These three papers, all attempting to deal with cataloging medieval manuscripts in the computer environment, have represented three mind-sets and three points of view.

Hope Mayo has attempted to show us the uses and limitations of MARC—in itself, in its AMC (Archival and Manuscripts Control) format, as limited by the strictures of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, as further limited by Steven Hensen’s Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts, and yet further limited by the particular application limitations imposed by the utilities OCLC and RLIN. She has compared this with a full-dress traditional description and not unnaturally has found the traditional form superior. Her treatment employs a scrupulous compliance with every letter of the present contradictory laws in an exercise worthy of the most experienced advocatus diaboli. Nevertheless, she has not convinced herself or me that MARC is useless for medieval manuscripts cataloging. Her paper included, at the end, the suggestion that MARC, even in the limited form available through the bibliographic utilities, might very well support census level records, which could bring the manuscripts to the attention of researchers and refer them to more ample descriptions, computerized or not.

Tom Amos, on the other hand, sees the limitations of the present applications as posing insuperable barriers to any use of MARC for medieval manuscripts cataloging and has committed himself to the use of dBase III, a relational database which he finds congenial and which he has employed successfully in the production of a printed catalog of microfilms of Portuguese medieval manuscripts. An in-house database, this system is at this point the microcomputer equivalent of the classic in-house finding aids to which most of us are accustomed. It has potential for becoming more widely available, for being consultable by modem.

Because of the nature of the Hill Library program—the collection in microform of manuscripts from throughout the western world and the cataloging of the texts

Alexandra Mason is Spencer Librarian, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.
portrayed on these microforms—this particular in-house finding aid is (or will be) a type of union catalog in itself. For this reason, what the Hill Library decides to use and how it decides to design its catalog is of much more interest to the world of scholarship than are the same decisions in most individual libraries. We must remember however that this program is not designed to treat manuscripts themselves but only the shadows of their texts on film and is primarily designed for the production of a printed catalog.

The union catalog characteristics of the Hill operation make it particularly appropriate that Amos’s paper should, in its second part, introduce an account of the Machine-Readable Manuscript Census Record (MCR) proposal—a plan for the creation of what might be a modern-day international De Ricci level census of medieval manuscripts. This idea is one which I can support wholeheartedly without being in complete agreement with the report form as it is proposed. I find it quite unhandy to have to read so far down the description, to the twelfth data element, before finding out what the text is which is being described. I would much prefer a little more correspondence with the old De Ricci, for example, that the identification of the text immediately follow the shelfmark and that foliation, notice of the existence of further descriptions, incipits, etc., follow that. These are minor quibbles however, which I suspect are shared by others.

Sara Shatford Layne is the odd woman out in this affair. Her paper has given us not a discussion or contemplation of theory but an account of a direct, practical application. Her paper is the most surprising and, to me, the most heartening of the three. Had I been asked if MARC was a suitable vehicle for an index of medieval manuscript images, my answer would have been very close to Tom Amos’s statements about its suitability for a catalog of medieval manuscript texts. I would have been wrong. Layne has demonstrated conclusively that MARC and even AACR2, if taken firmly by the horns, can be turned from an awkward bull which chases us up trees to a useful ox which pulls our plows. This is a pretty piece of work and a fine example of an ingenious application of MARC, demonstrating its usefulness in the hands of a capable cataloger who takes advantage of the often unrecognized flexibility of the program. I hope that the IMMI can investigate the possibility of making this work available on optical disk—illustrations and catalog alike.

I was asked to comment on these papers “as a curator assisting readers seeking manuscripts, as a sponsor of the cataloging of manuscripts, and as one desiring to integrate information about manuscripts into an online catalog.” What this combination reflects is the need to look at the entire affair from the point of view not of the end user—that’s the scholar—but of the person responsible for making sure that the end user gets what’s needed.

My qualifications for addressing these points are fairly simple. I’m an old cataloger of both printed and manuscript material who is presently the head of a
department of special collections of a reasonable size with a small staff and a clientele which includes bright children, bright and dull undergraduates, graduate students and faculty from my own institution and others as far away as Lisbon and Melbourne. The department’s holdings are around 200,000 printed books and maps and around a third of a million manuscripts of great variety, including about 150 codices written before 1500, encompassing perhaps 500 separate texts, as well as some 60 stray leaves from codices (mainly recovered from bindings) and a very large uncounted quantity of noncodex manuscripts from the same period. We do our own cataloging—indeed, our own everything. We use OCLC to produce cards for our catalog of printed matter. Our one-woman manuscripts division uses a microcomputer to produce the looseleaf catalog of our manuscripts and the cards which index it. None of our books or manuscripts is represented in the University Library’s online catalog and when alteration of this situation has been discussed manuscripts have been excluded from consideration since “Everybody knows those records won’t fit.”

What we need in order to answer the most basic requirements of ourselves and our clientele is a way to make, simply and clearly, a census level record of our medieval (and other) manuscripts which our clients can use to find what we have by looking in the same catalog they use to find everything else the library holds and which we can use to help them find the locations of other manuscripts no matter where located, again preferably by looking in the same catalog we search for the other books we find for them—in short, a form which can be merged with our own university’s online catalog on the one hand and with OCLC (or RLIN) on the other. This means a MARC-based record. I am therefore greatly intrigued and somewhat reassured by Hope Mayo’s suggestion that MARC may be quite suitable for the creation of census level records and by Tom Amos’s account of a movement to produce an international Machine-Readable Manuscript Census Record. Now all we have to do is put those two together and make the result MCR-MARC. Sara Shatford Layne has effectively demonstrated that MARC is a far more flexible system than generally thought; MCR-MARC requires a much less imaginative approach than did Layne’s work with images.

I agree that MARC is not suitable for the full-dress description of complex medieval manuscripts; as most commonly implemented it is only marginally suitable for the description of complex printed books, which share many of the problems of medieval codices. I do not however believe that the objections raised to its use are strong enough to cause its abandonment.

We must not allow the present state of applications to blind us to possibilities. Applications and MARC itself change as needs are recognized and technology permits. The absence of a dedicated incipit field, infinitely repeatable; the lack of a place of production field; the lack of sufficient levels in the hierarchically arranged place name field; the lack of a thesaurus of physical descriptors and of genre terms
for manuscripts; the lack of free-text searching across the fields in the database; the lack of a dedicated repository entry—these are most of the specific difficulties cited. None is irremediable and some are not even real.

Free-text searching is already available in OCLC through the EPIC search program, although its inexplicable failure to allow searching through subfield c of the title field has made this much less useful than it should be. A place of production field exists and will become available under format integration. It is already possible to make a repository/callmark entry, either as a main entry or as one of the additional access points. The thesauri can be compiled—indeed a great deal of this work has already been done in or can be based upon the series of thesauri compiled by the RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee, since manuscripts, at least codex manuscripts, share many characteristics with early printed books. With patience and logical persuasion the other matters can be changed or, in many cases, simply forced by remembering that what is not forbidden is allowed. If all this seems unlikely, just consider what the RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee has accomplished in under a decade.

The more serious objections to the cumbersome linking procedures or the treatment of separate texts as component-part records have to be answered, I fear, by deciding that MARC can go only so far and that the full picture of a complex manuscript must be painted on another canvas. I suggest treating separate texts from a Sammelband as component parts, providing only the most cursory description of the full manuscript in the MARC database, but including in the main record and in every component-part record information on how the interested reader can obtain a copy of a published or unpublished description of the full manuscript. The truly serious researcher will be able to obtain a full description with some slight delay; the researcher with less time can work his or her way stubbornly through the database, printing out one component-part record after another. This is not ideal but it is workable. I feel that hypertext applications will come soon, making even this procedure quick and useful.

The one problem truly overwhelming in my eyes is that of AACR2 name forms. Unless the medieval manuscripts community and the rare books community can agree on the adoption of a generally accepted source for medieval names such as Personennamen des Mittelalters,¹ we will have to live—or rather exist—with this highly unsuitable and frustrating situation. If we can agree, I find it perfectly imaginable that AACR2 will be revised to follow our wishes.

Both Hope Mayo and Tom Amos have paid a good deal of attention to the objections of “scholars” to the differences between the way records look in the MARC format and the way these persons are accustomed to seeing them in “traditional” descriptions. I believe that too much attention is paid to these cosmetic problems. I cannot believe, for instance, that 1151–1200 is harder to understand than XII²; it is certainly easier for a computer program to arrange and to search, and leaves no
ambiguity as to whether the date concerned is the 12th century or the 1200s. All of us have to adjust to different types of descriptions as we move from one catalog to another. I find the adjustments required when moving from Shailor, for example, to the MARC format less serious than those met when moving from a description by M.R. James to one by a Spanish or German scholar or to Mr. Amos’s MCR.

We must remember that MARC is not a cataloging system but a communications system. Most problems arise not from MARC at all but from the applications of MARC and from the too scrupulous following of suggestions for inclusion, exclusion, order of notes, etc. Very serious difficulties arise from the attempt to use the Archival and Manuscripts Control format for medieval manuscripts. This format, which would much more accurately be entitled the Archival and Collection Level Control format, was designed primarily for the handling of modern archives in modern archival practice, that is, by collection level description. Neither it nor Steven Hensen’s rules for cataloging archives is hospitable to the treatment of individual manuscripts, be they medieval or later. Some libraries (including, I believe, the Library of Congress), needing to describe individual manuscripts in detail, have decided to use the Books format and the AACR2 rules for manuscripts, both applied somewhat flexibly. A more satisfactory description results at the price of losing (under the present system) the useful search qualifier “amc”; I believe it is worth the loss.

This discussion has provided us much food for thought, resulted in much argument, and perhaps brought a few minds to the realization that medieval manuscripts have not been treated kindly in the design of automated cataloging systems. I hope that it has persuaded us to work, open-mindedly but determinedly, to have changes made in the applications of MARC to make this international communication system responsive to the needs of medievalists as well as scholars working in later fields. I look forward to the day when I can expect the international catalog network to respond helpfully not only when I ask for a title or the name of an author but when I ask for an incipit or a place of writing or a scribe’s name, when I can request everything produced in Lucca in the second half of the 15th century—1451–1500—and be presented with a list of incunabula, manuscript codices, notaries’ protocol books, and private letters. I believe that, with work and imagination, this can happen and that the means of making it happen will be with us much sooner than we can imagine inputting that information.

NOTES

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