W(h)ither the Copy Text ?

In his 1995 essay the *Rationale of HyperText* Jerome McGann challenged the need for a 'fixed point of relation' – a central copy text or some ideal reconstruction of the original – in electronic scholarly editions. For McGann the attraction of the hyper-edition was that all variants of a text could be presented to the reader with their inherent authority preserved. The previous year G. Thomas Tanselle had criticised the continuing 'tyranny of the copy-text' within the realm of printed editions. Tanselle's vision was of an editor free to reconstruct a text on the basis of the authority of all variants filtered through personal judgement – but not of presenting readers with a multiplicity of texts.[1] Following McGann, scholars involved in the electronic publication of the works of Shakespeare, Langland, Cervantes and Newton among others have been enthusiastic about the potential presented by the *hypertextual archive* to allow readers to create their own scholarly editions by selecting from the available materials. In this essay I want to confront the implications of this vision of the hypertextual archive replacing the critical edition for the types of material that are CELL's concern. My interest is less in the theory of textual editing and the desirability or otherwise of a copy-text than in the practical implications for editors, readers and others of the hypertextual[2] archive becoming the dominant model for electronic editions.

The assumption of the hypertextual archive is that all surviving versions of a given text should be made available to the reader, ideally in both transcript and facsimile form. These different versions are hypertextually linked to each other and to the scholarly apparatus provided by the editor – this is generally achieved by SGML encoding in line with the TEI guidelines.[3] The primary role of the editor is thus altered from that of studying and collating multiple witnesses to create a single, annotated text to preparing each of the witnesses for publication and providing the means for the reader to interact with the archive. Since not all witnesses are created equal and not all readers are willing to read or are equipped to evaluate multiple texts, the archive may be structured to present one or more preferred 'best' texts. Alternatively, a text analogous to the traditional critical edition may be constructed from the archive. For example, one of the aims of the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive is to recover the authorial texts of the three distinct versions of the poem from the 54 manuscript and 3 printed witnesses that the archive will contain.[4] Such reconstructed texts are superimposed on the multiple witnesses, just as they are in a traditional print edition. The difference in the electronic archive is that each of the

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[1] *Rationale of HyperText is* available on-line at <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/public/jjm2f/rationale.html>G. Thomas Tanselle, 'Editing without a Copy-Text', *Studies in Bibliography* 47(1994), pp. 1-23. Both McGann and Tanselle were writing in relation to the seminal text relating to critical editing: W. Greg, 'Rationale of Copy-Text', F. Bowers ed., *Studies in Bibliography* (1950), pp. 19-36.

[2] Since CELL is primarily concerned with texts, the term *hypertext* is used generally here although it is recognised that archives may include media other than text and that hypermedia might be the more appropriate term.

[3] For information about the Text Encoding Initiative see <http://www.tei-c.org/>.

[4] See <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/piers/archive.goals.html/>.

witnesses is also available to the reader and must therefore be prepared for publication.

This vision of the hypertextual archive as the model for scholarly electronic publishing in the Humanities raises concerns in three areas:

- practicality
- accessibility
- acceptability.

It is these areas of concern that I shall consider here, in relation to the work of CELL in promoting the electronic publication of texts for the study of early modern lives and letters.

Practicality

An immediate concern when we consider the implications of the hypertextual archive is the cost of the enterprise. Certainly, electronic publication frees us from many of the constraints imposed by the physicality of print. We may publish with impunity a volume of digital text and images, which would be prohibitively expensive on paper. The extent of the apparatus recording variants in a critical edition may be as extensive as we wish in electronic form – and may be concealed from those readers who wish only to see the reconstructed text. Yet preparing a large number of manuscript witnesses to a level that makes them acceptable for scholarly work – transcribing, proof reading, encoding and annotating – is also expensive. While canonical authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare or significant figures like Newton may command such attention, lesser figures will not – indeed, cannot, since there are insufficient researchers to do the necessary work on such in-depth publication for more than a handful of writers, even supposing that there were sufficient funds to support them. Since the preparation of multiple texts is likely to exceed the capacity of a single individual, editing becomes in the hypertextual model a collaborative enterprise – with all the inherent problems of project management and the consistent interpretation and implementation of standards. As McGann wrote of the creation of the Rossetti hypertextual archive:

> we regularly discovered that different persons implementing the markup schemes were liable to interpret the intent of the system in different ways. We tried to obviate this by supplying clear definitions for all the terms in use, as well as a handbook and guide for markup procedures. But it turned out - surprise, surprise - that these tools were themselves sometimes ambiguous.[5]

The distribution of the costs of creating electronic editions is different from publishing in print, but the total expenditure required is not necessarily less.

It is clear that the full potential of electronic publishing has not yet been realised. We have yet to overcome the problem of electronic editions being treated as surrogates for books. Within CELL we believe that innovatory techniques for interactive presentation and collaborative working will alter the way textual scholarship develops over the next decade. At the same time we are concerned that the emphasis placed on

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[5] See J. McGann, *Radiant Textuality* (2001), p. 91.

the value of publishing multiple witnesses of single works will militate against the development of innovative forms of presentation. The hypertextual archive represents one way of moving away from the paradigm of the printed book, but it is not the only possibility. An editor might choose to publish a critical edition in which animation was used to show how a text appeared to have evolved through manuscript, first printed and subsequent editions. Alternatively a number of editors working on individuals who corresponded with each other might create a model for collaborative publication – so that separate critical editions became part of a collective edition of the correspondence. The advantage of using a critical edition as the foundation for such experiments into the potential of electronic publishing is that the innovation occurs within a conceptual framework that is generally understood and may more easily be evaluated. It would of course be possible to base such experiments on facsimile editions, but it seems probable that some level of critical editing would be required.

There may be occasions when the need to preserve a major archive warrants the creation of an electronic edition of its contents and in this case the hypertextual archive approach of preserving all versions of all texts would be appropriate. The Hartlib Papers Project, for example, made an important collection for the study of seventeenth century scientific thought available to researchers.[6] The inclusion of facsimiles and transcripts of the whole archive was desirable in this instance, since access to the originals was to be closed. However, the Hartlib Papers provide the raw materials for scholarly editions, they are not an edition in themselves. The CD ROM edition is more useful than putting the contents of the archive onto microfilm and should be evaluated in these terms. It does not represent a desirable model for scholarly electronic editions, since so little editorial apparatus is provided to the user. Since the Hartlib Papers Project did not have the resources to implement fully a hypertextual archive as envisaged by McGann, it is an inadequate example – it does, however, suggest that the model may prove unachievable for the majority of textual editing projects within the existing climate.

It might be argued that the texts of interest to CELL are generally not as voluminous as the Hartlib archive nor exist in as many variants as major literary works. The work of creating a hypertextual archive might therefore correspond to that of producing a conventional edition. To an extent this is true, since diaries, commonplace books and so forth generally exist in a single copy. However, the nature of scribal publication in the early modern period means that multiple witnesses of even minor works are common. Let us consider an example. The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries held private meetings at which its members presented papers on agreed subjects – a forerunner of the modern academic seminar. A number of these discourses subsequently circulated in manuscript. Several on the history of parliament were published in 1658 by the nephew of one of the original members of the society and a collection edited by Thomas Hearne appeared in the eighteenth century. We can never recover the original discourses. Like plays or parliamentary speeches these are texts for which the original 'performance' is lost and which demand similar skills in the deconstruction of the witnesses and reconstruction of a critical text. Most scholars read the discourses in the 1771 second edition of Hearne's collection. A modern

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[6] See <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/hpp/index.html>.

electronic edition of those on the history of parliament could elucidate questions concerning their transmission and reception, as well as exploring the political context of their use in 1658 and their significance to Hearne and his contemporaries. A hypertextual archive of all the witnesses would enable a researcher to compare textual differences, which might be indicative of the copyist's or owner's political opinions. However, since such texts almost invariably survive within the context of either a collection of copied discourses, speeches and other political material or of antiquarian papers, studying the textual variations of the manuscripts would be less informative than comparing their archival context. In this instance a critical edition providing representations of the original discourses combined with an exploration of the context of the print editions and manuscript copies represents a better model for understanding their significance than a hypertextual archive of all the surviving witnesses.

Early modern letters were also frequently copied – for legal or political reasons, because of the fame or notoriety of the writer or recipient, or as a means of circulating information among friends. Many letters exist in more than one form: drafts, the letter sent, the copy entered into a letterbook. In such cases electronic publication allows us to publish all the distinct forms, which has often not been possible in print because of considerations of space. The value and practicality of publishing multiple copies of the same form of a letter should be seriously considered. The catalogue of the Francis Bacon Correspondence Project includes some 950 discrete letters, of which almost 800 survive in manuscript. Only a quarter of the letters are identified as holograph, while 40% exist in more than 10 witnesses. If it is impractical to contemplate the publication of such multiple texts in both facsimile and transcribed forms, the editor of an electronic edition has a choice of publishing:

- a critical edition derived from the multiple witnesses;
- as many witnesses as possible.

It might be argued that the editor should publish as many of the manuscripts as possible in a form suitable for a hypertextual archive. Over the course of time other manuscripts may be added to the archive and the material for a critical edition be accumulated. However, there is a danger in this approach of privileging particular manuscript versions of a work over others. To take the example of the Bacon Correspondence Project, the temptation would be to begin with Additional Mss 4261 and 4262 in the British Library, which would provide versions of 415 letters. This would, however, make the new edition largely dependent upon the work of Bacon's eighteenth century editor Thomas Birch, who compiled the source collections. There is also a strong possibility that funding will dry up before the critical edition is produced, leaving an incomplete archive of facsimiles and transcripts. With the hypertextual archive approach there is a danger of producing multiple editions of particular authorities, which the user must negotiate to the best of their ability.

Our concern with the dominance of the hypertextual archive as the model for electronic editions is that it will stifle other initiatives. There is a danger that the potential for electronic publication to allow the in-depth exploration of the work of a few will prejudice our ability to produce scholarly editions of a far wider range of sources than would be economically feasible in print. In the past discussion of the theory of textual scholarship has been dominated by literary scholars and this is to an extent reflected in the popularity of the hypertextual archive as a model for electronic

editions. For literary scholars who have traditionally focused on authority and intention for discovering the meaning of a work from among various witnesses, the hypertextual model has obvious attractions. For students of lives and letters more generally external evidence concerning context and transmission are at least as important as textual variations and a practical model for electronic editions should acknowledge this.

Accessibility

This leads us to the second concern – how accessible is the hypertextual archive to a user ? Is a phalanx of facsimiles and transcriptions of the same text required or desired by the majority of readers ? Of the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive Hoyt Duggan argues that: 'It matters little that no one is ever likely to want to *read* all fifty-four documents. Many will want to *use* them.'[7] This may be true of Langland's poem, which attracts the attention of literary scholars interested in textual analysis and reconstructing the history of its transmission. Similarly, the aim of the Canterbury Tales project was to use the computer to determine the textual history of Chaucer's works. Publishing the material in an accessible form was a subsidiary interest.[8] These are projects that are predominantly directed at literary scholars. The projects with which CELL works are primarily interested in publishing editions that illuminate the lives and work of early modern individuals for more diverse readership. For CELL making an electronic edition accessible is of vital importance.

For an edition to be accessible, it is necessary for the editor to guide the readership through the indeterminancy of early modern texts. The ability to publish images of all the available drafts of a letter does not relieve the editor of the need to untangle their relationship. When that work is done, it is doubtful that incorporating facsimiles and transcriptions of all the drafts into the edition is going to be the most helpful way of enlightening the reader about a particular letter. A form of presentation that uses the interactive potential of electronic publication to show how the letter evolved would be far more useful. The interactive version could in turn be linked to an edited text, that could be printed out, referenced etc.

For the types of material with which CELL is concerned accessibility also includes the ability of readers to reference and compare related texts from different editions. Consider, for example, the works of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys. Both wrote diaries which mention each other and were correspondents. A reader interested in Restoration London might want to be able to collate the sources in the two editions. To explore, for example, how the two men viewed the same event or how a letter in Evelyn's letterbook compared to what Pepys actually received. This putative reader would appreciate the use of similar conventions in the production and presentation of the editions and the sharing of biographical information, glossaries etc. A common search mechanism would make the two editions even more accessible. This form of accessibility would enable a reader to create an edition of texts suited to their own purposes taken from a variety of electronic sources. Few users of such created editions would care unduly about the evolution of all the texts they included. For the

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[7] H. Duggan, 'Some Un-Revolutionary Aspects of Computer Editing', available at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/public/hnd/Finneran.html>.

[8] See <http://www.cta.dmu.ac.uk/projects/ctp>.

majority the essence of what was written, elucidated by a careful editor, would be more important than the full details how all the witnesses varied – although those full details should be available for the minority.

Acceptability

If electronic editions are to be widely accepted within the academic community, they need to adhere to accepted scholarly practices or present compelling reasons for not doing so. The critical edition is embedded within the conceptual framework of scholarly editing. The hypertextual archive may conversely be considered as an extension of what Michael Hunter described as a

> miscellaneous compendium of undigested information … reflecting the arsenal of data that a scholar working on a subject might expect to build up in preparation for a monograph, rather than a discrete collection deserving of publication in its own right.[9]

The majority of scholars will be interested not in the miscellaneous compendium, but will look for the mediated texts produced by a careful and expert editor. If a hypertextual archive is incomplete, it is open to the criticism Greg levelled in 1950 at those editors who only produced an edition of particular authorities of an author's work.[10]

For the foreseeable future scholars of lives and letters will be working with both print and electronic editions. They will need a firm basis for comparison between the two. The translation of accepted editorial practices for the production of critical editions into the electronic arena is one way of providing this and does not preclude the introduction of innovative ways of allowing readers to interact with editions. Such innovation will prove more acceptable to the sceptical critic, if it is grounded upon a firm foundation of accepted practice.

Scholarly discourse is facilitated by such mediated texts as critical editions. The hypertextual archive provides fewer touchstones – it is more suited to the in-depth examination of a single text or author than to comparative research across different sources. Academic debate may be artificially constrained by its conventions, but it is by no means clear that we and our students are prepared for the freedom offered by hypertext in this respect. The slow acceptance of electronic editions as equivalent in academic value to their print counterparts will not be improved by a wholesale rejection of established editorial practices.

Conclusion

The hypertextual archive does not seem an appropriate or achievable model for the majority of texts in the field of early modern lives and letters. Nor is it desirable that a single model should become the de facto standard before the full potential of electronic publication has been explored. Through our own projects and by providing advice and assistance to others, CELL hopes to experiment with a variety of models

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[9] M. Hunter, 'How to Edit a Seventeenth-Century Document: Principles and Practice', *The Seventeenth Century* 10 (1995), p. 284.

[10] W. Greg, 'Rationale of Copy-Text', p. 29.

for electronic editions. We are particularly interested in how interactivity, multimedia and collaborative editions might be used to develop our access to and understanding of early modern lives and letters.