Introduction: Medieval Materiality

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"But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised."
—William Wordsworth,
"Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"

This special issue of English Language Notes asks what the growing interest in materiality means for medieval studies. That there is a growing interest in materiality—a term that can refer to objects, networks, actants, vital materialism, matter, and thing theory, as well as ideas about materialism (including historical materialism), and material culture—cannot be doubted. As any glance at conference panels and scholarly journals will reveal, theorists such as Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton have been embraced by scholars across the humanities, particularly in the field of literary criticism, and have encouraged entire subfields dedicated to materiality. An MLA search for “object” in the last thirty years of literary criticism provides clear evidence of this: the webpage for the search shows a graph of a rising trend with only 910 entries in the decade between 1980–1989 and 3,240 in the decade between 2000–2009.

The reason for such excitement around materiality is not hard to find; it offers nothing short of a new perspective from which to view familiar texts and ideas. To pay close attention to “stuff” as described by Jane Bennett in her influential study, Vibrant Matter, for example, is to see it as “command[ing] attention in its own right . . . [and not only in association] with human meanings, habits, or projects,” and, perhaps more importantly, to see “its thing-power and hear its ‘call’.” Such a shift from subject to object resonates particularly well in the discipline of literary studies, which may have exhausted the resources of subjectivity. It also allows scholars to set aside the debates over the relationship between historicism and older forms of theory, such as psychoanalysis. For these reasons, and certainly others, many medievalists have heeded the call of “things” and have tried to imagine “stuff” as independent of its relation to humans, to see objects meaning and acting on their own terms. One need only look to the work of The Material Collective, BABEL’s working group, the collected essays in Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s recent study, Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman, for examples of
this approach. This theoretical perspective on materiality parallels and at times intersects with another important trend in medieval literary criticism: attention to manuscripts and early printed texts. Although medievalists have always studied manuscripts, the recent trend distinguishes itself from past approaches by linking the study of manuscripts to formalism, theorizing the ways in which the particular physical characteristics of a manuscript or book play a role in our interpretation of the poems or other literary forms that manuscripts contain.

And yet, almost as quickly as the new theories of materiality have inspired some medievalists in literary studies, other medievalists have raised questions about the relation between these new theories and the Middle Ages and thus about their explanatory power. Simply put, these new theories engage very little (if at all) with the Middle Ages and the kinds of materiality, materials, and materialisms found therein. How then can they explain the material past to us? As the recent essays by Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things,” and Kellie Robertson, “Medieval Materialism,” point out, the new perspective that Bennett and others have offered on “stuff” might not be as new as it claims to be, dependent as it is on a brief intellectual history and a neglect of the pre-modern. Moreover, as Shannon Gayk and Robyn Malo write in an introduction to a collection of essays on “The Sacred Object,” religious objects, of which there were many in the Middle Ages, trouble categories—such as “thing-power”—on which many theorists of materiality thus far have come to depend. Indeed, as many of the essays included in this collection suggest, modern notions of ontology, substance, agency, and action are predicated to a great degree on their medieval counterparts. Perhaps as troubling is a growing sense that the new theories have the unintended consequence of eliding what we used to call materialism—the economic conditions that shape and are reflected in literary texts.

The disciplines of history and art history have also embraced a “material turn,” but they have done so along different lines and for different purposes. Since the 1960s historians, and especially medievalists, have turned to social history with a commitment to recover the experiences of non-elite segments of the population. To do so, scholars began to consider patterns of movement and migration, the use of space, and the roles and actions of women, peasants, and non-Christian “others” with a new intensity. As a result, there has been a growing interest in the interactions between people and things. Archaeology long offered both the information for addressing such questions and a methodology useful for framing the role of objects and things in their specific temporal and spatial contexts. At the same time, and as part of a related interest in recovering the actions and voices of non-elite and subaltern groups, the insights of ethnography and anthropology lent themselves to reconstructing the relationships—created through labor, ritual, and custom—between people and things. Thus materials (from needles and quills, to linen, flax, and wheat, silk, and the parchment page); materialism (the means and dynamics for the production of such things); and materiality (the meaning and quality of the objects) all formed important if various components of a new social history. The impact of “thinking materially” is now abundantly clear from numerous publications. Seminal articles, like Leora Auslander’s “Beyond Words,” and Robin Fleming’s “Recycling in Britain after the Fall of Rome’s Metal
Economy,” show how the material traces in the past could provoke an entirely new sense of an epoch or phenomenon bereft of texts and written records.9 The close reading of the material record revealed by the careful skills of archaeologists offered a new depth, feel, and presence to the past.

Attention to materiality has also enriched more traditional analyses and objects of study. It has called many scholars, but historians especially, to notice objects on a new scale. Things now seem to rise out of chronicles, letters, hagiography, legal texts, conventions, wills, accounts, tax records, and even the fly-leaves of manuscripts. For example, Michael McCormick has demonstrated how tracing materials across time and space allows us to see once lost trade routes, patterns of interaction, and communications transacted, not with coin or credit, but with things and people traded as objects, as chattel.10 Art historians too have embraced new readings of materials, showing how the touch and feel of the page mattered, how the colors of objects rendered in glass or paint could communicate the very matter of the object depicted, such as blood, light, or breath.11 This has not merely been the call to find things in images and texts, but to incorporate the meaning of the material of such objects into our analyses of the past. Recent work has also demonstrated a growing conviction that objects have their own stories to tell, their own biographies, which intersect with and inform the lives of individuals and groups in powerful ways.12 Research in cognitive science and anthropology suggests that objects and things have a “cognitive life,” and generate certain behaviors and ideas that are transformative in their own ways and move beyond previous notions of an object’s circulation, commodification, and “social life.”13

The essays collected in this special issue address both medievalists and non-medievalists, demonstrating that the new trends in materiality allow scholars to cross the boundaries of our disciplines and of traditional periodization. Yet, even as medievalists are inspired by the attempt to think about objects as independent of humans, they remain cautious about the distinctiveness of the Middle Ages and its versions of materiality. The essays here also implicitly raise questions about our recovery of medieval objects—whether we can, in fact, recover them at all. Many of the objects that interest medievalists and that remain available to us exist only as (or in) texts: as descriptions, ekphrasis, referents, signs, and symbols. Or, if and when the objects still persist—when they can be held, touched, or viewed—they often require texts to be understood. In this sense, the essays gathered here speak to a philosophical challenge embedded in material studies of the past: the intersection of words and things.14

While medievalists have, of course, always been interested in objects, these essays reveal that they are now rather more interested in pausing to examine the “objectness” (the material characteristics) of objects before addressing their cultural significance. Aden Kumler begins the collection with an essay on one of the most important objects in the Middle Ages—the Eucharist—in “Manufacturing the Sacred in the Middle Ages: The Eucharist and Other Medieval Works of Ars.” While the Eucharist has long been studied in terms of its theological significance, her essay focuses on its materiality and its manufacture. Such a
focus allows her to see the ways in which things can erase the boundaries between subject and object: things here are objects, but also speaking, gesturing, invoking subjects. As she states, the Eucharist, like many other moments, was a point where “the human and the non-human collaborated in the manufacture of the sacred in the Middle Ages.” At the same time, her analysis suggests a particularly transformative relationship between words and things. The transformation of the host (transubstantiation), as scripted within medieval liturgical manuscripts, required both the precisely manufactured material of the Eucharist—the bread and wine—and the sacramental words—written then spoken—to be performed. Relatedly, in his essay “Ekphrasis from the Inside: Notes on the Inscription of the Crown of Light in Bayeux,” Vincent Debiais addresses the meaning and materiality of the lavish liturgical object that hung over the altar where the Eucharist was celebrated in the cathedral of Bayeux. Debiais’s close reading of the ekphrastic poetic inscription on the crown demonstrates the ways that inscription renders words as things, visible markers to be viewed, interacted with, and read in their own right.

Such attention to “objectness” changes how we approach representation—whether visual or literary. For some of the contributors that means thinking hard about when and how or if an object functions as a sign. Irit Kleiman’s “The Shirt Is Closest to the Body: On Joinville’s Memoirs,” offers a close reading of Jean de Joinville’s Vie de Saint Louis. She argues that Joinville uses particular objects—a sheik’s shirt, the fossil of a fish, amber in the form of flowers, and a silver reliquary boat—to express experiences of different places (Egypt and the Levant) and times (Louis IX’s and Joinville’s experiences on crusade). Through a series of careful readings, Kleiman shows that these objects were evocations of a network of associations that included conceptions of maternity, sensory experiences, and the emotions of one thirteenth-century author.

Kathy Krause’s essay, “Material Signs? Gendered Birthmarks in Old French Narrative,” also explores the relationship between signs and materiality, arguing that birthmarks in medieval French narratives offer a kind of meditation on the materiality of signs. In the texts she considers, birthmarks on boys are signs of something immaterial—they signify a future royal rule. Girls’ birthmarks, in contrast, are curiously material signs in that they point the reader back to the female body. Similarly, Lisa Lampert-Weissig’s essay, “The Wandering Jew as Relic,” examines the materiality of a figure long understood as a sign—the Wandering Jew. She argues that his materiality links him to relics. Like all saints’ relics, he brings a physical remnant of the past into the present; but, unlike the bodies that make up saints’ relics, his body remains human. In this way, the Wandering Jew offers insight into anxieties or uncertainties in medieval Christian relic veneration—how is a relic both human and thing?—and into the objectifying of Jews in the Middle Ages.

The capacity of objects to function as signs is a central aspect of symbolism, a characteristically medieval mode of representation that should be familiar to us from many different kinds of texts, from sermons that allegorize the loaves and fishes multiplied by Jesus to the Middle English Pearl, which uses a pearl to symbolize salvation. The essays by Cristina Maria Cervone and Christopher Lakey examine the way in which materiality functions in
symbolic thinking, as it shapes and reflects the immateriality of ideas. Cervone’s essay, “(Im)materiality and Chaucer’s Temple of Mars,” revisits the much-discussed ekphrastic moment in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale.” In Cervone’s reading, Chaucer’s account of the paintings in the temple confusingly insists upon both their materiality, even their reality—the paintings show concrete details and have been crafted out of particular materials—and their immateriality—the paintings would be impossible to paint, and they point us toward abstractions—at the same time. Lakey’s essay, “The Materiality of Light in Medieval Italian Painting,” finds a similar fusion of material and immaterial in gilded reliefs—the haloes in Italian painting—which are depictions of light in all of its sensory and symbolic meanings (such as divine light).

For other contributors, the new emphasis on objects means changing how we look at texts, such as looking at objects for insights into how we might approach texts instead of the other way around, as has traditionally been the case. Denise Despres, in “Portals to Intimacy,” examines the role objects, such as rings, played in late medieval religious devotion, namely the Cult of the Side Wound. The study of such affective devotion has largely focused on mystical texts. And yet, to study these objects is to recover the particularly physical and domestic intimacy that characterized this devotional mode in the later part of the Middle Ages. One can also look at texts as objects, as is the focus of Carol Symes’s essay “The ‘Desire for Deeds’: On Cherishing Medieval Charters.” Here Symes analyzes a series of charters, which were valued not only for their written content but also as markers of social status, family connections, title, and identity.

As the essays collected here demonstrate, medievalists have much to add to the study of materiality and its methods. Perhaps most importantly the medieval allows for the longue durée framing of many of the most salient questions about the vibrancy of things. Although objects rarely speak and act independently of the texts that describe and encode them, medieval writers were frequently at pains to document their presence and meaning. When the non-human did speak, act, inform, appear, and reappear, it did so in ways that elicited human responses, critique, and dialogue. For this reason, medieval objects function in much the same way that modern objects do and can be brought into conversation with them. But at the same time, we must also acknowledge the important differences: as the descriptions of relics, birthmarks, and fossils demonstrate, medieval texts could display a greater nimbleness when it comes to subjectivity; they are tolerant of slippages between objects and subjects and of the hermeneutical space in and between words and things. Finding such spaces is something that medievalists have become adept at, as the essays here show, and it is one of the many contributions medievalists have offered the study of materiality.

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**NOTES**


3 The heyday of subjectivity for medieval studies was at the end of the twentieth century with the important books by Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) and H. Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Nevertheless, an MLA search for “subjectivity” suggests continuing, even growing, interest: 2254 for 1990–99 (up more than fivefold from 421 for the years 1980–89) and 3862 for 2000–09. For the debate between historicism and psychoanalysis, see *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*, ed. Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).


5 There are many studies that insist that we include the condition and characteristics of the physical text in our interpretation of the literary works it contains. For a recent example, see the essays collected in *Chaucer Review* 47 (2013). This special issue is titled *Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, & the Literary Text*, and it was edited by Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie.

7 See Shannon Gayk and Robyn Malo, “The Sacred Object,” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 44 (2014): 457-67 and the essays collected in that issue. For example, Bennett defines thing-power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Vibrant Matter, 6). Why is the ability of things to live or to have effects “curious?” It certainly was not in the Middle Ages. See Caroline Walker Bynum, Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe (New York: Zone Books, 2011); and more recently, Sara Ritchey, Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

8 This point is also made in several of the essays collected in the special issue of the Minnesota Review 80 (2013), see specifically Bruce Holsinger, “Object-Oriented Mythography,” 119–30, and D. Vance Smith, “Death and Texts: Finitude before Form,” 131–44.


11 See for example the special issue of Gesta 51 (2012) dedicated to these ideas, and specifically the remarks and historiography addressed in the introduction by Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey, “Res et significatio; The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages,” 1–17.

12 The collection of essays, The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) has long dominated the field in setting up these interpretations.


Below, Kumler, p. 33.