

Jessica Berenbeim
Art of Documentation. Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England

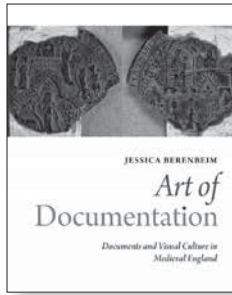
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THIS IS THE SECOND VOLUME in an important new series in medieval manuscript studies, *Text-Image-Context: Studies in Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, issued by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and edited by the distinguished medievalist Jeffrey Hamburger.¹ The book examines the various ways that visibility was employed in the service of social processes of documentation, authentication, and commemoration in late medieval documents in England, such as liturgical books, seals, and charters, all of which feature complex imagery and intricate text-image relationships. As Berenbeim shows, visually embellished documents constitute a vital part of ecclesiastical institutional identities and histories. The unique contribution of this study lies in the author's focus on images as a complex field of representation in medieval diplomacy, an area of study that is not usually discussed in art history.

In recent times, there has been a deeper interest in the medieval document as a work of art and not simply as an object for historical analysis, and Berenbeim builds on the seminal work of Michael Clanchy, Elizabeth Danbury, and Brigitte Bedos-Rezak in her attention to the importance of record-keeping and the growth in literacy and bureaucracy in later medieval England.² She is careful to establish that her argument does not follow a chronological or developmental



trajectory; instead she offers a series of related object studies that complement each other, and builds up a complex set of observations about selected English examples from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The result is a clear sense that the documents she studies are vibrant objects that possess powers beyond their apparent face value. Although the author is reticent about making any grand claims for a general theory of the medieval document, the archive seems to pulsate with new interpretative possibilities as a result of her book.

The first section ("Documents, Archives and Representation") opens with a succinct overview of the key issues in the book. This is followed by a chapter that examines charters, cartularies (collections of important deeds and historical data recorded to preserve the legal history of a religious or secular institution), and their appended seals in later medieval England. Here, the author provides an overview of charters as textual and visual objects and of the social actions they are designed to represent, or implement. She outlines her ideas of documents as art and analyzes the representation of documents within documents (i.e., illustrated scenes in which important documents are presented to key individuals). She concludes this chapter by showing how documents work aesthetically at a meta-level within the discourses of late medieval society. She also explains the processes by which written documents become locations of

authority. She is careful to note in each one of her examples how the different material forms are activated through social performances, such as the action of copying a charter in ceremonies of conveyance, as part of the overall life of an illustrated (or even un-illustrated) document.

The book's second section, entitled "Documents and Authority" (Chapters 3 and 4), concentrates on the important Sherborne Missal, written and illuminated ca. 1400 for the now defunct Benedictine abbey of Sherborne in Dorset (the building currently functions as a parish church). Deploying the arguments she made in Chapter 2, Berenbeim establishes that the art of visual documentation plays an integral part in the iconographic program of this missal through an extended set of images that depict key documents in the abbey's history. For example, one section of the missal includes a series of bust-length episcopal figures in roundels that hold up sealed charters relating to grants of property held by the abbey (88). The author suggests that such images constitute a visual counterpart to the textual forms, and that together they record, authenticate, and preserve memory for individuals in this community. As viewed through the lens of Berenbeim's careful scholarship, the missal offers the reader an illustrated deposit of various kinds of documentary sources, including a typological scheme, an annalistic history, a cartulary, an episcopal list, rolls of coats of arms, and a diagram collection for the pastoral care of souls. She is careful to situate the production of this manuscript within contemporary theological debates, which prompts readers both to consider how various audiences might have experienced meaning on the page and to ask the larger question of how such actions promote the dynamic state that is cultural representation.

While this is a meticulously researched and sophisticated text, it is also deeply frustrating in

its vagueness on certain important points. For instance, Berenbeim uses the term “representation” throughout her book without making it clear how she understands it. In various places in the study she also draws attention to the fascinating question of why people of all eras ascribe authority to certain objects made by human hands, but her noteworthy example (*pace* Derrida), the American Declaration of Independence—which is included presumably to link the concerns of the medieval world with the present—seems a highly arbitrary choice.

The third and final section of the book, “Unstable Documents: Evesham and Croyland,” comprising two chapters, concentrates first on a detailed visual analysis of the common seal of Evesham Abbey, which includes a representation of the abbey’s foundation charter on its reverse. In this section, the author shows how this act of self-representation might actually work at once to articulate and undermine its own authority. She introduces complexity into her argument as she analyzes the power of written texts and images, separately and in combination. The documents for both abbeys, at Evesham and Croyland, indicate the instability and anxiety inherent in their acceptance and reception.

The final chapter on Croyland Abbey examines a particular type of charter known as a *vidimus* charter, or *inspeximus*, which serves to recite and confirm an earlier charter. Berenbeim documents the way in which this type of charter provides a corroborating frame of texts and images to constitute a legal valid copy for a particular institution. Her case study is the *inspeximus* charter for Croyland Abbey, which depicts an image of the house’s charter in an elaborate historiated initial. Berenbeim analyzes this in relation to the layout and writing of the text itself. In the process, she reveals something of the dynamic

realities of the world of documents, demonstrating how previous formulations might be lost, contested, or erased over time, and then possibly rediscovered and re-invoked at other moments of historical tension or conflict.

This book will hold the most interest for specialist audiences, particularly for scholars working on textuality and visuality in later medieval cultures across Europe. The author is surely correct to assert that she had to limit her study to later medieval English materials, yet the questions around the different roles and facets of documentary objects will be relevant in other geographic locations and should inspire similar studies of other bureaucratic milieus. It is a sad truth that many of the religious houses discussed in this book exist only as ruins as a result of the Dissolution during the sixteenth century, but at the same time it is marvellous that, in cases such as Sherborne or Croyland abbeys, at least the documents have survived to provide important insight into late medieval schemes of thinking and experience. In studying them, Berenbeim offers salutary reminders that documents, then and now, represent, shape, and influence human actions in profound ways, and that images embedded in them can inspire deep emotions. As this book demonstrates, the act of producing an illustrated legal document held as much potential and real social power as a glittering altarpiece or object in a church treasury. ¶

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1. The first volume focused on the relationship of medieval cartography and the body in the drawings of Opicinus de Canistris, see Karl Whittington, *Body-worlds: Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination* (Studies and Texts 194; Text, Image, Context: Studies in Medieval Manuscript Illumination, IV. Series: Text, Image, Context, 1).

2. See Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, 2013); Elizabeth Danbury, “Décoration et enlum-

inure des chartes royales anglaises au Moyen-Âge,” *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes* 169 (2013 for 2011): 79–107; and the most recent contribution of Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, “Cutting Edge: The Economy of Mediality in Twelfth-Century Chirographical Writing,” *Das Mittelalter* 15 (2010): 134–61.

Exercices de lecture

Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen

Université Concordia (Montréal),
18 novembre 2015 au 23 janvier 2016
commissaire: Katrie Chagnon.

Benoit Jodoin

À L’AUTOMNE 2015, la commissaire Katrie Chagnon présentait à la Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen de l’Université Concordia *Exercices de lecture*, une exposition collective portant à réfléchir sur la place que prend la lecture dans le monde actuel. Au moment où, sous le couvert d’une «révolution numérique», plusieurs prétendent assister à une transformation radicale du mode d’accès traditionnel au savoir, les douze œuvres présentées réinvestissent plutôt cette pratique en la donnant à voir dans ses implications, son fonctionnement, son sens. Elles mobilisent les médiums des arts visuels afin de mettre en évidence les enjeux contemporains de la lecture.

Comme l’indique le titre de l’exposition, le parti pris de la commissaire est d’attribuer à la lecture le statut d’exercice dans son sens physique, cognitif, politique et éthique. Résolument rangée du côté de l’action, de la *praxis*, elle est dans l’exposition déployée comme une activité d’imitation, de répétition, d’entraînement, une forme d’engagement complexe visant une amélioration de soi. Dans ces œuvres, on exerce la lecture comme on exerce une profession: on la pratique, on l’occupe. Devant ces œuvres, on regarde l’exercice dans toutes ses formes—transcrit, interprété, traduit ou performé—et dans toutes ses considérations—esthétiques, épistémologiques et politiques. Que ce soit dans la