

A Review of Bridget Whearty's *Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor* (2022)

Loren Lee <lel7qsf_at_virginia_dot_edu>, University of Virginia  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2153-9991>

Abstract

Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor (2022) by Bridget Whearty is a crucial work for scholars engaging with digitized materials. Advocating for a digital codicology that treats digital materials as objects worthy of study in their own right, Whearty addresses the many concerns surrounding digital manuscripts and promotes a more active, informed use of these resources. She highlights the often invisible human labor behind digitization, providing a detailed history and autoethnographic insights that challenge the perception of digital manuscripts as mere stand-ins for physical texts. Through personal experiences and institutional analysis, Whearty delves into the complexities of interoperability and the labor-intensive processes behind digitization and metadata curation. Her book emphasizes the emotional and intellectual engagement digital manuscripts can provoke, advocating for broad digitization and recognizing the dynamic nature of digital projects. Ultimately, *Digital Codicology* calls for greater transparency, collaboration, and a redefined understanding of digital manuscripts as integral primary sources in modern scholarship.

Digital Codicology: Medieval Books and Modern Labor is an essential read for anyone who finds themselves making regular use of digitized materials, in particular anyone who feels uneasy with the digital turn and anyone who may doubt the intellectual merits of remediating premodern texts for digital users [Whearty 2022]. Bridget Whearty confronts anxieties around digital manuscripts by pushing her readers to become active users, writing:

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One persistent concern I have heard voiced about digital manuscripts is *but what if they* — it is unclear in these complaints who “they” might be — *are messing with the images I use?* My answer is that they are. Or might be. And if so, they likely have good, mission-oriented reasons for doing so. If you want and need to know, you can, and should, find out. [Whearty 2022, 162]

Responsible scholarship in the digital age means recognizing the invisible hands of digital labor and understanding the structural choices shaping sources. Whearty provides an insightful history of the development of manuscript digitization, and her autoethnographic approach will make readers reexamine their own practices and reevaluate the intellectual and physical labor that is the silent backbone of all digital repositories. Broken up into a preface, introduction, four chapters, a coda, and an appendix, *Digital Codicology* offers a scope ranging from the personal — as Whearty recounts her firsthand experiences in digitization and metadata curation — to the structural — as she demystifies institutional workflows, their long histories, their rationales, and how they operate (or don't) across institutional borders. The case studies of *Digital Codicology* are centered upon material from late medieval Western Europe, but — as Whearty notes — her methods are “transferable” to all disciplines that make use of digital artifacts [Whearty 2022, 235].

Whearty defends the idea that the digital is no less human or sensory than the material and even gently teases the way in which scholarship suddenly began fetishizing material books as a result of “the perceived threat of media extinction” [Whearty 2022, 12]. She dismisses the notion that bookish objects lacking in the same sensory data as the material book are incapable of provoking human attachment, and she advocates for the broad digitization of more everyday copies, not only out of purely intellectual rationales but also out of love. In reference to the emotional pull of her work digitizing Stanford University Libraries MSS Codex M0379, Whearty insists, “All digital manuscripts are made by real

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people, each with their own intellectual *and* affective responses to the objects of their labor. Even in the midst of workflows that emphasize systematic digitization, human elements and human emotions remain” [Whearty 2022, 53]. But although she argues that digital manuscripts are equally capable of provoking emotional responses, a cornerstone of Whearty’s argument is the fact that digital manuscripts are certainly not the same as their hard-copy counterparts. She writes: “Pixels can represent parchment but they cannot *become* it” [Whearty 2022, 12]. Yet, it is not enough to say what digital manuscripts are *not*, and digital codicology fills this gap. We need a *digital* codicology to fully appreciate this new medium, “to understand what digital manuscripts are, as well as the fears and expectations that swirl around them” [Whearty 2022, 9]. Treating digital manuscripts as primary sources, and not merely as “stand-ins” or “replacements”, allows for a more careful consideration of their use in scholarship, of the institutional constraints that shape them, and the labor required for their production and maintenance [Whearty 2022, 37].

Whearty weaves together the intricate threads of medieval manuscript copying and modern manuscript digitization, shedding light on the labor-intensive processes of the latter which are too often obscured in the digital age. Building on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation*, Whearty insists on the presence of the human in the digital: “The digital presents itself as immaterial, unmediated, unproduced by human laborers. But that is a lie. Humans are always there. They always have been” [Whearty 2022, 120]. To counteract any concealment of the human in the digital, Whearty urges end users to recognize the labor embedded in digital books. More than that, Whearty insists that the creative and intellectual qualities medievalists often attribute to medieval scribes must also be attributed to modern copyists even “when the tools of the copyist move from stylus and parchment to computer and camera” [Whearty 2022, 79]. Drawing parallels between the work of digitizers and medieval copyists, she emphasizes the skilled labor involved and underscores the physical and mental gruel of creating digital preservation copies, calling the work of digitization a “dance” and an “anchoritic” discipline [Whearty 2022, 66, 56]. Whearty invites a reconsideration of the erasure of copyists in both medieval and digital contexts, ultimately envisioning a future where that erasure is overcome.

Whearty likewise makes clear the need for digital codicology on a large scale as she explores the intricate challenge of interoperability in merging manuscript metadata across digital infrastructures via “crosswalks”. She emphasizes the broad lack of interoperability within manuscript studies, citing problems such as the absence of universally standardized terms for concepts as essential as how to refer to the “processed animal skins upon which many Western European manuscripts are written” [Whearty 2022, 172]. As a whole, *Digital Codicology* makes clear the need for large-scale collaboration to tackle these major concerns, but Whearty’s autoethnographic approach keeps the issue concretely grounded in the personal and the human. Whearty’s account of her postdoc work on the DMS-Index — a project which was ultimately “shuttered” — models the mix of humility and determination scholars must adopt in addressing interoperability collectively [Whearty 2022, 205]. As she writes, “I hoped, fiercely, that in the next iteration of DMS-Index a new, more skilled contributor would come along to correct my errors and improve my work” [Whearty 2022, 204]. Whearty makes clear how the decisions we make now must be made in the service of the future of the field and how we must not be afraid to make mistakes as we face such new challenges.

In fact, Whearty underscores the valuable lessons that may be gleaned from failed digital projects. She challenges traditional notions of success and failure, emphasizing the continuous, evolving nature of digital manuscripts and their repositories. Whearty insists that failure itself is not a problem but that hiding failures and even small error corrections without making such changes obvious to users is the true problem, as that hidden mutability breeds distrust and a “crisis of authenticity” in digital resources [Whearty 2022, 228]. In the same way that hidden changes to data and code contributes to the ongoing reproducibility crisis in hard sciences, silent alterations to digital materials can leave humanities researchers who are reliant on these resources unsure of the validity of their own work and that of their peers. Whearty acknowledges the unfortunate impracticality of trying to preserve every little modification and error for posterity, noting, “Server space is finite. Curation is not the same as hoarding. Not everything can — or should — be saved” [Whearty 2022, 230]. But as the cost of digital storage continues to decline and as storage methods continue to improve, particularly through solutions like distributed version control systems, saving records of modifications for posterity should not just be a worthy goal but standard practice. Much like medieval copyists who were responsible for preserving human knowledge through the production and distribution of local copies, distributed version control systems like Git prevent data loss and reduce strains on local storage via a peer-to-peer approach, as opposed to a client-server

approach. While the digital age promises such expanded research possibilities, Whearty recognizes the persistence of gaps and data loss as problems that have plagued record keeping since well before digitization, writing, “Lost books and destroyed files *are* the long history of medieval manuscripts” [Whearty 2022, 118].

In the meantime, Whearty proposes practical solutions such as the widespread adoption of version control systems through methods as simple as giving digital manuscripts version numbers, emphasizing the importance of visible records, and preserving errors and glitches to maintain authenticity and transparency in curation practices [Whearty 2022, 231–232]. Whearty advocates for a shift in perspective, viewing digital projects not merely as completed data but as dynamic “raw materials that are passed on to the future, an archive of labor, into which someone may yet breathe new, unexpected life” [Whearty 2022, 211]. She suggests that openly addressing project failures, errors, and glitches contributes to collective knowledge, preventing not just the reinvention of wheels but especially of “broken wheels” [Whearty 2022, 207].

Another major area of concern for Whearty is accessibility, which for the purposes of *Digital Codicology* she limits to mean accessibility “in the senses used by archivists and librarians” about the ability to locate and retrieve information, redirecting readers who may be concerned with “equal engagement by users with disabilities” to publications by Donna McCrea, Wendy Walker and Teressa Keenan, and Kathryn Wymer [Whearty 2022, 38]. Whearty emphasizes discoverability as a pivotal component of accessibility, underscoring that knowledge of a manuscript’s existence and relevance to one’s line of inquiry is fundamental before one can even think of laying hands on it [Whearty 2022, 163]. Furthermore, she highlights the pedagogical value of accessible digitized manuscripts, which serve as “a doorway in for new users” and provide essential skills like paleography for students [Whearty 2022, 94]. Contrary to what many may fear, digital collections act as a “gateway” to archives, not as a substitute for them [Whearty 2022, 94]. In essence, Whearty argues for a broader view of accessibility, encompassing various levels of engagement in both physical reading rooms and online repositories.

But one area of inquiry that is too briefly addressed is the relationship between increasing digital accessibility and current editing practices. Whearty cites Maureen Jameson, who asserts that mass digitization “fundamentally changes the status of the editor or paleographer... whose judgements are now exposed to wider scrutiny” (qtd. in [Whearty 2022, 166]), but she does not address the implications of broad accessibility to digital manuscripts on current editing practices with much depth, keeping her focus primarily on digitization and metadata curation. In Chapter 1, Whearty does suggest that editing and digitization are both acts of compositing — of combining several source elements to produce a single final product — but for Whearty, the act of compositing is much more obscured from the viewer of the digital manuscript than it is from the reader of a modern print edition, and so, best practices concerning digital manuscripts are in greater need of immediate attention and reform. Whearty also demonstrates the ways in which editors of premodern texts are careful to produce editions that are as true as possible to their source material through her analysis of a late nineteenth-century edition of a Hoccleve manuscript, but she otherwise leaves the issue of editing in the wake of the digital turn outside of the purview of *Digital Codicology*, leaving the door open for others to consider this matter elsewhere [Whearty 2022, 111].

Whearty leaves readers with one last compelling case for reforming the ways we approach digital manuscripts and their metadata, “...when you use digital manuscripts and you cite them honestly, you are helping make a case for present and future investment, for the ongoing maintenance of the digital collections upon which your — and our — collective work depends” [Whearty 2022, 240]. Underscoring the responsibility of users to contribute to the ongoing maintenance and development of digital collections, Whearty calls on her readers to be more rigorous, more curious, more humble, and less afraid. Whether by means of analog or digital copy, readers will come away from *Digital Codicology* better equipped for the reading rooms of our increasingly virtual field.

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