



# The Medieval Manuscript Book

Cultural Approaches

EDITED BY  
MICHAEL JOHNSTON  
AND MICHAEL VAN DUSSEN



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## THE MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT BOOK

Traditional scholarship on manuscripts has tended to focus on issues concerning their production and has shown comparatively little interest in the cultural contexts of the manuscript book. *The Medieval Manuscript Book* redresses this by focusing on aspects of the medieval book in its cultural situations. Written by experts in the study of the handmade book before print, this volume combines bibliographical expertise with broader insights into the theory and praxis of manuscript study in areas from bibliography to social context, linguistics to location, and archaeology to conservation. The focus of the contributions ranges widely, from authorship to miscellaneity, and from vernacularity to digital facsimiles of manuscripts. Taken as a whole, these essays make the case that to understand the manuscript book it must be analyzed in all its cultural complexity, from production to transmission to its continued adaptation.

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*Cultural Approaches*

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MICHAEL JOHNSTON AND  
MICHAEL VAN DUSSEN



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## *Acknowledgments*

In this collection, we insist that manuscripts are the products of multiple human agents and should never be reduced to a single moment in their dynamic life cycle. Scholarship is the same way: no scholar works alone, and an edited collection like this one is a process as much as it is a product. Our process was made all the happier by the generous contributions of friends and colleagues, who gave us their insight, read our proposal, or gave feedback on particular chapters. In this vein, it is our pleasure to acknowledge the help of Kenneth P. Clarke, Godfried Croenen, Alexandra Gillespie, Daniel Hobbins, Tim Machan, Jordi Sánchez Martí, Deborah McGrady, Alastair Minnis, Alex Mueller, Pamela Robinson, David Rundle, Jason Scott-Warren, Fiona Somerset, Carol Symes, Elaine Treharne, and David Watt. We also wish to thank the audiences at the Thirteenth Biennial Conference of the Early Book Society (St Andrews, 2013) and the 129th Annual MLA Convention (Chicago, 2014), where we and our contributors presented some of the initial ideas from this volume. We are also grateful for the help and diligence of two research assistants, Bianca Bourgeois and David Anidjar.

*Introduction: manuscripts and cultural history*

*Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen*

We begin with a proposition: the material particularities of manuscripts opened up and foreclosed forms of cultural exchange that were different from those facilitated by the printed book and the digital text. Given this, can we theorize and historicize *manuscript culture* in the same way that our colleagues from later periods do for *print culture* and now are doing for *digital culture*, but without compromising what is particular to manuscripts and how those in the Middle Ages produced and interacted with them?<sup>1</sup>

Manuscript scholars have yet to ask this question in a systematic and interdisciplinary way; the question must be addressed if we are to arrive at a fuller picture of late medieval European culture in its variegated forms. Latent in much scholarship on manuscripts is less an overt resistance to theorizations of manuscript culture writ large than a failure to undertake such analyses. In numerous essay collections there is a marked disjoint between the comprehensive and synthesizing aims of editors, and what contributors end up writing: tightly focused analyses of individual manuscripts or small groups of codices.<sup>2</sup> As James Simpson has observed: “paleographers and codicologists for the most part stick to paleography and codicology. They provide an invaluable service industry, but themselves eschew the translation of their findings into literary criticism and cultural history.”<sup>3</sup> This volume marks an attempt to move beyond the “service industry” model to place manuscripts firmly within cultural history.

Taking a broad view of manuscript culture does not threaten traditional approaches to manuscript study – in fact, we see these approaches as necessary complements of one another. Scholars trained in manuscript study, including the disciplines of paleography and codicology, need not sacrifice the precision that is essential to their research in order to communicate a synthetic overview of manuscripts and how they work within culture – provided one is similarly rigorous in exploring how the material

features of books work in their cultural context. The words of Bruno Latour, a founder of Actor-Network-Theory (and a man who is impatient with the application of a priori models to particular circumstances), are apposite here:

If you mention an agency, you have to provide the account of its action, and to do so you need to make more or less explicit which trials have produced which observable traces ... This seems obvious enough and yet worth pointing out to those intoxicated with too many invisible and unaccountable social forces. In [Actor-Network-Theory], it is not permitted to say: “No one mentions it. I have no proof but I know there is some hidden actor at work here behind the scene.” This is conspiracy theory, not social theory. The presence of the social has to be demonstrated each time anew; it can never be simply postulated. If it has no vehicle to travel, it won’t move an inch, it will leave no trace, it won’t be recorded in any sort of document. Even to detect Polonius behind the arras that became his shroud, the Prince of Denmark needed to hear the squeak of the rat.<sup>4</sup>

When we speak of the “culture” of manuscripts in this introductory chapter, we are really aiming to theorize and describe manuscripts as humans interact with them – in the vein of Latour, we conceive of manuscripts as objects within the cultural world, where people interact with them in meaningful, readable, ways. Models and synthesizing descriptions of manuscript culture, as we and our contributors employ them, are better used as heuristics, not frameworks to be imposed on what we want to understand. That heuristic functionality is in turn necessary if the intellectual pursuit is to maintain its vibrancy. This primarily comes down to how we communicate our findings. As in critiques of “pure” bibliography by figures such as D. F. McKenzie,<sup>5</sup> we seek to avoid a solipsistic brand of “pure” manuscript study as an end in itself and instead to allow analyses of manuscripts to inform and be informed by other academic lines of inquiry – thereby ultimately putting manuscript studies into dialogue with cultural history.

In this volume, our focus is on late medieval Europe (roughly 1100–1500). Such a delimited date range is necessary to allow the specific features of textual production and transmission from this period to stand in relief. The later Middle Ages saw a revolution in the technology of the book, so to appreciate what was a unique cultural moment, we have sought here to isolate it. We wish to resist the teleological narrative that sees the late medieval book as a transitional stage between the glories of earlier monastic literacy and the later triumph of print. Changes in the *mise-en-page* of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century codex, as the book transitioned from a primarily monastic to a primarily scholastic vehicle,

yielded a fundamentally new material artifact.<sup>6</sup> This period also witnessed the first substantial movement of book production outside of monasteries, when books came to serve both universities and the lay public;<sup>7</sup> the growth of European vernaculars in literature, with an attendant birth of the author as a public figure;<sup>8</sup> and the arrival of paper, which resulted in a much more diverse typology of the book, and, simply put, more books.<sup>9</sup> 1500 forms a suitable close to the book (though several authors extend to later periods), because by then the printed book had taken off and the balance had tipped against the hand-copied codex. The manuscript book would not become obsolete for several centuries, but by 1500 the future belonged to Gutenberg.

For nearly every aspect of production, manuscript scholars working in a number of disciplines and national traditions have happily agreed on a general canon of studies. Most readers will be familiar with some of the standard works on paleography,<sup>10</sup> codicology,<sup>11</sup> scribal *usus*,<sup>12</sup> illumination,<sup>13</sup> binding,<sup>14</sup> and scribal networks.<sup>15</sup> But, of course, production is just one stage in the dynamic life cycle of a manuscript; and if we are to think more broadly about the book in medieval culture, we must study the manuscript in all its stages, not just the moment of origin. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has remarked, “Once a text has left its author’s hands, reception is everything.”<sup>16</sup> When it comes to analyses of manuscript reception and use – how texts made meaning in the hands of readers, how encounters of readers with books were mediated by the materiality of manuscripts, and how manuscripts served diverse audiences over time – progress has been more halting than it has with studies of manuscript production. Of course, scholarship on the post-production lives of manuscripts abounds: there are studies of particular corpora,<sup>17</sup> particular authors or texts,<sup>18</sup> or isolated traditions at specific moments in time and in individual regions.<sup>19</sup> But most of these have been limited to case studies of small groups of manuscripts and are published in disparate essay collections or journals, resulting in what Ralph Hanna aptly terms a “fragmented situation.”<sup>20</sup> That is to say, most such studies do not speak to one another and remain in an atomized state, such that there is little encouragement for scholars to draw connections between manuscripts of different texts, languages, and regions, and thus rarely do we see the scattered studies crystallizing into a more cohesive vision of manuscript culture. The existence of so many fine, yet isolated, case studies shows us that there is an opportunity for medievalists to begin analyzing the unique contours of manuscript culture writ large.

In this regard, we would draw an analogy between studying the manuscript life cycle and studying the human life cycle. In basic biology classes, students are introduced to the processes giving rise to human life (sperm meets egg, cells divide, zygote becomes fetus, etc.). Such processes can be analyzed empirically and can be counted on to follow a consistent pattern that is repeated at the origin of every human life. But when we follow the child after its birth, the descriptive methods of biology no longer suffice to account for a life – we now also need recourse to sociological and epigenetic explanations, as nature meets nurture and society takes on a role. Analogously, manuscript scholars have been very good at explaining the processes that give rise to manuscripts by employing the empirical mode of descriptive bibliography – for example, the canon of studies cited above. We have been less successful in understanding the post-partum stages of the manuscript's life cycle, the exploration of which requires sociological explanations that build upon, but ultimately ask different questions than, traditional bibliography. In what follows, then, we offer three theses that point to the uniqueness of late medieval manuscript culture – a culture that takes in production, but as only one of its many components – anticipating the issues that the chapters in this collection will raise. These are merely three theses out of many one might posit. We offer them not in the spirit of Luther trying to enact programmatic change, but of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" – a series of self-consciously wide-ranging propositions that seek to challenge current thinking and sketch out what a more capacious paradigm might look like.

THESIS #1: THE MANUSCRIPT IS A PROCESS AS MUCH AS  
IT IS A PRODUCT, RESULTING IN ABSOLUTE NUMERICAL  
UNIQUENESS

Late medieval manuscript culture was inherently miscellaneous, with texts being compiled alongside other texts throughout a manuscript's history.<sup>21</sup> Manuscript books did not move in a discrete, linear way from production to use, but were rather, in the characterization of John J. Thompson and Stephen Kelly, a *process*, in which they could be expanded and reimagined at any stage – whether the scribe changed his mind mid-course and added something new, the owner wanted to add a new text ten years after acquiring a manuscript, or a subsequent owner excised a quire containing a text that she now found *démodé* or religiously suspect.<sup>22</sup> Manuscripts continued their growth when one extended them by procuring an additional quire, adding text to it, and then tucking it between the existing quires.

Or one could procure a group of inscribed quires from an acquaintance, religious house, or commissioned scribe and patch that into a previously completed codex. Alternatively, one could add a singleton to an existing quire to tack on a short text, or jot a short poem in the margins or on the flyleaves. The manuscript was in constant flux, always with the potential to be reshaped by its current owner.

The dominance of miscellaneity is a unique feature of manuscript culture. Miscellaneity also existed within print culture, of course, but in a much more circumscribed way. As Jeffrey Todd Knight and Alexandra Gillespie have shown, print culture was indeed miscellaneous. Readers may have perceived of *Sammelbände* as the standard form for printed books.<sup>23</sup> But in compiling a *Sammelband*, one was limited to what a publisher had decided was worth his investment, and thus there was a narrow range of options available to readers who wished to compile a miscellany. Of course, printed texts are full of marginalia and poems inscribed in flyleaves, but each act of manuscript copying inside an otherwise printed book registered a difference between reproducible type and the individual idiosyncrasies of copying by hand. One could not add a new printed text in the margins of a manuscript. Manuscripts, by contrast, contain a much wider diversity of texts (all produced with the same technology – the human hand), for compilers of manuscript codices were limited only by access to exemplars, the time and labor required to produce a copy, and cost.

While taking our inspiration from scholars working in later periods who have asked broad questions about book culture, we want to insist that manuscripts are different in kind from printed books and thus that they demand a different set of questions and methodologies. Although many scholars in recent years have rightly complicated the manuscript/print divide, insisting on the continuity of the book across the medieval and early modern periods, we want to insist that the form of books and, as a result, the ways readers interacted with them changed in important ways with the development of print. In short, by replacing Elizabeth Eisenstein's revolutionary model with an evolutionary one, we have pasted over much of the uniqueness of the hand-copied codex.<sup>24</sup> The medieval book world was composed of a network of handmade artifacts exemplifying myriad nodes of human contact. Under print, those forms of contact were dramatically reduced for most readers, who instead purchased a commodity that someone else had produced in a centralized location. With the move to mechanized production, decisions about what to include in the book were largely removed from readers' hands. It is to each unique codex, and

its attestation of multiple forms of human agency, that we must look to understand the cultural significance of the book in late medieval Europe.

Of course, no two printed books are absolutely identical, and textual instability was a central feature of the early printed book. Still, such books *appeared* reproducible to early modern readers (who did not have access to a Hinman collator, after all) and facilitated a phenomenology of reading that suggested sameness across copies of an edition, a point recently emphasized by Elizabeth Eisenstein.<sup>25</sup> Title pages, printers' colophons, references to where texts could be purchased, errata sheets – these all underscored the notion that the printed book was a reproducible commodity, something few readers would have ascribed to manuscripts, save perhaps those most popular texts, such as Books of Hours or Parisian glossed Bibles.<sup>26</sup> Scholars today can use Early English Books Online (EEBO) or the impressive library of digitized incunables on the website of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek and, even within the technological limitations we all recognize, arrive at a reasonable impression of what, say, the Q1 *Hamlet* or the *Nuremberg Chronicle* looked like. There could not be an EEBO equivalent for manuscripts – short, that is, of digitizing every surviving copy of a text – for manuscripts were not, for obvious technological reasons, reproducible and were thus not perceived as reproducible commodities. Instead, implicit to the manuscript's very existence is its production and reception as a numerically unique artifact. With manuscript production and reception, differences in scribal hands, abbreviation systems, dialects, decoration, ruling, *mise-en-page*, use of catchwords, and rubrication all make two copies of a text different in any number of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. These differences were registered across the entire life cycle of manuscripts.

THESIS #2: BECAUSE THE MANUSCRIPT AS PROCESS  
 RESULTED IN ITS CONTINUED AND CONSTANT  
 EVOLUTION, WE MUST FOCUS ON A MANUSCRIPT'S  
 ENTIRE LIFE CYCLE, NOT JUST ITS MOMENT OF  
 ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Such an approach as we here advocate reframes the life cycles of manuscripts, taking a broader view of the less concrete factors that inform production, while resisting the temptation to grant production activities a central position over, say, use, storage, retail, or refurbishment. As one example, the trade and circulation of secondhand books exemplify instructive alternative practices that were informed by and in turn

informed production patterns and decisions. Manuscripts were typically produced to outlive their first users, not least because the decision to produce a manuscript included a hope that it would retain value and remain useful or relevant through more than one generation of readers – an ambition made thinkable by the durability of medieval books. In such circumstances, book production and prolonged use intersect with medieval attitudes to tradition and *auctoritas*: when what is “contemporary,” or of use or relevance in the present, includes what was written perhaps centuries earlier, it is difficult – anachronistic even – to draw a strict line between what we now mean by “contemporary” and what that category included for medieval people. Instead, we have to come to terms with what Kate Harris calls “a medieval view in which the quality of contemporaneity in a book might actually be protracted.”<sup>27</sup> Books may be *used* without being *used up*, their value remaining more or less consistent (in contrast to receiving a new valuation, such as that which attracts antiquarians or scholars who conduct curiosity-based research at a critical distance).

What are the implications of these observations for manuscript study? It is commonplace to mention the bespoke nature of manuscript production, or production situations in which the one who intends to purchase a specific book is in close contact with its producers. In such a context, supply and demand correlate neatly because they are more or less two parts of the same whole. From a production standpoint, bespoke trade does account for the majority of manuscript books at their inception and first exchange as commodities. However, when we pan out and consider the broader life cycle of the medieval book, then production and retail no longer coincide as neatly as they would come to do in the era of print. There was a widespread trade in secondhand manuscripts that by definition could not have been “bespoke” by their new readers. As a result of value retained by (or added to) manuscripts, combined with a number of factors that made it more likely for books to enter the retail market after their initial production and use by first-generation readers or owners, a large proportion of books produced on commission would later enter the secondhand market, becoming part of a trade that was characterized by what we might call speculative retail (with the exception of the many books that were donated or bequeathed to libraries and heirs). The life of a manuscript, even including its production, is not always (perhaps even not typically) something that proceeds as linearly as does that of a printed book.

Yet aside from a handful of studies, scholarship on medieval manuscripts has tended to treat handwritten books as if their lives followed a

linear course, with emphasis placed on the origins of books at the initial production stage and on the trade in new books only.<sup>28</sup> That kind of approach has difficulty accounting for composite manuscripts, manuscript repair, or refurbishment. And as Michael Sargent has shown, the number of books available, or already produced and on the secondhand market (or, we would add, held in libraries), conditioned the rate of new production.<sup>29</sup> According to this dynamic, even in a manuscript culture characterized by bespoke production, the manuscript economy extends far beyond the level of local, interpersonal exchange that is implicit to most models of manuscript production. Carla Bozzolo and Ezio Ornato comment on “une véritable chute de la production” of certain kinds of manuscripts in the fifteenth century – including staples of academic training like commentaries on the *Sentences* – attributing this phenomenon not to a lack of interest in such texts, but to the effects of war, disease, and a depressed economy.<sup>30</sup> Malcolm Parkes notes further that these same crises and hardships led to an influx of secondhand books onto the market, books which were usually cheaper to buy than new copies.<sup>31</sup> We would add that the remarkable durability of manuscript materials was also a factor. As a result of such durability, volumes of staple texts eventually saturated the market for secondhand books. The manuscript economy must, then, be regarded from its many angles, including, but not limited to, attention to production and first-hand commissioning and readership.

We may go still further to take in other aspects of the circulation, or the “social lives,” of manuscripts. With emphasis on the later medieval period, it is striking how central secondhand books were to lettered activity and to the development of communication networks.<sup>32</sup> Retail trade in used books presents only part of the picture. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a marked explosion in library foundation, expansion, and donation.<sup>33</sup> This activity has relatively little to do with the production of new books, except where “public” (or “common”) access to library copies may have reduced the need to produce additional volumes, or where donors left money for books that had not yet been produced.<sup>34</sup> The majority of the books that ended up in these libraries appear not to have been commissioned for the library, but rather donated by a previous owner. Occasionally books may have been purchased or even commissioned with their eventual donation in mind.<sup>35</sup> Pressure was placed on stocks of secondhand books through competition as library foundations increased in number.<sup>36</sup> The market for secondhand books, and for books that would eventually stock libraries like Duke Humfrey’s, was also international. The general councils of the fifteenth century acted as

clearinghouses and markets for books from throughout Europe – places where book hunters could reliably find what they were looking for, or tap into networks of like-minded intellectuals who could procure what they wanted on their behalf.<sup>37</sup> The networks of intellectuals, books, and libraries that councils like Constance and Basel facilitated are registered in many ways, including in collecting activities and the compilation of impressive encyclopedic projects like John Whethamstede's *Granarium* and *Palearium*, and Thomas Gascoigne's *Dictionarium theologicum*. It was these general councils, too, and the patterns of readership, circulation, and production that they promoted, that were in large part responsible for the dramatic spike in manuscript production in Europe (particularly in Latin) that ushered in the innovations in production that gave rise to print technology.<sup>38</sup>

THESIS #3: THE MANUSCRIPT AS PROCESS COMBINED  
WITH THE MANUSCRIPT'S DYNAMIC LIFE CYCLE  
RESULTED IN DECENTRALIZED FORMS OF AUTHORITY

Many late medieval authors felt anxieties attendant upon the manuscript as process, for the meaning of a text was constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured as soon as the author released his or her work.<sup>39</sup> Because of the constantly shifting nexus of agents involved in manuscript production, literary and textual authority in the later Middle Ages was largely decentralized. In the wake of Linne Mooney's contention that the professional scrivener Adam Pynkhurst was Chaucer's own literary scribe, scholars of Middle English have been paying much more attention to Chaucer's short poem to "Adam scribeyn," which laments his scribe's unreliability.<sup>40</sup> Chaucer's scribal curse is just one example of a veritable late medieval genre (one that had roots in a more ancient manuscript tradition), suggesting that an awareness of textual agency defying the author's control was widespread.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most obvious method of gaining authorial control in a manuscript culture was to oversee the copying of one's own texts: scholars have suggested that a diverse group of authors, hailing from France (e.g., Christine de Pizan, Guillaume de Machaut), England (e.g., John Gower, Osborn Bokenham, Thomas Hoccleve), and Italy (e.g., Petrarch) did precisely this, with some even acting directly as their own scribes.<sup>42</sup>

The decentralized authority that characterized late medieval manuscript culture also opened up space for participation in book production by a

wider swath of the late medieval population. The beginning of this period saw the monasteries lose their monopoly over book production, as universities and urban commercial artisans became the new dominant force. As the period went on, book production became less and less centralized. Largely thanks to the advent of paper, the rapid increase in literacy, and the spread of vernacular texts, the later Middle Ages saw the emergence of amateur book production, such that Curt Bühler could justifiably contend that the fifteenth century was marked by the “every man his own scribe movement.”<sup>43</sup>

One of the most obvious signs of this opening up of book production first to urban professionals and then to amateurs is to be found in the numerous book-making recipes that spread throughout Europe at this time. Such recipes, offering guidance on how to prepare parchment, make ink of all colors, or sharpen a pen, provide a valuable index to the devolution of literary authority. In addition to the many scattered directions for or descriptions of scribal practice preserved by scholars such as Alexander Nequam and John of Garland, several Latin treatises devoted entirely to the craft of book-making emerged right before or during the early part of the period our volume covers.<sup>44</sup> In the tenth century, Heraclius composed *De coloribus et artibus Romanorum*; the *Mappae clavicula*, which originated in the tenth century, was greatly expanded in the twelfth; in the early twelfth century, Theophilus composed his *De diversis artibus*; and 1174 saw John of Tilbury’s *Epistola de arte notaria*. As the period progressed a number of shorter book-making recipes multiplied in the vernacular. Amateur book producers, after all, did not need lengthy treatises like Theophilus’ on how to make exotic colored inks or how to rule a complex *mise-en-page*; they needed a handy guide to producing black ink, or making red for rubrication, or scraping parchment. In late medieval England, for example, these recipes proliferated and have yet to be fully catalogued and analyzed.<sup>45</sup> Once they have been, we will have yet another indicator of the decentralization and “amateurization” of book production that marks our period.

In asking how manuscripts circulated and were encountered by readers within culture, this collection takes inspiration from scholars of later periods, for our print-focused colleagues have on the whole been far more intellectually daring and wide-ranging than we have as they seek a synoptic view of print culture. They have, in short, been better sociologists of the lives of books.<sup>46</sup> Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin made one of the first forays into thinking about book culture as a whole in their

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