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Illuminated by Archival Research: The Role of Books in Religious Reformation and Early English Drama

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Commentaries

Illuminated by Archival Research: The Role of Books in Religious Reformation and Early English Drama

—Katy Sternberger (Editor: [Jennifer Lee](#))

Katy Sternberger graduated from the University of New Hampshire in May 2013 with a degree in English/journalism and minors in French and history.

A bright, warm October day in 2012 found me at the Houghton Library in Harvard Yard, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Houghton is Harvard University's primary repository for rare books and manuscripts, particularly from medieval and Renaissance times. Fifteenth-century medieval manuscripts, called books of hours, and sixteenth-century printed books, including four different versions of the Book of Common Prayer, lay nestled in cradles to protect their worn bindings.

I carefully turned the pages of a book of hours. It was gloriously illuminated with gold leaf and vivid images of saints, snails, and flowers. Illuminations are painted and gilded decorations, including fanciful initials, marginalia, and miniature scenes that help explain the text. I touched this book with my naked hands; gloves were not required, though I was to touch only the unadorned margins of the pages. Despite the books' ages, the inks and paints have remained rich. Their vellum or parchment pages, made from calf- or sheepskin, hold up better than modern paper because they do not contain acids that degrade over time.

This opportunity to visit Houghton arose because I was taking an English seminar at the University of New Hampshire, which is a preparatory course for writing the undergraduate thesis. Throughout our seminar, my classmates and I explored ideas of religious reformation from the twelfth through seventeenth centuries, as portrayed by English drama. Jay Zysk, our instructor (who later became my thesis adviser), had arranged for the class to experience firsthand the religious texts that shaped the works of medieval and Renaissance dramatists.

Examining these books in person inspired my senior honors thesis topic: the roles that books played in the

development of the Reformation in England and in early English drama. Online databases, however, also became a crucial part of my research. The Houghton Library, like many archives now, has made its riches available digitally, enabling me to revisit the manuscripts and continue my research back at UNH. I also used the database Early English Books Online to gather other primary sources that I never would have known about.

Putting Devotion in the Hands of Laypeople

The books of hours we saw at Houghton were all manuscripts, written and illustrated by hand. Scribes would dedicate their lives to meticulously copying religious texts and fantastically illuminating them. Often covered in velvet or silver plated, these books contained calendars, listings of saints, the stories of Christ, and the same daily prayers that monks or clergy recited. Books of hours made it possible to observe certain Catholic rituals outside of church, but it still was difficult for a largely illiterate medieval society to take advantage of these devotional aids, which were written mostly in Latin. Only small portions of the text were in the vernacular. Accordingly, illuminations brought Bible stories to life by telling the story through images.



An illumination from a French book of hours, which introduces the Gospel of Mark and shows the apostle at work writing the Scriptures (Heures de Nôtre Dame: manuscript [ca. 1470]. MS Richardson 7. Houghton Library, Harvard University. 41).

I discovered the sheer beauty of these books of hours that had fascinated people hundreds of years ago. One of the books on display for us was made in France. Since I have studied French, I could read the few vernacular parts, but because I do not read much Latin, I relied on the illustrations to see what the page was about. When studying the books in person, the gold leaf sparkling, it was easy to see how illuminations could enhance the text and make its message understandable.

Whereas books of hours were expensive and still limited in their ability to give laypeople spiritual instruction, the Book of Common Prayer was the common liturgy for everyone. Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church in Rome took place in 1534, sparking a series of reforms that would put devotion more in the hands of laypeople. The Book of Common Prayer, created for the Church of England, first appeared in 1549 and finally gave the laity the opportunity to read and practice devotion independently in English instead of in Latin. Although not illuminated like the books of hours, this printed book included essential daily prayers and Bible readings and excerpts from church services, such as baptism or marriage—information necessary for faithful living. There was no longer a need for image-driven devotion when words now carried instruction exclusively.

As my classmates and I studied passages from successive editions of the Book of Common Prayer, we observed how



The author in front of Hamilton Smith Hall, home to the English department on the University of New Hampshire campus.

the text gradually gained more and more Protestant leanings as England shifted its beliefs. The religious reformation that we saw play out across the different versions of the Book of Common Prayer complemented our study of drama because Renaissance theater became a way to both educate the audience and complicate the religious debates generated by the Reformation. As religious beliefs changed, the stage brought both Catholic and Protestant ideas into question.

Theater's Adaptation of Religious Reformation

After my trip to the Houghton Library, I knew that I wanted to incorporate what I had seen into my thesis research. At a time when the state of the laity's afterlife was of utmost concern, books could significantly influence the spiritual lives of churchgoers. In an image from one manuscript, the Virgin Mary holds what looks like a book of hours. The moral message is clear: the reader should use devotional books in the same way that Mary used hers. Illuminations like this miniature helped laypeople discover things for themselves by "reading" what the images showed. As religious books played an increasingly prominent role in personal devotion, they found a prominent role in theater as well, for drama affects an audience in the same way that illuminations affect the reader. Both books and plays are meant to be seen in order to have their full effect on the reader or spectator.

In writing my thesis, I explored how medieval and Renaissance drama portrayed religious books like those at Houghton. I studied stagings of books in three dramas: the Croxton Play of the Sacrament (ca. 1461), Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (A version 1604, B version 1616), and Thomas Middleton's A Game at Chess (1624). I focused my research further on how these stagings develop our understanding of the book's impact on changes to religious ceremonies during the Reformation. A particularly powerful portrayal of a book occurs in Doctor Faustus, where a book of magic is the key element in the plot. This book gives Faustus ritualized instructions and thereby closely resembles the liturgical book that a priest would have used to conduct the Catholic Mass.

My senior honors thesis, "Books and Religious Reformation in Medieval and Early Modern Drama," completed in May 2013, argues that not only were books effective in their own right during church ceremonies, they were also effective in conveying through drama either proper devotion or an imitation of devotion.

The Role of Archives

Most of the texts we handled at Houghton required special permissions in order for us to use them, but online archives make them available at any time. Needless to say, though, technology simply cannot do justice to the intricacies of the page.

One of the best parts about writing my senior honors thesis was that it gave me the opportunity to take advantage of both physical and online archives to find unique primary sources. In medieval and Renaissance times, books were a precious luxury accessible only to a privileged few. Today, we can visit archives like those of the Houghton Library as well as find these treasures reproduced in online archives. Books are now very close to all of us indeed.



An illumination, depicting the Virgin Mary reading to the Christ Child, accompanies the "O Intemerata" prayer (Book of hours: manuscript [ca. 14--]. MS Typ 999. Houghton Library, Harvard University. 49).

Author Bio

Katy Sternberger graduated with highest honors from the University of New Hampshire in May 2013 with a degree in English/journalism and minors in French and history. She served on the Inquiry student editorial board for three years while attending UNH. Currently, Katy writes and edits under her own company, StarWrite. She will be attending Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science in fall 2014 to study archives management. A version of this commentary was presented at the New England Archivists spring 2014 conference in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

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