
Emily Savage

University of St Andrews, Scotland

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EMILY SAVAGE
University of St Andrews, Scotland

This sales catalogue, produced by Les Enluminures, presents a rich and varied collection of relatively unknown vernacular manuscripts from Western medieval Europe, dating roughly from 1300 to 1550. Founded in 1991 by Sandra Hindman, Les Enluminures now has gallery locations in Paris, New York and Chicago, and also regularly exhibits medieval manuscripts, jewellery and other works of art at international arts and antiques fairs. As this excellent little book demonstrates, however, their associated publications are more than mere advertisements.

In his introduction, Christopher de Hamel observes that manuscripts are special because, unlike other forms of art, “they can talk” (p. 8). De Hamel underlines the continuing significance of orality to manuscript production, first in the early transitional age famously described by Michael Clanchy in From Memory to Written Record (1979), and later in the rise of the vernacular languages to which this volume is dedicated. We can trace this development further as the taste for manuscripts in the vernacular trickles down
from the aristocracy, and vernacular books for private devotion, edification, and pleasure proliferate during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

This proliferation is reflected in the structure of the catalogue itself, with five sections devoted to French, Italian, German, Dutch, and English manuscripts, respectively. Each section is prefaced by a brief essay which weaves the catalogue’s featured manuscripts into the larger history of their vernacular. Such a framework might unintentionally produce isolated material and linguistic histories, but the authors are keen to highlight connections between the thirty-six books highlighted here. (Two items, cat. nos. 19 and 36, contain printed material.) The title, Shared Language, suggests one recurring element: multilingualism. A case in point is the religious miscellany likely produced in the Southeastern Netherlands or Western Germany (Cat. no. 23, Fig. 1). Dating to c. 1460-1480, it contains texts in Latin, Low German, and Dutch, thus reproducing the “linguistic realities” of its geographical origin (p. 76). In a time where white supremacists seek to bolster their cause by citing an invented white, monolingual, nationalist history, it is imperative that we teach this multilingual past.¹

Are certain kinds of texts better suited to the vernacular? Reading Shared Language, the overall impression is that vernacular languages fostered textual experimentation. For the medieval Low Countries, John van Engen focuses on the “veritable explosion” of religious texts associated with the Modern Devotion, a broad movement linked by regimental meditation on the Passion of Christ (p. 90). Dennis Dutschke comments on

the so-called Three Crowns, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, whose literary accomplishments ignited a passion for the vernacular in Italy, one which spread even amongst the nascent middle classes (p. 47). Meanwhile, in England, manuscript collections of legal statutes were perennially fashionable. One particular legal language used in these texts, Law French, combines ingredients from Anglo Norman, Parisian French, and Middle English (Cat. no. 33). In her accompanying essay, Emily Runde notes that even with the advent of print “British books remained sites of multilingualism” (p. 107). Of
course, this small collection should not be seen as wholly representative of the histories of these vernaculars; the variety of texts, or lack thereof, presented here must be due in part to commercial factors.

**Figure 2** Prudentius of Troyes, *Flores psalmorum* (Flowers of the Psalms); Prayers in Latin and Italian. In Italian and Latin, decorated manuscript on parchment. Northern Italy, c. 1400-1450 [TM 891]

Another matter echoed across the catalogue concerns the role of women, primarily as agents of translation. In scholarship women are often identified as the intended audience for early vernacular texts, due in part to low Latin literacy rates (p. 70). However, in this collection we see them not just as readers or listeners, but also as patrons, authors, and collectors (Cat. nos. 6, 16, 19, 21, 24, 28, 30). Indeed, a remarkable fifteenth-century prayerbook in this collection (Cat. no. 16, **Fig. 2**) may even have been compiled and copied
by its female owner. Its contents, which include the early medieval *Flores psalmorum* by Prudentius of Troyes and a charm to ensure safety in childbirth, suggest an individual comfortable reading in Latin and Italian, and a woman as concerned about the condition of her earthly body as her eternal soul.

Readers should note that fuller descriptions of most manuscripts in this catalogue are freely available on www.textmanuscripts.com, which features a detailed inventory of more than 1000 manuscripts that have passed through Les Enluminures over the years. This information is unfortunately buried on the publication page.

As a sales catalogue, this book naturally boasts an appealing page design, and each entry is illustrated with a single, high-definition color image. On an academic level, the author and contributors have succeeded in producing a volume that functions as a practical reference work for postgraduates and scholars. Their clear and concise introductory essays are backed up by a useful, if brief, bibliography. As for the manuscripts themselves, readers will find much to delight in.