

Excavating the Archives: Making Lincoln Cathedral Library's Middle English Manuscripts Accessible

Introduction

'Excavating the Archives: Making Lincoln Cathedral Library's Middle English Manuscripts Accessible' makes the Middle English manuscripts in the Cathedral Library more accessible to the everyday person. The manuscripts themselves are daunting, written in an early form of the English language that is unfamiliar to those with no experience of the medieval, and we wanted to render more accessible the complex issues and themes connected to their contents and production. This project culminates in an open-access, online resource for the public which provides information about a selection of Middle English manuscripts held in the Cathedral Library; it also highlights how the medieval is just as, if not more so, exciting and captivating as the modern.

Methodology and Approach

Our approach to this research was intersectional and interdisciplinary, calling on all of our academic experience as students but also the new skills we gained in preparation to undertake this project. To become acquainted with the manuscripts as artefacts and mouthpieces of our history we first trained with Claire on how to handle the manuscripts in the archive which was of the utmost importance in order to preserve their condition for future readers. We then, under the guidance of Renée, studied codicology (how manuscripts are made) and paleography (the types of 'hands' or handwriting styles used by medieval scribes), refreshing our knowledge of Middle English from previous studies. This work allowed us to read the various dialects and different hands of our selected texts. Once we had covered these areas, we fully immersed ourselves in reading and researching the texts. This is where our project truly unfolded: we progressed from a manuscript studies and material culture approach into both literary and historical perspectives, exploring the manuscripts and texts not just as physical artefacts, but as stories that shed light on medieval culture and people.

Why the Medieval?

The medieval period was a time of great music, literature, philosophy and culture that is unfairly dismissed or regarded as a literal dark age and primitive society. It was, though, a time of immense human curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge, a period of great social and political change; we have more in common with our ancestors than we perhaps wish to admit, and this is clearly displayed through the literature of the time which still moves, inspires and entertains us.

Most people, when they think of the Middle Ages, think of tales of battle and great kings and queens. While such topics abound, much more exists. As our selected manuscripts demonstrate, medieval writers and their audiences were also concerned about political happenings and the choices of those who rule society, social issues of the time like inequality of all forms, human desire to find love but also to challenge what we as a society know and acknowledge. Through this project, we dispel these preconceptions about the medieval period and connect the modern reader to a range of Middle English texts that share concerns that remain prevalent in modern society. Additionally, the manuscripts and texts we explore speak to the importance of Middle English – the earliest form of the language we now speak, which dominates much of the world's communications – as a literary medium and a political tool.

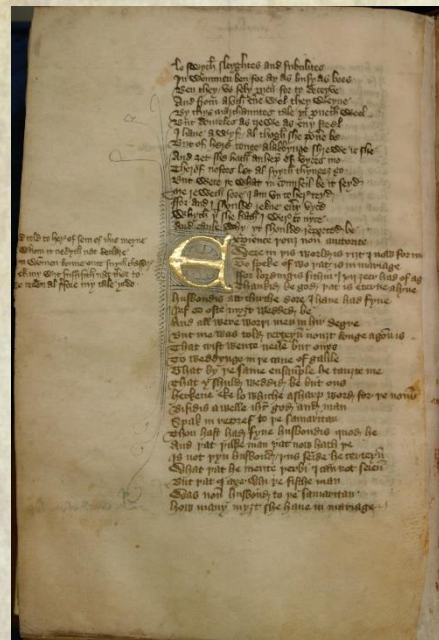


Image of MS 110 f.91v used with the permission of the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral

Sample Specimen: MS 110

A significant example of the texts we researched is *The Canterbury Tales* or MS 110 in Lincoln Cathedral Library and to effectively illustrate the research we have undertaken we shall use this as an example.

1. Assess the condition of the manuscript- We needed to determine how complete the edition is and the damage that has occurred over the centuries, MS 110 was missing the first 380 lines of the prologue and whilst it had all twenty-four tales, the order of them differed to the original.

2. Research the manuscript's physical features- This includes the codicology and paleography of the manuscript, MS 110 was composed using Vellum, a high-quality calf skin parchment, and was written by two scribes using southwestern and northeastern midlands dialects.

3. The best approach to the text itself- We found the most efficient and effective approach to the text would be to take it on as a team and each focus on one pilgrim of the twenty-four in the text.

4. Research author and context- Our next step was to take a historical approach and research the text's context and its author, Geoffrey Chaucer.

5. Research our chosen Tales- Once we had a wider understanding of the text, our next objective was to use a literary approach and analyse the tales we selected.

6. Assess audience- once all our research content was collected, we considered both a modern and contemporary audiences' reception of the text, the impact it had and will have on a modern audience but also considering what parts of our research is relevant and interesting to the everyday reader.

7. Write up- our final stage of research was to review our notes and form a comprehensive body of text that follows the aim of our project, to make the manuscripts and their contents accessible, written in terms that the everyday person could understand and is ready to be uploaded to our open access website.

Conclusion

As this aspect of our project draws to a close, we have reflected upon the skills we have gained from this research and how we will continue to benefit from this experience throughout our further studies and future careers. We understand that it has been a great privilege to handle and study these manuscripts and are thankful to Renée and Claire for their guidance and support throughout but also to the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral for making this possible. Not only do we as student researchers benefit from this project, but the general public will benefit from the end-product of our research: accessible new material for an online open-access website. All of our research has been carried out with the general public in mind, aiming to raise awareness and interest about the Middle Ages and highlight the importance and uniqueness of the manuscripts within Lincoln Cathedral Library and the insight they provide to medieval life, culture and entertainment.

As we continue our research, we will keep working towards our end-product of a website that contains accessible information about Lincoln Cathedral Library's manuscripts, creating an educational resource about the materials in the archive that can be enjoyed by all, allowing our project to have a profound and lasting impact.

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References

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Drawings done by Abigail Laycock.
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