

Threshold Concept: DH is About Books and Texts as Material and Social Productions

Assignment: In the Scriptorium: from Ryan Cordell's Texts and Technologies Course¹



Let's start again with McLuhan:

The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no "content." And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the "content" (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth.

We read and wrote by candlelight during our unit on medieval textual practices, and it is certainly true that scribes copied manuscripts by candlelight. But it's also true that technologies of illumination didn't change that significantly for a long while—people in the mid-nineteenth century still read and wrote by candlelight (and indeed, [they were still scrivening](#) well into the age of print). We are so used to the ways electric light reshapes our daily lives that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine landscapes and lives not defined by it.

To frame this in another way, the candle is a non-textual medium that has profoundly affected the texts we have inherited from previous generations. An ecology of media, including candlelight, parchment, and [calligraphic standards](#) circumscribed and defined the labor of early book making, which in turn helped determine what books were made (or saved). And that labor is also important as labor: bookmaking was a *laborious* process, an *embodied* process. The books through which we understand early periods are not simply those that were written, but instead those that survived, and often because they were mediated and remediated through a series of scribes, formats, materials, and, later, typesetters and editors.

Your task for this lab, then, is to discover and report a particular story of textual transmission and remediation. In short, I want to you research the [provenance](#) of at least one text written prior to the invention of movable type, with a special eye to debates over its textual details. That is, how do scholars believe "the text" we read today was shaped by the people who wrote and rewrote, copied and recopied, that text over centuries? From what physical, textual artifacts do we receive the text, and what do they tell us the text's reception history? What do scholars believe is authentic to the "original" text, and what do they believe was inserted in later moments of editing and recomposition?

You can choose any text you want and you don't need to read the text itself, just research its history. To pick a text, you might consult the early materials gathered in [a Norton Anthology](#) or something collection. The point of this assignment, in many ways, is to get you started thinking about how such anthologies come to be, and the complex, long textual histories that precede any piece appearing in such a ToC. The big question: how does "the canon" of texts we read today depend on a long chain of

¹ <http://f14tot.ryancordell.org/2014/09/16/lab-3-simulating-the-scriptorium/>

previous interactions between individual human beings; media forms; and larger political, religious, and social movements?