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Nicole de Bretagne and a collection of religious texts in French: Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 5366 (15th century)¹

Manuscript 5366 of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris is a fifteenth-century miscellany manuscript written on paper, which reproduces several religious texts in Middle French and two short fragments in Latin.² The first group of texts; the Gospel of Nicodemus and *La vengeance Vaspasien* (the Revenge of Emperor Vespasian, ff. 1r-86r); is signed with the words: “This book belongs to Nicole de Bretagne; she will pour a good quantity of wine for the finder who returns it” (fig. 1).³ This note is written in the same color ink as the preceding texts and in the same handwriting. Starting on the verso side of this leaf a slightly different hand, most likely a reader, has added three short fragments in French based on the Gospels (fig. 2). The thematic unity of these later additions suggests that they were the result of the spiritual needs and preferences of an owner of this manuscript, most likely a laywoman. Although the involvement of professional scribes cannot be ruled out entirely, this article will argue that one or several lay people, most likely women, were responsible for the production of this manuscript.

Together with the other texts reproduced in MS 5366, this miscellany manuscript is highly interesting, because it is a witness to the textual support of the religious life of laypersons in fifteenth-century France. Presenting a wide range of subjects that is nevertheless coherent, the texts are not only biblical and Christ-centered, but also of a moral, hagiographical, theological and eschatological nature. Moreover, the specific choice of texts, such as the life of a female saint and the teachings of Saint Louis to his daughter, might well reflect the female identity of its owner(s). The inclusion of fragments of Henry of Suso’s *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* and of the *Visio Tnugdali* in Middle French underscores the international and European dimensions of the religious reading cultures in France during the long fifteenth century.

Because of the high output by the commercial manuscript industry in Paris during the late Middle Ages (Rouse and Rouse), numerous modern scholars seem to have assumed that book production in late medieval France was mainly driven by commercial logic.⁴ As a result of this, the activities of lay people as scribes and as book makers have been underestimated. Especially in Francophone historical research lay people being engaged in the production of books is often presented as an exception of little significance: “During the Middle Ages writing was almost

¹ The research for this article has been financed by the ERC Starting Grant “Holy Writ and Lay Readers”, awarded to Sabrina Corbellini (University of Groningen, The Netherlands). I am grateful to her and to the two anonymous referees for their valuable suggestions that helped to improve the argument of this article.

² For religious miscellanies, see: Perry.

³ “Cest liure est a Nicole de Bretagne qui le trouuera cy li rende et elle poyra bien le vin.” Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 5366, f. 86r.

⁴ Recent studies that address exclusively commercial book production in the French vernaculars include: Van Hemelryck and Marzano; Croenen and Ainsworth.

exclusively done by professionals.”⁵ In a recent article Céline Van Hoorebeeck discussed “professional readers” as lawyers and humanists, who annotated their books and who sometimes copied them *manu propria*, as opposed to “amateur readers” from the bourgeoisie, who would predominantly have had books showcasing luxury aesthetics and intended for entertainment (129-131). From this perspective lay readers appear rather as consumers than as producers of books.

However, as early as 1980 Ezio Ornato and Carla Bozzolo have pointed to the activity of amateur scribes in fifteenth-century France, but they have not attempted to substantiate these scribes’ identities with historical sources (46-48). The existence of “non-commercial scribes” who copied their own books has been addressed more recently by Jean Pascal Pouzet (220-224), and Elisabetta Caldelli has called attention to manuscripts that were copied *in domus* (204-211). Although examples from France are relatively rare, codicological and contextual sources do indicate that non-professional lay scribes were active as copyists and disseminators of religious texts in the vernacular as well. Before analyzing the composition of MS 5366 in detail, I will first present historical sources showing that evidence from France does survive of lay people acting as amateur scribes of religious books and I will argue that MS 5366 might well be added to this list.

Finally, this paper will address the free circulation of biblical and religious texts and their accessibility to lay people – allowing the laity to read, copy and disseminate them, while selecting them freely according to their needs and interests. Taking into account choices of similar texts made by lay people as reflected in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century inventories, I will argue that the collection of religious texts in MS 5366 testifies to the highly developed religious reading culture of the laity during this period. Taken together, the historical evidence suggests that lay people in France were not passive recipients of heavily diluted texts distributed by the Church, but that they were actively involved in shaping the textual support of their religious and spiritual life.

Although French scholars often have expressed doubts concerning the levels of lay literacy in the late Middle Ages, evidence that proves the contrary is certainly not lacking. Basic schooling was accessible in all French towns during the fifteenth century, including for young girls (De Ridder-Symoens; Guyotjeannin). By the fifteenth century lay people from all social groups were making use of writing for pragmatic goals, as is shown by the receipts for goods or services delivered to the town council of Saint-Omer and written and signed by the inhabitants, including sometimes even day laborers, as André Derville has noted.⁶ The high levels of literacy as suggested by Derville’s

⁵ Lusignan 26: “Il faut également prendre en compte qu’au Moyen Âge écrire est presque exclusivement une affaire de professionnels.” See also Nichols 36: “Manuscript books were products of an urban micro-culture where every aspect of production was carried out by artisans living in the same or nearby streets.”

⁶ For other studies of writing by lay people in medieval France, see: Amsler 45; several contributions in Bourlet and Dufour; Bertrand, esp. “La part des laïcs”. For writing women, see: de Hemptinne. For the 16th-18th centuries, see: Messerli and Chartier; Narveson. Surprisingly, the subject of lay people acting as scribes in France is not touched

data are not surprising in the context of the increased complexity of trade, contracts, and finance, which had rendered it necessary for merchants to keep account books. Unfortunately the surviving merchants' account books from late medieval France have not yet been systematically studied.⁷ On the other hand we know of several family books (*livres de raison*),⁸ chronicles,⁹ and pilgrim accounts¹⁰ put down in writing by lay people. Women were also expected to be able to write, as the text *Une petite instruction et maniere de viure pour vne femme seculiere* (A short instruction and way of life for secular women) testifies. Printed from the early years of the sixteenth century onwards, it instructs the female reader to copy the prayer she had to recite every morning at dawn and the instructions how she should receive the host during Mass on a small piece of paper and paste it in the Book of Hours that she usually took with her to Church.¹¹

There is also evidence from France of lay people who copied religious texts with their own hand, for private use or as an act of charity for others. One of the best documented examples is that of the layman Jean Sardon, who donated in 1443 fourteen books from his personal library to the hospital in Vesoul, including *De vita christiana secundum vitam evangelicam* in five books, the first book of which he had copied himself (Vannier 123-124), as well as Saint Bonaventura's *Dialogus* (Brocard 72, 76). Another example is Jehan Talon, a *bourgeois* of Aurillac in the center of France, who in 1477 copied the story of Christ's Passion and Resurrection in French.¹² During approximately the same era the nobleman Jean des Essarts copied for his own use Jacques Legrand's *Livre de bonnes meurs*.¹³ Between 1420 and 1446 Nicolas du Plessy, royal procurator in Sens personally copied over 600 texts in French and in Latin, mostly of a juridical nature but also including prayers to Christ and Mary, an exposition of the Mass and the *Enseignements de Saint Louis*.¹⁴ Around the years 1430-1440, an anonymous lawyer in Paris copied for his own use legal and humanist texts, together with literary and religious texts in French, as the *Second Lucidaire* and

upon at all in recent publications as: Morsel; Van Hemelryck and Van Hoorebeeck; Chastang; Henryot.

⁷ For some studies see: Schneider; Moureau; Gouffran.

⁸ For recent bibliography, see: www.ecritsduforprive.fr. For *livres de raison* added to French Books of Hours, see: Reinburg 62-71.

⁹ As the chronicle of Metz written by Jacques d'Esch; Metz, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 831 (c. 1438, destroyed); partially autograph.

¹⁰ As the pilgrims account written by Jehan de Zeilbeke of which the original autograph manuscript survives: Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 793 (1499-1514).

¹¹ *Une petite maniere comment une femme seculiere se peult conduire devotement* (Paris, 1516): "Et aussi il vous seroit bon de en reciter en vng petit papier ce qui est a dire tous les iours comme la preparation que vous debuez faire tous les matins et la maniere de oyr la messe et ce qui y est pour quant vous recepez nostre seigneur Ihesu Crist. Et mettez cela dedans vos heures que vous portez a leglise" (sig. a iii recto).

¹² Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 968, f. 117v: "Cest present livre qui parole de la sainte passion et resurrexion de nostre sauueur Jhesu Crist est a moy Jehan Talon bourgeois de la ville de Orillac lequel a escript de sa main, lan mil iiii^c lxxvii, et fut achevee le xxx^e jour du mois de may qui le trouuera luy plaise de le rendre en payent le vin largement. Talon. Ita est." See: Hasenohr, L'essor 349.

¹³ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS NAF 1157.

¹⁴ Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 205. See: Portes.

the *Enseignements de Saint Louis*.¹⁵

Although these examples might seem particularly low in number in comparison to Italy,¹⁶ it **might be a result** of the high numbers of religious books that were destroyed in France during the Wars of Religion (Zemon Davis 153-188). Later during the French Revolution even more religious books were burned, mutilated or their paper recycled (Grégoire 2-6; Varry). This suggests that the massive destruction of books, especially of cheap booklets on paper containing religious texts, might have occurred in France on a larger scale than elsewhere in Europe and that the absence of great numbers of cheap home-copied books in French in modern **public** library collections is not representative of the historical situation.

Manuscript 5366 of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal is one of the late medieval small-size paper books that fortunately did come down to us. It contains 202 leaves, measuring 12 by 19 cm,¹⁷ which have been trimmed and rebound in an eighteenth-century binding. The tightness of the binding does not allow for a precise examination of the quires and only a few catchwords are visible.¹⁸ Several drips of candle wax, smudges and fingerprints on the folios of the Gospel of Nicodemus indicate that at least this part of the manuscript was consulted frequently. The writing, the watermarks of the paper, and a marginal note on the folios 90r-v referring to Emperor Sigismund (1368-1437) suggest a date shortly before the middle of the fifteenth century (Gosman 68-9).

Aside from her name, nothing is known about the owner who wrote the ex-libris note on folio 86r. It might have been Nicole de Bretagne (1424-1480), countess of Penthievre in French Brittany and daughter of Charles de Châtillon-Blois. The dates coincide, but the omission of titles of nobility in the ex-libris note, together with the absence of coats of arms in the manuscript – or even places reserved for their insertion – suggest rather that the owner was a different Nicole, of a much humbler social position, who originally came from Bretagne and who used it as a toponymic surname. Moreover, the promise of wine to the honest finder is typical for books from lay owners living in an urban context, and not for those owned by members of the high aristocracy.¹⁹

The manuscript reproduces the following texts, almost all of which were copied by different hands:

f. 1r-62r: The Gospel of Nicodemus (long version) in French (Ford, L’Évangile);

¹⁵ Paris, BnF, MS lat. 4641B. See: Pons.

¹⁶ Corbellini and Hoogvliet; Petrucci 169-235; Cursi. For a German example, see: Populer.

¹⁷ The pages have visibly been trimmed by the binder. The conclusions presented here are based on my own consultations of the original manuscript and on the detailed descriptions in Gosman 68-9 and Meyer 70-82. **A digitized version of the manuscript can now be consulted online on Gallica:** <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b525042226.r=5366>.

¹⁸ For instance on f. 174v and 179v.

¹⁹ As in note 12.

f. 63v: left blank;

f. 64r-86r: *La vengeance Vaspasien* (Ford, *La vengeance*), ending with a short treatise on the Host;

f. 86v-90v: Mary's search for Jesus after the teachings in the temple, with exposition; Jesus calms the storm at sea, with exposition; the rising of the son of the widow in Nain, **all three fragments close to *La vie de Nostre Benoit Sauveur Ihesuscrist* (Meiss and Beatson, 39-40, 48); *Prophecias secundum sanctum Eusebium*;**

f. 91r-124r: *Le Trésor de sapience* (a French translation of fragments of Henry of Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit/Horologium sapientiae*²⁰ written in two columns);

f. 124v: left blank;

[unfoliated blank page];

f. 125r-162v: Life of Saint Valerie of Limoges, in French verse (Meyer), followed by a short Latin prayer to Saint Valerie, signed "A de Ligondeix";

[white page without foliation];

f. 163r-180r: The punishments of Hell, after the *Visio Tnugdali* (1149), in French;²¹

f. 180v: left blank [**later *probatio pennae* in Latin and Italian**];

f. 181r-189v: *Dialogue du père et du fils*: religious teachings by a father to his son;

f. 190r-194v: Teachings by Saint Louis to his daughter Isabelle, in French (O'Connell);

f. 195r-202v: The Letter of Prester John, in French (Gosman)

f. 203r: Blank leaf with inscription (16th c.): "Jamais ne fut que neusse bonne vollente de faire bonne chose pour vo"; *probatio pennae* on verso side.

The ex-libris note by Nicole de Bretagne appears at the bottom of f. 86r, to the left and the right of the *explicit* (*Cy finist la vengeance Vaspasien*). The positioning of Nicole's note and the spaces between the words "*poÿra – bien – le vin*," show that it has been added after the *explicit* had been written. However, the red ink highlighting the *V* of "*Vaspasien*" runs over the *l* of "*le vin*" in Nicole's note and, consequently, the highlight must have been added after the ex-libris note (fig. 1). This shows that the ex-libris note was actually part of the original copy. Moreover, the ink of Nicole's note has exactly the same color as the preceding texts, and the handwriting, a somewhat irregular *semihybrida* (Derolez 163-165), is very similar. Most notably the *e*'s, *de*'s, *st*'s, *g*'s *b*'s and *y*'s are exactly the same. The only difference is the letter *l*, that has a small loop in Nicole's note and that is mostly penned as a straight line in the preceding texts. However, sometimes the scribe noted an *l* with a small loop, as in "*au temple*" on folio 44r (fig. 3; second line below *Tant vint ung capellain*). All this points towards the scribe of the ex-libris note – most likely Nicole – and the

²⁰ Edited in Glorieux 345-365. See also: Künzle 287. The attribution to Jean Gerson is, however, erroneous.

²¹ Based on Vincent Beauvais's version in the *Speculum Historiale*, see: de Pontfarcy ix-xv.

copyist of the Gospel of Nicodemus and *La vengeance Vaspasien* being the same person.

When leafing through the first two texts of the manuscript the irregularity of the handwriting immediately strikes the eye (fig. 3). This is partly due to the fact that the pages have not been ruled, but even more to the scribe, who did not consistently write letters of the same form and of the same size. The letter *l* with and without a loop has already been noted, but other letters have different forms as well, for instance on 44r (fig. 3) the *p* of “*pour lors*” in the first line is different from the other *p*'s. The first lines of the same folio show that the inclination is variably towards the right and to the left. Below the incipit “*Tant vint ung capellain*” the written lines are notably descending towards the right and the interlinear distance is much smaller than in the rest of the text. The divisions within the texts are marked by a few words in a slightly larger *littera textualis formata*, highlighted with some accents in red. On f. 44r can be seen that the scribe did not lineate these *incipits*, as a consequence of which the last letters are larger than the first. The uncertainty of the pen in the letters *g* and *p* show that the scribe was not very skilled in writing a *littera textualis*. All this suggests rather an amateur scribe than a professional scribe, who would have lineated the pages, whose handwriting would have been more regular, who would have planned beforehand the layout of the text, and who would have been trained in writing a *littera textualis formata* as well. The simple decoration reinforces the impression of an amateur scribe: the first and only initial in red on f. 1r is decorated with simple pen flourishes.

Manuscript 5366 does not contain hard evidence that Nicole de Bretagne copied the first two works of the manuscript herself, but given the fact that many women from fifteenth-century France had learned to write, together with the close similarities in ink and handwriting between the signature and the two preceding texts, serious consideration should be given to the possibility that Nicole was actually the scribe.

The manuscript contains additional traces suggesting a female lay readership and the activity of more amateur scribes. As indicated above, on the verso side of the last page of *La vengeance Vaspasien* (f. 86v) a slightly different hand²² started to write three shorter texts, **most likely copied from a version of a Gospel-based Life of Christ in French, in modern research known as *La Vie de Notre Benoit Sauveur Ihesucrist*** (fig. 2): the passage about the boy Jesus at the temple (following Luke 2:41-49); the story of Jesus who calms the storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25 and Matthew 8:23-27); and the raising of the son of the widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-17); **all three Gospel fragments being provided with expositions**. These are so-called filler texts (Gillespie 2): later additions by one of the readers on the pages that remained blank after the end of *La vengeance Vaspasien*. As in the first two texts, the handwriting of these fragments is also somewhat irregular.

²² The loops to the right of ascending strokes suggest a script closer to a *cursiva*. Meyer 78 points at the typical form of the letter *g*, but the same form can be found on f. 43v-44r (fig. 3).

The second scribe has tried to visually harmonize these additions with the preceding texts, but the *incipits* in a *littera textualis formata* marking the beginning of each fragment have visibly not been written by a trained copyist, as can be seen from the uncertain trait in the letters *v*, *a* and *y* of “*Vray*” on folio 86v (fig. 2).

The first short text evokes the Gospel passage about the boy Jesus at the temple by imagining the despair that Mary would have felt during her search throughout Jerusalem for her son, the young Jesus.²³ The depiction of deeply felt emotions of anguish especially stands out, such as in these first lines of the fragment:

“Vray dieux tres debonnayres et pardurables peres je vous a pleu moy donner vn filz maiz je lay perdu et ne scay en quel lieu. Rendez le moy. O pere ostez moy cestes ameres douleurs de mon cueur et me monstre mon filz. Regarde ma misere et me veuillez pas regarder ma negligence laquelle jay faicte par ignorance. Rendez le moy par vostre bonte car je ne pourray vivre sans lui.”²⁴

[True and very merciful God, eternal Father, I have begged you to give me a son, but I have lost him and I do not know in what place. Return him to me. O Father, take away these bitter pains from my heart and show me my son. Look at my misery and do not reproach me the negligence that I have committed through ignorance. Return him to me by your goodness, because I cannot live without him].

The exposition added at the end of the fragment explains to the reader that he or she should not **lose** hope when feeling abandoned by Christ:

“[...] quj espirituellement veult venir ne se semerueille point se aucune foiz lui semble que nostres seigneur layt delaisse car quant ceste chouse advint a la mere ou filz de dieu nul ne sen doit esbair en sa pensee mais tres diligemment le doit querir en esperant et en ces saintez eures et sil perseuere jusques en la fin il le trouuera.”²⁵

[The person who wants to live spiritually should not wonder when it seems at times as if our Lord has abandoned him, because this has happened to the mother of the Son of God, too, and nobody should be amazed about it in his thoughts, but one should search for Him very diligently by hoping and by doing holy works and if (s)he perseveres until the end, (s)he will find Him].

²³ This has to be corrected from my initial idea, “very personal prayers to Christ for the return of a deceased son”, as expressed in Hoogvliet, *The Medieval* 299.

²⁴ F. 86v.

²⁵ F. 88r-v.

A very similar exposition has been added to the Gospel story of Jesus calming the storm at sea that follows:

“Icy pouuons nous considerer que combien quil nous semble aucune foiz que nostre seigneur dorme et quj ne lui chaille de nous quant nous sommes en aucunes tribulacions touteffoiz il est moult diligent de nous garder tousiours car nous deuons tous temps estre fermez en la foy.”²⁶

[Here we can consider that, when we are in some trials and tribulations, how strongly it can sometimes seem to us that our Lord is asleep and that he does not care about us. However, it is certain that He is always very zealous to protect us and we should not stop being firm in our faith].

All three of the Gospel fragments added later to the manuscript are also liturgical Gospel lessons (Pericopes) that were read during one of the Sunday Masses of the liturgical year, and all three fragments refer to Christ revealing his Godly nature. This suggests that the owner of this manuscript might have wanted to include these fragments so that they could be read as a linguistic aid in order to understand these Gospel readings in Latin during Mass. The thematic unity suggests a second intention, however, as all three Gospel fragments and the expositions are centered around coping with the hardships of life, and especially with the grief caused by the loss of children (e.g. Mary’s search for Jesus and the death of the son of the widow in Nain). Consequently, the specific choice of Gospel fragments might well reflect the spiritual needs of laypersons, and more particularly, of laywomen, maybe Nicole de Bretagne, or a later female owner. The inclusion of Gospel fragments on pages left blank after a preceding text is also proof that amateur scribes, in this case most likely lay people, not only had access to biblical texts, but that they did have the opportunity to copy them for personal use.

The short text in Latin added on f. 89v-90v following these Gospel fragments is a second later insertion on the few remaining pages that were left blank. It has been copied by yet another hand and with darker ink. The text reproduces the *Prophecia secundum Sanctum Eusebium* and announces the coming of Antichrist (Brown and Lerner 222-223). This is thematically linked to the last text of the manuscript, the Letter of Prester John, which also has prophetic and eschatological implications.²⁷ Reading and understanding a short text in Latin was not always out of reach for lay readers, since many of them were accustomed to reading the Latin Book of Hours, often with parts

²⁶ “Icy pouuons nous considerer que combien quil nous semble aucune foiz que nostre seigneur dorme et quj ne lui chaille de nous quant nous sommes en aucunes tribulacions touteffoiz il est moult diligent de nous garder tousiours car nous deuons tous temps estre fermez en la foy.” (f. 89r).

²⁷ Gosman 44-5. In the sister manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12445 the *Prophecia secundum Sanctum Eusebium* (f. 96r-97r) follows immediately after the Letter of Prester John (f. 86v-95r). See below, note 38.

of the Gospels in Latin (Reinburg). Inventories show that it was not uncommon for lay people to own works in Latin destined for reading and study, as, for instance, the books owned the aforementioned Jean Sardon; Colart du Casteler from Tournai, who owned in 1455 several schoolbooks for children in Latin,²⁸ and Anne de le Tainture, also from Tournai, who bequeathed several books in Latin in 1470.²⁹

After the short fragment in Latin, a new text starts on f. 91r: *Le tresor de sapience*, a French translation of fragments of Henry of Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* (or of its Latin translation and adaptation *Horologium Sapientiae*) written by yet another different hand and in two columns instead of one. This text, which testifies to the European dimensions of religious reading practices during the late Middle Ages, was read by both the religious and lay people. The other texts in MS 5366, however, are predominantly addressing lay audiences. The Life of the female saint Valerie of Limoges recounts her conversion and includes extensive catechetical and religious instructions for a young laywoman. This text and the Latin prayer following it were copied and signed by "A de Ligondeix": possibly a later owner and amateur scribe who copied this text for his or her own use, but it could also be the signature of a scribe who copied this Saint's life for someone else.³⁰ The three texts that follow – the vision of Hell after the *Visio Tnugdali*, *Dialogue du père et du fils*, and the teachings by king Saint Louis to his daughter Isabelle – are all moralizing and catechetical works addressing lay people in particular, of which the latter is especially intended for women.

Since most of the texts of MS 5366 were written by different hands, one might suppose that this manuscript was originally composed of loose booklets of different origins that were rebound in one volume by an eighteenth-century collector. The occurrence of white pages is also consistent with the typology of a composite manuscript,³¹ which could have been bound in the fifteenth century, but also later. This seems not to be the case, however, as is testified by the watermarks that change after the beginning of several texts. The first watermark can be found from the beginning of the manuscript through folio 92, after which the watermark changes to a different type.³² This is two folios after the beginning of the third of the larger texts in this manuscript, the *Trésor de sapience*, which starts on folio 91r. This shows that the scribe must have started copying this text on the remaining blank pages after *La vengeance Vaspasien*. Another watermark can be detected until folio 170: seven folios after the beginning of the French *Visio Tnugdali* that starts on folio 163r. A last example can be found until folio 196, one folio after the beginning of the Letter of Prester John on folio 195r.

²⁸ Vanwijnsberghe 196 (T 172, 6 October 1455) will of Jaquemart du Casteler, a wholesale merchant, detailing the objects that belonged to his son Colart and his spouse: "Item tous les livres qui sont en latin pour aprendre enfans."

²⁹ Vanwijnsberghe 201 (T 197, 11 March, 1469 (=1470)).

³⁰ Miller 71 suggests that the scribe accidentally copied the name of Albert, seigneur de Ligondeix, who died in 1412.

³¹ Gillespie 2. For manuscripts with texts in Middle French, see: Hasenohr, *Les recueils*; Azzam et al.

³² A detailed description of the watermarks can be found in Gosman 68.

The occurrence of changes in watermark – and, consequently, changes of paper – within the actual texts indicates that MS 5366 is not a miscellany manuscript composed of separately written booklets bound together. These changes in paper after the beginning of several texts also argue against it being originally a “blank notebook” that was filled by several subsequent owners (Gillespie 25). Instead, MS 5366 is rather a material witness to more complex forms of “flexible production procedures”, as described by Ralph Hanna: its particular structure points towards practices such as “ongoing book production” and “post-production adjustments”.³³ It seems most logical to suppose that for the addition of new texts extra paper was added to MS 5366 in a way comparable to an inventory of the chapel of the confraternity of the Glorious Conception in Paris: a note indicates that in 1513 Jehan Prevot and Jaques le Bossu had donated 80 sheets of parchment to the confraternity in order to enable the continuation of the inventory.³⁴ The addition of new paper and new texts to MS 5366 might be the result of Nicole de Bretagne’s intentions in compiling the collection, perhaps even as the scribe, but it is also possible that one or more owners after her were responsible for it.

Nicole de Bretagne and the later owner(s) of MS 5366 could have found example texts to copy from a variety of places, such as parochial libraries (Hermand 50-7) or hospital libraries (Hasenohr, *Vie culturelle*). However, similar texts in the vernacular could also be found in the possession of lay people, who often owned Bibles, biblical fragments and Lives of Christ in French.³⁵ Other texts from MS 5366 were also owned by lay people, such as the copy of the *Tresor de Sapience* that the cloth merchant Jean Rimache from Amiens kept in the hallway leading to the workshop in his home according to an inventory of 1514.³⁶ Other lay people had composite manuscripts on paper, not unlike MS 5366, such as Jehan Hanicote, living in Tournai, who bequeathed one in his will from 1359.³⁷

The numbers of religious books available in the homes of lay people in France and elsewhere in Europe during the fifteenth century, together with their skills in reading and writing, open the possibility that lay people were active in the production of books and the multiplication of religious texts, for personal use or for others. From other sources we know that lay people were encouraged to share religious knowledge with others by reading texts aloud (Hoogvliet, *Pour faire*

³³ Hannah 24-29. For payments for post-production adjustments and reparations of manuscripts in medieval Saint-Omer, see: Gil and Nys 376-390.

³⁴ Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 2263: “Et en lan mil cinq cens et treize Jehan Preuot marchand qui lan mil cinq cens et douze auoit este maistre et gouverneur avec Jaques le Bossu aussi marchand dicelle confrarie en ensuiuant et accomplissant lauz et deliberacion quilz auoient fait de faire adjouster pour le bien et vtilite dicelle confrarie a cest liure quatre vingtz feuilletz de parchemin pour continuer et escrire de la en auant” (written on a parchment leaf against the inside of the front cover).

³⁵ For examples, see: Hoogvliet, *Encouraging* 262-71. I intend to publish in the near future a more elaborate study of the collections of religious books owned by lay people in France.

³⁶ Amiens, Archives Communales, FF 158/1 (12 April 1514).

³⁷ Vanwijnsberghe 169 (T 38, 18 May 1359) Jehan Hanicote: “Item a monseigneur Jehan Pippart .i. autre livre escript en papier, ou il y a escript plenté d’escrites et d’instoires.”

255-7), and MS 5366 provides interesting evidence for the agency of **the laity** in processes of copying as well, because it has most likely been compiled by lay people and at least partly been written by non-professional scribes.

To this can be added another surprising fact that has not been noted in prior scholarship: later in the fifteenth century the entire miscellany was copied at least once by a professional scribe. This later manuscript, the only other surviving copy of the collection, is manuscript français 12445 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France,³⁸ which contains the same texts as the manuscript signed by Nicole de Bretagne – including the unusual sequence of filler texts after *La vengeance Vaspasien*, added by a later reader (f. 86v-90v: Mary’s search for Jesus after the teachings in the temple, with exposition; Jesus calms the storm at sea, with exposition; the rising of the son of the widow in Nain; *Prophecia secundum sanctum Eusebium*)³⁹ – but now copied on parchment, with spaces left open for decorated initials and for miniatures, and written in a carefully traced *hybrida formata* by one single scribe. Although MS français 12445 reproduces the texts in a slightly different order and a few short texts have been added at the end, definitive proof for its dependence (or of a now lost intermediate manuscript) on MS 5366 can be found in the *Prophecia secundum Sanctum Eusebium*. The scribe of MS français 12445 incorporated in the main text the note about Emperor Sigismund, scribbled in the margin of MS 5366 by a reader and he (or she) updated it by replacing his name by that of his successor, Emperor Frederick (1415-1493), on folio 97r.

It is important to note that MS 5366 does not contain any evidence for the involvement of the Church or religious institutions in its composition and transmission; the only owner of which we can be certain is the laywoman Nicole de Bretagne. She, or a later owner of the miscellany must have lent it to another lay reader so that this person could have it copied by a professional scribe. The texts in the miscellany were important to other lay readers and the owner of MS 5366 was willing to help in “spreading the Word.” We do not know who commissioned and owned the luxury copy produced after the miscellany that once belonged to Nicole de Bretagne, but it is nevertheless

³⁸ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12445: f. 1 r-v: left blank; f. 2r-50v: The Gospel of Nicodemus in French; f. 51r-65v: *La Vengeance de Vaspasien*; f. 66r-67r: Mary’s search for Jesus after the teachings in the temple, with exposition; f. 67 r-v: Jesus calms the storm at sea, with exposition; f. 67v-68r: The rising of the son of the widow in Nain; f. 68r-79r: The punishments of Hell, after the *Visio Tnugdali* (1149), in French; f. 79v-83v: *Le dialogue du père et du fils*; f. 84r-86r: Teachings by Saint Louis to his daughter Isabelle, in French; f. 86v-95r: The Letter of Prester John, in French; f. 96r-97r: The *Prophecia secundum sanctum Eusebium*, in Latin; f. 97v: left blank; f. 98r-123r: *Le Tresor de Sapience*; f. 123r: left blank; f. 124r-146r: *La Vie de Sainte Valère*; f. 146v: Prayer to Sainte Valère for intercession, in Latin; f. 147r-149v: Short catechetical texts in French: *Pater noster, Ave Maria, Credo, Diz Commandemens, Sept vertuz, Sept dons du Saint Esperit, Huit beatitudes, Sept euvres de misericorde, spirituelles et corporelles, Sept ordres, Sept sacremens, Sept branches de penitance, Sept dons de gloire, Huit beatitudes des justes, Quatre conseilz de Nostre Seigneur*; f. 149v-151r: *Notables enseignemens de saint Gregoire; Les dix viandes que... Jhesucrist donne à sa glorieuse table; Les cinq utilités que on acquiert en recevant dignement le Saint Sacrement*; f. 151v: left blank. A black and white microfilm of this manuscript can be consulted online on <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90616396.r=12445>.

³⁹ **The latter text** can only be found in Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 5366 and in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 12445.

an important witness that sheds new light on the religious participation of lay people, who were not merely passive recipients of religious truths distributed by the Church, but who acted as intermediaries **and as agents** in the transmission of religious texts and could determine for themselves which texts they needed for their spiritual life. **MS 5366 is an important witness of the “decentralized authority” that characterized late medieval manuscript culture (Johnston and Van Dussen 9-10), which allowed for an almost uncontrolled copying and adapting of texts for personal use, and for sharing them with others. This suggests that late medieval manuscript culture should not be conceptualized analogous to the broadcasting model of modern centralized print culture, but instead rather to some of the characteristics of modern Internet culture: decentralized authority, an egalitarian character, interactivity, and the fostering of social networks.⁴⁰ However, in some respects medieval copying practices allowed for more freedom, because they were less subject to large-scale surveillance by the authorities and disciplining by fellow readers than in modern digital communication.**

Conclusion

Visually and materially MS 5366 of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal in Paris might seem at first glance a manuscript of lesser interest, but its particular characteristics presented here reveal that it is an important witness to the religious reading cultures of lay people in France during the fifteenth century. Even if the evidence for the activity of Nicole de Bretagne as the scribe of the first two texts of this manuscript is not entirely conclusive, the later addition of a filler text with fragments from the Gospels and a commentary that mainly addresses lay people makes clear that modern research should be more aware of the possibility that lay people were copying these texts themselves and that they were actively engaged in the production **and design** of religious books. Moreover, miscellany manuscripts such as MS 5366 reflect a selection of texts chosen by the owners, who intended to use them for their spiritual life, as religious instruction and as consolation in times of hardship. Together with MS 12445 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France it also provides important evidence for the circulation of religious texts in the vernacular and the agency of lay people, who shared their books with others. For a more complete understanding of the cultures of texts, writing and reading among the laity in fifteenth-century France, more attention **should** be given to cheap manuscripts – testifying to the activities of non-commercial amateur scribes, copying for themselves or for others – and the active involvement of lay people in these processes. **The decentralized character of the culture of “copy your own book” also suggests that late medieval**

⁴⁰ For this comparison see also McCutcheon 22-24.

religious reading cultures were perhaps less characterized by a close surveillance by the Church and by more freedom of choice than usually assumed. Manuscript 5366 of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal is one of the many understudied late medieval witnesses of the interactive engagement of lay people with religious texts and books during the late Middle Ages.

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Captions

Fig. 1 : Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 5366, fol. 86r. Reproduced with the permission of the

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Fig. 2 : Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 5366, fol. 86v. Reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.

Fig. 3 : Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal MS 5366, fol. 43v-44r. Reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.