

Warren, Michelle R. 2022. *Holy Digital Grail. A Medieval Book on the Internet*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pp. xiii + 342. ISBN 9781503608009.

Reviewed by Mike Kestemont 
University of Antwerp

Michelle R. Warren, professor of comparative literature at Dartmouth College, has written a book about a (single) book. Warren shows herself quite aware of the rather narrow focus on a single manuscript, but the reader quickly realizes that she makes up for this with the diverse array of domains through which the book approaches this unique artefact. The monograph effortlessly switches between diverse fields, ranging from critical data studies over philology to tech history and codicology. The preface explains how the book's coming about is interwoven with the author's own professional trajectory, which serves as an excellent *captatio benevolentiae*.

This single book—or at least, the material object, I should stress—is currently kept under the shelfmark Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 80. The manuscript was copied onto generous paper pages around 1425; it holds the only known copy of a text translated by the London citizen Henry Lovelich, skinner by profession, under the mercantile patronage of a fellow guild member, Henry Barton. Lovelich transformed a French-language Arthurian cycle into over 50,000 English couplet lines. The vibrant environment in which the London craftsman went about this significant effort is vividly sketched in chapter 2 (“Performing community. Merchants, Chivalry, Data”), which brings to life the colourful urban context in which the text of MS 80 originated and was performed. In the late sixteenth century, the book would end up in the collection of Matthew Parker, the first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury and an ardent proponent of his still young Church. His collection, including MS 80, reflected his ambitions to create a “Protestantized” version of Antiquity; Arthurian legend, once more, proved to be a fertile ground for ideological appropriation.

As opposed to its colourful history, the manuscript itself makes a rather plain, if not pale, impression—its physical appearance does not immediately make clear why precisely this manuscript invited a full-book treatment. The most striking aspect of its outlook is in fact the frequent blank spaces in the page layout, revealing a design for illustrations which never materialized. The author playfully builds on the metaphor of an incomplete book: it will turn out that, over the centuries, the book has been constantly re-completed, through countless generations of editors, cataloguers and more recently webmasters. *Holy Digital Grail* in particular capitalizes on the more recent publication of MS 80 through Parker Library on the web, a larger-scale digitization effort that freely makes available online the holdings of the eponymous collection in Cambridge's Corpus Christi College. The online version of the Parker library resulted from a remarkable intercontinental collaboration between two major institutions, in which Corpus Christi teamed up with Stanford University Library. Nevertheless, Warren didn't close her eyes for problematic aspects of such impressive ventures (see chapter 6; “Reproducing Books. Binding, Microfilm, Digital”).

The opening chapter, subtitled “Medieval Literature in the Digital Dark Ages,” is immediately one of the highlights of the book and introduces the notion of “tech medievalisms,” or the countless times Arthurian metaphors, in particular that of the well-known Grail, have been used in the recent history of computing technology. This chapter contains a bewildering set of surprising anecdotes—did you know, for instance, that the ubiquitous PDF format resulted from a project with the code name “Camelot” at Adobe? The chapter critically highlights the notion of the “digital dark ages” (15) and the fragility of cultural heritage, seemingly safely stored in the cloud. Of particular value was the discussion of the project behind the digitization of the Archimedes Palimpsest project, sponsored by a wealthy, anonymous patron who was later identified as a major internet innovator. This digital project was spearheaded by Princeton University librarian Will Noel, who sadly passed recently, following a tragic traffic accident in Edinburgh. Although Will deserves a much lengthier obituary than I can offer here, it deserves emphasis how visionary champions of change like himself have fundamentally shaped the resources that we have at our disposal today.

I have much appreciation for Warren’s radically trans-historic approach, breaking down conventional periodizations and drawing countless valuable analogies—some large, some small—between the handwritten, printed and digital infrastructures that are necessary to sustain texts, by connecting them to the next generation of readers, over longer stretches of time (see e.g. chapter 3, “Marking Manuscripts. Makers, Users, Coders”). This diachronic view also makes the book an excellent contribution to the *Text Technologies* series in which it was published at Stanford University Press. Even today, surprisingly few series exist at major publishing houses that are willing to—or should I say, dare to?—accommodate innovative scholarly work with a more digital orientation, making this series as a whole, in the capable hands of series editors Ruth Ahnert and Elaine Treharne, as outstanding a contribution to the field as this particular installment.

The genre of Lovelich’s Arthurian text, on the brink between chronicle and romance, is not easy to establish: the perception of the text’s genetic signals is reconstructed at great length in the highly readable chapter 4 (“Cataloguing Libraries. History, Romance, Website”), where the negotiation of the book’s genetic mode is traced through philological history, in particular that of the various cataloguers who aimed to capture the book’s place in the Parker collection. Warren convincingly argues how much of the evaluation of the manuscript’s semantic nature has co-evolved with a variety of *-isms* (including, but not limited to, nationalism, racism, and romanticism). The same diffuse image in terms of genre probably applies to Warren’s book, which can appear hard to categorize under a single label—but that is certainly part of the book’s charm.

The red thread which cuts through the chapters is the phenomenon of the “platformization” of literature, or the way in which various technologies and infrastructures have served as an interface between texts and readers. Computing technology certainly is a major aspect of this discussion, but the book never gets too technical (nor too theoretical) to alienate less initiated readers and remains accessible throughout to a more generalist audience in medieval studies, and even beyond. (It is probably in a similar light that we should understand the author’s choice to present excerpts from the manuscript in translation). When it comes to digital analysis techniques, the book presents a more limited view of the possibilities to my personal taste, where the discussion remains mainly limited to plain search technologies (although I should note that the author makes a host of interesting remarks about the potential dangers of such a naive approach). Depending on one’s scholarly profile, it

might be considered a lacuna that more advanced technologies which are nowadays increasingly and readily available in the community, such as handwritten text recognition or pixel-based image analysis through computer vision, remain out of sight.

At the same time, the book rightfully thematizes the instability of digital media: digital longevity, at least currently, presents perhaps more as a challenge than as an opportunity. Apart from mere storage and software compatibility issues (which are challenging enough in themselves), additional epistemological dangers are lurking in the shadows. Warren rightfully warns us that, especially in times when information is so readily available online, we should remain critical of its suppliers. Cataloguers are gatekeepers who mediate our access to knowledge in ways that are hard to oversee, much like search engines. The precise origin of digital information can be equally difficult to assess, as she argues in her close reading of the Parker website. When it comes to digital backups, the “3-2-1 rule” applies: to keep a file safe, at least three copies should exist, on at least two kinds of storage media, and at least one of the copies should be kept off-site, in a separate location. If this informal advice applies, the future of MS 80 seems to be safe, as this work and its editions have been beautifully preserved across various websites, such as Parker on the web, which seems to present the state of the art in the field.

Although the book in most places rightfully advocates the advantages of open scholarship, to the best of my knowledge, no digital version in open access is currently available of *Holy Digital Grail*, which somewhat limits the potential reach of the publication and makes it not so straightforward to consult the many URLs which the text references. The choice for a static print publication nevertheless also casts doubts about scholarly book publications at large. On pages 173–74, for instance, the reader will come across a worthwhile passage: the web interface which the book discusses is version 2.0; however, by the time the book would have been published, it would also have been outdated already, because of the publication of Parker 2.1, which would introduce changes in the interface. While such a minor update would of course not invalidate the book’s approach in the short term, it does raise uneasy questions about the relationship between scholarly monographs, printed for eternity, and the fast-paced changes in the digital world, that seem almost impossible to keep up with.

Holy Digital Grail certainly left me happy as a reader. The book luckily uses parenthetical references—instead of endnotes, which are always so tedious to consult—and comes with an attractively designed cover. The typesetting of the book has been meticulously deliberated. The book has been carefully structured as well, and avoids an overly teleological story, where a primitive manuscript infrastructure eventually and inevitably resulted in superior digital technologies. All in all, the book seems the rightful winner of 2023 History of the Book Prize from the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing. I hope this book, as well as the other volumes in the Stanford Text Technologies series, will find even more happy readers in the future.

(Received 28/05/2024)