

Treharne, Elaine. 2021. *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xiv + 248. ISBN 9780192843814.

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In this insightful and thought-provoking piece of work, Elaine Treharne takes us through a fascinating journey into the history of the handwritten book, from the medieval period to the present day. As she posits in the Preface, every manuscript “was a thing to be read [...] but also a thing written, sourced, shaped, and tooled by its creators; held, admired, perhaps caressed, neglected, or spurned by successive owners and handlers” (v). The book assesses the form and function of manuscripts, by taking into consideration British examples, through a holistic approach emphasising dynamic architextuality. The term *architextuality* emerges from literary theory¹ and is applied here to the arena of manuscript research to denote the different stages through which books go, from production to use.

In addition to the Preface, Acknowledgements, lists of Contents and Illustrations, Bibliography (divided into websites and printed sources), Index of Manuscripts and Index, the book contains ten chapters, in which the information is presented in a clear and orderly manner, often supported by illustrative images of folios of the manuscripts under discussion.

The first chapter, entitled “‘A Profit to People’: Introduction” (1–17), sets out the premise of the work under review by comparing the handwritten book to an edifice and examining all the agents involved in such a structure. The investigation is influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy (1958, 1964) in that the book as a thing and/or object partakes in the real world and may be consciously and physically perceived and experienced; thus, the book is investigated as it exists in the world. All the senses come into play and are significant, but the author is “most concerned to highlight the importance of touch in a book’s manifold functions” (6). A distinction is made between the perceptions of medieval readers-viewers and those of modern audiences, who are digitally focused and might, therefore, find it difficult to recreate earlier responses to the materiality of the book. This chapter closes by emphasising the individuality of the book and the importance of all its component parts in order to fully understand the whole text. Blankness and other invisible features in a manuscript are of equal significance, but their analysis has often been neglected in scholarship.

In the second chapter, “‘Fingers Folded Me’: Making the Book” (18–39), Old English Riddles are examined to elucidate the creation and reception of an illuminated religious book. The author takes into account for the purpose *Riddle 26*,² held in the Exeter Book

¹ According to Gérard Genette, *architextuality* refers to “the entire set of general or transcendent categories [...] from which emerges each singular text” (1997, 1).

² All the chapter headings in the book are, in fact, quotations taken from this Riddle.

(Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501), which dates from the tenth century. The codex contains over 120 English poems, among which more than ninety are riddles; some of these have to do with books. The solution to *Riddle 26*, for example, is ‘book’ or ‘Gospel-book’ (18). Treharne skilfully explains the stages of the manufacture of the medieval manuscript, from animal’s skin to leaf, through the words contained in this Riddle, which appeal to the senses, as she contends: “to work effectively and fully, [the Riddle] is truly dependent on the listener-reader’s senses and imagination” (22). To further her argument, the author alludes to other works, such as the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, and to contemporary events. Finally, lexis describing the early medieval manuscript is commented on.

The third chapter, “‘Covered Me with Tracks’: Writing the Book” (40–61), also revolves around the Old English Riddles to illustrate the writing process. Together with *Riddle 26*, the author resorts to *Riddle 51*, which has been solved as referring to a ‘quill pen’ and to *Riddle 88*, solved as ‘inkhorn’, among other Riddles. The discussion is imbued with interesting facts and images from other manuscripts, not only about writing materials but also about ruling, scribal practice, scriptoria, etc., which help the reader to envision the richness of the topic at hand.

Chapter four, “‘People Will Use Me’: Book as Archive” (62–87), moves on to explore the book as ‘inhabited’, that is, as an object that has been created, read and inscribed by a number of different people throughout its life. The handwritten book thus becomes a repository of information and experiences—an archive—and acquires a “memorializing function” (62). It is thanks to the enduring quality of manuscripts that some letters and charters have survived, such as the Reculver Charter, held in London, British Library, Cotton MS Augustus II. 2 and dating back to 679 (63). The permanent nature of the book is linked to the values of Christian religion and so the manuscript was given the status of a “relic, sacralized artefact” (65). Gospel-books were sometimes vehicles for recording matters related to territory and law (by means of annotations and additions) and the author offers extensive evidence of this double function—divine and historical—present in several manuscripts (64–79). The chapter finishes with a reflection on the immanence of the book, illustrated by St Cuthbert Gospel, housed in London, British Library, Additional MS 89000, and its audience’s experiences throughout time.

In chapter five, “‘My Name Is Famous’: Presence in the Book” (88–114), the focus is, as the title suggests, on names appearing in manuscripts, which can have been inscribed by owners and readers. The information that names provide is crucial “as evidence for the localization or provenance of a book” (88). They can also supply valuable data on date and ownership as well as on the social and cultural aspects of the time. The author draws from her extensive knowledge of early English manuscripts to showcase instances of interventions and traces in books, such as the colophon added by Aldred at the end of the Gospel of St John in the exceptional Lindisfarne Gospels (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero D. iv). Such interactions can shift the function of a given manuscript, as Treharne minutely argues throughout this chapter. Questions of multilingualism in the manuscript context and women as users and owners of medieval volumes are also tackled.

The unseen emerges as a central part of chapter six, “‘In Spirit the Wiser’: Invisible Things in the Book” (115–45), that is, the imperceptible features of the medieval manuscript. To wholly comprehend the meaning of a book, the author claims, it is of vital

importance to appreciate what cannot be seen in its physical form together with what can be perceived (122). These characteristics may refer to the heaviness of the volume or to gold illumination, for instance, and what they can convey depending on the situation in which the book is used. Accordingly, medieval books had (and have) the potential to trigger emotions and responses in their viewers. In the specific case of religious codices, they may also “phenomenologically provide an intense spiritual connection with God” (128). One must not forget the importance of religion in the medieval past, exemplified by overt allusions to the Divine within medieval manuscripts or documents of different sorts and genres. Blank spaces and margins, on the other hand, “reveal the interpretative potential of the inhabited manuscript” (136), since they encourage “the reader-user to participate in the book” (137). They are invisible spaces that go unnoticed until some kind of intervention has been made. But scribes and illuminators could also engage with space by means of embellishments, flourishes, etc., hinting at, according to the author, “the visible delight these craftspeople felt in their work” (145).

Chapter seven, “‘Covered with Protecting Boards’: Representing the Book” (146–67), deals with the representation of manuscripts through images and illustrations contained therein. One case in point is that of a covered or veiled hand holding the book, which “emphatically connotes the holiness of the object thus treated” (148). Again, the author turns to several manuscripts to support her discussion, such as London, British Library, Additional MS 33241, which contains a frontispiece depicting a scene in which the enthroned queen Emma receives the book from its author, who props it with veiled hands; these add a symbolic value to the volume. It is interesting to note how the book is represented in images found in manuscripts and other sources, such as paintings and sculptures. In this regard, Treharne puts forward a taxonomy with five broad categories depending on whether the book is open or closed, held or placed, blank or with content, etc. In fact, content can be, on occasion, asemic and thus the reader has to fill in the meaning (155). The usual portrayal of manuscripts with bindings suggests that they were conceived of as whole, well-formed objects (156). The chapter finishes with a special emphasis on the hapticity or touchability of the book, highlighting the view of “the manuscript codex as a hefty, weighty, and spiritually laden artefact” (167).

In chapter eight, “‘Cut by the Edge of the Knife’: Libricide and the Modern Book Trade” (168–94), the focus is shifted to the present day and to how the wholeness of a considerable number of manuscripts has been put at risk as a result of commercial trade, since they are “broken up intentionally and sold piecemeal” (171). The author details (and condemns) actions of biblioclasm or *libricide*, which involve dismembering the book and selling its parts (via auction sites such as eBay). Then, she looks back at the past and addresses the deliberate destruction of books during the Reformation in the sixteenth century as well as book vandalism in subsequent periods. On this matter, the publication of leaf books by the Society of Foliophiles in the twentieth century constitutes an example of the practices of fragmentation of manuscripts and early printed books, since leaf books were composed of folios and leaves excised from complete volumes. The impact of book-breaking is such that “thousands of books have been lost in the last century because of the vandalism of dealers and art connoisseurs” (187). Moreover, a new emerging field, Fragmentology, is concerned with the study of fragments and attempts to trace—and supply data on—manuscripts and broken books. This pursuit is shared by several

projects, including the Broken Books Project, whose aim is “to document and virtually reassemble books across repositories” (188).

The digital environment is key to chapter nine, entitled “‘More True and Better’: The Digital Book and Its Frameworks of Understanding” (195–212). Whilst Treharne claims that “representations of the manuscript online fragment and flatten”, these transformations should not be viewed as something negative, since “they create a new object” (196), which can be easily accessed. She then goes on to mention digital reconstructive work for damaged manuscripts. One of the main flaws of digital browsers and editions is that they may fail to embody the entirety or wholeness of manuscripts, thus providing only a fragmentary and decontextualised view. As the author points out regarding the text technological transition from the print to the digital environment, we are witnessing the onset, “a period of adjustment for users of new forms, tools, and devices (200).

The last chapter, “Bookending ‘Þa Wuldorgesteald’: The Wondrous Edifice” (213–15), is the shortest of all, functioning as a wrap-up of the previous ones. The author has exposed that “the past and present are intertwined within the medieval manuscript, such that they exist in the simultaneity of the book and readers’ or listeners’ experiences with that book” (213) and has highlighted the wholeness of the medieval book. This final chapter is followed by a comprehensive bibliography, which is complemented by the rich footnotes in every chapter furnishing additional information as well as useful links to manuscript images, press news, etc.

Elaine Treharne shows her unparalleled expertise in manuscript research, early textuality and other related areas in *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts*. The volume’s wide ambit testifies to it being the product of long reflection and work. In it, the best scholarship is combined with a straightforward and informative prose style that makes reading easy and enjoyable. All in all, this volume stresses the unity of the medieval manuscript and provides a holistic and complete picture of it from its inception until the present day. Hence, it is an outstanding and welcome contribution to the ample field of Medieval Studies and will be of interest not only to scholars and students but also to general readers, who may feel curious to peruse inspiring academic books like the one reviewed here.

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