Erik Kwakkel: Books Before Print. Leeds: ARC Humanities Press and
Amsterdam University Press 2018 (Medieval Media Cultures). xxi, 282
p. 130 colour illustrations. € 34.50/$ 39.95/£ 29.50. ISBN: 978-1-
942401-62-9.

Those of us who teach the history of the book spend considerable time de-
termining how best to communicate the basic building blocks of the disci-
pline: a cobbled together PowerPoint, an in-depth article in a 'companion'
volume, a museum-made animation on YouTube, a session in Special Col-
lections – what will be the most engaging? All of these have their place, of
course, but what has been missing from the field is a well-illustrated textbook
publication, available for a reasonable price, to which book history students
can go back time and again.[1] It is a pleasure to report that the book under
review here, available in both an affordable paperback and a more lavishly
produced hardcover edition[2], goes a long way to filling this gap.

Erik Kwakkel is, of course, known well beyond his home discipline for his
stoic efforts at engaging a wider public with the serendipity and wonder of
medieval manuscripts via his internationally acclaimed blog-sites, such as
*Turning a New Leaf* and *medievalbooks*. Viral memes about cats and 'author
selfies' in manuscripts seem almost all to originate from Kwakkel's various
social media endeavours. In the book under consideration here, Kwakkel
thus finds himself right at home, extending his public engagement work to
print in an effort to make medieval book cultures accessible to what he de-
scribes as his three target audiences: students, early-career scholars and a
more general audience interested in pre-modern books.

One of the great merits of this book is its tidy and organised feel. Each aspect
of manuscript study is given a short, engagingly written chapter, always sup-
ported by interesting and/or curious primary examples, which in turn re-
ceive helpful illustration through full colour images. These mini-chapters are

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[1]   Some good introductory, affordable titles do exist on book history more broadly
      (see, for example, J. Feather: A History of British Publishing, 2nd edn. London 2008
      and D. Finkelstein and A. McCleery: Introduction to Book History, 2nd edn. Lon-
      don 2008, but manuscript-specific studies of the same ilk are surprisingly few and
      far between, though there are some good online resources available.

[2]   The hardcover is available under the ISBN 978-1-942401-61-2, and its recom-
      mended retail price is € 105/$ 130.00/£ 90.00.

then grouped into larger thematic sections, broadly covering the following five areas: script and layout (including abbreviation, glosses and the features of opening/closing folia); decoration and binding (including cover features, types of decoration and model books); annotations and other paratexts (including ex libris, bookmarks and manicules); margins (covering a range of unusual book formats such 'accordion books', 'hornbooks' and fragments); contexts (including scriptoria, parchment manufacture, damage and the second-hand manuscript trade). As a textbook publication, therefore, this is particularly well thought through, as it is easy and quick to navigate to whatever section one might need when undertaking codicological study. Codicological and palaeographical terminology is introduced in an accessible, conversational way, and the 'Index of Material Features' provided at the back of the book (271–274) offers a useful finding aid for those wishing to dip into the volume for specific examples of a given feature.

What is also especially helpful are the suggestions for further reading at the back of the book, carefully tailored to the subject matter of each thematic section. This is a separate section from the bibliography, which is itself robust. However, despite the clear extensive reading that underpins the publication, Kwakkel sensibly avoids cluttering his prose with too many footnotes, which again lends the book a level of readability that makes it especially good for beginners. But beginners are not the only readers that might benefit from the volume, as Kwakkel himself points out in the introduction. The personally selected examples that are a product of Kwakkel's many own "meetings with remarkable manuscripts" (to borrow a phrase from the title of Christopher De Hamel's recent book)[3] give even the more experienced reader a plethora of new manuscript examples that they may not otherwise have encountered, and which will be of benefit both to their research and to their pedagogic practice. I must confess to having already noted down a few of the more amusing cases to liven up one or two of my own lectures over the next couple of years. Indeed, when setting out the audience for whom he was writing, Kwakkel actually seems to have underestimated just how useful this book will be to teachers, not just as a set text for students, but as a line into a large swathe of manuscript oddities and practices that due to both limited time and funding are just not as discoverable in such abundance for most academics.

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3      C. De Hamel: Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts. London 2016.

Indeed, the manuscript libraries whose holdings are used as examples cover repositories from across almost all of Europe, with a further handful from Russia and the United States, meaning that the range and type of medieval books cited by Kwakkel is similarly wide. He includes examples of Latin, Greek and vernacular texts from a range of periods – largely, of course, from the eighth to fifteenth centuries, but also making reference to manuscript items that pre- and post-date the core Middle Ages (such as ancient papyrus fragments, tablets from the Roman settlement of Vindolanda, early-modern manuscripts and seventeenth-/eighteenth-century 'hornbooks'). The types of books also range in nature, as they should, from liturgical works to romance and from works of philosophy to recipe books, as well as many other forms.

However, I do not mean to suggest with this somewhat extensive praise that the book is without fault. There are clunky phrases from time to time, ones that a more thorough copy-edit might have picked up, and the production quality (of the paperback in particular) does not feel quite as professional as it might. This is less about image reproduction, which is actually fairly good – especially for the price – , than it is to do with matters such font and layout choices. These, of course, are not really aspects under Kwakkel's control.

What is more under his control, however, is the tendency he sometimes has to make generalisations and to draw analogies that risk simplifying his point rather too far. The first line of the book, for example, reads: "It is easy to forget, but there were books long before Johannes Gutenberg started printing them in the middle of the fifteenth century." (2) And, just a few pages later, Kwakkel states: "Manuscripts in limp bindings can be compared to today's paperbacks." (23) Such examples are to be found throughout the book, even in book chapter titles, such as Chapter 26's "Medieval Book Apps" in which Kwakkel refers to items such as pop-up sundials as "hardware" (203–206). Whilst it is clear what Kwakkel is trying to achieve with statements such as these, the path is a perilous one to tread, since these are the sorts of 'pull-quotes' that students love only too frequently to shoehorn into essays. At times, therefore, I wish Kwakkel had embraced the nuance of medieval books a little more, and resisted with more regularity the all too appealing attraction of reducing things so as to fit square pegs into round holes. The practice of attempting to appreciate medieval books mainly through anachronism risks losing the view of these items as significant in their own right, and on their own terms, which is why it should, in my view,

be largely kept out of training manuals such as this. That is not to say that drawing analogies with modern counterparts cannot sometimes be helpful, rather that there are only a very small number which can really be called equivalent. In the end, though, this is perhaps nit-picking – I am, after all, only too aware of my own tendency to play much the same game in undergraduate seminars in an effort to encourage the buy-in of students to a topic that at first feels quite removed from their sphere of experience. The almost inevitable result of seeing such gobbets regurgitated out of context in the next submitted essay, however, means I have learned to hold back from putting such simplistic equivalences into writing.

A further thought – though this may be something already under development – is that this book would lend itself well to having a companion volume that sets out some more practical points in respect of how to write scholarly studies and essays about manuscripts, from the basics of transcription and edition, to the building blocks for creating good codicological and palaeographical descriptions. Such a book might, indeed, include exercises and test-pieces for students to practice with or for teachers to set as class- or homework.

In sum, this is a valuable publication indeed. It is sure to find uses in many scholarly contexts, and even has some potential to reach beyond the academy to interested general readers. Kwakkel is to be applauded for what he has achieved, but then he always is at his very best when enthusing others about the myriad surprises that medieval manuscripts can reveal. If this book is not a staple of book history curricula within the next few years, I shall be astonished. It is already on order for mine.

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Leah Tether, Bristol
leah.tether@bristol.ac.uk

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