

Chapter 8

REDESIGNING THE MEDIEVAL BOOK

DANIEL WAKELIN

HOW DO WE bring alive today the processes of designing and making which lay behind the objects of the past? The objects themselves can be shown in exhibitions or photographs, but visual and static displays do not readily tell stories of thinking and crafting. Curators of objects from all periods have noted how difficult it is to convey design as a process.¹ This was a challenge for an exhibition about the ingenuity of design in medieval English manuscripts called *Designing English* at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 2017–2018.² That exhibition presented handwritten books and other inscribed objects in English from the age of Alfred to the early Tudor period. The display focused on the process of making, by highlighting work in progress; a sheep's skin to show the preparing of parchment; unfinished pictures to show stages of work; seemingly identical pairs to reveal the effort of copying. The panels and captions in the gallery highlighted analogies between scribes' and illuminators' work on manuscripts and modern efforts at design—birthday cards, advertisements, “coffee table” books. We wanted people to whom medieval manuscripts might be unfamiliar to see continuities in the thought processes of design from the handwritten book to digital graphics.

To bring out that continuity, we invited contemporary artists to make new books inspired by our medieval ones for an accompanying display, *Redesigning the Medieval Book*. The twenty-first-century artist's book is a work of art that bears some relation, albeit often loosely, to conventional books. It might be modelled on the traditional western multi-gathering codex, or on the small pamphlet, various other kinds of folded form (accordion or *lepoirello*, French-fold and others), the roll, or the tablet. It might carry words or other signs, images, and patterns in some spatial arrangement like a text. Most often, it will have both these characteristics, but a codex structure with few words, or a text affixed to a shoe (to take two works for *Redesigning the Medieval Book*, by Helen Hayman and Jules Allen respectively) would also count as artists' books. The origin of artists' books is usually considered a response to the industrialization of printing in the

Daniel Wakelin, University of Oxford.

¹ Helen Charman, “Just What Is it that Makes Curating Design So Different, So Appealing?,” in *Design Objects and the Museum*, ed. Liz Farrelly and Joanna Weddell (London: Bloomsbury 2016), 137–47 at 139.

² *Designing English: Graphics on the Medieval Page*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, December 1, 2017 to April 22, 2018, www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/whatson/whats-on/upcoming-events/2017/dec/designing-english, catalogued in Daniel Wakelin, *Designing English: Early Literature on the Page* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018).

1800s, and medieval forebears are seldom prominent.³ But Michael Hampton has argued that the artfully made books of earlier centuries should equally be considered “proto artists’ books” or “cryptic examples of the artists’ book” *avant la lettre*.⁴ Contemporary book artists such as Sue Ann Robinson, Barbara Fahner, Russell Maret, and Edmund de Waal have sometimes turned to medieval manuscripts for inspiration.⁵ Yet it is fair to say that such models are not very common. One aim of *Redesigning the Medieval Book* was that book artists would engage more with medieval manuscripts after our workshops and competition.

The goal was not primarily, though, to prompt pastiches of medieval styles or revivals of medieval techniques—though there were a couple of superb entries like that. The goal was rather to let artists see in medieval books their processes of thought—improvisation, adaptation, appropriation. These underlying design processes, we hoped, might inspire artistic work even in new media and stylistic idioms. In this conceptual focus, our pair of displays was like some other recent exhibitions which have juxtaposed medieval and post-Modernist art not, as Alexander Nagel has noted, because artists today are directly influenced by medieval art or have a medievalizing style, but because the innovations of contemporary artistic practice share some kindred spirit with medieval creativity.⁶ The idea caught on. One participant, Paul Johnson, noted similarities between medieval manuscripts, as we presented them, and the “free-for-all” in contemporary visual arts, and notably the restless innovation in book arts. (In this chapter, all quotations from the artists and information about their work are from interviews, unless otherwise signalled.⁷) We aimed to allow book artists to understand and pursue some of the creative processes behind medieval manuscripts.

³ See only brief mentions in, for example, Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995), 21; David Jury, “Art, Design, and the Book,” in *Book, Art, Object*, ed. David Jury (Berkeley: Codex Foundation, 2008), 13–139 at 13; Stephen Bury, *Artists’ Books: The Book as a Work of Art 1963–2000* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 2015), 15

⁴ Michael Hampton, *Unshelfmarked: Reconceiving the Artists’ Book* (Axminster: Uniformbooks, 2015), page F (sic, on an insert after page 70). See his examples on 53–54, 69–70, 143–44.

⁵ On which see Marcia Reed and Glenn Phillips, *Artists and their Books / Books and their Artists* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2018), 86, 151, cataloguing an exhibition of this name at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, June 26 to October 28, 2018, www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/artists_books/index.html; Russell Maret, *Æthelwold etc: Twenty-Six Letters Inspired By Other Letters and Non-Letters and Little Bits of Poetry* (New York: Maret, 2009), catalogued in the Bodleian Library as Rec.b.78; Edmund de Waal, *Breath* (Madrid: Ivory Press, 2019), described on Ivory Press, “Breath (February 20, 2019—May 20, 2019),” www.ivorypress.com/en/art/breath/.

⁶ Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 8–9, 13–15, 21, 55–57. See, for example, most recently Charlotte Denoël and Erik Verhagen, *Make It New: Conversations avec l’art médiéval: Carte blanche à Jan Dibbets* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2018).

⁷ I contacted artists by email and conducted interviews by telephone between January 18 and February 27, 2019. This research was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Oxford, application R60554/RE001. The artists interviewed were Jules Allen, Mavina Baker, Tanya Bentham, Kate Bernstein, Angela Callanan, Lisa Davies, Jeremy Dixon, Sue Doggett, Imogen Foxell,

We began by advertising workshops in the Bodleian Library with the medieval manuscripts which would be in *Designing English*. We advertised through the informal networks of bookshops, workshops, and art schools which sustain the community of book artists in the UK.⁸ Some 140 people submitted applications, and from them we invited forty to a set of workshops in March 2017. The workshops began with a short talk setting out the themes of design as process. The Bodleian Library's conservators Nicole Gilroy and Andrew Honey introduced—with gory video and specimens—some facts about making medieval parchment and pigments. Then the remainder of the day was a “show and tell” in which I as curator of *Designing English* showed the artists about thirty of the eighty manuscripts which would be in that exhibition. As the workshops had small groups, the artists were able to inspect the books closely as I turned the pages and moved them. Some artists (Carolyn Trant, Jeremy Dixon, and Tom Sowden) noted how powerful it was to see books being “handled” in workshops, which brought to life their making and use far more than do static exhibitions. This might be a better way in the future to engage contemporary artists with historical collections. The small groups also allowed the artists freely to ask questions about the books—and to answer them for themselves, for, unsurprisingly, these practitioners had as much to teach me as I did them. They made brilliant observations of the manuscripts, drawing on their own experience as makers. There were several features that I described as mysterious but which they promptly explained by the practical demands of materials or techniques. They also took notes and photographs with their mobile phones and discussed with each other, in lively moments of recognition, what would be possible in their own entries.

Thereafter we circulated a “design brief” to all participants and to the hundred who had not been able to attend. This was a “mood board” of over ninety images of the manuscripts displayed at the workshop; and an anthology of short or excerpted texts in Old English and Middle English with modern translations by me, to serve as inspiration or content.⁹ The design brief asked people to make a new piece in any medium which responded to the medieval books we had shown. In September 2017 we received fifty-six new artists' books based on the workshops and design brief, from which we selected a winner and runners-up, and from which we curated a display of twenty items. That display called *Redesigning the Medieval Book* was mounted in the entrance hall to the exhibition of medieval manuscripts *Designing English*, and the pair of exhibitions had nearly 52,000 visitors.¹⁰ We hoped that the juxtaposition of medieval manuscripts with

Shay Hamias, Sue Hufton, Angela James, Jill Lauriston, Paul Johnson, Linda Parr, Nesta Rendall Davies, Kathy Sedar, Tom Sowden, Carolyn Trant, Lizzie Waterfield, Corinne Welch, Roy Willingham and Linette Withers.

8 Described by Sarah Bodman, “The Hybrid Lexicon: An Overview of Contemporary Artists Publishing in the United Kingdom and Ireland,” in *Book, Art, Object*, ed. Jury, 35–55.

9 See *Redesigning the Medieval Book*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, December 1, 2017 to March 11, 2018, <https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/learning/special-projects/redesigning-the-medieval-book>.

10 *Redesigning the Medieval Book*, <https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/learning/special-projects/redesigning-the-medieval-book>. Also one of the artists, Corinne Welch, organized a second display

modern artists' books would allow visitors to the exhibitions to appreciate the design process behind each body of work better. Seeing which techniques or design features the modern artists identified as salient in the medieval artifacts would bring the old newly to life.

What did the artists themselves learn from the project? To gain a sense of their changing ideas we asked participants to draw "mind maps" of what they knew about medieval manuscripts before the workshops and again after them. Then a year after the exhibition, twenty-three artists agreed to be interviewed about what they had learned. First and foremost, the workshops and design brief introduced the artists to completely new sources. Their "mind maps" after the workshops show much more accurate knowledge of medieval books, and less prejudicial or idealized assumptions about them, than the mind maps made beforehand. The knowledge in the later mind maps is also notably more technical in its vocabulary for medieval books and includes more direct comparisons with the artists' own technical expertise—terms for kinds of stitching or binding that they use now and had recognized in medieval craft. This increase in knowledge reflects the fact that only a third of the artists interviewed had worked with manuscripts as models in the past. A few worked in craft disciplines such as calligraphy (Susan Hufton, Kathy Sedar) and embroidery (Tanya Bentham) which continued from the Middle Ages, and one (Angela James) had experience as a conservator of medieval bindings. In the genre of artists' books, a few had previously attempted to make new artworks inspired by medieval ones. For instance, Carolyn Trant had a long history of using egg tempera, a favoured medieval medium, in her painting and had been making books with medieval models for some time, since her first piece, based on Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹¹ Three people (Carolyn Trant, Sue Doggett, Jill Lauriston) had taken part in similar competitions, drawing on medieval sources for contemporary artists' books, to celebrate anniversaries of Giovanni Boccaccio's birth or of the Magna Carta.¹² Most of the artists, though, described the manuscripts in the exhibition and workshop as "totally new" (Jeremy Dixon, Linda Parr) and remarked that it "hadn't occurred to [them]" (Imogen Foxell) to use medieval models in their work. Corinne Welch noted that the unfamiliarity was what prompted her to take part: she "was looking for something to take [her] book-making practice in a

of the artists' books at the Bower Ashton Library, Bristol, April 19 to June 29, 2018, www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/bodleian/.

¹¹ Carolyn Trant, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," <http://carolyntrantparvenu.blogspot.com/2007/06/>.

¹² *Locating Boccaccio in 2013: Commemorating Boccaccio's Septcentenary*, "Carolyn Trant: Caccia di Diana," <https://locatingboccaccio.wordpress.com/carolyn-trant/>; "Sue Doggett: Doves and Firebrands," <https://locatingboccaccio.wordpress.com/sue-doggett/>. On the competition, see *Locating Boccaccio in 2013: Commemorating Boccaccio's Septcentenary*, "Boccaccio and Artists' Books," <https://locatingboccaccio.wordpress.com/artists-books/>; *Re-imagining the Laws of England: A Book Arts Celebration of the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta*, The Bower Ashton Library, University of the West of England, December 6, 2016–January 30, 2017, www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/lawsofeng2016/.

new direction.” Their response to this new material at the workshop was enthusiastic, as they described it as “incredible” (Tom Sowden), “inspirational” (Jeremy Dixon) or “captivating” (Angela Callanan, Imogen Foxell, Lisa Davies).

We tried to highlight one specific feature of medieval books as inspiring. Our “show and tell” at the workshop balanced handling of the things themselves with key questions about the process of design behind them. These more conceptual questions were discussed but also highlighted visually on PowerPoint slides in the background of the event; the slides were repeated in the design brief emailed later. This interpretative commentary allowed the workshops and brief, like the manuscript exhibition *Designing English*, to highlight the endless process of redesigning, rethinking what form a text should take each time it was copied. *Designing English* argued that this was a distinctive feature of manuscripts: in books made by hand, every composition or copy required or, more positively, invited redesigning the text.¹³ The improvisatory, adaptable process of design was our key theme and the participants picked up on it in their new pieces and in their interviews about them. Like the contemporary artists described by Alexander Nagel, only a couple of contributors mastered medieval styles of script or illustrations directly and adapted them brilliantly to striking new formats (Imogen Foxell, Kathy Sedar). But all the artists took from the manuscripts the processes of improvising and adapting medieval materials and methods to new ends.

This improvisation was especially evident in the medieval manuscripts made with humbler materials or seemingly simpler designs but, we stressed, with no less ingenuity; such books were a focus of *Designing English* and of our workshops for *Redesigning the Medieval Book*.¹⁴ In response, many artists noted that these humbler books were less familiar than the illuminated classics (such as the “Book of Kells,” which some mentioned) and changed their view of what medieval manuscripts were like and could inspire them to make. For instance, Mavina Baker noted that she had “only previously been aware of Psalters and Books of Hours” and not of homely or quirky artifacts such as girdle books. Kathy Sedar thought it was “nice to see secular manuscripts in the exhibition” as a change from the books for the Church which are more often displayed or offered as models to craftspeople today. In particular, several artists commented on the surprise at the workshops of seeing roughly made books for practical purposes. Such books could seem “in some ways more human” than large, illuminated manuscripts (Susan Hufton), and it was easier to imagine the maker or user “there almost when you start unfolding them” (Jeremy Dixon). This was one of our goals in presenting everyday vernacular books: that this rougher work made more visible the processes of its making and use.

These books also inspired because their materials revealed the work of improvisation and adaptation. Several artists picked up on the impression they gained that there were

¹³ As argued in Wakelin, *Designing English*, 8–9, 14.

¹⁴ Daniel Wakelin, “Urinals and Hunting-Traps: Curating Fifteenth-Century Pragmatic Books,” *New Medieval Literatures* 20 (2020): 216–54, explores that focus.

“no rules” (Paul Johnson, Roy Willingham), as scribes worked with whatever was to hand. What often seemed to prompt such improvisation was, as several noted, the limits of materials. The calligrapher Susan Hufton warned that “You can’t have rigid rules using natural materials.” Medieval craftspeople, she thought, aspired to perfection but fell short: “They were always intending to be perfect—that’s their intention—but the reality was different, and they were flexible enough to adapt to that.” Many artists responded to the way that medieval scribes and painters had used materials sparingly, adapting what they had to hand, and often reusing or recycling. Recent research has paid attention to the role of recycling in medieval, and also early modern, books, because such adaptations chime today with theoretical concerns about materiality and ecological concerns about resources.¹⁵ Recycling was something taken up in many of the artists’ work. The effect of that improvisatory spirit can be seen in a piece by Roy Willingham: the writing support was recycled junk mail, whitewashed with thin paint to allow the origins of the material to show through; it had holes in the pages, as in so much medieval parchment, and it highlighted the holes playfully with pictures of snakes writhing from them.¹⁶ Tanya Bentham embroidered an alphabet scroll which incorporated numerous pieces of fabric, and other materials such as parchment, salvaged, purchased or found, thinking not only of manuscripts in our workshop but also of a famous cushion at Impruneta in Italy, made from tiny scraps of salvaged fabric.¹⁷ Bentham noted how medieval craftspeople could “make a virtue of reuse,” and artists exploited recycling for adding layers of significance. Likewise the winner of our competition, Sue Doggett, thought it was “in keeping” with everyday medieval books to recycle parts of a previous work of hers, a copy of Boccaccio’s *De Claris mulieribus*, for the folding supports in her submission, an updated almanac (Figure 8.1).

The feminist agenda of Boccaccio’s work also made it an appropriate material for her almanac’s calendar of modern saints, who were all inspiring women from the suffragettes to Rosa Parks. Finally, she made a chemise for her almanac from suede saved from an old pair of her boots: inspired by an influential study of the relationship between women and embroidery, *The Subversive Stitch*, the resewing of this cover evoked, for Doggett, the stereotypically “women’s work” to which her almanac was in part a monument.¹⁸

¹⁵ For example. Hannah Ryley, *Re-Using Manuscripts in Late Medieval England: Repairing, Recycling, Sharing* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2022).

¹⁶ For images, see Daniel Wakelin, “In Praise of Ugly,” *The New Bookbinder* 39 (2019): 1–6 at 6, and Roy Willingham, “My Book A Lever (Restrukturanza la Mezepoka Libro),” *Edizione Porcovolente*. www.porcovolente.com/bodleian-book.

¹⁷ Lisa Evans, “Anomaly or Sole Survivor? The Impruneta Cushion and Early Italian ‘Patchwork,’” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 7 (2012): 133–54.

¹⁸ Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984). This prompted a touring exhibition, catalogued by Jennifer Harris, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery in Women’s Lives 1300–1900* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 1988), and in an online archive at www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/.



Figure 8.1. Sue Doggett, *Almanac for the Modern Medievalist*, 2017. Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Rec. g.17. Source: Photo by Sue Doggett. Reproduced with the permission of the artist and of the Bodleian Libraries.

But the main element of improvisation which artists took up was the experiment of medieval scribes with the format of the codex itself. Our workshops and design brief presented several rare artifacts that differed from the usual hinged codex: rolls, folded single sheets, complex multi-folded almanacs, girdle-books with belt fastenings, roll-codex hybrids. (These also had their own case, “Freaky Formats,” in the manuscript exhibition.¹⁹) Unusual folding patterns and structures are common in contemporary artists’ books—especially the accordion or *le porello* fold—and our competition revealed an unexpected synergy between medieval manuscripts and this more recent practice. Of the fifty-six entries for the competition, about half used non-codex folding formats. (Not all the formats are easy to categorize.) Such folded formats offer both risks and practical benefits for an artist. Angela Callanan and Corinne Welch noted that the single folded sheet is more nerve-wracking than a quire constructed of separate bifolia, as if any page contains an error, the whole sheet must be abandoned, as is not the case with a quire.

¹⁹ Wakelin, *Designing English*, 59–71.

But Carolyn Trant, who used an accordion structure, noted that the format's prevalence in contemporary artists' books reflects the fact that a single folded sheet is quicker to produce and allows one to make short-run editions with limited resources and time. She and others such as Linda Parr and Susan Hufton chose folding structures because they can be stood up and displayed well in an exhibition, with more than one page or opening visible.

Given the ubiquity of folding structures in artists' books today, some artists already knew these formats, but others such as Angela Callanan and Lisa Davies made their first attempts at them in response to our materials. Sue Doggett noted that she "would not have chosen the format had [she] not been to the workshop." She had to "reverse engineer" the structure from the specimens in the workshops and design brief; she worked it out in a sketchbook before planning how each sheet would fold. Likewise, Nesta Rendall Davies said that when she came to the workshops "what delighted [her] were the ingenious structures" of girdle books and folding almanacs, which surprised her with their sophistication that reminded her of modern book artists' work in these forms. Furthermore, none of the artists simply reproduced these formats; they reimagined the form to bring out the ideas behind it. Rendall Davies began "playing around" with girdle books and folding paper, and rapidly realized that she could turn the folded almanac into an anthropomorphic shape. That then echoed another, unrelated exhibit in our workshops: the diagrams of "zodiac men" (naked figures decorated with the astrological signs which affect each body part);²⁰ so Rendall Davies chose to use the format for a medical text—namely, a childbirth manual. Similarly, Linette Withers reflected on an almanac which was displayed: it was in the form of a girdle book (MS Ashmole 8), which hung from a belt and carried agricultural information. Withers reimagined what information most people would want at hand today: not agricultural but, as in the FitBit, medical data. And, reasoning that such information was more private, she shrunk her girdle book to a tiny size, small enough to wear on a chain like jewellery, or like the bracelet of "medical ID" worn in hospital. Another adaptation of the format updated its technology: Jill Lauriston, who had previously been on a course to make girdle books, decided to adapt the format in new ways (Figure 8.2).

Reflecting on the portability and ready-to-hand utility of girdle books she compared contemporary digital devices. Her *Enquire Within* consisted of a bold purple leather girdle-book chemise with an e-reader stitched into it.²¹ Similarly but more obliquely, Tom Sowden also saw parallels in function between portable manuscript formats such as folded almanacs and digital technology. Rather than recreate either format, he printed a paper codex but of the size and shape of a smartphone—by calculating how many pages would give the right thickness and by hand-cutting the rounded corners. He too considered that medical lore would be the sort of content that users might

²⁰ Wakelin, *Designing English*, 98–100.

²¹ This caught the eye of a computer scientist who saw the exhibition and used it as the frontispiece for Tula Giannini and Jonathan Bowen, *Museums and Digital Culture: New Perspectives and Research* (New York: Springer, 2019).



Figure 8.2. Jill Lauriston, *Enquire Within*, 2017.

Source: Photo by Jill Lauriston. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

want to consult readily.²² In these ways and others, some of the most striking medieval manuscripts in our workshop and design brief led not to imitations at a surface level but to reflections on their underpinning fit of form to function.

Lauriston's and Sowden's are also typical of most entries for *Redesigning the Medieval Book* in that they pursue medieval methods but in contemporary media. For instance, three artists separately decided that the clean lines and limited palette of some medieval drawing could be evoked by new techniques, respectively linocut (Lizzie Waterfield), *pochoir* stencils (Mavina Baker) and rubber stamps (Angela Callanan). Even artists who imitated a medieval technique most closely updated it. For instance, Angela James had formerly worked as a conservator of medieval manuscripts, but in her bound codex *Gallimaufry* she chose to update the aesthetic idiom and the repertoire of materials. She experimented with frosted Perspex for the front board and red shoelaces for the binding cords; and she had to devise a slightly different method to lace in the cords using Perspex rods shaped to fit the drilled holes.²³ Even two more seemingly medieval binding structures, Jill Lauriston's girdle book (mentioned above) and a Carolingian style of binding by Kathy Sedar, beneath the leather covering used modern polystyrene (Lauriston) or MDF and card (Sedar), to create a more contemporary style of lettering by raised patterns in the skins. Sedar also brilliantly recreated late Anglo-Saxon script for her copy of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, but she did not write on ruled lines, as in a manuscript but, for a cleaner page, used ruling on a template sheet below, illuminated by a lightbox.²⁴ Sedar suggested that there might be a medieval precedent for this, if, as has been suggested, the scribe Eadfrith had used a desk of translucent horn for guiding his work on the Lindisfarne Gospels.²⁵ But Sedar's traditional craft was here modified by electrification.

Likewise, many artists modified traditional crafts with digital technology. So for the text of her folding book, *Invisible*, Angela Callanan settled on a black letter font like late fifteenth-century gothic *textualis* script, but she did so by using a digital font (Old London) which she then expanded in Photoshop, in order to create a template for carving letters into rubber stamps.²⁶ She also disliked the letter **v** in the font she used, so she scanned one from an early printed book reproduced online and Photoshopped it into her template. What looks like a satisfyingly fifteenth-century script in her book is in fact the

²² For images, see Tom Sowden, "Panacea," Bath Spa University Library, <http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/12161/>.

²³ For images, see Angela James, "A Gallimaufry of the Seasons," *Craft Council Collections Online*, <http://collections.craftscouncil.org.uk/object-2018-9>.

²⁴ For images, see Kathy Sedar et al., "Redesigning the Medieval Book," *The Scribe* 104 (2018): 2–8 at 2–3.

²⁵ This is suggested by the British Library's website: British Library, "The Lindisfarne Gospels," www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/lindisfarne/learningseminar2.html.

²⁶ The stages of this work are visible on www.instagram.com/preciousbirdy/ (accessed September 2, 2019), especially posts dated January 25, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BeXvZ5nFY80/ (accessed September 2, 2019).

product of three very unmedieval materials from rubber to digital image manipulation. Similarly, Sue Doggett used InDesign for the complicated layout of a folding almanac and rubber stamps to add decoration. She suggested that rubber stamps, which are a quick way of making repeatable patterns—something she often encourages students to begin with—gave the book a ‘DIY aspect’ that complemented its recycled elements and the amateur ethos of some late medieval manuscripts. Two artists combined embroidery with digital technology. Lisa Davies used digital embroidery, designing on screen and using the files to program a sewing machine with multiple needles and colours of thread (Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3. Lisa Davies, *For Love*, 2017.

Source: Photo by Lisa Davies. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

For Davies, the blend of a craft which was treated in the Middle Ages as a pastime for women with something machine-driven, industrialized and labour-saving was an analogy in method with the ideas in her book *For Love*, in which she had subverted medieval ideas of femininity. In her book an image of “what everybody thinks a medieval princess was like” lifts to reveal below a misrepresented woman angrily shaking her fist, modelled on the Wife of Bath, a weaver if not exactly an embroiderer, who challenged what men thought was appropriate for her. Similarly, Corinne Welch decided to use embroidery, interested by the discussion at the workshop of the uses of sewing in medieval books, but she too adapted the method. She drew illustrations by hand, coloured them in Photoshop, before digitally printing the artwork onto fabric; she then embroidered over the top of the printed images. (In addition, Welch later photographed her embroidered book and sold a small edition of a digitally printed paper version online and at artist’s book fairs.²⁷) Welch also could not find a style of lettering which suited her purpose, so she read Marc Drogin’s *Medieval Calligraphy*, scanned the alphabet she liked the most, a script known as Caroline minuscule, and using Yourfont.com converted the images into a new typeface. She also, like Angela Callanan, modified one letter from the alphabet in the Drogin’s textbook: she replaced the long s typical of late medieval script with a “round” one, the snakey shape familiar today; the script “had to be legible at first glance” as she didn’t want any “distraction” from the content. Repeatedly, even elements which looked medieval—black letter text; embroidery—were experiments, adapting medieval models and traditional crafts to new technologies or materials. The amateur appropriation of the book which we highlighted in our workshops found a parallel in the use of digital technologies which also allow consumers to become makers of media.

While some artists had used these techniques before, others reported that the adaptation of medieval crafts required them to expand and change their skills. For instance, Tom Sowden printed his book of medical remedies *Panacea* with print-on-demand technology as he often had but to make this book look like a smartphone he bought an industrial-strength corner-cutter and guillotined the books to a rounded shape, finishing digitally printed artifacts by hand.²⁸ What prompted such innovations were not only the artists’ imaginative visions but the demands of the medieval texts and manuscripts themselves, as presented in our workshops and design brief. For instance, like Tom Sowden, the book artist Jeremy Dixon in his *Beast Book* moved beyond InDesign and laser printing, with which he customarily makes small-run editions, to hand-finishing. To his printed pages, he applied gold foil decorations using a hand-iron; and on a fold-out woodcut of a medieval knight’s funeral brass, featuring a lion

²⁷ Corrine Welch, “Remedie,” www.corinnewelch.co.uk/blog/2018/4/20/redesigned-medieval-books-come-to-bristol.

²⁸ For his thoughts on the validity of print-on-demand technology in artists’ books, see Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden, “Some Thoughts on the Artist Book in the 21st Century,” in *Book Art Object 2: Second Catalogue of the Codex Foundation Biennial International Book Exhibition and Symposium, Berkeley, 2011*, ed. David Jury and Peter Rutledge Koch (Berkeley: Codex Foundation, 2013), 453–55 at 454.



Figure 8.4. Kate Bernstein, *Love and Toothache*, 2017.

Source: Photo by Peter J Stone Photography. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

asleep, he hand-stamped a line from Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry about animals and their pain: "AND WHAN A BEEST IS DEED HE HATH NO PEYNE" (*The Knight's Tale*, I.1319).²⁹ It took a whole day to stamp this text, letter by letter, meticulously inking and cleaning the stamps, but he felt that the "handcrafted aspect" echoed the medieval manuscripts more than a book solely printed would do. The medieval models elicited an innovation in technique. That is strikingly clear in Kate Bernstein's *Love and Toothache* (Figure 8.4).

Here too she extended her bookmaking skills: to the soft incised cover, a kind of binding which she had used before, she now added inlaid leather; she also screen-printed on vellum for the first time, in order to make a slipcase. But she went further: because she was copying a medical charm which was supposed to be written on foods, Bernstein used food as a material for the first time. She stencilled onto butter with cinnamon; she grilled toast with foil on it to leave different colouring beneath; and she used a rubber stamp to mark an apple. She then photographed the results and screen-printed the photographs with a limited colour palette in a semi-punk aesthetic. She is always "interested in the gap between the real and the image" so a mixture of real foods and stylized reproductions was crucial. And the bold experiment in form and material of the

²⁹ For an image, see Wakelin, "In Praise of Ugly," 5.

food charm itself—which claims that magic comes from writing on these substances—demanded that the artist test her limits too.³⁰ The challenge of the medieval materials was articulated clearly by the embroiderer and silversmith Tanya Bentham. She was “so intrigued” by the technique of making parchment, introduced at length in the workshop, that she bought scraps of treated sheep skins and stitched them into her embroidered scroll. She explained that the workshop had increased her willingness to experiment in mixing media and combining the different techniques they required—as well as parchment, silk, wool and appliqué and a real feather sewn into **Q** for ‘Quill’. The project had been “quite freeing” and had “made [her] happier to experiment with combining different techniques.”

Several artists reported that they had continued to use these new techniques and materials in work since the competition. Angela James had used heavy-weight tracing paper for some of the leaves adorned parts of the translucent printed images with gold leaf in *Gallimaufry*; pleased with the results, she planned “very much to carry on” with this technique and had used it for another piece since, about the seasonal rhythms of the garden. Similarly, Lisa Davies felt that she “had definitely found [her] medium” in the digital embroidery in her *For Love*: “It all suddenly fell into one piece,” she observed. The competition had tested the viability of this technique, and so she has used it since for an even larger piece called *Making Amends*, an entry for another competition, *Hand & Lock*.³¹ Kate Bernstein, Roy Willingham and Linda Parr noted that the folding structures with which they had experimented for *Redesigning the Medieval Book* have reappeared in their work since, for instance in Parr’s *Miserable Apparition*, her entry for a subsequent competition which asked artists to respond to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.³² For that same competition, Corinne Welch developed the technique of embroidering illustrations which she had first used for *Redesigning the Medieval Book*. In a piece *Memento Mori*, she illustrated and embroidered all the death scenes in *Frankenstein*. As she notes, she “wouldn’t have tackled that with embroidery if [she] hadn’t done the medieval competition.” Jeremy Dixon has since reused letter stamps, first deployed in his *Beast Book* (as noted), in another piece of hand-finishing on “found” matter, an old encyclopaedia, in a new piece *Collaging Ken & Joe*.³³ Dixon was one of

³⁰ For images, see Kate Bernstein, “Books,” www.katebernsteinbookartist.co.uk/books.html (accessed September 2, 2019).

³¹ Hand and Lock. <http://handembroidery.com/the-prize/prize-brief/> (accessed September 2, 2019).

³² Linda Parr, “Miserable Apparition,” <https://lindasusanparr.com/books/miserable-apparition/> (accessed September 2, 2019). Compare her entry for *Redesigning the Medieval Book*: Linda Parr, “Redesigning the Medieval Book,” <https://lindasusanparr.com/2017/09/15/redesigning-the-medieval-book/>. For the competition and exhibition, see Art in Liverpool, “Liverpool Book Art Announce ‘Frankenstein 2018’ Competition,” March 6, 2018, www.artinliverpool.com/news/liverpool-book-art-announce-frankenstein-2018-exhibition-may/.

³³ Hazard Press, “Collaging Ken and Joe,” www.hazardpress.co.uk/product-page/collaging-ken-joe.

several who noted, more generally, that *Redesigning the Medieval Book* encouraged them to expand and experiment with their techniques.

Some artists have continued to engage with medieval sources in work since the competition and exhibition. The illustrator Imogen Foxell, to whom previously “it hadn’t occurred” to draw on medieval models, after the competition took medieval illuminated initials as inspirations for a sequence of “animal alphabets” in a group illustration project on Twitter.³⁴ In a separate piece, Jeremy Dixon has responded to the zodiacs, folding prognostications and notably the rotating “volvelles” with zodiac predictions in our design brief, for a new artist’s book called *Divine Divination*, with images of the queer performance artist Devine. And Kathy Sedar received so many enquiries about her entry, a copy of part of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, that she made another book, a copy of twelve riddles from the “Exeter book,” entitled *Saga hwæt ic hatte*, using the same styles of page, scripts, and binding. She is now engaged in copying *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Tom Sowden has not made any books in a similar vein, but he has become involved, as curator, in a new project which invites responses to older books: *A Show of Hands*, in which graphic designers take inspiration from the manicules printed in early modern books. He has himself been examining fifteenth-century incunables in Cardiff University Library for the project.³⁵

Furthermore, the pieces for *Redesigning the Medieval Book* have circulated in other collections and competitions where they can influence new work in turn. Angela James’s *Gallimaufry* was purchased for the Craft Council’s new gallery and teaching collection.³⁶ The entries by Tanya Benthall and Linette Withers have been used in workshops at the arts fair *Making Leeds Medieval*, part of the International Medieval Congress.³⁷ Lisa Davies’s book *On Love* was part of her prizewinning portfolio for another competition, the Agassi Book Prize, and was selected for exhibition again in the *Orbit UK Art Graduate Show 2018*.³⁸ Shay Hamias’s animation of a pilgrimage manual formed part of a later exhibition at Birkbeck College, London, alongside animations inspired by Birkbeck’s

³⁴ Animal Alphabets (@AnimalAlphabets), <https://twitter.com/AnimalAlphabets> (accessed September 2, 2019), and Foxell’s contribution at Imogen Foxell (@imogenfoxell, September 17, 2018), [<https://twitter.com/imogenfoxell/status/1041751641064648706>] (accessed September 2, 2019).

³⁵ *A Show of Hands*, Corsham Court, September 27 to October 13, 2019, www.bathspa.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/a-show-of-hands/index.php (accessed September 2, 2019).

³⁶ Angela James, “A Gallimaufry of the Seasons,” *Craft Council Collections Online*, <http://collections.craftscouncil.org.uk/object-2018-9> (accessed September 2, 2019).

³⁷ www.imc2018.co.uk/news/making-leeds-medieval-here-be-dragons/ (accessed January 29, 2019, since removed); www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/imc2019/events/workshops/ (accessed September 2, 2019, since removed).

³⁸ “Meir Agassi, 1947–1998,” University of the West of England, www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/meir-agassi/ (accessed September 2, 2019); Lisa Davies, “For Love,” www.instagram.com/p/BmIk-7yhjVC/, dated August 4, 2018 (accessed September 2, 2019). Two other participants in *Redesigning the Medieval Book*, Linda Parr and Corinne Welch, are former winners of the Agassi Books Arts Prize.

collection of medieval manuscripts.³⁹ Outreach events at the Bodleian Library included workshops and demonstrations by participants Kate Bernstein, Shay Hamias, Paul Johnson and Lizzie Waterfield, teaching a wider community about their own working processes. And under the terms of the competition, the winning entry (Sue Doggett) and a few others (Paul Johnson, Julie Shaw Lutts, and Roy Willingham) were accessioned to the Bodleian for use in teaching. They take their place as part of its collection of “book arts” which dates back to the 1600s, and which has recently been extended by collecting new artists’ books. They are used alongside medieval manuscripts in “object handling” classes with undergraduate and Master’s students at the Bodleian Library. The striking juxtapositions invite students to look past the fascinating surface of the old books and their obvious differences from the new ones to question instead what underlying design processes and “affordances” they might share.

Several artists, such as Nesta Rendall Davies, have themselves brought out the lessons their work provides by using their and others’ entries in teaching. The embroiderer Tanya Bentham uses her entry as a model in her classes in historical embroidery, run with various other arts organizations,⁴⁰ and notes that “lots of students have been taking inspiration from it.” In particular, her willingness to improvise with materials (noted above) in her own embroidered alphabet has been similarly “liberating” for her students. Similarly, the calligrapher Susan Hufton has used her piece, *And Tie My Life within This Band*, in teaching, hoping that its unusual format would encourage would-be calligraphers to “think outside the ‘book’ box” and try writing on other supports than the page. It reminds them that a work of calligraphy “doesn’t have to be in straight lines or on sequential pages.” Moreover, Hufton uses her piece alongside the images of flawed medieval models from our workshop and design brief in her calligraphy classes, in order to show students the value of work without “everything having to be perfect”—a concern she has about some contemporary calligraphy that can be challenged by the make-do-and-mend aesthetic of the different range of medieval books we presented.

These were some of the essential points of the manuscript exhibition *Designing English* and the workshops and design brief for *Redesigning the Medieval Book*: that medieval books were often flawed, the work of improvisation and adaptation, but were often more inventive in such a condition, as their makers grappled with diverse materials and uses. Rather than seeking only imitation of specific formats or techniques, we hoped that artists would explore these processes of design which such rough work—often work-in-progress almost—makes visible. The artists who responded to our workshops and brief made those processes visible in astonishingly inventive ways. This focus led to the neglect of some other lines of enquiry too: there was less engagement with the medieval texts, the language and ideas of which perhaps are less accessible than the

³⁹ “Art Exhibition Uses Animation to Illuminate the Medieval Book,” Birkbeck University of London, June 7, 2018. www.bbk.ac.uk/news/art-exhibition-uses-animation-to-illuminate-the-medieval-book.

⁴⁰ See details on her blog: Tanya Bentham, “Opus anglicanum: One Englishwoman’s Work,” <https://opusanglicanum.wordpress.com/> (accessed September 2, 2019).

materials and craftsmanship of books. It is telling that the medieval content which most inspired the artists was the story of the Wife of Bath (for Jules Allen, Kate Bernstein, and Lisa Davies) or the medical experiences of ordinary people, especially women (for Allen and Bernstein, but also for Mavina Baker, Angela Callanan, Nesta Rendall Davies, Jill Newton, Alma Swan, Tom Sowden, Ruth Sutherland, and Carolyn Trant). These dissident or unheard voices within the medieval textual record allowed a critical or oblique stance to the off-putting misogynist thinking in medieval texts. And for others these medieval women were imagined to share the artists' skills of adroit adaptation and appropriation found in making medieval books. It was this thinking about process which the artists highlighted most consistently in interviews as the thing learned from examining and redesigning medieval books. While the manuscripts were so different in materials, methods, and appearance from the things made by the book artists, those divergences were what allowed the artists to see—and to show to visitors at the exhibition—the invisible formal ideas and processes of designing which the modern artists and the medieval artisans had both engaged in. Considering that process in the past, our artist were in turn able to highlight it to new audiences in their own work.

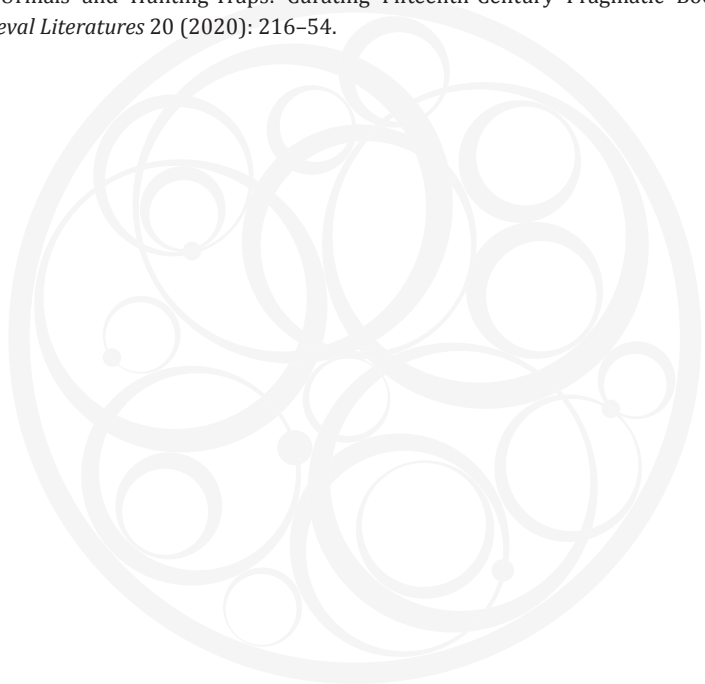
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Edited by
HELEN BROOKMAN and OLIVIA ROBINSON

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CREATING PLAYFUL FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH THE PRE-MODERN PAST

This collection explores playful ways of fostering creative engagements with the medieval and early modern past and its own literary and artistic products, especially among those new to their study.

As scholars and teachers of early English, the contributors cover literary and cultural material from a range of genres within the Old English, Middle English, Tudor, and Stuart periods and collectively delve into a shared interest in facilitating what we might loosely define as “newcomer” or “non-specialist” encounters with the past: initial, exploratory contact in which prior knowledge cannot be assumed, whether involving creative professionals, experts from other disciplines, undergraduate and school students, or members of the public. Considering artworks and installation, theatre and performance and curation practices, case studies offer practice-based examples of learning and engagement which proceed primarily through creative and playful approaches. The case studies are arranged into two broad groups: those which work through performance and theatrical play of various kinds, and those which work through playful practices of production and making. All share a perspective of irreverence, of vivid immersion, and of the possibilities of conjuring with the past.

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Helen Brookman is Professor of Liberal Arts & Interdisciplinary Education at King's College London and Vice-Dean (Education) in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities. Her interests lie in creative and interdisciplinary pedagogies and feminist critical and historical studies of the Humanities.

Olivia (Liv) Robinson is Lecturer in Late Medieval English Literature at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *Contest, Translation and the Chaucerian Text*, and publishes on the theatre of medieval nuns.

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