Brantley, Jessica. 2022. *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms.* Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press. Pp. xiv + 346. ISBN 9780812253849.

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Jessica Brantley's *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms* was released in 2022 as a brilliant contribution to the University of Pennsylvania's Material Texts series. Since 2004, this series has been publishing on the history of textual artefacts used for communication and on the complex relationship with their material qualities—from ancient manuscripts to modern films.

While Brantley necessarily draws from previous research (see, for example, Parkes 1969; Rouse and House 1991; Shailor 1991; Brown 1998, 2001; Clanchy 1993; Roberts 2005; Roberts and Robinson 2010; Clemens and Graham 2007; Kerby-Fulton, Hilmo and Olson 2012; and Hanna 2013, among many others), she certainly succeeds in also offering an innovative, all-encompassing, and very practical perspective on the subject. Brantley skilfully deals with both the multifaceted nature of the manuscript creation process and the significance of manuscript aesthetics, including layout, decoration, and binding. The author additionally resorts to etymological definitions and attractive historical explanations, and she competently presents handy methodological tools and research resources.

In the Preface of *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms* (xi–xiv), the author states her primary goals: to deal with the theoretical questions that arise from the study of medieval books and to provide anyone interested in medieval literature with a guide to manuscript studies. To this purpose, Brantley presents a useful template for manuscript description (110–12), 12 case studies based on actual manuscripts as practical examples, and a glossary of technical terms, which are conveniently bolded in the body of the text for easy identification. In addition, the abundance of well-selected and high-quality images—with 25 plates and nearly 150 figures included in the publication—is also worth noting, for they allow readers to become familiar with the contents under discussion in this well-structured, informative, and beautifully presented book.

Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms is divided into an "Introduction" (1–15) and two large chapters—"The Anatomy of the Medieval Manuscript" (17–112) and "Case Studies: A Selection of English Literary Manuscripts" (113–312)—both consisting of multiple subsections and followed by a "Glossary" (313–24), a "Primary Sources Cited" section (325) and extensive "Suggestions for Further Reading" (327–44).

The "Introduction" comprises two parts. The first one, "Reading Medieval Books: Manuscript Studies" (3–8), presents the complex reality of medieval manuscripts, described as unique creations whose understanding must be achieved interdisciplinarily. Consequently, manuscript and book studies have evolved to encompass not only early textual and philological perspectives but also aspects related to literary culture, history,

and other fields. In this section, Brantley describes the intricacies of the creation and reception of medieval handwritten documents and notes the challenges involved in trying to recapture both the medieval and modern readers' experiences in their "historical encounter with a text" (4), which may have been preserved in a single manuscript, as is the case of *Beowulf,* or in multiple copies, such as the *Canterbury Tales*. In the second part—"Reading Medieval Texts" (8–15), the author illustrates with two examples—Chaucer's "Adam Scriveyn" short lyric and his *Troilus and Criseyde's* final lines—how the relationship between contemporary editors and medieval manuscripts parallels the kind of collaboration that medieval authors and scribes must have had.

The next large section of the book—"The Anatomy of the Medieval Manuscript"— interestingly begins with the Old English Riddle 26, from the Exeter Book, which depicts the various stages of early medieval book production (17). The first chapter in this section—"The Writing Surface" (18–31)—meticulously describes, in subsections 1.1 to 1.3, the diverse range of writing supports used in Antiquity and during the medieval period, ranging from stone, wax, and papyrus to parchment and paper, all accompanied by valuable images and comments on their decorative or practical functions and their long-lasting or ephemeral nature. Moreover, Brantley includes attention-grabbing textual allusions to writing surfaces in, for example, Pliny's *Natural History*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (22), and Theophilus's *De Diversis Artibus* (26). Furthermore, visual evidence is often offered, such as, for instance, two contrasting images of the parchment hair and flesh sides in the Wycliffite New Testament—from Beinecke, Yale University, MS 125, ff. 65^r and 65^v; or the evocative illumination of the elaborate parchment-making process from a German alchemical manuscript in London, BL, MS Harley 3469, f. 23^r (27). Apart from the Exeter Book Riddle 26, the author also cites the Digby Burial of Christ. Both texts show the frequent medieval perception of the violent nature of the turning of parchment into a writing surface and they compare the suffering caused by this process with the wounds of Christ (28).

The second chapter—"Writing" (31–72)—proceeds to explain the medieval writing process and begins with a list of the items required for bookmaking, as described in medieval texts and iconography:

> And for writing, a desk, pens, chalk, two pumice-stones, two inkwells, a small knife, two razors for leveling the surface of the parchment, a punctorium, an awl, a lead pencil, a ruler, writing tablets, and a stylus. (Guigo I, *Consuetudines* 28.2, 31)

From there, Brantley describes the often collaborative nature of manuscript production and highlights the fact that scribes remained largely anonymous, with their identities only occasionally hinted at in colophons or marginal annotations providing names, dates, or locations. Through detailed analysis, successfully supported by manuscript images and illustrations, the author discusses—in subsections 2.1-2.3—various other aspects of manuscript creation over time, including pricking and ruling tools and techniques to prepare the *mise-en-page*, writing instruments, and the different kinds of scripts, which scribes often blended, resulting in texts transcending the traditional categories. Brantley also contextualises the challenges that may complicate the study of medieval texts (i.e. scribal mobility, dialectal variation, the scarcity of reliable data for accurately dating and locating manuscripts, etc.).

The plates included after page 58 are pertinent even if, regrettably, their insertion between the "Abbreviations" (2.4) and "Punctuation" (2.5) chapters creates a jarring interruption in the flow of the text. This unexpected and abrupt disconnection between subsections may have been prevented by placing the plates at the end of chapter 2.9. Chapters 2.5–2.8, namely "Abbreviations," "Punctuation," "Musical Notation," "Correction," and "Annotation" are also noteworthy and provide valuable information about functional and historical aspects of the subject matter. These chapters reinforce the idea that it is essential to take as many elements as possible into account in order to assess the significance of a manuscript. Finally, part 2.9 on "Editing" offers an overview of current editorial trends and highlights the similarity between modern editors on the one hand, and medieval scribes, annotators, and compilers on the other, for they share the task of "making preexisting texts accessible to future readers" (71).

The chapter on the writing process is followed by three others that are closely related: the first one, "Decoration and Illustration" (72–85), deals with "Rubrication" (3.1), "Line Fillers" (3.2), "Borders and Marginalia" (3.3), "Initials" (3.4), "Illustrations" (3.5), and "Diagram and Maps" (3.6); the second—"Bindings and the Shape of the Book" (85–110)—is specifically devoted to the "Roll" (4.1) and the "Codex" (4.2); and the third (Chapter 5, 110–112) is a useful "Template for Manuscript Description". These sections present a wealth of detail, numerous illustrations, and in-depth explanations of the various decorative styles and binding techniques throughout history. They serve the twofold purpose of introducing new readers to specific terms while also refreshing the knowledge of the more experienced.

The book's third major section, "Case Studies: A Selection of English Literary Manuscripts," is a collection of 12 chapters on various topics. In each chapter, the author describes and analyses a particular manuscript following the previously suggested template, thus including its dimensions, place and date of origin, languages, foliation, material, quiring, layout, script, textual contents, decoration, binding, provenance, and connections. After each description, an essay guides the readers through the analysis of relevant aspects. Brantley additionally includes illustrations and a list of recommended readings for those interested in further exploring the manuscript or the subject matter.

Case Study 1, "Literature: The Moore Bede (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and Other Items), Cambridge University Library MS Kk.5.16," revolves around the poetic origins of vernacular literary production in early England.

Case Study 2, "Afterlives: The Nowell Codex (*Beowulf* and Other Items), London, British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, ff. 94^r–209^v," studies the afterlife of a textual creation as reflected not only in the histories of its subsequent extant manuscripts with their rearrangements, additions, and deletions but also in modern readings and editions of the text.

Case Study 3, "Ownership: St. Albans Psalter, Hildesheim, Dombibliothek Hildesheim MS St. God. 1," explores the relationship between medieval readers and their books.

Case Study 4, "Language: Orm, *The Ormulum*; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 1," emphasizes the significance of language and spelling practices in understanding the larger context of medieval literary culture.

Case Study 5, "Miscellaneity: Trilingual Miscellany; London, British Library MS Harley 2253," raises questions about the interests and intentions of those who put

together the book and connects them with "larger patterns and habits in late medieval literary culture" (192).

Case Study 6, "Geography: *Roman D'Alexandre* and Other Items; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 264," shows the manuscript as a rich source for the study of the medieval cultural and geographical understanding of the known world.

Case Study 7, "Authorship: The *Gawain* Manuscript (*Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*); London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x/2," delves into the complicated notion of authorship in medieval manuscript culture.

Case Study 8, "Writing: The Ellesmere Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales*); San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9," focuses on the growing scholarly interest in identifying the hands responsible for creating medieval manuscripts in order to gain tangible knowledge about the texts' production contexts, such as specific dates and locations.

Case Study 9, "Editing: William Langland, *Piers Plowman*; John Mandeville, *Mandeville's Travels*; Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*; and Other Items; San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS HM 114," shows medieval scribe-editors at work.

Case Study 10, "Mediation: *The Book of Margery Kempe*; London, British Library MS Additional 61823," focuses on the numerous levels of intervention that reveal themselves in the manuscript: from recited recollections and the different scribes' skills to the annotating readers and early printers.

Case Study 11, "Illustration: Illustrated Carthusian Miscellany; London, British Library MS Additional 37049," prompts enquiries about the function of illustrations in medieval manuscripts.

Case Study 12, "Performance: *N-Town Plays;* London, British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D.viii," points to connections between theatrical staging or public performance practices and private readings of the manuscript that might have functioned "as both a script and a devotional book" (305).

Brantley's meticulous attention to detail throughout the different chapters is also evident in the extensive bibliography that she chooses to present in several thematic sections. Thus, following the "Primary Works Cited" (325), the "Suggestions for Further Reading" comprises a "General Bibliography" (327–29); a bibliography on "Materials" (329–30); another on "Scribes and Scripts" (330–32); and others on "Editing" (332–33); "Decoration and Illumination" (333–34); "Binding" (334–35); "Libraries and Collectors" (335–36); "History of Reading" (336–37), "History of the Book and Media Studies" (337–38); "Studies of Manuscript Genres" (338–40); "Studies of Individual Manuscripts" (340–41); "Printed Facsimiles" (341–43); and "Catalogs and References" (343–44).

Jessica Brantley's book is masterfully written. She comprehensively brings together the theory and practice of manuscript studies, into which she didactically integrates the analysis of medieval literary works. While contextualising all aspects of manuscript preparation, writing, decoration, and bookbinding, Brantley sometimes also includes interesting etymological explanations and literary allusions that enhance the book's scholarly value. Brantley's distinctive contribution lies in the practical guidance offered by her catalogue of essential terms, her useful manuscript-description template, the nicely developed sample case studies, and the many illustrations and bibliographical references that she provides. *Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms* has undoubtedly emerged as an enlightening read and a new manuscript research tool.

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