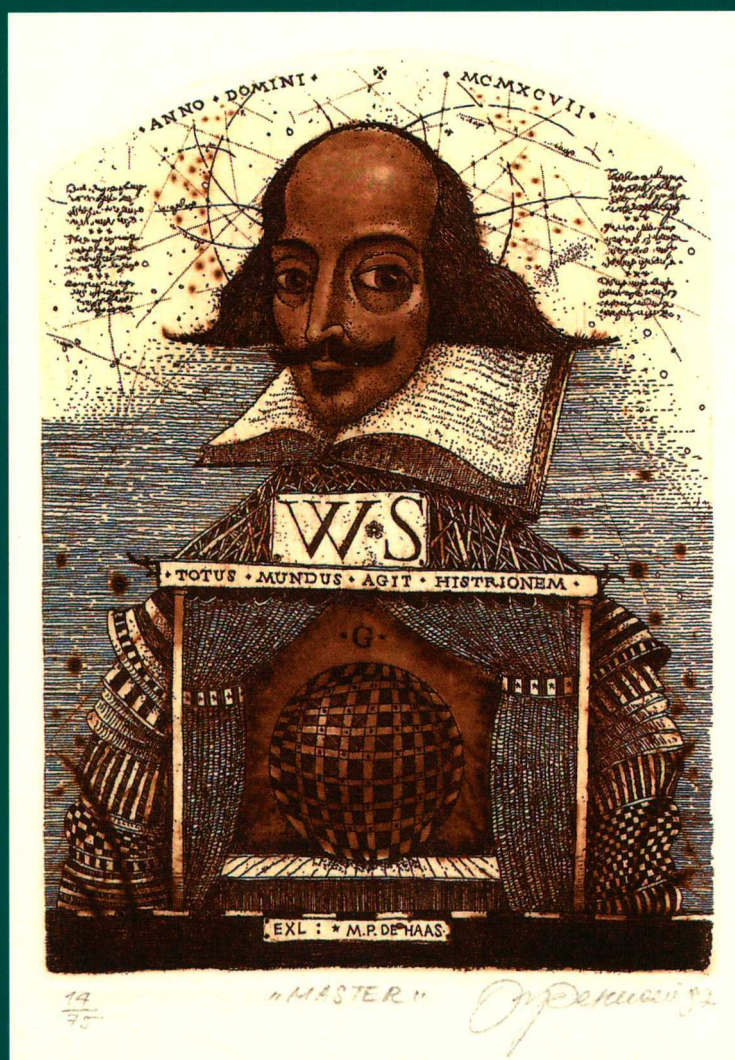

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Portraits of Provenance: Bookplates at the Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia

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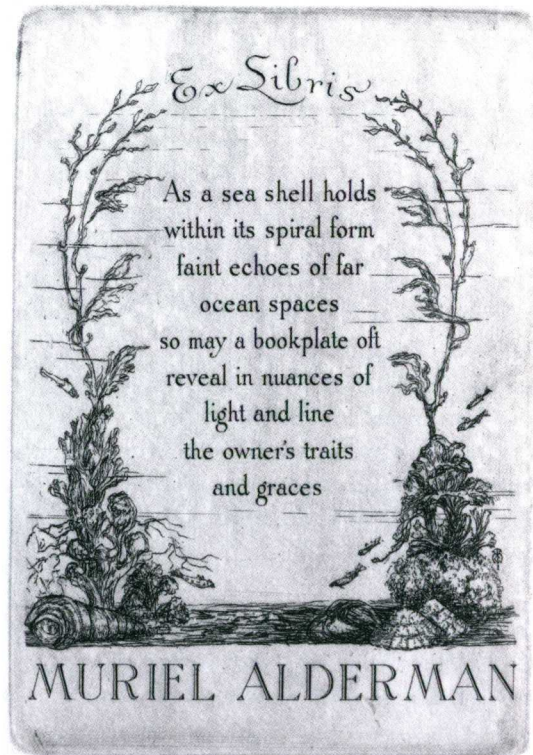
A verse found on an early twentieth century bookplate for Muriel Alderman (fig. 1), likely designed by Margaret Ely Webb,¹ encapsulates the spirit behind the art of ex libris.

*As a sea shell holds
within its spiral form
faint echoes of far
ocean spaces
so may a bookplate oft
reveal in nuances of
light and line
the owner's traits
and graces*

Bookplates, the verse infers, reveal important characteristics of the readers and collectors whose identities they signify. They are, in their own way, portraits of readers, pasted into the very books those readers loved.

In recent years, the attention of academics and librarians has turned toward the study of provenance, or using inscriptions and other marks of ownership to explore patterns of readership and collecting across time.² Of course, provenance has always been (and remains today) an area of central interest to bookplate enthusiasts, as the functional purpose of the ex libris is to document ownership of books. But the rising tide of scholarly attention to book history and history of readership offers a new opportunity to invigorate interest in the bookplate as a worthy focus for scholarly inquiry and public attention. An upcoming exhibition at the Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia, one of the United States' premier centres for the study of book collecting and connoisseurship, will engage visitors with the many facets of bookplates as art objects and historical evidence. Titled *The Art of*

Ownership: Bookplates and Book Collectors, ca. 1480 – The Present, the exhibition will feature more than one hundred bookplates drawn from ten museum and library collections. It will shed new light on the ex libris art form while sparking conversations about the place of bookplate collecting and study in the broader field of book history. Slated to open in late summer, 2016, the exhibition focuses on two interpretive themes. The first considers bookplates as 'portraits' of their owners, sometimes



1. Muriel Alderman by Margaret Ely Webb