Matthew Paris’s Illustrated Life of Edward the Confessor: 
History for the Eyes and Ears of a Queen

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In his mid-thirteenth-century Life of Edward the Confessor, the English monk, author, and artist Matthew Paris created a remarkable fusion of history and hagiography. In both the text and illustrations of the manuscript, Matthew embedded the traditional account of the saint within a broader historical narrative, rejecting the hagiographic tendency to dissociate saints from the historical circumstances in which they lived. The manuscript opens with a series of images depicting King Edward’s predecessors and the state of the kingdom prior to his accession to the English throne in 1042. In the first eight miniatures, Edward plays only a minor role in the narrative, which focuses on the violence and oppression caused by the invading Danes (Figures 1-4). The pictorial narrative then continues with the more traditional account of the saint’s life, and later, after the death of Edward, Matthew returns to a more historically based narrative, omitting several posthumous miracles in favor of an account of the events leading to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 (Figures 5-6).

The blended narrative present in the Life of Edward the Confessor is crucial to the understanding of Matthew’s unusual role as the author and artist of both historical chronicles and saints’ lives. Nevertheless, scholars have yet to examine fully the importance and implications of his innovative approach, which departs from contemporary conventions of hagiographic and historical illustration. This paper explores the significance, function, and reception of the historical miniatures in Matthew’s Life of Edward the Confessor. Consideration of the manuscript’s intended audience indicates that this striking narrative cannot be dismissed as simply a chronicler’s preoccupation with history or a hagiographer’s desire to extend his account. Instead, Matthew carefully designed the manuscript in order to present Queen Eleanor of Provence, who was both the intended reader and a young woman from abroad, with a very special manuscript that suited her age, lineage, and status as an influential woman. Through the manuscript’s tripartite mise-en-page and engaging historical sequences, Matthew created not only a spiritually affective hagiographic narrative, but also an accessible and entertaining, though sometimes biased, introduction to the history of England, the land in which Eleanor now reigned as queen.

Matthew’s renown is based largely upon his work as a writer and illustrator of Latin historical chronicles, such as the Chronica Majora (Figure 7; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MSS 26 and 16; and London, British Library, MS Royal 14.C.VII). He also wrote and illustrated several narratives, including the Anglo-Norman verse life of Edward the Confessor. Matthew’s autograph manuscript has been lost, but most scholars agree that Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.3.59 presents a later copy, and indeed the only surviving copy, of the manuscript’s miniatures, and indeed the only surviving copy, of...
his original work. The style of the Cambridge manuscript’s sixty-four framed and tinted line drawings suggests that the extant copy was produced c. 1255-1260 at Westminster or in London. Each page features one large miniature, which is placed above the poetic text and an abbreviated version of the story in rubrics (Figure 1). Together, these images form a lively pictorial narrative that develops and progresses with the turning of each folio. The textual narrative, entitled La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei, includes a dedication, which states that the text and illustrations were originally designed and produced for Queen Eleanor of Provence, who married England’s King Henry III in 1236. In the dedication, Matthew also explains that Eleanor’s knowledge of Edward the Confessor was particularly important due to Henry’s special affinity for the saint. According to D.A. Carpenter, this statement indicates that the manuscript was most likely commissioned by Henry around 1236 in order to foster his young wife’s familiarity with his favorite saint, a view that seems probable given Henry’s patronage of other Edward-related works of art.

This information regarding the manuscript’s audience has led several scholars to speculate about how Matthew intended the manuscript to function. Studies by Cynthia Hahn and by Paul Binski imply that Matthew hoped to present his female audience with lessons that dealt primarily with the proper behavior for royal and courtly men. Elsewhere, Binski has given greater consideration to the special needs of Eleanor, arguing that the manuscript provided this young foreign-born queen with an introduction to some of her new kingdom’s most distinguished saints. Although previous scholars have not explored the question of Eleanor’s understanding of Matthew’s historical additions, several studies have noted that the Estoire emphasizes the historical aspects of Edward’s life. These scholars suggest that Matthew’s decision to call his text an estoire, or history, rather than a vie, or life, is representative of the changes he made to the established version of the hagiography written by Aelred of Rievaulx in the mid-twelfth century. Thelma S. Fenster and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne argue that Matthew emphasized the historical circumstances of Edward’s life and death in order to stress the importance of maintaining legitimate rulership. Despite its plausibility, scholars have yet to consider how this explanation relates to the specific needs of Eleanor, the manuscript’s intended reader, rather than those of her husband, the king. This paper seeks to address this issue, exploring the ways in which Matthew manipulated the manuscript’s writing, mise-en-page, miniatures, and text-and-image relationships in order to appeal to the needs and interests of Queen Eleanor.

Eleanor of Provence spent her childhood at her father’s court in southern France, and it was here that she was shaped into the elegant and articulate young woman described in contemporary documents. In the last months of 1235, Eleanor traveled to England to prepare for her upcoming marriage to Henry III. On the day of their wedding in January 1236, she was twelve years old. The representation of this event in Matthew’s Historia Anglorum emphasizes Eleanor’s youth, depicting her as a diminutive and timid figure standing...
before the commanding presence of her husband (Figure 8; London, British Library, MS Royal 14.C.VII).  

Several aspects of the Life of Edward the Confessor’s text and mise-en-page indicate that Matthew carefully considered the ways in which he could present this young queen with a manuscript that would satisfy her needs and interests. Although Aelred’s Latin prose life, the Vita Sancti Edwardi, served as the primary textual source for the Estoire, Matthew composed his own version of the life in vernacular poetry. By doing so, Matthew created a narrative that was accessible to Eleanor, a lay reader who does not seem to have had a full command of Latin, even as an adult. As a vernacular poem, Matthew’s text would have appealed to the tastes of readers of romance literature, a genre with which the young Provençal woman would likely have been familiar. In addition, vernacular historical narratives were particularly popular among continental women living in England, and Matthew may have seen the Estoire as a way to present the queen with an abbreviated version of this type of text.  

Eleanor later owned a Roman de Guillaume le Conquerant, which suggests that her interest in vernacular histories, and in the historical events depicted in the Life of Edward the Confessor, continued throughout her lifetime. After arriving in England, Eleanor may have faced some period of time in which she was unfamiliar with Anglo-Norman, but Matthew provides evidence that the manuscript’s mise-en-page was designed to ensure that Eleanor could still enjoy the Estoire’s narrative. After relating the death of Edward, Matthew includes a brief prayer, in which he says: “For laypeople who do not know how to read, I have also represented your story in illustrations in this very same book, because I want the eyes to see what the ears hear.” This statement indicates that Matthew intended the manuscript’s audience to view the miniatures while someone else presented the text orally, which was a common way to experience literature throughout the Middle Ages. As noted by Victoria B. Jordan, the mise-en-page of this manuscript reveals Matthew’s desire to appeal to an audience that could understand spoken Anglo-Norman but could not necessarily read it. By placing each large miniature above the corresponding passages from the poem and rubrics, Matthew ensured that Eleanor’s eyes could, in fact, see what her ears heard. It is possible that she also viewed this manuscript privately, and the mise-en-page would have facilitated this experience as well. The pictorial cycle enabled Eleanor to enjoy Matthew’s story either alone or in the company of others, regardless of her ability to read Anglo-Norman. Moreover, by including both tituli and rubrics, Matthew would have enabled the young queen to read an abbreviated version of the story as she developed a greater understanding of the vernacular. As Eleanor gained a full command of the language, she could then enjoy the pictures, the poem, and the rubrics or any combination of the three and could also select a different combination for each sitting.  

Given Eleanor’s youth, the Estoire’s pictorial cycle may have served as the most accessible of the manuscript’s multiple versions of the narrative. That Matthew realized this is suggested not only by these images’ status as the longest surviving pictorial cycle of Edward’s life, but also by the miniatures’ engaging narrative format, which would have further enhanced Eleanor’s ability to comprehend the progression from one scene to the next. Although it was not uncommon for artists to use narrative imagery to illustrate hagiographic subjects, Matthew’s use of a highly narrative format for the

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16 Fenster and Wogan-Browne, introduction, 5-6, 32, 41. In his Life of Saint Edmund of Abingdon, Matthew acknowledges the benefits of writing in the vernacular, stating that Anglo-Norman was better understood by the laity and clerics alike (ibid., 32).

17 Howell, Eleanor of Provence, 6-7. Also see Hahn, “Proper Behavior,” 240.


19 John Carmi Parsons, “Of Queens, Courts, and Books: Reflections on the Literary Patronage of Thirteenth-Century Plantagenet Queens,” in The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 176. It is tempting to suggest that Eleanor of Provence’s interest in William the Conqueror may have been inspired by the Estoire’s account of the Norman Conquest, but there is no way to know whether or not that was the case.

20 The French spoken at the court of Eleanor’s father was a dialect of Occitan, which was quite different from Anglo-Norman. See Howell, Eleanor of Provence, 6.


24 The manuscript measures 11 x 7.6 inches, and each miniature covers roughly one half of a page, ensuring that multiple people could view it simultaneously. See Morgan, Early Gothic Manuscripts (III), 94.

Life of Edward the Confessor’s historical miniatures was exceptional. At this time, historical subjects were rarely illustrated, for most bookmakers considered such manuscripts unworthy of the costly and time-consuming artistic treatment accorded to religious texts. Matthew’s inclusion of an extensive cycle of marginal images in the *Chronica Majora* was groundbreaking, but even these images differ significantly from those in the Life of Edward the Confessor.

A comparison of the miniatures in the *Chronica Majora* with those in the *Estoire* sheds light on the way in which the narrativity of the latter’s historical illustrations would have affected Eleanor’s viewing experience, while also having important implications for medieval historical illustration more generally. In the *Chronica Majora*, Matthew visually represents history as a sporadic series of unrelated events that lack the narrativity of a cohesive story. Unframed drawings are scattered throughout the margins, frequently separated by many unillustrated pages of text. In the lower margin of a page from the *Chronica Majora*, an isolated image of a battle between Cnut and Edmund Ironside in the year 1016 stands alone (Figure 7). The narrative format of the illustrations in the Life of Edward the Confessor, however, creates a very different depiction of this event (Figure 2). Here the battle is squashed into a single framed miniature along with scenes depicting the subsequent truce between the two kings and the later murder of Edmund Ironside. What was an isolated marginal scene in the *Chronica Majora* is contextualized by the *Estoire*’s framed miniature, becoming a single, if crucial, component of a larger narrative rather than a lone iconic representation of an event. By placing a sequence of related historical episodes side-by-side, Matthew presents not only an exciting narrative, but also a coherent historical narrative. Thus, it is only within his saints’ lives that this great medieval chronicler was able to break free of the chronicle’s narrative limitations and to represent history in a cohesive visual format. Because contemporary bookmakers and patrons typically considered chronicles to be unworthy of even minor artistic embellishment, Matthew may have viewed his hagiographic manuscript as a safe venue in which to continue experimenting with new formats of historical illustration and, indeed, with a format that would suit the needs of Eleanor of Provence.

In her role as queen of England, Eleanor would need to possess some knowledge of earlier English history, and Matthew’s illustrations, writing, and mise-en-page guaranteed that she had an accessible textual and pictorial account of some of the major events from the later Anglo-Saxon period. The narrativity of the miniatures may have made this learning process especially enjoyable, but the cohesiveness of Matthew’s narrative, in both words and images, would have further enhanced Eleanor’s ability to understand the historical events portrayed. As mentioned, in this respect Matthew departed from the medieval chronicler’s approach to recording history, as represented by his own *Chronica Majora*. Whereas chronicles tended to adhere to a comprehensive and strictly chronological framework that lacked focus, narrativity, and closure, the *Estoire* presents a coherent and focused account of history in which historical episodes were selected based upon their relevance to the intended narrative. By creating a concise historical narrative, Matthew provided Eleanor with an intelligible account of events that he felt were particularly significant and presented them in a way that suited the needs and, perhaps, the attention span of the young queen.

Among the historical episodes represented in the Life of Edward the Confessor, Matthew lavished special attention on the events leading to the Norman Conquest. Although one could argue that Matthew’s inclusion of these events was simply the most logical way to lengthen his hagiography, there are reasons for believing that he had more specific motives for portraying the Conquest in Eleanor’s manuscript. The text’s favorable representation of William the Conqueror certainly supported the legitimacy of the post-Conquest kings of England, but Matthew’s historical manuscripts demonstrate that he also consistently acknowledged the magnitude of the Conquest’s impact on the English people. In the *Flores Historiarum*, Matthew severs English history at the year 1066, discussing the post-Conquest period only within the second volume of the text. In the *Historia Anglorum*, he omits the pre-Conquest period altogether. The *Estoire*’s description of the events leading to the Conquest was not simply translated and adapted from a single historical work; it was carefully compiled from a variety of historical texts, suggesting that Matthew gave considerable thought to the way he presented

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26 For an extensive study of narrative hagiographic illustration, including discussions of Matthew’s *Life of Edward the Confessor* and *Life of Saint Alban*, see Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart*.


28 For a more detailed discussion of the differing artistic approaches that Matthew took in the creation of his hagiographic narratives as opposed to his chronicles, see Carter, “History and Hagiography,” 13-25.


31 Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 119; and Reader, “Matthew Paris,” 119n5. Rebecca Reader also notes that in the *Chronica Majora*, 1066 marks the beginning of Matthew’s inclusion of rubricated page headers and illustrations of shields in the margins.
this momentous event to Eleanor.\footnote{Reader, “Matthew Paris,” 122-123.} Perhaps he hoped to provide her with a definitive account of the Conquest in order to shape her understanding of the events that led to the political complexities of her own time.

Discrepancies between the Life of Edward the Confessor’s visual and textual narratives demonstrate that Matthew did, in fact, present Eleanor with a particular, and personal, retelling of the historical circumstances that frame Edward’s saintly life. The pictorial cycle subtly reveals Matthew’s Anglo-Saxon sympathies, whereas the poetic text and rubrics depict foreigners, and the Normans in particular, in a more positive light.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion of the pictorial cycle’s negative depiction of foreigners such as the Danes and the Normans, see Carter, “History and Hagiology,” 22-23; For a more detailed discussion of the pictorial cycle’s negative depiction of foreigners such as the Danes and the Normans, see Carter, “History and Hagiology,” 22-23, 40-43, 52-53.} On folio 30 verso, Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, is crowned king of England after the death of Edward (Figure 5). Although he places the crown on his own head, Harold does not appear especially villainous in this image or in others. The poetic text and rubrics, however, portray him much more negatively. The rubric beneath the coronation scene says that Harold “wrongfully”\footnote{Matthew Paris, History of Saint Edward, 106.} seized the crown, and the poem even states that, prior to the saint’s death, “Harold thought it was high time for Edward to die!”\footnote{Ibid.} According to the poetic text, Edward posthumously appeared to Harold in several dreams and visions, warning him to keep his earlier promise to recognize William the Conqueror as the rightful king, but Harold simply mocked the saint.\footnote{Ibid., 109, 111-112.} These admonitions, however, never appear in the pictorial narrative, and given Matthew’s decision to emphasize references to vision in many other instances throughout this manuscript, the omission of these posthumous warnings from the miniatures is perplexing.\footnote{Noting the many images in which Edward cures blind men and experiences visions, Binski states that Edward was “pre-eminently a miracle worker for the eyes.” See Binski, Westminster Abbey, 146. I have found that references to vision—whether by means of optical sight, dreams, or divine visions—appear in a majority of the manuscript’s miniatures. Matthew uses these instances of sight and insight to emphasize Edward’s status as a charitable, peaceful, and pious king, as well as a powerful saint.} Therefore, although the images pay little attention to William the Conqueror and portray Harold in a moderate light, the textual accounts demonize the latter as a dangerous usurper whose misdeeds must be righted by William’s invasion.\footnote{Reader has shown that Matthew’s texts consistently depict Harold as a tyrannical usurper and William as pious and deserving of the crown, although Matthew harshly criticizes William’s brutality towards the English during his reign from 1067 to 1087. See Reader, “Matthew Paris,” 127-128. For Binski’s discussion of the Estoire’s portrayal of various members of the Godwin family, see Binski, “Reflections,” 341-343.} Like several other episodes illustrated in the manuscript, the pictorial narrative of the Conquest reveals Matthew’s own more anglicized vision of history. Thus, the text certainly would have pleased members of the royal family, but the images reflect a more ambiguous attitude toward foreigners and their role in English politics.

During much of his career as a chronicler, Matthew boldly tested the boundaries of propriety by openly criticizing various kings, popes, and foreigners, and it was only in his later years that he revised and erased some of the Chronica Majora’s more offensive passages.\footnote{Vaughan, Matthew Paris, 117-124.} Given the fairly early date of Matthew’s autograph copy of the Estoire, it is possible that this pictorial cycle represents another instance in which Matthew, as a younger man, refused to suppress his own opinions and biases. He may have hoped that the differences between the texts and images were subtle enough to go unnoticed by most readers, but substantial enough to influence someone like the young Eleanor of Provence, who might be expected to rely on the pictorial narrative rather than its corresponding texts. In particular, it seems that Matthew wished to provide the queen with a lesson regarding the legitimate rule of England. Matthew’s attention to issues of usurpation and the impact of foreigners on English politics may reflect lingering tensions wrought by relatively recent events in English political history. In the mid-twelfth century, Stephen of Blois seized the English crown from Henry I’s daughter, Matilda. Their struggle for the throne resulted in a civil war and the accession of King Henry II, whose own sons and wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, revolted against him in 1173-74 with the support and encouragement of continental forces.\footnote{Jim Bradbury, Stephen and Matilda: The Civil War of 1139-53 (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton, 1996), 1-25; and John Schlight, Henry II Plantagenet (New York: Twayne, 1973), 137-148. Also see Fenster and Wogan-Browne, introduction, 18-19.} Therefore, Matthew may have intended for the Estoire not only to teach Eleanor about English historical events that he felt were particularly significant, but also to inspire the young queen to regard England’s cultural heritage and the impact of its complex and shifting alliances with greater respect than some of her husband’s forebears had done in the past.

Matthew’s historical additions to the Life of Edward the Confessor do not merely extend his hagiographic account of Edward’s life: they form a crucial component of the narrative and allowed him to push the boundaries of the hagiographic genre in order to appeal to his intended reader, Queen Eleanor of Provence. Nevertheless, these historical additions do not diminish the Estoire’s ability to function as a powerful hagiographic narrative. By grounding Edward’s saintly life within a specific and identifiable historical context, Matthew enhanced the sense that Edward had once existed as an earthly individual but was now a heavenly saint whose life of charity, piety, and faithfulness could be emulated...
by viewers such as Eleanor of Provence.\(^{41}\) The success of Matthew’s blended narrative is indicated by the fact that his original manuscript was later copied. Evidence suggests that the surviving copy may have been owned by Eleanor of Provence’s daughter-in-law, Eleanor of Castile.\(^{42}\) At the time of her marriage to Edward I in 1254, this younger queen had spent her twelve years of life in Spain with her family, and it is tempting to imagine that Eleanor of Provence’s fond

\(^{41}\) In discussing the need for hagiography to provoke a spiritual response, Evelyn Birge Vitz states that the more historically oriented saints’ lives of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance mark the point at which hagiographers “lost sight of this central purpose of hagiography.” See Evelyn Birge Vitz, “From the Oral to the Written in Medieval and Renaissance Saints’ Lives,” in Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 113. I suggest, however, that this greater sense of authenticity would have heightened Eleanor’s response to Edward and his life and provided an especially powerful model for emulation. The notion that history could affect its viewers in such a way is strengthened by the increasing value placed on history during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See M.-D. Chenu, “Theology and the New Awareness of History,” in Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West, trans. and ed. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968), 162-201. Also see Hahn, Portrayed on the Heart, 307-316.


Figure 3. Life of Edward the Confessor: Edward and his family arrive in Normandy; death of Sweyn, c. 1255-1260. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.3.59, folio 4v. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Figure 4. Life of Edward the Confessor: Harald Harefoot oversees the torture of Alfred; oppression of the English people, c. 1255-1260. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.3.59, folio 6r. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.
Figure 5. Life of Edward the Confessor: Harold Godwinson crowns himself, c. 1255-1260. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.3.59, folio 30v. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Figure 6. Life of Edward the Confessor: the Battle of Hastings, c. 1255-1260. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.3.59, folio 34v. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.