



English 181

Medieval Monsters and Heroes

Materiality Analysis

Material was very limited back in Medieval Europe. Paper wasn't fully available to everyone and the materials that they wrote on were not so cheap. They utilized everything they could to create manuscripts; they used up most of the space available to them, making sure not to waste any space. The language, size, and material all had a meaning and purpose behind it. If we examine the Prayer Book of Claude de France, a companion volume to the Book of Hours, we see a tiny little book that may seem inconsequential to many people who take cursory glances; however, there's actually a lot of purpose and meaning behind it.

Take a look at the size of the Prayer Book of Claude de France; it's 69 millimeters in length and 49 millimeters in width. There was a reason for this: tradition. The French royalty, especially the queen, favored smaller books than bigger ones; the smaller the book the better because it acted more and more jewel-like as opposed to bigger books. The Prayer Book of Claude de France was most likely used for personal and travel uses. Something made so small was meant to be brought with them wherever they went. Queen Claude could easily keep this handy prayer book around wherever she pleases. Because the book was so small, reading from it could've been hard. Made to be jewel-like, the prayer book wasn't meant to be read as much and more to be praised for its colorful binding and illustrations. The manuscript's size strongly supports the use as aesthetics rather than reading.

The book contains rich illustrations "with 132 scenes from the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and numerous saints" with each page painted front and back and her coat of arms appearing on three different folios. One of her coat of arms appears on FoL 15v which is the beginning of a prayer to the virgin. It is located on the lower border of the book surround by a renaissance style frame around it. This prayer on FoL 15v was very popular in the late middle ages because it was written in the first person singular. Therefore, when reciting the prayer, the person would be saying "I" and "me" which were very different than most prayers. This prayer is accompanied by mysteries that are still unknown to art historians. Three golden round objects with purple feathers in between them sit on the top border of the page. We don't know what those objects are or if they refer to Queen Claude. However, other borders throughout the book have specific devices that historians know Queen Claude enjoyed to use herself, but these golden round objects have not yet been identified as to what they are.

The importance of the border can be seen in FoL 24v. We see the only reference to Queen Claude's husband, King Francis I, on this page symbolically through the frame of the picture. The left page depicts the Trinity with God the father on the right, God the son on the left, and the Holy Spirit above. Surrounding the Holy Trinity is a loosely knotted girdle with figure eight loops that is a specific device used by the House of Savoy which King Francis I belongs to. This girdle was one of the emblems for the House of Savoy and was the only reference to King Francis I. However, there's a lot of importance in the conjunction of the girdle surrounding the Trinity. It shows that Queen Claude is portraying her husband as one entity that combines the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. What's also interesting is that the gestures between the Son and Father and lack of wounds on the Son. This reveals that the Son is the pre-incarnate of Christ with the angels on the right page witnessing this event as the Father is about to send the Son to earth. The pre-incarnate of Christ is particularly important to Queen Claude because during the making of the book, she was about to be crowned as queen and hopefully produce an heir in the coming years.

The overwhelming pictures compared to the writing allow us to infer that the illustrations were the main component of the prayer book. It would make sense for the prayer book, containing scenes of Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and various saints, to embrace a positive message with a positive visual. However, a theme that is seen throughout the manuscript is the odd narratives of the illustrations that the artist draws. These odd narratives were the more unusual stories or narratives or iconographies that the artist chose to put in the borders of the manuscript such as Mark's martyrdom as opposed to the traditional portrayal of the evangelist seated in writing, which is also in the book. What's also unusual is that this prayer book has a very long and involved and detailed depiction of the passion of Christ. These were typical themes and stories that aren't typically found in a prayer book. The bizarre borders and themes are a rare find that makes this book more unique than other prayer books; even though it has these unusual paintings and borders, the text of the prayer book still complements the overarching theme of the images that are depicted on the page.

Notice that the artist leaves very minimal empty space. Due to the expensive material used, the artist would want to use up as much of the page as possible. The material that the book is made of, vellum, shows the prestige and quality of the manuscript. The type of material manuscripts is written on tells the viewer of the social status of the ownership. Vellum, one of the more expensive forms of manuscripts, is a durable and lasting material. As the newly crowned queen of France in 1517, Claude had all the money at her disposal. It's not a big surprise to see her with the more expensive form of a manuscript. Once she was crowned queen of France, she asked her favorite artist to make her this book as a coronation present, a nice one too. Queen Claude was never engaged in politics or maternal inheritance and preferred to devote herself to religion. Seemingly so, it would make sense for her to carry around a small prayer book that should last here wherever she went. Although the prayer book is in a relatively good condition until this day, bits of paint have been worn off indicating the queen's heavy usage of the book.

The Prayer Book of Claude de France was written in Latin, which not many people could read. The language of the manuscript tells us who the manuscript was meant for; it limits the amount of people who can read it. A Latin manuscript is typically made for clergymen or for the educated. In this case, it was made for the queen of France, who was most likely literate in Latin.

The Prayer Book of Claude is no ordinary prayer book. There's a story behind it that gives a different value and meaning to it. Queen Claude specifically had this made for her as a coronation gift by her favorite artist that no doubt would not disappoint. The language, the size, and material of the Prayer Book of Claude de France all have some contribution to the purpose of the book.

Reflection

The materiality analysis was really interesting to write about. I learned about how a manuscript can be examined and still tell a story. I never realized that the physical features could tell so much about this piece of work. I realized from the comments that I received that I wasn't very clear when I mentioned these "odd narratives" and "bizarre paintings". I went back and clarified why it was bizarre and in what context that made it so weird to the audience. I decided to provide examples by talking about some of the folios that were considered to be different and unusual. At first I never had any pictures or links to my analysis. Since it's posted on a blog, I never realized to include my object. Therefore, the audience never had any reference to what I was talking about. I went back and hyperlinked my manuscript along with many folios in my analysis that I decided to talk about due to their importance and interesting facts about them. I realized how important it is to consider the medium in which you post your writing. Hyperlinking the picture would not be possible if this was a written paper; however, the blog provides various options of presenting and supporting my analysis.