

Rare, Unique, and Invisible
Opening McMaster's
Hidden Special Collections

Strategic Alignment
Fund Symposium



Theodor Dorsten, *Botanicon*. Frankfurt, 1540.
Image: Ron Scheffler

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William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections

- One of Canada's preeminent special collections libraries
- Holds more than four kilometers of archives
- More than 100,000 books and manuscripts
 - 38,000 rare books (published before the year 1800)
 - 70,000 19th-21st century books
- Open to McMaster students, faculty, and staff, external researchers, and the public!



Ulisse Aldrovandi. *Naturalis Historia*. Bologna, 1599-1668.
Image: Ron Scheffler



What are “hidden collections”?

- Uncatalogued (and unfindable) books, archives, and other library resources
- A frequent occurrence in large special collections libraries
 - Has become known as the “hidden collections” problem
- Association of Research Libraries study found, on average, **15%** of books in preeminent special collections are “hidden.”

Part of McMaster’s “hidden collections”. Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.



“Hidden collections” at McMaster

- Recent survey of the Ready Division’s book collection estimated 20,000 uncatalogued volumes (20%)
- Our biggest concern: Books of the handpress era, from the dawn of printing through the early 19th century, require more specialized knowledge and expertise to catalogue accurately

Uncatalogued volumes in the John A. Fleming collection.
Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.



The project: opening hidden rare books

- Goal: focused effort to address uncatalogued rare books in our collection
- Dr. Ruth-Ellen St. Onge joined the Library in March 2023 as Distinctive Collections Cataloguing Librarian.
 - PhD in French and Book History and Print Culture (Toronto) and MI (Toronto)
 - Previous experience at Rare Book School (University of Virginia) and the Joseph Sablé Centre (University of Toronto)

Dr. Ruth-Ellen St. Onge, photographed in the Ready Division's rare book collection. Image: Ron Scheffler.



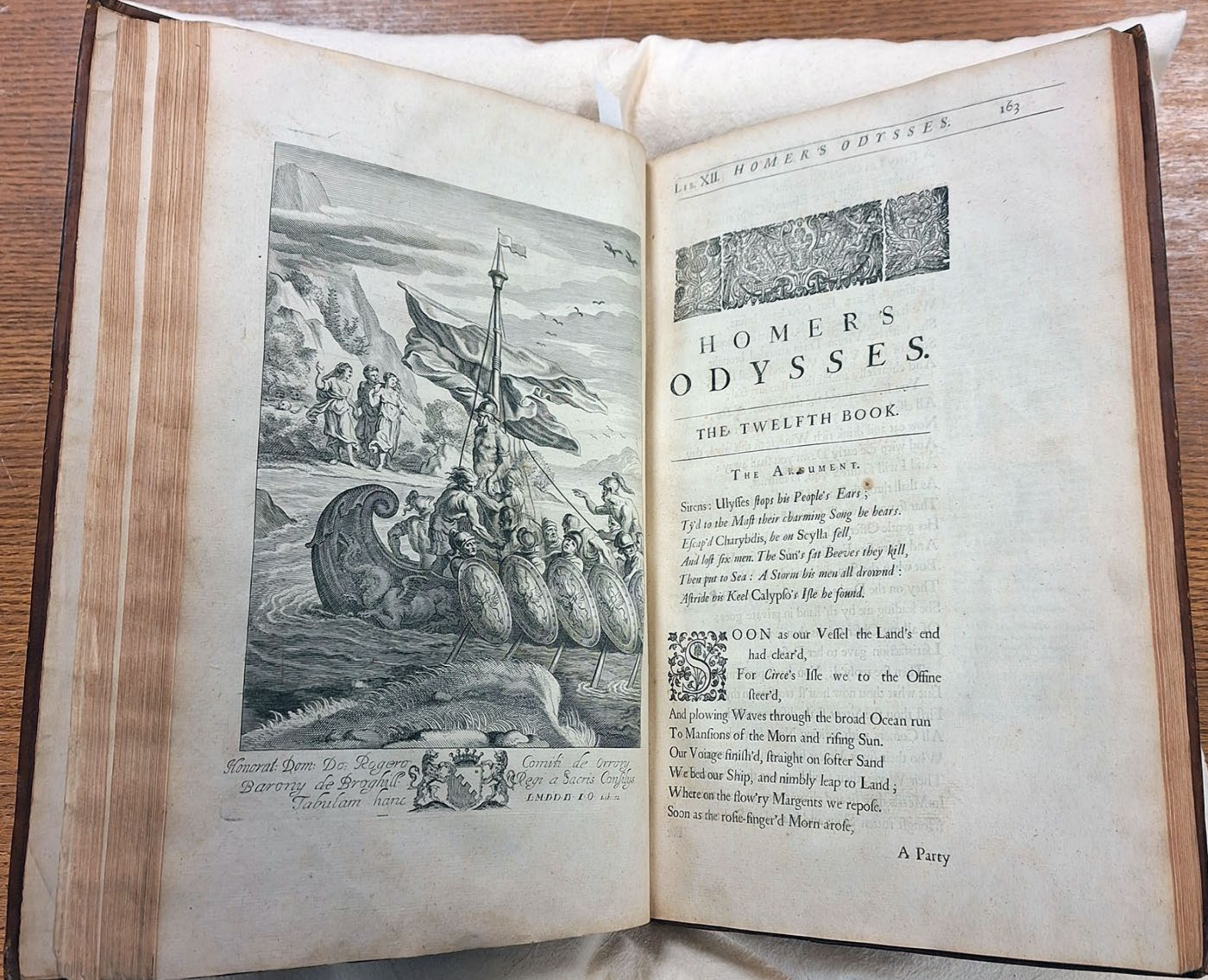
Work to date: Overview

- 985 physical volumes, catalogued
- Recording key information that documents the construction and history of the book
- Where possible, include names of artists, book binders, printers and others who participated in the book's creation
- Working to contribute McMaster's unique holdings to large-scale international rare books projects

Cedit Atlas Tercümesi. Tab'hane-yi hümayun (School of Military Engineering). Üsküdar, 1803/04.

Image: Ron Scheffler.

Work to date: Paul Fritz Collection



- 300 titles, donated by McMaster Professor Emeritus Dr. Paul Fritz
- Catalogued Fall 2023, the collection was quickly requested in the reading room, used in student projects, and incorporated into teaching

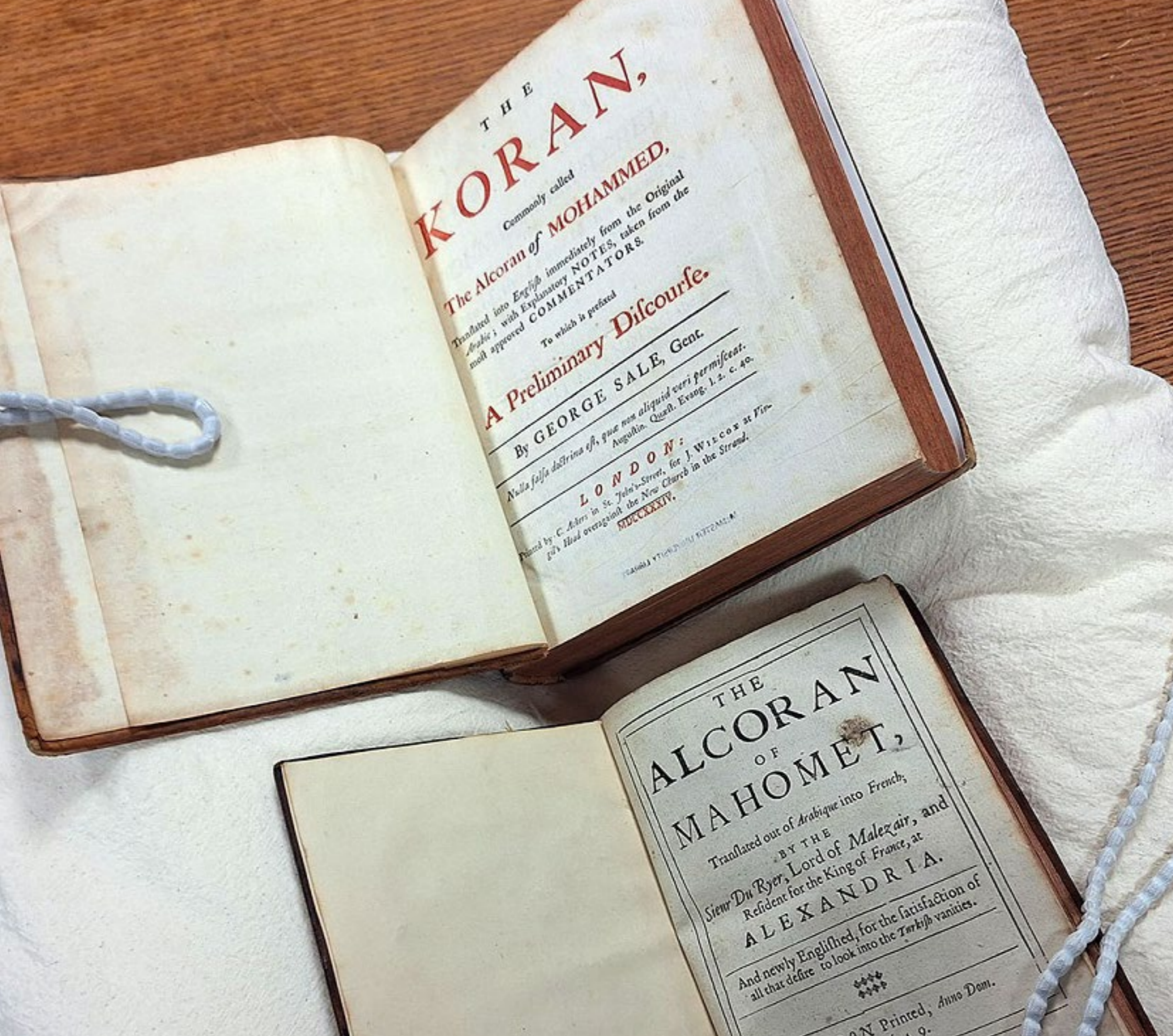
Homer his Odyssees. London, 1699. Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.

Work to date: John Fleming Collection



- Nearly 700 volumes, gifted to McMaster by Dr. Patricia Fleming
- Many of these books are extremely rare, with several not found in any other library in the world.
- Cataloguing this collection will have significant benefit for scholars of 18th century France, both at McMaster and beyond

Les capucins: ou le secret du cabinet noir, histoire véritable. Paris, 1802. Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.



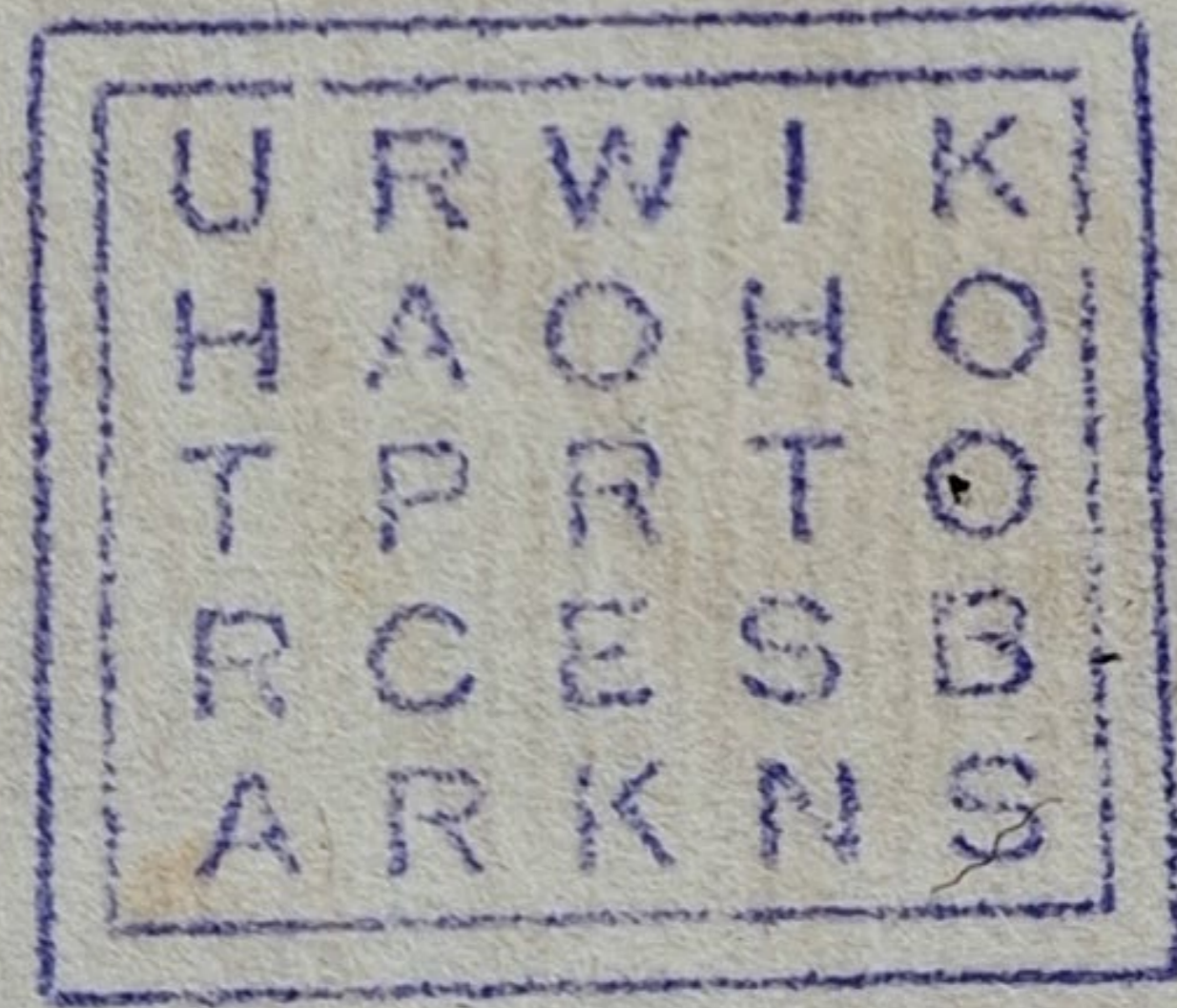
Work to date: Early English translations of the Qur'an

- An example of revisiting previously-catalogued resources
- Records for these two early translations of the Qur'an were enhanced with additional description
- The updated records improve discoverability in the library catalogue and better meet the needs of students and researchers

The Koran: commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed.... London, 1734.; The Alcoran of Mahomet, translated out of Arabique into French. London, 1649. Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.

Year 2: what's ahead?

- Working through more collections
- Digitizing some of the most extraordinary items and contributing them to international repositories
- Creating new digital exhibits
- Lots and lots of bragging!



Ownership stamp of Arthur Caswell Parker, found in one of McMaster's copies of *A spelling-book in the Seneca language: with English definitions*. Buffalo-Creed Reservation, 1842.

Image: Ruth-Ellen St. Onge.

Thank you!

