Every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways. The discovery of these ways and hence the manifold uses of things is the work of history. K. MARX¹

The theory of strictly economic practice is simply a particular case of a general theory of the economics of practice. The only way to escape from the ethnocentric naiveties of economism, without falling into populist exaltation of the generous naivety of earlier forms of society, is to carry out in full what economism does only partially, and to extend economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation... P. BOURDIEU²

Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a non-verbal medium for the human creative faculty. M. DOUGLAS AND B. ISHERWOOD³

Say it, no ideas but in things W.C. WILLIAMS⁴

This book is a study of three medieval English manuscripts as artefacts. Its content and premise is that an analysis of the whole codex – text, images, palaeography and codicology – opens a vista on medieval culture that may not be seen when these elements are studied individually. The assumptions are essentially Marxist and historical materialist but, because of its attentiveness to the materiality of these manuscripts – i.e. their construction as objects by the historical subjects which made and used them – it will not satisfy Marxists who are concerned strictly with the larger historical problems of the period. It is

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hoped, however, that the methodological emphasis on materiality guards against the reductive elements sometimes present in historical-materialist analyses and which, to some degree, every interdisciplinary study risks.

The manuscripts in question range in date from around the millenium to the middle of the twelfth century. The text which identifies them as a group is now generally known to scholars as the Wonders of the East, sometimes as the Marvels of the East and, occasionally, in order to distinguish the Latin text from its Old English translation, as De rebus in oriente mirabilibus or, simply, Mirabilia. The earliest volume is London, BL, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, fols. 94–209 (s. x/xi). It is of unknown origin and the first witness to the Old English text. It is a reasonable hypothesis that the second manuscript - London, BL, Cotton Tiberius B. v, part 1 (s. xi2/4) - was produced at the monastery of Christ Church, Canterbury. Tiberius B. v preserves a bilingual Latin/Old English text. The final volume is Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 614 (s. xii\textsuperscript{med}). The text of this last manuscript is entirely in Latin.

The great majority of scholarly writing on medieval manuscript books has concerned itself with either description (codicological, art historical, palaeographical) or with textual criticism. Although critical theory, usefully and rigorously applied or not, is fashionable in medieval studies, the same fashion has not spread to the sub-discipline of manuscript studies or, for that matter, to book history more generally. Perhaps it is because books, and the competent use of books, regulate participation in scholarly discourse that we are disinclined to theorize them as artefacts or commodities. Let me pursue this by analogy. Books are to academics what mobile phones are to those under the age of twenty: unquestionably the way life is practised, its assumptions and habits, would be impossible without them. The pervasiveness of the mobile phone within half a generation is very visible to those who recall a time when it was not so, yet is unnoticed by those who cannot. Of course, this analogy is imperfect. Books and scholarship have a much longer history and scholars are quite capable of conceiving of a time when there were neither. But imagine a group of teenagers texting or Facebooking or photographing their friends. If we asked them, they might think that their life with a smart-phone is, telephonically, like that of a City trader in the 1980s with a phone the size of a brick. They would be wrong. There are similarities, of course, and these are what we notice first: both are handheld, both are wireless. But it is the dissimilarities - of function, of signification, of the effects upon the user, of their potential to create social capital unrelated to their use or exchange value, in

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