Digital text cycles: from medieval manuscripts to modern markup

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Abstract
The paper argues that the current implementation of digital publishing is a minor step in a long development of digital text cycles. Rather than being a revolution, the digital transformation of text is an evolutionary process heavily influenced by social and cultural factors. The paper introduces the concept of a "text cycle". An examination of basic features of paper-based text cycles and features of digital text cycles demonstrates that digital technology has a potential for change that far exceeds that of the "Gutenberg revolution". However, by applying a historical perspective, I will try to show how the deep and enduring cultural heritage of print is impeding the radical potential of digital texts.

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The paper argues that the current implementation of digital publishing is a minor step in a long development of digital text cycles. Rather than being a revolution, the digital transformation of text is an evolutionary process heavily influenced by social and cultural factors. An examination of basic features of paper-based text cycles and features of digital text cycles demonstrates that digital technology has a potential for change that far exceeds that of the “Gutenberg revolution”. However, by applying a historical perspective, I will try to show how the deep and enduring cultural heritage of print is impeding the radical potential of digital texts.

The manuscript collection of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek perhaps contains a disproportionate number of Books of Hours, but there is no disagreement among students of the medieval book production that the Book of Hours was indeed the bestseller of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. A Book of Hours is basically a structured book of prayers. Main focus of those prayers is Jesus’ mother, the Virgin Mary, whose cult had become enormously popular. The most important cycle of texts of most Book of Hours, therefore, is the so-called Hours of the Virgin. The copies of this text in the collectio Manuscripts are catalogued through careful study of their texts, decoration and the materials used to make them. Our cataloguers also take to care to describe the history of the book and any known past owners. In this instance, they were able to determine that the bestiary was probably produced in Salisbury in the late 12th or early 13th century. Miniature of a knight on horseback and a tiger with a mirror, illustrating the text that a tiger can outrun a man on a horse, so in order to steal a cub and escape, the thief should throw down a mirror, and the tigress will stop to look at its own reflection, thinking it is her cub: Harley MS 4751, f. 3v. Miniature of an elephant with a wooden tower on its back, with soldiers with crossbows and other weapons: Harley MS 4751, f. 8r.