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REVIEWS

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise L. Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman*, Medieval Cultures vol. 15. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999) xviii + 269 pp, b/w ill.

For some time now medieval literary studies have drifted away from a focus on texts and toward an emphasis on the manuscripts that carry those texts. The manuscript becomes more than an object; it is a site of cultural exchange, a place where marginal voices shout out and are heard. Not only do they often succeed in subverting the authority of the center; they also often usurp that authority. Artists, readers, writers, speakers and hearers all intermingle, swapping identities and functions, losing all sign of propriety as they negotiate their way across the page.

Manuscript study seeks to illuminate these outer voices, seeks to understand their place in the culture of the medieval book. Finding out how various discursive zones interact on the manuscript page becomes the objective, immensely more complicated than mere textual study, but infinitely more rewarding for the researcher.

In their coauthored study *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman*, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Denise L. Despres attempt a comprehensive examination of a particular manuscript book from the point of view of the margins. They take as their object of study Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 104, the only extant illustrated manuscript of *Piers Plowman*. This particular version translates the C text of the poem into a Hiberno-English dialect, is fully annotated, and includes seventy-three illustrations. Kerby-Fulton and Despres locate in these pictures (as well as the marginal notations) a reformist agenda quite at home with the Anglo-Irish audience for whom the manuscript was prepared. Reading from the margins, their endeavor becomes less about William Langland's fourteenth-century poem itself, than about how scribes and artists receive the text and mediate it for readers to come. These artisans and publishers are preparing a text not for a faceless multitude but for a known patron. How they accomplish their objective says much about the politics of book production in the Middle Ages.

Kerby-Fulton and Despres divide the book between them, with Kerby-Fulton approaching the text from the political agendas of its preparers and Despres looking at the heuristics of the physical and textual makeup of the manuscript. In the hands of its Anglo-Irish professional readers, they suggest, Langland's poem becomes a radical text.

Where other critics have considered the Douce manuscript a below-par example of the illustrator's art, Despres and Kerby-Fulton look instead to a deliberate economy of style that points toward the ethical program of the book's preparers, rather than their supposed inability or poverty as stylists. Highly unusual, the marginal illustrations for the most part do not illustrate scenes from the poem; they do not show fantasy figures; they do not place their figures in any recognizable background. Kerby-Fulton suggests that these "visual silences" indicate disapproval of such images—a possibly Lollard reformist ten-

dency—on the part of the illustrator. The manuscript contains, instead, images of ordinary (often lower-class) people, who grace the edges of the text with only the parchment itself as a background. Few images depict religious authorities. Those that do depict them in a way that leaves no doubt as to the moral bankruptcy of their subjects. Few ecclesiastical figures in the manuscript are singled out for any kind of praise. Thus, Kerby-Fulton concludes, most of these figures have the effect of undermining established authority.

Further, the scribe-illustrator and the annotator of the book are each seen to be engaging their perceived public with often different aims, presenting on the same page competing readings of the poem. Kerby-Fulton finds the annotations “quite different from what we have seen in the illustrations, both in medium and in message” (68). Annotating becomes a highly polemical and subjective activity, reflecting the perceptions of real people as they encounter the text. The annotator in turn seems to mediate the illustrator. He is less inclined to focus on clerical abuses and often writes his notes over the illustrator’s images.

These at times contradictory messages from the margins reveal the act of reading to involve more than just encountering the text. Despres writes: “Reading from the margin, we can comprehend a visual heuristic that constructs, directs, and even challenges textual meanings through a matrix of images, providing us with a commentary on, rather than pictures of, the narrative” (119).

To better accommodate nonspecialists, the authors relegate much of their technical data about the manuscript to three very useful appendices that outline the various hands of the manuscript, provide a complete transcription of the marginal annotations, and also provide modern-English translations of textual citations.

For the most part the book succeeds. However, while the book is exhaustively informative and methodologically sound, it can be frustrating for a nonspecialist, especially in light of the authors’ interest in “reaching a wider audience than manuscript studies normally command” (xiii). The book abounds with examples of how “professional” readers mediated and altered the text to suit either their own needs or those of their perceived audience. However, it assumes too much about its own perceived audience.

Medievalists outside of the English discipline might have appreciated more context for *Piers Plowman* itself. If nothing else, a brief description of the narrative elements of the poem would aid tremendously those whose general medieval knowledge far surpasses their specific training in English literature.

The book is useful as a working model of how to “read from the margins”—how a reader-response study might work on one specific manuscript. Aside from that, this book will be of interest mainly to students of medieval English literature in general, and *Piers Plowman* in particular.

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