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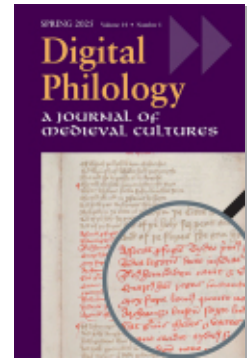
Making What's Common Count

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Making What's Common Count

► Abstract: Quantitative approaches to the study of medieval English manuscripts are useful for uncovering phenomena that are so ubiquitous that they need a wider perspective or so banal that they seem important more in aggregate than individually. On the one hand, to look at manuscripts in quantity can change our own vision, revealing patterns and trends, without the distortions of selective evidence. On the other hand, it might misrepresent the phenomenological perspective of people at the time, who generally did not experience books in large numbers. But in another way, quantifying lots of books does allow us to see the world from their perspective, when it forces us to take account of things that seem unremarkable or uninteresting from our point of view. Counting lots of books makes everything counted count: it is a levelling, even democratic, task. In particular, quantification can help us to recognize and respect the creativity, meaningfulness, and agency in what is numerically common and qualitatively commonplace and conventional.

Among the over fifty manuscripts of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, you might not linger long on a pair now in Oxford and Switzerland: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 414, and Cologne, Fondation Martin Bodmer, MS 48. There are other copies with texts that seem closer to Chaucer's words, or by scribes who might be closer to the poet himself, or just copies with impressive illustrations or script, works of art in their own right. In these two, the text diverges from what is thought to be Chaucer's own in large ways (for instance, both lack the Cook's and Squire's tales) and between each other in tiny slips that often leave lines unmetrical. The pages are plain, boxed in red but, apart from a few exceptions, unruled, with minimal decoration for verse paragraphs or some names. The handwriting is a fast and relaxed, although not untidy, specimen of secretary script of the decades after 1450. Metrical mistakes aside, however, the odd text is common to both, perhaps two cognate copies from one exemplar, and the handwriting is common to both too, the work of one scribe.¹ And

that is intriguing: visually unimpressive and textually imperfect though each is singly, they are as a pair an awe-awakening achievement. To mar one copy of *The Tales* looks like carelessness, to mar two looks like a lot of hard work. Yet it is not easy to appreciate that work. Indeed, even the likeness might look like automatic writing, unthinking reproduction. Why would the researcher now spend hard work and time scrutinizing both books, so similar and so lacking in distinction?

When book historians do choose to look at lots of books—as this special issue encourages them to—then they need to think about the qualities that they look for in that quantity. Evoking quantity evokes quality in inverse relation. To rethink why we look, and what we look for, in lots of books is pressing for those who look at books in English in the 1400s, the decades before and after printing was introduced, for that century saw a proliferation of them, and indeed of other kinds of writing in English. Of course, the closer in time to the establishment of libraries which welcomed English books, the greater the likelihood of survival. Even allowing for that, however, from this century onwards manuscript books, as well as documents and inscribed objects, become much more common in English. But *common* is a problematic word, both quantitative praise and qualitative disregard, even disdain; and the proliferation of books in English in the 1400s captures commonness in both senses. One challenge of studying English books in the 1400s is that it is difficult to recognize that proliferation and to respect it. Those twin copies of *The Tales* by one scribe exemplify the puzzle of appreciating lots of books in their unexceptional material qualities and texts. A few copies of *The Tales* are spectacular—say, the “Ellesmere Chaucer” (San Marino, Huntington Library, MS Ellesmere 26.C.9)—but most are serviceable rather than special. Similar work of duplication is continued by hundreds of other books of other texts, such as umpteen duplicates of the prose *Brut* chronicle, something even more abundantly produced. These works become common in all senses: widespread but also merely repeated, no longer special qualitatively, while numerous quantitatively. It has been an axiom of manuscript scholars since the advent of the so-called “New Philology” that each manuscript is unique,² and scholars often focus on a book’s unique features and on features that are striking—textual variants, rich miscellanies, quirky decor, striking fits of format to content. But while technically each is unique, as handmade artefacts tend to be, many manuscripts are also alike and so are interesting not only for how they diverge but for what they share. Both uncommon and common properties are in need of explanation.

That is not to jettison the recognition of what can be argued to be special: one valuable endeavor remains the art of critically discerning and interpreting works which retain, or recover, a power to communicate across or out of time. But as well as appreciating the lone work of genius, such as *The Canterbury Tales* or the “Ellesmere Chaucer”, another scholarly task is to register and respond to achievements of everyday craft, say, the over fifty more copies of Chaucer’s *Tales* dating from the 1400s, such as those two workaday copies of *The Tales* by one scribe (MS Bodley 414 and Bodmer, MS 48). As Michael Johnston has noted, the focus of research on a few London scribes—Thomas Hoccleve or Chaucer’s “Scribe B”—has “barely scratched the surface” of the thousands of manuscripts in English from the 1300s and 1400s.³ If recent manuscript scholarship has shown how to study one exceptional book well, why might we study many seemingly less exceptional ones?

The question of why we might look at lots of books is related to the question of whether and how we can. The question arises in part because to survey or sample more sources is becoming more feasible. Looking at lots of books once required slow, expensive travel or specially commissioned photography, but with growing digitized collections and the advent of “DIY digitization” on scholars’ own smartphones, some elements of books have become more easily examined on a large scale.⁴ (Of course, other elements, such as parchment offcuts studied lately by Stephanie Lahey, demand in-person study.)⁵ The other digital tools for gathering, collating, and sharing data that are part of all scholarship in the humanities—and not only in the specialized enclave of so-called digital humanities—also make work on lots of manuscripts easier to handle and write about.

Of course, access remains a challenge. Few scholars work close to libraries with large holdings (for English manuscripts of the 1400s, libraries mostly in the south-eastern UK or the north-eastern US), and there will remain a need for travel which is costly to the researcher, their institution—if they are lucky enough to have one that will pay—and the environment. That would remain true until everything were digitized, and it seems unlikely that everything ever will be. Nor do digitized manuscripts remain accessible forever, as they are vulnerable to changes in technology and funding or to cybercrime. Moreover, like printed facsimiles before them, institutional digitization early on focused on special cases, such as highly illustrated or culturally important books, like the “Sherborne Missal” (London, British Library, Add. MS 74236), for understandable reasons of using limited resources on an expensive process.

“DIY digitization” too often encourages the scholar to focus on—literally, to focus their camera on—eye-catching oddities rather than commonplace things, and on images and material features rather than text.⁶ This has fed, and fed off, the fame of exceptional manuscripts, akin to the aura of artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction.⁷

But second-wave digitizations of whole collections—OPenn, Parker Online, or by increments e-Codices, which has made Bodmer, MS 48 available—and in theory the free choice of what to photograph in “DIY digitization” could upset the focus on single and exceptional books. To some extent, looking at lots of books tends to bring out what is common rather than what is special—even, perhaps, at the risk of flattening out difference, as in the glare of an over-bright light. In this short reflection, I will first address some of the changes in perspective that come from any large survey or sample of books. Then I will suggest one particular benefit of such an approach: an expansion of the field of inquiry into common practices, of kinds less often appreciated and by people whose stories are less often told. Looking at lots of books reveals the lives of lots of people in the past, of craftspeople as well as fine artists, of everyday ingenuity as well as rare genius.

This particular advantage grows out of the general broadening of perspective which comes from surveying a large range of sources, of any kinds and in many fields. Most obviously, it provides a map of the territory more comprehensive than the narrow itinerary taken by any argument (as Jessica Brantley argues in this special issue). The importance of this breadth cannot be underestimated, as the first task in studying the past is to seek out what the sources are.⁸ This was the goal of earlier bibliographical traditions which produced catalogues, corpora, and handlists. For manuscripts and documents from England, landmarks emerged in the mid-twentieth century, such as the work of E. A. Lowe and of N. R. Ker and his collaborators, and they continue with indispensable multi-volume projects such as *The Index of Middle English Prose*, *The Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, and *An Index of Images in English Manuscripts from Chaucer to Henry VIII*.⁹ Such a process of thoroughness and breadth can produce not only lists of material but interpretations of the significance of that material.¹⁰ For instance, J. R. Mattison counted the copious copies of French texts in fifteenth-century England, a number exceeding some canonical English works: French prose accounts of Sir Lancelot survive in more copies than most works of imaginative literature in English, for instance. People in fifteenth-century England had a far stronger taste for reading in French than the focus of recent research in English studies or in French stud-

ies has recognized.¹¹ Of course, even exhaustive surveys can be, due to losses of manuscripts over the centuries, only samples in effect—a sample made of what survives from the category of books of which they were once part. Such surveys work synecdochally in scholarship as helpfully defined tranches to survey wider traditions. For instance, I used an avowedly inexhaustive and likely numerically inexact survey of four of Chaucer's and Lydgate's poems as a selective sample to show that it was not common to annotate English poems. Unlike the makers and patrons of the "Ellesmere Chaucer", for instance, most scribes and readers were happy to read the poem without writing intertexts or hypertexts on the page.¹² (The scribe of MS Bodley 414, for instance, provided only twenty-one marginal annotations and, intriguingly, reproduced only three of them in Bodmer, MS 48.) Michael Johnston has similarly sampled all the manuscripts of four widely copied works to get an overview of modes of book production.¹³ The aim of a survey is seldom complete knowledge—is this ever possible?—but a different kind of knowledge.

Any large survey or sample of sources leads to a shift in outlook. Even enumerative bibliography—listing lots of books—transforms what we know of the past, as has *codicologie quantitative*, a set of methods developed by analogy with the social sciences (and explored by Johnston and Daniel Sawyer in this special issue).¹⁴ But my own aim would be not necessarily to quantify, but to understand a wider quantity—by quantitative methods or by others; that is, not to complete or calculate one's knowledge but to broaden one's understanding of creative experience. For that broadening of outlook, various methods of surveying or sampling give what might be called an oculocentric or, in Chaucerian terms, a Boethian or Troilus-like bird's-eye view of the past. That is valuable. Looking down, like Troilus, on lots of books, we understand better from a distance—even with the inevitable loss of detail from the big picture, as in any study in quantity (as Julia King, in this collection, points out also of quantification). I would also stress, moreover, that thereby we *can* indeed know about people in the past what they did not know about themselves. Paul Strohm defended this principle once, noting that some theoretical perspectives might make us know more about Chaucer than he could know about himself; I would agree, adding also that the perspective of manuscript studies might let us know more about Chaucer's readers than they recognized—say, which trends they were part of.¹⁵

First, most simply, large corpora of sources offer help to paleography and codicology as "ancillary" or "foundational sciences" (*Hilfswissenschaften* or *Grundwissenschaften*). Charting the landscape

more fully allows the scholar to place other sources upon or against it, say by dating and locating manuscripts or tracing the circulation of texts with a sense of proportion on the measured ground. A fine example of this use of the large corpus is Ker's discovery, from surveying most manuscripts in the large collection at the Bodleian Library, that some scribes shifted from writing above the top ruling to writing below it around 1230, and that within a generation, the shift became standard. There are questions to ask about much later developments and counterexamples, but overall his very big survey—presented in a very small article—offers a useful tool, among others, for dating individual manuscripts against the trend.¹⁶ Large surveys offer all sorts of benefits such as these to scholarship now.

But while this kind of work improves the insights of scholars looking at lots of books now, it might misrepresent the perspective of writers and readers at the time. It is a moot point whether any scribe of the mid-1200s wrote below the top ruling in order to signal the date of their manuscript! Perhaps some scribes first did so with a sense of following a novel fashion seen in other scribes' work; but some, perhaps increasingly as the innovation became embedded, will have done so in the inertia of tradition, copying without considering what they had been taught to do. Part of what paleography and codicology have long done is chart such common practices, which are useful for mapping the history of the book. And a modern scholar's use of this feature to date a book chronologically treats the book anachronistically—as does almost every way we now handle it. All bibliographical scholarship looks at features—erasures by scribes, ink from print compositors' "furniture," and so on—that the makers of books did not intend users to see.¹⁷ And looking at those features in lots of books makes our prying into these things even more anachronistic. That is unavoidable and unproblematic; it just requires reflection on the distorting lenses of our scholarly tools. But it is also worth thinking about the way that such surveying and quantifying might make us, by contrast, *not* see the perspective of people at the time making and using them—what Elaine Treharne has described as their phenomenological experience.¹⁸ Most of the first makers and handlers of manuscripts did not live with a Boethian vision of the whole book culture in which they lived, though some people tried to imagine it (as for instance in Chaucer's reflection on the power of books in Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* or in *The House of Fame*). Quantifying books is anachronistically unlike most—but not all—people's impressions of books in the period itself. Only a small number of exceptionally nerdy figures, such as Henry de Kirkestede, Boston of

Bury, or William Worcester, numbered or catalogued a large number of books in England.¹⁹ Most people read far fewer, as their short booklists and dreams of “Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed” suggest.²⁰ That was especially true for books in English, which were not the kinds of books worth gathering in large numbers. In this way, then, even as it yields a fresh perspective for the scholar now, the large survey misrepresents the experience of most users of manuscripts at the time.

Yet looking at lots of books—as well as other sources such as documents or indeed material culture more widely—also allows us to capture other parts of past people’s experiences better. The first, almost incidental advantage is that when we know what is usual, we can contrast and identify what is unusual, and what early users will have found unusual within their range of experience. Large surveys can complement and contextualize the attempt to pick up the phenomenological perceptions of manuscripts. As Sawyer has noted, we can best appreciate how special books such as the “Ellesmere Chaucer” are when we understand what such a volume does *not* have in common with what *is* common.²¹ For instance, it has far more marginal annotations (the so-called “glosses”) and illustrations than most manuscripts of English poems. Most English books were not highly illuminated with portraits of authors or characters and did not have many intertextual annotations—despite the obvious reasons for the few that do looming large in museology, photography, and literary criticism. As emerges when one compares it with others—say, MS Bodley 414 and Bodmer, MS 48—the “Ellesmere Chaucer” is an uncommon book, the work of many people—patron, scribe, limner, author—with distinctive creative visions and making special efforts which we can appreciate by comparing a quantity of books, if not necessarily a quantification of them.²² Looking at more books is what clarifies that any particular one is quirky.

But studies of large corpora can work in two directions, at least. As well as revealing contrastively what makes a few books special in their uncommon properties, it also reveals cumulatively what makes a lot of books special in their common ones. I would suggest, in fact, that this second advantage is the more important one: that hunting widely helps to capture what is usual, in itself and for its own sake. In theory, one can choose and use an example or case study to illustrate what is typical, but in practice, when people choose to spend time on an example, it tends to be somehow special or extraordinary—the commonplace conveyed by an extreme case or by a counterexample; and any one instance risks being read as unique. Capturing common behavior is otherwise difficult. What is usual can be so ubiquitous that one needs a wider perspective

to perceive it, and yet can be so unprepossessing that it is impressive or interesting more in aggregate, as general patterns, than it is individually, as single instances. A large survey proved suited to studying corrections in manuscripts: I found that correcting in manuscripts was so commonplace—in the quantitative sense—that its occurrence could only be registered by tallying its frequency (which had been overlooked), but it often looked so commonplace—in an evaluative sense—that one instance was difficult to appreciate; it was the recurrence that was impressive. The corrections which scribes made were signs of critical intelligence; they were indeed little signs but they were done so often that they became awesome.²³ They revealed the skill of scribal craftspeople not as something exceptional but as something that was everywhere.

This highlighting of the scribes' work, moreover, is typical: one general effect of expanding the number of sources we consult is that it helps to expand the range of people whose experiences we consider. There is a degree of democratization even, that comes from looking at lots of books. (As I stress below, this is only a *degree*; of course, the vast majority of people in the 1400s had no ability to make or read manuscripts.) Recent work on manuscripts has often considered, brilliantly, the phenomenological effects of material texts on their users. Appreciating readers' experiences of manuscripts has helped to appreciate the texts the manuscripts contain; many medieval texts make more sense when their material form is envisaged and its effect imagined. Material textuality and reception history have been valuable additions to literary criticism since the 1980s. But alongside readers, one can also consider the experiences of their makers, who in some institutions and professions saw relatively more books. Looking at lots of books might supplement the study of reception with the study of production. Appreciating the experience of makers adds new personnel and processes to literary history and expands into other areas of cultural history, such as the archaeology and anthropology of making and material culture.

A capacious expansion of the people whose stories are told was an original part of what book history promised to literary history, and looking at lots of books helps to keep that promise. In classic defenses since the 1980s, studying the material forms of text was a way to study the materialist conditions of textual production: that is, to study the craftspeople who made literature in the physical sense, their labor, and their input. D. F. McKenzie acclaimed the pressmen who toiled on printing plays for William Congreve or the complex arrangements of laborers at a university press; Jerome McGann imagined editing to bring out "nonauthorial interventions," for instance, revealing Lord Byron's

poems as the product of printers as well as the peer.²⁴ Of course, it is important not to idealize how broad that vision can be. For the world before print, the number of people with literacy and money enough to read books was limited. But in that world, writing was also manual labor—literally—for artisans or clergy more than for the wealthy, so that looking at the writing of books does broaden the social reach of literary history a little, in ways that McKenzie, McGann, and others promised. Vernacular manuscript studies, which began with the study of great authors, can also be a study of humble artisans: scribes and limners—some of debated fame and attribution now as much as poets can be—as well as parchmenters, paper importers, or others.²⁵ And looking at lots of books entails looking at lots of these makers. When we focus on what Sawyer has called canonical manuscripts—those over-studied and now emblematic in the field—we risk not fulfilling the promise to tell lots of people's stories.²⁶ But looking beyond the few well-known manuscripts gives the demographics of literary history, via book history, a broader cast of characters. This is especially important for the history of the book in English in the 1400s, when the participation in making and reading manuscripts, and in other formats of documentary writing, expanded greatly.

That keeps the history of the book—indeed literary history—as part of the history of craft, the material crafts alongside textual crafts: the study of how to make things that is central to understanding media. Marilena Maniaci has noted that quantitative methods are particularly good at studying “book manufacturing techniques, given the conservative nature of artisanal practices,” and, as well as strict quantification, any study merely of a quantity of manuscripts draws attention to common practices—whether we find them “conservative,” traditional, shared, commonly radical, or something else.²⁷ A broad survey yields an insight into the working lives of craftspeople, otherwise largely anonymous, by looking at lots of their books, rather than focusing on one or two figures such as famous Chaucer or even the scribe himself recognized recently in other books, who made the “Ellesmere Chaucer”. As Sonja Drimmer has argued, not all scribes, for instance, sought to be identifiable or idiosyncratic, yet anon's experiences merit analysis as much as others' do.²⁸ As a method, the large survey of manuscripts, or of any other sources, need not only be inspired by the processing of big data or the methods of digital humanities; it can be inspired by modes of enquiry from cultural studies, or the study of folk art, historical archaeology, or anthropology.²⁹

A sense of how that large scale might work emerges in a study not of codices but of documents by Marina Rustow. From fragments of documents left in a Jewish genizah in Cairo after they were no longer needed, she has reconstructed the practices of the officials of the Abbasid state which once governed Egypt. Her corpus of fragments is large and thus an index of the scale of the bureaucracy that she reconstructs from it. And what she reconstructs is not an abstract system but a set of human beings at work on making and using documents. In the past, scholars have looked through these documents to recover “singular examples” and “colourful anecdotes,” and that looking *through* the sources rather than *at* them has left scribes and archival practices themselves “invisible.”³⁰ By contrast, Rustow’s study recovers the ordinary craftsmen who made these documents, their calligraphy, their mastery of procedure. She stresses that all studies of material texts are “ways of getting to know the ordinary people” who made them—in her case documents rather than books—and the scale of her endeavor is crucial for that.³¹ Only by looking at lots of sources can Rustow capture the lives of a large number of these “ordinary people” and their activities.

Moreover, looking at lots of sources can also capture what one might call ordinary activity, in a numerical sense, while challenging some of the normative or evaluative sense of that word “ordinary.” Looking in quantity allows us to see things that *seem* lacking in quality, things that are unremarkable or uninteresting, even unappealing. In this too Rustow’s study is exemplary, for, having brought lowly bureaucrats into the limelight, she does not uncover unique achievements; rather, she focuses on the “repeatable” and “formulaic” elements of documents.³² The repeated or copied formulae were, she notes, nonetheless markers of skill; furthermore, she argues that these bureaucrats helped to create a reliable state apparatus by their regularity of practice and to displace social conflict by their multiplication of paperwork. What might seem less exciting because repeated is nonetheless worth notice, both as a product of human labor as much as any other material text, and for the political effect of “scale” and “multiples.”³³ Studying sources in quantity encompasses things that a study that selects by quality, however well-argued the assumptions of what quality is, might choose among; the greater gaze could, in theory, capture all or, realistically, just some more or some different human experience. Counting lots of books makes everything counted “count”: it is a levelling perspective. (One claim, for instance, is that literary criticism has analyzed only 1% of published novels, and that big data can therefore paint a better picture of writing and reading in the age of the novel.³⁴) As well as challenging our perspective of what

matters, looking at lots of books might, in a way, bring us closer to part of people's preferences at the time, to see which kinds of writing and reading mattered so much that they did them a lot. So this expansive possibility is another way that looking at lots of books might alter our perspectives, but this time not to give us a distant, oculocentric perspective above theirs (as suggested above), but to bring our perspective closer to theirs. In that way, studies of manuscripts less as *Hilfswissenschaften* for the historian now than as attempts to capture phenomenological experiences then might be more historically sensitive—despite the risks of inference and interpretation in this kind of analysis.

That matters because, as I say, it shows us things that only seem to be lacking in quality to us. A post-critical reevaluation of the criteria of quality—and definitely not a jettisoning of *any* criteria—has been cultivated by many anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and latterly literary critics, who have taken care to recognize the importance of everyday experience, the meaningfulness and value of things that matter to people in the process of living life.³⁵ There is some dovetailing here with bibliographers' reminders of the presence and prevalence of practical texts and documents over literary books in people's uses of literacy in the late Middle Ages. Consider, for instance, the bracing reminder that the topic with some of the most numerous texts in English in the 1400s is uroscopy.³⁶ Surveying a broader quantity of what survives gives a sense of what was important in everyday reading and writing, and that helps us to help those undervalued, underrepresented cultural forms to survive. It is a call to a sharper historical sympathy and a challenge to our contemporary assumptions.

Copying, broadly defined, is an ideal example of something of which the interest is revealed by looking at lots of books. Indeed, copying is, by its nature, only discernible by looking at more than one book. It is telling that copying is central to Rustow's reconstructed archive of Abbasid documents; it has also been central to some of my studies of making English books which drew on large samples of books or quantitative sampling of elements in books.³⁷ Looking at a quantity of books offers a way to balance and contrast the attention to scribal variance and the unique manuscript that has been prominent in scholarship since the so-called "New Philology" (as noted above). The variance is, by its nature, only discernible from comparing more than one book to find textual differences. Simultaneously and by contrast, however, looking at lots of books also allows us to look beyond variance. For when one looks at an even larger quantity of books and of individual words, what is in the *most* books *most* of the time is not variance but

repetition, not composition but copying. Recognizing such “conservative” craft skill, as Maniaci called it—the craft, literally, of conserving common things—makes it possible to expand beyond the praise of variants. That seemed like a promise of democratizing the history of the manuscript book, in parallel with the broadening of the personnel in other kinds of McKenzian “sociology” of textual production: expanding attention from the unified text of the author—often of higher rank then, and certainly of greater reverence now—to the diversified texts made by craftspeople often of humbler rank then and disparaged by some past editors since.³⁸ But such praise of variance risks privileging some kinds of cultural creativity—kinds that look a lot like authorship. A more generous breadth of sources uncovers the agency and creativity not only in composition but in the consumption or conservation of texts, including by copying.

The prominence of copying challenges our evaluation of culture of the past. “Copying” sounds pejorative to an academic profession that rewards originality, innovation, change, and independence in its own research. But many examples bear out the interest of copying in other aspects of medieval material culture. For example, Rustow’s study of formulae in documents demonstrated the political effects—potentially positive ones—in the act of copying. Stephen Perkinson’s study of mass-produced alabasters suggested that such images were often revered because they were copied from others, rather than because they were unique.³⁹ (There are also aesthetic, political and other goals in the mass use of replicative technology in the twenty-first century—the digital playlist, bookmark, or “share”.) By loose analogy, it might be possible to explore a political, ethical, or aesthetic praise for invariance and copying of other kinds in codices: meaningfulness and value in conventions for the people who repeat those conventions; co-ordination and accumulation of texts in service of the common good. All these and more could be things to appreciate not in an individual book but in the shared bits of books, sharing that is visible only when we look at lots of books. Likewise, there could be things to condemn there: conformity, coercion, and so on. To see any of these elements of cultural life, some of which will confirm, some confuse, our judgements and opinions, we need to look at a large quantity of books and at all elements in them: not only the unique, innovative, and striking, but also the seemingly repetitive, conventional, and plain.

Thus this shift in our perspective to a large survey might not only reveal what could not be seen at the time—useful though that overview often is. It might also reveal past people’s perspectives, of kinds that

scholarship finds difficult to see. Spotting variance in some, or even quite a few, words in a book overlooks the rest of the words that people read that were invariant. It also misses the experience of most users, who (as has been said) did not look at a lot of books of what was roughly the same text and did not collate copies of their text. (Of course, there were always a few people who did both those things—bookish collectors of poems, religious orders preserving Scripture—and they are interesting too, in different ways.) To that majority of people, most variance will have been invisible. And indeed, incidentally, when they *did* spot variance, they generally commented on it as a problem or tried, with spotty success, to fix it.⁴⁰ Even when they see wrongly, we need to acknowledge what they see: to add to our facts about history, the facts about *their* experience of their story, faulty though their impressions might be.

On the one hand, the shift is the perennial problem of a “macro” scale, as of quantification. Looking at lots of books can sharpen our perspective, revealing variants in books in this case. But it can also prevent us from seeing through another’s eyes, to which the variants often went unrevealed. On the other hand, that shift is an advantage of the all-encompassing vision of a “macro” scale. That large scale, simply surveying all your relevant sources, reveals kinds of cultural activity that vernacular manuscript studies under the aegis of literary criticism has not often been able to appreciate. Appreciation might be easier if manuscript studies as a “sociology of texts” shared some of sociology’s fuller picture of all of society’s activity; or it might be better still if it borrowed some part of the outlook from historical archaeology, with its protocols of gathering, counting, arranging in series, and interpreting even nugatory, ephemeral, and literally throwaway things as well as treasures. In a nutshell, do we value the experience of the scribe who made two workaday copies of *The Canterbury Tales*—a Herculean effort in everyday life—as much as that of the people who made the eye-catching “Ellesmere Chaucer”? The question whether or not we want to look at lots of books is not only about our trust in quantitative methods; one could quantify the contents of even a single book. The question is whether we want our study of manuscripts to lead us to the finest creative works of writing or to what one classic study in historical archaeology calls “small things forgotten.”⁴¹ As much as quantifying, I am in favor, rather, of not forgetting.

Notes

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1. Manly and Rickert, *Text*, I:58–63, 421–426, who noted the textual relationship (giving the copies the sigla Bo¹ and, after a former owner, Ph²), suggested that there might be one scribe but did not confirm it; Seymour, *Catalogue*, 78, 167, also leaves it uncertain (“perhaps”). I assumed the identification in Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts*, 225. The unity of scribe, as of layout and *mise en page*, is immediately evident, now that one can compare one copy from its digitization (<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/fmb/cb-0048> [accessed 23 June 2023]) against the other with so far only three images online (https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_1446 [accessed 23 June 2023]). Partridge, “Minding the Gaps”, 54, discusses the textual relationship.

2. A “New Philology” was fanfared in a special issue of the journal *Speculum* in 1990: see Nichols, “Introduction.”

3. Johnston, *Middle English Book*, 6, and in general 4–8.

4. Bridget Whearty and Dot Porter, in this special issue, more fully consider the effect of technology on looking at lots of manuscripts. On the impact of smartphone “DIY digitization” on large surveys, see Wakelin, “New Age,” 83–84.

5. Lahey, *Scrap*.

6. Wakelin, “New Age,” 88.

7. For this effect, see e.g. Camille, “*Très Riches Heures*.”

8. Da Rold and Maniaci, “Medieval Manuscript Studies,” 11, note that even the number of manuscripts surviving from England is unknown. Johnston in this special issue offers a similar warning.

9. For information about the history and current status of these projects, see <https://imep.lib.cam.ac.uk/>, <https://www.dimev.net/>, and <https://www.brepols.net/series/hmiiem>.

10. Da Rold, “Tradition,” 36, notes Lowe and Ker’s anticipation of quantitative codicology.

11. Mattison, “Cest livre,” 23–25. For a helpful account of her method of impressions from a large survey, rather than from quantification, see 20–21, 28.

12. Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts*, 167–72.

13. Johnston, *Middle English Book*, 8–13.

14. For a recent overview of quantitative codicology, see Maniaci, “Statistical Codicology,” and the selection of seminal studies which it prefaces. Da Rold and Maniaci, “Medieval Manuscript Studies,” 3, note the language barrier preventing take-up of this method by scholars writing in English, but I would cite as innovative borrowers Barranu, “Multilingualism”; Da Rold, *Paper*; Johnston, “Copying and Reading”; Johnston, *Middle English Book*; Kwakkel, “New Type of Book”; Lahey, *Scrap*; Mattison, “Cest livre”; Ryley, *Re-Using Manuscripts*, 69, 154–162; Tahkokallio, “Counting Scribes”; and Sawyer, *Reading English*

Verse, 10–11. It may be significant that several of these scholars of *codicologie quantitative* who publish in English have also worked in mainland Europe or bilingual Canada.

15. Strohm, *Theory*.

16. Ker, "Above Top Line."

17. For this principle, see Tanselle, *Bibliographical Analysis*, 62.

18. Treharne, *Perceptions*, 156–58.

19. But for some who did, see Sharpe, "English Bibliographical Tradition."

20. Sawyer, *Reading English Verse*, 11, discusses how few books most people saw.

21. Sawyer, "Manuscript Canonicity," 2.

22. For many helpful considerations of the book in contrast with contemporary ones, see Stevens and Woodward, eds., *Ellesmere Chaucer*.

23. As argued in Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 13.

24. Quoting McGann, *Textual Condition*, 63, and in general 21, 57–63; see also McKenzie, *Bibliography*, 18–26.

25. For some studies which focus on craftspeople, see e.g., Drimmer, *Art of Allusion*, and Ryley, *Re-Using Manuscripts*.

26. Sawyer, "Manuscript Canonicity," 3.

27. Maniaci, "Statistical Codicology," 14–17.

28. Drimmer, "Connoisseurship," 459–461.

29. I am influenced here by Kocurek, "Towards a Digital Cultural Studies Cultural Studies," 81, who espouses such influences within the digital humanities themselves.

30. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 9, 11. I thank Bruce Holsinger and Deborah McGrady for the invitation to think about Marina Rustow's work in relation to my own, and Marina Rustow for discussing it.

31. *Ibid.*, 10.

32. *Ibid.*, 9.

33. *Ibid.*, 294, 423.

34. This figure is quoted, without a clear source, but ascribed to Stanford's Literary Lab, by Stella, *Digital Philology*, 2.

35. E.g. Felski, "Everyday Aesthetics."

36. Tavormina, "Uroscopy."

37. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 323–324, 423; Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 45–71; Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts*, 205–234.

38. See similarly Sawyer, "Manuscript Canonicity," 8, citing Eggert, "Brought to Book," 28.

39. Perkinson, "Making," 166–168.

40. Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 258–61.

41. Deetz, *Small Things*.

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