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Situating Digital Archives

Michelle R. Warren

Dartmouth College, michelle.r.warren@dartmouth.edu

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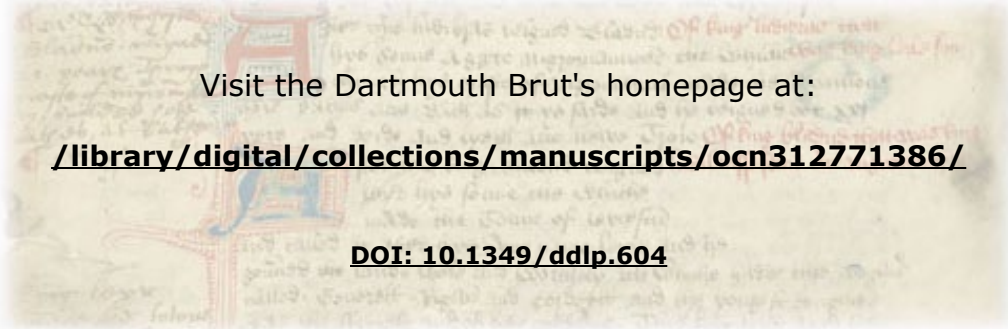


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Introduction: Situating Digital Archives

Michelle R. Warren
Dartmouth College

By way of introduction to this cluster of essays inspired by the Middle English Prose *Brut* manuscript purchased by Dartmouth College in 2006, this essay considers how the competing pressures of access and preservation condition scholarship in medieval studies. I suggest several analogies between broad conceptions of the digital humanities and the specific contours of digital philology.

The essays gathered in this issue illustrate some of the contours of digital philology through the case study of a single manuscript from the Middle English Prose *Brut* corpus. This fifteenth-century exemplar was purchased by Dartmouth College in 2006 as part of a multi-year initiative to expand the medieval vernacular holdings of the Rauner Special Collections Library for the primary purpose of undergraduate teaching. The book immediately elicited scholarly attention as well since it had not been previously available for study. Interest broadened when the codex was digitized through the Dartmouth Digital Library Program in 2009. The browsable scans enabled a group of scholars to come together for a conference at Dartmouth in 2011 to consider historiography, textual transmission, reading practices, and bookmaking. The conversations of the conference, in turn, have shaped the current form of the manuscript, the digital resources, and this publication.

At present, the Dartmouth *Brut* exists in several formats or modes. As a tangible artifact (Rauner Codex MS 003183), it includes a fifteenth-century codex, a sixteenth-century cover, several bags of

un-dated detritus, a twenty-first-century facsimile of the sixteenth-century cover, a twenty-first-century binding and cover—all except the facsimile cover contained in a hand-made box accessible at Dartmouth’s Rauner Library. As a digital artifact, the Dartmouth *Brut* includes master files in TIFF format, high-resolution JPEGs in HTML format (also downloadable in PDF), a zoomable “page turner” version of the manuscript leaves (ISSUU Image Viewer), and a zoomable “grid” version of the manuscript leaves (IIP Image Viewer). The HTML page and PDF file include images of the binding in addition to the manuscript leaves.¹

All of these forms—including the fifteenth-century text—have taken shape through the combined pressures of access and preservation. In the first instance, medieval scribes and rubricators preserved existing narratives of British history by making a new book; the book in turn provided access to historical narratives for new readers. The effort to preserve and the desire for access have both changed the text now recorded. Together, preservation and access make archives malleable and dynamic rather than static. Every form accreted to the codex as first produced—handwritten annotations, later bindings, digitization, etc.—extends this process. In the afterword to this issue, Matthew Fisher reflects further on the ongoing transmission of the *Brut* corpus, delving more fully into each essay’s contributions to both analog and digital platforms.

Here, I reflect on how encounters with the Dartmouth *Brut*, in any of its forms, engage some of the current preoccupations of the digital humanities. Is technology primarily amplifying long established scholarly practices or is it changing the very nature of scholarship? What are the fundamental differences between digitized and born-digital forms? Do the digital humanities require “building something” (as Stephen Ramsay has posited), or does it also include digitally-informed theory?² These broad questions also apply to the narrower terrain of digital philology. The Dartmouth *Brut* provides a small (but infinitely expandable) data set for exploring these issues. And while I don’t want to claim too much for what is so far a relatively simple project with no unique electronic features, its very human scale invites a digital intimacy that might lead to insights of broader significance. Together, the *Brut*’s various dimensions (3D and 2D, ancient and new) can support ongoing experimentation with the powers and limits of digital processing.

Digital Hack

The Dartmouth *Brut*, in its collective states, exemplifies the multiplicities of what Paul Fyfe has called an “unplugged digital humanities pedagogy” (abstract). Bringing a manuscript into a room, any manuscript into any room, constitutes a “digital pedagogy without computers”—digital in the “non-electronic senses of that word: something to get your hands on, to deal with in dynamic units, to manipulate creatively” (Fyfe, par. 4, 8). In other words, the ubiquitous potential for digitization makes analog environments key to understanding the critical labor and material workings of digital technologies (par. 12). Fyfe also offers a definition of digital humanities with “hacking” at its core: “‘Hacking’ these days means to adapt, manipulate, and make productive use out of a given technology or technological context or platform” (par. 3). Together, hacking and the unplugged digital frame continuities from medieval vellum to binary code.

For starters, the complex textual variations across the *Brut* corpus show that British history has been made by medieval hackers—people adapting, manipulating, and making productive use out of the materials they had at hand. We owe almost everything we know about medieval history to the perpetual hacking of scribes who copied, combined, and created anew. The Dartmouth *Brut* is an exemplary witness of this phenomenon, as Elizabeth Bryan has shown: the text is “unusually idiosyncratic” and represents an “independent revision and abbreviation” (207–8). One of the distinctive features, shared with some other exemplars, is the absence of four chapters that often follow the death of King Arthur. In his contribution to this issue, Edward Donald Kennedy argues that these chapters have been intentionally removed to make the history of English kingship more consistently heroic. History has been hacked, in other words, to serve new purposes.

The codex itself currently embodies an unplugged digital codicology. An ancient manuscript was asked a novel question: how can we keep using it? In answering, Deborah Howe, Collections Conservator, has effectively hacked the book—adapting, manipulating, and making productive use out of its quires, threads, and binding to create an artifact that can still be read in three dimensions. It was taken apart so that it could be digitized; it was digitized because it had to be taken apart. In either case, new opportunities arose for putting it back together. The Dartmouth *Brut* exists now in the interstice of *digital*—tactile touch of the finger on vellum, leather, paper, camera, keyboard, screen. In a photo essay in this cluster, Howe and I reflect

together on the conceptual implications of the book's migration to its current forms, where digitization serves as a prompt for material creativity.

Dark Archive

The Dartmouth *Brut*, in its collective states, also embodies the prismatic dimensions of "dark archives." Dark archives come in many forms, from classified materials with future publication dates (we know they exist but we can't access them) to obsolete technologies (we know the data exist but we have no way to read them). In Tim Maly's definition, "Dark archives are the repositories of human knowledge to which we no longer have operational access. They are the documents that have been lost, even though they still exist and the records that hold information we don't realize is there." Maly goes on to offer a four part typology of archival shades: known availables (the bright archive: information we know about and can access); known unavailables (dark to those who lack hardware, subscriptions, security clearance, etc.: information we know exists but can't access); unknown availables (dark archives, information that exists but cannot be accessed for lack of indexing, retrieval technology, etc.); unknown unavailables (dark ontology, information you don't even know you could know).

The medieval dark archive contains manuscripts once catalogued but no longer found as well as digital editions that don't function on current operating systems (some examples in O'Donnell). The Dartmouth *Brut*, like the other recently accessed manuscripts discussed in this issue by Lister Matheson and Ryan Perry, has traversed several dimensions of Maly's typology. Indeed, every time new materials become "known," they reconfigure the contours of the dark archive. The Dartmouth *Brut*, for example, has always been known and available to someone. For most, though, it existed for centuries as an "unknown unavailable" (and still does). Since the publication of Matheson's *Brut* catalogue in 1998, it became more widely known as an unavailable (xxxii).³ Once purchased by Dartmouth, it became a brighter and brighter archive for more and more people—still privately held but broadly available for the first time.

Yet the line between bright and dark can be surprisingly unstable since it depends in every instance on the mode of access. For

anyone reading Matheson's 1998 catalogue who doesn't also look for updates, the Dartmouth *Brut* remains dark. For anyone who uses the online *Imagining History* project as a manuscript catalogue (Kelly et al.), the Dartmouth *Brut* likewise remains dark (at least at the moment). Meanwhile, a casual Google search turns up the Dartmouth *Brut* at the top of the page, bright and clear, every time. Ironically, the more specialized tools prove the least reliable. This variable visibility suggests the instability of both archives and the operational tools that make them accessible.

The fact that archival contents can move so easily in and out of the dark, sometimes by chance, points to the challenges of sustainability faced by both physical and digital artifacts. The lessons drawn from obsolete digital projects are not encouraging for new cutting-edge projects: don't overdesign, don't use proprietary software, stick to the most basic code (O'Donnell). How can we design for gray? For dappled plays of light across fragmentary data? I'm not suggesting that the archival status of this particular codex is of monumental import, but the Dartmouth *Brut* nonetheless illustrates dynamics that affect all archives and are of broad relevance to digital philology and the digital humanities.

To embrace the variable existence of data, their lives from dark to bright, is to embrace humanism. The sheer quantity of extant data ensures that digital archives will always be as fragmentary and incomplete as any ancient analog archive. When archival discourse and visualization projects (be they printed editions or digital transformations) incorporate the knowledge that we can never know everything, they reveal resistance rather than loss. When the fragmentary and changing nature of our archives is integral to our engagement with them, the digital remains the humanities. Stains, cat hair, low res photos, and broken web links are all part of the story.

Prosthetic Practice

The Dartmouth *Brut*, in its collective states, can help parse the difference that the digital makes. The essays published here, for example, don't depend on any innovative digital tools—and yet they would not exist without digitization. Sometimes, "doing the same thing faster" is indeed a revolution, as Timothy Stinson has suggested—because we do things that otherwise would not be done. In this sense, much is already accomplished when we can look more

closely at what we can already see. The essays in this issue by Elizabeth Bryan, Emily Ulrich, and Julia Marvin illustrate how familiar questions about book production and readership are propelled forward by networked access to basic forms of digitization. At the same time, they each show that digital modes actively shape our perceptions of material history.

What next? At present, the Dartmouth *e-Brut* is primarily a surrogate, a mimetic prosthesis to the 3D manuscript. Even “add-ons,” though, are part of an ecosystem in which the digital is so pervasive that it cannot be extracted from other discrete activities. As Mauro Carassai and Elisabet Takehana posit: “As a condition, rather than as a technological prosthesis, the digital seems to function more and more as a true reality principle” (par. 2). Even a prosthesis, moreover, can be transformative: it does not have to mimic the form for which it substitutes. What happens when we re-imagine prosthesis itself as a creative expression? The twenty-first-century handcrafted cover of the 3D Dartmouth *Brut* is just such a prosthesis.

In its next iteration, the Dartmouth *Brut* could become a source for digital experimentation. What happens if we expand its data forms and apply multiple processing tools? Can we pinpoint how tools themselves change what we see? Can we generate new data that in turn can be processed in ever changing ways? For starters, Bryan’s assessment of rubrication could be visualized in various modes (215–18). And we can process Ulrich’s annotation transcriptions through several annotation tools. We can also investigate multiple implementations of Marvin’s suggestions for enriched visualizations of annotation patterns. How are annotations themselves handled in annotation tools? The goal would be to keep the processing mode (3D page turning, modes of reading through a given tool, etc.) at the center of the analytic process. In this way, the specificities of each platform as well as their nodes of interchangeability and complementarity can be made visible. Can we find a digital philology that takes up John Bradley’s call to move beyond the “media file” as the defining object of study and manipulation (par. 5, 56, 61–62)?

This experimental practice would be “prosthetic” in the sense that it begins by substituting and continues by creating. It is prosthetic in that it depends, consciously, on existing forms. It is a practice, rather than a lab, project, or tool, because it has no predefined space or end. It can explore the changing digital ecosystem over time. It can materialize philological practices that expose their own workflow processes. By engaging a variety of tools, we can

repeatedly assess their varying effects, turning research methods into another kind of research object. Perhaps we can see “in action” how archival research is shaped by access modes. This research would ask questions about digital tools first and about medieval culture second.

A number of tools are now available to support this kind of comparative experimental practice.⁴ In the case of the *Brut*, annotation tools can extend a practice already underway since the fifteenth century: handwriting in the margins of the codex is analogous to digital transcriptions of that handwriting and to digital mark-up of other codex features. What different kinds of philological and codicological questions are supported by the various tools designed for manuscript study? What insights might arise from comparing the outputs of different tools, applied intensely and repeatedly to a single data set? The data set may seem “small” (one manuscript) but the information available for processing is potentially quite large. It can fulfill well Julia Flanders criteria for optimal data: well curated, small enough to manage, large enough for meaningful processing and satisfying results.

The prosthetic practice space will also be an experiment in sustainability. For now, the Dartmouth *Brut* is one of the many isolated projects that, as Matthew Fisher has noted, are not interoperable nor truly networked (961). Ten years from now, will changes in the digital ecosystem have changed the local archive? What new forms, beyond the first facsimile, will have been created? Which ones remain accessible over a longer time line? In an experimental mode, obsolescence also provides data rather than an occasion to mourn archival failure. This ongoing practice is an “add-on” that does not imitate, a creative engagement that may sometimes veer toward art.

The first *Brut* experiment was the digitization and physical rebuilding of the manuscript. The second has been the publishing of these essays. Like the Dartmouth *Brut*, they have multiple forms: print as well as two digital versions (HTML and PDF); linking from the digital versions to stable Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) for selected manuscript folios. We have experienced the challenges of hybrid publishing as outlined by Fisher (955–58), from enhancements (zoomable images in the HTML versions) to obstacles (financing open access). We have bumped against the constraints of making dissimilar formats “the same.” Have we capitulated to traditional print-based scholarly modes? Or hedged bets on long-term sustainability? Both, of course. And out of this process, a born-digital

practice may begin. Meanwhile, when the lights go out, you might still be able to find a bundle of 3D paper called *Digital Philology*, maybe even in a box labeled MS 003183.

Notes

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The seemingly simple project of bringing together highly specialized scholars to talk about a single manuscript of possibly only local concern turned into a surprisingly poignant experience of archival humanism. We are honored to dedicate this publication to the memory of Lister Matheson and to count Tess Tavormina among our collaborators.

1. *The Brut Chronicle*:

<[/library/digital/collections/manuscripts/ocn312771386](http://library/digital/collections/manuscripts/ocn312771386)>; a CD-ROM was also produced for the 2011 conference. The physical codex and its digital surrogate each has its own entry in the online library catalogue: <<http://libcat.dartmouth.edu/record=b3765350~S11>> and <<http://libcat.dartmouth.edu/record=b4811802~S1>>. Bryan describes the documentation of the codex's twentieth-century provenance (237–38). The digital master TIFF files (available by request) were produced on an Epson Expression 10000 flatbed scanner, with 600 ppi resolution and 48-bit color; the online JPEG files are 24-bit color (David Seaman, personal communication, 3 July 2013). The digital images are freely useable for non-commercial purposes under a Creative Commons license <[/library/schcomm/copyright/rights.html#DCC](http://library/schcomm/copyright/rights.html#DCC)>; they are reproduced in this volume courtesy Dartmouth College Library.

2. For more detailed discussion of debates in the digital humanities, see Carassai and Takehana; O'Donnell; and Svensson (and many other places, of course).

3. See

<<http://archive.org/stream/prosebrutdevelop00mathuoft#page/xxxii/mode/2up>>. In another example of archive variability, you'll find the digitized and searchable version of Matheson's book through internet search engines, but you'll find only print through many online library catalogues.

4. The abstracts for the workshop Easy Tools for Difficult Texts (18–19 April 2013), provide a concise overview of many current projects designed for manuscripts; see also Bradley on annotation and the project *Medieval Electronic Scholarly Alliance* <<http://www.mesa-medieval.org>>.

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