

The art of allusion: illuminators and the making of English literature, 1403–1476, by Sonja Drimmer

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Sonja Drimmer, *The Art of Allusion: Illuminators and the Making of English Literature, 1403-1476* (Philadelphia, PA: U. of Pennsylvania Press), 2019. 321 pages. Price: \$59.95

Sonja Drimmer's book is remarkable work of discovery and synthesis, the product of original archival work conducted over a decade. Her scholarship combines the techniques of the art historian (visual analysis and comparison, hard looking) and the literary scholar (she analyses the Middle English adeptly). However, no one would want to make the error of calling her scholarship 'word-image' studies, which is a designation too pat and old-fashioned for this magnificent project. Drimmer seeks to avoid approaches that privilege words over images. She extends the meaning of 'intervisuality' to mean that images make meaning not just in relation to other images, but that the process of producing images (and not just receiving them) is a site of meaning-making. She shows how illuminators borrowed from several realms, some of them visual, others textual, in order to invent the imagery that would accompany a new vernacular literature.

She looks at a period when written English was new, when large numbers of manuscripts were being produced in the vernacular in England, and in a quite unlikely twist, were largely produced with images. The period under study is bookended by two significant years: 1403 (when manuscript makers formed the Stationers' Company in London) and 1476 (when Caxton set up his printing press). These decades staged the legacies of three main English authors: John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate. 'My aim', Drimmer writes, 'is not to devise a theory of literary illustration drawn from English texts; rather, I reverse this operation by examining how images think about English literature' (4). In asking how images 'think through' the new English literature, Drimmer makes the brave, well-argued, and convincing claim that illuminators co-produced the works of these authors.

In Chapter 1, Drimmer asks how manuscripts were made in England in the fifteenth century, and she challenges the notion that a named master was the head of a workshop with underling apprentices. At least for London's Paternoster Row, the centre of the book trade, the evidence simply does not uphold this sticky but wrong idea. In an era when illuminators simply did not sign their work (and we only know the names of three fifteenth-century English illuminators), assembling a corpus based on names is not feasible. Rather than lamenting that fact, Drimmer takes the opportunity to cast doubt on the assumption that there was a master-apprentice system in England at all, and that William Abell—one of the only names on record—was a 'master'. Like other precious namable figures from the fifteenth century, Abell has been the object of oeuvre creep – many illuminations have been attributed to him, because he's the only name around. Rather, the largely anonymous makers worked in a collaborative but decentralized manner, and probably shared models, techniques, and access to materials. Drimmer prudently resists the temptation to name hands and build oeuvres, which has been the mainstay of art historical practice until recently.

The next trio of chapters complicates the notion of the 'author portrait' by considering just how images conceptualise authorship. Chapter 2 asks how Chaucer manuscripts produced in the first decade of the fifteenth century present the author: not as one derived from scriptural 'author portraits', but as an embodied manicule—a pointing hand—drawing attention to the text. Chapter 3 treats John Gower's *Confessio*

Amantis, a highly unusual text, written for King Richard II. Much of the poem is written from the voice of a lover (Amans) confessing to the priest of Venus, but this authorial voice is unstable, as is the skittish English-cum-Latin language of the poem itself. In some cases, illuminators interpreted the confessor as the author, but the variability with which they portrayed the author points to the instability of authorship itself. Chapter 4 considers the large surviving corpus of manuscripts containing works by Lydgate. In dealing with the numerous ‘portraits’ of Lydgate they comprehend, Drimmer cleverly reframes them as votive rather than as authorial, which has consequences for how one reads the texts.

Part III drills down into particular copies of large histories written in the fifteenth century. Chapter 5 analyses Lydgate’s *Troy Book* (London, British Library, Royal Ms. 18 D ii), originally destined as a gift for Henry VI or Edward IV but left unfinished. Painstakingly unpeeling the layers in the campaigns of work allows Drimmer to show how later-continued imagery co-opted aspects of the past. Chapter 6 tackles a deluxe copy of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (New York, Morgan Library, Ms. M.126), which was commissioned upon the return to power of Edward IV in 1471. Among its images are many historical exempla that had never before been visualised. The illuminator seized upon these to form part of the PR for the reinstated king, who used it to help reshape his public identity. In writing his history, Gower made the past relevant to his English public; in illuminating the Morgan copy, the painter made the imagery relevant to Edward IV. The book ends by asking why there are no copies of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* with cycles of narrative illumination aside from the pilgrims’ portraits. To address this question, Drimmer shifts media, in order to analyse Caxton’s second printed edition of the collection, which includes 47 woodcut prints.

Drimmer has considered from a variety of angles what authorship meant in fifteenth-century England, and how images interacted with this construction of meaning. In so doing, she identifies and delves into categories of images different from those that have previously been studied. Because English manuscript painting often lacks the high degree of craft found in contemporary Continental images, it has rarely been the topic of major exhibitions, and art historians (besides Kathleen Scott and Kathryn Smith) have been far more smitten with Continental images. While literary historians have studied the texts in question – especially those by Chaucer – in great detail, the images have received relatively little attention. Sonja Drimmer has applied refreshing, thrilling and unconventional thinking to the illuminated vernacular literature that burst onto the scene.

This book combines qualities I value in modern scholarship: it brings together undiscovered or previously ignored material, a feat only possible when a scholar sacrifices untold hours to the archive; it creates a methodology out of the material itself and stays closely tethered to the physical evidence; and its claims extend beyond the boundaries of the material under immediate examination. Her work is respectful of previous scholars’ contributions, and dips into a wide array of them, from medieval art historians to theorists to antiquarians working in allied fields. Finally, the text stretches my vocabulary in delightful ways: at least once per page some *mot juste* made me smile. Her verb-driven prose never descends into jargon, and for that reason, this book will be timeless. I encourage you to read it, for the ideas, for the thrill of exploring archives with such an able guide, and also for the pleasure of the language.