

On the Aesthetics of 15th-Century Chansonniers

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It is hard to know whether it was the lavish presentation of the manuscripts, their inclusion of works by famous composers, or the frivolous subject matter of their texts that appealed most to owners of 15th-century chansonniers. The popularity of songs concerned with unrequited love, chivalry, New Year celebrations, and the vagaries of Fortune's wheel is already evident in earlier sources. But these chansonniers are more than simple repositories of song: the poetic texts, accompanying music, careful calligraphy, border decoration, and delicate illuminations invite – of readers past and present – multiple and interrelated modes of reading. Indeed, what sets these manuscripts apart from earlier and later song collections is the extent to which the reading experience of their users was mediated by the interaction of their related components.

This article investigates the semiotics of 15th-century chansonniers. I will concentrate on two of the group of five related chansonniers – the so-called Copenhagen, Dijon, Laborde, Nivelles, and Wolfenbüttel chansonniers – believed to have been copied in the Loire Valley region in the third quarter of the 15th century.¹ These five manuscripts distinguish themselves on account of their small size, the choice of high quality parchment, careful musical notation, and attractive decoration. I will argue that although they are related, both in terms of facture and content, to other books then in private ownership, they offered their readers an experience that was unique in several key ways.

THE CHANSONNIER AS A 'POLYPHONIC TEXT'

An illuminated manuscript presents a multi-layered text that invites disparate kinds of reading. Its textual contents, page layout, and pictorial decoration together call for a reading that can be simultaneously narrative, non-linear, pictorial, and thematic. If the manuscript also contains musical notation, the complex act of apprehending polyphony is added into the reading experience. Indeed, polyphony itself can be seen as a metaphor for this complex experience. Even more than other secular manuscripts, chansonniers embody the ideal of the multifaceted object.

1 The manuscripts are now housed in the following libraries: Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, MS Thott 291, 8°; Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 517; Washington, Library of Congress, MS M2.1.L25 Case, the 'Laborde Chansonnier'; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), département de la musique, Rés. Vmc. MS 57, 'Chansonnier Nivelles de la Chaussée'; Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, MS Guelf. 287 Extrav. A thorough summary of the arguments in favour of their Loire Valley provenance can be found in Paula Higgins, 'Antoine Busnois and Musical Culture in Late Fifteenth-Century France and Burgundy' (Ph.D. diss.; Princeton University, 1987), 234–96.

The tradition of music manuscripts whose words, pictures, and notation all work in the same graphic space had been well established by the 15th century. A famous example is the Fountain of Youth in Chaillou de Pesstain's interpolated *Roman de Fauvel* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS fr.146, f. 42r), where the boundaries between music and illumination overlap so that music becomes part of the decorative make-up of the page.²

The distinctive semantic nature of such manuscripts has been recognized only recently. Though contemporary readers understood the complexity of these artifacts, scholars of medieval texts have often used language that suggests a polarization between word and image. Until the rise of 'new codicology', writing, depiction, and content were treated as different entities, tackled separately by paleographers, scholars of literature, art history, and music. Terms such as decoration and ornamentation were used to dismiss figuration from writing, as if it were superficial and superfluous to the text. More recent scholarship has come to focus on the materiality of books and their *mise-en-page*.³ This approach is particularly fruitful for the study of chansonniers, in relation to whose readers' experience the interaction of the verbal, visual, and musical is central.

On account of their small size, chansonniers are often compared to similarly diminutive manuscripts intended for personal, solitary use, such as Books of Hours and 'girdle' books.⁴ Small Books of Hours had an earlier vogue in the 13th and 14th centuries; their revival in the 15th century began in Paris but was soon overshadowed by their popularity in the Loire Valley, in the 1450s and 60s.⁵ Our group of chanson-

2 For extensive discussion of this manuscript, see Emma Dillon, *Medieval Music-Making and the Roman de Fauvel* (Cambridge, 2002). On the specific relationship of music to the Fountain of Youth, see 256–57.

3 See, in particular, Dillon, *Medieval Music-Making*; Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Laura Kendrick, *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Columbus, Ohio, 1999); Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript* (Amsterdam, 2002); Henri-Jean Martin and Jean Vezin (eds.), *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit* (Paris, 1990); Henri-Jean Martin et al. (eds.), *La naissance du livre moderne (XIVe-XVIIe siècles): mise en page et mise en texte du livre français* (Paris, 2000).

4 Sometimes described as the 'best-sellers' of the Middle Ages, the popularity of Books of Hours needs hardly be restated. Though only a few survive, the frequent depiction of girdle books in paintings and sculpture attests to their similarly wide popularity; see J.A. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Aldershot, 1999), 236–39.

5 Examples of miniature-sized Books of Hours copied in Tours (c.1470) include the so-called Hours of Diane de Croy (Sheffield, Ruskin Gallery, R. 3548) and the Hours with the devise 'Hale ce moine' (Paris, BnF, MS n.a.l. 3203), respectively 102 x 69 mm and 93 x 70 mm; see François Avril, *Jean Fouquet: peintre et enlumineur du XVe siècle* (Paris, 2003), 364–68. For an example of an earlier and even smaller precedent, see the Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, Acc. 54.1.2), made in Paris in the early 14th century (c.1325), and measuring only 89 x 62 mm. The most prolific period in the Parisian production of Books of Hours was between 1400 and the arrival in Paris of the English armies of Henry V in 1420. The foreign occupation of Paris led many scribes and illuminators to flee to the provinces; see Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (2nd edn.; London, 1994), 184–85.

niers originated in the same region at approximately the same time and their physical appearance (size, illumination, support, etc.) was clearly influenced by this trend. Their secular content, by contrast, allies them more closely with other deluxe secular manuscripts, such as poetry anthologies and romances. Though related to these devotional and literary texts, chansonniers are differentiated by the inclusion of music.

SONGS OF LOVE AND LONGING

Chansonniers belong to the tradition of vernacular chivalric poetry, which, from the troubadours onwards, was concerned with singing about love. By making reference to the established conventions of *fin'amors*, writers of chansons created an allegorical space of love. As is well known, the formalized object of adoration was a lady of high standing. Convention required that her suitor's love be unrequited: while her role was to educate her lover, whose moral standing must be improved to make him worthy of her, his role was to behave with humility and respect, and to endure suffering for her sake. The playing out of these roles formed the *topos* of most chansons: the same types of characters, and even some of the same allegorical figures, are found in both musical and textual sources.⁶ The shorter length of song texts, however, precludes the narrative that characterizes romances. As a result, the significance of the themes shared between chansonniers and poetry anthologies derives more from participation in the same frame of reference than from the specifics of their content.

Although little is known of the circumstances in which chansonniers were made and used, the subject matter of their texts suggests they would have been particularly suitable as gifts for weddings or other intimate celebratory occasions. In his famous *Art de dictier* (1392), Eustache Deschamps describes love poetry as a 'natural music ... because the *dits* and songs or metered books they make are read with the mouth, and proffered by voice if not sung'. Such poetry was read aloud ('with the mouth'), but often only 'between lords and ladies in secret and private retreat', with obvious erotic implications.⁷

The chansonniers' main theme, love, was expanded and reinforced by the illuminations, in accordance with standard practice in books intended for the aristocratic market. The imagery drew on familiar tropes of courtly love as a way of imbuing these books with a noble pedigree. The specific aristocratic context of this love was clarified by the illuminations: courtly and rustic images frequently appear alongside one another, serving to distance the aristocratic ideal from the everyday; the privileged are juxtaposed with 'ordinary folk' as a way of showing all characters assuming their rightful place in the ordered view of society much cherished by the nobility.

6 The themes evoked in chanson texts are discussed by Howard Garey, in his introduction to the Mellon chanson; see *The Mellon Chansonnier*, ed. Leeman L. Perkins and Howard Garey (New Haven, 1979), 63–79.

7 'Pour ce que les diz et chançons par eulx faiz ou les livres metrifiez se lisent de bouche, et proferent par voix non pas chantable'; text and translation given by Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996), 113–14.

INTRODUCING IMAGES TO TEXTS

Books provided a pleasant pastime, but were also intended to be instructive. Romances were the most popular, followed by histories, philosophical, moral, and advisory texts. 15th-century owners of such books were able not only to identify with great historical heroes, but also to show the refinement of their court. Books describing the lives of Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, and other role models were commissioned and offered as flattering mirrors of their owners. The large size of these manuscripts – they are a world apart from small personal or devotional books – suggests that they were read from lecterns, so that all those assembled could see and follow the lavish illuminations. Here, illuminations offered particularly suitable objects of identification: according to the chronicler of Charles VII, Gilles Le Bouvier, merely looking at heroic images ennobled the spectator.⁸

It is noteworthy that whereas the texts of these histories – originally written in Latin or Greek – were not illustrated, their French translations were illuminated as a way of adapting the texts to the wishes and exigencies of the new public. The narratives were visually recontextualized with identifiable contemporary buildings (including St Gatien, Tours; le palais de la Cité, Paris; and the chateau at Mehun-sur-Yèvre, near Bourges) acting as substitutes for their historical counterparts.⁹ This visual glossing served as a way of making historical events present, with the manuscripts self-consciously prefiguring the histories their owners hoped would be written about them. Even in less prestigious manuscripts, the figures in illuminated initials form part of a dynamic exchange between past and present, helping the reader identify with typologies of chivalry. In providing, in lavish format, a pictorial commentary on vernacular texts, these manuscripts prefigure chansonniers, particularly the extent to which they combined the visual, aural, and literary to carry a message that was more than the sum of its parts. Though chansonniers radically depart from the epic tradition in terms of content, they served similar purposes, as books for leisure reading. The decorated borders and initials found in chansonniers drew on a vocabulary borrowed from historical, as well as devotional texts.¹⁰

8 Le Bouvier described seeing pictures of ‘the kings of France and Sicily’ as ‘a very noble thing’ (‘c’estoit moult noble chose a veoir les ... roys de France et de Cecille’); in Gilles Le Bouvier dit le Héraut Berry, *Les Chroniques du roi Charles VII*, published for the Société de l’histoire de France by Henri Courteault and Léonce Celier, with the collaboration of Marie-Henriette Jullien de Pommerol (Paris, 1979), 319.

9 Jean Fouquet added, c.1470, a number of illuminations to a large and impressive manuscript begun more than 50 years earlier for Jean, Duke of Berry. The manuscript (in two volumes) is a translation of *Antiquitatum Iudaicarum* (Les Antiquités judaïques), by Flavius Josephus (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 247 and n.a.f. 21013). Particularly striking is the illustration of the siege of Jericho, which appears to be taking place on the banks of the Loire (rather than the Jordan), and Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem, which is a lush depiction of St Gatien, Tours.

10 Mary Olson discusses the common iconographic codes shared by artists; see Mary C. Olson, *Fair and Varied Forms: Visual Textuality in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York, 2003), 166.

INTRODUCING MUSIC TO TEXTS

Even if a patron was not musically literate, he or she was able to gain entry into the conceptual performance of its texts by owning a book of music. Indeed, chansons were no doubt popular in a way that sacred music, because of its more specifically functional nature, could never aspire to be.¹¹ Because of their more modest length and strophic musical forms, non-musicians could gain familiarity with songs relatively easily. The demarcation of phrases is usually determined by the texts, which would often have been familiar from poetry anthologies. Whatever their musical background, then, patrons could hope to gain quite a close knowledge of the pieces contained in their chansonniers. Certainly, the fact that chansonniers contain music implies that their patron benefited from musical notation. After all, why else pay to have it copied in this manner?

But even if chansonniers were consciously produced for semi-literate ‘end users’, this did not mean that the accuracy of their musical content was in any way compromised: the luxuriously decorated Loire Valley chansonniers provide our best and often our only sources for much of the 15th-century song repertory. Indeed, works by all the best-known composers of the time are included in these manuscripts. Symbols of prosperity they may have been, but these chansonniers are not mere notational exemplars – they are collections of known musical works, consciously compiled as song anthologies.

VISUAL MUSIC

The 15th century saw the development of white mensural notation, arguably the most elegant form of musical script ever used.¹² It is probably no accident that this notational development should coincide with a rapid expansion in the market for books with music, suggesting that musical manuscripts may have gained in value as visual objects, irrespective of whether the patron was musically literate. The pictorial use of musical notation was not new to the 15th century, the most striking precedents being the pieces by Baude Cordier and Jaquemin de Senleches in the Chantilly

¹¹ In general terms, this is supported by the wider distribution of chanson sources. Whereas for a mass or motet to survive in as many as three sources is unusual, many chansons survive in more than ten sources, and some a good deal more.

¹² The development of white or void notation was motivated – at least in the first instance – by pragmatic rather than aesthetic considerations. Where, when, and, most importantly why this change from black notation took place is still being debated. The change coincided with the gradual shift from parchment to paper, and was almost certainly a response to the problems caused by the corrosive effect of black ink (particularly of filled notes) on paper; see Marie-Noël Colette, Marielle Popin, and Philippe Vendrix, *Histoire de la notation musicale au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance* (Paris, 2003), 141–42. Ink was expensive, and filling all the note-heads was time-consuming. As the demand for books grew, so too did the need for scribes to be able to copy efficiently. A chansonnier scribe needed a finely-cut pen to copy texts into these small books. Void notation allowed the same pen to be used for the music (rather than the wider nib used to fill black note heads); see Richard Rastall, *The Notation of Western Music: An Introduction* (2nd rev. edn.; Leeds, 1998), 101–2.

codex. These *ars subtilior* pieces were clearly intended to be read as much as heard. Their visual idiosyncrasies are an integral or perhaps the most crucial part of their meaning.¹³ The aesthetic and decorative appeal of musical notation can be gauged from the fact that in 1414 the young Charles d'Orléans had the song *Madame je suis plus joyeulx* embroidered in pearls onto a cloak (960 pearls for the text and 568 for the music, providing four pearls arranged in a square for each note): this object of pure luxury – it cost £276/7s/6d *livres tournois* (a sum in excess of the annual salary of most court officials) – strikingly attests to the high aesthetic value of musical notation *per se*, independent of any performance context.¹⁴

That musical notation was valued on aesthetic grounds is further underscored by its inclusion in paintings, murals, and intarsia. Walter Frye's motet *Ave regina celorum* appears in two paintings attributed to the Master of the Embroidered Foliage (an artist active in the Southern Netherlands in the late 15th century), both of the Madonna and Child. In one painting (now in Paris), an angel musician holds a choirbook with two voices of Frye's motet; in the other painting (now in Polizzi Generosa, Sicily) an angel sings from a scroll containing the beginning of the Tenor voice of the motet. The same work, complete with all three voices, is found on the ceiling of the oratory in the château at Montreuil Bellay.¹⁵

Two well-known chansons survive in marquetry in Italian palaces: Isabella d'Este had Ockeghem's canon *Prenez sur moy* inlaid in the walls of her *grotta* in Mantua (Palazzo Ducale) and Federico III da Montefeltro had *J'ay pris amours* inlaid in his *studiolo* at Urbino.¹⁶ Federico is himself the dedicatee of a second song, *Bella gerit musasque colit Federicus in omni*, also found in the intarsia. The *studiolo* contains numerous *imprese* (mottos and emblems) belonging to the duke, including the emblem

13 Works by Baude Cordier include the heart-shaped *Belle, bonne, sage* as well as the canonic *Tout par compas*, notated in two concentric circles, drawn as if with a compass; the text of Senleches' song *La harpe de melodie*, written in the shape of a harp, with the notes written on staff lines formed by the strings of the harp, tells the reader 'The harp should indeed gladden all with a melody written without melancholy for pleasure to see and hear the music played'; for further discussion of these pieces, see James Haar, 'Music as Visual Object: the Importance of Notational Appearance', *L'edizione critica tra testo musicale e testo letterario*, ed. Renato Borghi and Pietro Zappalà (Lucca, 1995), 97–128; and Reinhard Strohm, "'La Harpe de mélodie" oder das Kunstwerk als Akt der Zueignung', in Hermann Danuser et al. (eds.), *Das musikalische Kunstwerk: Geschichte. Aesthetik. Theorie: Festschrift Carl Dahlhaus zum 60. Geburtstag* (Laaber, 1988), 303–16.

14 Details of compensation paid to French court musicians can be found in Leeman L. Perkins, 'Musical Patronage at the Royal Court of France under Charles VII and Louis XI (1422–83)', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 37/3 (1984), 507–66. For sources on Charles d'Orléan's commission (dated 1414, when he was 20 years old), see David Fallows, *A Catalogue of Polyphonic Songs, 1415–1480* (Oxford, 1999), 265.

15 Fallows, *A Catalogue*, 572–73.

16 On *Prenez sur moy*, see Fallows, *A Catalogue*, 326; on *J'ay pris amours*, see *ibid.*, 195. For further discussion of the intarsia, see William Prizer, 'Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, "Master Instrument-Maker"', *Early Music History*, 2 (1982), 87–127; see also Nicoletta Guidobaldi, *La musica di Federico: Immagini e suoni alla corte di Urbino* (Florence, 1995), 46, 49–59, and pl. 28 for a facsimile of the intarsia of *J'ay pris amours*; also Gustave Reese, 'Musical Compositions in Renaissance Intarsia', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 2 (Durham, 1968), 74–97 and pl. 4.

of the Order of the Garter (bestowed on him by Edward IV in 1474). Whatever personal significance these songs had for Federico, their inclusion here suggests something akin to a musical *impresa*.

In none of these circumstances is notation directly related to performance – that is, these hardly seem suitable as performance texts. Rather, these images attest to an interest in the visual representation of music. The use of musical notation in these non-practical contexts is the outcome of a desire to elevate objects above the functional realm – part and parcel of an aspiration that the nobility practised comprehensively in other areas. If musical notation was valued in its own right, then what better medium for its calligraphic development than an illuminated chansonnier? These manuscripts were clearly not prepared in a hurry, nor produced out of musical necessity for use in performance.¹⁷ As principally aesthetic objects, they offered the scribes the opportunity to experiment with musical notation in the broader context of a decorated page.

PAGE LAYOUT

The page layout of chansonniers contributes to the aim of creating visually satisfying musical presentations. In liturgical manuscripts of polyphonic music, voice parts were, of necessity, written in choirbook format (*cantus collateralis*), so that the singers could gather around and perform from the one book. Chansonniers were also copied in choirbook format, but whereas the nature of the repertory transmitted in sacred manuscripts meant it was rarely possible for whole pieces to be presented across an opening, this situation was normal in chansonniers.

In fact, chansons were so musically compact that complete texts could usually be presented on each opening even in the smallest of these manuscripts.¹⁸ Since the majority of chansons are for only three voices, the text could be copied onto the verso leaves, under the discantus.¹⁹ The result is that almost every opening of a chansonnier portrays a musical whole. Thus, these manuscripts presented the reader with the opportunity to contemplate discrete musical works as visual entities; more than simply preserving chansons for posterity, they translated a musical experience – adorned with visual decoration – onto a page in all its immediacy.

17 As Craig Wright observed, these manuscripts show few signs of use by performers; see his ‘Voices and Instruments in the Art Music of Northern France during the 15th Century: A Conspectus’, in Daniel Hertz and Bonnie Wade (eds.), *International Musicological Society, Report of the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley 1977* (Kassel 1981), 643–49, on 644.

18 The Laborde Chansonnier is the smallest of the Loire Valley group, measuring only 126 x 92 mm, with a copying space of approximately 95 x 60 mm. The Wolfenbüttel Chansonnier is only a little bigger, at 148 x 104 mm. Dijon and Copenhagen are approximately 170 x 120 mm and the Chansonnier Nivelles de la Chaussée measures 190 x 133 mm.

19 In sacred manuscripts, choirbook format meant that the discantus and tenor were usually copied on the verso leaves, and the altus and contratenor on the facing recto, the voices supplying the *discant* thus appearing on the same leaf. In chansonniers, the pattern was to place both lower voices on the facing recto, leaving the discantus alone on the verso in three-voice songs.

The inclusion of music in chansonniers had repercussions on its graphic presentation, involving some aesthetic choices by the scribe. For example, all of the virelais in the Copenhagen Chansonnier are copied over two openings (the refrain on the first, and the couplets on the second). Both musically and visually, the two openings each have distinct identities: in musical terms, the form of the virelai is sharply differentiated in the couplet section, on account of the internal repetition. The contrast between the music of the refrain and that of the couplets is symbolically represented – at least in the Copenhagen Chansonnier – in the notation. The scribe was forced to compress the notation of virelai refrains, in order to accommodate their longer musical texts. But couplets presented a different challenge: their music might be shorter (because of the repeat), but two lines of text are underlaid to each line of music. Though his script for these texts is very compressed, the scribe did not apply the same degree of compression to the music, but instead chose to space out the notes (see Figure 1). The distinct characters that form the initials reinforce the visual contrast between the two openings, further reflecting the musical change in mood and pace.²⁰

With the combined presentation of verbal, visual, and musical aspects, the reader is invited to pursue a number of visual paths across the page. Even from a purely musical point of view, though he or she might grasp an overall sense of a song, its choirbook format forces the reader to follow only one voice at a time. Similarly, the need to match the additional text strophes to the music calls on the reader to play an active role in the poem's reconstruction. The layout of the page thus made readers aware of their own interpretative activity. The same process, by which each of the components is read separately, applies equally to the border decorations and illuminations.

BORDERS AND INITIALS

Floral borders reinforce the fictional dimension of these song texts by providing them with an ornamental trellis reminiscent of the borders of a garden. The symbolic association would not have been lost on readers familiar with the walled garden of the *Roman de la Rose*. The derivation of the French word for border (*bordure*) plays on a pun between *bords* (borders) and *bordes* (jests).²¹ Borders were – etymologically and symbolically – places for amusement, entertainment, frivolity, and bawdiness.²² Such allusions were intentional, as shown by the illuminators' inclusion of

20 This contrast is further accentuated by the different visual aspect of the two openings, the one using the hair side of the parchment, the other the flesh side. Gatherings were arranged so that hair-side leaves faced each other (and flesh faced flesh), in order to be visually consistent. Scribes almost always began virelais on hair-side openings, since this side of the parchment was better suited to densely-packed notes and stems, because the ink was less likely to spread.

21 The word *bordure* also stood for debauchery and whoring; see Alan Hindley, Frederick W. Langley, and Brian Levy, *Old French-English Dictionary* (Cambridge, 2000), 86.

22 Kendrick lists further cognates, such as *bordel* (brothel), *borderesse* (prostitute), *border* or *beborder* (to joust or to fight with or to play at hitting a mark with a lance), as well as *bordon* (bagpipe); see Laura Kendrick, 'The Jesting Borders of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and of Late Medieval Manuscript Art', *Animating the Letter*, 217–25.

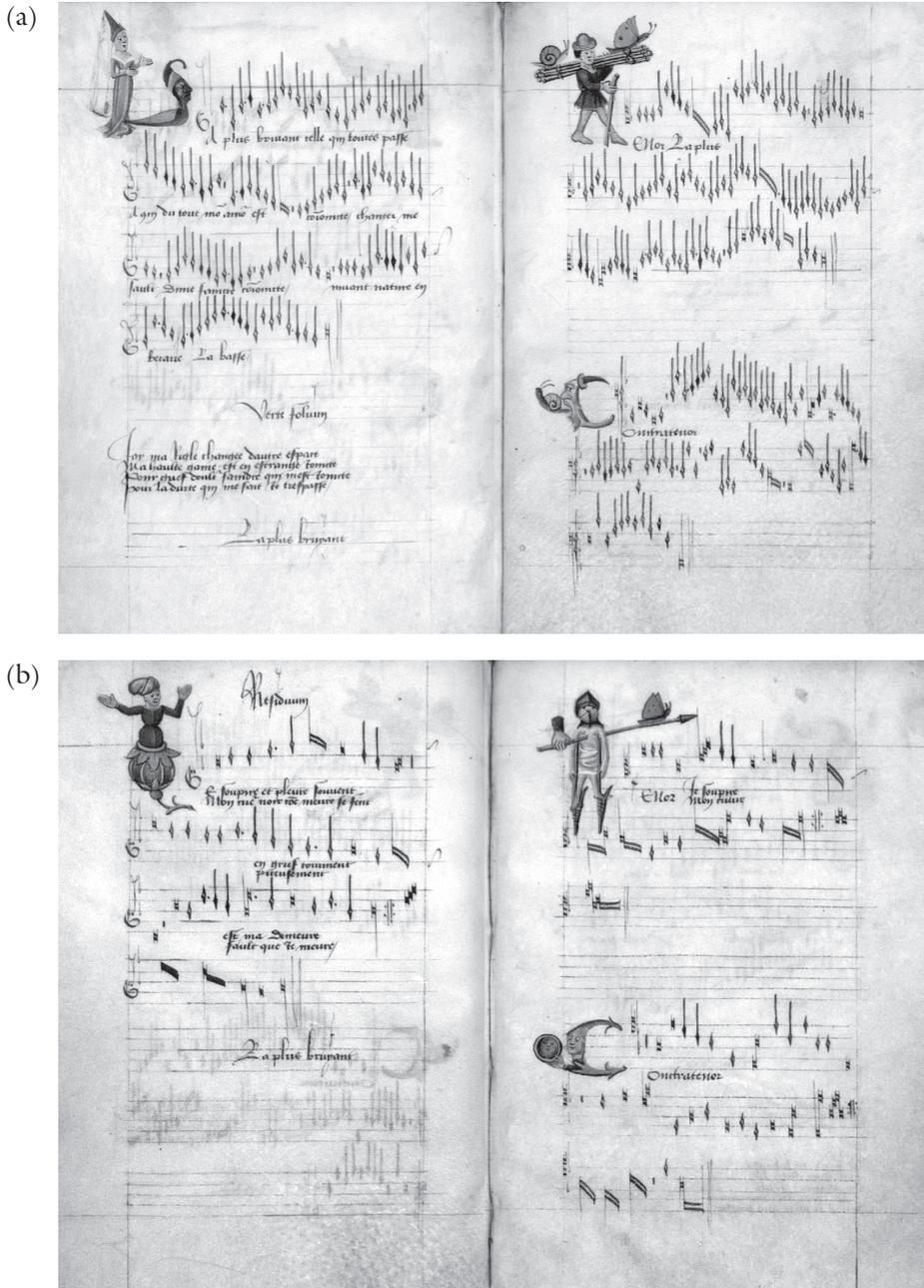


Figure 1. Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, MS Thott 291, 8^o; the ‘Copenhagen Chansonnier’, *La plus bruyant*, first opening, ff. 33v–34 (a), *Residuum*, ff. 34v–35 (b). Images reproduced from the website of the Royal Library, Copenhagen: http://base.kb.dk/pls/hsk_web/hsk_vis.forside?p_hs_loebenr=27.

verbal and visual puns in their margins.²³ There are numerous examples in illuminated manuscripts of figures playing horns or trumpeting (on which more below); though these images are immediately evocative of minstrelsy, they also pun on the word *tromperie* (trickery).²⁴ As I will show, the playful allusions of these puns are particularly well-suited to chansonniers. The illustrations in these books themselves comment on the nature of secular song: they are more than a decorative afterthought, instead serving as an adjunct to the reading apparatus.

Decorated initials immediately identify chansonniers as luxury objects. But they do much more. The musical and poetic texts, visually supported by flourished serifs and decorated borders, are often introduced using historiated initials. The relationship between the figures depicted in the initials and the text they preface is rarely direct, but the figures intrigue the reader, calling him or her to pause to explore the images they contain. Their eye-catching quality encourages readers to return again (and again) to the page and to rethink their response to the images portrayed. These large letters also have practical functions. They enable someone leafing through a manuscript to find songs by title. The animated letters can also trigger mnemonic responses: memorable images arouse the reader's emotions, and help them to recall the specific pieces the initials introduce.²⁵ In his magisterial book *Likeness and Presence*, Hans Belting argues that in the Middle Ages art for art's sake did not exist.²⁶ Books were decorated for a purpose; every image functioned in some capacity – to inform, to aid in devotion, to facilitate memorization, or to explain.

The most striking aspect of the initials in the Copenhagen Chansonnier is that instead of the usual structure of letters onto which ornamentation is grafted, the initials are themselves composed of the decorative characters.²⁷ Thus, the finely-dressed courtly lady seen on the verso leaf of Figure 1a herself forms the vertical stroke of the letter 'L' for the song *La plus bruyant* (with a grotesque forming the horizontal stroke). The letter 'T' (for tenor) on the facing recto is formed by a man carrying logs and a staff (his body making the vertical stroke and the logs and staff the horizontal stroke for the top of the letter). Beneath him, a grotesque with a snail tongue forms the 'C' of contratenor. The nobility of the lady is in contrast to the

23 For discussion of visual puns, see Camille, *Image on the Edge*, especially 36–47.

24 An exceptionally rich web of puns derived from the common root *trompe*: *baillier la trompe* was to act the fool; *jouer de la trompette* was to trick someone (with a pun on *tromper*); and a *trompeur* was not only a trumpeter or horn-blower, but also one who mocked others; see Hindley, Langley, and Levy, *Old French–English Dictionary*, 594. Frédéric Godefroy gives a contemporary use of *trompeur* found in *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* (1486): 'L'official voyant que ce estoit ung vray trompeur, et qu'il se trompoit de luy'; see Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française, et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle*, 10 vols. (Geneva, 1982) viii. 84.

25 See Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), 257.

26 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), originally published as *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990).

27 The initials in the Wolfenbüttel Chansonnier seem to have been illuminated by artists in the same atelier, even though the music of this manuscript was copied some years before the Copenhagen Chansonnier.

rustic attire of the man on the opposite page; judging from the position of her hands and her open mouth, she appears to be addressing him, but he is facing the opposite direction and apparently walking away. As we have seen, spreading virelais over two openings allowed the illuminators to give the second part of each song a different iconographic program. This is the case with the second opening of *La plus bruyant* (Figure 1b), where the lady emerging from a floral bud sharply contrasts with her predecessor on the first opening: judging from her attire, she is not a noble lady. Facing her on the opposite page is a naked knight on stilts – a ridiculed aristocrat, impaled on a spear held by an anonymous hand (the illuminator's?).²⁸

Most of the figures depicted in chansonnier initials would be equally at home in non-musical manuscripts; indeed, the people, animals, and objects represented tell of the extent to which these manuscripts belonged to a broader culture of decorated books. Animals, people, grotesques, and angels are frequently depicted with instruments, in both sacred and secular books. The popularity of visual, verbal, and musical puns on the word *trompe* (discussed previously) becomes significant in light of the iconographic depiction of wind instruments in the decorated initials of chansonniers (see Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c). While these figures are depicted *with* wind instruments there are a number of others depicted *as* instruments. These characters go beyond the representation of music to its deliberate embodiment.

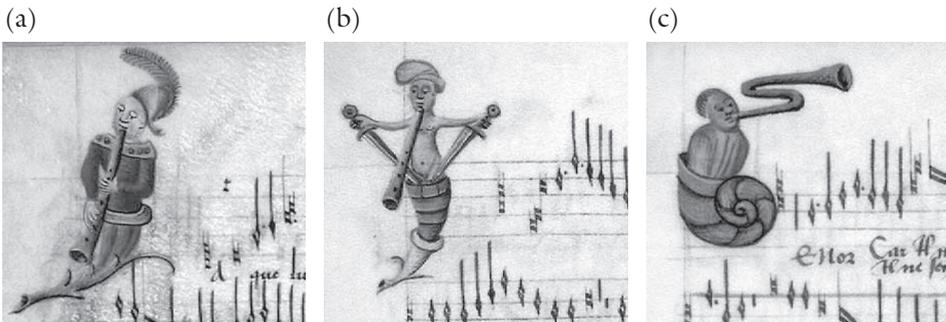


Figure 2. Copenhagen Chansonnier, *Ja que li ne*, f. 37v (a), *Garison scay/Je suis mire*, Residuum, f. 19 (b), *Soudainement mon cueur*, Residuum, f. 29 (c), (cf. fig. 1).

A wide variety of initials are found in the Dijon Chansonnier.²⁹ The figures inhabiting the lettrines (demarcated space around the letters) are mostly grotesques and

28 For discussion of the technical musical terms in the text of *La plus bruyant*, of the interplay between text and music, and a new edition of the song, see Peter Woetmann Christoffersen, 'Æslets skryden og sang gennem tårer: Billeder i musik i 1400-tallets populære og kunstfulde traditioner' (The Braying of the Ass and Singing through Tears: Pictures in Music in 15th-Century Popular and Courtly Traditions), *Musik & Forskning*, 26 (2001), 97–134.

29 Though the same scribe copied both the Copenhagen and Dijon Chansonniers, the manuscripts were not decorated by the same artists. The initials in Dijon are not of the same quality as those found in Copenhagen and Wolfenbüttel, and over half of Dijon remains undecorated. There are no guide letters for initials (generally added to assist the illuminator) in the undecorated part of the manuscript, making it possible that the scribe was himself responsible for the decorated initials, and guide letters were therefore unnecessary.

caricatures, accompanied by various creatures. Three letters contain faces with noses turned into wind instruments. The first appears in the contratenor initial of *Le resiouy* (see Figure 3a). His musical nose points directly at the clef, crossing the boundary line of the lettrine to do so. The same face, still scowling, appears in the tenor of *Jamais si bien* (see Figure 3b), this time with his nose bent down so that he can play it with his right hand. There are three holes, though his fingers are superimposed over the lower two holes, so only the top one is darkened. The third appearance of this curious frowning character is in the contratenor initial of *Tart ara quaresme* (see Figure 3c). This is the most exaggerated nose of the three: the ‘instrument’ has a number of holes and takes on a cornet or trunk-like shape.³⁰

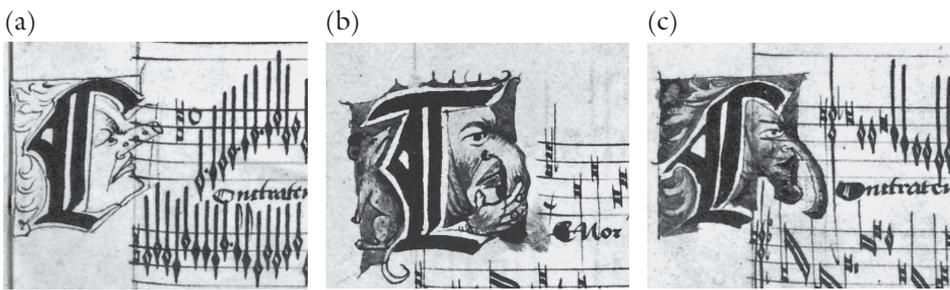


Figure 3. Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 517, *Le resiouy d'une seule esperance*, f. 34 (a), *Jamais si bien*, f. 52 (b), *Tart ara quaresme*, f. 58 (c). Dragan Plamenac (ed.), *Dijon, Bibliothèque publique, manuscrit 517*, Publications of Mediaeval Music Manuscripts, no. 12 (Brooklyn: Institute of Medieval Music, n.d. [1971]).

A grotesque creature with an instrumental nose is also found in the Copenhagen chansonnier, as the discantus initial of Hayne's *De tous biens plaine* – one of the most popular songs of the 15th century (see Figure 4a). Another grotesque – the discantus initial of the similarly popular song *D'un autre amer* by Ockeghem has an even longer protuberance emerging from his nose, which may symbolize yet another wind instrument (see Figure 4b).³¹

³⁰ Aside from the obvious pun on the dual meaning of the noun *trompe* – as both trumpet and elephant's trunk – the related verb *trompeter* suggests further possible meanings: this was a verb used to describe the act of speaking with a loud voice, which could perhaps be extended to singing; see Algirdas Julien Greimas and Teresa Mary Keane, *Dictionnaire du moyen français: la Renaissance* (Paris, 1992).

³¹ Musical instrument creatures are also found outside of chansonniers; for example, there is a wingless bird with a long beak in the form of a wind instrument (with five holes) in a Book of Hours dating from c.1480, now in New York Public Library (Spencer MS 43); see John Plummer, *The Last Flowering: French Painting in Manuscripts, 1420–1530, from American Collections* (New York, 1982), no. 98.

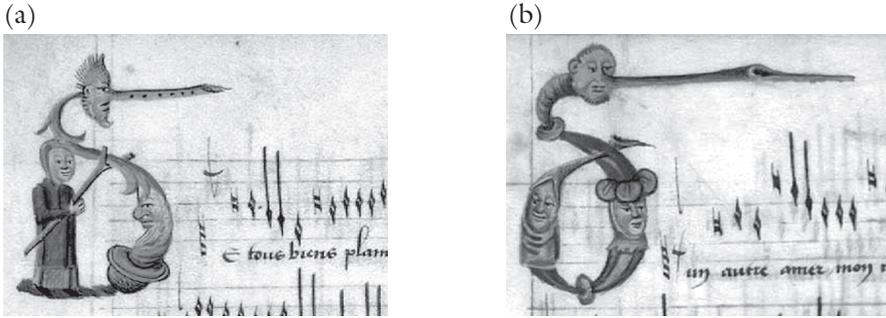


Figure 4. Copenhagen Chansonnier, *De tous biens plain*, f. 4v (a), *D'un autre amer*, f. 32v (b), (cf. fig. 1).

These *bordes* in the *bords* take the humorous initials found in the Dijon and Copenhagen chansonniers one stage further, with the physical body providing the instrument of play. The ‘trumpeters’ shown here play an active role in bringing this music to life. Perhaps the purpose of these embodied wind instruments was to allow those not musically literate to participate in, or be witness – in a musical sense – to the songs contained in the chansonniers. They were a way of articulating the place of music *within* the culture of aristocratic books, rather than alongside it. The bawdy initials provided a witty counterpart to the elegant and refined musical notation found in these chansonniers.

CONCLUSION

To an unprecedented degree, a cultural emphasis on display motivated the patronage of the arts in 15th-century France. Collecting and commissioning books and manuscripts was a way of demonstrating the status of the patron: by implication, the more extravagant the decoration, the more splendid the owner. A direct association is suggested between owner and subject matter: someone with the means to commission a book describing – in song – an amorous world of earthly pleasures belonged to that world. In this way, elaborately decorated books served to reinforce the public apprehension of the prestige and social standing of their patrons, attesting at the same time to their refinement.

It was this social context that favoured the cultivation of chansonniers. These luxury objects artfully combine love poetry, lavish decoration, and meticulous musical notation. They may have been associated with live musical events, but their close relationship to other secular manuscripts makes clear that they also participated in a broader cultural tendency to mythologize and make permanent the authority of the people whose patronage occasioned their copying. Though their owners were probably unable themselves to read mensural music, they understood that the purpose of the musical notation was to provide the means to make polyphony. In this way, these songbooks demonstrated the largesse of their patron, attesting to courts endowed with literate, skilled musicians, and owners who recognized the value of this art.

The poetic forms and the border decorations found in these chansonniers are drawn from established generic categories to form a web of recurring patterns. Motivic play between voices and thematic references between songs, though outside the scope of this study, provide a further aspect of patterning particular to the musical content of these books. Chansonniers contain *visual representations* of songs, captured and recorded on parchment for posterity. The inclusion of musical iconography in the borders and initials provides evidence that the enjoyment of their readers derived in large part from the specifically musical content.

Chansonniers were a way of preserving a musical culture as an artifact in its own right. In the same way that a patron would identify or wish to be identified with mythological or historical figures from the past, the performing patron – even if fictional – sought to embody the values in these books of song. Owners engaged in reading, seeing, hearing, and even singing from their chansonniers would have understood these books to embody the interaction of verbal, visual, and musical symbols. The task of readers, both past and present, is to undertake these activities simultaneously, so that the multiple narratives can work in conjunction with one another.

SUMMARY

The most distinct aspect of 15th-century chansonniers is their simultaneous presentation of text, music, and image. Whether their owners looked on these books as records of past musical events or repositories for future occasions, the songs they contain acquired a visual identity from their elegant presentation in these small, deluxe, personal manuscripts. The inclusion of decorative borders and illuminated initials expanded the appeal of chansonniers to readers with varied levels of musical literacy. As such, these books were able to symbolize and represent the musical interests of their patrons in very tangible terms. The attention paid by scribes to the visual representation of music can be seen in the well-designed page layout, clarity of musical notation, and musical iconography. Decorative characters in initials (here and elsewhere) often play horns or trumpets, but for a number of figures in these manuscripts the wind instruments they play are parts of their own bodies. This playful embodiment of music suggests that chansonniers were valued as musical objects even by those unable to read their contents.