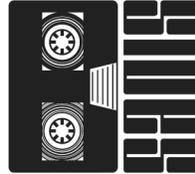


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Flora and Fauna in the Folio of a 14th Century Psalm

Amy J. W. Slowik

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Abstract:

“Flora and Fauna in the Folio of a 14th Century Psalm” explores an illuminated folio owned by the University of Iowa’s Special Collections & Archives.

Keywords:

Special Collections | medieval | folio | illuminations

Mysterious and gorgeous, folio xfMMs.Bo4¹ in the University of Iowa Special Collections is a small double-sided folio presumed to be from a 14th century book of hours. Although the folio remains isolated and specifically unidentified, I argue that we can make the educated guess that a woman of high but not noble rank owned it and that it could be an excerpt from either a book of hours or a psalter. I base these assertions on the texts used on the folio, the nature of the illuminations, and the quality of the manuscript.

The folio contains sections of Psalms 80 and 81 from the Latin Vulgate bible.² English translations from the New American Bible follow.

Psalm 80:

- 1 Shepherd of Israel, listen, guide of the flock of Joseph! From your throne upon the cherubim reveal yourself
- 2 to Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. Stir up your power, come to save us.
- 3 O LORD of hosts, restore us; Let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.
- 4 LORD of hosts, how long will you burn with anger while your people pray?
- 5 You have fed them the bread of tears, made them drink tears in abundance.
- 6 You have left us to be fought over by our neighbors; our enemies deride us.
- 7 O LORD of hosts, restore us; let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.
- 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove away the nations and planted it.
- 9 You cleared the ground; it took root and filled the land.
- 10 The mountains were covered by its shadow, the cedars of God by its branches.
- 11 It sent out boughs as far as the sea, shoots as far as the river.
- 12 Why have you broken down the walls, so that all who pass by pluck its fruit?
- 13 The boar from the forest strips the vine; the beast of the field feeds upon it.
- 14 Turn again, LORD of hosts; look down from heaven and see; Attend to this vine,
- 15 the shoot your right hand has planted.
- 16 Those who would burn or cut it down-- may they perish at your rebuke.
- 17 May your help be with the man at your right hand, with the one whom you once made strong.
- 18 Then we will not withdraw from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.³

Psalm 81:

- 1 Sing joyfully to God our strength; shout in triumph to the God of Jacob!
- 2 Take up a melody, sound the timbrel, the sweet-sounding harp and lyre.
- 3 Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our solemn feast.
- 4 For this is a law in Israel, an edict of the God of Jacob,
- 5 Who made it a decree for Joseph when he came out of the land of Egypt. If I hear a new oracle:
- 6 "I relieved their shoulders of the burden; their hands put down the basket.
- 7 In distress you called and I rescued you; unseen, I spoke to you in thunder; At the waters of Meribah I tested you and said: Selah
- 8 Listen, my people, I give you warning! If only you will obey me, Israel!
- 9 There must be no foreign god among you; you must not worship an alien god.
- 10 I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. Open wide your mouth that I may fill it.'

¹ Finding aid available at http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/MS/ToMsc550/MsC542/MsC542_Medieval%20MSC.html#bkhrs.

² Thanks to Kathleen Kamerick for her assistance in identifying these texts from the medieval Latin.

³ <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm80.htm>



[Figure 1]



[Figure 2]

- 11 But my people did not listen to my words; Israel did not obey me.
- 12 So I gave them over to hardness of heart; they followed their own designs.
- 13 But even now if my people would listen, if Israel would walk in my paths,
- 14 In a moment I would subdue their foes, against their enemies unleash my hand.
- 15 Those who hate the LORD would tremble, their doom sealed forever.

As one can see from even a quick reading of the text and a glance at the folio [Figures 1 and 2], the message of the psalms has no immediate bearing on the illuminations of the folio. The illuminations consist of brightly colored vines with leaves, decorated capitals, abstract geometric line spacers, vaguely aquatic creatures masking as margin decorations, and two independent birds.

Although lines 15-18 of Psalm 80 refer to vines and beasts of the field, I argue that the craftsman did not likely intend a specific link between the illuminations and the text. Illuminations such as these would likely have run through a series of folios, defying textual references except in the loosest sense. If a specific link between picture and text had been the craftsman's intention, she or he had a far more rich and specific selection of images to choose from throughout both Psalms. Instead, I believe that the rich, garden-like illuminations serve as stylizations belonging to a realm of illuminations of the time relating to women, gardens, sin, and heaven.⁴ I will go into this later, after we have confirmed the nature of the folio.

The question of whether the folio came from a book of hours or a psalter remains an unsolvable one unless further pages from the same book can be identified. Men and women of high birth used both, though books of hours became more popular after the 13th century.⁵ However, we can ascertain with high certainty that this folio belonged to someone of the upper classes.

The folio is designed to be easily read, indicating a non-scholarly but literate audience. Large dentelle (lace-like) initials in red and blue with geometric designs and the occasional dripping foliage mark new sentences. Periods mark the end of sentences along with more line ending geometric designs between sentences. Gold leaf touches parts of the vines and letters. One small but detailed red bird sits at the bottom margin of each side, crouching between the text and a curve of vine. Such colors and details would be meant to attract the eye of a non-scholar, perhaps someone not very serious about prayer or reading.

The book is of high quality but not the highest quality. The paint has been slightly sloppily applied over the lines of the illustrations: the illuminator did not bother to use a small enough brush or to take enough time for precise application. The smudges on the page corners and the fact that the letters are large enough to read easily indicate that this book was not meant to sit in a showroom⁶, it was meant to be read and used.

The only damage to the folio appears to come from use: but not a great deal of use. A small circle of a hard, discolored substance sits in the middle of the left column

⁴ Sand, Alexa. "Vision, Devotion, and Difficulty in the Psalter Hours 'of Yolande of Soissons,'" *The Art Bulletin*. 87:1 (March 2005), 10.

⁵ Canatella, Holle. "The Psalter & Commentary," University of Houston College of Education, 21.

⁶ In the Middle Ages, just as in any other age, the very rich collected and commissioned items of beauty purely to show off their wealth.

on the front page: possibly candle wax partially picked off. Edges and outside corners of the page show grayish smudges where someone might hold the book and turn the pages. Small parts of the illuminations have been covered over with what looks like lead: perhaps the user colored over them during Mass. A line of dark smudges down the front left column may also indicate that someone handled the book frequently. Tiny water or mold marks dot the long edges, but do not significantly mar the work. Though well-used, it has also been relatively well-cared for and therefore valued.

Such use would affirm my argument that the book belonged to a high-ranking but not noble woman. The user would possibly have been a young, not terribly devout one, given the folio's size, quality, detail, easily-read Latin. He or she likely did not have the reading skill or need for tiny font to save space that a cleric would have, and thus would have needed clear writing. The illuminations and script appear of high quality. The letters are perfectly formed: large and widely spaced, ranging from $\frac{1}{4}$ " x $\frac{1}{8}$ " for the small letters to $\frac{3}{4}$ " x $\frac{1}{4}$ " for the largest letter. No abbreviations or changes in kind of script appear. The text of both pages forms two columns; the front columns are separated by elaborate blue and red vine-like embellishments, which flourish at either end of the page with delicate foliage such as leaves and berries. Similar embellishments exist on the back page, but all along the outer edge and only on the top and bottom inch of the center margin. The text and illuminations have plenty of space on the page. There are no visible stylus prickings, but vague grid lines show care in production. There is also no pagination. Overall, the text is easy to read, indicating a user not proficient in Latin but not at all an illiterate: the more illiterate the reader, the more numerous and specific the images, and this folio has few images compared to many others of its ilk.⁷

The University of Iowa Special Collections finding aid lists the folio as being made of high-quality vellum, which a visual examination confirms. The flesh versus hair sides are very difficult to distinguish, possibly indicating that very expensive vellum from an unborn calf (which would have tiny hair follicles and veins) may have been used. There appear no inherent flaws or damages to the vellum, and the edges show slight raggedness. Ink bleeds through the thin and probably quite flexible and fragile vellum. Few but the upper classes could have afforded such a book.

As a psalter or book of hours of a wealthy but not royal or egregiously rich layman would have been quite a lovely and delicate gift and/or commission—a small treasure, perhaps, but not a priceless one. In contrast, the *Trés Riche Heures* of the Duke du Berry, belonging to a high noble and having the highest level of skill and wealth put into it, shows almost no wear because it sat on display for centuries. This book was pretty enough to be valuable, but not of such extraordinary value that it would not have been used. As I've discussed, the folio shows clear signs of regular use.

Books of hours often had less text and more images than the folio we examine. Also, a psalter would be more likely to house back-to-back psalms as in this folio: they were usually less interactive than books of hours and more scripture-based. This does not, however, exclude the folio from belonging to a book of hours. When I examined psalters on ARTstor, I found that only a few texts identified as psalters made use of the

⁷ Sand, 11.

two-column format.⁸ Also, they generally had more images, often including people.⁹ Our folio contains only geometric designs, flora, and fauna. We cannot know that other pages from the book did not contain the more common illuminations, though it seems unlikely that the book would have switched back to the usual one-column format for the rest of the text. This helps to argue that this folio came from a psalter, not a book of hours.

I believe that we can reasonably assume that the illuminations on our folio generally represent the illuminations through at least sections of its mother work. Medieval illuminations, no matter how frivolous they appear, should not be easily dismissed: “Sylvia Huot points out that ‘ethics and aesthetics went hand in hand’ for medieval audiences, and that the meditative, interpretative work of reading through images was a well-established habit of educated readers.”¹⁰ If the illuminations of the folio connect to the ethics of the text, what purpose do the birds and foliage in the folio serve? The answer, I believe, lies in the medieval connections between women, sin, gardens, and heaven.

If the folio in question largely represents the book as a whole, then the illuminations support my argument that the book belonged to a woman. Both psalters and books of hours (and the psalter hours which combine the two) served devotional and educational purposes. Women often owned such books because medieval society believed that they needed more religious and moral instruction than men.¹¹ Women, according to the Church at the time, descended from Eve and therefore shared her weaknesses. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the opposite of Eve in medieval Christian culture. Every medieval woman was encouraged to follow her example. A wealthy, devote woman in medieval Europe would have carried her psalter or book of hours many places with her—particularly a book of hours, which includes prayers meant for different times of the day throughout the day. This folio is four inches wide by six and three-quarters inches long, making the book it came from quite portable. A book such as this one would have made a wonderful present for a young lady at her marriage in the hopes that she would use it to become an ideal Christian wife like Mary, the mother of Jesus.¹²

The foliage and birds in the folio connect the reader to a garden-like atmosphere. In medieval illuminations, gardens appeared often and had many meanings:

The garden of love was one of the most frequently represented secular subjects of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As a consequence of its popularity as a setting for romance in chivalric literature, gardens of love are found not only in the illumination of manuscripts dedicated to these narratives, but also in murals, paintings, sculpture, the

⁸ “Books of Hours are usually in one column” (Psalters aren’t mentioned). Hamel, Christopher. *Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes & Illuminators*. London: British Museum Press, 1992, p. 21-23.

⁹ Sand, 8.

¹⁰ Sand, 10.

¹¹ Leyser, Henrietta. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women In England 450-1500*. London: Phoenix Press, 1996. 232-235.

¹² Sand, 6.

decoration of marriage chests, ivory and wooden boxes, tapestries as well as goldsmiths' and leatherwork.¹³

Mary often appears sitting in a garden, such as in the very famous image *Paradise Garden*, which portrays a young, beautiful Mary reading (probably the Bible) in the corner of a lush, walled-up garden. That garden has been interpreted as representing both the womb and Heaven—ideal images for devout mothers or future mothers. In medieval symbolism, a walled garden represents sanctuary from the perverse world. Women were to protect themselves from the world through the mysteries of religion, thus creating a wall around themselves and a fruitful interior of devotion and fertility. Because women were associated with nature which could grow wild, a walled, cultivated garden represented a woman whose vices could be cultivated into something holy and pristine.

Wild, unwallled gardens can be associated inversely with Eve, who lived in a garden until the snake tempted her with a fruit from the tree of knowledge. After eating the fruit, she and Adam had to leave the godliness of the garden (for Genesis states that God would walk through the garden) for the toils of the harsh world outside. In this sense, the garden can be seen not only as an ideal location parallel to or representing heaven, but also a place of temptation and danger. In the 13th century poem *Le Roman de la Rose*, the protagonist enters a garden full of temptations and sins. A garden has nothing but negative connotations in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* where the inhabitants engage in all manners of vice.

Medieval women often had to negotiate these contradictions on a personal basis: were they modeled after Mary, the mother of God, or after Eve, the destroyer of man? How could they be both? Setting the text of the psalms in a garden-like atmosphere of illuminations may have deliberately evoked these polemics. The foliage would be a reminder of heaven and the heavenly state, on which they should meditate and strive to achieve through reading the psalms. The foliage would also be a reminder of sin, temptation, and their own relationship to Eve. The glorious colors (including gold leaf) of the illuminations would have reinforced the connection to heavenly splendor and the salvation that can be achieved through it.

But what of the birds? Are they meant to be specific types of birds whose symbolism would have special meaning to the reader? The details of the birds do not give immediate clue to what types they're meant to be. One bird appears on each side of the folio, and they appear to be of the same species. Indeed, their mannerisms and styles appear so similar that they may well be simple tracings or copies of the same bird. This was not uncommon in medieval illuminations.¹⁴

Much of what we know about medieval knowledge of animals comes from bestiaries. England, the same country from where our folio is supposed to have

¹³ Moxey, Kevin P.F.. "Master E.S. and the Folly of Love," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 11:3/4 (1980), 125.

¹⁴ Yapp, Brunsdon. "Birds in Bestiaries: Medieval Knowledge of Nature." *The Cambridge Review* (November 1984), 184.

originated, was a hotbed of bestiaries.¹⁵ Medieval workshops circulated books of archetype drawings of popular subjects like angels and animals amongst themselves to standardize quality and save themselves time and creative effort.¹⁶ The birds in our folio resemble in shape and color illustrations of nightingales seen in medieval bestiaries.¹⁷

If indeed the birds depicted are nightingales, they would fit well with the messages of feminine piety and devotion indicated by the foliage. According to *The Medieval Bestiary*:

The nightingale has a sweet song, and loves to sing. It sings to relieve the tedium as it sits on its nest through the night. At dawn it sings so enthusiastically that it almost dies. Sometimes nightingales compete with each other with their songs, and the one that loses the competition often dies.¹⁸

Thus, the nightingale becomes associated with qualities that medieval women were expected to engender upon themselves, values similar to Christ's and Mary's: sacrifice to death or near death, joy in God's creations.

Even more specifically, the *Aberdeen Bestiary* compares a nightingale directly to a mother:

The poor but modest mother, her arm dragging the millstone around, that her children may not lack bread, imitates the nightingale, easing the misery of her poverty with a night-time song, and although she cannot imitate the sweetness of the bird, she matches it in her devotion to duty.

In the Middle Ages, womanhood was intrinsically meshed with motherhood. The only exceptions to motherhood were nuns, in which case the woman devoted herself to Christ as a wife with her "offspring" being prayer and devotion instead of children.

Psalters featuring illuminations of vines and animals appear common when one searches ARTstor. Illustrations of women also sometimes appear alongside these illuminations, strengthening the tie between women as readers and the text. Many of these psalters are attributed to ownership by women.

It cannot be proved without much more information and in-depth research that the folio belonged to a woman. However, I hope that my arguments have shown the likelihood of it. Were I to research this folio and my assertions further, I would examine as many psalters and books of hours as possible that belonged to women—or were likely to have belonged to women—and see if the patterns I have pointed out hold true.

¹⁵ Yapp, 183.

¹⁶ Yapp, 183.

¹⁷ "Nightingale," *The Medieval Bestiary: Animals in the Middle Ages*. Last accessed 5/3/2009 at <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast546.htm>.

¹⁸ "Nightingale"

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Folio xf mms .B04, side 1. Photo by the author.

Figure 2: Folio xf mms .B04, side 2. Photo by the author.