

While Mann often focuses on minor texts and forgotten moments, the sum of these parts is a bolder work than one might expect. Early on she declares “the story of Orpheus *is* the story of humanism” (17). This, it seems to me, is the larger claim Mann professes not to be making—the idea that all the captivating and terrifying tensions of human language and culture inhere in the figure of Orpheus, whose song could tame rocks and trees but could not save him from the savage fury of the Bacchantes. Indeed, she observes that “the moment words *fail* to persuade is precisely the moment that they become Orphic poetry” (186). This provocative and poignant claim is a reminder that Orpheus has much to say about poetry’s power, but also about its failures and limitations. It is one of the many reasons this book is sure to draw a wide and enthusiastic readership among scholars of Renaissance English literature.

Amanda Atkinson, *Southern Methodist University*
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Writers, Editors and Exemplars in Medieval English Texts. Sharon M. Rowley, ed. The New Middle Ages. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xx + 360 pp. €114.39.

Writers, Editors and Exemplars in Medieval English Texts honors the scholarship of Christina von Nolcken through its attention to what editor Sharon M. Rowley describes as “the literary legacy of the Middle Ages” (2). Within the collection, this legacy comprises the cultural and material circumstances of textual production and consumption. The texts examined are divided between Wycliffite and Lollard texts, and texts that are invested in exemplarity, whether hagiography or its secular echoes. The “exemplar” of the title entails two definitions that straddle these interests: one describing a copy of a particular text, and the other pertaining to conduct. Rowley identifies a lacuna, which the essays aim to fill, by uniting the two in their study of texts and their “writers,” a designation that seeks to “blur distinctions between authors and scribes” through their common work of editing, translating, or redacting (3).

The collection is divided into three sections: the first addresses clerks and readers of Middle English texts, and the second, Lollard redactions of religious texts. The third section, “Old English and Its Afterlife,” is more conceptual, and considers how readers and writers across centuries negotiate the relationship among language, history, and memory. While the volume’s divisions mostly privilege the historical period of the texts, there are other, perhaps more intriguing, connections among the essays. For instance, Fein, Havens, and Peikola investigate writers who actively manipulate their exempla, whether through additions or wholesale changes to the substance of the text. The authors seek to contextualize these editorial decisions by examining the writers’ interests, belief systems, and anticipated audiences. Adams and Irvin both unravel the complex identity of their protagonists against a broader history of

scholarship and education. Somerset and Kim address the way hagiography anticipates—and even dictates—the role of the lay reader in the creation of religious truth. Dockray-Miller and O’Neill examine gender expectations of readers and writers and the role that these expectations can play both practically, in the text’s production, and thematically, in the portrayal of its subject.

At their most illuminating, the essays expose the deep ties the texts—and writers—maintain with their own cultural and historical contexts. The authors remind us that a text never exists within a vacuum, but rather should be considered as part of a writer’s “wider career, social milieu and political affiliations” (19). As a whole, the essays characterize an exemplar as a moment captured in time; it resists stability or permanence through factors that are accessible through the textual content or material status of the manuscript. Depictions of exemplarity, too, shift in response to religious, economic, or political influences. This sense of movement and evolution in both text and ideology draws attention to the communal process of writing, editing, and redacting, and the great body of readers and listeners who, through conversations or annotations, left their mark on the exempla. Thus, to some degree, each essay is interested in the way texts allude to the past and anticipate the future.

A challenge of the essay collection is to achieve a unity of purpose. While the individual essays collected here betray differences in scope and depth, the volume as a whole successfully presents a number of methodologies to examine the literary legacy of premodern texts, both well-known and obscure. For instance, each section includes an edited transcription of a text, accompanied by a critical introduction. These chapters (Astell/Winston-Allen, Somerset, and Rabin) function as a *mise en abyme* to the collection’s larger interest in editorial practices. Rabin and Hudson also address the process of bringing a text from manuscript to publication in their study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors of medieval texts. These chapters showcase the intensive labor required of such a task, including the physical and economic challenges an editor must navigate.

With similar breadth, the essays devoted to exemplarity examine traditional models, such as saints, but extend beyond these by considering how other failed or rejected models of exemplarity can also reveal a community’s values. These topics and scholarship here will be of interest to those who have admired von Nolcken’s scholarship. The essays also serve as a reminder, and perhaps a warning, of the great and lasting influence editors can hold over their readers.

Allison Alberts, *Independent Scholar*
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