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A Love Affair: Passionate Pursuits of the Book of Hours

Tammy Boyer-Martel

Held close--corporally and conceptually--the Book of Hours filled laypeople's daily lives with meditative reflections. This devotion elevated the Book of Hours to the position of best seller, superseding the Psalter. The Books of Hours and their embellished contents provide crucial resources of cultural context that reveal the intimate and personal relationship between text and owner. A love affair grew between portraits of the Passion narrative and laypeople. Interests in the Passion were cultivated during the Middle Ages, starting in the twelfth century. Members of the clergy used themes of the Passion in manuscripts such as Psalters and Breviaries in private and public recitals. A compassionate connection between laity and the Divine developed and was no longer a relationship reserved solely for members of the clergy; others desired the assurance of salvation that the manuscripts provided.

Not only was the written word gaining in popularity because of increasing literacy rates, the following of the Cult of the Virgin Mary was growing as well. In addition to being considered the Holy Mother of God, as deemed by the Council of Ephesus in 431, her prominent position raised her up to the status of principle intercessor who spoke to God on the believer's behalf. Originally, the Book of Hours referred to the Hours of the Virgin, but now, the title signifies the whole book, though the contents of the books vary according to patronage and region. The Book of Hours contained numerous prayers addressed to the Virgin and a particular section devoted to Mary is called the Little Office of Our Lady or Hours of the Virgin, which was read early in the morning. In some instances more prayers were directed toward Mary than to God or the saints.

Books of Hours, like rosary beads used in prayer to the Virgin Mary, were also accessories carried or worn and were frequently used in public places. The smaller editions of the Book of Hours were portable, further providing evidence of the intimate relationship between book and owner. When small enough, these deeply personal objects were carried about in a sleeve or on the belt. In the Good Wife's Guide the husband instructs his young wife in proper behavior and attire in public. Upon her arrival at church she was to select a private and solitary place in front of a beautiful statue or altar while keeping her eyes on her book and constantly praying.

In the late fourteenth century, the French author Eustache Deschamps further illustrated the prominent relationship between owner and the Book of Hours in his poem:

*A Book of Hours, too, must be mine
Where subtle workmanship will shine,*

*Of gold and azure, rich and smart,
Arranged and painted with great art,
Paint it with gold and with azure
Covered with fine brocade of gold;
And there must be, so as to hold
The pages closed, two golden clasps.*

In addition to commissioning these opulent prayer books, the affluent also received Books of Hours as wedding gifts or family heirlooms. Among the leaves family notes were commonly written, recording marriages, births, deaths, and even recipes. Given as gifts they could be used as binding testaments of regard and fidelity. The Book of Hours was not only purchased for pious use but also for the manuscript's beautiful decoration. Although the content stimulated religious contemplation in the devout mind, they also delighted the secular eye. These manuscripts also attest to literacy among women and the rising prominence of the vernacular as seen in regional variances. The role that women played as patrons of Books of Hours was an important one, exemplifying the mother's cherished role of nurturing, tutoring, and shaping religious beliefs. They taught their children to read with the aid of illustrations that decorated the Books of Hours. It is from these books and the Office of Prime that the word "primer" evolved. In Britain, the term "Primer" is interchangeably used with the Book of Hours.

Even though women were prominent in commissioning the Books of Hours, men too held a close and personal relationship with the text which provided script for their personal prayers. Both women and men treated their Book of Hours as a representation for the body of Christ, with which they were encouraged to foster a close physical relationship. Owners of the Book of Hours would express this intimate relationship by kissing or touching the images. A soldier would recite the prayers that adorned the pages of his Book of Hours and decorate it with charms for protection against the enemy. A prayer known as the "Charlemagne prayer" is found in various late Medieval Books of Hours. It remained popular with soldiers and versions of it were carried into battle by French and German troops until the Second World War.

Tragically, death is a part of war, and death was at the forefront of the religious sentiment of the time. In addition to war, life proved to be fragile in the face of plague, other diseases, and the dangers of childbirth. The Medieval senses were heightened to the carnal aspects of life and death. This resulted in the vivid illustrations that accompany the Office of the Dead, the section containing prayers for funerals and commemorations as found in the PSU Book of Hours. This paraliturgical text was adopted from the Breviary (Fig. 18). In addition to sewing charms to the parchment they also sewed curtains over an image, such as those found in the Office of the Dead. Having to lift the curtain before contemplating the image, would have added to the intimate relationship with the manuscript. However, before one's existence drew to a close,

Medieval lives as viewed through Books of Hours were managed by natural cycles, religious ceremony, and cultural traditions.

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