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The Voice of the Manuscript



Folio 24v-25r. A picture of The
Prayer Book of Claude de
France. (Schechter Lee, The
Morgan Library and Museum)

Medieval manuscripts have preserved a plethora of Christian texts ranging from the whole Bible itself to a list of all the Psalms. The texts with which the manuscripts have been inscribed teach many lessons and tell many stories to their readers. The texts range from stories that tell of Christ and his ways to tales of famous saints' lives, but manuscripts tell of the untold story that the simple text cannot. Manuscripts tell us of the journey the text has travelled and with whom. Who has turned and touched these pages? Where has this text resided: an ornate castle or a towering cathedral? The manuscripts answer, whispering back their lengthy history. In order for us to listen and understand the voice of the manuscript, we must dive into the structure, composition, and history of the manuscript.

For example, we can look more closely at a manuscript known as *The Prayer Book of Claude de France* in order to understand its history and purpose and how its materiality affects our understanding of it. The very title of the manuscript itself speaks a great deal about the purpose of the manuscript. It was a prayer book for Claude, who was the queen of France in the early fifteenth century. Just from that title, which is simply a modern classification for the manuscript, we know for whom the manuscript was intended, what the manuscript is, and where it was for a time. The historians who studied *The Prayer Book of Claude de France* gave it that title with a purpose of classifying it, so the title gives the reader a lot of information. Consider, in another instance, if a person were to find this manuscript without any knowledge of what the current title is and had the task of understanding what about it affects his or her understanding. The materiality of *The Prayer Book of Claude de France* is what truly affects the reader's ability to understand its purpose and historical context. Only when the person began to seriously analyze the book and all of its interesting components would he or she finally start unraveling the history of the book.

Let's first take a closer look into the content of *The Prayer Book of Claude de France*. It is filled with many Catholic prayers and devotions. Based on the content of the manuscript, we can assume that it was probably made for private use, most likely by one person. We can make that assumption because prayers and devotions are very personal to the Catholic faith, thus the manuscript is probably for personal use. If it instead were a copy of the whole bible, we could assume that perhaps its use would be for many people, such as a family or church. Also, the size of the book helps to work in collaboration with *The Prayer Book of Claude de France's* content. It is extremely small with a measurement of approximately 2.7in x 1.9in. The extremely small size only supports the argument that the manuscript was definitely made for personal use. One would have to lift the manuscript closely to eye level in order to read it, supporting its use by a single person. The limited ability of the book's use tells us that it would have been used realistically by one person, as opposed to being on display at a church, etc. If the manuscript were larger, we could more easily assume that the book was for perhaps a Catholic service or display at a church, or even for use by a whole family. The small size and content of *The Prayer Book of Claude de France* tell us that it is has a very practical use for one person, most likely encouraging personal and every day use.

Other than using the size and content to analyze the prayer book, we can pinpoint its purpose and history even further by examining the illustrations within it. It is not necessarily the content of the illustrations that we should be concerned with in order to analyze the manuscript's history and purpose, but rather, the impressive array of colors used as well as the large space that each illustration fills on each page. The illustrations of manuscripts would have been quite expensive to commission. They were often drawn on several pages of an entire manuscript or were just simple drawings to accompany and decorate the text. The illustrations of *The Prayer Book of Claude de France* are quite elaborate in that they are on every page of the book, are quite detailed, and fill up all of the emptiness surrounding the text on each page. Based on the unique circumstances concerning the illustrations of the book, we can tell that the commissioners would have been extremely wealthy, as this book would have been exceptionally expensive. The large array of colors used in each illustration also supports the argument that the manuscript would have been very expensive, because colors of dye for the ink were hard to acquire and required wealth to attain them. In comparison to average manuscripts, there are many more colors used in the illustrations for this manuscript, paralleling the above average value of *The Prayer Book of Claude de France*.

Another characteristic of this manuscript that tells us that it was not created for the average townspeople is the language of the text. The text is entirely in Latin. This can represent one of two possible circumstances. Either this text was intended for Catholic clergy or it was intended for someone of most likely higher wealth and education for personal reading. The size and content have already established the idea that this book was for private use. Therefore, we can assume the latter circumstance. Latin was an exclusive language in that time. It was only used by those of higher religious or educational status, which usually coincided with wealth. Thus, the Latin language of this text even further strengthens the manuscript's exclusivity. Not only does it seem that this book was just for a single person, but for a very important person. The fact that this is book, being for personal use, was written in Latin signifies that the reader would actually have to know the language exceptionally well. In contrast, if the book were for Catholic service, one could simply read the Latin aloud or repeat it without a thorough idea of what it meant. With the size, content, and language in mind, we can make the assumption that this book was positively for personal use by someone of much higher social status.

There is an interesting aspect about three specific folios in this manuscript. On folios 6r, 15v, and 18v there is an illustration of a coat of arms. It is clearly depicted at the bottom of each of the three folios. It is bright blue with gold accents. This speaks volumes of the intended owner of this manuscript. The coat of arms signals that this book was specifically created for most likely someone of wealth and royalty. It also signifies the illustrator's intentions of honoring a very specific family by illustrating the symbol of their family on the same pages of sacred text and illustrations. Based on research, the coat of arms is Claude de France's. This personalizes the prayer book in an even greater way, it is worth noting that the prayer book was created around the year 1517, the year upon which Claude de France was crowned queen of France. The fact that this book was not meant for public display shows that the coat of arms was included to personalize it to Claude de France, to remind her of her family, duties, and faith in a very important year of her life.

Revising Reflection

I began this revision process my reading through the comments that I had been given when I turned this assignment in the first time. After reading through these comments, I corrected the only criticism that I had been given over the caption for the photo that I included. I went to my website and realized my mistake and immediately addressed it by adding the folio number of the image and hyperlinking the website from which it came. Upon finishing this, I read over the old assignment sheet for this subject to refresh myself with the assignment's goals. I also pulled up the websites that had information on the *Prayer Book of Claude de France*. After these readings, I brainstormed over which ideas I would formulate in my addition to the essay. I then read through my essay reminding myself of what aspects I had already covered. Following that, I looked through the specific details of the manuscript on one of the provided websites and decided on two interesting aspects of the manuscript: the inclusion of the coat of arms on several folios and the Latin language of the text. This revision process was quite helpful. It allowed me to bring new ideas into my essay which were rather important and interesting. I felt that through a close reading of my essay and the assignment sheet, as well as the informative websites on my chosen manuscript, I was able to reevaluate my essay and enhance it with substantial ideas to support my argument.