

## **ATTEMPTING TO READ ONLY: The Book Hours and the Making of Christian Publics**

In his book *Remix*, Lawrence Lessing makes a distinction. Read/Write is a file type that can be edited by users. Read Only cannot. It is useful to think of these files types as metaphors for how people interact with faith. Starting as an oral tradition Christianity can be seen as Read/Write<sup>1</sup>. We see in Church history ways individuals, synods and communities make their meaning and stories in relation to faith to fit specific lived contexts. With the printing press—thus the creation of books and manuscripts—Christianity become concretized in book form, the best example being the Bible. It is an assemblage of stories, letters, and other communications from a variety of authors, and with it the teachings of Christ becomes standardized, changing dissemination and reception.

The Bible is not the only example of faith in Read Only form. In this essay, using publicly accessible scholarship, I explore The Book of Hours, a type of devotional publication popular from the mid-13th century to the 15th century containing prayers, psalms and other texts people carried with them. Specifically I will be looking at one Book of Hours, a manuscript from the early 1400s—part of the Burke Library Collection—that was owned by the Culpepper Family of Kent. I am interested in the meanings around having a religious reference as a beautiful object close at hand and ideas around the power of text in relation to faith and community.

### **WHAT IS A BOOK OF HOURS**

A Book of Hours is “a prayer book designed for laymen, a compendium of psalms, Bible verses,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Lessing, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce in the Hybrid Economy* (London: Penguin, 2008).

hymns, antiphons, and prayers for private devotional use,<sup>2</sup> which began to be produced in the mid to late 13th Century, retaining popularity for 250 years. As Russell Hale notes, the publication gets the name from text within the book called the Hours of Virgin, “a set of eight daily prayers meant to venerate the Virgin Mary.”<sup>3</sup> These were texts to be recited at each of the eight connoical hours of the day. (see Appendix 1) A Book of Hours also contains a Calendar in which feast and other “red letter “ days were printed, as well as where people would record personal information such as the death dates of family members. Since death played a major role in the medieval life, the Book of Hours almost always included the full text of the Church’s Official Prayers for the Dead within the Office of the Dead section. Following these pages would be The Gospels, a collection of readings from the New Testament, often with illustrations. Proceeding those, some books would contain Suffrages—prayers addressed to popular saints, seeking protection from danger. Almost all books would have Prayers to the Virgin (often personalized via inscription or illustration) and Psalms. Sometimes only prompts of the Psalms would be printed, with the holder of the book expected to be able to recite the rest by heart. A Book of Hour often ends with a Litany, a list of of saints and martyrs. Book of Hours were often written in Latin, although later many would be produced in English known also as Primers.

The Book of Hours came of age at the dawn of the print age, meaning a Books of Hours could just as likely be a book printed on paper as a manuscript printed on vellum or parchment. Costlier editions would have hand decorated illuminations, while more modest versions would contain “striking facsimiles of hand-drawn decorations.”<sup>4</sup> Because of both the demand and the

---

<sup>2</sup> This essay is indebted to the public scholarship around The Book of Hours made available by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/enews/2010/june/booksofhours.html> (accessed 16 March 2015)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* (accessed 16 March 2015)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/enews/2010/july/booksofhours.html> (accessed 16 March 2015)

available technology, Book of Hours were “produced in greater number than any other single text”<sup>5</sup> of the time and most were manufactured to fit into a jacket pocket. Medieval scholar

Kathleen E. Kennedy provides insight into how the books were used:

With a Book of Hours the devotee prayed to Mary and the saints as personal heavenly intercessors, and the book itself could act as a sort of virtual shrine, including, by means of the Office of the Dead, the departed members of the devotee’s family and community.”<sup>6</sup>

Additionally she suggests, “Books of Hours demonstrated at once piety and privilege and formed an important means of expressing wealth and status.”<sup>7</sup> The cost of a Book of Hours was high. It is estimated even “modest versions made for the lesser aristocracy cost the medieval equivalent of several years' pay for an urban craftsman in the building trades.” According to Russell Hale, “every Book of Hours was an exquisite object custom made to taste for a patron who paid much of the cost in advance. Indeed, costliness was part of the point, for it drew attention to the wealth and elite status of its owner.” As we will see these books of faith and status were also passed down within families, communicating a rich inheritance of belief.

## LETS LOOK TOGETHER

Within the Burke Library collection is a Book of Hours that belonged to the the Clyfford / Culpepper family of Wakehurt, Preston Hall and Kent England. Cataloged as MS 50, the book survives as a collection of more than 10 gatherings, unbound, in a plain orange box. (see image: Gathering) It is a manuscript printed on parchment, measuring 190 x 150 mm, containing 80 pages. The script is formal gothic book hand, and the manuscript is in the style of Claes

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/enews/2010/may/booksofhours.html> (accessed 16 March 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen E. Kennedy, “Reintroducing the English Book of Hours or “English Primers””, *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, (Volume 89, Issue 03, July 2014, 693-723)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

Brouwer, most likely produced in the Netherlands, intended for export to England. Many of the miniatures (illustrations) are cut away, with only two remaining, one of which is overpainted: there is an image of the Empty Tomb painted over to include “the holy spirit as a dove descending along rays of the tomb”.<sup>8</sup> (see image: Holy)

According to the Digital Scriptorium, the book was “presumably disbound to correct its misbinding (of which the leaves still bear traces).”<sup>9</sup> The unbounding likely occurred circa 1840 when it was part of a collection of books owned by banker, library supporter, and philanthropist Fredrick Ferris Thompson. MS 50 was donated in 1923 to Union Theological Seminary on the occasion of, “the death of his widow, Mary Clarke Thompson.”<sup>10</sup>

We know the book belonged to the Clyfford / Culpepper family due to marginalia within the book that reads, “By me Edward Culpeper”<sup>11</sup>, (see image: Edward) i.e.: Edward Culpeper of Preston Hall in Aylesford Kent (before 1471-1533) as listed on the Culpepper Family tree.<sup>12</sup> The provenance of the book can be confirmed by further marginalia that reads, “ This is Jhon Culpepers booke, who soo ever stealeth this booke shal be hanged upon an hundred fute hygh.”<sup>13</sup> (see image: John). John (born most likely around 1494) was Edward’s son. Father and son were part of the Kent branch of the family.

Additionally, names hand written on the Calendar page of MS 50 list deceased family members providing a window into the book’s possible owner / whereabouts before Edward and

---

<sup>8</sup> This quote and much of the technical physical description of the book come from: <http://vm133.lib.berkeley.edu:8080/xtf22/search?rmode=digscript;smode=bid;bid=22;docsPerPage=1;startDoc=132;fullview=yes> (accessed 17 March 2015)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> MS 50

<sup>12</sup> This essay is also indebted to the <http://culpepperconnections.com/>, described as “The Culpepper Family Tree contains genealogical records for about 20,000 Culpeppers, displaying how they are related to each other and to about 20,000 non-Culpeppers.” (accessed 17 March 2015)

<sup>13</sup> MS 50

John. While we know the book was created between 1425 and 1450, the Digital Scriptorium notation, “s. XV2/4” suggests that the marginalia is from a later time. Listed on the May page of the Calendar is an obituary note that mentions Edward’s relatives: “walteri culpeper” (see image: May) who may be the father and father-in-law respectively of those listed on the July calendar page “Ricardi Wakeherst” and “margarete Culpepyr” (see image: July) Looking at the family tree, it is possible the pair are Richard Culpeper of Wakehurst (say 1435 - circa Oct 1516) and Margaret (Culpepper) Wakehurst (1448 - 1504). Given these names are listed and not others it is possible to consider the book had been the dominion of the Wakhurst side of the family before it was received by those living in Kent. How the book would have travelled from branch to branch is unknown, although Richard’s Will does survive and in it he mentions a house he had in Kent. Is it possible, given that people carried their Book of Hours with them, that Richard gave the book to Edward sometime between Edward’s birth (1471) and Richard’s death (1516) and that in turn Edward gave the book to his son John.

In addition to the miniatures cut out—maybe to be sold or to be shared with individuals—and the painted over miniature, later in the book there are two prayers written (thought to be of John’s hand) that read: “Stella celi extirpavit que lactavit dominum . . .” and “Ave maria, mater digna dei venie via luxque diei . . .”<sup>14</sup> (see image: Prayers)

A more in-depth study of this book would further explore the family tree, better assessing who is mentioned in its pages, consider the role of faith within this family at this time, and explore how shared objects fit into the practice of faith. Was this a book that was shared one person at a time, or one family at a time? Was it passed down only via men? How were the cut outs and marginalia understood by those who shared in the ownership of the book? How did the

---

<sup>14</sup> MS 50

book come to be in the hands of the Thompson family?

#### ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

In their ground breaking essay *Publics and Counter Publics*, Michael Warner explores how text makes possible the conditions for the creation of publics and counter publics.<sup>15</sup> Books, as a collection of text, are objects that one can literally and figuratively gather and form publics and counter publics around. A Book of Hours, as illustrated by MS 50, is a perfect example. While the work of the owner's hand not only tell us about the travels and web of ownership of the book, the marginal and personal additions also speak to the ways in which the book was more than an heirloom but also a shared site of faith. In this way we see how through the technology of a book—which can be seen as an attempt to make faith a Read Only practice—faith can not be contained and is indeed returns to a Read/Write phenomena, not only for the individual but for the body of a family. A public / counter public relationship to faith forms though multi-generations of the book's history and survives, allowing us to consider six hundred years later. A lesson from the Book of Hours can be faith can never be rendered as Read Only, rather it is always unbound even when attempts are made to bound it.

Appendix 1:

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Warner - "Publics and Counter publics", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, (Vol. 88, No. 4, November 2002, pp.413-425)

HOURS	TIME OF DAY	MINIATURE
Matins	the wee hours	Annunciation - Angel Gabriel greets Mary
Lauds	dawn	Visitation - Mary visits Elizabeth
Prime	mid-morning	Nativity - Born of the Christ child
Terce	late-morning	Annunciation - Angels appear to the shepherds
Sext	noon	Adoration of the Magi- Magi come to see the Christ child
None	mid-afternoon	Presentation in the temple- Mary presents the Christ child
Vespers	sundown	Flight into Egypt - Mary & Joseph flee Herod as directed in a dream
Compline	late evening	Coronation of the Virgin - Mary crowned Queen of Heaven

Image List:

From the Digital Scriptorium site: Prayers, Holy, John Edward, July, and May

Photo by student / author: Gathering