

Loren Lee

Prof. Alison Booth

DH 8991: Introduction to Digital Humanities

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Essay 3: 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 Scholars' 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 plan to develop this side project further so that I can present my initial

results at the end-of-the-year DH Showcase and at the useR! 2022 conference this June and so that I can inform what directions my dissertation work on French Medieval Studies will take.

I didn't come to UVA as a medievalist, but after taking coursework with both my primary and secondary readers (Amy Ogden and Deborah McGrady), I have become completely drawn to this period. And especially after taking Ogden's courses on Medieval Saints' Lives and on Old French translation, I have found my niche in concentrating on the subtleties and complexities of transcription and translation work. I'm 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'll be presenting some of my initial work on this subject at this year's International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo (online this year). Although saints' Lives as a genre was hugely popular in the middle ages, modern scholarship on the literature of the period has been largely fixated on more 'secular' texts like romances. By examining challenging texts like *La Vie de sainte Marie l'Égyptienne*, we can gain a greater appreciation of medieval popular culture and we can build a more nuanced understanding of female representation in the middle ages.

I believe that my work on this saint would be significantly elevated by DH methods. In particular, I'm planning to produce my own digital edition and translation of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman version of the Life known as T, which hasn't yet been translated into a modern language. The last major scholarly editions (both without translations) surveying the many versions of Mary the Egyptian in Old French were completed over forty years ago by Peter Dembowski (1977) and Michèle Schiavone Cruz-Sáenz (1979). 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. But moreso, I sincerely believe that change is needed to the way we edit and present pre-modern texts.

Thus far, digital editions of pre-modern texts have taken the format of digital facsimile, which provides users with the undeniable benefits of access and searchability, but I think we can do more. I would like to provide my modern readers with an experience and not just a tidied version of the text itself. I would like to make readers participate in the decision-making processes that editors and translators must go through in order to present these texts by creating an interactive digital edition. For example, the digital reader could be given the power to toggle between translations by selecting from a menu if they would prefer to read a translation that respects the rhyme and sound patterns of the text, or a translation that adheres strictly to the original syntax, or a translation whose tone is more casual or more reverent, or a translation that emphasizes Mary the Egyptian's sexuality or her connection to nature. Modern readers could even choose to read an edition that is inclusive of the abbreviations and scribal errors present in the original manuscript copy — both of these being features that are generally eliminated in print editions for the convenience of the modern reader but that would have been an unavoidable part of the medieval reader's experience of the text. With this approach, my reader would ideally experience a greater sense of interaction with the text and would participate more actively with the digital edition than they might if I were to present only one static print version. The scope of this edition and translation project will ultimately depend on the amount of variance I find among the manuscript copies and on my own pace of output. In this way, modern readers may gain some understanding of the medieval *bookmaker's* own decision making process when producing these manuscript objects hundreds of years ago.

The theories and methods that we've been discussing in this course have prepared 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. I expect that thinking more on this will be a constant challenge for me over the next few years as I complete my dissertation and start my early career.

There is something else though that both excites and frustrates me when it comes to the field of Digital Humanities, and that's how DH work can be an interdisciplinary bridge between the humanities and the STEM fields. (I voiced this opinion during our class discussion in Week 10 when we were visited by Lloyd Sy, and I felt that it really sparked some conversation in the room.) I have found that some of the most groundbreaking and exciting projects in my field (the [Archimedes Palimpsest](#), the [Beasts2Craft](#) biocodicology team, etc.) have been achieved through interdisciplinary work implementing expertise from both the humanities and STEM fields together, and yet, the prevailing attitude that I hear among my peers in the humanities is reluctance towards this sort of collaboration in favor of smaller projects where they can be the sole author on a project or a paper somewhere. Why? In an interview on [Coding Codices](#) with the team working on biocodicology, I was so disappointed to hear that the primary barriers to their work are finding sources of funding willing to bridge the humanities/STEM divide and finding young and/or pre-tenured scholars willing to share publications as co-authors. Our current infrastructure around humanities research does not seem built to support the types of scholarly teams necessary to expose the next great palimpsest or map the genetic material of a manuscript microbiome. And what a shame that is! But maybe the Digital Humanities could be one avenue toward reconciling the gulf between humanities and STEM. I would like to see more

of an effort to bridge the humanities/STEM divide among graduate students here at UVA.

Perhaps through a grant opportunity like that of the Double Hoo? Or by recruiting STEM-based graduate students to the DH Certificate? I cannot possibly speak for my peers, but personally, I dream of working on a team of experts each bringing their own distinct specializations to the table, willing to share their knowledge, their methods, their labor, and their funding.