Loren Lee

Prof. Alison Booth

DH 8991: Introduction to Digital Humanities

16 March 2022

Essay 2: Blog

Embracing the Variorum: New Methods for the Digital Editing of Medieval Texts

Since perhaps the invention of the printing press, the modern editing practice has been developed to appear so seamless that the reader of a finished text product will ideally not recognize the many hands, the many drafts, the many scribal errors (now called typos) that went into making a final polished text. Even born-digital literature tends to be developed with a final product in mind. This process of editing, printing, and releasing only finalized texts has a real, observable impact on reader experience as perfect books seem to just materialize on shelves both physical and virtual. But what if we changed our editing practice to make the entire process intentionally more apparent to the reader?

This is not a novel idea. The Melville Electronic Library (MEL) offers digital editions of many of Melville's works presented as "'fluid text', that is, any written work that exists in multiple versions resulting from authorial, editorial, or adaptive revision." But prior to the modern era of printing, the production of a final authoritative copy for mass production was not necessarily the goal, and so this concept of fluid text when applied to the Middle Ages must take into account the differences in writing culture from before the advent of printing. Looking back to the medieval era in which there was much more flexibility around what constituted a text, we can see how fluid text was an inherent concept to all writing: writers produced glosses on glosses; texts were copied and recopied by hand more or less faithfully depending on the

circumstances and the desired product; manuscripts were recycled as palimpsests, scraped clean repeatedly to make room for more text; legal charters were cut strategically to be reassembled at a later date, etc. Surely, the traditional modern print edition is an insufficient approach to representing a writing culture that produced such wide variability with many versions of the same text in circulation simultaneously. What if our modern editing practice better reflected the medieval writing practice?

Medieval texts come to us surviving potentially in many separate manuscripts produced in many different scriptoria over the centuries. Many texts survive in only one known copy, and still others may only be reconstructed from fragments or recalled as a mere memory recollected in the writings of other texts such as library catalogs. How do modern editors account for this? There are two basic approaches to creating modern editions of medieval texts. In one approach, the modern scholar attempts to determine the earliest iteration of a text and/or the most faithful 'original' iteration of a text. This earliest, 'best' iteration then serves as the base of an edition and any holes the copy may have are filled in by supplementary material found in similar copies. The other typical approach entails the combining of as many copies of a text as possible to produce a sort of Franken-edition whose completeness depends upon an exhaustive list of surviving manuscripts input into the modern edition. Either approach will ultimately result in a single orderly text in the form of a modern print edition filled with footnotes and endnotes and prefaced by substantial introductory material informing the reader on the decisions the editor has made to produce this particular edition.

Although these editing practices generally do an excellent job of transmitting medieval texts to modern readers, I would argue that their main flaw is that they are too clean, too streamlined. Our desire for tidiness, our expectation that there is one singular authoritative Text

to be reproduced, distorts the reality of medieval texts that survive in material manuscripts where there is almost never an 'original' version and where practically speaking there is no such thing as a 'final' copy. Modern editing methods are great for the production of static print editions (that can only be so large and can only be reedited and reprinted every so often), but by applying digital editing approaches, we can engage with these medieval texts more completely. We can create editions that embrace variety and reflect the animate nature of these texts that were meant to live in circulation, copied and edited from one hand to the next.

What I am *not* proposing is a digital facsimile. Facsimiles have been produced of medieval manuscripts for a long time both in print and in digital formats. And I am not about to suggest the use of hypertext, which is an incredibly useful tool that has been in use since 1965. What I am proposing is a more complete reading experience that presents medieval texts with all their diversity and messiness using data visualization tools like R Shiny apps. A dynamic digital variorum would bring modern readers closer to medieval texts than they ever could be with static print editions by keeping the reader constantly aware of the instability of the medieval text. And from an accessibility stand point, such a complex digital edition would reach a much broader audience than the material manuscripts themselves (Your average reader does not have the time or means to visit all the copies of a medieval text located all over the world in special collections libraries.) or even than the digitized versions of manuscripts, which are often behind institutional paywalls and are not screenreader friendly.

Embracing the variety of the medieval applies equally to the work of translating these texts as it does to the editing of these texts. Take, for example, *Le Roman de Silence*. The narrative concerns the youth Silence who is born biologically female but who is raised entirely in conformity with a masculine gender performance — even to the point of becoming the best of all

knights in the land — so that Silence and Silence's parents, Cador and Eufemie, may retain the rights to their land in secret violation of a ruling by the King Ebain that women may no longer inherit in England. Silence is ultimately stripped naked before the court ironically to maintain 'her' innocence against rape accusations by the cruel, foreign Queen Eufem, who is violently executed for cheating on the king with a man dressed as a nun (also stripped nude before the court), and King Ebain finally revokes the former inheritance law and marries Silence himself calling 'him' his most handsome, valiant knight (vv. 6579-6581), thereby reabsorbing the disputed lands into the fold of the monarch's control. *Quelle intrigue!* There is only one manuscript copy of this thirteenth century Picard verse romance, and even that one copy was almost silenced forever.[1] After its discovery in 1911, *Le Roman de Silence* was first edited by Lewis Thorpe in 1972, first translated into English by Regina Psaki in 1991, then translated again by Sarah Roche-Mahdi in 1992 (with further editions in 1999 and 2007), and finally translated into Modern French prose by Florence Bouchet in 2000.[2]

Although *Silence* only survives in one manuscript copy, the many copies of its critical editions have been the fuel for much impassioned debate concerning its mysterious author/narrator, Heldris of Cornwall, and his intended message regarding the influence of nature

[1] As Frederick Cowper describes in his assessment of the Wollaton Library Collection's Laval-Middleton 6 (WLC/LM/6), "Apparently, it had been there [at Wollaton Hall] since the reign of Henry VIII, for it was discovered by Mr. Stevenson in a box marked 'Old Papers – no value,' with letters from Henry VIII and other old documents and manuscripts" (Cowper 17).

[2] I call attention to these dates to emphasize the inherent slowness associated with the production of traditional print editions. *Twenty years* passed between Thorpe's first edition and the first modern language translation of *Silence*! *Twenty!*

and nurture on one's gender and one's character. Some label the text an outright misogynist defense of the status quo, while others revel in the gendered possibilities the text allows its reader to imagine. The text is so unstable and so unorthodox that many speculate that the otherwise unknown Heldris may have been a woman (**gasp**) in disguise.[3] Some question the quality of the writing itself, suggesting that its weaving together of dialects and its seemingly erratic spellings and word choice are the result of ineptitude rather than authorial intention.[4] Others praise the text's abundance of word play and its manifold, interwoven motifs. On the possibility of an intentionally ridiculous narrator as an authorial choice, Psaki writes, "On the other hand, it is quite possible that for *this* text, a faithful verse translation may guide modern readers towards a refreshed appreciation of the absurdities of the narrating voice and his claims" ("Verse Versus Poetry" 429-430). And although she is critical of Heldris's voice, Burr suggests that the text is written with the intention to "provoke dialogue extratextually well after *Le Roman de Silence* concludes" (34), and no doubt, it certainly does.

Because *Silence* survives in only one manuscript, in some ways it is a much more challenging text to work with than one that is extant in many copies because we have nothing to

[3] See Kathleen Brahney who is the first to raise this hypothesis in her chapter "When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*" (1985). Barbara Newman's chapter "Did Goddesses Empower Woman? The Case of Dame Nature" (2003) also offers an interesting comparison of Heldris of Cornwall with Christine de Pizan both of whom treat Dame Nature in a similarly unorthodox way when compared to their contemporaries such as Jean de Meun.

[4] In "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*", Kristin Burr writes, "He appears to be a man of limited ability" (38) based on Heldris's obtuse turn of phrase and contradictory generalizing. And in his corrections to the Thorpe edition, Félix Lecoy writes, "Heldris ne peut guère passer pour un styliste" (112).

compare this singular copy to, which prevents editors from being more certain about spelling variations as being the result of authorial intent or mere scribal error. The particular use of the Picard dialect in *Silence* creates a polysemy throughout the narrative in a way that has posed a serious challenge to modern translators' efforts to deliver this narrative to the modern reader in all its complexity. A single translation is not enough;[5] readers need many translations to approach the narrative, which I propose providing using data visualization tools like Shiny. By incorporating methods of data visualization, readers could interact with a dynamic translation that approaches the polysemy of the original text. Readers could be allowed to adjust the settings of the translation they are reading to highlight different aspects of the text. For instance, how much should a translation of *Silence* emphasize Silence's masculinity? Silence's class? What modern pronouns would Silence use? when? and why? Readers could even submit their own translations to the github that houses this *Silence* repository that I am attempting to build, thereby creating a web of translations that more closely resembles medieval scribal practices.

Embracing the variety, embedding variety in the digital edition and translation forces readers to think more critically about the text and to remain conscious of the fact that there is no one Text when it comes to medieval literature, but rather many texts produced and reproduced, copied and recopied, translated and retranslated again and again over time. I have only begun to play with these methods (See links to my github and website below.), but I see great potential in the application of data visualization tools in digital editing particularly for medieval texts. *Silence* is a text that particularly merits a plurivocal approach because of how its uniqueness, its ambiguity, and its mutability all defy the creation of any definitive edition. Translators know that their work is no substitute for the original, and so, quality translation requires many hands doing

[5] Elizabeth Waters in her article "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in *Le Roman de Silence*" (1997) writes, "Silence needs this third term, but also a fourth, a fifth, a sixth — an infinite number of terms to express gendered identities" (37).

many revisions in perpetuity to convey the words of the past. The methods I propose are not a cure-all for the inherent issue of mediation that occurs when a premodern text is represented to a modern audience. However, I have proposed an 'edition' that would give the modern reader more agency in their reading and bring the reader closer to the text, all the while acknowledging that bridging the gap between modern reader and premodern manuscript is an asymptotic endeavor. We may inch ever closer to one-to-one engagement with the 'original text', but no single, static edition could give full voice to a text as indiscernible as *Le Roman de Silence*.

My GitHub: https://github.com/leeloren/silence.git
My *Silence* project website: https://leeloren.github.io/silence/

Works Cited

Brahney, Kathleen J. "When Silence was Golden: Female Personae in the *Roman de Silence*." *The Spirit of the Court: Selected Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society* (Toronto 1983), edited by Glyn S. Burgess, Robert A. Taylor, Alan Deyermond, Dennis Green, and Beryl Rowland, D.S. Brewer, 1985, pp. 52-61.

Burr, Kristin L. "Nurturing Debate in Le Roman de Silence." *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honour of E. Jane Burns*, D.S. Brewer, 2016, pp. 33–44.

Cowper, Frederick A. G. "Origins and Peregrinations of the Laval-Middleton Manuscript." *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 1959. pp. 3-18.

Heldris de Cornuälle. *Le Roman de Silence*, translated by Regina Psaki, Garland, 1991.

---. "Le Roman de Silence." translated by Florence Bouchet. *Récits d'amour et de chevalerie, xiii^{e} – xv^{e} siècle*, edited by Robert Laffont, Bouquins, 2000.

---. *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, edited and translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, Michigan State University Press, 2007.

---. *Le roman de Silence: A thirteenth-century Arthurian verse-romance by Heldris de Cornuälle*, edited by Lewis Thorpe, Heffer, 1972.

Lecoy, Félix. "Corrections: Le Roman de Silence d'Heldris de Cornualle." *Romania*, vol. 99, no. 393, Persée - Portail des revues scientifiques en SHS, 1978, pp. 109–25. *www.persee.fr*, https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.1978.1913.

Newman, Barbara. "Did Goddesses Empower Woman? The Case of Dame Nature." *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages.*, Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 135–55.

Psaki, F. Regina. "Verse versus Poetry: Translating Medieval Narrative Verse." *The Medieval Translator, 10/ Traduire Au Moyen Age, 10*, Brepols, 2007, pp. 419–33, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TMT-EB.3.2265.

Waters, Elizabeth A. "The Third Path: Alternative Sex, Alternative Gender in Le Roman de Silence." *Arthuriana*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1997, pp. 35–46.