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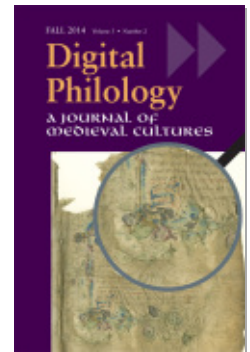
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Encountering the Dartmouth *Brut* in the Midst of History

► The texts and manuscripts of the Middle English prose *Brut* resist easy classification, largely because they have resulted from a long and ongoing history of re-writing. The articles in this volume grapple with these dynamics by bringing comparative perspectives to a single manuscript. In this afterword, I seek to make clear some of the pluralities at the heart of encountering the digital, physical, and always contingent *Brut*. I highlight the complexities of transmission with an example of how one late medieval reader responded not to the text at hand, but rather to his memories or expectations of other histories and other texts.

The Middle English Prose *Brut* tradition exists amidst a remarkable series of tensions between singular and multiple, individual and collective, particular and generic. The *Brut* manuscript at the conceptual center of this compelling collection of essays is no exception. Like all medieval manuscripts, Dartmouth College, Rauner Special Collections Library, Codex MS 003183 offers a unique articulation of scribal priorities in response to the specific historical and economic pressures that shaped its creation, transmission, and initial reception. It also records in its margins readers' responses—to the text and to each other. These essays join that ongoing dialogue. They refine the ways in which the presence or absence of even the most quotidian-seeming detail can make sense of the simultaneities of the two objects at the center of this volume, the codex and the digitized *Brut*: as history and literature, as medieval and post-medieval, as bound, rebound, and disbound, as physical and digital. The collective act of scholarship here situates the *Brut* in a dynamic process of encounter with the histories of a text, and with our own historical and technological selves. It makes visible the compelling value of reading the *Brut* against absences, omissions, and exceptions. In confronting the *Brut* in both its material and digitally remediated forms, the essays expose those forms as productively entangled, rather fittingly for a me-

dieval textual tradition itself generated by the entanglements of large numbers of manuscripts.

It has been over a century since the *Brut* was published in an edition by Friedrich Brie in 1906 and 1908 for the Early English Text Society. Its extraordinarily complex manuscript affiliations, which resulted very precisely from its popularity, made it resistant to the sober attention of editors, and Brie's text laid no claims to comprehensiveness. A quarter century has passed since Matheson's *The Prose Brut: The Development of an English Chronicle* set out a network of versions deemed Common and Peculiar, Extended and Abbreviated, all grouped by the years in which the text came to an end. Matheson provided scholars with a systematic vocabulary for discussing the unwieldy *Brut*. Matheson's work serves as an important reminder that the most awkward data and the most unruly aspects of the humanities still benefit from well-designed frameworks of usefully descriptive metadata. Even the electronic database of *Brut* manuscript descriptions, the *Imagining History Project*, relies on Matheson's framework; its awkward current instantiation as a wiki also exposes some of the tensions between manuscripts as structured and unstructured data. Metadata structures may require revision, of course, and the politics of their creation and implementation are practically and theoretically complex—points thoughtfully explored by Warren in her introductory essay. But without Matheson's lines of affiliation and dis-affiliation, variation in the *Brut* cannot be clearly understood in itself as meaningfully substantive.

The *Brut* that emerges from these pages is always contingent. One form of that contingency sees the Dartmouth *Brut* related to other *Brut* manuscripts, while also highlighting how extreme the variations in those manuscripts are. Where Matheson encountered in Glasgow University Library, MS Hunter 443 "the worst little scribbler in Surrey," Bryan instead reads the beautifully delicate Flemish-style miniatures of the Master of Edward IV. Such striking contrasts reveal situating "the" *Brut* as requiring collaboration—between scribes, between scribes and illuminators, and between scribes and their audiences. The fragility of these collaborations appears in the leaf now Belfast, Queen's University, Brett MS 3.12 B, separated at some time in its history from London, British Library, MS Harley 266, a leaf which preserves rather fortuitously a change in scribal stints. In his essay, Perry seeks to make sense of the transitions between the scribes: the Belfast leaf exposes the text and appearance of a *Brut* changing within the covers of what was once a single book. The multiplicity of exemplars and of scribally local texts and details embed the manuscript in the numerous and irreducible histories of all who encounter it.

The different scripts employed by the scribes of Harley 266 and Brett MS 3.12 B lead Perry to speculate that the scribes were of “different generations.” Writing books takes time, as does reading them. But the duration of both processes tends to be compressed in our encounter with medieval artifacts. Digital objects, and the ease and speed with which they can be accessed, warp still further our awareness of the slowness of the medieval book.

Several of the essays here work to reintroduce the multiple temporalities of the manuscript. Howe’s choices in creating a binding that is “a middle ground between wood boards and flexible leather” for the Dartmouth *Brut* negotiates contemporary requirements while visibly encoding aspects of the book’s history. In Howe’s hands, fragments from the original binding and the detritus of its quiet journey through centuries are brought together in a sleeve that recalls a box by Joseph Cornell. Bryan’s discussion of Lambeth Palace Library, MS 6 turns to scribal time, where written instructions for rubrication work to overcome linguistic, spatial, and temporal distances. The extended period of copying itself introduces a vast temporality into the manuscript tradition: scribal production of the *Brut* flourished for over a century, its communities of readers for a century more, and its influence for a portion of another century. As Kennedy’s essay reminds us, history does in fact repeat itself, and in doing so can render the distant past uncomfortably present. It is precisely historical repetition that makes difference perceptible. The act of annotating the Dartmouth *Brut* sometime after Jack Cade and his rebels revolted against Henry VI in 1450 differs almost unimaginably from that of annotating the book’s mention of Peter’s Pence as an 18-year old Henry VIII jousting in tournaments. Hand 1623 (identified by Ulrich) annotated Britain’s fabulous and distant past a few years after the Mayflower had sailed for North America. For nearly two hundred years, individuals repeated the act of reading the *Brut*.

The handwriting of the Dartmouth *Brut* offers an apposite analogy for productive indeterminacy. In her description of the script(s) of the codex, Bryan observes that it is “just possible that one hand is responsible for the entire manuscript” because of the “gradual shifting from one set of letter forms to another” (211). The Dartmouth *Brut*, like the handwriting of its scribe(s), shifts almost imperceptibly between versions, at once singular and plural. To read it, then, is in some senses to read an unstable target. Normative assumptions can be challenged at every encounter with the book, beginning with its particularly functional tacket binding, a type of binding more commonly used for account books (Bryan 208; see also Howe and Warren in this issue). In

its practical and accessible outer wrapping, the Dartmouth *Brut* became in part an account book: a book in which things are recorded, tallied, checked. The layered annotations of its readers are evidence of responses not only to the text, but to the invitation made by the book's very binding to participatory and classificatory forms of reading.

This understanding of the text of the *Brut* as an account, as inviting tabulation, is again one extreme variety of encounter. Ulrich notes in her essay that Hand 1623 treated the book as "a primary source for raw data" and "mined the chronicle for information about the mythical kings of ancient Britain." Her language here is not accidental: raw data is a technical term, and all data these days seems to exist in order to be mined. Ulrich shows us Hand 1623 understanding the narrative of the past before him as containing the raw stuff—names, dates, and encounters—of history. He also saw value in reading the book against the grain by extracting the stuff of history from its narrative, preferring to move from the uneven specificities of the *Brut*'s prose to measurable regnal lengths and distances. Hand 1623's project of separating what are thus framed as objective historical truths from the intersubjectivities of history writing continues to find new practitioners.

Digital humanities scholarship has inherited Hand 1623's conceptual framework as one form of textual encounter. The prose *Brut* has always challenged scholars by its vast amounts of raw information: in current parlance, the *Brut* is "big data." The number of manuscripts, the complexity of the groupings and affiliations, and the sheer number of substantive textual variants (not to mention large-scale interpolations and excisions) are difficult to grapple with in an analog world. Although such a scenario likely remains some way off, one wonders what visualization tools might render perceptible if run against the discrete texts of all (or even many) of the manuscripts of the *Brut*. It is possible that the cladistic and phylogenetic techniques employed by Peter Robinson and others as part of the *Canterbury Tales Project* might offer some insight into the manuscript affiliations and lines of textual transmission of the *Brut*. Alternately, the often falsely reassuring certainties of computer-based comprehensivity may re-authorize our sense that variant, peculiar, erratic, and idiosyncratic *Bruts* are in fact the most common versions.

No longer are digitization or digital editing reserved for the superstars of the medieval literary world—*Beowulf*, the *Canterbury Tales*, or *Piers Plowman*. The vastly reduced costs of making digital images, and the similarly reduced cost of making those images available to others, has had a wide-reaching, democratizing function as far as facilitating preliminary access to medieval manuscripts. This is not, of course, to

diminish the significant costs still incurred in the process, nor is it to suggest that there are not ongoing expenses necessary to ensure continued availability. The comparative ease with which photographs can be taken of medieval manuscripts, as against the labor involved in making accurate transcriptions of medieval texts, makes it likely that images of medieval manuscripts will continue to predominate our mediated experience of these books. The Dartmouth *Brut* project matches the innate heterogeneity of the codex in providing a variety of ways to access the digital images of the manuscript, including off-line viewing of a static PDF of the book and stand-alone image files of its folios. Particularly important, then, is the understanding that grounded the creation of the digital components of the Dartmouth *Brut*. The digitized codex honestly offers a useful surrogate for place-shifting and time-shifting, but it does so in order to facilitate access to the physical codex by scholars and students. It does not claim to create unproblematic surrogacy or unmediated access. The manuscript's beautiful new binding continues to invite readers to participate in making the meanings that can be arrived at through situated encounter with the book itself. Even as the physical cover can be partly removed for teaching purposes, the elegant new website and image viewer can be removed: the site's high resolution images can be downloaded for use, re-use, and misuse.¹ Medieval scribes and authors were keenly aware of how little control they had of the books they had written: the digital *Brut* acknowledges some of the ways in which that has not changed.

Encounters with the Dartmouth *Brut* are situated in relation to these particular physical and digital objects. As Marvin observes in her contribution, "an annotation is an entirely contingent entity." This interconnected polyvocality of text and annotation captures something of the *Brut* itself: stretching across multiple manuscripts, centuries, and temporal frames, any encounter with the *Brut* is at once singular and yet irreducible. Marvin's powerfully corrective observation that annotations may not only be responding to known prompts, but to unknown and unknowable historical particularities, is important.² Readers sometimes respond to the text they understand themselves to be reading, rather than the one they actually encounter. For example, on folio 79r of the Dartmouth *Brut*, Hand 1450 annotates the book in a large hand, with seeming horror, proclaiming "The vilaunye practiced at the death of Erle Thomas of lancaster." Thomas of Lancaster, executed in 1322 in Pontefract, Yorkshire, in a quasi-judicial proceeding assembled by the then much-hated Despencers, spawned a popular cult across England and parts of the continent, though he was never canonized

(Maddicott; Fisher, Chapter 3). The cult of Thomas spread as far as the Continent shortly after Thomas's execution (Echerd). It was kept alive at Pontefract well into the fifteenth century by the monks of St. John's Priory, Pontefract, who continued to observe his feast day, as recorded in the missal that is now Cambridge, King's College MS 31 (Pfaff 247).

Thomas of Lancaster's violent execution was designed to humiliate him and thus to discredit his political opposition to King Edward II. The *Brut* is very clear about the indignities he endured: he was tried "bare-heude as a þef, in a faire halle wiþin his owen castel, þat he hade made þerin meny a faire fest, boþ to riche and eke to pore" (Brie 222). They mockingly call him "King Arthur," as he had apparently so styled himself, perhaps rather ill-advisedly, in letters to the Earl of Moray and James Douglas in 1322 attempting to solicit their support (Maddicott 302). Creating obvious echoes of Christ's sufferings, Thomas's torturers stage his humiliations:

sette þai oppon his heuede in scorn an olde chapelet, al-to rent & torn, þat was nouȝt worþ an halpeny; & after þai sette him oppon a lene white palfray, ful vnsemeliche, and ek al bare, wiþ an olde bridel; and wiþ an horrible noyse þai drow him out of þe castel toward his deþ, and caste on him meny balles of snowe. (Brie 223)

Before his death, Thomas kneels facing east to pray to God, but Hugh of Moston forces him to "turne þe toward þe Scottes, þin foule deth to vnderfong" (Brie 223). The sympathies of the *Brut* lie clearly with Thomas. Its denunciation of the Despencers for traitorous and false counsel makes readily evident the text's support for judicial process and a reasonable monarchy. These positions are in keeping with the *Brut*'s largely moderate historiographical politics.

Yet the force of the Despencers' villainies is mostly lost in the Dartmouth *Brut*.³ Removing almost all of the salient details, and preserving only the outline of Thomas's final moments, the Dartmouth *Brut* offers a rather gentler version of Thomas's execution:

and in skorne called him Arthur dredefull thou shall dye an evill dethe as thou haste wele deserued Thanne thei sette vpon him a chaplette and vpon a white palfrey leyne and withoute Brydelle and drowe him oute of the castell towarde hys dethe and caste vpon him snawe balles and tormented him like tormentours.
(f. 79r)

Snowballs aside, the angry response of Hand 1450+ in the margin of the Dartmouth *Brut* seems to be not to the details of the text before him,

but rather to his memory of history and its narrative.⁴ That is, though the absence of part of the text might be meaningful, the absence of annotation in a manuscript tells us nothing about how avidly it might have been read at any given moment. Here we see a reader responding vehemently not to the book in his hands, but rather to the invisible networks of medieval historiography that stand behind the book itself.

The bright glare of digital visibility can obscure some of what becomes inaccessible in remediation: the weight of the book, the size of the book, even the changing slopes and curves and angles formed by every page we turn. But the manuscript behind its digital images is never entirely absent. We can zoom in and out, but “100%” zoom maps to the pixel density of our various screens, not the physical size of the photographed object. As a response to Rauner MS 003183 and its digital incarnations, the essays in this volume re-perform the polyvocal simultaneities of the interplay of the *Brut* and its annotations, of the codex and its digital forms. In places, the writings here reply to what is not there, like Hand 1450+, but they also encounter what we collectively agree is, or might be, there. In situating the Middle English Prose *Brut*, they transform the contingency of reading medieval manuscripts into something that extends beyond the initial moment of contact and connection.

Notes

1. As part of the Dartmouth College Library Digital Collection, the images are available under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License. The British Library’s recent decision to likewise make their manuscript images available under a Creative Common license suggests a welcome trend toward open access.

2. See, for example, Steven Justice’s speculation that a scribe’s boredom was behind his multilingual experiments in court records.

3. See the similar removal of gory details by the Dartmouth *Brut* scribe(s) transcribed in Matheson’s article in this volume, where the text omits the transport of the quarters of executed traitors “in sacks,” a detail which seems to fascinate the scribes of other manuscripts.

4. Thus, Ulrich’s observation that some of his annotations suggest “that he might been familiar with the *Brut*’s narrative before reading this copy of the text.”

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