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Translation Trouble in *Le Roman de Silence*: Using Shiny and bookdown for Digital Editing of Medieval Texts

I initially developed the concept for this digital editing project for my coursework last semester in a French medieval literature seminar, and I developed it somewhat further this semester as my research intervention for the Intro to DH course with Alison Booth. And later this summer I will be presenting a more expanded version of it at the useR! 2022 conference online. My work on this project has helped me to work through the directions I would like my dissertation research to take as I edit and translate another medieval French text called *Le Vie de sainte Marie l'Égyptienne.* But today, I'd like to talk to you about my thoughts on the potential benefits for digitally editing pre-modern texts and how we can offer modern readers more than we currently do in print.

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. 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. 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.

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 capital-T '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, but I see great potential in the application of data visualization tools in digital editing particularly for medieval texts. *Le Roman de Silence*, for example, 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. Embracing the variety of the medieval applies equally to the work of translating texts like *Le Roman de Silence* as it does to the editing of these texts.

Since its first modern edition produced fifty years ago, *Le Roman de Silence* — a thirteenth century Picard verse narrative — has been the fuel for much debate concerning its mysterious author/narrator, Heldris of Cornwall, and his message regarding gender. The narrative

concerns the youth named ‘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 false rape accusations made by the cruel, foreign Queen Eufem, who is violently executed herself for cheating on the king with a man who was dressed as a nun to gain secret access to the unruly queen. This disguised man is also stripped nude before the court like Silence in the climactic big reveal scene, and the King Ebain finally revokes the former inheritance law and marries Silence himself calling ‘him’ (Silence) his most handsome, valiant knight (vv. 6579-6581), thereby reabsorbing the disputed lands into the fold of the monarch’s control. *Quelle intrigue!*

The text is so unstable and so unorthodox that many speculate that the otherwise unknown author, Heldris of Cornwall, may have been a woman (**gasp**) in disguise. Some question the quality of the writing itself, suggesting that its weaving together of Old French dialects and its seemingly erratic spellings and word choice are the result of ineptitude rather than authorial intention. Others praise the text’s abundance of word play and its manifold, interwoven motifs. And although she is critical of Heldris’s voice, scholar Kristin 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. Despite many interpretations that exist in the scholarship, the common thread running through the contentious *Silence* scholarship is a shared frustration with the inability of modern language translations to convey the text's multilayered meanings. However, I argue that it is not the fault of editors and translators but rather the limitations of traditional print technology that prevent us from properly engaging with this unique manuscript, which by the way has not been digitized and is currently accessible only to specialists able to visit the manuscript and those with the funding to purchase images from the University of Nottingham.

There is only one manuscript copy of this thirteenth century Picard verse romance, and even that one copy was almost silenced forever. After its discovery in 1911 in a box of old papers, *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). It was also translated into Modern French prose by Florence Bouchet in 2000. 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 now it's been *fifteen years* since its last print translation.

Unlike a traditional print edition, a flexible, interactive digital edition could reflect the mutability of the author Heldris's language, thereby better articulating the ways *Le Roman de Silence* itself translates gender (Campbell 2019). I have developed this digital edition experiment, and I propose new methods toward the editing of medieval manuscripts such that the polysemy of the original is not lost on a modern audience. In this experiment, I present a new translation of verses 2439-2688 of *Silence* in a bookdown book, and I plan to harness the interactive power of Shiny to allow the modern reader to fully engage with the text. By

structuring my translation as tidy data, capturing more translation possibilities, and allowing the reader to interact with those possibilities via Shiny apps, the true depth of the text is unlocked as never before.

Because *Le Roman de 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 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; scholar 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). 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 *Le Roman de Silence* emphasize the character Silence's masculinity? Silence's class? What modern pronouns would Silence use? when? and why? Digital 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 of copying and rewriting circulating texts.

Although traditional print 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 might ironically be able to 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.

Thank you!

[If I have another moment or two, I could show you what I have so far, but it is still very much in the early stages.]

GitHub: https://github.com/leeloren/silence.git

Website: https://leeloren.github.io/silence/