In the context of recent French contemporary criticism, medieval miscellanies, not unlike the whimsical kaleidoscope of which they may remind us, have become an arresting domain of curiosity as well as a privileged object of literary investigation.¹ Scholars, as expected, well aware of Zumthor’s and Cerquiglini’s mouvance² and variance³ concepts, have been for the past couple of decades thinking over the fluid mobility of medieval texts, more often than not frozen up in the critical edition process. As a result, medieval miscellanies, by definition at once composite collections of heterogeneous works and homogeneous narrative fragments, force us to question the specificities and design of this book history phenomenon that grows out of thirteenth-century vernacular French literature and thrives until the modern period, which may be attested by the thematic density of the present volume.

But what is a miscellany? How does this “box” containing the quintessence of a field of expertise, this “laboratory” of erudite experimentation and of intel-

lectual speculation, this “courtly mirror” of mundane aspirations, this citizen’s savvy political “message” . . . work? A brief incursion in a modern language dictionary, the *Trésor de la langue française* for instance, tells us that a miscellany is a “work or publication collecting documents of a same nature or belonging to the same genre, which are written, reproduced, or printed.” Such a modern definition is based on the exclusive notion of content homogeneity and does not take into account the material dimension of the book, which has nevertheless radically evolved from the Middle Ages through to the seventeenth century.⁴

It appears that the difficulty in defining miscellanies is in part corroborated by the history of the criticism devoted to the making of miscellanies: at the outset of a material fact, a certain critical current may have been tempted in the past to analyze the succession of works in medieval codices through a strictly literary approach, all the while risking the distortion of reality and overlooking the decisive material space of the book in favor of editions of texts isolated from their context.⁵ However, putting the text back into its codex has constituted one of the fundamental characteristics of the medieval literary fact, as demonstrated by recent studies that do indeed primordially take into account the material characteristics of specific manuscript miscellanies.⁶ In the wake of recent studies⁷ devoted

---


⁵ A stunning example of this is the one pointed out by Sylvie Lefèvre about the famous BnF Ms.fr. 837 miscellany for which she provides—at last!—the first codicological description (see Sylvie Lefèvre, “Le recueil et l’Œuvre unique: mobilité et figement,” in *Mouvances et jointures: du manuscrit au texte médiéval*, ed. Milena Mikhailova (Orléans: Paradigme, 2005), pp. 203–17.


⁷ In addition to the synthetic works quoted above, let us also refer to the Limoges conference proceedings (*Mouvances et jointures: du manuscrit au texte médiéval*, ed. Milena Mikhailova, [Orléans: Paradigme, 2005]) as well as *Babel* issue 16 (*La mise en recueil des textes médiévaux*, ed. Xavier Leroux, 2007) and the proceedings of the joint conferences of Louvain-la-Neuve and Geneva, which aimed at approaching miscellanies from the beginning to the end of the Middle Ages (published as *Le recueil au Moyen Age*, 2 vols., ed. Tania Van Hemelryck and Céline Van Hoorebeec, Texte, Codex & Contexte 8 and 9 [Turnhout: Brepols, 2010]).
to miscellanies and influenced by the New Philology, the present volume tries to approach this phenomenon by means of its medieval literary materiality. As Anne D. Hedeman points out concerning the Shrewsbury Book (Ms. Royal 15 E. vi), it is imperative to consider “the physical book and its material presence as a subject of analysis and [to ask] how consideration of the visual narrative within the context of the material object that contains it might inflect our understanding.”

In fact, the medieval book, and perhaps even more if it presents itself in the form of a collection or miscellany, must be seen as a whole with specific traits owing to its modalities of existence, which cleverly exemplifies Saint Bonaventure’s formula about the four fundamental attitudes one assumes of a book: auctor, scriptor, commentator, compilator. In the case of miscellanies, the act is quadrupled, for the copyist gathers the literary material, thus becoming its unintentional commentator, perhaps even an author in some way. In any case, the result of this material act of collecting highlights a new space within the book; the book thereby operates by a complex dynamic: that of the context and of its makers, patrons, and receivers.

First and foremost, the literary work stems from a context and a legacy both literary and intellectual; the book, the codicological fact, is conditioned by a cultural environment, all the while being subjected to such pragmatic variables as economic ones, a fact indeed highlighted by several contributors to this volume. Thus, the emergence of the vernacular miscellany is the clear sign of a mutation of the form of the book, but also of the bookish universe and of its organizational principles within that same universe.

As Jack Goody points out, any single change in the system of communication does necessarily entail important effects on the contents conveyed, though we cannot reduce a message to the material means of its transmission.

Miscellanies, then, before being a literary manifestation, single out a technical and cultural revolution: it appears that the global context of the thirteenth century has encouraged, not to say sparked, the emergence and existence of this new form of the book and that the medieval act of collecting induces a new way of thinking that foreshadows its subsequent expressions, up until the Wikipedia.

9. Anne D. Hedeman, chapter 6, this volume. On this singular manuscript, the following contributions in this volume should be cited: Karen Fresco, chapter 9; Craig Taylor, chapter 8; and Andrew Taylor, chapter 7.
generation, actually. Be it organic, cumulative or heterogeneous, a miscel-

lany always stems from a particular intention: that of an individual transcended
by an aesthetic, cultural, ideological, or political project.

In fact, several of the contributions to this volume show indeed that the
medieval act of compiling is not confined to the sole world of the book, but
rather interestingly touches upon all medieval artistic manifestations.

Now, what is especially important to spell out is that, although we do tend
to celebrate the “print revolution,” the true “epistemic fracture” really occurred
in the thirteenth century, a period during which the book, far from being a
mere means of conservation, became a public space for all sorts of issues, work,
and discussions to happen. The reasons for producing books also change at
that same period: a production motivated by the personal and internal use of
monasteries moves to a production motivated on the contrary by an external
demand—thus, producing a manuscript becomes a lucrative and economic
activity, and not only a spiritual or intellectual one.

Therefore, as the exclusivity of monastic production is lost to a produc-
tion that makes of the book a trade with economic issues, the book’s crafts-
man inserts himself into a cultural and intellectual social fabric with which he
dialogues in order to respond to the system’s various needs. In the university
context, lay workshops develop strategies of production and of retailing likely
to meet the expectations of a new readership made up of professors and stu-

12. This contemporary expression of the concept must not shock us; our disciplines do indeed take advantage of it, as shown by Ainsworth’s contribution, which details the “efforts to create a collection of Froissart manuscripts for study across several inter-related projects”; see chapter 1, this volume.

13. Such are the three categories of miscellanies established by Geneviève Hasenohr in her pioneer-
ing article: “Les recueils littéraires français du XIIIe siècle: public et finalité,” in Codices miscellaneorum: Brussels Van Hulthem Colloquium 1999, Numéro spécial, ed. Ria Jansen-Sieben and H. Van Dijk (Brus-

14. The political dimension of the act of compilation is constant throughout the centuries, from
the medieval period (cf. Craig Taylor, chapter 8, this volume) up until our modern times. Marcus Keller
says in fact about the Renaissance: “In the uncertain, fragile world of the turn of the sixteenth century,
it is this freedom that the editor-printers of the Trésor might have sought to promote above all by opting
for the anthological mode. In doing so, they ultimately propose this mode, which resists any ideological
closure, as a basic condition for the modern state” (cf. Marcus Keller, chapter 5, this volume).

15. Paula Mae Carns, chapter 13, this volume.

16. François Roudaut, Le livre au XVIe siècle: Éléments de bibliologie matérielle et d’histoire, Études
et Essais sur la Renaissance 47 (Paris: Champion, 2003), p. 121. Carol Symes’s contribution about the
“earliest surviving single-author collection” of “complete works” from the Middle Ages confirms this
chapter 14, this volume).

17. See, for instance, Godfried Croenen, “Patrons, Authors and Workshops: Books and Book Pro-
duction in Paris around 1400,” in Patrons, Authors and Workshops: Books and Book Production in Paris

18. This observation does not exclude of course the intentions of monastic reading practices; cf.
Kathryn A. Duys, chapter 11, this volume.
dents but also of men of letters, tradesmen, or lawyers. The book becomes an object of daily use or at least motivated by the principal activity of its purchaser. Like any book, finally, a miscellany is loaded with power, that of surviving through time and pages by the force of the spirit and . . . of money! The manuscript is a machine with minute working parts, which is itself integrated into a system of economical, sociological, and cultural mechanisms, all with complex functions. From this, to consider a book as a part of a historical and economical space means to account for the multiple dynamics that run through it in its lifetime. In this context, the study of the marginalia of manuscript miscellanies allows us to apprehend the mental universe and the creative process at work in the artist, who in a way composes nothing but a collection of images within the text-collection. The marginalia moreover contextualize the space of existence of the book, as they do not refer to the text(s) contained, but rather to the artist’s visual representation as well as to the codex’s reception context.

Although we often spontaneously associate an author with a list of works, the medieval public tends to forget the creator’s trace and overlooks the “unity” of a work in favor of a construction of new ensembles that may respond to various expectations. Moreover, the authors’ manuscripts remain relatively isolated cases in the material transmission of a work; current studies show in fact that the authors get involved in very different ways: whether they actively participate in the material object’s elaboration or help develop their production, they appear to be more or less aware of their personal “style.”

It is generally accepted that the composition of a miscellany, be it cumulative or organic, responds to an intellectual organization that predates its actual collection, resulting in a unique material entity which turns out to be the consequence of a project, of a conceptualization. But more so than its nature, what is the finality of a miscellany? Does it respond to aesthetic, philosophic, historic, or economic imperatives? As Geneviève Hasenohr puts it, the first question does not appear to be that of the content, but rather that of the finality or destination of these volumes.

As a matter of fact, what meaning can we give the gathering of textual units that precede the existence of a miscellany? Why and how does one collect the texts in question? In order to answer these questions, modern criticism must first distance itself from the partial representation it may have had of the book


as an object, as illustrated by the initial lexicological definition of miscellanies quoted at the beginning of this contribution, that of a “work or publication collecting documents of the same nature or belonging to the same genre, which are written, reproduced, or printed.”

In the Middle Ages, indeed, before becoming an account of a given order, a miscellany is a factual assembly, not necessarily framed by a binding, of codicological unities, or booklets, which correspond to a succession of ontologically independent texts. However, conditioned by the classic organization of elements based on their morphological resemblances and their presupposed affinities, our modern systematic spirit tends to codify and organize the sense of *ordennancement* of these miscellanies into a hierarchy, in order perhaps to constrain them into a logic of contents that the researcher may or must unveil.23

This scientific tradition consequently forces the scholar to search for an impossible Ariadne’s thread or mysterious DNA that would intertwine miscellanies’ texts, obliterating the need to put the miscellany back into its frame and material context. Therefore, the pragmatic approach encourages us to think of miscellanies as a dialogue, as an interaction of elements, and prevents us from seeing them as a mere series of entities.

In conclusion, let us suggest that we ought to make a distinction between the order of a miscellany and its logic: the first echoing the programmatic codicological act, the other calling out the concepts involved in its reception; because, when culture becomes its own object, it subjects itself to constraints that deserve to be further explored. From the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, from France to Italy24 and England, in other words through a burgeoning modern Europe, the act of compilation queries the relationship of the individual25 to the book. All at once librarian, printer, author, copyist or patron, the producers of a book wear masks that are just as fluid and perpetually mobile as medieval literature in general . . . not unlike the textual versatility and existential singularity out of which they evolve.

---

23. This judgment is transcended by Nancy Freeman Regalado’s contribution (chapter 2) to this volume: “First, what makes a collection? Is it the intention of the makers, the decision of the owners who choose to bind works together, or the perception and the interpretation of readers of works gathered in a material book? Second, how can iconographic evidence be used to understand the intentions of the makers and the cultural meanings readers might have had in mind as they read works in a collection? Finally, what are the dynamics of reading in a collection: how do readers make signifying relations between images and texts in a manuscript book?”

24. For example, see Eleonora Stoppino, chapter 4, this volume.
