

Capturing Sound: The Art of William de Brailes in New College MS 322

This study offers a new interpretation of the fabulous and enigmatic marginalia adorning the folia of New College MS 322, a psalter completed c. 1238–1252 in the workshop of William de Brailes in Oxford, England. In the studies published to date on the manuscript, the distinctive pen flourishes and grotesques have been interpreted as pointers to important sections of text or otiose adornment. I suggest that these analyses have missed key useful functions of the design and offer three new interpretations. Primarily, I argue that William de Brailes schematically designed the pen flourishes to serve as mnemonically valuable heuristics in the form cuing images. Secondly, I suggest that they were abstract visualizations of sound, possibly reflecting the shifting nature of musical theory in the thirteenth century. Lastly, I suggest the flourishes may have been inspired by the anatomy of a bird's feather, which is both exegetically and theologically relevant to the Psalms. This study draws evidence from Aristotelian theories of sound, medieval memorial practices, and concepts of music resulting in a new perspective on the remarkable de Brailes psalter.¹

INTRODUCTION

The New College Psalter (New College MS 322) may be the most extraordinary treasure in the college's library. A large manuscript, measuring 13^{5/6} x 10 inches, with 162 leaves, and 21 lines to the page, it is lavishly decorated on creamy, top-quality vellum. It is one of sixteen manuscripts known to be made by William de Brailes as master illuminator (fl. 1230–1260, in Oxford 1238–1252).² De Brailes and his atelier were part of the book-making economy of thirteenth-century Oxford on Catte Street, supplying the university's demand for books.³ The most distinctive feature of manuscripts decorated by de Brailes illuminators are the historiated initials and fine linear embellishments. In fact, the scholar Nigel Morgan described the integration of the surrounding art with the text, the balance between the initials, exuberant border extensions, and unique penwork as entirely new in manuscript design of the Middle Ages.⁴ The first monograph published on MS 322 was authored by Sydney Cockerell, in which he generally dismissed the 'decorative scrollwork', and described the historiated initials as: 'necessarily rather monotonous'.⁵ Decades later, Michael Camille reconsidered the 'monotonous' miniatures, and convincingly emphasized the prevailing themes of orality and memorization, as each of the 138 square miniatures features a figure or two in the act of speaking or reading aloud from a book (f. 127r).⁶ Camille, however, did not offer a systematic study of the penwork embellishments. Clare Donovan

¹ I would like to extend thanks to Mary Carruthers for exploring the New College Psalter with me, for her time, generosity, and conversation. My gratitude also goes to the members of the Jesus College Medieval Forum and specifically to Jack Stebbing for delivering his talk, 'The Curious Case of Rahl. D 1225: Some Observations on Ecclesiastical Song in Britain in the High Middle Ages'. It was highly enlightening, and Jack's insights into polyphonic music of the thirteenth century helped clarify my own thoughts on the subject. I am also grateful to Daniel Wakelin, for pointing me in the right bibliographic direction and for his excellent teaching. I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude the Librarian of New College, Oxford, Christopher Skelton-Foord, and the invigilators who facilitated my time with MS 322.

² Nigel J. Morgan, *Leaves from a Psalter by William de Brailes* (London: The Folio Society, 2012), p. 16. Also: Peter Kidd, 'A Franciscan Bible Illuminated in the Style of William de Brailes', *The Electronic British Library Journal* (2007), Article 8, 1–20: <www.bl.uk/ebj/2007/articles/article8.html>. Michael Camille, 'An Oxford University Textbook Illuminated by William de Brailes', *The Burlington Magazine* 137(1106) (1995), 292–9.

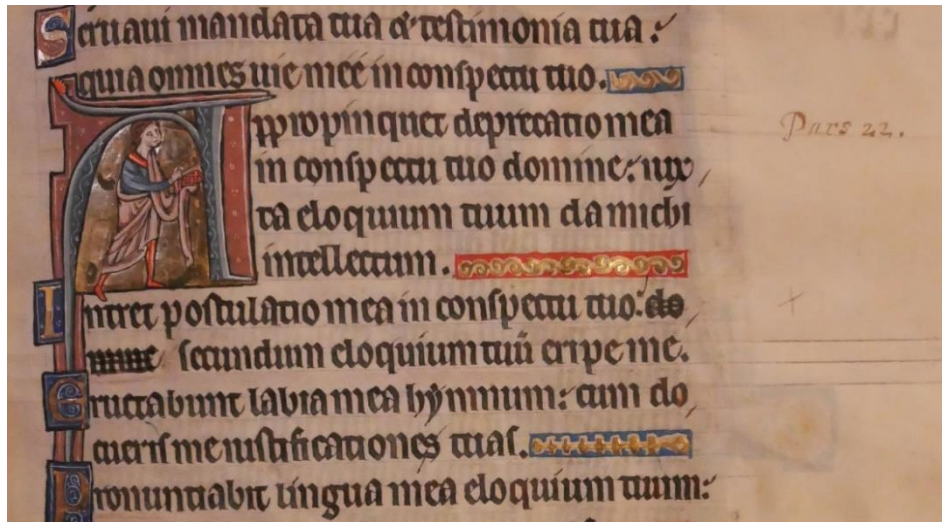
³ Morgan, *Leaves from a Psalter*, p. 13.

⁴ Nigel Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts; Vol. 1, 1190–1250* (London: Harvey Miller, 1982), no. 74, p. 122. Claire Donovan wrote: 'No long ancestry determined the shape of the de Brailes Book of Hours. There is no earlier surviving exemplar': Claire Donovan, *The de Brailes Hours: Shaping the Book of Hours in Thirteenth-Century Oxford* (London: British Library, 1991), p. 25.

⁵ Sydney Carlyle Cockerell, *The Work of W. De Brailes: An English Illuminator of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Printed for Presentation to the Members of the Roxburghe Club, 1930), pp. 2–3.

⁶ Camille, 'Oxford University Textbook', 296: 'The word "heard" here is important, since teaching was predominantly the oral explication of texts and learning was a matter of memorising and responding to these texts in the classroom'.

wrote a doctoral thesis and later published an important study on a sister manuscript from the same workshop, British Library, Add MS 49999. It is decorated with similar pen flourishes and initials, although much was lost due to careless bindings. Of the folia adornment, she wrote: “These border extensions form an important part of the organization of the page and the text—once again acting as a pointer to an important section”.⁷ This may be true of that Book of Hours from the de Brailes atelier, but unfortunately little more can be offered since much of the border decorations were lost.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 322, f. 12r [detail]
Initial figure actively reading aloud from a manuscript at hand
All MS 322 images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

I suggest that the previous publications on the New College Psalter have missed key useful functions of the marginalia. Rather than acting as pointers to an important section of text, or merely embellishment, in this concise study I argue that William de Brailes designed pen flourishes and figureheads to serve as mnemonically valuable heuristics in the form of cuing images.⁸ I suggest that they were way-finding pictures to aid in memorizing the text, or to adjacent sermons or theologically pertinent concepts, on each folio. The private memorization and public recitation of psalms and canticles were a fundamental aspect of ecclesiastical learning,⁹ and William de Brailes was a trailblazer, willing to experiment and integrate cutting-edge ideas into the *mise-en-page*.¹⁰ This is a new interpretation on the penwork flourishes and grotesques based on visual and theoretical evidence, although to a certain degree can only ever remain speculative, because the intents of the artist(s) and even the primary ownership and use of the manuscript have been lost to time.¹¹ However, the forethought involved in individuating each folio alone should discount the idea that they are otiose, and merit further exploration. To support my interpretation, I offer the following points:

- The pen flourishes spring forth from the last initials in the left column, indicating a direct link between text and image.

⁷ Donovan, *De Brailes Hours*, p. 30.

⁸ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 138; 283.

⁹ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 130: ‘So the practice of quoting, marking, and numbering a text for citation seems to have been the special prerogative of the most learned members of the university, who alone are able to quote *exquisite*’.

¹⁰ Clare Donovan exhibited the many ways de Brailes was a trailblazer willing to experiment: *De Brailes Hours*, p. 23.

¹¹ W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1964). Wimsatt defines ‘intentional fallacy’, the impossibility of ever fully comprehending an author or artist’s true intention.



f. 100r, red bird



f. 100v, owl



f. 101r, heron



f. 101v, griffin head



f. 102r, bearded man with gray hair

- In 36 folia the pen flourishes issue from figures' open mouths; no two figures are alike, and each leaf presents the reader with a new, strange and wonderful grotesque or feathery flourish. This could support memorizing the order of the Psalms in a visual sequence, or act as way-finders through the folia.¹² For example, the sequence above for Psalms 101–103 (ff. 100r–102r) is: red bird—owl—heron—griffin head—bearded man with gray hair. The sequence of images could act as a mnemonic device for the method of recitation, or exegetically adjacent ideas. The folia without figureheads spouting the flourishes are equally distinct, with bosses and barbs in different configurations (boss comparison: ff. 113v–114r).



ff. 113v–114r

¹² Monastic schools in the Middle Ages invented pagination schemes and bookmarks as indexing devices. Richard and Mary Rouse: '... before 1190, no such tools existed; and that, after the 1280s, the dissemination and new creation of such aids to study were commonplace': Richard Rouse and Mary Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia and Sermons: Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979), p. 4. Concerning the 'grammar of legibility', see also: Daniel Wakelin, *Designing English: Early Literature on the Page* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018).

- Even when the hand of a different illuminator is evident (ff. 113r–121v), the overall program and individual elements are intact, which indicates not only a desire for consistency and visual integrity, but perhaps also directions for an overall mnemonic scheme.
- Following conventional patterns that further link the text and decorations, the abstract pen flourishes alternate with red and blue ink, echoing the red and blue of the minor initials of each verse above.
- The folio at the end of a Psalm or canticle do not generally have pen flourishing (such as ff. 97r, 99r, 112v, 122r; although there are exceptions such as f. 152r); I suggest the pen flourishes were meant to act as visible, mnemonic hooks for a unit of text and not necessarily the text on an individual folio.

I propose that the flourishes issuing forth from figureheads are abstract visions of sound, an artistic rendition of prevalent aural theories, deliberately composed to spark memory of the text or pertinent concepts. Lastly, the beastly nature of the figureheads will be considered in the context of bestiary traditions, animal iconography in sacred texts, and the processes of bookmaking. Before considering the evidence in turn, I will preface this with a brief discussion of medieval theories and philosophies of sound in the following section.

AURAL THEORY

The idea that sound is a disturbance or vibration moving through air is founded on Aristotelian concepts.¹³ They are repeated in the works of Boethius (Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, 477–524 AD). In his treatise *De musica*, he states: ‘sound is defined as a percussion of air remaining undissolved all the way to the hearing’.¹⁴ He defines sound (*sonus*) specifically as music and the human voice (*vox*) rather than general ambient noise, a distinction that I maintain for this study.¹⁵ The words Boethius chose to describe the phenomena of sound are evocative, and resonate with the de Brailles pen flourishes: pulsation, percussion, striking frequency, relaxed or tense trembling chords (f. 18v, reproduced below).¹⁶ In the European Middle Ages these ideas were adopted and expanded upon by Vincent of Beauvais (c. 1184–1264) in *Speculum naturale*, written in the mid-thirteenth century.¹⁷ Today these principles are referred to as Relational Event Theory, defining sounds as ‘disturbings’ of a medium, hence depend existentially on a medium that is disturbed.¹⁸ John Blund, in Oxford 1207–9, discussed the experience of hearing in relation to the other five senses thus: ‘Moreover, the proper sensible of sight is color, and the proper sensible of hearing is sound. However, color is said to be in the thing seen, similarly flavor is said to be in the thing tasted, and likewise concerning the other proper sensibles of senses’.¹⁹ Sound is, of course, invisible, but I suggest that de Brailles and his workshop perhaps attempted an

¹³ Aristotle, *De Anima* II.8 420b15, trans: ‘. . . everything that makes a sound does so by the impact of something against something else, across a space filled with air’.

¹⁴ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, ed. and trans. Calvin M. Bower and Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), I.3, p. 11. See also: Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius (fl. 400 AD), commentary on *Somnium Scipionis*, 2.4.2. Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 5.3.6.

¹⁵ Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, note 63.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁷ Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum quadruplex, sive, Speculum maius: naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale* (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1964). From 4.14: ‘Sonus est aeris percussio indissoluta, usque ad auditum’.

¹⁸ Roberto Casati, Jerome Dokic, and Elvira Di Bona, ‘Sounds’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2020 Edition): <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/sounds/>>. Casey O’Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), also ‘Object Perception: Vision and Audition’, *Philosophy Compass* 3(4) (2008), 803–829.

¹⁹ John Blund, *Treatise on the Soul*, ed. D. A. Callus and R. W. Hunt, trans. Michael W. Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), XII.148, 81.

impossible feat: to represent *sonus* visibly. The artists of MS 322 are exploring the crossover of the visual and audible in the pen flourishes, especially with the grotesques, transforming sound into a 'sensible of sight'.



f. 18v

The de Brailes manuscript includes psalms and canticles, texts that were meant to be recited, sung and spoken.²⁰ This is emphasized in the historiated initials, every one of which depicts a figure in the act of speech.²¹ They relate to the text in other ways too, for example the capital on f. 52v depicts two individuals in a conversation.



f. 52v, historiated initial: two figures in conversation, relating to Psalm 51, a warning against gossip

²⁰ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 102; 123–7.

²¹ For a study on the relationship between illustrations and text in medieval manuscripts, see: Lucy Freeman Sandler, 'The Word in the Text and the Image in the Margin: The Case of the Luttrell Psalter', *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996), 87–99.

This directly relates to Psalm 51 it accompanies, which warns against a deceitful tongue and malicious gossip. The visual themes of the initials indicate this focus on orality, teaching, and public performance, and so do the more ephemeral traces left behind from centuries past, such as accidental splotches of wax and dirty thumbprints. This was not simply a showpiece manuscript as it was clearly manipulated,²² nor was it intended for use by neophytes familiarizing themselves with the Psalms.²³ The manuscript itself was part of a performative recitation, presumably for use in a chapel, with pen flourishes below to guide or conduct the reciter. These delightful and fanciful inventions are what Daniel Wakelin describes as ‘beautiful lunacy’, that in part serve a sociotechnic role to delight patrons and attest the artists’ talent.²⁴ Compared to the straightforward initial imagery and their correlation to the text, the energetic pen flourishes below appear abstract and unrelated. However, if they are considered as visual representations of sound, they are right at home.

CAPTURING SOUND: MNEMONICS, MUSIC, AND *IMAGINES*

Highly stylized, feathery pen flourishes decorate nearly every folio of the manuscript, each composed with a long, linear pen stroke issuing numerous fibrous ribbons and tendrils in symmetrical, organic flourishes. Initials trail into long tracery that reshapes into penwork or zoomorphic figures, leading the eye from letter and sound to embellishment. Thirty-six of these flourishes issue from the open mouths of human or animal grotesques. There are no identical designs across its many leaves.

Examples of pen flourishes

Notice also the drop of candle wax in the last line of text on f. 42r below



f. 42r

²² Graham Pollard described the manuscripts of de Brailles as ‘picture books for the rich and pious’, in: ‘The University and the Book Trade in Medieval Oxford’, *Miscellanea Medievalia* III (1964), 336–34, at p. 337.

²³ The psalms were initially memorized in the daily offices; see Hugh of St. Victor: ‘The Three Best Memory-Aids for Learning History’, trans. Mary Carruthers in *Book of Memory*, Appendix A; also footnote 4 (p. 455), and pp. 102–3.

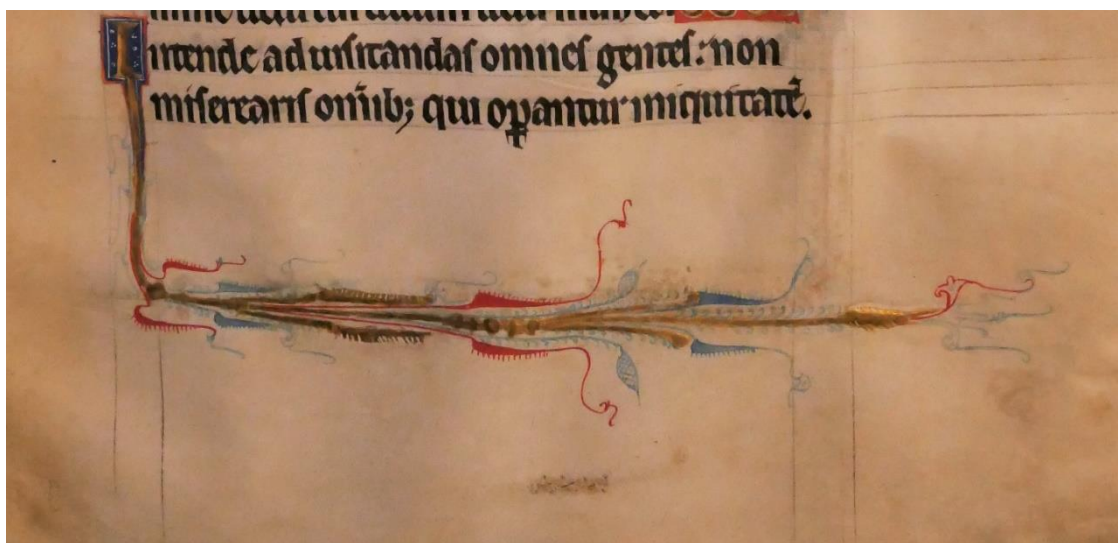
²⁴ Wakelin, *Designing English*, p. 101.



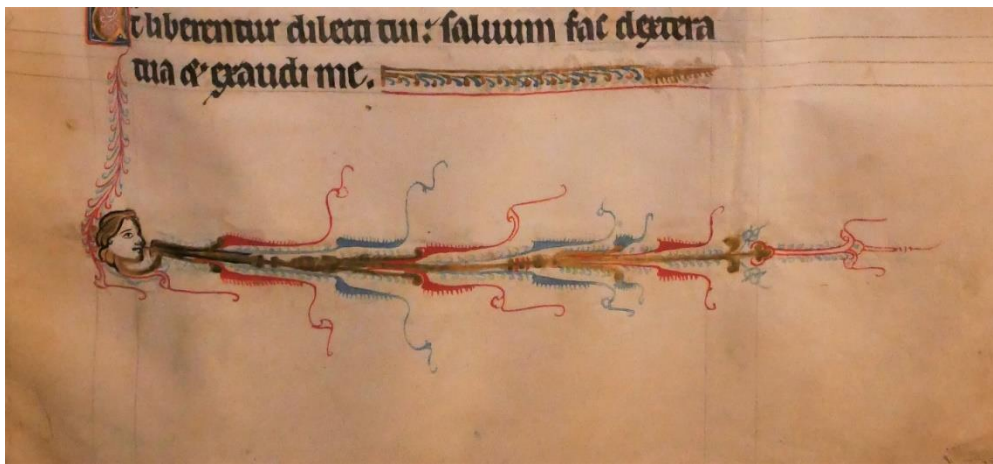
f. 44r



f. 52r



f. 59r



f. 60r



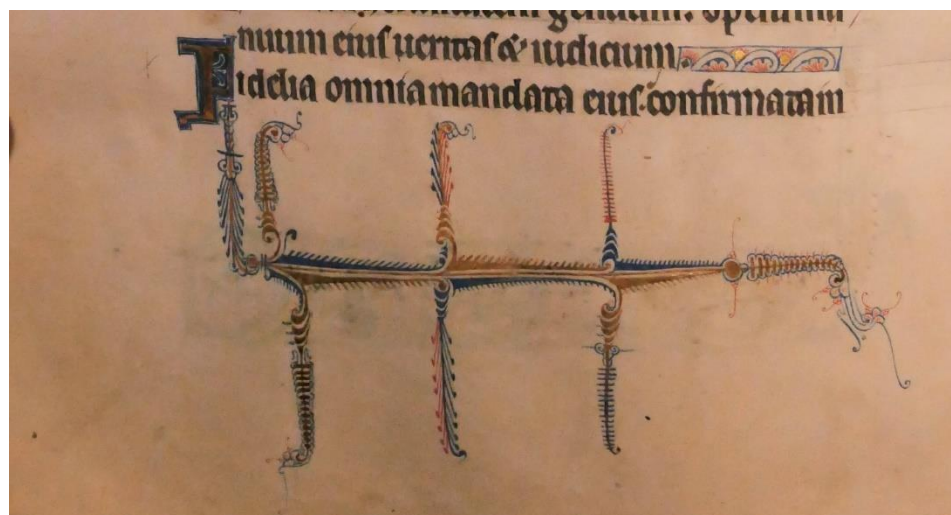
f. 69v



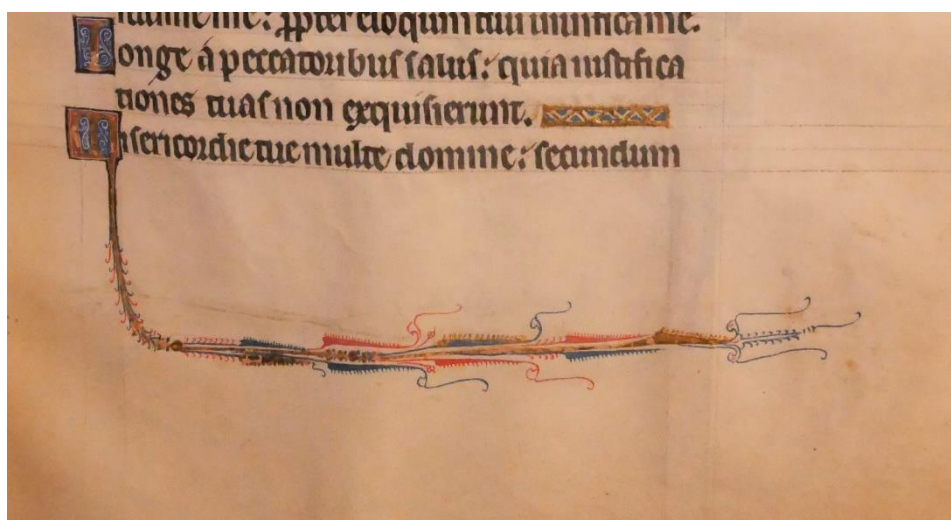
f. 73r



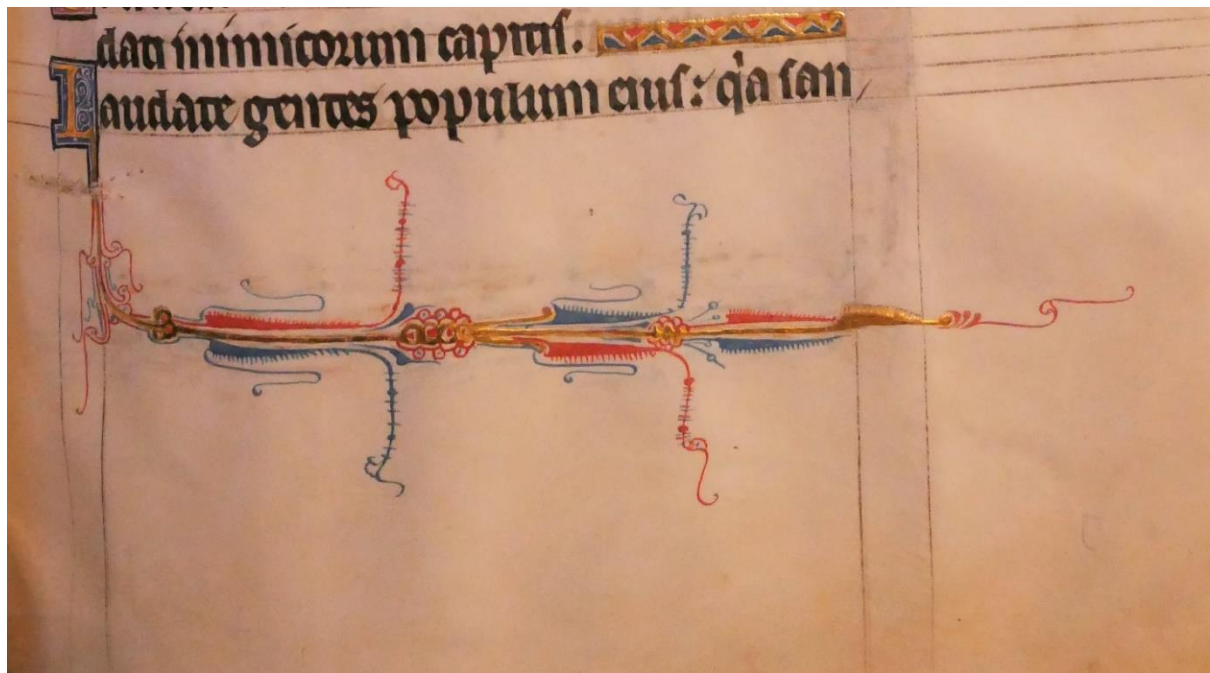
f. 95r



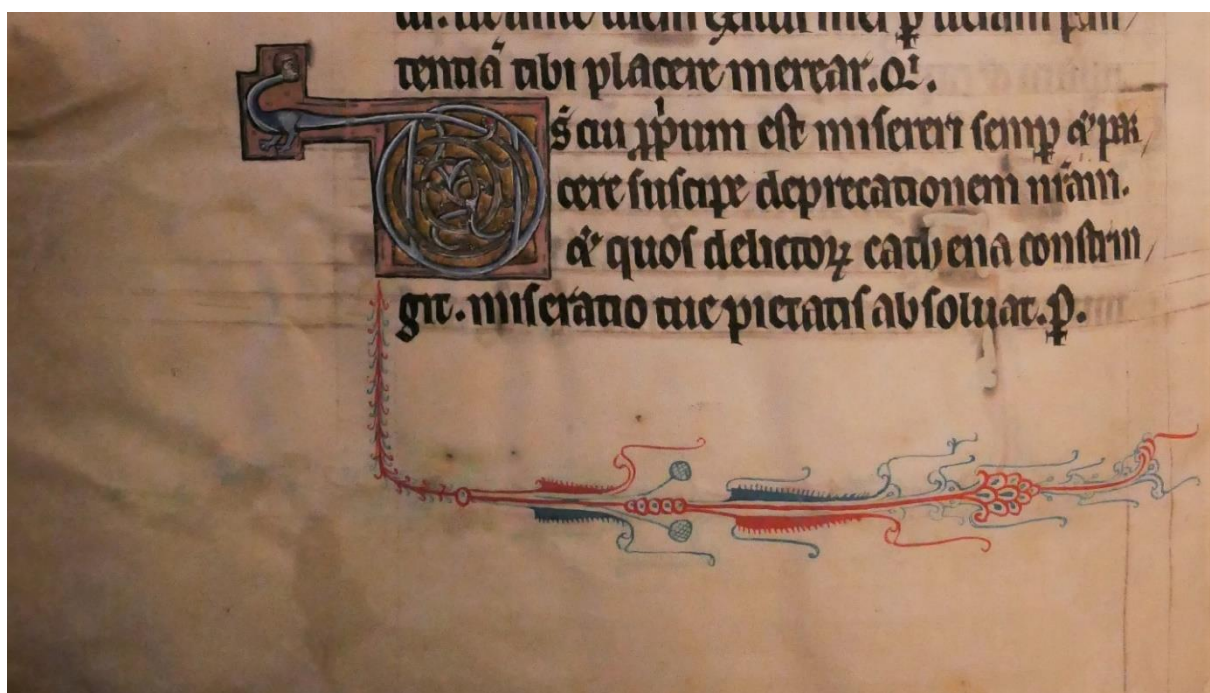
f. 113v



f. 126v



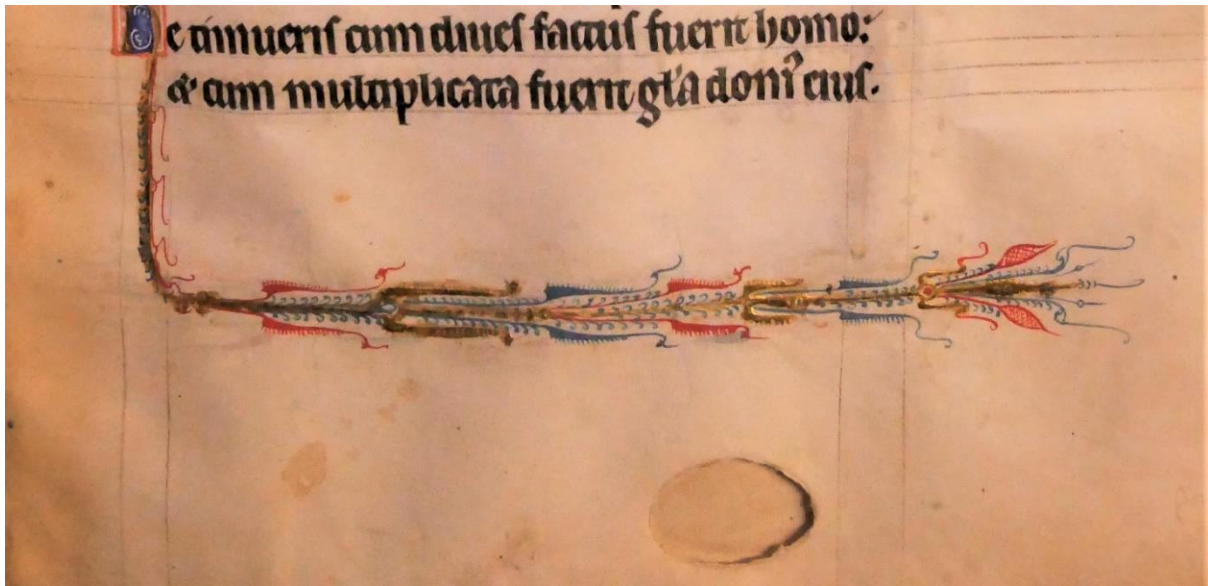
f. 153r



f. 161v

Compared to the script, with its disciplined and consistent *textura* hand, and the patterned line fillers which maintain visual solidity, the pen flourishes are surprisingly sinuous, breaking free from the rigid ruling lines. On leaves without a figurehead, and on some that have, there are quatrefoil or circular bosses punctuating the lines, all at different points along the central stria. Reading the text aloud with an eye to the chains of swishes, blazes, and eye-catching shapes at the bottom of the folia, they seem to capture the rhythms and punctuations of speech, catching the

rolling Latin 'r' and the hard stops, intakes of breath and trailing vowels. Sometimes the flourishes are rhythmic, as f. 51r,



f. 51r, an example of a rhythmic flourish

and sometimes they crescendo, as f. 95r,



f. 95r, an example of a crescendo flourish

perhaps suggesting different modes of recitation. The borderwork may have also acted as a conductor through the verses, with variations of emphases and rests, to guide in the reading and recitation. It is, of course, impossible to prove this was the intentional purpose of the program, but the text was certainly used for recitation, and the ornamentation may have been a sort of visual memorization technology. The figureheads fulfil Mary Carruthers's definition of mnemonic

imagines: agent images useful in mnemotechnic thought to create memory *locus*.²⁵ Each grotesque is vivid, unusual, and expresses a certain physicality, and many are well-known creatures from the bestiary tradition. They may have been useful in triggering associated meditations, sermons or colloquies. Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141), a foundational scholastic thinker in Paris, outlined in a letter the best techniques for memorization, specifically scriptures in the service of ecclesiastical education. His second tactic is particularly visual and describes assigning a ‘memory-image’ to texts with specific colors, shapes, and placement on the page. De Brailes’s stylized flourishes and figureheads neatly fit the requirements of a ‘memory-image’ as laid out by Hugh of St. Victor, and he encouraged his reader to implement this mnemonic method in the strongest terms: ‘Indeed I consider nothing so useful for stimulating the memory as this’.²⁶ This would hardly be an unusual idea in a thirteenth-century monastic school or university, as indeed de Brailes’s Oxford was. De Brailes and his workshop were also demonstrably interested in implementing the latest pedagogical systems in their work.²⁷ Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) devised a marginal indexing system that the de Brailes workshop deployed in organizing Proverbs in another Bible contemporary with the New College Psalter.²⁸ William de Brailes, his workshop and their patrons, were evidently well-versed in mnemonic practices and interested in implementing the latest theories in their manuscripts. Thus in this context, the composition and ornamentation of MS 322 can be read as reflecting prevalent aural and mnemonic theories.

Rarely in the history of western music has there been a period of as much upheaval and rapid change as occurred between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Musical notation evolved quickly, with no standard orthography in Britain until later centuries. Neumatic notation was open to interpretation, and forms of transmission altered greatly between manuscripts, even within a short time span. The nature of polyphony, and how to capture music on the page was in a fascinating flux of experimentation in Britain when the de Brailes psalter was formulated, and I suggest the artwork may be expressions of this kind of experimentation, situated in the crosshairs of the auditory and the visual. The only musical notation to survive in Britain from the period appear in fragments, libelli, or as part of larger miscellany.

Such is the case of MS Bodley 343, a *sermologus* miscellany with texts written in Old English in the late twelfth century, likely in the West Midlands. Nestled behind four sermons is a folio with musical notation for a liturgical sequence, *Salve mater salvatoris* (f. 10v). This visually organizes counterpoint in two columns, one the *vox principalis* and a second voice *vox organalis*.²⁹ The red and blue inks indicate where the verses overlap, meant to be sung in harmony. This draws on the established convention to alternate the colour of minor initial illuminations for scripture verses, just as it also appears in the de Brailes psalter. The harmony of red, blue, and gold in the de Brailes pen flourishes may have stylistic connections to similar notations in musical texts, indicating polyphony or harmonic sounds. The de Brailes psalter was demonstrably experimental in its guiding precepts, and the border extensions may reflect the contemporary musical exploration at the University of Oxford and beyond.

²⁵ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 157–63; 285.

²⁶ Hugh of St. Victor, ‘The Three Best Memory-Aids for Learning History’.

²⁷ Lilian M. C. Randall, ‘En Route to Salvation with William de Brailes’, in *Medieval Codicology, Iconography, Literature, and Translation: Studies for Keith Val Sinclair*, ed. Peter Rolfe Monks and D. D. R. Owen (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 83–93; at p. 90: ‘Patrons of manuscripts from de Brailes’ workshop in the 1230s may well have been aware also of current debate of Aristotelian theories at Oxford University’.

²⁸ Kidd, ‘Franciscan Bible’, 12: ‘Most of the manuscripts that contain his indexing symbols can be associated with the Oxford Franciscan house: we can therefore be doubly confident that the person for whom the manuscript was made was an Oxford Franciscan’.

²⁹ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. II: *Medieval Aesthetics*, trans. R. M. Montgomery, ed. C. Barrett (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 130.



MS. Bodleian 343, f. 10v
Musical notation for *Salve mater salvatoris* (photograph taken by the author)

WINGED, FURRY, AND WILD: THE DE BRAILES MENAGERIE

The zoological compendium of creeping, crawling and flying creatures across the manuscript's folia presents the viewer with a mixture of wild, domestic, familiar, and fantastic animals. About the borderwork, Nigel Morgan wrote: 'the profusion of line endings, dragon extensions and pen flourishes, is almost the maximum amount of decoration that can be given to the text pages of a Psalter'.³⁰ The illuminators combined vivid imagination, dexterous precision,

³⁰ Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts*, p. 122.

and whimsy to create continually new and surprising configurations.³¹ The leaves contain a veritable menagerie:

- Ape (f. 89r)
- Rabbit (f. 92r)
- Squirrels (f. 93v and the *Beatus folio*)
- Foxes (ff. 96v, 116r, 121v)
- Badger (f. 98r)
- Cat (f. 98v)
- Owl (f. 100v)
- Heron (f. 101r)
- Donkeys (ff. 106r, 130v)
- Oxen (ff. 106v, 109v, 131r)
- Goat (f. 112r)
- Fish (ff. 115r, 116v, 120r, 121v, 122r)³²

The creatures are a medieval harmonization of imagination and naturalism as defined by Erwin Panofsky, mixing details drawn from nature with unbridled imagination.³³ Natural observations surface in charming ways: creatures that are generally mute, such as rabbits, foxes, and badgers, are included, but the pen flourishes issue from their *closed* mouths.³⁴



f. 92r, rabbit



f. 96v, fox



f. 98r, badger

Birds and winged monsticules seem to be a favourite; at my count, an excess of 70 birds or winged creatures flap across the folia. They far outnumber their neighboring mammals and monsters. Birds are indeed also a favourite fauna in the text, as they are used as a metaphor in the Psalms. In the 83rd chapter, the human heart or soul is likened to a bird nesting in a tree, 'siquidem avis invenit domum'. St. Augustine gently alluded to this Psalm when he poetically described the rational mind's ability to 'soar' beyond the material realm of earth.³⁵ Considering birds as a symbol of the converted soul in medieval theological thought, Michael Warren wrote that it: 'consolidates a scriptural legacy which designates birds a special status in thinking through this key theological

³¹ This could relate to the ideas in John of Garland's text, concerning the usefulness of *voces animantium*, the habit and physical features of animals and birds. Bestiaries were commonly included in most monastic libraries, and it was probably a heuristic primer. Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 159.

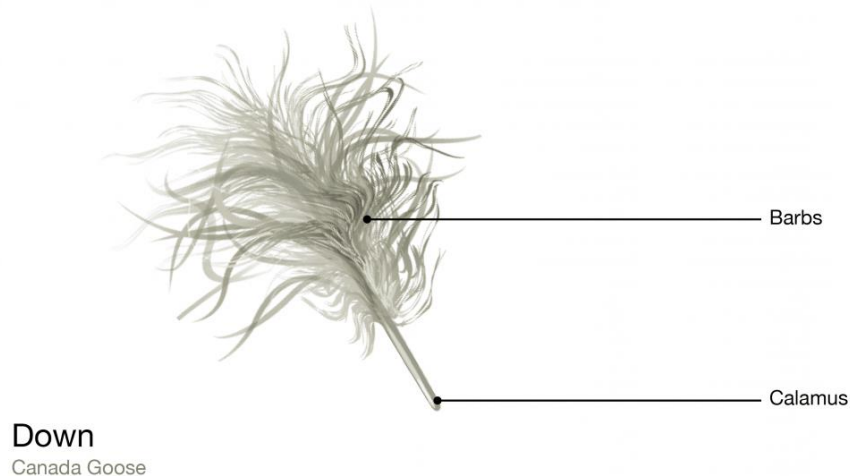
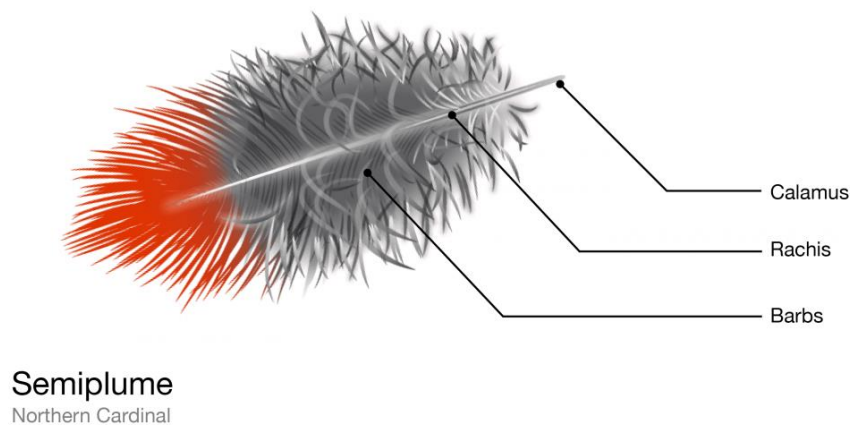
³² The fish are exclusive to the second illuminator, and mostly as line fillers.

³³ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: Meridan Books, 1957), p. 38.

³⁴ Two foxes are the work of the second artist, and they are not silent. The fox on f. 116r is a drollery, shown standing on his hindlegs causing a ruckus, playing a tambourine and singing loudly; f. 121v shows a smaller fox playing the panpipes. However, the third fox, done by the first artist (who may or may not be de Brailles), certainly has his mouth shut.

³⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God: Books VIII–XVI*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, volume 14 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), XI.ii., p. 188.

anxiety and inquiry, a legacy which locates birds as ideal creatures to articulate the Christian pilgrim journey by aligning avian flight with the metaphorical peregrinations of the faithful who must “soar to the unchangeable substance of God”³⁶. My last proposition thus moves from the metaphysical (soundwaves, memorization, and spiritual metaphors) to the intimately physical. De Brailes’s pen flourishes may be abstract, but perhaps they were influenced by the very tool used to create them: a quill, a manipulated bird feather. Often the haptic materiality of book production is overlooked in studies of manuscript iconography, perhaps because today we are so far removed from the labor involved in their fabrication. De Brailes’s penwork loosely echoes the anatomy of a semiplume or downy feather,



Diagrams of semiplume and down feathers³⁷

with a straight shaft and thin, parallel barbs and bristles. They are a profusion of plumage, symmetrical above and below the central line. Like vocalized chants, psalm recitations, and sung canticles (*aeris percussio*), birds beat the air with their feathered wings to fly and sing God’s praises. It is possible the penwork is not totally abstract: the form may reflect the structure of a bird’s

³⁶ Michael J. Warren, ‘Native Foreigners: Migrating Seabirds and the Pelagic Soul in *The Seafarer*’, *Birds in Medieval English Poetry: Metaphors, Realities, Transformations* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 25–63, at p. 26.

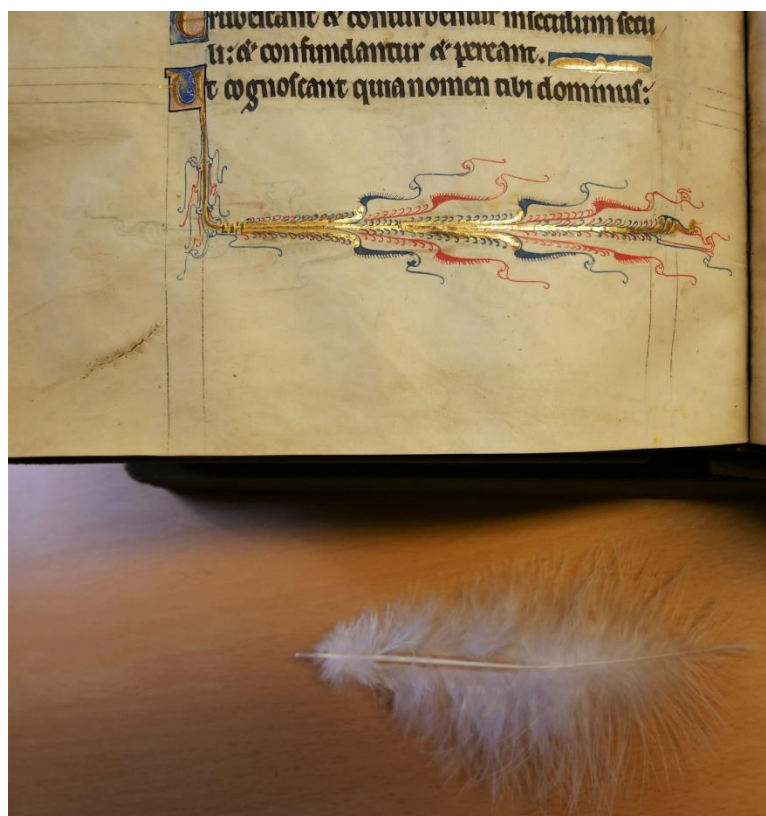
³⁷ Reproduced from: Mya Thompson, *Everything You Need To Know About Feathers*; illustrator: Andrew Leach: Cornell University, The Cornell Lab, Bird Academy: <<https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/feathers-article/>> (Accessed: 28 July 2022).

feather, an entirely appropriate exegetical symbol and literally 'at hand' for the scribes and illuminators.

Folia and feathers



f. 17r



f. 84v



f. 104v

CONCLUSION

This kind of analysis and argument can only be made because of the well-preserved nature of the New College Psalter. It is the only manuscript known to have originated in the de Brailes workshop to remain intact, it is even in the original collation.³⁸ It is possible that the other fifteen extant de Brailes manuscripts had similar memorization schemes, but were brutally sliced away in later bindings. In the case of MS Add MS 49999, the border extensions were inexplicably cut away almost immediately after it was finished, when the manuscript went to another workshop for binding.³⁹ From the manuscripts extant, it seems that later illuminators working in the 'de Brailes style' did not match the sophisticated penwork in the program. There are, naturally, weaknesses in this argument. The borderwork may not be as systematic as it seems, and the pen flourishes could be solely adornment. However, the evidence suggests otherwise. The figured initials point to orality and recitation connected with reading and manuscripts, and the texts themselves were parts of the

³⁸ Most of the folia attributed to the de Brailes workshop are disiecta membra or singletons. For example, the Walters Art Museum Bible has 31 leaves from an original manuscript with 98 miniatures, the rest of it is distributed across the world in Musée Marmottan in Paris; in Stockholm, National Museum Ms. B.2010; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS. 330; and New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. M. 913 (Morgan, 72a and 72b). Concerning the divided nature of de Brailes's work: William Noel, *The Oxford Bible Pictures: Ms. W. 106, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore; Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris* (Luzern: Faksimile Verlag, 2004).

³⁹ Donovan wrote of this heinous cutting, *de Brailles Hours*, p. 131: 'And (Susanna) must have fallen out forever with her binder'.

liturgical offices that were publicly performed. The manuscript may therefore be a part of the performance as a service book, and the feathery flourishes and their figureheads acted as visual *aide memoire* for the reciter. The wonderful and peculiar creatures could be interpreted as carefully placed loci for memory, as described by Hugh of St. Victor. There is significant need for further research on this manuscript as well: do the decorations relate in some way to canonical use versus liturgical order? Could there be meaningful connections between the Oxford Franciscan monastic community and the decorations? Why are more animal grotesques drawn in the central chapters of the Psalms, and fewer elsewhere? The purposes of the exuberant decorations in MS 322 remain open to debate, but this study provides valuable new insight and draws deserved attention to de Brailles's puzzling and delightful art.

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