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Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix (review)

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Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 393-396 (Review)



Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0018>

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tracing the different behaviors identified with literary gossips back to women's historical participation in the lying in and purification rituals of medieval childbirth.

Examining both the text and illustrations of the two translations, Phillips describes how both works raise the specter of women's pastoral instruction, and both foreclose on this possibility by making women's speech appear unproductive and ineffectual. Noting the emergence of unauthorized female textual communities in the later Middle Ages, Phillips proposes that the drunken gatherings of these "literary gossips" reveal deep cultural anxieties about the potential dangers posed by women's words. The strengths of this chapter also suggest problems with Phillips's original premise. By providing us with such a wonderfully thorough account of how "idle talk" could be mobilized to marginalize certain speakers and certain forms of speech, she returns us to the question of politics in a way that is not fully explained by her theory of gossip as transformation.

The responsibility for *Transforming Talk's* failure to fulfill its promise should not be laid entirely at the author's doorstep. With a couple of notable exceptions (like Holly Crocker's *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* and Tison Pugh's *Queering Medieval Genres*), books produced by the newest generation of scholars of Middle English have failed to expand upon the pioneering feminist and gender studies work of the 1990s. The widespread absence of new gender analysis in Middle English studies—compared with its continued flourishing in the study of other literary periods and even in other areas of medieval English studies, like history—suggests that this is less a problem with new scholars than it is with the leadership in the field: that is, those who guide dissertations and determine what gets published. Authority and marginalization, it appears, are salient issues not only for medieval authors but also for those who study them.

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MARTHA DANA RUST. *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. 290. \$69.95.

In *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books*, Martha Dana Rust offers readings of several fifteenth-century manuscripts and their texts in order to illu-

minate what she calls "the manuscript matrix." She expands the meaning of this term (borrowed from Stephen Nichols) through Heidegger, positing the medieval manuscript matrix as a "space that enables being and thinking," a virtual locale in which readers interact with books "as if they bounded a virtual, externalized imaginative faculty" (pp. 7, 5). This concept of a space that embraces both the physical volume and its reader's imagination is crucial to the book's primary objective: to bring together the material with the textual, and the codicological with the verbal, without giving primacy or priority to either one. This approach to medieval reading counterintuitively suggests that the literary concept of character can depend on such ephemeral details as rubrication and plot upon catchwords. As Rust explains, "The manuscript matrix is an imagined, virtual dimension in which physical form and linguistic content function in dialectical reciprocity: a space in which words and pages, 'colours' of rhetoric and colors of ink, fictional characters and alphabetical characters, covers of books and veils of allegory function together in one overarching, category-crossing metasystem of systems of signs" (p. 9).

Rust's unorthodox understanding of medieval reading relies on three of its best-known qualities: "involved" reading, or the kind of imaginative meditation presupposed by devotional texts such as Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*; a widespread codicological consciousness that makes legible the material support of reading matter; and the close connections in the period between reading and seeing, through which books and words and letters themselves become visual as well as linguistic means of communication. Taking all these characteristics together, Rust brings us a series of "tales" from the manuscript matrix, beginning with an interpretation of *The Book of the Duchess*. From Chaucer, she derives four common features that structure these tales: an initiating situation involving a reader or writer and a material text; a trick, ruse, artifice, or experiment that serves as a catalyst; the representation of the main character in one of multiple semiotic systems; and finally the frequent definition of that character in codicological terms.

These features appear inconsistently throughout the three central chapters, which stand as independent case studies in the kinds of reading the manuscript matrix can produce. Chapter 1, "Into the Manuscript Matrix: Middle Letters for Readers of a Middle Sort," considers a number of Middle English abecedaria in their manuscript instantiations. Rust's interpretation turns on the words of an unidentified Italian

preacher (perhaps Bernardino of Siena) describing a hierarchy of letters: pictures, written or alphabetic characters, spoken words, and mental letters ordained by God for contemplatives. It is the written characters he calls “middle letters,” and Rust argues persuasively for the importance of these in a set of Middle English poems based on the alphabet. Chapter 2, “‘Straunge’ Letters and Strange Loops in Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden B.24,” continues the connection between material books and immaterial texts, reading *Troilus and Criseyde* as it is preserved in one particular manuscript. Here Chaucer’s heroine moves from the text into the book as she leaves Troy for the Greek camp, “slydyng” from the world of the poet into the world of the scribe and bringing romantic “variaunce” into contact with the textual kind. When Criseyde’s signature—what should be “La vostre C”—looks instead very much like “Le vostre T,” one can see lover, poet, and scribe all writing masculine will over feminine character. This chapter is the most successful in *Imaginary Worlds*, both for its persuasive argumentation and for the consequences of its imaginative reach. Chapter 3, “John’s Page: A *Confessio amantis* {librorum} in Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.126,” argues that Gower’s *Confessio* as it is represented in one copiously illustrated manuscript stages connections between commentary and confession to show how several characters, and finally the author, exit the text and enter into the book. The three case studies conclude with an afterword about the scribe, “Ricardus Franciscus,” who copied the Pierpont Morgan *Confessio*.

Rust gives ample warning that some of her readers may object to her enterprise in *Imaginary Worlds*: she acknowledges that her study may even seem “impressionistic,” “subjective,” “hypothetical,” and “quixotic” (pp. 29–30). But she ultimately embraces these characterizations of her work, aiming to bring the forms of texts together with their meanings to “fulfill in a new and rigorous way” (p. 30) the promise of material philology. “Rigorous” is a surprise here in a catalogue of the author’s goals, and it is not a word I would use to characterize this book. *Imaginary Worlds* is indeed imaginative, and its many strengths lie in Rust’s ability to bring together her disparate materials in subjective and surprising ways. Its weaknesses likewise lie in its innovative methods, which are impressionistic and primarily analogical. Argument by analogy works to introduce a multitude of systems and terms without—for this reader—enough of an interpretative payoff for the work required to sort through them. If a set of stanzas function like a pair of prayer beads

(p. 61), or a manuscript opening is like the Theban history Criseyde leaves off reading (p. 111), or a commentary is like the process of empire-building (p. 129), or a pointing hand in a miniature is like a manicure in the margins (p. 146), the proof of the pudding is simply in how apt the local comparison seems.

Reading texts instead of manuscripts produces scholarly interpretations that have little to do with the ways in which medieval readers encountered their literature. Reading manuscripts instead of texts prioritizes histories of production over the verbal constructs at the center of the literary critical enterprise. *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books* seeks to bring literary criticism deeply into conversation with manuscript studies, and even though its conclusions are sometimes debatable, the project is important and worthy. Manuscripts give us more, Rust argues, than insight into the social and material conditions of medieval reading. They form a part of literary consciousness itself, and their physical features are never fully transparent to those—modern or medieval—who read texts in their original forms.

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CATHERINE SANOK. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. xviii, 256. \$55.00.

Her Life Historical is an extremely elegant book, well written and closely argued. Catherine Sanok uses the notion of exemplarity to understand the cultural position of the female saint's life in later medieval England. She concentrates on the fifteenth century and the "individual legend," a subgenre consisting of versions that "circulated independently of large legendaries" (pp. 39–41). In separate chapters she offers extended readings of Osbern Bokenham's midcentury *Legends of Holy Women*, which she takes as an attempt to construct a canon of the female saint's life, and of Henry Bradshaw's late-century *Life of St. Werburge*. She also offers a brilliant reading of Margery Kempe's use of both the Mary Magdalene and virgin martyr legends. These discussions are book-ended by two