

New Insights on Medieval Literature from Digital Manuscript Resources

Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed a revolution in access to medieval manuscripts. After half a millennium of existence as rare and precious artifacts conserved in the châteaux of aristocrats, or in libraries and museums, where only a select group of specialists could consult them, they have acquired digital identities allowing them to be viewed anytime, anywhere by anyone with a computer. Produced with extremely high-resolution cameras that record even imperceptible details, these digital versions transform manuscript study from an itinerant scholarly activity—where researchers had to go from one repository to another in order to viewing unique manuscript versions of a given work—to a data-rich pursuit where hundreds of manuscripts can be accessed at will in one’s own study.

While undeniably a tour-de-force of Information Technology, this revolution is not simply technical in nature. It also challenges how we have viewed, studied, and thought about medieval literature since Renaissance humanism began to set standards for textual scholarship. Since digital manuscripts offer a radically different image of medieval literary forms from that presented in modern critical editions, our ways of looking at them—and particularly the questions we ask—must change accordingly. This is so because digital resources enable us to display the works as authentic medieval artifacts, which means reading them in the original handwritten form that scribes created for their readers. Inevitably such a view challenges scholarly practice whereby the study of medieval literature should be carried out using a version of the text as close as possible to the poet’s “original.” Since manuscripts tend to be posterior to the poet, text editors study the manuscript tradition to find one deemed the best approximation of an “original.” That version is then published in a critical edition, representing the editor’s work of transcribing, annotating, and normalizing the text of “the best” of the medieval manuscripts of the work of all those that have survived to our own day.



Figure 1. Modern Critical Edition of the *Roman de la Rose*, showing some of the c. 250 extant medieval manuscripts of the Rose, each a variation of the allegorical poem. The edition represents a modern “fixed text” reconstruction of the poem.

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Here one might ask in perplexity: What difference does it make whether one studies a medieval text using a scholarly edition or an original manuscript version, especially if the critical edition is also based on a single manuscript? Don’t both seek to serve similar hermeneutical functions? In a general way, that may be so, but the material studied, their substances, are fundamentally opposed—to cast the problem in terms borrowed from Hans Blumenberg, channeling Ernst Cassirer.¹ Substances are rarely neutral phenomena, and that is particularly so when dealing with medieval manuscripts made from animal skins, and consequently imbricated in the natural, economic, and intellectual ecology of the period. In other words, manuscript materiality is the product of medieval technology, social organization, intellectual and

¹ Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg’s Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 18.

institutional evolution which stimulate a book trade, and a nascent bourgeoisie with money to buy books.

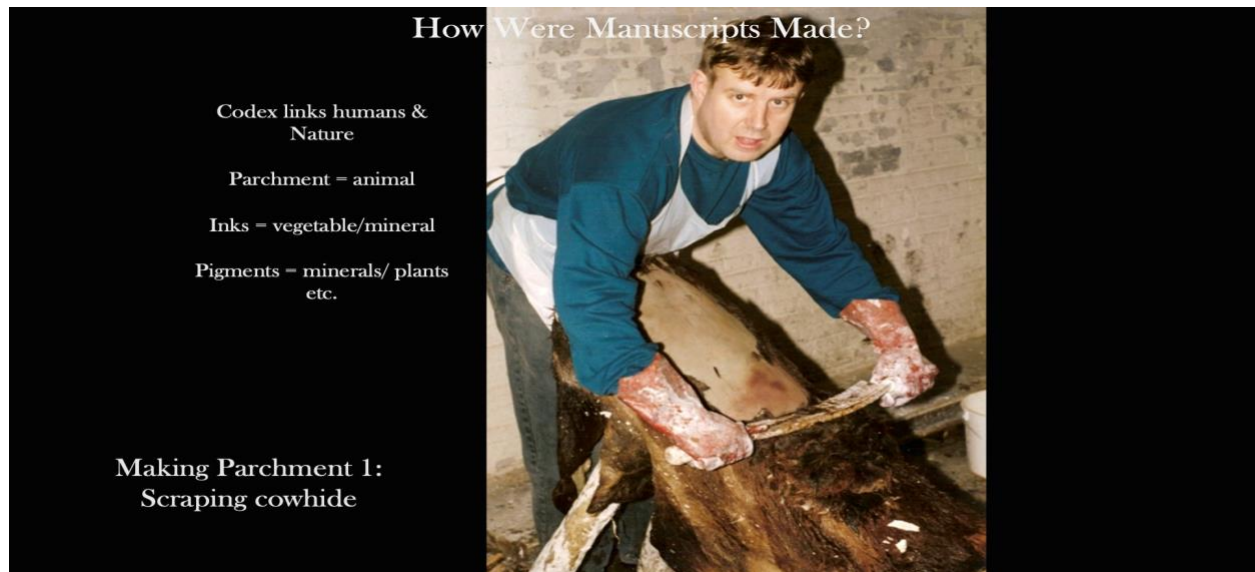


Figure 2. Preparing Parchment I: Scraping Hair (outside) and Flesh (inner side) from Animal.

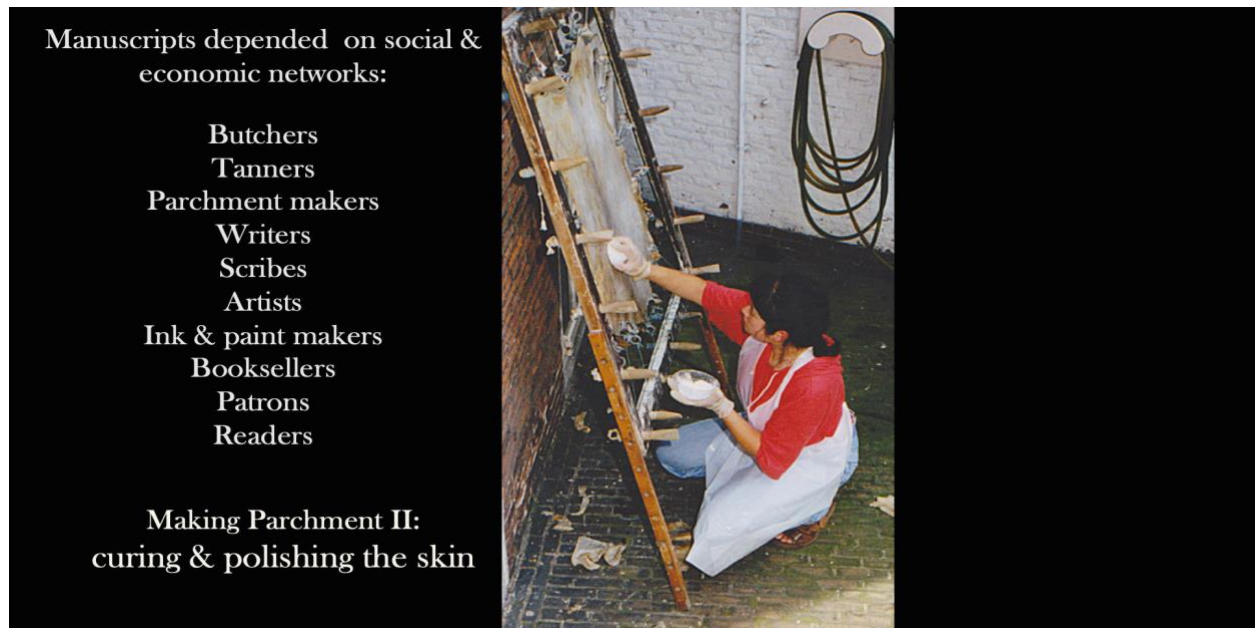


Figure 3. Preparing Parchment 2: Stretching, Curing, and Polishing the Skin to make the Writing Surface.

Substances demand scrutiny; they're contingent upon the researcher's perspective toward the object under investigation, a perspective that may reveal an entirely new set of components in the scrutinized matter. In the case of manuscripts, this means including the material entity—the parchment skins that constitute a codex—in what we might call “the ecology of the manuscript.” This is so because our modern idea of method bases itself upon “the establishment of a disposition of the subject” to participate in a process that directly engages the medieval artifact in its historical medium in order “to generate knowledge in a transsubjective manner.”²

“Disposition of the subject” simply acknowledges the different mindsets that can be brought to bear on the substances studied. For instance, textual study leading to critical editions belongs to a system of questions that have been continually refined since the Humanists formulated them in response to the dissemination of fixed texts that printing made possible.³ On the other hand, the ability to study unique versions of a literary work in their original medieval manuscript format dramatically alters what one sees, and not simply in appearance. It means nothing less than a willingness to accept—to paraphrase Blumenberg—a novel view of the mode of existence of the medieval literary work, continually re-versioned in ever-changing historical situations located in a shifting context of the phenomenal world. Digital resources present innovative ways of approaching this reality: they allow us to apprehend the episteme that produced it, and to devise strategies for interpreting it to contemporary readers.⁴

2

This proposal would hardly be controversial if several hundred years of scholarly convention had not taught us to look for the identity of the vernacular literary work in the verbal text itself. That is to say: if we had not applied the protocols of print culture to the pre-print work. A medieval literary work reduced to its verbal text alone, presented between book covers with the title and the author's name printed on the cover, offers a reassuring sense that this is indeed the poet's own work. Manuscript versions of the same work, on the other hand unsettle such expectations. Medieval literary creation was ongoing and fluid, meaning that works come down to us in unique iterations produced by anonymous scribes over decades or centuries. Artifacts of modern literature such as holograph copies of an author's original creation are not the norm for medieval literature.

And that is exactly the lesson that digital repositories convey by aggregating in a single site scores of manuscript versions of the same work created over a period of several centuries in the case of a thirteenth-century poem like the *Roman de la Rose*. The aggregated versions tell us that the manuscript is not only the vehicle of transmission for these works, but is also the key to the nature of medieval literary form. The literary work is quite simply coextensive with its

² Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, tr. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 33.

³ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 65.

⁴ Cf. Blumenberg, *ibid.*, p. 138.

manuscript representation. This is so because each manuscript represents a unique literary event, which means that in the Middle Ages, we cannot point to a single entity that can be understood as “the work.” Rather, we need to imagine a proteiform scheme instantiated by the number of extant manuscript versions of the work.⁵

The time and place of a manuscript’s production further complicate—or enrich, as I prefer to think—the nature of each instantiation of a work. A manuscript’s having been produced at a specific time and in a specific place—usually at the behest of an individual patron desirous of possessing a copy of a work—necessarily casts it as witness to a social and cultural network of transactions. And these transactions are imbricated in the natural world in ways we moderns can only imagine with difficulty. This is hardly surprising when we reflect upon the origin of a medieval codex. As an entirely natural artifact made from specially-treated animal skin (usually cow, goat, or sheep) with inks and paints also produced from organic materials, the completed manuscript involves sequential changes carried out via task-specific agricultural and artisanal practices performed by linked social configurations. This is, in part, what the expression, “manuscript ecology,” denotes.

That the substrate of a parchment page consists of animal skin had real implications for reading and interpreting medieval works at the time, which is why modern readers need to appreciate the broader implications of the categories, “animal” and “natural.” In *De Anima*, for example, Aristotle speaks of the soul as a general principle of life for plants and animals, where humans naturally figure in the genus animal. The context for this observation is Book 2, Chapter 11, where he notes that touch is the one sense that all animals share: “The primary form of perception which belongs to all animals is touch...All animals evidently have the sense of touch” (413b5-6).

Aristotle goes to the heart of our study when he asks whether skin is *a sense organ* or a *medium for perceptual stimuli* which it transmits to the inner organs of cognition. John Philoponus (c. 490-570 C.E.), a Christian theologian and scientist, discussed this aporia in his commentary on *De Anima*, where he rejects the notion that skin is a sense organ, seeing it rather as a receptive medium and transmitter of stimuli. “Since, then, the apprehension of objects of touch occurs through flesh, this is as a medium through which apprehension of touch-objects occurs.” And again, “Here is the third of the proofs that show that flesh is not a sense-organ, but a medium.” In his preface to a recent translation of Philoponus’ commentary, Richard Sorabji shows that these distinctions differentiate physical from cognitive processes: “Only the organ of touch, the most physical sense, takes on the tangible qualities perceived, because reception of sense qualities needs to be cognitive (*gnôstikôs*), not physical.” On this account, then, skin is a medium of perceptual transmission to an inner cognitive processing center. “Even touch and

⁵ On the conceptual and material variability of medieval works due to the nature of manuscript transmission, see Chapter 3, “No Fool of Time: The Paradox of Manuscript Transmission,” in Nichols, *From Parchment to Cyberspace: Medieval Literature in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016): 55-94.

taste work at a distance in a way, on Aristotle's theory, because their true (sense) organ is in the heart, not at the surface skin or the tongue."

If skin is a medium *of* perception in the living animal, it becomes a medium *for* perception when re-purposed as parchment. Medieval readers—if they thought about it—would have no difficulty understanding the continuity of skin in perceptual processes of a live animal and the perceptual stimuli triggered by animal skin transformed into a parchment matrix for visual representation, both graphic and figural. The continuity flowed naturally for medieval readers familiar with Aristotle's principle of hylomorphism, which he expounds in, among other works, *De Anima* (and of which his theory of the senses in Book II is an integral part). We'll return to this concept later when discussing the self-generating nature of the manuscript matrix.

3

The foregoing remarks claim nothing more nor less than that digitized manuscript resources propose a new epistemology asking us to conceive medieval culture and literature in a new light. The following summary may help to clarify the basic points of the argument.

1. Mass digitization of parchment manuscripts, especially of the same work, enables comparative study showing the codex as key to the nature of vernacular literary form.
2. Each manuscript is the site of a representational event offering a unique version of the literary work it presents; in other words, a medieval vernacular literary work is coextensive with its manuscript representation.
3. The Nature and substance of objects of study vary according to format: a critical edition and a digitized manuscript are different substances that require different perspectives.
4. "Manuscript ecology" recognizes the origin of a medieval codex as animal skins (usually cow, sheep or goat) whose transformation into parchment involves sequential changes carried out via task-specific agricultural and artisanal practices performed by linked social configurations.
5. The animal skin substrate of a parchment page has implications for reading and interpreting medieval works in accord with Book II, ch. 2 of Aristotle's *De anima*, which argues that skin is a medium for perceptual stimuli transmitted to the inner organs of cognition.

6. We recognize an organic continuity in the sensory function of animal skin from a medium *of* perception in the living animal to a medium *for* perception when transformed into parchment.
7. Skin-as-medium forms a natural bond between parchment page, scribe, and reader.⁶
8. The Parchment page—like Saint Augustine’s “tunic of skin” in *Confessions* XIII.15.16—mobilizes what Alan of Lille calls “the magic of pictures” (*incantatio picturae*), i.e. visual and graphic representation.⁷
9. The Parchment page deploys vision, thinking, and understanding, the three material aspects of form in Aristotle’s concept of *energeia* (actualization-of-potential) that brings about the changes we recognize as representation-as-performance.⁸

4

As I have been suggesting, one of the ways that digital repositories have changed the epistemology of manuscript study is by giving us open access to numbers of codices, especially versions of the same work. Such ready contact renders comparative study a compelling adjunct to our work practices. One of the first observations to strike the eye is the performative nature of the parchment page, the fact that it contains so much more than the text of the work.

⁶ See Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁷ Alan describes the dress worn by the goddess, Nature: “A linen tunic, with pictures from the embroider’s art, concealed the maiden’s body beneath its folds. This tunic, bestarred with many a colour...sought to approximate the element, earth. ... (here) the magic of pictures made animals come alive” (*In quibus quaedam picturae incantatio terrestria animalia vivere faciebat*). Alan of Lille, *The Paint of Nature*, Translation and Commentary by James J. Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval studies, 1980), Prose 1, pp. 98-99.

⁸ On the dynamic aspects of *energeia*, see Nichols, *From Parchment to Cyberspace*, Chapter 5, “Variance as Dynamic Reading.”

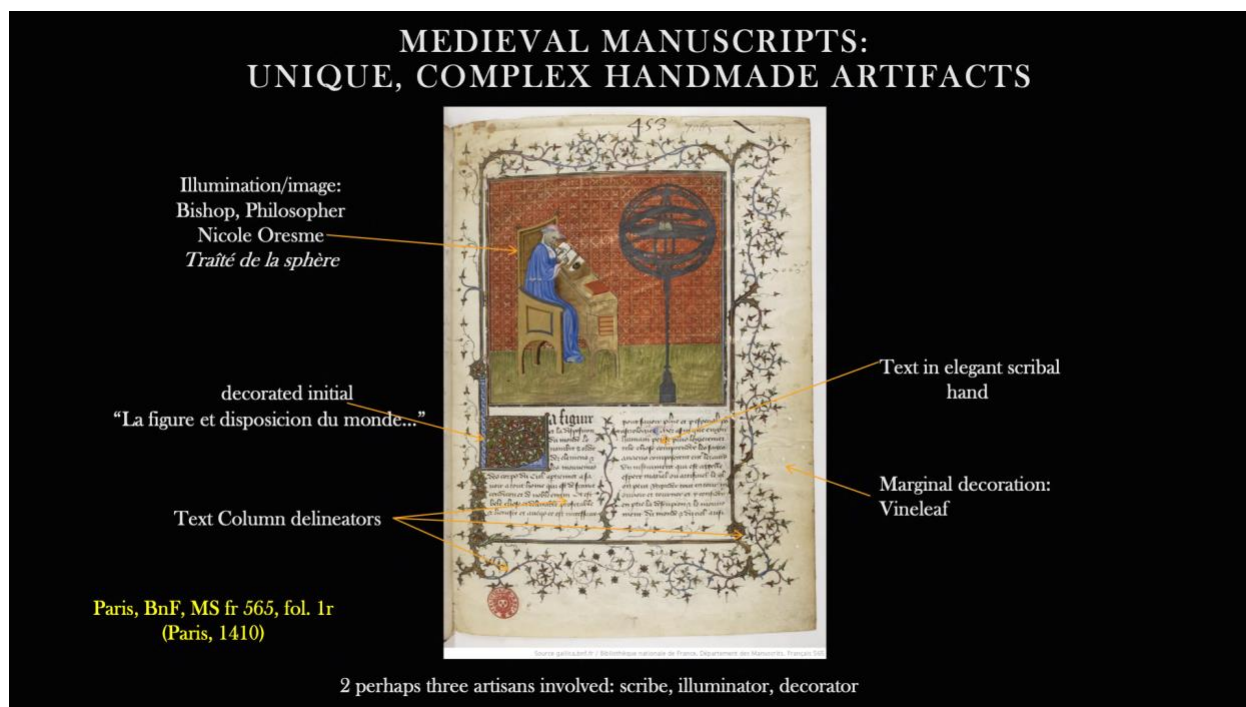


Figure 4. Medieval Manuscript Page as a Unique, Multi-Modal Performance, where Painting, Verbal Text, Pictorial Initial Letter, Decorative Borders, and Rubrics are Choreographed as Complex Representation.

Even a cursory glance at Figure 4 shows how a manuscript folio intricately choreographs picture, text, rubric, decorated initials, and marginal decoration in a sequence compelling perception, reflection, and comprehension. Decorated column delineators marshal the array of sign systems so as to enhance their symphonic effect. Note also how a separate border surrounds the image in the top half of the folio and the text in the lower half, effectively joining these competing signifying systems into a unified field of meaning.

It's impossible to spend even a brief time with a folio like that in figure 4 without realizing how much each register depends upon and enhances the others. Gazing at the manuscript page, we recognize that the elegantly hand-lettered text flows together with the other visual registers, blurring the sharp distinction between text and image, writing and picture, that modern print imposes. It's impossible not to feel that the text depends for meaning on the visual and sonorous (the words were often read aloud) experiences orchestrated by the design of the manuscript page.

A continuous visual flow choreographs the space of the folio. A space, I would add, that is anything but inert. We can see—or at least intuit—the hands, talents, and varied skills requisite to decorate, illuminate, write, and plan the intricate layout. Manuscripts are embodied objects, the result of intensive human activity, not unlike, *mutatis mutandis*, the collaborative activity expended on birthing, herding, feeding, and slaughtering the animals that produced the skin we see so transformed in this folio.

Graceful visual performance cannot help but connect us to the remote artists who made these artifacts. But the original purpose of the intricate network was meant as a guide for readers to allow them to perceive and appreciate the artisans' own vision, perception, and understanding of the work they were not simply "copying" but also performing. Just as each musical presentation of a composer's score contains the musician's or conductor's interpretation of the piece, so medieval scribes and artists similarly incorporated their understanding of the work into their manuscript version of it.

Written text, miniature paintings, rubrics set off in red to contrast with the black or sepia ink of the text, and the decorative patterns speak their idea of and for the work. Each node of the choreographed network of signs has been planned to connect with the others, to "gesture" to the others in a kind of circularity that imparts cohesion to the page. Visual images comment dialectically on the verbal text, which, in its turn, offers a counterpoint to the image. Rubrics—comments or headings in the text akin to stage directions and written in red ink to distinguish them from the poetic text—interrupt the flow of the text with a twitter-like comment or else a reminder of which character is speaking or the subject at issue.

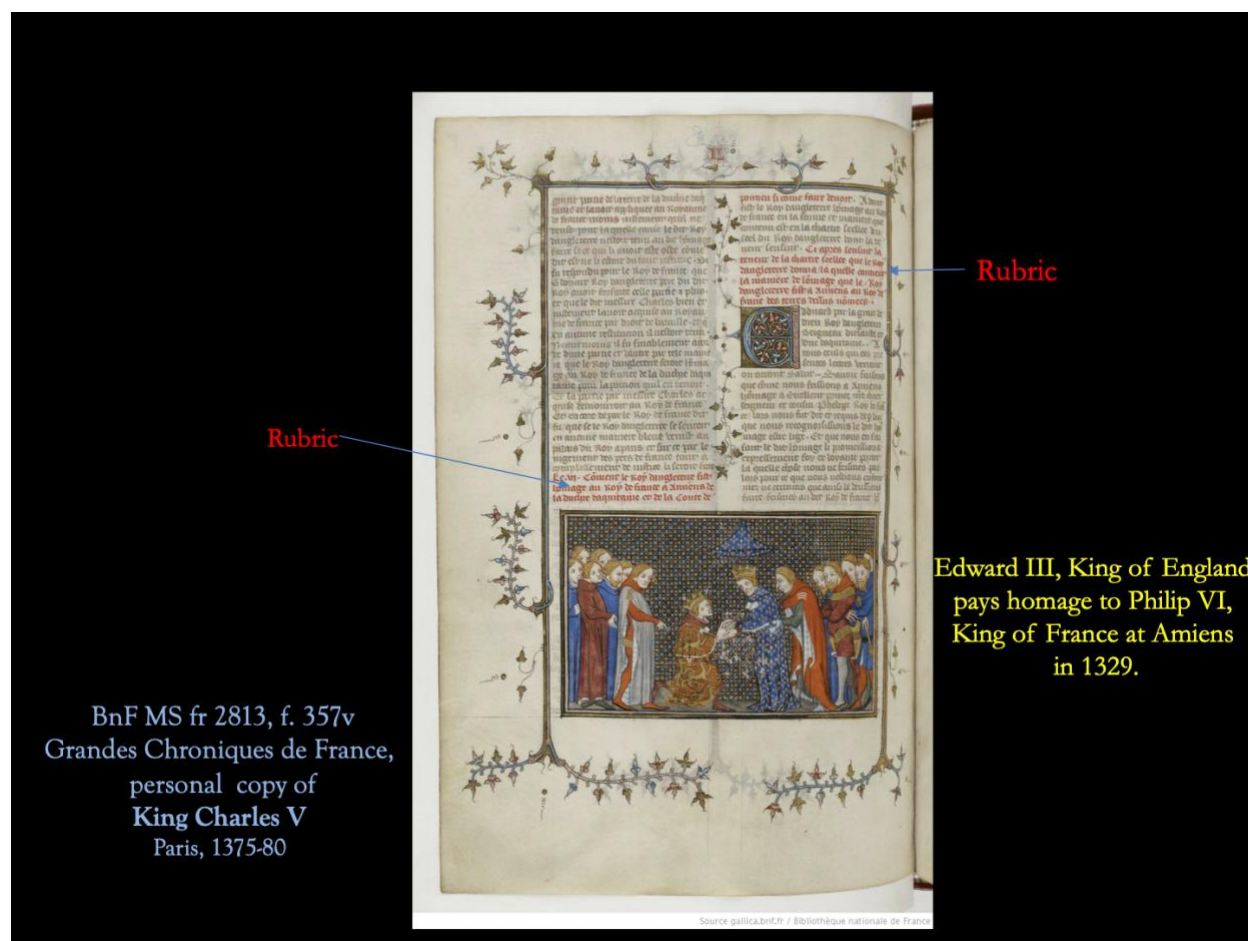


Figure 5. Example of Rubric as "Caption." *Grandes Chroniques de France*, Paris, BnF MS fr 2813, fol 357v. (Paris, 1375-1380). Personal Copy of King Charles V.

Even the page design conveys a sense of intention about its composition. The manuscript page is not simply a neutral space to be filled by a certain portion of the poem it presents. We have to think of the parchment space as akin to a stage where the portion of the poem it contains appears differently from any other representation of the “same” text. This is so because scribe and artist are physically “present” in the space of the folio they have filled with their handwriting and brushwork; even the poet—who may be long dead—is virtually present through the text of the poem. In this way the parchment page is a composite space where the separate perceptions of poet, scribe, and artist crystallize to form an understanding of the work subtly or widely different from other versions. In short, the material space of the parchment folio orchestrates the performance that gives specificity to a given version.

5

Now thanks to digital manuscript repositories, we can study this extraordinary literary flowering in its original forms. More importantly, we can readily access a variety of manuscript styles that demonstrate the range and inventiveness of this technology. The ability of the manuscript matrix to configure different sign systems led to innovative treatises on specialized subjects, such as music. Manuscripts proved effective for bringing new developments in music into metaphorical congruence with court life. The parchment page offered a practical way to close the gap between the universe of things and the world of signs. If flamboyant Gothic architecture is the pinnacle of fourteenth-century monumental display, its musical and artistic counterpart is the complex multi-media phenomenon known as *Ars Nova*. Responsible for some of the most elaborately illuminated manuscripts ever produced, *Ars Nova* deployed incredibly complex musical arrangements of part singing to constrain disparate voices and seemingly discordant rhythms in a flowing, soaring harmony. It also offered a fascinating example of self-determining form in a multi-media setting where musical notation and lyric text interlace on the parchment page.

Treatises of the period recognized the metaphorical congruence between a technology of instrument, voice, and language capable of imposing order on the confusion of mundane life. Perhaps the poet-musician who best exemplifies this art in the fourteenth century is Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377) who took lyric poetry as polyphony to new heights. Perhaps no image captures the magic of Guillaume de Machaut’s poetry and music or the qualities that made him pre-eminent in fourteenth-century Europe quite so well as this song from an early Machaut manuscript (Figure of 6).

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Et reueure vraiment.
 Ma fin est mon commencement.
 C'est tiers chans. iij. fois seulement
 Se retrograde: et ainsi fin
 Ma fin est mon commencement
 Et mon commencement ma fin. 7c

Et reueure vraiment.
 Ma fin est mon commencement.
 C'est tiers chans. iij. fois seulement
 Se retrograde: et ainsi fin
 Ma fin est mon commencement
 Et mon commencement ma fin. 7c

Pour ce que gent maniere
 Et vis a bel. Certes mon oueil
 Richement visa bel. Je fute
 Fleur des que fu vis a bel.
 Quant fleur des fleurs tous li mondez tapelle
 Certes mon oueil richement visa bel.
 Quant premiers vi ma dame bonne et belle.

.Rondei.

Figure 6. Guillaume de Machaut, rondeau: "Ma fin est mon commencement." Paris, BnF MS fr 22546, fol. 153r. (Paris, 14th c.)

The folio contains a rondeau, a circular lyric form originating in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century in France. It was favored by court poets for its fixed, but complex form that allowed poets and musicians—often the same person at this time—to demonstrate their virtuosity. Formally, a rondeau consists of thirteen lines, divided into three stanzas of 5, 3, and 5 lines, with only two rhymes throughout and with the opening words of the first line used as a refrain at the end of the second and third stanzas.

Looking at this graphic rendition of word and music, we marvel at the beauty of the elongated black notes running up and down the red lines of the polyphonic notation. We note appreciatively the symmetry of the five alternating red and blue initials marking discrete units of the song. And then, at the bottom, we discover the neat calligraphy of the poems transfigured by the musical score just above the text. The striking choreography of this folio “plays” the stately polyphonic rhythms for the eye as well as the ear.

Then we remark a curious anomaly: the first blue initial is upside-down. Not only is it upside down, but the text of the rondeau of which it is the first letter—*Ma fin est mon commencement et mon commencement ma fin* (“My end is my beginning and my beginning, my end”)—is also upside-down. To read it “normally,” you have to rotate the manuscript 180 degrees, at which point, instead of being the first item at the top of the left-hand column, the song becomes the last item in the right-hand column, making it, in effect, both the first and last song on the folio.⁹ It’s a masterful example of a manuscript page’s ability to imitate visually the circularity of the poem itself. But there’s more to it than that. When Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet says that this rondeau “condenses and embodies the art of the poet and of the musician,” she reminds us that we’re accustomed to looking for meaning primarily in the language and form of the poem alone.¹⁰

But here in figure 6, we find the manuscript page collaborating with the song to generate meanings beyond the boundaries of the text. By writing the rondeau upside down, so that the reader must rotate the volume to read it, the scribe evokes another prominent medieval metaphor for the contingency of being, the wheel of fortune. Writing on the page from left to right and from top to bottom are conventions so fixed that we take them for granted. A major purpose of book formats—be they handwritten or printed—is to establish and maintain conventions of communication. In life as in culture, habit reinforces rules.

⁹ Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet notes how writing the rondeau upside down “veils its immediate intelligibility but unveils the musical construction.” At the same time, she notes, “the act of turning the manuscript to read the text reveals its meaning, namely a form, the circle. The very gesture materializes the idea.” “Ma fin est mon commencement.” *The Essence of Poetry and Song in Guillaume de Machaut*, in *A Companion to Guillaume de Machaut*, eds. Deborah McGrady and Jennifer Bain (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 70.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 69.

Medieval Poets like Machaut and his influential precursor, Jean de Meun, deplored ontological complacency born of convention. Recognizing the latter as circular in nature—custom unreflectively guiding practice so that output conforms to expectation—they exposed the circularity of self-deluding rhetoric. Jean de Meun does so by using Fortune’s wheel to show how humans blind themselves to contingent being:

Quant seur sa roe les fet estre:
lors cuident estre si haut mestre
et leurs estas si fers voair
qu’il n’en puissent ja mes choair; (4831-4834)

...
Mes la contraire et la perverse,
quant de leur granz estaz les verse
et les tumbe, au tor de la roe,
du sommet envers an la boe... (4863-4866)¹¹

When Fortune places humans high on her wheel, they think themselves great lords, and look upon their estate as so firm they could never fall ... But Fortune, contrary and perverse, when she hurls them down from their high estate, and they fall with the turn of the wheel from the top down into the mud...

For his part, Machaut exposes convention by literally overturning its rules. His defiant act of inversion conceals immediate intelligibility in favor of asserting a higher, perfect form, the divine circle, which the manuscript then imitates by forcing us to rotate it to read the words; in so doing we enact the circularity they perform. Machaut’s circular metaphor contrasts human mutability with the paradox of the still turning center of divine stability: a form continually in motion, but ever returning to its point of origin. That’s exactly what the poem says, and what the manuscript enacts:

Ma fin est mon commencement	My end is my beginning
Et mon commencement ma fin.	And my beginning my end
Et teneüre vraiment	And this truly holds
Ma fin est mon commencement.	My end is my beginning.
Mes tiers chans trois fois seulements.	My third voice just three times
Se retrograde et ainsi fin.	Reverses itself and thus ends.
Ma fin est mon commencement.	My end is my beginning
Et mon commencement ma fin.	And my beginning my end. ¹²

¹¹Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Le roman de la Rose*, publié par Félix Lecoy, Tome 1 (Paris : Librairie Champion, 1965). Translation mine.

¹²Text and translation by Lloyd Ackert, <http://www.cycle-of-life.net/musmachaut.html>.

As the musical layout of the manuscript shows, this is a three-part rondeau with two top, or tenor parts, and a lower third voice. In keeping with its name, *rondeau*, the cyclical repetition evokes the metaphysical idea that “The thing which hath been is that which shall be.” Machaut raises the stakes by devising intricate musical formulas that happen also to illustrate the meaning of his lyrics more ingeniously. In this *rondeau*, two musical sections (lines 1-2, 4, 7-8 and 3, 5-6) confront each other as they cycle through the melody. The first states and restates the theme, while the second reflects on concepts—at once formal and metaphysical—of stability, procession and return. *Teneüre* in line 3 (the first of the second section) has multiple senses, including “tenor,” the top two parts of the round, and “holding or maintaining” the melody of the first section.

The dual tenor parts contrast with the “third voice” (lines 5-6), the lowest of the three parts. The second section (third voice) reveals the complex dynamic between the three parts: “the top two presents the same melody, but in opposite temporal directions, and the lowest of the three parts (i.e., the ‘third voice’) literally retraces its steps once it reaches the mid-point of the song. Since the two musical sections are repeated consecutively a total of three times, the third voice, true to the text, reverses itself exactly ‘trois fois’—three times—before the end.”¹³

Three voices, three repetitions, nine staves of musical notation, the inverted inscription, and the triple repetition of beginning and end: how can one not see allusions to Creation? Not only to Creation, but also to Christian eschatology as a whole—that most endogenous of concepts—since in that system, Genesis presupposes Revelation. In the words of Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, “With its intelligible figure and perceptible form, the *rondeau* presents itself, in the image of God, as the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, terms that bring us back to the Apocalypse of Saint John (Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13).”¹⁴

“Ma fin est mon commencement” as presented so dramatically in BnF fr 22546 offers an iconic symbol of the work of vision, thinking, and understanding discoverable in the parchment page. Like the “tunic of skin” evoked by Augustine, this folio mobilizes the “magic of pictures” (*incantatio picturae*) to offer a striking example of medieval literary works now readily available in digital repositories.

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¹³Lloyd Ackert, <http://www.cycle-of-life.net/musmachaut.html>.

¹⁴Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, “The essence of Poetry and Song in Guillaume de Machaut” (op. cit.), p. 76.