



Skills Lesson: Anatomy of a Manuscript Page

You don't need to know Latin to begin to understand how medieval books work, or how they might have been used by medieval people like Margery Kempe. In her autobiography, Margery interacts with books, while claiming not to read them; we're following her lead. What did those books look like?

Take a look at the page below, from an illustrated prayerbook in the Newberry Library. Manuscripts like this are written by hand by scribes, and decorated by hand by artists working with them; each one is unique. The descriptions below give you the terms to describe what you see.



Folio number, written in pencil by a modern librarian. Folio is Latin for leaf. This is the front or “recto” side of the 93rd leaf in this book. The back side of a folio is called the verso side.

Ruling, straight guide lines for the scribe, drawn on the parchment leaf. **Parchment** is not paper, but specially processed animal skin (calf or sheep).

Rubrication, lettering in red ink used in manuscripts; the rubric is the text written in red. Often it is a title or heading describing the text to follow. This rubric says “Ad ymaginem beate marie virginis” (To the image of the blessed Virgin Mary).

A Latin prayer in the **text block**, the area of the page where the scribe writes. This prayer is written in a style of writing (or **script**) called a bookhand — the scribe has to lift the pen between each letter. When writing in a cursive script, the scribe does not lift the pen so much, allowing for quick work.

Initial, a super-sized illustrated first letter of the text. When the illustration depicts a person or scene, they are called “historiated.” This initial is a historiated initial, featuring the letter I and St. John the Evangelist.

Border, decorations and illustrations surrounding the text block. This is called a floriated border because it depicts lush plant life like flowers, leaves, and strawberries.

Illumination, gold (or silver) used in decoration. The precious metals glimmer in the light, so, this manuscript is ‘illuminated.’

🗨️ Discussion Guide for Students and Instructors

🗨️1. We can see many clues on this page that this particular book was made with care. Its owner did not want any old copy of the text of these prayers; this is a deluxe edition. Describe any evidence you see that indicates that this book was a deluxe edition; in other words, how do we know that scribes put effort into presenting the text in this way? Be sure to use the terms from manuscript studies above.

2. Look at the prayer on the middle of the page. The manuscript introduces this prayer as “To the image of the Virgin Mary.” Now look at the image in the initial: is this how you would describe the image in the book? Why describe this picture in that way specifically? Margery herself would call this image a “pity” – why?