

Chasing Butterflies in Medieval Europe

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CHASING BUTTERFLIES IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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ABSTRACT. A survey of illuminated medieval manuscripts from Europe reveals depictions of several different methods used in the Middle Ages for catching butterflies. A discussion on the meaning and iconography of lepidopteran imagery in these manuscripts is presented.

Additional key words: Marginalia, Manuscripts, Lepidoptera, Iconography, Psyche

With the large-scale digitization of rare illuminated medieval manuscripts by libraries, museums and other institutions around the world, a new and unexpected online resource is rapidly becoming available for a least likely audience: entomologists. Although mostly of religious nature, the illuminated manuscripts produced during the Middle Ages (5th–15th century CE) are richly illustrated with scenes from daily lives of ordinary people, clerics, and royalty. The margins of these manuscripts are often ornamented with elaborate decorative illustrations, also known as “marginalia”, incorporating a variety of natural elements such as flowers, birds, and other animals, including insects. Previous studies on illustrations of birds (Yapp 1982), dragonflies (Kern 2005) and snails (Hope 2013) in medieval manuscripts have shown that beside useful historical taxonomic information, insights can be gained from these sources on iconography and symbolism of living elements in medieval times. In this paper I will discuss some of the ways in which the lepidopterans may be understood in medieval iconography, and in particular in the context of religion and warfare. The time frame for the works selected in this paper is 1280–1540, and the selection contains images from modern-day Belgium, England, France, Italy, Netherlands, and Spain. The manuscripts include books of hours, breviaries, pontificals, ordinals, decretals, psalters, oratories, graduals, and other works of devotion. The images in this paper are all either in public domain or are reproduced here with permission.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Using various online databases and websites from European and North American institutions, I conducted searches for digitized medieval manuscripts made available courtesy of universities, religious colleges, municipal or national libraries, or other institutions. The quality of images and the ownership rights varied but all institutions were cooperative in providing permission to use and obtain higher quality images for research purposes upon request. Many of these institutions have

built comprehensive online databases with descriptions of elements on every folio (page) of the manuscripts in their deposition, making it easy to search for key words (e.g. “butterfly”) and focus only on pages where these images appear. Others, however, did not have such a cataloguing system and required checking each manuscript page by page for relevant imagery.

Among the hundreds of manuscripts surveyed, I found about 270 that contained lepidopteran imagery. There is no doubt that a more rigorous search will yield further material. In many of these manuscripts, the depicted lepidopterans are highly stylized and it is often difficult to even tell if an image is of a butterfly or a moth. Among the ones I came across, about 30 manuscripts included scenes where lepidopterans were shown in some kind of interaction either with humans, monkeys, putti (child-like winged nude beings), centaurs, or other fantastical creatures. Lepidopterans in these scenes were either being pursued, aimed at, or caught in one-way or another. The diversity of methods depicted by medieval illustrators to capture butterflies and moths was truly surprising, especially since the principal motivation behind these activities has remained largely unexplained. Here I provide example images of these medieval collecting methods.

RESULTS

Although individual butterflies are common in marginal decorations, they rarely appear as background elements in other scenes. I found only one such instance in a Belgian Book of Hours¹ from early 16th century, where several butterflies are fluttering in a field with farmers working (Fig. 1). In a French Book of Hours² (1430), a butterfly seems to have startled a bearded man wearing a soft-peaked hat (Fig. 2). In another Book of Hours from England³ (1450s), a hooded, bearded man is pointing a finger at a large, poorly drawn *Aglais urticae* (Fig. 3). In “*Bréviaire à l'usage de Besançon*”⁴ (pre-1498), a putti is shaking a tree where a nicely drawn *Aglais urticae* is perched (Fig. 4). In a late 13th century Breviary from Burgundy, France⁵, two women are



FIGS 1-11: **1)** *Book of Hours*, 1525-1530, Belgium (Bruges), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.1175, f. 9v; **2)** *Book of Hours*, 1430, France (Rennes), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0173, f. 16r; **3)** *Book of Hours*, 1440-1450, England (London?), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS G.09, f. 12r; **4)** *Bréviaire à l'usage de Besançon*, Before 1498, Western France (Normandie), Besançon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 0069, f. 485; **5)** *Belleville Breviary*, 1323-1326, Netherlands (Ghent), attributed to Jean Pucelle (Enlumineur), Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, MS lat. 10484, f. 24v; **6)** *Pontifical of Guillaume Durand*, 1390, France, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, MS 0143, f. 1; **7)** *Heures à l'usage de Bayeux*, 1430-1440, Western France (Normandie), Aurillac, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 0002, f. 4; **8)** *Heures à l'usage de Rouen*, 1460-1470, France (Rouen), Aix-en-Provence, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 0022, f. 139; **9)** *Piccolomini breviary*, 1475, Italy (Lombardy), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0799, f. 260v; **10)** *Catholic Church, Ordinal*, 1482, Spain, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MS Typ 236, f. 1; **11)** *La Divina Commedia di Dante* (Dante and the Divine Comedy), 1430-1435, Italy, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS it. 74, f. 3v.



FIGS 12-19: **12** *Book of Hours*, Use of Rome (the 'Golf Book'), 1540, Netherlands, The British Library Board, MS 24098, f. 24v; **13** *Book of Hours*, 1495-1503, France (Rouen), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0261, f. 78v; **14** *Breviaire à l'usage de Langres*, after 1481, Eastern France (Bourgogne ?), Chaumont, Bibliothèque municipals, MS 0033, f. 119v; **15** *Romance of Alexander*, 1338-1344, France (Flemish), attributed to various authors including Lambert le Tort, Alexandre de Bernai (de Paris), Jehan de Grise and others, Bodleian Library Oxford, England, MS Bodl. 264, pt. I, f. 44r; **16** *Book of Hours*, Dominican use, 1458-1465, Italy, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MS Typ 463, f. 97; **17** *Decretals of Gregory IX with glossa ordinaria* (the 'Smithfield Decretals'), Last quarter of the 13th century or 1st quarter of the 14th century, Southern France (Toulouse?), The British Library, Royal MS 10 E IV, f. 91v; **18** *Romance of Alexander*, 1338-1344, France (Flemish), attributed to various authors including Lambert le Tort, Alexandre de Bernai (de Paris), Jehan de Grise and others, Bodleian Library Oxford, England; MS Bodl. 264, pt. I, f. 41r; **19** *Ormesby Psalter*, Mid 14th century, England (East-Anglia?), Bodleian Library, Oxford, England, MS Douce 366, f. 38r.



FIGS 20-28: **20)** *The Bird Psalter*, 1280-90, England, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, Cambridge England, MS 2-1954, f. 1r; **21)** *Partitiones Oratoriae, Topica, etc.* 1425-1430, Italy (Florence), The Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Marston MS 278, f. 1r; **22)** *Pontifical of Guillaume Durand*, 1390, France, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, MS 0143, f. 247v; **23)** *ibid*; MS 0143, f. 1; **24)** *Estoire del Saint Graal, La Queste del Saint Graal, Morte Artu*, 1315-1325, France, The British Library Board, Royal MS 14 E III, f. 89r; **25)** *The Queen Mary Psalter*, 1310-1320, England, The British Library, Royal 2B VII, f. 163v; **26)** *Horae etc.*, 13th century, Belgium (Flanders), Trinity College Cambridge, England, MS B.11.22, f. 137v; **27)** *Romance of Alexander*, 1338-1344, France (Flemish), attributed to various authors including Lambert le Tort, Alexandre de Bernai (de Paris), Jehan de Grise and others, Bodleian Library Oxford, England, MS Bodl. 264, pt. I, f. 132v; **28)** *ibid*; MS Bodl. 264, pt. I, f. 135r.



FIGS. 29-36: **29)** *Le roman de la rose*, 1390, France, attributed to Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, Bodleian Library, Oxford, England, MS e Mus. 65, f. 11r; **30)** *Breviary*, 1350-1374, France (Paris), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0075, f. 111r; **31)** *Hours of Charlotte of Savoy*, 1420-1425, France (Paris), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.1004, f. 133r; **32)** *Book of Hours*, 1418, France (Paris), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0919, f. 190v; **33)** *Romance of Alexander*, 1338-1344, France (Flemish), attributed to various authors including Lambert le Tort, Alexandre de Bernai (de Paris), Jehan de Grise and others, Bodleian Library Oxford, England, MS Bodl. 264, pt. I, f. 67r; **34)** *Psalter - Hours of Yolande de Soissons*, last quarter 13th century, France (Amiens), Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M.0729, f. 346r; **35)** *Gradual*, 1350-1400, Italy, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; MS Typ 079, f. 1; **36)** *Omne Bonum (Ebrietas-Humanus)*, James Le Palmer, 1360-1375, SE England (London), The British Library Board, Royal MS 6 E VII, f. 67v.

depicted in an outing, one of whom is holding what seems like a surprisingly modern net (cover photo). Although this maybe interpreted as a fishing net, its true purpose remains unclear since the accompanying text is unrelated and there are no butterflies or fish illustrated in the page.

A good portion of the imagery that I found depicted people reaching for, chasing or having caught butterflies with their bare hands. The oldest of these is found in the *Beleville Breviary*⁶ (1323–1326, Netherlands), where a monkey holds a well-drawn *Aglaia urticae* in his hand (Fig. 5). In the *Pontifical of Guillaume Durand*⁷ (France, 1390), a nude boy reaches to grab a white butterfly (Fig. 6). Similar scenes with humans, putti or other heavenly figures appear in the marginalia of several Books of Hours or Ordinals produced in France^{8,9} (1430s; 1460s), Italy¹⁰ (1475), and Spain¹¹ (1482, with a *Saturnia pyri*) (Figs. 7–10). On the front piece to a reproduction of Dante's "*La Divina Commedia*" produced in Italy¹² in the 1430s, a nude man is depicted on a tree reaching for a black butterfly or moth (Fig. 11). Nested within a wide marginal strip, the *Golf Book*¹³ (Netherlands, 1540) and *The Breviary of Eleanor of Portugal*¹⁴ (Belgium, 1510s, not shown) both show scenes of inconspicuous grey human figures chasing butterflies with bare hands and also with hats and medieval golf clubs (Figs. 12).

In a French Book of Hours¹⁸ from 1495–1503, a nude man is depicted attempting to catch a butterfly with an object in his hand that could be either a large gray hat or a rock (Fig. 13). I also found two instances, both in manuscripts originating from France, of men depicted clubbing lepidopterans. One of these is from a French Breviary¹⁶ produced after 1481 (Fig. 14), and the other is in the well-known "*Romance of Alexander*"¹⁵ (1338–1344)(Fig. 15). In an Italian manuscript¹⁷ from mid 15th century, a putto riding a peacock is aiming a spear at a highly stylized butterfly (Fig. 16).

In the *Decretals of Gregory IX*¹⁹ (13th century), a man is attacking a butterfly with a large sword in his right hand and a small shield in left hand (Fig. 17). A similar image also appears in "*Romance of Alexander*"¹⁵ (Fig. 18). But another more commonly depicted weapon against butterflies in medieval period is bows and arrows. Humans²⁰, centaurs^{7,21}, putti²², and monkeys^{7,23} have been depicted aiming at butterflies with bows and arrows, using various kinds of arrowheads (Figs. 19–24).

In *The Queen Mary Psalter*³² (1310–1320), boys are seen playing with butterflies tied at the end of threads (Fig. 25). Several manuscripts include scenes with people, putti or monkeys attempting to catch butterflies with long-tailed hoods (a.k.a. *gugels*). The oldest of such images comes from a 14th century Flemish Book of Hours from Belgium²⁴ (Fig. 26). In *Romance of*

*Alexander*¹⁵, the margins of two separate pages are dedicated to depicting elaborate scenes with several men (Fig. 27) or women (Fig. 28) chasing butterflies with their hoods or bare hands, and some holding their hoods on the ground, evidently having caught one. In "*La Roman de La Rose*"²⁵ (France, 1390), two young maidens are depicted in a garden, one seated holding something in her hands, while the other is standing with outstretched left hand, right hand behind her holding a hood to strike a butterfly above her head (Fig. 29). Similar scenes also appear in a French Breviary²⁶ (1350–1374) as well as *The Hours of Charlotte of Savoy*²⁷ (1420–1425) (Figs. 30, 31). Hoods are also depicted as collecting tools being used by putti²⁸ as well as monkeys¹⁵ (Figs. 32, 33). I also found two instances of nude men depicted attempting to catch a butterfly with a different, larger white item of clothing, possibly a cape or a cloak^{29,30} (Figs. 34, 35). In *Omne Bonum*³¹ (1360–1375), children are depicted playing with toys and chasing butterflies, with an unidentified item of clothing (Fig. 36).

DISCUSSION

Lepidopterans are very common elements in symbolism of societies worldwide. Within the limited scope of western art, Gagliardi (1976) describes 74 different symbolic contexts in which butterflies and moths may appear. Among these, the most prominent have to do with lepidopteran metamorphosis, a fascinating phenomenon that has captured the human imagination from the dawn of time. In Roman and Greek antiquity, the butterfly (*Psyche*) was a symbol of soul and transcendent immortal life after death ([Blatchford] 1889). In the ancient story of *Psyche and Cupid* (or Eros in Greek), best narrated by Roman writer Apuleius (2nd century CE), Psyche is an earthly woman whose beauty threatens Venus, the goddess of Love. Venus sends Cupid to take revenge, but Cupid falls in love with her. Venus banishes Psyche to the underworld but she comes back to life victoriously, and is granted immortality by Jupiter so that she can marry Cupid as an equal. Hence she symbolizes not only the image of the immortal soul, but the anguish and triumph of soul. The Greeks and Romans saw butterflies as personification of Psyche's death and resurrection cycle. In Greco-Roman artifacts featuring scenes with Cupid and Psyche embracing or otherwise engaged in various amorous or entertaining activities, Cupid is always depicted with angelic, feathered wings like those of a bird, while Psyche has fragile, often highly stylized wings similar to those of a butterfly. In Roman seals from the 1st century, Cupid is sometimes depicted burning a butterfly with a torch, symbolizing the anguish of the

soul in love (Platt 2007). In Greek artwork dating as far back as the 3rd century BCE, Eros is often pictured as a child rather than an adolescent (Stuveras 1969). Many of the scenes in the manuscripts I studied involve putti, the little winged children, shooting or otherwise catching butterflies. These putti may be justifiably interpreted as a representation of Cupid chasing his love, Psyche. The abundance of these scenes from an essentially pagan story in Christian religious manuscripts from medieval Europe is rather interesting and demonstrates the continued symbolic representation of butterflies well into the Middle Ages and beyond.

Moths are mentioned many times in the Bible, all in a negative context as pests of stored goods or cloths (e.g. Job 13:28; Psalms 39:11; Isaiah 51:8; Hosea 5:12; Matthew 6:19; James 5:2). Although some of the imagery presented here may be interpreted as depictions of frustrated people chasing away clothes moths, the negative attitude towards lepidopterans seems to have gradually changed over time, especially upon the introduction of silk to Europe in early 12th century. In fact, similar to the honeybee, the 'Silkworm' (*Bombyx mori*) was recognized as a useful insect and illustrated in detail in manuscripts dealing with silk production (Morge 1973). Entomology as a science, however, was rudimentary in medieval Europe, and the Greek philosopher Aristotle's biological works, written in 3rd century BCE, were the only source of zoological knowledge throughout the Middle Ages. Aristotle maintained that worms originated in woods or rotting meat, caterpillars in cabbage, and moths in clothes. Early biological observations during the 13th century—such as the works of Thomas Cantimpranus (*Liber de Natura Rerum*, 1233–1248), Albertus Magnus (*De Animalibus*, 1255–1270) or Bartholomeus Anglicus (*De proprietatibus rerum*, mid-13th century)—were not free from the old Aristotelian dogma. They contained wildly incorrect assertions about insects; some calling butterflies 'flying worms' or 'small birds' (Morge 1973). Aristotle's now-obsolete theory of spontaneous generation (of living beings emerging from inanimate matter) was in fact still being taught in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century (Kern 2005). The limited scholarly activity and scientific interest in butterflies during the Middle Ages cannot adequately explain the abundance of these scenes in medieval manuscripts.

Lepidopterans make rare appearances in Christian artwork predating the 14th century, such as tapestries or paintings, but are generally absent from manuscripts. One of the oldest illuminated manuscripts, the Scottish "*Book of Kells*" from 800 CE (Trinity College Dublin, MS 58; not shown), includes two small moths hidden within the gothic calligraphy of the Chi-Rho page

(Spangenberg 2010). From late 13th century onwards, butterflies begin to appear more frequently in the borders of European manuscripts. Some of the scenes involving butterflies in this period may be explained by the well-known religious symbolism during the Middle Ages (Panofsky 1955). In medieval iconography, monkeys represented mischief (Walker Vadillo 2013), snails may have represented humility (Hope 2013) or virginity (Ettlinger 1978), flies were symbols of death, evil or brevity of life on earth, and ladybugs the seven sorrows of the Virgin (Yanoviak 2013); scarabs represented sinners, bees were associated with virginity (Berenbaum 1995) or structure and hierarchy (Payne 1990); louse or fleas with plague and disease, and locusts with famine (Morge 1973). Butterflies maintained their status as the iconic representations of the soul. It has been argued that the combination of flies (symbol of death), dragonflies (symbol of flight and ascension) and butterflies (symbol of resurrection) in medieval marginalia is a representation of Christ (Hassig 1995).

The majority of these exquisite books were commissioned by the nobility and took several years to complete, and often involved several artists. They were prized possessions not only because of their religious content, but also as magnificent works of art. It is therefore worth noting some of the major pre-occupations of the nobility in medieval times: hunting and warfare. In the English "*Bird Psalter*" (1280–90), a bowman is shown aiming at a Snipe but also a white *Pieris* butterfly (Fig. 20). Scenes of hunting of birds and other animals abound in medieval marginalia, as this was a common activity among the nobles and royalty. However, weapons are more often portrayed in the context of warfare rather than hunting, reflecting the violent tenor of the age. Few regions of Europe or Asia remained untroubled by invasion, rebellion or civil war during the 13th and 14th century, resulting in a gradual change in the way armies were organized and battles conducted. For example, in 1337, just before the outbreak of the war with France, Edward III of England prohibited all sports except archery on punishment of death (Mortimer 2012). On every village green, young men became proficient in the use of longbows, and standards of archery soared. It is not far-fetched therefore to think that for these medieval warriors (as well as hunters) aspiring to improve their skills in archery or swordsmanship, tiny objects moving erratically in the air constituted the ultimate aiming target, and this may have been a routine part of fighter training in the Middle Ages. This practice was probably commonplace and continued even to modern times: Laubin & Laubin (1980) mention that modern American Indian boys practice aiming by shooting arrows at butterflies.

Whether a representation of the ephemeral beauty of nature or a religious symbol, butterflies and moths seem to have been a significant source of curiosity and contemplation for the medieval mind. Many of these butterflies were drawn from real models, which were perhaps captured by the illustrator or his aides in one way or the other; and one may presume that this activity itself somehow found its way into the margins of some of these illuminated books. The prolific use of insects in the margins of medieval manuscript may also have played a role in developing interest in empirical observations and changing attitudes towards nature, and formed the basis on which the first scientific naturalists—such as Thomas Muffet and Maria Sybilla Merian—started their work in the later centuries.

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