

# Opening the Geese Book II

(aka The Revenge of the Geese)

Interdisciplinary Multimedia Seminar in Medieval/Renaissance Studies

ARS 498/591

Spring Semester 2006

Monday 1:40pm-4:30pm /ASU Downtown Center C103

Qualified Students are sought to participate in a pilot project: making an interactive multimedia DVD ROM on the so-called *Geese Book*, a lavishly illuminated liturgical manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (M. 905). This large, two-volume gradual was produced between 1504 and 1510 for the church of St. Lorenz in Nuremberg. Website: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~cschleif>

Instructors: **Volker Schier**, musicologist, and **Corine Schleif**, art historian, who are co-ordinating the project Opening the Geese Book, a collaborative endeavor of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and nine other institutions, funded by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Bavarian Radio, ITER, and several other sponsors

We welcome students to participate, who have a foundation in one or more of the following areas: German, Latin, medieval music, medieval paleography, liturgy, Christian iconography, codicology, late-medieval history, church history, animal theory or gender theory. Since the manuscript contains scenes from sacred history as well as enigmatic animal representations students will explore conventions and innovations in religious iconography and examine issues of marginal illustrations and the social constructions of animals.



**Question Catalogue**

How and why did various early sixteenth-century users “open” the Geese Book? What did they see in, hear from, or associate with the folios of these two huge volumes? All the questions to be addressed in this project are those that the book itself presents. These include: Who was privileged to open the book? What might various viewers have thought when they saw a choir of singing geese together with the liturgy for the Feast of Ascension? What might they have thought on other feast days when they saw bas-de-page illuminations of a monkey playing a bagpipe, a bear playing a viol, a swine singing a vocal solo, a dragon snatching a baby, a wildwoman wielding a club, a wildman aiming his arrow at a sleeping stag, or a dog confronting a cat? Why would those who commissioned and fashioned the manuscript have included so many scenes of hunting or trapping birds or other wildlife? How did the stories from salvation history depicted in the initials complement the liturgical chants? What did the chants or the pictures have to do with the Nuremberg church year? What does a late-medieval manuscript have to do with Nuremberg at the time of the Renaissance? Why did community leaders who had been selected by the Nuremberg City Council – the provosts of the parish, Sixtus Tucher and Anton Kress – or the trustees of the church Andreas de Watt, Jakob Groland, and Hieronymus Schurstab – commission this expensive manuscript a half century after the invention of moveable type and a decade after the printing of a missal for the diocese? How did the St. Lorenz vicar and scribe, Friedrich Rosendorn, plan and compile these giant volumes? How did the artist — presumably Jakob Elsner and his workshop — go about illustrating and decorating this special book?

### **Geese Book Illuminations in Context:**

Heretofore the book’s illuminations have received the most scholarly attention. These images were, however, not made of and for themselves, nor were they made to be compared with other illuminations or other paintings. They were not made for art history or for art historians. The pictures appeared in a manuscript full of chants. And, although the bas-de-page illuminations, marginal decoration, and historiated initials appear to ornament or frame certain selected portions of the chants, when one examines the entire two volumes with their 560 folios – 1120 pages – it becomes apparent that these “few” pictures are surrounded by musical notation and Latin texts. Here too it should be pointed out that the music was not set down so that musicologists could analyze the development of notation or the advent of rhythmic devices. The music was written down on the parchment in order to carry the words and to express their content melodically to those for whom the meanings of the Latin texts – containing church dogma, and portions of biblical and hagiographic stories – were otherwise not accessible. These musical texts were meant to be sung – they were intended to leave the folios of the open book and fill the architectural space of the church of St. Lorenz with its newly completed hall choir. But here too, it was the goal that these sounds with their many meanings would emerge from the confines of the building in order to help form Nuremberg identities, liturgically and historically, within the diocese of which Nuremberg was a part. For the citizens of this wealthy merchant city and for those outside, these big books were signs. Clearly it was known that their utterances could ring out loud and clear, and that their illuminations could brightly proclaim the political autonomy of this place.

In order to pursue these historical contexts for an audience of today we must open the book and its pictures at their edges. We need to open it, since in many respects it has been closed for five hundred years. Much of its music for example has not been heard since the adoption of the Reformation in Nuremberg, in 1525. At the same time, we know that this task can never be

accomplished. One cannot turn back the calendar and hear and see what was perceived in sixteenth-century Nuremberg. Perception was different; in a sense, eyes and ears were different, and reception can therefore never be fully reenacted or reproduced. Moreover, then as now, the ways of seeing and hearing were infinite. We therefore see our endeavor as the opening of this book and in no way as a closing or imposition of closure or conclusion. We hope to leave the book open, making it accessible to others who will continue to open it.

It will not be possible for us to look at these books through the eyes of their makers or their first audiences. Historical distance allows us to employ critical tools in order to open the books for audiences today. One of the most interesting aspects of the illustrations are the whimsical animal narratives. They appear as the culmination of traditions that began with the *Physiologus* and medieval bestiaries. Representations such as these provided the foundation for notions of categories for living things – animals and people – species, genus, race and other social constructions that were divinized and naturalized with ever increasing specificity well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is well known that these closed boundaries and exacting distinctions have legitimized great atrocities to living beings. On the other hand, examining these sixteenth-century mythical animal representations from a twenty-first-century perspective likewise permits a ray of hope. In the *Geese Book* the categories are confounded; they are open: dragons exist as hybrid creatures that at the same time fall into several categories and into none. And what could be more optimistic and hopeful than an artistic imagination spawning a tendril that provides a pleasant communal habitat for European song birds, Asian peacocks, and heavenly angels?

The semester will begin with the two instructors introducing the project to the group and continuing students sharing their research, bibliography, and questions with new participants. Those students participating for a second time may wish to continue the topics they began last year or choose new aspects to explore. As we get deeper into the material we hope to apply various critical methodologies to the material. For example, we can use ritual theory, developed by anthropologists, to analyze the various multisensory components of the Mass liturgy. We can utilize reception theory to explore the ways in which audiences perceive the art, music and texts of the *Geese Book*. We can also employ gender and animal theory to probe beneath the surfaces of the enigmatic and provocative imagery of the margins. Enrollment is limited to 20 and instructor permission required. If you would like to sign up please contact the instructors: [Volker.Schier@asu.edu](mailto:Volker.Schier@asu.edu) and [Corine.Schleif@asu.edu](mailto:Corine.Schleif@asu.edu)