

**Joni M. Hand: *Women, Manuscripts and Identity in Northern Europe, 1350–1550*. London: Routledge, 2014. 266 pp.**

REVIEWED BY RAGNHILD M. BØ

In her book *Women, Manuscripts and Identity in Northern Europe, 1350–1550*, Joni M. Hand, assistant professor in art history at the Southeast Missouri State University, sets out to explore in which way illuminations in devotional manuscripts belonging to aristocratic women in the later Middle Ages reflect their religious, political, and/or genealogical concerns through portraits, coats of arms, marginalia, and texts. She also aims to incorporate how the same women respond to changes in religious doctrines, political life, and educational ideology in the same period – a great and ambiguous task.

The first aristocratic female book owner to be discussed is Bonne of Luxembourg (1315–1349), wife of John, duke of Normandy. John became John the Good when his father, Philip VI, the first Valois king of France, died in 1350. Bonne was never crowned queen, but owns her place in French history as the mother of Charles V, Jean de Berry, Louis, duke of Anjou and Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy – as it is, four men widely known for their interest in illuminated manuscripts. In this book, however, Hand is focusing on Bonne's daughters, Jeanne, Marie and Isabel, as well as subsequent generations of women who all belong to the House of Valois, either through birth or marriage (p. 16). As these women's patronage of ("in which they were used by the women of the Valois court" (p. 8)) and engagement in devotional manuscripts ("the manuscripts under discussion were all originally created for devotional use" (p. 7)) is the book's sole topics, the title of the book is slightly misleading. Hand's PhD-dissertation, "Female Book Owners in the Valois Courts, 1350–1550: Devotional Manuscripts as Vehicles for Self-Definition," from which the present book derives, is more aligned with its actual content.<sup>98</sup>

A short introduction contextualizes the present book in terms of identity, material, and historiography, and also its relation to existing scholarship. Here, the author clarifies her attempt to write – and why there was a need for – "a comprehensive survey of devotional manuscripts belonging to or commissioned by female patrons in the later Middle Ages" (p. 5). Manuscripts 'belonging to' and 'commissioned by'

<sup>98</sup> [http://www.semo.edu/pdf/old/Museum\\_JoniHandResume.pdf](http://www.semo.edu/pdf/old/Museum_JoniHandResume.pdf) (accessed 22 January 2015).

are rarely the same. However, the surviving material and the way (devotional) manuscripts were circulating among their (female) users in this period, makes it meritorious to look at the manuscripts from both these angles simultaneously.

While Chapter 1, which is devoted to the female book owners of the Valois Court, fifteen in all, is chronological, the next three, which are dealing with identity expressed through patronage, visual demonstrations of identity, and generational transference of identity, are thematically ordered. This is a welcome organization of the material: the abundance of names, dates and dynastical links in Chapter 1 are refreshed when a certain feature of a noblewoman's manuscript is highlighted in one of the case studies in the following three. As an example, Anne of France (1461–1522) is introduced in Chapter 1 (pp. 26–27), revisited in a section on hagiographic evidence of identity (pp. 88–89), and again in a section on portraits within narratives (pp. 112–115). However, some of the women introduced are only mentioned in passing in the subsequent chapters, probably because no extant manuscripts can be linked to them, neither by patronage or ownership. The initial inclusion of them in more detailed ways seems a bit inutile.

As scholars still do not fully agree upon to which extent the patron and/ or the intended owner was given the opportunity to voice his/hers own opinions on the decoration of a book of hours, Hand is right in turning to the manuscript themselves and their devotional aspects in order to learn more about what they actually meant to their female devotees. At times, however, she may be anticipating the actual involvement of the female owner whom she consequently addresses as 'patron.' A broader discussion on the various persons involved in the production of manuscripts for persons in this social stratum – the patron, the intended owner, the illuminator and the booksellers would have been useful. In fact, the illuminators are surprisingly absent from the book as a whole; they are not mentioned in the captions of the images, and seldom brought into the arguments concerning the iconographical choices in the manuscripts discussed, even in the section entitled Choice of Artists (pp. 58–65)

Also, Hand may at times uncritically buy statements e.g. about the women's physical appearances or their ability to rule from contemporary chronicles without asking any questions about the chronicler's possible reasons to downgrade them. Another unfortunate shortcoming is the discussion on portraits (pp. 104–105). Even in a book of this size and scope, a few lines on the research done on likeness, portraits and identity in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period would have been welcome and done more justice to – and enriched – Hand's examples as they touch upon a variety of identity makers.

Rowan Watson holds against the book that some of Hand's arguments are not convincing – e.g. that Isabeau increased her patronage of religious manuscripts in response to the conflicts between the French crown and the Papal schism (p. 19), or that Louise of Savoy had her crypto-portrait included in narrative scenes to possibly influence the ones who held her son in capture (pp. 116–121; cf. Watson 2014). In my opinion, however, these examples go well with the author's intention of addressing a more "comprehensive approach," which includes political and social issues, and the open-ended-ness of her material, presenting visual clues that may have served as vehicles of their owners' identity. Although the author may exaggerate her use of the term "patron", her discussions on the various visual clues in the devotional manuscripts and how these may have been understood by the female owners is mostly treated with the necessary caution.

If Margaret of Austria's decision to let the *Sforza Hours*, begun by the Italian illuminator Giovanni Birago, to be completed by the Flemish Gerard Horenbout around 1520 can be said to be, as Hand herself claims, a reflection of "her desire to connect with her Burgundian ancestry" (p. 62), it has been both highlighted and questioned in earlier reviews. However, no one is mentioning the possibility that Margaret of Austria acted out of aesthetical, or perhaps even fashionable reasons, rather than sentimental (as Hand claims) or practical ones (as Watson does). Although one may not be in favour of the view that luxury manuscripts were made just for display, one is often better off never to entirely estrange luxury aspects from devotional objects.

In particular, I welcome the author's discussion of some of the features in the *Sobieski Hours* (pp. 121–135), a book of hours made c. 1420–1425. Although now accessible through the webpages of the Royal Collection Trust (<https://www.royal-collection.org.uk/collection/1142248/the-sobieski-book-of-hours>), the fact that it is kept at Windsor Castle makes it much less accessible for scholars than many other manuscripts. It is mostly known through Eleanor Spencer's monograph from 1977 – a publication which is itself difficult to get hold of. Also, I welcome Hand's attempts to see the religious views of Geert Groote (c. 1340–1384), disseminated by the *Devotio moderna* movement, incorporated in the illumination of devotional manuscripts, as the prime example of a medieval writer concerned with the relations between images and meditations is often confined to Jean Gerson (1363–1429).

The book is furnished with six helpful genealogical tables, and a list of manuscripts cited. The latter is compound according to libraries and not cities, and also according to the digits in their shelf mark regardless of their other specifications (Latin, Sloane, etc.). This is unusual and confusing. It has elsewhere been pointed

out that the bibliography is heavily Anglo-centric (Cyrus 2014). In my opinion, this objection is partly irrelevant as the bibliography reflects the methodological approach chosen by Hand, namely a gender(ed) orientation. There are, unarguably, more Anglo-American scholars who have incorporated such perspectives in their research on medieval manuscripts than there are among scholars on the continent. That said, it is surprising that none of the works by Elizabeth L'Estrange are mentioned as she has published extensively on gender and late medieval manuscripts. It is equally surprising that the author refers to Tracy Adams' monograph on Isabeau of Bavaria, but none of the articles by Rachel Gibbons, and that the compilation *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence* is not referred to even once despite its being an early attempt to address (devotional) manuscripts with questions similar to the author's (Taylor & Smith 1997). There are a few factual mistakes – Charles VI was Queen Isabeau's husband, not her son (p. 19) – and some euphemisms – France, Burgundy and England did not only engage in “intense negotiations” (p. 128) at the beginning of the fifteenth century, they were at war.

Although scholarship focusing on female court members is burgeoning, it is still not matching the literature on their male counterparts. Joni M. Hand's contribution, therefore, is a step in the right direction for a more balanced and nuanced picture of the period. With its broad scope, focusing not only on one or two individuals, good quality reproductions of images – albeit black and white, as always in publications from Ashgate – and accessible prose, the book is very apt as an introduction to how manuscripts could shape the identity of the female members of the Valois court.

## Bibliography

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