

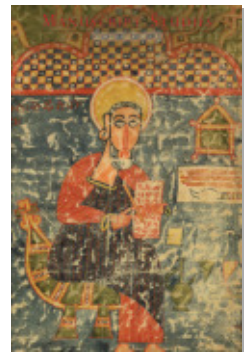


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Piety in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized Their Manuscripts by Kathryn M. Rudy (review)

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REVIEWS

Kathryn M. Rudy. *Piety in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized Their Manuscripts*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016. 416 pp. £34.95. ISBN: 978-1-78374-234-9.

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IN THIS COMPREHENSIVE STUDY, Kathryn Rudy makes an important intervention into studies of late medieval manuscript culture. “Manuscript culture” as a large phenomenon is a difficult object of inquiry, not least because manuscripts themselves are not easily treated within the frame of a single discipline, be it literary or textual history, art history, or media history. More difficult still is an attempt to characterize a large corpus of these objects as a single phenomenon pointing to larger trends within the economy, ecology, and society of the late Middle Ages in northern Europe.

What Rudy is attempting in this book is nothing short of a large-scale qualitative study of the largest arm of late medieval manuscript production: the dramatic rise in the creation and consumption of books of hours. Her study focuses on the Netherlands in the fifteenth century, but as a major production center for these objects whose style was very much in vogue across Northern Europe, the impact of Rudy’s study extends as far as the Dutch and Flemish books themselves did.

The difficulty of Rudy’s intervention is that she is attempting to enact a complete shift in the current conversations and conclusions about books of hours in the fifteenth century with an exhaustive, nigh on catalogic exploration of a large quantity of manuscripts. This is not a case study. This is not an attempt to make an argument out of a localized context that, by its very localization, generates a handy sample of objects that can be used for

evidence. It is instead attempting to redefine a totality—a large, sprawling, century-(or-more-)long whole by examining quite literally hundreds of manuscripts that feature in her study in 286 images. Rudy is executing a comprehensive redefinition of late medieval Netherlandish book culture—and by extension those of other countries, like England, whose book cultures interacted or traded with it. Rudy simultaneously upends the disciplinary logic of literary studies—that books are about authors and readers—and art history—that books are about artists and patrons—in order to center the conversation around books as usable technologies, with users and interface adaptations and upgrades—we might even say “hacks.”

This is based upon her introduction of what she calls the “modular method,” in which various pieces of books could be made and purchased in discrete units in a build-a-book fashion. The mere fact that manuscripts could be made in this way, and that they sometimes were, is not in itself a new discovery. Rather, Rudy pushes readers to absorb the magnitude of this element of devotional book production as more common than not, which understanding, if it does not entirely redefine how scholars are thinking about late medieval book culture, at the very least must open up another vein within that culture that shows distinct characteristics of production and use—which are often the same thing, we discover in Rudy’s analysis.

First, the modular method essentially notes that as literacy rates and demand for books of hours rose after 1390—a date that Rudy identifies as a marked turning point—book labor became increasingly divided and specialized even as it was de-skilled by the proto-assembly-line practices. Book pieces were sold in what Rudy calls “design units”—or modules of images, texts, or sets of either. These units could then be purchased piecemeal to include a vaguely standard set of texts (*The Little Office of the Virgin*, *The Office of the Dead*, the *Seven Penitential Psalms*, and a calendar) as well as a number of other options that provided opportunities for tailoring by adding particular prayers, indulgences, saints, or images.

What is more, however, is that Rudy argues that this kind of tailoring was not simply enacted at first production, but that manuscripts remained vital and accretive, accumulating texts, images, and objects, sometimes for centuries. In Rudy’s terms, they seem to “invite” personalization, almost as

if each one is an organically growing object, complete in itself but always with the potential to expand under the right circumstances.

To prove her point, Rudy has to do some accumulating herself. She organizes her study of so many manuscripts into an intricate taxonomy of additions that can be made to books—since studies of subtractions have already been well traversed. Rudy describes additions—ranging from marginal annotation to the complete overhaul, reorganization, and rebinding of a “Frankenbook”—as “volitional acts.” Rudy argues that these additions are ways of keeping manuscripts up to date, not unlike updates to what are now our familiar text technologies. Because Rudy is making this kind of argument about a large corpus of manuscripts, I am almost disappointed to find her argument stuck in its taxonomic mode, which loses its ability to trace out large patterns by the very nature of its linearity and arboreal hierarchy. This is where the use of statistics and graphs—quantitative measures for such a large quantity—might be more helpful in highlighting the patterns she is trying to draw to the surface. In so doing, however, Rudy would need to be conversant in outlining the editorial politics of representative sampling, and she would have to make a case that the sample she presents is indeed representative. But having achieved that, using a data-driven approach would only have made a strong case stronger, and it would have made more clear the larger patterns and trends she is trying to draw out. This more concrete approach would support her argument better than the conjectural codicology in which she occasionally engages in order to connect otherwise unconnectable pieces.

Rudy justifies her focus on prayer books because, she points out, their “large-scale production” and “innovative manufacture encouraged users to think not only about their relationship to newly procured books, but also to old ones” (6). As her choice of the word “user” implies, Rudy treats these books not as texts or containers for texts, nor even simply as art objects, but as useful, functional objects. She emphasizes the book’s material functionality, pointing out that some texts, like the opening to the Gospel of John, were deemed thaumaturgic or apotropaic, just by being carried, without even having to be read. Because of this thread of Rudy’s argument, her theorization could have benefited from some of the comparative textual

media work championed by N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, as well as the analysis of the manuscript as interface being done by medievalists Jessica Brantley and Dorothy Kim and media historians like Johanna Drucker.

Aside from these two soft spots in Rudy's argument, my main critique is really more of a caution. In her concluding section, Rudy is attempting to make the case for this kind of manuscript vitality by holding it up in contrast to both eight hundred years of codex master-planning—an oversimplification—and the “finality and fixedness” of printed editions (335). Rudy suggests that the low survival rate of incunables indicates that owners already considered them ephemeral, instead of considering that they may have been as well used as the books she details, but simply did not hold up under the repetitions as well, being made largely of paper. What is more, however, is that this is a careless overgeneralization that we might call a reverse-Greenblatt. While she so carefully avoided setting up an abrupt supersessionist narrative for the shift in manuscript culture she highlights, she lapses into a standard periodization logic that ignores the work of a great many early modern bibliographers, from Eric Rasmussen to Whitney Trettien, who highlight the vitality and changeability of books, their pieces, their multimodal affordances, and even the individual letter die-cuts used to construct letterpress plates. Buying into this binary logic seems to present manuscripts as supple, vital, ongoing, functional, and flexible objects made out of parchment. This is in opposition to cheap, disposable, paper-printed books that, in this logic, seemed to come right off the press as fully commodified mass culture products overnight. This medieval/modern opposition is unnecessary for proving that what Rudy is getting at is important. Rudy has highlighted that late medieval book culture in northern Europe *is* one of mass production built on interface invention and economic innovation. This should give all book historians pause: perhaps the printing press is not what created mass culture; the Book of Hours is.

Finally, I want to address the publishing format of this book from OpenBook Publishers, who are making the content of the book available for free as a downloadable PDF or readable online as a PDF or HTML file. I

applaud Rudy for the move to this publisher, since open-access publishing is an important resistance to gatekeeping and publisher profiteering from academic labor. The book is available in print for a reasonable £24.95 in a color-printed paperback bursting with images, or you can pay the smaller price for a £5.99 EPUB or MOBI file. In all of these formats, however, there are some odd publishing and editorial choices. The print book (and attendant electronic formats) exhibit a higher than usual number of typos, and some of the kerning and word spacing in the print, PDF, and the mobile version of the HTML file is downright maddening. This gives the final product an overall impression of being unprofessional, which does not serve the seriousness and validity of Rudy's exhaustive study and well-evidenced argument.

Additionally, there are dozens of "figures" that are numbered and labeled within the text (like fig. 27, mentioned on p. 51) that do not actually appear in the book or any electronic version of the text. Instead, note 52 contains the full URL to two images on the IIF digital facsimile of a manuscript in the Cambridge University Library. The only format in which this footnote is hyperlinked is the read-online HTML format, which then takes the reader away from the book (without opening a separate tab) to the specific folio image in the digital facsimile. If the reader spends any time at all in the facsimile before returning to the HTML book, he or she will have trouble navigating back. On the other hand, if an individual is reading the printed version or is away from the internet, these images are simply not present or accessible. In a book that is all about innovative user interface design, it seems tragic that so little thought has been given to its own user interface. I appreciate what OpenBook is doing with its project, but it will have to do better with its electronic editing if it wants to be a viable and respected academic publisher as other well-known presses begin to open their own digital arms. Frankly, it is distracting. These errors and oddities—like having an author label something a "figure" when no such figure appears in the printed book—take attention away from Rudy's argument while reading, and in this reviewer's opinion they take much-deserved attention away from the seriousness, thoroughness, and importance of Rudy's copious and monumental study.