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Art of Documentation: Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England (book review)

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to “engage in social, political, and religious history” (13), but also to engage in interpretation, to work toward understanding. “Every society asks what, if anything, should be done about inequity,” Calabrese observes; “reading *Piers Plowman* compels one to understand the question, though perhaps not to answer it” (233).

This book will be useful not only to undergraduate readers, but also to instructors looking for ways to reenergize their teaching of the poem—the book abounds with examples of how to incorporate questions of scribal and editorial practice into the conversation, how to compare passages across revisions or manuscript versions. Calabrese’s book will help students and instructors alike move away from the single, authoritative text model.

These two books revel in the pleasures of reading and thinking about Middle English literature, and it’s exciting to see *Piers Plowman* front and center, enjoying something of an undergraduate moment. Calabrese makes the poem accessible in its entirety and in all of its revisionary complexity, while Baldwin incorporates it into multiple chapters, pressing it into service not only in discussions of devotional culture, but of social, political, and formal poetic change as well. Although *Piers Plowman* has long been read as part of the mainstream of medieval literary studies, it isn’t universally embraced in the undergraduate classroom. Baldwin and Calabrese bring the poem back to the forefront by introducing it to first-time readers (and to instructors looking to do more) without dumbing down or diminishing its rich complexity. Inventive, resourceful, challenging, and creative: in these new books, two highly experienced teachers show us how it’s done.

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JESSICA BERENBEIM, *Art of Documentation: Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England*. (Text Image Context: Studies in Medieval Manuscript Illumination 2.) Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2015. Pp. xviii, 242; many color figures. \$95. ISBN: 978-0-88844-194-2. doi:10.1086/695706

Jessica Berenbeim’s *Art of Documentation* works at the crossroads of several critical threads in medieval studies, especially documentary culture, material history, and visual arts and architecture. The book argues that medieval documents articulated “an essential and consequential connection between objects and events” (5), asking how we might understand documents both as material objects and as expressions of administrative or devotional acts. In doing so, it pursues the complicated and often surprising ways visual and documentary languages produced and responded to dynamic understandings of the relationship between artifact and history, between diplomacy and devotion, and between authority and instability.

Art of Documentation focuses on English texts in particular, eschewing a narrative of progress for a more object-oriented study. “That approach allows these works to be examined in depth,” Berenbeim writes, “following the sequence of an argument rather than the march of time” (8). Concentrating on specific examples is certainly an effective way to develop rich readings of individual artifacts, but it also suggests that these objects can be taken as metonyms for documentary representational practices across a wide swath of time and space. The book does not offer enough connective tissue between these objects to support that suggestion. Missing in particular are accounts of the particularities of English bureaucratic, diplomatic, or devotional culture, which would have anchored the book’s arguments more specifically (and thus more persuasively). Likewise, the book could have contextualized these objects with other cognate texts; one thinks immediately of the *Charters of Christ* or Lollard anti-image tracts, both of which the book only mentions in passing. Nonetheless, the evocative readings offer much for scholars interested in documentary culture, material texts, and visual vocab-

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ularies, and the beautiful illustrations are crucial to the kind of text-image work this book performs.

The first (of three) sections functions as a theoretical overview, outlining how documents might operate imaginatively as much as analytically or diplomatically. Charter images could, for example, model ideal responses to documentary authority, and as such, they direct readers' engagement with social hierarchies and governance. Images of documents could reframe devotional narratives. A sharp reading of the De Brailes Hours, for example, reads the document's depiction of Theophilus's oath to the devil as a sealed document, which opens the possibility of arguing against the oath on the grounds of evidentiary value. In other words, the depiction of an oath as a document reconstitutes the very nature of that oath to imagine it as a site of argumentation and interpretation rather than an ironclad contract. Documentary images thus invite active participation, negotiation, and interpretation into devotional practice.

Subsequent chapters turn to the Sherborne Missal, the Seal of Evesham Abbey, and a 1393 *inspeximus* charter from Croyland Abbey to map the various ways these individual artifacts navigate the conceptual demands and possibilities of documents. Chapter 3 shows that the Sherborne Missal's scheme of depicted charters articulates conceptual parallels between the construction of archives and the performance of the Mass. In this reading, the Missal can be understood as a formal experiment, in which the placement of documentary images with respect to the sections of the Missal can express mutual reinforcements between documentary and liturgical practices. Chapter 4 looks outward to argue that the Sherborne Missal's visual program reveals a consistent and overtly orthodox response to Wycliffite ideologies around images and devotional practices. This was an exciting argumentative intervention into Wycliffite history, and the book could have sustained a longer engagement of this kind.

The next section (chapters 5 and 6) is devoted to thinking about how documents could express or inspire anxiety about their contingency and instability. The fifth chapter turns to the Seal of Evesham Abbey to show how it negotiates royal and divine models of authority to produce an institutional mythography. This seal is famously and peculiarly narrative, depicting the abbey's foundation legend in five scenes on one side and its foundation charter and seal on the other. Thus, it "comments on the diplomatic practices in which it participated," insofar as it operates as a circular system of self-validation (153).

The final chapter traces the evolution of a fourteenth-century *inspeximus* charter in Croyland Abbey in Lincolnshire. *Inspeximus* charters, the book explains, recite and confirm earlier charters via the seal of a presiding authority. As such, they are documentary objects that legally replace earlier versions of themselves. This "principle of substitution" is most obvious in the nested visuals of the Croyland Abbey *inspeximus* charter, which flank the charter with depictions of examination on one side and of confirmation on the other. Such visual enclosure moves away from more typical, linear models of prefatory lists of kings, and thus the Croyland Abbey *inspeximus* charter can be understood as an experiment in diplomatic form, much like the Sherborne Missal.

Art of Documentation is a wide-ranging and learned book, offering much to those working in art history, medieval diplomatics, material texts, and documentary culture. It is also very short, with images taking up quite a bit of page space, so the book could certainly have supported deeper, more thorough excavations of its provocative arguments. But many scholars will certainly find this book indispensable for thinking about English documentary culture from a visual and formal perspective.

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