Multimedia Learning Gets Medieval

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The debate over "new" technology in education is, of course, an old one. In the late Middle Ages, some writers fiercely criticized the newest technology—dramatic performance complete with special effects such as ascending angels and disappearing devils—as catering to the masses; according to these critics, the masses would benefit more from simple devotional texts than from such biblical spectacles. Others countered that audiences found a religious play to be a more effective form of instruction than a book or even a painting, "for this is a deed bok, the tother a quick" (*Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*; see Davidson 1993: 98). In other words, drama's defenders suggested that paintings and books were like dead texts, whereas spectacles were like "quick" or living ones because they used interactive performance and thereby enabled more effective learning. This medieval idea of a presentation that involves multiple senses and therefore deeply imprints an educational message strikingly resembles the modern concept from educational psychology of multimedia learning, which maximizes students' learning by utilizing verbal and visual elements together.[1]

Students often approach medieval literature as a collection of "dead books," artifacts of a culture and society that seem very distant: they cannot imagine what it was like to live, read, and write in the Middle Ages. Middle English, which looks like a foreign language for which they have had no training, throws up an additional obstacle. Glenn Burger and Steven Kruger (2003: 36) have described the challenges faced by teachers in undergraduate Chaucer classes, but their observations are applicable to any medieval literature

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course: "They must introduce students to the language of Chaucer's Middle English poetry; bring them into contact with the Middle Ages—its history and culture—knowing that, for many students, this course will be their only encounter with medieval material; [and] engage with religious ideas, cultural practices, historical specificities distant from (post)modern experience and foreign to the (post)modern eye." The perceived distance between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century makes it difficult for students to understand the historical and social context or to find connections between medieval and modern ideas, which in turn makes it difficult for students to interpret and analyze medieval texts.

But if in some ways the medieval period seems too distant, it may also seem peculiarly—and illusorily—familiar. Many students arrive in the classroom with ideas about the Middle Ages that have been shaped by Monty Python and the Lord of the Rings trilogy or other medieval-themed films, video games, and novels. Popular culture has reanimated but also reimagined the "dead books" in these instances, with an eye toward entertainment or artistic merit rather than historical accuracy. While we might see the continued relevance and adaptability of medieval ideas and narratives as one of their strengths and these revisions of them as objects of study in their own right, popular medievalism is nonetheless a different, albeit related subject from medieval studies, and students often have difficulty distinguishing them.

I want to suggest that one effective way to address these related but opposing issues while also improving students' learning is through the use of multimedia resources. Recent studies in educational psychology have indicated that the interdisciplinary and adaptable nature of multimedia presentations can help to create a learning experience that is closer to interactive performance than to passive reception—a "quick" book rather than a "dead" one. Furthermore, I will argue that particular benefits result from using multimedia in conjunction with medieval texts. The connection between the preprint and the postmodern is surprisingly natural; scholars have compared the two as periods in which technological revolutions required or inspired a paradigm shift (Rhodes and Sawday 2000: 11–12; Landow 2006: 49–52). On the other hand, Ruth Evans (2001: 44)—one of the few medievalists to have taken up this issue—points out that arguments comparing modern technology and medieval modes of production are "quite simply anachronistic." With that warning in mind, this essay will examine a few more specific similarities between these two historical moments and how such connections can work in the classroom. Throughout, I will focus on the Middle English literary culture that existed in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries because it

represents the material most often taught untranslated from the Middle Ages. While my definition of "medieval" is fairly narrow, however, my usage of "multimedia" is intentionally broad and can mean anything from PowerPoint slides to Web sites to films. The phrase "multimedia learning" has taken on a more particular meaning through the work of Richard E. Mayer (2001), a psychologist and the founder of this field of study; his most basic definition is "the presentation of material using both words and pictures" (1). This is common practice for many literature teachers, but current technology can make such presentations more effective by matching Middle English texts with dramatic audio recordings or by allowing access to manuscript illustrations, for example.

The kinds of multimedia I will discuss all involve technology, either because the multimedia resource itself is technological (e.g., Web sites) or because it is produced or viewed through technology (e.g., images on PowerPoint slides). I want to acknowledge at the outset that issues of access, whether at the institutional or individual level, have a very real impact on the availability and practicability of this kind of technology; nonetheless, I believe that the expanding presence of educational technology necessitates discussion about the responsible and productive ways in which we might utilize it.[2] As a result, this essay enters into the debate over whether technology belongs in the literature classroom and, if so, what its appropriate role is. I want to begin by addressing how my argument fits into that larger scholarly debate and what my own pedagogical experiences suggest about students' perspectives on it.

Literature and Technology: Strange Bedfellows?

When Edward R. Tufte (2003: 10), renowned scholar of visual design and famous critic of PowerPoint, referred to that tool as "medieval," he was not identifying it as particularly appropriate for medieval studies; neither did he intend it as a compliment. Tufte (ibid.: 4) denounces misuses of PowerPoint that result in the inclusion of irrelevant information and images ("PPPhluff") or the trivialization of important observations and connections. These issues concern educators as well as scholars of visual design; one professor has cautioned that such technology may become "pedagogical parsley added decoratively to the edge of the platter of learning" (Hulse 2000: 67). Even when instructors completely incorporate technology into a course, it often fulfills a traditional purpose: "the delivery of content" (Maloney 2007: B26). Teachers use it to repackage content, in other words, rather than to reshape or reconsider that material. Two significant concerns, then, are that multi-

media may be more ornamental than integral and that it may not offer any new pedagogical possibilities.

However, studies have shown that, while Tufte's concerns about the visual presentation of information via technology may be valid, multimedia elements can be valuable in an academic setting when carefully designed and implemented. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh concluded that such technology can be successful in literature courses: students taking a class on Russian fairy tales found PowerPoint presentations more effective than traditional lectures and particularly useful for incorporating visual images (Frey and Birnbaum 2002; see also Clark 2008). More broadly, educational psychologists have determined that multimedia learning maximizes students' understanding and retention (Mayer 2001, 2005).[3] The reason, according to Mayer's central thesis, is that "in the process of trying to build connections between words and pictures, learners are able to create a deeper understanding than from words or pictures alone" (Mayer 2001: 3, 5). Using visual and verbal elements will appeal to students who learn better from one or the other as well as engage all students in making significant connections between the two.

Despite this research, scholars rarely link multimedia learning and literary studies; the debate in English departments over the uses and dangers of technology has played out largely in relation to composition and literacy (Snyder 1998, 2002; Tyner 1998; Hawisher and Selfe 1999; Selfe 1999; Selber 2004).[4] These fields may be more interested or invested in such debates because they are directly concerned with different forms of communication and comprehension and are quickly expanding to embrace other types of literacy and other kinds of texts, such as images or hypertext. Composition pedagogy has also explored alternative ways of encouraging students to write effectively, including blogs and other Web-based approaches. The debate over and interest in technology in the literature classroom has been quieter and has developed more slowly. It gained a higher profile at the 2005 MLA convention, however, with several panels on technology and teaching literature and the comment by Marjorie Perloff, then incoming president, that the Internet "has probably changed the profession more than anything else and will continue to change it" (Howard 2006). The Internet is undeniably changing the profession, but its separate impacts on teaching and research remain unclear; many academics, for example, utilize Web resources as researchers but not as teachers.

Even the fundamental issue of whether technology belongs in a literature course is still sharply contested. Some scholars follow the lead of

composition studies, exploring the pitfalls and potential benefits of online communications, such as e-mail, discussion boards, and class Web sites (Saul 1997; Agathocleous and Enteen 2003; Jamison 2005). Others take a firm stand against technology in its assorted forms, with objections that vary from issues of access and conformity to questions about whether technology requires sufficient intellectual rigor or involves meaningful learning. Darin Payne (2005: 503) has argued against the use of course-management tools like Blackboard by literature teachers, contending that it is "too efficient, too uniform, and too normalizing" and offers "education saturated with the values of middle-class corporate America for students and teachers worldwide." Other objections are more wide ranging: in a recent essay on the classroom use of film, television, and other kinds of technological media, Jacqueline Foertsch (2005: 214) argued that they too often become "dessert," functioning as the "students' rewards for choking down the literary broccoli I've been cooking up all semester long." More provocatively, she contends that "courses in film and television analysis bring out the couch potato not only in students but in teachers as well" (226). For Foertsch, technology precludes rather than encourages active learning and threatens to turn the literature classroom into a living room.

I want to argue that technology and technological media can serve a specific purpose by enhancing one kind of learning that takes place in the literature classroom: the comprehension of historical, social, and material contexts, which in turn facilitates informed analysis of the texts. Successful literary analysis relies on this kind of nuanced contextual understanding even when it is not overtly historicist. Technology has many other potential uses, including as a tool for communication or an object of analysis in its own right, but this essay focuses on its uses for multimedia learning. And although I will speak to how this works in relation to medieval texts, I maintain that multimedia technology can serve this function in literature courses more broadly, across other periods and topics.

I have tested this hypothesis in the classroom while teaching an upper-division undergraduate medieval literature class. The theme was love and violence in medieval texts, and the readings spanned six centuries, from *Beowulf* to Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. The course involved multimedia in three primary ways. First, I developed PowerPoint presentations that included images for the lectures introducing each text or special focus (e.g., medieval manuscripts). Second, I incorporated other multimedia materials, such as audio and video clips. Third, each student completed a Web research project in which they located several Web sites on a given topic and wrote a

brief report analyzing the content and reliability of each site and providing recommendations on their usefulness for other students. Following these recommendations, we would periodically review a selection of those Web sites as a class. At the middle and end of the term, the students completed surveys on the ways in which the multimedia and more traditional aspects of the class had affected their levels of interest and knowledge. The surveys provided valuable and sometimes surprising insights into how the students were learning and how they were experiencing the multimedia elements. In almost every case, the students agreed that the use of multimedia resources provided a deeper comprehension and more engaging learning experience, but they also had definite—and occasionally conflicting—ideas about which presentations or materials were most useful.

The students commented specifically on the combination of visual and verbal elements, which is the basis of multimedia learning theory. These combinations, whether presented through PowerPoint slides, Web sites viewed as a class, or other methods, had a notable impact on how fully the students were able to envision the Middle Ages. Here are a few of their comments in response to the end-of-term survey question, "What one thing has been the most useful in helping you to imagine what the Middle Ages were really like?":

- Seeing the layout of the mead hall from *Beowulf* online and looking at the site of Canterbury . . . was what really brought the Middle Ages out of my imagination and into reality—these places are real!
- The visuals that were provided in class (audio, pictures, websites) helped the most. It's one thing to read about the time period and imagine, but it's completely another to actually see and hear what it was like.
- Visuals! Seeing photos online, looking at pieces in the library, etc. It made the Middle Ages more tangible; something that really happened.[5]

When asked in the midterm evaluation about the PowerPoint slides used during lectures and what kind of information was most effectively presented using that method, other students mentioned the connections they were able to make:

- Any information outside of lecture notes is a deeper step toward intellectual stimulation. When talking about armor worn by the Danes and the Geats, it is nice to be able to explore visual representations of that armor. It gives personality to an otherwise unknown way of life; it provides a link to the past that otherwise might be lost in the words on the page.

- I have found the images and sound clips most useful. It is nice to see images of the texts and artifacts from the medieval era. Sometimes when studying literature so far in the past, it is difficult to feel connected to the works. The image and language of the medieval ages [provide] a basis for the literature and direct interest in the people and their culture.[6]

Not all of the students extolled the multimedia; some commented that the literary texts themselves were the most useful in helping them to imagine the Middle Ages, and a few characterized the multimedia elements as "helpful" but not essential. To give some statistical weight to these anecdotal comments, 85 percent of the students (or twenty-three out of twenty-seven) marked "agree" or "strongly agree" in response to the statement "The multimedia resources helped me to imagine what the Middle Ages were like." None of the students disagreed with the statement; the remaining 15 percent were "neutral." As these survey questions and responses indicate, one of my primary goals in this course was to use multimedia to help the students "imagine the Middle Ages"; as I will show in the following sections, there are both practical and philosophical reasons why I believe that this multimedia approach is useful for the study of medieval literature.

Imagining the Middle Ages

It is a wonderful irony that the recent proliferation of technological resources can help to bring the Middle Ages to life in all of its complexity for twenty-first-century students. They need to be able to overcome the temporal distance and replace any misconceptions by seeing and hearing what the Middle Ages were like rather than simply sitting through lectures about the historical period or reading medieval texts for hints about that context. Students' revised vision of the Middle Ages, in other words, will be most useful from an academic perspective if it is at least as vivid and comprehensive as any prior version they may have encountered. Multimedia learning offers one way of addressing this challenge, and this section will lay out several practical reasons for bringing multimedia into a medieval literature course. There are three primary areas in which students feel most uncertain about or distant from the Middle Ages: language, manuscripts, and society. Using multimedia to address these concerns makes resources more widely accessible while also contributing to and demonstrating the topicality of medieval studies.

Perhaps the first and most intimidating impediment to understanding medieval texts and contexts is the language itself. Middle English can alienate students not only from the texts I assign but also from the writers and contem-

porary readers of those texts. Who could write, much less speak, like that? And how can any text in that language be connected or relevant to the present day? Studies of grammar or pronunciation may help students to feel more comfortable with the language, but such studies also tend to reify the differences between Middle and modern English rather than bringing the two into productive conjunction. Teachers can accomplish this kind of conjunction through traditional means; I often use a Middle English version of the story of the three little pigs on the first day of class in order to encourage students to approach the language with more open minds and less trepidation. I also read aloud to them in Middle English and ask them to practice pronouncing words. These techniques, however, remain largely academic exercises, focused on comprehending vocabulary and syntax within the confines of a specific course rather than apprehending a real language that was a predecessor of modern English and existed in a state of creative evolution.

The perfect solution would be a field trip to a place where Middle English is spoken as a living language. Lacking that, however, teachers can expose students to the many dramatic readings in Middle English that have recently been produced as audio recordings.[7] The fact that these are dramatic readings is important, as is the fact that they feature a variety of male and female readers with different accents and patterns of emphasis. Hearing a diverse collection of speakers use colorful tones that range from passionate to sarcastic to sorrowful revives Middle English as a spoken language: when real people use it, it becomes a living language. As a result, the Middle English on the pages of the students' books becomes livelier; the characters who speak it become more engaging, the authors who wrote it become more real, and the texts that were written in it become more accessible. Middle English, as a language, represents a significant barrier; if students can hear it, especially in a variety of voices and dramatized settings, then it seems more real and more comprehensible without collapsing the historical distance.

It is not only the language in which medieval texts were written that distances them from the present day, however; the process by which those texts were produced also differs radically. Scholars often correlate the end of the Middle Ages with the development of the printing press, a signal of how critical the transition from manuscript to print culture was. The difference between a time period during which a privileged few owned prohibitively expensive, hand-produced manuscripts and one that includes Amazon.com and Oprah's Book Club is a difference that teachers need to address in the classroom precisely because the manuscript culture shaped the medieval experience of reading and writing so fundamentally. This culture is chiefly

responsible for several vital characteristics of medieval literary practice that I will discuss in more detail below: that medieval readers valued retellings of well-known stories above completely original ones (which were a riskier investment), that medieval reading was a shared and oral event, and that texts were expected to offer some sort of moral or religious value rather than pure entertainment. If each bestseller cost a year's salary or more, our current literary values and tastes would likely shift as well.

Nothing makes the manuscript culture and its effects as real to students as seeing the actual manuscripts and how they were produced. Multimedia provides a valuable substitute for real-life experience; it would be ideal if students could see medieval manuscripts in person, but most institutional resources do not stretch that far. However, for scholarly as well as pedagogical reasons, many important medieval manuscripts are being digitally preserved and made accessible on either CD-ROMs or the Internet. As the medieval art historian Michael Camille (1998: 37) points out, reading manuscripts was more than a visual experience: "The biggest difference between these past pages and future screens is the present reduction of reading signs to the purely ocular level." Restoring at least that "ocular level" to students, however, is still useful. A significant side benefit of these resources is that the teacher can project images of the manuscript on a screen for all of the students to view, allowing those images to become part of the discussion as the class examines the damage that the sole existing manuscript of *Beowulf* suffered in an eighteenth-century fire or identifies elements of the Wife of Bath's portrait in the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*. Such manuscripts are the end products of a lengthy and expensive process of which students should be made aware. Most of the tools and materials that scribes and illuminators used are completely foreign to students. Several excellent Web sites, however, have posted detailed descriptions with images or animated presentations that demonstrate how medieval manuscripts were produced, including the preparation of parchment and ink, the copying of exemplars by hand, and the creation of illuminations with colored inks and gold leaf.[8]

Illuminated manuscripts obviously differ from mass-produced trade paperbacks, and Middle English obviously differs from our present-day language; medieval society, on the other hand, differs from modern society in ways that are just as real but more difficult to describe accurately. It is hard to draw distinctions that are clear without being too stark or simplistic: common misconceptions among students include the ideas that all medieval women were powerless, everyone was devout, and true love was adulterous. While students can see medieval manuscripts and listen to and speak Middle

English, they cannot encounter the society and culture of the Middle Ages as directly—multimedia resources are powerful, but even they cannot open a window into life in the past. However, multimedia resources do offer a variety of ways to help students imagine what society must have been like; most American and even many European students cannot visit medieval city walls or churches but they can see visual representations of these structures as they would have been and as they are now. Students may not be able to witness a royal coronation or progression, but they can view depictions of King Richard II in the Wilton Diptych or the Westminster Abbey portrait. They cannot meet representatives from the different social classes of the Middle Ages, but they can see how peasants, clergymen, and nobility would have dressed, where they would have lived, and how they would have spent their days. The medieval art and artifacts available through technology can help to fill in at least the physical structures and visible aspects of medieval society. It remains up to the instructor, however, to fill in the more complex shading of what it might have been like to live in that society and to make clear why and in what ways our modern understanding is necessarily incomplete.

Multimedia resources, as they aid students' understanding of medieval language, manuscripts, and society, also have the distinct advantages of addressing the rarity of medieval objects, structures, and manuscripts and, from the students' perspective, the obscurity of medieval concerns and topics. Of the artifacts, architecture, and art originally produced in the Middle Ages, relatively few pieces have survived and even fewer are readily accessible. American students are distant from medieval European culture not only temporally but also geographically, and many of the most important medieval collections are in European museums and libraries. Although manuscripts and works of art were most often produced by and for the upper class in the Middle Ages, modern technology makes these artifacts of privilege much more widely available. Other time periods have similarly rare artifacts or artistic masterpieces that might be relevant for literature students but are out of reach in one way or another. A signal advantage of the recent explosion in multimedia resources is that they can bring such objects into the classroom.

Making rare objects and texts available is an obvious advantage of using multimedia resources to teach medieval literature; a more unexpected benefit is that technology can uncover the topicality of medieval studies. Because the Middle Ages feel so distant to students, it is enlightening for them to discover the many different kinds of scholarly work being done on medieval topics. There are many pedagogical Web sites on medieval literature, but there are also fascinating sites on other medieval subjects, such as the Brit-

ish Museum's archaeological exploration of the Sutton Hoo treasure. These sites offer students a new perspective on the significance and relevance of the Middle Ages and make the academic investigations undertaken in class seem less like isolated or disconnected endeavors. These advantages of topicality and accessibility are significant practical benefits of bringing multimedia resources into a medieval literature course; however, the profound parallels between the preprint and the postmodern experiences add an additional layer of depth to this pairing.

Linking the Middle Ages

In a study of the utopian rhetoric inspired by the advents of the printing press and the Internet, Aleida Assmann (2006: 11) observes that "the multisensuous and multimedia quality of an oral society is, in a new way, restituted in the electronic culture." So, while the practical advantages of using multimedia resources described above also apply broadly to other historical periods, the resonances between preprint and postmodern culture are specifically valuable and therefore specifically relevant for teaching medieval literature. Experiences with both technological media and medieval manuscripts involve various kinds of links; I will argue for two suggestive parallels based on links between texts and links among readers, viewers, or listeners. Creating links is also essential to multimedia learning: Mayer (2001: 57) declares, "Perhaps the most crucial step in multimedia learning involves making connections between word-based and image-based representations." Likewise, the links I identify between texts and among their readers are cognitive and intensely integrative; ultimately, I will suggest, they provide parallels that allow twenty-first-century students to connect with medieval texts.

These parallels bridge not only the intervening centuries between the Middle Ages and the postmodern classroom but also the markedly dissimilar methods of textual production and circulation involved. Any medieval text had to be created by hand, requiring a substantial investment of time and money, and would circulate slowly and in restricted ways, often by being read aloud or passed down as a family heirloom. In contrast, a key feature of the Internet is that textual and visual information can be produced and disseminated with minimal cost and technical expertise. Partly on this basis, numerous critics have argued that electronic hypertext fundamentally departs from the traditional physical text; some view this transformation negatively (Birkerts 1994) and others positively (Lanham 1993; Bolter 2001). In one sense, this distinction is incontrovertible—physical texts cannot replicate the variability and changing topography of links on the Web—but this divide

between electronic and traditional texts makes it all the more interesting that they contain some elemental similarities.

The first parallel concerns the allusive relationships between medieval texts over time and the hypertextual relationships that exist on the Web and in Web-based multimedia resources. I suggest that these relationships work similarly in spirit if not in form. The interconnectivity of the Web is its foremost characteristic, and it signifies a certain way of thinking: links bring together related texts, but each link brings you to a site with a changed focus or a different interpretation—and most often a different author—than the one before. In many ways, this process is a literal manifestation of Roland Barthes's (1989: 60) claim that any text is "entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes . . . which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony." On the Web, however, each link is variable, impermanent, and only one of many possible steps, creating a system of virtually infinite narrative and connective possibilities.

The conditions of manuscript production in the Middle Ages preclude the variety of possibilities offered by such proliferating and shifting links, but medieval texts nonetheless exist in a similarly referential relationship to each other. Medieval aesthetics approached originality differently than we do today; our contemporary idea of an original text as one that is the inspired product of an individual mind dates back to the early modern period, but medieval readers and writers valued a form of originality that we would consider derivative or even plagiarized. Originality was measured on a small scale rather than a large one: writers demonstrated their skill by adapting narratives that were already well known rather than creating completely new stories. By their nature, medieval texts linked closely to what had been written before. The story of Patient Griselda, for example, appeared in the Middle Ages in multiple languages and genres—including poetry, drama, prose, and conduct book—as each successive author, including Giovanni Boccaccio, Francis Petrarch, Geoffrey Chaucer, and an anonymous Parisian gentleman, put his own stamp on it.

The texts encode these links, sometimes overtly, as when Petrarch prefaces his Griselda narrative with a discussion of his friend and source Boccaccio, and sometimes covertly through parallels in structure or echoes of phrasing, as when Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* mirrors a description of Griselda's patience from a French version by Philippe de Mézières: "impossible à porter" becomes "inportable" (Goodwin 2002: 134). Theorists have posited that hypertext decenters the author, and this is very much what medieval writers often do (albeit with questionable sincerity) by explicitly gesturing to source

texts and their well-known authors while insisting modestly on their own lesser skills. Such intertextual relationships motivated the kind of source study that was the bread and butter of medieval literary studies for much of the twentieth century and that continues to be influential. Scholars exploit such links not only to trace influences but also to distinguish the moments of innovation that medieval writers created by altering nuances as much as by excisions and additions. Critics can pinpoint some of the things that Chaucer has done differently from Boccaccio in his version of the Griselda story, for instance, and draw conclusions about their different aesthetic aims or authorial practices. As with the Web, each followed link produces a different perspective and casts the original text in a different light.

It might be argued that literary texts from all periods have this kind of hypertextuality because earlier texts always influence later authors and some, like James Joyce or T. S. Eliot, carefully cultivate innumerable allusions. But I want to suggest that this "stereophony," to borrow Barthes's terminology, is particularly pronounced and significant among medieval texts because they are so conscious of building on existing narratives—because, in fact, that is a vital aesthetic value of medieval literary culture. While all texts have allusions and influences or "quotations without quotation marks" (Barthes 1989: 60), medieval texts are characterized by links that are substantial and intentionally central. Following those links leads to rich intertextual relationships that create a more nuanced view of each text within its literary as well as historical context and that have interesting correlations with the Web.

The next parallel moves from the production of texts to their presentation. Most modern readers encounter written texts in the quiet and relative privacy of a bedroom, library carrel, or similarly isolated spot; in contrast, the experience of reading in the Middle Ages was very much about public performance. In a society structured around religious and courtly ceremonies and invested in dramatic spectacles, reading was a performative and communal experience; those same qualities now characterize encounters with multimedia and Web technology.

The potential community of readers was much smaller in the Middle Ages because literacy rates were low; upper-class men were likely to be able to read but most of the rest of society could not. The historical records on this subject are complicated by the fact that medieval culture defined literacy as an ability to read and write Latin rather than English or French, although people wrote and spoke all three languages in various contexts in England (Clanchy 1993: 224–52). Julian of Norwich writes two texts in Middle English but describes herself as "a simple creature that cowde no letter"—an uneducated

and illiterate person—because she could not read Latin (Crampton 1994: 39). The literacy rate was not the only contributing factor, however; the expense of producing manuscripts meant, as discussed above, that they were relatively rare. As a result of these two factors in combination, texts were more likely to reach their audience by being read aloud than by being physically reproduced and circulated. Such literary performances were perhaps most common at the royal court; a famous frontispiece for a manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde* shows Chaucer reading the text aloud to a courtly audience, with a castle looming in the background to denote their status. However, religious texts were probably read aloud in a similar fashion; Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century spiritual figure and memoirist, mentions that she has "herd redyn" many devotional texts (Staley 1996: 51). Even when texts were not read aloud, their audiences were imagined as communal. Families, friends, and religious houses often jointly owned or shared texts; Brian Stock (1983: 88–92) has coined the phrase "textual community" to describe groups that formed in the Middle Ages around not merely a written text but people's shared understanding of it.

If there is little comparison on that point, there are key similarities between the medieval reading experience and our present-day experience with multimedia and Web technologies. These are also performances, incorporating not only illustrations but also animation, links, sounds, and even advertisements: a Web site does not so much appear on a computer screen as perform on it. Furthermore, although some are designed to facilitate social networking, all Web sites presume a wide-ranging group of users; we often view Web pages in private but we are always aware that others are viewing the same pages and a kind of diachronic community develops as a result.[9] Multimedia presentations exhibit the same qualities; by combining visual and verbal elements and thus engaging more than one of our senses or modes of cognition, they "perform." In addition, students experience most multimedia presentations communally; studies have shown that those that are viewed individually are less effective (Clark and Feldon 2005). The textual communities of the Middle Ages were much more limited than Web-based ones; later, the rise of the printing press decreased performative, communal reading practices by allowing distances—temporal and geographical—to increase between writer and reader or among readers. Paradoxically, this created opportunities for more and broader connections between text and readers. The Internet allows connections across even greater distances but also restores a more immediate sense of community.

These parallels that I have sketched out between medieval manuscript

culture and the postmodern Web culture also have practical applications in the classroom. If, as I have suggested, medieval texts seem like "dead books" to many students, then these parallels provide some shared ground on which to build a discussion of how texts functioned in the Middle Ages. The concepts of Web links and communities constructed through technology provide models for understanding how medieval texts relate to each other and how medieval readers would have related to those texts, their authors, and other readers. Conversely, such parallels may defamiliarize the technology itself, allowing students to think more critically about how it operates and why. Once the common ground is established, the contrasts can be more instructive: How are diachronic and virtual communities different from physical ones? In what ways are the expectations of medieval readers and modern Web surfers different? How does the compression of time change the experience of tracing links between texts? How have medieval and postmodern social contexts shaped literary values?

From the instructor's perspective, there is one final parallel: didactic aims motivate medieval literature as well as multimedia learning. Due in part to the strong Christian influence on medieval society, readers expected literature to provide an educational or ethical message (Minnis 1988: chap. 5). This was its primary value. Aesthetic or pleasurable qualities also were important but especially for the ways in which they enhanced the moral message of the text by rendering it more comprehensible and memorable, often by making it more attractive or entertaining. Both multimedia learning and medieval texts work to achieve deep learning by combining different types of cognition: visual and verbal processing in the former and aesthetic pleasure and moral development in the latter. The best-known Middle English text, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, promotes these literary values within its narrative. It represents a tale-telling contest among pilgrims that is to be judged by this standard: whoever tells the tale "of best sentence and moost solaas," or most artfully combines a meaningful message with an entertaining presentation, will win (Benson 1985: "General Prologue," 798). Medieval literature draws together aesthetic and moral values, profoundly linking them. At its base, this strategy corresponds with the concept behind multimedia learning: appealing to more than one way of thinking or processing the information enhances learning by spurring the active process of making connections. With multimedia, the visual image or auditory experience helps the underlying information to become more comprehensible and memorable in a connection that is fundamentally interdependent: seeing the Canterbury cathedral helps students envision the endpoint for the pilgrims' journey and

analyze their tales within that underlying religious context. The instructor might introduce this metaparallel in class; students could reflect on how the concepts of multimedia learning are analogous to the didactic strategies of medieval texts or examine how the combination of cognitive elements affects their own learning and why it is such an important feature of multimedia presentations and medieval texts.

Throughout, my argument has been not that current technology involves some kind of revival of medieval values or experiences but instead that there are fundamental and complicated ties of relevance between the two, and that those can usefully inform classroom practices for teachers of medieval texts. I have suggested that multimedia and Web technologies have great practical value for many subjects, fields, and periods and used the Middle Ages as one model of that, but I have also highlighted the provocative resonances that exist with particular aspects of medieval reading and writing. Teachers can leverage these points of relevance within the literature classroom to help students understand the medieval texts in their own complex historical context while also understanding how they might relate to—yet still stand distinct from—our postmodern context. Multimedia learning will never become the only form of learning that takes place in a literature classroom, but it provides an excellent component. Similarly, technology and technological media will never supplant literary texts in English departments, but they can enhance the ways in which students understand and approach those texts. While instructors need not go so far as to revive the theatrical tricks that so outraged critics of religious drama in the later Middle Ages, I do propose that we can use technology and multimedia to help turn medieval texts into "quick books"—books that come alive for the students.

Notes

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1. My title borrows from Dinshaw 1999, which—appropriately—borrows in turn from the film *Pulp Fiction*.
2. Instructors who have access to equipment but not training might begin with Atkinson 2005. They can also find more detailed discussion of how to create such resources for medieval literature courses in Coote 2007 and Semper 2007.
3. Mayer's work argues against Tufte's in some ways; see the dual review by James Gall and Linda Lohr (2004). As we continue to develop thoughtful and theorized

scholarship on literature pedagogy, it makes sense to turn to advances in teaching strategies like multimedia learning. Pedagogical issues can be viewed through a variety of theoretical lenses, but educational psychology offers one of the most practical and easily applicable approaches because it focuses not only on theories but also on experimental results that demonstrate how students learn most effectively.

4. One notable exception is Landow (2006), although his work focuses on hypertext rather than multimedia more generally. Conversely, studies of multimedia learning have paid little attention to literary studies, preferring to test comprehension of scientific concepts or physical processes.
5. Quotes from survey administered 14 March 2006 in ENG 425/525: Medieval English Literature.
6. Quotes from survey administered 14 February 2006 in ENG 425/525: Medieval English Literature.
7. The Chaucer Studio, for example, has produced some excellent recordings of texts such as *The Second Shepherds' Play* and selected tales from the *Canterbury Tales*.
8. See, for instance, the flash presentation by the Fitzwilliam Museum on how the Metz Pontifical was made at www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos/sections/making_art/manuscript.html.
9. Popular books may create similar diachronic communities but lack the performative element. Some readers — such as the fans of the Harry Potter series — strengthen their community through Web-based media.

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