



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
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Module tutor: Janet Burton		
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Comment on the nature and function of the illustrations in the Luttrell Psalter

The Luttrell Psalter has been scrutinised on many levels by a great number of scholars and medievalists to try and unlock the story and meaning behind the content and context of an amazing surviving example of medieval religious observance. Each commentator approaches the pages from their specialisation and add enormously to the knowledge of the period in which it was made. To understand it fully all of these areas need to be drawn upon and to shed a light on why '*The Lord Geoffrey Luttrell caused me to be made*'.¹

I will explore the theory that its purpose, nature and function, was to demonstrate to those who read and possessed it, that Geoffrey Luttrell fulfilled to his best ability the calling on his life as a member of the aristocracy, landowner and lord of the manor taking care of the peasants working on his estates, and as a man of deep religious conviction. Also, that he did in all respects model his life on both King David who wrote the psalms and Jesus his ultimate master.

I will look at the Luttrell Psalter through the illustrations in terms of events at the time of its creation, the location within which it was set, the personal and spiritual nature of the content and the context in which it was made. I will try to assess if it does really portray the reality of the Luttrell's demesne or if it fulfils a higher need than that of Sir Geoffrey's desire to demonstrate his calling to be a good and devout christian, serve his king and do right by those who are dependent upon him, in the form of a psalter. The psalter is something which

¹London, British Library, Add MS 42130, fol. 202v.
'Dominus Galfridus Louterell me fieri fecit'.

would survive and give testament to him and which he may have instructed to be used long after his death.

To put psalters into context it is important to see how they became a fundamental part of daily religious life both private and communal, focused on devotion and carrying out the liturgy. Bibles were very expensive to be copied and physically large, whereas the psalter could be produced in a smaller more affordable form for the church as well those of the nobility. To assist the daily offices they might contain in addition to the psalms, a liturgical calendar, canticles, collects and prayers along with in some cases the Office of the Dead. Originally written for churchmen in Latin, they could contain several versions of the psalms written in parallel for scholarly comparison with little or no decoration and often glossed. A simple example containing just text is the Faddan More Psalter discovered in a peat bog in Tipperary in 2006 and dated to around c. 800.² The Utrecht Psalter³ (330 x 250mm) dating from around c. 820 has the text supported by a series of monochrome sketches at the top of the page which read like a picture book following the narrative of the psalm. It may also have been designed to be used for teaching the skill of reading Latin. In the twelfth century psalters were being more widely used including by noblemen and women as the psalms gave instructions for good leadership exemplified by King David and a model for a well lived life.

²National Museum of Ireland (NMI), 06E0786:13.

³Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS Bibl. Rhenotraiectinae I Nr 32.

The Macclesfield Psalter⁴ shows evidence of ownership by wealthy literate elite as well as churchmen and is highly decorated. It is small in size (170 x 108mm) so would have been for private use and dates from fourteenth century.

The Winchester Psalter⁵ (320 x 222.5mm) mid-twelfth century, is considered to have been made for use in Winchester Cathedral and commissioned by Henry of Blois, the Bishop of Winchester and brother of Stephen King of England.

Psalters were personalised by adding to the calendar significant names to be remembered, both by families and institutions, in the cycle of prayer and personal identifiers like a coat of arms or a likeness of the owner shown praying. In the case of many of the illuminated psalters they contain a series of full page illustrations of the life of King David as well as the life of Christ.

The Luttrell Psalter (350 x 245mm) does not follow the traditional format described above although it does follow the English Gothic tradition of divisions and uses ten large historiated letters; contents of which relate directly to the text of the psalm.⁶ The page contains just fourteen lines of text which is far less than most known psalters, it has no full page illustrations and only one half page miniature in which the subject is Geoffrey Luttrell. Geoffrey was a religious man he had in his household a priest confessor William de Foderingaye, who would have advised him on his spiritual journey as well on the content and interpretation of the psalms.⁷ Geoffrey may have been

⁴Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS. 1-2005.

⁵London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero C iv.

⁶ divisions at psalms 1, 26, 38, 51, 52, 68, 80, 101 and 109.

⁷ Camille, M., *Mirror in Parchment* (London: Reaction, 1998) p. 144.

influenced by Robert Manning of Bourne⁸ and his treatise '*Handlyng Synne*' and also '*The Cloud of Unknowing*' attributed to Richard Rolle.⁹ Both works are deeply spiritual and ones that question one's relationship with God and the world from the pen of writers of his time. Geoffrey Luttrell may also have known of the works of William Langland in particular '*Piers Plowman*' considered to be a quest for the true Christian life.

All the text is the work of one scribe set out in a very clear clean large Gothic script, except for five lines on folio 206v. which were added later in a poor hand. The text is just the framework for the the illustrations which have been attributed to at least six different hands.¹⁰ One is the main 'Luttrell Master' as Camille calls him. A limited palette of colour was used 'sparing the green' which gives the pages a distinctive look.¹¹ Emerson observes that 'The colour of the pigments used is dictated by aesthetics rather than social realism'.¹² Eric Millar commented that illustrations are better seen in monochrome to fully appreciate them.¹³ The pages certainly do look different, but I think Millar may have missed the point of the depth of Geoffrey Luttrell's commitment to his purpose for his psalter to which the limited palette brings focus and meaning.

⁸ Backhouse, Janet, *The Luttrell Psalter* (London: British Library, 1989) p. 45.
Robert Manning was the cannon at Sempringham.

⁹ Backhouse p. 45.

Richard Rolle was a hermit associated with the nunnery at Hampole, near Hooton Pagnell where Geoffrey's sisters were nuns. It is unclear if it was written by Rolle, he was a prolific spiritual writer. Geoffrey would have access to his other works.

¹⁰ Camille p. 324.

¹¹ Camille p. 231.

¹² Richard K. Emerson, and P. J. P. Goldberg, "The Lord Geoffrey had me made': Lordship and Labour in the Luttrell Psalter", in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, eds. James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg and W. M. Ormrod (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000) pp. 43-63, (p. 59).

¹³ Camille p. 39.

To explore the meaning the illustrations can be divided up into several types. The *bas-de-page* which have a number of themes; large and small historiated initials; babewyns; line endings; and foliage as well as the grotesques, animals and people in the margins. All of the illustrations are used in some way to connect into the text to which they are adjacent. To paraphrase Camille, the psalter is written in Latin but the illustrations are understood in the English Vernacular.¹⁴ It is however necessary to have a full knowledge of Latin to understand completely how the play on words is used throughout the psalter.

At first glance the cycle of pictures for the life of Christ appear to be cameos of events, and the agricultural scenes are seen by most scholars as giving an honest, idyllic, representation of the every day life and labour of the fourteenth century, but on closer study neither are quite what they seem. Emmerson's view is that the illustrations cannot be taken literally as mirroring the past but that they have a greater purpose, that Sir Geoffrey is depicting himself through the psalter, i.e. its function, as if he was on a par with King David, and Christ himself.¹⁵ All are Lords in their own demesne.

I will explore this and start with the table scene on folio 208r., illustrating psalm 114(115) the final of three *bas-de-page* illustrations showing a feast which resembles in every way the table of the last supper of Christ (folio 90v.) in the life of Christ sequence. Closer observation and comparison show that it may not be a feast at all. The way in which Sir Geoffrey is holding his cup resembles the way a chalice would be held at a communion service; also the

¹⁴ Camille p. 306.

¹⁵Emmerson p. 44.

positioning and type of plates and the meal on the table reflect that seen in folio 90v. Sir Geoffrey is at the centre of the table flanked by his household, which includes men of the church with the important members of his family, in the same way Christ is at the centre of his disciples.¹⁶ The clothing is simple, the design on the fringe on the table cloth on Christ's table is symbolic and is the same pattern as that of the scarf worn by Sir Geoffrey's cupbearer; also his stance mirrors Judas linking one to the other.

The life of Christ series starts at psalm 44 (f86r.) with the annunciation to Mary. Psalm 44(45) speaks of the Messiah and His bride. The holy family travel to Egypt in folio 88v. and further stories are played out showing the resurrection and miracles to the end of the gathering all in some way connected to the text above. There is something not quite right about the content or sequence. Some parts of the well known story are missing; possibly a text connection could only be found for these that were illustrated.¹⁷ What is striking is that the shepherds are not represented in the stable scene (folio 88r.). It could be argued that it reflected the hierarchical system of the fourteenth century. The next gathering is unfinished, it is possible further stories of the apostles or saints were to be illustrated here.

The narrative of the agricultural cycle (folio 170r.-181r.) is an idealised depiction rather than the reality of the life on the manor and the Luttrell

¹⁶ Camille p 89 goes into greater detail about the symbolism of the cup and the connection the verse above his head 'I call upon the Lord...' and to v13 on the following page 'I will take the chalice of salvation...'.
¹⁷ Camille p. 140.

demesne. The series show fruitfulness with everyone and everything in its proper place which is far from the reality at the time.

The Luttrell's were living in turbulent times and Geoffrey would have many concerns apart from the salvation of his soul. He had a duty to the king to supply men from his estates to fight (a new crusade was being planned in the 1330s), his own lineage and the validity of his marriage was a concern, he had a duty to the church, and his responsibility and changing relationship to his villeins and their duties.¹⁸ As well as the matters of running his household and estates there had been a catastrophic cattle plague in 1320 as well as crop failures between 1315 and 1322.¹⁹ Lincolnshire suffered greatly and lost a lot of cattle; horses were being used instead of oxen. If the psalter was to be a window into his world, we should be seeing something rather different.

One very clear illustration of Sir Geoffrey's purpose is the ploughing scene (folio 170r.) which is the first of eight *bas-de-page*. Ploughing is the most important aspect of the agricultural year and the lord of the manor relied on his tenants to carry out the work. The image is traditionally used in the psalter calendar for January. Here the sequence starts at psalm 93(94); it shows well-dressed peasants working with four healthy oxen pulling the plough. The detail in the drawing of the plough is accurate in every detail as are the following sequences of sowing through to harvesting.²⁰ Camille points out that the series

¹⁸ Camille p. 277.

¹⁹ Camille p. 252.

²⁰ Camille p. 182.

are the only *bas-de-page* drawings that have a ground line.²¹ All the peasants are positioned and are related to or on the ground emphasising further the image it is trying to portray. They are firm footed, verse 17 of the psalm refers to this. The ground line on which the figures are shown does not occur on any other folio. The sequence is an idealistic portrayal of how Sir Geoffrey wished to be seen as a good lord over his world, his workers happy and well-dressed, serving their master was far from the reality of the 1320s. Ploughing was the start and the foundation of the year's cycle and had to be done correctly. In 'Piers Ploughman' Will the ploughman was concerned with saving his soul and searching for a way of living a good life which would have resonated with Sir Geoffrey.

The next striking aspect of the psalter are the babwyns that populate the later margins. They are fanciful and are more difficult to understand and translate their message and meaning but they cannot be ignored, they had a purpose. The first noticeable thing is the limited colours, red, blue and yellow/brown mostly are springing from flower tendrils. To understand the nature of these we need to look at the folklore of Luttrell's landscape. Mummers were part of the life of Leicestershire performing folk stories wearing masks and capes portraying grotesque and fantastical characters turning the world upside down and challenging the status quo. Camille suggests that the babewyns in the psalter ' . . . may be representations of folk forms but they are not in a folk style; rather they are a highly sophisticated pictorial treatment that draws attention to itself as artifice. . . ' are cunning devices to trick and deceive.²²

²¹ Camille p. 180.

²² Camille p. 241.

Used in their abhorrent form to direct the reader to reject sinful ways and understand the consequences and underline that in his lifetime Sir Geoffrey was at pains to do this. Obvious examples can be seen on folio 184r. where the wheeled sea dragon is straight out of the folk plays and refers to psalm 103 v 26.²³ Brown suggests that the creature looks as if it were made of leather similar to pantomime horses for carnivals which could be used to distract the onlooker.²⁴

On folio 191v. starts with psalm 105 v20 referring to an ox or the 'golden calf' made by the Israelites which they worshipped instead of God.²⁵ The image at the bottom the page is a grotesque calf with a peasant's cap on its back and the babewyn in the margin has an ox head mask on a bird-like body.

The warning of straying and getting impatient must have been very clear to the reader. The babewyns and grotesques get larger and more frequent as the psalter progresses, it could be the case that the warnings are getting louder as time to change ones ways get shorter.

The placing of the full colour, gilded and bordered half-page illustration of Geoffrey Luttrell is placed just before Psalm 109. Above the illustration is the statement 'The Lord Geoffrey caused me to be made' which in turn is preceded by '*Gloria parti*' Glory be, the opening of the doxology, this is unique and has not be found in any other psalter to date.²⁶ This poses the question could this

²³ Camille p. 242.

²⁴ Michelle Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* (London: British Library, 2006) p. 80.

²⁵ Camille p. 243.

²⁶ Emmerson p. 55.

be another statement to make the comparison between King David writing the psalms and Sir Geoffrey having the psalter made? The large historiated letter for this psalm contains a seated figure Christ with David relating to the opening verse and is in Emerson's view is another example of Sir Geoffrey attributing 'heavenly' qualities to his role as Lord.²⁷ The picture fits the text but again Emerson points out that the picture of a donor usually comes before Psalm 119. By the time the psalter was commissioned Sir Geoffrey was no longer able to fight for the king and was not in the best of health. Here he is presenting himself as he wished to be remembered, who he was and what legacy he is leaving. The illustration is a representation of the past and the future. It shows him getting ready for battle or a tournament and being equipped with all the accretions of a knight by his wife Agnes Sutton; and his daughter-in-law, Beatrice Scope who represents the future. Her coat of arms as well as that of his Agnes are found on other folios as well as within the costumes they are wearing. He shows he had married well and including Beatrice he could also demonstrate that he was putting his faith in his son Andrew and Beatrice to continue the family dynasty.

Wherever the Luttrell coat of arms is included in the margins it is adjacent to a verse or within a psalm that proclaims the attributes of God, that of trust, glory and greatness which Sir Geoffrey wishes to ascribe to himself. Folio 171r. includes his shield adjacent to verse 4 of psalm 94 (95) which translates as 'In his hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong' proclaiming that like God he is master of his demesne. On folio 59r. the psalm 30 (31) speaks of the greatness and of God.

²⁷ Emerson p. 53.

In the psalter he is putting the case that he has carried out his responsibilities during his life time on earth, being a good steward of the land fighting well for his king, looking after his workers, being aware and guarding against sin and preparing to meet his maker by living a simple life. He has demonstrated that in the illustrations and as each psalm is read its message is underlined by the visual connection to the everyday and the sin that could be lurking, disguised, at every turn.

A clue to the final function for the psalter and the illustrations it contains could be found in his will. Psalters were such an investment of time and money they were usually mentioned in wills but there was no mention in Geoffrey's will, except he states '...I give and bequeath to the clerks reciting the Psalter forty shillings.'²⁸ It could be the case that the original purpose was for it to be given to the church at Irnham where he was to be buried and where his chantry chapel was in the process of being built. This could also explain as Emmerson suggests the lack of prayers in the vernacular which are usually included in psalters for laity.²⁹ Sir Geoffrey also made great provision for those that attended his funeral; the candles that were required to be lit and for the five years of praying for his soul. Emmerson queries the non-inclusion of the/a psalter but the will does capitalise the word.³⁰ Camille copies Millar (I have seen the Millar at the British Library) in using a capital P surely denotes a particular manuscript (I have been unable to see the original will but assume

²⁸ Camille p. 122.

²⁹ Emmerson p. 51.

³⁰ Emmerson p. 48.

Millar was diligent in his copying of the wording) adding weight to the possibility that the original plan was for the psalter to be used by the clerks at St Andrews Parish Church as they prayed for his soul.

(3060)

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