

## *Paper in Medieval England: From Pulp to Fictions*

Orietta da Rold

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

[ISBN 9781108886536]

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With a few exceptions that include Lothar Müller's *White Magic* (2014), and now Orietta da Rold's monograph, scholarship on paper has consisted in mostly historicist approaches to its production and trade, and the elaboration of watermark repertoires. This new wave of research now begins to focus on a critical examination of its cultural history, a trend which had an important precedent in 1990 when Renzo Sabbatini published his account of early modern paper in Tuscany.<sup>1</sup> Orietta da Rold situates her approach to paper in Medieval England within the general history of paper by engaging in a critical survey of some of the most relevant secondary literature on the material aspects of Medieval and Early Modern paper production which also suggests new paths for further research with the incorporation of views from disciplines such as literary and economic history, knowledge management, and media studies.

Her insights on paper in Medieval England also result from the careful scrutiny of a wealth of primary documentary sources and the use of statistics distilled from some of the most relevant existing databases – one of which, the *Mapping Paper Project*,<sup>2</sup> is actually coordinated by Orietta da Rold herself. The attention to detail deployed in her examination of these sources is both an antidote against overgeneralization and an unavoidable starting point for a fresh approach to the subject, whose proper development, she also acknowledges, will require the compilation of further quantitative data and analysis. Her book, in short, makes a good case for a more nuanced approach to paper that can go beyond some of the received ideas about its cultural history. This is particularly called for in those cases which involve what we might call micro-histories of paper.

One of these received ideas involves the role of production costs in the adoption of paper as a medium. To demonstrate that cost need not be the main factor for the

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<sup>1</sup> LOTHAR MÜLLER, *White Magic: The Age of Paper* [*Weisse Magie*, München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012] (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014); Renzo Sabbatini, *Di bianco lin candida prole. La manifattura della carta in età moderna e il caso Toscano* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> ORIETTA DA ROLD and HOLLIE MORGAN, 'Mapping Medieval Paper in England,' *The Manuscripts Lab For the Research and Pedagogy of Handwritten Culture*, November 28, 2015, <https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/manuscriptslab/mapping-medieval-paper-in-england/>.

success of paper, at least in the English case, da Rold turns to ‘the accounts of the household of King John II of France during his captivity in England in the middle of the fourteenth century’ (60-61). This document does not just suggest that cost was not the only consideration for the use of paper-based products, but it also provides evidence on the different sorts of paper-products available at the time in England in terms of ‘size, quality, colouring and finishing.’ (61). From this record, whose data she carefully collates and registers in a list in page 62, da Rold concludes that ‘paper was used frequently, and that it could be found easily’ and stresses the fact that this information documents the use of paper in ‘England in the 1360s, almost a century before the arrival of printing in Westminster.’ This is indeed an important first step, and a practical demonstration of the insights that microhistories of paper can provide. The data are certainly valuable and relevant, and although out of a narrow chronological frame of just two years (i.e. 1359-60) and a corpus of items bought by the household of a monarch with a purchasing power well above the average consumer one can only reach partial conclusions about this particular case, microhistories like this do counterbalance the traditional contention that paper was always cheaper than parchment and that this led to the triumph of the former above the latter. As da Rold suggests, insights on the general cultural and social drift provoked by the gradual adoption of paper and its long cultural history as a medium require a much larger corpus of primary documents, and a critical mass of microhistories like this that can put together a more fine-grained and nuanced account. Da Rold’s first approach to paper in England is in fact followed by a string of case studies during the rest of her book which document the increasing amount and variety of paper in England over the course of the fourteenth century.

Although this is a history of paper in Medieval England, one of the conclusions that the reader draws from the book is that a proper attention to local or national histories of paper requires an international approach. This dialectic between the local and the international alongside close attention to particular case studies and the *longue durée* pervades da Rold’s monograph. In her chapter 4 she proves that the relative prices of paper and parchment were established by a series of factors, one of which was the region under scrutiny. Even within the Italian Peninsula the quality and price of paper in relation to parchment varied according to the diversity of its regions and their respective circumstances – which stresses that a national Italian approach is as reductive as an exclusively English approach can be. These domestic Italian regional differences exacerbated once paper was exported to places like England, when additional costs in transportation and taxes increased its original price, and eventually affected its competitive edge vis à vis parchment.

The result is a general picture that registers significant differences in the perception, cultural and political function of paper in different domestic and international regions over the course of the late Middle Ages. This is the complex picture we get when we approach the cultural history of paper as a mosaic of microhistories. A bird eye’s view in combination with a comparative analysis of

particular cases in England and Italy result in a series of telling general differences, one of which confirms that a relatively abundant supply in combination with proximity to important centres of production did generate lower costs in Italy. In other words, and all necessary nuances considered, paper was more competitive in Italy vis à vis other media, whereas in England the lack of local expertise and production centres delayed its adoption in comparison with other European regions where it was more readily available. As we all know now, in the long run, paper ended up displacing parchment and became the omnipresent medium for global communication.

Besides the need for an interdisciplinary and international approach, da Rold's book also confirms that important aspects of the use of paper are closely linked to practices like administration, diplomacy, trade, and finance. In other words: the use of paper as a medium was just a piece in the vast and complex mechanisms that made up Late Medieval and Early Modern communication systems and their networks. It is very revealing that the history of paper in England must start not just with documents that reached the country from abroad during the thirteenth century, but also that these papers include above all diplomatic correspondence and financial documents sent by the Riccardi Italian banking family.

Da Rold also addresses the administrative dimension of paper vis à vis other media in her chapter 3, which starts with a reference to Frederick II's edict on the compulsory use of parchment and the ban of paper for public documents. This naturally underlines the persistence of parchment, but it also reveals the fact that whereas parchment-based documents constituted the permanent nodes or hubs in imperial networks, the fragments of information that circulated among them and which fed Frederick's administrative machinery circulated first in paper format. These paper documents were then discarded once these clusters of scattered information had been properly processed and registered in the more permanent medium of parchment. This ban on the use of paper for public documents by Frederick II does in fact reveal that paper had been in frequent use among *curiali* notaries, i.e. it had been a well-established practice for some time, and suggests that this was a practice that Southern European notaries might have imitated from their Arabic counterparts. In short, da Rold's chapter 3 confirms the coexistence of paper and parchment, their different uses and the close relation between paper and the adoption of new types of script that could optimize and speed up the production of documents.

The most substantial and indeed innovative part of the book provides a critical account of the role of paper in Medieval England, with important insights on its cultural and literary history. This includes a discussion of the use of paper in a variety of disciplines and practices – such as medicine, wrapping, the manufacture of playing cards, the preservation of food and the presentation of confectionery. Da Rold also stresses how paper circulated alongside other goods that came from abroad – such as spices. Not surprisingly, these merchants who traded in spices and paper were Italian, and they operated in the London district where Chaucer grew up. This does not merely stress that paper and spices reached England thanks to Italian merchants. It also proves

that Chaucer's familiarity with all things Continental, from paper to literary models, were to a very large extent mediated by merchants and aided by diplomatic activity. These constitute further proof that all national literary canons are established upon essentially transnational exchanges and processes of material and immaterial appropriation which involve mediators like merchants and diplomats, as well as practices like trade and translation. Paper was just one among the different materials and practices that were entangled in these complex processes: this is yet another reason to contemplate the cultural history of paper always in relation to other processes and phenomena.

An account of the presence of paper in the English literary imagination also calls for a return to Europe in general, and to Italy in particular. A passage of Dante's *Inferno* in which paper is used as a trope gives da Rold an opportunity to apply the concept of *affordance*, which was first used in cognitive psychology.<sup>3</sup> Affordance works very well for a mostly empirical approach that can bridge the gap between the material dimensions of paper and their perception, both subjective and collective. Critical and heuristic categories like affordance, but also agency and value, all complement each other by converging in the materiality of a specific medium (paper in this case) in order to explain how specific aspects of such materiality can be semiotically activated. In her final chapter da Rold sets about exploring how paper and its affordances stirred the literary imagination of Medieval England. She musters a long list of primary sources to explore the rich diversity in the use of paper as a trope, from Chaucer and the anonymous *Cleanness* to the *Gawain* poet, among several others. These sections are without any doubt the most valuable and ground-breaking in her book.

The many strengths of this book lie in the way it demonstrates through a rigorously empirical method that paper is a far more complex material and medium than we have come to believe so far. With the example provided by her detailed approach to paper in Medieval England within an international context, da Rold's book confirms that a cultural history of paper will need to take into consideration the nuances that punctuate each of its different episodes, as well as the diversity of its uses and perception within its very long history, which is still in the making.

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<sup>3</sup> JAMES G. GIBSON, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966). The use of affordance as a heuristic tool allows da Rold to go beyond the concept of agency, on which she quotes Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford, University Press, 2005).