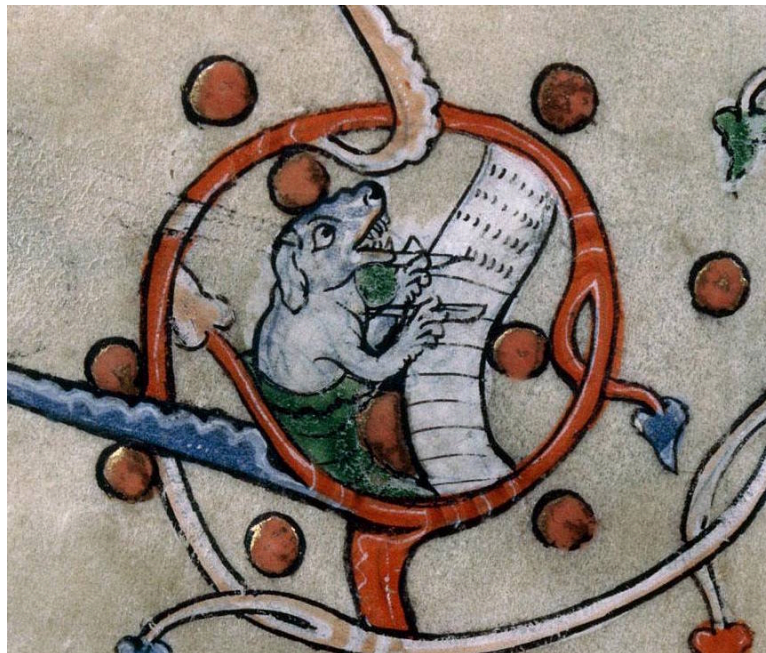


Bodies of/and Books: Purpose, Prayer and Play in Books Made for Medieval Women

Robyn Cadwallader

Good morning and thanks for inviting me to speak to you today. I'm flattered to be asked to speak to a group of librarians, but equally aware that I might be bringing coals to Newcastle when I talk about books. So, this morning I want to explore a little of what I do when I write fiction that circles around books — the interaction of research and imagination in *The anchoress*, and in the novel I'm currently writing. And ... if you're weary of words, I even have pictures!



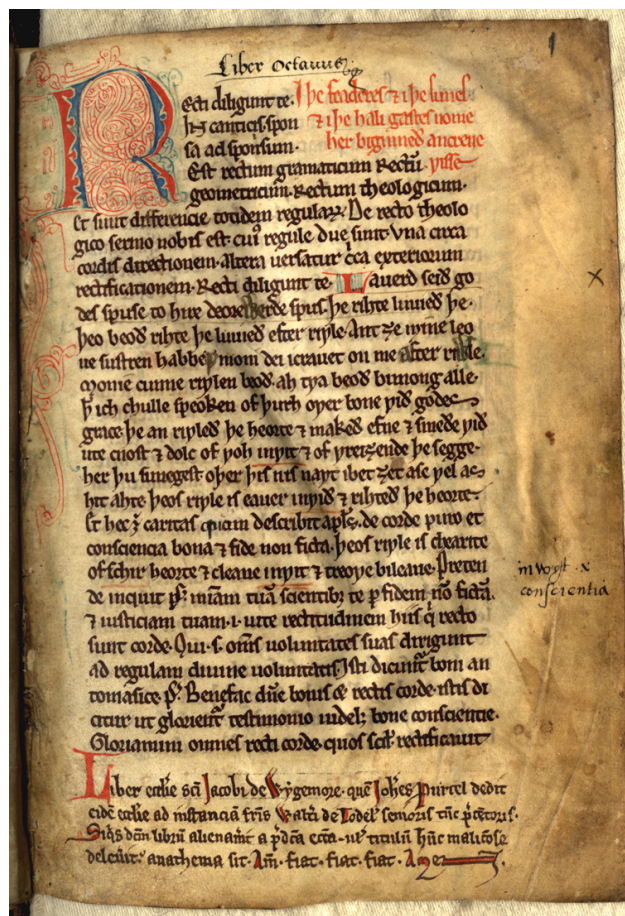
Dog scribe: *Breviary of Renaud de Bar*, f. 194rⁱ

Surprisingly, this is an image from one of the books I'll be talking about today: a prayer book for medieval women. It's probably more playful than many of us would expect, and I'll speak more about that toward the end of this paper.

Today I will be looking at two different kinds of books given to medieval women to help with their devotions: the kind given to anchoresses and those made for aristocratic women.

Ancrene Wisse

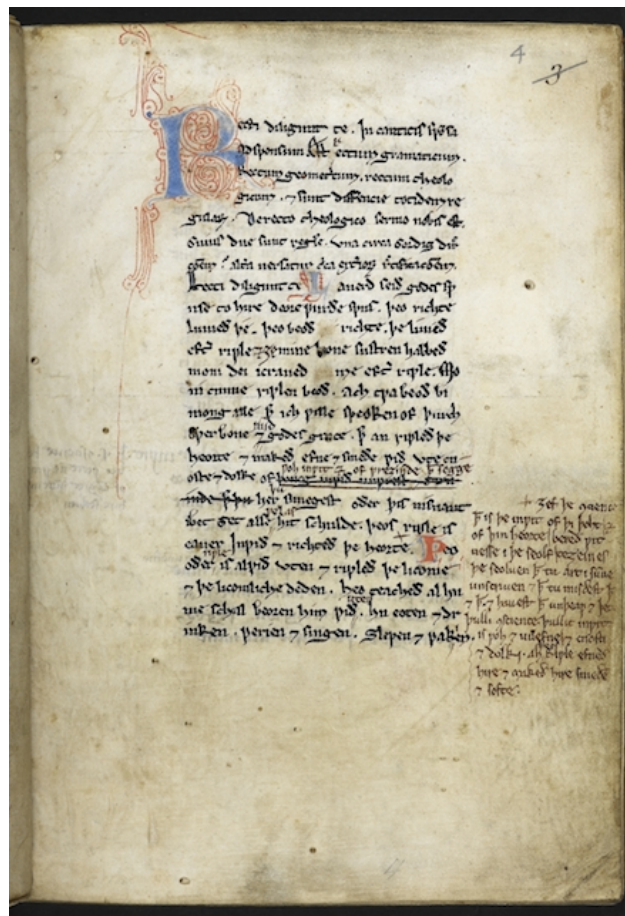
My novel *The anchoress*ⁱⁱ features a Rule of Life given to an anchoress, a woman who has chosen to be enclosed for life in a small stone cell attached to a village church. There she is to 'die to the world', to never look out of her small, curtained windows. She is to pray, read and counsel the village women. The book that my fictional anchoress, Sarah, reads in her cell each day is closely based on a real book, the *Ancrene Wisse* or Guide for Anchoresses, a text written in the second decade of the thirteenth century.



Ancrene Wisse: [Cotton MS Cleopatra C VIⁱⁱⁱ](#)


It was copied many times for other anchoresses, and perhaps also for other women who were not enclosed. Here is one of the copies. It's very simple and unadorned, as perhaps befits its content; anchoresses were not to be distracted from their prayers, their reading, and their focus on Christ.

In many cases, the *Ancrene Wisse* was bound together with the narratives of the lives of female virgin martyrs and other devotional material, all designed to help the anchoress in her commitment to deny the world and devote herself to Christ alone. This is another copy of the *Ancrene Wisse*, similarly unadorned.



Ancrene Wisse: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, f. 1r^{iv}

This Rule of Life gives guidance on daily routines, but is most interested in guiding the woman's 'inner life', underpinned by the theology of the early and medieval church — that women are inherently inferior, weak, lustful and bodily. As 'daughters of Eve' they draw men into sin. The *Ancrene Wisse* encourages and praises the piety of anchoresses, but equally reminds them of their inherent sinfulness, describing the



horrors of the female body. To come to God, it counsels, the anchoress is to control her senses and deny her body.

As I tried to imagine what Sarah's life would be like and thought about her relationship to this book, I realised that there are some interesting dynamics going on here. We all know that one of the great values of the book is that it appeals to the mind and the imagination and in that sense, is beyond external control. The *Ancrene Wisse* is perhaps an extreme example, but it is nonetheless a book to be used by the woman, alone in her cell, and so offers her the exciting independence of reading alone and the physical intimacy of bodily holding the book and turning the pages, simple though they be. What happens to Sarah? What happens in her mind and body as she reads, and as the various texts — guidance, saints' lives and devotions — interact with one another?

And even more, sitting in her cell alone, unable to see the outside world, her sense of sight limited to her four small walls, surely the anchoress's other senses would be heightened, not lessened. Touch and taste would become more acutely sensed, and the outside world would come to her through her heightened senses of sound and smell.

This paradox, for me, was ripe for exploration. Even though ideological control is of its nature subtle, parading as simply 'the way things are' and therefore not to be challenged, the body and the imagination also have their own insistence force. In many ways, that paradox is the heart of the novel. Sarah, my anchoress, struggles with her commitment to die to the world and obey her Rule, but slowly discovers that the life of the village, and the life of her own body, are insistent and fruitful sources of discovery. Far from a distraction, she begins to admit that they have much to offer her in her relationship with Christ.

But let's return to medieval books, and look at other devotional books for women written around the same time — the beautiful books of hours provided for aristocratic women. Ornate and sumptuous, illuminated with gold leaf and depictions of Christ, Mary and the saints, books of hours contain prayers that follow the monastic hours of the day, and are intended to guide the woman in her daily devotions. Perhaps it's not so surprising that a book of prayers for an aristocratic woman would be beautiful and expensive — after all, they haven't made the severe kind of commitment an anchoress has made. But what I find so fascinating is that they also contain margins alive with what seem to be completely contrary images: the playful, the cute, the monstrous, the bestial and the bawdy. Here's an example, and we'll look at some more later.




Pabraham-Clifford Hours, Fitzwilliam Museum: MS 242, fol 29^v

I began my research for my second novel because I had sniffed out an apparent contradiction between the text and the margins. Though I wasn't quite aware of it when I began, the paradox between quiet, ordered text in the centre of the page and the riotous margins in these books has resonance with the anchoress attempting to sit prayerfully in her cell, while the world of the village works, plays and inevitably impinges on her.

I'm very interested in the illuminators who worked on these books, but this morning I want to talk about the patron, the woman for whom the book was made.

The Book of Hours

The book of hours is basically a book of prayers that follow the cycle of prayers, or the eight 'hours' of the monastic day, but tailored for domestic use. Sometimes they include psalms as well, even poems, romances, recipes and herbals, so they're a mixed



combination of texts. Psalters were obviously decorated collections of psalms used for devotion.

One of the most fascinating things about these books is that their uses and their significance are almost as complex as the decorations on the page. A close look at the social context and the details of the book suggests the decoration has a lot to say about attitudes to aristocratic women and social constructions of their position and responsibility. The books do not offer direct advice, as the *Ancrene Wisse* does, but their decorations, beautiful as they are, reinforce expectations of their role. It is a book of devotion, but we need to move beyond thinking that devotion means simply saying your prayers. In the medieval context (and others, as well) the word ‘devotion’ is complex: it is physical, mundane, transcendent, social, political, and ideological. Almost every element in the book is designed to reflect status, lineage and the accompanying responsibilities of the female patron.

So, let’s imagine. It’s the early decades of the fourteenth century in England. Perhaps 1322. A woman of the upper class — let’s call her Isabella — has just taken delivery of a book of hours. Five years earlier, she visited London, or perhaps Oxford or Peterborough, and spoke to a stationer about having a book of prayers and psalter copied and decorated for her.

In the previous centuries, most books were copied for religious houses, and often by monks, but gradually, with the establishment of universities and the demand for texts to be copied, the book business became secular as well.

There aren’t many details of how the program of decoration was decided. Religious imagery was a complex language that had to be learnt. It seems that some patrons asked for particular religious images, or some requested that the scribe and or the illuminator planned decoration to demonstrate certain qualities about the family — perhaps to emphasise its grand history, or to demonstrate its prospects of a prosperous future. They might do this by intertwining heraldic devices and family portraits with a combination of selected images of biblical stories and the sacred narrative of the church.

Isabella waits five years for her book to be finished; it’s ornate, and takes time.



*St Omer Psalter, BL Ms **Add 36684, f 46v***

As she opens her book, imagine how excited she would feel, hearing the rustle of the pages, feeling the slight stiffness of the parchment, her skin touching the tanned and stretched animal skin. As she turns the pages, the smell of paint and the glue used in the binding rises up, and she sees pages filled not only with words, but with colourful, detailed, beautiful and playful decorations. It would be a remarkably bodily and sensuous experience.

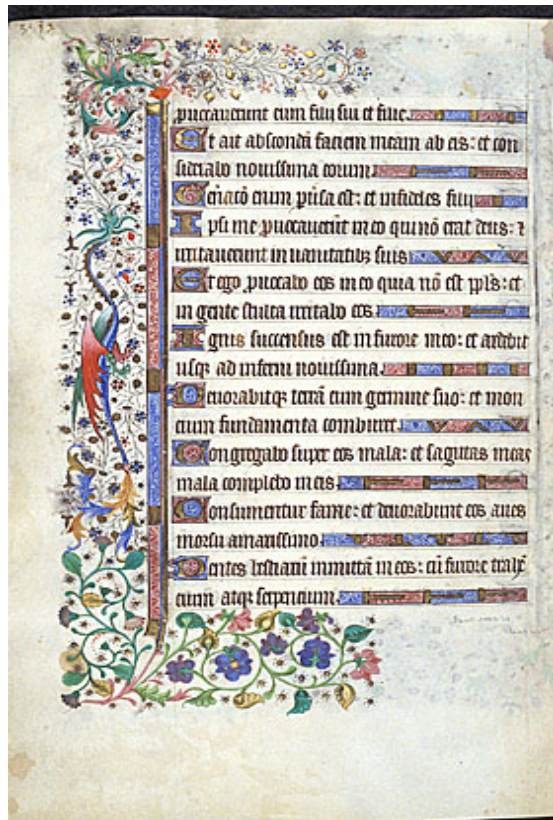
It is first of all and most obviously, a sumptuous work of art. It's expensive, the kind of purchase that only the upper classes could afford. This book, though intended for prayers, is so magnificent that it can be shown off to visitors, friends, neighbours, and especially those they want to impress. Often the books were quite small and could be carried in a purse attached to the woman's belt, so that she could have it with her and show it off when she visited others as well. It is a sign of status in which beauty, art, expense and devotion are intertwined.

So, Isabel turns the pages.



Calendar: De Neville Hours Calendar page for January^{vi}

The first pages are usually a decorated calendar that lists the significant days of each month: religious feasts, festivals and saints' days, but also significant days for the family and for the district: births, deaths and marriages of the family, or of other significant people, or the dates of local markets. The choice of what to include in the calendar places the woman within family, lineage, and the local area, all intertwined with the sacred history of the church. So, even though a calendar can seem quite simple, its list of contents effectively tells a story of the family that owns it.



Borders: St Omer Psalter f 162v^{vii}

There are borders —the decoration edging the writing — but they vary considerably from book to book, and sometimes within the books themselves, depending on how many artists were employed on one project. They're usually mostly foliage, but often intertwined with creatures, and they vary from the simple and stylish to the incredibly elaborate.



Heraldry: Christ Enthroned, Dubois Hours MS M.700 f4r^{viii}

One of the notable things in the borders, especially about the early pages, is the number of shields with coats of arms, often alongside various portraits. The main coats of arms will be those of the owner and her husband. Heraldry was a primary way of visually indicating family lineage that was enormously important for the gentry and nobility in the Middle Ages; it signifies position, power, the past history of the family and its prospects into the future. This emphasis on heraldry within a book of hours draws together the woman's devotions with her own vital role in reproduction that will ensure the continuity of the family line. Her pious duty is to reproduce; the two cannot be separated.



Catherine Praying to the Virgin, Hours of Catherine of Cleves MS M.945, ff. 1v–2r^{ix}

Some books also included the coats of arms of relatives, as well as neighbours or contacts the owners of the book sought to impress. Imagine Isabella showing off her book to the neighbouring nobility and there on one of the early pages is their shield — a pledge of loyalty and admiration, and what we might call ‘sucking up’! It is essentially buying favour, demonstrating connections, and shows how politically charged these books really are.



Illuminations: Virgin and Child, Dubois Hours MS M.700 f 3v^x

One of the most obvious and spectacular elements of the book of hours or psalter is the illuminations, given the name because of the gold leaf that made the pictures shine. It was expensive, of course, and apart from being so appropriate for decorating images of Christ, Mary and other holy figures, it was a sign of opulence.

For me, one of the most fascinating elements of the page is the inclusion of owner portraits that were particularly common in the fourteenth century. Sometimes the woman is portrayed kneeling in prayer, perhaps reading her book of hours, or at Mass with the priest holding up the bread, but more often she is looking on at figures in an illumination.



Nativity: Neville of Hornby Hours, BL Egerton 2781, f 13^{ri}

So, as the wife of Neville of Hornby would have seen herself in this picture, Isabella might see herself kneeling at the Nativity, peeping in on the scene right next to Mary and adoring the baby Jesus along with the shepherds and a sleepy Joseph. Or, she might even be standing behind Mary, almost participating with her in her actions, as in this picture of Mary ushering Eve into Paradise, with the book owner just behind Mary, echoing her stance.



Eve Guiding Mary into Paradise: Neville of Hornby Hours, BL Egerton 2781, f 18v^{xii}

These pictures are quite remarkable in the sense that they encourage the owner in prayer to see herself in intimate contact with Christ and Mary. The biblical story that took place in the past becomes present to Isabella, or more accurately, she is present to significant events of the biblical narrative. Of course, she is not physically there, so the picture asks her to see with her physical eyes the spiritual experience of an encounter with God or Mary.

This evocation of intimacy and physicality is an intriguing shift in the church's attitude to piety, because, as we have seen, women were described as daughters of Eve, and were counselled to control their body that drew them away from God.

But in these portraits, the woman's bodily presence is evoked. It's a remarkable shift that results from changes in both theology and directives from the church for the good order of the laity. To be clear, the attitudes to women's inferiority and sinfulness did not change, but Christians, and especially women, were encouraged toward a stronger individual piety, and to look upon Christ and feel his suffering, or to sit with Mary as mother and comforter. It is a much more fleshly, emotional devotion than in previous

centuries. This kind of paradox — denial of the body in tandem with an emphasis on the importance of the body in devotions — is just one aspect of the complexity that is characteristic of the Middle Ages. And we'll see more of that in the playful marginalia.

What intrigues me most is the fascinating reflexivity of these portraits. Imagine Isabella at prayer, reading her book and seeing herself at prayer. Sometimes she sees herself reading the book she is reading; it's like being in a hall of mirrors.



The woman at prayer: Neville of Hornby Hours London, BL Egerton MS 2781 f 122v^{xiii}

She becomes at once the woman who sees and the woman who is seen. In one sense, it is no doubt affirming for the woman to see herself, reassuring her of her position and her subjectivity. On the other hand, what she sees is not Isabella in her particularity as a person. The portraits are not intended to be accurate and realistic; instead, indications such as heraldic devices on the clothes of the owner and her husband indicate individual identity via lineage.



Patrons praying before Virgin and Child: Dubois Hours MS M.700 f 3v^{xiv}

This portrait is an especially powerful example. Here, the owner and her husband are dressed in surcoats that reflect the shields beneath them. In many ways, they become the shield.

So, when the woman looks at her portrait, she sees her role within the context of heraldry and political influence we have been exploring. (There are no doubt implications for the husband as well, but they will be different from those of the woman.) This one image of the woman identified via the family coat of arms evokes her devotions, her relationship with God, her responsibility to continue the family line and her aristocratic duties. Here, being seen becomes a tool of social regulation and gender construction.

I'm still thinking about the implications of this, but I can see the slippage in that moment is something to explore. I recognise that the expectations of her as an aristocratic woman are so embedded in her culture that they would become as natural as the air she breathes, but I also believe that there is a power to image and story and imagination in the book's decorations. Being alone with a book can be volatile territory because the mind of the reader or viewer is beyond reach.

Marginal illustrations

If the owner portrait is a moment of slippage, as I call it, the marginal illustrations are another matter again. They range from the sweet and beautiful to the grotesque and monstrous, to the playful and bawdy, and sometimes to the very weird.



Christ Enthroned with marginal images: Pabenhams-Clifford Hours, Fitzwilliam Museum: MS 242, fol 55^v

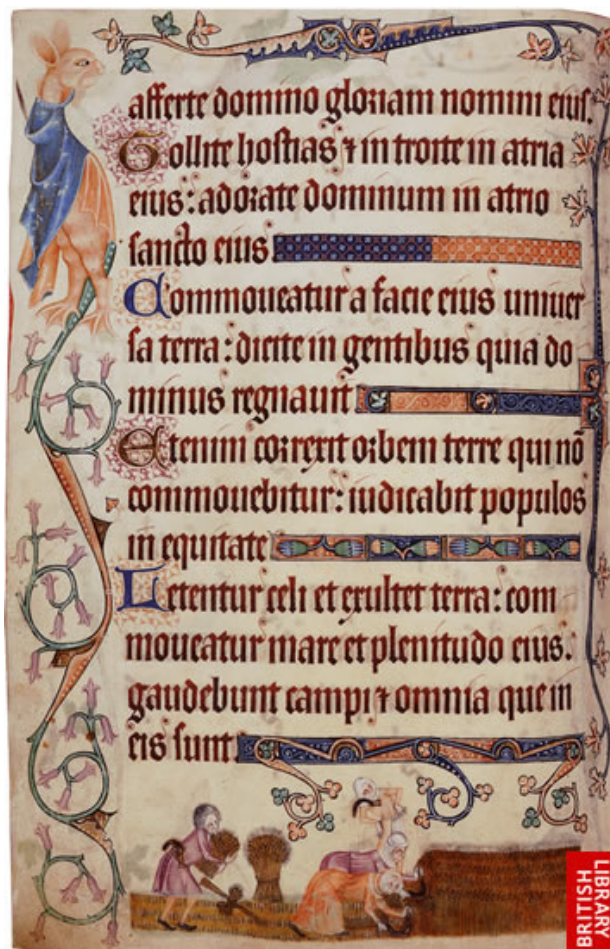
What these images actually mean has been long debated, and there is still no agreement. the twelfth century St Bernard suggested that they were a distraction from the words.

Some have seen marginalia as playful doodles with no meaning at all, just a kind of childishness, and others have seen them as the product of a deranged mind. But recent studies have, fortunately, taken the images more seriously.

One suggestion is that they are **aids to memory**, and there is good evidence that, in large books without page numbers, some of the marginal decorations help the reader to find her way to a particular page. This is a much more functional, pragmatic use of the images, but it doesn't quite explain why the artist would use a creature with a dragon's head, a bear's body and a bird's feet instead of simply a swan or a flower.

I think that for most people, the first reaction to some of the more playful or grotesque images is simple bewilderment. We can accept beautiful decorations as appropriate, but anything less seems to militate against the main text which is, after all, for devotions. But we've already seen that devotion is a complex idea, so it's worth investigating further.

Another approach is to read the margins as **illustrations of the text** itself. One of the most straightforward examples is from the beautiful Luttrell Psalter, where workers gather in corn, reflecting the words of the psalm: 'The fields and all in them rejoice'. (Psalm 95:12).



Harvesting corn: Luttrell Psalter, BL Add MS 42130 172v^{xvi}



Harvesting corn: Luttrell Psalter, detail, BL Add MS 42130 172v^{xvii}

Thus the everyday and the mundane are gathered into the call to praise God.



Luttrell life on estate: BL Add MS 42130

Clockwise from top: Man sowing: f 170v, Maid dressing a lady's hair: f 63r
 Sheep in wattle pen: f 163v, Woman feeding chickens: f 166v^{xviii}



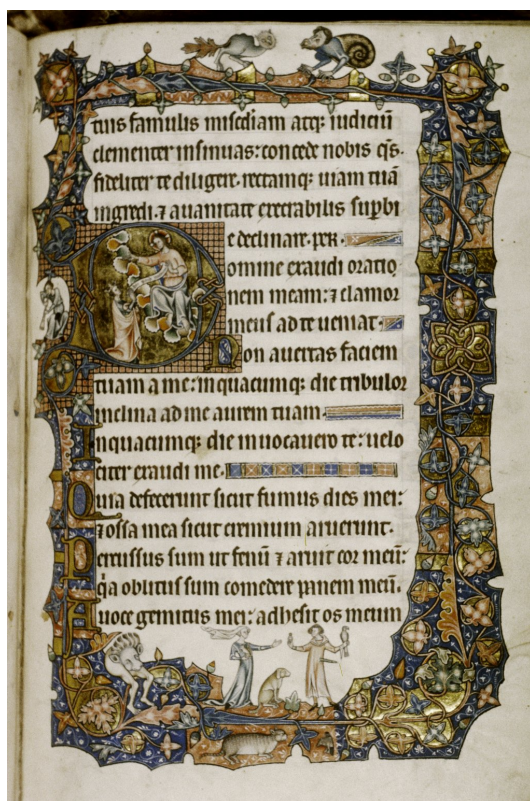
While the images in this psalter have been used to help understand the practicalities of life on the land in medieval England, they are also remarkably pretty pictures, where the peasants look remarkably well fed and dressed. The truth of their lives would almost certainly be far from this. Again, it's a medieval version of PR to portray the workers on one's own land as well fed and cared for.

Other, more complicated examples, suggest that **words, or even syllables**, inspire some of the pictures in the margins and offer exempla of the consequences of sin. In others, the images interact.

In the Ormesby Psalter, the main picture is of Christ and David, with David gazing up to Christ, illustrating the cry of the psalmist. The text is Psalm 101:

Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top.

Everything on the page echoes David's gaze upon Christ in the sense that it is all focused on the dangers of sight. Perhaps the creatures at the top are strange versions of the sparrow.



Psalm 101: Ormesby Psalter, f 131^{verso}

As the detail below shows, the man and woman in the lower margin gaze at one another in a suggestion of amorous intent. The interplay of images is overtly erotic: the woman holds a squirrel, a medieval symbol for the female genitals, and the man's sword is suggestively phallic. Nearby, the gryllis, a creature with a head on legs, gazes on, but as Michael Camille,^{xx} a prolific commentator on marginalia, suggests, the head is where its genitals should be, and the gaze becomes an ejaculation. Beneath, life is turned around where the cat watches and threatens the mouse in its hole that echoes the hole in the man's robe above. The margins become exempla of sin, demonstrations of what happens when God's word is not heeded.



Psalm 101: Ormesby Psalter, f 131r (detail)

While some of this might sound far-fetched and over interpreting, we need to remember that in the Middle Ages, reading images was considered as important as reading words. It was a complex language that had to be learned. I'm beginning to think it has elements of that now-dreaded term, postmodernism. Watching how images — sometimes apparently disparate images — might bounce off one another to create meaning is not that far away from our own digital experiences.

Another suggestion for reading the margins is that they reflect social forces of the time. There is often a contestive spirit between the text and the margins that is seen most clearly in the clean, neat and ordered words surrounded by capering and disordered creatures.

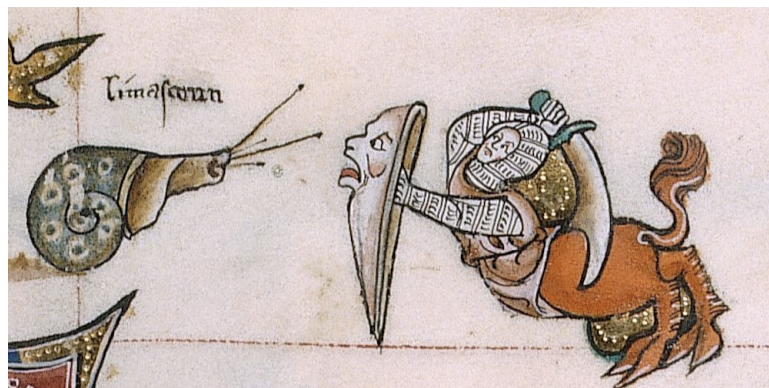


Snail and knight: Smithfield Decretals BL Royal MS 10, f 107r^{xxi}

If the aristocracy define themselves over against all who are not, the ‘other’, as most classes do, the margins are at once kept apart and yet tethered to them; there’s an intriguing interplay and dependence between the two.

The Church and the Christian faith were pervasive in the Middle Ages, impacting on almost every facet of life — effectively in the air that everyone breathed. This does not mean, therefore, that everyone believed and obeyed. One of the ways that Christianity survived as it did, was in its flexibility to accommodate most aspects of life and belief. This is seen perhaps most clearly in the Christian calendar’s adoption of festivals from folklore and other beliefs; instead of contesting, the Church absorbed and gradually took over festivals, making them its own. All thought and behaviour is gathered into a kind of piety that we, now, might find surprising. And this is at least some of what is at work in the margins. All of life is gathered in, even the crude and sinful.

I especially like the ways the margins overturn the familiar and expected, and one of the most common of these images is the snail versus the knight. There are endless interpretations of what they might mean, too many to even outline.



Snail and knight: Gorleston Psalter, Add MS 49622, f 193v^{xxii}

What appeals to me is the idea that the snail’s shell echoes the armour of the knight and the giant snail laughs at the knightly and chivalric class with all the trapping of position.



Snail and knight: Breviary of Renaud de Bar, f. 194r^{xxiii}

And what these marginal images show us, if nothing else, is the extent to which everything could be included in the life of prayer. It's easy to imagine medieval spirituality as dry and removed, but it was, of necessity, bound up with the physical, the messy and the mundane.



*Fantasy images: Luttrell
Psalter^{xxiv}*

Clockwise from top left: Blue-skinned man and dragon, f 83v, Figure riding bird creature, f 198v, Fantasy creature, f 208v, Birds fighting: f 145r.

I'm still trying to get my head around all the implications of the marginal images, but what I find so exciting about them is the slippage, as I've been calling it. They offer such possibilities for fantasy, resistance and play for the creators of the books and for the woman who reads it. With images as fantastic as these, surely there would be much

more to her story than simple obedience. If they offer her a life of imagination, who knows what could happen?



*Rabbit attacking man: Breviary of Renaud de Bar, f 210.^{xxv}
Rabbit attacking bishop: Gorleston Psalter, BL, Add 49622, fol. 13v.^{xxvi}*

And I can't finish without a small homage to the Monty Python crew, who definitely knew their medieval culture in 'Monty Python and The Holy Grail'. The killer rabbit wasn't their own invention!

- ⁱ http://www1.arkhenum.fr/images/dr_lorraine_ms/MS0107/index.html'
- ⁱⁱ Robyn Cadwallader, *The anchoress* (Sydney, HarperCollins), 2015.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/03/a-puzzle-for-our-blog-readers-who-were-medieval-anchorites-and-what-is-their-link-to-lord-of-the-rings-sometime.html>
- ^{iv} <http://tei.oucs.ox.ac.uk/Projects/EETS/soton/msa1r.htm>
- ^v <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/illuminated/manuscript/discover/the-pabenham-clifford-hours/folio/folio-29r/section/panel-intro>
- ^{vi} <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=11523>
- ^{vii} <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=7795>
- ^{viii} <http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/4/133201>
- ^{ix} <http://www.themorgan.org/collection/medieval-and-renaissance/manuscript/76941>
- ^x <http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/3/133201>
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- ^{xii} <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=11542>
- ^{xiii} (Image at: <http://www.abebooks.co.uk/Art-identity-devotion-fourteenth-century-England-three/9103600801/bd>)
- ^{xiv} <http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/3/133201>
- ^{xv} [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Pabenham-Clifford_Hours_-_Fitzwilliam_Museum_Ms242#/media/File:Pabenham-Clifford_Hours_-_Fitzwilliam_Ms242_f55v_\(beginning_of_the_Penitential_Psalms\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Pabenham-Clifford_Hours_-_Fitzwilliam_Museum_Ms242#/media/File:Pabenham-Clifford_Hours_-_Fitzwilliam_Ms242_f55v_(beginning_of_the_Penitential_Psalms).jpg)
- ^{xvi} http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_42130_fs001ar
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- ^{xix} <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/detail/ODLodl~1~1~42574~120469:Psalter-known-as-the--Ormesby-Psal>
- ^{xx} See Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books) 1992, pp 37-38.
- ^{xxi} http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Royal_MS_10_e_iv, f 107r
- ^{xxii} http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_49622 f193v
- ^{xxiii} http://www1.arkhenum.fr/images/dr_lorraine_ms/MS0107/index.html, f194r
- ^{xxiv} http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42130&index=0
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