RESEARCH STATEMENT

Rachel Tharp

I research the history of reading, paratext, and interpretation in my dissertation “Accent and Embellishment / A History of the Virgule from Grammar Handbook to Liturgical Leaf.” Beyond paratext, my interests include textual editing, distribution of authority in marriage, digital editions, the fabliau and exemplum forms, and digital preservation. I study the textual history of Geoffrey Chaucer’s works, for example by interrogating the possibility of authorial punctuation in the Knight’s Taleor by digitally preserving the unpublished notes of John Manly and Edith Rickert on variant readings of the *Canterbury Tales.*

The study of punctuation before the age of print is often isolated to a single manuscript, the work of a single scribe, or the manuscript witnesses of a single text. While narrowly focused studies and broad overviews provide us with discrete examples of punctuation use and a history of overlapping notational systems, neither focus on punctuation as an indicator of how people read. My dissertation demonstrates that punctuation and interpretation are one and the same. The four chapters are a chronological history of punctuation beginning in the first century CE and extending to the fifteenth. I present the history of the virgule or slash (/)as a measure of how students read and interpreted texts first by methods taught in grammar handbooks but then according to scribal-driven innovations to the page. The dissertation contrasts the punctuation we see in extant codices with punctuation from the perspectives of the grammarians who taught it and the academics who applied it. I couple evidence from the papyri or manuscripts with the statements of contemporary figures, such as Cassiodorus or Alcuin. The accounts given in grammars, encyclopedias, reference works, and private correspondence reveal that punctuation trends are a result of changes to the concept of reading and how much interpretive responsibility scribes allowed readers; the responsibilities once considered as acts of interpretation left to the reader became expectations for the appearance of texts placed upon the scribe.

Scholars of Middle and Early Modern English will recognize the slash or virgule (/), from Latin *virgula*, in medieval manuscripts as a straight pen stroke that is neither part of the formation of a letter nor a mark of abbreviation. The first chapter, “Reading Unseparated Text: *Distinctiones* in First- to Seventh-Century Grammars & Carolingian-Period Codices,” describes the formatting of early Greek and Latin texts, the processes by which readers interpreted texts, and contemporary descriptions of the formal system of punctuation in the Early Middle Ages. Punctuation was intended as a literal measure of the reader’s comprehension because readers inserted *distinctiones,* a three-point punctuation system, into unseparated text. “Ancient Origins of Interpretation: Tracking the Virgule from the Third Century BCE to the Ninth CE” shows how the term *virgula* specialized from its original sense “twig” to the “stroke” of accents and critical marks over the course of the first to ninth centuries. Readers applied accents, critical signs, and punctuation marks to divide text, indicating that the defining characteristic of punctuation, its relationship to syntax, is a modern development. “Innovation and Exemplars: the Virgule’s Role in Insular Book Production During the Eighth and Ninth Centuries” proves that the virgule in eighth- and ninth-century Insular manuscripts was not an imitation of Roman exemplars but a result of increased demand for books. “Restoring Punctuation to ‘the Hands of the Copyists:’ the Virgule in Notational Systems on the Continent from the Ninth to Eleventh Centuries” demonstrates that punctuation was subsumed under the emendation process to ensure the proper recitation and interpretation of ecclesiastical texts. The educational reforms of the ninth to eleventh centuries resulted in a multiplication of the number and complexity of notational systems designed for specific applications, including neums and *positurae,* two systems that feature the slash mark. Eventually, the virgule would become a common punctuation mark in fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century Middle English poetry, including in the earliest surviving copies of *The Canterbury Tales*. The mark can still be seen in early printed editions until it is effectively replaced by the comma in the mid-sixteenth century.

The history of the virgule is indicative of how readers theorized, categorized, and adopted novel signs to meet their interpretive needs until those needs were met by scribes, editors, and authors. The significance of this argument is twofold: first, punctuation historically functions as a record of readers’ and eventually scribes’ interpretations; second, punctuation trends are influenced by the same forces acting upon scripts, including purpose of use, comprehensibility of writing, treatment of exemplars, and demand for copies. The dissertation recontextualizes the idiosyncratic features of texts as our most valuable insights into the history of manuscript reception and production.

The second chapter of the dissertation, “Ancient Origins of Interpretation is under review with *PMLA* and the first, “Reading Unseparated Text,” is in preparation for submission to *Medium Aevum.* I presented “The Ancient Origins of the Virgule” at the 2021 International Medieval Congress and “The Virgule in Context” at the 2019 Mid-America Medieval Association Annual Symposium from this research. My paper “Innovation and Exemplars: The Virgule’s Role in Insular Book Production During the Eighth and Ninth Centuries” has been accepted to the 2022 International Congress on Medieval Studies. I will submit a book proposal in May 2022 with the goal of publishing by May 2025. My dissertation has been supported by the Rudolf C. Bambas Memorial Scholarship and a dissertation fellowship.

A second research project on the virgule has been funded by the Derdeyn-CMRS Travel Scholarship. On one of Geoffrey Chaucer’s two trips to Italy in the 1370s, he acquired a copy of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* and *Teseida.* While both influenced Chaucer, *Il Teseida* is a known source of Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. Though Boccaccio’s repertory of punctuation varied, he applied the virgule to a copy of a Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. If the virgule appears in Chaucer’s copy of *Il Teseida,* now housed at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, we may have cause to believe the virgules in the earliest copies of the *Canterbury Tales* were copied from an autograph and Boccaccio’s influence on Chaucer included punctuation. I will propose my findings as a paper at the 2023 Conference of the Early Book Society and submit an article to *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* in August of 2022.

Additionally, I am seeking funding for a project to digitize, transcribe, and make available John Manly and Edith Rickert’s collation cards currently split between the University of Chicago and University of Oklahoma libraries. The cards record variations among all the extant manuscripts and Caxton’s two prints of the *Canterbury Tales*. Unfortunately, the data on these cards is not always represented accurately in Manly and Rickert’s eight-volume *The Text of the* *Canterbury Tales,* which theoretically reconstructs the oldest and least corrupted version of Chaucer’s work. The cards not only permit correction of the published record of variants, they also contain occasional notes that do not appear in Manly and Rickert’s edition. Thus the cards are an essential supplement to the eight published volumes. I will present a trial website featuring images of the cards at the 2022 New Chaucer Society Congress and submit an article for publication in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* that defends the accuracy of Manly and Rickert’s edition when supplemented with the website. Investigating the earliest interpretations of Chaucer’s work expands our knowledge of how Chaucer’s drafts first appeared, exposing how much decision-making power authors had over the design and dissemination of their work in the Late Middle Ages.