In a brief fifth chapter, Drechsler assembles an institutional archaeology, arguing for a placement of the Helgafell group and related manuscripts in three workshops in the Breiðafjörður region of western Iceland and tracing some of the patronage history behind manuscript commissions there, which pulls together several strands from the previous chapters into a convincing narrative history of collaboration and the movement of people and ideas. A conclusion on travel, commerce, and manuscript production reinforces the movement of book production influences over time from France, first directly, then through Norway and, at further remove, England, up to the arrival of the Black Death in Iceland at the dawn of the fifteenth century (1402), at which point production ceased. Back matter is extensive, including a well-organized bibliography and multiple, helpful indices for the vast amount of material consulted in the study.

Illuminated Manuscript Production in Medieval Iceland is a rare combination: an extensive, thorough revision of a dissertation published in a format befitting its contents that not only adds to our understanding of a significant group of Old Norse manuscripts but also provides a model for further research in the Icelandic context and beyond. Truly multidisciplinary, the book will contribute particularly to readers’ understanding of the art-historical stakes of transmission and production in the medieval North.

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Sarah Fourcade’s approach to the literary production of the late medieval period is that of an historian – she is less interested in the literary works themselves than what they tell us about the authors and audiences of the period. She proposes to show how the military class that was the nobility turned into a cultured and literate society, a group seeking to promote its class and members by means of the written word. This volume represents research that led to her doctorate in history (13; she now teaches at the Université Paris-Est Créteil) and retains some of that dissertation feel, from its lay-out and presentation of information.

Using examples drawn from across medieval France, Fourcade begins with the question of education. That of noble children involved not only military skills for the males, domestic skills for the females, but also a certain degree of literacy. Proof lies in the educational materials prepared for children of the period, from elementary readers (*abécédaires*), to works that cover religious and moral training or history. These materials could be acquired by wealthy families; some individuals composed works for family members (71). Fourcade’s careful examination of multiple codices allows her to identify loci of acquisition: books are purchased in the city (144) though the majority of noble families lived in a rural milieu (46). Volumes were borrowed and shared, given and received.

The documentation shows that families transmitted books across generations; Fourcade suggests that women bequeathed prayer books more often than men (87), men were more likely to convey entire libraries to their offspring (89). Looking at seventeen distinct family groups, Fourcade recognizes “the omnipresence of books in the middle and upper nobility” (103).
The French royal court presented a model for noble families: the males should be wise and learned, supportive of the arts and letters (121). This model must be considered with care, though, when considering members of the lower nobility (133). We know of a particular circle of “chevaliers poètes” united by war and by friendship circa 1400 (135), not all of whose names are well-known: Lotard de Willériès, Jean de Werchin, Guillaume de Lannoy, for example. Fourcade suggests these authors were the fruit of a “collaborative … community” (137).

The collections that Fourcade reconstructs demonstrate the deep faith of noble book owners (163); religious materials form a large part of personal libraries. In addition, she identifies an interest in moral and didactic works, history, technical and scientific literature (encyclopedias, for example [181]), and lastly, “littérature de délassement,” works read for pleasure rather than for education. This last group includes the works literary scholars are more familiar with: lyric poetry and romances.

Fourcade asks, “Is there a model for a noble library?” She considers twenty-nine collections for which medieval inventories exist, presenting the results of her analysis in a chart (192–94), whose organizational principles are unclear. The data suggest that literary and devotional works were found in more than 90 % of these collections, followed by religious materials (biblical works and prayer books). Scientific works follow, then didactic works, history and politics (present in 68.9 % of the collections). Legal materials were the least present (27.6 %) (194–95). Considered over time, we see that the number of volumes in a library tended to increase (212). Significantly, the language of these volumes was most often French (212).

Fourcade takes a slightly different approach in her chapter on “Les Nobles et la culture savante.” She observes how authors use their sources, “L’originalité de la littérature nobiliaire tient aux innovations des écrivains nobles” (224), specifically the evocation of personal experience (227) and that nobles were a motor for translations into French (233). Fourcade notes that books were a sign of a superior education, an indication of wealth, and a social marker, flattering the owner (265). She identifies “amateur and professional readers,” distinguished by where they chose to read (283).

The next topic relates to what kind of works noble authors composed; their writing focused on didactic works and history (252). The author suggests that the nobility developed a functional culture, of use to itself, literature that was a response to the times (264). In a sidebar, Fourcade implies that there is some regional specificity to genre choice: works about war were written by nobles based in Anjou and Vendôme; cynegetic works by nobles in Anjou and Normandy; history by nobles in the North. Nobles from Gascony, the Agenais, and Languedoc composed travel narratives, etc. (255). This observation warrants further exploration in another volume.

Fourcade notes that many noble authors in her corpus became more active after 1450 (291); it had become easier to retire to a life of writing. She says that authors picked up the pen at the prime of their lives, between 30 and 55 years old, even though they had already busy lives (295). She thinks that this turn to the literary life suggests a new model for the noble male – it was not sufficient to be a good warrior, one had also to be a man of letters (297). “Écrire, c’est œuvrer directement pour son salut, pour la puissance du prince et pour le bien commun, présent et futur” (306).
As the Middle Ages drew to a close, illiteracy became an unpardonable weakness for the nobility (309). Furthermore, the written word allowed nobles to defend their reputations and their family’s history, pointing to the modern practice of repairing the record by writing the book.

Fourcade points to an inherent conflict: the activity of writing was deemed effeminate, whereas the knight/noble should be masculine (334). However, by the middle of the fifteenth century, this dichotomy was losing its power; intellectual pursuits were increasingly valorized (336). Even as authors used the humility topos, they were confident they had something to say (341). Fourcade adds that noble authors of the late Middle Ages deliberately played against the rules to legitimize their works:

Une tension durable s’instaure entre deux imaginaires, celui des armes et celui des lettres, longtemps jugés inconciliables. Soulever cette prétendue incompatibilité passe par la démonstration de l’utilité de la culture écrite à tous les niveaux de la vie nobiliaire … responsabilités de seigneur et d’officier, transmission des savoirs techniques, protection du patrimoine familial, quête de renommée ou reconquête d’une réputation. (345)

The conclusion restates the points made above, that books were more important to the nobility than has been thought, that French nobles mastered the tools of writing and used them to their advantage.

Fourcade provides a number of annexes filled with information: Annex A: 673 Book Owners (351–510) with the books each owned; Annex B: her Corpus of Literate Nobles (511–606) with the book(s) each composed; Annex C: Personal Libraries of 20 Volumes or More, with a list of the books in each (607–24). Each annex is organized alphabetically by first name and then by family name. E.g.: Fourcade lists Raoul d’Ailly after his daughter Jacqueline d’Ailly and before Armand-Amanieu d’Albret, that is, first the d’Ailly family, organized by first name, then the d’Albret family, organized by first name. While readers are provided an index of manuscripts mentioned, a second index of authors and translators (which helps somewhat with index B), and a third index of anonymous works, there is no index of book owners, making it somewhat difficult to locate individuals described in Annex A.

There are some errors in the data associated with some book owners. I considered only the Rohan-Montauban family. The marriage of Guillaume de Rohan (ca. 1370–1432) and Bonne Visconti (1385–ca. 1434) was celebrated in 1414, a union which had been arranged by the French king. Fourcade assigns their daughter Isabelle de Rohan-Montauban dates of “v. 1390–v. 1442?” (490). Isabelle’s brother Jean de Rohan-Montauban (1412–1466) (490) is equally unlikely to have a birth date before the wedding of his parents. As Fourcade’s information in these cases is wrong, there are two possibilities: one, that these are the only errors and the remainder of the data is trustworthy, or two, that there are similar data errors in the volume. I let other readers judge for themselves.

In truth, this book was very hard to read. The format of the volume (an Introduction, then three parts, each with four chapters, each chapter subdivided, a very brief Conclusion), made the whole seem chunky. The presentation of the arguments left something to be desired; line graphs in black and white did not show information clearly (201–06); the organizational logic of charts was rarely explicit. The text is
roughly one-half of the volume; the annexes form the rest (see above). It took this reader a very long time to understand the rhythm of the book and get to its end.

In conclusion, Fourcade’s La Noblesse à la conquête du livre achieves its goal of demonstrating how the late medieval French nobility turned into a book culture. I believe the Annexes are the most important contribution of the scholar to others, and I recommend the book especially for that data.

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