

Johannes Brassart's *Summus secretarius*: Extolling the Evangelist*

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The motet *Summus secretarius* remains an enigma in the polyphonic output of Johannes Brassart (ca. 1400/5–1455). Of the ten complete Latin motets ascribed or attributed to this composer, eight name a holy or worldly subject, such as the Virgin Mary,

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St. Lambert, St. Martin, St. John the Evangelist, and the Habsburg ruler Frederick III.¹ Yet instead of a named addressee, *Summus secretarius* alludes to an elusive “highest secretary.” Who is this high-ranking figure, and how can we use this reference to discern the underlying meanings of Brassart’s motet?

These questions have perplexed musicologists for decades. Despite various attempts to identify the *summus secretarius* of the motet’s opening line, scholars have yet to reach a consensus. Some have associated the “secretary” with a worldly official, such as an unspecified “high dignitary of the pontifical Court” (suggested by Charles van den Borren); the episcopal secretary Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini—future Pope Pius II—serving the Bishop of Fermo, Domenico Capranica, at the Council of Basel (proposed by Louise Cuyler); or a member of the imperial court (suggested by Laurenz Lütteken).² Others have interpreted the “secretary” from a spiritual perspective as the Holy Ghost. Here we find the greatest agreement, with endorsements by Guillaume de Van, Gilbert Reaney, and Robert Nosow.³

Yet one other possibility merits consideration. In his 1961 doctoral study of Brassart’s career and output, Keith Mixter challenged Van den Borren’s modern reading of the term *secretarius*.⁴ Focusing instead on the motet’s ninth and tenth lines, *Erat in principio ante tempus verbum*, paraphrasing the first verse of the Gospel of John, Mixter suggested the motet might honor St. John the Evangelist, the *secretarius* of God. He further speculated that because *Summus secretarius* is transmitted in the same source (GB-Ob 213) as *Fortis cum quevis actio*, which names John the

¹ Named subjects appear in: *O flos fragrans* (Virgin Mary); *Regina celi* (Virgin Mary); *Ave Maria/O Maria* (Virgin Mary); *Christi nutu sublimato* (St. Lambert); the anonymous *Lamberte vir inclite* (St. Lambert) attributed to Brassart; *Te dignitas presularis* (St. Martin and Pope Martin V?); *Fortis cum quevis actio* (St. John the Evangelist); and *O rex Fridrice/In tuo adventu* (Frederick III). This list is based on that given by Peter Wright in “Brassart, Johannes,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed 17 January 2017, www.oxfordmusiconline.com. Alongside *Summus secretarius* only *Magne deus potencie/Genus regale esperie* (possibly for Pope Martin V) lacks a named subject. On the challenges of *Magne deus*, see Margaret Bent, “Early Papal Motets,” in *Papal Music and Musicians in Late Medieval and Renaissance Rome*, ed. Richard Sherr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5–43, at 34–36.

² Charles Van den Borren, ed., *Polyphonia Sacra: A Continental Miscellany of the Fifteenth Century*, rev. ed. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), xlv; Louise Cuyler, *The Emperor Maximilian I and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 12–13; Laurenz Lütteken, *Guillaume Dufay und die isorhythmische Motette: Gattungstradition und Werkcharakter an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit* (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1993), 364n103.

³ Guillaume de Van, “Inventory of Manuscript Bologna, Liceo Musicale, Q 15 (Olim 37),” *Musica Disciplina* 2 (1948): 231–57, at 252–53; Gilbert Reaney, “The Manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici Misc. 213,” *Musica Disciplina* 9 (1955): 73–104, at 86; and Robert Nosow, “The Florid and Equal-Discantus Motet Styles of Fifteenth-Century Italy” (Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992), 117.

⁴ Keith Mixter, “Johannes Brassart and His Works,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1961), 1:96.

Evangelist, both motets share a common subject and origin, possibly composed at the collegiate church of Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste in Liège.⁵ Although Bobby Cox, Julie Cumming, and Margaret Bent have since acknowledged Mixer's reasoning, and although Mixer himself has called for a closer reading of the motet's challenging text, no study has tested the validity of his hypothesis.⁶

Summus secretarius reveals its secrets when examined within the context of the medieval cult of St. John the Evangelist. Taking our cues from Brassart's careful musical treatment of words quoted from the Gospel of John (1:1), we can decipher the motet's language and symbolism using a diverse array of exegetical writings, images, and liturgical music that illuminate the unique status of Christ's most beloved disciple. Although the pervasive veneration of St. John would have generated multiple opportunities for Brassart to encounter similar portrayals of the visionary, it seems probable that it was indeed in Liège that Brassart experienced the evangelist's cult most vividly. Through his decade-long affiliation with the church of Saint-Jean, from 1422 to the early 1430s, Brassart undoubtedly came to appreciate the lofty position of its titular patron.

Both text and context situate Brassart's motet within the widespread medieval understanding of the Fourth Gospel and the veneration of the evangelist in fifteenth-century Liège. As the most philosophical and elusive of the Gospel writers, John's visions required explanation, generating a longstanding exegetical tradition in the form of Gospel commentaries, homilies, mystical writings, iconography, votive poetry, and music. We begin our analysis below with the influential and widely circulated writings of St. Augustine (354–430), the Venerable Bede (672/3–735), Alcuin of Tours (ca. 735–804), and John Scottus Eriugena (810–877), all of which shaped literary, visual, and musical representations of the saint.⁷ These

⁵ *Summus secretarius* is transmitted in two manuscripts: GB-Ob 213, fols. 6v–7r (first gathering); and I-Bc Q 15, fols. A302v–303r (gathering twenty-six). The motet is published in Brassart's *Opera omnia*, ed. Keith Mixer, 2 vols., *Corpus mensurabilis musicae* 35 (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1971), 2:32–35. My musical examples are based on this edition, with additional *musica ficta* suggested by Margaret Bent and one minor change to the text underlay.

⁶ Bobby Wayne Cox, "The Motets of MS Bologna, Civico Museo, Bibliografico Musicale, Q 15" (Ph.D. diss., North Texas State University, 1977), 1:277–78; Julie E. Cumming, *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 142; and Margaret Bent, ed., *Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript: Introductory Study and Facsimile Edition*, 2 vols. (Lucca, Italy: Libreria musicale italiana, 2008), 1:229.

⁷ The widespread influence of these commentators on the later cult of St. John is discussed in Annette Volting, *John the Evangelist and Medieval German Writing: Imitating the Inimitable* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24–25; and Alexander André, "The Glossa Ordinaria on the Gospel of John: A Preliminary Survey of the Manuscripts with a Presentation of the Text and its Sources," *Revue bénédictine* 118 (2008): 109–34, at 117–23. Copies of the following are documented in medieval inventories of two libraries in the city and diocese of Liège: Augustine's tractates on the Gospel of John (at the abbey of Saint-

varied sources facilitate translation of the motet text and interpretation of its symbolism, from the enigmatic *summus secretarius* hailed at the outset to the biblical and cosmological references in the ensuing lines. Indeed the text's deliberately elusive tone mirrors the evangelist's privileged status as the recipient and disseminator of divine mysteries. With a firmer grasp of the motet's meanings, we next examine the extant archival and liturgical evidence from Liège to determine how Brassart might have encountered relevant imagery through his ecclesiastical service and for what occasions the motet's performance might have been suitable.

To date, the most detailed studies of *Summus secretarius* have given more attention to musical characteristics than to the text.⁸ By scrutinizing the textual complexities of this work, we can recognize the extent to which fifteenth-century motets lacking a plainchant or other musical quotation might nonetheless perpetuate and adorn medieval exegetical traditions.⁹ As will become evident, *Summus secretarius* demonstrates to an exceptional degree the hermeneutic richness of the enigmatic language found in the unique texts of this freely composed polyphony.

In principio: *John as Summus*

At the heart of *Summus secretarius* lies a textual paraphrase of the first verse of the Gospel of John, *In principio erat Verbum*:

1	Summus secretarius,	The highest secretary
2	Omnia scientis,	of the All-Knowing One
3	Irroratus gnarius	was bedewed by the mystic streams
4	Misticis fluentis	with deeper knowledge
5	Omnibus mortalibus	than all mortals

Laurent and Lobbes); Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* (Lobbes); Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis* (Saint-Laurent and Lobbes); Bede's commentary on the Gospel of John (Saint-Laurent); and Bede's commentary on Genesis (Saint-Laurent). See Jean Gessler, "La bibliothèque de l'abbaye de Saint-Laurent à Liège au XIIe et au XIIIe siècle," *Bulletin de la société des bibliophiles liégeois* 12 (1927): 91–135, at 107, 114, 118; and François Dolbeau, "Un nouveau catalogue des manuscrits de Lobbes aux XIe et XIIe siècles," *Recherches augustiniennes* 13 (1978): 3–36, at 18–20.

⁸ Mixer, "Johannes Brassart and His Works," 1:96, 115, 138, 151; Cox, "The Motets of MS Bologna," 1:276–80; and Nosow, "The Florid and Equal-Discantus Motet Styles," 114, 116, 117–21.

⁹ Previous scholarship analyzing the meaning and symbolism of fifteenth-century motets has tended to prioritize works featuring borrowed musical material. Exceptions to this trend include: Julie Cumming, "Concord out of Discord: Occasional Motets of the Early Quattrocento" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987); David J. Rothenberg, *The Flower of Paradise: Marian Devotion and Secular Song in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Robert Nosow, *Ritual Meanings in the Fifteenth-Century Motet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

6	Erumpnose vallis,	of this wretched vale,
7	Fatibus nam talibus	for his own path stood
8	Suus stetit callis:	by utterances like these:
9	Erat in principio	“In the Beginning, before time,
10	Ante tempus verbum,	was the Word.”
11	Intellectus clipeo	That seems harsh
12	Quod paret acerbum	to the shield of understanding
13	Ob altam materiam	because of the lofty matter
14	Tene[b]rose molis,	of the dark mass—
15	Vibrantem materiam	matter that shimmers
16	Instar clari solis. ¹⁰	like the shining sun.

The biblical reference, however, does not inspire musical quotation. Typical of the equal discantus and Italian subgenres, the motet lacks a cantus firmus—all voices are newly composed.¹¹ Brassart nonetheless recognizes the scriptural allusion by manipulating the musical texture to distinguish the biblical verse from the rest of the motet (ex. 1). Unlike several of Brassart’s other four-voice works that repeatedly reduce the texture to two voices, *Summus secretarius* avoids duets altogether and calls more consistently for the full ensemble. The most notable exception to this pattern coincides precisely with the words *Erat in principio ante tempus verbum*. For the duration of this biblical paraphrase, Brassart omits the tenor—this is the only time the tenor rests—thereby limiting the texture to three voices. Here the rhythmic and melodic motion of the two discantus voices is less equal than elsewhere in the motet, as one voice plays more of an accompanying role to the embellishments of the other. Slower moving longs and breves as well as restricted melodic motion—perhaps reminiscent of plainchant—govern the first discantus on the word *erat* and the second discantus on *ante*, returning to the first for the beginning of *verbum*. Nosow notes that the contratenor in this three-voice passage is harmonically inessential, and Bent suspects that *Summus secretarius*, like many other freely composed equal discantus motets, was initially conceived without the contratenor altogether.¹² As a three-voice work, the

¹⁰ The Latin text follows Brassart, *Opera omnia*, 2:32–35, with changes to capitalization.

¹¹ As defined by Nosow, the equal (or double) discantus motet “emphasizes the interaction of two equal discantus parts—equal in terms of range, melody, rhythmic activity, and text—above a slower, free tenor.” Nosow, “The Florid and Equal-Discantus Motet Styles,” iii. Cumming classifies *Summus secretarius* in the “other double-discantus” subgenre of motets composed by northerners. Cumming, *The Motet in the Age of Du Fay*, 142, 229. For characteristics of the Italian motet, see Margaret Bent, “The Fourteenth-Century Italian Motet,” in *L’Ars nova italiana del Trecento VI*, ed. Giulio Cattin (Certaldo: Edizioni Polis, 1992), 85–125, at 99–104.

¹² Nosow, “The Florid and Equal-Discantus Motet Styles,” 118. Bent notes that an extra stave was ruled for the contratenor in I-Bc Q 15 (fol. A303r) and discusses the

EXAMPLE 1. Brassart *Summus secretarius*, mm. 56–92

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[Discantus 1]
lis: E -

[Discantus 2]
lis: E -

Contratenor

Tenor

61

rat in prin - ci - pi -

66

o an - te

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omission of the tenor in this passage would have exposed the self-sufficient discantus duet even more strikingly.

problematic status of contratenors in this manuscript in *Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript*, 1:146–47, 53, 229. My thanks to Margaret Bent for this insight and for confirming that *Summus secretarius* was copied into I-Bc Q 15 during the early 1430s when contratenors were being added.

EXAMPLE 1. (Continued)

73

tem - pus ver -

78

bum, in - tel - bum,

Intellectus

86

le - ctus cli - pe - o quod in - tel - le - ctus cli - pe - o

The conspicuous placement and synchronization of rests further distinguishes this passage from the seamless polyphony setting the preceding and ensuing lines, allowing the listener to recognize and ponder its significance. Joint rests facilitate coordination between the two discantus voices, which declaim the words *in principio* in homophony. Subsequently, a pronounced pause of one breve—the longest simultaneous rest in the entire piece—separates the biblical quotation from the paraphrase *ante*

tempus, followed by a shorter semibreve rest before the joint utterance of *verbum*. These musical clues suggest that Brassart deliberately intended the textual reference to the Gospel of John to be audible.

The phrase “In the beginning was the Word” is the most distinctive passage of the Fourth Gospel. It was because of this sublime portrayal of the mystery of the Incarnation, in which John revealed the dual nature of Christ, that medieval exegetes considered John to be the most philosophical and intellectually acute of the Gospel writers.¹³ These words became an identifying attribute (fig. 1). Author portraits in illuminated Gospel books—such as the Saint-Laurent Gospels (from eleventh-century Liège)—depict John with a scroll or codex inscribed with the words *In principio*.¹⁴ The position of the evangelist’s feet, frequently placed unevenly on a footstool or with one foot higher than the other, suggests John’s heavenward ascent to behold divine mysteries.¹⁵

In patristic and medieval commentary the loftiness of John’s intellect elevates him above the other evangelists. In a homily on the opening of the Fourth Gospel, St. Augustine emphasizes the challenge of the first verse and compares John to a mountain that rises above all the world’s peaks, the constellations, and even “all the choirs and legions of angels.”¹⁶ Augustine explains, “The heart of John could not have reached that which he says, ‘In the beginning’ . . . unless he had risen beyond all things which were made through the Word.”¹⁷ Rather than receiving divine knowledge from above, John rises up to it, surpassing all creation to contemplate the divinity of the Word.¹⁸ Inspired by Augustine, the Carolingian commentator Alcuin of Tours describes John’s intellectual superiority by analogy to flight:

And among the writers of the Evangiles the blessed John is surely the most eminent in depth of insight into divine mysteries. . . . He is elevated far before the three other Evangelists; these you can see, as

¹³ Volting, *John the Evangelist*, 44–45.

¹⁴ Other examples are discussed by Jeffrey F. Hamburger in *St. John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 37–42 (fig. 30), 54–56 (fig. 41), 57 (fig. 45), 58–59 (fig. 47), 120–21 (fig. 105).

¹⁵ Jennifer O’Reilly, “St. John as a Figure of the Contemplative Life: Text and Image in the Art of the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine Reform,” in *St. Dunstan: His Life, Times and Cult*, ed. Nigel Ramsay, Margaret Sparks, and T. W. T. Tatton-Brown (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1992), 165–85, at 170–71. O’Reilly acknowledges that the uneven positioning of John’s feet is typical of seated evangelist portraits more generally, yet also mirrors depictions of John writing at the Crucifixion stepping up or standing on raised ground.

¹⁶ Augustine, Tractate 1 in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 1–10*, trans. John Rettig, Fathers of the Church 78 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 44. Commenting on John 1:1, Augustine notes, “The fact is, the natural man does not understand this” (p. 42).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ O’Reilly, “St. John as a Figure of the Contemplative Life,” 170.

FIGURE 1. Saint-Laurent Gospels, Liège, ca. 1050–1100, B-Br 18383, fol. 124v. Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels. St. John the Evangelist, holding his scribal knife, contemplates the opening words of his Gospel “In principio erat verbum.”



it were, on the earth conversing with the human Christ, while him you see mounting above the cloud which covers the entire earth and reaching the liquid light of heaven where he beheld, with a most acute and powerful mind, the Word in the beginning. . . . For this reason, he is rightly compared to the flying eagle in the image of the four beasts; indeed, of all the birds, the eagle flies highest and, of all living creatures, he alone dares to fix his gaze on the rays of the sun. . . . John flies up to

heaven with the Lord and in speaking of his temporal acts recognizes also the eternal power of his divinity through which all things are made.¹⁹

Alcuin draws on the widespread association of John with the eagle—reflecting the attribution of the four beasts in Ezekiel (1:10) and Revelation (4:6–8) to the four evangelists—to depict the sublimity of John’s theological insight. Medieval bestiaries praise the eagle for its keen vision, sunward gaze, and habit of flying up into the circle of the sun where it singes its wings and rejuvenates its eyesight.²⁰ Theologians and artists frequently associated the eagle’s soaring flight and ability to stare directly into the sun with John’s Gospel vision and the contemplative’s propensity to fix his mental gaze on Christ.²¹ St. Jerome, for example, explains that John “takes the wings from an eagle to soar up even higher and discuss the Word of God.”²²

Aquiline imagery pervades the plainchant repertory proper to John. Of the eighteen hymns or sequences for the evangelist quoting or paraphrasing the words *In principio* transmitted in *Analecta hymnica*, eight associate John with the eagle and another four reference John’s height or transcendence.²³ The sequence *Laus harmoniae resultat alleluia* transmitted in the first layer of proses in the eleventh-century Winchester Troper depicts the eagle-like evangelist gazing at lofty divine secrets, contemplating their height before preaching his Gospel:

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2b	Evangelista	John the Evangelist,
	Iohannes, divina	proclaiming
	Annuntians praeconia	divine praise,
3a	Velut aquila	like an eagle
	Figens lumina	gazing at the lights,
	In alta	toward the high secrets

¹⁹ Alcuin, *Commentarium in Joannem*, PL 100, cols. 741–44; translated by Meyer Schapiro in “Two Romanesque Drawings in Auxerre and Some Iconographic Problems,” in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle Da Costa Greene*, ed. Dorothy Eugenia Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 331–49, reprinted in Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), 306–27, at 308–9.

²⁰ Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 113–15.

²¹ Volffing discusses John’s aquiline attributes in *John the Evangelist*, 45–47, 94–96, 136–37. Hamburger examines artistic portrayals of John with the eagle in *St. John the Divine*, 30, 34, 42, 51, 57, 84, 92, 95–96, 100–103, 121, 145.

²² “Quarta Iohannem euangelistam qui adsumptis pinnis aquilae et ad altiora festinans de Verbo Dei disputat.” St. Jerome, *Commentaire sur S. Matthieu*, ed. and trans. Émile Bonnard, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1977–79), 1:66–67.

²³ References to the eagle are found in: AH 3, no. 21; AH 9, no. 255; AH 11, no. 285; AH 12, no. 249; AH 40, no. 252; AH 40, no. 253; AH 55, no. 8; and AH 55, no. 191. Additional references to John’s height or transcendence are found in: AH 2, no. 1026; AH 9, no. 251; AH 14, no. 19; and AH 42, no. 256.

	Deitatis arcana,	of the Godhead,
	Supergrediens omnia	surpasses all hidden things
	Cordis oculo condita;	of the heart with the mind's eye,
3b	Mente liquida	with a flowing mind
	Contemplans illa	contemplating
	Excelsa	these heights
	Voce palam prolata;	[that were] revealed openly, with the utterance:
	“In principio cum patre	“In the Beginning with the Father
	Erat verbum per saecula.” ²⁴	was the Word throughout the ages.”

The supremacy of John's intellect allows him to gaze unflinchingly at the divine light in which he beholds what he will preach. These versicles equate John's Gospel with his aquiline ascent much as Alcuin recognized the loftiness of his theological insight.

Other sequences similarly emphasize John's extraordinary sublimity, such as *Caelum laudes moduletur*, transmitted in a fourteenth-century gradual from the Dominican community at Val di Pietra in Bologna:

3b	Velut avis transvolavit	Like a bird he flew over
	Caeli summa, hic intravit	the summits of heaven; here he entered
	Et transcendit omnia. ²⁵	and transcended all things.

Having penetrated the celestial summits (*summa*) John flies higher (*altius*) than other visionaries, as specified in the widely disseminated sequence *Verbum dei*:

9a	Volat avis sine meta	He flies like a bird without limit,
	Quo nec vates nec propheta	in that neither seer nor prophet
	Evolavit altius.	ever flew higher. ²⁶

As John surpasses “seers and prophets,” the height of his intellectual flight becomes limitless. From these accounts there can be little doubt that John, called the Divine or the Theologian, ranked the highest

²⁴ AH 40, no. 252. For details of the transmission of this sequence in the Winchester Troper (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 473, fols. 91v–92v), see Susan Rankin, ed., *The Winchester Troper: Facsimile Edition and Introduction*, Early English Church Music 50 (London: Stainer and Bell, 2007), 7, 41, 57–59, 92.

²⁵ AH 40, no. 249.

²⁶ AH 55, no. 188, trans. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 209. *Verbum dei* is one of the more widely known sequences for St. John. Volfing, *John the Evangelist*, 94. Formerly attributed to Adam of Saint-Victor, *Verbum dei* is now thought to have originated in a later Dominican context. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 105. Unlike the two preceding sequences, *Verbum dei* does not quote the opening of John's Gospel.

among the evangelists; Clarembald of Arras (1110/20–ca. 1187) solidified this reputation when he dubbed John the *summus theologorum*.²⁷

John the Secretarius

While there remains little doubt that John enjoyed the status of *summus*, how can we equate the Evangelist with the *secretarius* of the motet's opening line? Here we would do well to heed Mixer's caution against a modern reading of the term secretary. What did *secretarius* mean in the Middle Ages? In a study of the English mystic John of Forde (d. 1214), who showed a predilection for the Fourth Gospel, Hilary Costello traces the etymology of the word *secretarius*, noting that this term does not occur in classical Latin.²⁸ Rather it derives from *secretarium*, "a secret retreat or hiding-place," itself related to the verb *secerno* with the participle *secretus* meaning confidential, secret, or hidden.²⁹ A *secretarius* is therefore the person to whom one confides a secret. While the medieval use of *secretarius* might designate an official function, such as a sacrist, chancellor, or forest agent, the term nonetheless retained its association with confidentiality. Du Cange includes among the five possible meanings "hidden, concealed" and "the holding of a secret," an association prioritized by Niermeyer, whose first two of four definitions are an "intimate counselor" or "confidential clerk."³⁰ When John of Forde calls John the Evangelist a *secretarius dominici pectoris* he thus identifies the evangelist as a "confidant of the secrets of the Lord's heart."³¹

John of Forde was not alone in applying the term *secretarius* to John the Evangelist. The sequence *Dies ista quae sacrata* transmitted in fourteenth- and sixteenth-century sources from Compiègne and Vendôme describes John as the "chosen and beloved secretary of God" (*electus et*

²⁷ Agnieszka Kijewska, "The Eriugenian Concept of Theology: John the Evangelist as the Model Theologian," in *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena: The Bible and Hermeneutics: Proceedings of the Ninth International Colloquium of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies, held at Louvain-la-Neuve, June 7–10, 1995*, ed. Gerd Van Riel, Carlos G. Steel, and J. J. McEvoy (Leuven: University Press, 1996), 173–93, at 176.

²⁸ Hilary Costello, "Secretarius Dominici Pectoris: Saint John's Gospel in John of Forde," in *A Gathering of Friends: The Learning and Spirituality of John of Forde*, ed. Hilary Costello and C. J. Holdsworth (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 93–130, at 93–94.

²⁹ *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 1992), 1718.

³⁰ Charles Dufresne Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infirmae latinitatis*, 10 vols. (Niort: Favre, 1883–87), 7:387–88: 1) sacrist, 2) chancellor, scribe, 3) forest official, 4) hidden, concealed, 5) holding of a secret; and J. F. Niermeyer and C. Van de Kieft, *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus*, rev. ed. Johannes W. J. Burgers (Boston: Brill, 2002), 2:1239–40: 1) intimate counselor, 2) secretary, confidential clerk, 3) forest official, 4) sacrist.

³¹ Costello, "Secretarius Dominici Pectoris," 94.

dilectus Dei secretarius).³² After brief references to John's symbol the eagle (*aquila*) and to his virginity (suggested by the adjective *illibatus*) the sequence describes John's proximity to Christ by recalling the scene from the Last Supper at which John reclined on Christ's breast (John 13:23):

5a	Supra pectus reclinatus Deitatis conscium, Epotavit, eructavit Omne, quod est mysticum.	Reclined on the breast that shares knowledge of the Godhead, he imbibed [and] spewed each single thing which is secret.
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Commenting on the biblical source of this versicle, Augustine interprets Christ's bosom specifically as secret in his explanation: "Here is surely the bosom of the chest, the secret hiding place of wisdom."³³ Indeed it was from this privileged position that John was imagined to have imbibed the heavenly secrets contained within Christ's heart, the source of his visions and superior intellect.³⁴ Brassart himself would have vocalized this idea in a responsory sung at Matins on the Feast of St. John in Liège and elsewhere:

Iste est Joannes qui supra pectus Domini in cena recubuit. Beatus apostolus cui revelata sunt secreta coelestia.	This is John, who during the Last Supper reclined on the breast of the Lord. Blessed is the Apostle to whom the secrets of heaven were revealed. ³⁵
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It was thus on account of John's proximity to Christ as the confidant privy to his secrets, the *dilectus secretarius*, that the evangelist came to understand the divinity of Christ revealed in his Gospel.

In the medieval mind the *secretarius* writing the Fourth Gospel was equally the author of Revelation.³⁶ The Gospel that John was believed to

³² AH 9, no. 248. John is also hailed as a *secretarius* in a glossed version of the *O intemerata* prayer transmitted in a compendium from Clairvaux. André Wilmart, *Auteurs spirituels et textes dévots du moyen âge latin: Etudes d'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1971), 498–503. Similarly, a sixteenth-century German prayer book from the Benedictine convent of Kühbach addresses John as *secretari*. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 122.

³³ Augustine, Tractate 61, in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55–111*, trans. John Rettig, *Fathers of the Church* 90 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 36.

³⁴ Volting, *John the Evangelist*, 45; and Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 17, 18, 43.

³⁵ CAO, vol. 4, no. 7001; translated in *The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin: A Bilingual Edition of the Roman Breviary Text, together with Introductory Notes and Rubrics in English Only*, 3 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1963–64), 1:1211.

³⁶ Some medieval commentators questioned the evangelist's authorship of Revelation, but this doubt was countered by a conscious attempt by others to promote John's authorship of both texts. Suzanne Lewis, *Reading Images: Narrative Discourse and Reception in the Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Apocalypse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 28–29.

have penned in Ephesus was frequently conflated with the vision of the Apocalypse that John experienced on the island of Patmos. This conflation is represented pictorially in an illustration accompanying Berengaudus's commentary on the Book of Revelation in the thirteenth-century Lambeth Apocalypse (London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 209, fol. 47v) showing John writing Revelation in an open codex while the scroll unfolding from his lectern reads *In principio erat verbum*.³⁷ Conversely, fifteenth-century Books of Hours such as the Black Prayer Book originating from Bruges and thought to have belonged to the Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 1865, fol. 33r) customarily pair the Gospel lesson from John (1:1–14) with an image of John on Patmos.³⁸ Both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation, moreover, were imagined to share a common source—the celestial secrets imbibed by John from Christ's breast.³⁹ As explained by Jacobus de Voragine, "The name [John] means one to whom a gift is given, and in John's case this gift was the revelation of secrets. For to him it was given to know many profound secrets, such as the divinity of the Word and the end of the world."⁴⁰ Imagery inspired by the Apocalypse similarly portrays John as a *secretarius*. In his commentary on Revelation 1:9 Bede interprets Patmos as the place where "it was fitly given him to penetrate the secrets of heaven," an idea echoed in hymns such as *Salve nunc evangelista* and *Iste electus Johannes*.⁴¹ Through his vision on Patmos John was imagined to soar heavenward to see the mysteries revealed to him through an open door, signaled by the voice commanding him to "Come up hither" (Revelation 4:1).⁴² John's mystical ascent and sight assumes a variety of forms in the illuminated Anglo-Norman Apocalypses that flourished in the thirteenth century depicting John carried by an angel, climbing a ladder, peering through clouds and windows, or

³⁷ Lewis, "Exegesis and Illustration in Thirteenth-Century English Apocalypses," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 259–75, at 267; and Lewis, *Reading Images*, 28–29.

³⁸ This image appears in *Codices Illustres: The World's Most Famous Illuminated Manuscripts 400–1600*, ed. Ingo Walther and Norbert Wolf (New York: Taschen, 2001), 362–63. For the more widespread tradition, see Roger Wieck, "Prayer for the People: The Book of Hours," in *A History of Prayer: The First to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Roy Hammerling (Boston: Brill, 2008), 389–440, at 394, 401.

³⁹ Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 43; and Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62, 98–99.

⁴⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:50.

⁴¹ *The Explanation of the Apocalypse by Venerable Bede*, trans. Edward Marshall (Oxford and London: J. Parker, 1878), 13; AH 3, no. 21, attributed to Conrad of Hainburg (d. 1360); and AH 2, no. 111. Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, 100.

⁴² Commenting on Revelation 4:1, Bede specifies, "He fitly sees a door in heaven, as he is about to ascend, for that it is promised that the heavenly mysteries are to be opened to him." *The Explanation of the Apocalypse by Venerable Bede*, 29.

opening a door.⁴³ Moreover, the illustration accompanying the Letter to Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7–13) in the Douce Apocalypse (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 180, page 9) depicts John the scribe looking toward the open door signaled by Christ, who beckons to John while holding the key of David.⁴⁴ Perhaps more than other Apocalypse illuminations this scene emphasizes John's secretarial attributes—the visionary writer entrusted with Divine secrets to which only Christ has the key.

Having considered the various ways in which medieval commentators, poets, artists, and singers identified John the Evangelist as a *secretarius* we are now in a position to interpret the cryptic language of Brassart's motet. As shown in my translation, the first three couplets celebrate the superior knowledge of the secretary or confidant of the "All-Knowing One"—the omniscient Creator. God's "secretary" exceeds the intellectual capabilities of all other mortals on account of the mystic streams or rivers with which he is watered. Brassart emphasizes this idea through textual repetition resulting from varied use of strict imitation between the two discantus voices—the highest concentration of imitation in the entire work (ex. 2). Imitative treatment of *gnarius* (literally, more knowingly, i.e., with greater or deeper knowledge), set to a descending six-note motive found in roughly half of Brassart's works (mm. 23–26),⁴⁵ leads to echo-like alternation of short phrases for each of the paired words of lines 4 to 6 (mm. 28–32, 33–34, 35–39), with repeated notes and rapid declamation on *misticis fluentis* (mystic streams) and especially *omnibus mortalibus* (all mortals). Contrasting with the longer melismatic phrases of the opening and ensuing lines, the accelerated declamation of these short, imitative phrases—even more audible without the contratenor—infuses the description of the secretary's superior intellect with verbal clarity and rhythmic vigor. Indeed imitation can be heard to highlight the concept of intelligence, for the only remaining imitative passage coincides with the words *intellectus clipeo* or "shield of understanding" (ex. 1).

John's extraordinary intellect is complemented by his virginity, as specified in the third line by the participle *irroratus* from the verb *irroro*, "to moisten with dew," drawing from the medieval tradition of

⁴³ Richard Emmerson, "Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Culture," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 293–332, at 328; and Emmerson, "Visualizing the Visionary: John in his Apocalypse," in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, NJ: Index of Christian Art, 2010), 148–76, at 156, 164–65.

⁴⁴ Nigel J. Morgan, *The Douce Apocalypse: Picturing the End of the World in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2006), 48–49.

⁴⁵ Peter Wright identifies this motive as "Figure B" in "A New Attribution to Brassart?," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 3 (1994): 23–43, at 30–31.

EXAMPLE 2. Brassart, *Summus secretarius*, mm. 20–39

20
[Discantus 1] ir - ro - ra - tus gna -
[Discantus 2] - - - - - tis, ir - ro - ra - tus
Contratenor
Tenor

24
ri - us
gna - ri - us

28
mi - sti - cis flu - en - tis
mi - sti - cis flu - en

associating dew with purity.⁴⁶ John was revered for his lifelong chastity, and tropes such as *Rore caelesti perfusus* for the Introit *In medio ecclesiae aperuit os eius* sung on the principal feast of St. John depict the evangelist shrouded in dew.⁴⁷ It was because the chaste John was believed to have

⁴⁶ Volving, *John the Evangelist*, 80, 212n13.

⁴⁷ O'Reilly, "St. John as a Figure of the Contemplative Life," 167–68. In the different meanings of John's name documented by Voragine, the second is the gift of "freedom

EXAMPLE 2. (Continued)

32

o - mni - bus mor - ta - li - bus e - rump - no -

tis o - mni - bus mor - ta - ti - bus

36

se - val - lis, fa - ti

e - rump - no - se - val - lis,

renounced his bride on his wedding day that he alone was permitted to rest his head on the bosom of Christ, from which he drank the heavenly secrets (represented here as the “mystic streams”).⁴⁸

The identity of the motet’s superior confidant becomes even clearer in the fourth and fifth couplets, in which the paraphrase of the Fourth Gospel is preceded by the statement, “For his own path stood by utterances like these.” These lines at once link the *secretarius* to the distinctive opening of the Fourth Gospel and celebrate the author’s originality—John was the only evangelist to reveal the dual nature of Christ with the words *In principio erat verbum*. Thus the motet begins by celebrating the

from fleshly corruption.” Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 1:50; and Volting, *John the Evangelist*, 92.

⁴⁸ Volting, *John the Evangelist*, 69. John’s exclusive right to this privilege is emphasized in the second stanza of the hymn *In Johannis solemnio* transmitted in a tenth-century codex from Moissac, asserting that the beloved disciple was “imbued more fully with heavenly secrets in comparison with all the other mortals” (*Et secretis coelestibus/Prae ceteris mortalibus/Perfectius imbuitur*). See AH 2, no. 1026. These verses recall Augustine’s comparison of John to the other evangelists in *De consensu evangelistarum*.

power of knowledge. Only God's knowledge is infinite, but John's intellect is such that he surpasses all other mortals to assume the lofty rank of *summus secretarius*.

John and Wisdom

The remainder of the motet text reads like a gloss on the opening lines of the Fourth Gospel. The quote from the first verse, *In principio erat verbum*, is embellished by two words, *ante tempus*, specifying that the Word existed "in the beginning, before time." We find an explanation of this idea in a Christmas homily by Bede on the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, which constituted the Gospel reading for the third Mass of Christmas.⁴⁹ Bede states:

Now there were heretics who said, "If Christ was born, there was a time when he did not exist." [John] refutes them with his first utterance when he says: *In the beginning was the Word*. He does not say, "In the beginning the Word began to be," [because he wrote] in order to point out that [Christ's] coming into being was not from time, but that he existed at [or before] the emergence of time, and so that through this [wording] he might point out that he was born of the Father without any temporal beginning, according to what he himself said in [the Book of] Proverbs, *The Lord possessed me at the start of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning. From eternity I was appointed.*⁵⁰

Quoting Proverbs 8:22–23, Bede equates the Word with Wisdom, the daughter of God, who in this passage expounds on her origins before the creation of the world.⁵¹ As medieval commentators recognized, numerous parallels link the prologue to the Fourth Gospel with the sapiential books of the Old Testament. Just as the Word existed "in the beginning," so too Wisdom was created before eternity, as stated in Ecclesiasticus 1:1: "All wisdom is from the Lord God, and hath been always with him, and is before all time"—an idea also found in the Wisdom of Solomon (9:9).⁵² This association of the Word of John's Gospel with divine wisdom is explicit in the writings of a local exegete,

⁴⁹ William Durand, *Rationale divinarum officiorum*, ed. A. Davril and T. M. Thibodeau, 3 vols., Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 140, 140A, 140B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995–2000), 2:189, 191.

⁵⁰ Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels: Book One Advent to Lent*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), 74–75.

⁵¹ Gale Yee, "The Theology of Creation in Proverbs 8:22–31," in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, ed. Richard J. Clifford and John J. Collins (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), 85–89.

⁵² Michael Willett, *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 14, 35–36.

Rupert of Deutz (ca. 1075–1129), who was a monk at the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Laurent in Liège. Rupert comments: “The Word, who was in the beginning before the very air and before all things that were made, ‘remains forever.’ For truly that Word is eternal reason, is everlasting wisdom, is inexpressible understanding, is unalterable truth.”⁵³ These examples draw on the widespread understanding of the Word as personified Wisdom, the Creator’s companion and inspirer.⁵⁴

Indeed, the first verse of John’s Gospel was frequently linked to that of Genesis: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.”⁵⁵ In his commentary on Genesis, Bede interprets “the beginning” in precisely the terms he used for the Fourth Gospel, stating, “He who created the world before the beginning of time had himself existed eternally before time.”⁵⁶ The concept of *ante tempus* thus applies to Genesis. In this Old Testament context, Bede stresses the timelessness and omnipotence of God the Creator, who “has no need for any passage of time.”⁵⁷ This idea belongs to a longstanding exegetical tradition in which the power of God’s wisdom is such that his acts of creation occur instantaneously and simultaneously rather than according to a successive temporal sequence: the six days merely represent creation’s order.⁵⁸ As noted by Augustine in his *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, the work associated with the words “In the beginning” was accomplished “before the beginning of days,” that is, before the creation of time itself.⁵⁹

The conflation of John with Genesis is evident in the cosmological imagery that pervades the final four couplets of the motet, in which John’s vision of the Word “seems harsh to the shield of understanding because of the lofty matter of the dark mass—matter that shimmers like the shining sun.”⁶⁰ As shown in Table 1, this reference to the dark mass

⁵³ Rupert of Deutz, “Commentary on Saint John,” in *Early Medieval Theology*, ed. and trans. George McCracken and Allen Cabaniss (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 261.

⁵⁴ John himself was sometimes represented as the embodiment of Wisdom, as discussed in Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 123–24, 132–40.

⁵⁵ Prominent commentators who link John with Genesis include St. Augustine, Bede, and Thomas Aquinas.

⁵⁶ Bede, *Commentary on Genesis: Book I*, trans. Carmen S. Hardin in *Commentaries on Genesis I–3*, ed. Michael Glerup (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 113–59, at 114.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Timothy Furry, *Allegorizing History: The Venerable Bede, Figural Exegesis and Historical Theory*, Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 71; and Aimé Solignac, “Exégèse et métaphysique: Genèse 1, 1–3 chez saint Augustin,” in *In Principio: Interprétations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1973), 153–71, at 169.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. and annotated by John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Writers 41–42 (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 1:27.

⁶⁰ As Barbara Newman notes, these lines play with the antimony of light/dark and the physics of matter/mass. Several words in this passage appear to have a double meaning. The choice of *clipeus*—a round shield that might also refer to the sun-disk (toward which the aquiline John flies and gazes)—may convey the notion that our limited, mortal

TABLE 1.
Comparison of Brassart's *Summus secretarius* to the opening verses
of the Gospel of John and Book of Genesis

Brassart, <i>Summus secretarius</i>	Gospel of John	Book of Genesis
(Lines 9–10) In the Beginning, before time, was the Word.	(1:1–3) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was made nothing that was made.	(1:1) In the beginning God created heaven and earth.
168 — (Lines 11–14) That seems harsh to the shield of understanding because of the lofty matter of the dark mass—	(1:4–5) In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.	(1:2) And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved over the waters.
(Lines 15–16) matter that shimmers like the shining sun.		(1:3–4) And God said, “Be light made.” And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good, and he divided the light from the darkness.

and shimmering matter resembles the darkness that covered the earth before the creation of light in Genesis and the darkness that did not comprehend the light in John. Inspired by Augustine, Bede equates this darkness with the “stupid and iniquitous,” who do not have the

understanding shields us from the divine vision of the evangelist. In this context, *materia* might be heard in two ways: both as subject matter and as physical matter. My thanks to Barbara Newman for these insights. The double meaning of *materia* would have justified the use of this word as a rhyme, as Leofranc Holford-Strevens confirmed to me in a personal communication.

intelligence to perceive the light as Christ, who illuminates the hearts of the worthy “by the presence of his knowledge.”⁶¹ It is in the Gospel of John that Jesus says, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me walketh not in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). In a homily on this passage, Augustine identifies Christ specifically as the “light of Wisdom,”⁶² no doubt drawing from the Wisdom of Solomon, in which Wisdom herself is described at once as “the brightness of eternal light” (7:26) and as the creative agent that preceded it: “For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of the stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it” (7:29). The contrast between darkness and light in John’s Gospel and in Brassart’s motet can thus be understood to represent the world before and after the Incarnation, and to distinguish human sin and ignorance from divine purity and reason.⁶³ The concluding couplets portraying the emergence of *materia* “that shimmers like the shining sun” from the matter of a “dark mass”—an oxymoron embellished with lengthy melismas in the discantus voices, punctuated by cadences—recall the separation of light from darkness in Genesis (1:4) and the persistence of the light that is not overcome by darkness in John’s Gospel (1:5).⁶⁴ This idea is related to the notion in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:29–30) that Wisdom, considered superior to the light that is succeeded by darkness, withstands evil.⁶⁵ Represented by the shining sun, Wisdom and the Word thus prevail.

These lines may also include a veiled allusion to the end of Boethius’s poem *O qui perpetua* from *The Consolation of Philosophy*.⁶⁶ Boethius’s Neoplatonic summary of the influential account of creation in Plato’s *Timaeus* circulated widely as a school text and elicited frequent

⁶¹ Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels: Book One Advent to Lent*, 77.

⁶² Augustine, Tractate 34, in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28–54*, trans. John Rettig, Fathers of the Church 88 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 64.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James Weisheipl, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 1:41–46. The association of light with the righteous and darkness with the wicked is explicit in Proverbs 4:18–19: “But the path of the just, as a shining light, goeth forwards and increaseth even to perfect day. The way of the wicked is darkness: they know not where they fall.”

⁶⁴ Nosow notes the increased rhythmic motion that generates “drives to the cadence” on the words *tenebrosae molis* and *solis*. Nosow, “The Florid and Equal-Discantus Motet Styles,” 118.

⁶⁵ Michael Willett highlights the parallels between John 1:4–5 and Wisdom 7:29–30 in *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 37–38.

⁶⁶ “Dissice terrenae nebulas et pondera molis / atque tuo splendore mica; tu namque serenum, / tu requies tranquilla piis, te cernere finis, / principium, vector, dux, semita, terminus idem.” Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2000), 80 (Book 3, Meter 9, lines 25–28). My thanks to Barbara Newman for identifying this allusion.

commentary.⁶⁷ The poem, sung by Lady Philosophy on Boethius's behalf, marks a turning point in Boethius's outlook from despair over his worldly circumstances and the fickleness of Fortune to an optimistic view of the cosmos and its creator, embracing the idea of intellectual ascent. The poem begins by invoking God as the Creator who governs the world with eternal reason, initiates the passage of time and the motion of all things, and forms the world from fluid matter (*materia*). After describing the structure of the world according to the elements, the World-Soul, and lesser souls, the poem concludes with a prayer-like appeal to God to facilitate the ascent of the mind toward divine vision. Beseeching God as the "serene light" to dispel the clouds and the weight of earthly matter (*terrenae molis*) and to shine forth, the petitioner aspires to the ultimate goal of beholding the Creator. The resemblance between *O qui perpetua* and Brassart's motet is evident not only in the shared cosmological references, but more specifically in the radiance of light, symbolizing divine illumination, through obscurity.

John himself was believed, both literally and figuratively, to have seen the light. Alongside Peter and James, John was chosen to witness the Transfiguration, the event by which God revealed the divinity of Jesus—radiant like the sun—atop Mount Tabor.⁶⁸ According to at least one commentator, at the very moment of Transfiguration John looked directly into Christ's shining face.⁶⁹ Having identified Christ as the true light in his Gospel (1:9), John's vision and understanding of divine mysteries could be perceived as a form of enlightenment. As noted by Augustine, "By that light he had been enlightened who said 'In the beginning was the Word.'"⁷⁰ We find an additional luminary association when we recall John's symbol, the eagle, and especially the bird's sunward gaze, as a way of representing the sublimity of John's theological insight. These acts of looking directly at a luminous object represent moments of intense contemplation and revelation. When he looked into the sun, John saw the Word, as vocalized in the sequence *Gratulemur ad festivum* attributed to Adam of Saint-Victor (d. 1146):

⁶⁷ Introduction to Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xliii–xlvi; and Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 11–18. My summary draws from this source.

⁶⁸ Christ's Transfiguration is recounted by Matthew (17:1–9), Mark (9:2–10), Luke (9:28–36), and 2 Peter (1:16–18).

⁶⁹ This tradition is referenced in a sermon attributed to the Dominican preacher Johannes von Offringen (d. 1375), comparing John to Adam. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 36.

⁷⁰ Augustine, Tractate 1 in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 1–10*, 58.

14	Scribens evangelium Aquilae fert proprium, Cernens solis radium, Scilicet principium, Verbum in principio.	Writing the Gospel he bears the character of an eagle, gazing at the ray of the sun, namely the beginning, the Word in the beginning. ⁷¹
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The motet can now be understood at once as a tribute to the sublimity of John's knowledge and to his unique perception of Christ. Having soared above all of creation to reach, in the words of Augustine, "the one 'through whom all things were made,'" only John understood Christ as the Wisdom of God—the co-creative and eternal force present before the beginning of the world.⁷² As Aquinas noted, the loftiness of John's insight is an example of perfect contemplation in which "the one contemplating is led and raised to the height of the thing contemplated."⁷³ Through clever word play, the motet's closing reference to the "shining sun" blurs the distinction between the subject of John's divinely inspired vision and the evangelist's own aquiline ascent and (in)sight. As the disciple most loved by Christ and privy to his secrets, only John reached a state of enlightenment high enough to recognize Christ as the eternal Word who would bring light to humanity.

The Liégeois Context for Summus secretarius

To Brassart's contemporaries the reference to the Fourth Gospel at the heart of *Summus secretarius* would have been universally recognizable. As a high-ranking saint within the Temporale, St. John's feast and cult were ubiquitous throughout Christendom. By the fifteenth century the beginning of John's Gospel (1:1–14) had become a staple in Books of Hours and was also heard regularly during Mass, accompanying the blessing of the bread on Sundays and recited by the priest daily as the concluding Gospel.⁷⁴ The mobility of Brassart's motet, lacking any trace of a local marker, would have allowed for multiple performance possibilities. Yet of the eight institutions Brassart served over the course of his career, the collegiate church of Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste in Liège was undoubtedly one of the most suitable contexts for a motet extolling the evangelist's superior intellect.⁷⁵

⁷¹ AH 55, no. 191; translated by Juliet Mousseau in Adam de Saint-Victor, *Sequences*, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 18 (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 36–37.

⁷² Augustine identifies Christ specifically as the "wisdom of God" in Tractate 1 in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 1–10*, 55.

⁷³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1:4.

⁷⁴ Wieck, "Prayer for the People," 399–401.

⁷⁵ Brassart served the following institutions: the collegiate church of Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste, Cathedral of Saint-Lambert, parish of Our Lady *ad fontes*, and collegiate

We find support for this suggestion by examining the trajectory of Brassart's early career. Following his first appearance at Saint-Jean in the church accounts for 1422,⁷⁶ Brassart is documented as a singer and chaplain, retaining his affiliation with this institution until at least 1432, the year in which he collated his canonry and transferred the annual income from his family's property to the chapter.⁷⁷ During this time Brassart made two trips to the papal court (in 1424–25 and 1431) where he was probably exposed to the Italianate equal-discantus motet style,⁷⁸ returned to Saint-Jean to celebrate his first Mass as priest (recorded in the church accounts for 1426),⁷⁹ and acquired additional revenue from the Cathedral of Liège as chaplain and succentor (beginning in 1428).⁸⁰ That *Summus secretarius* was completed before the official record of Brassart's entry into imperial service in December 1434 is confirmed by its presence in an early stage-three copy in I-Bc Q 15 begun in late 1433.⁸¹ The motet's transmission from Liège to the Veneto may be explained by Brassart's presence at the Council of Basel, to which he was admitted by name on 5 June of that year. Bent has shown how Brassart's tenure at the Council overlapped with that of the Vicenza delegation,

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church of Saint-Paul (in Liège); the court of Pope Eugenius IV (in Rome); the chapel of the Council of Basel; the imperial chapel under Sigismund I, Albert II, and Frederick III; and the collegiate church of Our Lady (in Tongeren). The principal studies of Brassart's career include: E. Droz, "Musiciens liégeois du XVe siècle," *Revue de musicologie* 10 (1929): 284–89; Suzanne Clercx, "Jean Brassart et le début de sa carrière," *Revue belge de musicologie* 6 (1952): 283–85; José Quitin, "Les maîtres de chant de la cathédrale St. Lambert à Liège au XVe et XVIe siècles," *Revue belge de musicologie* 8 (1954): 5–18; Keith Mixter, "Johannes Brassart: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study I: The Biography," *Musica Disciplina* 18 (1964): 37–62; Pamela F. Starr, "Letter to the Editors," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 1 (1992): 215–16; Eugene Schreurs, "Music at the Collegiate Church of Tongeren and the School of Liège in the Late Middle Ages," *Revista de musicologia* 16 (1993): 2476–94; Margaret Bent, "Ciconia's Dedicatee, Bologna Q15, Brassart, and the Council of Basel," in *Manoscritti di polifonia nel Quattrocento europeo: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi: Trento, Castello del Buonconsiglio, 18–19 ottobre 2002*, ed. Marco Gozzi (Trent: Soprintendenza per i Beni library e archivistici, 2004), 35–56; Saucier, "Sacred Music and Musicians at the Cathedral and Collegiate Churches of Liège, 1330–1500" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2005), 313–15, 320–24; and Alejandro Enrique Planchart, "The Liégeoise Diaspora in Italy in the Early Fifteenth Century," *Revue belge de musicologie* 67 (2013): 81–101.

⁷⁶ AEL Saint-Jean, 445 and 448.

⁷⁷ The transaction for the Brassart family property is recorded in AEL Saint-Jean 2, fol. 17r–v, and analyzed by Droz, "Musiciens liégeois du XVe siècle"; and Mixter, "Johannes Brassart: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study I," 44–45. Planchart discusses Brassart's canonry at Saint-Jean in "The Liégeoise Diaspora," 97–98.

⁷⁸ Brassart's visits to Rome are discussed by Mixter, "Johannes Brassart: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study I," 40, 42–44; Bent, "Early Papal Motets," 34–36; and Planchart, "The Liégeoise Diaspora," 96–97.

⁷⁹ AEL Saint-Jean, 229 and 450.

⁸⁰ Quitin, "Les maîtres de chant de la cathédrale St. Lambert," 10; Mixter, "Johannes Brassart: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study I," 41; and Saucier, "Sacred Music and Musicians," 321–22.

⁸¹ At this stage *Summus secretarius* was copied into an empty stage-two opening. Bent, ed., *Bologna Q15: The Making and Remaking of a Musical Manuscript*, 1:19, 22, 229.

which may have had I-Bc Q 15 in its possession.⁸² While *Summus secretarius* could have been performed at Basel, the *liégeois* church of Saint-Jean seems the most logical place for its composition—probably between 1426 (after Brassart's first trip to Rome) and 1432.

Brassart most certainly identified with the titular patron and liturgy of the church he served as a singer, chaplain, priest, and canon, as suggested by his contemporaneous motet *Fortis cum quevis actio*, which names both the evangelist and the city.⁸³ Owing to the loss of all medieval service books proper to this institution, we can only speculate that the chapter would have venerated their titular patron with liturgical observances similar to those cultivated elsewhere in the diocese where John's cult was strong, such as the Sint Janskerk in 's-Hertogenbosch.⁸⁴ To compensate for this lacuna, we may turn to the extant archival evidence from Saint-Jean, where polyphony is documented from 1388,⁸⁵ as well as to liturgical sources from the city's cathedral and collegiate churches of Sainte-Croix and Saint-Paul illuminating aspects of the local cult of St. John most relevant to *Summus secretarius*.

The chapter of Saint-Jean—to which Brassart was admitted—cited St. John's authorship of both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation to symbolize their corporate identity, as attested by two seals affixed to documents from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁸⁶ Appended to a capitular

⁸² Brassart's *Summus secretarius* could easily have been acquired by the Vicenza delegation in the spring or summer of 1434 alongside his Gloria and Credo copied into I-Bc Q 15, also in stage three. Bent, "Early Papal Motets," 36; eadem, "Ciconia's Dedicatee," 44–49; and eadem, "Bishop Francesco Malipiero, Music, and the Vicenza Delegation to Basel," in *Music and Culture in the Age of the Council of Basel*, ed. Matteo Nanni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 161–69, at 168–69. The presence of *Summus secretarius* in the Veneto could account for its further transmission into GB-Ob 213, as supported by the motet's position among the last works in that manuscript (copied ca. 1436). See the Introduction in David Fallows, ed., *Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Canon. Misc. 213* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 19–20, 27–29.

⁸³ Saucier, "Johannes Brassart's Civic Motet: Voicing the Biblical Topography of Medieval Liège," *Acta Musicologica* 85 (2013): 1–20. Both motets are transmitted in GB-Ob 213, although not in the same gathering. *Summus secretarius* (fols. 7v–8r) appears in the first while *Fortis cum quevis actio* (fols. 131v–132r) is in the ninth, copied earlier (probably sometime after 1428). Fallows, ed., *Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Canon. Misc. 213*, 19–20, 27–29, 57.

⁸⁴ In addition to the widely celebrated principal feast of St. John (27 December) and commemoration of John at the Latin Gate (6 May), the clergy of 's-Hertogenbosch venerated St. John with more obscure feasts: his Dormition (26 June), Exile (27 September), and Return from Exile (3 December). M. Jennifer Bloxam, "A Survey of Late Medieval Service Books from the Low Countries: Implications for Sacred Polyphony, 1460–1530" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1987), 57–58; and Véronique Roelvink, "Gheerkin de Hondt: A Singer-Composer in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries" (Ph.D. diss., Leiden University, 2015), 253, 587–90. The liturgy of these feasts will be the topic of my future research.

⁸⁵ In his will dated 1388, canon and scholaster Jacobus de Wonck founded a polyphonic mass at the altar of SS Barbara, Leonard, and Giles. AEL Saint-Jean 19, fols. 4r–6v; and Saucier, "Sacred Music and Musicians," 195–96.

⁸⁶ My description of these seals draws on: Jacques Stiennon, "Les sceaux, oeuvres d'art du Pays mosan et de la Rhénanie," in *Rhin-Meuse: Art et Civilisation 800–1400*, ed.

act dated 17 December 1242, the seal, used by the chapter from the 1150s, shows the nimbed evangelist seated at his desk, with one leg extended before him and the other tucked back, his left index finger resting on his chin in a sign of reflection as he traces the words [*In princi]pio*. John is further identified by the legend [IOHA]NN[ES APOSTOL]VS ET EV[ANGEL]L[ISTA] and by his symbol, the eagle. A later seal used throughout the fourteenth century portrays John in a similar position, seated at his desk, writing, as the eagle flies toward him. While the content of his book is illegible, the seven bell towers decorating the seal's upper rim recall the seven churches of Revelation (1:4, 11). This scene is further embellished with a river represented by four lines suggesting the four evangelists in the form of the four rivers of Paradise. To authenticate their corporate diplomas, the chapter of Saint-Jean thus invoked the authority of their titular patron specifically as the aquiline visionary and writer.

As a singer Brassart would have encountered John's divinely inspired authorship of both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation in the sequence repertory proper to the Liège diocese. In place of widely circulating sequences for St. John such as *Johannes Jesu Christo dilecte* or *Verbum dei*, the clergy of the cathedral and other churches from the city and diocese favored the more localized alternative *Laus gloria virtus et gratia*. After praising Christ's oversight of John "the apostle and evangelist uncovering the secrets of this word" (*verbi huius archana reserare apostolum et evangelistam*), the sequence pairs a reference to Christ's Transfiguration with the scene from the Last Supper at which John drinks the mysteries of his Gospel from Christ's breast:

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4b	Et supra pectus Tuum infra cenam pausans, Unde larga, Que sparsurus erat Epotavit mystica. ⁸⁷	And, during the Last Supper, resting upon your breast, whence he imbibed the abundant mysteries, which he was about to pour forth.
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Jacques Stiennon and Rita Lejeune, 2nd ed. (Brussels: Ministère de la Culture française, 1972), 45–55, at 55; Anne Stassens-Vandael, "Sceaux des chapitres des collégiales de Liège, du XIIe au XVe siècle," *Revue belge de numismatique et de sigillographie* 123 (1977): 189–211, at 196–99, 210; Joseph Deckers, "Notger et la foundation de la collégiale Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste à Liège," in *La collégiale Saint-Jean de Liège: Mille ans d'art et d'histoire*, ed. Joseph Deckers (Liège: Mardaga, 1981), 13–19, at 14–15; and Deckers, "L'iconographie de saint Jean sur les sceaux de la collégiale Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste à Liège," in *Millénaire de la collégiale Saint-Jean de Liège. Exposition d'art et d'histoire, sous le haut patronage de Leurs Altesses Royales les Princes de Liège, Eglise Saint-Jean de Liège, du 17 septembre au 29 octobre 1982* (Brussels: Ministère de la Communauté française, 1982), 17–18.

⁸⁷ AH 37, no. 217, with minor variants in B-Lgc H118/87 (GC.REL.25c.1987.34050), fols. 41v–42v, and B-Ls 32 A 8, fols. 15r–16r. The orthography follows the most common spellings in the *liégeois* service books.

The sequence melody features a recurring seven-note cadential figure that links the *mystica* of the fourth versicle to the *mysteria* of the sixth,⁸⁸ in which Christ grants John his vision of the Apocalypse:

6a	Qui Pathmos insula Exulaveras . . .	You [John] who had been exiled on the island, Patmos . . .
6b	Dum ei plurima Revelaveras Inibi mysteria. ⁸⁹	while in that place you [Christ] had revealed to him very many mysteries.

The sequence thus portrays John as the recipient not only of Christ's care, but specifically his mysteries. Through the varied terms *archana*, *mystica*, and *mysteria*, this chant alludes to John's status as a *secretarius*.

Much of the imagery of Brassart's motet is found in the chants and readings of the Office and Mass sung on St. John's principal feast (27 December). Brassart would have sung the word *secreta* in the aforementioned Matins responsory *Iste est Joannes* identifying John as "the apostle to whom the secrets of heaven were revealed" (*Beatus apostolus cui revelata sunt secreta coelestia*). In the *liégeois* Office modeled largely on that transmitted in sources of northern French provenance,⁹⁰ several Matins chants depict John leaning on or drinking from Christ's breast. As explained in the antiphons *Supra pectus Domini Jesu recumbens* and *Quasi unus ex paradisi fluminibus* quoting the first lection extracted from *De ortu et obitu patrum* attributed to Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636),⁹¹ Christ's breast becomes the source of the evangelical streams with which John, himself compared to a river, waters the world. Combining the tradition of depicting the evangelists as the rivers of Paradise with water imagery from both the Fourth Gospel (John 4:14, the spring of water welling up to eternal life) and Revelation (22:1, the river of the water of life),⁹² these chants portray John as a conduit for the dissemination of the fluid Gospel that he drinks from

⁸⁸ This same figure is also found at the end of the seventh versicle, on the words *operans miracula* and *inibilet melodia*.

⁸⁹ An alternate version of versicle 6a begins: "He who had been exiled" (with *exulaverat* in the place of *exulaveras*). See AH 37, no. 217; and Joseph Daris, "La liturgie dans l'ancien diocèse de Liège," *Notices historiques sur les églises du diocèse de Liège* 15 (1894): 1–276, at 133. This versicle appears to be lacunary in every known source.

⁹⁰ The medieval office of St. John the Evangelist sung in the city of Liège is preserved in the Cathedral breviary copied ca. 1320 (D-DS 394, fols. 186v–91r) and printed in 1509–11 (B-Lu Res 1310 A, fol. 22r–24r) as well as in the fourteenth-century winter antiphonal for the collegiate church of Sainte-Croix (B-Lsc 1, fols. 45v–51r). This office follows the so-called "*Gallicanus*" tradition documented by Hesbert in CAO 2, xix–xx, 44–50.

⁹¹ Isidore of Seville, *De ortu et obitu patrum*, PL 83, col. 151A–B. This lection is not found in D–DS 394, which transmits a different series of lections from that printed in B-Lu Res 1310 A.

⁹² Volting discusses the prevalence of these associations in *John the Evangelist*, 47, 69.

the “fountainhead” of Christ’s breast—the biblical and liturgical equivalents of the “mystic streams” of Brassart’s motet.

The source of John’s superior knowledge also shares a connection to the sapiential books of the Old Testament in chants inspired by the Epistle reading at Mass.⁹³ The Introit *In medio ecclesiae* draws from Ecclesiasticus 15:1–6 to depict the God-fearing individual—understood in this context to be John—nourished with “the spirit of wisdom and understanding.”⁹⁴ John’s writings themselves become a source of enlightenment in the Collect intoned just before the Epistle:

<p>Ecclesiam tuam quesumus domine benignus illustra: ut beati iohannis apostoli tui et evangeliste illuminata doctrinis: ad dona perveniat sempiterna.</p>	<p>In thy goodness, O Lord, enlighten thy Church, that being illumined by the doctrines of blessed John, thy Apostle and Evangelist, she may attain to everlasting gifts.⁹⁵</p>
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Thus the Mass begins by portraying John as the worthy recipient of God-given wisdom, the intellectual infused with the “spirit of understanding” whose doctrinal insights illuminate believers.

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These liturgical references to John’s intellect suggest that the Feast of St. John would have been a highly suitable occasion for a *liégeois* performance of *Summus secretarius*. At Saint-Jean the Evangelist’s principal feast was especially festive, enlivened by the participation of extra clergy. The confraternal alliance concluded between the canons of Saint-Jean and the collegiate churches of Saint-Martin and Saint-Paul in 1242 (renewed in 1352) stipulated joint celebrations between the three chapters on the feasts of the titular patron and dedication.⁹⁶ Fifteenth-century payment records from Saint-Martin confirm the presence of these visiting canons at Saint-Jean for First Vespers, during the procession preceding Mass, and at Mass itself on the feasts of St. John (27 December) and the Dedication (1 May).⁹⁷ Given the prominence of John’s wisdom and enlightenment in the Introit, Collect, and Epistle near the beginning of Mass, we can envision a particularly apt moment for the singing of *Summus secretarius* during the foregoing procession—a time during which

⁹³ The medieval mass of St. John the Evangelist sung in the city of Liège is preserved in the Cathedral missal printed in 1509 (B-Lu Res 143 A, fols. 12r–13r) and in the fourteenth-century graduals for the collegiate churches of Sainte-Croix (B-Lgc H118/87 [GC.REL.25c.1987.34050], fols. 41r–43r) and Saint-Paul (B-Ls 32 A 8, fols. 14r–16r).

⁹⁴ Volging, *John the Evangelist*, 67–68.

⁹⁵ B-Lu Res 143 A, fols. 12r–13r; translated in *The Catholic Missal; being a Translation of the New Missale Romanum arranged for Daily Use* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1943), 101.

⁹⁶ Saucier, “Sacred Music and Musicians,” 239–45.

⁹⁷ AEL Saint-Martin 124–41.

motets were customarily performed.⁹⁸ Other performance possibilities would have been at the conclusion of Mass, replacing or following the *Deo gratias* or as a substitute for the *Benedicamus domino* at the end of First or Second Vespers. Early fourteenth-century statutes stipulate that the Mass for the titular patron be celebrated at the high altar—the altar that had been dedicated by the founder, Bishop Notger (972–1008), specifically in honor of the Evangelist.⁹⁹

In addition to this elaborate annual feast, the motet could have been sung more frequently in a meditative setting. Several spaces within the church interior other than the high altar shared an association with St. John. Archival records from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries document the presence of six altars with dedications to the evangelist, at least one of which featured votive observances specifically to “Blessed John the Evangelist” each Thursday.¹⁰⁰ A weekly votive Mass for the evangelist, to be sung by the choirboys every Tuesday, was also founded in 1404.¹⁰¹ While Brassart’s motet lacks the customary prayer-like plea for the saint’s intercession typical of votive observances, motets sung in this context were typically paired with a Collect serving precisely this function.¹⁰² The aforementioned Collect at Mass (repeated at Lauds) invokes John’s enlightenment, while the Collect for First Vespers *Deus qui per os beati apostoli* depicts John as the conduit for God’s secrets (*arcana*). These prayers are also found in late-medieval Books of Hours from the Liège diocese in the Suffrage to St. John, paired with the Antiphon *Valde honorandus* in which John reclines on Christ’s breast.¹⁰³ The complementary relationship between Collect and motet would have endowed *Summus secretarius* with a prayer-like appeal.

The evasive language of Brassart’s motet further supports the possibility of its performance in conjunction with Mass—either on the saint’s principal feast or on his weekly commemoration. The enigma surrounding *Summus secretarius* stems largely from the lack of a named subject. Here again we find the answer in the Fourth Gospel, which never names the author, referencing in his place an unidentified disciple “most loved

⁹⁸ Nosow documents this and other customs of motet performance in England, France, and the Low Countries in *Ritual Meanings in the Fifteenth-Century Motet*, 8–10 (procession before Mass), 116–17, 122–23, 127–28, 134 (before Mass), 174–75, 233–34.

⁹⁹ AEL Sainte-Croix 14, fol. 50. The twelfth-century *Vita Notgeri episcopi Leodiensis* describes Bishop Notger’s consecration of the altar thus: “principale altare in honore beati Johannis evangeliste manu sua consecravit.” Godefroid Kurth, *Notger de Liège et la civilisation au Xe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Picard, 1905), 2:10–15, at 15.

¹⁰⁰ The weekly votive observances are documented in a collection of registers copied or compiled in 1410, AEL Saint-Jean 855, fol. 18v.

¹⁰¹ Specified in the will of canon Johannes Noyel de Blarey, AEL Saint-Jean 19, fol. 9v.

¹⁰² Nosow, *Ritual Meanings in the Fifteenth-Century Motet*, 143–44, 147, 151.

¹⁰³ An example is B-Br IV 36, fols. 150r–v (psalter-hours, early 1250s); and B-Lu 431, fols. 173r–v (psalter-hours, ca. 1285–90).

by Christ.”¹⁰⁴ Similarly, chants of the Proper of the Mass—especially the Gradual, Alleluia, and Communion—substitute the unnamed disciple for John.¹⁰⁵ The Gospel reading from John 21:19–24 equates the beloved disciple who had reclined on Christ’s breast at the Last Supper with “that disciple who giveth testimony of these things and hath written these things, and we know that his testimony is true”—a phrase anticipated musically in the Alleluia verse. Thus, in the context of the Mass, Brassart’s elusive *secretarius* would have been perfectly at home.

As noted previously, *Summus secretarius* is not Brassart’s only motet for John the Evangelist. *Fortis cum quevis actio* overtly names the evangelist as the companion of the Virgin Mary identified as the “Queen of Chastity,” following a locational reference in the form of *legia*, the medieval term for Liège.¹⁰⁶ This motet alludes to the Crucifixion scene from John 19:25–27 in which Christ (named earlier) entrusts the virginal “disciple whom he loved” with his mother’s care. *Summus secretarius* and *Fortis cum quevis actio* share a number of similarities, beginning with their joint inspiration from the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰⁷ Both John’s ability to drink his Gospel vision at the Last Supper and John’s presence at the Crucifixion demonstrate his extraordinary intimacy with Christ—the result of his virginity. Brassart would have given voice to the pairing of these scenes in the Matins Responsories *Valde honorandus est beatus Joannes* and especially *Iste est Joannes* in which the two Gospel scenes are joined by the repetendum invoking John as a *secretarius*:

Iste est Joannes qui supra pectus Domini in cena recubuit. Beatus apostolus cui revelata sunt secreta coelestia.	This is John, who during the Last Supper reclined on the breast of the Lord. Blessed is the Apostle to whom the secrets of heaven were revealed.
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¹⁰⁴ Volfing, *John the Evangelist*, 12–14.

¹⁰⁵ Gradual and Communion, *Exiit sermo inter fratres quod discipulus ille non moritur*, Alleluia verse, *Hic est discipulus ille qui testimonium perhibet de his: et scimus quia verum est testimonium eius*. B-Lu Res 143 A, fols. 12r–13r. These chants are also prescribed for the commemorative mass for St. John given in two liturgical books from the Sint Janskerk in ‘s-Hertogenbosch: Stadsarchief ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Archief Sint-Jan tot 1629, Inv. no. 216-1, fol. 122v; and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Res B-7881. In the context of Christmas week, the absence of John’s name from the chants of the Proper of the Mass would have been especially striking. St. Stephen is named in the Offertory, *Elegerunt apostoli stephanum*; and the Holy Innocents are referenced indirectly in the Introit, *Ex ore infantium*.

¹⁰⁶ For analysis of these details, including the term *legia*, see Saucier, “Johannes Brassart’s Civic Motet,” 6–17.

¹⁰⁷ Stylistic similarities include two melodic motives (identified by Wright as Figures A and B), echo-like imitation of short phrases featuring repeated notes and rapid syllabic declamation, and a full breve rest in all voices. With the exception of Figure A these similarities are also found in the anonymous motet *Lamberte vir inclite* for St. Lambert (attributed to Brassart). For the prevalence of Figures A and B in Brassart’s other works see Wright, “A New Attribution to Brassart?,” 30.

V Iste est Joannes cui Christus in cruce Matrem virginem virgini commendavit. Beatus. This is John, the virgin to whom Christ on the cross entrusted his mother the Virgin. Blessed [is the Apostle to whom the secrets of heaven were revealed].¹⁰⁸

The *liégeois* sequence *Laus gloria virtus et gratia* similarly pairs Christ's protection of the Virgin Mary with his oversight of the virginal John—the *secretarius* who “uncovers the secrets of this word”—in versicles 2a and 2b, sung to the same melody.¹⁰⁹ In the ensuing account of John's deeds, references to John “imbibing the abundant mysteries” from Christ's breast (versicle 4b) and his care for Christ's mother at the Cross (versicle 5a) follow in immediate succession, although they are not linked musically. Besides these chants Brassart would have hailed John both as *secretarius* and as the adopted son of Mary in the prayer *O intemerata* transmitted widely in Books of Hours from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹¹⁰ Addressing both Mary and John, the prayer invokes the evangelist as a virgin chosen by Christ who “among all the others, was more esteemed and was imbued, before all the others, with the heavenly mysteries.”¹¹¹ In subsequent lines the supplicant beseeches Mary and John as “two divine lamps shining before God” to banish the gloom of sin through their “radiance” before referencing the Crucifixion scene quoting Christ's commands to the virgin and evangelist from John 19: 26–27. The pervasive coupling of John's privileges—as Christ's confidant and as Mary's adopted son—in plainsong and prayer may well have motivated the subject matter of Brassart's two Johannine works.

Enigma and Exegesis

In comparison to Brassart's other motets, the enigmatic language of *Summus secretarius* is puzzling. Owing to the lack of a named subject and

¹⁰⁸ CAO 4, no. 7001; translated in *The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin*, 1:1211; and by Volging (quoting an antiphon with the verse text) in *John the Evangelist*, 74n24. In the *liégeois* rite *Valde honorandus* and *Iste est Joannes* are the first and fifth responsories at Matins. See D-DS 394, fols. 187r–88r; B-Lu Res 1310 A, fol. 22r (and following); and B-Lsc 1, fols. 46v–48r.

¹⁰⁹ B-Lgc H118/87 (GC.REL.25c.1987.34050), fols. 41v–42v; and B-Ls 32 A 8, fols. 15r–16r.

¹¹⁰ *O intemerata* appears alongside the Marian prayer *Obsecro te* in nearly all Books of Hours from this period. Wilmart, *Auteurs spirituels*, 474–504; and Wieck, “Prayer for the People,” 406–7.

¹¹¹ Translated by Wieck in *Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: George Braziller, 2001), 164. As noted previously, a glossed version of this prayer invokes John specifically as a *secretarius*: “Tu es ille specialis Christi amicus et secretarius ac secretorum conscius.” Wilmart, *Auteurs spirituels*, 498–503, at 501.

avoidance of locational, laudatory, or supplicative rhetoric that would suggest an intended function, the motet seemingly resists interpretation. Yet as we have observed, the work's deliberately elusive text reflects the hermeneutic challenge of the opening of the Fourth Gospel. Like the exegete who simultaneously extolls and explains the mysteries of John's writings, the motet embraces at once the intangibility of John's vision and the rich symbolism with which it was understood. Thus it can be argued that *Summus secretarius* echoes the tone of the Fourth Gospel itself to celebrate the supreme intellect of its author.

Unveiling the secrets of Brassart's work exposes the interplay of varied forms of exegesis. While familiarity with commentary on the Fourth Gospel is requisite for deciphering the symbolism of *Summus secretarius*, the motet itself performs exegesis by contributing a new polyphonic voice to the existing musical, textual, and pictorial portrayals of John's privileged status and lofty vision. Of the diverse array of exegetical and iconographic models upon which the motet draws, perhaps the closest resemblance lies in the visual realm of the author portrait. The centrality of the Gospel quotation to Brassart's motet, and its careful musical treatment, may well have been inspired by the illustrated Gospel—a liturgical book accessible to clerics at the high altar—or miniatures for the lessons in Books of Hours portraying the four evangelists as inspired authors.

Depicted in the act of writing or meditating on the opening words of their Gospel, each evangelist is typically surrounded by attributes and symbols, such as the eagle for John, that signal their individuality.¹¹² Details of physical posture, the manner in which the author interacts with their writing and symbol, and additional texts or images with which the portrait is embellished reflect the unique message of each Gospel as understood by Patristic and medieval commentators. This visual model equally accommodates the motet's conflation of John with Genesis, since artists illuminating the Fourth Gospel customarily consulted Genesis initials for the cosmological imagery suggested by the Gospel's preface.¹¹³ Yet in the inverted syntax and paraphrase of the Gospel reference, as well as details of word choice and imagery, the motet finds a more apt counterpart in the monophonic medium of plainchant, especially the Gospel paraphrases in sequences such as *Laus harmoniae resulltet alleluia* and *Regia diva tuae* and the *secretarius* of *Dies ista quae sacrata*. To the extent that the

¹¹² Wieck, *Time Sanctified*, 55–57; Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 30, 49–51, 54–59, 120–21; and Jane Rosenthal and Patrick McGurk, "Author, Symbol, and Word: The Inspired Evangelists in Judith of Flanders's Anglo Saxon Gospel Books," in *Tributes to Jonathan J. G. Alexander: The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art, and Architecture*, ed. Susan l'Engle and Gerald B. Guest (London: Harvey Miller, 2006), 185–202.

¹¹³ Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*, 37.

motet combines these musical and visual models with the biblical, theological, and homiletic texts upon which they are based, *Summus secretarius* emerges as a polyphonic participant in a multifaceted culture of exegesis—one that permeated liturgical and paraliturgical observance.

As *Summus secretarius* demonstrates, freely composed fifteenth-century motets may be just as conducive to exegesis as their cantus-firmus based counterparts. In the absence of preexisting music, composers were at liberty to explore subtleties of structure, texture, and text setting to tease out unique aspects of the motet's message. Alongside details of word choice and their exegetical connotations, these compositional nuances—such as Brassart's treatment of the biblical quotation and paraphrase—invite us to probe beneath the motet's perplexing surface. Through similar analysis perhaps other enigmatic motets will join *Summus secretarius* in revealing their secrets.

ABSTRACT

The motet *Summus secretarius* remains an enigma in the polyphonic output of the south Netherlandish composer Johannes Brassart (ca. 1400/5–1455). While extant sources (I-Bc Q15 and GB-Ob 213) attest to Brassart's authorship, the message and function of this motet have long perplexed musicologists seeking to identify the work's elusive subject and understand its cryptic language. Who is the "highest secretary" hailed at the outset, and what is this figure's relationship to the biblical and cosmological references in the ensuing lines?

Summus secretarius reveals its secrets when examined within the context of the medieval cult of St. John the Evangelist. Taking cues from Brassart's careful musical treatment of words quoted from the Gospel of John (1:1), we can decipher the motet's language and symbolism using a diverse array of exegetical writings, images, and liturgical music that illuminate the unique status of John as Christ's most intimate confidant, the seer and evangelist privy to his secrets. Brassart would have experienced the evangelist's cult most vividly through his service as singer, chaplain, priest, and canon at the collegiate church of Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste in Liège—the most likely place for the motet's composition and performance. *Summus secretarius* demonstrates to an exceptional degree the hermeneutic richness of enigmatic language in the unique texts of freely composed fifteenth-century motets.

Keywords: Johannes Brassart, exegesis, *Fortis cum quevis actio*, John the Evangelist, Liège, *Summus secretarius*