

Towards a Taxonomy of Interpolation

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ABSTRACT

The manuscript culture of antiquity and the Middle Ages rendered texts permeable to foreign insertions — known as interpolations — as they were recopied. Despite how common interpolation is, however, it remains understudied, in part because of a lingering unsavory reputation, but also because scholars lack an adequate vocabulary to describe its permutations. This article offers a descriptive taxonomy of interpolation as a shared framework that will facilitate future investigations and cataloguing efforts.

INTERPOLATION IS EVERYWHERE IN MANUSCRIPT CULTURE. IT'S HARD TO find a text copied without a word added here or a phrase inserted there. In more extreme cases, whole romances, lyrics, hagiographies, image programs, and letters exuberantly crop up in foreign textual fields. Some of these intruders are so well known that they have their own monikers: the “Great Interpolation” in the gospel of Luke or the “Helen episode” in the *Aeneid*. In the Western Middle Ages, the focus of this article, interpolations appear in works as generically diverse as histories, romances, fabliaux, lays, allegories, and the Bible, in Latin and in various vernaculars. Sheer frequency demonstrates that interpolation was a major component of medieval textual culture. These insertions have historically been the objects of philological attention not because they were seen as valuable evidence of praxis, however, but rather because they represented undesirable weeds in the would-be *locus amoenus* of authorial textuality. Interpolation has been reviled as a member of a refractory group of textual practices that also includes forgery and pseudoepigraphy (WEAVER 2022, 4–8). Its long history of censure has led to scholarly practices that make this endemic form of revision fade into the background, particularly for those who rely on printed editions of classical and medieval texts, rather than manuscripts.

The time for reassessment has come. Scholars in classics, medieval studies, and comparative literature have begun to rehabilitate

interpolation. We are beginning to understand that interpolation bears witness to a culture of reception that was “highly proactive and performative” (PEIRANO 2012, 243). As a mode of reception, interpolation can reveal the concerns of the cultural milieu in which it was produced. Among the abilities that have so far been claimed for interpolation, we find that it places emphasis on themes that resonate with the moral climate of the interpolator; it emphasizes what is most crucial (tonally, didactically) in the host text; it shows a preference for certain literary forms and/or formal variety; and it explores philosophical topics so complex that they can’t be fully captured in treatises (COMBES AND SKZILNIK 2012; PEIRANO 2012, 256–63; WEAVER 2022, 2024). In light of these reappraisals, which he has also been instrumental in advancing, the classicist Richard Tarrant has offered a taxonomy of the motivations of interpolators (1989; 2016, 87–88). The literary historian Sophie Rabau more recently offered an alternative, speculative chart of the relationship between the receiving text and the interpolation, a matrix of source (self or other) and literary procedure (creation, translation of one’s own text, translation of another’s text, and variation). She is notably uninterested in the physicality of interpolation, perhaps because her project is transhistorical rather than focused on manuscripts (RABAU 2020, 276–82). But these efforts are only first steps. To better understand what interpolation makes possible and discern trends over time, larger surveys must be undertaken. Such an approach is stymied, however, by the lack of adequate data on interpolation.

Critical editions and manuscript catalogues have both been affected by interpolation’s shady reputation, which in turn means that these go-to resources for the study of textual cultures tend to minimize its prevalence and effect. Historically, makers of critical editions have scoured their manuscript corpus for interpolations so that these belated insertions can be identified as non-authorial and washed away to the apparatus. The practical effect of privileging authorial material in this way is to render interpolations significantly less present to readers. For the curious who bother to consult them, the notes to a critical edition often contain a description of what the interpolation contained rather than a transcription of the offending lines.

But in the wake of the New Philology, with its commitment to prioritizing manuscript evidence over critical conjecture, philosophies of textual editing have changed. It has become *de rigueur* among many sets to “praise the variant”, including, one assumes, the interpolation; to do otherwise now

seems inaccurate and curmudgeonly (CERQUIGLINI 1989). Technology, too, has progressed in ways that make interpolation more visible. It would be impractical to issue print editions that reflect every interpolation that accrues to a textual tradition, but the possibilities of digital editions make what was once a fantasy more realistic. The online editions of two manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* mounted by Simon Gaunt and his team at the research project *The Values of French* show one possible form of more capacious online editions. Their editing project, spearheaded by Hannah Morcos, created diplomatic transcriptions of early manuscripts of two different recensions of the history, made available open-access, both on separate pages and in a parallel viewer (GAUNT, ET AL., 2015–2020). H. Wayne Storey and his collaborators' *Petrarch* offers another promising format for digital editions, presenting high-resolution images of manuscript pages along with corrected diplomatic transcriptions of the authorial manuscript of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Canzoniere*), Vatican Latino 3195. This manuscript contains palimpsests and corrections, so though it is only one codex, it already has variants that scholars seek to grapple with. In a future phase, they hope to include comparison with other manuscripts, which will further enrich our understanding of how Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* transformed in copying (STOREY, ET AL., 2013–2023). As interpolation, along with other species of variant, becomes more visible in projects such as these, the need for precise descriptors is rendered more acute.

Faced with the unruly habits of medieval scribes, cataloguers have inadequately documented the appearance of interpolation in their archives. In part, this situation is due to the impracticality of detecting and signaling minor interpolations, a serious philological endeavor that goes beyond the remit of the cataloguer. But even in the case of substantial interpolations of several hundred lines or more, initial searches of online catalogues for the term “interpolation” do not usually return accurate results. Querying Gallica, the digital repository of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, gives just 25 results for “interpolation” in medieval manuscripts as of May 17, 2023. None of them is the most studied interpolation in their collection, the insertion of Chrétien de Troyes's romances into Wace's *Roman de Brut* in BnF fr. 1450. If finding aids cannot find interpolations, it is difficult to study their forms, effects, and histories.

It doesn't have to be this way. To make the relentless work of cataloguing interpolations easier — which will, in turn, support new scholarship — we need a more precise critical vocabulary to name the permutations of this phenomenon. This article aims to supply an initial set of descriptive terms, along with examples drawn from medieval French and English literature,

my areas of greatest familiarity. I do not seek to explain the purpose of these interpolations, even though I have chosen particularly interesting cases. Rather, I hope to present a selection that most vividly illustrates the categories proposed here. I offer a taxonomy of seven categories, which I call covert, material, auto, translational, absorptive, citational, and non-literary. To be clear, these categories are not necessarily exclusive: a covert interpolation can be translational; an auto-interpolation might be material. I will examine each of these varieties in turn, noting as I go when categories shade into one another in the manuscripts.

Before proposing a descriptive taxonomy of textual interpolation, however, I should clarify exactly what I understand it to be. The term interpolation comes from the Latin verb *interpolare*, which originally referred to fulling, a process by which textiles are refined. *Interpolare* could still refer to the improvement of textiles through fulling or patching throughout the Middle Ages. By late antiquity, however, it more commonly referred to textual insertions (WEAVER 2022, 4–8). It has proven difficult for scholars to agree on the boundaries of this concept: what counts as an insertion, and which insertions count as interpolations? For the manuscript scholar Denis Muzerelle, interpolation is simply the “introduction dans un texte d’un élément qui lui est étranger” (“introduction into a text of an element foreign to it”; 1985, §412.19). He does not attempt to delineate the borders of the “foreign”; that task has been taken up by later critics, with differing results. The most restrictive definitions insist that interpolation requires two texts by two different authors, and that the inserted material must attempt to blend in with the host text work (COMBES AND SZKILNIK 2012, 7–14). This approach is most closely aligned with philological approaches to interpolation that see it as a pernicious problem (RABAU 2008, §1, §3). More lax definitions of the foreign, on the other hand, include pre-planned changes of form within a single author’s work (for instance, an “interpolated” poem in a prosimetrum); such insertions are often seen as poetical (RABAU 2008, §2–3). Notably, both sides share the idea that interpolation is a belated readerly intervention, whether that reader be a later intruder into a homogenous discourse or the author herself rereading her own work (RABAU 2008, §43).

In this article, interpolation has two necessary characteristics. First, the material must be inserted within another work — not appended to its beginning or end (which structure would make the work a compilation). Second, this insertion must happen after at least one part of the work already exists (whether it be the receiving text or the interpolated material). In other words, the essential foreignness of interpolation is created by time rather

than author or form. I do not insist that the inserted work have a different author than the main work, not only because the two-phase process is more essential than authorship, but also because (as Rabau has noted) scholars often use the term to describe authors' own later revisions and any taxonomy should capture the uses of its category. In sum: interpolation is a foreign insertion into a text, whether it is authorial or non-authorial, alike or different in form; either or both the inserted material and the receiving text must exist independently of the interpolated version; the interpolation occurs in a second time, after an independent or uninterpolated version of the text already exists.

Covert

A covert interpolation is not signaled as an addition in any way. The transition between the host text and the inserted material is not marked materially or visually, nor is another author cited as the source of the insertion. These interpolations are the ones that philologists most fear (and, in their hypervigilance, perhaps most invent) because of their sneakiness (RABAU 2020, 31–62). The librarians of ancient Alexandria marked them with an *obelos* as spurious (REYNOLDS AND WILSON, 1974, 7–11).¹ Many of the most famous interpolations, such as the “Helen episode” of the *Aeneid*, fall into this category.

Covert interpolations often use moments of connection between the receiving text and some other material, such as shared names or related themes, to locate their insertions. A typical example can be found in BnF fr. 1416, a late thirteenth-century manuscript in which the brief appearance of Edward the Elder in Wace's *Roman de Brut* is excised and replaced by a long saint's life of Edward the Confessor written by a nun at Barking Abbey, known to contemporary scholars as the *Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur* (BLISS AND WEISS 2012). The only point of connection between these figures is their name; the added material does not make sense chronologically. Materially speaking, the insertion is completely unmarked on the manuscript page (see Fig. 1). A reader unfamiliar with the *Roman de Brut* and/or the succession of English kings would not have any reason to suspect an interpolation at this juncture.

1. MUZERELLE 1985 calls these ancient editorial efforts “atéthèse”, defined as an “annulation opérée par un grammairien antique, au moyen d'un signe conventionnel, d'un passage considéré comme non authentique dans un texte classique” (§413.04).

In other cases, the interpolator may take advantage of moments of narrative heterogeneity, such as dialogue or interlace, to disguise that an insertion has been made. The French manuscript Coligny, Bodmer 147 provides a scintillating array of examples of this technique of covert interpolation (VIELLARD 1974; VIELLARD 1975a, 46–60; BOITANI 2025). This beautifully illustrated tome was copied by two hands at the end of the thirteenth century, likely in Paris or its environs. The first of these scribes made a number of interpolations into his section of the manuscript, ff. 1r–290v (VIELLIARD 1974, 336–37). His version of the *Estoire del Graal* contains extracts from the four Gospels and Genesis as well as religious texts by Maurice de Sully and Innocent III. The scribe also inserts a unique version of the story of Troy between two sections of the Grail cycle, the *Merlin* and the *Suite-Vulgate* (VIELLIARD 1979). The *Suite-Vulgate* continues the interest in antiquity by including an abridged version of the *Faits des Romains* and French translations of the Book of Judith and Maccabees (I and II). At times, a rubric, miniature, or initial marks the beginning of an interpolation. The manuscript’s level of illustration and rubrication varies across the codex, however. Rubrics, miniatures, and inhabited initials often appear during the course of one of the texts, in addition to signaling moments of transition between sources (see Figs. 2 and 3). They do not consistently mark the intrusion of another text. For instance, folios 62–83 contain ten rubrics and miniatures, only one of which occurs at the beginning of an interpolation (of the French translation of “De miseria conditionis humanae” by Innocent III, f. 66v).

Most often, this manuscript’s scribe uses one of the characters as a mouthpiece of interpolation. In the *Estoire del Graal*, when asked by Vespasian how it could be possible that Jesus created heaven and earth millenia ago given that Mary was born only 74 years previously, Joseph claims that he will tell him all about it, then “speaks” the portion of Genesis from Creation to Noah’s Ark (f. 20r; VIELLIARD 1974, 305). Preaching to a crowd that he baptizes, Joseph later explains Christian beliefs in the words of an anonymous commentator on the *Credo* and the theologian Maurice de Sully. In the *Suite*, the scribe continues to use this strategy, exploiting a moment when the emperor Julius Caesar asks Merlin’s name to make a transition to the *Faits des Romains*:

Et li dist que il avoit a non Mellin de Nohomberlande. Qant li emperes oÿ ce, si en fu moult liez, qar mainte foiz en avoit oÿ parler, si li enquist de moult de choses . . . et li dist, “Julius Cesar, se tu aimes droit et iret et tu vueilles riens faire de mon conseil, ire loe que tu ne voyses mie ou

royaume de Logres pour grever le roy Artu, car trop iret [*sic*] prodoms et loial; que bien saches, se tu I vas, que grant damage t'en venra; car tu partes le non dou bon Juille Cesar, le premier empereor de Rome, qui tant conquest de provinces et qui si longuement guerroia a Pompee et au commun de Rome por l'achoisson dou triumphe que li commons ne li voloit ostroier." — "A Mellins, biax dolz amis, ire pri que de celui Juille Cesar me dies la vie et des ses huevres." Et Mellins dist, "Volentiers, le vos ire tot mot a mot." (F. 197v; VIELLIARD 1974, 322)

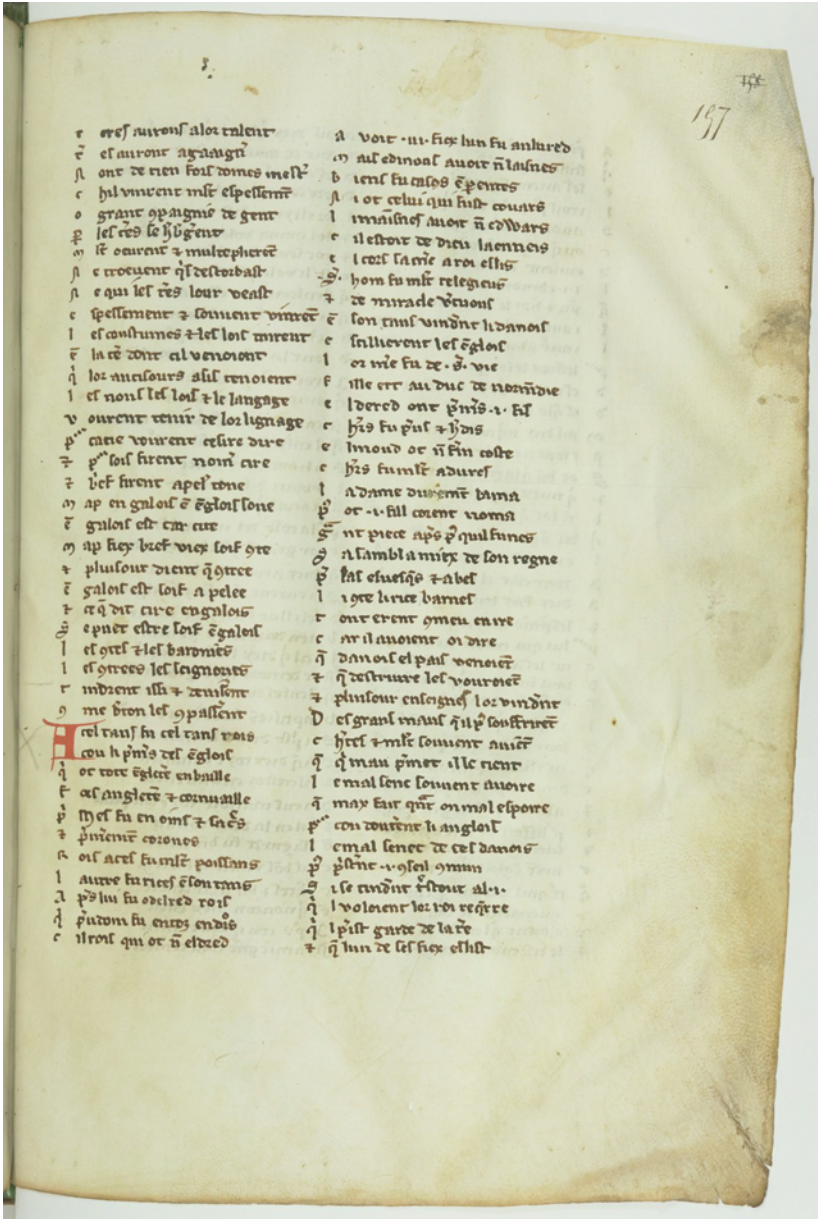
And he told him that he was called Merlin of Northumberland. When the emperor heard this, he was very happy, for he had heard a lot about him, and so he asked him about many things . . . and [Merlin] said to him, "Julius Caesar, if you honor right and justice and you want to do something with my advice, I advise you not to think of going to the realm of Logres to harm King Arthur, for he is excessively noble and loyal; and know well, if you go there, great harm will come to you; for you share the name of the good Julius Caesar, the first emperor of Rome, who conquered so many provinces and made such a long war against Pompey and the people of Rome when the people refused to concede his triumph." "Ah, Merlin, fine sweet friend, I beg you to tell me about the life and works of that Julius Caesar." And Merlin said, "Happily, I will tell you everything word for word." (My translation)

The scribe thus positions the *Faits* as a long monologue. Clumsy as this premise may be, it is nevertheless clear that the redactor seeks to integrate the interpolated material and disguise it as part of the *Suite*. That attempt at disguise is what renders these interpolations covert.

Material

A material interpolation is made by inserting pages or quires into a pre-existing book. Muzerelle described this type of interpolation, which he classed as an "element adventice" (weedy or unexpected element), with the evocative verb "farcir" (to stuff) (1985, §314.14). This type of interpolation is not covert to anyone interested in codicology, but it is possible that a casual reader could overlook the insertion if the scribe and layout of the insertion happen to be the same as those of the frame text.

In BnF fr. 17177 (Flanders, second half of thirteenth century), a material interpolation inserts the first French prose translation of *Suite* of Geoffrey of



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits, Français 1416

Figure 1. Covert transition from *Roman de Brut* to *Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur*. The interpolation begins at the bottom of the first column, five lines from bottom. BnF fr. 1416 (1252/1292), f. 157r, copyright Gallica/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

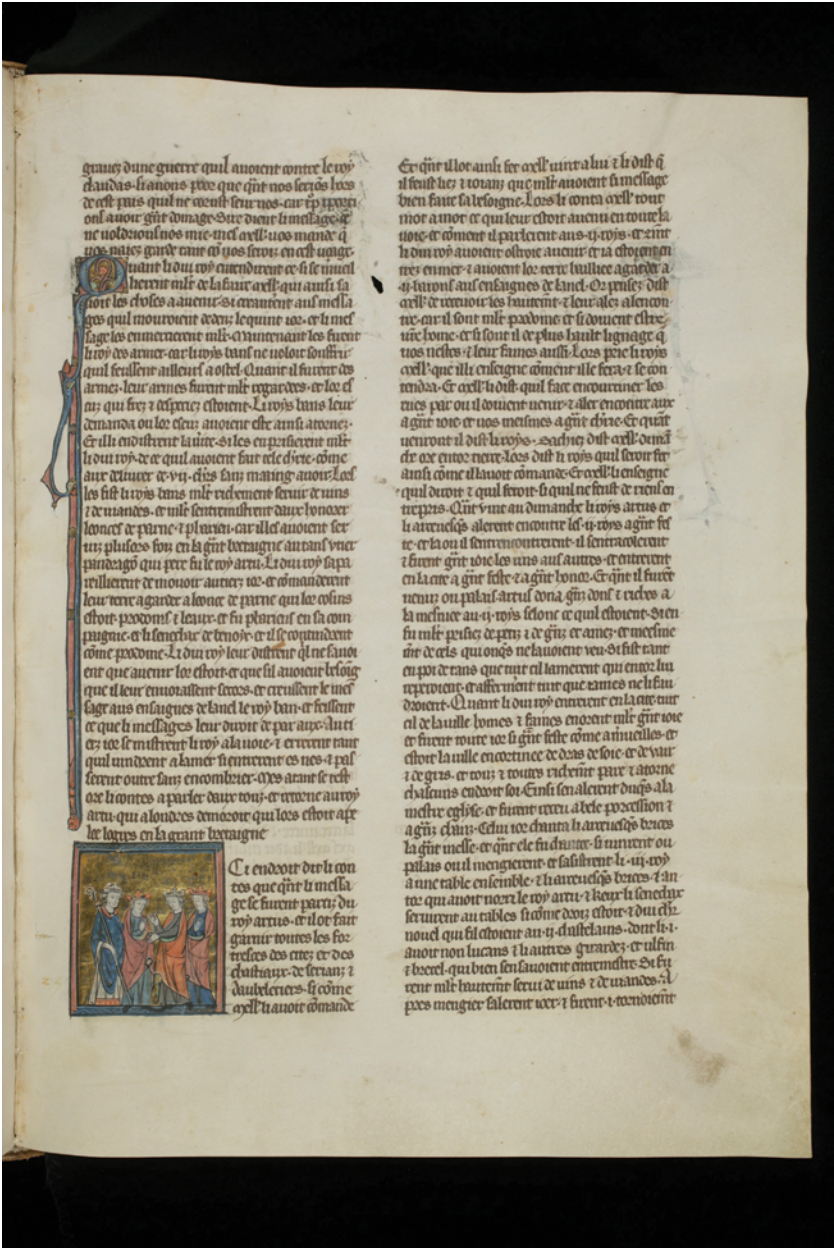


Figure 2. Page with decorated initial and miniature from the *Suite Vulgate*; neither marks an interpolation. Coligny, Bodmer 147 (end c13), f. 165r, copyright the Martin Bodmer Foundation, Coligny (Geneva).

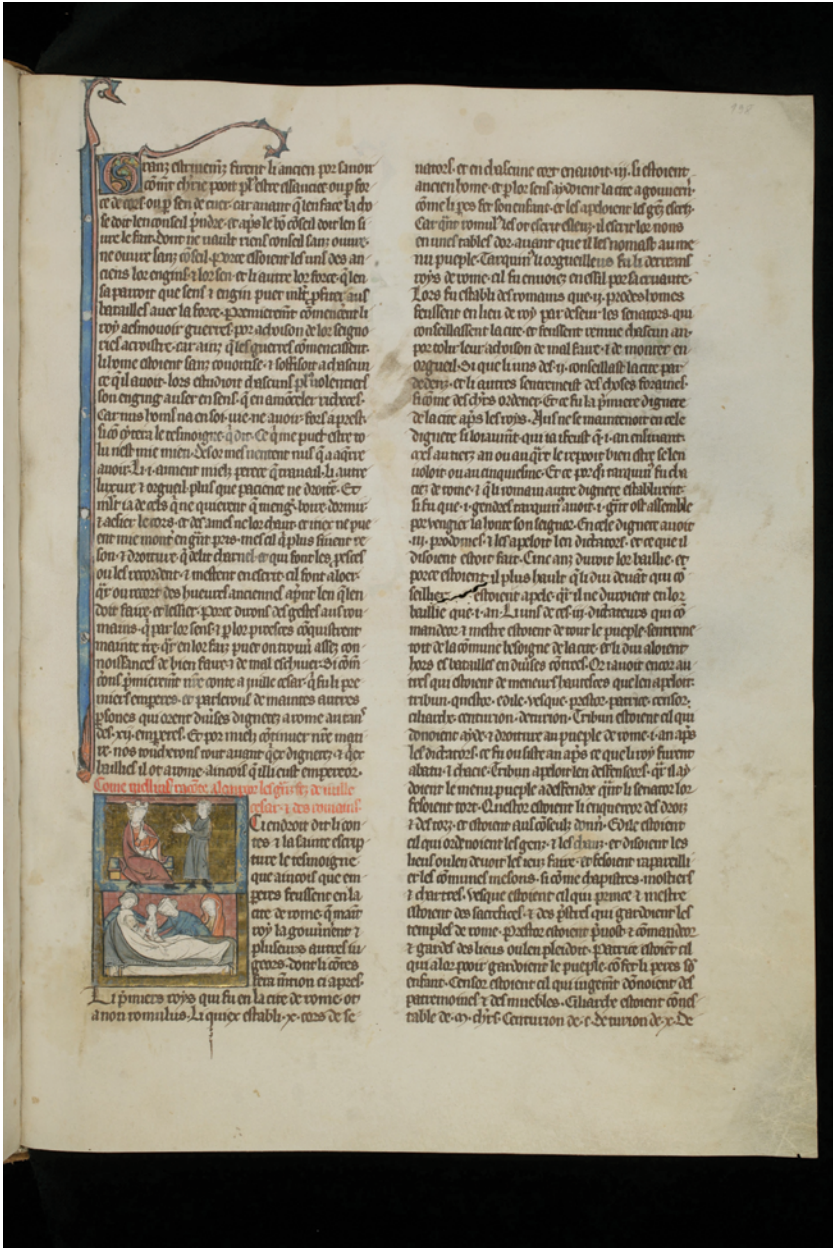


Figure 3. Page with decorated initial, rubric, and miniature from the *Suite Vulgate*; this time, the rubric and miniature accompany the beginning of the interpolation of the *Faits des Romains*. Coligny, Bodmer 147 (end c13), f. 198r, copyright the Martin Bodmer Foundation, Coligny (Geneva).

Monmouth's *De Gestis*, known as the *Estoire de Brutus*, into the universal history *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. *Estoire de Brutus* is inserted by adding supplemental quires after nine complete quires of the *Histoire ancienne*. Medieval quire numbers in Roman numerals appear on the last page of each of these nine. Next follow a singleton (f. 83) and three quires lacking quire numbers (ff. 83–108 in the modern pencil foliation). With the quire beginning at folio 109, the medieval quire numbering begins again. It is clear not only from the quire numbers, but also from the text itself, that this interpolation occurred after the manuscript of the *Histoire ancienne* was copied in full. Folio 109 recto contains all the text that was recopied on folio 82, the singleton, to assure the transition to *Brut*; this redundant text was excised from f. 109r by the expedient means of red Xs. The verso of folio 108 is blank. Thus, the interpolated folios are set off at both ends by blank or nearly-blank pages.

Evidence indicates that this insertion was pre-planned. The interpolated quires come from the same Soissons workshop around the same time as the copy of the *Histoire ancienne*. The script and decoration both support this assertion, as does the peculiar version of the Picard dialect common to both texts (OLTROGGE 1989, 22; VEYSSEYRE 2014, 14, 196–215). Beyond stylistic elements, the revisions to the paragraph immediately prior to the insertion of the *Estoire de Brutus* (a paragraph that is replicated on ff. 82 and 109) truncate the Roman genealogy that in other manuscripts leads into the Rome I section of the *Histoire ancienne*. This makes for a smoother transition into the Galfridian material (RAVENHALL 2020). In this highly ornamented and carefully executed manuscript, moments of blankness around the interpolation both enforce separation from and share parchment with the main text. Physical disjunctions — blank pages, barred text — call attention to the concrete aspects of manuscript production. Despite many physical similarities between the quires bearing the *Histoire ancienne* and those that hold the *Estoire de Brutus*, this material interpolation is far from covert.

The copy of the Crusade cycle of *chansons de geste* in BL Additional MS 36615 (Northern France or England, ca. 1300) contains two material interpolations (COOK AND GRILLO 1978; RAVENHALL 2023). One is of a singleton, which fills part of the lacuna caused by a missing quire (f. 83), and the other is of five folios, which add a new episode to the pre-existing text (ff. 92–96). Even though it is in the same hand as the surrounding text, the singleton stands out because it is of a darker, lower-quality parchment than the neighboring folios. It is also badly damaged and torn. The recto has accrued scribbles of a later owner's name (Jehan Sagot) and a Sator

square with a fanciful, serpentine grid drawing, while on the verso a fourteenth-century English hand has written, in French, a prose version of the *Credo* that has become nearly illegible due to wear (COOK AND GRILLO 1978, 225–26). Whether it is the last folio of the missing quire, which, judging by the evidence of fourteenth-century quire numerotation and foliation, would have been somehow extracted, damaged, and re-inserted very soon after the manuscript was made, or whether it is an incomplete attempt at repair made by the scribe of this section when he noticed the loss, is difficult to say.²

The longer material interpolation of five folios (five singletons presented as a quire; COOK AND GRILLO 1979, 232) adds the episode known as “Sathanas mere” to the more conventional three episodes of the epic *Les Chétifs*.³ This episode was copied by a new, albeit contemporary, hand, different from the two present in the manuscript before this point (though the interpolating hand reappears in later sections of the manuscript).⁴ This interpolation annoyed a later medieval reader, who marked it with a “seainne” (sign — now unfortunately trimmed away) and suggested that the reader turn to a “crois” (cross) to skip it (f. 91v). A square cross does indeed appear in the upper left corner of the page immediately following the note (f. 92r) and again, in the same position, on the folio after the interpolation (f. 97r). This reader evidently recognized the material interpolation as a later insertion and marked it as optional reading.

Auto

Auto-interpolations are insertions that authors make into their own texts. This term thus describes a certain kind of redaction or revision more precisely, one in which revision takes the form of insertion. As with translational interpolations, discussed below, the inserted material can be composed by the author or by someone else. Either they happen in a second phase of composition and are inserted as part of a process of authorial

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2. COOK AND GRILLO (1978, 234) think it is the last folio of the otherwise missing quire; see also MYERS 1981, xiii. RAVENHALL 2023 thinks this does not make sense textually, and it is more likely a separate folio drawn from somewhere other than the missing quire.
 3. This episode is printed as Appendix 12 in MYERS 1981. It is also present in Paris, BnF fr. 786. See MYERS 1981, n147, for remarks on this digression, which Myers thinks was absent from the original tradition but written by 1268.
 4. This hand is “Scribe D” in COOK AND GRILLO 1978.

revision, or they are comprised of pre-existing foreign material that the author decides to include in their work. In either case, auto-interpolation involves time: the time of revision, or time that passes between the creation of some work and its careful insertion by an author into a later one. Citing Montaigne and Proust as the most well-known practitioners, Sophie Rabau recently coined the term “auto-interpolation” (2020, 278). But auto-interpolation was not uncommon in the Middle Ages, either. Some medieval writers chose to expand their own material with colorful stories during revision; others inserted popular lyric into their narratives; still others interpolated their own preexisting, separately circulating works into later efforts.

Revisionary auto-interpolation plays a role in a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman history. Geoffrey Gaimar likely wrote his *Estoire des Engleis* sometime between 1136 and 1141 (WHEELER 2021, 6–12). As it has been transmitted, the text begins abruptly with the arrival of Cerdic in 495 and ends with William Rufus’s death in 1100. For the first 459 years, until the accession of Edgar, Gaimar primarily translates a Northern recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, while also referring to an early version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *De Gestis Britonnum*. But Gaimar also interpolates new episodes into his source texts during these years. Some of these interpolations are translational, incorporating oral tradition into the information he got from the *Chronicle*. The famous Haveloc episode is also an auto-interpolation, in that it seems that he added it in a second phase of composition.

Gaimar starts his history by describing the aftermath of Arthur’s war with Modred. He mentions that “the Saxons . . . who had arrived with Cerdic” (“li Seisne . . . ki od Certiz furent venuz”, ll. 9–10) kept expanding their territory after the death of Arthur. The Britons were having a tough time because of these Saxon incursions. There follow 785 lines about Haveloc, which the philologist Alexander Bell long ago contended were a later insertion. He shows how the logic of the uninterpolated text continues after this episode with a reference to a “second Cerdic” — “l’altre Certiz” (l. 822). It is hardly reasonable to expect an audience to remember the first, briefly mentioned Cerdic after nearly 800 lines that had nothing at all to do with him. It seems that that the Haveloc episode was added after Gaimar had already translated the Galfridian passage about Saxon incursion (BELL 1925, 5–6). We can thus understand Gaimar’s composition as a process that unfolded across several moments in time, making the Haveloc story an auto-interpolation.

In a related gesture, some authors interpolated their own earlier work into later work. For instance, Geoffrey of Monmouth included his *Prophetiae Merlini* as Book VII of his *De Gestis Britonnum* (ca. 1138), even though it had already attained a measure of independent circulation. He pauses his history at the moment when the sage Merlin has theatrically revealed the existence, below a pool, of two dragons that have caused the exiled King Vortigern's building project to crumble repeatedly. Geoffrey breathlessly interrupts his narrative to explain the frantic desire for prophetic knowledge among his contemporaries. "Before I had reached this point in my history," he writes, "news of Merlin spread and I was being pressed to publish his prophecies by all my contemporaries, and particularly by Alexander bishop of Lincoln, a man of the greatest piety and wisdom" (REEVE 2007, VII.109). Geoffrey misleadingly writes that his original plan had been to finish the translation of *De Gestis* before turning to the *Prophetiae Merlini*, which also needed to be translated from an "unknown tongue" into Latin (VII.110), but that Alexander "compelled" (*coegit*) him to get started on the prophecies. In fact, the prophecies were already written. We know that Orderic Vitalis, a historiographer-monk in Normandy, saw a copy before 1135 because he included citations in his own history (MCINERNEY 2020, 131). When he includes them as Book VII of *De Gestis*, therefore, Geoffrey engages in auto-interpolation.

Auto-interpolation is also the category that best holds the most well-studied corpus of medieval interpolations: lyric insertions. As Sylvia Huot, Maureen Boulton, and Ardis Butterfield have studied in detail, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries over 90 narratives, especially romances, contained inserted popular lyrics (HUOT 1987; BOULTON 1993; BUTTERFIELD 2002). Often cited as the originator of this literary trend, Jean Renart explains the goals that motivated his interpolated anthology of poetry in the proem to his *Roman de la Rose*: to enhance his *roman* and make "une novele chose . . . brodez p[ar] lieus de biaux vers" (a new thing . . . embroidered in some parts with beautiful verses, ll. 12, 14; see JEWERS 1996, 911n7). His evocation of embroidery here recalls interpolation's historical semantic affiliation with fulling and patchwork. Renart includes forty-six poems, usually slipping them into characters' mouths at moments of heightened emotion, not unlike the covert interpolator of the Grail cycle in Cologny, Bodmer 147. Admittedly, at times he names the poet, which makes the lyric a citation, technically speaking. In general, however, the poems (or stanzas taken from longer poems) are unlabeled and have a diegetic function, even as they "constitute a rupture within the narrative" (JEWERS 1996, 912). These poems were part of a careful design, but they

still qualify as auto-interpolations because they are foreign material added by the author to his later, “original” work.

Translational

A translational interpolation happens when translators insert foreign material into their sources as they translate them. While this category theoretically includes minor additions made to clarify meaning in the target language, more interesting are the insertions of whole new episodes, descriptions, or dialogues, whether they are sourced from another pre-existing text or oral tradition or invented by the translator themselves.

Arguably the best-known practitioner of this type of interpolation is Geoffrey Chaucer, who lards his *Troilus and Criseyde* (mid-1380s), which is mostly a translation of Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, with inserted passages from Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Boethius, Petrarch, Dante, and Statius, among others (WINDEATT 1984; GASTON 2020, 15–47). He also adds stanzas of his own invention. Chaucer’s interpolative translational technique has long been remarked — indeed, it is even signaled explicitly by the poet himself when he alludes to parts of the poem that have been “in-eched for the beste” (added in to better it, III.1329) and states that some sections offer “thing collateral” (I.262). Barry Windeatt characterizes Chaucer’s process as one of “extending, amending, fusing [*Filostrato*] with many other borrowings and allusions” (1984, 3). His edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* helpfully prints the Chaucerian text in parallel with *Il Filostrato*, allowing for the easy detection of interpolations and identification (via exhaustive notes) of their sources or lack thereof.

In the proem, Chaucer immediately interpolates his source in a sequence of requests to the audience. Boccaccio asks his readers to pray for him, as unhappy in love as Troilo (stanza 6). Chaucer picks up on the idea of “bidding prayer”, but changes what is asked for: he suggests first that audience members think about their own past adversity in love (ll. 22–28) to fuel their prayers for the soothing of “hem that ben in the cas / of Troilus” (ll. 29–30). He adds three further stanzas of requested prayers: for his own efficacy as a poet in telling Troilus’s story (ll. 32–35); for despairing and injured lovers, that their woe may cease (in extreme cases, through death; ll. 36–42); for happy lovers, that their pleasure may continue and they may pity the poet (ll. 43–51). All of these additions come from Chaucer, as opposed to another source, as best as we can tell. As he begins Troilus’s story, Chaucer reaches for outside sources in addition to

his own imagination. He immediately uses Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Guido delle Colonne to fill in historical detail only sketchily transmitted in *Filostrato*, making one stanza into two by adding information from these sources about the arc of the Trojan War and the mechanisms of the seer Calchas's special access to divine knowledge (ll. 57–77; cf. *Fil.* 8; see also the interpolated stanza citing authoritative sources Homer, Dares, and Dictys at ll. 141–47).

When Troilus appears in the narrative, Chaucer again engages in both kinds of translational interpolation. First, he expounds on the imprudence of scorning love, given his power, in what Wendeatt calls his “first substantial interpolation” (101; ll. 218–66); though it is full of *topoi*, it has no precise source. Chaucer then adds details about Troilus's reaction to the sight of Criseyde (ll. 274–80; ll. 295–301) and gives his hero an extended ironic speech about the foolishness of lovers (ll. 330–57). All of this comes from Chaucer, to the best of our knowledge. But the lovesick Troilus soon becomes the mouthpiece for Chaucer's most famous interpolation, the so-called “Canticus Troili”, the earliest English translation of Petrarch's Sonnet 132 (ll. 400–20). A similar admixture of novel and sourced interpolations continues throughout his translation. Whether he adds material of his own or gathers additional details from other sources, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, interpolation is central to Chaucer's process of translation.

Absorptive

An absorptive interpolation brings material once written in the margins, such as commentary, glosses, or translations, into the main text body. Absorptive interpolations may be covert, or they may be signaled through rubrics or a different ink color. They tend to be relatively short since the margins can only accommodate so much material.

The most notorious example in medieval English literary studies is Cædmon's “Hymn”, familiar to scholars and students alike as one of the earliest recorded English-language poems (HOLSINGER 2007). The earliest written version of the “Hymn” is Bede's Latin paraphrase of it in book 4, chapter 24 of his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (731). Bede goes out of his way to say that he's transmitting the gist of the song, rather than Cædmon's exact words. Bede's abridgment was soon accompanied by Old English versions in the margins of Latin manuscripts; in fact, two of the earliest witnesses of the *Historia*, known as the Moore Bede and the St. Petersburg Bede, feature the poem in Old English, appended at the end of the history or in its

margins.⁵ Ten later Latin manuscripts also feature marginal Old English “Hymns”, in two dialects, Northumbrian and West Saxon. In the tenth century, when an Old English translation of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was produced during Alfred’s reforms, the translator likely used a Latin base manuscript that had a West Saxon version of the Old English poem in the margins; the marginal poem had become a conventional, if not ubiquitous, feature. This West Saxon version, which started off in the margins, ended up absorbed into the main text of the Old English translation. The Old English translator took some pains to authorize the marginalia and smooth the alliterative poem’s interpolation within the main text by replacing or erasing Bede’s comments on the difficulties of translation and reasons for paraphrase (KIERNAN 1990, 165). He thus renders this absorptive interpolation somewhat covert as well.

It was not only the Old English translation of Bede that absorbed the Old English “Hymn”. Several later Latin manuscripts of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* contain various recensions of the Old English “Hymn” in the main text block (O’DONNELL 2005). Most intriguingly, and earliest, the scribe of London, College of Arms, s. n. (twelfth century) copies the West-Saxon “eorðe” recension on alternating lines with Bede’s Latin paraphrase (f. 84v; see Fig. 4). This strong layout choice forces him to cram the first and last Old English phrases between lines in order to maintain the pattern of Old English/Latin, so that these phrases look like interlinear glosses and therefore signal that something unusual is going on at this moment on the page. The bulk of the poem, however, is copied in the same script as the Latin text.

The Northumbrian “eordu” redaction was absorbed into the main text block of Latin copies of the *Historia* four times; scribes interpolated it before Bede’s paraphrase (after “iste est sensus”). In Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 574, the main scribe wrote the Old English and the Latin. Though the hand remains the same, the “Hymn” is marked as an insertion with two small crosses, one at the beginning and one at the end. A line of dots and dashes also runs vertically along the Old English in the right margin. The same placement before Bede’s paraphrase is found in Cambridge, Trinity College, R. 5. 22 (c14), f.32va, but this time, nothing

5. The Moore Bede (dated 737) is Cambridge, University Library MS Kk.5.16; the St. Petersburg Bede (dated 742) is M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library MS Q.v.I.18. For a detailed description, see O’KEEFE 1987, 10–11. For a summary of the debate about whether the Old English version is a translation of the Latin paraphrase or rather an independently circulating poem that predated Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see O’DONNELL 2005, 174–78.

marks the change of language, meaning that to a reader idly flipping through this manuscript, this interpolation is both absorptive and covert. Similar unmarked placements occur in Paris, BnF, lat. 5237 (c15, after 1422; see Fig. 5) and Brussels, KBR, 8245–57 (dated 1489).

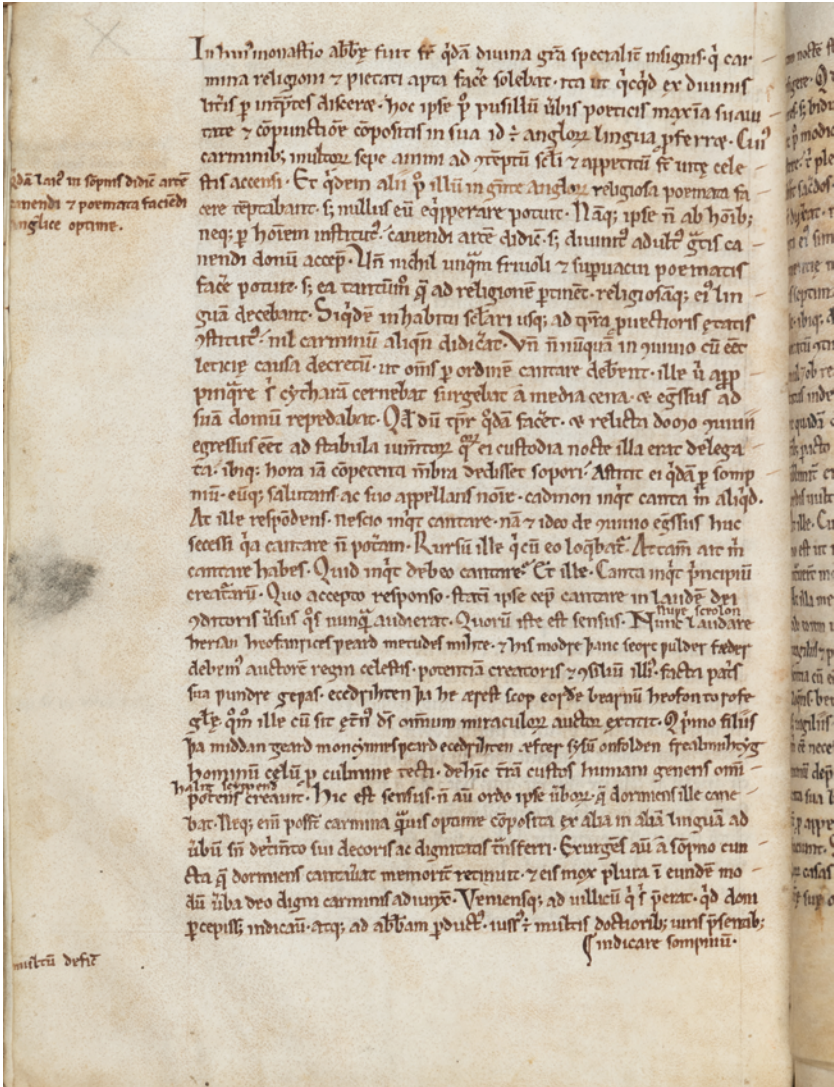


Figure 4. Alternating lines of interpolated West-Saxon “eorðe” recension of Cædmon’s hymn, beginning line 23. London, College of Arms, s.n. (c12), f. 84v, reproduced by permission of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms.

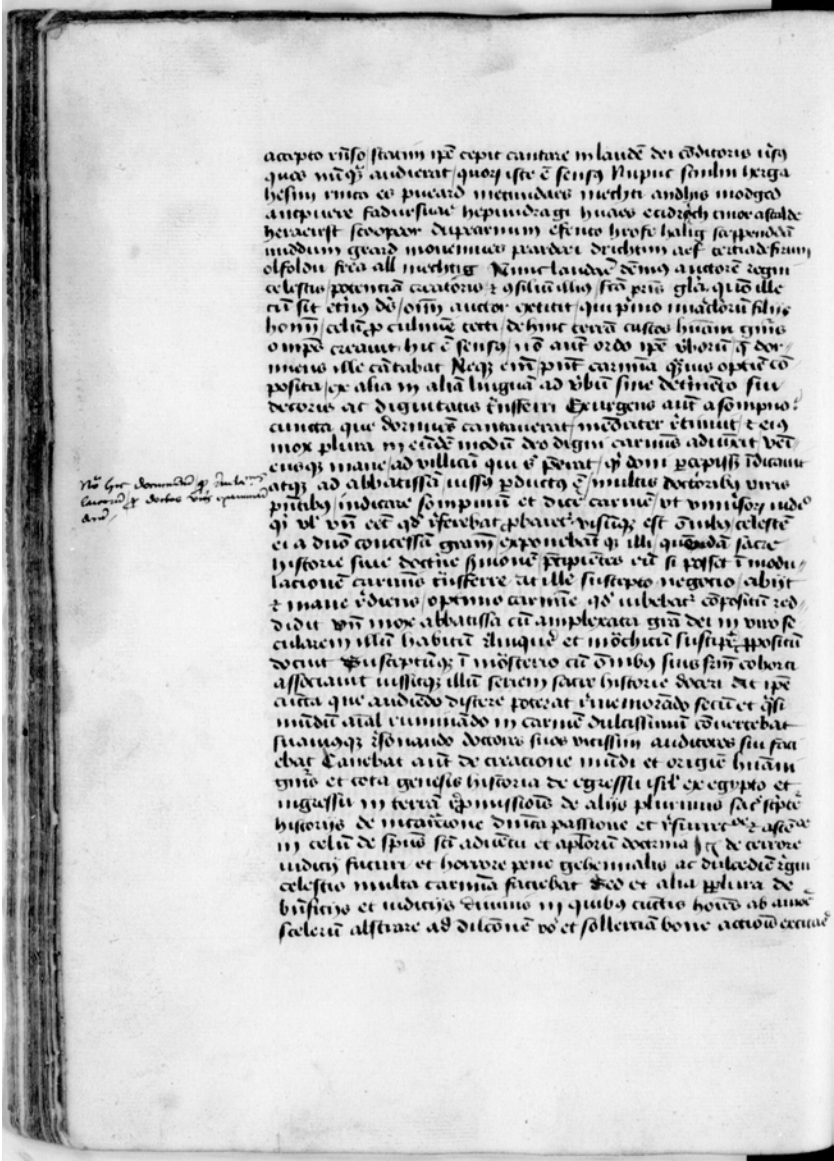


Figure 5. Unmarked insertion of Cædmon’s hymn on line 2. BnF, lat. 5237 (c15), f. 72v, copyright Gallica/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

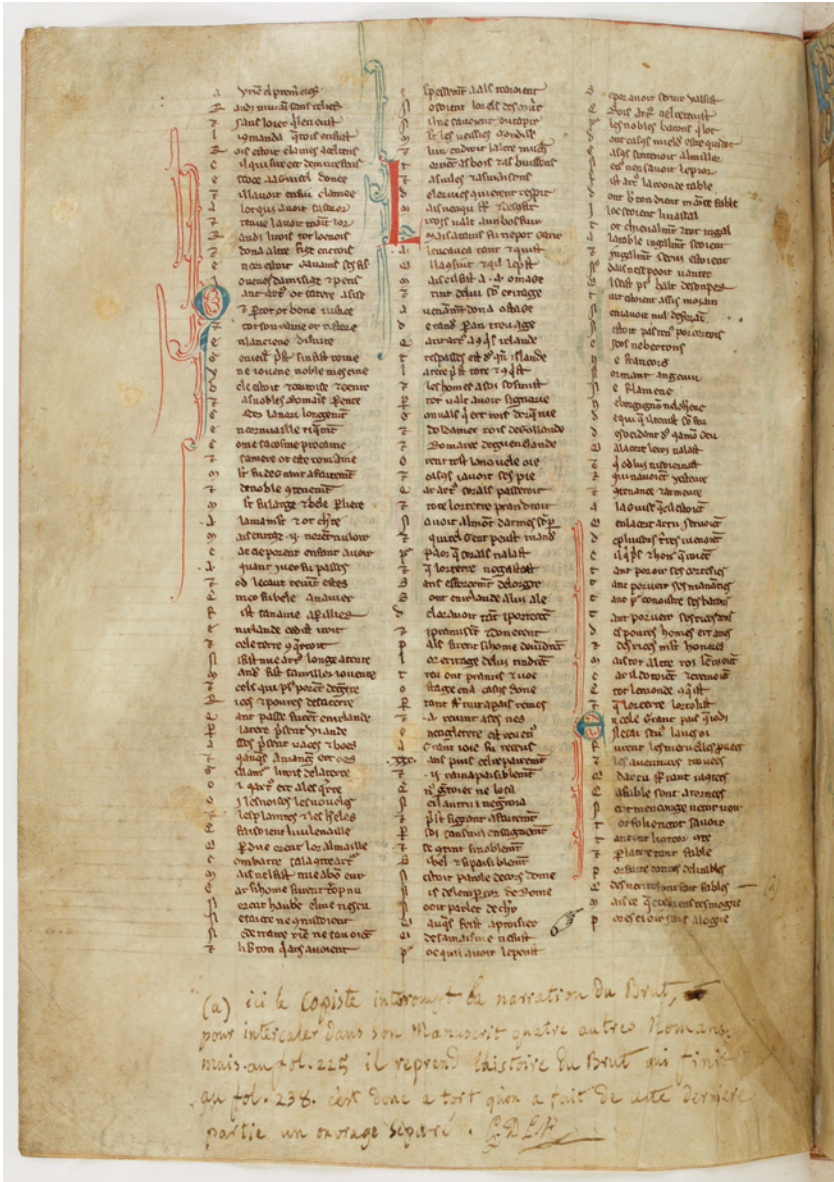


Figure 6. The interpolated couplet citing Chrétien is signaled by a medieval manicule and explained in the bottom margin by the Abbé Gervais de la Rue (1751–1835). BnF fr. 1450 (ca. 1240), f. 139v, copyright Gallica/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Citational

Comparatively rare, citational interpolation names another author or work as its source. Admittedly, this is the most controversial category in this taxonomy, for many purists would say that attributing inserted material to another voice excludes it from being an interpolation at all (COMBES AND SZKILNIK 2012, 11). But I would say that a citational interpolation is distinguished from an ordinary citation by its length: it is simply not possible to cite a long work in its entirety. Intuitively, there is some outer limit for what a quotation can be. An entire romance or a complete saint's life, when inserted into another work, cannot reasonably said to be a mere citation, even if its author is named. While it is hard to distinguish the exact border where a citation turns into a citational interpolation, certain manuscripts present extreme cases that clearly fall into the latter category. The most famous of these outliers is BnF fr. 1450 (ca. 1240), the manuscript in which all five of Chrétien de Troyes's surviving romances are interpolated into the twelve years of peace in Arthur's reign in Wace's *Roman de Brut*. The scribe calls upon "ce que Crestiens tesmogne" (what Chrétien testifies) to fill in the time of the "grant pais" (great peace) (f.139^{vc}; see Fig. 6). Though the interpolator explicitly names Chrétien as a source, I find it implausible that five romances can be "cited"; and indeed, in scholarship, they are usually said to be "interpolated". Using the term "interpolation" instead of "citation" also captures more adequately the revisionary force of this insertion, which in its sheer length necessarily inflects the operation of the receiving text in a way that a brief citation may not do (WEAVER 2022, 16–23; WEAVER 2024, 128–39).

Non-Literary

A non-literary interpolation incorporates illuminations, diagrams, or musical notation in the text block. Just as with literary interpolation, these insertions happen in a second time, after one or both elements (the receiving text and the interpolated material) exists. Admittedly, the term "non-literary" is imperfect, because often the interpolated material contains text as well as other types of inscriptions (neumes accompanied by lyrics, for instance). But it is still necessary to distinguish these interpolations from the purely textual.⁶ I will briefly explore examples from each sub-type of

6. To be more precise, this category refers only to insertions into manuscript texts of non-literary material; purely pictorial or musical interpolation outside of

non-literary interpolation, ending with a complex literary manuscript that inserts both illuminations and music.

The study of interpolated images and diagrams lags behind the prolonged and clear-eyed scrutiny of musical interpolations in texts, in part because the term “interpolation” has not been typically applied to visual insertions. It is difficult from the scholarship to distinguish between an image that has been appended or one that has been truly interpolated. Manuscript stemmata, indispensable as they are for seeing the belatedness of interpolations, often rely only on textual variants alone, perhaps because the image programs are perceived as circulating separately from the text. Rather than being seen as a hermeneutic feature, the appearance of images in a tradition is often analyzed without any sense of how unusual they are or how they might disrupt a pre-existing tradition (see, e.g., NICHOLS 1992). In fine readings by art historians, belated diagrams are similarly treated as obvious corollaries to the texts they accompany as opposed to elements that transform their surrounding text. The attitude towards interpolated images and diagrams is usually positive, unlike the dominant sentiment about interpolated texts — but this positivity may be due to repeated exclusion of these elements from the category of interpolation at all. But added image programs and diagrams are, like textual and musical insertions, still the response of a later reader and certainly share the same transformative force. Interpolation is the best word to describe them.

A clear case of an interpolated image program occurs in BL Egerton 3028 (ca. 1338), which contains the only French verse *Brut* with a sophisticated image program along with two unusually illustrated *chansons de geste*, *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*.⁷ Its uniqueness makes clear the effects of interpolation in comparison to other copies of these texts. All three French poems are abridged in comparison to the rest of their respective traditions (BLACKER 2006; BOUTET 1987; LE PERSON 2023). With three exceptions occasioned by the incorporation of frontispieces, every recto presents a large pen-and-ink drawing unique to this copy. The interpolated images thus dominate the reading experience of this small codex, since they loom over nearly every opening. The limner

manuscripts (i.e., in works of visual art or music), both of which deserve further study, are not in the purview of this study of textual cultures.

7. The British Library has fully digitized Egerton 3028 in color: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=egerton_ms_3028_fs001r. Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, IV 578 is a related manuscript of *chansons de geste* with a similar interpolated image program.

who illustrated this volume paid careful attention to the text, rather than potential iconographical models such as the Arthurian Vulgate tradition (WHITAKER 1990, 31–34).

The Arthurian cycle of drawings in the *Brut* shows how the interpolated images can encourage their viewer to make comparisons across the history. In a sequence of four images of a conquering Arthur, the interpolator composes the king's encounters with other leaders to construct a visual pattern of power. In each frame, Arthur stands on the reader's left, facing right, wearing a crown and mail and holding a weapon. Facing him, looking left, another man kneels. The series of four begins with two nearly identical images. First the king of Ireland does homage; Arthur holds his scepter above the submitting monarch, who like the king of the Britons wears a gilded crown (f. 38r; see Fig. 7). A very similar depiction shows the king of Denmark kneeling on the red frame of the image, grasping Arthur's scepter as Arthur gestures with his left hand (f. 39r). On f. 40r, a much busier image nevertheless transmits the same body language. Rather than two figures in front of an empty background, architectural elements clutter the entirety of the frame. As in the previous two images, however, the King stands over a kneeling man, weapon in his right hand, with left hand raised in a gesture of speech. Given that the prior iterations showed the concession of these other monarchs to Arthur, the messenger's body language proleptically suggests the outcome of the upcoming battle with Frolles, the Roman ruler of Gaul. So it is no surprise that on f. 41r, we find Arthur standing on the left, splitting the kneeling Frolles's skull with his weapon, held in his right hand as always. All four images assert Arthur's dominance: an Arthur standing on the left of the frame is an Arthur to whom others submit. An attentive looker might notice that when he embarks on his campaign against Lucius on ff. 50 to 53, Arthur has switched positions: he is now mounted on the right of the frame, riding leftward. Just as the encounter with the messenger on f. 40r predicted Frolles's defeat, the new body language and new right-to-left direction across the frame point to Arthur's own demise, depicted on f. 53r. The interpolated images amplify the patterns of the written history.

Diagrams can be defined as “visual constructions using an abstract or figural framework to arrange knowledge — information, concepts, and beliefs — that is communicated in verbal and/or visual form” (SANDLER 2020, 429). While they are often appended at the beginning or end of a work, offering a visual preface or postface, diagrams can also be interpolated. In his 1377 translation of (pseudo-)Aristotle's *De caelo et mundo*, *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, the scholastic philosopher Nicole Oresme interpolates diagrams as one way of

arguing with his source. Two of his interpolated diagrams use the Aristotelian square of opposition to prove that Creation is finite, contra Aristotle, who believed that the world was eternal (BnF fr. 1082, f. 53v; see Fig. 8). He places “always existing” (*toujours estre*) in diagonal opposition to “having an end” (*avoir fin*), and “always not existing” (*toujours non estre*) in opposition to “having a beginning” (*avoir commencement*). In his explanation of the diagram, itself a translational interpolation, Oresme contends that anything that has a beginning must necessarily have an end. The second interpolated square of opposition continues in the same vein (see Fig. 8). In Christian terms, this logical statement is a necessary corrective to maintain the validity of a conception of time that has Creation as a beginning and Judgment Day as a telos. Oresme co-opts visual vocabulary from Aristotle (and its associated authority) to argue more convincingly against those of the Greek philosopher’s views that have no place in a Christian system (HAMBURGER 2020, 76–77). The placement of his diagrams within the text block of his translation further suggests to a casual reader that they would have been present in his source. In *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, then, Oresme engages in translational and non-literary (specifically diagrammatic) interpolation.

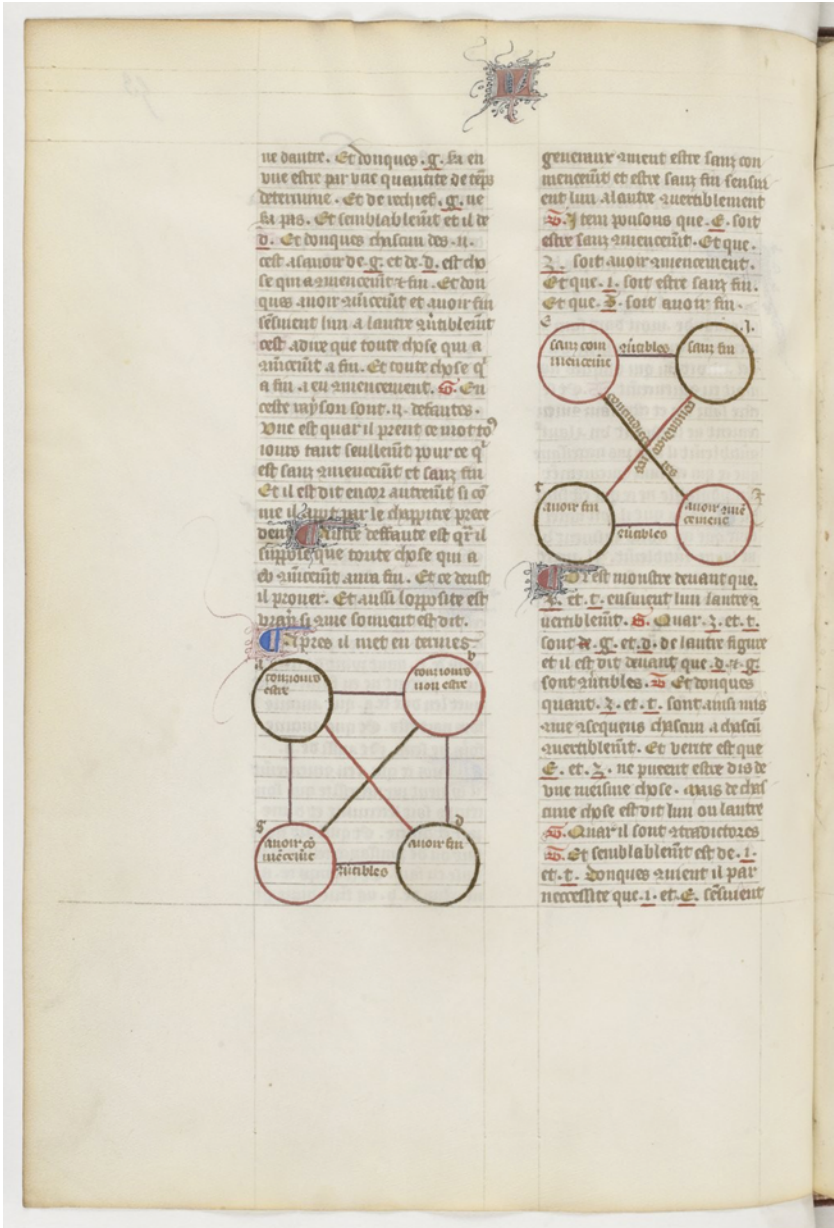
Among the important corpus of manuscripts that feature interpolated lyric poems in French and Latin, a subset also contains musical notation (staves and neumes, or sometimes, incompletely, staves alone).⁸ The incorporation of this notation both facilitates musical performance when the manuscript is read aloud and visually emphasizes the heterogeneity of the text. An example from a late fourteenth-century copy of the *Tristan en prose*, BnF fr. 776 (ca. 1240), shows how the manuscript page can be dominated by an interpolated lyric (see Fig. 9). On this page, the notation accompanies the first stanza of the *lai* sung by Lamorat, who is in love with Gawain’s mother, overheard in the story by King Mark. The subsequent stanzas, not notated, are still marked off as distinct from non-lyric narrative by gleaming illuminated initials in gold, blue, and red. Three first stanzas are notated in this manuscript; surprisingly, none of them mark *lais* sung by the musical Tristan.⁹ In another *Tristan en prose* manuscript, Vienna, ÖNB 2542 (northern France, ca. 1300), seventeen out of some twenty-two *lais* are notated (BOULTON 1993, 44–47, 298). Boulton has argued that

8. See handlists in FOWLER 1979, 19–27, 34, 238–322; BOULTON 1993, 298–99.

9. In addition to the *Lai of Lamorat*, the manuscript also notates a lyrical letter from Mark to Guinevere (“Salue vous com le doy faire”, f. 246r) and an insulting song sent from the knight Dinadan to Mark (“Tant me suis de dire teüs”, f. 271v).

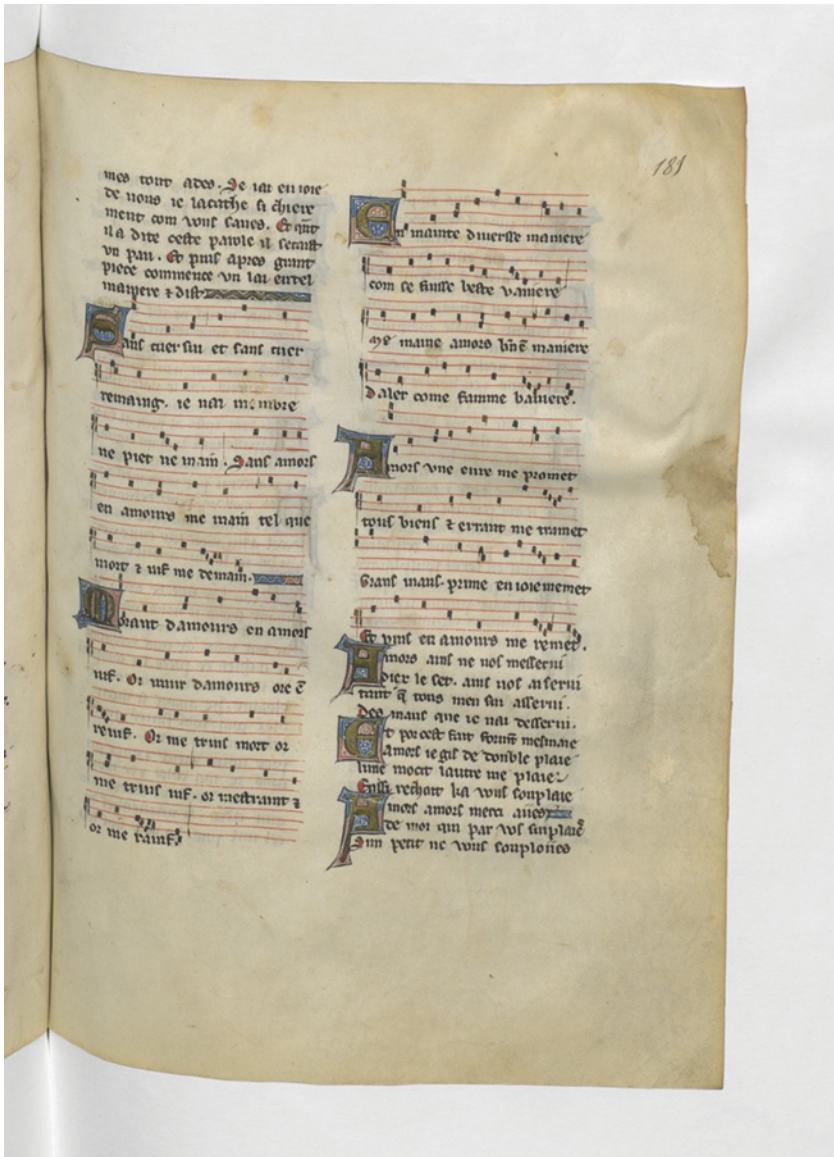


Figure 7. Arthur triumphant, on the left. BL Egerton 3028 (ca. 1338), f. 38r; copyright British Library Board.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 1082

Figure 8. Nicole Oresme’s interpolated squares of opposition in *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, BnF fr. 1082 (1377), f. 53v, copyright Gallica/Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 776

Figure 9. Interpolated staves and neumes in the *Tristan en Prose*, BnF fr. 776 (late c14), f. 181r, copyright Gallica/Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 146

Figure 10. Interpolated bifolium, now paginated ff. 28bis-ter, containing the lai *Pour recouurer alegiance* as well as a miniature of Fauvel. BnF fr. 146 (ca. 1317), f. 28bis, copyright Gallica/ Bibliothèque nationale de France.

the passages prior to these inserted lyrics evoke lyric tropes, such as the “nature introduction”, and that the songs themselves serve “as the expression of [the lover’s] thought” (1993, 51).

The types of non-literary interpolations need not exist in isolation from one another. A multimodal example of non-literary interpolation occurs in the most famous manuscript of the Old French *Roman de Fauvel*, written by the cleric Gervais de Bus around 1310 and surviving in at least fourteen medieval manuscripts (BRUN 2023). Though this manuscript tradition testifies to a modest popularity in the Middle Ages, Gervais’s original moral fable is not, however, the *Roman de Fauvel* that scholars most study today. That honor is reserved for the amplified version created by Chaillou de Pesstain, now under the shelfmark BnF fr. 146 (ca. 1317), which contains a wealth of textual interpolations, but also a spectacular quantity of non-literary visual and musical interpolations. The most famous of these, the lai *Pour recouurer alegiance*, is also a material interpolation of a bifolium (now ff. 28bis-ter; DILLON 2002b, 236–63; see Fig. 10). A painstaking table of contents enumerates the motets, lays, “proses”, ballads, rondeaux, responses, and other insertions (f. Br). Some of these works predate *Fauvel* and were integrated by Chaillou, while others have no known source and may have been composed as part of his revisionary process (DILLON 2002b, 227). The result of Chaillou’s interpolative method is a staggeringly heterogenous, prodigiously luxurious manuscript in which text, image, and musical notation compete for the viewer’s attention. The complexity of this manuscript, caused in large part by these interpolations, has made it an enduring locus of study, adumbrating the ways in which interpolation can leave traces of medieval priorities, creativity, and habits of mind (BENT AND WATHEY 1998; DILLON 2002a and 2002b; BUTTERFIELD 2002, 200–15).

Conclusion

Inquiry into interpolation, a pervasive and transformative form of manuscript textuality, has historically been hampered by a lack of shared terminology. The proposal of a taxonomy of covert, material, auto, translational, absorptive, citational, and non-literary (pictorial, diagrammatic, and musical) interpolation is meant to provide a framework useful to further criticism and cataloguing work. This is no light task, to be sure; but with these terms in mind, it will be easier to be precise about the permutations of this phenomenon. We can now speak of a material non-literary interpolation, like that of the lai *Pour recouurer alegiance* in

the copy of the *Roman de Fauvel* in BnF fr. 146, or a covert translational interpolation, like those Chaucer makes in *Troilus and Criseyde*. For librarians and cataloguers, the distinction between material and other species of interpolation will likely be most useful. Though they are not the focus of this article, both the motivations for interpolation and the results of these revisions are complex, variable, and worthy of further investigation. It is my hope that this taxonomy will facilitate future explorations.

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