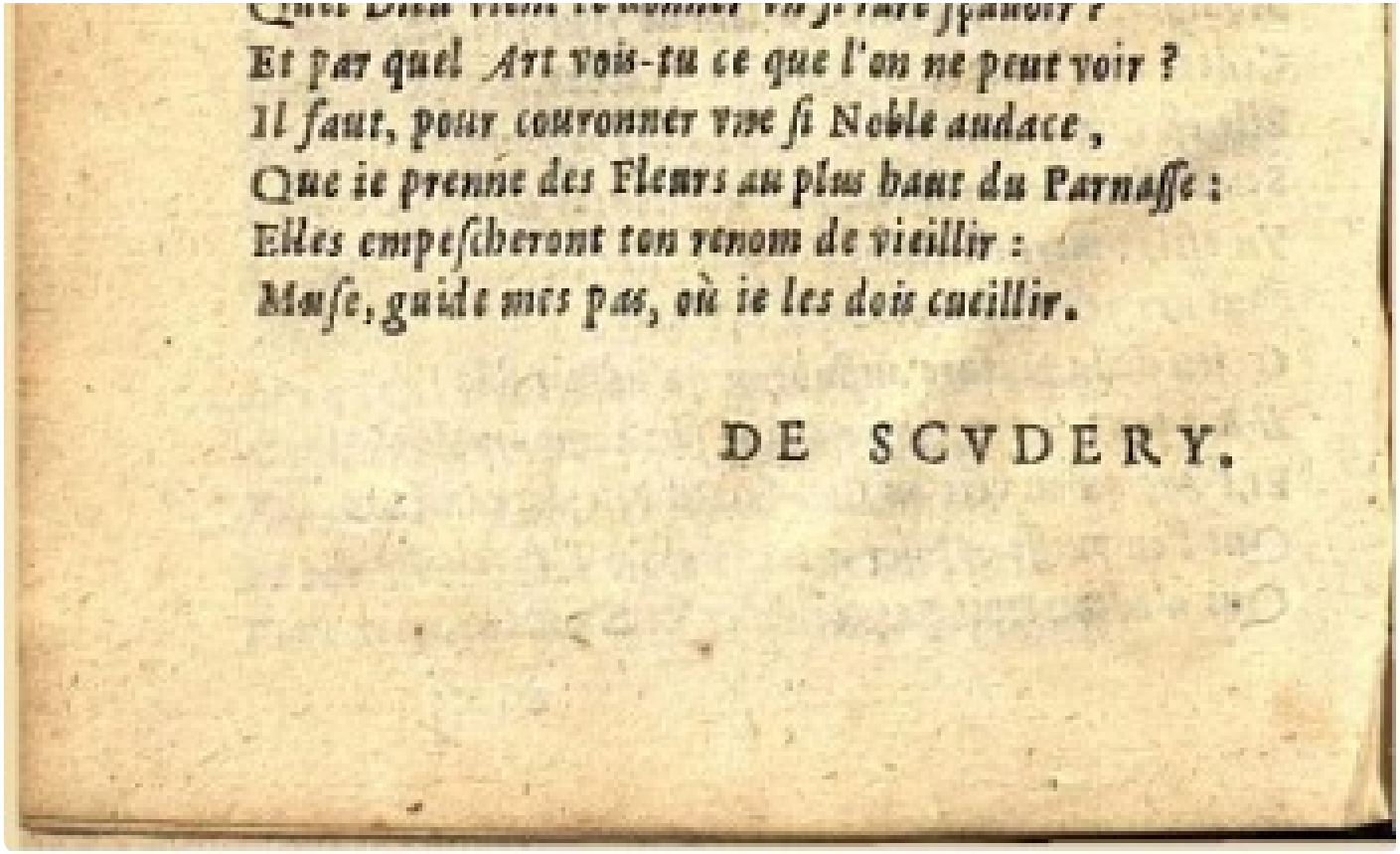

Comme ie n'ay iamais eu de plus
forte paßion que de rencontrer quelque
moyen de vous témoigner mes reſſentimens
pour les obligations que ie vous ay ; I'ay
ã ij

Dedication to Mademoiselle de Beuvron, a noble woman of the House Harcourt. Tulip cultivation was an elite practice and de la Chesnée Monstereul hoped to keep it that way. Google Books

La Chesnée Monstereul and his commentators placed the tulip above all other flowers and its cultivation, they argued, was the focal point of 'gentle society' (*douce societé*). At the time, flower markets could not yet supply the public with rare and exquisite flowers, including tulips. These remained the preserve of elite collectors who

corresponded with each other, shared bulbs, and discussed their cultivation. Marvelling at the speculation in the Netherlands, La Chesnée Monstereul expressed concern at the prospect of the tulip becoming a public commodity: ‘if tulips were rendered common, it would only take away the most praiseworthy commerce between men, and deprive them of the gentlest society that existed among men of honour.’ Those, like the Dutch, who attempted to market tulips like diamonds and pearls had ‘nothing for their aim except an infamous utility’ and should be ‘banished from human commerce.’ The distinguished tulip was an object of cultural sophistication, moral reflection, and elite sociability. It was far too good for the market.

Ce meslange reglé, ces belles differences,
Ces caprices heureux, de qui les nouueautez
Nous donnent tous les ans de nouuelles beautez ?
L'vne montre à nos yeux de la Neige ondoyante ;
L'autre sur de la Neige & rouge & flamboyante ;
L'vne croise son blanc parmy de l'incarnat ;
L'autre d'vn sombre obscur releue son esclat ;
L'vne de trois couleurs également esclatte ;
L'vne paroist de Iaspe, & l'autre est vne Agathe ;
Celle-cy jaune & rouge ébloüit les regards ;
Et celle-cy moins viue est belle en toutes parts :
L'inuisible Pinceau de la docte Nature,
Meslant plus d'vne forme, & plus d'vne peinture,
En compose vn objet, si beau, si precieux,
Que rien d'égal à luy ne tombe sous les yeux.
Mais toy qui le descris, toy que i'admire encore,
Qui t'a fait penetrer dans les secrets de Flore ?
Et qui t'a descouuert, Autheur rare & sçauant,
Tout ce que tu nous dis d'vn Miracle viuant ?
T'es-tu trouué present aux naissances des choses ?
T'inspire-t'on ce Liure, ou si tu le composes ?
Quel Dieu vient te donner vn si rare sçauoir ?



Et par quel Art vois-tu ce que l'on ne peut voir ?
Il faut, pour couronner vne si Noble audace,
Que ie prenne des Fleurs au plus haut du Parnasse :
Elles empescheront ton renom de vieillir :
Muse, guide mes pas, où ie les dois cueillir.

DE SCVDERY.

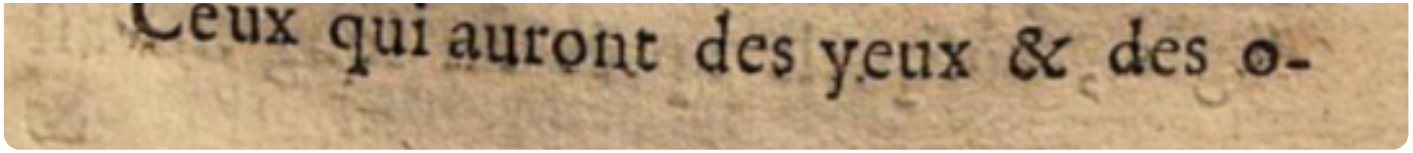
Madeleine de Scudery's verse chastens other flowers to 'damp down your pride…Cede to the Tulip, & hide yourselves. She is incomparable, & nothing resembles her: She alone has more beauty than all of you together.' Digital Library of the Royal Botanical Garden: https://bibdigital.rjb.csic.es

This exclusivity of tulip cultivation was somewhat contradicted by the publication of a printed treatise. La Chesnée Monstereul claims to know the secret to 'breaking' tulips, the process of creating multi-coloured streaks in tulip petals. He insists, however, that this knowledge was only suitable for manuscript circulation so not to allow such 'secrets of Divinity' to be 'profaned by the vulgar'. Instead, he cryptically encodes this

process into a bizarre poem so as only to be understood by ‘Sages Curieux (curious sages)’. He justifies his secrecy by citing Francis Bacon’s treatise on Art and Nature: ‘it is not reasonable that such a curious person has obtained some knowledge by his industry, to publish it to all; especially since it is madness to give lettuce to an Ass, seeing that the thistles suffice for him.’

gnant seulement à ceux qu'ils en jugeoient dignes. Et suivant ce dessein, je diray aux curieux Fleuristes.

Si tu multiplie la vertu de ta Mere, la nourrissant de la cendre de ses os, & de la substance de son Pere; alors tu possederas la terre de promission, en laquelle sera un estang de lait, au travers duquel passera des fleuves de vin, & autres liqueurs de diverses couleurs, plusieurs rochers d'Or seront épars en luy; son fonds sera remply de ses Huistres, qui vomissants leur rouge cramoisy sur le sable, produiront le beau pourpre. Et si tu veux suivre la mode, le lait de l'estang se changera en liqueur de saffrant, qui te donnera du soucy.



La Chesnée Monstereul's method of 'breaking' tulips encoded in a poem. We know today that the multi-coloured streaks in tulip petals were actually the result of an aphid-borne virus. Digital Library of the Royal Botanical Garden: https://bibdigital.rjb.csic.es

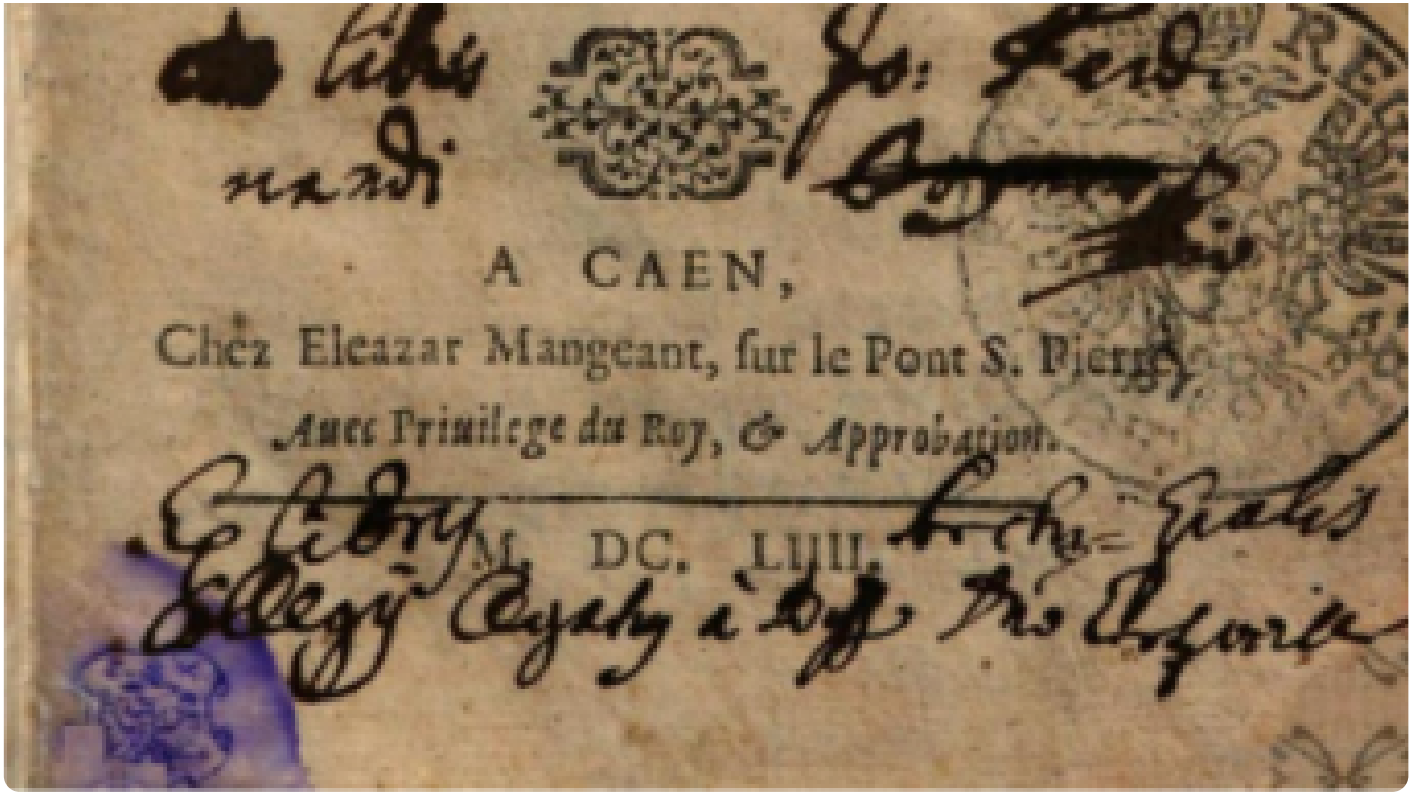
La Chesnée Monstereul's efforts to keep tulips solely in elite hands failed. As the flower trade became more sophisticated and the tulip more accessible, the public interest in gardening and flowers presented a new opportunity for publishers. A Paris printer, Charles de Sercy seized on the opportunity to publish modestly priced gardening handbooks and reprints of floriculturist classics. *Le Floriste François* had undoubtedly earned its place as a classic of the seventeenth century and reappeared in Sercy's re-editions in 1697 under the title *Traité des tulipes*. As the exotic tulip and its secrets were 'rendered common', the age of the 'Sages Curieux' declined. Flowers remained a decorative favourite, but tulips were no longer a focal point in noble connoisseurship. La Chesnée Monstereul's worst fears had come true.

LE FLORISTE FRANÇOIS

TRAITTANT DE L'ORIGINE des Tulipes. De l'ordre qu'on doit obseruer pour les cultiuer & planter. Comme la Nature leur donne la diuersité de leurs couleurs. Du moyen de les faire embellir. Et de leurs maladies, & remedes.

Auec vn Catalogue des noms des Tulipes, & distinctions de leurs couleurs.

Par le Sr. DE LA CHESNEE MONSTEREVL.



A CAEN,

Chez Eleazar Mangeant, sur le Pont S. Pierre.

Auec Priuilege du Roy, & Approbation.

M. DC. LIIII.

LE FLORISTE FRANCOIS

TRAITTANT DE L'ORIGINE des Tulipes. De l'ordre qu'on doit obseruer pour les cultiuer & planter. Comme la Nature leur donne la diuersité de leurs couleurs. Du moyen de les faire embellir. Et de leurs maladies, & remedes.

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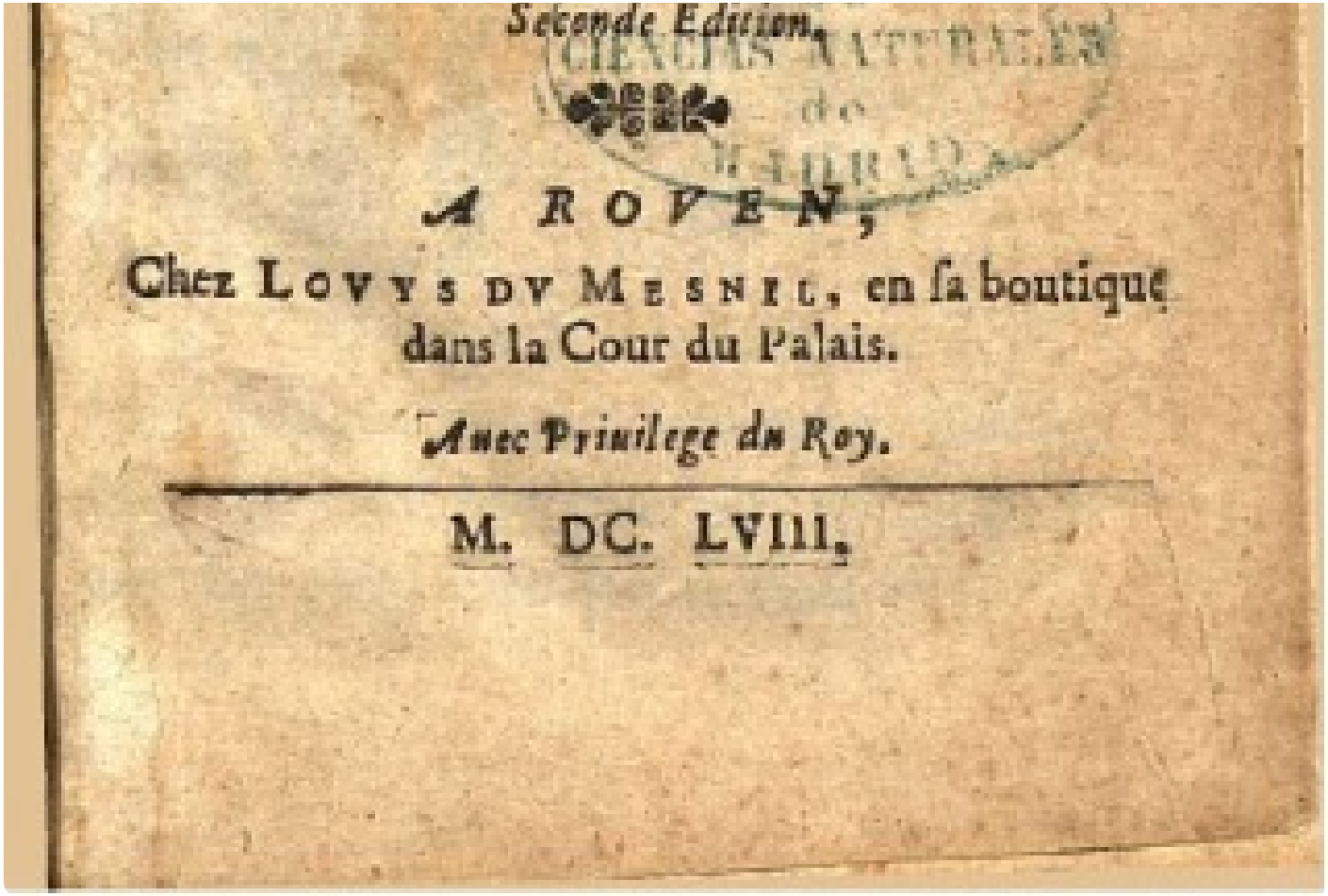

Seconde Edition.

A ROVEN,

Chez LOVYS DV MESNIL, en sa boutique dans la Cour du Palais.

Auec Priuilege du Roy.

M. DC. LVIII.

The first edition published in Caen in 1654 next to a Rouen reprint from 1658. Le Floriste François was reprinted several times in the seventeenth century, both in Paris and the French provinces. It is fascinating that the author chose first to have his work printed in Caen by Eleazar Mangeant, the son of the prominent Protestant printer, Simon Mangeant. Eleazar would continue to publish in Caen at least until 1682. Google Books.

Le Floriste François is available in a number of collections including one of our partner libraries in Aix-en-Provence BM. It is a unique text in its own right but also in its origins in the town of Caen. As we continue to incorporate data from the second half of the seventeenth century, the richness of the seventeenth century French provincial book world will become clearer for book and horticultural historians alike.

About the author

Claire MacLeod is a fourth-year modern history undergraduate student at the University of St Andrews. She is a digital media intern at the St Andrews Institute of Medieval Studies and has been a part of the USTC Vertically Integrated Project since 2020. Her research interest include the seventeenth century French provincial book world and Jesuit print.

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