

Medieval Heroes and Monsters

English 181 Elizabeth Miller

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The Depiction of Medieval Life Seen Through The Hours of Catherine of Cleves

When first glancing over any time of literary work, images and colors draw a reader's eyes to the work. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves demonstrate this idea perfectly and allow readers to discover the meaning within the pages. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves's history strays from the typical medieval manuscript, making it such a rare and astonishing work of art. Originally the book was bound as one, but in the 19th century, it was split. One half being withheld from the public, a part of a secret family collection; the other owned by the Morgan Library. In fact, up until the 1960s, very few people knew of the existence of the second half of The Hours of Catherine of Cleves. The facts and images behind the manuscript are what make it such a valuable and priceless piece of medieval history. The imagery displays main aspects of Catherine's life: the role of the Virgin in Mother in comparison to Catherine, the miserable marriage she had and the uniqueness in the design of the manuscript. All these qualities contribute to shaping the overall idea that manuscripts such as The Hours of Catherine of Cleves present the life of the medieval times while also contradicting previous interpretations of the lifestyle.

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, being a prayer book, would not appear to display the life of Catherine, but through the images displayed, the audience gets a glance at the culture surrounding her everyday life. The manuscript acted as a way for Catherine to get involved with religion and prayers that could be recited throughout the day. The images that correlate with the prayers contain vivid colors that contrasted many other manuscripts written during the 15th century. Every page contains multiple different colors, which strayed from the ordinary manuscripts that used primarily reds, greens, and shades of brown. Catherine, the commissioner for this work, paid a large sum for such intricate and colorful designs. The Dutch manuscript's striking images are what present it as such an influential work. When opening to the first page, an image of the Virgin Mother, Baby Jesus, and Catherine highlight the page. Catherine, cloaked in a beautiful red dress, kneels down to Mary, emphasizing who possesses the domineering power. Also looking at the size difference between Catherine and Mary, the Virgin appears as a giant in comparison. The accentuation in size conveys the ethos that Mary has over not only Catherine but also the readers. People look up to the Virgin; a sinless Mary pictured at the start of this prayer book gives hope and reassurance to those looking for sanctuary through prayer. The strong view of religion here conveys the importance that Christianity had on life during the medieval period.



The Morgan Library and Museum, Hours of Catherine of Cleves

Also on the opening page of The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, several coats of arms border the holy figures. Out of the five crests not one relates to Catherine's husband, instead they represent her family history. On the bottom of the page her crest is placed and a red ox sits on top. Normally the wife would place her husband's crest there; the lacking appearance of Arnold further portrays her distance from him. Absence Arnold in the image demonstrates some logos behind the story. Catherine and her husband did not have a happy relationship; her and her son were disowned by him and Arnold imprisoned his son Adolf. Catherine uses the crests to represent her independence from him and the troubles he caused her. Through the image of the crest on the first page, Catherine tries to evoke pathos in the reader. She presents herself in terms of ethos as a respectable person who acts in accordance with the bible. Then with this kind hearted image presented of her, she utilizes it to rationalize for her abandoning her cruel husband. Women were typically more obedient to their husbands during the 15th century, and with Catherine contradicting this, she presents how life in the medieval period varied throughout each family. Catherine represents a woman would not succumb to social restrictions, and instead took matters into her hands by abandoning her marriage.

Later into her manuscript she does choose to include an image of Arnold. The picture does not depict in the light he would want for himself though. First, his portrait is placed behind Catherine's portrait, symbolizing that she holds more authority than him. This order of portraits, also corresponds to the placement of Mother Mary's portrait placement; she is placed at the start of the manuscript, signifying her dominance over Catherine. The commissioner carefully organizes the manuscript to show the chain of authority in her life. To further repudiate her husband, she displays Arnold kneeling in front of Jesus Christ asking for repentance. This image does not seem bad until you see the devil behind Jesus, speaking for Arnold to come to hell. The devil represents how Arnold is not truly sorry for his sins and should not be admitted into the gates of heaven. This vivid, detailed image just further justifies her point that her husband has not done any good for her or her family and that she will not stand to be obedient to the traditional head of the household.



The Morgan Library and Museum Hours of Catherine of Cleves M.S. M.917, pp.68



The Morgan Library and Museum The Hours of Catherine of Cleves M.S. M.917, pp.237

The images in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves also convey differences that were unlike many manuscripts. Out of the three hundred and sixty-nine astonishingly detailed and colorful pages, no two contain a like border. The distinct borders alone draw readers to stare at the various images such as rosaries, pretzels, bow and arrows (The Hours of Catherine of Cleves). The unique perimeters almost cause readers to question if they should be focusing on the border or what lays inside. The importance in detail that the artist put into this prayer book had some reasoning behind it then just making aesthetically pleasing. Catherine wanted a prayer book that did not become a daily chore, but rather something that interested her in reading. Every page she would turn to displayed eye catching details, instead monotonous text, thereby encourage her to reading further into the words that correlated with the images. These detailed images required a large sum of money, that very few people could afford. Catherine uses this elaborate and expensive manuscript to assert her dominance and authority over the common people. Her commissioned manuscript depicts the life that the wealthy could afford.



Hours of Catherine of Cleves MS M.917, pp.237

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves create breathtakingly beautiful details that accentuate the lavish life that Catherine lived. Not only does the manuscript give a glimpse into her life, but also brings spirituality to the readers. Through the hidden meanings found in the images readers can see her horrendous marriage and the abhorrence she had for her husband. The manuscript also gives some hope from the strong devotion she has towards the church. Through these readers can understand Catherine in a new light. The manuscript enables a piece of the medieval times to today's time and illustrates the similarities and differences between the pre conceived notions of the 15th century.

Reflection

When I first started revising this paper I had some difficulty because I could not remember the details of the manuscript. After spending time reviewing what I had previously wrote, looking over the notes Professor Bledsoe gave me, and looking at the images, I came to conclusion of what I needed to do to expand my essay. First, I did not give a lot of background, besides the marriage of Catherine. The background of the manuscript is actually very interesting, so in my expansion I included several facts behind the creation of The Hours of Catherine of Cleves. I also decided to write about another image in the book. I originally only had one image that I really described, so I found another image in the book that corresponded to what I had already written. Along with finding a new image, I also expanded on the image that I already talked about. I found this assignment to be very beneficial in not only in my writing, but also in my knowledge behind medieval literature. Previous to this class I have never written an essay over images, so this allowed me to discover new ways to go about writing and what to analyze.