

Stefka Georgieva Eriksen, *Writing and Reading in Medieval Manuscript Culture: The Translation and Transmission of the Story of Elye in Old French and Old Norse Literary Contexts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014). Print, xxii + 262 pp., 12 colour ill., ISBN: 9782503547794.



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*Review*

In this ambitious study based on her PhD thesis, Eriksen analyses the manner in which manuscripts were produced, disseminated, and accessed throughout the medieval period. Her overall purpose is threefold. Firstly, Eriksen aims to establish a relationship between Old Norse, Old French, and Latin literary traditions by examining them through their social, literary, and communicative contexts and how the reception of a given text may vary depending on the way in which it was transmitted to the reader or audience. Secondly, Eriksen proposes to consider the relationship between sociocultural context and literature production and reception during the medieval period. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, she constructs a theoretical and methodological framework, encouraging comparative work across different languages and literary traditions. This is done through examining closely three manuscripts, produced between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, all of which contain a version of the story of Elye of Saint-Gilles. Throughout these analyses, Eriksen tests two hypotheses: that different writing processes all involved cognitive internalisation of the source text itself and its various hermeneutic interpretations; and that various readings were contingent on context. While Eriksen does, on the whole, substantiate these arguments sufficiently, her most important contribution to the field is the methodological framework she provides, which provides the means to carry out a holistic analysis of various texts based on the manuscripts in which they are contained.

The structure that Eriksen uses throughout her book ensures that her study is both thorough and cohesive. Her first chapter focuses exclusively on her methodology, providing the basis of how her later chapters are structured. The following three chapters then utilise this framework to consider in turn each of the chosen manuscripts. Eriksen analyses two versions of the story of Elye in three extant manuscripts: the Old French poem *Elye de Saint-Gille* in BnF fr. 25516 (c. 1280), *Elíss saga* in the Norwegian De la Gardie 4-7 fol. (c. 1270), and in the Icelandic Holm Perg 6 4to (c. 1400). These chapters have a uniform structure, firstly summarising the broader context in which the manuscripts were made, before undertaking a detailed analysis considering the *mise en livre*, *mise en page*, and the *mise en texte* of each manuscript. The final chapter then compares the three manuscripts considering the evolution of how the story of Elye was transmitted and received by the contemporary reader.

Given that the story of Elye remains extant in several manuscripts, Eriksen's choice of primary source material seems initially erratic, particularly as there was a lack of explanation as to why each specific manuscript was selected. However, such an omission may be overlooked in this case as the book does not serve to establish a singular narrative trajectory, but to analyse a cross-section of the different contexts in which this one story, which has only been studied to a limited extent, was transmitted over the course of more than a century. To that end, Eriksen was successful in choosing three manuscripts which were codicologically and contextually distinct, which serves to test her methodological framework.

It is this framework, outlined extensively throughout Chapter 1, which is the most successful aspect of Eriksen's thesis. Alongside a detailed review of the historiography of philological theories, she emphasises three important points: that each version of a given text is a response to its previous version or edition; that all aspects of a text, both material and textual, should be considered in interpretation; and, that the text itself is not only shaped and conditioned by its cultural, historical,

and social context, but also by its communicative context. After considering different approaches that may be taken, Eriksen opts for an effective hybrid methodology which considers equally the materiality and textuality of her chosen manuscripts, questioning how the codicological structure relates to the textual composition, and how the manner in which the text was written reflects the way that it would have been read by its contemporaries.

In taking such an approach, Eriksen has achieved a successful interdisciplinary study of how a thorough examination of textuality, materiality, and context may provide some insight on the manner in which a manuscript would have been compiled, written, read or performed, and received by its contemporaries. Through encouraging a comparative study of a single story across different times and places, using a thorough, multidisciplinary approach, Eriksen has added a balanced voice to the often parochial field of manuscript studies, something which is imperative for achieving a holistic view of how books were read and understood throughout the medieval period.

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