

Afterword

Perfecting Medieval Manuscripts

In paper, many a Poet now suruiues
Or else their lines had perish'd with their liues.¹

John Taylor, *The praise of hemp-seed* (1620)

When the poet Taylor sought to extol the merits of paper as a medium of preservation, he was able to invoke Shakespeare, Spenser, and Sidney, but also 'Old Chaucer' and Gower in the same breath. Taylor's verses confirm the key role played by print in Chaucer's afterlife, and this book has demonstrated the extent to which readers' knowledge and expectations about Chaucer in the early modern period were derived from the printed folio volumes to which Taylor's poem alludes. It has also shown that print's function in relation to manuscripts could be an enabling one, for the new editions sustained the manuscript culture in which Chaucer's works first circulated. Today, medieval manuscripts are at the heart of Chaucerian scholarship, and names such as Ellesmere and Hengwrt have become inseparable from the study of Chaucer. The varied trajectories of these and other medieval manuscripts through the centuries have seen growing scholarly attention, and this book has sought to foreground their vital place in medieval reception history.

Like the medieval manuscript book itself, perfecting has had a rich afterlife beyond the early modern era, though the most sustained discussions have been in relation to printed materials. In her study of the Shakespeare First Folio and the remarkable afterlives of individual copies, Emma Smith chronicles the emergence of a 'capacious and overlapping market for improved, facsimile or perfected copies' during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whether compiling extra-illustrated copies, making up one copy with leaves plucked from another, or creating facsimiles in pen or type, modern owners and collectors might have been inspired by anything from decoration to deceit.² As was noted,

¹ John Taylor, *The praise of hemp-seed* (London: [Edward Allde], 1620; *STC* 23788), sig. E3^v.

² Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, p. 322.

Sidney Lee's 1902 census of copies of the First Folio deployed a taxonomy for ranking individual exemplars according to their place in Class I (Perfect Copies); Class II (Imperfect); and Class III (Defective).³ Like First Folios, incunabula were especially susceptible to the bibliophilic desire to preserve and perfect. Amongst the modern flyleaves in one copy of Caxton's second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* formerly owned by Thomas Grenville (1755–1846), attached slips in Grenville's hand recount his admiration of his book: 'the singular beauty of this Copy, induced me to incur a heavy expense in copying the defective leaves from that in St John's College Oxford'. Another note adds the artist's name: 'This beautiful Copy of mine wanting several leaves I had them supplied in facsimile by Harris from the Copy at St. John's – it is now quite perfect'.⁴ The prolific John Harris (1791–1873) is today known as a facsimilist whose beguiling hand may be found in rare copies of printed books, but he had a reputation in his own time as 'a very ingenious man, who repairs manuscripts and imitates old books in a way quite surprising, so as to make it impossible to observe them from the original'.⁵ Harris's contemporary reputation as an artificer of manuscripts reminds us that both printed and manuscript books could be subject to renovation and repair under the banner of perfecting in this period. The work undertaken by Eliza Denyer (b. c. 1765), Harris's predecessor and another artist who applied her skill to the perfecting of medieval manuscripts, reinforces this point and encourages us to trace still earlier examples of this practice back into the early modern period, where this study has located it.⁶

The early modern desire for complete and perfected medieval manuscripts may be traced forward in time too. The work of the Spanish Forger around the turn of the twentieth century tells of the desire for the medieval manuscript book and the modern market forces that supported it. The single leaves, cuttings, and whole manuscripts painted by the Forger – many depicting secular scenes rendered in idealising pastels – show this work to be informed by medievalism's nostalgic flavour.⁷ In one case, the Forger illuminated an unfinished Book of Hours from the fifteenth century, filling in blank spaces with an invented cycle of images, some of which were drawn from a modern printed book generously illustrated with scenes of medieval and Renaissance life and culture.⁸ Andrew Lang, the Scottish

³ Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, p. 296; see also Chapter 2, p. 123. ⁴ BL C.21.d.

⁵ Qtd. in Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, p. 324. ⁶ Drimmer, 'A Medieval Psalter "Perfected"', 2.

⁷ Sandra Hindman and others, *Manuscript Illumination in the Modern Age: Recovery and Reconstruction* (Evanston, IL: Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2001), p. 157.

⁸ Described and pictured in Hindman and others, *Manuscript Illumination*, pp. 159–60. The printed book from which the images were copied is Paul Lacroix's edition of *Vie militaire et*

historian, was evidently already familiar with such practices by 1881. Lang warned collectors that ‘a MS. which is not absolutely perfect, if it is in a genuine state, is of much more value than one which has been made perfect by the skill of a modern restorer’ and asserted that the more convincing the forger’s skill at fakery, ‘the more worthless he renders the volume’.⁹ Lang’s condemnation of perfected manuscripts provides an early articulation of Walter Benjamin’s belief that a greater value inhered in ‘genuine’ copies compared to those retroactively made perfect.¹⁰ Not everyone would agree, however, and facsimilists, librarians, editors, bibliographers, collectors, and booksellers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries all had their own systems of value and incentive for appraising imperfect copies against perfected ones.¹¹ The collector who prized a certain aesthetic effect, the editor seeking to establish a historical text, and the artist responsible for retouching a medieval artwork all approached perfected books differently.¹² Of course, aesthetic and cultural value might vary not only in relation to different individuals or groups in a given time, but might evolve with time itself. As past practices of disbinding manuscripts, washing their leaves of marginalia, and treatment with chemical reagents attest, the techniques applied to artefacts in the hope of improving them by rendering them cleaner, more legible, more beautiful, or somehow truer to their imagined original forms are always submitted to the judgement of future generations.¹³ To study the applications of this term and all its morally charged baggage is

religieuse au Moyen-Âge et à l'époque de la renaissance (1873). Such practices were not exclusively the domain of the Spanish Forger. In another Book of Hours (Pierpont Morgan MS M. 54) which was originally lacking its miniatures, an artist has added a cycle of illumination, again following a modern publication by Lacroix (1871). The illustrations were passed off as medieval and the book was sold in 1895; see *Manuscript Illumination*, p. 162.

⁹ Andrew Lang, *The Library* (London: Macmillan, 1881), p. 83.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–51 (pp. 222–23).

¹¹ On conservation and its impingement on differing ideas of value, see David A. Scott, *Art: Authenticity, Restoration, Forgery* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2016), pp. 12–19.

¹² The ethical concerns surrounding the creation of facsimile inserts were neither straightforward nor easy to dispatch. Writing in 1927, the bibliographer R. B. McKerrow could see some merit in the practice: ‘Where such insertion takes the form of an honest and unconcealed facsimile from another copy of the same edition, it is a clear gain, for none but the most uncompromising of bibliographical purists would prefer an imperfect copy of a book to one so made-up’. See R. B. McKerrow, *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927; repr. Winchester: St. Paul’s Bibliographies, 1994), p. 232.

¹³ On reagents, see Oliver Bock, ‘C. Maier’s Use of a Reagent in the Vercelli Book’, *The Library*, 16.3 (2015), 249–81. These matters are far from settled in the twenty-first century. Within the fields of restoration and conservation, the principle of minimal intervention continues to inspire debate and disagreement; see Scott, *Art*, pp. 4–5.

to recognise, with Smith, that ‘the notion of bibliographic perfection is a highly subjective and historically contingent one’.¹⁴

While perfecting is not a new concept to historians of art, architecture, or the book, I have suggested that scholarship on past attempts at perfecting would benefit from a more accommodating, historically informed view of this phenomenon.¹⁵ When techniques of perfecting are invoked today, they are often framed by scare quotes: thus a book or a painting has not been perfected but ‘perfected’. That punctuation is usually intended to register distance between what it meant to perfect an object in the past and its more abstract, Platonic meaning today. There are good scholarly reasons for this signalling, which acknowledges that past methods may fall short of modern standards, and that techniques intended to improve historical artefacts may, to twenty-first-century eyes, seem harmful, invasive, or too interventionist. But the punctuation also registers, more implicitly, a sense of quiet disapproval at the work past readers undertook to improve their books. Without wishing to do away with the theoretical and practical strides that the fields of restoration and conservation have made in recent decades, this book has asked what might be gained from accepting the perfecting of manuscripts by early modern readers on their own terms and by observing the ends to which such improvements aspired.

With the emergence of new technologies for reproducing images and text, the desire for complete and perfected manuscripts has increasingly been displaced from medieval artefacts and onto their printed and digital surrogates, giving rise to a new manifestation of what Echard has identified as a centuries-old ‘impulse to facsimile’.¹⁶ When the Ordnance Survey began experiments with photo-zincography for the making of accurate and affordable facsimile prints around 1859, the new method was framed as an innovation capable of producing ‘perfectly accurate copies of documents of any kind’, but not before the nation’s manuscripts were singled out: ‘we can, if required, print any number of faithful copies of the ancient records of the kingdom, such as “Doomsday Book,” the “Pipe Rolls,” &c.’¹⁷ With the ubiquity of the digital facsimile in these first decades of the twenty-first century, the quest for the medieval manuscript book in all its completeness

¹⁴ Smith, *Shakespeare’s First Folio*, p. 287.

¹⁵ On the perfecting of buildings in the eighteenth century, see Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), pp. 277–307.

¹⁶ See Chapter 4, p. 219.

¹⁷ David McKitterick, *Old Books, New Technologies: The Representation, Conservation and Transformation of Books since 1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 123; Smith, *Shakespeare’s First Folio*, p. 309.

is most clearly expressed in the remarkable efforts of scholars working in the field of fragmentology, many of which are emblematised in the Fragmentarium project.¹⁸ Here, the establishment of open standards for sharing images (in particular, IIIF) alongside the development of shared canvas viewers (such as Mirador) have enabled the reunion of manuscript fragments and the reconstruction and identification of formerly dispersed books taken apart by binders and biblioclasts from the Middle Ages to the present day.

The scholarly and cultural value of such work is unimpeachable. In its mission to preserve and advance knowledge of the manuscript book through digital reconstruction, the goals of the Fragmentarium project may appear to be in opposition to those previous generations of collectors who reworked manuscripts according to their own tastes, or who dramatically remade and irreversibly customised them through the methods described in this study. At the time of writing, the Fragmentarium website styles itself as a 'Laboratory for Medieval Manuscript Fragments' and states its *raison d'être* thus: 'Fragmentarium enables libraries, collectors, researchers and students to publish images of medieval manuscript fragments, allowing them to catalogue, describe, transcribe, assemble and re-use them'. The scholars involved in the Fragmentarium project might hesitate to align their platform with the more invasive and transformative types of bibliographical perfecting which had purchase until the nineteenth century. I would venture, though, that the project's stated aims – enabling cataloguing, description, transcription, assembly, and re-use – and the interest in the past that drives them intersect with historical practices of perfecting in meaningful ways. The early modern readers who perfected medieval manuscripts, their nineteenth-century successors, and today's digital fragmentologists may operate in divergent historical circumstances but their activities of collating, annotating, and reconfiguring old books share much common ground. In different ways, their activities extend the lives of medieval volumes by remaking them for their own age. The readers, scribes, and collectors who painstakingly copied, corrected, and completed copies of Chaucer's works would be amazed at the modern-day tools for reproducing images of the medieval manuscript book, but they would have recognised the fundamental and enduring desire that motivates their creation and use.

¹⁸ The digital interface of the Fragmentarium project was launched in September 2017 and its journal, *Fragmentology*, was first published in 2018. See 'Fragmentarium: Laboratory for Medieval Manuscript Fragments', <https://fragmentarium.ms>.