Leaf from a fifteenth century French Book of Hours printed by Thielman Kerver.

Background:  

The Tisch library leaf is from a Book of Hours printed by Thielman Kerver. Based on a match with an Horae currently in the Huntington Library’s collection, RB 108803, the Tisch fragment appears to be from Kerver edition 11 Kalendas Maii, 1505. Thielman (or Thielmann) Kerver was born in Coblenz but was based in Paris. Kerver’s shop was active in printing not only Books of Hours, but a range of works which catered to the diverse tastes of his customers. He first entered into the market as a simple ‘libraire’ and Jean Phillipe printed Kever’s first Book of Hours in 1497. In 1498 Kerver started printing in his own right, and in that same year he partnered with Georg Wolff; it was Wolff who brought to Kerver’s shop the roman type used in the Tisch fragment. Kerver sold not only in Paris but in other regions of France as well as on the international market; indeed one of his earliest editions was a Book of Hours for the use of Salisbury. After his death in 1522 his wife Yolande de Bonhomme took over the printing shop, subsequently run by his first and second son. Thus, the Kerver print career spans over 50 years.

Iconography:

The engravings found on the Tisch fragment illustrate two biblical typologies, each consisting in three images. These typologies juxtapose two Old Testament ‘antitypes’ with a single ‘type’ at center. On the recto of the Tisch folio, the border frames the texts “Libera me” and the beginning of Psalm 50. The lateral border depicts three images, interspersed with two lines of text. At the top, Jezebel sending a messenger to Elijah (1 Kings 19:2); at center Christ before Pontius Pilate, Pilate washing his hands (Matthew 27:24-25); at bottom, King Nebuchadnezzar, forced to give Daniel to the furious populace (Daniel 14:29). The citation which corresponds to the New Testament image is divided between two rectangles in the lateral border, it reads: “Accepta aq la uit man’ cora populo dices. Innoces ego sum a sangui-ne.Mat.27”. The foot-piece depicts two Old Testament prophets, between which are found the two citations corresponding to the Old Testament images from the lateral border. The topmost citation is from 1 Kings 19:2 and reads, “Misitque iesabel nu-tiu ad helia dices hec mi.rc.m. reg.19.” The bottommost citation is from Daniel 14:29, “Topuls’ nabuchodonosor tradidit eis daniele.Da.14”. The headpiece depicts a grotesque holding a sword hunting a quadruped, with floral decoration; the inner border depicts a hunter with two dogs at the bottom, a man playing the bagpipes in the middle, and a grotesque at the top amid floral decoration.

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1 For a brief summary of the early printed market, please see essay on the Vérard fragment.
2 Huntington Library, San Marino, California: RB 108803
4 Early English Books Online, catalogue no.15885
5 http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/flemingsi_scope.shtml
6 In Daniel 14, the King is actually Cyrus and not Nebuchadnezzar, however in the footpiece of the Tisch folio the king is cited as Nebuchadnezzar (Nabuchodonosor). This same error is made in the Esztergom Blockbook of Forty Leaves, a Biblia Pauperum from the fifteenth century. See: Avril Henry, ed... Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile and Edition. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (1987). Pg 140, note b.13.
7 Abbreviations used by the scribe have not been included in the citation, reference the images provided on website.
Psalm 50 continues on the verso of the Tisch folio, followed by Psalm 64. The borders follow the same format as is found on the recto. The lateral border depicts: at top, Abraham and Isaac, Isaac carrying a bundle of wood (Genesis 22:6); at center: Jesus carrying the cross (John 19:17); at bottom, Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:12). The text which corresponds to the New Testament image, found in the lateral border reads, “Et baiulans sibi crucem exivit i eum q dicit Calvariae locu hebraice Golgotha.Jo.19”.

The foot-piece depicts: two Old Testament prophets, between which are found the two citations corresponding to the Old Testament images in the lateral border. The topmost citation is from Genesis 22:6, “Tulit quoqm ligna olocausn:et iposuit iup ysaac.Gen.22”. The bottommost citation is from 3 Kings 17:12, “En colligo duo ligna ut ingrediar: et facia illud.3.re.17”. The headpiece depicts a centaur shooting a bow and arrow at a quadruped amid floral decoration. The inner border depicts, at bottom, a grotesque, at center, a monk indicating the text with his finger, and at top, a man riding an animal amid a floral decoration.

Kerver’s Borders:

Based on comparisons with other editions of Kerver’s Books of Hours, these borders would have been part of a much longer cycle containing numerous sets of ‘antitypes’ and ‘types’. An early appearance of the cycle in a 1497 edition by Kerver consists of 34 sets of these types. In later editions, Kerver appears to have added to the set, and by 1500 it had grown to 45 pieces. It should also be noted that Kerver was developing other aspects of this border ‘narrative’, and in all editions noted (see footnote 8) there is a clear progression of narrative in the borders. Kerver starts the set with a cycle of Creation Images, followed by the typological or historiated borders, and then by a set of scenes from the Book of Revelations. Kerver also uses many smaller cuts of scenes from the life of martyrs and saints, the life of Christ, the life of the Virgin and other small liturgical scenes, generally before and after the completion of the three other sets. In the later Books of Hours, these miscellaneous cuts tend to be replaced with various Renaissancizing ornamental images. In 1510, Kerver introduces the Dance of Death cycle, which starts during the Office of the dead. Generally, the Creation set starts either during the four Gospel Lessons or the Passion of Saint John, directly prior to or at the start of the Hours of the Virgin. The historiated borders often start at the beginning of the Hours of the Virgin.

These borders obviously represent a significant effort and economic input. He strives to group the borders containing actual narratives (as opposed to decorative imagery) around some of the more important sections of the text: such as the Hours of the Virgin. Through the use of these borders, he is both highlighting these areas of the text and providing alternate sources for meditation during the various hours and offices in one of the areas of Books of Hours not proscribed or circumscribed by liturgical tradition.

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8 Princeton: 5.3.5 Kerver July 15, 1497; Morgan PML 126023; Kerver 10, Harvard TYP 515.10.262
9 Princeton 5.3.5
10 Kerver 10, Harvard TYP 515.10.262
12 Winn, ibid., pg. 103.
The borders become an alternative narrative at the margins of the page, neither directly tied to the text nor completely unrelated. The development of these margins results in a productive space with both image and text of its own. The question of how, or whether, these margins would have actually been used has been brought into question. The print itself identifying the images is indeed small and heavily abbreviated, and therefore difficult to read. However Winn often notes the potential of such borders as ‘selling points’ in a market that was filled with Books of Hours. Kerver’s continuation to develop and print these borders for over 10 years, they started to fall out of use around 1513, suggests that this was indeed a financially viable format.

As previously stated, how these borders would have been ‘read’ is an issue which requires exploration. Such Books of Hours present not just illuminations and images in the margins, but the multiplication of entire narratives and stories—something which marks them off from many of their earlier counterparts. Given the significance of the early print trade as creator and result of a new reading public with new reading habits, and given the popularity of Books of Hours during this critical period, transformations such as the ones we find in the borders could be fruitful ground through which to explore these issues. Paul Saenger has already noted the critical importance of certain texts in Books of Hours as symptoms of the assertion of new types of readership—comprehension literacy and the extension of religious meditation through reading into new classes, that is those outside the ecclesiastical and aristocratic. Perhaps these borders could help us understand this development further.

Furthermore, the appearance of certain motifs within the miscellaneous sections of these borders deserves fuller attention. Kerver develops a massive repertoire of everyday scenes, with images such as a boar using a mortar and pestle, boys bird-nesting, and other scenes which may derive their sources from commonly known puns, folktales and daily life. Other recognizably ‘medieval’ conventions such as empty scrolls and hunting scenes populate the pages of earlier Kerver editions. Slowly, these images are replaced by Italianate vases and arabesques.

A finite transition from ‘Medieval’ to ‘Renaissance’ is a dubious claim, however certainly the iconographic shifts found in Books of Hours such as Kerver’s are part of larger trends in the print market and a transition away from the faithfulness to a manuscript model that had dominated early print. How can we think of these earlier images, so easily identifiable to us as ‘medieval’, in the context of the later Renaissance images? Contrary to representing any pure ideal of the ‘medieval’ it appears to me that these earlier decorative images provide an image of a post-medieval characterization of the medieval. Kerver’s pages are practically a running lexicon of the illuminated grotesques found for hundreds of years in the margins of manuscripts. Such transitions

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13 Winn, ibid., pg. 103.
18 By this I mean a standardization of images which had previously been subversive and poignant commentaries on individual texts made by marginal illuminators, the phenomenon Camille describes as a sort of ‘unraveling of the text’. This is an opinion I will be exploring—and assuredly revising—in my senior thesis. This is also an opinion which relies on a certain characterization of what is medieval, which is of course a shifting and constantly changing concept.
can also be used to think about what actually constitutes the ‘medieval’ and the
‘renaissance’—the exploration of a mindset in its ‘crystallization’ at the boundaries.

The Biblia Pauperum Borders:

Finally, one of the most interesting components of the Kerver Hours finds us
returning to the typological borders of the Tisch Fragment. Typological borders with a
similar format are found in Jean Du Pré’s 4 February 1488/89 edition, and Vérard’s 8
February 1489/90 hours. The source for this imagery and format are the rather inaptly
named Biblia Pauperum, or the ‘Bibles of the Poor’. 19 The Biblia Pauperum presented a
series of between 40 to 50 types, using the format of two Old Testament antitypes to a
single New Testament type. 20 These texts, first appearing in the 13th century, made the
transition to the woodcut format in the 1460s. 21 A variety of texts surrounded these three
images: glosses and quotations from relevant New Testament sources, as well as a few
prophecies and Old Testament sources. In the Biblia Pauperum, this pairing of image and
text becomes a powerful meditative tool, through which the user can contemplate the
images and texts—garnering a plethora of different religious significances from the
practice. 22 23 It is not just the text that is used to draw the parallels between the types and
antitypes, but the images themselves. Through specific formal parallels between key
elements of the images, the image itself becomes a way to ‘read’ the significance of these
events—key images, such as the cross, becoming like ‘words’ which can be recognized
in the ‘sentences’ of other illustrations.

The Tisch fragment’s examples preserves this idea of the fusion between word
and image, image and symbol. On the recto, we see that the three images: Jezebel,
Pontius Pilate, and Nebuchadnezzar (who is in fact King Cyrus in this section of Daniel)
are juxtaposed in order to present a commentary on unjust judgments. Jezebel sends her
messenger to Elijah, telling her she will kill him for championing Yahweh over Baal, a
locally worshiped God; Pontius washes his hands and thus condemns the innocent Christ;
and King Cyrus/Nebuchadnezzar allows Daniel to be handed over to the furious
populace, after he has killed a Dragon worshipped locally as a god. The miniature
narrative however is also connected to a larger narrative which: all three survive, and the
Old Testament prophets’ victories ultimately find their full fulfillment in Christ’s coming
victory and resurrection. There is both a single lesson, and a larger lesson that reflects the
larger narrative of a Christian system of morality and divine will.

Although the typologies of our fragment and those of the Biblia Pauperum are
extremely similar, not all of the elements of the Biblia Pauperum’s multiple lessons are
preserved. For example, although it is clear that Jezebel, Pilate, and King Cyrus are
visually paralleled in the Tisch folio, this varies slightly from the resolution expressed in
the Biblia Pauperum. In the Biblia Pauperum, it is Jezebel, the crowd before Pilate and
the crowd before Cyrus who are most directly condemned. In fact, Pilate and Cyrus are
used as examples of the corruptibility of power—and the dangers of allowing oneself to

19 Mary Beth Winn. “Illustrations in Parisian Books of Hours: borders and repertoires”. *Incunabula and their readers. Printing,
21 Henry, ibid.
22 Henry, ibid.
be swayed to the side of evil—as opposed to the most direct perpetrators of evil. The aims of the Biblia Pauperum images and those of the borders are not completely parallel, thematic differences which result from shifts in format.  

On the verso, we have an image of Abraham and Isaac, of Christ carrying the cross, and Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath. The well known story of Abraham and Isaac provides an Old Testament antitype of sacrifice for the type of Christ, while the Widow of Zarephath carries two sticks with which she must feed herself and her son. Despite her penury, she takes Elijah in and ultimately God provides for all three. Thus what we have is two acts of faith, or sacrifice, which give life. Again, this small narrative is superseded by the larger narrative—in which Christ’s sacrifice becomes the highest life-giving element, willingly (and not unknowingly) giving us not mortal but immortal life.

This example also shows thematic variations from the Biblia Pauperum model. The glosses in the Biblia Pauperum place the emphasis on the symbol of the wood: Isaac carries the wood with which he will be sacrificed as does Christ, and the wood which nourishes the Widow and her son is like the wood of the Cross which will nourish us. Although part of this symbolism is retained through the imagery—especially by the similarity of the Widow’s two crossed sticks to a cross—the lack of glosses on the Biblical passages, and not simply the passages themselves, results in a shift in meaning.

Further comparisons must be made between these two sources, however this translation of a standard group of typologies is a fruitful area for research. It is clear that these images would not have been read in the same way as the Biblia Pauperum. The absence of most of the accompanying text, as well as their placement in the border of the Book of Hours suggest that as a devotional tool they would be used in a different manner. However, it is possible that they had an independent role to play in the text as well as a conjunctional one. Further questions pertaining to the reading of these images center around other shifts occurring in the world of books. In a world in which reading practices were shifting dramatically, did the reading of images change as well?

Bibliography:

24 The fact that these thematic shifts are dependent merely on the format may be incorrect, again this is a topic I will be more fully pursuing through my senior thesis.

25 Henry.


