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DH 8991: Introduction to Digital Humanities

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Essay 1: Intellectual Autobiography

My first introduction to digital humanities occurred thanks to a total chance encounter with Rennie Mapp at a bus stop on my very first day at UVA. After I asked her for directions, we shared the short bus ride into Grounds, and she asked me about what my plans were here at the university. I was absolutely beaming with excitement for all the plans that I didn't have yet. After listening to my ecstatic ramblings, Rennie gave me an enthusiastic pitch all about the programming in digital humanities here. She gave me her card when we parted ways, and I had to know more.

Since then, I've been dipping my toes into all things DH at UVA. Before joining the DH Certificate program, I started by attending numerous workshops on R and Python and ArcGIS and LaTeX through the library and the Scholar's Lab. I've been a regular member of the informal DH book club, and I've experimented with using DH methods in a couple of small research projects. For instance, I once gave a brief demonstration of R to illustrate Blaise Pascal's concept of the human machine in a course on Baroque literature, and I'm currently developing a mini-digital edition and translation of *Le Roman de Silence* using bookdown (available here: <https://leeloren.github.io/silence/>). The goal of this *Silence* project is to demonstrate how DH approaches to editing and translation can render Old French texts more accessible, flexible, and interactive and can better reflect their mutability, which cannot be as easily conveyed in traditional print editions.

I didn't come to UVA as a medievalist, but after taking my advisor Amy Ogden's course "Medieval Saints' Lives" and her course on Old French, I have become drawn to this era and to the subtleties and complexities of transcription and translation work. I am particularly obsessed with one saint's Life that has previously received very little research attention despite the many extant versions and manuscripts of it that survive. I'm referring to the Life of Mary the Egyptian whose Life includes a radical bodily transformation, which I believe may have greater theological implications than have been previously examined. I believe that my work on this saint would be significantly elevated by DH methods. In particular, I'm hoping to produce my own digital edition and translation of the Old French Life, which hasn't yet been translated into a modern language. The last major scholarly edition surveying the many versions of Mary the Egyptian in Old French was completed over forty years ago by Peter Dembowski. The way I see it, it's time for a new edition of this text to entice the attention of other scholars and to render it more accessible to even non-experts.

My hope is that the theories and methods that we'll be learning about in this course will better prepare me for my dissertation project and for future projects yet to come, but in particular, I would like to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of digital editing compared to traditional editing practices and the ways that digital and print can work together in harmony to produce better representations of medieval manuscripts.