Combining Latin Language Learning and Undergraduate Research with Digital Humanities

Undergraduates rarely have the chance to work with any texts other than student editions and commentaries, but for centuries Latin language learners had no other option than to read and copy texts from manuscripts, with arguably better results. This paper will argue that transcribing manuscripts can provide a unique opportunity for intermediate and advanced undergraduates to hone their understanding of Latin grammar, syntax, and style and to exercise their critical judgment in the evaluation of scribal errors. Paradoxically, working with ancient manuscripts can also be an opportunity to learn important skills for the 21st century and to make a contribution to scholarship.

For the past year and a half, I have worked with a small group of Latin students from the intermediate to advanced levels in an experiment in pedagogy based on producing a critical transcription of a medieval manuscript. The idea came to me while reading E.J. Kenney's review of two editions of Vibius Sequester's *De Fluminibus, Fontibus, Lacubus, Nemoribus, Paludibus, Montibus, Gentibus* (Kenney 1969). Kenney remarks that the world needs not another critical edition of this text, but rather a diplomatic transcription of its main manuscript (V=Vaticanus Latinus 4929), to help readers make sense of the text's many problems. I had some interest in this text because it figures into another project of mine, so I acquired images of the manuscript and began to see possibilities for involving undergraduates in my research.

The text itself, a kind of gazetteer of the ancient world, is simple enough for an intermediate student to read, since the entries are short and straightforward. For example, the entry on the river Achelous is a simple indirect statement: *Achelous, Aetoliae, primus erupisse terram dicitur.* Because the manuscript is written in a very legible hand, an intermediate student should be able to read it with ease. On the other hand, the second entry on the same river,

presents more problems, since it was copied incorrectly by the first hand (*Achelous ex Indo monte perrhebiorum fines in Maliacum mare decurrit, quia etoliam abarca dia diuidit*), then corrected by a second to *Achelous ex Indo monte per rhebiorum fines in Maliacum mare decurrit, qui aetoliam ab Arcadia diuidit.* This effectively illustrates to a more advanced student the problems of manuscript transmission and the importance of understanding morphology and syntax.

The exercise becomes even more valuable when combined with modern techniques for producing critical transcriptions in a digital format. The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) has guidelines for using Extensible Markup Language (XML) for the representation of primary sources. As computer code goes, XML is a relatively simple markup language that requires no previous experience to learn. Indeed, students only need to know how to type to use it. Moreover, the free Komodo Edit application provides coding hints and error checking to make the process as easy as possible. The benefit to using TEI/XML for the transcription is that XML tags allow the transcriber to identify and explain the various interventions in the text without intruding into the text itself. For example, there is an abbreviation in the entry on the river Araxes, but traditional transcriptions would just expand it without comment. In TEI/XML, however, there is room for both the abbreviation and the expanded form:

> <p>Araxes, Armeniae, Ar
>
> <lb/>abi<abbr><choice><am>ā</am><ex>am</ex></choice></abbr> <add
>
> xml:id="#V2">a</add> Medis diuidit.</p>

Interpreted literally, that indicates that the word *Arabiam* appears in the manuscript in an abbreviated form as *Arabiā*, that its expanded form is *Arabiam*, and that a second hand inserted the preposition *a* before the word *Medis*. When transforming the XML into a more human-

friendly format (e.g., HTML), decisions can be made about which information to include (i.e., the abbreviated or expanded version).

To demonstrate the surprising results of this experiment in Latin pedagogy, I will share some of the entries that my students produced. I will also share my time during the session with a current student who has expanded on this experiment for his McNair Scholars research project, so that those in attendance can see firsthand the benefits of combining manuscripts and 21st century technology in the Latin classroom.

Works Cited

Kenney, E.J. (1969). "Quot Editores, Tot Vibii," *The Classical Review* n.s. 19.2: 183–85.

TEI Consortium, eds. "11. Representation of Primary Sources." *TEI P5: Guidelines for Electronic Text Encoding and Interchange*. 2.5.0. July 26, 2013. TEI Consortium. http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/PH.html#index-body.1_div.11_div.9 (September 25, 2013).