CHAPTER I

Prologue
Materials, Making and Manuscripts

> Tell us a tale of som honest matere
> Hit schall be don yf ye woll hit here[1]

As a material thing, this leaf (in Figure 1.1) of *The Canterbury Tales* is nothing special. Half the beige page is plain. There are just the thirty-four lines of brown text that segue from the Canon's Yeoman's Tale through the Host's words to the Physician's story. There are no pictures, only two simple headings (in red in the original). Like most pages of this book, this one shows no adversarial marginalia, just a dash of uncertain date where the Tale begins.[2] There seems little to say about a bland, indeed half blank, page such as this.

But the Canon's Yeoman's Tale shows that lumpen stuff can be transformed and infused with power by the 'craft' of alchemists – a word used frequently in the Tale – and by the imaginings of their dupes.[3] Likewise, this page is informed by the scribe's ingenuity and ideas – ideas about books. First, the rectangle, which western culture for seventeen centuries took for granted as the shape of language, was not used unthinkingly here. Like the fraudulent materials of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale – metals hidden in charcoal or wood, holes wadded with wax – this page is an object of craft, indeed of craftiness. There was a gap in the animal skin or parchment from which this leaf was made, and it was mended with a patch beneath the middle of four lines. (You might detect the circle under the words 'chanon putte', 'this woll passen', 'phisyk y' and 'of som' in lines 9–12.)

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[1] Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 181, f. 195ᵛ, on which see Manly-Rickert, i, 166–9; Bowers, 48–9; and nn. 39 and 48 in Chapter 5.

[2] There are 106 likely pre-Reformation readers' notes clustered on 35 pages (of 600), most in the Parson's Tale (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 181, ff. 268ʳ–279ᵛ), and only 8 readers' marginalia elsewhere; there are some Tudor readers' corrections.

[3] For *craft*, see *Tales*, VIII.619, 621, 751, 785, 830, 838, 866, 882, 952, 1247, 1320, 1349, 1369, 1395, and in a variant in this MS at VIII.803 too: 'To brynge aboute oure crafte yf þat we may' (f. 187ʳ; cf. 'oure purpos, if we may').
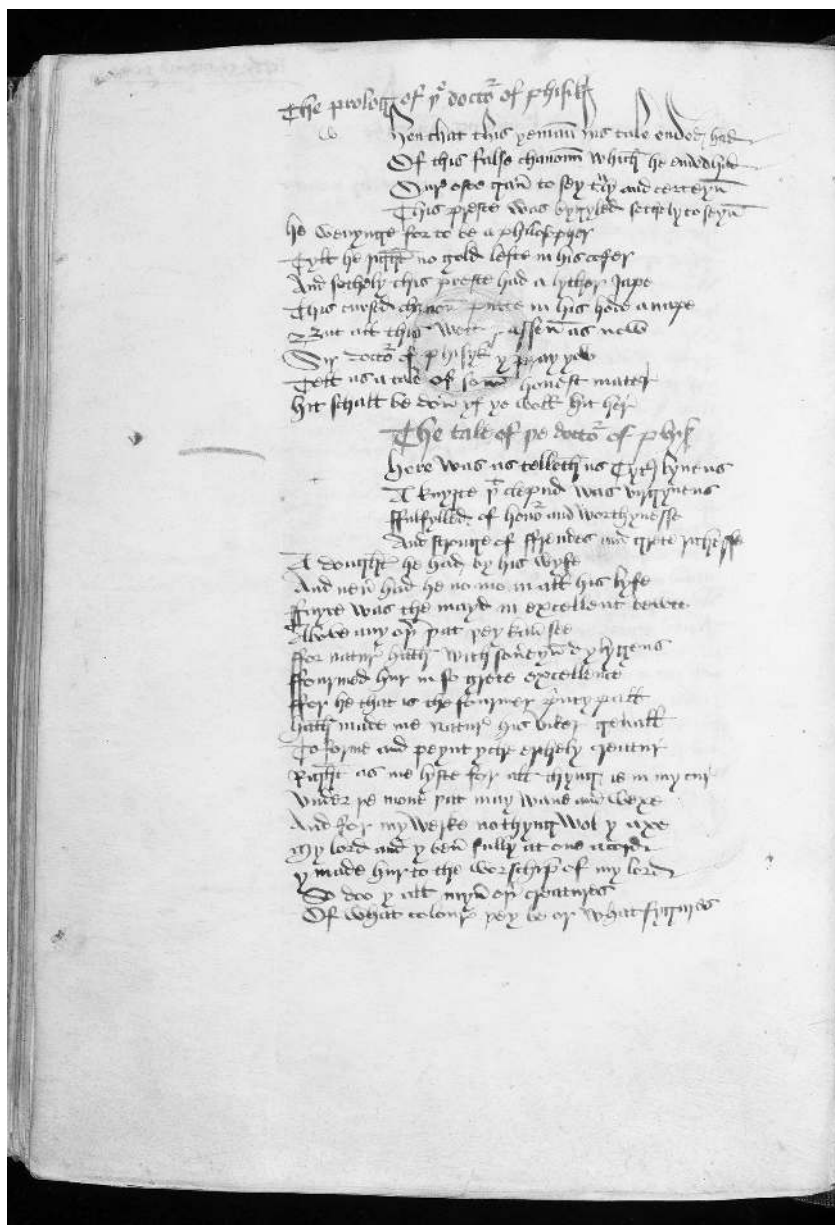
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Figure 1.1 Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 181, f. 195ᵛ: a spurious link to Geoffrey
Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, on parchment with a hole patched.
© The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge.

Also, the scribe had some notions of the visual dignity which would befit the poem: he flourished the ascending strokes of letters **h**, **l** and **d** on the top line of the prologue ('When that this yeman his tale ended had') into what he had first left empty as the top margin, and the page would thus have framed the poem with panache. Likewise, the margins empty of annotation might not set out *how* to read the words but they suggest that they are worth reading: they present the poem with clarity, give it space. And the scribe had other ideas about the layout, even if some are evident more in their defects than their achievement. Of the headings for the Prologue and Tale in red, the second was written over a prompt now erased; there was forethought or design here. Indeed, there were competing designs in play: the first heading was added in the top margin and overlaps the decorated ascenders. And there were prompts too for two coloured initials, a large **W** and a **T**; but the coloured ink never arrived. Some elements of the material page exist only in the immaterial realm of intentions: ideas about the thing and not the thing itself.

Last but not least, there are ideas about the text. There is something odd here, for the Prologue to the Physician's Tale is (you might know) not by Chaucer himself: some anonymous person invented it. This invention suggests the sorts of textual variation assumed to be ubiquitous in the material conditions of transmission for English poems at the time. It also, though, suggests ideas that shape this book: an idea of the completeness of *The Canterbury Tales* as alternating Prologues and Tales, an immaterial concept of the work that is more complete than the fragments that existed. There is a conception of Chaucer's style, too, in the idioms and rhymes (such as rhyming 'putte in his hode an ape' with *jape* or 'Iape') that echo Chaucer's genuine Prologues. Whoever wrote these lines held in mind a sense of *The Canterbury Tales* as a coherent whole.[4] This writer was probably not the scribe of the copy here, for twenty other books also have this Prologue, or parts of it, and this scribe probably did not know that this Prologue, along with three others in his copy, were not by Chaucer; he copies them with nothing to suggest that he was cobbling together exemplars or making things up.[5] His unspoken assumption was that he must copy what he found. And his copy is very close to those twenty others:

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[4] Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 181, f. 195ᵛ (with the word-division 'a nape'). See Bowers, 52; Manly-Rickert, ii, 316, and vii, 3; *Tales*, I.3389–90, I.4201–2, VII.439–40, VIII.1312–3; and, for echoes in other spurious links, n. 160 in Chapter 6.
[5] Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 181, ff. 65ʳ, 118ʳ, 208ʳ (reproduced on *LMES,* s.n.). He does lack a space for a large initial in the link on f. 118ʳ.

where he diverges he makes the same slips of the pen as his peers.[6] And even in one unique divergence from the common text of this Prologue, there is evidence of an effort to copy:

> When that this yeman his tale ended had
> Of this false chanoun which he ended had

When he, or the scribe whose exemplar he transcribed, repeated two words 'ended had' by dittography from the end of the first line to the next, he was not idly inventing but was so fixated on the text that he reproduced it twice. He strives too much to render on this page what exists on other pages elsewhere, for his material book gets its value not by itself but by its linguistic likeness to other books and to what is supposed to be Chaucer's work.

Finally, though, this scribe *does* omit the usual last couplet of this Prologue, as other manuscripts have it,[7] and as a result he ends with two lines which hint at one other dimension of this text:

> Tell us a tale of som honest matere
> Hit schall be don yf ye woll hit here

The Host asks the Physician for 'honest matere' and he means not a book but a story. *Matter* meant all sorts of clutter, but in literary use it was the common term – adopted from scholastic science and commentary – not for the material form of texts but for their intellectual content.[8] This 'matere' will be even less material in *The Canterbury Tales*, for the Tale will be told orally, heard aurally ('Tell us', 'ye woll it here'): as the couplet resounds, matter is what you hear in the ear. That is Chaucer's fiction about the pilgrims telling tales on the road to Canterbury; it is also likely true that people did 'here' this Tale read aloud from this manuscript. It was common to read aloud thus, as Joyce Coleman has shown.[9] On the

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[6] I.e., 'gan to sey', also in Cologny, Fondation Bodmer, MS 48, f. 150ʳ, and BodL, MS Bodley 414, p. 255, instead of 'gan seie' in other MSS (Bowers, 48, l. 9); and 'to seyn', also in CUL, MS Ii.3.26, f. 167ᵛ, and BL, MS Egerton 2863, f. 137ᵛ, instead of 'forto sayn' in other MSS (Bowers, 48, l. 10).

[7] Cf. e.g., BodL, MS Bodley 414, p. 255: 'Seid this Doctour / and his tale began anon | Now good men coth he herkneth euerichon'.

[8] *MED*, matere (*n.*), 5(c), 5(d); *OED*, matter (*n.*¹), 9.a. Nicholas Perkins, *The Gift of Narrative in Medieval England* (Manchester University Press, 2021), 213–14, stresses this sense; Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown, 'Introduction', in their *Lydgate Matters: Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–11 (2), stress its use for everyday objects.

[9] Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). On such traditions more widely, see Christopher Cannon and Matthew Rubery, 'Introduction to "Aurality and Literacy"', *PMLA*, 135 (2020), 350–6.

previous page, in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, the servant of an alchemist reports that some of his master's dark art has never been written down; the philosophers would keep it secret and 'Ne wryte hit in no boke in no maner.'[10] Not all knowledge is written, not all text material.

The plain materials of this book, then, are traces of immaterial traditions, intentions, assumptions, activities and performances – ideas and processes that are not easy to see but that we should not overlook. Scribes were, of course, trained and paid and engaged in making material things – what Derek Pearsall stressed was 'the world of Hard Work'.[11] But their work was also informed by immaterial thinking – a world of ideas, of the hard words they transcribed, of complex conventions and long habits. Unlike the priest in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, as the Host sums it up here, we must not be 'bygyled' by trusting their matter: like the canon they exercised their 'craft' to shape matter for their own ends, and this craft-based thinking is where the magic lies. The purpose of *Immaterial Texts* is to reconstruct some of those immaterial notions of the scribes of *The Canterbury Tales* and of other English poetry and prose in manuscripts in the fifteenth century.

There are three senses in which these ideas are immaterial. First, this book stresses that the material manuscripts are informed – given form – by ideas of the scribes, and of readers, patrons, authors and their wider community. It stresses in general the force of minds over the handling of matter: the 'hylomorphic' processes of forethought or planning. It uncovers some of those ideas in particular: for instance, the convention that pages are mostly rectangles, whereas the skins used for manuscripts were not; that reading will be continuous and sequential, beyond the distractions of the margins; that one copy of a text will have the same words as another, whereas in handwriting there was no need for this to be so. (This list is selective; other such principles could be uncovered.) It stresses the presence of such ideas in forming manuscripts of English literature.

Second, among these ideas, *Immaterial Texts* stresses that scribes and their readers conceptualized the texts themselves as immaterial entities, not only nor perfectly available in material books but experienced in processes of reading, aloud or otherwise. (Those reading processes obviously used

brains, bodies and sound waves that were also, strictly speaking, 'matter', but that matter no longer survives for us to study, and is not co-extensive with the books that do survive.) That is, the makers of manuscripts in English in the fifteenth century were often less invested in the materiality of the text than in the text as something immaterial that exists beyond its exemplars, often in reading that goes little prompted or recorded in its copies – in the head or ear.

Third, the scribes' ideas – conventions, traditions, ideas about texts – are themselves, ironically, immaterial, largely absent from our written evidence. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century scribes passed on their skills by word of mouth for the most part, and if they articulated their hylomorphism, their cultural conventions, their concept of textuality at all, they would not have done in these terms which English did not yet possess. Indeed, some of their principles or conventions were ones that users of the western codex then and now hold unconsciously and are almost invisible; some are so ordinary they seem obvious. But even everyday thinking is worth exploring, whether exposing or just acknowledging. *Immaterial Texts* therefore excavates what the folklorist Henry Glassie called 'the wordless experience' of people who never wrote down their thinking, ideas only 'cumbersomely formed in language but gracefully shaped into artifacts'.[12] (Of course, the artefacts made by scribes are not 'wordless', but the words are not usually their own nor about the artefacts.) These ideas shared among craftspeople are what the roof carpenter and philosopher Arthur Lochmann calls 'un trésor immatériel' ('an immaterial treasure').[13] This book quests for some of that treasure.

The Material Text

These immaterial ideas offer ways to extend one important mode of literary criticism: the study of 'material texts'. This is the argument that we better understand literature from the past when we understand its physical and visual forms. This approach had long been pursued in traditions of codicology, palaeography and bibliography, but those fields had become disconnected from other parts of literary scholarship. In the last thirty years, attention to the material text has become a standard

[12] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 44.
[13] Arthur Lochmann, *La vie solide: La charpente comme éthique du faire* (Paris: Payot, 2019), 155.

method of criticism again.[14] It began, as Roger Chartier put it, with a rejection of 'the abstraction of the text' and a recognition that the text was experienced in ways influenced by its social, physical and visual setting in different media.[15] This led to a renewed focus on relating material form to textual content. The stance is summed up in magisterial dicta by D. F. McKenzie and N. Katherine Hayles: 'forms effect meaning', and '*the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean.*'[16]

More recently, in one historical enquiry, Adam Smyth has queried the search for the meaning in material features. He warns that this method 'has grown so pervasive among literary critics that there is a danger it will become naturalised as a seemingly inevitable and therefore under-interrogated set of interests and questions'.[17] Instead, he explores some places where material features – for instance, binding fragments that echo the texts they bind by accident – create meaning that seems likely to be unintended or do not seem meaningful at all.[18] The problem of meaning is raised by books such as the drab copy of the Physician's Prologue (above). For instance, there might be a suggestive synergy between the patched-up poem and the patched-up parchment. But it seems unlikely that the scribe intended readers of the book to spot those echoes. Although he will have noticed the patch when he wrote over it, even if he bought the sheet pre-patched from a parchmenter, here and elsewhere he seems not to highlight the damage to his pages. For instance, he writes over thin, oily 'plaques' in the page that make his ink run or ignores holes.[19] He seems rather uninterested in the materiality of the book. Rather than convey meaning, his handling of matter reflects instead (I suggested) his ideas about the rectangle of the page or about paratexts, even when the ideas were not

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[14] For a surprising claim that this approach is still neglected, see Stephen G. Nichols, 'What Is a Manuscript Culture? Technologies of the Manuscript Matrix', in Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, eds., *The Medieval Manuscript: Cultural Approaches* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 34–59 (34–5).

[15] Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), iv, viii, 85.

[16] D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13; N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 25 (her italics). McKenzie's dictum is frequently misquoted, as noted by Alan Galey, 'The Human Presence in Digital Artefacts', in Willard McCarty, ed., *Text and Genre in Reconstruction: Effects of Digitalization on Ideas, Behaviours, Products and Institutions* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2010), 93–117 (110–14).

[17] Adam Smyth, *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 175.

[18] Ibid., 12, 169–71.

[19] For holes, see Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 181, e.g., ff. 46^{v}, 186^{r-v}, 193^{v} and among numerous plaques, see, e.g., ironically, one under a line referring to 'This hole': f. 191^{r} (*Tales*, VIII.1164).

realized well, and his notions of the text as some 'whole' that transcends the holey state Chaucer left it in. The scribe wanted people to read the poem, not to look too closely at the book. Rather than material forms shaping meaning, here concepts and intentions – not quite 'semiotic' meanings – shape the material.

The ways how this occurs are theorized in a stirring study of early modern print by Juliet Fleming. She notes that the ideas of Jacques Derrida might encourage critics to look again to writing's physical properties, but that his thought would also – a typical paradox – refuse to fetishize that material text. His ideas, she warns, help us to 'resist the romance with matter that is currently turning literary criticism towards a love of things'.[20] As she notes, for Derrida language should be studied in its local, material instantiations as writing; it is only through writing that language operates as the system he sees it to be. Hence the importance of the careful description of material texts by sciences such as epigraphy, palaeography and so on. But conversely, because of Derrida's interest in *différance*, the way that meaning refers elsewhere and is deferred, Fleming warns that:

> It will not even be enough to bear in mind what typographers have always known . . .: that texts are interpreted by the way they are presented and transmitted, and that their 'forms effect meaning'. For writing is an ideal object, which is to say that any local instance of it (say, the occurrence of the letter 's') will only be itself (only be 's' and an instance of writing) if it can be repeated elsewhere – repeated in different fonts, hands, materials, and styles while still retaining, however minimally, the recognizable form of 's'. Writing in the narrow sense is an action that is undertaken within the nested, institutional, and already given codes that allow it to appear, each time, as the relation of the singular instance to *what is already there and equally already gone*. So . . . this was not an invitation to think – in however complex or prudent a manner – simply about matter.[21]

Derrida, as Fleming parses him, reminds us that the material forms are legible only because of some 'deferral' or reference to immaterial ideas beyond themselves, whether whole systems of conventions – if nebulous, never fully present – or particular textual forms. That theoretical claim entails a methodological point about how to study so-called material texts. As Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie have urged, one must attend not

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[20] Juliet Fleming, *Cultural Graphology: Writing after Derrida* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 23–4. Cf. the emphasis on materiality in her inspirational *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (London: Reaktion, 2001), e.g., 19–22.
[21] Fleming, *Cultural Graphology*, 115; see also 8, 113.

only to 'the book in your hand' but also 'the one in your head'.[22] A scholarly focus on materiality must keep in sight the way that such material practices are made possible by and gesture to immaterial systems, ideas, conventions, texts beyond themselves.

By paying such attention, *Immaterial Texts* offers a historical excavation of those immaterial texts – cultural conventions, literary attitudes – that informed the making of one group of books. Those books are copies of works in English, primarily poetry and learned or imaginative prose, between the late 1300s and early 1500s. This book argues that the people who copy these manuscripts sometimes show little regard for the material form of texts. Indeed, there are places where they even seem vexed by the material; but overall there are moments where they use their materials largely to refer, or defer, to an immaterial set of conventions or texts or practices. They were interested in the 'immaterial treasure' of craft conventions as processes with a logic of their own, often in disregard of material necessity; and they were interested in the text if not as an ideal thing – for they saw its flaws – then as an 'abstraction'; and in its reception as something not limited by the materials of its transmission. They of course relied on the material book but they also treated it instrumentally as a vehicle for ideas about books and for that ideational thing that is language. Those ideas, assumptions and attitudes need capturing too as part of the story of material texts.

Materials and Makers

A focus on the power of makers' ideas also offers a different emphasis from another important strand of twenty-first-century literary and cultural studies. These are the overlapping and, to the uninitiated, similar traditions of 'vibrant materialism' or 'object-oriented ontologies', developed by thinkers such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Graham Harman and Timothy Morton. These philosophies claim that matter and objects not merely are tools subject to human power but have their own agency to shape human action. This is not a naive view that objects have conscious 'will' but a subtle understanding of the 'agency' of things as something like their 'force and influence'. And that agency is understood to be 'distributed' and to occur only when one agent interacts with another in 'inter-agential'

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[22] Arthur Bahr and Alexandra Gillespie, 'Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and the Literary Text', *ChRev.*, 47 (2013), 346–60 (350–1).

interventions.[23] For instance, the presence of a mountain will influence what sort of journey a person takes, but only when that person decides to make a journey round it. This understanding of the agency of materials has opened fissiparous debates among archaeologists about whether the arte-facts of the past were forged either by 'hylomorphism' or by 'morphogen-esis', as they are sometimes called.[24] Some, studying the effects of environment on culture over enormous timescales, have rejected the idea that human beings impose their ideas on the material world – 'hylomorph-ism'. Instead, the philosophy of agential objects suggests that the material thing 'precedes' the ideas of the people who fashion or use it and shapes those ideas so profoundly as to be an 'agent' in human culture. Thus mind is not imposed on matter but is formed through the processes of encoun-tering matter – 'morphogenesis'. This theory is most movingly expounded by Tim Ingold: he describes the knapping of flint hand-axes, an apparent marker of prehistoric human skill, less as 'intelligent design' than 'instinct' in responding to the intrinsic properties of stone.[25] It is a powerful vision of human dependence on the environment and on resources that are taken too much for granted today.[26]

The power of agential objects has been explored well in the cultural history of pre-Reformation Britain.[27] These ideas from archaeology and anthropology could more often frame the archaeology of the book, the anthropology of its use, for there are loose but clear parallels between statements about objects having agency and the central maxim of studying material texts, that 'forms effect meaning'. For instance, A. R. Bennett has written with conceptual precision about the interactions of animal,

[23] The theory is well summarized with reference to this period by Anne F. Harris, 'From Stone to Statue: The Geology and Art of English Alabaster Panels', in Jessica Brantley, Stephen Perkinson and Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, eds., *Reassessing Alabaster Sculpture in Medieval England* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 37–63 (38).

[24] E.g., debates between Elizabeth DeMarrais and the other contributors in Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew, eds., *Rethinking Materiality: The Engagement of Mind with the Material World* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2004), or in the journal *Archaeological Dialogues* running from Tim Flohr Sørensen, 'Hammers and Nails. A Response to Lindstrøm and to Olsen and Witmore', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 23 (2016), 115–27, to Artur Ribeiro, 'Against Object Agency 2. Continuing the Discussion with Sørensen', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 26 (2019), 39–44.

[25] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 35–7, 50–2, 55. See similarly Nicole Boivin, *Material Cultures, Material Minds* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 23.

[26] Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 15–16, highlights the value of this theory for ecological and political critique.

[27] E.g., Ben Jervis, *Pottery and Social Life in Medieval England: Towards a Relational Approach* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 28, 30–1; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7, 22–3.