
Medieval and early modern manuscript studies have experienced a significant upsurge in interest during recent years, with scholars focusing increasingly on the material and cultural aspects of pre-modern book culture and textual (historical as well as literary) production. The present volume adds to this continuing trend by offering a collection of studies dedicated to exploring medieval and early modern manuscripts in different cultural settings. The aim, according to the editors, is to transcend isolated case studies in favour of ‘broader interpretative claims about manuscript culture’ (p. 12), ‘thereby ultimately putting manuscript studies into dialogue with cultural history’ (p. 2). The book’s primary focus is on the later Middle Ages, defined by the editors as the period c.1100–1500, which naturally encourages an emphasis on vernacular writings.

In the introduction (chapter 1), Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen offer three theses that serve to delineate the wider parameters of the book, emphasizing (1) the role of the manuscript as a process as much as a product (pp. 4–6); (2) the manuscript’s constant evolution that requires a focus on its entire ‘life cycle’ (pp. 6–9); (3) the decentralization of authority that resulted from a combination of the two (pp. 9–12). Amongst the chapters that follow, particularly outstanding are the contributions by Stephen G. Nichols, Pascale Bourgain, Lucie Doležalová, and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. The fact that these are singled out here is not, however, to detract from the achievement and academic rigour of the book’s remaining chapters; space merely prevents all from being evaluated individually here. Nichols (chapter 3, pp. 34–59) argues compellingly that manuscripts must be understood as a ‘technology’ in their own right, characterized by a set of representational components invented and cultivated so as to create a ‘unique form of multimedia literacy’ (p. 36). As such, manuscripts are showcased both as products of their cultural environments and as powerful media that help in shaping these environments in the first place. Bourgain (chapter 8, pp. 140–59) offers a comprehensive discussion of the various key stages that characterized the circulation of texts (and the objects in which they were contained) in the medieval period. Exploring the roles of authors, editors, and recipients, as well
as the factors that facilitated (or indeed hindered) a given text’s success, this chapter will prove useful to experienced scholars as well as university students. Discussing the role of multilingualism in late medieval manuscripts culture alongside the political implications of this culture in modern, nationalistic contexts of reception, Doležalová (chapter 9, pp. 160–80) offers a keen and compelling piece of research that serves as a powerful reminder that it is often ‘impossible to assume that the texts that came down to us were successful acts of communication’ (p. 175). Finally, Kerby-Fulton’s afterword (chapter 13, pp. 243–54) sketches the possibilities (as well as the risks) of future scholarship on the subject by unravelling the history of one ‘wholly neglected medieval literary term, *originalia*’ (p. 244).

As Kerby-Fulton’s contribution makes clear, there is still work to be done, but it must be said that the present volume makes a commendable start that will benefit generations of scholars to come. Some editorial slips aside (for example, the somewhat unexpected occurrence of contractions such as ‘it’s’ and ‘he’ll’ instead of ‘it is’ and ‘he will’, pp. 40f. et al.), there is very little to criticize. One critical observation concerns the fact that, whilst some chapters succeed beautifully in bridging the gap between Europe’s Latin and vernacular cultures, others focus much more explicitly on the latter. Some readers, including the reviewer, might wish for a little more balance and specificity concerning medieval European Latinity, both alongside vernacular culture and as a historical/literary vehicle in its own right. All in all, this is an important and innovative book, which manages to impress in many ways. Its field-shaping potential will be recognized widely by scholars (and their students) from various academic fields (historians, literary scholars, palaeographers/codicologists, art historians, bibliographers, archivists, etc.). Indeed, the fact that the book was declared out of stock by Cambridge University Press within months of its original publication in August 2015, thus requiring a reprint as early as January 2016, is surely testimony that just such a warm reception is already widely being offered, and rightfully so.

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It is greatly to the credit of the two main authors of this study that in the 1990s they uncovered the small (approx. 13 × 9 cm) and unpretentious illustrated prayer-book that forms the subject of this investigation, and over the next decade and