

Introduction

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Introduction: New Approaches to Medieval Romance, Materiality, and Gender

Morgan Boharski, Jane Bonsall, Amy Burge, Lydia Hayes,
Danielle Howarth, Vanessa Wright

“**M**EDIEVAL MATTER MATTERS”: Kellie Robertson ends her 2010 “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto” with these uncompromising and challenging words.¹ Arguably, many medievalists have been attempting to define how matter matters ever since. This special issue takes up Robertson’s challenge, specifically exploring how materiality is gendered, how romance texts deal with materiality, and how new approaches to matter, gender, and romance might further develop the scholarly field. Our hope is that this special issue, via its articles and response pieces, provides a case study or model for future research and researchers working in the field.

This special issue had its origin at the International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds in 2017 in three panels focusing on romance and materiality. From those panels, a collective team came together to produce this issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* based on and inspired by the papers given at the Congress, with invited response pieces from three established scholars in materiality and gender: Bettina Bildhauer; Liz Herbert McAvoy; and Anne E. Lester. Though this issue highlights a small group of researchers focused on the marriage of materiality and gender studies in medieval romance, it provides a significant contribution to this growing field.

The theme of the International Medieval Congress 2019, “Materialities,” highlighted the scholarly opportunities provided by studies of

1. Kellie Robertson, “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto,” *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (2010): 115, <https://doi-org/10.1179/104125710X12670926011996>.

“Materialities” of “objects, artefacts, matter, and material culture.”² The fact that the IMC chose the plural “Materialities” demonstrates the inherent flexibility of materiality as a conceptual framework and reflects the multivalent potential of material objects themselves. Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little’s all-encompassing definition of materiality also evidences the breadth of materiality as a conceptual framework: materiality is “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.”³ This flexibility is one of the reasons why materiality has continued to attract critical attention in recent years; as Lester writes in her contribution to this issue, “materialism remains both a deceptively simple and familiar term and an anachronistically complex concept.”⁴ This is shown by the wealth of previous scholarship that has examined the material medieval world, from secular material culture, to religious devotional objects, to the natural world.

In “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto,” Kellie Robertson traces the shifting ways of “thinking through things” over the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries; from new historicist modes of “turning anthropological and sociological models on objects . . . and their cultural circulation” to “the more recent materialist work of what came to be known as ‘thing theory,’” heavily influenced by the work of Bill Brown.⁵ Within medieval literary studies, as Bettina Bildhauer notes in her contribution, while “The recent ‘new materialism’ or ‘material turn’ has also encompassed medieval studies, . . . so far most scholars have taken pragmatic rather than theoretically informed approaches, and studied material objects rather than materiality as such.”⁶ In recent years, scholarship by,

2. “IMC 2019,” *International Medieval Congress*, accessed 27 August 2019, <https://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/imc2019/>.

3. Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little, introduction to “Medieval Materiality,” special issue, *English Language Notes* 53, no. 2 (2015): 1.

4. Anne C. Lester, “Possession, Production, and Power: Reading Objects in the Material Field,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 56, no. 1 (2020): 218.

5. Robertson, 100.

6. Bettina Bildhauer, “Textiles, Gender, and Materiality: A Response,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 56, no. 1 (2020): 72.

for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, E. Jane Burns, Roberta Krueger, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, as well as the work of the three responding authors, Bettina Bildhauer, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Anne E. Lester, has focused on the production and provenance of historical, physical artefacts, as well as objects and things as they are represented in medieval literature, further developing the field of medieval materiality studies.

Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little's "Medieval Materiality," a special issue of *English Language Notes*, and Nicholas Perkins's 2015 collection *Medieval Romance and Material Culture* consolidate this previous scholarship and, for Perkins in particular, signal a turn to medieval romance as a focus for materialities research.⁷ Works such as these highlight the particular utility of applying a study of the material to medieval subjects and demonstrate a way of thinking about objects and the material as having multivalent potential to communicate meaning beyond their usual human-applied symbolic association. In other words, "reading . . . within and for the material field engages a new epistemological awareness for how and what we can know about the past."⁸ Materiality does matter, as does the way scholars think about objects or "things": "Attending to such objects, especially as we consider the role of gender, should provoke us to question the subject role of the narrative's protagonists to look for the ways that objects, and the objectified, provoke their own readings, narratives, actions, and agendas often in radical opposition to any sense of 'master' narrative."⁹ The three response pieces in this special issue—by Bettina Bildhauer, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Anne E. Lester—offer a comprehensive outline of historic developments in materialities scholarship, so we will not reproduce it here. However, we do wish to draw attention to two key strands of medieval materialities research: gender and romance.

In medieval studies and more widely, materiality has been closely connected to gender. In her contribution, Lester remarks that "the two

7. "Medieval Materiality," ed. Anne E. Lester and Katherine C. Little, special issue, *English Language Notes* 53, no. 2 (2015); Nicholas Perkins, ed., *Medieval Romance and Material Culture* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2015).

8. Lester, "Possession, Production, and Power," 219.

9. Lester, 219.

subfields of gender history and materiality have developed in tandem over the course of the past two decades” and “in many respects the new interest in materiality and a revival of materialism has much to do with new questions about the roles of women and the dynamics of gendered interactions often made visible through the creation, use, division, and deployment of things.”¹⁰ As Bildhauer points out, “Gender studies and specifically feminist theory have been pioneering the current wave of interest in materiality that spans much of the humanities and social sciences”; “The long-standing feminist interest in the material world stems primarily from the observation that women in patriarchal societies are more closely associated with the body, with matter and domestic concerns, while only men are assumed to have access to the highest domains of reason, spirit, and mind.”¹¹ An important aspect of scholarly work on medieval materiality and gender, outlined by Liz Herbert McAvoy in her contribution, is its significance for current discourse. McAvoy specifically identifies how contemporary performances of toxic masculinity in advertising and popular television shows draw on apparently medieval gender concepts—what she terms “pseudomedieval masculinity”—but broader connections can be made between medieval practices and modern ideologies when it comes to gender, materiality, and romance. Yet, Bildhauer also helpfully reminds us to be cautious, noting that “the connotations of textiles and other material objects have clearly changed over time, and it is important to remain alert to our own contemporary biases.”¹²

Materiality and its connections with gender are particularly apparent in romance: indeed, European romance has been a persistent source of interest for materiality scholarship. In her contribution, Lester notes that:

Romance texts, like liturgical texts or monastic rules, detail how and when objects should be encountered and put to use. As normative texts, they prescribe idealized behavior, suggesting more about scripted or imagined action than recorded deeds; offering scholars a sense of representations set in conversation with material “reality.”¹³

10. Lester, 208.

11. Bildhauer, “Textiles, Gender, and Materiality,” 70.

12. Bildhauer, 80.

13. Lester, “Possession, Production, and Power,” 211.

In a similar vein, Perkins's collection focuses on the metaphorical and allegorical objects in medieval literature and specifically those found in medieval romance. As Perkins notes, because romance has traditionally been a lens through which we examine culture, a study of the materiality of romance is a way to "foreground the processes by which people and things symbiotically shape cultures."¹⁴ The "cultures" that Perkins examines take many forms, but the focus here is on the ways that gender identities and relationships are both defined and represented in romance in relation to objects and things, both textual and visual. The prevalence and importance of such objects in medieval romance facilitates these readings; as Perkins also argues, "the significant objects, places, bodies and books in romance stories become not only symbols of identity formation which wrap themselves around the selfhood of their leading protagonists, but actants that overlap with those protagonists and have their own narrative trajectories."¹⁵ Furthermore, Nicola McDonald points out that medieval "romance offers [. . .] a *poetics of performativity*, in the service of normative practices of sex, gender, and sexuality."¹⁶ Conceived between Lester and Little's and Perkins's 2015 publications and the 2017 Leeds International Medieval Congress, this issue continues in the vein of this scholarship, recognizing that medieval romance is a productive arena in which to study materiality. It also expands the reach and range of Perkins's study, offering new methodological approaches and ways of reading canonical and lesser-known medieval romance texts.

About this Special Issue

"New Approaches to Medieval Romance, Gender, and Materiality" seeks to connect important existing scholarship and scholars with new approaches to gender, materiality, and medieval studies. This is a new and innovative project in that the articles are by postgraduate and early

14. Nicolas Perkins, "The Materiality of Medieval Romance and *The Erle of Tolous*," introduction to *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*, ed. Perkins (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 7.

15. Perkins, 7.

16. Nicola McDonald, "Gender," *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 69 (emphasis in original).

career researchers with the intent of highlighting emergent research and researchers who are actively engaged with and impacted by the current academic climate. The collection of articles invites established scholars and early career and doctoral researchers to respond to each other's work through research essays and responses. The issue thus offers a unique perspective on the subject, allowing current social and political discourses to further the study of gender and materiality from its strong foundations, as well as to show the value of collaborative, cross-generational approaches to research.

The main argument of this collection is that, while the study of gender and materialism in medieval literature and medieval studies more broadly is certainly growing, there is a need for more intergenerational discussion and interdisciplinary endeavors. The three sections of the special issue provide a different focus for the study of materialism in romance—textiles, gendered identity, and repurposed objects—and each section's response from an established scholar provides a unique dialogue with the research in the section, as well as with the past, present, and future of medieval gender studies. What sets this collection apart from others of its kind is the intended "conversation" that takes place between the authors of the articles and the section respondents. The intention behind this open collaboration is to foster continuing dialogue between upcoming researchers and established scholars who have significantly contributed to the field of feminist material studies. This dynamic is demonstrated through a model used often in feminist scholarship constituting an exchange between scholars, in this case three established figures in the field—Bettina Bildhauer, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Anne E. Lester—and the six articles written by early career and PhD researchers. Each respondent draws connections between the articles and the wider field, explicitly situating this new research within the existing literature as well as the current academic and political climate. Therefore, while this special issue provides new perspectives, it also fits well within the existing literature on the topics of gender and materiality.

The six articles each explore the relationship between gender and materiality in medieval literary culture, focusing on that most popular of

medieval secular genres: romance.¹⁷ Three articles take Middle English romance as their focus (Burge and Kertz; Bonsall; Howarth), Boharski discusses Old French romance, and both Shartrand and Hayes turn to French Arthurian romance. While demonstrating a variety of approaches and methodologies, the contributions nonetheless offer a usefully coherent insight into material feminist readings of a single tradition, albeit one that spans centuries, cultures, and forms.

The issue is divided into three sections, each containing two articles and a response piece focused around a specific theme. The first section, “Fabricating Gender and Identity,” focuses on cloth and clothwork in Middle English and Old French romance. The study of textiles has long been confined to research on the physical and historical remnants of tangible objects. Recent studies have opened up discussion on textiles and textile production in literary texts to provide a window into how gender, identity, and women’s work were perceived in the Middle Ages across Europe. The material of this section lies in the discussion of fabric and clothwork and how fabric transcends its tangible existence, coming to represent both the history and identity of medieval women.

Morgan Boharski’s article, “Like Looking in a Mirror: A Material Reading of the Sisters in *Galeran de Bretagne*,” examines the relationship between the twin sisters in Renaut’s romance insofar as they are connected and disconnected through material objects. The materiality found within the romance of *Galeran de Bretagne* directly reflects the sisters’ own objectification, inextricably linking them to the cloth objects that they manipulate. In “Fabricated Muslim Identity, Female Agency, and Cultural Complicity: The Imperial Project of *Emaré*,” Amy Burge and Lydia Yaitsky Kertz use assemblage theory, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to read the fifteenth-century romance’s famous cloth as revealing of its imperial politics. Burge and Kertz argue that the cloth can be read as an assemblage, made up of components that can be understood individually and as part of a whole. The cloth as assemblage emphasizes the connections between the Muslim woman who made the cloth and *Emaré* herself, yet, *Emaré*’s persistent separateness serves as a

17. Nicola F. McDonald, “A Polemical Introduction,” *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1.

reminder of her simultaneous position in yet another assemblage—that of the Christian Empire. Ultimately, as Emaré's actions resignify the cloth and uphold the patrilineal project of empire, the complicity of white Christian women in support of Christian imperial power is made overt. Burge and Kertz bring together critical work on medieval articulations of empire with research on nineteenth-century imperialism to argue for the importance of the Middle Ages in a full understanding of Western imperial and colonial culture.

The response by Bettina Bildhauer reflects her own interests in material culture and German literature. She draws on scholarship in gender studies and materiality in medieval and modern contexts to demonstrate connections between the English and French texts discussed in the articles and a range of German literature, including the Middle High German *Orendel* or the *Grey Robe*; the epic poems *Solomon and Morolf* and *Song of the Nibelungs*; Konrad of Würzburg's account of the Trojan War; Wirnt of Grafenberg's thirteenth-century German Arthurian romance *Wigalois*; Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*; and Wolfram of Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Bildhauer points out that "many medieval narratives report the past histories, present powers and future trajectories of objects, including textiles, in thing biographies similar to the ones of the cloths traced by Boharski and Burge and Kertz."¹⁸ She identifies and expands upon four themes from the two articles: the idea that textiles can travel; that textiles make connections, material and immaterial, seen and unseen, through networks; the ways in which textiles can be compared to texts and used as metaphors for texts; and how textiles can "exude shine," revealing their appropriation of objects and texts to "illuminate patterns of cultural appropriation."¹⁹

The second section, "Materiality, Masculinity, and Subversion," focuses on materiality and its effects on masculinity and femininity in romance. A necessary element to any study of gender and materialism is an exploration of the uncertain balance of masculinity and femininity, and of materiality as a site of tension, permeability, and transference between the two. This section explores the formation and dissolution

18. Bildhauer, "Textiles, Gender, and Materiality," 74.

19. Bildhauer, 83.

of gendered identity in Middle English romances, interrogating the relationships between bodies, objects, and spaces. Specifically, these articles speak to the power that material objects and things (signifiers of wealth, objects of warfare, castles, even trees) can have over human identities and open up destabilizing readings of medieval cultural material. From the construction of female identity through “masculine” objects in Middle English romance to the reimagining of male identity through wooden objects and the nonhuman, the articles included in this section offer innovative approaches and a new perspective to the field.

Danielle Howarth’s article, “Making it Through the Wilderness: Trees as Markers of Gendered Identities in *Sir Orfeo*,” is an ecocritical, ecofeminist approach to the lay of *Sir Orfeo* that uses trees as a lens through which to view Orfeo’s human, masculine identity. She argues that various trees and wooden objects witness and participate in Orfeo’s transformations throughout the lay and become material actants that hold power in the margins of the narrative. Jane Bonsall’s article, “Whose Sword? Materiality, Gender Subversion and the Fairy Women of Middle English Romance,” considers the role that the objects of material wealth commonly found in the Middle English “fairy-mistress” narratives have in the construction of gendered identities. Focusing on the material components of chivalric identity, she argues that the fairy-mistresses’ authority over the objects upon which their knights rely destabilizes traditional structures of power and gender in these texts.

Liz Herbert McAvoy’s response to the articles in this section situates them within current trends in the study of medieval masculinities—including the reclamation of the “femfog” and scholarly work by Carolyn Dinshaw, Jack Halberstam, and Mads Ravn—and within the current interest in what it means to “be a man” in recent pop culture, citing the 2019 Gillette advert “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” as well as the “Time’s Up” and “Me Too” feminist movements. She discusses what she terms psuedomedieval masculinity in these pop cultures; a “performative gender display . . . constructed both on and around often willfully under- or un-informed phantasmagorical ideologies . . . based on reimagined Viking or Crusader aesthetics—and their material prosthetics.”²⁰ For

20. Liz Herbert McAvoy, “The best a man can be”: Subverting Masculinity’s

McAvoy, the “medievalization” of modern toxic masculinity necessitates an exploration of masculinities outside of the hegemonic. McAvoy makes use of Halberstam’s theory of “masculinity without men” to demonstrate how medieval romances, including those discussed by Bonsall and Howarth, facilitate a more open and inclusive conceptualization of gender.

The third and final section, “Repurposing Objects,” explores the way that material objects and their uses can be fluid, subverted, and changed. Many studies that focus on the role of materiality in the relationship between men and women examine male control of material objects and the resulting subjugation of women who interact with these objects. In a similar vein, this section examines the relationship between material culture and feminine power in Arthurian romances. Although this section nods to material feminism by examining male control over women and their objects, the articles also consider how these objects become symbols of feminine power or how men become dependent on women and their objects.

Lydia Hayes’s article, “Objectifying Love: Ladies and Their Tokens, Saints and Their Relics in Chrétien de Troyes,” examines the parallel that exists between the lady–knight relationship in the romances and the saint–devotee relationship in hagiography. Both relationships are signified by the perceived power of material objects, whether these objects are love tokens or holy relics. Emily Shartrand’s article, “Distaff as Weapon in the Margins of Two Late-Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Romance Manuscripts,” examines the significance of women using distaffs for purposes other than spinning wool in the margins of Arthurian manuscripts. In the margins, some women are peacefully spinning wool, while others are brandishing their distaffs as weapons; examining this dichotomy reveals the ways in which distaffs give power, both physical and emotional, to the women who wield them.

Anne E. Lester’s response explores the revival of interest in materiality and the relationship between medieval material culture and gender. Offering a rich and extensive overview of the study of materiality and gender, including a new definition of the “material field,” drawing on

Excess(es) in Medieval Texts,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 56, no. 1 (2020): 135.

Pierre Bourdieu, Lester specifically discusses how objects obtain their value and meaning within medieval texts, including Arthurian romance literature. She argues that material objects give a woman power and control, outlining how this is evident through objects within texts (as Hayes demonstrates) and in material production (as Shartrand shows is evident). Lester poses—and offers some answers to—many provocative questions raised by the articles in this section and in the wider issue, critically examining the overall theme of repurposing objects.

This collection can be navigated in various ways. Various material objects—or “things”—are discussed: from cloth and clothwork (Boharski; Burge and Kertz) to armor, weapons and castles (Bonsall), trees (Howarth), relics (Hayes), and distaffs (Shartrand). By orienting their focus around these different material objects, the authors demonstrate the potential for feminist material culture to open new ways of reading and interpreting popular romance texts. New and emerging methodologies are modelled; Howarth offers an ecocritical reading of the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo*, and Burge and Kertz use assemblage theory to argue for a Christian imperial reading of the Middle English *Emaré*. Together, these pieces offer models for further theoretical and critical interventions in medieval romance studies.

Several articles offer new readings of conventional romance motifs and narrative and manuscript devices through “thinking materially.”²¹ Jane Bonsall considers fairy-mistress narratives and material wealth in the Middle English romances *Sir Launfal*, *Partonope of Blois*, and *Melusine*, drawing on the scholarship of Nicholas Perkins, Aisling Byrne, James Wade, and Helen Cooper. Bonsall ultimately argues that the fairy-mistress narrative can be reinterpreted as subversive through a material reading of gendered objects. Lydia Hayes brings relic tradition together with the conventional representation of women as saint-like in Chrétien de Troyes’s Arthurian romances to argue that these objects provide agency for their female owners. Morgan Boharski interprets Jean Renaut’s Old French *Galeran de Bretagne* through three cloth objects that appear in the text: a piece of cloth used to wrap a baby, a silk sleeve, and a white veil. Boharski’s material lens proffers a new reading of the relationship

21. Lester and Little, “introduction,” 2.

between the twin sisters in the text in which these cloth objects become part of the narrative. Emily Shartrand's article on Old French Arthurian manuscript marginalia offers an example of materiality in visual culture. Shartrand expands on the idea of marginal art as textual gloss, arguing that the distaff as an object is associated with women's textile production. Cloth and clothwork is thus another line of connection between Shartrand's article and those by Boharski and Burge and Kertz.

As noted above, a distinctive feature of this special issue is that it showcases research by new and emerging scholars. We therefore consider it appropriate to acknowledge the current challenges faced by many emerging scholars in medieval studies. It is a particularly difficult time for those entering the academic job market. The current neoliberal agenda in western higher education has resulted in excessive reliance on casualized and precarious employees that has fundamentally altered the "journey" of an academic career. In Australia, 75% of new university jobs since 2005 have been insecure, casual, and contractual appointments.²² In November 2016, a *Guardian* study found that 53% of academics in UK higher education were employed on insecure contracts and that Arts and Humanities graduates have been the worst affected by these changes.²³ These issues are even more marked for women and for scholars of color; only one in four professors are women, and of those, 92% are white.²⁴ This is a reality facing many early career scholars, including contributors to this special issue.²⁵

22. Briony Lipton, "Gender and Precarity: A Response to Simon During," *Australian Humanities Review* 58 (2015): 64.

23. Marie-Alix Thouaille, *One size does not fit all: Arts and Humanities doctoral and early career researchers' professional development survey* (The Careers Research and Advisory Centre Limited, 2017).

24. Richard Adams, "UK universities making slow progress on equality, data shows," *The Guardian*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/sep/07/uk-university-professors-black-minority-ethnic>.

25. While all of the contributors to this special issue are women, we equally note that all of the editors are white and that this is further evidence of how invisible the scholarly contributions of our colleagues of color can be. In her contribution, Liz Herbert McAvoy cites Dorothy Kim's blogpost "Teaching medieval studies in a time of white supremacy" in which Kim encourages medievalists to signal "how you are not a white supremacist and how your medieval studies is one that does not uphold

Precarity both masks and reveals the alienation of scholars and their scholarship. As a precariously employed academic, you are ostensibly part of the academy—you teach, you have an email address, you can access the library—but this is not a meaningful or permanent belonging. Many scholars do not enjoy even such temporary privileges. This special issue models feminist academic practice encouraging conversation between generations of scholars and building on existing scholarly discussion. We are acutely aware that academic precarity obstructs such generative conversations, directly threatening the feminist models of scholarly collaboration that underpin the research in this issue. Thus, one of the goals of this issue is to create a space for early career researchers, to support and amplify their scholarship, and to open up new ways to challenge, resist, and reinvent the material realities of medieval studies scholarship. It is our hope that future scholarly practice in medieval studies will similarly acknowledge and address the precarity of early career scholars, particularly women and scholars of color, to ensure that valuable scholarship in gender, romance, and materiality continues to develop.

white supremacy.” *In the Middle*, August 28, 2017, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/08/teaching-medieval-studies-in-time-of.html>. As an Editorial Collective, we support and endorse this approach and have tried to reflect this in the subject matter of this special issue, in the scholarship we have cited in the articles featured, and in this introduction. We realize there is much more work to be done and that our own efforts are only a small part of that work. We affirm that the scholarly future we hope for and are working towards must be one in which we work together to challenge the barriers that impede particularly our colleagues of color.