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## The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art

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discusses strategies of Richard and the Appellants in the case of appeals against Brembre, and she devotes chapter 3 to bills, libels, and petitions in cases dealing with Lollards, the Oldcastle rebellion, Jack Cade, William de la Pole, and, finally, “clamour” in Yorkist and early Tudor England.

Throughout her analyses Scase is careful to identify the means by which “clamour” traditions were appropriated and built upon in the development of a popular literature of clamor. In several instances open letters and bills were circulated by Yorkist lords who “were themselves responsible for recycling the texts” (p. 139). Her concluding chapter brings her findings to bear on the literature of complaint in the *ars dictaminis* tradition, with examples of epistolary writing by Chaucer, Hoccleve, and Christine de Pisan. “Judicial plaint offers all of the authors . . . , from the thirteenth-century poet to the Reformation pamphleteer, a framework within which to create a literature of complaint” (p. 216).

Students of literature and history will be in Scase’s debt for generations to come for her gathering of archival materials in support of her argument—nearly four dozen manuscripts and documents from the Public Record Office, the British Library, the Bodleian and Magdalen College libraries in Oxford, Cambridge University Library, and the library of Trinity College Dublin. Given the range and depth of her archival work it is easy to forgive her for not including more acknowledgment of classical literary traditions of epistolary and petition literature, which in the eyes of medieval writers served as a means of social commentary and political protest. And it seems odd to me that she virtually ignores the writings of John Gower, who, with his legal background and keen interest in linguistic protest, used legal formulas throughout his writing, frequently featuring embedded letters of complaint, petitions, and appeals within his narratives. As the principal *vox clamantis* poet of the fourteenth century, Gower understood the voicing of clamor and used it in all his works, whether in French, Latin, or English.

Scase views her book as a beginning study. Perhaps work on Gower will be in her future plans. It might also be of interest to see how her arguments could be brought to bear on early English drama, where strongly voiced protest often works in and around legal issues contested in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

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MEYER SCHAPIRO, *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*. Foreword by Charles E. Pierce, Jr. Introduction by Jane E. Rosenthal. New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 2005. Paper. Pp. vii, 201; 177 black-and-white and color figures.  
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This volume presents a series of public lectures on Insular manuscript illumination given by Meyer Schapiro at the Pierpont Morgan Library. Published nine years after his death and thirty-seven years after they were first delivered, the lectures provide unique insights not only into their stated subject but also into a single, dramatic moment in the history of theoretical and art-historical studies. While the foreword proclaims the lectures to be “timeless,” part of their attraction is that they are so clearly of a specific time and place and person: Schapiro, in New York, in the late 1960s. Although Schapiro delivered the lectures extemporaneously, they were recorded at the time, and he had begun editing the transcripts before his death. Jane Rosenthal has completed the task, taking great care to stay as close to the original transcripts as possible. Although it lacks the extensive footnotes that Schapiro had intended, the book is beautifully presented.

Upon first inspection, Schapiro’s purpose seems dated. At the time of the lectures, Insular (then “Hiberno-Saxon”) works had been largely dismissed as barbaric and degenerate, and Schapiro’s response—evident throughout the book—was to justify the study and appreciation of Insular objects as “art.” The lectures make frequent, anachronistic-sounding appeals to

“taste,” arguing that Insular illumination is not “banal” or “obvious” but complex, sophisticated, and indicative of “extraordinary skill.” In places, the text could almost be a passionate appeal to Ruskin himself. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that even today Insular objects make only the briefest appearance in art-historical surveys, glossy history-of-art series, and major art exhibitions. Additionally, relatively few academic institutions offer upper-level and graduate courses on Insular material. In light of this, Ruskin’s scorn and Schapiro’s defense may not be as outmoded as they first appear.

The book’s six chapters follow Schapiro’s six lectures. The first chapter demonstrates how the figures and details of well-known images “have qualities that we associate with reality, nature, and the empirical world: articulation, organic continuity, and subdivision, response of objects to their surroundings—the interplay of neighboring parts.” The second chapter examines the “expressive qualities” of Insular carpet pages and display script, effectively appropriating terminology and methodologies from music and literary studies but also from cubism and abstract expressionism. In the third chapter, Schapiro notes that the frames in Insular manuscripts, unlike those from the late Renaissance onwards, were created in conjunction with and as an integral part of the artwork. The fourth and fifth chapters suggest that art historians examine the transformation of models by moving beyond investigations of “the genealogy of a single motif” to consider instead features of composition and syntax such as the relationship between the figure and the frame or between the parts and the whole. In the final chapter, “The Religious and Secular Grounds of Insular Art,” Schapiro states that he will attempt to explain the causes behind Insular art. The title and Schapiro’s claim are somewhat misleading as the chapter instead asserts the status and intellect of Insular artists while providing an overview of the various cultural prejudices and diversity at work within Insular objects and their study.

Until the publication of these lectures, many art historians had only glimpsed Schapiro’s approach to Insular manuscripts, either via fragments gleaned from his other publications or through the works of those whom he had taught. Even so, the methodology that is so clearly set out in this text has indirectly influenced contemporary approaches to early-medieval art, especially in terms of incorporating the vital but neglected components of frame, field, script, and layout into the discussion of these works. Unfortunately, Schapiro’s examination of the “grammar” of the page is not applied to the manuscript as a whole, and pages are treated as isolated entities with little to no consideration of the image and decoration of the facing recto or verso. Ironically, Schapiro chose to dissociate the visual from the verbal in these lectures, only rarely addressing the relationship of the image to the textual content present either on the page itself or in surrounding folios. In some places, the experience of reading Schapiro’s incredibly detailed visual analysis while looking in parallel at the equally intricate images is similar to that of reading subtitles while watching a foreign film, but the book’s sumptuous illustration helps and incorporates a number of visual experiments to good effect. Several of the comparative images are not placed together in the same opening, which is rather surprising considering the otherwise lavish illustrations and layout.

Schapiro’s approach in these lectures is essentially a master class in looking—closely and freshly—in a way that attempts to permit forms to speak for themselves and in their own language, as much as such a thing is possible. Its formal analysis stands at odds with the current focus upon context through the use of exegetical tracts, historical documents, material culture, and the liturgy. The book presents an almost closed system, treating the Insular object as “art for art’s sake,” divorced from its moorings of meaning and intent. While in part this reflects the methodology current at the time the lectures were delivered, it also enables those of us not fortunate enough to have been taught by Meyer Schapiro to experience his technique. Like the best of teachers, he offers a new way of looking and of knowing, acting as a guide who points to the mountain peak but steps back so as to allow others to venture forth and claim the best view.

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