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978-1-108-84057-6 — Paper in Medieval England
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Paper and Culture in Medieval England
An Introduction

Upon a thikke palfrey, paper-whit,
With sadel red, enbrouded with delyt,
Of gold the barres up enbosede hye,
Sit Dido, all in gold and perre wrye;
And she as fair as is the bryghte morwe,
That heleth syke folk of nyghtes sorwe
(Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women: The Legend of Dido*, ll. 1198–1202)

Why paper? Chaucer chooses paper and other exquisite objects to define one of the most significant moments in his late fourteenth-century version of the love story between Dido and Aeneas.[1] A sturdy horse as white as paper carries Dido to meet Aeneas and his retinue in order to go hunting. A red saddle, Chaucer notes, adorns the horse and is delightfully embroidered with embossed bars of gold. Dido is covered in precious stones, and gold and is as beautiful as a bright morning. Chaucer associates paper with rich embroideries, gold and gems. In this association, paper stands out as an unusual material for comparison, both for the novelty of the lexical choice and the adaptation of the source. Chaucer reads paper as a precious, beautiful and luxurious material, rather than a utilitarian, cheap and worthless surface, creating a surprising contrast for a modern reader who often expects medieval paper to be a serviceable writing tool. Chaucer achieves this effect intentionally by substantially reinterpreting Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*.[2] A close analysis of the poet's adaptation of the *Aeneid* will

[1] On the context and the interpretation of the poem, see Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) and Carolyn P. Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2014).

[2] See Amanda Holton, *The Sources of Chaucer's Poetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 121. It is now accepted that Virgil's *Aeneid* had a significant role in shaping 'The Legend of Dido', even though it is recognized that here and elsewhere in *The Legend of Good Women* Chaucer uses Ovid's *Heroide* and possibly fourteenth-century Italian vernacular translations of both Virgil and Ovid. It is unlikely that Chaucer used the translation of Andrea Lancia at this point of the story; see Andrea Lancia, trans.,

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help to understand further why Chaucer used paper at this specific point of the story, and my approach to paper in this book.

Chaucer's version of the story abbreviates Virgil's text substantially, retaining key moments leading up to the appearance of Dido, but suggestively shifting the mood of the narrative in what follows. Chaucer begins by relating to his reader Dido's sleepless and tormented night and explains how this night brought clarity to her feelings for Aeneas; he then swiftly moves to the beginning of the dawn, rising from the sea: 'The dawenyng up-rist out of the se'.[3] This line translates fairly literarily Virgil's mythological personification, 'Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit',[4] and pointedly indicates the beginning of a new day and the premonition of a change in the story, which brings joy to counter the previous night's pain of love. Dido's feelings and emotions speak through the movement between the night and the new day before the reader is told how Dido met Aeneas. This moment is substantially different from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Virgil describes the queen lingering in her room, almost delaying the beginning of the hunt. The emphasis of the description is on the fierce horse kept waiting with the retinue of Punic princes. When Dido arrives, she is surrounded by a great crowd. Dido does not sit on a white horse when the reader encounters her, nor is she dressed in white and gold. In Virgil, Dido's horse is not white, rather it is decorated with red and gold ('ostroque insignis et auro / stat sonipes'),[5] which are a fitting complement to Dido's purple dress with a gold brooch ('aurea purpuream subnectit fibula vestem').[6] These are the colours of the emperor and the wealthy. Both Dido and her horse wear the distinctive insignia of magnificence in traditional Roman hues. Chaucer reworks these lines by describing Dido on her horse, and offers to the reader an ekphrastic description of a powerful portrait of the queen, shifting the dominant colours of the section from purple and gold to white, red and gold. The horse, strikingly,

Compilazione della Eneide di Virgilio, ed. by Pietro Fanfani (Florence: Stamperia sulle Logge del Grano, 1851). For further discussion on sources, see Louis Brewer Hall, 'Chaucer and the Dido-and-Aeneas Story', *Medieval Studies*, 25 (1963), 148–159; Frank, *Chaucer*, pp. 57–78; and, for additional directions, 'Explanatory Notes', in *Riverside*, p. 1067. On Chaucer and Ovid, see Sanford Brown Meech, 'Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the *Heroide*', *PMLA,* 45 (1930), 110–128; further discussed with an updated critical apparatus in Kenneth Patrick Clarke, *Chaucer and Italian Textuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 9–46.

[3] Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women: The Legend of Dido*, l. 1187, in *Riverside* (all quotations are from this edition).

[4] R. A. B. Mynors, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis: Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), IV, l. 129.

[5] *Ibid.*, IV, ll. 134–135. [6] *Ibid.*, IV, l. 139.

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becomes white, with a red embroidered saddle, and Dido is covered in gold and precious stones.

Chaucer evokes majesty with the glittering of the gold, the preciousness of stones and the brightness of light. Paper sharpens this effect, impressing upon the reader the idea that Dido is enveloped by light rather than by people. Chaucer uses paper as a reflective surface which enhances the beauty of the queen. He demonstrates that he had a good sense of the optical properties of paper and its ability to reflect light, as well as being aware of the effect.[7] Of course, parchment reflects light too. It is intriguing to note, however, that Chaucer's choice of comparison is white paper, a rough material. Physics explains that an uneven surface has the effect of a diffuse reflection; that is, the light hits the object and shines back in lots of different directions. A diffuse reflection would create the impression that Chaucer is evoking in these lines. Dido's arrival is almost a rebirth: the queen emerges from the beams of light that paper creates like the dawn emerging from the sea. Chaucer enhances the juxtaposition with the previous lines, 'so priketh hire this newe joly wo',[8] and the closing line of the description, 'That heleth syke folk of nyghtes sorwe'.[9] The oxymoronic connotations of the 'newe joly wo' contrasts the dark night of pain with the morning of joy, but then the new day will heal those who are sick of the night's sorrow, because with the new day there is light.

Chaucer's scene is emotionally charged. The splendour of the appearance of Dido juxtaposes the sadness of Dido's spirit, but also signals a new beginning. Even though the tone is solemn in both versions of the story, the mood substantially differs. That change is set by the colours and the objects which define the passages themselves. One of the crucial elements of Chaucer's description is the colour of the horse, a detail that Virgil does not mention, but that Chaucer introduces. The horse is not just white, but 'paper-whit'. The association of the colour of paper, the light at the beginning of a new day and the brightness of the attire of the queen is brought together by one material: paper. Paper in these lines is imagined as bright and luxurious. Chaucer evokes it for its chromatic properties and places it among other wonderful, luxury objects.

[7] Peter Brown investigates the influence of *perspectiva* or 'the medieval science of optic' on Chaucer and demonstrates that Chaucer was aware of medieval theories of optical space in his poetry. Brown considers, for example, Robert Grosseteste (*c.*1168–1253), Alhacen (*c.*965–*c.*1039) and Roger Bacon (*c.*1220–*c.*1292), who discuss in different ways the properties of light and how objects reflect it. See his *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 41–74.

[8] Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, l. 1192.

[9] *Ibid.*, l. 1202.

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The way in which Chaucer imagines and uses paper is very different from the current scholarly understanding of what paper meant in the medieval period; indeed, this episode defies modern expectations of what paper ought to represent. Chaucer invites us to read paper as a sophisticated object, used here for skilful rhetorical effect, rather than a poor tool for writing. Was this image, a poetic innovation, legible by Chaucer's audience? In order to be so, it required multiple levels of familiarity with paper by both author and audience, thus strongly suggesting that modernity needs to rethink and broaden the way in which it discusses medieval paper, and its cultural value in medieval society. Scholarly discourses on the arrival of paper to England are shaped by the belief that paper is a cheap substitution for parchment; Chaucer tells us that this discourse needs to be corrected.

Chaucer initiates a story of medieval paper in England which is multi-faceted and needs a clearer articulation to take into consideration the affordances of paper as a material, an object in its own right and a technology. Paper is a material when it is used for writing upon, for wrapping, or for any of its physical affordances. It can also be imagined as a thing, as an object; when its use relates to perception, that is the way in which paper was seen, understood or sensed. Paper is a technology, the product of innovative knowledge, which can also be improved by new techniques and methods.[10] There are no hard boundaries to the ways in which medieval society and culture understood these three definitions of paper. Chaucer was familiar with paper as a writing material, he then imagined it as an object, and yet, as I explain further in Chapter 2, that object would not look white had it not been for the know-how of the papermakers who made it so. Affordance, then, shapes the complex ways in which paper can be studied and investigated.

Paper was a cultural product with its own connections and, at the same time, an instrumental material in defining that culture. Latour's actor–network theory cemented much of my thinking on this idea of cultural interconnection determined by a web of affordances, to which I will return below.[11] However, my thoughts on agency diverge. Latour observes that

[10] For an overview of the many medieval technological innovations, from glasses to paper, see Lynn Townsend White, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); and, more recently, Leonard C. Bruno, *The Tradition of Technology: Landmarks of Western Technology in the Collections of the Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1995) and Elaine Treharne and Claude Willan, *Text Technologies: A History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[11] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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an object can be an 'actant', that is have some kind of agency or influence on an actor.[12] The term 'agency' has troubled me over the years, especially in arguments that put agency onto the object itself. Brown has extensively reviewed the subject–object dichotomy and the debate on locating agency, presenting a balanced overview to which I defer.[13] I have tried to work with this debate in my own conceptualization of paper and its effect, and I propose that the concept of agency may be supplemented or substituted by the concept of affordance.

Cave explains that affordance 'necessarily implies agency, intention, purpose, but (initially at least) as a potential to be realized'.[14] Agency in this context is not the ability of the object to make humans do things, but the ability of humans to select and use certain affordances.[15] This idea extends Gell's argument that agency resides with the maker of the objects and its social interactions rather than with the object itself,[16] and redirects 'our attention from the materiality of objects to the properties of materials'.[17] Paper does not actively do things, but inspires and invigorates accomplishments through how it is seen or experienced.[18] The polarity between object–agency and subject–agency is neutralized by the idea of the affordances of paper.

Affordance is a concept which was devised by James J. Gibson in his work on cognitive psychology and visual perception. Gibson argues:

> When the constant properties of constant objects are perceived (the shape, size, color, texture, composition, motion, animation, and position relative to other objects), the observer can go on to detect their *affordances*. I have coined this word as a substitute for *value*, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What they *afford* the observer, after all, depends on their properties.[19]

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 71. Latour was heavily influenced by Greimas' narratological categories which differentiated actors, actant and figures on discursive structures. See A. J. Greimas, 'Actants, Actors, and Figures', in his *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* (London: Pinter, 1987), pp. 106–120. For a review and the discussion, see Brown, *Other Things*, pp. 171–172.
[13] Brown, *Other Things*, pp. 162–169.
[14] Cave, *Thinking with Literature*, p. 51.
[15] This idea of how books can be read as trophies and tools, for example, has been admirably discussed by Leah Price in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). In her discussion, Price does not consider affordance, but uses 'reception theory' and the reader's perspective to investigate the book as an object, as well as its circulation and handling in Victorian Britain.
[16] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
[17] Ingold, *Being Alive*, p. 29.
[18] James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 26.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 285.

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For Gibson, affordance is about perception and selection or choice: 'the information registered about objects and events becomes only what is needed, not all that could be obtained. Those features of a thing are noticed which distinguish it from other things that it is not – but not *all* the features that distinguish it from *everything* that it is not'.[20] In essence, affordance is about use and how individuals choose to use an object, but it can be extended to include 'not only the uses of an object but also the object itself viewed in the light of those uses'.[21] Gibson argues that 'an affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective–objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer'.[22]

Gibson's contribution to the subjective–objective debate demonstrates that an environment ought to be understood as an occasion for action. As Withagen *et al.* clarify, 'action possibilities exist by virtue of a relation between the properties of the environment and the actor . . . This means that the same object can afford different behavior to different animals, and even to the same animal at different moments in time'.[23] Withagen *et al.* argue that Gibson's theory of affordance could be usefully expanded to 'explain why animals utilize certain affordances and not others at a certain moment in time. This is all the more true because a single object generally offers multiple action possibilities to an individual agent . . . implying that selecting affordances is a ubiquitous and continuous process'.[24] In this continuous process, affordance and choice are important, because the uses of paper in England are manifold. It is through this lens that I investigate paper in this book, steering the discussion away from the 'parchment *versus* paper' debates in manuscript studies to a holistic approach which differs substantially from the current discourse on paper studies.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 286.
[21] Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 48.
[22] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), p. 129.
[23] Rob Withagen, Harjo J. de Poel, Duarte Araújo and Gert-Jan Pepping, 'Affordances Can Invite Behavior: Reconsidering the Relationship between Affordances and Agency', *New Ideas in Psychology*, 30 (2012), p. 251.
[24] *Ibid*, p. 252.

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Paper in Culture

Modern readings of medieval sources often argue that medieval society was sceptical of paper and perceived it as a problematic material. Scholars substantiate these arguments by quoting the writing of Peter the Venerable (a Benedictine monk at Cluny, d. 1156), who allegedly condemns paper in Jewish book production; and the edict of Frederick II, which prohibits the adoption of paper in his chancery in 1231. Scholars also refer to the 1480 Statutes of the University of Cambridge, which denounce paper books as items of little value; and refer to Johannes Trithemius, abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Spohnheim, who praises parchment for its durability and condemns paper for its fragility in his *De laude scriptorum* (1492).[25] These historical instances are, however, usually presented in a vacuum, removed from their social, historical and economical contexts, which inevitably results in claims that paper in medieval Europe was considered 'an inferior material'.[26] This argument is a rather crude assessment of a richer transnational phenomenon demanding a more sympathetic approach and a careful consideration of the economic, social, political and cultural implications which enabled the introduction and acceptance of paper in the West. I will return to these sources in the following chapters to reflect on the cultural and social significances of these examples, because they offer opportunities for multiple readings and interpretations. In the late medieval period, paper was a new material to which society needed to adjust. Sometimes it is accepted with scepticism; on other occasions it is embraced with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, its stable growth shows that what seem to be two opposite, almost polar, positions are often united and should invite modern scholars to think differently about paper. These positions also stress the need to reconsider the role of those countries, in this case England, which do not invest in papermaking

[25] For a starting point, see Robert I. Burns, 'Revolution in Europe; Crusader Valencia's Paper Industry: A Technological and Behavioral Breakthrough', *Pacific Historical Review*, 50 (1981), 1–30. Martha Rust also thoroughly peruses the sources of this narrative in her 'Love Stories on Paper in Middle English Verse Love Epistles', *Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History* 15 (2012), 101–144. See also John Gagné, 'Paper World: The Materiality of Loss in the Pre-Modern Ages', in *Approaches to the History of Written Culture*, ed. by M. Lyons and Rita Marquilhas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 57–72; and on Trithemeus, Paul Needham, 'Book Production on Paper and Vellum in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries', in *Papier im mittelalterlichen Europa: Herstellung und Gebrauch*, ed. by Carla Meyer, Sandra Schultz and Bernd Schneidmüller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 247–274.

[26] Erik Kwakkel and Rodney M. Thomson, 'Codicology', in *The European Book in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 9.

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until the late fifteenth century, but clearly have a role in the consumption of medieval paper.

The history of medieval paper has been told from the main places of its European production. Briquet, in his introduction to *Les filigranes*, explains that the premises of his investigation on paper in Europe are based on two main questions: when paper was first used in Europe and where it was first produced in Switzerland. This rationale was then applied more expansively to those European countries which established paper mills up to the seventeenth century, excluding Turkey, Greece, Russia, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Britain gets a special mention in his *avant-propos*, but it is discarded from the investigation because of the relative absence of evidence about the paper-making industry.

> Nous avons également laissé de côté l'Angleterre, parce que l'industrie papetière ne s'y est pas développée de bonne heure, malgré l'existence durant quelques années (de 1496 à 1507) du battoir de John Tate à Herford [*sic*].[27]
>
> We have equally set aside England, because the industry of papermaking had not developed early, despite the fact that during those years (from 1496 to 1507) John Tate had his paper mill in Hertford.

The mammoth effort that Briquet had undertaken easily explains the need to be selective in his approach to the origin and subsequent development of papermaking in Europe, and yet this decision had a long-lasting effect on how paper is perceived across Europe. More than a century has passed since Briquet's publication, and some countries are still regarded as peripheral to the dissemination and use of medieval paper. In this sense, I suggest a dislocation of our approach to paper studies from close analysis of where paper was made to where it was used, how it got there and how it was adopted. The diffusion of paper was the result of trial and error which built resilience in the development of the technology itself. I argue that paper is a new material facilitating new developments for those using it. Cultural acceptance works at more than one level and leads to the absorption of new ideas, and thus the dissemination of new practices.

Chaucer and other literary authors disrupt the narrative that cultural histories of paper have so far professed. The compound 'paper-whit' (of course only hyphenated by editors) is a neologism that Chaucer introduces into the English language at the end of the fourteenth century. Its first and unique attestation in Middle English can be found in the lines

[27] Briquet, vol. 1, p. xiii.

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(cited above) from 'The Legend of Dido'.[28] It is then sporadically in use during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until it appears more frequently in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not exclusively in literary constructions.[29] Lexical ingenuity, however, is not in itself extraordinary, because cultural contacts enable this type of linguistic usage. As I discuss in Chapter 1, evidence of paper use in England goes back to the end of the thirteenth century and so Chaucer had opportunities to see and use paper in England and in his travel during the later fourteenth century. What is remarkable, though, is Chaucer's choice of paper as a term of comparison. This choice indicates that paper has a place in his cultural environment, an importance that he shared with his audience. Paper is an object charged with significance.

Analysing the process by which paper became a cultural touchstone in the late medieval period requires scholars to shift the focus of their enquiry from paper as a writing or printing tool to paper as a commodity.[30] The success of paper as a writing support goes hand in hand with a range of other uses and cultural perceptions which need careful consideration. It is also important that any inquiry into the technology of paper is decoupled from post-medieval printing economies. Eisenstein's important work on the profound changes in communication that the arrival of the printing press in the West brought about has consolidated the understanding that printing is a paradigm-shifting technology. It has also contributed, perhaps unintentionally, to the scholarly perception that firmly associates paper with the printing press, and to the establishment of an opposition between printing and handwritten culture.[31] This antagonism, which has now been challenged, is still present in current academic debates in book and literary histories.[32] As Gitelman notes: 'The history of communication typically defines print by distinguishing it from manuscript, yet there is considerable poverty in that gesture'.[33] What can be interpreted as competing technologies for some can be complementary tools or just a different

[28] *MED*, 'papir-e' (n., b). [29] *OED*, 'paper-white' (adj.).

[30] John Bidwell, 'Study of Paper as Evidence, Artefact, and Commodity', in *The Book Encompassed: Studies in Twentieth Century Bibliography*, ed. by Peter Davison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 69–82. For a recent debate on paper as commodity, see Lothar Müller, *White Magic: The Age of Paper*, trans. Jessica Spengler (Boston: Polity, 2014), pp. 23–51.

[31] See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[32] As David McKitterick explains and problematizes in his *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), but on this topic see the excellent introduction in Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents, Sign, Storage, Transmission* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 1–20.

[33] Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, p. 7.

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option for others. Equally, the technology of paper was not developed to enable printing; it was in use in the West for more than three hundred years prior to the arrival of print (and for far longer in the East), and by the middle of the fifteenth century it had become a sturdy material of choice. This book will not look at the coexistence of printing and handwritten technologies, because the significance and extent of that investigation warrants a separate study, but this will be an attempt to reconsider the importance of paper across cultural practices within medieval handwritten culture.

It is often argued that the use of paper in the late medieval period contributed to reducing the cost of books and thus enables the spread of literacy.[34] But the extent to which this is true requires further analysis. Does paper fulfil a need or create one? Chapter 1 will consider how the investment in this technology enabled a process of slow and firm integration of paper, encouraging people to use it in a wide range of ways either to fulfil a need already in existence or to create new uses; for example, in transportation of goods, medical practices and making books. Chaucer does not seem to be interested in either literacy or cost when he writes of paper, strongly suggesting that there is more to paper use than its impact on book production, and yet rarely are the discussions about paper in literary book production informed by discoveries and research in cognate fields such as economics or diplomatic.

Our knowledge of medieval European paper has steadily increased over the past thirty years, but important milestones were achieved in the previous 150 years too.[35] Pan-European paper histories have also

[34] For an initial discussion, see M. B. Parkes, 'The Literacy of the Laity', in *The Medieval World*, ed. by David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London: Aldus Books, 1973), pp. 555–577, but the literature on this topic is vast. See, for example, Donald Roy Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 63–67; R. J. Lyall, 'Material: The Paper Revolution', in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475*, ed. by J. Griffiths and D. Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 11–29; Erik Kwakkel, 'A New Type of Book for a New Type of Reader: The Emergence of Paper in Vernacular Book Production', *The Library*, 7.4 (2003), 219–248.

[35] A perusal of the excellent bibliography by Schmidt and Sobek will offer a sense of the growth of the field in these years; see *IBP*. All the volumes of the Paper Publications Society, which started with the book by Edward Heawood, *Watermarks Mainly of the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Hilversum: Paper Publications Society, 1950), are relevant in setting these milestones. Another important milestone in the study of watermarks is the recent project, *Bernstein: The Memory of Paper*, www.memoryofpaper.eu/BernsteinPortal/appl_start.disp (accessed 1 December 2019). This is one of the most recent attempts to bring together databases of watermarks across several countries. Little evidence from British archives is included. For an excellent overview on the rich bibliography on medieval paper, see also Ornato *et al.*; in particular, vol. 1. A copious bibliography is also available in Marilena Maniaci, *Archeologia del manoscritto: metodi, problemi, bibliografia recente* (Rome: Viella, 2002), pp. 206–215.

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