

HELP! THERE'S A BEOWULF AFTER MY MOUSE! MEDIEVAL RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

Imagine teaching the Norman invasion of England of 1066 - and unrolling the Bayeux Tapestry for your students to have a look at. Now imagine that you are a literary scholar studying Piers Plowman and are unsatisfied with the editions available at your university's library - and so you conduct your own comparative study of surviving manuscripts. Finally, imagine that while writing you vaguely recall the perfect quotation from Augustine's Confessions. Although you have no idea where in the Confessions the quote is from, you quickly locate it without even getting up from your PC.

These aren't idle fantasies. Each scenario is entirely possible, or rather, virtually possible. These are just some of the uses that researchers and educators are making of the medieval resources available on the internet.

If the notion of medieval manuscripts and documents on the internet seems odd, it is only because the word "medieval" has entered the popular lexicon as a synonym for social and technological backwardness. In reality, the internet may be the perfect home for medieval resources. Institutions such as the British Library have begun to post digital facsimiles of rare and unique items: not only can you scroll through the Bayeux Tapestry on the 'net (available: http://orb/rhodes.edu/schriber/bayeux_tapestry.html), you can also look at the original Beowulf fragments (available: <http://www.bl.uk/index.html>), examine the Magna Carta (available: <http://www.bl.uk/index.html>), or flip through selections from the Book of Kells (available: <http://www.tcd.ie/kells.html>). Such digitization projects - and these are only a few of the highest profile ones - enable amateur and professional historians alike unlimited access to delicate, priceless treasures.

Moreover, digital editions of transcriptions and translations of medieval texts and documents enable educators to use primary sources in their classes without requiring students to buy costly course readers, or even more costly printed editions of the texts. Instructors can either cut-and-paste to create virtual course readers, or simply direct their students to relevant websites. The enthusiasm of amateur and professional medievalists for online resources is amply demonstrated by the scores of websites they have created. These can be easily located through medieval mega-sites like Netserf (available: <http://netserf.cua.edu/>) and Labyrinth (available: <http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/labyrinth-home.html>). Eager to gain insight into the use of medieval internet resources, I recently posted a questionnaire on three medieval studies listservs, querying the hows and whys of online resources in research and teaching. Although the number of respondents to my questionnaire was too slight to allow quantitative analysis, my data yielded a number of interesting trends.

The respondents were most enthusiastic about the variety of resources available with free access. Of course, nothing on the internet can really be considered "free" if you factor in the cost of buying the hardware and software necessary to access the 'net; this is especially true if you consider the situation on many university and college campuses where computer access is often far too limited for instructors to require students to make use of internet resources. That said, the range of medieval resources freely available on the 'net is impressive: whether you are interested in the philosophy of Aquinas, the joy of Chaucer or the surging melodrama and slapstick of the Middle English Corpus Christi plays, it's all out there, and it's all free.

The downside, as was frequently noted by the respondents to my survey, is that these texts can only be free because (a) they dodge copyright by being derived from out of date or idiosyncratic editions; and (b) they are not as scrupulously edited and copy-edited as printed texts are. Thus, many of the texts bear witness to the peccadilloes of Victoria translators and editors; and if this doesn't bother you, the numerous scan errors (electronic typos which inevitably creep into long documents during digital conversion) probably will. As well, most internet texts lack the scholarly apparatus of introduction, notes and glossary that we take for granted in printed editions. In short, internet editions cannot be considered authoritative.

Which is not the same as saying that they are not useful. Indeed, several of my respondents proved quite resourceful at making a minus into a plus. One argued that distortions of texts and scan errors can be used as a healthy lesson to students on the importance of questioning the reliability of all sources, whether digital or printed. Another instructor commented that she encouraged her students to pick out and relish the new ironies created by the transposition of medieval documents into a digital environment - and what could be more ironic than coming across computer-generated errors in an internet-based edition of a Victorian translation of Aquinas?

Who needs authoritative editions on the 'net anyways? Authoritative editions can always be found on that other information highway - the library. Internet resources are best treated as tools rather than texts. They are excellent in certain specialized applications, but their usefulness has its limits, as do all tools. You can use a spanner as a hammer, but you're probably better off heading back to the toolbox for the hammer itself.

Internet resources are ideal for exploration and quick reference. Keyword searching, the most frequently mentioned advantage of internet resources in research, allows the reader to quickly locate relevant portions of a given text. Once located, all agreed that the next step was to find the corresponding passage in an

authoritative print edition of the same text. Or even better, in the original manuscript, if it has been posted on the web.

Researchers and instructors also cited the great convenience of cutting and pasting from digital documents. Whether instructors prepare virtual course readers for their students, or whether researchers download the relevant chunks of the text they are currently working on, the result is the same: readers gain access to medieval texts in a form which lends itself to dissection and manipulation. Of course, virtual course readers are only effective if students have access to the web, but even this is not an insurmountable problem: two of the respondents to my questionnaire mentioned that they print out and photocopy their virtual readers for students who lack internet access.

Medieval resources on the internet are allowing medieval studies boldly to go where it has never gone before. Instructors say that they can finally get primary sources in a format flexible enough, and cheap enough, to allow them to be incorporated into all levels of instruction, from secondary school through to college and university. Researchers are able to access virtual copies of

some rare documents and manuscripts, as well as countless transcriptions and translations. Moreover, the digital format of these texts allows new possibilities for research. In New York, literary scholar Judith Weise downloaded selections from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and used spreadsheet software to perform mathematical analyses of the text for her recent article in the journal *Style*. In Greece, Panagiotis Antonopoulos, a congenitally blind university professor, has a computer system that converts digital text into Braille, allowing him to read any text posted on the internet, vastly expanding the number of medieval texts available to him.

Internet sources are not without their drawbacks. But all of the respondents to my questionnaire would agree that, when used cautiously and appropriately, they can offer great opportunities to amateur and professional medievalists alike. So next time you feel like making the journey to Canterbury with Chaucer's pilgrims, why not try surfing?

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THE INTERNET & HISTORY

The Public Record Office (PRO) has recently released two new sets of UK Government Records of great interest to British historians. First, on Jan. 1, the PRO released documents from 1968 that had been sealed under the 30 year rule. The web site has the highlights of this release, with some of the actual documents scanned onto the site, accompanied by a brief synopsis of their historical relevance. Among other things, these documents cover both the three year diplomatic negotiation between Britain and Argentina over the sovereignty of the Falklands Islands, and the changes to immigration legislation as a consequence of the Kenyan Asian crisis. On Jan. 27th, the PRO released the records of MI5 (British security service) from 1914 to 1945. The web sites offers some enlightening and intriguing selections from these records which should be highly relevant to historians of the world wars. [Http://www.pro.gov.uk](http://www.pro.gov.uk).

Historians of the English common law will be eternally grateful to know that the Selden Society finally has a web page up and running. This site provides not only a full index with descriptions of all past publications, but also a list of upcoming publications. [Http://www.law.harvard.edu/Programs/selden_society/main.html](http://www.law.harvard.edu/Programs/selden_society/main.html).