

The Meanings of Devotional Space:

Female Owner-Portraits in Three French and Flemish Books of Hours

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Books of Hours are traditionally held to be ‘women’s books’.¹ Made for women but constructed by men (or so runs the truism), they are books which, as an aid to devotion, are seen to either delight or to educate them.² Although their implications for medieval women’s literacy are difficult to gauge, at the very least, Books of Hours locate women in a book-reading and book-owning culture. More than just owners and readers, however – through the convention of owner-portraits³ – Books of Hours make individual women *visible*. Furthermore, women are made visible alongside images of the divine, and as L. F. Sandler warns us, we must not forget “just how great an imaginative leap such conjunctions of the human and the holy represent.”⁴ Thus, like the new architectural space of the Romanesque churches and great Gothic

¹ Certainly, men read, owned and are represented within many Books of Hours, *The Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (c.1411) is among the most famous, but in no way presents an anomaly. Books of Hours however, from the evidence of i.e. wills and catalogues, are seen as particularly associated with women.

² Undoubtedly, some women had influence over the kinds of images depicted in their Hours and even over their ‘portraits’, but lack of evidence usually means that this can only be speculation. Moreover, Hours were often given to women as gifts, constructed by male patrons, confessors and artists.

³ I have adopted the term ‘owner-portraits’ – though they are not portraits in the modern sense of the word – because it conveys two important notions: 1) that women would identify the images as themselves, and 2) that there was an emerging awareness of individual identity at this time. Furthermore it avoids the limitations of terms such as ‘donor’ or ‘patron’ which imply a control over production that does not necessarily exist.

⁴ L. F. Sandler, ‘The Wilton Diptych and Images of Devotion in Illuminated Manuscripts’, in D. Gordon (ed.) *The regal image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych* (London, 1993), p.137.

cathedrals,⁵ I would argue that owner-portraits create a new textual space for women. Indeed, they are the means of a new way, not just of seeing women, but also of women *seeing*.

Women, within the misogyny of the medieval period, are associated with the corporeal, with appetite, temptation, sex, sin and thus, death. Devotion, however, provides a means for their redemption, a way a transcending their ‘fallen’ bodies. Even within this tradition, women stand uncomfortably with the church; excluded from ordination (because they have ‘the wrong kinds of bodies’),⁶ forbidden from touching sacred objects or even from entering the church after giving birth (until the churching ritual had taken place at the church door). If we then imagine a medieval woman who, as she reads of and meditates upon divinity, looks and finds her self-image – her own marginalized and defective body – inscribed on the same page, we must also recognise the massive “imaginative leap” that this performs. Hence, the textual space that women can inhabit within Books of Hours is ideologically empowering because they are pictured as communing, and communicating, with the divine. It is however a double bind, for it is this very devotion that provides the means for the control of the female body: the ideas of virginity and chastity not only facilitate mystical experience, they cordon off the dangers of the female. In this essay I will look at three owner-portraits in Books of Hours – those of Yolande de Soissons (c.1280), Jeanne d’Evreux (c.1326), and Mary of Burgundy (c.1477) – and ask how both a textual space and a real space might operate under this double bind, in order to understand how these women see and are seen.

⁵ M. Camille, *Gothic Art, Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London, 1996), p. 12. Taking the example of Amiens Cathedral, Camille argues cathedral-space represents “a new way of seeing... a new architectural space.”

⁶ See A. J. Minnis, ‘*De impedimento sexus*: Women’s Bodies and Medieval Impediments to Female Ordination’, in P. Biller and A. J. Minnis (eds.) *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body*, (Woodbridge, 1997), pp.109-139.

In order to do so I will use two frameworks: The first is that of contemporary ideas about perception as depicted in an image (c.1310) made for a French Dominican nun [fig. 1].⁷ The stages of perception it presents have a close bearing on my interpretation of the three owner-portraits, and are thus deserving of some consideration. Divided by an elaborate gothic frame, there are four images. In the first, the nun kneels before her confessor and although the divine is not present, it is tangible, signalled by Christ's strangely disembodied hand blessing from the edge of the scene. Here, in this first level, the nun has only earthly sight; unable to see divinity 'in the flesh', her piety must be mediated by another. The second frame depicts the nun kneeling before an image of the Virgin and Child. It is the statue that mediates her act of devotion; in other words, the nun recognises the statue as a signum of a higher truth. As such, this second level identifies with the basic semiotic function of symbols in medieval Christianity, such as that of the Eucharist. The third image shows a spiritual level of perception that Michael Camille terms "imagined contemplation."⁸ Prostrate before an image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, the nun's eyes do not look at the vision, implying that it is created in her mind. Christ himself mediates this level of perception as he, quite literally here, pours out his blood for the nun. Finally, the highest level of perception is the "mystical mode."⁹ Now looking at a vision before her, this is "pure and naked seeing of divine reality."¹⁰ Perception, in 'real' space (here, I mean by this a perception of the divine in the same space that the nun occupies), is mediated

⁷ Illumination on parchment, Yates Thompson II (formerly Add. 39843) fol.29, The British Library, London. See Camille, *Gothic Art*, pp. 120-3 for his interpretation of this tract.

⁸ Camille, *Gothic Art*, p. 123.

⁹ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, quoting Richard of St. Victor, p. 17.

through the nun's own body and has become entirely internalised. This account maps a process of internalisation important to the way in which these women-owners see.

The second framework is the development of the use of space in French and Flemish art. Book illumination flourished in France during the 14th century and, led by the innovations of Jean Pucelle and his Paris atelier,¹¹ the interior perspective in Books of Hours began to open up by means of – as Panofsky terms it – the “doll's house” scheme [fig.3].¹² Until this kind of development, space in Gothic art paid “no reference to the visual processes of the beholder.”¹³ There was no perspective in the size of figures in the front or in the back of the picture, save for a hierarchical perspective based on the importance or divinity of the figures. By the 15th century, however, Flanders (or the Netherlands) itself becomes pre-eminent. It is here that we find miniatures taking on the ideal of a “prospect through a window”, based on the direct observation of visual experience. Now three-dimensional, this mode created a “view through something” into a section of space.¹⁴ Thus, perspective began to create real spaces; in the way the spectator really saw it. These developments affect the changing devotional spaces in which Yolande, Jeanne and Mary figure and, by their progression towards a real space, provide the possibility of a space beyond devotion.

¹¹ Pucelle is believed to have visited Italy and seen the work of artists such as Duccio, because of the similarities in their innovation of perspective. However Pucelle, not simply copying, reinterprets what he has seen to develop his own, individual style.

¹² E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, London, 1953, p.30. See also Panofsky, pp. 21-74; G. Dogaer, *Flemish Miniature Painting in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, Amsterdam, 1987; M. Schild Bunim, *Space in Medieval Painting and the Forerunners of Perspective*, New York, 1970, for the developments occurring in France and Flanders.

¹³ Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p.14.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

The *Psalter and Hours of Yolande de Soissons*,¹⁵ use of Amiens, 1280-90 (7¼ x 5¼ in.) is the earliest of my examples and it is suggested that Honoré, the artist of the Breviary of Philippe le Bel, executed its finer illuminations. This Hours, stamped with her heraldic devices, contains two portraits of Yolande; one with her husband (Bernard V) and two children, the other *a prie dieu*. It is this second [fig.2] that is most important to her self-perception, as she is disassociated from her ‘natural’ role of wife and mother and rendered as a spiritualised individual, alone in her devotions. It is not an unusual image, but there can be little doubt that Yolande would see herself in it. Finely clothed, Yolande kneels before an image of the Virgin and Child. Her ‘textual’ space is separate from the word and Yolande, in profile, is dominant in it. Surrounded by the typical Gothic arch and background, this space – though it is easily recognised as sacred – conveys little sense of real space, despite a foreshortened column that begins to hint at an interior. It is therefore, a frozen devotional space, enclosed and protected, in which there is no implication of a world outside or beyond it. This kind of enclosure – which is also a feature of other Books of Hours, notably Jeanne d’Evreux’s – resonates with Jocelyn Wogan-Browne’s statement that,

Virgin and chaste women are represented as sealed away from the world, whether in convent, chamber, cell or anchorhold [and, I would be tempted to add here, within Books of Hours]... such women’s bodies are placed within the custody of their own internalised vigilance.¹⁶

For women like Yolande, it is precisely a form of “internalised vigilance” that the owner-

¹⁵ *Psalter and Hours of Yolande de Soissons*, M.729, fol. 232v, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

¹⁶ J. Wogan-Browne, ‘Chaste bodies: frames and experiences’, in S. Kay & M. Rubin (eds.) *Framing medieval bodies* (Manchester, 1994), p24.

portraits mediate, and which in turn project their 'double bind'. The composition of Yolande's image is not, however, exclusively feminine, neither is 'enclosure' within Books of Hours gender-specific. I would argue, though, that for Yolande an enclosed space represents one of the few kinds of spaces in which she can be perceived as chaste. For the woman wandering in the street risks her chaste reputation, the man, on the other hand, does not. He may 'choose' enclosure, but he may also 'choose' an alternative open and public space beyond this. Thus, it is within a problematically limited and limiting space that Yolande perceives. The level of perception depicted in her Hours bears a strong resemblance to the second image of the French nun, both in style and composition. Looking at a statue – the outward appearance – Yolande sees its mystical significance. As in the nun's manuscript page, there is no hierarchical proportion; the statue of the Virgin and Child is much smaller than the image of the venerator. Yolande is therefore the protagonist and her 'action' provides the central subject for the page.

Placed between Yolande and the statue, however, is the book. She is not reading it;¹⁷ instead her eyes match the gaze of the Virgin and Child who look at her. In this way the book itself becomes a mediating symbol. Like the Virgin who mediates the salvation of the world, the book mediates the devotion of the woman. Yet this image, which at first sight seems to place the female body in an intimate relation to the divine, is subtly destabilised. For aligned

¹⁷ The many images of women reading in Books of Hours (and indeed other devotional texts) have raised questions concerning the literacy of these women. I do not have time to consider these within this essay. It is important to note, however, the possibility that the illumination serves a pneumatic function, and that rather than 'reading' the books, some women may have simply 'remembered' them. See Carole M. Meale, "...alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englich, and frensch": lay-women and their books in medieval England', in Meale, (ed.) *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.128-147

with the mediating book is a little black dog. The dog at the woman's feet¹⁸ symbolises faithfulness in marriage, as such it is a symbol of chastity which refers us back to her earthly role. Yolande, therefore, cannot achieve even this level of perception if her body, the channel of her devotion, is not chaste. As our eyes pick out this small but subversive detail, they are drawn across to the margins, where more dogs, hares, squirrels and babewyns seem to grow out of the woodwork. Matched with the six heraldic symbols which punctuate the frame, it is possible to read these images as reminders, not just of Yolande's familial and public responsibilities, but of the sexuality that threatens to disrupt this perceptory moment. Yolande may well see herself communing with the divine, but she cannot avoid the perception of herself as the earthly wife and the naturally corrupted woman.

The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux,¹⁹ Dominican use, c.1326 (3 5/8 x 2 3/8 inches) marks another phase in book illumination. Possibly a wedding gift from her husband, Charles le Bel,²⁰ its textual space is immediately more complex. If it is a gift, we must assume that Charles and/or Pucelle constructed the space which Jeanne herself inhabits: crowned as Queen, she kneels in the initial D beneath the Annunciation miniature [*fig.3*], but is surrounded by profuse marginalia and a *bas-de-page* scene of a buffeting game. This image, unlike that of Yolande de Soissons, is much harder to find, let alone see. The tiny size of the manuscript exacerbates this, and suggests that the act of reading involves poring over its pages, gradually discovering

¹⁸ G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, 1961, p.15.

¹⁹ *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, fol. 16, New York, The Cloisters.

²⁰ For an outline of the arguments for both the claim that this manuscript is in fact Jeanne's and that it was given as a marriage gift, see M. H. Caviness, 'Patron or Matron? A Capetian Bride and a Vade Mecum for Her Marriage Bed', *Speculum* 68 (1993): 333-362; J. J. Harthan, *Books of Hours and their Owners*, London, 1977, p.43-33; L. M. C. Randall, 'Games and the Passion in Pucelle's Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux', *Speculum* 47 (1972): 245-57.

all of its elements. Her self-image, again in profile, is subservient on the page to the miniature, and more importantly, to the word itself, as it introduces the first hour of the Virgin with *Domine labia mea aperies*. Again, there is nothing unique about the image of an owner within a historiated initial, and certainly, it is not always a human space, but one in which the divine can also be located. However, it is a literary space and so is entirely abstracted from real space. It does not even evoke the intimacy of Yolande's space in which both the "human and the holy" reside; rather it seems to contain and restrain her, separating her from the divine. We are once again confronted by Wogan-Browne's cloistered woman and her "internalised vigilance". These kinds of implications of space for a medieval woman do not seem to me to be exaggerations, given that even her bodily movement was socially prescribed. Indeed, it is in late 14th century France that *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry* is circulating (but also more widely, for example, in England, hence William Caxton's vernacular translation). Written by Geoffroy for his daughters, this 'courtesybook' makes an example of "How wymmen ought not to cast her hedes here and there". This takes as its example the marriageability of the woman who controls her body over prettier women who do not:

late not your eyen ben ouer ventyllous / ne tourne not youre hede hyder and thyder / But
when ye wille see ony thyng [b ij] on ony side torne your visage and youre body to geder
/ And be not ouer full of wordes...²¹

In effect, the courtly woman's movement should create the illusion of stillness, and this stillness correlates with her near-silence. Similarly, Jeanne is bodily restrained by the word, unable to get up and leave her devotion. Although contained by the word, Jeanne also possesses it for

²¹ W. Caxton, trans. *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*, M. Y. Offord (ed.) London, 1971, p. 27, ll 5-8.

she, like Yolande, owns a book. This time she is reading it. The image she perceives is pictured in the separate space above her, i.e. the Annunciation miniature. In this way, her perceptory level follows the nun's third; it is an "imagined contemplation", a spiritual perception. Much like the thought-bubble of cartoon strips, this conjunction of separate images puts into action Sandler's "imaginative leap". Here, however, the internalised space has begun to expand; Pucelle's "doll's house scheme" begins to construct and extend space and "[t]he figures are placed for the first time in a coherent perspective setting."²² But while her mental world begins to take on an aspect of realness and physicality, Jeanne in contrast is confined to two dimensions. Thus in this portrait, although the book stands typically for the image and the word, its mediation is not only into a higher level of perception but one which moves closer to seeing the divine in reality.

Once again, the image is destabilised. The dog sitting at Jeanne's feet is no longer just a mediating image – representing the chastity that accesses divinity – it watches Jeanne. Behind her sits an ambiguous figure, along the descender of the 'D'; perhaps he is a benign clerk with a candle or a seneschal with a spear. This first interpretation refers us, less problematically, to the labour of making the manuscript. The second can be read as a protecting presence. As a seneschal, however, it is easy for both him and the dog to be read, more sinisterly, as actually curbing her: Jeanne's 'D' becomes somewhat like a prison. Returning to the function of the Hours as a gift, the location of the portrait begins to reflect male anxiety over women's sexuality: Charles desires a wife who will be chaste. Caviness's explanation of the surrounding marginalia and the *bas-de-page* usefully builds on this interpretation. "The feelings aroused by the cumulative images," she remarks, "far from being erotic, might range from surprise and fear

²² Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Art*, p. 29.

to repulsion and disgust.”²³ In other words, they present a message to frighten Jeanne, to keep her mind on her prayers and away from adultery. Jeanne only has room to move, and indeed to see, within a carefully constructed mental space.

My final image is also the latest: *The Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, use of Rome, c.1477 (8⁷/₈ x 5⁷/₈ in.) is a Flemish Manuscript. The famous image of Mary of Burgundy at a window [fig. 4], by the Master of Burgundy, conveys the lavishness of the Hours that reflects the enormous emphasis in the Burgundian court on display. Mary (married to the Hapsburg Maximilian I) was part of a hugely powerful family, the publicity of which necessitated “a reputation for piety...for the female members of the ducal house.”²⁴ It is unsurprising, therefore, that Mary’s image takes ascendancy over the page – and certainly hers is the largest Hours of my examples (though it is still very small). Even the composition is daring, unlike the profile images of Yolande and Jeanne, Mary presents herself more confidently to the spectator, whilst still able to look out of the window with ease. Furthermore, she sees herself not just once but twice and, uniquely, the second image – as through a window – inhabits the “new space” of the church. This creates two distinct spaces on the page: the first is that of the foreground, which is still a private, enclosed space. Mary of Burgundy sits in an oratory, the indow of which opens into a central view of the church, and for the first time in my selection of images, a woman sits in a space which implies another space beyond it. The second, that of the background, is accessed through the window. Mary enters both the holiest, central space of the church (the choir), and also a real, indeed, a public space. The publicity of this church space is emphasised not only by the ladies accompanying Mary, but by the figures that can be seen in

²³ Caviness, ‘Patron or Matron?’, p.353.

²⁴ E. Inglis, *The Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, London, 1995, p. 5.

the distance. This is also a space populated by men, as the man to the right of the Virgin in his red cloak, wafting a censor, shows. Most importantly, this image represents the highest level of perception and religious experience: it is “the mystical mode”, the “seeing of divinity” itself.

Yet, we are reminded, Mary cannot escape the mediating act of reading, for she is simultaneously represented reading a book, as Jeanne does in the previous stage of spiritual perception. This relocates the vision through the window behind her, back into her body as well, whilst emphasising the real space and her real role in the scene. This is a world – a vision – that is entirely interiorised, mediated by the book and by her body. We might usefully look at an English example of this kind of perception: *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1430) perfectly demonstrates this function of the image in devotion; for Margery as for Mary, the physical image is a stimuli for a mental, mystical experience. In Chapter 57, Margery is in the Church of Saint Margaret in her home town of King’s Lynn – an architectural space like that seen through Mary’s window – and relates the spectacle of the Easter Sepulchre. Here kneeling priests and men with burning torches are “devowtly representing”²⁵ the death and suffering of Christ. She describes the effect of this visual re-enactment as it:

“sodeynly occupiid the hert of this creatur, draw ing hir mende al holy into the Passyon of owr Lord Crist Jhesu, whom sche behelde with hir gostly eye in the syght of hir sowle as verily as this she has seyn hys precyows body betyn, scorgyd, and crucified with hir bodily ey.”²⁶

This experience for Margery has been internalised; a whole architectural space has expanded

²⁵ L. Staley, (ed.) *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1996, Chapter 57, ll 3304

²⁶ Ibid, Chapter 57, ll 3307-3310.

and opened up within her. In this context, both the bodies of Mary of Burgundy and the Virgin Mary take on a dual symbolism, facilitated by the two-way threshold of the window. As the *fenestra coeli*,²⁷ the Virgin herself is the window of heaven, mediating through her own body the birth that facilitates salvation. At the same time, this is also Mary of Burgundy's own window; her mark of possession is on it. It is therefore inverted as an image, suddenly Mary too mediates through the vessel of her body and gives birth to the vision. However, Mary's empowered perception of her dominant body, communing with divinity in a real space, is once again imprinted with male anxiety.

Mary's possessions fill the oratory, but as signs of her wealth they also advertise the message of her chastity. This time the by now expected dog sits in her lap, not just at her feet. Looking across to the windowsill there is a rosary made of pearls; pure, round, impenetrable, they speak of chastity and impregnability. Next are two red carnations, the symbols of pure love,²⁸ which here operate on both a spiritual and earthly level. Finally the tall irises,²⁹ an alternative for the lily as the symbol of the Virgin, frame the window and balance the composition of the scene, perhaps operating as a mirror of Mary of Burgundy. Clearly, these images emphasise the importance of Mary's association with the Virgin and her attributes (indeed, this is an association which figures centrally in the church space), the most important of which are her virginity and purity. The representation of Mary's devotional space – as for Yolande and Jeanne – strives to constrict her sexuality, proffer only the roles of wife and mother to her, and place her body in the “custody” of her own “internalised vigilance”. Thus, whilst

²⁷ See Camille, *Gothic Art*, p.54.

²⁸ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, p.29.

²⁹ Ibid, p.32.

Mary sees herself engaged in a powerful, religious discourse, daily devotion is underlined by a heavily prescribed self-image as chaste and sexually pure; in sum, she is to be the perfect (earthly) wife.

Devotional space in these three Books of Hours is therefore troubled. Enabling these women to see (literally and spiritually) and to be seen, their representations do not seem to escape anxiety about the female body, perhaps it is even an anxiety these three women had about themselves. In investigating these images, I have been made aware of the dichotomies of empowerment and repression, of literacy and indoctrination that seem to be implicated in women 'reading' their Hours. Ultimately, the problem of devotional space is that it empowers within a specific 'chaste' and religious context. Such empowerment is difficult to translate into everyday life. In fact, I have argued that in translating these images into an earthly context they become quite the opposite – for Yolande, Jeanne and Mary find only reaffirmations of their social functions and their marginalisation as the 'second sex'. Devotional space seems to enclose and restrain, even to prevent these three women from acting fully in society. It is important to ask, therefore, if there is room to re-read these images. To do so, I would suggest there is a need for the construction of space beyond devotional space. It is perhaps possible, therefore, to find it in one of my examples: *The Hours of Mary of Burgundy*. Not only do the publicity of the church and the privacy of the oratory offer alternative spaces for devotion, when read reflexively, the miniature of 'Christ laid on the cross' [fig.5] makes a striking contrast with Mary's portrait. It features a window opening from a kind of oratory space out, not into a church, but into the scene of Calvary – taken out of time, this scene is the enactment of the real event. Still stamped with the distinctive images of Mary's possessions, this time she is absent and her Book of Hours lies unread, fluttering in the wind. Perhaps she has been able to get up

and leave her devotions and her enclosed room. Or perhaps she has joined the mystical vision entirely, as the figure in the scene looking back to the spectator begins to suggest. In any case, the artist's use of both more than one space and the threshold-image of the window might just leave Mary with an opportunity to make a choice for herself and go either way.

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