

Was medieval manuscript marginalia pure distraction?



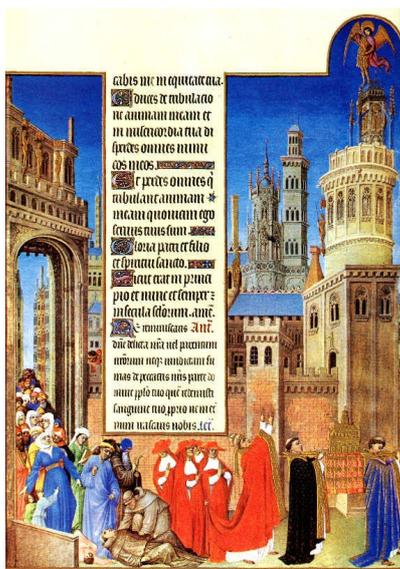
Introduction

It is almost impossible to determine when it became common to use the margins of books to write comments or to make drawings or pictures, but it started without doubt long before the birth of Christ. It is easy to associate marginalia with the modern book format, the Codex, but examples of papyri with marginalia have been found, for example in the Oxyrhynchus collection.¹ The marginalia evolved during the centuries and became more and more advanced and elaborate. Marginalia exist in a huge spectrum of qualities and appearances. There is for example a vast difference between the modest scholarly annotations in the margin of a book and the marvellous pictures of the margin in the late Middle Ages, that could be fantastically rich in detail, gold and colour.

This essay aims at investigating the roles and meaning of pictures in the marginalia of medieval manuscripts, and I will try to reach some conclusions through looking at examples from some European manuscripts of mainly the high and late Middle Ages.

Illustrations in manuscripts

Pictorial marginalia exists in a large variety of styles. Sometimes initials are enlarged and made into a great, expanding illustration in gold and colours. One good example is the *Lindisfarne Gospels*², dated late 7th or early 8th century, which contains some of them fill the better part of a whole page. In the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, the letters and initials almost become the illustrations. There are full-page illustrations in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* as well, but they are often used as frontispieces, or made to mark the beginning of a new chapter.³ Some illustrations



Ms. 65, Musée Condé

are like patterns, covering the whole page, except for the text-block, in the style of *horror vacui* – fear of the emptiness. Others are illustrations, made to exemplify and clarify aspects of the texts. In yet other cases, mainly in manuscript from the high middle ages, manuscripts contain pictures that tell a parallel story, disconnected from the text of the book. Furthermore, there are also illustrations in medieval manuscript that are wonderful

1 Kathleen McNamee & Michael L. Jacovides, “Annotations to the speech of the muses (Plato *Republic* 546b–c)”, (<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~mjacovid/muses.pdf>), visited 2011-12-12, 18:34

2 British Library Cotton MS Nero D.IV

3 Michelle P. Brown, *Lindisfarne Gospels – Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*, (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2003), p. 16-18.

pieces of art, paintings and drawings of the highest class. One of the absolutely most famous illustrated books of the middle ages is *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* from the 15th century (Ms. 65, Musée Condé, Bibliothèque Chantilly), with numerous fantastic illustrations.

Unexpected marginalia

In medical works, recipe books, herbals and scientific works, it was very common with marginal illustrations, or even full-page illustrations. The illustrations were used as an aid to understand the text, and could be used as help in following steps of a recipe or a medical procedure. These illustrations can, but do not have to be, of great artistic quality – because their main purpose was to be clear and explaining. Good examples of this kind of illustration can be found in Ms 26 (a collection of alchemical recipes) and Ms 230 (an anatomical treatise) in the Wellcome Collection in London. In the Ms 26, the illustrations for example depict bottles and a distillation apparatus.

Disturbing marginalia?

Illustrations in margins of medieval manuscripts seems to have followed other rules than normal paintings and drawings. The margins was a space where artist could experiment and draw fantastic objects and creatures. Even in holy books, many “sinful” and supernatural objects could be found.

One such, unexpected example can be found in a fourteenth century copy of *Roman de la Rose*⁴ where a nun is depicted picking erect “penises from a phallus-tree”.⁵ On the same page of MS Fr. 25526, one can also see a man having sex with a nun. The book also contains several depictions of



MS Fr. 25526

“copulations and prominent erections”. Interestingly enough, evidence suggests that the images of this book were made by a woman, called Jeanne de Montbaston. She and her husband, Richart de Montbaston, are also depicted in the manuscript. Richart is writing the text, and Johanna is painting the images.⁶

It is hard to understand how much the society and our perception of the world has

4 MS Fr. 25526 in Bibliothèque Nationale France.

5 Michael Camille, *Image on the edge: the margins of medieval art*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 147

6 Camille, *Image on the edge: the margins of medieval art*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 147-149

changed since the middle ages. But sometimes one can still be shocked by the differences. In another medieval manuscript, a Psalter from Cambridge⁷, two young men are depicted producing faeces in a bowl, which is carried to a lady who later worships them at “the altar of the anus”. It is difficult to understand why anyone would like to depict that, and it is astonishing that it can be found in a Psalter. But faeces was not necessarily regarded as something as unpleasant as today, and the risk associated with it, with sickness and deceases, was unknown in the middle ages. Faeces was, however disgusting and unwanted, a natural part of most people's everyday life, due to the sewage water flowing through the cities and villages.⁸ It also becomes rather clear that the pictures are entirely disconnected from the text.

When it comes to that in our eyes seems to crazy or perverted remember that the paintings lived in not have the same normal and accepted as normally regulated, and



Royal MS 2 B.

depictions of this kind, be made by an either person, it is important to people that made these another world, which did perception of what was exists today. Art was the middle ages were not

an age of great immorality, probably at least not very different from the world today. But the paintings in the marginalia of manuscript seems to have been an exception, where artist could experiment and test the limits of what was acceptable. In addition to the sexually evocative and naughty pictures earlier mentioned, could also depictions of the supernatural, for example dragons, devils, half human-half beasts, and monsters like the one found in Queen Mary's *Psalter*⁹(see picture above) be found in medieval manuscripts.¹⁰

Scribal Portraits

Sometimes the production of the manuscript is depicted in the marginalia. In some cases, one can follow all the steps, from the production of vellum, to the work of the scribe, the illuminator, the rubricator, the book binder, (less common) the book dealer and finally, and finally and perhaps most common, portraits of the patron of the book. The book trade was one of few businesses which allowed women. Some of these artists immortalized themselves through making self-portraits of the books they were writing or decorating.

⁷ MS. B. 11. 22., Trinity College, Cambridge.

⁸ Camille, *Image on the edge: the margins of medieval art*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 111-112.

⁹ Royal MS 2 B. Queen Mary's *Psalter*, folio 168b.

¹⁰ Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Manuscript*, (London, Phaidon Press Ltd, 2006), p. 46-47

One good example is the portrait of the German nun Guda, who drew herself in an initial in an *Homiliary of St Bartholomew*¹¹, and signed it with the very thorough explanation “Guda peccatrix mulier scripsit et pinxit hunc librum”.¹² Another example is from the earlier mentioned *Roman de la Rose* (MS Fr. 25526) where Richart and Jeanne de la Montbaston are depicted working with the production of the book. Richart is depicted writing one of the sheets, and his wife is making one of the illustrations.¹³ Sometimes scribes have signed the manuscript at the end of the book, often together with the date, and the place where it was written. In some cases, scribes have also added comments on the working conditions, for example complaining on the cold, the low quality of the vellum or or holes in the pages. There are even examples of scribes who boasts of the fine quality of their work. But in most cases the scribes did not sign their work, at it is therefore incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to determine who, and often also where and when, a book was written.



CMO 5652, CMO II/257

A key to a lost world?

It is in many cases very difficult to understand the pictures in the margin of medieval manuscript. Some of them are reasonably clear and easy to understand; the portraits for example are made by artists and craftsmen who wanted to have some credit for the work to which they had dedicated several months, if not year, of their lives. But other types of illustrations, like the obscene and sexually loaded pictures mentioned earlier, stand out as much more obscure, and are a lot harder to interpret for a modern viewer.

Some illustrations can, often through comparison with illustrations in other manuscripts, works of art or literature, be interpreted and thereby be used as important pieces of puzzles for understanding the time and culture of the middle ages.

Some subjects are frequently seen in the margins of medieval manuscripts, and their meaning was probably very clear and undisputed at the time they were made – they became “an accepted element of medieval imagery”¹⁴ –, but today they are difficult to interpret. One such example is the frequently used motif of a knight battling a snail. In one survey made in 1962, the author found depictions of the “knight battling snail” in the

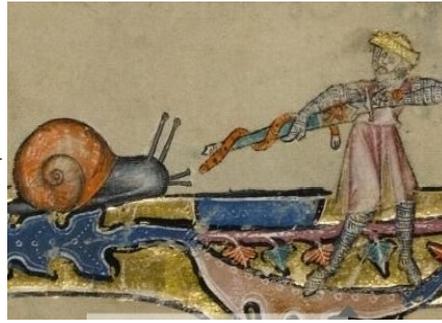
11 CMO 5652, CMO II/257, Frankfurt Stadt Bibliothek

12 Sibylle Harksen, *Women in the Middle Ages: Image of Women*, (Leipzig, Universe Books, 1975), p. 46

13 Camille, *Image on the edge: the margins of medieval art*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 147

14 Lilian M. C. Randall, “The Snail in Gothic Marginal Warfare”, from *Speculum*, vol 37 (no 3; Jul. 1962), p. 359

margins of French, Flemish, manuscripts, most of them 1310.¹⁵ The manuscripts vary snail and knight can be found and pontifical decretals as The motif seems never to the textual passages on the but they are in some cases



MS. M214

English and Danish dating between 1290 and substantially in genre; the in bibles, *Livres des Heures* well as in profane novels. have any real connection to same pages they are made, depicted together with hares.

It is a good example of how marginal images can tell a story that is completely detached from the books they are in. The tentacles of the snails are sometimes depicted as arrows aiming at the poor knight. In one case, the snail has devoured the knight. The dangerous snail is one of many examples of *monde renversé*, an upside down world, often illustrated with “apes armed with sword or crossbow or on horseback with spear; a cat stalking a snail with the head of a mouse; a dog, dragon, ram or even a hare in fierce opposition”.¹⁶ It is hard to say exactly why the snail and the knight were such a popular motif in marginalia during a rather limited period. But the snail had existed as a powerful symbol in literature and in Merovingian tombs, as a symbol of endurance, strength and safety. But during the 12th century, the snail was increasingly associated with cowardice. It goes back to a history of a battle against Lombards, where the Lombards were accused of fleeing – figuratively crawling into their shells.¹⁷ Another theory is that the snail symbolizes a slow, but determined, approaching death. And the knight is simply fighting the snail to survive.¹⁸

Letters as images

Sometimes letters can be enlarged and used as illustrations on their own, like in the earlier mentioned example of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. It is not unusual in medieval manuscripts that the initials have been substantially enlarged, and sometimes they contain advanced imagery with portraits or landscapes, beautifully painted in colours and occasionally even illuminated.

This sort of typographic imagery that is on the borderline between images and texts, exists in a variety of shapes. In the Jewish book culture, the use of micrography became rather wide-spread during the middle ages, and was used in Jewish books and images until

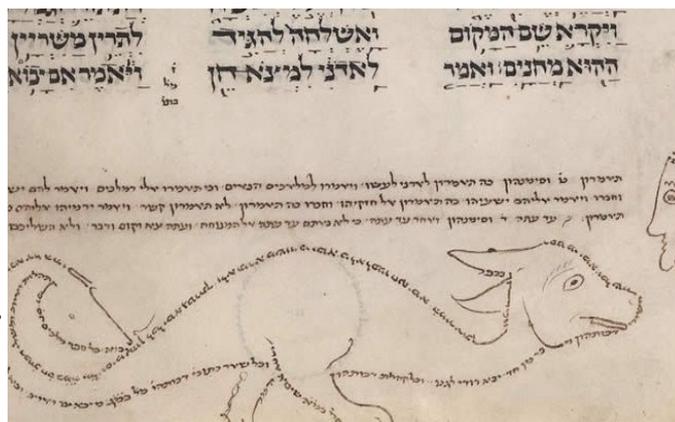
15 Conrad Rudolph, *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, (London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 285

16 Randall, “The Snail in Gothic Marginal Warfare”, from *Speculum*, vol 37 (no 3; Jul. 1962), p. 359

17 Randall, “The Snail in Gothic Marginal Warfare”, from *Speculum*, vol 37 (no 3; Jul. 1962), p. 366

18 Carl Pyrdum III, “What’s so funny about Knights and Snails?”, (<http://www.gotmedieval.com/2009/07/whats-so-funny-about-knights-and-snails.html>), visited 2011-12-15, 22:40

at least the 18th century. Just as in the example of the *Book of Kells*, here the letters become the images, but with the difference that the letters here was not enlarged, but together to form fantastic creatures or symbols. This example is from a German *Pentateuch*¹⁹, written



BL Add. MS 15282

about year 1300.²⁰

These images did, apart from most of the other marginal images discussed in this essay, have a strong connection to the text beside them. They consisted in fact often of gloss, comments on the, in this case, biblical text.

Conclusion

Images in the margins of medieval manuscript were used in a great number of different ways. This essay has showed examples of how illustrations could be used; to fill the the feared emptiness – *horror vacui*, to clarify certain steps in recipes or experiments (more or less like the illustrations in this essay), to form complete pieces of art of often very high quality, to give credit to the artist and scribe of the book (sometimes also the parchment-maker, the rubricator, book-binder et. c., and very often the patron of the book), to be an unregulated space for artists where their most forbidden and fantastic (and sometimes morbid and disgusting) ideas and creatures could take shape in a *monde renversé*, to make up a space where non-verbal, pictorial, stories could be told (regardless of how little it had to do with the text of the book), to create a complex world of symbols and figures, that in many cases is very difficult for a modern viewer to grasp, and finally, to be an expression of the inventiveness and the imagination of book artists during the middle ages.

It would, with other words, be far too limiting to call all manuscript marginalia for “pure distraction”. Some of it was, without doubt, only distraction, sometimes for the writer and sometimes for the reader, perhaps. But the marginalia could be a great help to understand the text, or in other cases, to provide completely new stories. In some cases, like the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, the illustrations were the important part of the book – the text could be found everywhere.

19 BL Add. MS 15282, f. 45 v.

20 John Reeve (editor), *Sacred – Books of the Three Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, (London, The British Library, 2007), p. 150

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