

## "IT'S A MAGICAL WORLD": THE PAGE IN COMICS AND MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS

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"The best comics," writes Anne Elizabeth Moore, "create an all-encompassing environment."<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer would seem to be making the same claim for medieval illuminated manuscripts when his narrator in *The Book of the Duchess* famously falls asleep while reading a book and dreams of waking up in a room that looks remarkably like the inside of one: with *The Romance of the Rose* painted on its walls—"bothe text and glose"—and the "story of Troye" depicted in its stained-glass windows.<sup>2</sup> This bookish chamber suggests that an ideal, "dream" book is an all-encompassing environment that includes images as well as texts, a space designed for seeing as well as reading. Moreover, the specificities of the narrator's description of this room-sized book imply that he is not one to limit himself to enjoying reading and looking as two separate activities, for he notes a visual aspect of the text of *The Romance of the Rose*—that it has been painted in brilliant colors, "colours fyne"—and he refers to the series of images in the stained glass windows as a "story," a narrative, in other words, to be read.<sup>3</sup> As the narrator goes on to tell of the sun's "gilden stremes" filling the room with light, we sense that this is a dream not only about being inside a book but also about the illuminating dream-like effects of the narrator's synthesizing engagement with text and image.<sup>4</sup> Understood in this way, Chaucer's dream space bears a functional resemblance to those cognitive territories that, as Chris Ware argues, the best comics open onto: "areas of imagination and memory that . . . would otherwise be left inaccessible to words or single pictures alone."<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I examine the location in the material world that calls forth that cognitive frontier: the page. As I show, both medieval book artists and contemporary cartoonists make use of the page as a device for giving their readers access to a domain of representation that is beyond the regimes of either pictures or words—yet somehow in the shadow of both—and for inducting them into the kind of unbound, boundary-free thinking that goes on there. Creative treatments of whole pages concern me in the essay's first section; here I consider Bill Watterson's use of a blank sheet of paper in his last episode of *Calvin and Hobbes*, and an anonymous medieval scribe's use of a hole in a sheet of parchment bound into an Old French tale of adventure-comics proportions, *Parise la duchesse*. By prompting readers to see these blank spaces as aspects of the book (or newspaper) at hand while simultaneously reading them into the narratives they subtend, Watterson and his medieval

predecessor demonstrate the usefulness of pages as objects to think with and as realms to think through. In the essay's second section, I shift from considering entire pages to areas of pages and the interactions between them: between marginal images and center-page scripture in the celebrated fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter and between backgrounds and panels in contemporary cartoonist C. Tyler's "Just a Bad Seed." By allowing incursions of marginal material into the center and vice versa, both Tyler and the Luttrell Psalter artist suggest "in-between" solutions to ostensible "either-or" problems. Beyond demonstrating the sophistication of cartoonists' and medieval book artists' approach to the page, my goal with these readings is to promote an ever-more robust conceptualization of the object of literary studies: an object that is, in fact, no longer a site for literary interpretation alone but a site for humanist interdisciplinary study instead. Here I present the page as an example of such an object of inquiry: one that is for seeing as well as reading, and one that is also paradoxically an environment, like Chaucer's dream chamber, for illuminating thinking.

The last installment of *Calvin and Hobbes*, Bill Watterson's beloved and critically acclaimed comic strip, appeared on Sunday, December 31, 1995 (Color Plate 1). In a letter sent to newspaper editors just over a month earlier, Watterson had announced his retirement, explaining, "My interests have shifted . . . and I believe I've done what I can do within the constraints of daily deadlines and small panels."<sup>6</sup> Looking at Calvin and Hobbes riding exuberantly into the wild white yonder with Watterson's letter in mind, a reader might think of another famous and fictional boy, Huck Finn. Like Huck, Calvin is last seen taking off into the wilderness, his rousing "Let's go exploring!" a lively updating of Huck's more restrained "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory." And like Watterson's, Huck's departure was also linked to a clear-eyed commentary on the rigors of literary production: "if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it."<sup>7</sup> Especially for readers who knew some of the details of Watterson's testy relationship with the commercial comics industry, the image of boy and tiger flying into the distance on a bounding toboggan may easily have been read as an symbol of Watterson, lighting out, Huck-like, with nary a concern for the community he leaves behind. Tony Chamberlain of *The Boston Globe* certainly saw it this way; in a note on the strip's final installment, he wrote, "And with that, one of the country's beloved strips bid its adieu. . . . It was clear that creator Bill Watterson had constructed a perfect symbol for his own newly found freedom, his escape into a world of endless possibility."<sup>8</sup> But another look at the strip discovers another way to read boy and tiger and with it the revelation that Watterson's "world of endless possibility" is present before us "in" the page at hand and, moreover, that far from leaving his readers in the (snow) dust, Watterson invites us to experience that magical world.

In order to catch a glimpse of that world, we must loosen our grasp of the linear, chronological narrative thread that is available for *reading* in the strip, a thread that leads us from Calvin's pronouncement of "a fresh clean start" to imagining the pair's exploits in the "new year" ahead. Instead, we must remain engaged with the page before us, accessing the

space available there for *seeing*. Upon doing so, we find that the strip's broad expanses of white comprise its most overwhelming visual impression. In the narrative of the snowy day, the white space is to be read as snow, but its very extensiveness also has the unsettling, if not downright shocking, appearance of being blank. This effect would have been especially strong in those newspapers in which this strip occupied a full half page of the Sunday comics section.<sup>9</sup> Hobbes validates the latter perception of all that white with his exclamation "It's like having a big white sheet of paper to draw on!" On one level, Hobbes's simile appropriates the white space to the strip's narrative setting, a winter day, heightening our readerly appreciation of the untouched splendor of its fresh-fallen snow. On another level, it increases our viewerly awareness of the blankness of the page at hand. In the process, the simile opens a gateway between the strip's visual and verbal registers, inviting us to shift in our imaginations between the realm of the snowy day to the space of the page instead, where Watterson presents a parting gift to his readers: a view of the page as a playfield of the imagination for both cartoonists and their readers.

The presentation of that gift begins with Hobbes's simile linking new snow and fresh pages, which occupies the top portion of the strip's upper right panel, and opens up from there into the triangular cluster of figures and speech balloons in that panel and the inset panel to the left. At the apex of the triangle, Hobbes's full smile and wide-open eyes convey complete, untarnished, all-caps, gold-leaf happiness. That impression is made all the more brilliant by Hobbes's spiky whiskers, outward facing palms, and wide-spread fingers, which frame his face like cartoon sunrises. What with the emanations from his sunny face, his tiger coloration—a streak of white bordered by orange and black stripes—his jaunty red scarf, and towering height, Hobbes is a luminous column in this panel. Together with his comments in the speech balloon above, he presents an emblem of the white-bright light of creativity and of its connection, for Watterson, with the most elemental procedure of his work: drawing on paper. In the light of Hobbes's emblematic stature, Calvin's posture in the inset panel to the left—a three-quarter turn to the right, arms outstretched—appears to acclaim Hobbes's signification in the panel I have been considering while the ellipses between "A new year" and "a fresh clean start" in his speech balloon along with that panel's inset position work to initiate a subtle doubling of the strip's subject: not only the happy prospect of fresh-fallen snow to boy and tiger but also the thrilling possibilities at hand to a cartoonist in the form of a new sheet of paper to draw on. Calvin's posture and speech in the next, upper right panel furthers this twinning: hands on hips, standing to the right and slightly in front of the ecstatic Hobbes, Calvin operates here like a confident middleman who elaborates without clarifying, his elated "A day full of possibilities!" applying equally to a day of drawing and a day of playing in the snow.

Picking up on the ambivalent referent of Calvin's exclamation, we may reverse the relationship between the terms of Hobbes's simile so that the snowy day serves as a figure for what it is like to have a new sheet of paper to draw on instead of the other way around. Another look at Hobbes's raised-hands gesture with this reversal in effect suggests that having a

fresh sheet of paper to draw on is like being in a three-dimensional environment, for Hobbes does not point to the surface of the snow as he utters his simile but raises his hands rapturously to the air instead, indicating his entire surroundings as the comparandum of his simile. As dazzling, as exhilarating, as strange yet familiar as the world transformed by new-fallen snow, the world that awaits the cartoonist "within" a new sheet of paper must surely be a wondrous one. The inset panel in the lower half of the strip makes this implication of Hobbes's gesture explicit: given the strip's twin subjects outlined above together with the panel's position, set into a broad swath of what strikingly resembles a blank page, the "it" of Calvin's "It's a magical world, Hobbes old buddy!" now refers just as compellingly to Hobbes's "clean white sheet of paper" as it does to the snowy day. Moreover, as we follow the lines Calvin's toboggan "draws" on the snow-like page, we may also recognize that the space of the page is the magical world to which Calvin, Hobbes, and *Calvin and Hobbes* are naturally drawn, and that we viewers are included in Watterson's (in the voice of Calvin's) first-person plural exhortation "Let's go exploring!"

In his valedictory strip, then, Watterson gifts his readers by opening a window onto the space in which he had been creating *Calvin and Hobbes* all those years—a narrative space conjured from the visible aspects of the materials of his art—and gives us, in the form of the very sheets of paper on which his last strip was printed, a tangible connection to the pleasure and excitement he found there. A look at an attempt Watterson makes in prose to describe the process of creating comics implies that comics may be the necessary medium for discussing such ineffable matters. In the introduction to *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, Watterson comments, "People always ask how cartoonists come up with ideas, and the answer is so boring that we're usually tempted to make up something sarcastic." He goes on, "The truth is, we hold a blank sheet of paper, stare into space, and let our minds wander. (To the layman, this looks remarkably like goofing off)."<sup>10</sup> Despite verging on sarcasm at the end, Watterson's description of his creative process sounds frank enough; in his final strip, however, he states "the truth" much more vividly: cartoonists hold a glittering world of possibilities in their hands in the form of "a blank sheet of paper"; gazing into that wild white yonder, they set their imaginations free to go exploring. In their finished works, they invite readers to come along for the ride.

Medieval scribes did not have quite the creative license that cartoonists enjoy; instead, they were valued for their faithful copying of the original work of others: from the scriptural Word of God to the words of such mundane authorities as theologians, philosophers, historians, and poets. Nor could a scribe assert his originality in the style of his script, for scripts were identified both with textual genres (gothic *textura* for the liturgy, *bâtarde* for romances, for instance) and with national and regional customs. But if in the space of the authorial text block scribes were officially barred from acts of individual ingenuity that were visible as such, they did find a realm of possibilities in the space of the page as a material object, which, for most of the Middle Ages, was a sheet of parchment. Prepared from the skins of animals—usually of sheep, calves, or goats—every sheet of

parchment was different from the next, a terrain offering its own unique resistances or amenabilities to the flow of ink from pen. Even the two sides of a sheet of parchment were different, the "hair side" tending to be greasy and the "flesh side" over-absorbent. Beyond these characteristics of even the ideal sheet of parchment, a given sheet could also be marked by a variety of flaws—holes, cuts, and the mending campaigns they occasioned—presenting further challenges to a scribe's skill.<sup>11</sup> Faced with one of these irregularities, a scribe had two options: either to minimize it or to make the most of it by arranging the text so that the flaw contributed somehow to the text's meaning. And just as it presented a challenge to its scribe, any given flaw on a page in a medieval book presents a riddle to readers as well: has the scribe minimized the flaw or made full use of its possibilities?

In a particularly fascinating instance of scribal experimentation, a hole in a leaf of parchment not only enhances a theme in the text but also models a reader's mental journey through it. This productive hole occurs in the tenth leaf of a manuscript containing a thirteenth-century French *chanson de geste*, *Parise la duchesse* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France fr. 1374, referred to hereafter as BNF fr. 1374).<sup>12</sup> While offering much adventure fare, including treacherous vassals, jealous courtiers, a basket of poisoned apples, a kidnapping, an auspicious birthmark, a beneficent king, and a royal wedding, *Parise la duchesse* is essentially a tale of loss and recovery, for its primary plot concerns the separation and reunion of a mother and child, the duchess Parise and her son Huguez.<sup>13</sup> As is often the case in such narratives of relations lost and found, even when Parise and Huguez are finally in one another's presence, it takes a while for them to discover each other's identities, a delay the narrator draws out by dwelling upon each character's long suffering over the other's absence. In its instantiation in BNF fr. 1394, this episode occupies the recto and verso sides of folio 10, where its hole "dilates" it even further, intensifying readers' awareness of the proximity of Parise and Huguez to the fulfillment of their dreams even as the written narrative focuses on what they lack.

Parise is the first focus of attention in this revelatory episode, which begins to take shape just below the hole on folio 10 recto (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> Here, where the narrator portrays Parise regarding Huguez and marveling over his resemblance to her husband, a reader may clearly view the words "vostre fil" [your son] on folio 11 through the "window" in folio 10.<sup>15</sup> As the narrator goes on to stress Huguez's long absence in Parise's life, noting that she has not seen him for fifteen years, a reader's view of "vostre fil" on folio 11 opens up an even more touching "subtext" of the developing scene. In that auxiliary plot the book itself endeavors to restore Parise's loss, the "vostre fil" on folio 11 filling in the empty center of folio 10—the empty centers both in the parchment leaf and in Parise's knowledge—and virtually calling out "vostre fil!" as if to help her recognize her son. The composite view of folios 10 and 11 captures an impression of Huguez's state at this moment as well, for the word that follows "vostre fil" is "vueil" [wants]. Thus the full line on folio 11 visible through the gap in folio 10 reads "vostre fil vueil" [your son wants], effectively capturing Huguez's own want



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FIGURE 1. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fr. 1374, f. 10. Reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the editors of *Exemplaria* from Nancy Vine Durling, "Birthmarks and Bookmarks: The Example of a Thirteenth-Century French Anthology," *Exemplaria* 16.1 (2004), figure 4.

of a mother even as he stands in her presence: in the fictional world as well as in and through the corporeal lack of folio 10.

Turning folio 10 to read its verso side, a reader can now see folio 9 verso through the opening in folio 10, a composite view that focuses on Huguez's side of the story. That story has recently involved Huguez's abrupt departure from his adoptive father and from his fiancée (the king of Hungary and his daughter, respectively) which has brought him sorrowfully but fortuitously to this moment of imminent reunion with his long lost mother. In the text around the hole on folio 10's verso side, Parise asks Huguez to tell her where he was born and the name of his father. The text on folio 9 verso visible through the hole just adjacent to these lines is "le roi et sa fille" [the king and his daughter], portending an ongoing presence of the king of Hungary and his daughter in Huguez's life even as he believes he has lost them forever.<sup>16</sup> If we turn back to look at the whole of folio 9 verso—as opposed to what we can see of it through the hole in folio 10—we find that it narrates Huguez's leave-taking from the Hungarian court and that the phrase "le roi et sa fille," which is decontextualized in our view of it through the gap in folio 10, is part of the line "Saluez moi le roi et sa fille au vis cler" [Give greetings to the king and to his fair daughter].<sup>17</sup> Thus the very same words, literally, serve in Huguez's parting from the king and his fair daughter and, when seen from the perspective of folio 10 verso, insist that they are with him still. And indeed they are, for the details of the self-pitying tale Huguez relates in response to her question establish his identity for Parise, whereupon she exclaims, "Car me baisiez, biau fiz, por sainte charité!" [roughly, "Then kiss me, dear son, for the love of God!"], and the tale's happy ending unfolds from there.<sup>18</sup>

While this scribe's arrangement of text in relation to the opening in folio 10 works to emphasize the theme of loss and recovery within the fictional world of *Parise la duchesse*, it has an extradiegetic facet as well, in which it presents a model in parchment of a specific and implicitly visual aspect of readerly pleasure in a tale like *Parise la duchesse*, one in which at crucial moments readers know more than the characters do. Technically speaking, such episodes are instances of dramatic irony, a literary phenomenon that tends to be described as a matter of "levels." Thus Claire Colebrook speaks of dramatic irony situating audiences at "an almost God-like position," implicitly "above" the characters.<sup>19</sup> BNF fr. 1394 makes these metaphorical levels concrete, or, more accurately, it renders them in layers of parchment. In the dynamics of folio 10 in relation to its neighboring leaves, BNF fr. 1394 provides a visible, three-dimensional representation of a reader's mental transitions among the "layers" of any narrative, moving as their "openings" allow from a position on the same level as the characters to levels above or even below them. In this way, at the moment Parise ponders the resemblance of Huguez to her husband, an engaged reader (or listener) might well think, drawing upon his or her "deeper" knowledge of Parise's situation, "vostre fil, vostre fil!" And the same engaged reader or listener might juxtapose Huguez's self pity with the benefits he has received from his adoptive family—"le roi et sa fille"—and find Huguez wanting in more ways than he thinks. Ultimately, then, by providing a model of readers'



mental trajectories through a narrative, BNF fr. 1394 and its windowed tenth leaf provides a more radical insight still—one that would spring from a scribe's intimate knowledge of how pages function in books—that by virtue of its layered structure, a book is itself a tool for thinking.

By appropriating aspects of the physical materials of their media into the thematic "materials" of narrative, both Watterson and the scribe of *Parise la duchesse* enhance readers' experiences of the narratives on offer. To this extent, their materials serve as ingenious illustrations of their stories and so maintain the separate-and-unequal relation between word and image that pertains in, say, an illustrated encyclopedia. Both cartoonist and scribe do more, though: overlaying narrative upon substrate, they invite us to see the substrate through the "lens" of narrative. When we do, we find ourselves transported into a "magical world," a liminal dimension, somewhere between the conceptual world of fiction and the visible, tactile, perceptual world of real paper or parchment pages; along the way we also recognize that quasi-material, quasi-conceptual page-based space—a space we access by reading and seeing—as an environment and tool for creative exploring. As I show in the next section of this essay, areas of pages and the interactions among them serve as tools for innovative thinking as well.

Given that comics is essentially a "sequential art," as Will Eisner dubbed it, its page layout is largely a matter of panel layout, for a cartoonist guides a reader through a story by selecting panels' inclusions and then arranging them in an appropriate sequence.<sup>20</sup> While a page in a graphic novel may thus have at least as many signifying areas as it has panels, the generic page layout in medieval manuscripts consists of just two primary areas: center and margin. And while individual panels of comics customarily include both text and image, the two main areas of medieval pages tend to divide image away from text, giving text pride of place in the center of the page and relegating images to the margin.<sup>21</sup> Despite their differences in number, content, and function, though, the page divisions that typify comics and medieval manuscripts call forth similar imaginative work from their readers, work that entails bridging the boundaries between areas of the page, whether between center and margin or one panel and another. In the case of comics, the disjunct narrative elements presented in the panels require readers, comparing one panel to the next, to supply in their imaginations what happens between them. Furthermore, as Marion D. Perret has pointed out, "when the comics artist manipulates our imaginative involvement effectively, we do more than fill in gaps between pictured actions: we become co-creators of the story's meaning, which we therefore find relevant to us."<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, medieval book artists sometimes work to fortify readers' understanding and investment in a text by prompting them to work back and forth between center and margin—here between text and image rather than segments of narrative—divining for themselves the meaning that connects the material presented in each area.

Whether on a page of comics or a leaf of medieval parchment, the imaginative work that boundaries elicit depends upon their clear delineation by the writer and their proper nego-

tiation by the reader. In medieval manuscripts the center is for reading and the margins for looking; the generic pathway among comics panels, on the other hand, is to begin with the top row of panels on a page and work down, reading each row from left to right. But what happens when boundaries and protocols are themselves the problem a comic or a medieval page explores? In what follows, I examine one instance of medieval page layout from the Luttrell Psalter and several examples of a contemporary comics layout from C. Tyler's "Just A Bad Seed." Each of these works presents a struggle to resolve a problem that appears to entail erecting sturdy boundaries: Tyler depicts herself attempting to further her work as a cartoonist by separating her needs as an artist from the duties and pleasures of motherhood while in the Luttrell Psalter an aging medieval knight attempts to renounce his pride. As I show, Tyler and an anonymous medieval artist both create breaches in the boundaries between areas of the page and in doing so offer "in-between" solutions to these apparently intractable problems. In order for readers to discover those openings, they must adopt new ways of reading and seeing areas of the page.

By all accounts one of the most treasured legacies of medieval gothic art in England, the Luttrell Psalter (London, British Library Additional MS 42130) was made sometime between 1330 and 1345 for Sir Geoffrey Luttrell III (1276–1345), knight, baron, and owner of extensive estates in the English northeast midlands.<sup>23</sup> The manuscript's primary claim to fame rests in the wealth and astonishing variety of painted images in the margins of its pages: from scenes of everyday life (farming, sports, games, feasting, and so on) to fantastical creatures, which, as L. F. Sandler recounts, are "so huge in scale, so brilliant in colour, so vivid and yet so unreal" that one prominent art historian thought them "nightmarish and suggested that no sane man could have conceived them."<sup>24</sup> As unique and endlessly fascinating as these marginal images are, they are in keeping with a widespread phenomenon in Psalter manuscripts: the use of what Sandler calls "images of words."<sup>25</sup> These images often provide simple pictorial equivalents of words in the biblical text, but they may also take more complicated forms: images may be based, rebus-like, on individual syllables of the text, they may interpret a word metaphorically (the word "soul" may be represented by a picture of a bird, for instance) or an image may be constructed so as to represent more than one word in the text and hence have no immediately apparent connection to the text at all. In theory, the effort a reader undertakes in discovering the connection between the text and one of these more enigmatic images is rewarded, as Sandler has argued, with "a heightened and intensified experience of *reading*, through the discovery and appreciation of all the riches both apparent and concealed in the words."<sup>26</sup> Understood in this way, image, margin, and *seeing* perform their traditional "helper" roles in relation to text, center, and reading. At the same time, however, an image without an immediately clear relation to a text has a tendency to take on a life of its own, in which case the text may appear to illuminate the image rather than the other way around.

The ensemble of images that accompany a page of Psalm 88 in the Luttrell Psalter (f. 160r, Color Plate 2) are of precisely this ambivalent nature. On the right, outer side of the text

block, a rowboat is depicted as seen from above. Four men sit in the boat, two on each side, each clutching an oar. A rope extends from a loop in the boat's bow to two men who tug on it near the lower right corner of the text block. In the lower margin, a large snail appears to be moving to the left (towards the book's gutter), its head turned upward and to its right, towards the text. The snail here looks like a specimen of medieval natural history, the boat, rowers, and tuggers an example of the kind of "slice-of-medieval-life" image for which, along with its fantastical hybrid creatures, the Luttrell Psalter is so famous. A reader—medieval or modern—might well ask what they could possibly have to do with the text from Psalm 88 on this page. The answer to that question depends upon one's interpretive strategy: using the customary, text-"centered" protocol, they offer an enriched, orthodox understanding of this passage; seeing the text as itself an aspect of the image ensemble discloses a message that has to do with how to get out of a tug-of-war, a sense of the passage that may have been particularly relevant to the Psalter's redemption-seeking owner and patron Sir Geoffrey Luttrell.

The conventional strategy for interpreting these images of words is to work back and forth from margin to center, playing a kind of matching game, the goal of which is to disclose evermore significance in the text. Starting at the top of this page, we can quickly match the following words and phrases with images in the margin: "mare" [the sea, Ps. 88.13], "brachium cum potencia" [powerful arm, Ps. 88.14], and "sedis tuae" [your seat, Ps. 88.15].<sup>27</sup> Together these lexical items yield the image to their right: the men seated in a boat, who use their strong arms to row through the sea. The two men pulling on the rope present more of a riddle, but seeing that they are nearly level on the page with the words "misericordia et veritas" [mercy and truth, Ps. 88.15], we may venture to read them as Mercy and Truth personified. As for the snail, we may take a first clue from the phrase towards which it appears to turn its gaze: "lumine vultus tui" [the light of thy countenance, Ps. 88.16]. Taking into account the snail's traditional association with humility (among other things), we may conclude that this snail portrays the humbling yet illuminating effect of divine light.<sup>28</sup> Together these word-image correspondences emphasize key points in this passage of scripture: God is mighty, the maker of the sea and all things, and a source of blessings, in the form of mercy, truth, and divine effulgence.

But many details in these images find no ready match in the text and thus seem to have their own story to tell, a story that is only tangentially related to the Psalter text on this page. First, as Michael Camille has pointed out, given the direction the men in the boat face, they must be rowing away from the two men pulling the rope, an insight that suddenly transforms this image into one depicting resistance to Mercy and Truth.<sup>29</sup> The text on the bottom of the facing page mentions "the proud one" (Ps. 88.11); might these rowers be figures of pride, or of any proud one in particular? Noting that elsewhere in the manuscript, Sir Geoffrey is depicted wearing a hat just like the one worn by the man sitting in the front of the boat on the side closest to the text, Michelle Brown proposed that this particular rower should be seen as Sir Geoffrey and argued that the other rowers ought to be seen as his

sins, who aid and abet him in resisting Mercy and Truth.<sup>30</sup> In the light of this interpretation, Sir Geoffrey and his sins would also appear to be rowing against the current of the sacred text as it flows down the page; instead, they pridefully muscle their way upwards, towards the top of the page and the "north" on the page—the word "aquilonem" (Ps. 88.13)—the north being the region associated in the Middle Ages with the Devil, Lucifer in particular.<sup>31</sup> Brown's caption for a reproduction of this page in *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* sums up the apparent drama in this marginal story perfectly; it reads, "A Visual allegory of Sir Geoffrey's spiritual struggle to do his duty."<sup>32</sup> Given what we know of this socially ambitious patriarch and battle-proven man of arms, Sir Geoffrey's "duty" would presumably be to abandon his "high" knightly and dynastic pride and bring himself "down" to the humility of a snail: an obligation that would indeed involve a struggle.<sup>33</sup>

But this narrative of conflict between quite opposite tendencies proceeds from a "reading" of the image in the margin that touches very little on the text at the center, and like the word-image matching game I described above, it maintains a clear boundary between these two areas of the page. The implications of two further features of the boat image point to a breach in that boundary, however, opening up a way of truly reading and seeing the text and image together and revealing a channel for Sir Geoffrey's salvation that lies "in between" the pride of Lucifer and the lowliness of a mollusk. The first of these features is the boat's presentation from an aerial perspective. According to the visual logic of this point of view, most of the page would be water, upon which both text and boat would float; indeed, the fish in the line filler at the end of the page's penultimate line would mark a fishy water's edge and the beginning of the land, upon which Mercy and Truth walk and where the snail would also dwell. Viewed in this way, Sir Geoffrey is at sea, and rather than constituting a radically separate signifying domain, the text of the Psalm is part of his seascape. Given this sighting of the boat and text together on the same (maritime) surface, a second feature of the boat image stands out: Sir Geoffrey's position on its right-hand, or starboard side. The word "starboard" derives from Old English "stéorbord," steering board, or rudder. Its association with the right side of a boat goes back to the physics of paddling a canoe-like vessel: when a right-handed person steers such a craft, he or she naturally steers over the right-hand side; since there are more right-handed than left-handed paddlers, the "steering" side of a boat came to be equivalent with the right-hand side. When rudders—"stéorbords"—were developed, they were affixed to the right, now termed "starboard" side of a boat to accommodate the prevalence of right-handed people.<sup>34</sup>

The boat of folio 160 is rudderless (noteworthy in itself) but our aerial perspective makes it pointedly clear, nevertheless, that Geoffrey is sitting on its steering side as does the "sin" behind him. That rower touches the syllable "ex" with his oar, indicating that he steers Sir Geoffrey's boat "from" God, for "nomine tuo" (thy name, Ps. 88.13) are the words that precede the syllable "ex" in that line. By contrast, Sir Geoffrey looks towards the text out of the corner of his eyes while his oar touches a line filler that occupies a space between two phrases in the Psalm's fourteenth verse: "tuum brachium cum potencia" [Thy arm is with

might] and "firmetur manus tua et exaltetur dextera tua" [Let thy hand be strengthened, and thy right hand exalted]. In this way, Sir Geoffrey's oar, positioned on the steering side of his boat, reaches out for the aid of a specifically right—and hence steering—arm of divine power. The Middle English verb "steren" [to steer] appears frequently in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century metaphors for governance, including in references to divine governance.<sup>35</sup> In an early version of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1376), for instance, a friar describes human life in seafaring terms, explaining that in the midst of the great waves of worldly trouble and temptation, a person can depend upon God's love to steer his soul.<sup>36</sup> Read and seen in this way, folio 160 offers Sir Geoffrey (and anyone else caught in a similar situation) a passage between the "great waves" of pride and abject humility: to rely on divine governance. Moreover, that opening appears by virtue of an interpretive strategy that (sea) levels the traditional hierarchy between areas of the page: that is, between the "pride" of the center text and the "humility" of the marginal image.

Contemporary comics artist C. Tyler portrays herself caught in a bind in her story "Just a Bad Seed," which appears in her recent book *Late Bloomer*.<sup>37</sup> Tyler's dedication for the book states the conflict in broad terms:

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ANYONE WHO HAS DEFERRED A DREAM DUE TO RAISING CHILDREN OR CAREGIVING, OR HAS EXPERIENCED A SIGNIFICANT SETBACK . . . THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE POSSIBILITIES THAT LIE WITHIN ALL OF US. THIS BOOK IS A CELEBRATION OF US LATE BLOOMERS.<sup>38</sup>

"Just a Bad Seed" depicts Tyler in the thick of being forced to defer her own dream "due to raising children": specifically, her daughter Julia, who looks to be around two years old in this strip. The strip's plot covers roughly a twenty-four-hour period, beginning with a scene in which Julia cries out to her mother at night because she is afraid of the sunflowers outside her bedroom window and fearful about daycare the next day (Color Plate 3 shows the second page of this scene). It turns next to depict a traumatic morning at daycare for Julia and an unsuccessful stint of cartooning for Tyler at home. The story ends with Tyler showing Julia that she has cut down the sunflowers that were scaring her during the night; in the strip's last panel Julia playfully mimics a sunflower plant, calling "Look mama! I'm a sunflower!"<sup>39</sup> Told in this way, the story works almost like a medieval exemplum: Julia's nighttime fears and exposure to the distresses of daycare might warn all mothers against even trying to do any creative work beyond parenting; Julia's happy "sunflower dance" at the end shows that a child grows best under her own mother's care. Clearly the resolution to the conflict that pulls Tyler in two directions is to give up her needs as an artist and devote herself solely to her child. Told by Tyler in the medium of comics, however, the story also hints that her negotiation of this conflict is always already a work of art.

Tyler's management of the areas of this strip's pages sets up the ostensibly "either-or" quality of her predicament: overlaying blocks of panels on a sequence of telling backgrounds, she constructs a rigid boundary between inside—home and mothering—and outside—career and daycare—a boundary she breaks down on the strip's final page. In this way, on

the facing pages just before that final page, Tyler makes use of an agonistic relationship among panels and backgrounds to bring the no-win agony of daycare for both herself and her daughter to a moment of crisis. On the left side of the opening, two vertical columns of panels present Tyler's and Julia's days unfolding side by side: in the left column (Color Plate 4), Tyler sits outside on a lawn chair, frustrated over not being able to "think of any gags" despite the "perfectly gorgeous day with child care"; in the right column, Julia throws her food at the table and then has a bladder "accident."<sup>40</sup> Tyler narrates Julia's accident as a matter of her movement from inside to outside: in the lower panel of the vertical column depicting the progression of events at daycare, Trudy, the daycare provider, says exasperatedly, "Here we go again. Peeing on my clean floor for spite" and points her finger towards Julia, who is now depicted outside the panel in the lower margin near the gutter of the two facing pages, hand to crotch with a tell-tale yellow puddle spilling all the way into the white space outside the margin. Above her, Trudy's sunflower wallpaper has become a mass of angry-faced flowers, glaring down through a zig-zag of red bars that converge on the indignant, yet tearful Julia. On the next page, a monstrous-looking Trudy gives Julia a spanking, accentuated in classic comics style by the word "SMACK" inside a splash of yellow. In the last panel on the page, Trudy calls Tyler on the phone, tells her that Julia is "Just a *bad seed*" and, adding insult to injury, quips that she has "nicer kids on the waiting list . . . whose parents pay on time."<sup>41</sup> Here the panels' background is a crazy quilt of fabric patterns, some with trite printed sayings ("If friends were flowers I'd pick you!" and "Sunshine is love") evoking the bewildering patchwork of methods and messages that frames many a contemporary childhood.

On the last page of the strip, Tyler and Julia are together again in domestic bliss. It is evening once more; in the background a crescent moon rides in the midnight blue sky while mother and daughter laugh and giggle about the evil Trudy inside the house. In the midst of the hilarity, Julia points to the window, saying "uh-oh. where's them?" and in the next panel we get a view from inside Julia's room of the once-menacing sunflowers, which are now only stems, their scary "faces" having been lopped off. Tyler beckons to Julia to come outside, and in the next "panel," which lacks a right-hand border and thus opens seamlessly onto the yard outside of the house—the "background" of the block of panels—Tyler shows Julia the two cut sunflowers set out on a table while Julia ponders the sunflower stems she had noticed from the inside of her room. In the strip's penultimate panel, Tyler eats a sunflower seed, and the strip concludes with her sunflower daughter dancing in a space where inside and outside merge. In the strip's denouement, then, the bad sunflower that was the sign for Julia of all that was "outside" the comforts of mother and home has been cut off, making its naturally good seed available for taking in as nourishing food, at the same time releasing Tyler's figurative "bad seed" (Julia) to happily grow and blossom. All that is missing is space for Tyler's art—or is it?

A beginning answer to this question is the art on the page before us: *Late Bloomer* is itself a testimony that although Tyler's devotion to her daughter may have delayed her own artis-



tic development, it did not cause it to wither away. While the book's very publication provides tangible evidence of Tyler's eventual ability to bloom where she was planted, there is something going on in the backgrounds both inside and outside some of the panels of "Just a Bad Seed" that helps us readers fill in the gap between this image of toddler-bound motherhood and the picture of successful cartoonist the book itself supplies. In fact, there is an allusion to that "something" on the strip's first page: a seemingly off-hand remark Tyler makes about Van Gogh. In the final panel on that page, Julia demands that her mother cut the sunflowers down "right now!" to which Tyler responds, "They do look kinda spooky in the moonlight. And I believe they drove Van Gogh nuts."<sup>42</sup> Considering the second (Color Plate 3) and final pages of the strip with this remark in mind, we find this apparent story of Tyler's capitulation to her duties as a mother infused with the aura of Van Gogh. The rich blue executed in broad, visible brush strokes in the backgrounds of the page's last panels stands out as the signature of Van Gogh's technique while the palette of these whole pages, complete with night sky and crescent moon, recall several of his most well-known paintings, "Starry Night," "Road with Cypress and Star," and "Café Terrace at Night." The most striking yet subtle Van Gogh allusion is on the strip's final page: a reference to his painting "Two Cut Sunflowers." Looking at the sunflowers Tyler has laid out on the backyard table, we can see Van Gogh's painting as if from its "verso" side and recognize that from Tyler's perspective inside the panel, she is looking at the materials of Van Gogh's still life as if ready for her to paint. Whether or not sunflowers "drove Van Gogh nuts," we can see on this last page of Tyler's "Just a Bad Seed" that Tyler kept her own artistic sanity over the years by seeing every aspect of her life through an artist's eyes rather than by compartmentalizing—or panel-izing—it into times for art and times for Julia.

For both Tyler and the Luttrell Psalter artist, boundaries between areas of the page serve to formulate problems while artful disintegrations of those boundaries open up solutions that entail new ways of looking both at the page and at the original problematic situation: for Tyler, daily life with her daughter becomes art rather than what keeps her from it; for Sir Geoffrey, divine power is a guiding rather than subjugating force. Looking back, Watterson and the scribe of BNF fr. 1394 are boundary workers as well: incorporating the material features of the page into the pictorial or linguistic subjects it carries, both artists merge substrate and representational content, two strata of the page that are conventionally distinct. In doing so, they invite readers to reflect upon the visual and spatial qualities of the cognitive processes involved in both the production and enjoyment of the page at hand. Thus all four artists I have considered in this essay put the page on display as a dimension in which matter and mimesis may interact to open up a "magical world" whose channels, layers, compartments, and open spaces support and reflect back to us the very material or structural aspects of all imaginative work, whether by medieval scribes and painters, by contemporary cartoonists, or by the readers of all of the above. And while my analyses of these pages demonstrates the transhistorical affinities of these artists, readers, and the imaginative processes they engage, they also offer the page as a model object of an expanded humanist inquiry: an object that we examine for what it shows as well as for what it says

and, beyond that, for the kind of creative thinking its alchemical compound of substrate and representation supports.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Preface," in *The Best American Comics 2007*, edited by Chris Ware (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2007) xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of the Duchess, Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987) lns. 326, 333.

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of the Duchess* ln. 332.

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of the Duchess* ln. 338.

<sup>5</sup> "Introduction," in *The Best American Comics 2007*, xix.

<sup>6</sup> The letter appeared in papers on November 9; for its complete text, see *The Derkins Library* for Calvin and Hobbes Research, <http://ignatz.brinkster.net/cwords.html>, accessed 10 May 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo with the late Walter Blair (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003) 362.

<sup>8</sup> "Sliding is king of hills," *The Boston Globe* 5 January 1996, city edition: Sports, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning in 1992, the Sunday *Calvin and Hobbes* ran as a half-page feature in some newspapers, a development Watterson discusses in *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (Kansas City, MO: Universal Press Syndicate, 1996) 14–16.

<sup>10</sup> *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* 19.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher De Hamel describes the features of parchment, including the distinction between hair and flesh sides, steps in its preparation, and the causes and repair of holes, in *Scribes and Illuminators* (London: British Library: 1992) 8–16.

<sup>12</sup> *Chansons de geste* (literally, songs of heroic deeds) are among the earliest examples of French literature and were composed in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. *Parise* has been edited by May Plouzeau in *Parise la duchesse* (Aix-en-provence: Publications du Cierma, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> For more details on the plot of *Parise la duchesse* and on BNF fr. 1374 together with another reading of its hole, see Nancy Vine Durling, "Birthmarks and Bookmarks: The Example of a Thirteenth-Century French Anthology," *Exemplaria* 16.1 (2004): 73–94.

<sup>14</sup> The curatorial convention for medieval manuscripts is to number their physical leaves rather than each side of the leaf; thus the front side—the side that appears on the right-hand side of an open book—is referred to as the "recto" side, and the other, reverse side as the "verso."

<sup>15</sup> *Parise la duchesse* ln. 1574, all translations of this text are mine.

<sup>16</sup> *Parise la duchesse* ln. 1306.

<sup>17</sup> *Parise la duchesse* ln. 1306.

<sup>18</sup> *Parise la duchesse* ln. 1489.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004) 14.

<sup>20</sup> On this controlling function of panels, see Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, expanded edition (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse, 2005) 40–41.

<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to medieval page layout, see Barbara A. Shailor, *The Medieval Book: Illustrated from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991) 13–18.

<sup>22</sup> Marion D. Perret, "And Suit the Action to the Word": How a Comics Panel Can Speak Shakespeare," in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001) 136.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* (London: British Library, 2006) 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Gothic Manuscripts 1285–1385* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 2.120. The art historian whom Sandler mentions as doubting the sanity of the Luttrell Psalter artist (or artists) is E. G. Millar, who published the earliest detailed study of the manuscript, *The Luttrell Psalter* (London: British Museum, 1932).

<sup>25</sup> Sandler discusses this tradition in "The Word in the Text and the Image in the Margin," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 54 (1996): 87–99; and in "The Images of Words in English Gothic Psalters," in *Studies in the Illustration of the Psalter*, edited by Brendan Cassidy and Rosemary Muir Wright (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000) 67–85. See also Mary Carruthers' earlier discussion of such images in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1990) 226–42.

<sup>26</sup> "The Word in the Text and the Image in the Margin" 97 (emphasis in the original). Here Sandler stresses "reading" as opposed to listening to or memorizing the text.

<sup>27</sup> Using Vulgate numbering and the Douay-Rheims translation, *The Holy Bible; Translated from the Latin Vulgate . . . Douay, A. D. 1609; Rheims A. D. 1582* (New York: Beiziger, 1914). My readings in this paragraph draw from Sandler, "The Word in the Text and the Image in the Margin," 95–97; Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 168–69; and Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* 17.

<sup>28</sup> On snails in medieval symbolism, see Camille, *Mirror in Parchment* 168–69.

<sup>29</sup> *Mirror in Parchment* 168. Camille credits Eric Millar as having noticed this first.

<sup>30</sup> *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* 17.

<sup>31</sup> A *locus classicus* for linking the north with Lucifer is Isaiah 14.13–14.

<sup>32</sup> *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* 19.

<sup>33</sup> For a biography of Sir Geoffrey, see Brown's *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* 12–19.

<sup>34</sup> Drawing from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and "Why do sailors say 'port' and 'starboard,' for 'left' and 'right'?" at the National Maritime Museum website, <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/server/show/conWeb.Doc.17900>, accessed 9 July 2008.

<sup>35</sup> *Middle English Dictionary* (Regents of the U of Michigan, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, accessed 30 June 2008, s.v. "steren."

<sup>36</sup> *Piers Plowman: The A Version, Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-Well*, ed. G. Kane (London: Athlone P, 1960) 9.42.

<sup>37</sup> *Late Bloomer* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005) 69–74. The story also appeared in *The Best American Comics 2007*, 33–38.

<sup>38</sup> *Late Bloomer* 9, capitals in original.

<sup>39</sup> *Late Bloomer* 74.

<sup>40</sup> *Late Bloomer* 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Late Bloomer* 73, ellipses in original.

<sup>42</sup> *Late Bloomer* 69.

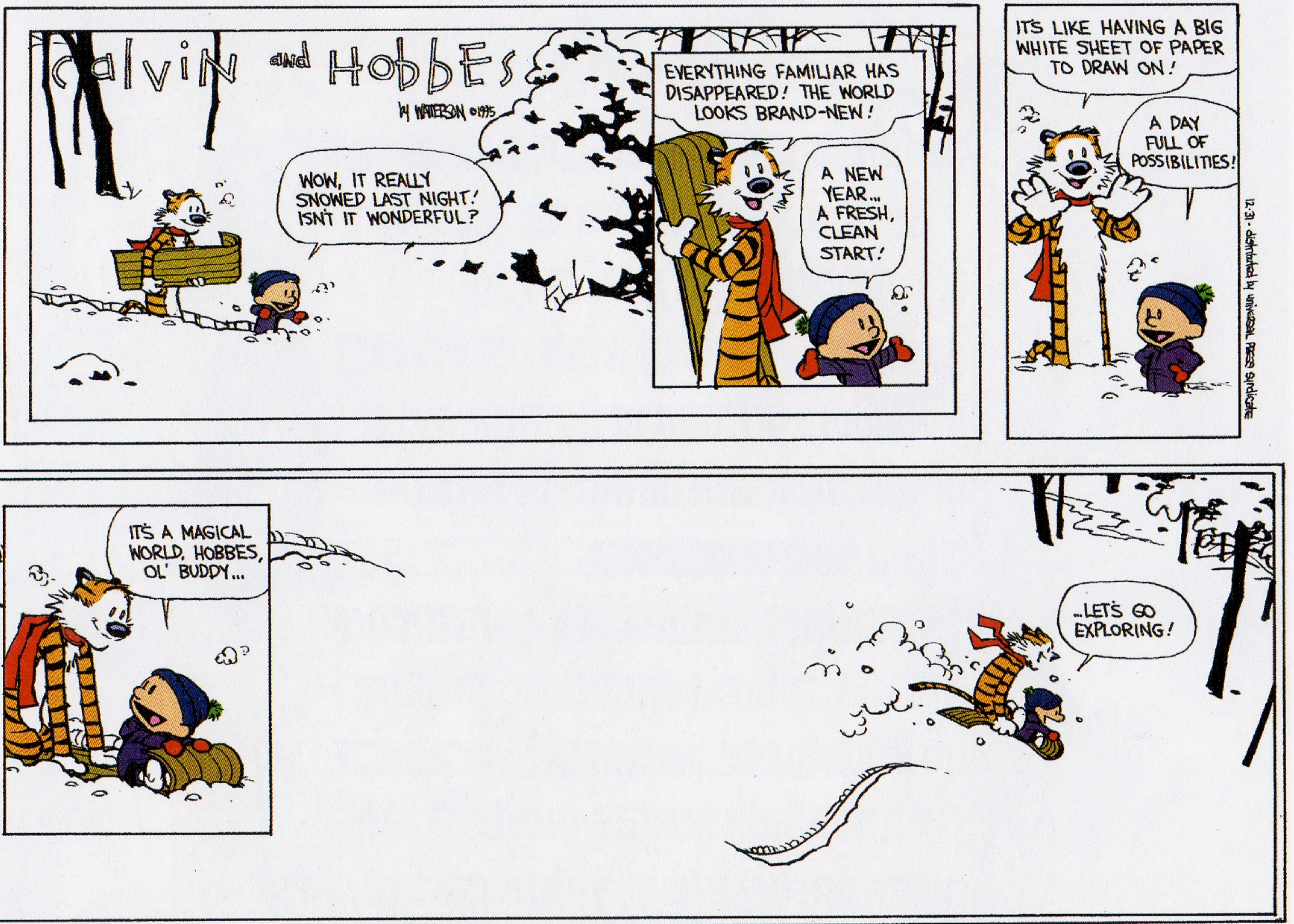
## WHAT IS GRAPHIC ABOUT GRAPHIC NOVELS?

JOHANNA DRUCKER

Is there a difference between a graphic novel and some of the apparently close cognates to the form such as illustrated books, comics, 'zines, artists' books, and *livres d'artistes*? Do precedents for graphic novels exist *avant la lettre* or are they a phenomenon produced uniquely in contemporary culture? If so, what distinguishes them within a field of other productions where text and image relations work to produce meaning? In graphic novels, the dual formalisms of literary and graphic expression articulate narrative in an integrated system that is extensive and immersive. They make use of characteristics of visual materiality that are enhanced by recent developments in print technology and other forms of mass visual culture. In scope and intensity, they suggest a new dimension of storytelling. Graphic novels synthesize the language of cinema, the sensibilities of contemporary literature, and the appeal of mass media in a format that calls attention to artistry and technique. Rather than operate in the one-off mode of fine art production, graphic novels are the realization of the vision of the democratic art form once trumpeted by champions of the artist's book, works of art that circulate widely and freely in consumer culture even as their sensibility keeps open a place for counterculture sensibilities within the mainstream.

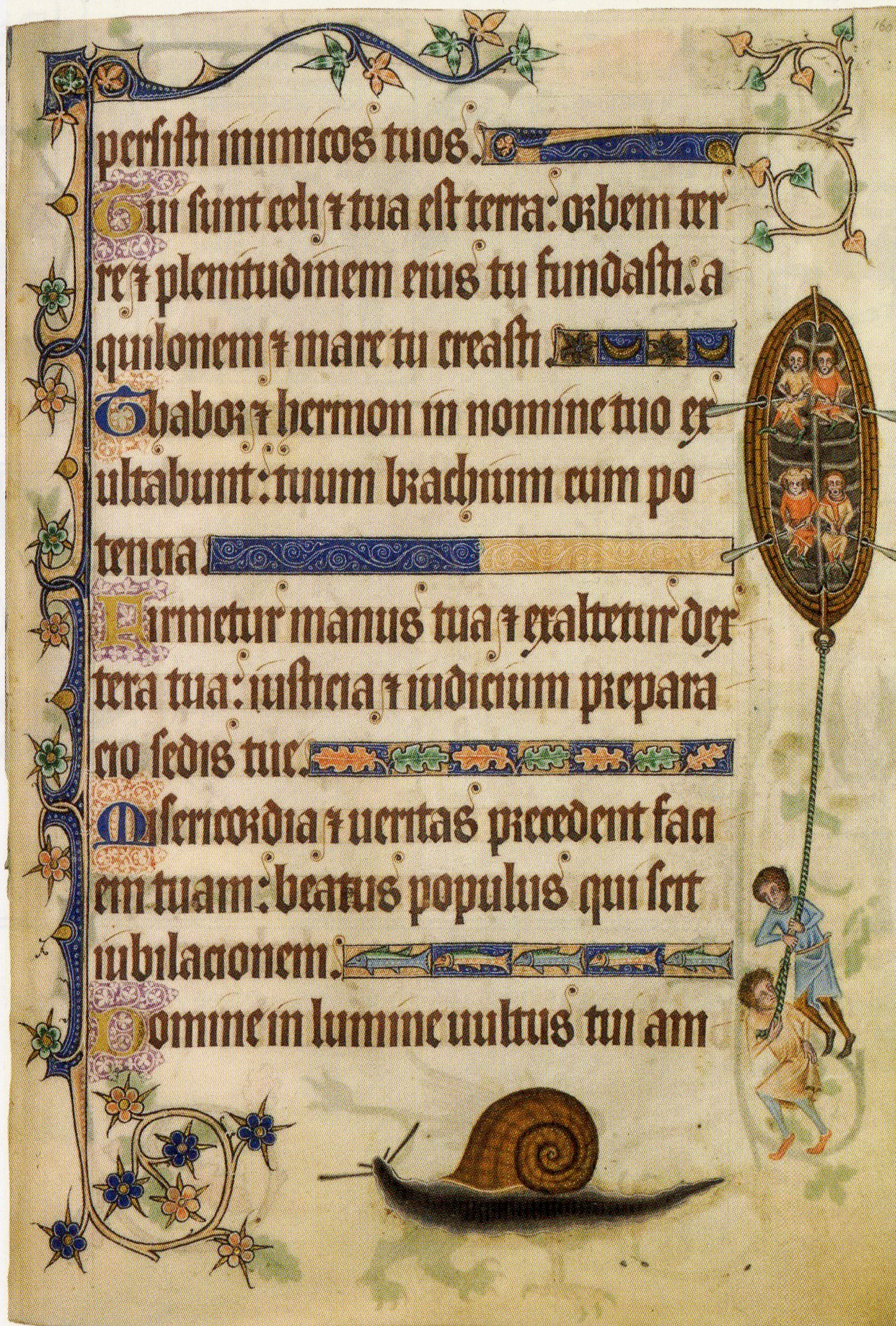
We can approach graphic novels in several ways, none of which are mutually exclusive. We can use a formal structural analysis, elaborating the elements and relations in graphic systems through a semiotic point of view. That allows us to relate the graphical features to elements of narrative such as story, plot, discourse, and enunciation while attending to their visual properties. We can frame graphic works through an understanding of technology and media of production that connect them to publication traditions and their separate social spheres of influence and activity. That allows us to distinguish graphic novels from illustrated books, fine art press publishing, mass culture artifacts, artist-initiated publications, or subculture expressions. In spite of the legacies on which they draw, graphic novels are uniquely contemporary phenomena for reasons that combine technological opportunity and cultural disposition. We can engage cognitive studies approaches to reading and narrative, extending earlier perceptual theories of gestalt psychology that also inform graphic and diagrammatic information design, while borrowing art historical vocabulary for discussion of image composition, technique, idiomatic expression, and cultural values and ideology. The reader-subject of graphic novels has characteristics in common with literary





**COLOR PLATE 1.** *Calvin and Hobbes*, December 31, 1995 *Calvin and Hobbes* ©1995 Watterson. Reprinted by permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.





**COLOR PLATE 2.** The Luttrell Psalter, f. 160 ©British Library Board. All Rights Reserved London, British Library. Additional MS 42130.









**COLOR PLATE 4.** From "Just a Bad Seed," p. 72—detail of 73 ©2008 C. Tyler from *Late Bloomer: Stories by C. Tyler*, Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, WA. Used by permission.