Title
Insular Books: Vernacular Manuscript Miscellanies in Late Medieval Britain

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jc6839n

Journal
REVIEW OF ENGLISH STUDIES, 67(279)

ISSN
0034-6551

Author
Fisher, M

Publication Date
2016-04-01

DOI
10.1093/res/hgv114

Peer reviewed
Our brains find patterns. A 2008 study by Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky on ‘illusory pattern recognition’ exposed some of the ways in which a lack of control prompts people to perceive ‘a coherent and meaningful interrelationship among a set of random or unrelated stimuli’ ('Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception', *Science*, 3 October 2008, 115–117). Precisely what is perceived is similarly complex—hungry people see food in ambiguous images more frequently than non-hungry people, and cultural differences affect the nature of the patterns seen. Apophenia, the tendency to perceive patterns amidst unconnected points, lies at the heart of our encounters with randomness, and the many ways in which we attempt to make meaning out of it.

Any collection of essays on medieval miscellanies is bound to be, well, a bit miscellaneous. The editors deftly wield the variety of the essays here to construct interesting resonances throughout the volume. Broadly, the introduction, 15 essays, and an afterword offer a sustained and very detailed focus on a remarkable number of late fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century manuscripts. The almost 300 entries in the welcome Index of Manuscripts attest to the learning on display here. The breadth of manuscripts under consideration is noteworthy, moving beyond the usual suspects in English manuscript study (Digby 86, Harley 2253, Auchinleck, the books of Robert Thornton, John Shirley, and Richard Hill) to include Welsh, Scottish, and Tudor manuscripts. These reimagined cultural, linguistic, and chronological borders put fascinating pressure on ideas of miscellaneity that have been primarily derived from late medieval English manuscripts.

Not unexpectedly, most of the essays argue for ways in which a number of these manuscripts do or do not combine homogeneous or heterogeneous texts in French, Middle English, Latin, and Welsh in meaningful ways. Many of the essays work to expose some sort of previously unrecognized logic connecting the texts and contexts of particular manuscripts. They do so on linguistic, temporal, and historical grounds. Other essays survey a range of manuscripts that might be considered miscellaneous on generic or linguistic grounds. A third group of essays argues instead for ways to theorize or define the core and contested idea of the medieval miscellany.

Methodological disagreements amongst the constituent essays are honest, though not always productive. Where Emily Wingfield interestingly employs the idea of ‘material intertextuality’ (p. 216) to make sense of CUL MS Kk.1.5 as ‘a composite and thematically coherent whole’ (p. 230), Andrew Taylor worries about ‘how tricky the business of classifying becomes as it involves a judgment not just on the contents but on the compiler’s original intention’ (p. 150). Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards attempt to move from scribal intentionality to a ‘specifics of time and place’ (p. 267) of manuscript production as a way to distinguish between ‘purposive and accretive copying’ (p. 277). Yet, Dafydd Johnston’s exemplary essay on ‘Welsh Bardic Miscellanies’ argues compellingly that NLW MS Peniarth 54, written by 18 different hands in the late fifteenth century, and localizable to neither place nor time, is an emphatically coherent assemblage.
The distinctions that Johnston raises concerning Welsh manuscripts find similar concerns in Keith Busby’s ‘Multilingualism, the Harley Scribe, and Johannes Jacobi’ and Ardis Butterfield’s brief afterward, both of which contrast English vernacular miscellany to the more emphatically legible organization of Continental recueils. Busby, seeking to avoid what he terms the ‘scribal or compilatorial fallacy’ (p. 50), attempts to steer a middle way as he uncovers broad strokes of meaning in the trilingual corpus of the Harley Scribe and the work of the less-familiar Francophone Italian scribe Johannes Jacobi. Susanna Fein also considers the Harley Scribe alongside the books assembled by Robert Thornton, making a strong case for the Harley scribe’s ‘nimble way of cobbling together materials to create new meanings’ (p. 68). Fein argues for the ways in which a genre-based design initially framed the texts and booklets of the Lincoln Thornton manuscript, and ties that plan to Thornton’s larger undertaking to gather, copy, and compose verse amidst his regional networks and the flourishing English book trade.

In some ways, the volume makes a larger argument about the nature and variety of the ‘units’ that scholars identify in medieval multi-text manuscripts, and upon which arguments about miscellaneity and unity rest. Thus, Wendy Scase discerns three distinct units in BL, Additional MS 37787 on codicological, paleographical, linguistic, and art-historical grounds in ‘John Northwood’s Miscellany Revisited’. Scase cogently transforms our understanding of Additional MS 37787. Rather than seeing a Cistercian book owned by John Northwood of Bordesley Abbey at the end of the fourteenth century, she exposes a ‘composite manuscript and the outcome of several production campaigns’ (p. 119). In doing so, Scase offers major challenges to current conceptions of Cistercian book production and the formation of individualized devotional collections at the end of the fourteenth century.

Moving from the codicological unit to the historical and cultural ‘unit’, Carol M. Meale, in ‘Amateur Book Production and the Miscellany in Late Medieval East Anglia: Tanner 407 and Beinecke 365’, sees organization in eclecticism by focusing upon regional identities. The two titular manuscripts, ultimately called by Meale a ‘domestic miscellany’ and a ‘personal manuscript compilation or “boke”’ (p. 173), attest to two individualized expressions of regional identity: late fifteenth-century East Anglian orthodoxy. Her category of ‘boke’, attuned to issues of class and gender as well as regional culture, is a particularly powerful model for understanding late medieval vernacular manuscripts. In a similar vein, Raluca Radulescu considers exemplarity as a conceptual ‘organising principle’ (p. 140) at the heart of Dublin, Trinity College MS 432, while offering a fascinating though brief exposition of the complex relationship between dramatic text and dramatic performance.

Some of the essays offer broad and informative surveys of manuscripts that do and do not qualify, in their authors’ views, as miscellanies, from Ailes and Hardman’s assessment of Charlemagne texts and romances, to Putter’s attention to the ways in which English and French lyric and romance do and do not cluster in manuscripts, to Lloyd-Morgan’s authoritative review of multilingualism in Welsh prose manuscripts. Such summary is not meant to be dismissive, and the contributions by Connolly, Marx, Youngs, and Wingfield also deserve more attention than a brief review can provide.

Though not every argument for or against the coherence of individual manuscripts is wholly persuasive, this perhaps points more to our deeply ingrained tendency to perceive patterns rather than randomness. The irony should not be lost on anyone that this is an unusually coherent collection of essays. The contributors and editors have produced essays in lively dialogue with one another, and also with debates in manuscript and literary studies more generally.

MATTHEW FISHER University of California, Los Angeles doi:10.1093/res/hgv114