

ENHANCING THE MANUSCRIPT:
BINDING AND DECORATION



Figure 40. Book of hours with chemise binding (discussed at pp. 95–96).
The Hague, KB, 135 J 55. With permission.

INTRODUCTION

Picking up where the previous section left off, this section deals with the ways in which the copied manuscript was enhanced, both on a decorative level and with respect to the binding. Decorators and binders have not yet been formally introduced as co-producers of the manuscript. While they were not involved in the production of the book's core, the copied text, their tasks were nevertheless important. The decorator added pen drawings, penwork decoration, or even miniatures to the text copied by the scribe. While these are often pleasing to the eye, their primary function was usually a different one: miniatures and decorated letters acted as signposts and marked important starts and transitions within the text. In other words, the reader's eyes easily fell on these colourful creations and were thus guided to new paragraphs and chapters, or to the beginning of a new text. Because of its function, decoration is yet another way to gauge how the book was used.

The binder, too, had an important role to play in preparing the object that would ultimately end up in the hands of the reader. Bindings held the quires together and turned a pile of leaves into a single entity that could be handled with ease. While it would suffice to have a binding that would merely hold the quires together, additional features were often added, such as protective elements and clasps. Like decoration, such add-ons contribute to our understanding of how the book was used, and even in what kind of environment the user consulted it, such as a private or monastic library, or while out and about. The subtext of this section, then, is to discuss two important stages in a manuscript's production, binding and decoration, while showing how these functional enhancements contribute more broadly to our understanding of medieval book culture.

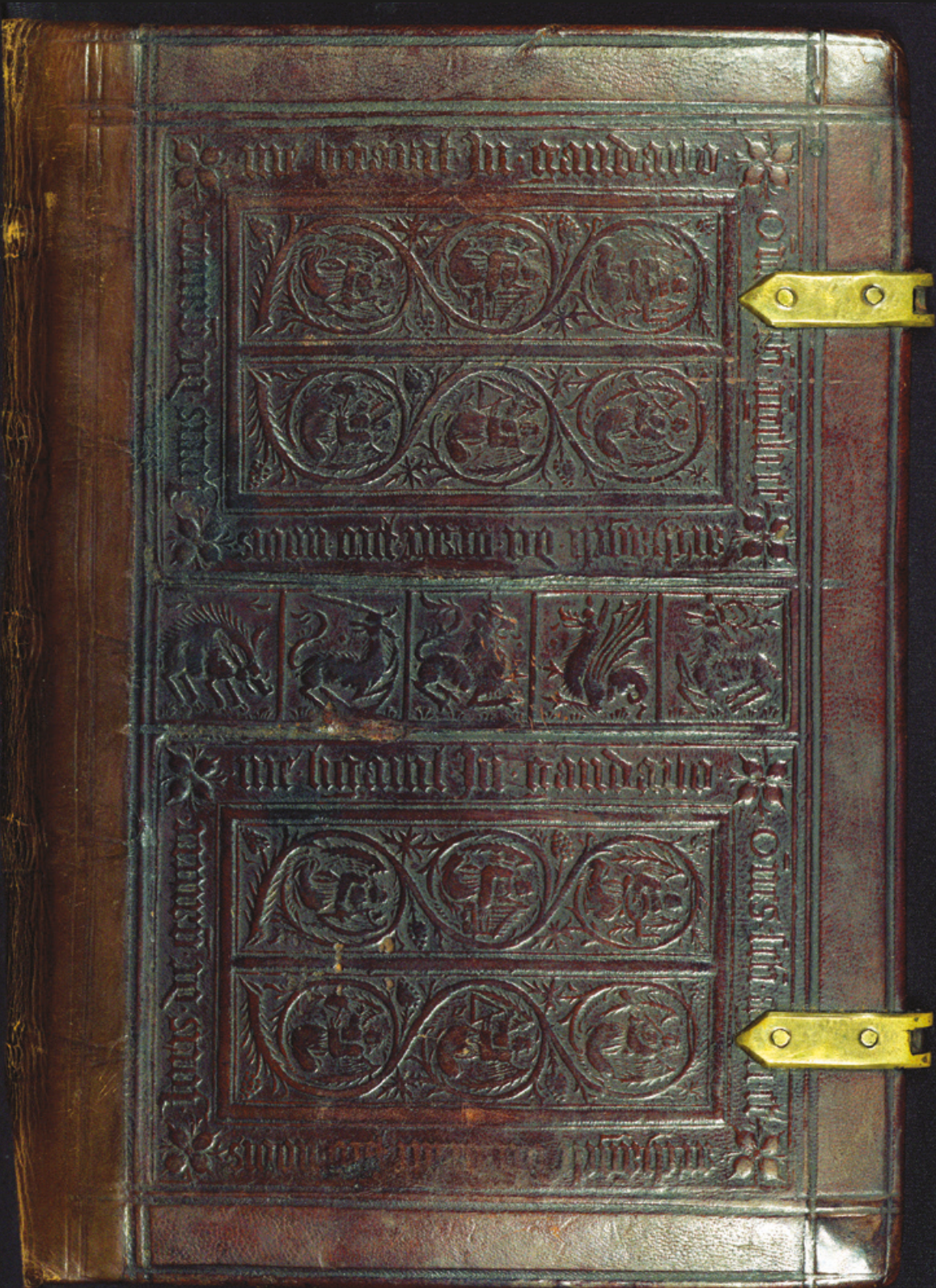
The first three chapters are devoted to bookbindings and the range of features found on them. **Chapter 7** discusses the materials that were used to cover the

binding, from leather to cloth, while **Chapter 8** focuses on the metalwork encountered on some bindings. **Chapter 9**, by contrast, examines the binding not as the product of a binder, but as a device that held critical information about the manuscript to which the binding was added: both owners and librarians wrote information on the leather cover of the binding in order to identify the book's contents. Other logistical information found on bindings, such as pressmarks, may even indicate in what kind of library the book was stored. There is quite a lot one can judge, then, from a manuscript's cover.

The next three chapters focus on decorative elements found on the inside of the manuscript. Three themes are chosen to show not only how medieval book decoration was often carefully considered, but also how iconography (the way in which a scene is depicted) may reflect elements or preferences of the culture that created and used the manuscript. **Chapter 10**, for example, explores the iconographical tradition of Mary's portrayal during the Annunciation, the moment when the Archangel Gabriel revealed to her that she would bear the Son of God. It was customary to show Mary as a reading figure, but medieval decorators had very different ideas about how to do this: some show her modestly handling a single book, while others place her in a library surrounded by multiple volumes.

This versatility is also observed in a special kind of manuscript decoration discussed in **Chapter 11**, which consisted of drawings built up from words. They are often found at the opening of a text, and they reveal to the reader what text he or she is about to read. However, because it concerned the beginning of the text, this title line (the rubric) was often made pretty: this way it stood out and guided the reader. However, when text is turned into an image, especially when an actual scene with humans or animals is created with words, it starts challenging the seemingly clear distinction between text and image. This, too, is discussed in **Chapter 11**.

Having observed colourful initials and miniatures, this section then turns to another location along the very broad spectrum of decoration. In **Chapter 12** the aim is to highlight a pragmatic use of drawn lines and shapes, namely for the creation of speech bubbles. This is also the first of a handful of chapters in this book that emphasize how many of our modern communication concepts have medieval roots: speech bubbles in manuscripts have a striking resemblance to those in current comic books. **Chapter 13**, finally, highlights a tool that was popular among decorators: the model-book, which provided both inspiration and prototypes for scenes and decorated letters. Many scenes discussed in this section were likely to have been taken from these model-books, which turns them into an important instrument in the creation of manuscripts.



Chapter 7

DRESSING UP THE MANUSCRIPT

Bindings are a key feature of the manuscript. Without a bookbinding, the quires remained individual entities. Curiously, this was sometimes the very rationale for *not* binding a book: some users preferred to keep their quires separate, for example, teachers who needed to bring only part of the book to class.¹ Another important function of the binding was to protect pages from moisture and dust, the dirt of hands and desks, and even the teeth of hungry insects and rodents. From their very early days, books were, therefore, usually given some kind of cover. Medieval bindings generally consist of two components: boards made of wood (but in the late Middle Ages also from compressed paper), as well as a material with which to cover the boards. While the most common covering material was leather, there is great variation in the kinds that were used, as well as how they were decorated. Different readers and reading communities had their own preferences in this regard. Consequently, bindings invite us to “read” the outside of the book for cultural and historical clues.

Wearing Leather

Most medieval bindings are covered with animal skin: it was usually a pig, cow, or sheep that—involuntarily—ended up guarding the manuscript. Leather proved an ideal material for bookbindings. It is flexible enough to cover the stiff boards,

¹ Kwakkel, “‘Dit boek heeft niet de vereiste breedte,’” p. 44.

Figure 41. Book of hours bound in Ghent, ca. 1525–1535. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, W.170. CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: www.thedigitalwalters.org.

but also durable. This means it does an excellent job of protecting the precious cargo it carries, while at the same time adding to the desired appearance of the book. It also repels moisture quite well. This benefit may seem odd from a modern perspective, but it is actually an important consideration: while medieval monks were unlikely to read books in the bathtub (as my spouse tends to do), they did consult them in the cloister, which was a damp environment filled with hallways in the open air. The purple manuscript in [Figure 122](#) at p. 239 demonstrates what could happen to a book in such surroundings. An added bonus of leather was that it accommodated blind-tooled or stamped decoration, which was applied in mesmerizing shapes and patterns. It is hard to capture in photography, but the decoration is still visible in this binding made in 1525–1535 by the Ghent artisan Joris de Gavere ([Figure 41](#)).

The oldest book to survive with its original binding still stitched in place is St. Cuthbert's Gospel, which is a copy of the Gospel of John dating from the seventh century. Currently in the British Library as manuscript Add. 89000, it shows just how utterly beautiful (and charming) early medieval leather-covered bindings were.² This tiny manuscript was placed in the coffin of St. Cuthbert shortly after his death in 687, and was rediscovered when his grave was opened in the early twelfth century. By then a cult had grown around St. Cuthbert, so the book—in its original binding—was well taken care of. In fact, the binding looks like it was made yesterday.

The use of leather in bindings predates manuscripts made out of parchment. Before parchment became common, books were made from the pith of the papyrus plant. Such papyrus codices were extremely fragile and they needed the protective qualities of leather, which may have started the tradition of using skin for bindings. Given that papyrus fell into disuse after the fifth century (with some exceptions), very few original papyrus books survive. The oldest specimens we have are those in the Nag Hammadi library, which date to the third and fourth centuries. Unlike St. Cuthbert's Gospel, their bindings have no wooden boards. Instead, these are limp bindings: a kind of leather “folder” that was stitched to the papyrus sheets at the fold. Flaps wrap over the fore-edge to protect this side of the book and to keep it closed. The limp leather binding of Papyrus 1442 in the British Library, which dates from 716–717, shows that the covers of papyrus books could also be handsomely decorated.³

2 The object is digitized and can be found by searching for its shelfmark at www.bl.uk/manuscripts.

3 The object is digitized and can be found by searching for its shelfmark at www.bl.uk/manuscripts. For limp bindings, see Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, pp. 285–319.



Figure 42. The “Hairy Blue Register,” covered in cow’s hair. The Hague, Nationaal Archief, Grafelijkheidsrekenkamer/Registers, 3.01.27.01, Inv. nr. 493 (1510–1540). CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.gahetna.nl/en/collectie/archief/inventaris/gahetnascan/eadid/3.01.27.01/inventarisnr/493.

Exotic Leather and Hairy Bindings

What to do if you need a leather-covered binding, but there are no pigs, cows, or sheep whose skins can be used for this purpose? This seems to have been the very problem that occupied binders in Iceland. The solution was to use skins from animals that *were* around. Take the Old Icelandic Homily Book (Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, Perg. 4^o no. 15), which was copied and bound in Iceland ca. 1200. To do his job, the binder turned to a creature that was available in abundance: seals. Another Icelandic book bound in sealskin is kept at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík: GKS 2870 4to, which contains a copy of *Njáls saga*.⁴

⁴ The object is digitized and can be found by searching for its shelfmark at <https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/GKS04-2870>. I owe this reference to Sheryl McDonald Werronen (Copenhagen).

The two seal bindings from Iceland clearly show the origins of their cover material: fur is still clearly visible on the binding. While it is rare to encounter hair on regular literary or historical manuscripts, it is more often encountered on archival registers. The one shown in [Figure 42](#) is as good as it gets as far as visible hair is concerned. This “Hairy Blue Register” is kept in the Dutch National Archive, The Hague, and contains accounts for the years 1510–1540 (Grafelijkheidsrekenkamer, Registers, Inv. Nr. 493).⁵ The pages of the register are filled with numerous descriptions of expenses. The “hairy” (*ruyghe* in early modern Dutch) in its title refers to the appearance of the volume, which is still covered in cow’s hair. It may just be a clever way to identify the book in question, just like medieval archival bindings were sometimes called “red book” or “black volume,” which helped to distinguish them from the other books on a shelf.

Cloth

However, not all medieval books were dressed in leather and fur. Less commonly used, probably because it is more fragile, is cloth. Fabric handles the frequent use of a book much worse than does leather. The real-world use of a medieval book was such that it would be pushed back and forth over a wooden desk, which did not contribute to a long life when cloth was used. Towards the late Middle Ages, however, cloth-covered bindings became more common, perhaps because so many more books were privately owned by wealthy men and women, who appear to have enjoyed cloth covers.

The manuscript in [Figure 43](#), known as the Felbrigge Psalter (London, BL, Sloane 2400), has the earliest-known cloth covering. It was embroidered by a noble nun named Anne Felbrigge in the early fourteenth century. The delicate linen has been mounted onto a leather-covered eighteenth-century binding that replaces the original.

These soft and rich coverings suggest that the objects were not consulted on the hard surface of a wooden desk, but on the soft lap of the reader. As with embroidery-covered bindings, which continued to increase in popularity in the Early Modern period, cloth may have been regarded as a more suitable material for private reading, or publicly showing off. In tune with the dress code of their owners, as time went on, books knew when to slip into something more comfortable or something more stylish.

⁵ More information and images at www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/inventaris/gahetnascan/eadid/3.01.27.01/inventarisnr/493.



**Figure 43. Felbrigge Psalter with earliest known cloth covering, embroidered, ca. 1300–1325. London, BL, Sloane 2400. CC0 1.0 Universal.
Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.**



Chapter 8

HUGGING A MANUSCRIPT

We will linger for a while longer in the world of the bookbinding. Wooden boards and leather covers are not the only components of a medieval binding. Sometimes readers asked the bookbinder to add additional elements, some of which were made of metal. Two of these are highlighted in this chapter: clasps and tiny feet. Why were these curious-looking pieces of metal added? And what do they tell us about the manner in which the manuscript was used?

Arm and Hand

While medieval manuscripts were made for reading, the makers of these books also carefully planned how to close them and put them away. In order to preserve the organic parchment pages, it was necessary to keep the volume tightly closed when it was not in use. Not only did this keep moisture out, but parchment also has a natural tendency to buckle, especially when handled at room temperature (see the image on the cover of this book). In fact, parchment pages curl up with so much force that they would push the wooden boards open were it not for this smart device designed to keep the lid on: the clasp ([Figure 44](#)).

The clasp is like an arm that extends from one cover to the other. Indeed, I find it hard not to think of clasps as hugging arms that embrace the leaves, safeguarding them from the harsh realities of medieval book use. Clasps protected the pages by generating the pressure needed to keep them fully flat. At the end of the arm a tiny “hand” locks into an extension—we could call it a “handle bar”—as clearly visible in [Figure 44](#). At the same time, it ensured that the book was a firm object that

Figure 44. Clasp, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 2579. Photo by the author.



**Figure 45. Removed clasp, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 96.
Photo by the author.**

could withstand daily use and abuse, such as being knocked off a desk or shelf in a medieval library.

Generally, two clasps were able to contain the force issued by the buckling parchment of a book. However, it was important to get it right as a bookbinder. When the distance between the one end of the arm (say, the “armpit”) and the handle bar was too much, there was insufficient pressure. By contrast, if the distance was too short, the book did not close. Medieval manuscripts that have lost their clasps, which are by far the majority, show what happens to the book when the pressure was too low: unhappy pages with a wavy pattern appeared, as seen in this manuscript that lost its clasp (Figure 45).

Up in Arms

Some readers preferred exotic clasps. A curious specimen is seen in Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, MS A 233 (ca. 1500). The book it helps to close is tiny, made to fit in the palm of your hand. It was designed for the road, containing a portable book of hours (or prayer book) that was carried around by a reader on a religious pilgrimage. The clasp holding it closed is a macabre skull carved out of bone. The theme is fitting for a pilgrim seeking redemption along the dusty roads of medieval Europe. Every time he or she sat down to open the book they were

confronted with the future, which looked rather grim: *memento mori*; remember that you will die one day. Better smarten up and keep going.

The exoticness of clasps can also be connected to their number instead of their shape. Clasps are a must for a peculiar binding known as *dos-à-dos* (back-to-back). Such bindings usually hold two books bound together which share the same back board (hence the name), but the National Library of Sweden owns a unique variant that contains no fewer than six books. They are all devotional texts printed in Germany during the 1550s and 1570s, and each one is closed with its own tiny clasp. A book with six arms and hands: it is quite the display of craftsmanship.

Fancy Feet

If clasps can be compared to arms and hands, another feature of the book-binding must be called “feet.” In late-medieval libraries it was customary to store manuscripts on lecterns (see Figures 76 and 77 at pp. 143 and 144, respectively). In lectern libraries, which were found in monasteries and churches, readers consulted books while sitting on—uncomfortable—benches. The libraries were often semi-public, with outsiders walking in and out to consult books. To facilitate such use while making sure none were unlawfully removed, the books were



Figure 46. One of four feet at bottom of binding, fifteenth century. Leiden, UB, BUR Q 1. Photo by the author.

usually chained to the lecterns. Books in lectern libraries were not read on a flat surface: the objects were resting on nearly vertical stands. This kind of use presented a challenge: the shuffling that inevitably happened when the book was read wore out the lower edge of the binding. More importantly, since the medieval book block was flush with the binding, the constant dragging across the lectern as the reader flipped through the book could easily damage the page. A simple tool was invented to prevent such damage: tiny brass studs that hoisted the book up and made it hover, as it were (Figure 46). The feet that are attached to bindings are often worn to a shine, showing just how much the book was used, and how much damage was prevented by the attached feet.

Book historians tend to compare features of the medieval book to body parts. For example, the manuscript's "head" (top edge) is connected to its "spine" (the back) via the "shoulder" (the area where board meets spine). This chapter has added to such bodily analogies: the binding contained arms and feet that helped protect the manuscript during use. As it happens, these particular "body parts" are useful tools for understanding the setting in which a medieval book was used, or even if the owner was, perhaps, a private individual. They also show how in-tune bookbinders were with the needs of readers. They made sure manuscripts could withstand rough consultation, while their designs also left room for a certain amount of personality, as the example of the skull clasp shows.



Chapter 9

JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

The previous chapters dealt with the construction of the bookbinding: they highlighted the materials used to produce it and gauged how a binding sometimes reveals information about the manner in which the manuscript was used. The present chapter now turns away from the protective design of bindings and turns to modifications that were made by later readers and librarians. That is to say, both groups added logistical information—words and numbers—to the leather cover, usually with the help of pen and ink, but sometimes even with hammer and nail. By the end of the medieval period all sorts of useful information had made its way onto the binding. Some of it was aimed at library use, such as shelfmarks (or pressmarks), the equivalent of our library call number (read ahead to [Chapter 17](#) to learn more about these). The present chapter explores the medieval roots of yet another—and very familiar—tool for finding a specific book: information related to the author and the text displayed on the book’s spine and dust jacket. How did the outside of the medieval manuscript communicate what was hidden inside?

Text on Leather

Why make things complicated? The easiest way to identify a manuscript was to simply jot the title on the front cover, straight on the leather of the binding. The manuscript in [Figure 48](#) contains Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. A fourteenth-century librarian wrote the author’s name on the back of the book, using particularly dark ink: “*Ovidius Majorus*.” The location of this name, on the back, indicates that the

Figure 47. Fore-edge with ownership mark of Jean, duc de Berry, fifteenth century (before 1416). London, BL, Burney 275. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.

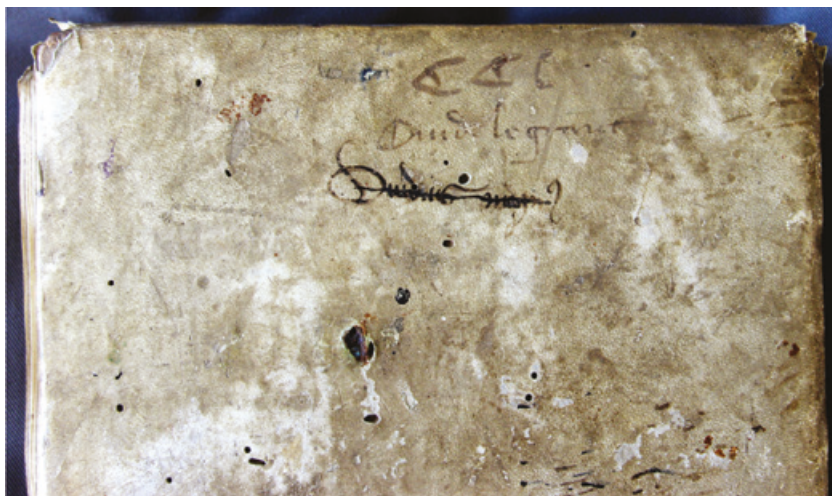


Figure 48. Leather cover with two titles and shelfmark, fourteenth century. Leiden, UB, BPL 96. Photo by the author.

book was stored with the front facing down, which was often the case in the medieval period. A later librarian wrote the French equivalent of the name right above it ("*Ovid le grant*") as well as the shelfmark "CCI" (201), which probably linked the book to an entry in a library's catalogue.

Inscriptions like these show that our modern book titles are actually a medieval invention—although because of the lack of surviving original bindings it is hard to know when, precisely, this practice began. Curiously, while the Ovid manuscript was produced in the middle of the thirteenth century, it was not until over half a century later, in the fourteenth century, that the first of the quoted titles was added to its cover (the book is still in its original binding). This tells us that its users in the second half of the thirteenth century were content with a title-less book that provided no clues as to what information it contained. This is all the more striking when you consider that the library that owned the book in question would probably have harboured several dozen others. It sparks a question that is unfortunately rhetorical: how did monks, or the community's librarian, find their way to such "anonymous" manuscripts that did not reveal their content?

Title Labels

Writing text on a manuscript's cover was not easy. The surface of the leather could be coarse and uneven, which may have made it difficult to write the title

information legibly. More importantly, when the leather had a dark colour, a black title may simply not be visible. In such cases it made more sense to write the information on a parchment or paper slip—a label—that was subsequently pasted onto the cover, as is still common practice in libraries today. These paste-on labels could be quite extensive. In fact, some book owners preferred to have the entire contents displayed on the outside, even if the book held ten works. As detailed as these labels are, however, they exclusively list the titles of the works contained in the manuscript, not the authors' names. It seems as though the librarians who labelled these manuscripts judged the title, and not the author, to be the most important information for identifying a book.

The Fenestra

Paper or parchment title labels were sometimes placed under a thin piece of animal horn for protection (see Figure 49). The *fenestra* ("window" in Latin) was secured to the wooden cover with nails, as the image clearly shows. This type of cover information can be seen as the next step in the process of providing effective book titles: a clear and permanent label, hammered into wooden boards with nails. It is a far cry from the on-the-fly title hastily written directly on leather.



Figure 49. Fifteenth-century fenestra on a binding from Egmond Abbey. Leiden, UB, BUR Q 1. Photo by the author.

A fenestra is often found on manuscripts that were part of a well-organized library. The one in [Figure 49](#) is from the library of the Benedictine Abbey in Egmond, near Amsterdam, and it provides various pieces of information to the user. It contains Lucan's *Pharsalia*, which the label in the fenestra describes as "*Historia romanorum versifice*," the history of the Romans in verse, which is a good description of the book's contents (we encountered this manuscript in two previous chapters as the teaching manual of Baldewinus). This particular fenestra works in tandem with a shelfmark, which is written on the white label right above it. It reads "Q 2," indicating that the book was placed in the Q cupboard. The use of red ink for the letter Q is significant, because it indicated that the book was housed in a library where the manuscripts were placed on wooden lecterns. The lecterns in this particular library had books on both sides (see [Figure 76](#) at p. 143), as opposed to lecterns with books on one side only ([Figure 77](#), p. 144). The ones on one side were marked with a black letter in their shelfmark; the ones on the other side were fitted with shelfmarks that contained a red letter. This book was apparently the second volume on the "red" side of the Q cupboard. Surviving medieval shelfmarks can tell quite a lot about the library in which the book was originally placed.

Spine Titles

Not only did the front (or back) cover display information about a manuscript's content, such information would ultimately also make it onto the spine, as any modern reader knows. This feature has its own path of development. It all started on the fore-edge, the opposite side from the spine that shows the edges of the paper or parchment pages. Although rare in the Middle Ages, modest decoration was sometimes added to this location from at least as early as the fourteenth century. Manuscript Burney 275 in the British Library shows that medieval fore-edge decoration could serve a functional purpose: Jean, duc de Berry (d. 1416) had his coat of arms painted on the fore-edge of this fourteenth-century manuscript ([Figure 47](#) at p. 86). We may assume the books in his library were positioned with the fore-edge facing outward, as was common practice in many medieval libraries. How impressive his library must have looked to visitors: dozens of precious books, all evidently owned by the duke.

Given that the fore-edge was facing the reader, this location was also the perfect place to write down the title or author of the work contained by the volume. The earliest cases I have encountered date from the fifteenth century, although there may have been earlier examples now lost: fore-edges were often cut when binders in the Early Modern period refurbished books with new bindings.

When books eventually turned their backs to the reader, the title ended up where it is still found today: on the spine. Based on my interaction with manuscripts, this practice was uncommon in the Middle Ages, perhaps because manuscripts were not usually placed with their backs facing the reader. By the Early Modern period, however, it had become so popular that some readers wrote extensive tables of contents on the spines of their books.

The early path towards displaying a book's title, and eventually its author, on the outside is long and winding: first the information was found on the front or back, then on the fore-edge, and finally on the spine. This order is no coincidence, because it roughly reflects changes in how books were stored: first flat (early and High Middle Ages), then upright with the fore-edge facing the reader (late Middle Ages), and finally with the spine facing outward (Early Modern period). What is striking about this brief history of medieval "dust jackets" is that some medieval books were apparently not fitted with a title, at least not right away (like the Ovid manuscript discussed above). In such cases readers or librarians could not tell what texts were found inside a book unless they opened it. That said, frequent users may recognize a certain volume from the features of its binding, such as its colour and decoration or the type of clasp used to close it. Frequent perusing of a library teaches us to judge a book by its covers.



Chapter 10

MARY HAD A LITTLE BOOK

Having explored in the previous chapters how the outside of the manuscript was enhanced, it is now time to turn to the inside of the book and see what happened there after the scribe had finished copying the manuscript. The next three chapters each highlight a type of decoration—a decorative tradition, even. The first of these, discussed in the present chapter, shows how the Annunciation scene was depicted in medieval books of hours. The Annunciation tells the biblical story in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, Jesus Christ (Luke 1: 26–38). There is something very attractive about these scenes for lovers of medieval books. Especially in the late Middle Ages, Mary is pictured reading when Gabriel breaks the news. The idea was to show her in a holy place engaged in prayer, and to make this connection to the beholder; she was shown with a book, which shows just how important books were for practising religion. In other words, this particular scene invited decorators to depict a reader engaged with a book, in a life-like fashion and to the best of their abilities. While being careful not to take medieval iconography too literally, we are given a glimpse into the practice of reading: how the book was held, what it looked like, and what kind of binding it had.

The Manuscript Tradition

A quick search in public online databases results in hundreds of Annunciation scenes: as of the time of publishing, the British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts returned 173 manuscripts, and the French *Initiale* database no fewer

Figure 50. Annunciation scene, ca. 1250. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, W.34, fol. 31v. CC BY-SA 3.0. Source: www.thedigitalwalters.org.

than 407.¹ These manuscripts provide much information about the tradition of a reading Mary. It is striking, for example, just how many Annunciation scenes depict her with a book, as seen in the Carrow Psalter, a ca. 1250 manuscript from East Anglia (Figure 50), where Mary holds a red book in her hand while greeting Gabriel. It became so much of a tradition, in fact, that after 1300 there are few scenes without a book.

The results from the image databases allow us to gauge in what kind of manuscript the scenes are predominantly found. By far the majority are books of hours, but there is also a fair share of psalters and bibles, as well as some liturgical books such as missals. The most popular vehicle of this scene, the book of hours, is *the* vehicle for texts used in a setting of private devotion: it contains prayers, psalms, the Litany of Saints, the Office of the Dead, and other short texts, which were read several times per day.² Many psalters were also used for this purpose, as were some bibles. In other words, the readers of these manuscripts were engaged in precisely the same thing as Mary: praying with a book in their hand.

It is telling for the importance of the manuscript that both Mary and the medieval reader are interacting with it during moments of private devotion. What is also striking is that Mary is shown interacting with the book in different ways. In some cases she is simply holding the object in her hand, either open or closed (as in the Carrow Psalter). In the later Middle Ages, she is usually caught reading, with the book placed either in her hand or on a table or podium in front of her. In most cases Mary is depicted in a room or a building with arches, providing the illusion of a church or private chapel.

While it is really easy to find bookish Annunciation scenes from the later medieval period, when the tradition of a reading Mary was well-established, examples from before 1100 are rare. The earliest I have been able to find date from the late tenth century. One of the oldest is the magnificent Benedictional of St. Æthelwold, which was made in 963–984 for Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester (Figure 51). Others dating from the late tenth century are found in luxury manuscripts produced in monasteries close to the court of Otto III.

Beyond Manuscripts

Older examples of a reading Mary do exist, but not in books (the sample from the two databases did not return them, in any case). A scene dating to 860–880 is found on the

1 The British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts is found at www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts (“annunciation”) and Initiale: Catalogue de manuscrits enluminés at <http://initiale.irht.cnrs.fr> (“annonciation”).

2 Duffy, *Marking the Hours*.



Figure 51. Annunciation scene, ca. 963–984.
 London, BL, Additional 49598, fol. 5v. CC0 1.0
 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.

earliest surviving ivory *situla*, a bucket for the Holy Water used in the Mass (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Acc. Nr. 7.190.5).³ It shows Mary looking up from her book to see the angel Gabriel making a gesture of blessing with his hand. The arch above her suggests she is in a room, a holy space, as seen in so many manuscript depictions. As in many of the images in manuscripts, Mary is shown holding a surprisingly small object in her hand. These are probably meant to represent a portable book, a type of manuscript designed to be carried around.

If we expand our scope and include medieval paintings, we are shown other details of the medieval book as a physical object. Notably, the

famous Mérode Altarpiece from the early fifteenth century shows Mary holding a book fitted in what is called a chemise binding (Figure 52).

This type of binding allowed the reader to fold the book into a piece of cloth or leather extended from the binding. Very few have survived from the medieval period, but a particularly well-preserved specimen survives in the Royal Library of the Netherlands in The Hague (see Figure 40 at p. 71). It is fitted around a book of hours that was produced during the 1460s in Valencia, Spain. Measuring only 15 cm × 10 cm, the object is quite modest in size—about the size of a smartphone. Curiously, the Mérode Altarpiece also shows a second book on the table, with a green “bag” underneath it. This bag is another medieval bookish artifact that survives in very small numbers: the manuscript pouch, which was also

3 This object is digitised by the museum and is found at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464438.



Figure 52. Workshop of Robert Campin, *Annunciation Triptych*, oil on oak, detail, ca. 1427–1432. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 56.70a-c. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.metmuseum.org.

used for carrying a book around. These bookbindings and bags indicate that the manuscripts Mary uses are portable. More importantly, the beholder would have recognized them as such. By the late Middle Ages, devotional practices had become mobile, and so books used to that end needed to be shown as ambulant. In that sense, the manuscripts depicted in these paintings are very realistic.

The Mérode Altarpiece shows Mary with not one but two books. It appears that this increase started in the fifteenth century and continued into the age of print. A book of hours from an artist known as the “Master of the Polemical Texts” of Bruges shows Mary with three thick volumes, while the famous *Belles Heures* of Jean, duc de Berry, produced by the Limbourg Brothers in the early fifteenth

century shows Mary with three books at hand (one placed on a lectern, two inside a compartment), plus a roll (New York, Metropolitan Museum, 54.11a, b).⁴ In a woodcut from 1511 by the famous Albrecht Dürer there are at least three books present (New York, Metropolitan Museum, 1975.653.5).⁵ Mary is consulting them while sitting at a small lectern (there is probably a fourth copy in front of her), which gives the setting the distinct feel of a library. Considering that she would soon have a child, it makes sense that Mary try to get as much quality time with her books as possible.

4 This object is digitized by the museum and is found at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470306.

5 This object is digitized by the museum and is found at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/388014.

† ih̄s xp̄s · Matheus homo

ih̄s
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9 1



argumēt
godspeller
incipit euangelij
genelogia mathei

sym
necce
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chou
nirre

haalen
de
muyter

dauder
runt

abraham
er runt

GENERA
TIVIT
HUS
XPII
FILII
IOHANNIS

Chapter 11

DRAWING WITH WORDS

This chapter introduces a very different iconographical tradition from the Annunciation scenes in the previous chapter. The kind of decoration discussed here challenges our seemingly clear-cut distinction between text and image. By now it is evident that the medieval page was generally filled with two things: words and decoration. Words make up the text, of course, and are executed with pen and ink, while illustrations, produced with brush and paint, decorate the text. There are medieval manuscripts, however, in which this convention is turned upside-down: they contain decoration created by words, inviting the reader to read an image. This intriguing scenario blurs the divide between text and illustration, and it challenges how we define both.

Decoration Forming Words

Decorative elements forming readable text are fairly common in medieval manuscripts. High-quality volumes often open with words—or even a full sentence—that are painted with a brush rather than copied with a pen. The Lindisfarne Gospels, which is perhaps the most impressive manuscript that survives from the early Middle Ages (it was made at Lindisfarne on the coast of Northumberland between ca. 710 and 721), is famous for this mix of words and decoration. The page in [Figure 53](#) shows the *incipit* (the opening line) of the Gospel of Matthew, which is executed with brush and paint: “*Liber generationis Iesu Christi filii David filii Abraham*” (“The book

Figure 53. Lindisfarne Gospels, incipit to Gospel of Matthew, ca. 710–721. London, BL, Cotton Nero D.IV, fol. 27r. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.

of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, the son of Abraham"). Trying to read this sentence is like solving a puzzle.

In spite of the fact that it holds words, this decorative page and the others in the book are commonly discussed within an art-historical context, not as expressions of writing (they are prime examples of Hiberno-Saxon art). This magnificent page blurs the boundary between text and image: it presents something to read, but nothing has actually been written, in the traditional sense of the word, with a pen. The intriguing hybridity forced the user to read a painting.

Words Forming Decoration

Much more unusual is a different mix of text and image: instances where a meaningful scene is made out of words. Delightful examples from manuscript production in the West include that of Cygnus, a swan (Figure 54), taken from a ninth-century copy of Cicero's *Aratea*, on astronomy. The pages in this manuscript show constellations represented as animals and gods according to Greek mythology (the solid red dots in Figure 54 are stars). Curiously, the animal illustrations consist, for the most part, of words written out with a pen.

The text in the swan is not actually the *Aratea* itself, which is found lower on the page, underneath the swan. The animals are instead formed by an explanatory text by Hyginus, called the *Astronomica*. Here, word and image are engaged in a peculiar symbiotic relationship wherein one would become meaningless without the other. Without words the swan, which represents a constellation, would be incomplete; and without the painted top part of the swan, the meaningfulness of the word pattern would be lost.

A similar tradition is witnessed in Torah manuscripts of the tenth century. It introduced a phenomenon called micrography, the art of decorating the page with meaningful text written in tiny letters. By the thirteenth century, Hebrew manuscripts often contained elaborate depictions of humans, creatures, and objects—all made from written words (Figure 55). Jewish religious leaders protested against this practice of drawing with words, as they felt it distracted from taking in their meaning.

See the Music

The notion of drawing an image with words took further steps in the late Middle Ages. By the thirteenth century, for example, we encounter marginal glosses in the shape of objects and people, and sometimes even the entire main text. The fourteenth century Chantilly Codex (Chantilly, Musée Condé, 564) is a particularly



Figure 54. Swan made out of words from Hyginus's *Astronomica*, ninth century. London, BL, Harley 647, fol. 5v. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.



Figure 55. Micrography in Hebrew manuscript, ca. 1250–1300. London, BL, Additional 21160, fol. 181v. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.

elaborate late medieval variation on this theme. It contains over a hundred polyphonic songs by French composers, including one song composed by Baude Cordier called “*Belle, Bonne, Sage*” (“Beautiful, Good, Wise”). As the Renaissance was nearing, wordplay became a favoured occupation of poets, including in a visual sense. Cordier borrowed the word *Cor* (*coeur*, heart) from his name and used it for the visual presentation of this song, forming the notes and lyrics in the shape of a heart.¹ Cutting-edge design? Hardly. Drawing and writing at the same time was old-school.

¹ An illustration can be seen at “Chantilly Codex” in Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chantilly_Codex.



corde suo non est deus;

Corrupti sunt et abhominabiles facti sunt
in iniquitatibus: non est qui faciat bonum.

Deus de celo prospexit super filios ho-
minum: ut uideat si est intelligens
aut requirens deum.

Omnes declinauerunt simul inutiles fa-
cti sunt: non est qui faciat bonum non

Chapter 12

SPEECH BUBBLES

Even more so than before, the decoration style in this chapter blends decorative shapes with functionality. Although it may appear peculiar at first, this chapter is driven by speech. Books are generally quiet objects, apart from the rustling of their leaves as you flip them. The fact that the book is a silent medium (besides audio- and e-books) implies that sound embedded in a text is not heard but read. Generally, this was no problem, except that in book illustrations it was sometimes necessary to indicate that certain words were uttered by certain people. How to show that it concerned direct speech? And how to indicate who said what? Decorators employed an all-too-familiar strategy to deal with these issues: they used speech bubbles. This chapter examines the different ways in which speech was visualized in medieval decoration. As is shown here, they take on different appearances, some of which show a striking resemblance to those encountered in our modern comic books.

Dialogues

The British Library owns a ca. 1300 copy of Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, the most popular collection of saints' lives from the later Middle Ages (Stowe 49).¹ The manuscript contains a number of marginal drawings in which the characters

¹ Stowe 49 has been digitized by the British Library, and can be found by searching for its shelfmark in their Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts at www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/welcome.htm.

Figure 56. Man holding banderol, ca. 1205–1210. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS 66, fol. 56r. Public domain. Source: www.getty.edu/about/whatwedo/opencontent.html.



Figure 57. Scene with talking travellers in lower margin of manuscript, ca. 1300. London, BL, Stowe 49, fol. 122r. CC0 1.0 Universal. Source: www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts.

are shown talking. In one of them we see a group of people strolling, some of them with a walking stick in their hand (Figure 57). You can almost hear their sing-songs in the background. Curiously, we are looking at a group of travellers conversing in English. What is perhaps even more remarkable is that the words they speak are written out and connected to the mouths of the persons that utter them. In other words, as in modern comic books, there is a visual connection between words on the page and the fictional person that speaks them. Also paralleling modern comic books, the story that unfolds in the Stowe manuscript is funny and familiar.

The following conversation may be overheard. The figure on the left starts with a strange mantra: "They die because of heat, they die because of heat." Then the two young people on his right speak, probably addressing their father, who is walking behind them: "Sir, we die of cold!" The father, carrying a heavy toddler, orders them to stop whining: "Behold your little brother in front of us, he is only wearing a hood." (He is right, because the child is otherwise naked.) Then the toddler speaks, uttering universal toddler sounds: "Wa we." Finally, the two children in the back come into play. "Sir, I am carrying too much weight," says the one on the left. The one on the right closes the conversation by comparing his own misery to that of his brother and father, stating "It is not they who carry the heaviest burden."²

The Middle English scene is recognizable to many of us. We are shown a family en route to an unknown location. The young ones are verbally poking at each other,

2 Identification of these figures' roles and a translation of their conversation is here paraphrased from that offered in Freeman Sandler, "Pictorial and Verbal Play," pp. 52–68.

and complain about the temperature and the weight of their suitcases. It is the medieval version of a modern parent's nightmare: being on the road with a crying toddler and whiny kids that egg each other on. "Are we there yet?" The most notable feature of the scene, however, is the ease with which we can reconstruct the dialogue—thanks to the graphic support.

Banderol

Books before print used yet another method to make a silent figure on the page speak: the banderol. This clever device gave the decorator the ability to make someone deliver a short statement. Short, because it had to fit on a tiny roll. In [Figure 56](#) (p. 104), for example, we see a fool repeat the words whispered in his ear by the devil: "There is no God" (*Non est deus*). The speaker holds the tip of the scroll in his hand, so as to claim the words as his own, while the angel above him tries to dissuade him of this error.

Such points of contact (the narrator holds the scroll or touches it) were particularly important when an image presented more than one speaking person. It allowed the viewer to identify who was saying what. Alternatively, and particularly interesting in light of the comic book parallel, is that the banderol was not always held in or close to the speaker's hand: it could also flow from his or her mouth on a white scroll. While such cases are less common, they have a strikingly modern appearance because the banderol creates the illusion of a real text bubble. Not all banderols present such a "live" text. Some label a scene, while others clarify the identity of a person.

No Bubbles

Then there are, finally, manuscripts where direct speech is written in mid-air, unsupported by a banderol or a bubble. In order to relate the uttered text to a given person, the scribe wrote the lines in such a way that they appeared to flow from the speaker's mouth. The resulting wavy lines of text dance across the page. An example is seen in Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, St. Peter Perg. 92 ([Figure 58](#)). This miniature is part of a cycle on the life and work of the scholar Ramón Llull (d. 1316). Here he is shown conversing with Thomas Méysier, his student and disciple. The images in the cycle were made under personal supervision of Thomas, who also compiled the contents of the manuscript, which presents a compilation of Llull's work called the *Electorium parvum sue breviculum*.³

3 A study and facsimile of this manuscript is available in Römer and Stamm, *Raimundus Lullus*.



Figure 58. Ramón Llull and student engaged in discussion, after 1321.
Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, St. Peter Perg. 92, fol. 11v. CC BY-SA 3.0 DE.
Source: <https://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de>.

Over a big and authoritative pile of books we see master and student engaged in a lively discussion. Arguments fly across the page. It looks like the scribe is trying to help the viewer keep track of the discussion through the use of different colours (red and black). Also, the scribe presents the conversation in such a way that each component begins with a line that sticks out slightly. Cleverly, the extended tip is found next to the speaker's mouth, leaving no doubt as to who is saying what. No bubble required.



Chapter 13

MODEL-BOOKS

Having discussed a variety of decoration styles in medieval manuscripts, the present chapter adds contextual information to the culture of decorating manuscripts. While decorators were creative individuals, they had some help in how to depict certain scenes or decorated letters. They could look these up in model-books, which appear to have been quite popular in the later Middle Ages.¹ A true feast for the eye, these books are filled with drawings and paintings that were meant to show scribes and illuminators how to embellish letters, paint initials, or add large segments of decoration to the page. Within this tradition, two types of model-books can be distinguished. Some functioned as instruction manuals, providing detailed step-by-step instructions for artisans. Other model-books appear to have merely functioned as a source of inspiration: they present a wide array of shapes and drawings from which the artisan could take his or her pick.

The level of sophistication among surviving model-books varies considerably. On the lower end of the spectrum there are pattern books that merely show how to make enlarged letters with some minor flourishing. On the higher end, by contrast, there are copies with rich stand-alone designs and sophisticated historiated initials inhabited by figures and scenes. Evidently the requirements of artisans varied, and, by proxy, so did the taste of medieval readers, for whom these drawings were ultimately meant. It is this variation that makes

¹ Scheller, *Model-Book Drawings*.

Figure 59. Page from Gregorius Bock's Scribal Pattern Book, ca. 1510–1517. New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 439, fol. 31r. Public domain. Source: <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/tags/digital-collections>.