

Scase, Wendy. 2022. *Visible English: Graphic Culture, Scribal Practice, and Identity, c. 700–c. 1500*. Turnhout: Brepols. Pp. xvii + 408. ISBN 9782503589420.

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Wendy Scase's *Visible English: Graphic Culture, Scribal Practice, and Identity, c.700–c. 1550* is part of a series devoted to medieval literacy. Through the analysis of a wide range of materials, the book aims to provide a fresh approach into the ways in which English writing and reading can be interpreted within the framework of the medieval theory of "*Littera* pedagogy," that is, the basis for learning and teaching reading and writing skills in Latin. The main purpose of the book is to show that this frame facilitates discourse about identity within communities of Anglophone literate practice.

The book starts with an introductory chapter setting out the author's methodological and conceptual basis. The focus is placed on written English as a *visible* language and seeks to establish its function as contributor to identity formation from c. 700 to c. 1550. Her approach, Scase states, aims to divert from the highly established tradition on written texts of the Middle English Dialect Project from which *LALME*, *LAEME*, *LAOS*, and *CoNE* emerged, and to develop a "very different, socio-cultural approach to the material" (5). Her interest, then, moves from the strictly dialectal approach that was envisaged in McIntosh, Samuels and Benskin's project for their initial linguistic atlas published in 1986 to a view of how "communities that read and wrote in English understood and experienced their literate practices" (6). The author takes up the same line as Laing (1999) and later in her collaboration with Lass (2003, *passim*) on using the doctrine of *Littera* for interpreting the writing systems used by medieval scribes. The way that scribes understood orthography is probably better represented by this theory. In her study, Scase links the use of the doctrine of *Littera* with the ideas of more recent works on identity and communities of practice such as Tyrkkö (2013), Timofeeva (2013), or Rogos-Hebda (2013) to introduce a more social dimension than other previous studies on written medieval English. To meet her goals Scase uses an impressive wide-ranging selection of sources in different formats and materials such as manuscript books and documents written on parchment or paper, wax tablets, graffiti on stone or inscriptions on metal, glass, wood, or bone. These materials range from the early Old English to the late Middle English period, and they include different genres such as alphabets, poems, riddles, literary and non-literary prose and scribal signatures and doodles.

The contents are organised thematically, rather than chronologically, into five chapters. The first chapter addresses the topic of *Littera* pedagogy in relation to the variations in graphs, alphabets, and orthographies available to medieval scribes writing in English and how this analysis may show an expression of identity and the performance of social functions. An attempt is made to apply modern perspectives of graphic variation to the written English of the past, although not entirely convincingly, in my opinion, as some of the examples offered for variation in contemporary English, such as some forms of written Caribbean English, are consciously used by speakers to mark a difference from

the standard written variety, as opposed to Middle English's spelling variation which can only be partially attributed to a conscious desire to express difference, as variation is part of the very nature of the output of individual scribes as well as that of different groups or communities, and their motivations were probably more practical than ideological. The materials under consideration for this chapter include alphabets (Latin alphabets, Runic alphabets and modified Latin alphabets with the inclusion of *ƿ*, *þ*, *ð*, *ȝ*, and *æ*), whose arrangements varied considerably and the scribal choices in these arrangements are interpreted as markers of identity. The primary sources analysed in this chapter range from monuments and codices from the Anglo-Saxon period to late medieval primers.

Chapter two moves into the use of models as a practice of "literacy socialization" (103). *Littera* pedagogy, for Scase, was rooted in the imitation of models. She argues that this practice was applied within communities of Anglophone literate practice, and that the graphic models were associated with their values. By a process of *imitatio*, learners then engaged in the particularities of their community. Material analysed for this chapter includes late medieval school-text manuscripts and pattern books where apprentices produced, for example, imitations of the ductus of different *figurae*. Similarly, manuscripts with no apparent connection to teaching also served for the same purpose. On many occasions, the practice is exercised in the margins or flyleaves of books but, as the author fairly acknowledges, these marginalia might well be later than the copying of the main text. If so, they cannot be taken as evidence for the community she is talking about. The imitation of scribal signatures and formulaic expressions also acquires in the study a similar status for the identification with a community of practice.

The third chapter deals with a particular genre found also in manuscripts. Here, Scase takes us into the complex world of games by looking into various and varied resources such as puzzles involving codes or acrostics, riddles, alphabet poems and literary games which, apart from being entertaining, played a crucial role in language learning by promoting "attention to the *figurae*, *potestates* and *nomina* of *litterae*" (159). These games, the author argues, "become mediators of belonging and difference" (159). Those able to solve the puzzles, she defends, belonged to a literate elite. The doctrine of *Littera* functions in some of these games taking advantage of the different *potestates* that a *figura* might represent in English or vice-versa. Attention is also paid to the layout of the pages where these games appear, as in some cases this promotes visual recognition of the *figurae*. Some of the examples, such as the *Rune Poem* are specially interesting as they show the interactions between different writing models (Runic and Latin). Examples of scribal signatures and colophons are also included in this section as a highly challenging graphic play.

Chapter four turns to a different milieu from that of the world of manuscript books. The author now transports us to a slightly less elitist environment that was accessible to a larger part of the population in chosen locations. Beyond the world of books, English writings have existed since the early Old English period in monumental forms or decorative objects carved in stone, wood, or bone. Scase argues here that the display of writings in particular places contributed to the sense of belonging and social difference. Among the very interesting materials used in this chapter are the Ruthwell Cross, multiple graffiti on many other church inscriptions and writing on wall, windows, fireplaces, and objects found in some more domestic settings. The material is varied and points, in fact, towards different communities as the status of any of these objects is not equal or parallel, since monuments such as the Ruthwell Cross are of a very different

order from casual graffiti in churches and houses. Particularly interesting are the connections between the graffiti messages with various lines found in manuscript culture. As in previous chapters, *Littera* pedagogy is the framework through which these writings are interpreted.

Finally, chapter five focuses on scribal practices for reproducing texts, and it suggests that *Littera* pedagogy provided a framework within which scribes developed their ways of copying in relation to social identity among scribal communities. Here, Scase states that McIntosh's (1973) labels for scribal strategies are not based on actual medieval concepts of copying. *Littera* pedagogy, on the contrary, is suggested as a more appropriate framework to understand scribal practices in English and this new approach is intended to supplement the already well-established analysis of reprographic practices. The chapter offers case studies of "various scribal communities of copying" in three subsections: a) problems faced by copyists of lengthy verse texts, b) responses to prose of a scribe that might be associated with the Carthusian order and, c) treatment of problems among early scribes of the Middle English translation of *Polychronicon*. Some of the case studies are more convincing than others. *The Ormulum*, for example, provides a systematic approach to writing that can easily be interpreted as an adaptation of the precepts of *Littera* pedagogy and its contribution to the formation of identity. However, the analysis of five out of the 115 extant manuscripts of *The Prick of Conscience* described by Lewis and McIntosh (1982) (and some later additions to their list) seems to offer a fragmentary picture of the copying practices of that lengthy poem. In Scase's view scribes were "instructed to copy rhyming syllables to match visually rather than to copy the exemplar exactly only when the *sounds* of rhymes are going to be spoilt" (310). These conclusions drawn from the scribal treatment of the reproduction of spellings in rhyming position seem somewhat dubious when the vast majority of the extant manuscripts of the *Prick of Conscience* are not considered. She also questions the term *translation* for the different copies, and her proposal is that scribes worked from memory with spellings previously learned. Even if the term *translation* is probably not the most fortunate one when talking about scribal practice, in the case of the *Prick of Conscience* manuscripts the primary sense of the term can be reasonably applied as in most non-northern copies of the poem, the alterations are not limited to changes in spelling alone; many copies show changes in the choice of vocabulary and morphology, which, as with spelling, may (or may not) remain unaltered in rhyming position. Moreover, even more radical changes in the target text may be required, involving complete rephrasing of lines (Carrillo-Linares and Williamson 2019).

The brief general conclusion after the five thematic blocks emphasises again the idea that has been the argument line of the book: the experience of reading and writing English understood through the perspective of *Littera* pedagogy, and how those who had this "rare and specialised skill" (354) would have drawn identity boundaries. I believe that a distinction could have been made throughout between reading and writing skills since they certainly signify different communities in the late Middle Ages, and writing was a much more specialised skill than reading. According to Hanna (2001, 173), in the fifteenth century "reading was perceived as an intellectual activity, but writing probably only a handicraft . . . in the Middle Ages vastly more people could read than write."

The volume provides a very useful General Index and also, one of the over 250 medieval manuscripts cited. The bibliography is neatly organised in two blocks including each of them primary and secondary sources (printed and electronic). Some of the

electronic primary sources in the bibliography include a link where readers can visualise some manuscripts, runic inscriptions, or graffiti. Although there are 28 figures for images of texts and objects referred to in the different sections, the book could have benefited from a few more or, alternatively, links in footnotes to images available online, as the graphic is essentially visual and the arguments would perhaps have been clearer. With a few exceptions, quotations of Middle English or Latin extracts are translated into contemporary English for the benefit of non-specialists.

A global approach, as the one in this study, relies on previous micro-historical studies of many of the sources. Scase has certainly worked herself with some of them, and for those which have not been her object of study, she has relied on very valuable works by many other scholars. She shows an impressive erudite knowledge of a good number of manuscripts, monuments, and objects in her descriptions of these sources. A global approach is the only method that can ultimately reveal large-scale patterns of behaviour, but it always carries the danger of overgeneralising from a partial interpretation of the sources, and this can sometimes mislead as the author can leap to conclusions that cannot be directly supported.

The project undertaken in this book is certainly very ambitious with regard to the scope and sources. Its intended universe is perhaps too broad and diverse. The geographical area is well delimited but the chronological distance between the earliest and latest sources means that the conclusions are not equally convincing when interpreting all periods. From a socio-cultural point of view, there are significant differences that seem to fade away as the analysis of the different sources leads to practically homogeneous conclusions. All in all, an attempt is made to address a very uneven and disparate reality from a socio-cultural approach. This point of view for the study of medieval material is certainly welcome as a very useful addition to better understanding of the English medieval literate world. In my view, this approach does not conflict with other philological or linguistic views and approaches, as sometimes the author seems to suggest. The different perspectives from which we may address the study of medieval material complement each other to offer a less distorted picture of a reality we can only try to reconstruct.

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(Received 08/02/2024)