Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor

Bridget Whearty. *Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 338pp. Hardcover. $80. 9781503632752.

Using a captivating blend of ethnographic narrative and medieval manuscript case studies, *Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor* pushes back against the twin dangers inherent in academic digitization processes. On the one hand, Whearty rejects any "techno-utopian" idea that digitization renders historical documents radically and universally accessible (32). On the other, Whearty also rejects the outright dismissal of digital texts by academics who scoff at their "disembodied" nature. Such scholars contend that digitized texts erase (or manipulate) the materiality of the "original" text and, in doing so, obscure the research apparatus that should contextualize the text (11-19). Whearty's proverbial *via media* is found in embracing the history of digitization *as* a history worthy of its own analysis. Whearty similarly recognizes the digital codex as a material object in its own right, part of the ongoing reception history of medieval texts. Engaging the same methods scholars employ to analyze the contributors to medieval manuscripts, Whearty demonstrates the value of foregrounding the "labor and laborers" that produced digital texts (32). She has even created the "Caswell Test" to encourage authors to credit (and listen to!) archivists and librarians as a part of their work (17).

Whearty's intra-historical method thus highlights the enduring questions to consider when engaging texts, regardless of medium or era: Why and how was a text produced? What economic, emotional, and editorial factors contributed to the decisions made in producing this text? *Digital Codicology* peels back the layers of these questions, engaging the entirety of the digitization process in a variety of institutions. In many instances, Whearty draws on specifics from her time as a Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellow in Data Curation for Medieval Manuscripts at Stanford University. Although she was trained as a medievalist, *Digital Codicology* is interdisciplinary at its core—evidenced in the deft interplay between precise manuscript studies and larger arguments about digital codicology. Thus, the book has takeaways for academics, digitization specialists, archivists, and librarians in any field.

One of *Digital Codicology's* main strengths is that Whearty practices what she preaches. The monograph models many of the suggestions Whearty makes around making the labor of digitization (both people and processes) more visible. Throughout the text, for example, images of digitized projects include attribution conventions for teams and individuals that participated: "Digitization by a team at Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text and image; image capture performed by Andrea Nuñez" (157). In the same way, Whearty invites readers into the digitization process with narrative descriptions culled from her own experience as well as interviews with others in the field. Since "we cannot know what the work is until we ask," Whearty's ethnographic and autoethnographic narrative helps readers experience that work almost in real-time (22). The first chapter, in particular, explores the backbreaking, monotonous work of digitization that Whearty experienced as part of her CLIR fellowship.

As she investigates other digital projects, Whearty pays close attention to the nuances that separate different fields and institutions. While she has her own preferences, Whearty describes digitization choices without judgment, preferring to inquire *about* the choices rather than critique them. In this way, the visibility of rulers or color markers (or even the single leaf vs. a full spread display) is less about a specific technique and more about the power dynamics at play. Archivists and librar-

ians know better than most that changes in leadership or funding can impact digitization processes in unexpected ways. Whearty's narrative reports on how these economic choices make an often invisible conversation accessible to non-specialists. Similarly, she explores the issues at stake in seemingly minor metadata choices using the slippery nature of the word *vellum* as it appears in various catalogues: "in a digital manuscript aggregator, all these regional varieties would coexist... entries that call one type of writing support parchment...would appear besides entries that call the same material 'vellum'" (172). Neither designation is incorrect, but these variations can "fragment" the data—rendering these pieces of information as scattered as medieval manuscript fragments embedded in early modern book binding.

In short, this book does a wonderful job of bringing together a wide variety of fields—but that breadth might result in the reader losing the overall narrative thread, particularly when Whearty conducts an in-depth analysis of single manuscripts. While the section headers and summative chapter paragraphs are very helpful, non-historians would benefit from a timeline or other visuals along the lines of the cataloging summaries and fulsome images of digital texts. The minutiae of the digitization process (though crucial to her argument) might become overwhelming were they not paired with Whearty's moving narrative descriptions: in particular, the "affective" intensity found in the manuscript (53) and the joy of "serendipitous human relationships" (134) that are often unseen in traditional manuscript studies.

Although there is much to appreciate about *Digital Codicology*, two themes emerge as particularly significant. First, Whearty issues a clarion call to interrogate canonicity, especially the ways in which digitization reifies field-specific blind spots. Throughout her text, she names ways in which biases toward particular authors, regions, or eras show up in digitizing choices. Libraries and institutions can push back against this tendency by seeing digital media as a component of larger processes. In this way, they might honor rather than denigrate the "distinct media history" of digital repositories (150).

Second, the book interrogates the notion of "accessibility" and the ways in which a variety of human labor contributes to access. All can agree that digitizing does *not* automatically result in some magical democratization of that item. But Whearty asks readers to consider what it might mean to truly consider the audience for digitizing work. What would it mean to design user experiences for students, seasoned scholars, and the general public? What role does training play in access? What future use of these digital assets in new creative mediums could contribute to pedagogical development? As Whearty describes her own goals for the process: "I wanted to create something that was not just useful for professional scholars...but also for undergrads, book artists, hobbyists...imagining this broader audience clarified the limits of what I could define as 'usable' metadata" (203). Indeed, librarians and academics of all stripes should heed Whearty's reminder that "curation is not the same as hoarding" (194). This book is a vital first step in making these myriad digital processes visible to a non-specialist public, and instructors would do well to include it in their classrooms.

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