

Loren Lee

Prof. Eric Field

SARC 5400: Data Visualization

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Assignment 1: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Notions of “print culture” and “digital culture” have been thoroughly discussed for a long time in the scholarship of how we read, but it is only fairly recently with texts like Johnston and Dussen’s *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches* (2015) that a serious consideration of “manuscript culture” is now taking place. With this new consideration of the uniqueness of and the value that comes with understanding manuscript culture, we are also seeing reconsiderations of how we approach the editing of medieval texts in the digital age.

I would argue that the best approach to editing medieval texts looks something like John Bryant’s concept of the “fluid text,” which he applies to the digital editing of Melville’s works (which readers can interact with via the [Melville Electronic Library](#)). However even with Bryant’s model, digital editing can seem like little more than the production of a digital facsimile — a product that could just as easily exist in an extensive enough material book (perhaps a multi-volume work) and that suggests a teleological progression toward a final book product at the end of a long “revision narrative.” I think that digital editions could do even more when it comes to bringing readers closer to medieval texts, and I would like to think about how we might think about digital editing differently. What can we do as editors to enable readers to visualize medieval texts more effectively and to experience manuscript culture more fully?

My selected visualizations are pulled from the current digital projects meant to enable users to read and understand medieval texts and manuscripts.

The Good: [VisColl \(Collation Visualization\)](#)

My example of “the Good” in visualization is a recent tool released by The Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries for modeling and visualizing the physical collation of medieval manuscript codices. It has been a notorious challenge to archivists to properly describe and catalog codices as these textual objects are bound and rebound, pulled apart and stitched together over hundreds of years. Traditionally, collation has been cataloged using complex formulas that are really only interpretable by experts in the field and that are often misleading, which then makes it extremely difficult to meaningfully understand any one codice’s collation. Some examples of these formulas look like the following screengrab from the VisColl site:

[1] i, 1-9 (8), 10 (6), 11-20 (8), 21 (7), i

[2] I-III⁸, IV¹⁰, V-IX⁸

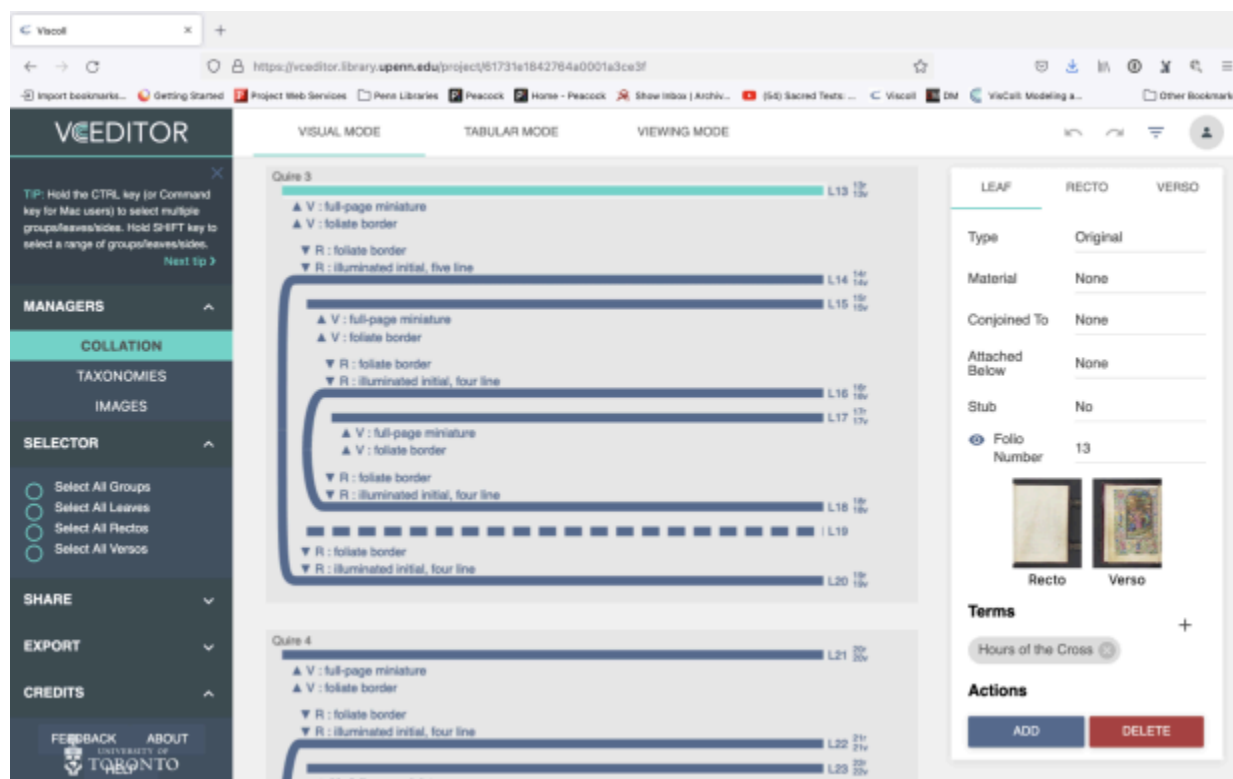
[3] IV(32), IV-1(40), 9 IV(120), IV-4

[4] 1-4⁸, 5², 6⁴⁻¹, 7-10¹⁰

[5] 2°: $\pi A^6(\pi A1+1, \pi A5+1.2)$, A-2B⁶, 2C², a-g⁶, x2g⁸, h-v⁶, x⁴, “gg3.4”
(±“gg3”), ¶1-2¶⁶, 3¶1, 2a- 2f⁶, 2g², “Gg⁶”, 2h⁶, 2k-3b⁶

Of these, the first four illustrate different patterns of collation formulas utilized for manuscripts, whilst the latter shows a bibliographical description of the gathering assembly of a printed book.

In place of these ugly formulas, VisColl allows users to produce interactive visualizations of collation that look like this screengrab from VisColl:



Now virtually anyone can understand how any given manuscript has been collated without needing to meticulously work through a complex, abstract formula. This, in turn, allows researchers to draw meaningful conclusions from collation evidence. We must continually ask ourselves: How can we as digital humanists better represent these centuries-old text objects?

The Bad: [Marco Polo Digitale](#)

I feel a bit bad about my selection for “the Bad” visualization because this digital medieval project — Marco Polo Digitale — was created by a graduate student like me who doesn’t have the level of funding and technical support that some other well-established digital projects have. That said, I have pulled this example of a digital edition and translation of Marco

Polo's travels because I think it does have several aesthetic flaws that could have easily been fixed and that make the project much more difficult to use and understand. First and foremost, there is no sort of home page or introduction where digital readers can land and get their bearings before being thrust into the text. Because of this, I have no idea how to interact with this digital edition without just experimenting and clicking around blindly until I figure out what all the features are and what the critical apparatus is meant to tell me. On top of that, there are bugs in the project that are frustrating and do not encourage me to continue interacting with it. For instance, if you click on the "Help" button in the top right menu, it just redirects you to the first page of text. I hope that this digital project is just so bad because it is in development and will be dramatically improved in the future, but for now, it is virtually unusable. In my own work, I would like to consider the varying approaches that digital editions can take. What does the production of these digital editions provide the reader? And how are they still lacking? What advances can still be made here?

The screenshot displays the 'Marco Polo Digitale' interface. The top navigation bar includes the title 'Marco Polo Digitale' and icons for a list, a book, a search, and a menu. Below the navigation bar, the left sidebar shows 'Chapter 106' and a 'Prova' button. The main text area displays a passage from Marco Polo's travels, starting with '#104 Prova' and '#105'. The text includes footnotes marked with superscript letters 'a' and 'b'. The right sidebar, titled 'Critical Apparatus', lists the footnotes with their corresponding text and a 'Critical Note' button for each. The bottom of the interface features a 'No Selection' dropdown and a 'Heat Map' button.

Marco Polo Digitale

Chapter 106

#104

Prova

#105

[1] Here is told of the great city of Juju. ^a

[2] When one leaves this bridge and has gone thirty miles to the west, always finding fine hostelries and vineyards and fields, then one finds a great and beautiful city which is called Juju. [3] There are many abbeys of idolaters. The people live by trade and manufactures. They make cloths of silk and gold, and very fine "sendals". And there are many hostelries that offer accommodation to the travellers. [4] And when one has left this city and gone one mile, then one finds two roads: one of which goes to the west, and the other to south-east. [5] The westerly one is that of Cathay and the south east one goes towards the great province of mock lemma ^b [6] Taianfu, one rides through the province of Cathay for ten days, and one always finds many beautiful cities and boroughs, with much trade and industry, vineyards and fields. And from here the wine is carried into the province of Cathay, because wine

Critical Apparatus

^a [1] Here is told of the great city of Juju.]

Critical Note

^b mock lemma Fr1 Fr2 L R TA TB V VA VB Z P]

F mock reading FK mock reading K

Critical Note

^c mock lemma Fr1 Fr2 L R TA TB V VA VB Z P]

F mock reading FK mock reading K

Critical Note

^d [8] And at the end of a five-day journey of the [...] condition that he is a nobleman]

Critical Note

^e [10] There is nothing else worth mentioning: so, [...] kingdom which is called Taianfu]

Critical Note

No Selection

I found this digital edition of Marco Polo because its creator was interviewed on the podcast *Coding Codices*, which is an amazing podcast produced by the Digital Medievalist Postgraduate Committee (follow on Twitter [@digitalmedieval](#)). They have another episode in which they interview another young scholar who produced [a beautiful digital edition of the Scottish Bannatyne Manuscript](#) that even offers users XML downloads of the edition.

The Ugly: [Piers Plowman Electronic Archive](#)

For my example of “the Ugly”, I have selected the famous (famous among digital medievalists at least) Piers Plowman Electronic Archive (PPEA), which they describe on their homepage as “a collaborative open-access project, presents the rich textual tradition of *Piers Plowman*, a fourteenth-century allegorical dream vision attributed to William Langland.” As modern readers, we tend to think of texts as being quite fixed when they are published in print, but in the premodern era especially, texts were fluid things that were altered — either by accident or with intent — each time they were copied and recopied by scribes for distribution to readers and patrons across long distances. This means that when we study medieval literature, we really must consider the many manuscript copies that survive in order to more fully understand how texts functioned in different contexts for different audiences. *Piers Plowman* survives in more than 50 manuscripts, and so the PPEA seeks to make the variations among all these manuscripts apparent and accessible to digital readers.

This is a valuable project that endorses an approach that should be adopted for more medieval texts. However, the PPEA website could be greatly improved by some improvements to how readers can visualize the relationships between all these manuscripts. The notation used on the site to indicate variation is quite clunky and necessitates a page called [“Instructions for](#)

[First-Time Users](#)”. Ideally, any reader could begin interacting with the PPEA with little to no instruction. When we pick up a book, we do not generally need additional instructions on how to read it, and I think it would be much better if we could somehow have that same pleasurable, unimpeded reading experience for users of the PPEA. Here is a screengrab from the PPEA to give a sense of what this digital archive looks like:

fol. 37v (cont.)^I

Passus nonus de Visione

nota bene

s

M.9.4 [KD.9.4]

S Ire Dowell dwelleþ quod witt{e} : nouȝt a day henn{e}es
 In a Castell þat kynde made : of foure kynnes þinges
 Of erthe and eire is it ma{e}ad : medled to-gidres
 With wynd{e} and with watur : witturly enioined

fol. 38r^I

passus ixus

Kynde hath clos{e}d þere {t}{n}inne : craftely with-alle
 A lemman þat he loueth : lik{e} to him-seluen
 Anima she hatte : ac enuie h{e}re hateþ .
 A proud{e} priker of Fraunce : **Princeps huius mundi**
 And wolde wynnyn hire a-wef{e}y : with wilus and he miȝte .

M.9.8 [KD.9.8]

Ac kynde knoweth þis wel : and kepup hire þe bett{e}re
 And hath doon hire with sire Dowell : is Duc of þis Marches
 Dobet is hire damoisell : sire Dowelles douȝtur
 To serue þis lady lelly : bothe late and rathe
 Do-best{e} is a-bouen bothe : a Bisshopus pierce
 Þat he bit moot be don : he reuleþ hem alle .
 Anima þat lady : is lad{de} — by hire {e}ring^T

M.9.12 [KD.9.12]

M.9.16 [KD.9.16]

secunda descriptio de
dowell

Other sources:

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