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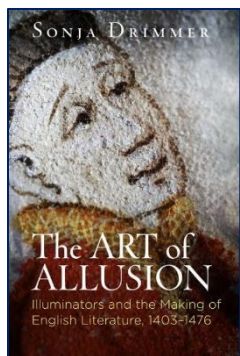
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Review of Sonja Drimmer, *The Art of Allusion Illuminators and the Making of English Literature, 1403-1476*.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 7 x 10 in, 352 pages, 27 color, 97 b/w illustrations, ISBN: 978-0-812224-84-9

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It was a pleasure to read Sonja Drimmer's well-researched and elegantly written book, which considers how "images think about English literature" (4). Over the course of six chapters divided into three different sections, Drimmer challenges the idea that illuminations in 15th-century manuscripts of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate's poetry must be understood as consequential to the words that they accompany; instead, she suggests that these illuminators utilized "allusion" to give "visual form to ideas and preoccupations arising from vernacular literary culture at large rather than from exclusively the text at hand" (13). Drimmer's understanding of "allusion" is not simply "intertextuality," but rather considers how illuminators drew on a variety of cultural idioms in order to produce new ideas about English vernacular authorship, book production, and even political history.

"Part I: The Illuminators" contains only one chapter, which describes the landscape of book production in London from 1403-1476. Drimmer's choice to start in 1403 reflects when the Court of Alderman of London consented to the petition that brought together illuminators, bookbinders, writers, booksellers, and other book-making professionals into a single company. This petition resulted in a landscape of

manuscript production characterized by versatility, collaboration, decentralization, and anonymity. Drimmer thus cautions readers against fetishizing the notion of the identifiable hand of an illuminator, as the institutions in which these professionals worked did not encourage them to “individualize” their own hands (34). She concludes the chapter by explaining how the very circumstances of “anonymity and piece-meal production of books” in 15th-century England undermined the association of the poet as the “auctor” of a manuscript (50).

“Part II: The Authors” examines a variety of manuscripts from Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate reflecting the illuminators’ choices regarding how to depict these authorial figures, revealing “unease with the protean category of author” (58). In Chapter 2, Drimmer’s visual analysis of the “multiplicity of Chaucers” in *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts discusses visual evidence of limners’ hesitancy to depict Chaucer as the author of the text at hand. Particularly striking in this chapter is Drimmer’s analysis of how the brushwork, signs of scraping, and overlaid paint in the image of Chaucer in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS Takamiya 24, f. 1r (**Fig. 1**) shows the limner’s indecision of how to depict Chaucer’s authorial status (66-68). She concludes the chapter by examining one iconographic similarity across *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts --the depiction of Chaucer pointing at a text with his index finger. This gesture also appears in Hoccleve’s commission of Chaucer’s portrait in *The Regiment of Princes* in London, British Library Harley MS 4866, fol. 88r (**Fig. 2**), which highlights the possibility that limners include this gesture to indicate Chaucer’s authorial status; however, Drimmer also points out that in the medieval manuscript tradition, this gesture was also utilized to direct readers’ attention to certain aspects of a text. As such, this gesture could also signify Chaucer’s dual role as a reader of the text rather than solely as an author (81).



Figure 1 Chaucer, Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, London c. 1450-1475. MS Takamiya 24, fol. Ir (detail), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Chapter 3 focuses on miniatures of the narrator Amans in the *Confessio Amantis* manuscripts, investigating how illustration choices reflected illuminators' difficulty with reconciling the various features of the confession itself, such as "the narrative of sexual sin and renunciation, the identification of the lover with the elderly author, and the questionable orthodoxy of its proctor" (106). Consistent across most depictions of

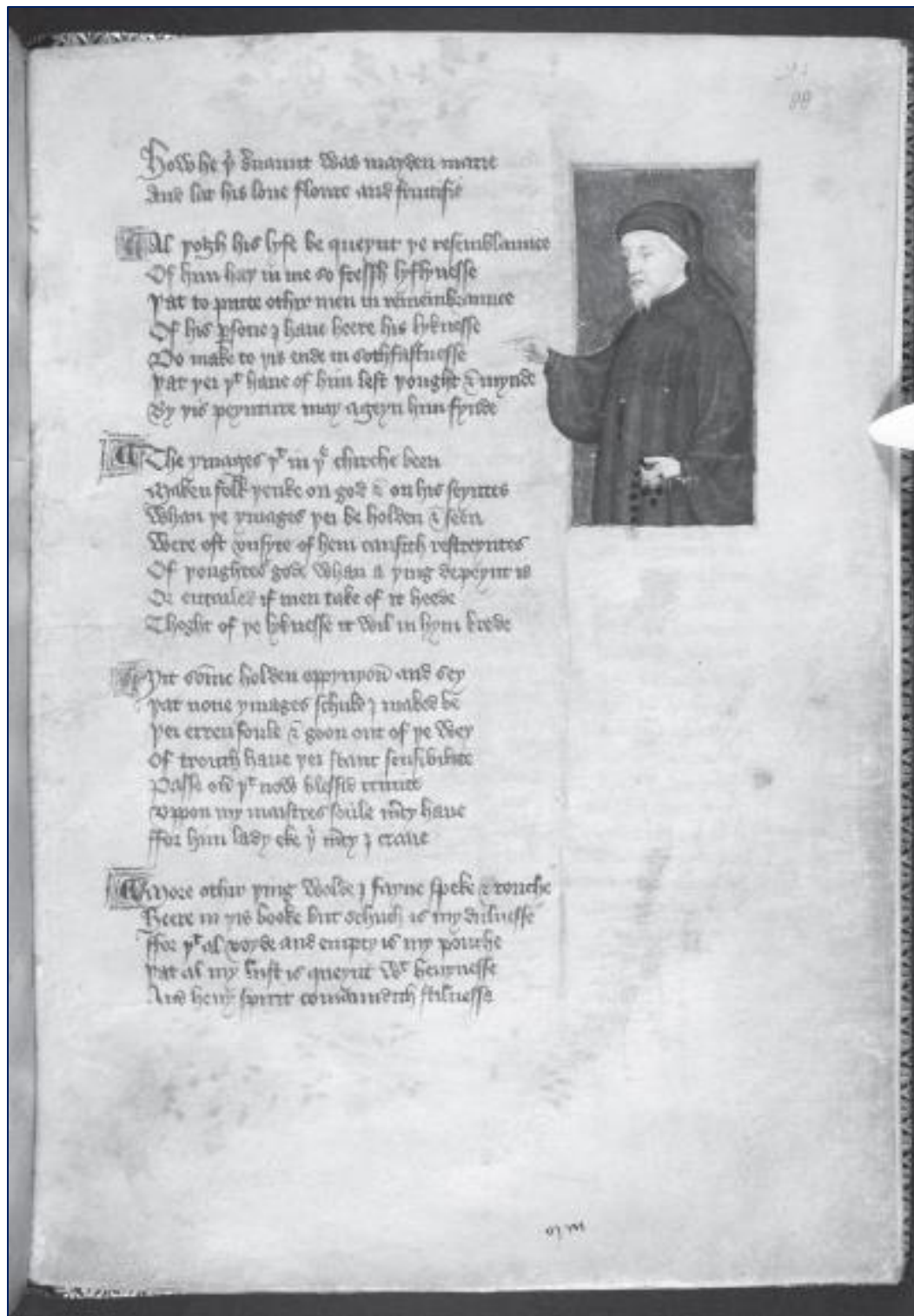


Figure 2 Chaucer, Thomas Hoccleve, The Regiment of Princes, London of Westminster, after c. 1411. Harley MS 4866, fol. 88r. London, British Library.

Amans is the use of the “humilatio gesture,” where Amans crosses his arms over his chest (Fig. 3). Thus, while illuminators were unsure of whether to associate Amans with the figure of Gower explicitly, they uniformly depicted the text’s narrator in a position of humility and “subjection to the dictates of others” (112). Similarly, Chapter 4 argues that across manuscripts depicting John Lydgate, illuminators chose to depict him kneeling as a devotee before his patrons (Fig. 4) allowed them to give visual form to the paradox of “Lydgate’s successful self-promotion through self-abnegation” (16).



Figure 3 *Aman’s confession*, John Gower, *Confession Amantis*, London, c. 1400-1425. MS Bodley 294, fol. 9r. Oxford, Bodleian Library.



Figure 4 *Lydgate kneels before Henry V*, John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, London, c. 1420s. MS Digby 232, fol. 1r. Oxford, Bodleian Library.

“Part III: Histories” extends this argument by exploring the broader political consequences of limners’ choices within Gower and Lydgate’s manuscripts in the second half of the 15th century. She connects two particular manuscripts to the two defining conflicts of the 15th century: the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453) and The War of the Roses (1455-1485), demonstrating how illumination was integral to the political project to establish a national vernacular literary canon.

In Chapter 5, Drimmer examines a manuscript that contains Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes* (London, British Library Royal MS 18 D ii), with a particular focus on the manuscript’s history as an object commissioned by William Herbert and Anne Devereux for the Henry V. Its production was interrupted, and over the next seventy

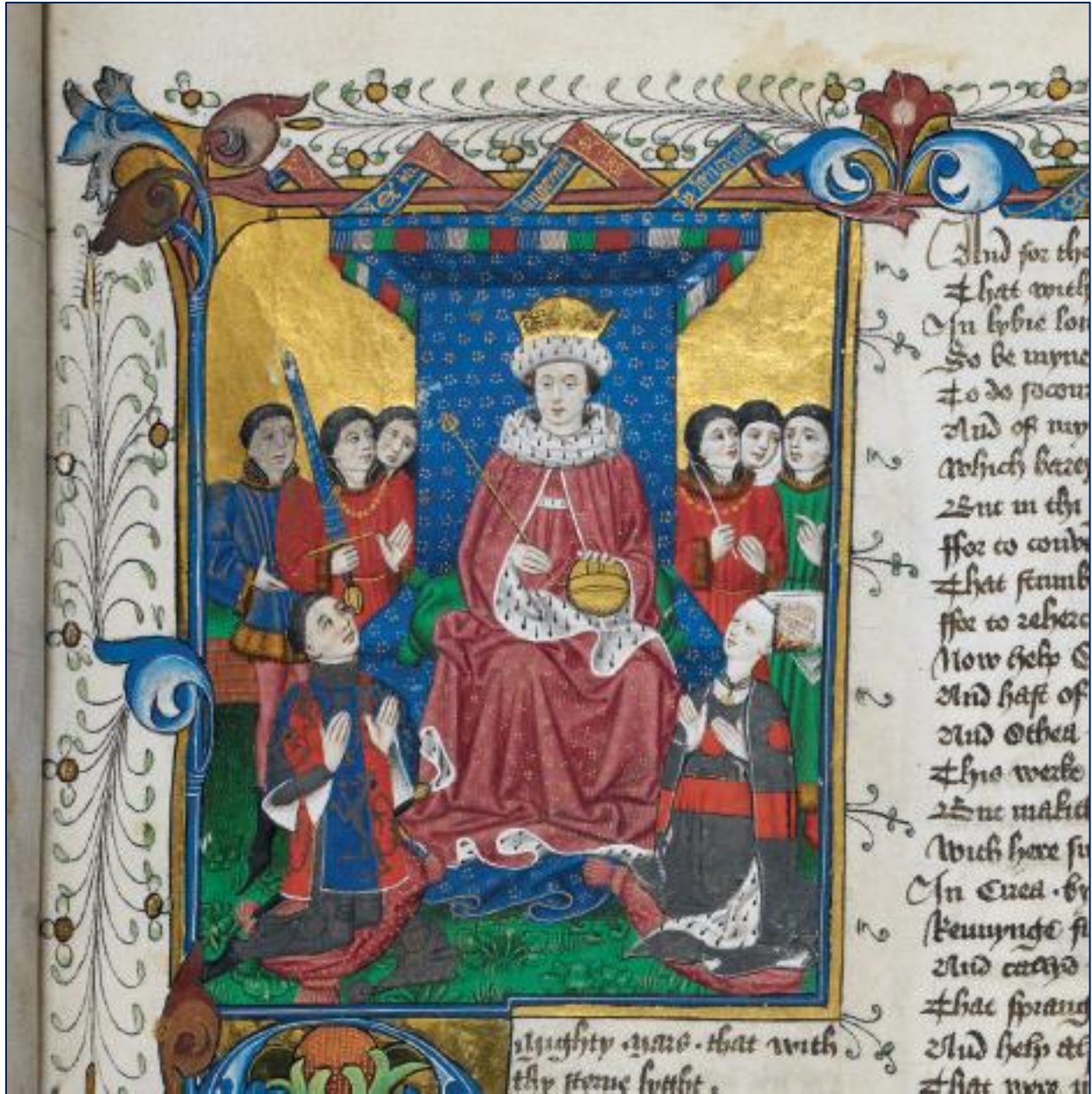


Figure 5 *William Herbert and Anne Devereux kneeling before the King*, John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, Royal MS 18 D ii, fol. 6r (detail), London, British Library.

years, family members asked illuminators to finish the program and add additional texts to the manuscript (Figs. 5, 6). The text exists now as a multigenerational “megamanuscript” that reflects the political interests of its patrons. Particularly impressive was Drimmer’s opening analysis of the prologue of *Troy Book* (157-159),



Figure 6 Calchas and the Brass Horse, John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, London, c. 1490. Royal MS 18 D ii, fol. 74r (detail), London, British Library.

which shows how Lydgate's poetry itself authorized the ways in which its owners drew on the representations of the past within it to respond to their own political goals. As she notes, "It was the author's own invitation to use and instrumentalize both that opened his work to the horizons of time in which it would be read and viewed" (187-188).

The final chapter of the book examines a manuscript of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (New York, Morgan Library and Museum MS M.126), commissioned for Edward IV and his queen consort, Elizabeth Woodville. She describes how the 106 miniatures within this manuscript, most of which were completed by one illuminator, depict historical exempla in a way that coincides with the Yorkist political project and establishes Edward IV "both proleptically and retroactively, into a pan-historical gallery of leaders" (191) (Fig. 7).



Figure 7 *Lycurgus enthroned*, John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, London, c. 1470, MS M.126, fol. 169r. New York, Morgan Library and Museum.

question of why no manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* contain narrative illumination. To this question, she offers one possible explanation, which is that the pilgrim tellers, because of their role as protagonists, themselves function as a type of narrative illustration. As she compels us to consider, “What could possibly be more effective at creating a coherent narrative cycle than to portray each protagonist marking the progress of pilgrimage to Canterbury across the manuscript’s or printed book’s pages?” (230).

Overall, Drimmer’s book compellingly utilizes art history and literary studies methodologies to explore the function of manuscripts as objects both within and beyond the cultural and historical contexts in which they originated. As a literary scholar myself, I was intrigued by Drimmer’s call for us to think about how illumination choices produced the authorial personas and notions of vernacular authorship that one might take for granted as effects of authors’ poetic choices. While her argument is quite complex and multi-layered, the first chapter provides an accessible starting point for readers who may be unfamiliar with the history of manuscript production in medieval England. With that said, because Drimmer does not provide much background on the plots of the poems within the manuscripts she examines, this book may be challenging for a reader who is not familiar with the English literary canon.

As Drimmer notes, the authors of the texts within the manuscripts of this study often wrote “their dismissal” into the texts themselves (152). If Drimmer had been granted the gift of more space, a section about the possible reasons for this poetic self-dismissal would have been an apt addition. How might the shared uneasiness regarding representing poetic authority speak to the shared political and cultural stakes faced by authors and illustrators alike? 🐼