Collecting to the Core-Manuscripts in Medieval Studies

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Collecting to the Core — Manuscripts in Medieval Studies

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Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham’s Introduction to Manuscript Studies “has now enabled — for the first time — the introduction of detailed codicological study into the undergraduate classroom,” declared Michael Johnston in the Spring 2012 issue of the journal Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching (SMART), a volume devoted to teaching the history of the book.1-2 The articles in this special issue synthesize new pedagogical trends in medieval studies that advocate moving beyond the traditional “show-and-tell” approach to better utilize manuscripts in undergraduate instruction.3-4 Medievalists in art, literature, history, historical geography, religious studies, and music, as well as book historians and special collections librarians, are training students to consider how the physical artifact helps contextualize the impact and meaning of a text over time by incorporating elements of book and manuscript analysis. This essay will describe the contribution of Clemens and Graham’s work to manuscript studies and discuss a few individual facsimiles and how they can serve a manuscript-centered medieval studies curriculum, particularly for new programs or small institutions.5

Manuscript studies as a discipline focuses on the idiosyncratic and particular features of each artifact, which can include the date and place of production, the physical construction of the artifact, the ownership and use of the item between its production and its current repository, and a host of other details. Often, this information can only be discerned by applying analytical techniques to physical evidence within the manuscript. Introduction to Manuscript Studies attempts to synthesize the complex, and occasionally contradictory, field of manuscript studies for the beginner. The attractive volume includes copious photographic examples from the rich manuscript collections of the Newberry Library. Clemens and Graham begin with topics in manuscript production including the materials used to construct pages and bindings, the inks and tools used, the design and execution of the text and images, evidence of readership including correction and annotation, and the structure of completed codices. They then provide a brief outline of analytical issues and techniques for working with manuscripts, including handling, punctuation conventions, damage, clues to the history of the object in the handwriting, and how to read scholarly manuscript descriptions. The final section addresses various common genres and formats of manuscripts. An extensive bibliography supports each section of the textbook.

While the images in this textbook are well-chosen and instructive, ideally, teaching a course involving manuscript study will involve the handling of manuscripts. Providing access to materials for manuscript studies can challenge librarians whose collection development focuses on monographic and serial resources. Many institutions with a program in medieval studies may not be able to leap into purchasing manuscripts or even individual leaves, which grow more costly and scarce every year, without an established curriculum to justify the expense. Digital collections, carefully-selected facsimiles, and the development of ties with libraries that might have appropriate collections can be first steps in developing a collection that can fully support manuscript-based courses.

The number and types of medieval documents available in digital forms, including transcriptions, translations, and images, are expanding rapidly. A decade ago, many digital facsimiles were produced for distribution by CD-ROM, and were wonderful resources with inventive scholarly tools. Unfortunately, a large proportion of these have been rendered obsolete by changes in technology, and the migration of these resources to new systems is complex and expensive. Web-based collections are generally a better resource for instructors and potentially for librarians to highlight in library catalogs. Many individual libraries (particularly national libraries in Europe) and important museums regularly develop virtual exhibitions and new digital facsimiles (sometimes called surrogates) that provide excellent resources for teaching and are often available free of charge. Other collections, such as Parker on the Web, which provides digital images of medieval manuscripts at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, offer a free public interface, but additional scholarly resources can be accessed by subscribing institutions.6 Finally, several major and stable collections are the result of collaboration among various archives and libraries, such as the Europeana Regia project, which plans to digitally reunite several dispersed medieval royal libraries.7 These projects often create or re-create sources in ways that could never be done physically and include scholarly tools and features such as zooming, which allow enhanced study. This electronic experience is very far removed from the manuscript, however, and the “magic” of direct interaction with an artifact.

Print facsimiles allow the discovery of an artifact page by page and, in contrast to digital resources, can closely replicate the physical experience of working with a manuscript. They often include scholarly commentaries that illuminate and analyze the images and the construction of the codex. Manuscript facsimiles are available in a variety of genres and at several price levels. Many individual manuscripts are often available in several formats including more deluxe publications; the various facsimile offerings for a given manuscript may range from less than $100 to many thousands of dollars. Predictably, the most expensive facsimiles most closely replicate the experience of using a manuscript and often use special paper which “feels” like vellum, colors not available by standard printing methods, and gatherings and stitching that mimic the original, but even less expensive facsimiles provide access to the text and images. Over the course of a few semesters, the curriculum can be greatly enhanced through the purchase of individual titles chosen to complement scholarly interests and required core classes that constitute a beginning “manuscript” collection for new programs or courses. The key to developing the collection is enlisting the expertise of the faculty teaching the course, who will need to have enough familiarity with the manuscript or the genre of manuscript to comfortably teach with a facsimile.

One of the best-documented areas of manuscript study in undergraduate education is transcribing and editing a handwritten text.8-10 A professor I work with uses a facsimile of a mystery play such as The Towneley Cycle: A Facsimile of Huntington MS HM 1, which, despite its humble exterior and black-and-white pages, provides students with an example of a vernacular text to decipher.11 A social historian, art historian, or religious studies professor might prefer The Holkham Bible: A Facsimile, which illustrates many noncanonical biblical texts, particularly stories of the childhood of Christ, that can be used to teach topics from the modern understanding of medieval childhood to the variations in religious experience across Europe.12 The Luttrell Psalter, a common liturgical text for lay people lavishly illustrated with scenes of agriculture and town life, as well as a variety of grotesques and imaginative creatures, is also approachable for many disciplines and thematic courses.13 These glossy color publications are superficially familiar as coffee-table books, but the images and sparse text continued on page 79
can raise fruitful discussion about the choice and organization of stories and the execution of images with ample material for analysis of artistic, cultural, economic, and religious issues. Themed courses, for example, classes which use environmental studies approaches to understand the middle ages, might use several different manuscript facsimiles. *The Hunting Book of Gaston Phébus: Manuscrit Français 616, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale* both describes and illustrates hunting techniques for prized game animals or herds for feeding large groups of people. "Medicina Antiqua: Codex Vindobonensis 93, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek" is a recipe book for medicines with abundant illustrations of plants and descriptions of appropriate seasons and techniques for harvesting ingredients. Book of Beasts: A Facsimile of Ms. Bodley 764 is a compendium of information about animals, a bestiary, compiled from various ancient and late antique authorities with many illustrations and Aesop's fable-like moral conclusions.

The editions listed above are all affordable, but these less expensive facsimiles have drawbacks and can additionally be difficult to locate. They are often radically altered from the original in size, material, method of construction, and binding, which limits the level of analysis an instructor can teach or require. Instructors will most likely have strong feelings about which manuscripts they would like to teach, but budget concerns may limit the library’s ability to purchase the most “authentic” manuscript facsimiles. These facsimiles can prepare students to work with the real thing, if faculty want to arrange a capstone experience like visiting a manuscript repository. As a special collections librarian, I often work with groups from regional institutions who come to work with manuscripts in Western Michigan University’s collections because their own schools neither have nor are likely to acquire any due to lack of funds, lack of expertise, or low priority for this type of acquisition. Knowing a class has some practice with facsimiles can be reassuring to a special collections librarian, who may be concerned about unleashing a group of unknown undergraduates on the university’s treasured possessions, particularly for a faculty member they do not know personally. The “home” librarian can often help reassure the host librarian of the preparation and reliability of the students involved until the faculty member establishes a relationship with the curators at the host institution.

Librarians increasingly strive to become partners in instruction, but that requires them to be aware of pedagogical innovations in the disciplines they serve and to develop creative ways to support them, particularly in interdisciplinary fields. The richness of the manuscript tradition is an integral feature of medieval studies, and these materials can intrigue students and stimulate classroom discussion, but few undergraduates have the basic skills to fully realize the benefits of working with handwritten materials in other languages, a tension which Johnston characterizes as “student resistance and attraction to using rare books and manuscripts.” Instructors want to challenge their students through this kind of study because manuscript description and analysis involve the attention to detail, interdisciplinary thinking, and analytical skills that are among the primary goals of a liberal arts education. This approach can also lead to discussions on issues such as authorial intent, cultural change, the transmission of information, and the ways in which history and its artifacts are reinterpreted by modern scholars, which lead students to challenge their assumptions. For librarians, these new trends in teaching illustrate the vitality of library collections at a time when much of the focus of the profession has been on the growth and promise of digital resources, and this work can provide stimulating challenges. Specialized collection development is an important tool to help instructors realize their goals for student achievement and to help academic librarians stay involved with the intellectual life of the departments they serve.
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Collecting to the Core Endnotes
17. Ibid 2, p. 11.

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.

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