

# The Scholarly Edition as Digital Experience

Reading, Editing, Curating

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## ABSTRACT

*What if the makers of digital scholarly editions reimagined the edition as an exhibition? There is no shortage of vision when it comes to reimagining the digital edition for the future, but innovation always lags behind vision. This affects in particular the call for reader-oriented editions. Digital scholarly editions are, on the whole, rich and useful resources developed to support the critical work of their users. But as resources they can also be complex and somewhat daunting, which does not make them “usable” for a broad spectrum of readers. Bringing curation into the editorial process can help make editions more inclusive and reach a wider readership. To do so is not to change the nature of the game or the purpose of the edition, but to think about simple solutions for how the data and editorial argument can be communicated more clearly and effectively. Though separate activities, curating and editing clearly intersect with one another in the creative-critical modes that they apply to historical artifacts. The aim of both is to contextualize, historicize, and mediate the past for the present. Borrowing some of the verbal, visual, and multimedia tools that curators employ in exhibitions can augment the edition, help guide the reader through the complex data, and support her in becoming the kind of relational reader that the digital scholarly edition envisions.*

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“CURATING” IS A BUZZWORD NOWADAYS. BUT I FEEL JUSTIFIED IN making it the subject of my provocation, for I believe it can help us reimagine the scholarly edition, especially the digital kind. To that end, any similarities, real or rhetorical, between “curating” and “editing” is not what I am interested in. In fact, how they are in essence different, but complementary, activities is what I want to explore, specifically how curation, as a professional practice, might be fruitfully brought into the domain of textual scholarship. The reasons for doing this are varied, but the main one is to enrich the digital scholarly edition, to make it more versatile and attractive, and, ultimately, to increase its user base. One of the issues that still plagues digital editions is that they remain under-used by readers

and researchers other than textual scholars. In this challenge also lies an opportunity to think more clearly about editing and inclusivity, in terms of access as well as in terms of the editing works outside of the white, male, Western canon.

Reconceiving the scholarly edition to include a curatorial component seems first and foremost a question of design followed by technical solutions. What would such an edition look like? How would we deliver this technologically? There has been no shortage of vision reconceptualizing the form and function of digital editions for the future. From Peter Shillingburg's "knowledge sites" (2006, 100–02) to Edward Vanhoutte's ergodic editions, which could include "a *play mode* which showcases the contents of the edition to the user as a recorded movie" (2010, 143), digital editions are conceived as being much more comprehensive than their printed predecessors. Most recently, and hugely relevant to my argument, Christopher Ohge has advocated for digital editions to become more like multimedia: "[e]ditions reimaged as exhibitions of works with multifaceted functions" (2021, 122) could facilitate a whole new type of readerly engagement that is intersubjective, creative, experiential, and aesthetic. The *Melville Electronic Library* (<https://melville.electroniclibrary.org/>) project, of which he is Associate Director, has the ambition to realize this type of edition. More attention is also going to usability and inclusive design of the user interface, whether it is through user testing, through the provision of advice and guidance (e.g., PIERAZZO 2015, 158–62), or by compiling data on user experiences around accessibility and usability (MARTINEZ et al. 2019). Unfortunately, the reality is that despite all of these creative and technological innovations, very few editions are in existence today that radically rethink the edition's form and functionality.

Curating the scholarly edition should start with at least one fundamental conceptual change by making the reader more central to the edition. Of late the call for reader-oriented editions has certainly become louder (e.g., EGGERT 2019, 64). Traditionally, scholarly editions have been (with good reason) work- or text-centred. After all, aside from producing reliable texts, they contain a critical argument about the production and transmission of these texts; this argument is enacted in the edition through its critical apparatus, textual introduction, and other forms of commentary. The edition, in other words, is a tool which empowers the reader to do her interpretive-critical work. Even as a printed resource, the edition was already designed to be a reference, something to be consulted rather than read; conceived in the sixteenth century around the collocation of text and apparatus, the form, function, and structure of the scholarly edition was

oriented towards “relational” reading (GABLER 2018, 322–23), much like Agostino Ramelli, the inventor of the famous book wheel, or the user of Shillingsburg’s digital knowledge sites who practice relational reading. The corollary, however, is that, as a tool, the edition creates passive recipients (EGGERT 2019, 5–6; OHGE 2021, 16, 101) who perform their work outside of the edition. While this was so by necessity in the printed edition, the interactivity of the digital edition has not enabled the reader to become a more active participant in the edition. Editions are still designed top-down. The editor and her team analyze the textual condition, model the edition, create the data, and design the interface. This work flow is right and proper in accordance with the principles that make the edition reliable, but the edition can only be interrogated in the ways permitted by the data model, which puts a limitation on users (see PIERAZZO 2015, 47–48).<sup>1</sup>

The upshot is that, as a resource, the digital scholarly edition continues to effect a “transactional deficit” between textual scholarship and “a broader readership capable of appreciating and using the results of their labour” (EGGERT 2019, 72). The digital edition, furthermore, remains a complex tool to use. The fact is that, from the user perspective, there is less uniformity and standardization than there was in the printed edition. As Frederike Neuber recently observed in a Twitter discussion on the usability of digital editions, “there are some conventions for digital interfaces of editions but they haven’t been systematically expressed (yet)” (<https://twitter.com/FrederikeNBR/status/1443233671406817286>, 29 September 2021). Digital technology enabled experimentation with new forms, functionalities, and editorial perspectives, providing a richer view on the documents relating to the composition and transmission of the work than the printed edition could provide. But these innovations and enhancements also meant more complex structures and bespoke navigation systems. The more dynamic the edition, the more complex its use is.

For the digital edition to address the distinct abilities of a diverse readership remains, therefore, a tall order. Digital technology allows, at least in principle, different editions to exist within one framework; by encoding

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1. Users can of course discover ways to use an edition that was not originally envisaged by the editors, but mostly the data model will determine the type of inquiry one can make. The *Internet Shakespeare Editions* (<https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>) offers a simple illustration. This edition collates not only the Quartos and First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, but includes the later Folios as well as a wide range of major editions from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, thus allowing a user to interrogate the textual history of Shakespeare’s works but also their editorial tradition.

them into TEI XML the different editions are latently present in the source file until they are activated in the output. In theory, this type of “paradigmatic edition” (PIERAZZO 2015, 29) can be modulated towards the needs of individual readers, each according to their expertise and interest, but importantly also to achieve inclusivity by enhancing access and usability for differently-abled readers. The reason this principle has not yet been exploited is no doubt because of the constraints on time, resources, and publishing support. The paradox, perhaps, is that by addressing an inclusive usership, the edition becomes yet more complex in turn.

Consequently, reader-oriented editions with full bells and whistles may still be a while yet. Nonetheless, that does not mean editorial responsibility towards inclusivity should be set aside. So how can we make the critical argument in the edition more apparent and accessible? Digital editions do not perform as well as their print predecessors in making their argument explicit to its users. The reason is that digital editions focus more on their archival function (EGGERT 2019, 9), presenting the textual, bibliographical, and documentary evidence either through dynamic collation or digital reproductions, than on textual commentary and introductions. Eggert’s suggestion that in the reader-oriented scholarly edition the discursive elements may well have a greater role to play (EGGERT 2019, 74) is extremely interesting in this respect, for it points to the way where editorship and curatorship can work together.

Where editing and curating overlap is in the coincidence of their respective creative-critical process. Scholarly editing entails the amalgamation and analysis of textual evidence to represent a text or a work for a new readership and to create an argument about the history of its production and reception. Curating involves the selection of artifacts and arranging them together in an attractive manner to tell a story, whether that is a story about their history, use, aesthetic value, or simply about the way they suddenly resonate with one another. The purpose of this story, supported by contextual/interpretative commentary, can be to educate, illuminate, or inspire. Editing intervenes in the textual artifact — constructs, as it were, a new text that sits alongside the original — while curation creates a new (but also temporary) experience in a particular time and space.

By absorbing certain kinds of curatorial activity, we could make the critical transaction between author, work, and reader that the edition effects better. When brought into the edition’s framework, these activities are about pointing, connecting, and guiding; about highlighting and illustrating what is important to the history of the text. The digital environment

was built for this: to link information. So some of the curatorial measures can in fact be quite simple, e.g., inserting hyperlinks in textual introductions and commentary that link the argument directly to the materials in the digital edition. (It seems like an obvious idea, yet it is surprisingly rare in the field.) To get a realistic sense of what is possible, we only need to consider the tools we commonly encounter in museums and galleries such as captions and text panels; graphs, maps, and images; replicas and models; audio guides, videos, and interactive installations. Each of these tools is a form of commentary on the artifacts that take the visitor along a “gentle” pathway through the gallery.

Some of these tools the digital scholarly edition already uses. Annotation and textual commentary via pop-window are closer to the caption than their printed counterpart, which is often placed physically and materially separate from the main text; images are the mainstay of the digital archive. But note, for instance, how a digital facsimile of a manuscript page is not quite a replica. Zooming and rotating notwithstanding, a digital facsimile is a flat object that does not do justice to the three-dimensional manuscript. Moreover, leafing through the “pages” of a digital archive is an unsatisfactory experience because of the time it takes for each page to load. The images themselves, furthermore, often poorly render the manuscript’s codicological affordances: the unit is the single page rather than the double-page “opening” in the case of a notebook or bound manuscript or the recto and verso of the folio. The linear sequencing of images also means that connections between disparate parts of a manuscript or between two related manuscripts are rarely represented. Dynamic genetic representations of the kind best exemplified by the Beckett Digital Manuscripts Project of course toggle between the text of different drafts, but these representations work best when representing the growth of a passage constrained by identifiable boundaries. More complex, non-localized passages that are less clearly delineated as well as non-verbal connections between documents are more difficult to capture. An extreme case is that of *The Unicorn from the Stars*, a play written collaboratively by Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats where manuscripts are produced in tandem. Over a period of several days, Gregory and Yeats were together working out the structural and conceptual contours of the play, while Gregory by herself was simultaneously drafting pieces of dialogue. The drafts produced in either situation are closely interrelated, but not necessarily at the textual level. Another example is the non-linear growth of *Leaves of Grass* in which Whitman revised, replaced, and relocated entire poems between printed editions. The *Walt Whitman Archive* currently does not trace these connections.

As again Ohge argues quite eloquently, however, multimedia offer substantial potential in the way they can provide the basis “for deeper knowledge through situated creativity” (2021, 19). In saying this, he highlights a crucial aspect that has not yet been fully recognized in digital scholarly editing: the notion of experience. If reading a literary work is fundamentally an aesthetic experience even before it becomes a hermeneutic act, enhancing relational reading with a multimedia experience will have far-reaching effects. Illustrating the passage in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Miss Kilman exits the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria Street and observes the tower of Westminster Cathedral rising in front of her: “the habitation of God. In the midst of traffic, there was the habitation of God. Doggedly she set off with her parcel to that other sanctuary, the Abbey” (WOOLF 2014, 119) with an image of the Cathedral in question would do as well, if not better, than annotating it as: “Byzantine-style Catholic church [sic] designed by J. F. Bendey and erected 1895–1903. Its bell tower rises 284 feet. It is the centre of the Roman Catholic Church in England” (WOOLF 2014, 286). The point is that Miss Kilman, a member of the Church of England, is conservative in her ways; the modern, Byzantine extravagance of the Catholic cathedral looks garish to her sensibilities, and she promptly takes a bus down to Westminster Abbey, at the other end of Victoria Street, to say her prayers. Just like visual annotation can enhance the reader’s understanding, digitally animating the process of composition and revision, as Ekaterina Andreeva and Varvara Goncharova (2019) are doing in their “Videotext” project, can likewise bring the genetic text to life. In the 1990s, the Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes in Paris had experimented with similar animations, but abandoned the endeavour for its alleged lack of scholarly relevance. The creative-critical gains of this type of intermediation are now becoming clearer, however, as the advantages of complementing verbal data with audio-visual information in knowledge sharing are being recognized (see CALLAHAN and KUHN 2012).

To envision a “participatory edition” based on what archivists and curators have called a “participatory archive” (HUVILA 2008) is, once again, not new. Johanna Drucker might as well have been talking about editions when she asked: “Can we conceive of models of interface that are genuine instruments for research? That are not merely queries within pre-set data that search and sort according to an immutable agenda? How can we imagine an interface that allows content modeling, intellectual argument, rhetorical engagement?” (2013, #34). This is a pipedream for a digital workbench that users can use to experiment, test their hypotheses, and generally perform their critical work. In this conception, the reader is not so

much an active collaborator, as in the social edition (SIEMENS et al. 2012), but an active user who has the freedom to pull together data from the edition and play around with it inside a digital sandbox. In my genetic and archival work, for instance, I often want to see non-consecutive folios or even different manuscripts side-by-side, but to do this I have to open multiple instances of the resource in different tabs of my browser. The reality is that digital editions will not even let you scribble in the margins, even if the functionalities that I have described already exist (e.g., whiteboard and visual collaboration apps, web annotation apps like *hypothes.is*, and so on).

Possibly we will have such a user edition one day. But to serve that other, less specialist reader we can also enrich the edition with “guided tours” and deploy multimedia to that end. A “Videotext” of all of Whitman’s, Yeats’s, or Woolf’s manuscripts would need enormous time and resources to create, but short examples would illuminate their creative process in ways that a discursive introduction alone cannot. We can also revert much better to the tradition of the Textual Introduction in the printed edition in which editors analyze textual cruxes by building digital pathways into the edition. This would help less experienced readers to come to terms more quickly with the textual complexity of the work as well as the heuristic capabilities of the edition. Finally, we could apply the principle of generous interfaces in editions as they are being applied to unlock the digital collections of archives and heritage institutions (WHITELAW 2015). The problem with digital editions, as with all databases, is that users cannot quickly rifle through and scan them for relevant content in the way you can with a book. The search box is not necessarily a suitable alternative. String or subject searching works well if you know what you are looking for; if not, it is very much hit and miss. As Whitelaw writes: “Where information retrieval is premised on a specific intention or question, browsing reflects broader and more complex motivations” (2015, #9). In the digital edition, the goal is again to help the user find what is relevant to her in the easiest, quickest, most straightforward way.

However we conceive of curating the edition, its purpose is to complement and augment the critical and hermeneutic labor that already takes place there. Inclusive editions that speak to different readers are not always about creating more functionality, or even improving functionality, but about improving access to and understanding of the data. Therefore it is crucial that we create editions that engage and stimulate readers with a meaningful digital experience that helps them come to terms with the texts and works from the past that the edition remediates. If we want editions that are reliable and inclusive, then balancing the design and

interface of the edition with the needs of users remains an important goal. This is possible only if the reader function is defined in the edition's data model. The inclusive edition, however, is not only about accessibility and functionality, and what editions can do, but also about persuading real readers to engage with the argument in the edition. This can be achieved by better guiding the reader through the relational reading that the digital edition as reference work invites. It also means expanding the traditional focus on the processuality of writing (textual production and editing) to the processuality of reading and to develop activities/functionalities within the edition that support both.

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