Law books represent an under-studied sub-genre of medieval illuminated manuscripts. The “Illuminating the Law” exhibition in the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2002–3 raised the profile of images employed in volumes of canon and Roman law,¹ but the books containing common law statutes and treatises have been largely neglected. A few high-profile manuscripts have been highlighted by art historians because they contain coherent programmes of illumination, or can be associated with particular artists or workshops.² The assumption has been that the vast majority of common law collections were left undecorated, or were sparsely illuminated usually with unexceptional images because they were primarily of use to legal practitioners in their day-to-day work. To a certain extent this is undoubtedly true: many of the surviving English law books contain no form of coloured decoration, let alone illumination. But a proportion, probably around a fifth, have at least a single image, usually a king, heading up the volume or at a book division within it.

This chapter examines the deployment of these images in the context of the common law texts in which they occur and in relation to other forms of illuminated manuscript genres. In so doing it assesses the extent to which the images reflect contemporary expectations of kingship and how far they mirror or differ from some of the features expounded in other papers in this volume. Finally I will consider how the images benefited the sovereign, and whether or not they represent a form of royal propaganda. These images will be analysed, therefore, not simply in relation to their stylistic traits and symbolic resonance, but also in terms of the discourses and ambiguities observable from their particular pictorial setting when applied to the immediate and wider textual and visual contexts.

Before going on to the images themselves, I should explain for the non-lawyer and those unfamiliar with this genre the nature of the English law

¹ L’Engle and Gibbs, eds. Illuminating the Law.
² For example: Oxford, Christ Church College, MS 92 (Walter Milemete treatise); see Michael, “Iconography of Kingship”, 35–47.
texts in which these particular kingly images are found. Royal images are most prevalent in collections of statutes, but some illuminators also employed them effectively in the practitioner-orientated treatises. The collections of statutes form two distinct sets, differing both chronologically and iconographically. The statuta antiqua (or statuta Angliae as they are sometimes termed) usually begin with Magna Carta (the Great Charter of Liberties), which may be the original 1215 version or the re-issue of 1225 or the confirmation of 1297, thus having the possibility of relating to three thirteenth-century English kings: John, Henry III and Edward I. This was often succeeded in the collection by the Forest Charter similarly granted. The legislation that follows is normally that of Henry III and Edward I, including the great declaration of the common law in statutory form that occurred under the latter (hailed by Sir Edward Coke in the seventeenth century as the “English Justinian”). Ordinances or pseudo-statutes of an uncertain date are also included, but there is little of Edward II’s legislation. The volumes containing this material date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Collections of nova statuta, the second type, depending upon when the volume was compiled, usually comprised statutes from the reign of Edward III through to Richard II, Henry IV or up to Henry VI. Later fifteenth-century volumes added statutes of Edward IV or ran through to Henry VII’s reign.

One or other (sometimes both) of the statute books can form a discrete volume, but they were frequently supplemented by common law treatises. Some (such as Bracton or Britton) were lengthy tomes, others (such as Fet asaver, Judicium Essoniorum, Hengham Parva and Hengham Magna) were much shorter. Copied and assembled to order by willing members of a thriving book trade, these texts could be substituted for—or the compendium expanded with—precedents on pleading (such as Brevia Placitata or Novae Narrationes) and/or general Registers of Writs. The surviving books demonstrate that they varied considerably in size: some are extremely small pocket-sized books (no more than a few inches in diameter), others a more regular in size, others (often presentational-style volumes) were larger still. Such collections were of use not just to legal practitioners, whom one would expect to have commissioned or owned the work, but to a whole spectrum of “consumers” of legal literature, among whom were public officials, lay landowners, merchants, estate stewards, ecclesiastical institutions and borough corporations.

The image of an enthroned king features in a high proportion of the images accompanying the legal texts, either as a single image (at Magna

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