

Whearty, Bridget. 2022. *Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press. Pp. 338. ISBN 9781503632752.

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Bridget Whearty has written an extraordinary book. To say that this is just a digital humanities monograph is to simplify a complex, multifaceted and extremely timely contribution to the humanities as a whole. While ostensibly the topic of *Digital Codicology* describes the process of digitisation and its consequences, Whearty has delivered on little over three hundred pages a book on the nature of medieval research, a piece of auto-ethnography, and a pretty decent piece of critical theory. All this in a readable form with a light, approachable style.

The book is divided into four chapters preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Coda and an Appendix with a methodological manifesto. Even though the monograph forms a coherent whole, each of its parts tackles a distinct subject and manages to maintain subtle differences in style and approach. The Introduction provides a sizeable methodological foundation. Perhaps the boldest move that Whearty offers is to use (late) medieval authors as theoreticians: Chaucer, Hoccleve, and Lydgate. This works astonishingly well and, additionally, is a piece of academic honesty. The texts or objects on which we work also influence, in the form of a feedback loop, our methodologies. Nothing is really just a “primary” source.

The first chapter is, as Whearty admits herself, auto-ethnographical, showcasing her participation in the digitisation process itself. But its main protagonist is Astrid Smith, the digitisation specialist at the Stanford University Libraries whose expertise and knowledge is spotlighted in the description of Stanford, MS Codex M0379. The chapter also happens to be a valuable overview of how the digitisation process itself looked in the late 2010s and early 2020s and gives the readers a peek into how a major institution like Stanford structures this process.

The second chapter focuses on San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 111 and its various copied afterlives. Here Whearty always keeps the physical in mind, putting the disembodied reproduction process in its bodily context. She makes us see the labour in the digital (but also earlier, analogue) facsimiles. But at the same time, this allows her to talk about the interface between what is seen as valuable and what becomes visible. How does digitisation influence our judgement of authors like Hoccleve? For Whearty, the digitisation process is not something that appears out of nowhere in the late twentieth century but rather is part of a continuous history that begins with the making of the manuscript itself.

The third chapter tackles questions of access and inequalities of the digital. By introducing us to the history of early digitisation projects (and the compromises that had to accompany them), Whearty highlights again how nothing that appears on our screens

nowadays exists in isolation. We are used to date manuscripts and archaeological artefacts. But how do we date digital copies (or, as the author of this review would say, facsimiles) in the face of inconsistent or missing metadata? Whose responsibility is it to date these digital objects?

The fourth chapter looks at metadata and interoperability. And here again, Whearty shows how every scholarly narrative is also embedded in the biography of the scholars themselves. Starting with her own experiences she proceeds to discuss the modern metadata evolution and inconsistencies. This allows for a discussion of the meanings of curation in the digital sphere (and also what kind of necessary losses are connected with it). For Whearty, metadata is a balance act between completion and failure. Hers is a story of translation between languages of data curation.

The Coda provides a look at the way errors inform the lives of digitised manuscripts – how these errors in a way mirror scribal errors (and how their corrections exist on a similar plane). This is for Whearty a chance to argue for a stricter integration of version control into the workflows of digitisation.

Finally, the Appendix is a seven-point manifesto on how the future of digitisation should look. The theses range from ontological and epistemological to methodological. They remain useful and personal, a fitting ending for the book.

As mentioned above, this is not only a scholarly monograph on digitisation. It is also a primary text documenting the labour and the process of creating non-analogue copies in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. Just like medieval histories, it not only analyses the past but also documents it. Whearty remains in control of registers, presenting the material to the book's readers in a structured and critical manner.

Doing digital codicology is a praxis that already influences most of manuscript studies. We are all digital humanists now. Therefore, it is our duty to engage with methodological discussions over the matter. Whearty's book is a perfect starting point for that. Yes, some parts of it (especially in the discussion of metadata) might seem rather hermetic at a first glance for an uninitiated reader. But there are many points of access for those outside of the field.

For those who have been in the field of digital manuscript studies for a longer time already, *Digital Codicology* is a timely reminder that the 0s and 1s on our hard drives and servers require specialised manual labour to appear. Whearty never lets the digital object disembodify. She also aptly shows how our discipline is no longer a newcomer, that it has many decades of history and that we are no longer in the "first cycle." There is a calm, balanced view on things in this book, far away from the epistemic panic present in many other attempts to understand the impact of the digital.

Yet another area in which Whearty succeeds is in showing how there is no necessary divide between the "digital" and "analog[ue]" methodologies of manuscript studies. Her investigations are mostly limited to codicology and archival studies but the same applies to other areas like diplomatics and palaeography. Well-executed, the digital and the analogue do not stand in opposition, clutched in mortal combat for the future of hearts and minds. Instead, they co-exist propelling each other forward in an increasingly complex world. There is a sense of cautious optimism in this book about where we are and where we can go, even if there are pitfalls on the way. Yet, at the same time this is a book written under conditions of late capitalism and these conditions underpin many of

its themes (precarity, invisible labour, non-sustainable practices). Our scholarship, Whearty shows, can no longer ignore this context.

The book will and already has started many productive discussions. Whearty's avoidance of the term "digital facsimile" on the grounds of avoiding the value judgement (37) can be questioned. Sometimes, very rarely, shades of positivism can be seen in the discussion of the metadata debate and striving for "more correct" (199) data. The aspect of narrativity underlying the dynamics of digitisation is present but plays a rather limited role. Perhaps the greatest absence is ecology and climate: the toll that the push for digitisation takes on the fragile ecosystems. In future editions another, eighth, thesis in the "Doing Digital Codicology" manifesto (235–40) might appear that will address this problem. The impact of medieval manuscript production on ecosystems of the day was an acute concern. So is the impact of making their digital copies today.

These points should by no means be seen as errors, rather they are epistemological choices taken inside of a coherent and well-argued narrative. Thus, they open the discussion, invite other approaches, make the book connect. Whearty's book will remain a perfect example of this kind of engagement for years to come and should make it to the reading lists of all well-structured manuscript studies modules. She has written a monograph that will shape the field.

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