

## Hybrids Playing Musical Instruments as Depicted in Medieval Manuscripts

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### Abstract

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*Hybridity has appeared throughout history in art, music, and literature. This paper focuses on human/animal hybrids playing medieval musical instruments. The data collected for this study consists of forty-six examples spanning from 1109-1510. Research shows that there is commonality among the depictions of hybrid forms and the musical instruments they are playing. These include the types of instruments, the hybrids, and the use of colors. Although research exists on both hybrids and medieval musical instruments, none seems to exist on the topic of hybrids playing medieval musical instruments. This study emphasizes the similarities that appear in data spanning a 400-year period and the importance of this topic in both history and musicology.*

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**Keywords:** musical instruments, hybrids, medieval manuscripts, history, musicology

Hybridity has appeared throughout history in art, music, and literature. Grotesque as defined in the dictionary is fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature. It would seem that since the beginning of time, humankind has been fixated with the grotesque. The focus of this study is on human/animal hybrids playing medieval musical instruments. This data set includes forty-six examples dating from 1109-1510 taken from both sacred and secular texts. Although research has been done on both hybrids and medieval musical instruments, none seems to exist on the topic of hybrids playing musical instruments as depicted in medieval bestiaries, Books of Hours, and literary manuscripts. Books of Hours were popular in the medieval period for private devotional use. These books contained the prayers that were to be recited at the canonical hours of the day. Eighteen of the forty-six examples in this data set come from Books of Hours. The imagery found in the religious texts were often inspired by another type of medieval text, the Bestiary. Bestiaries were popular in the Middle Ages and provided the reader with images of animals, both real and imaginary, accompanied by text that described the imagery. Through this project, attention will be brought to hybrids playing musical instruments as depicted in medieval manuscripts to kindle interest in a new area of historical and musicological research.

### Literature Review

Sandra Pietrini's (2017) article *The Parody of Musical Instruments in Medieval Iconography* addresses the hysterical appearance of musical instruments during the Medieval period. An example of this parodying of the instruments would be a jawbone played as a violin with tongs for a bow. Another author that addresses the presence of musical instruments in medieval art is Christopher Page (1977). His article, *Biblical Instruments in Medieval Manuscript Illustrations*, discusses the sources from which medieval iconographers took their information on what instruments looked like. The source discussed most here is Jerome's Epistle to Dardanus entitled *De Diversis Generibus Musicarum*.

*Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* by Sophie Page (2017) offers a window into the presence of magic in Medieval manuscripts, whether it be in the imagery of witchcraft, diagrams to find treasures, or the incantations for love. Research also exists on how medieval manuscripts came into being. An informative example of this is *Stages of Execution: Procedures of Illumination as Revealed in an Unfinished Book of Hours* by Robert G. Calkins (1978). This article highlights the process of how manuscripts were illuminated in the medieval period. Furthermore, this article's main focus is on a Book of Hours which is one of the common types of medieval manuscripts to contain hybrid creatures playing musical instruments.

Ten examples in the data set appear in books of poetry. As each manuscript was unique and being produced for a special purpose, the margins of these manuscripts were often illustrated with the characters and objects being described in the text. Not only are these illustrations found in books of poetry, but they can also be found in encyclopedias, books of history, fictional stories from the time period, and even the artwork of a church ceiling. In this research, examples are taken from each of the aforementioned sources.

### **Musical Instruments in Medieval Life**

Musical instruments existed in the early modern world, but not in the same way that they figure in today's society. In the article *A Panoply of Medieval, Renaissance: Instruments for and Baroque Music* (1979), there is discussion of how instruments were used as accompaniment for poetry, often the performer would improvise (38). Music played a major part in the Catholic Church during the medieval period. Prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, little information is available about secular music and the role it played in daily life. What is known about secular music is that musical instruments such as the harp, the vielle, bagpipes, flutes, and shawms were used to accompany dancing. These instruments also all make an appearance in the illustrations in the medieval manuscripts selected for use in this study.

In his article *Musical Instruments in Medieval Psalm Commentaries and Psalters*, James McKinnon (1968) addresses the issues with the assumption that the reference of musical instruments in the Psalm texts and their depiction in iconography means they had a liturgical usage. He goes on to say that further examination of those instruments provides proof that no other instrument besides the organ was used to accompany liturgical music. Furthermore, he says that the musical instruments referenced in the Psalm commentaries are allegorical references to the actual instruments in the Psalm texts, and that in many cases the allegorical references made their way into other literature from the period (10-12). We can't know for sure what the authors of the Psalms, The Old Testament, and the Psalm commentaries meant by the references to musical instruments in their writings.

### **Mermaids and Sirens**

What is known for sure is that musical instruments appear throughout the margins of both sacred and secular texts as well as in central artwork. The earliest example in this data set is depicted on the ceiling of St. Martin's Church in Switzerland. The church has 153 images painted on the wooden ceiling. Three of the tiles depict split tailed mermaids playing musical instruments. They play a harp, a bowed string instrument, and a horn. The bowed string instrument is either a vielle or rebec. The uncertainty lies in the shape of the instrument body and the number of strings. It has the pear-shaped body of a rebec but only three strings which is within the number range of strings that would be found on a vielle. The horn appears to be a ram's horn or other natural horn held with both hands and curving upwards towards the sky. In a bestiary made in Northern Italy around 1290 and held at the Morgan Library as MS M.459, mermaids with split tails appear on fol. 8r. One plays a horn that is quite similar to that of the mermaid found on the church ceiling. The other mermaid with a musical instrument in the imagery is shown playing a harp decorated with the head of an animal.

The appearance of the female hybrids in groupings of three occurs multiple times in this research. A grouping of three mermaids appears in *The Book of Treasures* dating from 1230-1294. Currently held at the National Library of Russia as Fr. F. v. III, 4, this text is recognized as the first encyclopedia written in English. In the image three mermaids play a rebec, a horn, and a harp. Differing from the mermaids found on the church ceiling and in the bestiary, these mermaids have a single tail and fin like feet. At the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Ms. 3516, a book of poetry from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, three hybrids are depicted together in a miniature. One does not have a musical instrument. The other two are playing a horn and a harp. These creatures have different body types. The one playing the harp appears to have a fish body on her lower half, while the one playing the horn has the body of a bird for her lower half. This imagery of a bird body for the lower half is similar to the sirens described in Homer's *The Odyssey*.

These bird/human sirens appear in a grouping of three in MS Bodl.602 on fol. 10r, a bestiary held at the Bodleian Library from the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Like the previously discussed grouping, one of the three is not depicted with a musical instrument while the other two play a harp and an aulos. An aulos is an ancient Greek wind instrument with multiple pipes and tone holes to change the pitches. These sirens have defined bird features on their lower half and have extended wings coming out of their hips.

Two mermaids with a single tail appear in *le livre des échecs de l'amour moralisé*, a text about courtly love, held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France as Français 143. These mermaids appear similar to the ones found in *The Book of Treasures* although it was created almost 200 years later between 1495-98. The mermaid in the foreground has a single tail and fin like feet. She is holding a lute in one hand and plays a straight trumpet. In the background of the image, another mermaid plays a natural trumpet. On fol. 15r of *Les abus du monde* from 1510, held at the Morgan Library as MS.42, a hybrid female with the body of a bird, tale of a dragon, and upper half of a human holds a harp in one hand and a straight trumpet in the other. Like the one hybrid from *le livre des échecs de l'amour moralisé*, this creature holds two very different instruments and the similarity of the depiction of the straight trumpet is striking. The colors of this image are quite vibrant. The hybrid is richly colored with browns and golds while the background is a rich blue.

Two creatures different from any so far discussed can be found on fol. 23v of MS 526, a book of poetry from 1300, held at the Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon. One creature is a mermaid playing the violin while the other has a birdlike tail, lower body of a lion, wings at the waist, and is playing the harp. This mermaid, unlike the previous discussed examples, is not shown in water. The use of vibrant background color is similar to that of MS 3516 and *The Book of Treasures*. Another instance of a mermaid out of water appears in the margin of MS.63(96.MR.17), a manuscript titled *The Fate of Illustrious Men and Women*. This particular example appears on fol. 282 which is the page tells the story of the death of Brunhilde, Queen of France. This mermaid again appears out of water, with wings coming out of her back and playing a harp. Her tail is blue while her wings are a vibrant combination of red and green.

Continuing with another pair of creatures found in a Book of Hours, MS 662 is held at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. Created between 1450-75, in the margins of fol. 21r is shown a Melusine and a lionlike hybrid. The Melusine plays the vielle while the lion hybrid plays a shawm. A Melusine is a mythological creature similar to a mermaid with a serpent or fish body for the lower half. In this depiction, the Melusine is not in the water although her lower half is a vibrant blue color. Rather than appearing with her hair down as other female hybrids often do, this one has a red turban like headdress with a long piece of fabric extending down her back. The other creature that appears in this manuscript has the body of a lion including the tail and all four feet. Where the head of the animal should be is a male face. Above this face is the upper half of a human female.

### **Oddities**

Delving into the more absurd examples, on fol. 16r of *Les vœux paon*, a literary manuscript from c. 1350 held at the Morgan Library as MS G.24, a mermaid appears in the margin playing a jawbone as a violin and using a pair of tongs for a bow. This creature and its makeshift musical instrument are far from the most absurd thing to appear in this manuscript. In several instances the lower half of a human appears in the margins, playing a bagpipe with the anus. These appear on fols. 65r, 82r, and 136v. A swan like creature with a human head at the end of the long neck appears on fol. 24v, playing the straight trumpet. The most absurd creature appears on fol. 18v depicted as an anus playing a bagpipe with a serpent body and human head wearing a crown.

Further examples of hybrids playing bagpipes can be found in two different Books of Hours. MS M.919 from c. 1418 contains three examples of bagpipe playing hybrids while MS. M.26 contains one example. Both manuscripts are held at The Morgan Library. Looking at the examples in MS M.919, on fol. 7r a half horse half man plays a bagpipe. The horse lower half is vibrant pink, his tunic is vibrant blue, and the bagpipe is a golden color. On fol. 83r the upper half of a man wears a hat with bat wings and plays a red bagpipe. Similar to the previous example, the tunic here is also vibrant blue. On fol. 136v a merman plays a white bagpipe. His tail is gold and blue while his tunic is pink. Take now the example found in M.26 on fol. 115v, here a half cat, half man hybrid plays a purplish gray colored bagpipe. Although partly covered by a cloak, this creature is wearing a blue tunic similar to those found in MS M.919.

### **Snail Hybrids**

Another strange hybrid type found in this data set is the multiple instances of snail/human hybrids that exist in both sacred and secular texts. In both types of manuscripts, these hybrids are depicted with books that appear to be of a musical nature. Three examples of this appear in the marginal decoration of *Le Livre des hystoires du Mirouer du monde* a secular manuscript from the 15<sup>th</sup> century that discusses history, held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France as Français 328. On fols. 26r, 26v, and 31r the snail human hybrids each appear with either a book or a roll of music. The presence of the music would indicate that these hybrids sing. The other example of this type of hybrid appears in the margins of a Book of Hours from 1420-1425 held at The Morgan Library as MS M.1004. On fol. 168r a snail/human hybrid appears wearing a wolfskin on its heading and reading from a book of music.

### **Animal Hybrids**

MS M.1004 also contains a number of other vibrantly colored examples of different types of hybrids with musical instruments. On fol. 168r, the same page as mentioned above regarding snail hybrids, a bird/lion/human hybrid appears playing bellows as a violin with tongs for a bow. This creature has a maroon phoenix like bird tail, legs of a lion, and the upper half a human. The depiction of a non-musical instrument being played as a musical instrument is reminiscent of the mermaid playing a jawbone as a violin with tongs for a bow found in *Les voeux paon* as discussed above. Pietrini (2017) cites a similar instance of a hybrid playing bellows with tongs (87). Two instances of hybrids that are half human and half not animal appear on fol. 104v and fol. 151r. On fol. 104v, the hybrid is half human with wings, half cloud and is playing a lute. On fol. 151r, the hybrid is half human with wings, half flower and is playing a harp. The appearance of the human upper body with wings could possibly be angels, but with the lower half hidden in a cloud and a flower it is impossible to know for certain. In both instances the wings and clothing of these hybrids is quite vibrant. On fol. 164r of MS. M 1004 there are two examples of that are definitive. First is a half human, half bird wearing a wolfskin on its head and playing a shawm. The bird part of the body is bright yellow with blue wings and orange legs. In the lower margin a half human, half lion with the tale of a horse is playing a triangle. The lower body and tail are a muted pink while the upper body is clothed in a bright blue tunic.

MS M.453 created just after MS M.1004, between 1425-30, has two examples of hybrids that are similar in style to the aforementioned manuscript. On fol. 61r, a merman plays a shawm. The fish body is a light blue and the tunic is again a vibrant, rich blue. Later in the manuscript, on fol. 108r, two wings hybrids, possibly angles, sing from a roll of music. The lower halves of these two creatures are hidden in a vibrant blue cloud. One creature has wings that are blue and gold while the other has wings that are green and gold. The use of blue and gold together again appears in MS H.7, a Book of Hours from ca. 1470. In the margin a mermaid appears wearing a crown and playing a lute. Both her tail and her tunic are vibrant blue with gold details. The motif of a half human, half flower as described previously appears again on fol. 116r of *Horae ad usum Parisiensem Latin 919*, held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, a Book of Hours for use in Paris dating from 1400-1410. This half human, half flower plays the harp. The flower is a bright red and blue combination and the creature has big hair which is unlike the other hybrids found in this study.

Also, from *Horae ad usum Parisiensem Latin 919*, on fol. 46r appears a human/lion hybrid playing the pipe and tabor. This creature has a reddish orange lower body of a lion while the upper body is that of a human clothed in a long golden tunic or dress. This manuscript is illuminated; however, neither this example nor the previous one is detailed with any of the gold leaf. The final example from this data set depicts a hybrid creature playing the tambourine. This example appears in the margins of fol. 33v from MS M.919, a manuscript discussed earlier in conjunction with bagpipes. Like the tabor mentioned above, the tambourine is a percussion instrument. This hybrid has the full lower body of a horse with all four legs and where the horses head should be is a human torso. The entire body except for the hands and face are a muted pink color.

## **Conclusion**

Though the research samples span 400 years and each manuscript as well as the creatures found inside are unique, there are common threads that bind all these examples together. The data presented in this article is just a brief survey of a topic that should be explored and featured by scholars of history and musicology. With more time and resources, I would like to survey a larger data set. Music is a universal language no matter the century, and the appearance of musical instruments in manuscripts are meant to represent something. Every hybrid discussed here is playing or holding a musical instrument from the time period, whether it appears in a sacred or secular text. Furthermore, across manuscripts and centuries, many of the creatures have features as well as color schemes that are similar. Further research would allow me to draw examples from more manuscripts and their contents, as well as highlight the overarching similarities that appear in the hybrids, the musical instruments that they are playing, and the meaning behind them.

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