Kate Maxwell

**When Here is Now and There is Then: Bridging the Gap in Time with “Sumer Is Icumen In”**

1 Introduction

“The text resists; you take it into you, but it is not ‘you’; you break it open, suck it, chew it; you change it, and it will change you, so that, ultimately, you and it, subject and object, then and now, are not easily distinguishable.” (Brown 2000: 561)

The past is getting closer. It seems so close to our reach. We can carry around every book ever written (or so it seems) in our pockets. We can find a picture of anything on the Internet, and we can tour the streets of 17th-century London. We can visit museums virtually. Quotes from people long deceased regularly feature in social media, often with a mugshot alongside. Chaucer, Walt Whitman, Mellibus, Queen Anne Boleyn – Shakespeare alone manages multiple accounts from his side of the pearly gates.

This interaction with today’s world from notable figures beyond the grave is symptomatic of what I consider to be false bridges over the gap in time. Indeed, if these are bridges at all then the traffic they bear is only one way: today’s culture is projected onto the past which is manipulated to fit the needs of the present dominant culture. In a wider cultural sense, such manipulation is also felt – and responded to – by many cultures and people that do not ‘fit’ the apparent hegemony. The past, or at least what we think of as ‘the real past’, is silent.

Except, of course, that the past is not silent at all – it is just that we don’t always listen. If the past were silent, we would know nothing about history. All of us can listen to and understand the past – not just scholars with special training who act as gatekeepers to this mysterious land which requires their significant interpretation for mere mortals to understand. In terms of multimodality as a discipline, the basic process of identifying semiotic modes is one which leaves aside aspects of a culture which are of supreme importance for an understanding of that culture. Therefore the model which I shall propose and demonstrate here can be adapted

---

1 Sincere thanks are due to Lisa Colton for commenting on a draft of this article, and to Janina Wildfeuer for patient and insightful editing.
in order to build bridges between various cultures, not just between the past and
the present, and I invite readers to do so: to read, to write, to change.

My object of study in this article is the medieval manuscript. Indeed, in the
article I will concentrate chiefly on a single page of a single manuscript: the *unicum*
(single surviving copy) of the Middle English folksong and contrafact *Sumer Is
Icumen In*. The manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 978, is a miscellany,
containing multiple works in Latin and in vernacular languages, both musical
and textual. It was compiled in the 13th century, possibly in the 1260s (cf. British
Library 2015). It is the source of several *unica* works in addition to *Sumer Is
Icumen In*, and as well as musical works, it contains (among other things) a calendar, a collection
of medical texts, letters, fables, poems, laments, a treatise on hawking, lais by
Marie de France, and the *Song of Lewes*. The manuscript is incomplete, with some
22 folios apparently having been lost.

2 Beyond ‘mode’

In historical discourses, ‘mode’ is a problematic term. It can refer to the musical
modes of the Middle Ages, the lyric mode and the narrative mode of writing,
it can mean something akin to genre in some literary discourses – indeed, it is
a little four-letter word which has manifold meanings for different disciplines
(cf. Maxwell 2015). Even within multimodality, the term ‘mode’ is debated. For
my purposes here, it is therefore more useful to think of three levels of ‘mode’,
which we can imagine as concentric circles. In the outermost circle, which of
course encompasses the other two, lie *cultural practices*, which are necessary for
an understanding of all the others. For example, memory training and reading
practices in the Middle Ages are behind many of the decisions in the basic design
of a medieval manuscript (a design on which books such as this are of course still
based), including word spacing, margins, headings, page numbers, and so on. In
the middle concentric circle lie *semiotic resources*, which are modes whose use
required some degree of conscious choice. For a manuscript these will typically
include modes such as order, page layout, choice of material (parchment, paper,
rotulus, wax tablet), binding materials, and so on. Finally, in the innermost circle
we find *elements* (or, in Latin, *pars*), which are the smallest details that make up
semiotic resources. For the example of a manuscript these would include colour,
style of script, punctuation.
Figure 19.1: © The British Library Board. London, British Library, MS Harley 978, fol. 11v
Clearly, the boundaries between cultural practices, semiotic resources, and elements are fluid, and there are many modes which can be situated in one or more of the categories depending on context. Music notation is a clear example of this: performing music or inscribing it onto a page are clearly cultural practices, yet since many manuscripts transmitting music do not actually record the notes themselves, music, whether present or absent, is also a semiotic resource. Finally, it is an element: the ways that individual notes are written can reveal much about the circumstances in which the manuscript was produced and its intended audience. Manuscript decoration is another mode which can cover all three categories: artwork such as miniatures and marginalia are cultural practices, but they are also semiotic resources, since their inclusion or exclusion is a meaningful choice. Like music, they are themselves made up of *pars*: colour, gesture, position, layout, and so on.

3 A multimodal reading of a medieval manuscript: *Sumer* in its material context

So far, I have taken it for granted that readers will know what a medieval manuscript is. Yet, for today’s readers of medieval codices, contact with these artefacts comes primarily through mediated technologies, editions. These editions can be in facsimile, in a scholarly or readerly textual (or musical) edition, via a sounding performance, on a screen, or indeed in a combination of these (and more: consider a performance of medieval music with the manuscript images projected onto a screen; or a YouTube video of an oral reading played over the manuscript, with the edited text viewable in the comments). Indeed, for readers of this article, the page in question is readily viewable in the mediated form which is Figure 19.1: a reproduction (black and white for those reading the printed version) of the digital photograph of the manuscript page, surrounded by this article, enmeshed in this anthology where it lies bound between book covers (actual and virtual) with bedfellows that are almost as diverse as those with whom it shares its bindings ‘in real life’.

Clearly, the reception and interpretation of ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’ is dependent on context. There are accepted cultural practices for the readers of a collection of scholarly articles, though individual readers are free to depart from some of these (if you want to read this text in bed with a pen in your hand whilst singing the song, then I for one won’t stop you). There are also accepted – indeed, imposed – cultural practices on those who consult the manuscript in the British Library: annotate the manuscript, or attempt to remove it, and you will be subject to swift and heavy sanctions. Yet, for readers in the Middle Ages, manuscript annotation was an accepted
When Here is Now and There is Then

(and acceptable) way of engaging with the text. Indeed, many manuscripts were designed to be annotated by readers, and if it were not for readers’ annotations, our knowledge of past readers and their cultural practices would be much poorer.

When it comes to the reception of the song itself – that is, a reception of its sung, time-based form – the field of possibilities becomes even wider. It can be sung in private or in public, in a formal setting or among friends, it can be interpreted as a folksong or a religious work (using the Latin text); it can be performed in any manner of ways running the gamut from the vulgar to the high-brow. Of course, the previous sentences in this paragraph are equally applicable whether those receiving the song are medieval, modern, both, or neither.

The concept of ‘cultural practices’, however, extends beyond the physical reading situation. In the case of Sumer Is Icumen In, a distinct whiff of nationalism can be detected in the reception of the work at least since the early 20th century. Taylor (2002: 76) writes:

“With ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’, English once more bursts into song; after the long winter of the Anglo-Norman ascendency comes the spring of national self-expression. The mocking cuckoos and farting bullocks mark the beginning of a robust poetic tradition that will pass through ‘genial good-humoured Chaucer’ to Shakespeare’s ‘native woodnotes wild’.”

Yet, as Taylor of course goes on to note, this projection of nationalism is symptomatic of a present (here, a past present) being projected onto the past.2 Even the popular translation of the word ‘verteth’ ignores the possible (probable?) Latin root, preferring instead the Old English which better fits the view of the Middle Ages as bawdy and lewd (cf. Taylor 2002: 79). On a larger scale, the nationalistic view of the innocently bawdy folksong song ignores the Latin texts that are also present on the manuscript page.

This Latin words laid under the music along with English text speak of the suffering and death of the son of the ‘celicicola’ (‘celestial husbandman’), “who will give life to the half-alive captives, rescuing them from punishment, and crowning them with him on his heavenly throne” (translations from Taylor 2002: 79). While ultimately a positive story of salvation, the Latin text does not forget the suffering that must precede it – unlike the English, which gleefully proclaims the arrival of summer and does not even mention the winter that has passed.

2 In writing these lines I am of course aware that it is currently all-too au fait to dismiss out of hand the Romantic notions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, even in scholarship. While many events of the 20th and 21st centuries have made nationalism, including English nationalism, a dirty word, it nevertheless remains an important discourse which cannot be ignored in this context.
When sung in canon, the high-pitched and simple, slow rhythm of the line “sing cucu” is easily distinguishable as the quadruple waves of the music progress in parallel; with the Latin text it is the word “filio” which receives this honour. Thus, the cuckoo (of summer) and the son (of God) are marked out by the melodic and rhythmic setting. Likewise, the canonic form coupled with the downward melodic motion of the song prioritises the opening words, the only others to be sung at the highest pitch. In the English version this is the joyful declaration of summer’s arrival; in the Latin the call to Christians to see, to perceive: ‘Perspice Christicola’ (‘See, Christian’). Finally, despite their low pitch setting, the last lines of the canon are of course particularly easy to hear as the voices drop out in turn. In the English version these are an ironic plea to not stop singing (“nae swik bu naver nu”); in the Latin they serve as a reminder of the glory of the son ‘in celi solio’ (‘on his heavenly throne’).

The layout of the manuscript page also reveals modes in all three categories. What we now term “multimodal literacy” (Kress/Jewitt 2003) is not unique to contemporary reading practices. A reader of the page bearing Sumer has to take into account multiple modes in order to devise a reading path. Although reading paths are individual and we cannot use eye-tracking software on our long-deceased forebears, when I glance at the page my eye first takes in the entire page top to bottom and left to right (staves with music, text and colours, dense black text lower right, spacious red text bottom right), before returning to the large initial “S” top left via the two at bottom left. A closer look is then guided by these initial letters, and the red rubric “pes” with its lines connecting it to the music. As a reader who has learnt the song (like many a child in the UK, I was taught it at primary school), that is all I need to remind myself of the (English) text, rhythm, and melody. The tale of the layout does not stop there, however, for although it may have been the medieval norm that readers were already familiar with works they read in manuscript form, it was certainly not necessarily the case (then or, of course, now). To fully understand the canon of the song, the reader has to consult the performance instructions given in the black (and lower red) Latin text. Yet there is also the Latin text of the song to consider. Apart from the increase in importance implied by the choice of Latin over vernacular (cf. Wellesley 2013), the use of the colour red also makes it stand out over the English, despite being written underneath. In addition, the sparse nature of the Latin words means that their

---

3 For a comparison between semiotic analysis and eye-tracking in a newspaper context see Holsanova/Holmqvist/Rahm 2003. It is worth noting here that most of the semiotic assumptions, including those most closely related to mine as stated here, were supported by the empirical results of the experiment.
placement under the music, and under the English text, is spacious and elegant. Just as it strikes the ear in an aural rendition of the song, so the word “filio” (on the second staff) strikes the eye. While this is a manuscript without miniatures, colour, textual flourishes, and, indeed, the presence of musical notation where it appears, all serve a decorative purpose which is also didactic: see and perceive, O Christian! Finally, while it is surely no coincidence in this bilingual song with two distinct meanings that the red symbol to mark the entry of the canonic voices is in the form of a cross, the fact that the British Museum would centuries later choose to stamp, in red, certain folios of manuscripts in its possession provides a secular, nationalistic counterstroke.

In this multimodal reading of *Sumer Is Icumen In* I have used reading and music-making as examples of cultural practices, rhythm, melody, and page layout as examples of semiotic resources, and colour and the setting of individual snippets of text as elements. There are, of course, more modes present on the manuscript folio, or indeed on any artefact, than I have sketched here, and much could be said of them all. Through the identification of semiotic modes coupled with this system of categorisation which takes into account both the macro, cultural context and the micro details, we can build bridges to the past on which the traffic can actually be two way: the past can speak to us, we can learn from it and let it change us. Historical multimodality is thus not just a passing fancy; its findings can and should inform study into present cultures. Let me end, then, with a striking image, very prevalent in medieval times, which finds resonances in writings about the other.

4 Consuming the other, then and now

The notion of eating and digesting a text in order to fully understand it can be traced through writings in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, for example in the works of Philo of Alexandria, John the Evangelist, or Augustine of Hippo, to name but three. In the act of consuming a text, it is not just the text that is changed, chewed, broken up; the body that consumes it changes too.

The text is other; when we read it, it changes, and we are changed. Compare the following from Augustine and bell hooks:

> “You beat back the weakness of my vision; your light shone upon me in its brilliance, and I thrilled in love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from you. It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your own and I heard your voice calling from on high, saying, ‘I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your
“Fucking is the Other. Displacing the notion of Otherness from race, ethnicity, skin-color, the body emerges as a site of contestation where sexuality is the metaphoric Other that threatens to take over, consume, transform \textit{via} the experience of pleasure. Desired and sought after, sexual pleasure alters the consenting subject, deconstructing notions of will, control, coercive domination. Commodity culture in the United States exploits conventional thinking about race, gender, and sexual desire by ‘working’ both the idea that racial difference marks one as Other and the assumption that sexual agency expressed within the context of racialized sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one’s place and participation in contemporary cultural politics. The seductive promise of this encounter is that it will counter the terrorizing force of the \textit{status quo} that makes identity fixed, static, a condition of containment and death.” (bell hooks 1992: 367)\textsuperscript{4}

Both of these writers see change occurring in the subject (the reader) through consumption, seduction, pleasure, and fear. When I extract meaning from a text, particularly a text which I see as somehow ‘other’ (or, at least, more ‘other’ than I am used to), I desire it, and I consume it. Yet if I do so only on my own terms, if I force my culture onto that of a different person, place, or time, then the bridges built will be faulty. I must not assume that the other exists to please me on my ‘grand tour’ of intellectual awakening, of somehow ‘becoming-other’. Instead, I must be ready to be challenged as well as changed by what I read (see, hear, write), ready to let the other speak, and to \textit{listen}. This can and should be the case for all who seek to understand something new (to them), whatever (or whenever) their ‘other(s)’ may be. The threefold identification of cultural practices, semiotic resources, and elements, is one way of achieving this, but it is surely not the only one. I write as a white female medievalist, musicologist, and multimodalist, not as a philosopher, linguist, or scholar of race, colonialism, gender studies, queer studies, or any of the other disciplines which also seek to build working bridges across cultural divides, yet I await reactions to these words, positive or negative. The power of art is that it can provoke change; scholarship should be a vehicle of, not a hindrance to, this miracle.

\textbf{References}


\textsuperscript{4} My thanks are due to Melanie McBride for introducing me to the work of bell hooks.


Wellesley, Mary (2013): “‘Evyr to be songe and also to be seyn’: The Performing Page of the N-town *Visit to Elizabeth*”. *Piccia: Le livre et l’écrit* 16, pp. 146–157.

**List of Figures**

Figure 19.1: © The British Library Board. London, British Library, MS Harley 978, fol. 11v.