

## **Textual (id)entities in late medieval Europe (13th-15th c.)**

In contemporary literary creation, each individual textual entity in circulation can be pinpointed thanks to two identifiers: its author's name and the title coined by the latter. This does not preclude change — the literary work may be translated into another language for instance. The work then continues to circulate with its two original identifiers, plus the name of the translator — provided that the translation was done by the book: no cuts, no additions, no commentary...at least theoretically, as reality sometimes proves otherwise. In general, if these rules are broken, the translator is considered as a creator in his own right, and the product of his intervention as a new work, with its own bibliographical data.

In the late Middle Ages, authors had little control over their texts' circulation, which of course obeyed a different logic altogether. Most works remained anonymous — for some this remained true long after the introduction of printing. Medieval titles prove a volatile affair, both in medieval library catalogues and in manuscripts themselves — sometimes they disappear, or they are phrased in a language which is not that of the text and is itself subject to change. Similarly, the role of the various agents mentioned in prefatory matter or in the body of texts is not always specified — indeed authors, revisers, scribes, etc. may be difficult to tell apart, as functions frequently overlap. Finally, texts were never copied identically: manuscript circulation prompted endless revising and updating.

Despite intrinsic textual mutability and the fragility of the most basic bibliographical data, the modern editing or documenting process often resulted in the grouping and unifying of more or less dissimilar manuscript sequences under generic titles, such as *Chanson de Roland*, *Guiron le Courtois*, *Vitas Patrum*... However efficiency-driven, this practice of ours distorts medieval textual reality, and manufactures an illusory textual stability.

This symposium's intent is to question our very own bibliographical tagging practices, in the light of texts whose circulation was so dynamic that it almost resulted in creating new works altogether. Such reworking processes could, for example, have been :

1. changes in size — abbreviation and amplification;
2. changes in contents — re-modelling by cutting, re-shaping, interpolating, either by the initial author in the course of a second recension, or by a later reviser;
3. corrections in the course of a transformation — turning into prose for instance;
4. transposition from one language to another, including subsequent changes such as massive updating;

5. reworking in the shape of a florilegium.

These various processes were sometimes combined. They were seen as necessary forms of adaptation, and all of them allowed the survival — albeit in modified form — of textual entities whose success was ensured for various reasons. It was customary to maintain the identity of the modified work, whatever shape or language it found itself in. Sometimes the name of an initial author of sorts was preserved more or less faithfully alongside the title.

We shall strive to try defining what constituted a ‘work’ in the late medieval period, inasmuch as this meant a specific textual entity. How valid is it to use one title to designate dissimilar textual objects, which may differ in contents, in form, in language? How far were these very modern constructs already perceived as consistent sequences at the close of the Middle Ages? By moving away from our comfortable editorial and bibliographical assumptions, it will become possible to assess how late medieval authors and readers perceived these instances of textual remanence. Late medieval practices of authors and readers alike can shed light on this issue. Self-revisions, in which authors commented on their own work and sometimes provided a second recension, were a common phenomenon in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries: Heinrich Suso, who translated and revised his own *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* into the *Horologium sapientiae*, or Guillaume de Digulleville, who explains his revising drive at the opening of his second recension of the *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*, are two iconic examples of this trend, which would benefit from more documenting. Present knowledge of readership and reading practices at the end of the Middle Ages makes it possible to map various responses to this issue by probing the demands and the initiatives of specific commissioners, the evidence of scribal practice and readers’ response as recorded in manuscripts, by analysing the bibliographical conventions used in library catalogues, in wills, etc.

What is at stake is a finer historicized perception of the late medieval authors’ relation to their texts, and of readers’ attitude towards works in manuscript.