Review of *Reading English Verse in Manuscript, c. 1350-c. 1500*

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Daniel Sawyer’s excellent monograph opens with the disarmingly basic question: “How did people read later Middle English verse?” (1). To answer this question, Sawyer builds from the foundational work of book historians such as Robert Darnton, Paul Saenger, and Malcolm Parkes. Yet, as he notes, medieval histories of reading have tended to concentrate on the high Middle Ages, ending their surveys ca. 1300, while book historians of later periods, such as Peter Stallybrass and Amy Blair, tend to start their treatments ca. 1500. This phenomenon has left a significant lacuna admirably filled by this book. Further, Sawyer productively eschews the focus on marginalia, book ownership marks, and evidence from wills favored by scholars of later medieval reading. Such evidence, Sawyer argues, is unquestioningly valuable, but it is also fragmentary, education-specific, and privileging of readers who engage with their books through writing in them, a category that does not encompass all medieval readers. Instead, Sawyer examines the history of reading by studying the codicological evidence of manuscript mise-en-page, internal and externally added organizational aids, and binding, through both concerted case study and several quantitative analyses, across a vast body of Middle English verse manuscript copies. This approach offers the reader a rich perspective on the manifold ways, beyond writing, by which compilers and readers understood the formal operations of Middle English verse as they were registered graphically on the page.
Provocatively, Sawyer does not survey the manuscripts one might immediately expect when thinking of later Middle English verse—namely, the body of Chauceriana and Lydgateiana found in numerous fifteenth-century manuscripts nor does he look at *Piers Plowman* manuscripts. Rather, as his opening chapter explains, Sawyer bases his analysis around the *Prick of Conscience* and the *Speculum Vitae*, two lengthy religious poems originating in northern England that do not occupy the canonical status of London-area verse. And yet, looking to the circulation patterns and evidence of ownership for these poems’ manuscripts uncovers significant inter-penetration between the reading publics of this northern religious verse and London-area verse. Sawyer suggests reading the *Prick of Conscience* and the *Speculum Vitae* as being on the earlier part of a continuum that also includes Chaucerian verse to revise our understanding of the exceptionalism with which we treat the latter.

Sawyer’s second chapter explores whether or not, and to what extent, readers read longer verse linearly and continuously. Surveying external and internal scribal and readerly navigational aids in ninety *Prick of Conscience* and thirty-nine *Speculum Vitae* manuscripts, Sawyer posits a marked shift toward discontinuous reading. Sawyer identifies three types of external navigational aids: summaries, indices, and tables of contents. While summaries tend to work from and reinforce the poems’ own internal divisions and structure, indices and tables of contents refashion lengthy poems into florilegia and encourage readers to dip into discrete sections. External navigational aids thus bolster the agency of the reader, overriding original authorial intention. From here, Sawyer explores internal navigational aids added by scribes and readers, such as headers and marginal notes that mark out quotation sources or offer Latin summaries of known topoi or exempla, which similarly allow the reader to seize control of the long text by skimming. Sawyer then turns to physical finding aids, or bookmarks. Fixed bookmarks, made with attached knots or string, he finds, tend to reflect existing textural divisions intended by the author or compiler, while ad hoc bookmarks, made by folding and cutting the page to create tabs, reflect instead a reader’s idiosyncratic interest in content. These kinds of readerly interventions, Sawyer concludes, have significant ramifications for scholarship on medieval miscellanies that has generally focused on the compilers’ agential organization of
texts as fully and completely guiding readers’ experiences. If readers actually have substantial freedom to choose how they read longer texts and textual collections, then our sense of compilatorial agency demands reevaluation.

For his third chapter, Sawyer explores how readers physically interacted with books of verse, both in terms of the individual page and in terms of the whole material object. Where earlier studies have concentrated on folio size, a question often obfuscated by manuscript trimming, Sawyer looks to the ruled text block to determine how much text on average medieval readers experienced and expected on the page. Sawyer measures the proportions of the text block relative to the margins in 308 manuscripts of the *Prick of Conscience*, *Speculum Vitae*, *Piers Plowman*, and the Middle English *Brut* as well as other varied miscellanies dominated by both verse and prose. His findings reveal striking consistency in lateral marginal width among verse manuscripts, regardless of folio size, manuscript provenance, or verse genre, while prose manuscripts correspondingly feature narrower lateral margins on average. Further, verse manuscript margins consistently take up a surprising 49 to 53 percent of the page. These features suggest that later Middle English verse had accrued an established “look.” Sawyer then nuances our prevailing understanding of books’ portability through another quantitative analysis that brings density—the weight of a book relative to its bulk—into the picture, adding richness to our sense of how medieval readers experienced their books.

In his superb fourth chapter, Sawyer looks to scribal punctuation and rhyme braces (or bracketing) to determine how medieval readers of verse understood and visually experienced verse form and rhyme in particular. Sawyer begins by noting that late medieval punctuation habits almost invariably highlight rhyme units when verse is laid out as prose. Put otherwise, when verse is copied in a prose format, its verse quality is articulated by visually marking out its rhyme scheme, suggesting that rhyme is the formal feature of verse par excellence for late medieval scribes and readers. Next, Sawyer ponders how readers understand the workings of rhyme. Here he discovers that the *Prick of Conscience* and the *Speculum Vitae*, like other northern religious verse, tend to be organized in couplets correlating to syntactic units: that is, short ideas take up a couplet, while longer ones are subdivided by couplets. Chaucerian verse, by contrast, employs more complex
rhyme schemes, like rhyme royal, along with rhyme-breaking, or a willingness to carry syntactic units across rhymes. Nevertheless, rhyme bracing of Chaucerian verse reveals that readers approach a rhyme royal stanza as consisting of two paired and distinct rhyme schemes—not ababcc, but abab (bracketed together), a separate symbol for line 5, followed by a bracket for the final two lines, or abab + x + cc. Similarly, Lydgate’s ababcbeb stanza gets written with two separate brackets: ababb + cbcb. Thus, while Chaucerian verse represents a clear formal shift from other Middle English verse, readers approach it by adapting it to earlier conceptions of Middle English rhyme. Sawyer concludes with a detailed overview of how rhyme bracing in Prick of Conscience manuscripts is executed with meticulous precision and few errors, even where rhymes are split across column and page breaks, showcasing a remarkable sensitivity to rhyme in this period. This chapter excitingly contributes to the recent New Formalist turn in Middle English studies and enriches our still limited understanding of the complexity with which lyric form was treated by medieval audiences.

Sawyer’s short final chapter recapitulates the preceding and presents proposals for further research into minor scribal markings, such as underlining, boxing, and running headers, and the insights those can offer our ongoing understanding of late medieval perspectives on genre, the distinction between verse and prose, and definitions of “the literary.”

Crisp and efficient, Sawyer’s monograph ushers the reader through meticulous codicological discussions with engaging readability. This readability is particularly impressive given that the monograph includes only eight manuscript illustrations of the visual features it describes, yet at no point did I feel like more were needed; Sawyer’s precise bibliographic descriptions more than suffice. At times, however, Sawyer’s prose can be too efficient; on several occasions, Sawyer notes a relationship between a particular scribal feature of Middle English verse manuscripts and Anglo-Latin manuscripts without clarifying those intriguing links. Further, Sawyer repeatedly stresses a vexed dichotomy between Chaucerian verse and the northern religious texts, the Prick of Conscience and the Speculum Vitae, that constitute his focus. However, only chapter 4 substantially engages with this dichotomy to demonstrate the important continuities and ruptures between both verse manuscript traditions. In other sections, discussion of Chaucerian verse gets
reserved for the final few pages, or even paragraphs. This choice diffuses the robust dichotomy put in place by the first chapter and makes the inclusion of the Chaucerian material feel rather like a concession to the latter’s canonical status. If this later material is truly not relevant to Sawyer’s aims with this book, then Sawyer could simply have made a clear case for its exclusion or minimization. If it is, then the argument would have benefited from more discussion and development of this well-trod corpus’s exciting ties with underappreciated northern religious verse.

This critique aside, Sawyer’s study reminds all Middle English scholars that manuscripts can shed light on medieval perceptions of form, genre, and geographically based literary traditions in ways that modern ingrained academic disciplinary divisions, traditions, and schools of thought can miss, neglect, or obscure. It also, excitingly, reveals that no aspect of the material text should escape our notice: from the ruled text block to the punctus elevatus, the most minor codicological and paleographical features can reflect deep, far-reaching cultural developments that transform our understanding of the past.


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In this strikingly original and thought-provoking book, Marisa Libbon asks us to think about how we have come to trust that what we know of the past is true. Historical narrative and scholarly consensus alike are the result of a number of factors, one of which is especially complex, fundamentally important, and until now, undertheorized: talk. Rumors circulate; scholars cite theories as commonplaces; witnesses rehearse stories in the courtroom. Talk is a critical mode of producing, asserting, and