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Latin, Vernacular Language, and Personal Devotion in the Portland State Book of Hours

Matthias Bladou

Books of Hours were produced all over Medieval Europe, as can be seen in this exhibition showcasing examples from French, Italian, and Dutch manuscripts. While stylistic and material analyses can help establish regional variations, a linguistic analysis of a Book of Hours' text can yield significant insight as to where and when it was produced. Most Books of Hours were written in Latin, as it was, and still is to this day, the language of the Church. However, some of these manuscripts were written, at least in part, in the vernacular of the various regions where they were produced.

French society in the Middle Ages was highly multilingual, that is not to say that everyone spoke many different languages but rather that the country was divided socially, culturally and geographically in several linguistic groups.¹ Latin was considered to be at the very top of the linguistic hierarchy in France at the time, it was associated with the church, education, intellectual life and also power, as most people could not read it.² French, along with the various regional dialects in France such as Gascon, Occitan or Provençal, was thought to be the language of the common people.³ While it was commonly used in spoken communication, its written component was associated with ignorance and illiteracy.

Books of Hours, however, were primarily owned by laymen and women, individuals that were not part of the clergy. These books were made for individual devotion and were thus very personal possessions, sometimes even tailored to the owner. While this can be seen in simple acts such as the owner writing their name in the book, it could also take on a less explicit but arguably more meaningful form. Indeed, Books of Hours' patrons sometimes had personalized prayers for specific saints who were pertinent to them. Furthermore, with the rise of *Devotio Moderna*, or Modern Devotion, it was not uncommon in more lavish manuscripts for the owner to be depicted in a miniature in the presence of a saint or a religious figure. However, this was also a marker of status, as only wealthy patrons could afford having a Book of Hours created specifically for them. Because of this close relationship between a Book of Hours and its owner, the choice of Latin, a language used for specific purposes, would be less meaningful to the patron, and partial vernacular text in Books of Hours became more prevalent.

The Portland State University Book of Hours is a great example of this state of linguistic transition. The highlighted feast day of Ste. Geneviève in the calendar, as well as the

¹ Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 86

² Ibid

³ Ibid

prayers to St. Godo and St. Fiacre place the manuscript around Paris, more specifically in the Marne region (Figs. 6 and 12). The French language, originally just a vernacular, started developing in the area known as Île-de-France, the region surrounding Paris where most of the royal administration took place. While it was first a regional dialect, it eventually expanded and became the kingdom's "langue maternelle," or mother tongue.⁴ The parallel between personal or intimate devotion and the use of the native language is further strengthened by the fact that the more canonical prayers were usually kept in Latin whereas the vernacular was more often used for the personalized parts of the book,⁵ as in the month of January from the Portland State Book of Hours calendar (Fig. 1), written in French with important days highlighted in red as mentioned above. The text in Latin, "Domine labia mea aperies," the opening verse from the Hours of the Virgin, is an essential part of any Book of Hours (Fig. 4).

With the advent of printing, Books of Hours saw major changes in their process of production, and towards the end of the Middle Ages Books of Hours written in vernacular languages were becoming more prevalent, with about half of them written in Latin and the other half in vernacular by the middle of the sixteenth century.⁶ However, while this transition to printed Books of Hours accompanied the increased use of French text, there are also instances of prayers in the vernacular becoming more scarce. For example, the Book of Hours here at Portland State contains the prayer, "Quinze joies de la Vierge" (Fifteen Joys of the Virgin), which is a French prayer that would later become much less frequent with the shift to print.⁷

Books of Hours provide significant insight on the subject of linguistic trends in the Middle Ages, in France and in the rest of Europe. The clues they give modern scholars are even more relevant when we consider that besides being used for a religious purpose, Books of Hours were also used as a teaching tool to promote literacy.⁸ Students were required by their instructors to recite passages from Books of Hours or Psalters as a means to gain proficiency in Latin, and it is somewhat ironic that this more highly valued language was being taught using the native, vernacular language of the pupils.⁹

⁴ Ibid, 85

⁵ Pierre Rézeau, *Les Prières aux saints en français à la fin du Moyen-Âge* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1982-1983), 12-15

⁶ Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, selling and reading, 1450-1550* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974), 132

⁷ Pierre Rézeau, *Les Prières aux saints en français à la fin du Moyen-Âge* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1982-1983), 14

⁸ Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours Making an Archive of Prayer, c. 1400-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 100

⁹ Ibid

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