INTRODUCTION: READING OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY, MS LAUD MISC. 108 AS A “WHOLE BOOK”

Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch

By 1633, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury (1633–1645) and Chancellor of Oxford University (1629–1641), had acquired a late thirteenth-century manuscript (with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century additions) that came to be called Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Miscellaneous 108 (L). Laud donated it with a large collection of manuscripts to the Bodleian Library in 1635.1 The greater part of Laud’s donations were cataloged as Laud Miscellaneous Manuscripts in contrast to sets classified as Laud Latin, Laud Greek, and Laud Oriental Manuscripts. As Thomas R. Liszka explains, those grouped into the Miscellaneous set landed there because of what they did not contain: texts in Latin, Greek, or Oriental languages.2 This process of classification was thus determined by language, not content. Nevertheless, the name “Laud Misc.” has branded L as essentially miscellaneous in content. The shelf name has historically skewed criticism toward assumptions of a lack of artistry and organization within this particular “miscellany.”3 This erroneous name persists, without any persuasive evidence for its relevance, as a critical marker of its contents. But this vernacular manuscript, unique in assembling, perhaps as early as 1280, such a large number of Middle English texts without the inclusion of French and Latin texts, is likewise exceptional in its absence of miscellaneity.


2 See Thomas Liszka, Chapter Two in this volume.

L bears singular importance to the field of medieval studies, for it preserves and anthologizes unique versions of a number of seminal medieval English texts that span a range of religious and secular genres. This manuscript is well-known for containing the earliest surviving copy of the Middle English collection of saints’ lives known as the *South English Legendary* (SEL), one that differs significantly from the “standard” version in content and organization. L also contains copies of the two earliest extant Middle English romances, the only complete copy of *Havelok the Dane* and the earliest known version of *King Horn*. Finally, the manuscript contains the only extant witness of the alliterative Wheel of Fortune poem *Somer Soneday* and some significant religious texts, including unique versions of the lyric poem *Sayings of St. Bernard* and the dream narrative *Vision of St. Paul*, and the earliest known copy in English of the *Dispute Between the Body and the Soul*. In addition to preserving these singular works, the collation of the texts in L suggests a purposeful and deliberate arrangement, revealing a prioritizing, perhaps on the part of an owner or compiler, of certain spiritual and political themes and concerns.

L stands as a rare early example of a monolingual manuscript, all of its texts written in Middle English. In fact, the language of L turns out to be a defining component of its content and readership. In thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England, English was still considered to be an essentially oral medium (in contrast to the perception of Anglo-Norman as a written vernacular), so that writing narratives in English was a deliberate and self-conscious choice. If writing in the English vernacular was not commonplace, assembling an anthology of narratives written entirely in English was especially unusual. As Anne B. Thompson explains, writing in English in the thirteenth century was

---

4 On the differences between the L and the standard SEL versions, see Manfred Görlach, *Textual Tradition*, esp. 6–90; see also Horstmann, *ESEL*, vii–xii.


6 Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 22. In her examination of writing in English during the thirteenth century, to which this discussion is indebted, Thompson also refers to the “self-conscious” elements found in English writings during this time.