Charles M. Radding has done the community of scholars of medieval literature and history a great service by gathering and translating ten articles written between 1972 and 1986 by the great Italian paleographer and cultural historian Armando Petrucci. The value of the book lies not only in the publication of this corpus of scholarship for those who do not read Italian, but also in presenting these articles in a coherent whole that sheds light on the individual issues being discussed and offers a clear vision of the development of Petrucci’s work and of the growing importance of codicological studies for the study of the Middle Ages.

Petrucci’s broad interests range from Latin epigraphy to the age of printing; he sets out a coherent theory of the development of what he calls "written culture" as a self-contained, inherently conservative category of thought. Handwriting, documents and books, in their great variety from the end of Antiquity to the Renaissance, in the multiplicity of their materials, confection and uses, reveal "modes of thought" which form the basis of our understanding of the past. Although few readers may be willing to follow every thread of his rich thought, even fewer will fail to find something useful for their research in these pages. Although it is not possible in this context to give a full accounting of all ten articles, it is important to discuss some issues brought up by Petrucci...
In this fascinating book, one of the world's foremost authorities on writing and the social history of books discusses reading and writing in medieval Italy. Writers wrote for a performance of their work, not a private reading in solitude. Literacy rates rose during the 15th century, and with the development of the printing press, more books became available. The act of reading by one's self for personal pleasure became more common and this changed the way writers wrote. Early written medieval literature is mostly legend or folktale set down on a page rather than recited but the storyteller still needed to gather and hold an audience and so wrote in the vernacular to be understood and in poetic meter to be remembered. Poetry, with its regular cadence, sticks in the mind far better than prose.