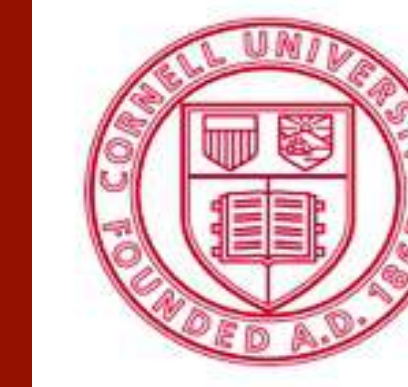


Teaching Medieval Books in a Digital Age

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The Issues

- How might teachers of pre-modern history and literature help students think about “unfamiliar” medieval texts in relation to “familiar” digital ones?
- What are some of the potentials and pitfalls of these comparisons, and what do students actually make of them?

A sample comparison:

Like hyperlinked webpages, highly glossed medieval manuscripts allow for “many voices” on one page and can be read productively in many different orders.



The Literature

- A special issue of *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* (2012) was devoted to the teaching of book history in the undergraduate curriculum
- Articles were uniformly thoughtful, detailing the authors’ experiences teaching classes similar to my own
- However, the literature, it seemed to me, did not make a concerted effort to incorporate students’ feedback and students’ voices in a systematic way

The Results

- Based on my review of the above-mentioned data, I isolated and discussed several key themes. Here I will mention two:
- The Allure of the Medieval Book. As evidenced by the first quote above, students uniformly reported enjoying visits to Cornell’s Rare and Manuscript Collections. I suggest that the “experience” of holding a medieval book can be a powerful draw for students. I encourage teachers to consider their special collections libraries as active instructional resources that can help connect the medieval past with students’ present.
- 2) Framing Medieval-Digital Comparisons. Teachers of pre-modern history and literature are understandably wary of undergraduates’ proclivity for making trans-historical generalizations. Comparisons between medieval and digital modes of textual production need to be made sensitively and rigorously. The more I taught this course, the more I felt that what I was trying to do was to equip students with a set of tools to interrogate different kinds of media. As evidenced by quote two above, students are rarely asked to think about the *forms* in which texts are manifested. Close attention to the material forms of medieval texts, I suggest, might help students think more about the digital forms that surround them.

The Class

- Reading in the Middle and Digital Ages, a first-year writing seminar (FWS) I taught in the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2013
- Demographics: eighteen students in the fall, thirteen in the spring; mostly freshmen, from a variety of programs and colleges; an even mix of men and women
- Six essay assignments explored a variety of questions and issues: e.g., the book as a technology; the *Canterbury Tales* in medieval manuscripts, modern printed books, and online; the roles of glosses and commentaries in manuscript and digital cultures
- Field trips to Cornell’s Rare and Manuscript Collections (see images)



Note the interlinear and marginal glosses in this manuscript excerpt; both offer “user-generated” commentary on the central text.

