
Margaret Connolly and Raluca Radulescu’s edited collection *Insular Books: Vernacular Manuscript Miscellanies in Late Medieval Britain* contains a number of essays that emerged from a conference on this subject held in London at the British Academy in June 2012. As stated on its website, the conference’s objective was to “bring a new and multidisciplinary focus to the late medieval miscellany, a little-investigated and poorly understood type of manuscript” (<www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/insular_books_vernacular_misc_in_late_med_britain.cfm>).

The resulting book’s principal foci are to outline “the main issues for those unfamiliar with this particular aspect of medieval studies” (xiii) and to suggest “some directions that might fruitfully be taken up by future researchers” (xiv). In other words, *Insular Books* concentrates on identification, by defining the complex term *miscellany* in the context of late medieval Britain, and on methodology, by considering the diverse ways in which miscellanies can be critically analysed.

The broad definition of *miscellany* advanced in *Insular Books* is “essentially a multi-text manuscript, made up of mixed contents” (1). The scholars who have contributed to this collection start from this premise to examine the production of miscellany manuscripts, “pointing to cultural practices established in Wales and Scotland and particular regions of England (with their distinct linguistic and cultural traditions)” (1). They focus on case studies of single manuscripts or manuscripts of a “more physically composite nature, made of discrete elements” (1), and apply comparative approaches to either individual manuscripts or manuscripts “in which particular types of text are housed” (11).

The editors recognise that *Insular Books* is itself a miscellany and “encourage readers to approach [the] essays both sequentially and selectively” (xiv); nevertheless, the essays appear to be grouped according to specific boundaries, specifically linguistic, methodological, geographic and chronological. Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman’s “Texts in Conversation: Charlemagne Epics and Romances in Insular Plural-text Codices,” Keith Busby’s “Multilingualism, the Harley Scribe, and Johannes Jacobi,” Susanna Fein’s “Literary Scribes: The Harley Scribe and Robert Thornton as Case Studies” and Ad Putter’s “The Organisation of Multilingual Miscellanies: The Contrasting Fortunes of Middle English Lyrics and Romances”
offer multilingual intertextuality as their commonality. Wendy Scase’s “John Northwood’s Miscellany Revisited,” Raluca Radulescu’s “Vying for Attention: The Contents of Dublin, Trinity College, MS 432” and Andrew Taylor’s “The Chivalric Miscellany: Classifying John Paston’s ‘Grete Booke’” feature case studies on individual manuscripts and explore the socio-cultural circumstances influencing their compilation and dissemination. Carol M. Meale, in “Amateur Book Production and the Miscellany in Late Medieval East Anglia: Tanner 407 and Beinecke 365,” presents East Anglia as a backdrop to compare two manuscripts; she examines their accretive structures and how they document “the individual in relation to the community, particularly with reference to religious devotion and practice” (167). Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan’s “Writing Without Borders: Multilingual Content in Welsh Miscellanies from Wales, the Marches and Beyond” and Dafydd Johnston’s “Welsh Bardic Miscellanies” examine Welsh prose and poetry respectively; and Emily Wingfield’s “Lancelot of the Laik and the Literary Manuscript Miscellany in 15th- and 16th-century Scotland” addresses the “lamented lack of scholarship on Scottish literary manuscript miscellanies” (209). Deborah Young’s “Entertainment Networks, Reading Communities, and the Early Tudor Anthology: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C. 813” and William Marx’s “Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 12: The Development of Bilingual Miscellany—Welsh and English” study community in Tudor England: the first, how entertainment networks facilitate the transmission of ideas; and the second, how the manuscript’s compilation was “driven by a sense of contemporary need” (262). And, lastly, Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards’s “Towards a Taxonomy of Middle English Manuscript Assemblages” and Margaret Connolly’s “The Whole Book and the Whole Picture: Editions and Facsimiles of Medieval Miscellanies and Their Influence” present a whole-book perspective to consider closely the taxonomy and accessibility of late medieval miscellanies respectively.

The editors of this collection unquestionably realise their primary objectives through their multidisciplinary approach and their inclusion of scholars whose expertise enables readers to obtain insight into the complex nature of vernacular manuscript miscellanies in general and their contents more specifically. Their descriptions of manuscripts, such as Tanner 407 and Beinecke 365 by Meale, are vivid and engaging, and numerous secondary sources in footnotes encourage readers to conduct further independent research. However, the devil manifests often in the abundance of detail — that is, the effort to understand the physical and socio-cultural conditions of a manuscript’s production is at times overshadowed by the
thorough cataloguing of content.

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