

## How do Medieval Manuscripts Differ from Modern Books?

Books today are very different from their medieval counterparts. The difference is not simply one of physical form. The dissimilarity goes beyond the mechanics of representation to recognizing that in the case of medieval books creation and representation are not separate, but conflated. However strange it may seem to us, the making of a medieval book determined *what* the work said and *why* the meaning of a literary text was tightly linked to the form of each copy of the work. In short, the medieval period did not clearly differentiate the act of creation from that of publication.

The current delineation between the domains of author and publisher is a relatively recent development. The book as we know it has evolved gradually since the Renaissance. Moveable letters, developed at the end of the fifteenth century, allowed a writer's words to be set in type, one page at a time, then printed in multiple copies. For the first time, identical specimens of a literary work could circulate to the reading public. Advances in print technology meant books were increasingly more available to the public because more affordable. These factors favored the gradual evolution of modern concepts of the book.

The growth of a reading public meant financial gain for publishers and authors. Furthermore, the corollary of seeing an author's name on multiple copies of a printed book—especially popular one's like John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, or Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* or Cervantes's *Don Quixote*—accustomed readers not simply to associate a specific work with a particular writer, but also to associate the contents with that writer and no other. In short, the book was recognized as the author's "property," by right of being his creation. By the end of the eighteenth century, these rights came to be known as "intellectual property," which recognized the legal rights of authors to their work. This meant that a literary work could be registered as the author's property, making it theoretically illegal for others to appropriate or alter the text.

Medieval books differed from the paradigm just sketched not only physically, but conceptually as well. Since books were handwritten—whence the term, "manuscript" (from the Latin words for "hand" and "written") by which medieval books are known—each manuscript book was a unique version of the work it represented. To appreciate the beauty and complexity of medieval literature, means understanding the nature of the manuscripts that bring these works to us. An important element of that beauty is the visual complexity of the medieval "folio" ('leaf'), as manuscript pages are called. We intuit their "polyphonic" nature from our first glimpse of the graphic elements. Manuscripts convey literary meaning not simply through the verbal text, but also through images, designs, and commentaries interspersed with the verbal text on the same folio. Understanding how and why medieval literary works were made in this way equips us to understand the meanings of the various "voices" we encounter in them.

It may come as a surprise to find that a literary manuscript contains paintings and interjections seeming unrelated to the text. We are not used to a situation where the modes of publication and creation go (literally) hand-in-hand, but such is the case in a culture where each copy of a well-known work like the allegorical *Roman de la Rose* must be produced by hand, or more likely by many hands with different skills. Although the medieval scriptorium (workshop for copying and painting manuscripts) is often portrayed in a monastic setting (as, for example, in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*), by the late 13th century major manuscript production occurred in workshops located in city centers. In Paris, for instance—the major center of book production in the 13th and 14th centuries—manuscript ateliers clustered in contiguous streets of the Latin Quarter near the Seine.

This means that manuscript books were products of an urban micro-culture where every aspect of production was carried out by artisans living in the same or nearby streets. Preparation for copying a text included transforming the animal skin into parchment, grinding minerals and plant products for pigments and ink, planning the layout of the codex in columns with spaces for miniatures, decorated and historiated initials, marginalia, and rubrics. The actual production of the work involved copying the text, decorating the margins, and painting the illuminations, determining the binding, and, finally, delivering the codex (plural 'codices,' a Latin term designating a manuscript book) to its patron.

This micro-culture also left its imprint on the contents of the codex. While the work or works to be copied furnished the impetus for the commission, they were but one component of the book's *dispositio* (layout). What we have called the "polyphony," or blending of voices on the manuscript page makes a crucial contribution not only to the way the codex represents its work(s), but also to the sense of the works themselves. As we can see from the illustration below, these components include both verbal and visual elements such as rubrics, miniature paintings, decorated or historiated initials, marginal embellishments, glosses, etc.

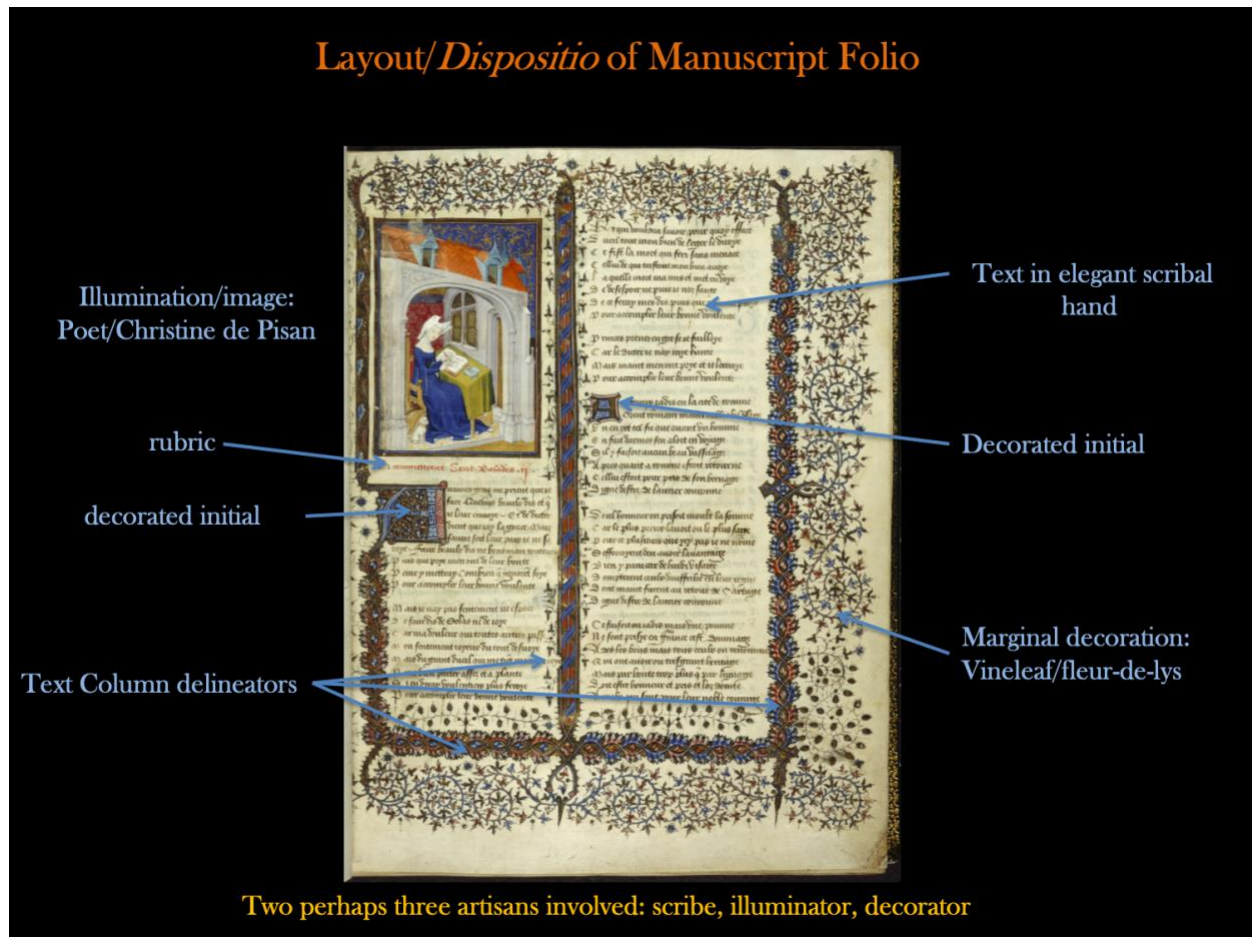
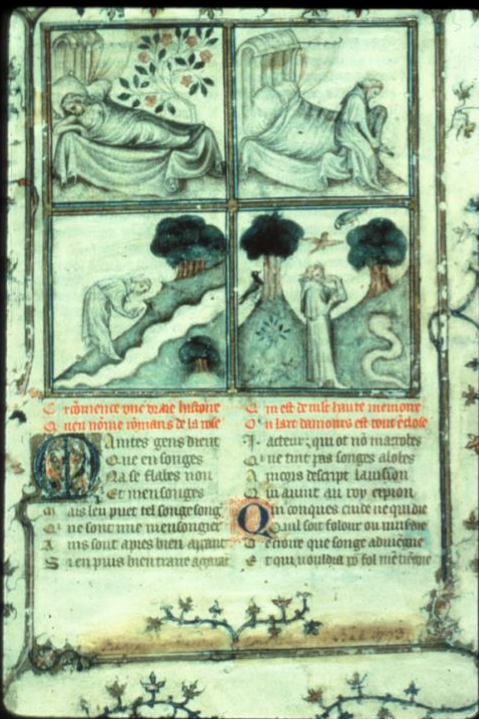


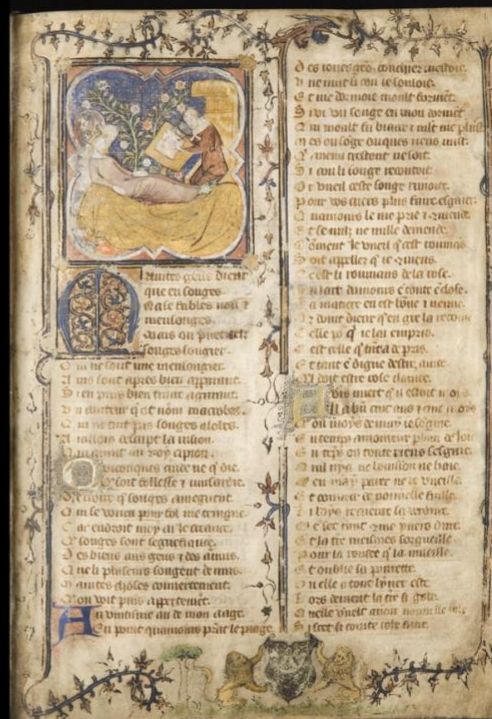
Figure 1: Components of a manuscript page. “Christine de Pizan, *Cent Ballades*,” London: British Library, MS Harley 4431, fol 4r (Paris, c. 1410).

The crucial contribution of these components to the perception of a work can be seen when we view the “same” work as represented by different manuscripts as in Figure 2. While it’s natural to find differences in manuscript presentations of a given work when produced by diverse teams of scribes and artists working over a period of several centuries, variations also arise naturally from the fact that making a manuscript also means creating a unique version of the work in question. Since there is no “original” author-copy of the work to serve as a template, scribes followed its main episodes and language as found in other versions of the work, but did not hesitate to make additions and commentaries or visual illustrations as they saw fit. Each manuscript version of a work like *The Romance of the Rose* had distinctive variations arising from the creative and interpretive imagination of the scribe(s) and artist(s) who created it. In this sense each manuscript version was a (re)creation. There was no original version.

## Manuscripts of “same” work vary significantly



MS Morgan 132, f. 1  
Paris, c. 1325-40



MS U Chicago 1380, f. 1  
Paris, late 14<sup>th</sup> c.

Figure 2. Incipits (opening page) of two manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose*. Left: New York: Morgan Library MS 132, fol. 1r (Paris, c. 1325-40). Right: Chicago, U Chicago Library MS 1380, f. 1 (Paris, late 14<sup>th</sup> c.).

For moderns accustomed to finding the same (or virtually the same) text of an author’s work in editions published at different times, it’s startling to discover the wide variation of treatments accorded a work in different codices. Still more unsettling (or exciting) are the different reading experiences and perspectives on the work from one manuscript to another. These variations have everything to do with the non-textual components of the codex that critical editions omit in favor of focusing on the verbal text.

The factor that makes these variations so effective—and readily recognizable on the folio—goes by the Latin name of *dispositio*: the disposition or layout of the different graphic systems on the folio. It’s helpful to think of *dispositio* as the dynamic element that transforms the manuscript page or folio into a multi-media space. As such, it distributes representational elements logically on the page in a way judged to encourage the reader to recognize the dynamic interaction of the verbal and visual elements. *Dispositio* organizes the representational space of the folio into iconic *and* verbal units, rather than relying solely on the verbal text to convey meaning. Whereas reading privileges verbal text and relegates images to merely “illustrating”

textual meaning, dynamic perception holds all representational signs as iconic, positing meaning in different ways.

We are so used to printed letters that we may tend to forget that each letter in a manuscript was formed by hand, and thus unique, in the same way as the strokes in manuscript paintings were made by the artist's brush. Since medieval "readers" had no conception of mechanical printing, it was natural for them to view the parchment page as consisting of different kinds of images, each positing meaning that engaged the other systems. It was up to the viewer to register and synthesize the several systems and interpret their collective meaning. Once we begin to think of the parchment page as a system of signs all of which contribute elements whose synthesis contributes meaning to the work as a whole, we can also understand how they interact to guide the viewer's experience and understanding.

Book manuscripts differ from their modern counterparts above all in their mode of being as the product of collaborative creation. Long after the death of the poets responsible for a given work, artists and scribes continue to enrich these works with color, meaning, and aesthetic pleasure. In the case of the *Romance of the Rose*, there are over 250 such representations of the work, each differing from the others. Collectively, these manuscript versions point to a time when the culture of the codex played a major role in determining how the poem appears, and how it may be understood.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, romance compilation and image production encouraged new kinds of hybrid literature that mixed music, art, and lyric thanks to the multi-media potential of the manuscript form. So if we learn nothing else from listening to what manuscripts of the period have to tell us, it's the story of a moment when poets, artists, scribes, readers, and all those responsible for producing parchment, ink, and colors, lived and worked in close collaboration with one another and as part of an interdependent court and urban society. Medieval manuscripts convey that story dynamically and in what Hollywood used to call "living color."

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