Teaching the Electronic Manuscript

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On my first trip to Oxford to work with medieval manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, I stayed with a friend, a PhD student who had also done his BA in Oxford. Despite my own completed PhD and two paleography courses, I was amazed and ecstatic that the librarians actually allowed me to handle 600-year-old books – not scraps of parchment, whole books. My friend endured my rhapsodies for a few minues before observing, 'I could have called those up in my first year at university.' I boggled, trying to imagine the alternate universe in which eighteen-year-olds read Middle English texts not just in the original language, but on the original vellum.

The Internet makes possible a virtual alternate world, where required class texts are manuscripts, though digitally encoded ones. While there is no substitute for parchment and ink, an on-line edition with photographs acquaints students with the look, though not the feel, of a manuscript, and allows them to study page layout, scribal corrections, transcription, and editorial practices, alongside the literary questions common to English classrooms. When I taught a graduate seminar in Middle English literature using the online Auchinleck manuscript (Edinburgh, University of Scotland Advocates Ms. 19.2.1; www.nls.uk/auchinleck), the experience was deeply rewarding for the students and led me to think about ways I could incorporate their discoveries into both the undergraduate classroom and a graduate course covering the history of the book.

The online edition has greatly assisted my own work on Auchinleck; the full-color reproduction gives a more immediate sense of the manuscript than does the black-and-

white facsimile (Pearsall and Cunningham), although in some cases the greater contrast of the facsimile pages makes it easier to recognize letter forms. It is easier to keep in mind that missing portions of a text may differ from other extant versions when looking at page stubs than when consulting a critical edition. Similarly, looking at the page where one text succeeds another immediately shows how the second fills out a gathering, in a way that assembling edited works does not. The visual and spatial elements of manuscript study are important to scholarly understanding of textual relations; they can be equally important to students learning about medieval literature.

The course I taught using Auchinleck was an advanced one, aimed at PhD students though open to MA candidates, requiring previous study of Middle English. Six out of the seven students enrolled had studied with me before; the other had had Anglo-Saxon with my colleague who teaches Old English. To be sure, this was a select group, but their enthusiasm went beyond what I expected; they particularly enjoyed the paleographical elements of the course, and asked for more. Viewing manuscript pages sparked their interest: seeing the changes of hand from one scribe to another, noticing that they could see where a hand changed, even though they had difficulty explaining how they could tell this. They wanted to know how one hand can be distinguished from another, what to look for, as well as what this meant for the texts being copied.

We met in a 'smart classroom,' equipped with a computer and projection equipment, and a document camera (ours was an ELMO) to project papers or objects placed on it. Having the ability to project simultaneously from separate devices would be ideal; often I would have liked to show a transcription and image, both full-size, at the same time, or project both lecture notes and an image, to help students look for particular

points in the image. We began the fifteen-week semester with an introduction to paleographical and editorial matters, and then spent two weeks on the example of *Sir Orfeo* and its textual and editorial history, considering five different editions of it, from A. J. Bliss's critical edition for scholars, through various classroom versions, to the Auchinleck website's transcription. We discussed questions such as 'What is the aim of the edition? Why has the editor picked a particular base manuscript? What information (manuscript description, dialect description, literary introduction, literary notes, linguistic notes, glossary, editorial apparatus) do various editors include, and why? How concerned are editors with manuscript context?'

In the second quarter of the term, we turned to the longer romances, and tackled *Amis and Amiloun*, *Floris and Blauncheflour*, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, and the first (couplet) part of *Guy of Warwick*. Again we considered manuscript contexts—where the romance begins and ends, what other texts share the gathering, whether or not it is grouped with other romances (very roughly speaking, the first third of Auchinleck presents religious material, the next third romances, the last third history)—along with more traditional literary-critical questions. Many of these romances have received relatively little critical attention, particularly when compared to major works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and we also asked why this should be. *Guy of Warwick* presents its own problems, first because of length, and second because of its structure: Auchinleck divides it into two distinct portions, one in couplets, covering Guy's career up until he returns to England to kill a dragon, and the second in stanzas, presenting Guy's marriage and subsequent career as a defender of his faith. Although the medieval manuscript numbering gives the same number to these two

portions, and the stanzas continue the couplets on the same page, without a break, the transition between the two parts is very clear on the page. Not only is there a decorated capital, as at other 'paragraphs' in the romance, but the ink and size of writing change (Pearsall and Cunningham, however, identify the scribe of both portions as Scribe 1 [xv]).

This page thus demonstrates several key points about the physicality of texts: although the Auchinleck *Guy* is often called the 'tripartite version,' the manuscript treats it as having two parts (Guy proper, plus Reinbrun, his son’s story). At the same time, the break between couplets and stanzas is easily detected visually, and probably would affect manuscript readers’ perception of the story. That the same scribe wrote both the couplet and stanzaic versions shows that he took responsibility for the whole work, which in turn implies that the reason for the shift in composition is that the couplet exemplar either was incomplete or he had access to it for only a limited time. He then appears to have copied his exemplars as accurately as possible, rather than 'translating' stanzas into couplets. That his writing changes suggests that some time elapsed between the time the couplet exemplar ceased to be available and the time the scribe acquired another text to copy. All of this information can be presented verbally, as I have just done, but is much more quickly apprehended visually, through study of the page itself.

After this, we spent four weeks on religious texts, including saints’ lives, holy legends, miracles, didactic material, and salvation history, all important elements of Middle English literature, but often overlooked in treatments of Auchinleck that regard it as a repository of romances. The manuscript now begins with the original item five, sections at beginning and end having been lost, but it appears that the book began with

religious material. *The Legend of Adam and Eve* is now the first text, followed by a conversion romance, *The King of Tars*, and a saint's legend, that of Pope Gregory. Although it's often asserted that before Tyndale (1537), there was no English Bible, there were in fact many translations of portions of the Bible (as James Morey points out in *Book and Verse*); it is tempting to speculate that Auchinleck originally began either with prayers or with a Creation story, before proceeding to the Adam and Eve legend. Other Biblical stories in Auchinleck include a Harrowing of Hell and a narrative of the early life of the Virgin Mary.

We ended the semester with a study of generically problematic works, romances that resemble holy legends, legends that resemble romances, and the frame-story, *The Seven Sages of Rome*, which is sometimes considered a romance, sometimes a series of didactic tales. The manuscript itself appears to offer its own categories, grouping *The King of Tars* and *Amis and Amiloun*, generally considered romances, with the religious material of the first third of the book, and sandwiching two fabliaux, a miracle of the Virgin, and a lai between 'historical' romances later on. Another advantage offered by manuscript study, though, is the opportunity to consider how and why certain works appear where they do.

The fabliaux-miracle-lai sequence, for instance, spans the gap between two gatherings: the fabliaux and miracle conclude a gathering in which a long romance about King Arthur comes to an end, and the Lai le Freine begins the next gathering, as a bridge to a Charlemagne romance, *Roland and Vernagu*. While it is a commonplace that 'filler' texts with little or nothing to do with 'main' texts may occupy the ends of gatherings, Freine's presence at the beginning of a gathering belies that assumption. Why not begin

the gathering with the somewhat more substantial Charlemagne romance? Freine and Roland together fill the gathering nicely; Scribe 1, who appears to have been the compiler or editor of Auchinleck, seems to have calculated his material carefully for this gathering. The following gathering, containing another Charlemagne romance, Otuel, was written by another scribe, number six (Scribes 1 and 6 are sometimes identified [Hanna, following Pamela Robinson in her thesis], but Wiggins's linguistic analysis argues that they are separate writers, in accordance with Bliss, Pearsall and Cunningham). Since the two Charlemagne romances are closely connected in content and themes, it seems likely that Scribes 1 and 6 worked contemporaneously on these texts. Scribe 1 allowed Scribe 6 to begin a new gathering, rather than trying to hand over a partially filled one, and since Scribe 1 wanted the two similar romances grouped together, he sought another text of suitable length to begin the Charlemagne booklet, rather than 'filling' with a work that would seem an interruption to the exploits of Charlemagne's knights.

Nearly all of Auchinleck's contents have sources or analogues in Old French and/or Latin. To be sure, this is true of many Middle English works. Nonetheless, in some sense the Auchinleck manuscript presents many examples of a single genre: the translation into Middle English verse of texts written in more prestigious languages. Thus, some speculate that the manuscript was written for a mercantile audience (Pearsall and Cunningham viii), although Peter Coss has shown that knowledge of French was common among the rising English middle class. Another possibility is that it was compiled for less-educated members of a family, such as women and children, or that it was commissioned by a monolingual gentry family. Various citations, such as that in the prologue of the Auchinleck romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, suggest that there were

many English people who did not know French. Present-day scholars tend to divide the contents of Auchinleck based on their topics, but perhaps to a medieval audience, all of these disparate texts were the same sort of thing, a combination of education and entertainment inaccessible in their original form. Confronting the manuscript as a whole collection, again, gives a stronger sense of the sheer mass of this material than does reading individual edited texts.

The most important element of teaching from the manuscript is the constant reminder that the manuscript itself is a book, not merely the source of other, edited books printed on paper and distributed by corporate presses. It has a bodily existence; despite excised illustrations and pages, it remains an intact, bound collection of reading material. It is not a mysterious 'document' but a book-shaped set of bound pages, a familiar object, subject to the same sorts of wear and tear as printed books. Having images of its pages available meant that students could see why Auchinleck texts are often headless or have gaps near the beginning: cutting out the illuminations removed the accompanying text and that on the reverse of the leaf. Again, this information can be conveyed verbally, and again, the visual sense of what is missing carries far more impact. Further, we could examine scribal hands, to see how different (or similar) they appear, and to see which seem most legible. We could check on whether we could see what editors claimed to see: does the word really divide there? Is that letter shape actually what the editor thinks? We were able to critique editorial practices; did editors really put into practice the principles announced in their introductions?

Students save through not buying a textbook, since the University of Scotland makes the Auchinleck manuscript freely available (although for this graduate course, I

had an extensive coursepack of accompanying articles and samples of editions). Yet another advantage to using the online transcription and images is the ability to assign any text, including those not edited in hard copy since the nineteenth century. If anyone wants to read the entire manuscript straight through, it's there, of course; but it's also possible to treat the book as an anthology, and pick out the lais, or the didactic works, to focus on particular themes and ideas. Looking at the texts last edited by German scholars in the late mid-to-late 1800's encourages discussion of changing editorial conventions and degrees of intervention, including presentation of the debate over whether to pick a best manuscript or attempt to reconstruct an 'authorial' version. When students have seen the images of manuscript pages, they have a greater investment in debating these questions; even if they never go on to be editors, they view the editions they use differently, at the same time more critically and more appreciatively.

The greatest problem with relying on an online book is that students want hard copies. For short texts, printing out the transcription is quick and easy, but for the long romances, *Guy of Warwick* being the longest, printing directly from the website is not a good option. *Guy* would run 300 pages or more, and many printers choke up when sent so much material, not to mention that students balk at the amount of paper used in this way. One option is to copy the text into a word processing file and manipulate it so as to have 3 columns per page, in small type. Interlibrary loan came to the rescue in our very small class; another time, I would be more selective about texts and order TEAMS editions so that students could have their own inexpensive copies of any work that would run more than 10 pages or so.

The 'problem' I was thrilled to have is the amount of time we wound up spending on paleography, codicology, and editing in what was supposed to be a literature class. I had not foreseen how popular these topics would be. One reason students like paleography and codicology, I think, is that they are so tangible, so different from their literary studies; one of my students was doing a linguistics MA (at my school, linguistics is an English department specialty, not a separate department) precisely because she preferred a more concrete field of study. Focusing on the details of the page as a preliminary to interpretation made it possible for her to enjoy a literature class in a way she rarely had. Another reason may be the feeling of direct contact with the writer; looking at manuscript pages, even digitized ones, connects the reader to the hand that held the pen. Present-day books are mediated through so many people and processes that although we receive the writer's thoughts and words, we don't feel that we are reading the same page that the writer wrote on.

The enthusiasm my students expressed made me think about ways to bring elements of this class into a course required of all English graduate students at Northern Illinois University, the Introduction to Bibliography and Research Methods, which includes a history of the book component. Not all teachers spend as much time with manuscripts as I do, but in my experience, students find the concepts and terminology of manuscript study more accessible than those of incunables. Of course, we are all familiar with handwriting, in a way most of us are not familiar with the workings of a printing press; and even into the present day, some writers hand-write their works, so a scholar might deal with, say, twentieth-century American manuscripts. Showing the ways early printed books were modeled on medieval manuscript makes both seem more familiar. It

seems to me that studying a single manuscript could help guide students through the technology and terminology, by providing a fixed point of reference, rather like teaching history through biographical and exemplary stories. Ideally, manuscript study would then be followed by attention to early prints of at least some of the texts in the manuscript. At schools with a subscription to Early English Books Online (EEBO), this would be possible. Northern Illinois, however, does not subscribe to EEBO, which makes it hard to do this sort of detailed follow-up.

For two years, I have been experimenting in undergraduate Chaucer courses with an exercise in which students, working in groups, create their own 10-line edition of a chunk of Chaucer based on photocopies of manuscript facsimiles. They establish the text, provide notes and glossary, and include a statement of editorial principles. At one extreme, a group suggested a photographic reproduction with glosses, saying that the handwriting wasn't so bad and they wanted their edition to recreate the experience of reading the manuscript. At the other, I received a normalized-spelling version that came close to outright translation. This assignment generates considerable discussion, and students get excited about seeing what their readings looked like when they were new in the world. This experience suggests to me that using Auchinleck in the undergraduate classroom – supplemented with TEAMS editions, for the glossaries and background information – could offer students a new way of thinking about medieval literature, not just in a literary, social, or historical context, but using its physical context to introduce the others.

It is now a commonplace wonder among medievalists that medieval books, or at least their digital facsimiles, are available to anyone with a high speed Internet

connection, whereas not so long ago only a lucky few well-funded researchers got to see them. This availability certainly changes the research practices of the professoriate, and it should also change our teaching practices. Books are books, even when they're handwritten; handwritten books are not exactly books as we commonly think of them. Manuscript study shows – visually, immediately, in detail – how both statements are true. My midwestern American classroom cannot be the brave Old World, in which students visit the Bodleian to call up medieval manuscripts for private reading. But I can provide a virtual manuscript experience, thanks to the generosity of British libraries who post images of manuscripts, in whole or in part, on the Internet for international use.

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