

People and Books

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I am a lover of books. Like most people, I'm sure it's the love of books that led me to study the humanities. But today, I'm going to talk much less about books and their place in what it means to be human than about one book: *The Menagier de Paris* (**slide one**), the book upon which my research focuses. In telling you about this book I am going to highlight a few things. **1. Why** having *physical* books is so important (or one reason why this is so important). **2. That** people have long recognized the incredible power of books; book-lovers are not new. **3. (And** this is the heart of my talk), how medieval Christians interacted with the official version of religion found in books from a lay perspective. As married people who were not monks, nuns, and priests, they lived their beliefs in ways that while not contradictory to Church teaching, were not identical to the official line. **4.** Finally, I will look specifically at how lay Christians viewed the Jews living in their midst.

Description of Menagier

The *Menagier de Paris* is a strange book. It was written by a man for his fifteen-year-old wife, in order to teach her to be a good wife in every sense of the word. It starts with prayers and the seven deadly sins, then goes into stories of good and bad women. After this, there is a big shift, and the author discusses gardening, hawking, hiring servants, cleaning, and finally provides a set of sample menus and the largest extant medieval collection of recipes. This book exists in four manuscripts. **Here is where real, physical books, matter.**

Books from modern times are printed. This means that the text doesn't change much (and if it does we are alerted by edition numbers). This was not the case in the Middle Ages. Books were copied out by hand. What this means is that they are seldom identical, even if they are the same "book". Some works can have major variations from one manuscript to another (and this can be true of early printed books as well). For example, we are not sure what order Chaucer's tales are meant to be in because the order varies a bit by manuscript. So we can learn a great deal from these physical books. First, the kind of writing can tell us a lot about where a book was written. Unlike today, where penmanship is fairly standardized, writing varied a great deal by place. It also varied by time. **(Slides 2, 3, 4)** This is true of the books in the Rose Collection too. For example, to a scholar, the Commentary on Aristotle can almost immediately be dated to the early 17th century from the handwriting alone. Thus, looking at the writing, we can get a decent idea of when and where something was written. Of course, by "written" I mean that particular manuscript; I do not mean the first version of the book. For the *Menagier*, there are three manuscripts (the fourth isn't much studied yet). Two of these are fairly nice, pretty copies. One has a miniature in it (**slide 5**). One has a coat of arms in it (this suggests who owned it first). We can be fairly certain from the sort of writing and other things that one was written in Burgundian Flanders (Belgium) and one in Paris. They don't have any readers' marks on them – no places where the pages are worn or writing in the margin. This suggests that they might have been more like "coffee table books" and not really read or consulted much. Again, the copy of Chaucer in the exhibit has beautiful illustrations, which suggests that a fairly wealthy person probably owned it. The last copy of the *Menagier* is different. It is not a pretty book. It is written in cursive, and it has mistakes that are crossed out and fixed. There are marginal notes. This one was made by someone who wanted the book for the information itself and not for some symbolic

reason. Or maybe it's the one the author wrote. We would not know ANY of this, if all we had were modern print versions of the book.

Again, we can get a sense of which manuscript was copied from which other manuscript sometimes by looking at the nature of mistakes, similarities, etc. We think, for example, that the manuscript from Paris, copied the manuscript from Flanders. We can also get a sense of how these manuscripts could influence other books. For example, in his recipe section, the author of the *Menagier* uses another book called the *Viandier* (**slide 6**). This book also exists in many versions. One is kept in the Vatican library and called VAT. The other is kept in the Mazarine library and called MAZ. I think that the *Menagier* might have been used by the writer of the MAZ version of the *Viandier*. Here's why. VAT, the likely source for the *Menagier*, says "ne soit pas lyant". (**slide 7**) This means "it should not be thick". The *Menagier* says the same thing in different words "soit non lyant"; "it should be not thick". MAZ has a mistake "sera noir lyant". "It will be black thick". "Noir lyant" could be a mistake for "non lyant" (**slide 8**) – one can imagine it quite easily, the first leg of the "n" looks like an "i" and there you have it. It would be a lot harder to mistake "ne soit pas" for "noir". (**slide 9**)

So while there are now modern editions and English translations of books like the *Menagier*, it is extremely important that we have the original manuscript versions and not just some electronic copy. Having physical books MATTERS.

Books lovers before us.

Now, I'm going to turn to the idea that books have been incredibly important and powerful for centuries and centuries. The author of this book (again, we don't have his name) decided to WRITE a BOOK for his wife. He knew that if he simply told her what to do, she might forget. But if he wrote it down, she'd have it forever, and she'd be able to share it with

other people. The author knew that writing down his ideas and opinions and memories and so forth would keep them alive after he was dead.

Using other books. But like most of us, the author didn't just get his ideas from his own head; like most of us, he got ideas and information from many different places, including books. The author seems to have loved books, and he likely had quite a few. He tells his wife that she has at her disposal "the Bible, the Golden Legend, the Apocalypse, the Life of the Fathers, and other good books in French that I possess". (I.iii.118) His wife likely only read French, but the author might well have read Latin too, and had books in this language. Furthermore, even though he mentions that he owns these books, we can be quite sure that he read others, whether he owned or borrowed them. He uses the cookbook called the *Viandier*, Robert of Sorbonne's treatise on the Seven Deadly sins, the works of Petrarch, possibly classical history, Josephus, and many more.

Authority. Books had great weight in the Middle Ages (and they still do). They were considered "authorities". There's a bit of this that remains today. Students will be shocked when I say "the textbook is wrong." How can it be wrong if it's in a book?! Or better yet, "but Wikipedia says..." Thus, we might not be so different in our view of books, or anything in writing, as authorities. But in the Middle Ages, it went further than this. In the Middle Ages being creative and especially "original" was not a goal. If you wrote something, you wanted to show that your ideas came from "authorities", usually the Bible, the church fathers, and classical writers. The author of the *Menagier* was no different. He's always telling people where his ideas came from. "As St. Augustine says...." "As the apostle says...." "This story was translated by Master Francis Petrarch", "The Romance of the Rose [a popular medieval courtly love poem] says..." and so on. In fact, he does this so often, that many scholars have been tempted to see the

whole book as copied from other sources and devoid of any authorial perspective. In other words, we can't figure out what the author thought about anything because it's all other people's words and he's just copying them down. This was NOT the case.

Adapting his sources.

For example, the author of the *Menagier* very frequently makes alterations to recipes he gets from the *Viandier* – that's the other cookbook I mentioned. In one place, we see him literally arguing with his source. He says “Brown, how can it be brown if there is no toasted bread? Item, I believe it must be thick because I find it among the thick potages above. And for these two reasons I believe it must have toasted bread to be thick and to be brown.” (II.v.105) He's definitely using a source because he tells us where he found the recipe, but he's definitely not afraid to disagree with his source.

Still, it's one thing to disagree with a cookbook, another to take his own view on the teachings of the church.

Near the beginning of the *Menagier*, the author includes a mini-treatise on the Seven Deadly sins, designed to help his wife in confession. The Seven Deadly Sins are: Lust, Gluttony, Avarice, “Accidia” (often called sloth)(**Slide 10**), Rage, Envy, and Pride. The author certainly doesn't disagree with these long-established categories. But exactly how he views these sins varies a bit. For this section, he does use another book, Robert of Sorbonne's book on confession. However, he does not follow this book perfectly. The places he makes the most changes are in Accidia and Lust.

Accidia is often called Sloth. But many historians leave the word in Latin because what it means is a bit different from what most of us mean by “sloth”. Accidia is the sin of despair. (**Slide 11**) It's the “I'm such a sinner, I'll never be saved, so I might as well give up” thing. Over

time, however, it began to be understood as “not bothering” not only with salvation, but with daily life....being lazy. The source the *Menagier* uses, Robert of Sorbonne, understands this sin as a spiritual sin, and so does the author of the *Menagier*. But the author adds a more physical sin too. In the preface he makes clear that he understands at least part of this sin to lie in the failure to perform one’s work and being idle – a sin much closer to our own understanding of sloth as laziness. The *Menagier* introduces the sin as follows:

From which [the preceding sin of gluttony] is born and descends the sin of idleness, which is a foul blemish and ugly stain in the person who wishes to be good. Because the Gospel says that on the Day of Judgment every idle person will have to render account [note the mercantile vocabulary] of the time she has lost through her idleness. It is a great marvel what defense the idle will use when they are accused before God. In another place in the Gospel it says the life of the idle body is the mortal enemy of the soul. (I.iii. 62)

This is not in the official, theology-professor source that the author is using. What do we see? He isn’t rejecting the church’s view (he does talk about despairing of salvation too), but he’s adding to it, developing the idea a bit. And he’s doing so in a way that fits his position in society. He’s a working man (at least sort of). Money is extremely important to him, and wasting it is a horrible disgrace. He’s “bourgeois”. And not working is, indirectly, wasting money. Many people think of this idea of hard work being next to godliness as quintessentially Protestant, but here is a good Catholic living over a hundred years before the Reformation, expressing the same idea. And he even adds in commercial language “render account”. He develops this side of the sin of “accidia” further. Each sin is divided into sub-sins. The author of the *Menagier* adds one: the sin of staying in bed and missing mass. Clearly, he sees what is usually a very mental sin as having a physical component. For him, laziness is a deadly sin. That he sees this sin in a more

day-to-day, commercial-life way, is brought home when he discusses Virtues that counteract the sin.

In his discussion of countering Avarice, the author focuses exclusively on the corporal works of mercy, while his source includes the spiritual works. This again shows his concern with work and the poor and his emphasis on the earthly and practical.

Sex

Where we really see the author's lay attitude come out, however, is in his attitude toward sex and marriage. In the same treatise we discussed above, he makes slight, but telling, alterations to his source's description of lust. **(Slide 12)**The source, Robert of Sorbonne, says:

The first branch [remember there are sub-sins] of lust is when a man thinks of some woman and takes delight in such thinking and remains a long time in it, and then his heart is moved because of the delight toward committing the sin, and he does not pull himself back quickly enough or recall his mind as he ought.

The *Menagier* says:

And this sin of lust has six branches. The first is when a man thinks of a woman or a woman thinks of a man. And the person has in such thinking great pleasure and delights greatly in it and remains in it a long time. And by long remaining, the flesh is moved to delight. She does not sin one bit when by the first movement [arousal?], which comes suddenly, if the person constrains her heart to forget it and remedy it.

What differences do we see here? First, he says man or woman. He acknowledges female sexuality. Second, while both agree that the initial thought is not sinful and that specific circumstances must develop to make interest in sex into a sin, the *Menagier* stresses when it is

NOT a sin. Why might this be? Well, he's writing to his wife.....he probably wants her to take an interest in sex.

Sarah (slide 13)

In a rather notorious passage of Genesis (actually two passages), Abraham asks his wife Sarah to pretend to be his sister, because he is afraid of the Egyptians. She's beautiful, so he's afraid they'll kill him for her sake. Sure enough, they go into Egypt, and Pharaoh takes Sarah into his household, thinking she is Abraham's sister. The author of the *Menagier* stresses that Sarah was not sinning, because she only did this to save her husband and household. Now, the Bible isn't 100% clear on what happened next, but the *Menagier* certainly is. He says:

But never, neither then nor afterward, in whatever hour, king Pharaoh could not come near here that he did not find her always crying on account of the regret that she had for her husband. And because of this, when king Pharaoh saw her in this state, the longing and desire that he had for her so diminished and changed, and he left her. (I.v.4)

This passage is fascinating for several reasons. First, it makes clear that Sarah never had sex with Pharaoh. Second, it adds something not in the Bible, without actually changing the Bible in a fundamental way; still, if the Bible is an authority (and medieval people can't question authority), then what the author did was daring! In other words, once again, we see people having a less rigid view of authority than we often think. Third, that Pharaoh leaves Sarah alone because she was crying says something about the author's view of sex: he wants a happy, willing partner (and assumes Pharaoh would too). Fourth, he sees Sarah as loving her husband very much. This is no arranged marriage of convenience. And we can assume he'd like the same for himself.

Comestor and Eve

This more positive view of sex comes out in other places too. In fact, it brings him into fairly strong, if subtle disagreement with one of the great theological works of the Middle Ages. A man called Petrus Comestor (**slide 14**) wrote a work called *Historia Scholastica*. This was a detailed commentary on the Bible that presented the stories of the Bible as a history. This work was translated into many languages, including French, and French translations of this work became the Bible to a lot of French lay people.

The author of the *Menagier* starts out using Comestor or a translation when he talks about Adam and Eve. (**Slide 15**) When discussing Eve's punishment for eating the "apple", Comestor says:

Because she raised herself up, he humiliated her saying : You will be under the violent power of man, to the extent that he will afflict you with wounds in deflowering you. (PL 198: 1074b)

This comment is completely absent from the *Menagier*. (And indeed, from the Bible). Again, this seems to fit with his understanding of sexuality as discussed above. Not only would he not wish to harm his wife in intercourse, but he would shy from the implication that sexuality was a result of sin – since Eve must be a virgin until the Fall in Comestor's version. Here, the author both sticks more closely to the Bible itself and avoids interpretations that do not fit his perspective.

Again, after discussing the creation of woman, Comestor goes into a discussion of Lilith, Adam's supposed first wife. Lilith is part of Christian and Jewish tradition, but she is not mentioned in Genesis. She first appears in a Jewish Midrash, and then ends up in Christian tradition too! This leads to the interesting interactions of Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. Comestor knows about Lilith, but what he says is "Now the Jews draw in an error, when they say that another wife was made first." The *Menagier* omits her because she is a bad, disobedient

woman who sins before the Fall. If she is included, then marriage isn't perfect from the start...but the author clearly wants to see marriage as a blessed state. But he might also omit her because she comes from Jewish tradition. Sadly, these two are linked.

In 1215, the Church held the Fourth Lateran Council. This council was (and is) extremely important. It listed marriage as a sacrament. This was fairly new way of looking at marriage. From 1215 forward, this continued to develop, and we eventually see people like the author of the *Menagier* seeing marriage as a key part of salvation.

(Slide 16) Again, and again, he emphasizes the blessings of the married state. In describing his book to his wife, the author says “the first three sections teach you how to attain God’s love and the salvation of your soul, and also to win your husband’s love, and to give yourself, in this world, the peace that should be found in marriage.” He doesn’t say anything contrary to church teaching. He doesn’t actually say that a husband’s love is part of salvation...but the implication could be there. Moreover, when the author thinks of spiritual bliss, he cannot conceive of it the way a mystic living in a remote monastery might; he views spiritual bliss as a happy home and marriage. Once again, he sees Church teaching from within his own married and lay perspective.

But this was not the only thing to come out of Lateran IV. Lateran IV also declared that Jews and Muslims had to be identified by their clothing. **(slide 17)** Jewish religious figures could not associate with Christians. And here too, lay people had their own ideas. Sometimes these were better than the official line, sometimes they were worse. They were always complicated.

For example, after telling the story of Susanna (who is accused of adultery), the author says “Certainly it is true that the Jews, men and women, who currently live in this realm hold this sin in such horror that if a woman were found in adultery she would be stoned and tortured with

stones until death, according to their law.” Now this passage conveys a lot about Christian Jewish relations. First, the author’s comment seems fairly innocuous; he seems to be praising the Jewish community. The problem, however, is what he says isn’t true. He thinks that the Jews were living just as they had in the Old Testament, following the law! The idea that the Jews were symbols of the old law that Christ had done away with was used as a reason to protect the Jews, ever since the time of St. Augustine. In fact, some Christian scholars went to study with the rabbis and learned Hebrew and Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament....and that’s how they discovered things like the story of Lilith. What they discovered was that the Jews were NOT “living letters of the law” as they had thought....and they decided they didn’t need to be so protective of them anymore. Which leads to another important thing about the author of the *Menagier* mentioning what the Jews in his land do. Scholars use this comment to date the book to no later than 1393. Why? Because that year, the Jews were expelled from France. Why? The king (and most kings) had taken their property rights away; many Jews made money as money-lenders....and when the kings got to in debt, they outlawed the Jews and took their belongings...In fact, this had happened in France before (more than once). When they were expelled in 1182, Christians took over the Jewish quarter in Paris on the Right Bank....and made it the trendy part of town. Many of the places the author of the *Menagier* mentions were in this part of town. He might have lived there. Of course, as awful as these expulsions were, they were nothing like the violence against the Jews at the time of the Crusades or the Black Death. And those too, were done by lay people going against the rule of the Church.

Thus, I hope I have shown you why physical books matter, and that they have mattered for many centuries, and will for many more. And I hope I have shown you how one medieval

person engaged with books, and how that engagement led to a very particular understanding of the Christian life, and how those Christians related to their Jewish neighbors.

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