



Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art

Michael Camille

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What do they all mean – the lascivious ape, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jongleurs to be found protruding from the edges of medieval buildings and in the margins of illuminated manuscripts? Michael Camille explores that riotous realm of marginal art, so often explained away as mere decoration or zany doodles, where resistance to social constraints flourished.

Medieval image-makers focused attention on the underside of society, the excluded and the ejected. Peasants, servants, prostitutes and beggars all found their place, along with knights and clerics, engaged in impudent antics in the margins of prayer-books or, as gargoyles, on the outsides of churches. Camille brings us to an understanding of how marginality functioned in medieval culture and shows us just how scandalous, subversive, and amazing the art of the time could be.

Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art Details

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Wendy says

Gems in this book:

the etymology of baboon, from babeweyn, a deformed human in illustration

the fatrasie, a poetic form linking bits of psychic rubbish in strict versification, producing images reminiscent of Bosch

and grylli, human forms culminating in calligraphic tails.

If you want to revise your notion of the Middle Ages, this is a great place to begin!

Sam says

As someone who, upon having their first experience with a real medieval manuscript was confounded when the title page had what appeared to be a projectile vomiting peacock doodled into the margins by some ancient monk, this book was very illuminating. This book offers a very interesting look at the meanings behind medieval artwork and structures, whilst also telling me what to make of the little half naked men on goats and vomiting peacocks which seemed to make a mockery of medieval manuscripts. Those monks must have gone a little stir crazy being stuck in their monastery all that time.

Jon Hewelt says

Finished this one a while back but never got around to doing it.

When I was a kid I found a book called The Measly Middle Ages, part of the Horrible Histories series that later became a BBC children's show. It revealed the grosser, weirder aspects of history, and I absolutely loved it. Since, I've found fascination with anything related to the Medieval period, from Chaucer in AP English to the liturgical dramas we read in college and beyond.

A few months back I watched a Vox video on snails in Medieval manuscript marginalia that cited this book, and so I quickly put it on order.

Image on the Edge is an academic analysis of Medieval marginalia, though not necessarily regarding specific imagery (though there is mention of a few key figures). Instead, Camille focuses on marginalia's relationship to its "texts" in various parts of Medieval culture, from manuscripts to the carvings on the outsides of cathedrals. His main argument, to my understanding, is that we (both academics and laypersons) view marginalia as little more than doodles, with no greater purpose than, at most, the subversion of the central text. Noting how these images on the edge--rather than being random--related to the central (often religious) texts, Camille posits that marginalia reenforced the manuscript's message while simultaneously subverting

and satirizing it, at times going so far as to directly contradict it through the use of arrows.

As an academic text, *Image on the Edge* is delightfully readable. I oftentimes disdain academic papers for their gratuitous use of elevated language, isolating the context to a select, smaller audience. But despite a few vocabulary words that suggest a deeper understanding of Medieval manuscripts, Camille's prose is engaging and easy to understand. And unlike so much else coming out of academia, *Image on the Edge* is FUN. This is due in part to the subject matter: you can't not have fun with such image captions as "monkey suckling a nun". But Camille doesn't take the subject too seriously, either. In fact, at certain points in the text he argues that previous researchers misinterpreted the purpose of marginalia because of their staunch moral biases.

There's a lot of butts in Medieval marginalia. Analyze them sure, but can they not also be appreciated (even chuckled at) for what they are?

This is a great read for Medieval fans and history buffs alike, but I would highly recommend *Image on the Edge* to anyone and everyone. It wasn't so long ago that scribes were doodling in the margins, and the influence on religious discourse, sequential art, and storytelling are, in my opinion, incalculable. Plus, there's pictures!

Image on the Edge is a short-ass read. And, giving it a chance, you'll soon find it's a short ass-read, as well.

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

An interesting look at marginal decoration, both at literal manuscript margins and decoration such as the carved decorations of misericords. Somewhat speculative.

verbava says

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Chris says

This book is good because of the subject - what do all those seemingly random doodles on the margin mean? Why is a knight fighting a snail? Why is a giant head with two legs walking around? But it suffers in my reading from vaguely rambling and disorganized writing. I don't know why one section follows another. Still, it's short, and I don't know of any other books on this neat little subject, so it's a keeper.

Sara says

I have read a lot of medieval history, both primary and secondary sources; dozens of articles and books about medieval European culture, religion and society; works concerning medieval cities, travel, literacy, monasticism, aristocracy, gender and art. I mention this only to provide context for my statement that Michael Camille writes perhaps the most enjoyable medieval history books I have ever read.* His books blend impeccable research with inventive prose and playful enthusiasm with sophisticated insight. Most recently, I finished *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*. This marks the fourth of Camille's books I have read and while a slender little volume, it packs the same intellectual wallop as the rest.

In *Image on the Edge*, Camille explores marginal art of the high Middle Ages (roughly the 11th through the 14th Centuries). By "marginal" he, of course, means the copiously illustrated margins of medieval manuscripts, but he also means the doorways and corners of Gothic cathedrals and the spandrels and misericords of medieval monasteries. To the medieval imagination, writes Camille, "edges were dangerous [and] they were also powerful places." (16) Edges, margins, boundaries, or liminal zones - points of ingress and egress on land, on buildings, on pages and on people - these are the spaces where order can and does break down. Camille examines the potency and possibility of these in-between places with a view to deciphering the medieval way of viewing them. In a sense, Camille is his reader's tour guide to these marginal medieval images. He speaks the language and decodes the symbols for us. In doing so, he introduces us to a world that, despite an often-held misconception, did not represent a paragon of pristine order or of simple dichotomies - whatever medieval church fathers might have us believe. "We should not," advises Camille, "see medieval culture exclusively in terms of binary oppositions." (26) Dichotomous thinking certainly existed in the Middle Ages, but as in our own time, a rather large divide yawned between structured, hierarchical and prescriptive ideals and the chaotic, irreverent and descriptive reality of daily life. Marginal art, according to Camille, is where this divide could be bridged and muddled.

Despite its aspirations of order, the Middle Ages contained plethoric amiguities and ambivalences. It subscribed to paganism as well as to Catholicism. It idealized the sacred, but contended daily with the

profane. "What we today may perceive as contradictory cultural codes might not have been seen as so separated during the Middle Ages," observes Camille. (13) Therefore, gracing the margins of sacred texts, we find monstrous creatures, lewd gestures, bare bottoms and shit.

As Camille elucidates again and again, these marginal images do not stand alone, apart from the text. Neither do they correspond straightforwardly as negative examples for the text. Rather they interact in punning ways with the text, usually undermining its authority by willfully misconstruing its meaning. For example, Camille explains an image from the missal illuminated by Petrus de Raimbeaucourt in 1323, in which monkeys merrily cavort around a scribe, one quite obviously mooning the monk. Camille writes:

"Petrus the pictor [painter] was probably playing a game with the scriptor [scribe] here, since the bas-de-page [bottom of the page] image of a monkey displaying its rear to the tonsured scribe was presumably inspired by an unfortunate word division seven lines above. This line ends by breaking the word culpa (sin) in a crucial place, thus it reads Liber est a cul - the book is to the bum!" (26)

This example also highlights an important aspect of book illumination in this period - the scribe and the illustrator were separate people. Increasingly throughout the period, illuminations were executed by lay craftspeople (sometimes even women) and not by clerics at all. This increased the possibility for marginal art to subvert the text or at least to regard it with something less than pious reverence. The same holds true for stone and wood carvers who created the beasties and related images that appeared in the nooks and crannies of cathedrals and other religious buildings - they were secular craftsmen hired, but not always closely supervised by the church. And Camille observes that, especially in the case of exterior cathedral ornamentation, often the images would be placed too high to be seen from the ground with the naked eye. Sculptors could use these details to exercise their own skills and convey their own meanings, regardless of what church regulators had in mind.

Indeed, Camille's research suggested to him that "such carvings were...the sole inspiration of the sculptors working outside ecclesiastical controls." (69) This relative independence gave medieval artists increasing freedom of expression; not in the modern sense in which artistic expression draws attention to the artist's subjective experience, but in the sense that the medieval artist could editorialize in a way not possible when all art production occurred under ecclesiastical purview. "[M]edieval artists," states Camille, "created marginal images from a 'reading,' or rather an intentional misreading, of the text." (41)

As is probably abundantly clear from my citations of *Image on the Edge*, Camille approaches medieval art history with a mindful and sophisticated blend of reader-response and post-modern critical theory. This academic rigor and responsibility coupled with his quirky and enthusiastic appreciation for alterity yields a plainly delightful book that also imparts to the interested reader that holy grail of scholastic endeavors - the frisson of intellectual excitement.

*Sadly, I suppose I should say "wrote". He died in 2002 at the age of 44.

Barb says

It's got to be hard to write a book about illuminated manuscripts, and even harder to write one about the little figures in the margins because the sheer beauty of the subject cannot be conveyed in smaller than life size figures in a modern book. Camille has done that admirably, however, all the while explaining how context

(monastery, cathedral, city, or court) matters and how the margins define the center as much as the centers define the margin. Think there might be a lesson in there. Hmmm. Learned some great new words: babewyn and misericord. The former what we would call grotesques, the latter a seat (usually with a babewyn on it) for monks to sit down on during the recitation of the liturgy of the hours. Misericordia meaning mercy it's a funny joke on the word, See? Pretty much a specialist's book. I would not recommend it for general reading, although I enjoyed it thoroughly.

John Carter McKnight says

What a fascinating little book! Camille uses the marginal illustrations of medieval manuscripts as a window into a complex, alien world of medieval culture and its symbols.

A medievalist would gain much more from this book, but what struck me is just how foreign 12th-14th Century Europe was, in class composition, values, imagery. And yet, there are rich prospects here for the scholar of contemporary communications: echoes of trolling, selfies, gross-out humor, perversions indulged and condemned, the creative products of a time of social change, urbanization, class turmoil and disruptions of tradition.

This may not be the best first book for the non-medievalist looking for insights into the history of liminal, outsider or critical art, but it is a little gem of a book on its own, fascinating, charming, and thought-provoking.

My only criticism is that the illustrations don't do the book justice: they're all black-and-white, smallish, and not super high resolution. Detailed color examples would've added much.

Kate says

By the time I finished the introduction to this book I was already very sorry that the author was long deceased. It would have been a great pleasure to interview him, to hear more on his thoughts about high vs. low art, the creation of images, and the most skillfully drawn fart. This book was three of my favorite things: painstakingly researched, eloquently written, and full of butt jokes. What's not to love? I'll be writing about this soon.

Tammy says

If you enjoy reading about medieval culture and art history, you will like this.

Erin says

This is an excellent book: clearly written, well researched, highly focused, and a good source for further study.

Moloch says

Un veloce testo, corredato da molte bellissime e spassosissime immagini, sui *marginalia*, ovvero quelle bizzarre figurette, che si incontrano nei margini delle pagine dei codici medievali (ma l'autore le analizza anche in architettura), che sembrano uscite da un folle mondo a rovescio: scimmie che mostrano il sedere, animali che si mordono la coda, mostri semiumani, coppie che copulano, uomini che fanno la cacca o le boccacce, ecc.

Interessante e sorprendente, per chi è abituato a pensare alla società medievale come a qualcosa di immobile, rigidamente compartimentato, scoprire come invece confini (ad es. quello fra il sacro e il profano, talvolta l'osceno) che ormai, per la nostra mentalità, sono ritenuti invalicabili, o valicabili solo con grande scandalo, erano nel medioevo più indistinti, soggetti a scambi e contaminazioni.

E quindi, accantonate le spiegazioni che si tratti di *divertissement* senza senso o la proiezione dell'inconscio o del represso del monaco-miniatore, è molto interessante seguire il "dialogo" fra il testo scritto e i disegni nei margini, tutt'altro che casuali e insensate e tutt'altro che "ingenue" forme di una cultura "popolare" (giustamente l'autore rileva che questi codici non erano né prodotti in né destinati ad ambienti "popolari"), ma ben calcolate e coltissime: dal semplice botta e risposta fra scrittore e miniatore, dal disegno il cui soggetto si spiega come un gioco di parole o una storpiatura del testo soprastante, alla complessa combinazione di simboli che spiegano, rafforzano, illuminano per contrasto, o al contrario satireggiano il testo scritto.

3/5

<http://moloch981.wordpress.com/2014/0...>

Laura says

This one was pretty neat too. The color plates are great. Had to read this one for a class, and would have appreciated the time to read it more thoroughly, but it was good nonetheless.

Rather Dashing says

A fun and insightful monograph on marginal art and architecture from the medieval period. Camille is often brilliant, occasionally irritating, but always lucid and thought-provoking. Didn't read like an academic monograph at all.
