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The Medieval Manuscript: A Multimodal Performance?

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F-P: Bn fr 1586, fol. 165r. Photo credit: BnF/Gallica.
Date of ms: c. 1450. Guillaume de Machaut, lays, opening.

The term 'social actors' describes the agents in a multimodal 'text' and their interactions, whether involved in its creation, interpretation, or portrayed within it. In this paper, I rework this into the idea of manuscript 'performers' in order to understand the various roles involved in creating and receiving a medieval manuscript. The foremost performer, at least in a traditional sense, is the author. Yet the construct of 'the author', so ingrained in scholarship, has in fact been forced upon medieval texts. By focusing on the social practices of both manuscript compilers and manuscript readers, I explore how the practice of authorship is constructed and received through the semiotic resources and elements present on the manuscript page. The discourses of religion, feminism, anti-Semitism, racism, nationalism, and the 'other' will all be touched upon. How can what is essentially 'the same text' by 'the same author(s)' be presented and received so differently in various versions, times, and places? The multimodal approach shows that we are not dealing with the same text, or indeed author – we are dealing with different constructs of text and author, re-packed, re-presented, and re-interpreted to fit the different practices, societies, and times.

