

12th-Century Tales & 21st-Century Technology

Online Digital Videos of Medieval Narratives in Performance

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Modern performers and scholars have long recognized that medieval plays were meant to be played and lyric poems were intended to be sung. Yet minstrels and various entertainers likewise sang medieval epics using instrumental accompaniment, recited and acted out verse romances, and performed *fabliaux* and other tales.

Public reading of stories to assembled audiences also became an important performance mode; private, silent reading, which is the norm today, was the exception in the Middle Ages. In short, medieval narratives were created to be performed. Their performability was, and remains, part of their fundamental character, affecting audience response in significant ways.

In order to illustrate these points, we have produced *Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase* (henceforth *PMNT*). *PMNT* is an online research database that provides scholars, teachers, students, and performers with digital videos of modern performances of medieval narratives. Evelyn Birge Vitz and Marilyn Lawrence, both of NYU Faculty of Arts and Science's (FAS) Department of French, direct the site, which is managed by Jennifer Vinopal, Services Manager of

NYU's Studio for Digital Projects and Research.¹ The Studio initially created and now hosts *PMNT* thanks to a gift by an anonymous donor, and continues to develop the site with support from NYU's FAS Comparative Literature, English, and French Departments, and the Medieval and Renaissance Center. The idea for *PMNT* grew out of another project,

a book of essays entitled *Performing Medieval Narrative*, edited by Vitz, Lawrence, and Nancy Freeman Regalado (also of the FAS French Department). The book demonstrates that medieval narratives were stories intended for performance, and shows how understanding their performance is essential for appreciating the narratives fully.²

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Performing Medieval Narrative Today: A Video Showcase' website. At the top, the title is displayed in a large, bold font. Below the title is a navigation menu with links for 'home', 'about', 'contact', 'videography', 'bibliography', and 'teaching tips'. The main content area features a search section titled 'Find Performances' with the instruction 'using one or more criteria from menus below (help)'. This section is divided into two columns: 'Performances' and 'Original Works'. Each column contains several drop-down menus for selecting search criteria. The 'Performances' column includes menus for 'Performance descriptors', 'Musical instruments', 'Performer categories', 'Name of performers/ensemble', 'Title of clip', 'Language of performance', 'Setting', and 'Geographical location'. The 'Original Works' column includes menus for 'Title of work', 'Author', 'Genre', 'Subject', 'Period', and 'Language of Work'. Below the search menus are 'Search' and 'Reset' buttons. At the bottom of the search area, there is a note: 'Quicktime 6 required for this site. Netscape recommended for this site.' On the left side of the search area, there is a small image of a person playing a lute.

Figure 1. On the *PMNT* home page, visitors search for video clips using drop-down boxes. The boxes list descriptors for performances and for the medieval narratives performed.

1. For information on NYU's Studio for Digital Projects and Research, a joint project of ITS and the NYU Libraries, see <http://www.nyu.edu/studio/>.
2. *Performing Medieval Narrative*, eds. Evelyn Birge Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado, and Marilyn Lawrence (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005). For a description of the book, go to <http://www.boydell.co.uk/43840391.HTM>.

We initially considered creating a CD-ROM to accompany the book, but soon realized the vast potential of a website. Unlike a CD-ROM, a website can be altered, updated, and expanded as technology evolves and as the needs of its developers and visitors change. Moreover, a website reaches a global audience—indefinitely broader than that of a CD-ROM—and supports real-time interaction with its growing online content.

While numerous relevant textual and audio resources exist online, as well as visual resources in the form of illustrative stills, there is currently no other website devoted to videos of performance of medieval narrative. Many recordings and websites concentrate on medieval music and drama, but scholars are only beginning to appreciate the importance of performances of medieval narrative. A unique online resource in a budding area of research, *PMNT* focuses exclusively on digital videos of the performance of narrative. Such videos are difficult to obtain: few are sold commercially and rare is the library collection that holds them.

PMNT uses the latest developments in online technology to enable scholars and performers from around the world to view clips of these videos. The clips feature a variety of actors, storytellers, singers, musicians, mimes, dancers, and puppeteers, among them professionals, teachers, and students—including many NYU undergraduates from Vitz's course on "Acting Medieval Literature" and from her own independent studies. They perform scenes drawn from a range of medieval narrative genres, including epics, romances, *lais*, tales, *fabliaux*, and others. *PMNT* also represents some performances of narratives from analogous traditions (such as the Egyptian *Hilali* epic).

We have constructed *PMNT* as a pedagogical and scholarly database. Its purpose is to demonstrate how medieval stories can be brought to life in performance for modern audi-

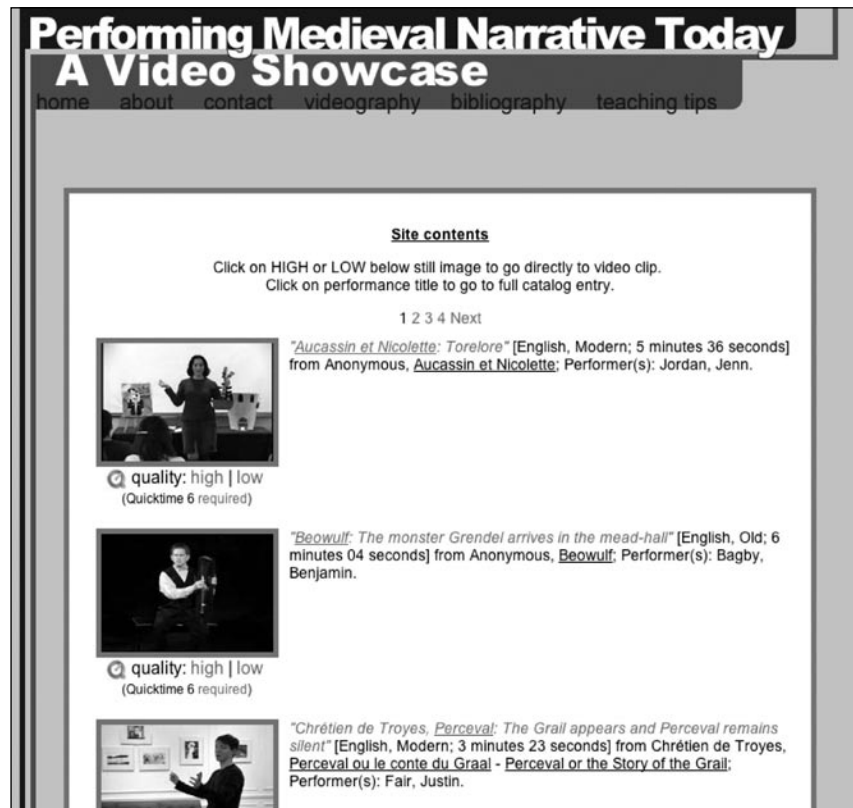


Figure 2. From the list of search results, visitors can click directly to the video or to the clip's full catalog entry.

ences, and how teachers of medieval literature can use performance in the classroom. We aim as well to promote a better understanding of ways in which medieval narratives may have been performed for their original audiences. To assist students of varying levels (including middle- and high-school students, as well as undergraduates and graduate students) and scholars from other fields of specialty, essential metadata—information regarding the performance and the work performed—accompanies each clip. Visitors can also search for clips using individual metadata fields (such as Performance Setting, Author of Work, and Subject Keywords).

PMNT includes a bibliography pointing to relevant scholarship, a videography of commercially available videos, and tips for use of the website and performance in teaching. In the future we plan to add more video clips and other resources to the site, including further information

on pedagogical uses of performance, and video interviews with performers, faculty, and students who work with performance.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two primary goals drove technical decisions in creating the website: making online video available to viewers worldwide (potentially via slow Internet connections), and protecting the intellectual property of the performers and other content owners. Since each performer who appears on the *PMNT* site is a copyright holder, we did not want to risk having material downloaded and used in ways that might violate holders' rights. We therefore encoded the video to use streaming technology (rather than download). Streaming presents the viewer with an ephemeral stream of bits of audiovisual data that disappear once played by the media player, thus preventing capture to the viewer's computer.

Digital video files can be extremely large: in its raw form, a five-minute digital video file can take up one gigabyte or more of hard drive space. Because streaming relies on the continuous flow of video data through the viewer's Internet connection, streaming raw digital video files is impossible: even the fastest Internet connection cannot continuously deliver that amount of data. Thus, in addition to being encoded for streaming, the files had to be compressed in order to travel smoothly to the viewer's computer.

Visitors to *PMNT* access the Internet using a variety of connection speeds, from low-speed dial-up modems to high-speed Internet connections such as DSL or LANs. To accommodate this variety of connection speeds, we created one high- and one low-bandwidth version for each video clip: high-quality files to stream via cable modem/DSL or faster, and low-quality files for visitors with dial-up modems.

In addition, it was important for us to choose a video format that is easily streamed, compressed, and

played on a media player that is simple to download, free of charge, and readily available for PC and Mac. There were several popular video formats that met our criteria: Windows Media, Real, and QuickTime. How to choose among them?

One consideration was that although the website is currently being realized and housed at NYU's Studio, from the start we planned for *PMNT*'s interoperability and possible integration with other digital resources and services produced by NYU Libraries' Digital Library Team. We wanted *PMNT*'s technical design, metadata, and video encoding to be commensurate with the Digital Library Team's standards in order to assure the ingest, maintenance, and migration of *PMNT* data over time.

Following the Digital Library Team's lead, we encode *PMNT*'s video using the MPEG-4 standard—a non-proprietary, international standard that provides for relatively high-quality, low-bit rate encoding, and can be optimized for streaming. During the academic year 2003-04, while we were testing the video

encoding and streaming for the project, QuickTime was the only widely-available player fully supporting the MPEG-4 format and the streaming protocol used (Real Time Streaming Protocol, or RTSP, via Darwin Streaming Server).

At the time, Real had discontinued its support of the MPEG-4 format and, while Windows Media Player could play our MPEG-4 files, it would not stream them. We thus decided to present the video files to the viewer embedded in a web page (instead of appearing in a pop-up media player window) that forces the viewer's system to use QuickTime rather than Real or Windows Media Player.

Recently, Real has re-introduced its support for the MPEG-4 standard, and we are considering allowing viewers to stream the files using Real in addition to QuickTime. As the project continues, we are closely watching the development of MPEG-4 as a standard and will follow its adoption and implementation by the three major media players.

As we develop both *PMNT*'s scholarly content and our means of bringing that content to viewers, we continue to explore how ever-advancing technologies can serve humanities scholarship. A virtual and global stage, *PMNT* seeks to provide a worldwide audience with performances of medieval tales using the latest in modern technology.

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To explore the *Performing Medieval Narrative Today* website, visit <http://euterpe.bobst.nyu.edu/mednar/>. We welcome your feedback; please send comments to: perf-med-narr@forums.nyu.edu.

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Performing Medieval Narrative Today
A Video Showcase
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Nibelungenlied, opening lines; a group dances to the Nibelungenlied

The Performance

Performance descriptors:
 dance; instruments; performers, solo; performers, multiple; reading aloud; song

Instruments:
 Chordophones; Mechanical & Electrical

Performer category:
 professional performer

Names of performers & ensembles:
 Kummer, Eberhard

Language(s) of performance:
 German, Middle High

Setting:
 public performance setting

Geographical location:
 United States

The Work

Work:
Das Nibelungenlied - The Nibelungenlied

Author:
 Anonymous

Genre:
 epic

Subject:
 Mythology: Anglo-Saxon/Germanic

Period:
 Middle Ages: 12th-13th century

Language:
 German, Middle High

quality: high | low
 (Quicktime 6 required)

About the scene and clip:
 The performer sings the opening lines of the *Nibelungenlied*, which introduce the themes of the work and the central female character of Kriemhild; he sings and reads the text, accompanying himself on an Irish harp and using appropriate music from the medieval period. The clip then briefly shows a group dancing a medieval round-dance step in a garden, while the performer plays the melody of the epic on the hurdy-gurdy. The *Nibelungenlied* is sung here to a melody called the "Hildebrandston," known to be

Figure 3. The full catalog entry displays all metadata, as well as notes for each video clip.