



Encounter: The Rothschild Canticles

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Encounter: The Rothschild Canticles

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In the spring of 1980, having returned from London to New Haven to visit my parents and finding myself at loose ends, I decided to visit the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library to look at a manuscript. I didn't have a particular manuscript in mind, so I thumbed through the card catalogue; in those days, Barbara Shailor's catalogue of the library's magnificent collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, on which I was to collaborate as her research assistant, had not yet been published. The handwritten cards with summary descriptions offered many temptations, but my curiosity was piqued in particular by the cursory description of a Latin miscellany of Flemish origin with hundreds of miniatures. I proceeded to order it.

The manuscript in question turned out to be the Rothschild Canticles (Fig. 1). The study of medieval manuscripts still offers many opportunities for extraordinary encounters with unpublished works of art, but never in my life before or since had or has a single book made such an impression on me. As I turned the pages of this tiny trove of images, my emotions ranged from awe and astonishment to bafflement and surprise. Virtually every opening made me blink in amazement. What on earth was this book about, I asked myself. The power of the visual imagination embodied in every image was mind-boggling. One thing, however, was certain; despite its diminutive size, the manuscript represented a veritable explosion of visual and iconographic inventiveness that transcended the norms of what was generally thought possible in medieval art. Without having much of a clue as to how I would go about it, I decided right then and there that I would write my dissertation on this manuscript.

After several years of course work, during which I had next to no time to give the matter further thought, the moment came to prepare for my comprehensive exams. By then I had written my prospectus, despite warnings from various quarters that as many as five senior scholars had declared an interest in

the manuscript and that, given its complexity, I might well be advised to find another topic. To his credit and with his usual generosity, Walter Cahn, my adviser, who had been considering organizing a conference devoted to the manuscript, encouraged me to proceed. I was convinced that the manuscript, rather than being a loosely organized didactic miscellany designed to instruct the reader in the mysteries of Christian faith, embodied a carefully planned, cohesive instrument of initiation in which visual experience and direct appeal to the viewer's eye played a role that rivaled or even surpassed that of the accompanying texts. The manuscript, I sensed, had been made for a mystical adept whose experience (a fraught word) somehow had informed the content. Moreover, I was convinced that this reader must have been a woman and a nun.

That the manuscript's recipient was almost certainly a religious woman has recently been confirmed in a brilliant article in these pages by Barbara Newman.¹ Looking back, I ask myself how I might account for my intuition. I couldn't (yet) read a word of German. As an undergraduate I hadn't studied monasticism, let alone female monasticism, nor mysticism (not that it would have been easy to do so: in those days female monasticism and mysticism hardly existed as academic subjects). Hard though it may be to believe, in 1981 the major comprehensive study of female monasticism in the Middle Ages remained Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535*, a masterpiece published in 1922 that, whatever its deficiencies, in many respects remains unrivaled in scope or flair. Power was a pioneer, yet few followed the path she had charted. One of those who did was Caroline Bynum, whose *Jesus as Mother* appeared in 1982. Not only did Bynum's book look to Germany, precisely the region on which I wished to focus, but it also underscored the distinctive character of certain forms of female monastic spirituality in ways that, rather than setting them apart, emphasized their transformative impact within broader currents of medieval intellectual and religious history.

1. Barbara Newman, "Contemplating the Trinity: Text, Image, and the Origins of the Rothschild Canticles," *Gesta* 52, no. 2 (2013): 133–59.

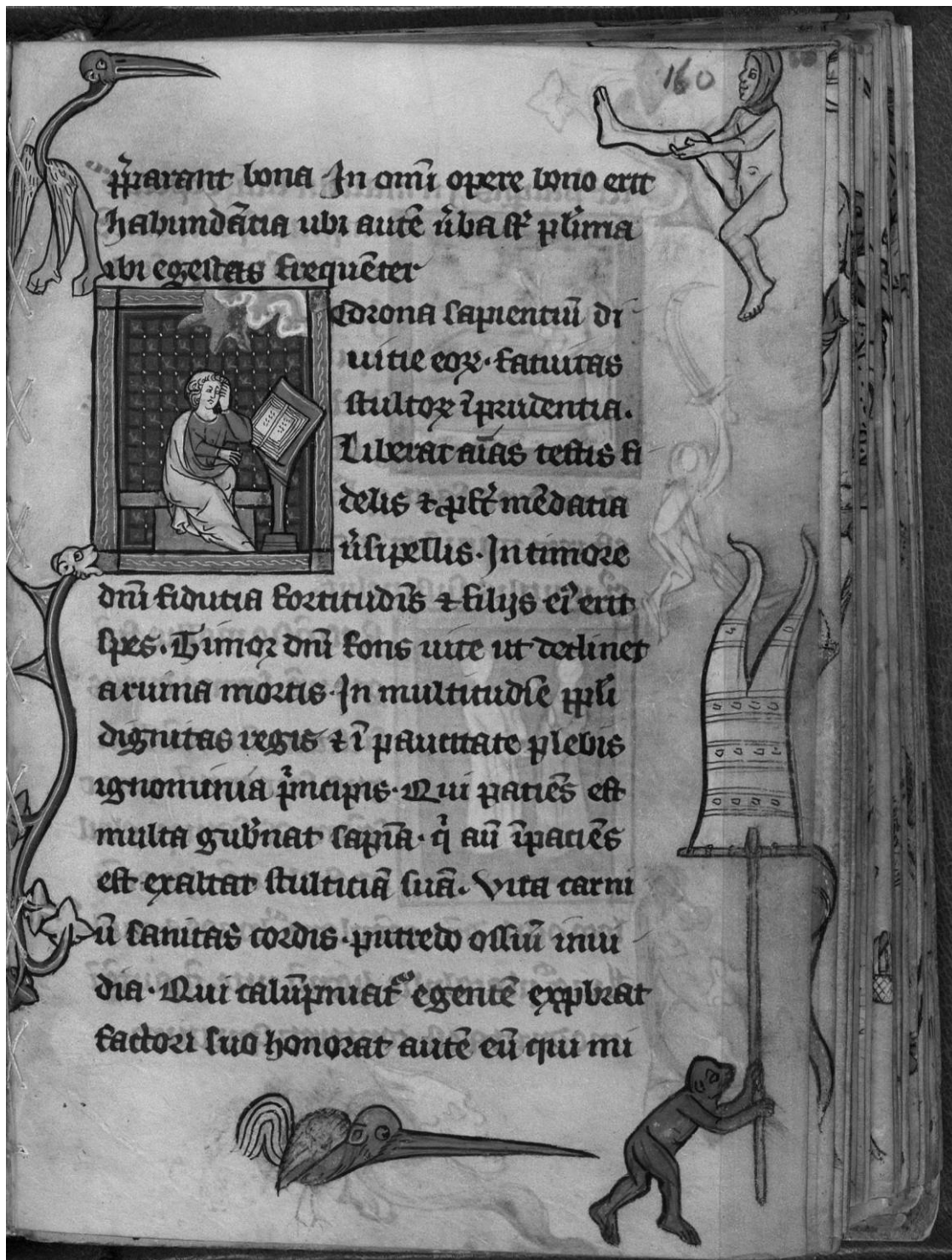


Figure 1. Proverbs 14:24, fol. 160r, Rothschild Canticles, made for Bergues, ca. 1300, New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, MS 404 (photo: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). The illustration to Proverbs 14:24 (“The crown of the wise is their riches: the folly of fools, imprudence”) can serve as a lesson for scholars, even if that was not its original intention. Looking very much like an inspired evangelist, except that he looks down rather than up toward the sunburst emerging from the cloud above him, the man seated at the desk seems less to read than to be lost in melancholy contemplation. In fact, his pose most closely resembles that of Job on his dunghill (a type of Christ as the Man of Sorrows). Around him in the margins, looming large, is all that might distract him: a naked gymnast who raises his leg, as if to display his genitals, not unlike a dog preparing to urinate; a monkey raising a banner about to be poked in the arse by a bird with an enormous beak; and a second, bodiless bird, perched on the upper left corner of the miniature, who engages not only the gymnast but also the viewer in a game of glances that stands in contrast to the inward vision of the contemplative seer, head in hand. See the electronic edition of *Gesta* for a color version of this image.

The bewildered curiosity that the Rothschild Canticles stirred in me was matched by my parents' initial incredulousness that a nice Jewish boy should take such an interest in Christian art of the Middle Ages. They were not immediately persuaded by my insistence that, as the joke goes, "art history in America consists (today one would have to say 'consisted') of Jewish professors teaching Protestant students about Catholic art." The only thing that had prepared me for my encounter with the Rothschild Canticles was my undergraduate study of English literature. I had been especially fascinated by the fantastic, frequently paradoxical language of metaphysical poetry, which often mixes imagery of the sacred and the secular, love both human and divine. John Donne's "The Ecstasy" offers a classic example. Immersion in the poetry of Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, and Andrew Marvell somehow had prepared me to perceive the poetic spirit inhabiting the images. Metaphorical imagery provided the key to understanding the manuscript. The images elaborated imagery rooted in scripture, for the most part in the Wisdom books, including the Song of Songs that somewhat misleadingly lends the Beinecke manuscript its name. "Cloud of Unknowing," "Heart of Darkness," or "Blindness and Insight" would all have been more apt. They, however, are taken. As I came to understand over the course of the following four years, during which I, like any struggling graduate student, experienced my own moments of darkness and unknowing, visionary literature associated with late medieval women provided the key to understanding the Rothschild Canticles, as did the dialectical discourse linking vision to blindness in certain strands of apophatic theology. It was not feminism that led me to the Rothschild Canticles, but it was feminist scholarship that helped me understand why certain categories of experience, including visual experience, were in the late Middle Ages associated above all with women. I came to be convinced that a history of late medieval mysticism, let alone late medieval devotional art, required a historical sociology and anthropology of religious experience in which a history of attitudes toward images and vision would have to play a central part.

Any account of an encounter also requires a retrospective, a fresh encounter with the encounter itself. Were I to write about the Rothschild Canticles today, what might I do differently? New anthropological approaches to the image might warrant a return to a more embodied understanding of religious and devotional experience (others might see this as a retreat from the more militant understanding of cultural construction that was ascendant in the 1980s). The concomitant reawakening of interest in medieval sculpture, and with it medieval materiality, would have less impact, given that the Rothschild Canticles is a manuscript, although it might be possible to pay more attention to the manuscript as object.

One thing is certain. If I were writing about the manuscript today, I would be able to take into account the now vast bibliography on female monasticism of the Middle Ages, nearly all of which did not yet exist in 1980. As three of the essays in this issue of *Gesta* bear witness, the study of medieval women as an audience for medieval art has after more than thirty years entered the mainstream of art history. There remain quarters in which the topic is not taken seriously. Yet when it comes to the patronage and participation of medieval women in the production of medieval art, the phrase "the power of women" has acquired an altogether different valence than it had a generation ago, let alone in the Middle Ages itself. Such figures as Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude of Helfta, Marguerite Porete, and Christine de Pisan no longer appear so utterly isolated or exceptional. The landscape of medieval art history has changed, and with it the history of European culture.

To use a metaphor that is omnipresent in the images of the Rothschild Canticles, throughout my career I have devoted much of my time to unveiling hidden image worlds. To all graduate students seeking encounters of their own, I would say: do not be deterred; trust your intuition; take risks; bring good questions, but also let the material ask its own questions of you; accept advice (but not too much); aspire to interdisciplinarity but respect expertise; and never let the notion that everything has been done or discovered stand in your way. There remain many encounters to be had and many worlds to discover.